

THE SICARII IN ACTS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

If we desire to understand the NT, we must learn all that we can about the world in which Jesus, the disciples, and the earliest Christians lived. The reason why is easily understood but often overlooked: the biblical authors did not write to a modern western world but rather to those who lived in first-century imperial Rome. We, therefore, simply cannot read any NT passage and then ask directly, “What does this mean to us?” because that question cannot be answered until we have determined, as far as possible, what the text meant to the original readers. So those who would bring God’s word to bear on 21st-century lives have no choice but to learn the ancient Greek language, rhetoric, culture, and history, for these comprise the world of the NT authors.

These same principles, which apply generally to all ancient literature, apply also to Flavius Josephus. There is no other single author as important for our understanding of first-century Judea, yet we cannot read any particular passage in his writings and then ask directly, “What does this tell us about the New Testament?” The works of Josephus must first be studied for their own merits before they can be used reliably to enhance our understanding of late Second Temple Judaism in general or the NT in particular. Doing so often leads to a readjustment of our understanding. This can be illustrated well by the topic and passage at hand. In Acts 21 we read that when Paul was placed under arrest at Jerusalem at the close of his third missionary journey, the tribune expressed surprise that Paul knew Greek and then assumed that Paul was a certain Egyptian who had led a band of Sicarii out into the wilderness. This word, variously translated as “assassins” (ESV) or “terrorists” (NIV) or “murderers” (KJV), is exceedingly rare in ancient Greek literature. In the NT it is found only here, and apart from this passage the first Greek author to use it is Josephus. In this article I intend to address briefly how Josephus adds to our understanding of the NT primarily by looking at this particular text. My aim is to introduce the scholarly discussion about the usefulness of Josephus as a historical source, and then bring Josephus and Luke into dialog on this verse, and from this then see what we discover about Luke, Josephus, the Sicarii, and what Luke would have us understand about Paul.

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II. JOSEPHUS AS A SOURCE FOR NEW TESTAMENT HISTORY

Josephus was born a Jew in first-century Judea, where due to his education and noble descent he emerged as a leader in Judean affairs.¹ When Judea finally revolted against Rome, he was appointed to command the rebellion in Galilee. But Vespasian defeated the Judean rebels there, and Josephus himself surrendered at Jotapata. There he claims to have prophesied to Vespasian that he would be the next emperor of Rome. When this indeed happened, Josephus was freed. He was present at the fall of Jerusalem and then taken to Rome, where he was granted citizenship and enjoyed Flavian patronage.

At Rome, Josephus took it upon himself to defend the character of the conquered Judeans. His literary career embraces four Greek works, all of which are extant. These are in order, *The Judean War*, his account of the Judean rebellion and the destruction of the temple in AD 70; *Judean Antiquities*, the largest of his works that presents in twenty books Jewish history from the biblical creation account to the Judean governorship of Gessius Florus (AD 65–70); *Life*, his shortest work wherein he gives a favorable accounting of himself primarily by describing the course of his public career; and *Against Apion*, his apologetic and panegyric of Judaism. Although classical scholars have tended to ignore Josephus, whose works are not listed on any canon of classical texts, he is nonetheless a particularly fascinating author of first-century Rome as he represents the illustrious history and noble character of the Jewish people in a largely hostile environment. Moreover, he is the most prolific extant Greek author of this period, a fine example of the beginnings of Second Sophistic, and his importance for biblical studies can hardly be overstated. Our knowledge of first-century Judean peoples, institutions, politics, and events stems from his writings more than from any others.

Scholarly thinking about precisely how Josephus can be utilized as a historical source has, however, undergone a transformation in recent decades.² On the one hand, it is not uncommon to read in many places that when Josephus tells us fact “A” in passage “B,” we are reading historical reality. Josephus is often used in this way to illuminate what we read in the NT. Indeed, for a lengthy period Josephus was simply used as a source book for details about archaeology, Roman governance, the intrigues of the Herodian family, Judean religious identity, or for anything else he happens to mention in his writings. That Josephus cannot be used in such a simplistic and straightforward fashion becomes apparent in view of how Josephus is so apparently careless with his facts in all his works. For example, Josephus claims in the proem to *Antiquities* that he will not add to anything that is recorded in the sacred writings (1.17). But to take only one example, Josephus crafts speeches and records

¹ Standard introductions to the life and literary career of Josephus include Tessa Rajak, *Josephus, the Historian and His Society* (2d ed.; London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 2002); Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus Between Jerusalem and Rome* (Worcester: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988); and Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (2d ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003). Somewhat older but still foundational is H. St. John Thackeray, *Josephus the Man and the Historian* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1929).

² See Mason’s chapter entitled “Josephus as Authority for First-Century Judea,” in *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009) 7–44.

events not found in the Scriptures as he transforms Moses into a Hellenistic philosopher.³ This and numerous other examples that are examined by Louis Feldman demonstrate how Josephus recasts, and to some measure even reinvents, the biblical record as he endeavors to impress his Greco-Roman readers, using their own philosophical and heroic values, about the long and illustrious history of the Jewish people. His presentation, however, does little to reassure modern historians about his integrity.

Historical variances and contradictions emerge not simply when *Antiquities* is compared with the parallel biblical accounts. The parallel stories variously told in *Antiquities*, *War*, and *Life*, concerning the events and progress of the war or concerning his own activities, also exhibit what at first seems an equivalent disregard for fact as Josephus recasts his material. Steve Mason, the dean of Josephan studies, observes, “Changes run from the trivial to the comprehensive: dates, relative chronology, locations, *dramatis personae* and their motives, details of scene, and numbers.”⁴ So we simply cannot assume that when Josephus tells us fact “A” in passage “B” that we are reading historical reality. Josephus himself does not allow such straightforward confidence.

It goes beyond the purpose and constraints of this article to explain how scholars attempt to find a way forward as they employ Josephus as a source for first-century Judea in particular. Briefly, some attribute such changes either to Josephus’s careless handling of his material or to his changing circumstances as an author. In order to distill historical *realia* from such a patchwork of tendentious material, attempts are made to strip away our author’s influence upon his material either by trying to recover his sources or by privileging certain elements that emerge via narrative contradiction.⁵ Mason, who questions the validity of such approaches, tends to attribute the disparate details within Josephus’s narrative rather to the author’s rhetorical mentality.⁶ He suggests that Josephus is a “zealous practitioner of what ancient rhetoricians called *paraphrasis* or *metaphrasis* (παράφρασις, μετάφρασις)—changing the form of expression while retaining the thoughts (Theon, *Prog.* 62–4, 1–7–110; Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.9.2; 10.5.4–11)—and he certainly pushes the limits of ‘retaining the same thoughts’. . . . He seems to abhor the prospect of boring his audience, at least by retelling stories verbatim, and so he experiments with new literary and rhetorical configurations, careless of the historical casualties.”⁷

Mason has always been critical of mining Josephus simply for historical facts, insisting that before one can ask such questions, one needs to have analyzed his works in their own right.⁸ He appears in this way to insist that the same exegetical methodology which applies to Scripture, that every passage

³ See Louis Feldman, *Studies in Josephus’s Rewritten Bible* (Boston: Brill, 1998) and more recently *Judean Antiquities 1–4* (Boston: Brill, 2000).

⁴ Mason, *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins* 196.

⁵ Major works here include James S. McLaren, *Turbulent Times? Josephus and Scholarship on Judaea in the First Century CE* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Boston: Brill, 2002); Jonathan Price, *Jerusalem Under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State 66–70* (Boston: Brill, 1992).

⁶ See Mason, *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins* 103–37.

⁷ *Ibid.* 196.

⁸ Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* 7–31.

be interpreted in light of its literary and historical context, also be applied to Josephus. Otherwise, the passage in question will likely be taken out of context and thereby misunderstood and misapplied. Recently Mason has pushed this discussion further by insisting that utilizing the works of Josephus as reliable sources of historical data is in fact a category mistake. Ancient authors centered the authority of a particular piece not in the facts it presented but in their own qualifications to write on the subject. Thus Josephus crafts his material for his own purposes like a work of art and then says, "Trust me! I know what I am talking about." Modern historians, on the other hand, are always suspicious of such statements and look for independent verification. Where none can be found, a degree of uncertainty is inevitable. Finally, Mason states we have more certain knowledge from the works of Josephus about his engagement with Flavian Rome than we do about the history of Second Temple Judaism.⁹

All of this should encourage careful rhetorical analysis of Josephus and make us circumspect about accepting him as a reliable source for matters in first-century Judea. More specific to our investigation, we cannot conclude that since Josephus makes no connection between the Sicarii and the Egyptian in *War*, Luke, who did, must therefore be in error. We must first ask how and for what purposes Josephus presents the Sicarii in his works. Then we will be in a position to compare Josephus's Sicarii to what we read in Luke and proceed to ask how these two authors might add to our understanding of their historical existence, identity, and activities. To these matters we now turn.

III. A CASE STUDY: ACTS 21:38

When Paul had gone to the temple to complete a vow at the end of his third missionary journey, his presence caused a disturbance. Opponents from Asia stated that Paul's teaching was inimical both to the Judean people and the Torah (τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ τοῦ νόμου) and that he had also defiled the temple by bringing Greeks inside. Paul was dragged out of the temple, and a mob of people began to beat him. The tribune on hand, Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26), arrested Paul and, because he could learn nothing from the agitated crowd, he had Paul brought back to his barracks. Luke then records:

As he was about to be brought into the barracks, Paul said to the tribune, "May I tell you something?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? So you are the Egyptian who some time ago rose up and led four thousand of the Sicarii into the wilderness, aren't you?" And Paul said, "I am a Judean, a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia, no insignificant city. I beg you; allow me to speak to the people. (Acts 21:37-39)

Lysias allowed Paul to address the crowd. After emphasizing his impeccable pedigree and how he had been intent on stopping the spread of the "Way," Paul told of his conversion experience and mission to the Gentiles. At this point the crowd began to cry out again. Lysias was going to have Paul whipped but learned he was a Roman citizen, and the narrative soon shifts to Caesarea.

⁹ Mason, *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins* 7-44.

As mentioned above, this is the only place in the NT where the term “Sicarii” is found, and the only other Greek author to use the term, until much later in the Church fathers, turns out to be Josephus, a rough contemporary of Luke writing in a similar background. Complicating matters, however, is that Josephus also wrote about the Egyptian in two places and in neither place does he mention Sicarii. In *War* 2:261–63 we read:

But the Egyptian false prophet afflicted the Judeans with a greater blow than the latter. For this imposter appeared in the wilderness, claiming to be a prophet, and gathered together about thirty thousand of those who were deceived. And after he had led them around out of the wilderness to what was called the Mt. of Olives, from there he was ready to force an entry into Jerusalem and, after defeating the Roman garrison, become a tyrant, using those who rushed in with him as a body guard. But Felix prevented his attempt, going out to meet him with armed soldiers, and the entire populace joined in the defense. And so when battle commenced, the Egyptian escaped with a few, but the majority of his followers were destroyed and taken captive and the rest were scattered and escaped to their own homes.

Josephus gives a similar account in *Antiquities* 20:169–72. There we read:

Now a man came from Egypt to Jerusalem about this time, saying that he was a prophet and urging the common crowd to go with him to the Mt. of Olives, which lies opposite Jerusalem at a distance of five stadia. For he claimed that from there he meant to show them how, at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall, through which he promised to make for them an entrance into Jerusalem. But when Felix learned of these events, he ordered his soldiers to take up their weapons and, rushing out of Jerusalem with many horsemen and foot soldiers, he struck out against those who surrounded the Egyptian. He killed four hundred of them and captured two hundred alive. But the Egyptian himself escaped the battle unnoticed.

When these two accounts are compared to Luke, questions naturally arise: Where did Luke get this information about Sicarii when Josephus makes no mention of them? What do we learn from Josephus about the Sicarii which might help us understand the nature of the tribune’s question? How does the passage in Luke add to our understanding of the historical existence, identity, and activities of the Sicarii? Finally, and closer to the intent of the narrative, what would Luke have his readers understand about Paul by including such a striking term in this transitional section of Acts? Let us consider each in turn.

1. *The first question: The source of information.* It stretches the bounds of probability to the breaking point to suggest that Luke independently, apart from all historical usage in Judea or acquaintance with Josephus, stumbled upon a Latin word in the writings of Cicero or learned of the *lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis* and then decided that this word would make sense not only in his narrative but also coming out of the mouth of a tribune in Judea.¹⁰ From *War* we conclude that this term was in use in Judea, beginning with

¹⁰ For the term’s Latin usage see Mark Andrew Brighton, *The Sicarii in Josephus’s Judean War: Rhetorical Analysis and Historical Observations* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009) 58–59.

the governorship of Felix and continuing through the course of the revolt, although precisely how is debated.¹¹ So a more reasonable proposal is that Luke became aware of the label “Sicarii” in Judea.

Martin Hengel established a position followed by several commentators. He wrote that from Josephus we learn how the Sicarii originated from Judean banditry, from which they were distinguished by their violent tactics in Jerusalem.¹² This passage from Luke becomes an important component of Hengel’s thinking because to his mind Luke here provides evidence of how this Latin loan word, originating with Roman authorities and applied to a specific brand of violence, was at a later period generalized so that it could be applied to insurgents as a whole.¹³ Ernst Haenchen echoes and builds upon these ideas. He insists that the Sicarii are “precisely distinguished” in Josephus as daggersmen. It is not a term used to describe unarmed mobs fired by messianic hopes. Luke is thus using the term in a general way, lumping rebel groups together to illustrate how Paul was often associated with *stasis*. He does this so that in the mouth of the tribune he can sound the “first acquittal of Christendom.”¹⁴

The implication is that Luke has used a term, somehow known to him, as one which would conveniently summarize the Judean rebellion against Rome in the minds of his readers and has used it for purely redactional purposes. Luke’s usage amounts to an anachronism, using the word “Sicarii” more generally when in fact at this time it was used more precisely during the governorship of Felix. Luke’s use of the term, therefore, is unhistorical, one that was never applied to the Egyptian’s followers or was ever at this time used in such a general way. It is also, then, not one that the tribune would have ever suggested about Paul.

Mason offers an explanation of how Luke came to use the term.¹⁵ He, too, observes how Josephus “stresses” that the Egyptian was not a member of the Sicarii. The latter were “guerrillas” whereas the Egyptian was a “religious-prophetic” figure. The implication is that the term Sicarii would not have been applied by any contemporary to the Egyptian’s following. Moreover, since “Sicarii” is a Latin loan word, Mason suggests it seems unlikely that it would have been adopted by any Judean group. It must rather be a term applied by the Romans themselves, “official outsiders,” and not one which would have been in common use among the Judeans. How then did Luke come upon the

¹¹ Ibid. 1–11.

¹² Martin Hengel, *The Zealots* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989) 46–48.

¹³ Ibid. 397.

¹⁴ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 621–22. Similar points are made by Hans Conzelmann (*Acts of the Apostles* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 183–84) and I. Howard Marshall (*The Acts of the Apostles* [TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 351).

¹⁵ We focus here primarily on Luke’s statement that the Egyptian led a band of Sicarii. The other narrative differences between Josephus and Luke regarding the Egyptian are perhaps more apparent than real. Luke gives us an abbreviated, not contradictory, account of the Egyptian’s movements and activities. As for the numbers, Luke’s four thousand as opposed to Josephus’s thirty thousand, F. F. Bruce suggests a copyist error since Δ (4000) and Λ (30,000) could easily be confused (*The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951] 398). However, we must keep in mind also that Josephus nowhere enjoys a sterling reputation concerning the amount and restraint of his reported numbers.

term? Mason states that Josephus is the obvious source inasmuch as he is the first author writing in Greek to use the word “Sicarii.”¹⁶ Mason suggests there is evidence at this point in Acts of a conflation of persons and events that are carefully distinguished in the same context of *War* (2:254–263). These are the rise of the Sicarii, imposters who led their followers out into the wilderness, and a nameless “Egyptian” who led his followers to the Mount of Olives. It would be “uncanny” for Luke to have mentioned all these same details independently of Josephus. Mason therefore suggests that Luke may either have read or heard a recitation of this portion of *War* and with imperfect memory later merged these details together and made use of them to lend an air of realism to his narrative.¹⁷

A third alternative is that Luke got this bit of information from eyewitness testimony. All recognize how Luke opens his two-volume work by stressing eyewitnesses as his sources of information and the guarantors of the accuracy of his narrative (Luke 1:1–4). Here the “we” passages of Acts can be brought to bear (Acts 16:10–17, 20:5–15, 21:1–18, 27:1–28:16). The literature on this issue is voluminous, yet the simplest and least problematic proposal about those portions where the narrative lapses into the first-person plural is that at these points the author, Luke, is with Paul.¹⁸ On this basis Witherington then proceeds to make connections between the “we” passages and Lukan sources. Those places where Luke is with Paul “ostensibly bring the author into enough contact with primary persons and locations to account for all that we have in this book.”¹⁹ The point for our discussion here is that there is primary evidence that Luke travelled to Jerusalem with Paul, where together they appeared before James and the other elders in Jerusalem. Since the events of our text happened only seven days later, we have good reason to conjecture that Luke was still present and that the source of information about the exchange with the tribune was Paul himself.

How then are we to assess these alternatives? Haenchen’s or Mason’s suggestions account for what many think is a historical inaccuracy. Since Josephus “precisely” distinguishes between the Sicarii and the Egyptian’s followers, Luke must be in error. A closer examination of how Josephus employs this term throughout his works, however, calls this conclusion into question. To this matter we now turn.

¹⁶ For a summary of scholarly positions and bibliography about Luke’s possible dependence upon the writings of Josephus, see Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (Boston: Brill, 1992) 365–66 and Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006) 149–99.

¹⁷ Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* 280–82. Similar statements and conclusions are made by Pervo, who largely follows Mason with the exception that, due to his late dating of Acts, he suggests this conflation of material should be attributed not to faulty recollection but to a desire “to accumulate opprobrious epithets.” It serves no other purpose than to be a “splendid foil for the famous riposte” (*Acts: A Commentary* [Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009] 553 text and note). See also his more extended treatment of this passage in *Dating Acts*, 166–70.

¹⁸ See Ben Witherington’s discussion of the matter with bibliography in the notes in *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 480–86. For an opposing view see Pervo, *Acts* 392–96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 170.

2. *The second question: Josephus's presentation of the Sicarii.* How then does Josephus use the term in *War*? We begin with the observation that contra Hengel and Haenchen above, Josephus is not nearly so precise or consistent in his usage of the word Sicarii to designate a particular group of people. This is apparent straight away when *War* 2.254–57, where Josephus gives his account of the rise of the Sicarii, is compared with its parallel in *Antiquities* 20.162–63. The accounts are markedly different. In *War*, Josephus introduces the Sicarii in connection with the assassination of the high priest Jonathan. In *Antiquities*, we also read of the assassination of Jonathan, but there he falls victim to bandits (λησταιί) and not to Sicarii. Indeed, Josephus does not mention Sicarii at all. Josephus accents different reasons in the two accounts for this act of violence. In *War*, Josephus briefly showcases the Sicarii as emblematic of “sickness” and *stasis*, the latter in particular a controlling theme for the narrative.²⁰ By contrast, the passage in *Antiquities* is thick with intrigue. We read that Felix had put forth a sustained effort to capture and put to death a number of bandits and imposters, who were “filling up” the entire country. Josephus in particular mentions how Felix captured and put to death one Eleazar b. Dinaeus, who was apparently some sort of leader among the bandits. In this context, Josephus tells how Jonathan had become a constant irritant to Felix because the high priest had repeatedly urged him to improve conditions in the country. Felix did not take this well and so hatched a plot for Jonathan’s removal. He succeeded in bribing one of Jonathan’s most trustworthy friends, Doras, to have Jonathan killed by bandits. This they did by mingling around Jonathan in Jerusalem and stabbing him with daggers. Josephus goes on to say that because the murder went unpunished, the bandits continued to commit such stealthy murders in Jerusalem and the temple precincts, either to do away with personal enemies or for mercenary gain.

The differences between these two narratives are striking. Indeed, if it were not for the fact that in both narratives Jonathan is killed, we would suspect that we had here two entirely separate incidents. In *War*, we read of Sicarii, a new type of bandit (ἕτερον εἶδος ληστών). In *Antiquities*, we read of bandits only. In *War*, the Sicarii embark upon a stealthy assassination. In *Antiquities*, the bandits do this as well as commit numerous murders and raid whole villages. In *War*, the assassination is emblematic of *stasis*, which will soon overrun the entire Judean state. In *Antiquities*, the assassination, murders and raids are entirely mercenary. From *War* arises the classical understanding that the Sicarii were a violent, principled, anti-Roman, revolutionary group. From *Antiquities* the Sicarii appear to be little more than a loosely organized gang of thugs.²¹ We can account for these different emphases in view of the literary aims of each work. *War* focuses more narrowly upon Judean *stasis* and how it brought about the ruin of the Judean state. *Antiquities*, on the other hand, embraces a moralizing element as it showcases the ultimately world-

²⁰ Brighton, *Sicarii* 53–64.

²¹ For the former see Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1890) I.ii.80–81, 178. For a more finely nuanced understanding see Hengel, 46–53. For the latter see Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 213–15.

wide effectiveness of the Judean constitution.²² We have another example of how Josephus will recast his material to suit his rhetorical agenda, “careless of the historical casualties.”

More to the point for our purposes here, if all we had was *Antiquities*, we would not trace the rise of the Sicarii to Jonathan’s murder. Indeed, we do not encounter the name Sicarii in this later work until the governorship of Festus. There (20:185–86) we read about a group of bandits who slew so many people at the festivals with short daggers that they became known as Sicarii. Josephus writes:

When Festus arrived in Judea, it happened that Judea was in distress by the bandits, who were setting fire to and plundering all the villages. And also those who were called Sicarii—now these were bandits—were at that time in particular increasing, using daggers resembling in size the Persian short sword, but curved and resembling what the Romans called *sicae*, from which the bandits also got the name because they did away with so many. For they would mix together with the crowds at the festivals, and just as I indicated earlier, they easily slew whomever they wished when the crowds drew together in mass from everywhere to the city for worship, and often they would come also upon their enemies’ villages with weapons and plunder and burn them. (*Antiquities* 20.185–87)

Here Josephus famously explains the connection between stealthy acts of violence with small daggers (ξίφιδίους), known among the Romans as *sicae*, and the name “Sicarii.” Commentators on Josephus make much of this derivation of the Sicarii name. The traditional view of the Sicarii holds that the use of the dagger in an urban environment is what uniquely identified a person, at least initially, as one of their number.²³ And indeed, Josephus uses the word ξίφιδιον eight times in his works, always to describe stealthy violence. But Josephus does not intend this exclusive understanding of the Sicarii because he immediately states that they also employed other weapons (μεθ’ ὀπλων) as they raided (διήραζον) whole villages, and neither of these terms is appropriate for describing stealthy, urban violence. Josephus employs διαρπάζω throughout his works (102x) to describe a regular activity of armies and soldiers. Such raiding activity happens after the defeat of an enemy force and is never stealthy. Moreover, small daggers are entirely inappropriate for this activity, and indeed Josephus never uses the term ξίφιδιον in such contexts. Ὀπλον, as the name suggests, rather describes the regular equipment of an armed soldier (139x) and, according to Josephus, included two swords (ξίφοι), a longer one on the left and a shorter one of about nine inches upon the right (*War* 3:93–94). Such terminology, “plundering with weapons,” certainly ought to give us pause in identifying the Sicarii, even at the earliest stages of unrest, exclusively as urban fighters who committed stealthy assassinations. In other words, it is more reasonable for us to conclude that Josephus digresses here about *sicca* not to describe the unique activity of the Sicarii, because he would then immediately contradict himself when he writes about them “plundering with weapons,” but rather merely to explain the origin of the name.

²² Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* 55–121.

²³ So Hengel, *Zealots* 46–49, 397–98.

Close examination of how Josephus employs the term “sicarii” in *War* confirms this more general usage.²⁴ Although there is certainly evidence that the term came into use in connection with the high profile assassination of Jonathan, Josephus by no means restricts the term for this type of activity. Indeed, the Sicarii at Masada, commanded by Eleazar b. Yair, were never active in Jerusalem or in any urban environment. Instead they raided nearby villages. The one consistent trait of the Sicarii that Josephus carefully maintains throughout the narrative of *War* is how they either employed or more generally clearly threatened violence against their own people for religious and political ends. Josephus, for example, sometimes calls the group from Masada bandits and sometimes Sicarii depending on whether they raid Gentiles or Jews respectively. The murder of their own people is precisely the sin that Josephus has Eleazar b. Yair, the Sicarii leader, confess at Masada immediately before describing their voluntary deaths. All this leads to the conclusion that from a historical perspective, the word Sicarii was used in Judea, beginning with the governorship of Felix, not only in a specific way to designate stealthy urban assassinations but also in a more general way, much as today modern western politicians might use the label “terrorist.” Exactly by whom and how widely spread the word was employed is less certain. Josephus does not stipulate who employed the term. Certainly the Roman leaders would have used it in Judea inasmuch as “Sicarii” is a Latin loan word. We might also reasonably suggest the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, who had regular dealings with these “official outsiders,” made some use of the term, but in view of its complete absence from the Gospels and elsewhere in Acts, and its rare and unclear use in later Rabbinic literature, the term certainly does not appear to be widespread.

3. *The third question: our understanding of the Sicarii from Luke.* In Luke, we read about a Roman official employing a Latin term and applying it to the followers of a nameless Egyptian. It is clear from both passages above that the Egyptian threatened violence not only against the Romans but also against the established Judean leadership in Jerusalem. Josephus tells us in *War* that this Egyptian was intent upon forcing his way into Jerusalem so that he might become a tyrant. The point is made rather more indirectly in *Antiquities*. There we read how the Egyptian postured himself over and against Jerusalem in a manner which recalled Joshua against Jericho. At his command, the walls of Jerusalem also would fall and, presumably, the corrupt leadership would be destroyed. This tribune in Acts, then, was employing the term, much as Josephus himself also used the term, to describe and marginalize organized seditious activity against one’s own people. Hengel implies that this usage of the term is in fact an anachronism, for the term originally was used much more precisely. But we have seen in *Antiquities* that from the very beginning, Josephus does not distinguish the Sicarii so precisely. The same can be said against Haenchen’s insistence that Josephus preserves the distinction of the Sicarii as “daggermen.” Josephus clearly states that, even at their first

²⁴ For all these following conclusions, see Brighton, *Sicarii* 141–50.

appearance, they also employed ὄπλα, the weapons of soldiers. Haenchen also states that the term *sicarii* is inaccurately applied to the Egyptian's followers because they were an "unarmed mob." But a close reading of the narrative in *War* indicates that the Egyptian intended to employ these "unarmed" followers as body guards after they overcame the Roman garrison. Clearly, it is much more likely that the Egyptian's followers had weapons of some sort.

We turn now to Mason's theory of Luke's faulty memory. We might begin by observing that the theory seems to work against itself in some measure, for it would be odd if Luke had heard this part of *War* read, remembered the exceedingly rare word "Sicarii," but failed to connect it to the high profile assassination of Jonathan, instead incorrectly connecting it to a nameless "Egyptian." One might suppose that the whole point for remembering anything at all about "Sicarii" from this part of *War* was the assassination of the high priest. By way of comparison, history remembers John Wilkes Booth precisely because he assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Of more substance, however, is this: the theory would be attractive if we believed that the term "Sicarii" would never have been applied to the Egyptian's followers. Here Mason sharply distinguishes between this "religious-prophetic" figure and the Sicarii as guerrillas. But we have seen above that the distinction is not nearly so sharp. Mason suggests that this Latin loan word was not in use by Jews but only by outsiders. The way Josephus uses the word in *War* suggests some use among the Judeans, but even if this were not the case, in Acts it is precisely an "official outsider," and no one else throughout the narrative, who makes use of the term.

Therefore, there is no real objection to be raised from the writings of Josephus against a tribune's employing the term in this manner about the Egyptian's followers. A recent study of the Sicarii in *War* suggests that from a historical perspective they were not an outgrowth of the Zealots. Nor are they to be identified with the sect of Judas, whatever that sect may have been. Nor are they identified by any singular mode of violence. Rather, the word was "a somewhat fluid term used to describe Jews of the Judean revolt who were associated with acts of violence against their own people for religious/political ends."²⁵ If Luke got this bit of information from Paul, as seems most likely, then in Acts we have independent confirmation of Josephus's usage. The Egyptian aims at violence against his own people in order to become a tyrant. His followers were forcefully disbanded, but he got away. At least one Roman official dismissed the Egyptian as nothing more than a leader of a band of "Sicarii." This same Roman official apprehended Paul, who was at the center of a civil disturbance in the temple. Paul's opponents claimed that his very presence stood in opposition to the Judean people and the Torah. The tribune's initial confused guess about Paul is indeed understandable.

4. *The fourth question: Luke's usage of the term in the narrative of Acts.* We can venture an answer to this question much more quickly, for it has already been suggested by Haenchen above. Opposition to Paul in Acts most often came from fellow Jews. Witherington makes this observation also and

²⁵ Ibid. xiii.

marks Paul's arrest at Jerusalem as a turning point in Acts. As the narrative continues Luke emphasizes how Paul's mission to the Gentiles is not an "anti-Jewish" one: Paul is not an enemy of his own people. As partial evidence for this theme, Witherington observes that the speeches that follow in Acts, delivered before Roman officials, are directed towards Jews. "What these chapters show is that Luke is not mainly interested in doing apologetics either to or for Roman officials. Were that his interest we would surely have at least one speech where Paul addresses the relationship of the Way to Roman interests and the Empire's concerns."²⁶ Haenchen suggests that Luke here takes the opportunity in a transitional moment to sound a note of acquittal concerning these charges. Paul is no "terrorist" or leader of "Sicarii." Luke draws all the more attention to this transitional moment by the use of such a rare and striking word.²⁷ He did not come to lead any civil revolt against the Judean leaders. Judging by his words and activities in Acts, we conclude that Paul's agenda was far greater than that.

III. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The foregoing illustrates the necessity of a thorough understanding of Josephus in order to understand a portion of Acts. A superficial reading of Josephus will lead to misunderstanding and inappropriate conclusions. This is true not only in regard to the Sicarii, but also the Pharisees, priests, Roman administration—in short, anything at all that Josephus would tell us about late Second temple Judaism. Josephus simply cannot be used as a proof text for the NT world, as we have seen above, but must first be read as an author crafting his works in defense of his own people at Rome. Only when we understand the whole will we be able to understand the parts.

More particularly, it has previously been assumed that Luke's reference to the Sicarii in Acts 21:38 is unhistorical. This assumption is based in part upon the idea that Josephus precisely distinguishes the Sicarii in his works as urban revolutionaries who wield the dagger, and that, therefore, the term would never be applied to the Egyptian's followers. Such an understanding, however, is sustainable only when we privilege certain passages about the Sicarii in Josephus over and against others. We have seen above that even at their earliest appearance, such an idea necessitates that we privilege his account in *War* over that in *Antiquities*. In view of Josephus's rhetorical habits, such privileging appears tenuous at best. A more holistic approach demonstrates how Josephus, throughout his works, uses the word much more loosely and, we might add, in a manner which corresponds precisely to Luke's usage in Acts. Rather than using Josephus (incorrectly) to convict Luke of a historical inaccuracy, we should rather conclude here that Luke provides independent confirmation of Josephus's portrayal of the Sicarii.

²⁶ Witherington, *Acts* 660.

²⁷ Luke apparently assumes that Theophilus, his patron, would understand the term. As mentioned above, this points to its historical usage at some level in Judea. The assumption also harmonizes well with identifying Theophilus as a more highly educated person, who was himself acquainted with Roman administration in Judea.