The politics of Judaea in the 50s CE: the use of the New Testament

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ABSTRACT In an article in JJS lxviii:2 (Autumn 2017), Peter Tomson took issue with my arguments against the traditional view that the politics of Judaea witnessed an increase in tension between Jews and Gentiles in the 50s CE. In responding to Tomson, this study examines in particular the New Testament texts he cites in support of the traditional view and enquires more generally into the value of the New Testament as evidence for Judaean politics in this period, with a close investigation, in particular, into the significance of Galatians 6:12 and the depiction of Agrippa II in the Acts of the Apostles.

In an article published in this journal in autumn 2017,1 Peter Tomson took issue with the arguments I have put forward, in a number of works,2 against the standard accounts of Judaean history, based on Josephus, which describe the 50s as a time of increasing tension.3 Tomson is unconvinced by my suggestion that Josephus, writing with hindsight, attempted, in the manner of Thucydides, to explain the disastrous war which broke out in 66 CE by treating the events of the previous period as a prelude to destruction, exaggerating the impact on Jewish–Roman relations of the few incidents he described. Tomson argues to the contrary that the fuller account of the decades preceding the war to be found in Josephus’ Antiquities

3. As Tomson notes correctly (‘Sources on the Politics of Judaea’, pp. 234–5 n. 2), this standard view is put forward in many important works published in the 1970s and 1980s.
suggests that Josephus minimised in the *Jewish War* the extent of unrest in the 50s, and that this period in fact witnessed increasing tension between Jews and Gentiles characterized by zealot pressure on Gentiles to submit to circumcision.⁴

Peter Tomson is undoubtedly correct that the parallel I posited between Josephus’ pre-war narrative in the *Jewish War* and Thucydides’ analysis of the years leading up to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War is not exact, but I am not convinced that this makes any difference to our understanding of Judaean politics in this period. The Romans were well aware that the Judaean populace had threatened an uprising in 40 CE in response to Caligula’s plan to set up his statue in the Temple,⁵ but the garrison stationed in the province remained small from 44 to 66 CE,⁶ and the Romans continued to allow pilgrims to congregate three times a year in Jerusalem despite knowing the huge size of the crowds.⁷ The silence of Tacitus in both his *Histories* and his *Annals* about unrest in Jerusalem during the 50s CE still seems to me significant.⁸

But I accept that another assertion by Peter Tomson in his article requires more detailed consideration, for his insistence that the New Testament should be considered as a potential independent check on Josephus’ description of the pre-war period is persuasive, since it is likely that all of the New Testament was written without knowledge of Josephus’ histories and some at least of the New Testament texts were composed before the war of 66–70 and might provide a corrective to Josephus’ hindsight.⁹ The rest of this article will therefore be devoted to an examination of what, if anything, the New Testament can tell us about Judaean politics in this period.

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⁵. Tac. *Hist.* 5.9.2.
⁸. Contrast Tac. *Ann.* 12.54.1–4, on the clashes between Felix and Cumanus in Galilee and Samaria in this period.
Paul’s letters

As Tomson himself notes, the most promising material is to be found among the letters of Paul.¹⁰ The precise date of Paul’s death is uncertain, but the authentic Pauline epistles (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon) were all certainly written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and there are good grounds for dating them in the 40s and 50s CE.¹¹ If these letters have good information about Judaean politics they should have primacy, as contemporary documents, over the later narratives of Josephus and Tacitus.

Tomson claims that precisely such contemporary information can indeed be culled from these letters,¹² but it seems to me that, although these epistles have much to say about Judaea with regard to relations between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Jews and relations between Jewish and Gentile Christians, it is less clear that they reveal anything about general relations between Jews and Gentiles in Judaea. Tomson notes that Paul writes at the end of Romans, probably around 58 CE when he was carrying funds to Judaea for ‘the poor among the saints in Jerusalem’, to beseech the Christians in Rome to pray ‘that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judaea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints’ (Rom. 15:30–31), but it is not clear how this can be said, as Tomson claims, to reinforce ‘the impression of increasing “zeal for the law” in Jerusalem’.¹³ On the face of it, Paul’s concerns lay in the danger of opposition by Judaean Jews to his Christian teachings and the possibility that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would find fault with the funds he had raised. Neither issue has anything obvious to do with increasing zeal for the law in Jerusalem.

But Tomson’s prime case is based on Galatians, since he argues that the debate about circumcision which permeates this letter reflects a movement among Judaean zealots to force resident Gentiles to become Jewish and accept circumcision, an ideology alleged to be in ‘remote continuity’ with the practice of Hasmonean rulers in the late second century BCE.¹⁴ According

¹⁰. Ibid., p. 244.
¹³. Ibid., p. 248.
¹⁴. Ibid., pp. 256–7.
to Galatians 6:12, those who ‘try to compel you [the Galatian Christians] to be circumcised’ do so because they are themselves exposed to pressure and even persecution. Tomson notes that ‘it is not clear where they come from, but the frequent mention of Jerusalem along with Peter and James [in the epistle as a whole] makes that a likely provenance.’ Since this interpretation of Galatians 6:12 is shared by other scholars, it is worth laying out here why I believe it to be wrong. Galatians 6:12 is found in a postscript at the end of the letter:

[12] It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised – only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. [13] Even the circumcised [or, better (see below), ‘those who are being circumcised’] do not themselves obey law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. [14] May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. [15] For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! [16] As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. (RSV)

Paul’s assertion at 6:12 raises difficult questions for modern interpreters. To what sort of persecution did Paul refer, and who would persecute whom for failing to circumcise Gentile Christians in Galatia, and why?

Commentators generally recognize this as a puzzle. The interpretation proposed by Peter Thomson, that the persecutors were Jews from Judaea, transferring into Galatia a Judaean campaign for conversion of Gentiles by the forcible circumcision of males, was adopted already in 1982 by Frank Bruce, but manifold other suggestions have been made. Perhaps the persecutors were non-Christian Jews upset that Gentile Godfearers were being enticed away from synagogues into Paul’s Christian communities, attracted by admission without circumcision? Perhaps they were local Jews in Galatia who made Gentiles who had become Christians and been circumcised feel uncomfortable

15. Ibid., p. 247.
within the Jewish community if they did not force other Gentile Christians also to be circumcised?\textsuperscript{18}

My own suggestion starts from an observation about the probable nature and purpose of the postscript (6:11–18), which Paul indicated he had himself added to the letter he had dictated. Since publication of the great commentary on Galatians by Hans-Dieter Betz, it has been standard to accept his assertion that this postscript is the ‘hermeneutical key to the intentions of the Apostle [in the letter as a whole]’\textsuperscript{19} But it seems to me more likely that the postscript, scribbled with distinctively large letters (6:11), was actually adding something new in relation to the predicament of Paul’s correspondents in order to add even more force to his furious denunciations in the body of the epistle. The postscript must have been intended to be intelligible to the recipients of the letter in Galatia, but that need not mean that it simply echoed what was said in the document to which it was appended. The main epistle and the postscript both encouraged Paul’s Gentile Christians to resist those who wished them to be circumcised, but neither Paul’s arguments nor the identity or alleged motivation of those urging circumcision necessarily remained the same.

I can see no reason to differ from the consensus that those opposed by Paul in the main text of Galatians were ethnic Jews who had accepted Christ, nor that these Jewish Christians wanted Gentiles in Galatia who accepted Christ to become circumcised proselytes as the hallmark of the people of God, nor that these Jewish Christ-followers probably had some links with the Jerusalem church and bolstered their arguments theologically from biblical texts, especially the narratives about Abraham.\textsuperscript{20} But these opponents of Paul attacked in the main letter do not seem to be the same people as those attacked by him in the postscript, since in the postscript, at 6:13, Paul appears to envisage those who ‘want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh’ as Gentile Christians who are undergoing


circumcision – hence his use of the present participle to refer to ‘those who are being circumcised (peritemnomenoi)’.  

If it is such Gentile Christians who are urging circumcision on fellow Gentiles to avoid persecution ‘for the cross of Christ’ (6:12), and if we ask from what source Gentile Christians in Galatia might have expected persecution for adopting Christianity without becoming Jews, it is not hard to find an answer – but it lies not in the politics of Judaea but in the civic life of Galatia. Paul’s teaching to his Gentile converts was not always consistent (as can be seen not least in his rhetoric about the significance of circumcision in Galatians 5:2–12), but he does not seem to have wavered in his insistence that his flock must demonstrate their faith in Christ by abjuring the worship of other gods. It is true that this is not a theme emphasized in Paul’s letter to the Galatians as it is elsewhere in his correspondence, but Galatians 4:8 and 5:20 take it for granted that the recipients of the epistle have abandoned their previous life as pagans and ‘turned to God from idols’ (so Paul in I Thessalonians 1:9, the earliest of his letters to survive).

The people who will have objected to this rejection of pagan worship by Galatian Gentiles will have been not Jews but local pagans. It is not accidental that accounts of Christian martyrdoms at the hands of Gentile authorities stress so consistently hostility to the refusal of Christians to recognize the gods of the community – hence the account of Christian trials by the younger Pliny over half a century later in Pontus, just north of Galatia, clearly implies that the main issue at stake was the neglect of the traditional cults.

It is not possible to demonstrate conclusively that pagan converts to Christianity could avoid such persecution by their Gentile neighbours for their rejection of ancestral religion if they were thought by those Gentiles to have become Jews, but it might at the very least have seemed a tactic worth trying when Gentile Christians came under pressure from their erstwhile pagan co-religionists. There seems no doubt that Gentiles in the cities of the early Roman Empire recognized, however grudgingly, the validity of proselyte conversion, however distasteful they found it. Nor should it be doubted that Gentiles were well aware that adoption of Judaism also involved

21. J. Munck, Paul and the Salvation of Mankind (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp. 87–9, argued already in the 1950s that the opposition to Paul in Galatia was comprised of a group of law-observant Gentiles, but he has persuaded few New Testament scholars because his hypothesis fails to distinguish the opponents in the letter from those attacked in the postscript.

withdrawal from the traditional religious practices of the polytheistic community which the proselyte left behind. As Tacitus remarked sourly in the early second century CE, proselytes ‘renounce their ancestral religions’ and ‘those [Gentiles] who are converted to their ways [i.e. of the Jews] follow the same practice [i.e. circumcision], and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods [and] abandon their fatherland’.23

I suggest, therefore, that Galatians 6:12 refers to Gentile Christians in Galatia trying to avoid persecution by their Gentile neighbours for abandoning the religious practices of the community. Such abandonment simply ‘for the cross of Christ’ ran the risk of intense hostility from puzzled neighbours, just as the nomen Christianum evoked distaste for Pliny half a century later. Jews, by contrast, practised a permitted religion, with privileges long woven into the fabric of civic life.24 Demonstrating Jewish identity was not altogether easy either for a born Jew or for a proselyte, but non-Jews fastened on male circumcision as an identity marker, as shown most starkly in the awful account by Suetonius of the public stripping of an old man in a Roman court which he witnessed in Rome as a boy during the rule of Domitian: for the court the exposure of the defendant’s circumcision was enough to make him liable to the Jewish tax levied on all Jews after 70 CE.25

If Gentile Christians in Galatia could be accused by Paul of having undergone circumcision simply for such social and political reasons rather than out of theological conviction, this might explain his otherwise odd assertion in the postscript that ‘those who are being circumcised do not themselves obey the law’ (6:13). Their pressure on other Gentile Christians in their community to undergo circumcision along with them could be explained by their desire to avoid being stigmatised by association with ‘atheists’ who (in the eyes of pagans) had rejected worship of the gods for no reason apart from the new-fangled notion of salvation through Christ alone.

If this analysis is correct, the alignment of this sociological polemic with the theological arguments in the rest of the epistle will have been made by Paul as he came to pen his final urgent message in a postscript to his backsliding community. I do not think that such conflation by Paul of two

23. Tac. Hist. 5.5.1–2.
different issues as a way to bolster his polemic should really be a surprise. Paul’s rhetoric was frequently innovative and inventive – indeed, the emphasis on male circumcision so that it alone can become a metonym for Jewishness which is at the heart of the epistle to the Galatians seems to have been one such rhetorical innovation.²⁶

I suggest, in sum, that Galatians should not be taken as evidence that Jewish followers of Jesus were in danger of persecution by fellow non-Christian Jews if they did not demand circumcision of the Galatian Gentiles who believed in Christ, let alone as evidence of an alleged ‘politics of circumcision’ in Judaea. Rather, it should be seen as a reflection of a crisis within the Galatian Gentile Christian community, where the danger of persecution came not from Jews but from their Gentile neighbours.

Acts

The account in Acts is hard to reconcile with Paul’s letters, as Tomson notes,²⁷ but he is right to contend that the discrepancies encourage us to treat Acts as an independent source. If Acts was composed after 70 C.E., and therefore with as much hindsight as Josephus (as is almost certain), the value of this source as a check on Josephus’ account of the 50s lies in its provision of an alternative perspective on Judaean politics before the war, composed by an author whose primary purpose was not to explain the disaster but to trace the early history of the Christian movement, including the persecution of some of its leaders.

On a straight reading, it is not clear that the narrative in Acts about the history of the early Christian movement in Judaea projects any suggestion that Judaean politics were increasingly in the grip of zealots opposed to Gentiles and Gentile rule. The narrative is dominated by disputes about the best way for Jewish Christians to treat Gentile Christians, an issue internal to the Christian movement. Concerns about Gentiles are voiced by non-Christian Jews only in relation to the allegation that Paul had defiled the Temple by bringing a Greek within its precincts, but there was nothing novel about this

taboo, which was enshrined on Greek inscriptions affixed to the balustrade surrounding the Court of Israel.\(^{28}\)

When the author of Acts referred to political disaffection in Judaea in a short speech to the Sanhedrin ascribed to Gamaliel, the speech was remarkable primarily for its ignorance of chronology, stating explicitly that the uprising of Judas the Galilean in the time of the census (6 CE) had taken place after the suppression of Theudas in the time of Fadus (44–46 CE), and for its argument that the failure of these previous movements to achieve anything should encourage the Sanhedrin to leave the nascent Christian community alone.\(^{29}\) The only reference to a troublemaker in Judaea actually in the 50s found in Acts is the suggestion attributed to a tribune in Jerusalem that Paul might be the Egyptian demagogue who had assembled a crowd of supporters in the wilderness and (according to Josephus) intended to lead them to the Mount of Olives to witness the miraculous collapse of the walls of Jerusalem and defeat of the Roman garrison.\(^{30}\) The Egyptian’s followers had been massacred by Felix, but the Egyptian himself had escaped, and he was evidently remembered, although Acts refers to four thousand ‘assassins’ in contrast to the thirty thousand alleged by Josephus, who was a teenager or young adult in Jerusalem at the time.\(^{31}\) In sum, if the writings of Josephus had not survived and a modern reader was able to pick up information about Judaean politics in the 50s only from the information provided by Acts, it is unlikely that she would form the view that Jewish–Gentile relations and anti-Roman sentiment were increasing in tension through this decade. But it is worth noting that this putative reader would instead have gained an impression about one unusual element of government in Judaea in this period which was largely suppressed in Josephus’ Jewish War, and which might have led her to realize the exceptional significance of religious institutions in the politics of this province. I have discussed elsewhere the striking omission by Josephus in the Jewish War of any reference to the central role of Agrippa II in the management of the Temple on behalf of Rome during the 50s despite the fact, revealed in the Antiquities (20.222), that he was granted

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28. On the balustrade, see Joseph. AJ. 15.417; BJ 5.194; 6.124–8; C.Ap. 2.103; Philo, Leg. 212; on the prohibition of Gentiles entering the inner regions of the Temple already in the early second century BCE, see Jos. AJ 12.145.


curatorship (*epimeleia*) of the Temple from early in the decade right through to the outbreak of revolt in 66 CE.\(^{32}\) It was an anomaly in Roman provincial administration that the governor, with his headquarters in Caesarea, did not exercise formal control over the institution which dominated by far the largest and most important city in his province. Trouble, when it broke out, was usually focused on the Temple, and the High Priest was expected to play a major part in its suppression, but responsibility for appointing the High Priest and oversight of the good government of the Temple was the task not of the governor but of Agrippa. Thus it was Agrippa, residing (sometimes with his sister Berenice) in the old palace of the Hasmonaeans in the Upper City overlooking the Temple Mount, who appointed the Temple officers who would have to take action if a maverick like Paul was thought by other worshippers in the Temple to be a possible threat to the sanctity of the Temple cult.\(^{33}\)

I have argued that Josephus’ decision to play down the central role of Agrippa in Judaean society was prompted by Agrippa’s ultimate failure to fulfil his task successfully. It was, after all, in the Temple that revolt broke out in 66 CE, many of the priests appointed by Agrippa took the side of the rebels, and the institution which had been entrusted to him by Rome was ultimately burned to the ground. It is not hard to see why Josephus, writing in Rome in the 70s when Agrippa and his sister Berenice were close friends of the future emperor Titus, might choose to gloss over this failure.\(^{34}\)

The author of Acts was under no such constraints, and his account of the role of Agrippa and Berenice in the questioning of Paul in Caesarea provides a more detailed insight into Agrippa’s constitutional role than any other source. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem in c.58 after (unintentionally) sparking a riot in the Temple (21:27–36), and he had been quizzed by the council of the High Priest (23:1–10), before being sent to procurator Felix in Caesarea (23:23–30). The High Priest in question, Ananias son of Nedebaeus (23:2; 24:1), had been appointed by Agrippa’s uncle Herod of Chalcis more than a decade earlier, in c.47 CE,\(^{35}\) but Agrippa must have made the decision

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 88.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., pp. 89, 92.

\(^{35}\) On the appointment of Ananias in c.47 CE, see Joseph. *AJ* 20. 103.
to keep him in post when he took over care of the Temple in c.52 CE, and it was only to be expected that he would take upon himself, on behalf of Rome, to sort out Paul, as a potential troublemaker.

The account in Acts of the hearing of Paul’s case held by Agrippa and Berenice when they came to Caesarea to welcome the new governor Festus in c.60 CE is thus entirely plausible (even if the speech assigned to Paul in 26:1–23 is not). Agrippa’s standing was based not just on his status as king over regions neighbouring Judaea, his self-appointed role as spokesman for Jewish communities around the Roman world, or his knowledge of Jewish practice and law (which will have far exceeded that of the incoming governor, who is unlikely to have received any briefing about local customs before he was despatched to his province). Nor was his standing based just on his position as an important Roman to whom a governor of equestrian rank, such as Felix and Festus, might be expected to show respect. The matter was much more formal, since Festus, asking Agrippa to give him ‘something to write’ as a charge against Paul when sending him to the emperor in Rome (25:26–27), was recognizing that Paul’s behaviour in Jerusalem came under Agrippa’s jurisdiction for which he had a mandate from the emperor.

The hearing followed standard Roman procedures, with the presiding judge accompanied by colleagues seated with him (26:30) to give advice, even if the prominent role accorded to Berenice (25:23) was something of an anomaly in a political system which generally denied women a public role. When Agrippa said to Festus, after being told about Paul, ‘I would like to hear the man himself’ (25:22), Festus’ agreement to the request was a matter not of politeness but a recognition of formal Roman policy in the administration of Judaea, and it is likely that this was known to the author of Acts when he wrote about these events many years later, after Agrippa had become a famous personality in Rome.

37. On Agrippa’s expanding kingdom in the region, see Joseph. BJ 2. 247, 252; on his role as spokesman for Jews, see Joseph. BJ 2. 245; AJ 20. 135.
38. On Agrippa’s courtesy visit to Tiberius Julius Alexander (his erstwhile brother-in-law) on his accession to the role of prefect of Egypt in 66 CE, see Joseph. BJ 2. 309.
Conclusion

Peter Tomson is thus right to encourage the use of the New Testament as a check on the narrative of politics in Judaea in the 50s CE in Josephus’ *Jewish War*, but use of this evidence does not support his claim that there was ‘a growing exasperation over the presence of non-Jews [in Judaea] and an increasing readiness to act violently against it, apparently even in the diaspora’. The genuine letters of Paul can indeed be read as a precious testimony to this period unpolluted by the baneful effects of hindsight after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE; but unfortunately these letters have nothing whatever to say about Jewish–Gentile relations in Judaea apart from the debates within the nascent Christian community itself. On the other hand, Christian writings composed after 70, notably Acts, provide insights into alternative memories of Agrippa’s role in the government of Judaea as a valuable counter to the apologetic amnesia displayed by Josephus in the *Jewish War*.40

40. I am grateful for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article from participants in the seminar on Jewish History and Literature in the Graeco-Roman Period in Oxford and from participants in the conference on Jews in the Graeco-Roman world held in Pavia in June 2018 in honour of Prof. Lucio Troiani.