

The diffusion and use of Greek in the land of Israel at the transition from B.C. to A.D. are treated in many of the above studies, and specifically in J. N. Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek: How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?* Supplements to Novum Testamentum 19 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968); Meyers/Strange, *Archaeology*, pp. 62-91; and James Barr, "Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age," in Davies/Finkelstein, *Judaism*, pp. 79-114.

2

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION JEWS & THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The encounter with the Hellenistic culture of the Hellenistic empires of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria was of great significance to Judaism. But perhaps the encounter between Judaism and the political power of Rome was to become even more fateful. The Romans cared little about Jewish religion as such, and yet they caused one of the major revolutions in Jewish history: they forced Judaism to become a religion without a temple. This resulted in one of the deepest transformations of the whole character of Judaism. In razing the temple in A.D. 70, the Romans probably only meant to take a wise political precaution. But the religious significance of this event far outweighed its political effects. It is, however, with the political and juridical dimensions of the Jewish-Roman relationship that this chapter is concerned. The religious effects are treated more fully in chapters four and five.

The End of the Hasmonean Dynasty and the Beginning of Roman Rule

Again we begin with a story: In the spring of 63 B.C. three Jewish delegations appeared before the Roman general Pompey, who had erected his military headquarters in Damascus. Two of the Jewish groups represented competing Hasmonean brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, who were fighting for control of the Hasmonean throne. Each party appealed to the Roman general for

support against the other. The third delegation represented neither of the competing Hasmonean princes, but quite simply "the Jewish people." This third group said that they did

not desire to be under kingly government [by the Hasmoneans], because the form of the government they received from their fathers was that of subjection to the priests . . . and that these two [Aristobulus and Hyrcanus] . . . sought to change the government of their nation to another form in order to enslave them. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14:41)¹

What a sad epilogue to the Hasmonean dynasty. A hundred years after the Maccabean uprising, Jewish leaders appeared before Pompey and appealed to the Roman general to abolish the constitution created by the Hasmonean rulers and their oppressive regime and to restore the ancient priestly theocracy—but now under Roman auspices! How could this be?

It was, in fact, the logical outcome of the process which began only a few years after the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt. The Maccabees could not end their involvement when the Syrian soldiers were ousted from the Holy City. In order to retain their newly gained freedom, the liberators had to become rulers. In 152 B.C., Jonathan, the brother of Judah Maccabee, received the title of high priest from the Syrian rulers, who had kept the power to appoint the high priest. Thus, in their very zeal to protect the Torah and tradition, the Maccabees did violence to both. They were priests, but not sons of Zadok, and therefore could not claim any hereditary right to the office of high priest (cf. Ezek 40:46; 43:19).

Some pious Jews reacted strongly against this, and a number of them—after some time—even retired to the desert shores of the Dead Sea to build a

community center at Qumran, vehemently denouncing the "wicked priest" who had persecuted their own leader.² The Pharisees, on the other hand, during most of the last 150 years B.C., had varying relations with the Maccabees. Josephus records a break between the Pharisees and Hyrcanus (156-104 B.C.), who was himself originally their disciple (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:288-98).³ Pharisaic political influence later reached its peak under the Hasmonean Queen Shlomzion Alexandra in the years 76-67 B.C. (*The Jewish War* 1.110-14).

An increasing tension, however, developed between the pious, learned men of the Torah and the self-conscious Hasmonean princes who would have their say in all sectors of Jewish life. Israel was no longer under foreign rule, but the government prescribed by tradition—a legitimate Davidic king and a legitimate high priest, descending from Zadok—was lacking. In their stead were the Hasmoneans, who were descendants of neither David nor Zadok. And no human effort was likely to provide a better alternative. It must have dawned on many pious Jews that the creation of the true messianic kingdom was in the hands of God, not humans. In the meantime, would it not be better to have no king at all rather than these pseudo-kings? "Later, and in a precisely similar fashion, after the death of Herod, the Jews petitioned that none of the Herodians be named king, but that they be permitted to live without a king, according to the law of their forefathers!"⁴

So, to return to our story above, the Jewish delegation to Pompey very likely thought that the Romans would not interfere with the internal aspects of Jewish life prescribed by the Torah. So why not prefer high-priestly rule under Roman auspices to that of the Hasmoneans?

We have every reason to think that Pompey listened to the delegates from "the Jewish people" with considerable sympathy. He would have greatly appreciated their reverence for the traditions of their fathers. In fact, this was to become a basic element and principle of Roman policy concerning the religions of subjugated peoples: each people should be allowed to follow their ancestral religious traditions and worship the gods of their fathers. The Romans held their own religious traditions in high esteem, and were willing

²The exact date of this exodus to Qumran is debated among scholars. See further details in chapter six.

³Günter Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 105-10, presents a rather persuasive argument for the view that Josephus mistakenly attached the story of a break with the Pharisees to Hyrcanus, and that it may originally have been told about Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.).

⁴Elias J. Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (New York: Schocken, 1962), p. 174.

¹The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (ca. A.D. 37-100) belonged to a priestly family and was a commander in Galilee during the first Jewish revolt against Rome (A.D. 66-70). He surrendered to the Romans and later settled in Rome. His works are often somewhat biased towards the Romans, but nevertheless they are the best sources on late Second Temple history. Josephus wrote in Greek. In the 70s he wrote *The War of the Jews*, and in the 90s *My Life* (his autobiography). *Against Apion*, an apology for Judaism, and *Antiquities of the Jews*, a history of the Jewish people from biblical times to his own. For general information on Josephus as a historian, see H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian* (New York: Ktav, 1967); Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian*, *Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition* 8 (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979); Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship* (1937-1980) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984); idem, "Flavius Josephus Revisited: The Man, His Writings, and His Significance," in Haase, *Aufstieg* 2 21.2:763-862; Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus Between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works and Their Importance*, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series* 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).

to respect those of others. Many Jews appreciated this, and when Pompey, in the fall of 63 B.C., advanced to take control of Jerusalem, the city gates were opened to his generals by the Jewish majority in the city. Only a minority voted for resistance. They took control of the Temple Mount, and Pompey had to take this area by force. But once the fierce fighting was over, Pompey was satisfied to merely inspect the temple and its treasures, "yet did Pompey touch nothing of all this, on account of his regard to religion. . . . The next day he gave order to those that had the charge of the temple to cleanse it, and to bring what offerings the law required to God" (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.72-73).

So it seems that those Jews who favored a Roman take-over were basically right: the Romans respected the ancient Jewish institutions and traditions, and had no intention of interfering in internal Jewish affairs. The following years to a great extent confirmed this. The Romans regarded the Jews as their faithful allies, and the Jews living in Greek cities outside Israel were repeatedly granted special privileges not given to others (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.185-267). And so it seemed that the Jews had found their ideal government while waiting for full freedom in the kingdom of the Messiah. But this began to change in the days when Herod and his sons became the executors of Roman rule in Israel.

Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.) was not liked by the Jews.⁵ As a founder of cities and a master builder, he was one of the greatest Hellenizers in the history of Israel. Even though he was eager to show, when need be, that he respected the Torah and its ordinances, the Pharisees were not duped by his shows. The relationship between him and the Jewish leadership was strained.⁶

Things did not improve when Judea came under direct Roman rule in A.D. 6. It was clear to all that by now the honeymoon between the Jews and Romans was definitely over. The reason involved a conflict between their basic principles and values. Three times, in A.D. 66-70, A.D. 115-117 and A.D.

⁵Herod the Great has, understandably, attracted the attention of many scholars. Three comprehensive studies are those of Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk*, Studia Judaica 4 (New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969); Michael Grant, *Herod the Great* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971); Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

⁶On Pharisaic attitudes toward Herod and his sons, see Gedalyahu Alon, "The Attitude of the Pharisees to Roman Rule and the House of Herod," in *Alon, Studies*, pp. 18-47; esp. pp. 37-42.

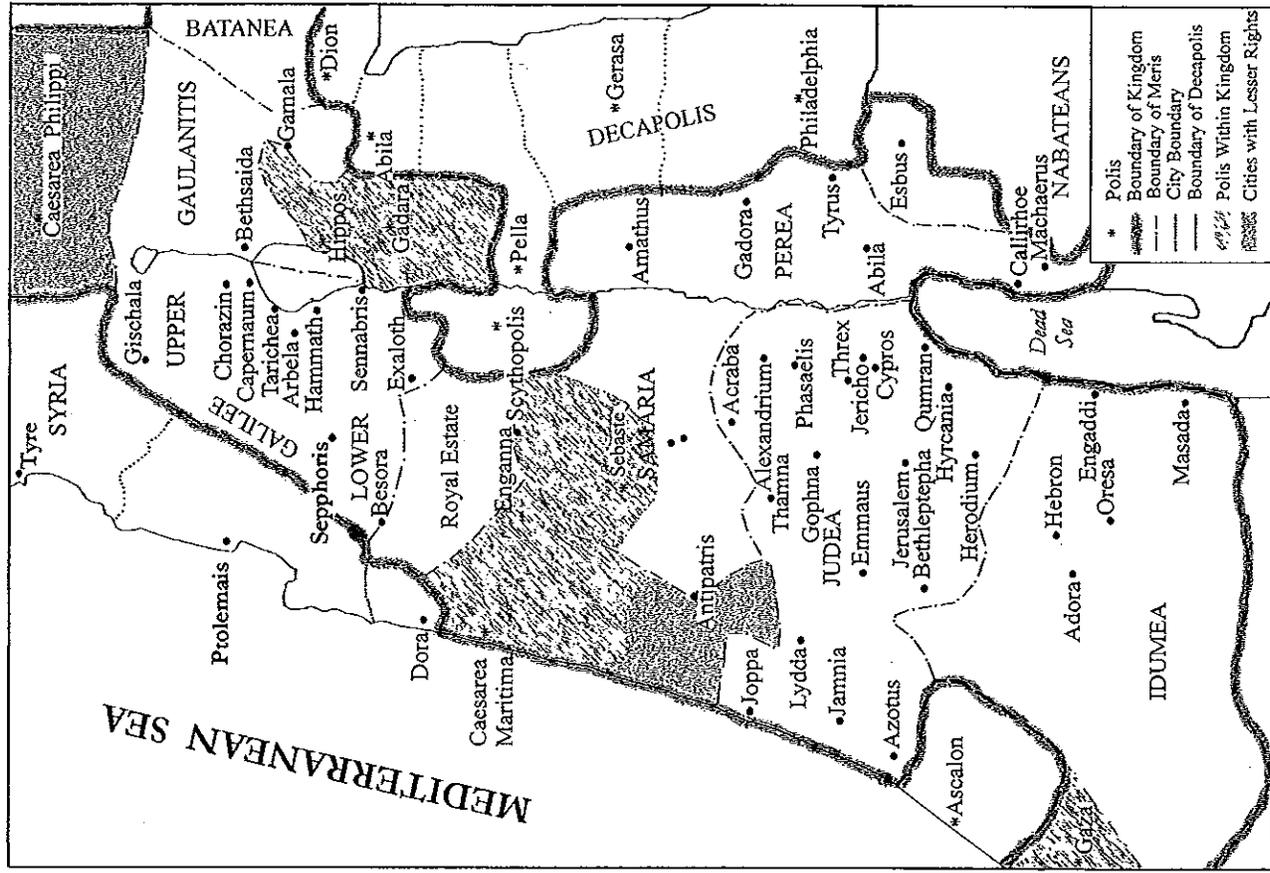


Figure 2.1. Roman and Herodian Palestine

132-135, the conflict erupted in outright war,⁷ and during the first of these the Jewish people lost their cultic center, the temple in Jerusalem.

What had happened? We shall first take a closer look at the last Jewish revolt (A.D. 132-135). As usual, we begin with a story, this time a Talmudic one.

The Bar Kokhba Revolt

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the Shema, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven (that is, he recited the Shema). His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, "with all your soul," which I interpret, "even if he takes your soul." I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the word *Échad* [One] until he expired while saying it. (*TB Berakhot 61b*)

This Talmudic passage recounts another classic story about martyrdom in Jewish tradition. This time the oppressive power was Rome itself, the most impressive political and military power the world had yet seen. The ones torturing Rabbi Akiba were Roman soldiers. But why did they execute the foremost Jewish rabbi of their time? If we had had the opportunity to ask the Roman authorities this question, they would probably have answered in political terms: Rabbi Akiba supported Simon Bar Kosiba, the leader of the second great Jewish rebellion against Rome. He identified him as the "King Messiah" and "The star that comes forth from Jacob" (Num 24:17), thus giving support for his popular name Bar Kokhba, "Son of the Star."⁸

In the years 132-135 Bar Kokhba headed a revolt against Rome that was initially successful, resulting in the establishment of an independent Jewish administration which even struck coins commemorating the liberation of Judea.⁹ This, of course, was intolerable to the Romans, and the rebellion was

⁷The first and last occurred in the land of Israel, the second in the Diaspora, in Egypt, Cyrenaica (part of present-day Libya) and Cyprus. As I am not going to comment further on the second Jewish rebellion (that of A.D. 115-117 in the Diaspora), I refer the interested reader to the relevant chapter in *New Schürer 1*, Part One, 21.2, pp. 529-34.

⁸*Lam. Rab. 2.2; TJ Taanit 4.7*. Cf. Peter Schäfer, "Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kokhba," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. William Scott Green, *Brown Judaic Studies 9* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980), 2:113-30; and Craig Evans, "Was Simon ben Kosiba Recognized as Messiah," in *Evans, Jesus and his Contemporaries*, pp. 183-212.

⁹On the Bar Kokhba revolt, cf. the studies listed in the Suggestions below, and in addition, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Bar Kokhba Period," in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament*, Sources for Biblical Study 3 (London: G. Chapman, 1971), pp. 305-54; Alon, *The*

brutally crushed. After they killed the last Jewish fighters, the Romans proceeded to take measures that would prevent any future conspiracy or revolt against the empire. Jews were excluded from Jerusalem, and the Holy City was converted into a pagan, Hellenistic city, called *Aelia Capitolina* ("The Capitol-City of the Aelian family"). A shrine to Jupiter was erected on the Temple Mount, and one to Aphrodite on the site held by the Christians to be the place of Calvary and the tomb of Jesus. (The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built on this site in the fourth century. One of the arches through which Hadrian's temple was entered can still be seen in the "Russian Excavations" inside the Russian convent, to the east of the Holy Sepulchre.) To the south of this temple Hadrian leveled the ground to make room for the Roman forum (now in the Muristan area of the Christian quarter), and he partly changed the pattern of streets to fit this new center in the city. The new main street ran from north to south, passing the facade of the Aphrodite temple and ending at the new forum—along the line of present-day Suk Khan ez Zeit, which runs southwards from the Damascus Gate.¹⁰

The victory of Hellenism at last seemed complete. Hadrian had succeeded where Antiochus had failed; Jerusalem was now converted to a non-Jewish polis. The sources contain hints that this process had begun prior to Bar Kokhba's uprising, and that it was the main provocation for the revolt.¹¹

From this it is evident that for the Jews, the issue at stake was not mainly political. Bar Kokhba and Rabbi Akiba must have felt that Judaism was once again being threatened, just as it was in the days of the Maccabean revolt. For them the uprising had religious motives, and they fought for the God of Israel and his Torah. Akiba's hope for the rebuilding of the temple is reflected in the prayer and benediction he added to the Passover Haggadah:

Therefore, O Lord our God and the God of our fathers, bring us in peace to the other set feasts and festivals which are coming to meet us, while we rejoice in the building-up of your city and are joyful in your worship; and may we eat

Jews 2:570-637; Benjamin Isaac and Aharon Oppenheimer, "The Revolt of Bar Kokhba: Ideology and Modern Scholarship," *Journal of Jewish Studies 36* (1985): 33-60.

¹⁰For a recent archaeological assessment of Hadrian's Aelia Capitolina, cf. Hillel Geva, "Searching for Roman Jerusalem," *Biblical Archaeological Review 23*, no. 6 (1997): 34-45, 72-73; Hanan Eshel, "Aelia Capitolina: Jerusalem No More," *ibid.*: 46-48, 73.

¹¹Cf. G. W. Bowersock, "A Roman Perspective on the Bar Kokhba War," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. William Scott Green, *Brown Judaic Studies 9* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980), 2:131-42. Bowersock argues strongly for the view that Emperor Hadrian had begun to turn Jerusalem into a pagan temple-city before the Jewish revolt broke out, and that this project was among the causes of the revolt.

there of the sacrifices and of the Passover-offerings whose blood has reached with acceptance the wall of your Altar. . . . Blessed are you, O Lord, who has redeemed Israel! (*M Pesachim* 10:6)

The Tension Between Jews and Romans

As noted above, the Romans showed great respect for the religious traditions of conquered peoples. But this tolerance had some very pronounced limitations.¹² For one thing, foreign religions should not contain rites that were offensive to Roman standards of ethics and decency.¹³ In this respect there was only one problem with the Jewish religion: the Romans, as Hellenists, strongly disliked circumcision. They considered it a mutilation of the body, contrary to their ideals of physical beauty and proper treatment of the body. Nevertheless, the Romans let their respect for ancestral traditions prevail over their dislike for the rite; besides, the Romans were shrewd realists who must have realized that a ban on circumcision would have been tantamount to a declaration of war on the whole Jewish nation in Israel and abroad. So the Romans grudgingly accepted circumcision, except perhaps in the days immediately prior to and after Bar Kokhba's revolt.

There is evidence to suggest that Emperor Hadrian issued a general ban on circumcision in the early 130s, and that this was one of the provocations that sparked the revolt. From a purely political point of view it was a hopeless decree. The Romans must soon have realized this; it seems that they silently let the ban be forgotten after some decades.

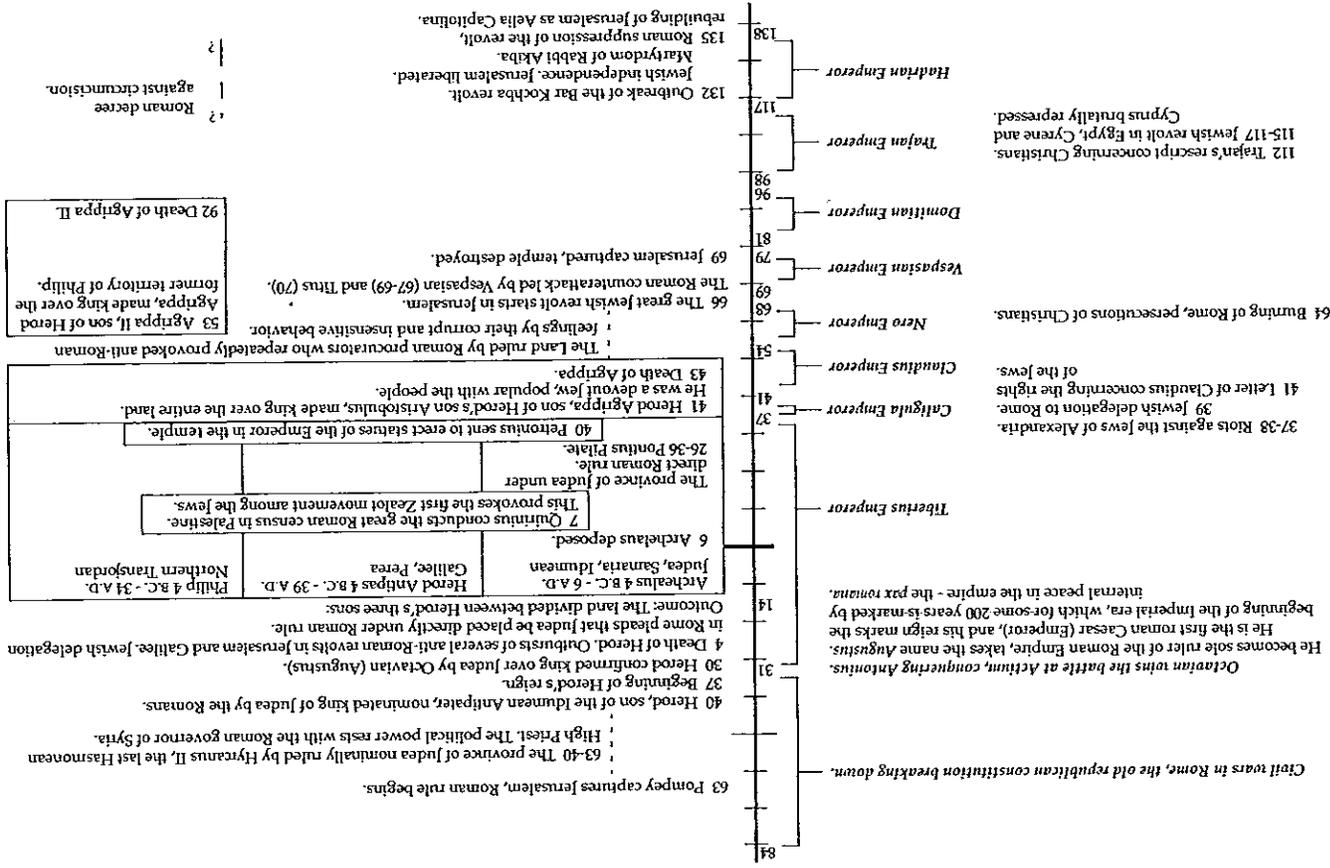
There was, however, another limitation to Roman tolerance that was more fundamental: no foreign religion should refuse to honor the Roman gods. As a rule this created no problems. Most subjects of the Roman Empire were polytheists, who willingly accorded the Roman gods their due honor—and no more. This was all that was required. Among the educated elite, some were philosophical monotheists, some agnostics and some atheists. In any case it did not trouble their conscience to pay homage to the gods—it was mostly a question of social and political expedience.

Not so with the Jews. In the Diaspora, the Gentile neighbors of the Jews had long noticed that the God of Israel was peculiar: he tolerated no other

¹²Cf. in general the studies by Juster, Smallwood, and Noetlich listed in the Suggestions below. For shorter but instructive treatments, cf. W. H. C. Frend, "Rome and First-Century Judaism," in *The Early Church*, pp. 15-23; *New Schürer* 1:243-557; and Alon, "Attitude" (above, n. 6).

¹³A very good survey of Roman policy with regard to "foreign" cults is contained in Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, pp. 104-26.

Box 2.1. Romans and Jews: Some Main Events



gods. "The Greeks were prepared to accept the God of Israel into their Pantheon, but they were faced with a riddle. The gods of Greece could easily compromise with the God of Israel, but He could not compromise with them. This was hard to understand."¹⁴ Converts to Judaism behaved strangely: they no longer visited the temples of the gods of their fathers and fellow citizens, and avoided dining with their relatives and former friends. It seemed that they despised official religion and avoided close contact with other men, arousing the dislike of their neighbors. The Jews were branded atheists (deniers of the Roman gods) and haters of men. The Roman historian Tacitus was probably speaking for many when he said about the Jews,

they are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion [towards one another], but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity. They sit apart at meals and they sleep apart, and although as a race, they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves nothing is unlawful. They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference. Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account. (*Historiae* 5.5.1-2)¹⁵

Already in pre-Christian times we hear of pogroms against the Jews in

¹⁴Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, p. 374.

¹⁵Quoted according to Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors* 2, no. 281, p. 26. It should be noted that Tacitus also had more positive things to say about the Jews, and that he was by no means among the extreme Jew-haters of antiquity. Cf. esp. David Rokeah, "Tacitus and Ancient Antisemitism," *Revue des études juives* 154 (1995): 281-94. There is a lot of ancient source material on pagan attitudes toward and ideas about the Jewish people, conveniently collected in Stern's three volumes (arranged by author) and in Whittaker's one-volume anthology (arranged according to themes); see the references in the Suggestions in chapter 1. Here it may be pertinent to add some other examples that show part of the tradition to which Tacitus belonged. (1) Diodorus (first century B.C.): "The majority of his [Antiochus Sidetes] friends advised the king to take the city by storm and wipe out completely the race of the Jews, since they alone of all nations avoided dealings with any other people and looked upon all men as their enemies. . . . [The Jews] had made their hatred of mankind into a tradition, and on this account had introduced utterly outlandish laws: not to break bread with any other race, nor to show them any good will at all. . . . [This was due to Moses] who had ordained for the Jews their misanthropic and lawless customs" (*Bibliotheca Historica* 34-35.1.1-3; Stern no. 63 = 1.183). (2) Apollonius Molon (first century B.C.): "Apollonius reviles us [Jews] in one place as atheists and misanthropes" (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.145; Stern no. 49 = 1.155). Cf. the following studies: Sevenster (listed above in chapter one, n. 16); David Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict*, *Studia Post-Biblica* 33 (Leiden: E. J. Brill/Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), esp. pp. 56-61; John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 35-112.

some of the greatest cities of the Roman Empire.

The Romans must have been aware of Jewish objections to worshipping the Roman gods from the very beginning of their alliance with the Jewish people. No homage whatever would be offered to the Roman gods in the temple of Jerusalem. The best the Jews could do was to say prayers and offer sacrifices to the God of Israel for Caesar's well-being. And so they did, from the time of the first emperor, Augustus, and right up to the outbreak of the great revolt in A.D. 66.¹⁶

Josephus tells a moving story related to this sacrifice. The Emperor Caligula (A.D. 37-41) in a fit of megalomania ordered that statues of himself be erected in all the temples of the empire, Jerusalem included. The Roman general Petronius was sent to Israel with three legions and an order to place the emperor's statue in the temple, and "in the event of the Jews refusing to admit them, his orders were to put the recalcitrants to death and to reduce the whole nation to slavery." In Tiberias, Petronius spent fifty days negotiating with the Jewish leaders and an assembly of the people. He told them that their protests against the images of Caesar were unreasonable, because "all the subject nations . . . had erected in each of their cities statues of Caesar, along with those of their other gods, and that they alone should oppose this practice amounted almost to rebellion, aggravated by insult." But the Jews stubbornly referred to their Law, which did not permit any image at all to be erected in their country, much less in the temple, and said they were ready to suffer for the Law. Petronius then quieted them, and said to them, "Will you then go to war with Caesar?" The Jews replied that they offered sacrifice twice daily for Caesar and the Roman people, but that if he wished to set up these statues, he must first sacrifice the entire Jewish nation. This made such an impression on Petronius that he decided not to carry out Caesar's orders, but rather to try to persuade Caesar to change his mind, and if he should fail in this, "I am ready on behalf of the lives of so many to surrender my own." Josephus concluded his story of this noble Roman officer with great satisfaction: Caesar was indeed enraged and sent a letter threatening Petronius that he would die if he did not immediately carry out the emperor's orders. But this letter was delayed for three months due to a storm, and in the meantime Petronius received another letter—this one informing him of the emperor's

¹⁶For similar practices in earlier times, see Ezra 6:9-10 and 1 Macc 7:33: "After these things Nicanor went up to Mount Zion, and there came some of the priests out of the sanctuary, and some of the elders of the people, to salute him peaceably and show him the whole burnt sacrifice that was being offered for the [Syrian] king [160 B.C.]."

death! (*Jewish War* 2.184-203).

This direct attempt to paganize the temple worship in Jerusalem was not typical of the general Roman attitude. But the Jewish refusal to recognize the gods of Rome continued to irritate and annoy the Romans—to say the least. And the annoyance was mutual.¹⁷

This incident vividly calls our attention to a new factor that had made itself increasingly evident since the days of Augustus: the worship of the emperor's genius—his personal protecting and sustaining deity.¹⁸ In theory, the Roman emperors did not claim to be gods, and the incense burnt in front of their statues was not meant to be a sacrifice offered to Caesar personally, but only to his genius. This distinction, however, was more easily grasped by the sophisticated Romans than by the citizens of the East, who for centuries had been accustomed to the idea of divine kingship. The Romans were hardly eager to clarify the distinction. To the contrary, this worship of the emperor was of fundamental political significance, as it was tantamount to a declaration of loyalty to Rome. If the orientals held Caesar to be god, so much the better.

To the Jews, the worship offered to Caesar's statues was, of course, completely unacceptable. The Romans were never able to understand the religious motives for this refusal and tended to interpret it in political terms. As Petronius said in the story above, to refuse the emperor's worship "amounted almost to rebellion, aggravated by insult."

The fact that the Jews—however grudgingly—were allowed to not participate in emperor worship can only be explained by the fact that another Roman principle protected the Jews, namely, the Roman respect for ancestral traditions. Besides, the Romans were realists, and they clearly recognized that enforcement of emperor worship among the Jews would have entailed a mass slaughter of terrible proportions. The Romans were not overly sentimental about the value of human life and could be ruthlessly brutal, but their ideals were against unnecessary violence. Petronius again reminds us of the best in Roman morality. So the Jews were left in peace—to some extent. But they were disliked and were considered politically unreliable, especially after the three rebellions. They were treated with suspicion, even though their legal right to remain faithful Jews was recognized. Again a Roman author may speak for many when he said, in the 220s A.D.:

¹⁷We shall return to the Jewish attitude in chapter five (pp. 126-29).

¹⁸On this, see G. W. Bowersock, "The Imperial Cult: Perceptions and Persistence," Sanders, *Self-Definition* 3:171-82, 238-41.

The Jews have long been in revolt not only against the Romans but against humanity; and a race that has made its own a life apart and irreconcilable, that cannot share with the rest of mankind in the pleasures of the table nor join in their libations or prayers or sacrifices, are separated from ourselves by a greater gulf than divides us from Susa or Bactra or the more distant Indias. What sense then or reason was there in chastising them for revolting from us, whom we had better never annexed? (*Philostratus, Life of Apollonius* 5.35)¹⁹

There is a revealing sequel to the story related above concerning the Emperor Caligula. On the death of Caligula, Claudius was made emperor (A.D. 41), and the Jews of Alexandria sent emissaries to him—formally to congratulate him on his accession, in fact to win his favor. To the Jews this was especially important because in A.D. 38 there had been an anti-Jewish pogrom in Alexandria, led by the Roman governor, and the former emperor had not taken appropriate action. The reply of the new Emperor Claudius has been preserved. In respect to Roman law the emperor was strictly correct and impartial: both sides had been guilty of riot and were rebuked. The Jews should enjoy the privileges they possessed in the time of Augustus, but no more. After this had been said, the emperor began to betray his own true feelings about the Jews. They should not behave as though they lived in a city separate from their Alexandrian neighbors. They "are not to introduce or invite other Jews who sail down to Alexandria from Syria or Egypt, thus compelling me to conceive the greater suspicion; otherwise, I will by all means take vengeance on them as fomenting a general plague [disorder] in the whole world."²⁰

The Legal Position of Jewish and Gentile Believers

The above description of the Roman attitude toward the Jews and their religion contains the clue to understanding the policy followed by the Roman Empire with regard to the believers in Jesus. It is immediately apparent that this policy would be quite different, depending upon whether the believer in Jesus was Jewish or not, at least in the first decades after A.D. 30.

(1) If Jewish, the person remained a Jew in the eyes of the Romans, legally and otherwise, and his or her purely religious convictions were of no concern to them. They would not be involved in internal Jewish disputes and refused to intervene unless social peace and stability were at stake. In other words,

¹⁹Stern no. 403 = 2.342.

²⁰The complete text of Claudius's letter is to be found in English translation in Lewis/Reinhold, *Roman Civilization*, pp. 285-88.

Jewish believers in Jesus were basically treated by the Romans on par with other Jews. We see this Roman attitude clearly demonstrated in Acts 18:12-17 (indicated with italics):

When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. They said, "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law." Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters." And he dismissed them from the tribunal. Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, belief in his messiahship was no longer a political concern for the Romans; if Jews came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, they nevertheless remained Jews and were entitled to the same protection and privileges as other Jews, including exemption from emperor worship. Throughout Acts, the Romans appear as Paul's protectors, not his persecutors. The Jews who believed in Jesus were not persecuted by the Romans, but—when persecutions occurred, according to Acts—by their fellow Jews.²¹

The situation was different for Gentile converts to Christianity. They could not claim, like the Jews, to be following their ancestral traditions. On the contrary, they broke with the tradition of their fathers in a most provocative way. At baptism, before confessing his faith, the Gentile had to say the following about his past life as a participant in official Greco-Roman religion: "I renounce you, Satan, with all your pomp and splendor." That is, I renounce all my former religious loyalties and obligations, and I now see them as slavery to the devil.²²

²¹ After some time, the situation probably became more blurred in practice. When prosecution of people denounced as Christians became the official Roman policy, the status of "Christian" might be more significant to the Roman officials than the status of "Jew" for Jewish Christians. They would probably then regard Jewish believers in Jesus as Jews who had joined an illegal sect. In that case, the Jewish believers would have little protection from their status as Jews. Perhaps we are here touching upon the legal background of John's banishment to Patmos in the days of Domitian (the 90s A.D.).

²² The first Christian writer to record this renunciation at baptism was Tertullian in the 190s A.D., but very likely it antedated him by several decades. Cf. Tertullian, *On the Crown* 3; *On the Shawl* 4 (e.g., in Whitaker, *Documents*, p. 9); and Hans Kirsner, *Die Taufabsage: Eine Untersuchung zu Gestalt und Geschichte der Taufe nach den altkirchlichen Taufbüchern* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1960).

To put it mildly, this was not destined to make the Christians popular with their families and neighbors who remained loyal to the inherited religion of their fathers. If the Jews had been called atheists and haters of men, how much more so the Gentile converts to Christianity! They shared with the Jews the burden of being accused of intolerance, but they did not have the defense the Jews had: they could claim no ancestral or national tradition, for they had no Christian or Jewish forefathers, and they were not a nation. They could be persecuted individually, since there was no question of having to massacre a whole nation. So none of the restraints which prevented the Romans from taking wholesale action against the Jews were at work with regard to the Gentile converts.²³

In general, the Romans had a strong dislike for any change of religious loyalty. You should respect the Roman gods and worship the gods of your fathers. Period. But this quite simply did not work in the Roman Empire, and the Romans had to take some of the blame themselves. Their excellent administration and communication systems had the effect of breaking down national and linguistic barriers, so people of different religious convictions met and talked with each other and influenced each other. Gods who had been local deities of a tribe or a nation began to travel—they were brought in new cities all along the Mediterranean coast, and ultimately they arrived in Rome. The capital of the empire increasingly became a kind of religious supermarket where you could always hear something new and interesting—as Luke tells about the Athenians (Acts 17:21).²⁴

The Romans did not like this,²⁵ but neither could they stop it. So they established a commission of fifteen men who were to inspect foreign religions and decide which of them should be "recognized" (*religio licita*). Christianity was never officially allowed by the empire (until it suddenly became the favored religion under Constantine). We have seen the reasons for this. Christianity grew out of Judaism and was, like Judaism, incompatible with emperor worship and respect for the Roman gods. But the Gentile Christians

²³ Cf. the excellent treatment of this issue in Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*.

²⁴ One of the best descriptions of migrating religions and the Roman response is found in Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933; paperback reprint London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 1961/1972), chaps. 3-8.

²⁵ The Roman historian Tacitus probably spoke for many when he complained that all sorts of foreign cults made their way to Rome, "where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular" (*Annales* 15.44.3; Barrett, *Documents*, p. 16).

had no excuse which the Romans could understand and accept. How miserable was their legal standing! It has been much disputed among scholars whether Nero passed a specific law that made Christianity as such illegal. It is as difficult to prove as to disprove the existence of such a law,²⁶ but in any case it would probably have made little difference. The point is not that Christianity was officially made illegal, but that it was never made legal.

Initially, the Romans took little notice of the Gentile converts, partly because they were few in number, so few as to escape notice, and partly because they were regarded as converts to Judaism. But toward the end of the first century A.D. the Romans must have become increasingly aware that Gentile converts to Christianity did not become Jews and were not recognized as such by the Jews. In other words, it was the Gentile converts—not the Jewish believers—who made the Roman authorities aware that Christianity was no ordinary Jewish sect. But then what was it? It was as hostile to Hellenistic cults and religions as Judaism ever was. The Christians were not "Greeks," but neither were they Jews. Some began to call them "the third race," and eventually the Christians adopted this designation and applied it to themselves with great pride. They were something new; they belonged to a category unheard of in Hellenistic culture.²⁷

The Christians may have been proud of this, but the sentiment of their contemporaries is summarized bluntly in a phrase quoted by Tertullian: "You ought not to exist" (*Apology* 4.4). Thus for non-Jews, Christianity was not formally allowed. This meant that Gentile converts to Christianity fell victim to the changing moods and the personal likes and dislikes of Roman officials, from the emperor on down. Until the time of Decius (A.D. 250), the Roman officials were under no obligation to actively investigate Christians. An order given by Trajan (A.D. 112) expressly said that they were not to be sought out. Trajan's order came in response to a question from one of his lieutenants, Pliny the Younger, who had been sent as the emperor's special envoy to the province of Pontus-Bithynia on the south coast of the Black Sea. The question,

²⁶The scholarly debate has focused on two passages in Tertullian in which he speaks of an "institution from Nero" (*institutum neronianum*). To the *Nations* 1.7 and *Apology* 5. Cf. the discussions in A. N. Sherwin-White, "Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 3 (1952): 199-213; J. Zeiller, "Institutum Neronianum," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 55 (1955): 395-400; Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, pp. 165-71. On the Christians as a "third race," see *Preaching of Peter* (ca. A.D. 125), fragm. 2a (in Henrichs, *Apocrypha* 2:100); *Apology of Aristides*, 2; Pseudo-Cyprian *De Pascha Computus* 17. Cf. esp. Adolf von Harnack, "Die Beurteilung der Christen als drittes Geschlecht seitens ihrer Gegner," and "Die Botschaft von dem neuen Volk und dem dritten Geschlecht," in Harnack, *Mission*, pp. 281-89 and 259-67.

as well as the answer, are of considerable interest:

[Pliny:] My Lord: It is my custom to consult you whenever I am in doubt about any matter. Who can better direct my hesitation or instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at trials of Christians. Consequently I do not know the precedents concerning the question of punishment or the nature of the inquisition. I have been in no little doubt whether one should discriminate with regard to age, or whether the young are to be treated no differently from the older; whether renunciation is to be rewarded with indulgence, or if it is of no consequence to have abandoned Christianity if one has once been a Christian; whether the very profession of the name is to be punished, or only the disgraceful practices which go along with the name. So far my procedure when people were charged before me with being Christians has been the following: I have asked the accused if they were Christians. If they said 'Yes' I asked them a second and a third time, warning them of the penalty. If they were stubborn I ordered them to be led off to execution. For I had no doubt that, whatever kind of thing it was that they pleaded guilty to, their very stubbornness and unyielding obstinacy in any case deserved to be punished. There were others afflicted with the same madness whom I decided should be sent to Rome, because they were Roman citizens.²⁸

[Emperor Trajan:] My dear Secundus: You have acted absolutely correctly in deciding the cases of those who have been charged before you with being Christians. No general decision can be made by which a standard procedure could be established. They must not be ferreted out. If they are charged and convicted, they must be punished, provided that all who deny that they are Christians and give practical proof of that by invoking our gods, should be pardoned because of this repudiation, no matter what grounds for suspicion may have existed against them in the past. You should pay no attention to anonymous documents which are laid before you. They form a very bad precedent and are quite unworthy of the present age. (Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96, 97; author's translation)

The gist of this correspondence seems pretty clear: The Romans thought

²⁸In the rest of Pliny's letter, which is too long to be quoted in full here, he goes into some detail as to his interrogation technique and what he found out in his interrogations. Some of this will be quoted later, in chapter nineteen on early Christian worship. Notice the following about his "test" technique in interrogation: "Some [of the denounced persons] denied that they were Christians or had ever been so. When I instructed them to do so, they invoked the gods and did reverence with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose, and also statues of the gods; they also cursed Christ. As I am informed that people who are really Christians cannot possibly be made to do any of those things, I considered that those who did them should be discharged."

that the best one could do with the Christians was to ignore them as much as possible; probably the whole thing would soon die out by itself, whereas too much attention and publicity might have the opposite effect. The number of Christians had increased alarmingly for a while, said Pliny, but with a lenient policy, granting ample opportunity to recant Christian faith, there is good hope: "The temples, which had been almost abandoned, are beginning to have visitors again; and the customary services, neglected for a long time, are beginning to be resumed." So let the whole thing die out through lack of attention.

But once Christians had drawn attention to themselves and were known by the authorities, the normal procedure was to verify the accusations. If the accused persisted in their refusal to sacrifice to Caesar's image, they would usually be executed.

Epilogue

We have seen in this chapter how the Roman policy toward the Jewish people goes a long way in explaining the subsequent Roman policy with regard to the Christians, and why Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus were treated differently, at least in the early period. Before we continue to look more closely at the religious consequences of the Roman-Jewish encounter, we shall add, in the next chapter, some considerations on what we might call the "Jewish geography" of early Christianity.

Temple Square

In Jerusalem there reigned an invisible king and his visible representative: the high priest. The temple was the palace of the heavenly king. To the Romans, this represented an insoluble dilemma: they knew that if they challenged this center of the Jewish nation, if they tried to occupy it, plain and simple, a mass insurrection and a massacre of the whole people would follow. On the other hand, as long as they did not control this power-base, their control was always incomplete and precarious. The concrete symbol of the Roman attempt to deal with this dilemma was the Roman garrison in the Antonia Fortress overlooking the temple courtyards: control without interference. Whenever the Romans slipped off this tightrope, revolt threatened. When the revolt finally became unavoidable, the rebels took their last stand in the temple. And the Romans had learned their lesson: they razed the temple, eliminating it forever. Only with the temple eliminated was there any prospect of full Roman control.

As in the days of the Hellenistic challenge, this posed a new challenge to Judaism: could it redefine itself once more? We have seen how crucial, how indispensable the temple had been for Jewish identity, for the status of Israel as a holy, a pure people, a people apart. But however this question was answered, however this challenge was met, Judaism would forever bear the mark of the temple, and so would Christianity.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For good treatments of the theme of this chapter, see Murphy, *Religious World*, pp. 247-310; 345-55; Schiffman, *Text to Tradition*, pp. 139-76.

The two classic studies on Rome and the Jews are Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire Romain: Leur condition juridique, économique et sociale*, Vols. 1-2. (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1914 [reprint, New York: 1966]); and Max Radin, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1915).

A selection of more recent studies are: Michael Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973); E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian: A Study in Political Relations*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976 [reprint with corrections, 1981]); U. Baumann, *Rom und die Juden: Die römisch-jüdische Beziehungen von Pompeius bis zum Tode des Herodes* (63 v.Chr.-4 v.Chr.) (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984); Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit/Jerusalem: Wayne State University Press, 1987); Karl Leo Noetlich, *Das Judentum und der römische Staat: Minderheitspolitik im antiken Rom* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996).

On the Bar Kokhba war: Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt Against Imperial Rome* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971); Peter Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand*, Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981).

Concerning the legal status of Christians and the Roman persecutions, one should read the excellent chapters on this theme in Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*.