Why Did Vespasian and Titus Destroy Jerusalem?

The Roman Political Perspective on the Destruction of the City

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Abstract: What brought Rome to present a military campaign against the small and distant province of Judaea as a great victory? Why did such a small rebellion succeed for so many years? What brought Titus to raze the most important metropolis of Judaea when much less would have put down the rebellion? Finally, why did the Flavian emperors actively publicize the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple? The answer to these questions should be sought not in Jerusalem, but in Rome and its political climate.\(^1\)

Introduction

Every summer, during the month of Av, the Jewish people mourn the tragic events of the Great Revolt, which culminated in the summer of 70, when the Romans burnt the Second Temple and devastated Jerusalem, the national, religious and spiritual center of Jews worldwide. Many Second Temple Jewish groups, such as the Sadducees and the Essenes, completely disappeared, and those who survived needed to reinvent Judaism without a Temple.

While today we naturally tend to concentrate on the tragedy of the Jewish people, the events of 70 CE were just an
outcome of a much bigger change in the Roman Empire. The fate of Jerusalem was resolved by the political circumstances which were occurring not in the Land of Israel but in Rome, in the short period from June 68 to December 69 CE. In fact, it had very little to do with Jews at all. Nevertheless, the results of this year in Rome were disastrous for the Jewish people for the next two thousand years.

**The Situation before the Revolt:**
**Judaea as a Nonthreatening Province**

Josephus' *Jewish War* is our primary source for the events in Judaea. Josephus, a former Jewish commander of Galilee and a freed slave of Titus, wrote in Greek, addressing a Roman audience familiar with their contemporary politics. Josephus’ story was, thus, an interesting account of war in a distant place.

Although the *Jewish War* focuses on the local history in Judaea, to understand what happened in Jerusalem in the summer of 70 CE, we need to use a wider lens. During the 1st century CE, Judea was an insignificant Roman province situated at the edge of the Empire. Rome does not appear to have believed that this province had the potential to inflame the empire and put Roman rule in danger. The local power in Judea was entrusted to governors of the equestrian rank, the lower class of the Roman public service officials, who were not allowed to command Roman legions, a sure sign that the province did not count for much in Roman eyes.

Josephus provides an overview of the history of Judaea under Roman rule. His goal was to demonstrate how the situation in Judaea deteriorated, leading to the outbreak of the war. However, modern research has found little evidence of large-scale hostilities before the revolt.[2]

The fact is that the Roman authorities continued to allow multitudes of Jews to gather in Jerusalem for the three Holiday of Pilgrimage (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot), indicating that there was no fear of rebellion. Moreover, the Romans did not object to the Jewish Diaspora contributing the Half-Sheqel tax to the Temple in Jerusalem, and they allowed the Temple authorities to accumulate significant wealth, which was utilized for local purposes. In short, Judaea was treated as a small distant province of limited concern to the emperors.

**From a Run-of-the-Mill Operation Restoring Order to a Great Conquest**

Emperor Nero perceived the outbreak of hostilities in 66 CE as a problem of local unrest, and not as a real threat to imperial rule. Hence, he simply instructed the Roman governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, who was the superior of local governor in Judaea, to restore order.

Gallus' campaign was a fiasco and more severe measures were required. Even so, Nero’s ratcheting up Rome’s military involvement hardly meant that he saw it as an existential crisis for Rome. Although the battle was serious—the Romans eventually sent four legions to quash the rebellion—it was not originally perceived as a battle with a powerful foreign enemy, but merely as a necessary campaign to restore order in a Roman province. Nevertheless, by the end of the campaign, it was presented as the former in Rome. What changed?

**Nero, Vespasian and the Roman Politics**

Emperor Nero was a controversial figure in Roman history. According to some accounts, he started the Great Fire of Rome (64 CE) in order to clear the public space for a new city to be rebuilt according to the principles of art.[3] Nero’s ambitious project of rebuilding Rome required huge expenses. Funds were confiscated from the Roman high society. Thus, the Emperor acquired many enemies in the Roman society and, as a consequence, he initiated purges.

By the beginning of events in Judaea, Nero had already fallen into a deep (but partially justified) paranoia. He distrusted his generals, suspected senators, and worried that he might lose his throne and life in a conspiracy arranged by his Roman opponents.

**Appointment of Vespasian to Quash the Rebellion**
In this context, Nero appointed Vespasian to head the Roman legions in Judaea. Nero appointed him precisely because he was perceived as a relatively unremarkable personality in Roman public life.

Vespasian’s family was not of the Roman elite. Although he excelled as a military commander on the battlefield in Britain in 53 CE, and later served as the governor of the Roman province Africa Proconsularis, he had no influence with the Roman aristocracy. After leaving office, Vespasian withdrew to his country home, having been removed from public life after falling asleep during one of Emperor Nero’s many singing performances. In other words, Vespasian was placed to lead the troops in Judaea because there was little danger that he would be capable of abusing his powers to fight his way to emperor’s throne.

Nero underestimated Vespasian, whose next moves indicate that he already had his eyes set on something bigger than the Judaean campaign. In the winter of 67-68 CE, Jerusalem was immersed in a civil war between rebel factions that weakened the defense of the city. This would have been the best time for an assault, but Vespasian refrained from an action that would have ended his position as leader of the Roman army in the east too quickly. Instead, Vespasian used this opportunity to restore his public name, win influence, and acquire financial support for political and military moves which he planned in Rome. Vespasian was biding his time and awaiting the right moment.

The Year of the Four Emperors
Such a moment arrived in the years 68-69 CE, during the Roman civil war, which is known (in modern historiography) as the “Year of the Four Emperors.” Emperor Nero committed suicide and Rome sank into turmoil. During a single year, three different generals rose to power in Rome and were put down by bloody military coups, until the fourth, Vespasian, prevailed. Vespasian was declared Emperor by the Roman legions stationed in the East after he secured the support of the Roman governors of Syria and Egypt. This support resulted from Vespasian’s machinations during his time in Judaea.

After leaving for Rome to assume his position, Vespasian did not hesitate to entrust the conduct of the war on Jerusalem to his inexperienced son, Titus. This is because the Judeans posed no real threat and, the rebellion was still considered to be a minor incident in the background of political intrigues in Rome.

The Rebellion Takes on New Meaning
After the turmoil of the “Year of the Four Emperors” and a long period of instability in Rome, the Roman elite feared a total collapse of the public order. Vespasian sought to present himself as the emperor who brought back stability. Thus, the tactics in Judaea needed to change, and instead of a prolonged campaign, he needed a prompt and decisive victory.

This explains why Titus laid siege to Jerusalem, actively broke through the fortifications, devastated the city, and brought the revolt in the Jewish capital to its epic end so quickly. The stabilization of his father’s rule in Rome was largely dependent on the public legitimacy of the Flavian family. The ability to present Rome with the conquest of Jerusalem, the contents of the Temple treasury, cheap slaves, the humiliation of the enemy and the concomitant tales of victory would all help Vespasian and Titus consolidate their positions as emperor—and future emperor—of Rome. Thus, Vespasian and Titus did not wish to wait, e.g., for the rebels to capitulate as a result of hunger following a long siege, which was often the practice in siege warfare, and certainly would have led to fewer Roman casualties.

The new imperial propaganda invested enormous efforts to increase the public visibility for the destruction of Jerusalem. Roman public opinion might question Vespasian’s previous record and doubt why he deserves the highest position in the Empire. These doubts were even more severe concerning the young Titus, who was destined to become the next emperor, but had very few achievements of his own. The dynasty had to establish its public legitimacy.

Giving the Romans a Victory to Celebrate
The victory over Jerusalem was presented in the course of the Flavian public relations campaign as of the utmost importance for the Roman people: a remarkable accomplishment that was only obtained due to Vespasian and Titus. This effort aimed to create a new image of Vespasian as a national hero who rescued Rome from the perilous civil war, defeated the dangerous enemies of the Roman people and restored peace within Rome’s boundaries.

This public persona of the “new” Vespasian was constructed on the basis of the campaign in Judaea. It was designed to overcome his undistinguished family origin and his previous average achievements in political life. To do all this, however, the Flavians had to puff up the power, and thus the threat, that Judaea had posed. Moreover, the destruction of the Jewish Temple retroactively added a religious legitimacy to the new dynasty, since the Roman god Jupiter defeated the “powerful” God of the Jews by means of the Flavian family.[5]

Rome, The Flavian Amphitheater (‘Colosseum’). Photo © David Gurevich, 2014

The Flavian Propaganda and Jerusalem

The city of Rome became the stage for the Flavian political theater. The return of Titus to Rome in 71 CE after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple was celebrated with a spectacular triumph. It was probably the only documented triumph in the imperial history that aimed to dignify the recapture of a rebellious Roman province rather than a defeat of a foreign country. Josephus, who probably witnessed the triumphal march, observed:

But nothing in the procession excited so much astonishment as the structure of the moving stages; indeed, their massiveness afforded ground for alarm and misgiving as to their stability, many of them being three or four stories high, while the magnificence of the fabric was a source at once of delight and amazement. For many were enveloped in tapestries interwoven with gold, and all had a framework of gold and wrought ivory. The war was shown by numerous representations, in separate sections, affording a very vivid picture of its episodes.

Here was to be seen a prosperous country devastated, there whole battalions of the enemy slaughtered; here a party in flight, there others led into captivity; walls of surpassing compass demolished by engines, strong fortresses overpowered, cities with well-manned defenses completely mastered and an army pouring within the ramparts, an area all deluged with blood, the hands of those incapable of resistance raised in supplication, temples set on fire, houses pulled down over their owners’ heads, and, after general desolation and woe, rivers flowing, not over a cultivated land, nor supplying drink to man and beast, but across a country still on every side in flames. For to such
sufferings were the Jews destined when they plunged into the war; and the art and magnificent workmanship of these structures now portrayed the incidents to those who had not witnessed them, as though they were happening before their eyes.[6]

Rome, Via Sacra, Arch of Titus. The relief depicts the triumphal procession of the Roman army after the victory on Jerusalem. Photo © David Gurevich, 2014

Imperial Architecture Celebrating the Victory of Jerusalem

Visitors to Rome in the two decades immediately following the revolt would be astonished by how much attention was devoted to Jerusalem in the imperial architecture at the public space.[7]

The Temple of Peace – A new compound called “The Temple of Peace” (Templum Pacis) was erected near the famous Imperial Fora. Designed to commemorate the reestablishment of peace by the defeat of the Jews, this was not a temple in a regular sense, but was more like a modern exhibition hall. The compound hosted, among other things according to Josephus, the sacred vessels looted from the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.[8]

The Colosseum – A short distance away, the Flavians erected the biggest amphitheater of Rome, known today as the Colosseum. Modern scholars successfully identified the traces of its ancient wall inscriptions that attributed the public facility to the funds captured by Titus for the Roman, people most probably, in the Jewish war.[9]

The Arch of Titus at Via Sacra – Two triumphal arches were erected in honor of Titus in Rome’s most central locations. The later arch of these monuments, is the famous Arch of Titus that stands today at the Sacred Way (Via Sacra), the leading way to the Roman Forum and Colosseum.
The reliefs depict the Roman legionnaires in the course of the triumph carrying the captured Menorah.

**The Arch of Titus at Circus Maximus** – The other, lesser-known triumphal arch in honor of Titus, which has not survived, was erected at the entrance to Circus Maximus and had a remarkable inscription. Its content was recorded by a later traveler who saw the monument when it was still standing in the 8-9th centuries CE. According to this source, some of the 100,000 attendees of the Circus, would pass through the arch and get impressed by the inscription that Titus

“subdued the race of the Jews and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, which by all general, kings or races previous to himself had either been attacked in vain or not even attempted at all.”[^10]

The monumental architecture brought Jews of Judaea as enemy of the empire, and the image of Jerusalem as their ruined ancient capital, into the center of public attention in Rome.

**Commemorative Coins: Judaea Conquered**

Vespasian and Titus were not satisfied with the victory parades and the establishment of monumental buildings to
publicize the devastation of Jerusalem. In those days, when the mass media did not exist, the most effective way to convey the ruler’s political message to wide audiences was issuing “commemorative” coins. The Flavians designated a special series of coins, which were introduced into the monetary circulation in the empire – the “Judaea Conquered” (Iudaea capta) coinage.

These follow the type of imperial coins that used to mark the successful defeat of a powerful country and its annexation to Rome. The coins were struck in Rome, Lyon, Spain, Antioch and of course, in Judaea itself. The typical composition on the coins was an image of a grieving woman, who symbolized defeated Judaea, kneeling beside a palm tree. Near the woman, stood proudly a tall Roman figure (perhaps, Vespasian or Titus), who demonstrates the acquiescence of the captive.¹¹

A Roman sestertius of Vespasian’s Judaea Capta coinage, ca. 71 CE. Source: Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. via Wikimedia Commons

“Jew Tax” to Replace the Half-Shekel Temple Contribution
After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the Flavians imposed a special tax on Jews, not only in Judaea but all around the Roman world. The tax, known as the “Jewish tax” (Fiscus Iudaicus), was intended to replace the Half-Sheqel tax, which Jews used to donate to Jerusalem’s Temple. The tax continued into the reign of Titus’s brother, Domitian, who came to power in 81 CE, when was collected in an aggressive manner.

By installing this tax, the Flavians aimed to convey a particular message: We, the Flavian emperors have permanently abolished the Jewish Temple cult, the core of the Jewish resistance against Rome. The humiliated Jews, “who continued to observe their ancestral customs”¹² and thus remain potential enemies of the empire, are obligated, from now on, to send this money to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus at Rome.

Epilogue
The Great Revolt and the destruction of the Temple were the key events that shaped the Jewish-Roman relation for centuries. By presenting a real but not particularly significant rebellion as an enormous, powerful, and dangerous foreign threat, Vespasian was able to present himself and his son Titus as military heroes who saved the people of Rome.

Two thousand years have passed since the destruction of Jerusalem. Empires have risen and fallen; humanity has made huge progress. Nevertheless, it is still not unheard of for modern leaders to utilize fear or hatred of Jews to establish their own political legitimacy and acquire wider public support. Perhaps, one day, this sad page in the
history of humanity will be left behind.

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[3] Nero put the blame on the Christian community in Rome, and many Christians were caught and executed. According to Christian tradition, St. Peter, considered to be the first bishop of Rome, was among them.


[9] The inscription was removed in ancient times and is no longer extant. The reconstruction is based on the marks left by the letters on the stone. See: Millar, “Last Year,” 118.


