

HEARERS OF THE WORD

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145 (144); Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed them to those seated

John 6:1 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the *Sea* of Tiberias. 2 A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3 Jesus went up *the mountain* and sat down there with his disciples. 4 Now the *Passover*, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5 When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy *bread* for these people to eat?” 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, 9 “There is a *boy* (Greek: *paidarion*) here who has five *barley* loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” 10 Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11 Then Jesus **took** the **loaves**, and when he had given **thanks**, he **distributed** them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” 13 So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “*This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.*” 15 When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, *he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Twice in the liturgical year B, Mark is supplemented by the Fourth Gospel. This happens for three Sundays in Lent and more extensively during the summer. The reading of Mark is suspended for no fewer than five Sundays and we read instead from John 6. However, the

sequence of the entire chapter follows Mark, as may be seen from the chart overleaf.

KIND OF WRITING

This is the Johannine reception of the traditional story of the multiplication of the loaves. Already at the level of Mark’s Gospel, this story is to be read symbolically—to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to figure out “what actually happened.” At the level of the present text, this doesn’t matter because it is the teaching about present risen Jesus (and the Lord’s Supper) that counts.

Behind the story lies symbolism linked with Moses and Elisha (see the Old Testament background) and in front of the story lies the Christian practice of the Eucharist, a reality which shapes all of John 6. An even more fundamental reality lies beneath the narrative, however, and that is the identity of Jesus. Each of the sections is focused first of all on *who Jesus is* and only then on how we encounter him in the Lord’s Supper.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Significant texts from the Hebrew Bible are alluded to in this telling. In the text of John 6 above, the Moses and Elisha allusions are in *italics*. The Eucharistic references are in **bold**.

(i) Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give

Thought for the day

The multiplication of the loaves generates many levels of meaning, often deeply spiritual. At a more ordinary level, we see an anonymous boy with the bread and fish making available what little he had for the Lord to make use of them. Placing ourselves at his disposal, offering whatever gifts we have is all that is asked of each of us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we know that you see potential where we see limits. All we have and are is your gift in the first place. Help us to place ourselves and your gifts at your disposal for the service of the Kingdom.

us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favour in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” (Num 11:10-15)

(ii) When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land. As the company of prophets was sitting before him, he said to his servant (Gk: *paidarion*) “Put the large pot on, and make some stew for the company of prophets.” (2 Kgs 4:38)

(iii) A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” (2 Kgs 4:42)

(iv) The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. (Deut 18:15)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though

Sequence	John	Mark
Multiplication (5000)	6:1-15	6:30-34
Walking on the water	6:16-24	6:45-54
<i>Skip to what follows in Mark after the second multiplication (4000)</i>		
Request for sign	6:25-34	8:11-13
Remarks on the bread	6:35-59	8:14-21
Faith of Peter	6:60-69	8:27-30
Passion theme/ betrayal	6:70-71	8:31-33

there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:9-14)

ST PAUL

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Cor 9:6-11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 “Sea” (twice) reminds us of Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea.

Verse 2 Earlier, Jesus condemned faith based only on signs: *Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”* (John 4:48)

Verse 3 The mountain too is symbolic reminding us of Moses on Mount Sinai.

Verse 4 It is very important that this is Passover and the reference returns at the end of ch.6 in an oblique way: *He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.* (John 6:71) In this Gospel, Jesus is the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36), sent to death at the moment when the slaughter of Passover lambs traditionally began (John 19:13-15). This feast was the context for the programmatic temple action

in John 2, as well as for the dénouement of this Gospel in John 19-20.

Verse 5 Like Moses, Jesus himself notices the problem of the shortage.

Verse 6 In this Gospel, Jesus is always portrayed as totally aware and in control, a portrait under the considerable influence of the Easter faith.

Verse 7 This verse underlines the seriousness of the challenge. The “little” contrasts strongly with the extensive leftovers gathered into twelve baskets.

Verse 8 Andrew has a higher profile in this Gospel (John 1:40, 44; 6:8; 12:22).

Verse 9 The words here evoke the Elisha texts cited above.

Verse 10 The instructions evoke Mark: *Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.* (Mark 6:39)

Verse 11 Notice the Eucharistic language – important in a Gospel that does not recount the Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper in John 13.

Verse 12 Gathering is a significant image in this Gospel. Cf. Jn 11:52.

Verse 13 Twelve alludes, in the context, to all Israel, symbolised by the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel.

Verse 14 This refers to Deuteronomy 18:15. There was an expectation that a Moses-type figure would inaugurate the Messianic age. In this Gospel, it is clear that Jesus is indeed a prophet (as with the Samaritan woman).

Verse 15 The people don’t actually say or attempt this, so the transition is abrupt. In this Gospel Jesus really is a king, but conceived utterly differently, as the dialogue with Pilate makes clear (John 18-19).

POINTERS FOR HOMILY AND PRAYER

One could start by reflecting on times of need in one’s own life, coupled perhaps

the estimation of apparently inadequate resources. It might have been that the simple giving of what one had led to results, which took those involved by surprise. The metaphor of bread is linked to hunger. It might be good to recall any relevant experiences of need which formed part of our journey of faith, critical times when we felt nourished by our faith. Part of that journey may well include an initial, not yet fully formed grasp of who Jesus is. What image of Jesus followed? What relationship then developed? Where are we now in relation to that? It is not without interest that the initiative comes from Jesus, suggesting that we don’t know how hungry we are until we encounter him. Often, it is only when we are surprised by relief (and belief) that we recognise how needy we really were.

1. At the heart of this story we are told that Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed them. In our day this reminds us of the Eucharist, the bread of life with which Jesus feeds us. By sharing the bread and wine in the Eucharist we symbolise our unity with one another and with God. Can you recall a particular Eucharist that was especially nourishing for you. What was it that made it different?

2. Take, give thanks, distribute. The actions of Jesus also suggest an attitude to time, gifts and living. We take what we are given, give thanks, and use what we have. Have you found that having a grateful heart for what you have been given has made it easier for you to share with others?

3. From what seemed meagre and inadequate resources many were fed. When have you found that when you gratefully use what little resources you have the results are beyond your expectations?

4. Jesus chose to involve those around him in feeding the people. Have there been times when you have experienced benefits from calling on those around you to use their gifts to help with a task?

PRAYER

O God, you open wide your hand, giving us food in due season. Out of your never-failing abundance, satisfy the hungers of body and soul and lead all peoples of the earth to the feast of the world to come. We make our prayer through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

One body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all

Eph 4:1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Pauline tradition regularly combines the indicative and the imperative. The sequence is inverted here and the writer gives us first the ethics (how?) and only then the theology (why?).

KIND OF WRITING

The exhortation in Ephesians (the *paranesis*) takes up 4:1-16. The outline is clear enough:

- 1-3 Qualities and virtues
- 4-6 Unity in confession
- 7-10 Digression on Christ
- 11-12 Enumeration of gifts
- 13-16 Maturing in faith

Our reading takes in steps one and two. Thus the author begins with the virtues to be sought and only then goes on the see why we might desire such qualities.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As frequently in Ephesians, the exhortation is rather general. It could apply to many situations. There is an advantage in that it may also still apply to us today. If one were to attempt a “mirror reading”, then the advice would imply a life *not* worthy, *lack* of humility gentleness etc., perhaps even *divisions* in the community. Of course, conflict is normal and to be expected. Any attempt to pretend otherwise is a form of denial, however sophisticated.

RELATED PASSAGES

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may

know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. (Ephesians 1:17-19)

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1Corinthians 8:5-6)

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23)

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. (Colossians 3:12-15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The hearers are explicitly called to be “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” All these is God’s initiative

and now it is their time to respond and to live the great gifts. To live is lit. “to walk,” an old biblical term for ethical living.

Verse 2 All four virtues are interesting. *Humility* had, in the culture, an association with slaves—shocking but this is also the way of Jesus (Matthew 11:29). *Gentleness* is a kind of persistent courtesy, a virtue recommended by the Roman moralists of the period. Cf. Matthew 5:5. *Patience*, in Greek, has an illuminating etymology. It means lit. to be long-heated or long-tempered. *Love* is the greatest of the virtues. Each of these qualities implies some kind of self-restraint, some kind of holding back for the greater good.

Verse 3 Making every effort is lit. being eager, with emphasis more on the motivation than on the deed. The bond of peace (Gk: *syn-desmos*) is a play on the word prisoner in v. 1 (Gr: *desmios*). The bound writer wants them to enjoy the bond of peace.

Verses 4-6 These verses resemble closely 1 Cor 8:6, 12:4-6. So much so that some writers think we have here a kind of early confession or creed. Note that the order is not the one which later became classical. Instead, this begins with experience in the Spirit, and move through Jesus to God the Father. Unity is quality found through Ephesians. The final doxology in v. 6 has both a Jewish and a Stoic ring to it.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Taking a look at myself, which of the virtues do I (more or less) live and which do I really lack?
2. The four qualities in v. 2 all imply some kind of holding back for the good of others. Am I in a situation now which requires these strengths?
3. Spirituality from the top down is what we were brought up on. Perhaps spirituality from the bottom up is more authentic, more real, less inclined to self-delusion?

PRAYER

Loving God, Spirit, Son and Father, in you we live and move and have our being. As we grow in discipleship, help us to make our own in heart and in need the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience and love. Amen.

Elisha set it before them, they ate, and had some left

2 Kings 4:42 A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." 43 But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" 44 He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The links with our Gospel for this Sunday are clear, especially the question in v.43, the mention of barley, the contrasting numbers fed and the abundance of the leftovers.

The Elijah and Elisha stories lie behind the telling of some of Jesus' miracles in the New Testament. This partly a "hermeneutic of continuity" (!), showing that the fulfilment of Old Testament types in the New. It is also an acknowledgement of the prophetic identity of Jesus, who is a prophet to the poor in need. The relatively low "abundance" of the Elisha story serves to highlight the extraordinary abundance in the case of the twelve baskets. A similar a fortiori comparison is intended by the contrast of 100 with 5000 in the Gospel.

KIND OF WRITING

The reading comes from 2 Kings 4, a chapter which illustrates the career of Elisha as a miracle-working prophet who cared for the ordinary people. Thus, we have the story of the widow in debt (4:1-7), the threat of food poisoning at Gilgal (4:38-41) and the feeding of a hundred people with twenty loaves (4:42-44).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The second book of Kings is really part of a four part literary work, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. In the Hebrew Bible, 1 and 2 Kings are a single work; even the Greek Old Testament

treats the four books as really one in four parts. Broadly speaking, the 2 volumes tell an extensive story in several parts:

1 Kgs 1-11: the reign of Solomon

1 Kgs 12-2 Kgs 17: the divided kingdom

A. *The division* (1 Kgs 12)

B. *Separate kingdoms* (1 Kgs 13-2 Kgs 17)

2 Kgs 18-25 Judah on its own.

Our reading comes from the stories of the divided kingdoms in 2 Kgs 4.

RELATED PASSAGES

If you bring a grain offering of first fruits to the Lord, you shall bring as the grain offering of your first fruits coarse new grain from fresh ears, parched with fire. (Leviticus 2:14)

The first fruits of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give him.

For the Lord your God has chosen Levi out of all your tribes, to stand and minister in the name of the Lord, him and his sons for all time. (Deuteronomy 18:4-5)

The first fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours; everyone who is clean in your house may eat of it. (Numbers 18:13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

There is a preceding story, which sets some of the scene:

2 Kgs 4:38 When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land. As the company of prophets was sitting before him, he said to his servant, "Put the large pot on, and make some stew for the company of prophets." 39 One of them went out into the field to gather herbs; he found a wild vine and gathered from it a lapful of wild gourds, and came and cut them up into the pot of stew, not knowing what they were.

40 They served some for the men to eat. But while they were eating the stew, they cried out, "O man of God, there is death in the pot!" They could not eat it.

41 He said, "Then bring some flour." He threw it into the pot, and said, "Serve the people and let them eat." And there was nothing harmful in the pot.

Verse 42 Baal-shalishah is south west of Shechem (today's Nablus). The first fruits were a symbolic offering to God, in acknowledgment of his gift of the harvest. It is interesting that these offerings are made not to the priest but to the prophet and the prophet's "sons." It probably points to a rejection of the legitimacy of the Temple "reforms" under Jeroboam.

The barley is important for the link with John's Gospel (only). This is to be used, then, to feed not just a few but the people.

Verse 43 The servant is of practical disposition and raises the obvious objection. After all, one man could carry it all and therefore it will not be sufficient for one hundred. Elijah, however, puts his trust in the word of the Lord. Notice that the prophet, unlike Jesus, merely predicts the miraculous feeding. Initially there was anxiety about whether it would be enough or not and now there is even some left over, as a sign of superabundance.

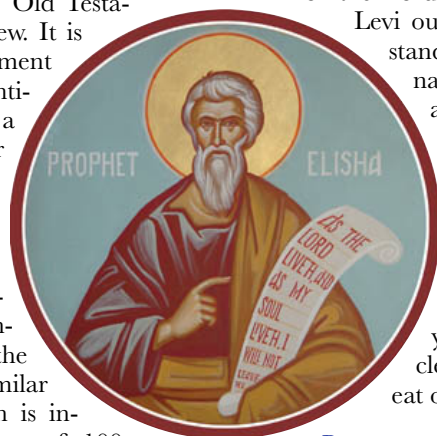
Verse 44 The servant is obedient and it all works "according to the word of the Lord."

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Part of the text teaches acknowledgement of God's gift, from which we have all received. It invites profound thanksgiving before God.
2. Recall some time in your life and ministry where the resources seemed woefully inadequate and yet great things were achieved.
3. The abundance is noted twice. To trust in the abundance of God's gift, in spite of appearances, is also part of faith.

PRAYER

God of abundance gifts, may we receive your gifts with grateful hearts. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



THE LITURGY

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145 (144); Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

READINGS 1 AND 3

As noted above, the first reading forms essential background for the Gospel.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 145 (144) makes a perfect response to this reading and a good bridge to the Gospel as well.

The eyes of all creatures look to you and you give them their food in due time. You open wide your hand, grant the desires of all who live.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

2 Kings 4:42-44

Anyone who has been anxious about having enough food for those around the table will understand this brief tale. What do you think is the point of the story? Could it be that at the Lord's hands we receive not only enough but more than enough, such is the love of God?

Second reading

Ephesians 4:1-6

How can Christians, with so much in common, still be divided? As you listen to this reading, notice the number of times "one" comes up ... one body, one spirit and so on.

Gospel

John 6:1-15

In John's Gospel, everything is a bit different. Where do you think the emphasis falls in this story? On the miracle or on the person of Jesus? The clue is in the last couple of sentences.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 29 July

Sts Martha, Mary and Lazarus

Jeremiah 13:1-11

From time to time the prophets use an illustration—a prophetic gesture—to get their message across. Today's is quite dramatic!!

John 11:19-27

John's symbolic narratives offer real human emotions, easy to connect to. The

context here is loss and bereavement, known to us all. At the heart of the story is one of the seven great I AM sentences in John's Gospel: challenging faith and offering consolation.



Tuesday 30 July

St Peter Chrysologus, bishop and doctor

Jeremiah 14:17-22

In the face of tragedy, today we hear a heart felt prayer, true at almost any time in human history. The person praying shows tremendous faith in God: O our God, you are our hope, since it is you who do all this.

Matthew 13:36-43

The parable of the darnel teaches patience and a certain non-interfering tolerance. In case this might lead to complacency (not much of risk these days!), the community developed this rather threatening interpretation.

Wednesday 31 July

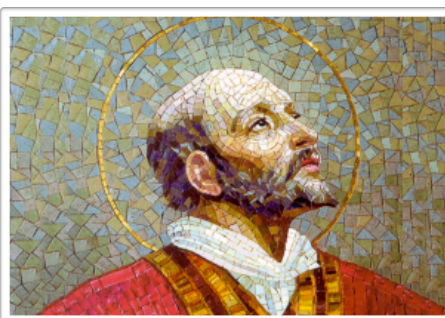
St Ignatius Loyola, religious and priest

Jeremiah 15:10, 16-21

Jeremiah really did suffer for his calling as prophet. Not only had he difficult things to proclaim but he was personally treated very badly. In this passage, he brings his pain before the Lord.

Matthew 13:44-46

These two simply and direct parabolic sayings teach something we all know but lose sight of from time to time: discipleship "costs not less than everything."



Thursday 1 August

St Alphonsus Mary de' Liguori, bishop, doctor

Jeremiah 18:1-6

Again, we have a prophetic gesture with a very clear message: Yes, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine, House of Israel.

Matthew 13:47-53

The gospel of Matthew can be uncomfortable and today he does teach that there will be a judgment and a sorting at the end. It is, of course, not a literal description but an invitation not to lose the potential of the present moment.

Friday 2 August

St Eusebius of Vercelli, bishop

Jeremiah 26:1-9

The Lord entrusts a message to the people, to be proclaimed in the holiest place the Temple. Will people pay attention? The reaction is forthright.

Matthew 13:54-58

As we say, familiarity breeds contempt. Because they *think* they are utterly familiar with this neighbour of theirs, their minds are blinded. This can happen to us too in our piety—we may think we know this Jesus, but do we really?

Saturday 3 August

Jeremiah 26:11-16, 24

Continuing from yesterday, we hear the divided reaction to Jeremiah's proclamation. Fortunately for him, he has a supporter and a protector.

Matthew 14:1-12

The death of John the Baptist is a sad, even absurd ending to a fiery career. It is reported Mark and Matthew, both of whom use it a warning about the cost of discipleship. It is omitted in Luke and John, probably to avoid any comparisons with the unique death of Jesus. We know a little more about it from Josephus, who writes: "Accordingly John was sent as a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I already mentioned, and was put to death. Now the Jews thought that the destruction of his army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure with him." (*Jewish Antiquities* 18).