

A Clash of Mind and Might: The Mutual Cultural Misunderstanding that Led to Roman-Jewish Conflict in the First Century

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Introduction

After the devastation of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the soon-to-be emperor Titus, the Romans must have been incredulous when Jews in the eastern provinces broke out in further violent rebellions in 117 CE and 132 CE, while still maintaining a genuine belief in eventual success. Such persistence by a small and relatively disorganized nation, scattered among gentile communities, seemed a testament to the ultimate incompatibility of the Roman and Jewish culture. The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, noted and sought to dispel this concern in his two major works, *The Antiquities* and *The Jewish Wars*. His account of the conflict between Romans and Jews in the decades leading up to the destruction of the Temple is our most comprehensive source on the matter. The Romans also note this troubling period in their history, but we see their reactions and understanding of the Jews best through the social attitudes and military and political decisions regarding Judea, not through a written history addressing the events.

In the first half of this paper, I will examine the conflict that led to the destruction of the Temple first by briefly examining the Jewish source, Josephus. I will then turn to evidence we have for the Jewish perspective at the time, found in their study of Torah (the Pentateuch) and rabbinic traditions that show their attitude toward history, divine will, and the Temple. In my exploration of these, I will evaluate how these religious traditions shaped the way the Jewish community viewed and reacted to the conflict with the Romans and the ultimate destruction of their homeland and Temple. The second half of this paper examines the Roman understanding of the conflict, by examining texts which address their attitudes towards the Jews, who were residing in Roman cities around the Mediterranean, and then examines the specific political and military decisions made regarding the province of Judea and the revolts that arose there.

I will show that a conflict existed between Jewish and Roman thought, which made the escalation of violence nearly inevitable. The religious texts of Jewish communities make clear their belief in a divine will in action, both in their history and their present circumstances. I will argue that the centrality of these texts within Jewish society led the Jewish community to view the events leading to the destruction of the Temple as purposeful attacks on their religious precepts. Their reaction was likewise motivated by an expectation of divine intervention and support. The Romans first saw merely a distant province with a tenacious attachment to their religious practices and attempted to rule Judea with standard provincial measures. Yet, with an escalation of violence and revolts, the Romans identified the Jewish cult as the origin of the unrest—a focal point of Jewish resistance that ultimately needed to be eliminated. To deal with this threat to peace in the eastern provinces, Roman control of Judea evolved from that of a provincial overseer to an empire attacking an enemy force. It is unlikely that they understood and purposefully attacked Judaism, but they certainly recognized that the Jewish attachment to its proper worship was the source of the conflicts.

Examining only one side of the conflict, Roman or Jewish, can lead to a misunderstanding of the true nature of the conflict. From the Roman perspective, the conflict is merely that of another troublesome province which, after two embarrassingly effective shows of rebellion, was soundly defeated and the matter set aside. For the Jewish community, it was a religious catastrophe, an utter destruction of centuries of Temple worship, and a rejection of the people by God Himself. In this paper, I strive to correct the tendency to embrace one or the other perspective. By presenting both sides in light of each other, I will show the *mutual* cultural misunderstanding that shaped the evolution of the conflict.

I. The Jewish World

Josephus

Flavius Josephus, the controversial Jewish historian, gives us the most comprehensive source of the events of the first century CE in two of his works; *The History of the Jewish War* (=BJ) and *The Antiquities* (=Ant.). The former was written in Aramaic and translated into Greek sometime after 79 CE, barely a decade after the events occurred. *The Antiquities*, which chronicles the entire history of the Jews from their biblical origins to the reign of Nero, was written nearly twenty years later. Both relate the events leading up to the Jewish War in intriguing detail, but Josephus is not a straightforward and reliable source. Though raised as a devout Jew and serving both as a priest and a general in the early rebellions, Josephus surrendered to the Romans in 67 CE. He went on to live in Rome for the rest of his life under the patronage of the Flavian emperors and was reviled as a traitor by his own people. While I cannot supply a full discussion of his works here, I will attempt to show briefly the major biases and motivations behind their composition.

L.H. Feldman notes that we are almost entirely dependent on Josephus' autobiographical work *Vita* for information about his life. This naturally creates problems of verification. The *Vita* gives us little information until Josephus' fourteenth year.¹ Josephus claims he was born in 37 CE into a proud priestly family in Jerusalem which traced its lines back to Aaron and Moses and received the best possible education a young Jew could, studying the Torah, in which he found both the faith and law of the Jewish community.² Mireille Hadas-Lebel (=H-L) explains that the foundation of such an education would have been the memorization of the Torah. Josephus claims he quickly became a gifted young member of the priesthood, one to whom chief priests and leading men came for clarification.³ H-L notes that this seeming show of vanity is

more believable given the increasingly corrupt nature of the system of high priesthood. The rigorous standards of learning were at this time being phased out and priestly families battled each other for the position since “the clique in power controlled the tithe wrung from other priests.”⁴ Thus, from a young age Josephus witnessed the human weaknesses that operated within Jewish society, despite its divine ordination. Even more importantly, he was steeped in Jewish traditions of Torah and, as a priest, was familiar with the Temple and its place in Jewish society. I believe his perspective on the events he narrates was inevitably influenced by this upbringing.

At only twenty-six, Josephus came into contact with Roman imperial power and life when he was selected to be part of a delegation to Rome in 64 CE, to petition the emperor Nero regarding the imprisonment of some fellow priests. Josephus tells us that with the aid of Poppaea, who was Nero’s wife and sympathetic to the Jews, the priests were freed. Josephus returned home, triumphant yet humbled, as the trip, H-L contends, “convinced him of Rome’s power.”⁵ Back in Judea, under the rule of Roman procurators, rebel movements were gathering strength, and in 66 CE, war broke out with the Jewish seizure of a fortress in Masada. H-L notes how Josephus stresses that his knowledge of Roman strength drove him to try to avoid a role in the war but that the initial success of the Jews and the pressure of his fellow Pharisees eventually led him to accept the role of general in Galilee.⁶

In Galilee, Josephus came under suspicion of treason regarding his decision to hand some pillaged Roman booty back to pro-Roman forces. He made a serious enemy of another rebel leader, John of Gischala, when he refused to hand over a store of imperial corn to the rebel leaders. He was tried and although he escaped the death sentence, he emerged, H-L contends, a conflicted figure.⁷ Up until 67 CE, H-L summarizes, he continued to deal with mostly civil

matters, especially the increasing tendency of the Jewish community to be reconciled with King Agrippa, a pro-Roman, but Jewish king. But with the arrival of Vespasian, Josephus and his rebel forces found themselves under siege in a fortress called Jotapata.⁸

In Book III of *The History of Jewish War*, Josephus describes this long and difficult siege, which ended for him when the Romans stormed the walls and launched a search for Josephus, who found himself trapped with many fellow rebels in a well. In a long, passionate speech, Josephus entreats his compatriots not to commit suicide, and when they insist on drawing lots to kill each other, he manages to draw the last lot. But with this prayer, Josephus decides he is divinely ordained to survive and serve Vespasian as a prophet, and surrenders:

Since it pleases you,” he said, “who have created the Jewish nation, to depress the same; and since all their good fortune is gone over to the Romans; and since thou has made choice of this soul of mine to foretell what is to come hereafter; I willingly lend them my hand and am content to live. And I protest openly, that I do not go over to the Romans, as a deserter from the Jews but as a minister from you.⁹

Josephus goes on to describe how he convinced the Roman general of his status as a prophet by predicting his future rise to emperor.¹⁰ Although Josephus’ timeline gets vague at this point, H-L concludes that he was entrusted to Vespasian’s son Titus, who took him first to Alexandria and then, in 70 CE, to Judea to execute the final siege of Jerusalem. After witnessing the final destruction of his city, Josephus, only thirty-three years old, left Judea for the last time and spent the rest of his life in Rome, writing his many works, included the *The History of the Jewish War* and *The Antiquities*.¹¹

Josephus’ motives for writing

Josephus, like many historians, had a personal legacy to preserve and defend. Shaye Cohen notes how, in Book II of his *History of the Jewish War*, the historian establishes himself

as a heroic and just commander of Jewish forces, the “ideal general.”¹² In the *Vita*, while omitting mention of his two colleagues and their probable assistance, he gives an elaborate account of his actions in Galilee, from winning over the local population to setting up a judicial system and successfully recruiting a large fighting force.¹³ As Cohen notes, “we see Josephus not only as a commander of a mighty army but also as a man concerned for his *innocentia* and εὐνοία (goodwill).”¹⁴ Josephus’ desire to preserve a favorable picture of himself for future generations is understandable. As a Jew who surrendered to the Romans and resided in the capital of the empire, writing under Flavian patronage, he was considered a traitor by his own people. In the *Vita*, he mentions the attacks and harassment of fellow Jews making just such accusations.¹⁵ Later, I will note how these factors find their way into Josephus’ account of the war, especially within his own speeches.

Cohen gives an overview of the possible motives behind Josephus’ composition of *The History of the Jewish War*. He notes an overarching attempt to offer an apology to the Romans for the Jewish revolts. In order to achieve this, he stresses that not all the Jews revolted, indeed, the entire uprising was aggravated by a small group of war-hungry rebels, led by such “evil tyrants” as his own personal enemy, John of Gischala. He excuses the masses, the priestly class, and the pro-Roman King Agrippa from major blame.¹⁶ Morton Smyth notes these same instincts and adds further compelling evidence that Josephus’ writings could be categorized as “propaganda” for his Flavian patrons. *The History of the Jewish War*, he notes, was written first in Aramaic and sent to large Jewish populations in Mesopotamia and Adiabene as a warning against future rebellions. It seems to me that Josephus’ account of the disaster would not only discourage further unrest but that the effect of presenting the revolts as “in large part, the work of small factions of troublemakers,” could trivialize the motivation for the rebellion: the revolts

would then appear to be inspired by “brigands,” not true Jewish citizens with a legitimate cause.¹⁷ The account must have been successful, Smyth concludes, because Vespasian and Titus then commissioned Josephus to translate it into Greek for further distribution. Josephus’ writing is also quite careful regarding the contemporary Roman administration, and whenever a bias arises in the accounts I use, I will make note of how his attempt to portray the Roman rule as fair and well-instituted will influence his presentation of the given event.

Josephus clearly had an agenda, but perhaps the reason he listed in his opening paragraph of the *Antiquities* is not far from his mind either. He describes himself as one of those historians compelled by ἀνάγκης (by necessity):

because they [historians] are concerned with the facts, and so cannot excuse themselves from committing them to writing, for the advantage of posterity: nay, there are not a few who are induced to draw their historical facts out of darkness into light, and to produce them for the benefit of the public, on account of the great importance of the facts themselves with which they have been concerned.¹⁸

Even if such a claim serves merely as a rhetorical flourish, Josephus remains a useful source. Though his presentation of the events may at times be contrived and distorted, he still gives us a Jewish perspective that cannot be entirely concealed. He was raised as a priest, lived with, led, and fought alongside Jews; Josephus could not have avoided thinking like a Jew. That is, his view of history and the very logic used in his presentation of events would have been shaped by Jewish beliefs and approaches to history and time. Smyth, too, notes that Josephus the Jew is never entirely removed from his accounts. Throughout his writing he “not only celebrates his people, city, and temple, but hopes for their restoration.”¹⁹ Such a hope and celebration are the inevitable consequences of study of the Jewish Torah, the religious tradition which I will now examine as the heart of Jewish society and leadership in Palestine.

A Chosen People

In an article on the canonization process in Jewish communities, James Sanders acknowledges the difficulty in assigning a set biblical canon to a time period. The process was long and had no moments of official closure, such as the Church Councils provided for Christian canon. What did finally emerge was “a tripartite Hebrew Bible,” consisting of the “Pentateuch, Prophets, and Writings.”²⁰ With the discovery of the Judean Desert Scrolls between 1947 and 1956, Sanders asserts that “it is clear that first two sections of the tripartite Jewish Bible were secure” in the middle of the second century BCE.²¹ We can be reasonably sure that Jewish communities in the first century CE were thus very familiar with the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and the story of their history as a chosen people of God. Seth Schwartz points out that Jewish study of “Torah” also involved lawbooks and local practices, with varying degrees of dependence on the Pentateuch from one community to another, but he too concludes that the Pentateuch “by the first century . . . was *the* normative canonical legal text”²²

In Genesis 12 through 17, we see God first establish a relationship with his people. “I will make of you a great nation,” the Lord tells Abraham, and “to your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”²³ Moreover, the divine hand in their history is visible and strong. God tells the Jews that they will suffer at the hands of foreign nations, but that He will always redeem them.²⁴ For Jewish communities, whether in Judea or in Roman cities around the Mediterranean, these promises are timeless ones; this is a concept that is important for my argument.

Not only, as Sanders argues, can we safely assume that Jewish communities were reading the Torah, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the Torah and its message held a prominent

and influential place in Jewish communities, both within Judea and among the far-flung members of the Diaspora. “It is not an exaggeration,” Seth Schwartz maintains, “to say that Torah was the constitution of the Jews in Palestine.”²⁵ For many Jewish communities, especially the one in Judea in the first century CE, religious thought and leadership played an extremely dominant role in society. Schwartz notes the significant role it played in governing Jewish communities by both foreign and local authorities: “The Temple and Torah were thus not only the main mediators between Israel and its God, but also . . . nodal points . . . in imperial and native royal control of the native population of the country.”²⁶

At the same time, Schwartz cautions against trying to entirely reconstruct the role that religious texts would play in a community. The Torah and the lawbooks and commentaries that were derived from them (which I will use as sources later) speak, on the surface, only to the religious life of a community. “No set of prescriptions can be assumed to control completely the lives of those to whom they are addressed,” he warns, and we can rarely fully know the manner in which individual communities administered the laws of Torah.²⁷ Yet, by examining more concrete evidence, such as the lack of pagan shrines, Schwartz concludes that “the texture of public life in the Jewish parts of Palestine” were indeed, “broadly influenced by the prescriptions of the Torah.”²⁸ Even more compelling for me are the instances of devout Diaspora communities. Schwartz notes that such communities were “never compelled to submit to the authority of the Jewish law,” but that the reactions of Romans living alongside them²⁹ prove that Jews there consistently maintained recognizably Jewish practices from the Torah, such as dietary laws and keeping the Sabbath, in cities as distant from Judea as Rome. That the Torah held a central, deeply influential place in Jewish society seems certain. I will now argue that we can see its influence in the Jewish community’s view of the events in the first century CE.

The persistence of a Temple society

The centrality of the Temple in Jewish thought in the first and second century CE existed well after its destruction in 70 CE. Historically the Temple had served as the focal point of the Jewish cult. The Torah speaks of the necessity of sacrifice there and the Pentateuch discusses in detail the construction of the divinely ordained Temple. In Exodus, after Moses has descended from Mt. Sinai to present the Lord's commandments to the Israelites for the second time, he begins the instructions to create a tabernacle (the inner room of the Temple which holds the ark of God) with these words: "Whosoever of you is wise, let him come, and make that which the Lord hath commanded."³⁰ This is the first instance in the Pentateuch of a physical place being constructed as a point of access to God's presence, and while the Lord was thus making himself available to the Jews in this way, the consequences of such an almighty deity being so accessible are always great. Housing the ark of God in a physical location created a place both incredibly sacred and incredibly dangerous. The text orders Jews to go to significant lengths to preserve the purity of the tabernacle, and much of Leviticus is devoted to rules addressing how to maintain and, if necessary, restore this purity. When the tabernacle is finally constructed, the very first thing to occur is the destruction of two individuals, Nadab and Abihu, after they conduct a sacrifice improperly.³¹ When the Jews have finally settled in Judea and constructed the Temple, a permanent house for the tabernacle, it is unsurprising that this building had a deeply sacred and central nature for the Jewish community.

This central place of the Temple, and the ruling class of high priests who maintained it and administered its holy rites, was acknowledged by outside rulers as well as the native population. Schwartz notes the successive "Persian, Macedonian and Roman rulers' support" of the Temple and the system high priests when they ruled Judea.³² In the *Antiquities*, Josephus

mentions a letter from Antiochus, the Seleucid ruler of Judea in 200 BCE, which orders that the Temple and the Jew's ancestral laws remain intact and undisturbed.³³ Not only do both Schwartz and Erich Gruen conclude that such treatises preserved in Josephus are basically authentic, but Schwartz goes on to argue that "there is no reason to doubt the unanimous claim of the ancient writers that the [Roman] emperors patronized the temple."³⁴ Clearly, foreign rulers recognized how deeply entrenched the Temple was in Jewish society and understood that any attempts toward the alteration of this role would create a major disruption.

Further evidence for the "internalization of the value of the Temple and Torah" in Jewish communities is found, according to Schwartz, in the wealth of the Temple itself. Much of the taxes collected for its upkeep would have been drawn from communities outside Judea and the jurisdiction of the Temple priests who were in charge of the collection.³⁵ Not only was much of it thus given "voluntarily" by Jewish communities, but in many cases, they had to make official requests to the Roman authorities to maintain this practice. "It is worth emphasizing," Schwartz notes, "that these voluntary gifts were made to an institution that could offer nothing tangible in return, in a society whose economy was probably functioning not far above subsistence level."³⁶

This centrality of the Temple was quite persistent in Jewish texts following the destruction of the Temple. Goodman discusses the undimmed expectation of a new Temple after 70 CE, noting that "there was no need for [the Jews] to seek a novel theology" that would replace the role of the Temple in Jewish practices and beliefs.³⁷ Schwartz too notes that the Temple and Torah had been "transformed into central symbols of Palestinian Judaism," which allowed attitudes toward the Temple to "survive political displacement...and destruction."³⁸ It was well into the fourth century CE before rabbis and Jewish leaders began adhering to a newer form of Judaism in which devotion and prayer could eclipse the need for Temple sacrifice.³⁹ Not

only did Jews possess detailed instructions in both the Mishnah and the Pentateuch for the construction of a temple and its holy items, but the looting of their Temple had occurred before. In the fourth Book of Kings, in 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, “the king of Babylon . . . carried off from Jerusalem all the treasures of the House of the Lord and the treasures of the royal palace.”⁴⁰ The items are eventually restored and Temple worship continued. With such a history behind them, it seems likely that Titus marching off to Rome with the sacred items of the Temple, though disastrous, was not an unprecedented event. In fact, Josephus, in his dramatic recount of the Romans burning and pillaging the Temple, speaks of the “cycles of fate,” which seem to govern the life of the Temple:

We may wonder too at the exactness of the cycle of Fate; she kept, as I said, to the very month and day which centuries before had seen the Sanctuary burnt by the Babylonians. From its first foundation by King Solomon to its present destruction, which occurred in the second year of Vespasian’s reign, was a period of 1,130 years, 7 months, and 15 days; from its rebuilding in the second year of King Cyrus . . . to its capture by Vespasian was 639 years and 45 days.⁴¹

It should be noted that it is in Josephus’ interest to present the destruction of Jerusalem as divinely ordained—any attempt to further defend it is therefore an action against God’s will and Josephus can thus neutralize his own abandonment of its defense. But his point that the Temple had repeatedly been restored by divine intervention stands. It is no surprise that Jews would expect another cycle of renewal to begin. Moreover, as Goodman points out, the destruction of temples, either by fire or military action, was not uncommon in antiquity, and “Romans took it for granted that the obvious response was to rebuild.”⁴² Jewish history and common practice, therefore, combined to soften the devastation of Jerusalem with hope for a future rebuilding. No doubt this made possible the continued agitation and rebellion of the Jews in the eastern provinces, even as their Temple, their city, and much of their populace lay in ruins.

A Jewish approach to time and causation

According to James Kugel, the early Jewish community appears to have possessed a distinctive sense of time that had an important effect on its approach to history, especially its own. Kugel makes note of this phenomenon in a discussion of the Jewish tradition of Midrash, the rabbinic writings of the first centuries CE that supplemented and commented on Scripture. For instance, where there are confusing gaps or non-sequiturs in Scriptural stories, rabbis would compose segments of the story to explain or reduce confusion. In his article on this tradition, Kugel identifies a tendency toward “cyclical thought,” a way of viewing the events of history which seems particularly prevalent in Jewish texts of antiquity. He describes it as a “peculiarly Israelite feeling of *consequentiality*, the unflagging consciousness of how events in the past *create* the present.”⁴³ Such an approach to history, he concludes, leads to a hyper-sensitivity to causes and in the Jewish scriptural tradition, divine causes, a constant belief in God’s will behind every event.

This can be seen in Josephus’ assessment of the power of the Roman Empire, as expressed in *The History of the Jewish War*. In Book II, he presents a governor of the Jews, Agrippa II, addressing the population of Jerusalem, and it is important to notice the explanation for the success of the Romans that he chooses to use. The argument Agrippa puts forth is mostly a pragmatic one, pointing out the visible power of the Roman Empire to discourage a revolt, but he also delves into the reason for this power and then encourages the Jews to focus instead on observing their religious law. He reflects upon the Roman Empire:

You have recourse to divine assistance, but this is already on the side of the Romans; for it is impossible that so vast an empire should be settled without God’s providence . . . if in time of war you transgress the law of your country, I cannot tell on whose account you will afterward go to war; for your concern is but one, that you do nothing against any of

your forefathers; how will you call upon God to assist you when you are voluntarily transgressing his religion?⁴⁴

Josephus was, of course, writing for Romans, and was inclined to portray the Roman Empire as graciously and subserviently as possible. He hoped to show that the Roman rule had not aggravated the revolts by itself. Yet in his logic, a Jewish perspective emerges. Through the figure of Agrippa, he presents the success of the Roman Empire as clearly resulting from divine causation: it was “impossible” that a country could become so powerful without the will of God. Moreover, Josephus points out, if the Jews want to see results in their struggle against unjust governors, the answer is in continued piety. Ancient figures in Scripture secured God’s favor this way, and here Josephus presents it as the only certain way Jews have to ensure present and future fortune. Josephus would not put this appeal in Agrippa’s mouth if he did not believe it would resonate with those listening and if he was not certain that the Jewish community understood the system of divine cause and effect.

A timeless approach to Scripture

The Mishnah is an enormously important Jewish tradition wherein “an almost comprehensive system of Jewish law and practice” was recorded, though most likely well after the fall of the Jewish temple.⁴⁵ It remains, however, a useful source for Jewish practices in the first century, for it is a recording of a longstanding oral tradition in the Jewish community. Thus the laws and practices found within it are those which would have been passed down and followed for centuries before its final redaction. This is evidenced, David Kraemer explains, both by its style, which was “formulated for memorization and subsequent recitation,” and its

content, which includes rules (such as those for Temple worship) that would only have been pertinent only in earlier centuries.⁴⁶

With her discussion of the Passover procedure found in the Mishnah, Judith Hauptman highlights the timeless sense of historical events that seems to have existed in Jewish religious texts. In one particular tradition, Jews would gather every year to celebrate the Lord passing them over on the night all the firstborn children of the Egyptians were killed. The event occurs in chapter twelve of Exodus, but Hauptman notes a sense of immediacy that emerges during the Passover celebration. She summarizes a section of the Mishnah, which gives the following procedure:

The Mishnah then says that to tell the story of the Exodus to one's son a person must feel as if he himself left Egypt. A proof-text follows, 'And you shall explain to your son that day, it is because of what the Lord did for *me* when *I* went free from Egypt.'⁴⁷

Not only is the story told in first person, but the Mishnah demands that the narrator *feel* the events and consider them his own. Thus an event over a thousand years old is brought directly into the life of the observant Jew and passed on, with that same sense of immediacy, to the next generation. Events in Scripture are never made distant by the span of years or geography: what God did for the Jews thousands of years ago, he still does in the present. When Josephus writes the history of the Jews in the twenty books of the *Antiquities*, he begins with the story of Genesis and devotes half of his books to events from Scripture. He then moves into non-biblical history in his eleventh book, and concludes in the reign of Nero. A modern reader makes an intellectual divide between Josephus' ten books recounting Scripture and his last ten books, which can be partly corroborated by Roman and Egyptian historical accounts. Yet for Josephus there probably was no such divide. For him, the events of Scripture were not an ancient history, clouded by

myth, but a very real and tangible part of Jewish history. Events that occurred in Exodus are as relevant to the Jews' present situation as events in the first century CE. Nor is there, for the Jewish historian, the modern distinction between religious and secular events. God is ever-present in Jewish history and his will is behind all events, religious or secular.

This view of the ancient events of Scripture that Hauptman puts forward is clear in a passage in Josephus' *History of the Jewish War*. The historian recounts his attempt to convince the rebels and inhabitants of Jerusalem to cease their resistance to Titus and his soldiers, and thus "to spare their country, and their temple."⁴⁸ As I have noted, such accounts in part seek to justify his own abandonment of the Jewish rebellion, but I do not believe this bias compromises the logic he presents. When his attempt is met with mockery and insults from his fellow Jews, Josephus turns to their common history:

O miserable creatures . . . will you fight by your weapons, and by your hands, against the Romans? When did we ever conquer any other nation by such means? And when was it that God, who is the creator of the Jewish people, did not avenge them, when they had been injured? . . . Will you not recall to mind the prodigious things done for your forefathers and this holy place, and how great enemies of yours were by him subdued under you? . . . However, hearken to me, that you may be informed, how you fight, not only against the Romans, but against God himself.⁴⁹

Josephus goes on to recount biblical events such as the flight of the Jews from Egypt and the Assyrian theft of the ark, laying emphasis on the divine intervention that each time alleviated the suffering of the Jews, without much effort on their part. In this account, the Jews are not only forsaking the true trust in God displayed by their ancestors, but they have gone even farther astray and attacked a nation clearly favored by God. Even more pointedly, Josephus states boldly that God Himself νῦν ἐπὶ τῆς Ἰταλίας εἶναι ("is now settled in Italy"), in support of this empire, a concept to which the earlier submission to Roman rule by the Jewish forefathers

attests.⁵⁰ Josephus uses the ancient, cyclical events of scripture to not only point out the proposed error of Jews, but to endorse a contemporary foreign nation.

Given the centrality of Scripture for the Jewish community and its presentation of an active divine will in history, the idea of current events as divinely-ordained is most likely present in Jewish society in the first century CE.

The Destruction of the Temple

The devastation described by Josephus in *The History of the Jewish War* is enormous and disturbing. His account may be influenced by a flair for the dramatic or a desire to stress the sufferings already endured by Jews at the hands of Romans, but even this cannot diminish the pain and despair that Jews in Judea would have felt during the events of 70 CE. No doubt the Romans understood the completeness of their sack of Jerusalem as well, and an ancient Roman inscription declares that the destruction “subdued the Jewish people.”⁵¹ But instead, for nearly fifty years, the Jews remained hopeful and resentful, with anger building at the lack of a rebuilt Temple and city. Added to their loss was the institution of a Roman tax to replace the Jewish tax that supported the Temple. This yearly reminder that Rome was actively prohibiting the rebuilding of the Temple was briefly suspended during the reign of Nerva, giving hope to Jews everywhere that their allotted time of suffering was nearing an end. When Trajan took over in 98 CE and re-instated this tax on the Jews, it angered and frustrated Jews everywhere.⁵² This frustration, combined with an impatience that no doubt stemmed from the conviction that God would bring about the revival of His people, as he had in centuries before, came to a head between 113 and 117 CE, when Jews in the eastern Mediterranean launched violent revolts, surprising Rome.

The exact catalyst for the outbreak of these rebellions is uncertain. Cassius Dio records elaborate descriptions of their violence and damaging effects, but he is vague regarding a specific origin. The timing of it (when the renewal of the Jewish tax would have reached all ends of the empire) and the nature of the attacks (Goodman notes that “temples of Apollo, Zeus, Demeter, Artemis, and Isis in the city of Cyrene were all destroyed or damaged”) leads to Goodman’s conclusion that “Jewish frustration at Roman attacks on Judaism manifested itself in a war against the religion of the oppressive state.”⁵³ The Roman reaction was delayed by the death of Trajan and the establishment of Hadrian as the new emperor in 117 CE. It wasn’t until 130 CE that Hadrian arrived in Judea and launched the construction of an entirely Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, complete with a temple to Olympian Zeus, to utterly replace and displace the Jewish people still residing there. Added to Goodman’s view of this reaction as “against the religion” of the Jews is the possibility that Hadrian had earlier issued a decree outlawing circumcision, a defining ritual of Judaism.⁵⁴ Hadrian’s actions were to be the final elimination of Judaism, their homeland had been destroyed and, according to the Christian bishop Eusebius, writing nearly two centuries later, “by decree and enactments of Hadrian, the entire people is strictly forbidden to set foot even upon the land around Jerusalem.”⁵⁵ Goodman notes that, “Leaving the site of Jerusalem open for 60 years had proven an invitation to the Jews to agitate for a return to their former glories,”⁵⁶ and Hadrian had clearly decided the removal of any hope for a rebuilding of the Temple was the solution.

Faced with the loss of their homeland and Temple the Jews once again proved astonishingly resilient and rose up in yet another rebellion. Aelia Capitolina’s creation, according to Cassius Dio, “brought on a war of no slight importance nor of brief duration.”⁵⁷ Again, expectations of divine intervention seem to have driven this uprising. The leader, Simon

Bar-Cochba, presented himself as the Messiah, and was backed by the highly influential Rabbi Akiva, an expert on Jewish law.⁵⁸ The rebel leaders were surprisingly organized and, mobilized by the possibility of a divine intervention in action, the rebel leaders assembled a large force and even produced coinage proclaiming the freedom of Jerusalem people, the new Messiah, Simon, and the creation of a new Israel.⁵⁹ The Roman reaction was, this time, swift and decisive. Hadrian took personal command of the force sent to Judea and Cassius Dio describes an utter rout and destruction of rebel forces. Both Romans and Jews perished in great numbers, and by the end, he concludes, “Thus nearly the whole of Judea was made desolate.”⁶⁰ Any remaining Jews were banished from Judea and the Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, was completed.⁶¹

For the Jews, the Roman destruction of the Temple and Rome’s subsequent refusal to rebuild it echoed the past grievances and oppression suffered by their ancestors. But their concept of history as driven by divine will led them to resist the Roman rule with a remarkable stubbornness and persistence. Feldman notes that Josephus, in his concern for the Roman view of Judaism, is forced to “downplay the “messianic goal of the rebellion,” in an effort to portray its events as the actions of “fanatical element” of Jewish society, not a central belief in the eventual divine intervention against Rome.⁶² But even Josephus reads the events in 70 CE as a result of divine anger, and as the Pentateuch had demonstrated, the solution to such a situation was neither passive nor pacific but rather a matter of patience and persistence, of waiting out the fall and looking forward to rebuilding when God was no longer angry. With the examples of past instances of divine intervention, such as the Exodus, present in their consciousness, not as ancient history, but as the working of a living, active God, their rebellions continued long after all reasonable hope of success was feasible.

II. Roman Policy and Reactions

The cultural misunderstanding between the two cultures arises even more clearly when one examines the Roman treatment of Jews, both politically and socially, in the first centuries BCE and CE. The Jews defined themselves in relation to God and centered their culture around the worship of Him. Thus any events that occurred, whether instigated by the Romans or themselves, were imbued with religious significance. Roman insults or restrictions to their Temple worship or feast days were seen as deliberate affronts, and their own behavior was driven by the conviction that the divine will was at work. Yet the Romans sought mostly to govern peacefully and profitably over the distant province and its people who had spread around the Mediterranean. Rarely do we see Romans taking special notice of particular Jewish beliefs or shaping their actions to deal with them. Only after the destruction of the Temple, when the Jews demonstrated the lengths to which they will go for the sake of uninhibited worship, do the Romans show a consciousness of Judaism itself and act with the Jewish religion in mind. Fearing the disruptive nature of such a rebellious element in their distant eastern provinces, the Roman reaction was violent and comprehensive. Yet even in their destruction of the Temple, and eventually Jerusalem itself, we find no evidence of a true understanding of the Jewish beliefs.

The Roman reaction to Jewish communities within their empire

No discussion of Roman reactions to Jewish practices and behaviors can be limited to the province of Judea. The Jewish Diaspora around the time of Jesus, that is, the many communities of Jews living throughout cities all around the Mediterranean, made Jewish religion and customs recognizable to Romans. Both before and after the destruction of the Temple, Roman sources,

from histories to satires, address the Jewish presence in cities as geographically disparate as Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria. The visible nature of many Jewish customs, such as circumcision, dietary laws, and keeping the Sabbath made followers stand out. Yet in Rome, for example, this distinctiveness did not result in hostility, but rather confusion and ridicule. Erich Gruen provides a detailed discussion of the reactions of Roman writers to Jewish customs. We find some writers seeking to reconcile the practices of the two cultures, equating, for instance, the Jewish Sabbath with the day of Saturn or a day devoted to fasting. Suetonius says the emperor Augustus commented to Tiberius that, “Ne Iudaeus quidem, mi Tiberi, tam diligenter sabbatis ieiunium servat quam ego hodie servavi” (Not even a Jew, my dear Tiberius, fasts so scrupulously on his Sabbaths as I have to-day).⁶³ Plutarch makes the groundless suggestion (rejected emphatically by Tacitus) that the Sabbath is a type of Dionysiac feast day. And Gruen notes that when Romans were not trying to fit a Jewish custom into the Roman world of religion or astronomy, they took the simpler tactic of disdaining and criticizing the custom as wasteful and lazy.⁶⁴

A similar approach was taken to Jewish dietary laws, specifically the restriction on the consumption of pork. “Roman satirists,” Gruen remarks, “had a good deal of fun with the Jewish diet,” from Juvenal to Petronius and even Plutarch.⁶⁵ Yet these reactions are neither notably hostile nor unprecedented and reveal no fear of Jewish communities and their peculiar habits as subversive or dangerous, but rather merely ridiculous. Even the issue of Romans converting to Judaism did not appear to have caused consistent concern among Roman authorities. Goodman notes that Tacitus makes mention of it and criticizes the requirement to “disown their fatherland,” but Gruen points out that his discussion is less one of fear and more of anger and disgust at fellow Romans for deserting the Roman gods and traditions.⁶⁶ Active

proselytizing by Jews did not seem to be much of a concern for the Romans, if only because of the Jewish instinct to shun and isolate themselves from neighboring Gentiles. For instance, the common Roman practice of attending theaters and gladiatorial games was frowned upon by Jewish authorities as frivolous and barbaric. In Rome, Jewish attendance at such events would probably have been infrequent and the city of Jerusalem, though host to an amphitheater at the time of the less pious Herod, was certainly not a hub of Greek and Roman entertainments. Josephus insists that ἀνθρώπους ὑπορρίπτειν ἐπὶ τέρψει τῆς ἀνθρώπων θέας (to throw men to wild beasts for the pleasure of other men as spectators) was considered ἄσεβες (impious) and disdained by devout Jews.⁶⁷

The overall attitude of Romans, Gruen concludes, was one of indifference. Roman communities everywhere incorporated foreign populations with diverse practices, and though Jewish practices may have been distinctive in form, the fact of their existence was not at all unusual, and for Romans, not too alarming. In fact, there is evidence, in both Tacitus' *Annales* and Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, that Romans were apt to confuse Jewish beliefs with the magical practices of Egyptian cults, another group of people whose religious practices stood out from those of the Romans. Of the fairly rare expulsions of Jews from Rome, the one by Tiberius in 19 CE appears to have been the result of such a confusion. Suetonius observes that:

Externas caerimonias, Aegyptios Iudaicosque ritus compescuit, coactis qui superstitione ea tenebantur religiosas vestes cum instrumento omni comburere. Iudaeorum iuventutem per speciem sacramenti in provincias gravioris caeli distribuit, reliquos gentis eiusdem vel similia sectantes urbe summovit, sub poena perpetuae servitutis nisi obtemperassent.

[Tiberius] abolished foreign cults, especially the Egyptian and the Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia. Those of the Jews who were of military age he assigned to provinces of less healthy climate, ostensibly to serve in the army; the others of that same race or of similar beliefs he banished from the city, on pain of slavery for life if they did not obey.⁶⁸

Once again, the terms *superstitione ea* and *similia sectantes* attest to a hazy understanding of specific Jewish beliefs. As Gruen points out, official actions by authorities in Rome do not appear to have singled out the Jews, rather they were directed to all kinds of religious cults or practices that did not conform to strictly Roman practices. Moreover such expulsions as the one in 19 CE were usually quite short-lived. In this sense, Romans treated Jews as they would any other foreign peoples living under their rule: they noticed their differences, with either ridicule or an attempt at assimilation, but found them neither threatening nor unprecedented.

Roman social policy regarding the Jews: Protection in the hope of peace

While some Romans may have found Jewish practices ridiculous, the authorities, from local governing forces to emperors, do appear to have understood the importance of allowing the Jews the freedom to continue these practices with no disruption from the governing forces or local populations. Gruen suggests that the exclusiveness of many of the Jewish customs, such as Sabbath and Temple worship, often led local communities to resent them, and notes that the lifestyle of the Jews, particularly those living in the Diaspora alongside other communities, inspired the opinion that they “did not fit civic expectations.”⁶⁹ Josephus complains fairly regularly of the abuse suffered at the hands of pagan neighbors, especially the Greek communities. Τοὺς δὲ κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν Ἰουδαίους καὶ ὅσους ἢ πρὸς Κυρήνη Λιβύη κατέσχευεν ἐκάκουν αἱ πόλεις (Now the cities ill-treated the Jews in Asia), he asserts at one point in the *Antiquities*, and πάσχοντες δὲ κακῶς καὶ πέρας οὐδὲν εὐρίσκοντες τῆς τῶν Ἑλλήνων (they found no end of the barbarous treatment they met with among the Greeks), especially in regard to the Greek attempt χρημάτων ἱερῶν ἀφαίρεσιν ποιῆσθαι (to take away their sacred money).⁷⁰ Indeed, the Temple tax paid by all Jews was particularly troubling to non-Jewish neighbors. It

was a conspicuous practice, involving a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and “the municipal governments could regard this as opting out of civic responsibilities and debar Jews from services and benefits of the community.”⁷¹ The lack of such “civic expectations” are at the root of a problem that Josephus acknowledges in his story of an Ionian attempt to curtail the rights of the Jews. The Ionians approached Agrippa, the king of Judea installed by the Romans at the time, regarding their own πολιτείας (privileges of citizens) and demanding that εἰ συγγενεῖς εἰσιν αὐτοῖς Ἰουδαῖοι, σέβεσθαι τοὺς αὐτῶν θεοὺς (if the Jews were to be joint partakers with them, they might be obliged to worship the gods they themselves worshipped). But when the matter came to trial, Josephus notes, ἐνίκησαν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (the Jews prevailed).⁷²

This example helps make visible a pattern that Gruen establishes, that is, “the constriction of Jewish privileges by Greek communities and the summoning of Roman intervention to restore and protect those privileges.”⁷³ Claudius’ famous letter to the Alexandrians regarding conflict with the Jewish community there confirms this tone of Rome acting as a protectorate of Jewish concerns for the sake of peace and unity in their eastern provinces. It is described by Josephus, and although his accounts of the content of letters are never entirely trustworthy, we can probably trust the overall tone:

I [Claudius] will, therefore, that the nation of the Jews be not deprived of their rights and privileges. . .but that those rights and privileges, which they formerly enjoyed, be preserved to them, and they may continue in their own customs. And I charge both parties [Alexandrians and Jews] to take very great care that no troubles may arise after the promulgation of this edict.⁷⁴

His final line, a warning that both communities πλείστην ποιήσασθαι πρόνοιαν, ὥπως μηδεμία ταραχὴ γένηται, (take very great care that no troubles may arise) most likely sums up the truest concern of Roman authorities regarding Jewish communities in their empire, that is, their effect on peace in the distant eastern regions of their empire. There does not appear to be an innate

hostility towards Jewish practices by Roman authorities, as long as they do not disrupt Roman rule.

Rome's early military restraint regarding Judea

Even before Rome had established Judea as an official Roman province in the first century CE, there is evidence of fair, even generous, treatment of the Jews, militarily speaking. Josephus, in his attempt to persuade his Roman patrons that Judaism and Rome were never incompatible, makes a great deal of this idea. He relates in Book XIV of his *Antiquities* instances of Roman goodwill to set the tone for the defender role that Rome will play later, once Judea is a province. First, he narrates Pompey's drive in 49 BCE to seize the city of Jerusalem. The Jews put up initial resistance, and the Romans set up siege equipment and began assaulting the city. Yet, Josephus claims, when the Romans came to understand the sacred nature of the Sabbath, κατ' ἐκείνας τὰς ἡμέρας, ἃ δὴ σάββατα καλοῦμεν, οὐτ' ἔβαλλον τοὺς Ἰουδαίους οὔτε εἰς χεῖρας αὐτοῖς ὑπὴντων (on the days which we call the Sabbath, they threw nothing on the Jews, nor came to any battle with them).⁷⁵ He uses the participle συνιδόντες to describe the Romans coming to a knowledge of the Sabbath. The verb σύνειδον which means literally "to see together or at the same time," suggests that Josephus is equating the Romans' physical observation of the Sabbath day with a knowledge, or at least a respect, for the practice (Intermediate Liddell-Scott, σύνειδον) He goes on to relate Pompey's respect toward the Temple and its sacred items when the city has finally been taken: οὐδενὸς ἤψατο εὐσέβειαν . . . ἢ τε ὑστεραίᾳ καθαίρειν παραγγείλας τὸ ἱερὸν τοῖς ναοπόλοις καὶ τὰ νόμιμα ἐπιφέρειν τῷ θεῷ (yet did Pompey touch nothing of all this; on account of his regard to religion . . . The next day he

gave order that had charge of the Temple to cleanse it, and to bring what offerings the law required to God).⁷⁶

Like much of Josephus' work, what is found here most likely reflects a kernel of truth upon which he attaches meaning or even fabricates events. The Romans may have practiced restraint in their siege of Jerusalem, but his claim regarding the Romans' reaction to the Sabbath seems most unlikely, especially given the Roman confusion regarding the purpose or meaning behind the Jewish observation of a Sabbath day. Yet, Cicero also attests to Pompey's restraint regarding the Temple, in his speech in support of Lucius Valerius Flaccus. However, Cicero and Gruen each find a different motive behind the Roman moderation that Josephus praises. In his speech, Cicero attributes it to Pompey's foresight:

In primis hoc, ut multa alia, sapienter; in tam suspiciosa ac maledica civitate locum sermoni obtreptatorum non reliquit. non enim credo religionem et Iudaeorum et hostium impedimento praestantissimo imperatori, sed pudorem fuisse.

In the first place, he acted wisely, as he did in many other instances, in leaving no room for his detractors to say anything against him, in a city so prone to suspicion and to evil speaking. For I do not suppose that the religion of the Jews, our enemies, was any obstacle to that most illustrious general, but he was hindered by his own modesty.⁷⁷

Cicero, we note, is defending Flaccus, former governor of Asia, who had been accused of stealing the money collected by Jews and intended for the Temple fund. Cicero does not even attempt to allege Flaccus' innocence and instead seeks to vilify those who have protected the Jewish practice of paying tribute to the Temple.⁷⁸ Thus he strives here to dismiss the much-respected general's courteous treatment of the Temple, and although this gives a bias to his presentation, his reasoning does give us a Roman perspective on a policy regarding the Jewish Temple. It is considerably distant from Josephus' attestation of Pompey's εὐσεβειαν (regard for religion), and perhaps he strikes closer to a motive that Gruen puts forth, that is, the desire for peace in the eastern provinces above all else.

Gruen's discussion of this motive does not focus on Pompey's treatment of the Temple, but on the exemption issued for Jews from service in the Roman army. One of the generals in Pompey's forces, L. Lentulus Crus, set forth a decree in 49 CE that Jews were not to fall under conscription in the Roman legions then stationed in Asia. Josephus mentions this incident in Book XIV of his *Antiquities*, once again, as Gruen points out, setting as motive "respect for religious feeling and the practice of Jewish rites."⁷⁹ Gruen notes however, that only Roman citizens were conscripted to serve in the Roman army, and the exemption, therefore, would extend only to an insignificant number of Jews at this time. Moreover, such a move would serve a larger goal at hand, that is, the "advantage of harmony in the eastern part of the empire" that would "present a united front against Caesar." By making such a gesture to Jewish sensibilities, Lentulus could gain the cooperation of Judea with little or no effect on the imperial forces. Such a motive, moreover, stands behind more than just this episode, it is a consideration behind the actions of all "the Pompeian generals" operating in the eastern provinces.⁸⁰ Thus, it is most likely a factor behind Pompey's careful treatment of the Temple and the general restraint practiced during his seizure of Jerusalem.

Rome's political policy regarding the province of Judea

On the surface, the province of Judea was not an unusual one for the Romans to control. In the first century CE, the Roman Empire extended down the entire Eastern edge of the Mediterranean, from Mesopotamia down to Egypt, and the distance of these provinces from Rome forced a form of indirect government, characterized by the use of local leaders and systems already in place. Judea was no exception. Since the first century BCE, the Romans had

selected Semitic leaders to be kings, such as Herod and Agrippa, leaders who were sympathetic to Rome but also familiar with the Jewish people and their customs.

After Herod's death in 4 CE, his son Archelaus was installed under the title of Ethnarch, a term which Origen tells us functions as the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for patriarch—essentially a local leader who answered to the Roman authorities.⁸¹ Archelaus was deposed only two years later by the emperor Augustus due to the complaints of Jews regarding his rule. In 6 CE, Judea was officially made a Roman province of secondary rank with an equestrian governor called a procurator, who was subordinate to the legate of the larger province of Syria. While legions were posted in Syria, only auxiliaries were stationed in Judea, using foreign soldiers, not an uncommon Roman practice, from the region of Sebaste and Caesarea. Schurer notes that only a few other nations, such as Egypt and Thrace, where there existed “a special tenacity” in “adhering to peculiar national customs,” were governed in the same way.⁸²

While the Romans took care to integrate their power within the local system, they stayed distant from local affairs for many decades. They handpicked the high priests, but the Sanhedrin, the Jewish law court, appears to have continued governing with little interference. “The administration of civil law was wholly in the hands of the Sanhedrin and local or native magistrates,” Schurer notes, and so also with criminal cases, unless they involved the death penalty, in which case the Roman governor was to preside.⁸³ The Romans took note of local customs and affairs and had no interest in disrupting them, unless their power was challenged. This type of rule remained in place from 6 CE to 41 CE. Romans installed procurators from the royal families of the Jewish community and allowed them freedom to worship, as long as a sacrifice was made on behalf of the emperor and the Roman people twice a day.⁸⁴ This state of affairs lasted until the death of Tiberius in 37 CE, when Agrippa I, through his favor with

Caligula, was given the kingship of Judea, and until his death in 44 CE, the Jews once again had a familiar and sympathetic leader to mediate with Rome.

The potential for Roman-Jewish clashes

One unusual act of interference by the Romans demonstrates the potential for conflict that constantly brewed under the surface of Jewish-Roman relations. The Roman authorities insisted between 6 and 36 CE on keeping the sacred robes of the high priest in Roman hands, forcing the high priest to ask for their release on holy days such as the Day of Atonement. According to Millar, there is “no parallel to this deep official involvement in the annual cycle of festivals in a local community” in the near-Eastern provinces of Rome.⁸⁵ That such a move would be a grievance to the Jewish community did not appear to be a major consideration for the Romans. When, in 36 CE, the Jews petitioned the legate of Syria, Vitellius, for the robes to be returned to their own custody, Tiberius granted the request with little hesitation.⁸⁶ It seems unlikely that the Romans fully understood the religious significance of these robes for the Jewish community. It is more likely they recognized the useful symbolism of keeping the institutional garments of the local Jewish leaders under their control. Though the incident never escalated into a major conflict, it serves as a good example of the potential for disharmony between Judea and Rome. The Romans felt little compunction in overhauling an institution for the purposes of power, unaware of the importance and sanctity it held for the Jews.

This potential for conflict remained in check only as long as the Jews had someone to intervene with Rome on their behalf. The last such individual was Agrippa I, to whom Caligula gave control of the Judean province in 37 CE. The years spent under Agrippa proved to be the last relatively peaceful ones for the Jews. Agrippa’s friendship with the Roman emperor allowed

him to guard the religious sensibilities of the Jews, and he was much admired by the Jewish communities for his piety.

A war could have started with a crisis in 40 CE, without the interference of the Jewish king and Roman officials such as Petronius, the legate of Syria, and the death of the emperor. This crisis was most likely spurred by the report that the Jews in Jamnia had destroyed an altar to the emperor set up by local pagans. Caligula was enraged by this report of disrespect and insisted that his statue be erected in the Holy of Holies, the innermost room of the Jewish temple.⁸⁷ While not an unusual demand for a provincial temple, it was probably deliberately provocative, given that Tiberius had decided to abandon an attempt to do the same thing a decade earlier. Josephus recounts the dramatic reaction of the Jews that startled Pilate, the procurator in 27 CE, to abandon the issue.⁸⁸ Yet, Caligula gave the order to Petronius to march south toward Judea with half the imperial legion, which the legate obeyed reluctantly.

Josephus describes the immediate outrage of the Jews, who cried out to Petronius that in the face of this sacrilege, παρέχειν δὲ σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ἐτοιμοὺς εἰς τὴν σφαγὴν ἅμα τέκνοις καὶ γυναῖξιν (they were ready to expose themselves, together with their children and wives, to be slain).⁸⁹ Fortunately for the Jews, Agrippa could appeal to Caligula as a friend and fellow Roman to rethink his demand. Petronius, too, sent a letter to the emperor, asking that he repeal his order. Agrippa appears to have been successful, for Caligula sent a letter to the legate ordering him not to touch the temple. However, he must have changed his mind soon after, since he set off for a trip to the eastern provinces, intending to drop the statue off in Palestine en route. His death, however, set the matter to rest.

Josephus interprets these events as a dramatic testament to Jewish religious righteousness. Caligula's order was, he asserts, a deliberate act of ἀσέβειαν (impiety) against

the Jews, ὥστε θεὸν ἑαυτὸν καὶ δοκεῖν (as to take himself to be a god).⁹⁰ It should be kept in mind however that Caligula had responded favorably to a Jewish complaint in Alexandria in 38 CE, when a Roman governor was leading a violent persecution of the Jewish community there. Philo of Alexandria, who writes of this incident in his *Legatio Ad Gaium*, accuses Caligula of enmity towards the Jews, but Gruen finds no evidence for this, stating that “nothing in the emperor’s behavior suggests inveterate hatred of the Jews.”⁹¹ In the case of the Temple statue two years later, it should be noted that installing an emperor’s image in a provincial temple was a standard Roman procedure, and Caligula’s order seems to stem more from his anger at the disrespect shown to his authority and a generally unreasonable nature for which he was famous, than from any hatred of the Jews or their religion.

Josephus also speaks of Petronius’ awe at the Jews’ ἀνυπερβλήτου θρησκείας τῶν ἀνδρῶν (inexpressible sense of religion) which convinced him to appeal on their behalf to the emperor.⁹² In the *Antiquities*, Josephus declares that ὁ θεὸς παρρησίαν ἐπεδείκνυτο τὴν αὐτοῦ Περωνίῳ (now did God show his presence to Petronius) with miraculous showers of rain. He then asserts that Petronius κατεπέπληκτο μειζόνως ὁρῶν ἐναργῶς τὸν θεὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων προμηθοῦμενον (was mightily surprised when he perceived that God evidently took care of the Jews).⁹³ He finishes the account with details of the letter of Petronius to Caligula:

This was also among other particulars which he wrote to Caius: which all tended to dissuade him, and by all means to entreat him not to make so many thousands of these men go distracted: whom if he should slay (for without war they would by no means suffer the laws of their worship to be set aside) he would lose all revenue they paid him, and would be publicly execrated by them for all future ages. Moreover, that God, who was their governor, had shewn his power most evidently on their account; and that such a power as left no room for doubt about it.⁹⁴

Philo on the other hand, as summarized by E. Mary Smallwood, first mentions the problem at hand: “Gaius decided that, as a punishment for the Jews' action, a colossal gilded

statue of himself should be made and erected in the Temple,” and then relates the letter’s content as slightly more pragmatic, describing only the reason for his delay in executing Caligula’s order:

He wrote to Gaius apologizing for the delay over the dedication of the statue and explaining that this was due partly to the work involved in the construction of the statue and partly to the fact that it was the season of the grain harvest, which he feared that the Jews might deliberately destroy in their frenzied opposition to the proposed desecration; there would then be danger of a famine.⁹⁵

The differing presentations are quite telling. Josephus sees the Roman behavior, both against and in support of the Jews, as driven by an understanding of Jewish religion. Caligula sets out to deliberately affront the Jewish God and Petronius defends the Jews on the basis of their piety and God’s visible power. Philo’s account shows what a Roman official would more likely have based his appeal on: the potential for economic loss in a wealthy province. In addition to this, he presents Caligula’s sacrilegious action as a move to punish the Jews for insurrection, not attack the precepts of their religion. Josephus’ confusion of motives tells of the larger problem between the Roman authorities and the Jewish community: what the Romans interpreted as standard measures of control, the Jews saw as deliberate attacks on their religious convictions. Ultimately, it was Agrippa’s intervention and the emperor’s death that settled the crisis, but without the king’s mediating force later on, the full effect of these clashes could not be avoided.

The end of mediation and the clash that ensued

Thus Roman rule was not innately incompatible with the Jewish communities, but a mediator with interests and ties to both the imperial governing power and the religious demands of the province was needed at all times. The structures of Roman government, however, did not

always guarantee such a figure and, when Agrippa passed away in 44 CE, a clash was inevitable. Claudius, deeming the young Agrippa II not of age to rule, set Judea under the control of Roman procurators once again. For the next twenty-four years, Judea was ruled by a line of governors, some Jewish by birth, but all closely aligned with Rome and with little understanding of or consideration for Jewish concerns and religion. The result was two tumultuous decades as Jewish resentment grew and increasingly violent rebellions occurred. From the first major rebellion onward, the lack of mediation between the Jews' religious sensibilities and the Roman governor proved to be a dangerous problem. This particular revolt came under the governorship of Ventidius Cumanus, who ruled from 48 to 52 CE, and took place in the Temple, during the Passover ceremony. As always, the Roman auxiliaries stood around the Temple to ensure order, but on this particular occasion, Josephus reports that:

One of the soldiers pulled up his garment and bent over indecently, turning his backside towards the Jews and making a noise as indecent as his attitude.⁹⁶

The crowd gathered became enraged, and demanded Cumanus interfere, but the procurator, perhaps misunderstanding the magnitude of the insult, instead tried to calm them with words. When the crowd only grew angrier, he panicked and called in his forces, resulting in a stampede and the death of many, though probably not the 30,000 that Josephus claims (a very common number used in his death tolls).⁹⁷

Revolts and unrest continued to escalate, a dangerous situation that went unaddressed by authorities in Rome for a critically long period. Trouble spots in other parts of their far-flung eastern empire can most likely be blamed for this: "The Roman preoccupation with Armenia and Parthia," Millar contends, "may perhaps explain why, in spite of ever-increasing unrest and violence in Judea, no intervention by the *legatus* of Syria or his forces is attested by Josephus until Passover of AD 66."⁹⁸ When the Syrian governor did finally visit Judea in 66 CE, he found

the population in a frenzied state of near-rebellion, complaining about their latest procurator, Gessius Florus. Josephus describes a visit by Agrippa II and his attempt to reason with the angry mobs by showing the absurdity of waging war with the Roman Empire. He pleads, οὐ περισκέψασθε τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίαν; οὐ μετρήσετε τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἀσθένειαν; (Will you not carefully consider the whole Roman Empire? Will you not estimate your own weakness?).⁹⁹ The warning went unheeded, and full-fledged rebellion broke out, first with the auxiliary forces stationed within Jerusalem, and eventually with an entire legion of the Roman army led by Cestius Gallus, the *legatus* of Syria, and joined by local forces along the way, “who made up for their training by their hatred of the Jews.”¹⁰⁰

In an astonishing turn of events, the population of Judea managed to withstand these forces and see their eventual withdrawal by Gallus, an event so unprecedented in Roman history that Millar makes the claim “there is no other example of a comparable defeat of Roman regular forces by the population of an established province.”¹⁰¹ The death of the emperor Nero in 68 CE slowed the Roman response, and the new emperor Vitellius was forced to send some of his best generals to secure other unstable regions of the empire, such as Egypt and parts of Italy, leaving Titus with the task of seizing Jerusalem. An enormous force, Millar notes, nearly “one-seventh of the Imperial army,” took “five months, from April to September of AD 70 to complete the capture of the city.”¹⁰² In the heat of the siege, the Temple caught fire and although Titus probably did not intend for it to be completely destroyed, it burned to the ground.¹⁰³

What followed was an intense display of the Jewish defeat by the conquering Titus, consisting of often gruesome and vivid punishments of Jewish captives throughout the eastern provinces. Such a display was not unwelcome in much of the Near East. Millar gives a long list of cities which had experienced major conflict between gentile and Jewish communities.¹⁰⁴ In

Caesarea, Josephus describes Titus overseeing Jewish prisoners: οἱ μὲν θηρίοις παραβληθέντες, οἱ δὲ κατὰ πλῆθὺν ἀλλήλοις ἀναγκαζόμενοι χρήσασθαι πολεμίοις (some thrown to wild beasts, others forced to meet each other in full-scale battles).¹⁰⁵ Moving on to Berytus and Antioch, Titus oversaw similar displays, displays that Millar calls “a prelude to the great triumph held in Rome in 71 AD,” and an attempt to “associate other communities of the Near East with the repression of the revolt.”¹⁰⁶ Rome was clearly deeply disturbed by the long and destructive nature of the Jewish war. They had been taken off guard by the peculiar, but relatively non-threatening population of Judea, and this brutal aftermath must have been an attempt to recreate the settlement of a provincial revolt as a victory over a common enemy.

The Roman triumph that followed was to be, Millar notes, “the only triumph ever to celebrate the subjugation of the population of an existing province.”¹⁰⁷ Thus Judea had made the fatal turn in Roman eyes, from a demanding and restless province, still worthy of defense, to an enemy of the empire, worthy only of defeat. Goodman makes note of this as well, in reference to Titus’ destruction of the Temple, writing that the general must have felt the need to present the “disastrous accident” of the Temple’s destruction as “a great achievement and a cause for Roman celebration.”¹⁰⁸ He also contends that Titus’ triumph seemed unusually directed against Judea’s religion. The Romans were not accustomed to celebrate the destruction of foreign temples, on the contrary, there was a practice of offering foreign gods a place in Roman religion, making the point that “war was waged against human communities, not their gods.”¹⁰⁹ Yet Titus makes a point of marching the sacred items of the Temple in conspicuous fashion, as Josephus relates:

More prominent than all the rest were those captured in the Temple of Jerusalem—a golden table weighing several hundredweight and a lampstand similarly made of gold . . . it extended slender branches placed like prongs of a trident . . . these numbered seven, signifying the honor paid to that number by the Jews. After these was carried the Jewish Law, the last of the spoils.¹¹⁰

To anyone familiar with Jewish history, these items, and their listing here, recall the books of the Pentateuch which detail the care taken in constructing and sanctifying them, by order of God. They are items almost inexpressibly sacred to the Jewish people, and to Josephus, their display in the triumph is “more prominent” than anything else. Goodman agrees, citing the display of these items to represent clearly a conquest being “celebrated not just over Judea but over Judaism.”¹¹¹ Yet to a Roman, this might not be true. The items of the temple were probably not readily identifiable to the average Roman citizen who had never seen the inside of the Jewish temple, and their most distinctive characteristic would probably have been the gold from which they were fashioned. What would have been most prominent for Romans viewing (and organizing) the triumph was probably what Josephus spends the other half his account detailing:

What caused the greatest wonder was the structure of the traveling stages; indeed their immense size caused alarm . . . many were hung with curtains interwoven with gold, and all were framed in wrought ivory and gold. Numbers of tableaux showed the successive stages of the war most vividly portrayed. Here was to be seen a smiling countryside laid to waste, there whole formations of the enemy put to the sword.¹¹²

The more pointed effort of the Romans seems to be an attempt to reconstruct the events, not as a provincial rebellion that had proved embarrassingly difficult to put down, but as a grand victory over a common enemy of Rome.

If symbols of Judaism made their way into the celebration, it seems likely that they were there to represent the totality of defeat; not even this province’s sacred aspects were left unassailed. If the Jewish God was not offered a place in Roman religion, it could be that the Romans understood the place of His worship in the origins of the rebellion. Not that they

understood the Jewish beliefs in God or the meaning behind their practices, but that they recognized that the Temple, and the God to whom it was dedicated, were what incited the province of Judea, again and again, to revolt and unrest. Whether it was an auxiliary soldier being disrespectful in the Temple, or the placement of Caligula's statue in its interior, the Romans could not have been ignorant of the central place the Temple and its God held in the Jewish revolts. Hence the prominent place the images of the temple items hold in the depiction of the triumph on the Arch of Titus, constructed by Domitian after the death of Titus, to commemorate the defeat of the Jews. The religious items of the Jews, especially those connected with the Temple, must have served as useful symbols for the Romans to represent the very conflict itself.



An image of Temple items on display in Titus' triumph, as depicted on the Arch of Titus

The Roman refusal to rebuild the Temple and the replacement of Judea following later rebellions.

With the shock and devastation of the Jewish war in mind, the Romans took a harsh line with the Jewish province. The Tenth Imperial Legion was stationed in Judea and for several

decades after 70 CE, taking a firm stance against a Jewish revival proved to be a matter of political expediency for emperors. The emperors Titus and Domitian sought to demonstrate continuity with the rule of Vespasian, and one way to do so was the continued suppression and treatment of Jews as an enemy. The revolts that flared up in 113 and 130 CE served to validate the unease with which Rome continued to view Jewish presence in the eastern empire. Hadrian's construction of Aelia Capitolina and the construction of a temple to Zeus were a final attempt to eradicate the dangerous presence of the Jews in Judea. And, with the exception of Nerva, who sought to distance himself from Domitian, the emperors following Vespasian refused to consider the possibility of rebuilding Jerusalem and its Temple. Goodman calls this persistent refusal the result of a "prejudice against the Jewish cult" that was "deeply entrenched in Roman minds."¹¹³ The Roman attitude toward Jews and their "cult" at this time might be better defined as a newfound phobia: they had seen the violent ends to which the Jews would go to ensure the proper worship of their God, and they feared the disruption it had already caused in their eastern empire. The easiest way to eliminate the possibility of such violence occurring again was to eliminate not only the Jewish nation, but the Temple, which appeared to be the focal point of their religion and worship.

τὸν θεὸν νῦν ἐπὶ τῆς Ἰταλίας εἶναι: "God is now in Italy"

The difference between the Jewish and Roman perspectives of the escalating conflict of the first century BC is perhaps best seen in their immediate reactions to the final eradication of Jerusalem in 130 CE. Goodman notes how greatly the Roman portrayal of this defeat differs from the conspicuous and triumphant depiction of the sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE. There was no imperial tour of the east, punishing Jewish captives, no grand Triumph conducted through the streets of Rome; not even the usual coinage symbolizing the defeated enemy was ever circulated.

For the Romans, Goodman remarks, “It was a war that should not have happened.”¹¹⁴ The large number of Romans and Jews that had died in a conflict spanning seven decades and the intensity of the final rebellions in 130 CE were not things the Romans wished to advertise. Instead, we see what Goodman calls, “Roman burial of memories of the conflict;” an effort for it, “to be as if the Jews had never been in Jerusalem.”¹¹⁵ The Jewish conflict was a troubling but ultimately forgettable disruption to Roman rule. A surprisingly fierce provincial revolt, centered around the province’s religious practices had escalated into a war against an enemy of the empire. The problem was only finally resolved with the forcible removal of an entire people, along with their religion, from the Roman East in the interest of peace. The original goal was not to attack Judaism, nor were Roman actions motivated by an understanding of Jewish beliefs, a conclusion that Morton Smyth supports: “Thus it appears that, from a Roman point of view, the war of 66-74 was never a war against Judaism, nor against all Jews.”¹¹⁶ It was an attempt to maintain peace in a distant eastern province at any cost, and those costs proved to be tragically high.

Religious texts of the Jewish community attest to a central belief in the divine guidance of their nation and point to a society that centered around the worship of their God and thus, for the Jews, the events of the first century CE were inextricably tied to their practice of Judaism. History was driven by the will of an angry God, a divine abandonment of biblical proportions but without the expected eventual divine intervention that Scripture had attested to throughout Jewish history. The loss of their divinely-ordained temple and homeland were a theophany that radically reshaped Jewish religious thought. James Sanders notes how the replacement of Jerusalem with Aelia Capitolina and the consequent exile of any remaining Jews from their homeland led to a radical reworking of Jewish theological precepts:

These two events left their lasting imprint on surviving rabbinic Judaism as perhaps no other did or has done. Two major decisions were apparently made. The first was to affirm

the belief that God must indeed have departed from ongoing history well before these events, and the second concerned the [re]shaping of surviving rabbinic Judaism into a community in pursuit of Torah as a way of thought and life [in replacement of the centrality of the Temple].¹¹⁷

For the Jews, the events were a divine abandonment best summed up by Jospheus, when he tells his fellow Jews: ὥστε ἐγὼ πεφευγέναι μὲν ἐκ τῶν ἁγίων οἶμαι τὸ θεῖον, ἐστάναι δὲ παρ' οἷς πολεμεῖτε νῦν (Wherefore I cannot but suppose that God is fled out of his sanctuary, and stands on the side of those against whom you fight).¹¹⁸

This mutual cultural misunderstanding: an empire seeking peace and a province seeing only an attack on their religious needs, led to the violent and, for the Jews, disastrous events of the first century CE.

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