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THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST CRISIS



HISTORY

THIS BOOK HELPS us understand the relationship between the ancient Romans and the ancient Jews. As history from above, it describes the geopolitical relationship between the Julio-Claudian dynasty (49 BC to 68 AD) and the Herodian dynasty (37 BC to 92 AD) and the way the landscape changed after Nero's death in 68 AD. As history from below, it tells us something about the people the Herodians tried to govern, including the religious establishment, and nationalistic elements that supported insurrection when they weren't fighting against each other. Goodman is astute when assessing the objectivity of primary sources: for example, Josephus.

In May of 66 AD the Roman governor of Judaea—appointed two years earlier by Nero—let his troops loose in the upper market in Jerusalem with instructions to kill all they met. It was intended as political theatre, designed to humiliate, but when the troops met with resistance, moderates led by King Agrippa II tried to stem the flood of Jewish protest without success. As Jerusalemites polarised between a peace party and a war party, Eleazar, the captain of the Temple, forced the issue by persuading those officiating to refuse further gifts or sacrifices brought by foreigners. "This action," wrote Josephus, "laid the foundation of the war with the Romans." By ending the long-standing custom of demonstrating loyalty to the Roman emperor, a cycle of violence began, which ended just over four years later in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

In the first few months of the conflict, Roman troops weren't directly involved. Factional strife led to heavy losses of life and the spectacular destruction of the

large townhouses of rich Jerusalemites who opposed revolt. A Roman cohort of 600 men, garrisoned on the edge of the city, struggled to support the peace party, but they were besieged by rebels and confined to their headquarters. By late August or early September, the cohort was overcome and agreed to surrender its weapons in exchange for free passage out of the city. Once

the agreement was given, though, the rebels slaughtered the cohort. "Seeing the grounds for war to be now beyond remedy," wrote Josephus, "the whole city was a scene of dejection, and among the moderates there was not one who was not racked with the thought that he would personally have to suffer for the rebels' crime."

A month or so later, the Roman governor of Syria arrived from Antioch intending to punish the Jews for Roman losses. Rebel forces rushed out to attack him, with considerable success, killing 515 Romans for the loss of only twenty-two Jews. Agrippa II still tried to mediate a peaceful solution but it was too late. The Roman governor marched into Jerusalem and began to besiege the inner city. The besieged began to panic and some—it was said—offered to open up the city to him. Then suddenly he stopped, and withdrew from the city, in what turned out to be a misguided calculation. The rebels followed him, a bloody rout ensued, and the Romans lost 5300 infantry and 480 cavalry.

After such a reversal there could be no more offers of peace. After so public a humiliation, the Roman empire required a full and thorough punishment of the rebellious city. The moderate Jews who had remained in Jerusalem, trying to broker peace, now fled to the Roman side. Those left in the city set about organising its defence under the leadership of a former High Priest. But a full-scale siege of such a well-defended city wasn't to be undertaken lightly. Titus Flavius Vespasianus, the future emperor Vespasian, spent months collecting a huge force, and two years cautiously gaining full control of the surrounding countryside. The death of Nero in 68 AD threw his formal

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THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

right to prosecute the campaign into doubt, but, after a year of turmoil, he was proclaimed emperor in 69 AD. In the spring of 70 AD his son, Titus, arrived outside the walls of Jerusalem with a vast army. The siege, once begun, was prosecuted with exceptional speed and vigour. The force deployed by Rome was overwhelming. The change in Roman behaviour took the Jews by surprise. Passover pilgrims were trapped by the surrounding army. Within days the squabbling Jewish factions united. But by mid-August Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.

Why had this disaster come about? Was there anything intrinsic in Jewish and Roman society that made it impossible for Jerusalem and Rome to coexist? Were the tensions which had so dramatic an effect in August 70 AD already apparent in 30 AD when Jesus preached in Jerusalem and died there on the order of a Roman governor? Martin Goodman sets himself the task of seeking answers to these questions.

GOODMAN FRAMES THE ancient Mediterranean world as essentially the story of two cities, one world under Rome, and diversity and toleration.

Two Cities: The inhabitants of Rome and Jerusalem came into close contact: Romans visited Jerusalem as soldiers, politicians and tourists; Jews came to Rome as suppliants, slaves and fortune-seekers. They shared a political world fostered by friendships, alliances and patronage. Despite their differences, there were striking similarities, since both cities metamorphosed at the same time from ramshackle agglomerations into shining testimonies to massive state expenditure. Both used the most up-to-date techniques of urban planning and borrowed architectural styles from the most impressive city of the previous generation: Alexandria. But the glory of Rome was different from the splendour of Jerusalem. Rome was magnificent in the provision of public facilities and private indulgence. The gap between rich and poor was extreme. Bread and circuses stabilised an impoverished population living in overcrowded tenements. The biggest danger wasn't from subject peoples of the empire but tensions among ambitious Roman nobles. Jerusalem's greatness in Jesus's time wasn't because of victory in war, success in commerce, political intrigue, or the harnessing of natural resources, but the religious fervour of millions of Jews living throughout and beyond the empire. Life was shaped by the routines of the Temple, and like Rome, it depended on imported wealth. The city housed a large proportion of poor living alongside the

rich but there was an additional source of instability: the periodic influx of pilgrims who brought economic opportunities as well as potential for political and social unrest.

One World: The cohesiveness of the empire depended on a brutal reality: the power of the emperor could reach almost every corner of the Mediterranean. But this cohesiveness depended on the consent of disparate societies—whether forced or voluntary—which created an underlying geopolitical fragility. As there was no decentralised imperial bureaucracy, government could only operate successfully by consent, and local administration was carried out by local urban elites in return for Roman support for their local status. The economic unity of the empire, as a series of local agrarian economies at the mercy of the weather, depended on the comparative ease with which goods could be traded throughout the empire. A lot depended on fluctuations in the price of traded goods and the empire is best understood not as a single market but as a series of linked local markets. The cultural unity of the empire was less Roman than Greek, as the civilisation

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of classical Athens still represented the pinnacle of human achievement even though Athens had become a political backwater. In the first century AD, both Rome and Jerusalem were good examples of the adoption and adaptation of Hellenism. Romans and Jews wanted the best of both worlds, to borrow whatever they wanted from Greek culture while despising the Greeks. Contrary to popular belief, there were many social ties, including familial ties, between Jews and Gentiles.

Diversity and toleration: Thinking Romans were fascinated by the variety of peoples, places, and natural phenomena within the borders of their huge empire, which was what we would now call multicultural. Roman observations of the kaleidoscope of customs within the empire elicited at different times moralising, humour, disdain, distaste or admiration, but never surprise. Everyone knew the peoples of the Roman world followed distinctive local traditions and apparently took it for granted that such variety was inevitable. In general, the Romans were happy to allow their provincial subjects to continue to live in their idiosyncratic ways. The state was tolerant in allowing provincials to retain non-Roman lifestyles and the normal attitude of the state to provincial culture was laissez-faire. But laissez-faire didn't imply that Romans believed all cultures were equally valuable. If they weren't racially prejudiced they did have a clear sense of the barbarian, as the opposite to civilised society, and what was

THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

outside the bounds of true humanity. Many Jews came to be regarded as prominent Romans and their Jewish ancestry wasn't an issue. Why then, when such diversity flourished unchecked without interference, should the life of Jerusalem have become so much more inimical to Rome than other cities in the empire? To answer that, we need to understand the differences between Roman and Jewish attitudes to the world they shared.

GOODMAN FRAMES THE differences between Romans and Jews around their identities, communities, perspectives, lifestyles, government, politics, and attitudes towards each other. Here are but a few.

Identities: The liberality of Romans with citizenship was unusual in the ancient world. Romans could be Jewish and Jews could be Romans. Legitimate citizenship of offspring depended on a wife being Roman or from a foreign community allowed to intermarry with Romans. Some but not all slaves became Roman citizens. The question "Who is a Jew?" was as difficult to answer then as now, since identity could be ethnic or religious. As Gentiles could become Jews, conversion wasn't just a theoretical possibility, but, unlike Roman identity, Jewish identity was a matter of self-identification for converts as there was no defining authority.

Communities: Romans and Jews conceptualised the state differently. For Romans, the state was *res publica*, "the public affair", individuals united for the common good, permitting the greatest possible freedom of private ownership and individual political action. For Jews, Josephus defined the state as *theokratia*:

Some peoples have entrusted the supreme political power to monarchies, others to oligarchies, yet others to the masses. Our lawgiver, however, was attracted to none of these forms of polity, but gave to his constitution the form of what—if a forced expression be permitted—may be termed a "theocracy", placing sovereignty and authority in the hands of God.

Perspectives: Romans regarded abortion as contraception. The treatment of newborns was left to the discretion of their parents. A child was accepted as fully human not when it first breathed but when its father acknowledged its legitimate existence. A child not recognised could be killed, left to die, or sold as a slave. In contrast, Jews abhorred abortion, except in extreme

circumstances, and in all cases infanticide. There was a general assumption that, since humans were made in God's image, human life was sacred. To kill a foetus is to destroy a soul, even if real life often involves complications and compromises.

Lifestyles: It's too crude to describe Romans as libertarians and Jews as puritans but neither caricature is too far off the mark, even at the most basic level of the way they treated their bodies and bodily functions, and their attitudes to male and female nudity. Roman attitudes to the body were extraordinarily relaxed and, while some sexual activities might be deemed demeaning to one or other participant, nothing was ruled out. For Jews, the biblical purity system assumed there was nothing wrong or worrying about being impure, since bodily fluids and corpses are natural and unavoidable, but purification was required before entering the sanctuary.

Government: Roman law was perceived as man-made, a product of decisions by assemblies and magistrates, of experience from case law, and of reasoning; at no point did jurists claim divine authority; torture was an admissible means of exacting the truth. Most Jewish law was different, since the Torah, which covered all aspects of religious and secular life, was believed to come from God, although the Mishnah contains laws without a biblical basis; torture was occasionally used but no source suggests it was admissible. War was an inevitable part of life for both Romans and Jews; both made war frequently in the first century AD.

Politics: Romans and Jews held different views about status and power. In Rome political status derived from wealth, noble ancestry, age, and above all military glory; in principle, authority was shared between rich male aristocrats elected by the people as magistrates and senators, but in practice all power derived from the emperor as autocrat. In Jerusalem political status depended on lineage, priestly or royal, learning in the law, and occasionally a claim to divine inspiration; however, as the first century AD progressed, the concentration of influence devolved from status to those who could gain access to the ultimate source of brute power: the Roman governor.

Romans and Jews: Roman comments about Jews were rarely hostile before the outbreak of war in 66 AD. Far more common were amusement, indifference, acceptance, admiration and emulation. In Rome, synagogues were treated much like other voluntary associations, to be controlled and occasionally suppressed, but generally tolerated. The most remarkable and least disputed element of that toleration was the exemption for

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THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

Jewish Romans from the normal rule that decent citizens must pray to the Roman gods. Romans knew that Jews, uniquely among the inhabitants of the empire, refused to worship any god apart from the jealous God worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem.

GOODMAN FRAMES THE conflict between Romans and Jews around the road to destruction (37 BC to 70 AD), reactions to destruction (70 AD to 312 AD), the growth of the church, and a new Rome and a new Jerusalem. As it's difficult to summarise such a broad range in a few words, and since the book's emphasis is why Romans changed their tolerant attitude towards Jews, and why Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, we'll focus on that aspect of the conflict.

Judaea: Why did Roman control of Jerusalem, established in 37 BC, end in destruction of the city in 70 AD? The disaster wasn't inevitable. Nor was violence continuous. Herod's iron repression of dissent between 37 BC and 4 BC prevented any need for Roman intervention, but when he died the country descended into chaos. Intrigue between his sons robbed the country of competent rule, and Augustus sent a financial agent to take charge of Herod's extensive properties. Because the agent wasn't a governor, he was sucked into an atmosphere of violence which resulted in the desecration of the Temple. The desecration, and a lack of legitimate central authority, encouraged outbreaks of violence all over the country. Messianic expectation may have been a contributing factor but academics still argue over the degree. According to Josephus:

And so Judaea was filled with brigandage. Anyone might make himself king as the head of a band of rebels whom he fell in with, and then would press on to the destruction of the community, causing trouble to few Romans, and then only to a small degree, but bringing the greatest slaughter upon their own people.

Roman governors marched from Syria to Judaea on several occasions over the following seventy years, but they came not to suppress insurrection but to prevent opposition to Roman actions which might become inflammatory.

Diaspora: In the Diaspora, most Jews lived under Roman rule before 66 AD without apparently feeling at odds with the Roman state. The only Diaspora community known to have suffered from a persistent threat to its welfare was that of Alexandria in Egypt, probably the result of conditions specific to that city. Elsewhere Diaspora Jews came to an accommodation with their neighbours and might be grateful for the imperial peace that helped to preserve a status quo it was in their inter-

est to defend. But what they couldn't control was the politics of the homeland—in which they took a keen interest—and the possibility that events in Judaea might influence Roman policy towards Jews in far distant lands. Before 66 AD, one looks in vain for any expression of Roman fear that Jews might act as a fifth column within the empire. In general, Diaspora Jews only came into tension with the Roman state when something went drastically wrong in the homeland, such as Gaius's plan to desecrate the Temple by erecting his statue within it; however, for some Diaspora Jews, when full-scale war broke out in Jerusalem in 66 AD, it proved impossible not to be affected.

War: As we saw in the prologue, the death of Nero, and Vespasian's bid for purple, were unexpected. Suddenly, in July 69 AD, the commander of the Roman forces against Jerusalem was no longer an obscure senator of mediocre talent and minimal prestige in the court of the emperor. Now he was, or hoped to be, emperor himself. If Jews didn't ascribe glamour to war, Romans did, and military glory was fundamental to political status. Vespasian's need of a victory over foreigners, to give his bid for power legitimacy, explains why he instructed his son Titus to win the war against Jerusalem as rapidly and comprehensively as possible regardless of the cost. Roman losses were huge and the number of casualties was a direct result of Titus's need to capture Jerusalem quickly. The pressure wasn't military but political. Jerusalem could have been starved into submission; it was only necessary to wait; but there wasn't time to wait. The destruction of Jerusalem was the product of no long-term policy on either side. It had come about through a combination of accidents unrelated to the origin of the conflict. But once the destruction was complete it had to be construed as a victory over a religion not worthy to exist: as an act of piety to the gods of the Roman world.

MUCH HAS BEEN written on the origins of anti-Semitism. Various hypotheses trace it to Egyptian hatred of Jews in the third century BC, the anti-Jewish propaganda of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC, Greek resentment of the expansionist policies of the Hasmonaeans in Judaea, and the separateness of the Jews in the Diaspora which made them distinctive and vulnerable. There has been much discussion, also, of the unfocused anti-Jewish comments found in the work of pagan Greek and Latin authors, and of the theological roots of Christian anti-Semitism, growing from the assertion that the Jewish covenant with God has been rendered obsolete by the new covenant of Christ. Goodman doesn't dispute the value of any of these hypotheses and discussions—all of which have merit—but he wants to emphasise something he believes hasn't

THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

received the attention it deserves.

The Jewish world in which Jesus lived was under Roman rule but didn't feel oppressed by Rome. The Jerusalem to which Jesus came at Passover in 30 AD was a glorious city, adorned with gleaming new buildings and awash with pilgrims from all over and beyond the Roman empire. The might of the Jewish God was patent in the astonishing spectacle of the rebuilt Temple. Roman peace was good for Jerusalem. The Jews prayed for the emperor. They understood Roman power deterred assaults by neighbouring peoples and left them at liberty to worship as their forefathers had. The Romans were aware that Jews were different in aspects of lifestyle and outlook, but they were used to ruling over strange peoples and revelled in the variety of their subjects. Jews were occasionally despised, because they were a defeated nation, but they weren't seen as dangerous or hostile.

The revolt that broke out in Jerusalem in 66 AD wasn't sparked by Jewish revulsion against Roman imperialism. It was a reaction against maladministration by an individual low-grade governor. The initial Roman response was little more than a police action, a show of force, but the punitive action planned in 66 AD escalated in 70 AD and became an intensive siege and eventual destruction of Jerusalem. Why? The cause was less the strength of Jewish resistance than a series of *coups d'état* in Rome culminating in Vespasian's decision to seek supreme power for himself. Total defeat of the Jews was now needed to provide him with the aura of a victorious general which might justify his rise to power. It wasn't the first time a foreign war had been used to disguise embarrassing domestic politics and wouldn't be the last. But it was unusual for the enemy to be a people who had lived within the Roman sphere for over a century, and it was even more unusual for the demonisation of the defeated people to last for centuries. The reasons, again, were political.

Goodman believes the most significant development in the century after 70 AD was a by-product of this new Roman hostility to the Jews: the emergence of Christian anti-Semitism. While Roman imperial power gradually disintegrated from the beginning of

the fifth century AD, Rome's living legacy in Europe throughout the Middle Ages to our own time has been the institution and the ideology of the church. He says the impetus to the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity came less from the Jewish side than from the Christian. Ordinary Jews in the first century AD accepted there were many odd Jewish groups who interpreted the Torah in idiosyncratic ways. The fact that Christians claimed Jesus was the expected Messiah was no reason to expel them from the Jewish fold; however, the impetus for Christians to distance themselves from Jews after 70 AD was much more clear-cut. By that date many if not most Christians

lived outside Judaea and most had not been born Jews. To gain credibility in the Roman world Christians needed not only to deny their Jewishness but to attack Judaism altogether. In the second and third centuries Christian theological discourse took on a life of its own and attitudes towards Jews hardened. By the time of Constantine, Christians took for granted Jews were to be despised and shunned. This assumption, inherited by medieval Christendom from the Roman empire, has by no means faded away in the modern world.

Since this hypothesis—that anti-Semitism is essentially Roman prejudice morphed into Christian prejudice—has been around for a long time, it's eccentric to see Goodman suggesting it hasn't received the attention it deserves. In the last two paragraphs of this otherwise excellent book, he ends with a plea for

the existence of a Jewish state as a means of bringing Jewish travails to an end. As he juxtaposes these two ideas—the traditional hegemony of Christian anti-Semitism alongside the ongoing struggle for a Jewish state—without linking them explicitly, we assume he believes the current Middle East crisis is fundamentally a matter of Christian anti-Semitism. Even if that's partly true, it isn't wholly true, since there are anti-Semitic nations and religions that aren't Christian. But it's certainly the view of an aetiologically-challenged Westerner unable to look beyond the West.

Michael Giffin discussed Leonard and Virginia Woolf in the July-August issue.

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