

The Jewish War (A.D. 66-73)

Rebellion of the Jews against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire in first century Palestine for complex reasons turned into war during the year A.D. 66 and ended with the fall of the last Jewish stronghold in Masada in A.D. 73. The war reached its climax at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and brought about the end of the Jewish nation until the rebirth of Israel in 1948.

Outline

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Étant Nabuzaradan Princeps exercitus de Babylone et inuencit domum Domini, et deinde Regium et domos Iherosolymitanorum in circuitu delensit et reliquias videlicet columnas quoque arcos et balnea et muros &c. deluit. 2. Reg. 25. 9. 12.

JERUSALEM CAPTIVEE DES JUIFS.

Podmosar dux exercitus de Iherosolymis, hunc venit et traxit le temple, le palais des maisons de Iherosolym et en delruisit les les et transporta le reste du Palais, et nua les balnes, lacore d'airain &c. quora

(1) Historical Sources

Main historical source about the revolt is the account of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus *De bello Iudaico* (engl. “Jewish War”). In addition, he wrote his other major work called *Antiquitates Iudaicae* (engl. “Antiquities of the Jews”) and two minor works *Vita* (engl. The Life of Flavius Josephus) and *Contra Apionem* (engl. Against Apion). Josephus was born in A.D. 37/38 in Jerusalem and died in A.D. 100 in Rome. He descended from the influential Hasmonean family and became a Pharisee who took part in the Jewish War as a general in Galilee in A.D. 66/67. Vespasian defeated and captured him in Jotapata but later gave him his freedom. Even more he was granted Roman citizenship and received generous benefits from both Vespasian and Titus with whom he enjoyed a friendly relationship. (*Vita* 75, 76) Analysis of his accounts should consider his career and background. Josephus tends to portray history in favour of Rome, especially Titus, and his own Jewish class. His works therefore should be studied with consideration of other historical materials like the New Testament, intertestamental writings, other historians like Tacitus, rabbinic sources and archaeological evidence. Excavations revealed that Josephus’ descriptions of the landscape and buildings are for the most part accurate. Probably he got some information from field reports of military commanders.

(2) Causes and Background

The encounter between the Romans and the Jewish nation was strained from the beginning of the occupation by Pompeii in 63 B.C. Since then, the nation was governed by procurators and client kings, of whom the most prominent was Herod the Great who ruled from 37-4 B.C. Due to Jewish nationalism that goes back to the Mosaic covenant and was particularly stimulated by the success of the Maccabean revolt around 164 B.C., the Jews never totally submitted to such foreign authority. They were committed to defend the Mosaic Law and the Temple, and therefore they often rebelled when Jewish religious beliefs and practices were at stake.

For the most part Rome restrained its interest on tax farming to finance its glory. Jewish leaders cooperated with Rome and at the same time Rome granted the Temple priests their religious autonomy. Minor revolts could be suppressed by military power. Such stable rule reached its turning point when the Jews suffered under the tax burden in face of increasing poverty and when at the same time the Romans challenged the religious zeal of the Jews. Social problems, religious commitment and political motivation formed a complex bundle of reasons for the war. In detail, Josephus describes several causes for its outbreak as listed below. Careful observation will be necessary to properly weigh the points in order to get a realistic overview of the case that is not distorted by the bias of Josephus or partial analysis.

Reference	Causes of the War
Ant., XVIII.1.1	Teachings of a Fourth Philosophic Sect
JW, II.14.1	Governor Albinus' toleration of robbery
JW, II.14.4	Removal of rights of the Jews in Caesarea by Nero
JW, II.14.5	Pollution of the synagogue in Caesarea by the Greeks
JW, II.14.6	Florus' seizure of money out of the Temple treasury
JW, II.17.2	Refusal of the priests to sacrifice for the Emperor

Josephus' record about the origins of a sect we commonly call the 'Zealots' is controversial. According to him a group formed around Judas from Gamala in Galilee who persuaded the people to rebel against the census of the Roman senator Cyrenius in A.D. 6. He taught that "God would not otherwise be assisting to them." Josephus concludes that "the sedition at last increased so high, that the very temple of God was burnt down by their enemies' fire." At first sight, the historian here apparently defines the scapegoat for the war. But, shortly after this passage, he also states that the sect is not very distinct from the Pharisees. (Ant., XVIII.1.6) In addition, Josephus later describes more parties involved. It seems that for apologetic purposes he sets a certain group apart in order to release the majority of Jews – including his own class – from responsibility for the war. Yet he shows us that people rebelled against Roman taxation, and likewise Tacitus records a complaint against the tax burden in A.D. 17.

(*Annales*, II.42) Josephus further exposes that Jews were motivated by religious zeal and apocalyptic thinking, which is also reflected in religious literature like the Qumran Scrolls (e.g., *War Rule*, 1Q M).

On the Roman side, tactless misbehaviour of the Roman procurators contributed to the Jewish resentments. (Goodman 1987, 7-9; cf. Tacitus, *Historiae*, V.12) Pilate minted coins with pagan religious emblems; Felix took the Herodian princess Drusilla away from her husband and married her. Josephus emphasized on the malice of Albinus and Florus who were the procurators before the war. Albinus was bribed and released rebels from prison, and Florus took money from the Temple treasury for Caesar's use. The Jews started mocking and publicly collected money for Rome. Florus came to arrest those who joked, but the Jewish tribunal did not hand the mockers over to him. At this point the collaboration of the Jewish elite with Rome ended. Florus exercised authority by military power and the conflict soon escalated. (Goodman 1987, 170) When the Temple priests shortly afterwards refused to sacrifice for the Emperor, the Jews in effect declared war to Rome.

Historically, Jewish resistance goes back to the time of Alexander the Great who conquered Palestine and confronted Judaism with Hellenism. Josephus starts his work about the war against Rome with an introduction about the Maccabean revolt against the Greeks most likely with parallels in mind. (cf. Farmer 1956, 4) History is recalled

when the Jews again struggled with the Hellenistic population in Caesarea. First they were officially discounted by Nero against the Greeks and then provoked by the pollution of their synagogue when pagans sacrificed birds at its entrance. Mutual hostility intensified, Jews killing gentiles and gentiles killing Jews. (JW, II.18) The Roman forces were inevitably involved and the conflict matured. Josephus explicitly asserts that Nero's decision in favour of the Greeks caused the revolt. (JW, II.14.4)

Lastly, a closer look along the chronological development of the war as outlined below reveals the deep inner conflict of the Jewish leadership. Josephus himself was a member of the ruling class and does not admit that power struggle among the Jews was another reason for the downfall of the Jewish state. He describes the rebels as tyrants of the lower class, but the leaders of the conflicting parties were in fact rather wealthy and related to the Jewish elite. (cf. Goodman 1987, 201ff.) On the other hand, rabbinic literature reveals that some of the religious leaders fled Jerusalem and withdrew to Jamnia, where they opposed the war and promoted peace in face of the imminent defeat. (cf. Bohrmann 1989, 238-252)

In sum, the Jews battled against Rome, against the Greeks and against themselves. The majority suffered on the social level and fought for survival, but the upper class reached out for power. Many of the Jews were driven by religious fanaticism or at least used such teaching for motivation and justification.

(3) War Chronology

The Jewish war can be divided into five phases, that is (a) the outbreak in and around Jerusalem in A.D. 66, (b) the military operations in Galilee and Peraea from A.D. 66 to A.D. 68, (c) the cessation during the unrest in Rome from spring A.D. 68 to spring A.D. 69, (d) the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70., and (e) the attacks of remaining strongholds until the last one fell in A.D. 73. The following table is drawn from the work of Josephus, the 'Jewish War'.

Reference	Date	Event
JW, II.14,15	A.D. 66, May	Rebellion against procurator Gessius Florus
JW, II.17.2		Jewish rebels take the fortress Masada
JW, II.17.5		Civil War among the Jewish factions in Jerusalem
JW, II.17.7	A.D. 66, Sept	Jewish rebels attack Antonia and the Palace
JW, II.17.9		Murder of High Priest Ananias and Civil War
JW, II.17.10		Romans massacred in Jerusalem after capitulation
JW, II.18.1-8		Persecution of Jews in Alexandria and other cities
JW, II.18.9-10		Intervention of Syrian procurator Cestius Gallus
JW, II.19.4-7	A.D. 66, Nov	Cestius Gallus attacks the Temple area but retreats
JW, II.21.1-7		Civil War among the Jewish factions in Galilee
JW, III.4.1; 6.3		Vespasian takes Sepphoris and most of Galilee

JW, III.7.34-36	A.D. 67, July	Fall of Jotapata in Galilee
JW, III.10	A.D. 67, Sept	Fall of Taricheae in Galilee
JW, IV.1.3-10	A.D. 67, Oct	Fall of Gamala in Galilee
JW, IV.3-6.1		Civil War among the Jewish factions in Jerusalem
JW, IV.7.3	A.D. 68, Mar	Fall of Gadara in Peraea
JW, IV.8.1; 9.1	A.D. 68, June	Vespasian takes Jericho and Gerasa
JW, IV.9.3-8		Civil War among the Jewish factions in Judaea
JW, IV.9.9	A.D. 69, June	Vespasian takes most of Judaea
JW, IV.9.10-12		Civil War among the Jewish factions in Jerusalem
JW, V.3.2-5	A.D. 70, Apr	Titus besieges Jerusalem
JW, V.7.2	A.D. 70, May	Titus takes the first wall
JW, V.8	A.D. 70, May	Titus takes the second wall
JW, VI.1.7	A.D. 70, July	Titus takes Antonia fortress
JW, VI.4.7	A.D. 70, Aug	Jerusalem Temple burns
JW, VI.8.4-5	A.D. 70, Sept	Fall of Jerusalem
JW, VII.6.1		Fall of Herodium
JW, VII.6.4		Fall of Macheros
JW, VII.8,9	A.D. 73, Apr	Fall of Masada

(a) After Florus was publicly mocked by the Jews because he drew from the sacred treasury, he crucified and massacred many of them. When King Agrippa II tried to pacify the crowd, he was banished from the city. Some 'Sicarii' extremists under Menahem b. Judas rebelled against the Romans at Masada and took the fortress. Another faction of extremists commonly assigned to the 'Zealots' formed around Eleazar b. Ananias, who instilled the priests to refuse sacrifice on behalf of the Emperor. They gained control of the lower city and the temple mount. The Romans, the priests and other supporters of King Agrippa II opposed the Zealots but also lost the upper city and the Antonia fortress. In the course of fighting, the High Priest Ananias as well as Menahem were murdered and many Roman soldiers slain.

The conflict quickly intensified and turned into mutual slaughter between the Romans, Jewish parties and gentiles living in Palestine. Josephus records about unrest in Caesarea, Philadelphia, Sebonitis, Gerasa, Pella, Scythopolis, Gadara, Hippos, Gaulonitis, Kedasa, Ptolemais, Gaba, Sebaste, Askelon, Anthedon, Gaza and Alexandria. The Syrian legate Cestius Gallus accompanied by King Agrippa II came to intervene and also attacked Jerusalem but eventually retreated. The Jews followed him and defeated the legion. Cestius then sent message to Nero who had to consider further action. The war with Rome became irrevocable. In Jerusalem, the Jewish elite divided the country into six districts, appointed leaders and prepared for the war. The

former High Priest Ananus b. Ananus and Joseph b. Gorion were given command in Jerusalem, and thirty-year old Josephus the future historian was put in charge as general in Galilee. The Jews also issued autonomous coins, proclaiming national independence that was won in A.D. 67 and lasted until A.D. 70.

(b) Nero sent Vespasian to Palestine. In the meantime, the inner conflict of the Jews went on in Galilee. Josephus was opposed but not overpowered by John of Gischala who probably belonged to Eleazar b. Ananias's faction. (cf. Goodman 1987, 183) Then Vespasian with his son Titus marched into Galilee and conquered the area. Before they went southwards to besiege Jerusalem, they first took Sepphoris, Jotapata, Taricheae, Gamala and most of the other cities in Galilee. At the end of the year A.D. 67 the Northern part of Palestine was under Roman control. The historian Josephus was captured at Jotapata. In Jerusalem, the Jews argued about leadership and battled against each other, again. John b. Levi of Gischala of the Zealot party murdered Ananus and triumphed against the Jewish elite with the help of the Idumaeans. For Josephus, this was a significant turning point of the war, because Ananus could have served as a moderate mediator between the Jews and Rome. (JW, IV.5.2)

After Galilee, the Roman troops came closer to Jerusalem and attacked Gadara, Jericho, Gerasa and other cities in Peraea and nearby. In June A.D. 68, Vespasian was facing Jerusalem but had to cease warfare because of the unrest in Rome.

(c) On the 9th of June 68 Nero committed suicide. Galba succeeded him but was murdered by Otho on 15th of January 69. Otho's civil war against Vitellius led to his suicide in April 69. Vitellius succeeded but was soon murdered by supporters of Vespasian in December 69 and the turbulent year of the four Emperors ended.

Without regard to the situation in Rome, the Jews were further engaged in civil war. John of Gischala fought against the Zealot leader Eleazar b. Simon but had lost his Idumaeen allies. In addition, another party under Simon b. Giora first regained control of north east Judaea, invaded Idumaea, and finally was brought into Jerusalem in April A.D. 69 to overpower John. Then, three parties battled for power over Jerusalem. Significantly, large grain stocks were burnt during the struggle, which contributed to the severe famine during the later siege.

Vespasian came back after a one year break and conquered more of Southern Palestine in June A.D. 69. When he was proclaimed Emperor in July, he went to Alexandria. From there he went to Rome and sent Titus to continue the campaign. Eusebius records that about this time the Christians were warned by revelation and fled to Pella in Peraea. (*Historia ecclesiastica* III.5, 3)

(d) Titus arrived at Jerusalem in April A.D. 70. Inside the city, when Eleazar's party opened the Temple gates for celebration of the Passover feast, they were attacked and defeated by John's followers. Outside, Titus erected towers and hit the wall with rams.

Only then in face of their common enemy the Jews stopped to diminish themselves and united their forces against the Roman threat. Nonetheless, Titus conquered the first wall after fifteen days of work in May A.D. 70 and the second wall five days later.

After his failed attempt to raise banks against the upper city and the Antonia fortress, Titus decided to build a circumvallation around the besieged in order to starve them. Against the weakened Jews, the second raising of banks was more successful and with the help of the battering rams the troops triumphed over Antonia. When they attacked the Temple court, they laid fire at the gates and later burnt the Temple in August A.D. 70. According to Josephus, Titus did not consent, but the 4th century Christian writer Sulpicius Severus (*Chron.* 2.30.6-7) records him to believe "...that the destruction of the temple was of prime importance in order to abolish more fully the religion of the Jews and Christians." Finally, Titus plundered the rest of the city. John surrendered and Simon was caught. When the Romans withdrew, the whole city was in flames. Jerusalem was eventually conquered by Titus in September A.D. 70.

(e) With the destruction of Jerusalem, the battle against the Jews was won, and thus Titus sailed back to Rome for his triumph that he celebrated together with Vespasian. He brought with him loot from the Temple like the Table of Showbread and the seven-branched candelabrum, and displayed about seven hundred Jewish prisoners, including John and Simon. The latter was publicly executed, and John imprisoned for

life. Most rebels were put to death, strong prisoners were sent to labor, and others were kept for shows with gladiators and wild beasts.

The last fortresses still left unconquered were Herodium, Macheros and Masada. When Lucilius Bassus was sent as procurator to Judaea, he attacked Herodium and Macheros and forced the Jews to surrender. Bassus then passed away and his successor Flavius Silva marched against Masada. Josephus records that the Jews there committed mass suicide before the Romans stormed the citadel. The end of Masada marks the end of the Jewish War in A.D. 73.

(4) Aftermath of the War

With the Jewish land sold to strangers, the Jerusalem city garrisoned by Romans and the Temple destroyed, Judaism changed significantly after the war. The new situation made it impossible to comply with the Jewish law related to land and the Temple. A rabbinic school was established in Jamnia and the new heart of Judaism became the study and teaching of the Thora. The oral traditions were compiled in the Mishnah at the council of Jamnia around A.D. 220. Sadducees and priests of the ruling class vanished together with the Temple, but the Pharisees' power grew stronger.

Hostility between Jews and Romans continued. The Jewish temple tax was transformed into a much hated annual poll tax paid to the pagan Temple of Jupiter.

Roman coins were minted with inscriptions like 'Judaea Capta' and symbolism of Jewish submission. A few Sicarii extremists fled to Alexandria and rebelled but were defeated, too, and the Jewish temple in Egypt was also closed down by Vespasian. Jewish resistance later culminated again in the second revolt that broke out in Diaspora in A.D. 115-117 and the third revolt in the hills of Judaea in A.D. 132-135 led by Simon Bar Kochba who claimed to be the Messiah. Again, the rebellion was crushed and the Jews persecuted. Nonetheless, Judaism survived and the nation Israel was re-established in 1948.

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For a thorough bibliography about Josephus and the Jewish War see also the database at the University of Münster, Germany, at <http://www.uni-muenster.de/Judaicum/Josephus/JosephusOnline-e.html> <Category: History of the Jewish War 66-70 AD> (accessed August 2006).