



## The Catastrophic Fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

By Paul L. Maier, from *Christianity Today*, **Christian History: Not One Stone Left Upon Another**

*And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. **Matthew 24:1***

**J**esus predicted it thirty-seven years before it happened. Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice, who heard Paul's testimony at Caesarea (**Acts 26**), tried hard to prevent it, as did the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (our main source of first-century information: see **UNABRIDGED LIBRARY OF JOSEPHUS': Wars of the Jews**). But the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple in A.D. 70 happened nevertheless, and it was a catastrophe with almost unparalleled consequences for Jews, Christians, and, indeed, all of subsequent history. It compelled a whole new vector for synagogue (not Temple) Judaism, it submerged the Jewish homeland for the next 19 centuries under foreign domination, it helped foster the split between church and synagogue, and it set the stage for rampant prophetic speculation about the End Times that continues to the present day. Few episodes in history have had that sort of impact.

The Jewish rebellion in A.D. 66 that ignited the war with Rome was by no means inevitable. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire, and Nero's own empress, Poppaea, was very interested in it. Contrary to biblical novels and movies, far worse things could happen to you in the ancient world than to be conquered by Rome. The Romans hung out the traffic lights in their sprawling empire, curbing piracy at sea and brigandage by land, thus providing security in the Mediterranean world. The Apostle Paul's missionary journeys would have been impossible without the *Pax Romana*, the "Roman peace" that ordered society. As for the "horrors" of Roman taxation, I would much rather have paid the tribute to Rome as a citizen of Jerusalem than American income tax!

Still, Rome did have wayward governors who were not always disciplined, even if there was an extortion court set up for this purpose at Rome. Governors of Judea had a particularly difficult role, because according to Deuteronomy 17:15 it was heresy for any Gentile to govern God's people: "*You must not put a foreigner over you who is not your brother.*" Nevertheless, the governors Rome sent to Judea in the first century were able enough, including Pontius Pilate, who could never have had a ten-year tenure there had he been the villain so familiar in sermons and novels.

**Gessius Florus**, however, Rome's last governor before the Jewish rebellion, made Pilate look like a paragon of virtue by comparison. Emperor Nero, perhaps distracted in the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome, had not done a good job of screening overseas governors, and this wretch slipped through. Venal, corrupt, and brutal, Florus hoped that a Jewish rebellion would somehow cover his own crimes in Judea, and so he fomented discontent among his subjects wherever possible. Even the first-century Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus commented, "Jewish patience persisted until Gessius Florus became procurator" (*History* 5.10).

Justifiably outraged, Jerusalemites rose in revolt, even though Jews who had visited Rome warned that war would end in disaster because of Rome's overpowering resources. Zealots in Jerusalem—the "fourth party" after the Scribes, Pharisees, and Essenes, according to Josephus—carried the day, and the Jews won some surprising early victories against the Romans.

Until, that is, Commander Vespasian landed in Galilee with three legions. After that, it was a steady Roman advance southward into Judea, with Jewish strongholds falling one after another along the way. In fact, Vespasian was at the walls of Jerusalem when news reached him of the turmoil in Rome following Nero's death. Soon Rome's eastern legions declared Vespasian the new emperor. Before hurrying off to Rome in 69 to don imperial purple, he transferred command of the Jewish war to his own son Titus (also future emperor), who would complete the siege and destruction of Jerusalem.

### **The Burning of the Temple**

With careful strategy and maximum resources, Titus finished the job in a matter of months, despite fierce Jewish resistance. Spurning all overtures for peace, the Zealots inside Jerusalem fought amongst themselves as much as against the Romans, while Titus surrounded the city with a siege wall and simply waited. The starvation inside Jerusalem was severe because many of the Judeans from the countryside had taken refuge there. It got so bad, Josephus wrote in *The Jewish War* (6.194ff.), that dove dung went for premium prices, and one poor woman even ate part of her own baby!

The best of friends wrestled with each other for even the shadow of food. Others, mouths agape from hunger like mad dogs, staggered along, beating on the doors like drunken men. ... They put their teeth into everything, swallowing things even the filthiest animals would not touch. Finally they devoured even belts and shoes or gnawed at the leather they stripped from their shields.

After furious fighting inside Jerusalem, the Temple Mount finally fell to the Romans. According to Josephus, Titus had ordered that the Temple itself be spared (though some historians doubt this), but one of the Roman troops hurled a burning firebrand through a window of the Temple and it went up in flames anyway. The date, August 30 in the year 70, was the very day on which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the Temple in 586 B.C. What was left was torn down by the victors, almost in literal fulfillment of Jesus' famous statement, "Not one stone here will be left upon another" (Matthew 24:2). This was the catastrophic end of Temple Judaism.

Might it have been the end of Judaism itself? Possibly. The Romans, however, permitted a Jewish sage named Jochanan ben-Zakkai to be smuggled out of the Temple Mount in a casket. He virtually re-founded Judaism in a rabbinical school established at Jamnia near the Mediterranean. The previous central authority of the Temple was now transformed into the regional authority of the synagogue—a tradition that has remained to the present day. Also in Jamnia, the Jewish rabbis established the canon of 39 books in their Hebrew Bible—the Christian Old Testament—in the year 93.

### **The Bar-Kokhba Revolt**

Josephus, our major source for all this information, does not name *a single Christian victim in connection with great Jewish War*. Why not? With immense luck—or blessing—the earliest Christians largely escaped all this horror for two reasons:

- (1) Only four years before the war's outbreak, James the Just of Jerusalem (the first Christian bishop according to both Acts 15 and Eusebius) was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin, which must certainly have led the struggling Jewish-Christian community to think about leaving.
- (2) Eusebius, the "father of church history," also tells us that Christians were warned by an oracle to flee the city some time before war's outbreak. In fact, they evacuated to Pella and other cities north of Jerusalem, and so escaped the Roman siege and conquest.

After the war, some Christians returned to Jerusalem, where they must have kept a low profile since Zealotry and the yeast of Messianism among the Jews led to one last tragic uprising in A.D. 132 under a rebel named Shimon Bar-Kosebah. Rabbi Akiba, the leading Jewish sage at the time, put Bar-Kosebah on a white horse, led him through the streets of Jerusalem, and cried, "The Messiah has come! The Messiah has come!" He also changed his name to "Bar-Kokhba," which means "Son of a Star" (showing us that the gospel writer Matthew did not invent the idea that the Star of Bethlehem was a messianic symbol for Jews).

When the Zealots learned that Hadrian, the Roman emperor at the time, planned to build a new temple to Jupiter on the ruins of the old Jewish Temple, they rose up in revolt. Hadrian had a very difficult time conquering

these rebels, some of whom hid out in caves on the western coast of the Dead Sea, where letters written by Bar-Kokhba have been discovered. Some 580,000 Jews perished, and the Romans also suffered great losses until they finally conquered the rebels. Furious at this renewed Jewish uprising and without a shred of patience left, they dismantled Jerusalem and rebuilt the city as "Aelia Capitolina" in honor of Aelius, Hadrian's family name.

All Jews were expelled from the city, and only Gentiles were allowed to live there. (This exile was moderated later when first Jewish Christians and then also Jews slowly returned to the city.) The Roman province of Judea now became Syria Palaestina—further diminishing Judaism in favor of the Philistines who had battled Saul and David a millennium earlier. It remained "Palestine" up through the British mandate in the 20th century and among Arabs to this day.

In the second and third centuries, Aelia Capitolina (a.k.a. destroyed Jerusalem) showed barely a glint of its former glory. It was not a ghost town, but it was sequestered to the boondocks of the Roman Empire.

### **Church and Synagogue**

An equal-opportunity desecrater, Hadrian attacked Christianity when he raised a shrine to Aphrodite adjacent to his new temple at the site of Golgotha, where Christians had held liturgical observances until they fled the city in A.D. 66. But in trying to desecrate the site, he merely helped identify it for later generations.

It is no surprise to learn from Aristo of Pella, an early Christian historian whose works are not extant, that the Jerusalem church after the Bar-Kokhba revolt was now composed almost entirely of Gentiles. In his *Church History* (5.12), Eusebius lists 12 Gentile bishops of Jerusalem following Mark, the first.

Early on, Christians in Jerusalem recognized the importance of the sites where biblical events took place. The early Christian apologist Justin Martyr (c. 100–c.165) was born of pagan parents in Nablus, Samaria, and after his conversion to Christianity knew the cave or grotto where Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Melito, bishop of Sardis, visited there in the 160s. The mightiest

mind in early Christendom, Origen of Alexandria, spent the last part of his life (230-254) in Caesarea and regularly visited the sacred sites, including Bethlehem.

Slowly, Jews were allowed to return to their Holy City. But other centers of Judaism across the Mediterranean world, such as neighboring Alexandria in Egypt, Ephesus in Asia Minor, Athens, and even Rome, could now compete through their synagogues for the authority once held by the Jerusalem Temple. Those Jewish Christians who had not abandoned the Temple (such as those described in Acts) now had to look elsewhere for cohesion and authority. The split between Jews and Christians only widened in the future...

\*\*\*

*Paul L. Maier is professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University and editor/translator of books by Josephus and Eusebius.*