



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Rendering to God not Caesar: the Jewish Revolt of 69-70 AD

McLaren, James S.

### Citation

McLaren, J. S. (2009). Rendering to God not Caesar: the Jewish Revolt of 69-70 AD. *Leidschrift : Empire & Resistance. Religious Beliefs Versus The Ruling Power*, 24(April), 15-31. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72967>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72967>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Rendering to God not Caesar: the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 AD

*James S. McLaren*



Fig. 1: Roman victory parade after the recapture of Jerusalem depicted on the Arch of Titus. Source: author's personal archive.

Numerous physical reminders of the 66-70 AD rebellion by Jews against the Roman Empire are still visible today for anyone who travels to Jerusalem and Rome. The amphitheatre, now better known as the Colosseum, and the Arch of Titus are two significant monuments in Rome that were constructed as part of the Roman celebrations of their victory.<sup>1</sup> In Jerusalem excavations have revealed numerous indications of the devastation associated with the recapture of the city by the Romans in 70 AD in houses and round the base of the Temple mount. Probably the most iconic physical reminder of the war is Masada, the fortress-palace located on the edge of the Dead Sea, where the outlines of the Roman siege wall, camps and ramp used in the assault can be readily identified.<sup>2</sup> The various

---

1 On the monumental legacy of the war in Rome see F. Millar, 'Last year in Jerusalem: monuments of the Jewish War in Rome' in: J. Edmondson, S. Mason and J. Rives ed., *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome* (Oxford 2005) 101-128.

2 Other notable sites in modern Israel offer clear signs of the fighting (e.g. Gamala and Yodfat, both located in the Lower Galilee).

tangible reminders of the conflict are matched by the extensive literary account of the war written by Flavius Josephus. His *Jewish War* is an intriguing account of the conflict written within ten years of its conclusion that enables us to examine the war in substantial detail.<sup>3</sup>

From our vantage point, there would appear to have been only one possible victor in the war of 66-70 AD. Although very much on the outer boundaries of the Roman Empire, it was not conceivable to think that Rome would allow the Jewish homeland to renounce its status as a subject territory. Rome had regarded the territory as its own ever since the request made to Pompey to help resolve a leadership dispute among the ruling Hasmonean family in 63 BC. While the manner in which Roman control was implemented varied for the next century, at no stage did Rome consider renouncing its claim.<sup>4</sup> If anything, the remarkable initial success of defeating an under strength Roman legion in the autumn of 66 AD, which probably gave hope to the rebels, merely reinforced the determination of the Romans to reassert their control. As such, it was only a matter of time before a substantial response was made. It commenced in 67 AD, when Vespasian was commissioned by the Emperor Nero to quash the revolt. His campaign in 67-68 AD managed to quell most of the resistance outside of Jerusalem but his assault on the city was halted by events taking place in the Roman political arena. The suicide of Nero and the resultant shuffling for power by various aspirants delayed the reassertion of Roman control. Eventually, with Vespasian Emperor, his eldest son Titus marched on Jerusalem with four

---

3 Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2 vols., H. St. J. Thackeray trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1927-1928). Josephus was a commander of the forces that initially fought the Romans in Galilee. He then surrendered to them and, in turn, provided information to the Romans as they commenced their assault on Jerusalem in 70 AD. Having watched the destruction of the city he then travelled to Rome to witness the Roman celebrations and resided in the city under the patronage of the new Flavian rulers, spending the remaining years of his life undertaking a number of literary projects. On the life of Josephus see Tessa Rajak, *Josephus. The historian and his society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London 2002) and James S. McLaren, 'Delving into the dark side: Josephus' foresight as hindsight' in: Z. Rodgers ed., *Making history. Josephus and historical method* (Leiden 2007) 49-67.

4 One of the interesting aspects of Roman rule was who they chose to administer the territory. Initially it was through local client rulers (63 BC–6 AD). Next they employed a mixture of locals and Roman officials within specified locations (6-41 AD). They then returned to a local client alone (41-44 AD) and then went back to a mixture of local and Roman administrators, again in specified locations (44-66 AD).

Roman legions and numerous other troops in 70 AD. By late August the city was captured: there had been significant loss of life and much of the city was in ruins.

Given how unlikely they were to succeed, we may well ask what prompted the Jews to rebel. The answer lies in what is best labelled as a religious motivation, an unflinching belief that the Temple belonged to the God of the Jews. In general, the Jewish community was able to accommodate being ruled by foreign powers; there was no ideological clash inherent in being governed by non-Jews. There was, however, one crucial proviso: the Temple at Jerusalem was always to be controlled by Jews in order that its sanctity and all its associated activity be devoted to the worship of the God of the Jews. Any attempt to either assert direct control over the Temple and/or to divert its function as the Jewish sanctuary would be met with resistance.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of the vast majority of Jews, as long as the Romans did not try to claim ownership and control of the Temple there was no reason to oppose being part of the Roman Empire. Therefore, while it stood the Temple was the crucial factor for Roman-Jewish relations in the Jewish homeland; it is also the key to explaining the war of 66-70 AD.

### **The importance of the Temple at Jerusalem**

The Temple at Jerusalem was no ordinary religious sanctuary. Its role as the only divinely approved place for the offering of sacrifices to the God of the Jews had been enshrined in Torah and actual practice for many centuries.<sup>6</sup> God was present in *the* sanctuary so any Jew that wanted to make a sacrifice to God, as required by Torah, was bound to do so at this one sanctuary.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Antiochus IV learnt this lesson in the years immediately following his order in 167 BC that the Temple be turned into a sanctuary for the worship of Zeus. By 164 BC Jewish forces under the command of Judas Maccabee recaptured the Temple. See I Maccabees 4.28-4.59. All biblical citations are from *The new revised standard version Bible: Catholic edition* (Nashville 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 12.1-12.19.

<sup>7</sup> II Maccabees 3.28; Josephus, *War*, 6.127, 6.300; Josephus, *The Jewish Antiquities*, 9 vols., H. St. J. Thackeray, R. Marcus, A. Wikgren and L. Feldman trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1930-1965) 3.215-3.218.

The importance of the Temple was recognised even by Diaspora Jews.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Herod the Great (r. 37-4 BC) also acknowledged the importance of the Temple. Early in his reign he commissioned a vast redevelopment of the Temple.<sup>9</sup> As a result, any visitor to the city would be struck by the grand proportions of the Temple complex. It was the largest building structure in the city, clearly dwarfing Herod's palace, and seating atop a purpose built platform above the Tyropoeon and Kidron valleys.<sup>10</sup>

The massive redevelopment of the complex was seen as an opportunity to harness increased income from a growth in the number of pilgrims, from the homeland and from Diaspora Jews, as they were required to attend one of the three annual pilgrimage festivals.<sup>11</sup> From within Judea, Galilee, Perea and Idumea the number of people regularly doing so was high.<sup>12</sup> Aside from the building work undertaken by Herod, the day to day activity associated with the Temple also required significant human, animal and agricultural resources. As such, the Temple was a major factor in the local economy.

The importance the Jews attached to the sanctuary was evident from the layout of the complex. Having past through the large porticoes surrounding the outside, a visitor would see that it was divided into a number of courts. Access to each court was restricted the further a person moved toward the actual sanctuary. Non-Jews were allowed only to enter the largest, outer most court of the complex. A balustrade separated this outer court from the remainder of the complex. The next court was for (Jewish) women and then the court for (Jewish) men. The final court before the actual sanctuary was for priests, it was also where the sacrifices took

---

<sup>8</sup> For example: Philo; Pseudo-Hecataeus; and the author of Letter of Aristeas. Note also that Jews who opposed the way the Temple was being administered, such as the Qumran community, depicted a future that involved a glorious restored Temple. See Y. Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *War*, 1.401, 5.184-5.227; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.380-15.425.

<sup>10</sup> On the Temple in general see E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: practice & belief 63 BCE-66 CE* (London 1992) 51-145.

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Goodman, 'The pilgrimage economy of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period' in: Lee I. Levine ed., *Jerusalem: its sanctity and centrality to Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York 2005) 69-76.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.280, 2.515, 6.423; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 11.109; Philo, *On the special laws books I-III*, F. H. Colson trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1937) 1.69.

place. In the sanctuary itself there were two chambers. In the outer chamber there was a large lamp stand, the showbread table and an altar for burning incense. Inside, at the centre of the sanctuary was the Holy of Holies, devoid of any furnishings. According to Josephus, it was 'unapproachable, inviolable, invisible to all'.<sup>13</sup> For Jews it was the most sacred place on earth and it did not belong to any human power.

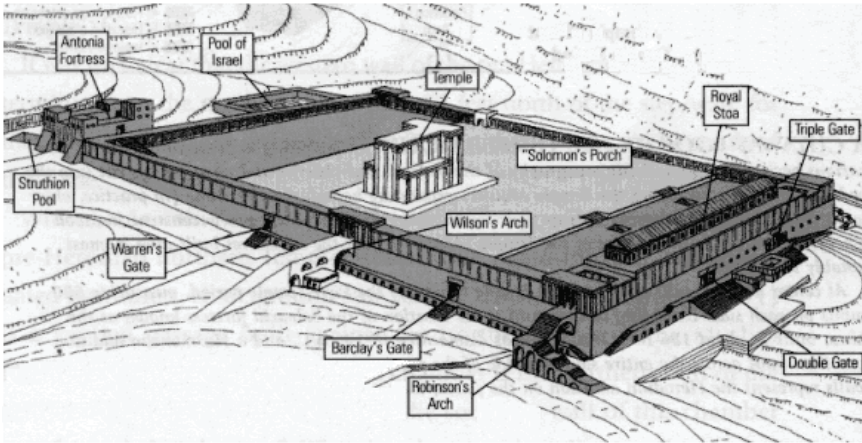


Fig. 2: The Second Temple after Herod's expansions of the complex. Author: Leen Ritmeyer ([www.ritmeyer.com](http://www.ritmeyer.com)).

### **Roman rule and the Temple: a working relationship**

From the moment Rome became involved in life within the Jewish homeland the importance of the Temple was acknowledged. No attempt was made to interfere with its activity, let alone claim direct ownership or control. Although exactly how Rome asserted its control over the territory would alter on a number of occasions, the principle of not trying to claim ownership of the Temple remained the norm. If anything, the more the Romans learnt about governing the Jews the more they tried to ensure that control of the Temple lay with members of the Jewish community and the distancing of Romans from its functioning. No Roman was ever given

---

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *War*, 5.219.

direct control over the running of the Temple nor was the Temple to be viewed as a sanctuary functioning primarily for the good of Rome. Although not necessarily ever stated explicitly as a policy, there are five significant indicators of Roman recognition that the Temple was not a possession of the Roman Empire.

The first such indicator is the reported behaviour of Pompey in 63 BC. Having decided to favour Hyrcanus II in the dispute with his younger brother Aristobulus II, Pompey laid siege to Jerusalem. As described by Josephus the assault involved fighting in the actual Temple.<sup>14</sup> Immediately after the Temple was captured Pompey was accompanied by his staff on a tour of the Temple that included the inner most chamber, the Holy of Holies. Josephus describes this action as a great 'calamity'.<sup>15</sup> However, in what follows Pompey apparently displayed model behaviour. He refrained from touching any of the sacred vessels, let alone removing any of the treasures as booty. He also ordered that the Temple be cleansed and that its ritual activity be resumed immediately.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he handed over control of the Temple to Hyrcanus II. While it is likely that Josephus focuses on Pompey's behaviour in order to offer a direct contrast to that of Titus when he captured the Temple in 70 AD, the brief account provided by Tacitus supports what Josephus describes. According to Tacitus, Pompey placed the Jews under Roman control, entered the Temple and was surprised by its lack of statues, but did not interfere any further. In fact, Tacitus states that 'the Temple was left standing' by Pompey.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, at the commencement of Roman rule in the Jewish homeland tribute was levied, territory redistributed, an approved local appointee placed in charge, and the Temple protected as Jewish sacred space.

The second indicator is a privilege that was given to Jews throughout the Roman Empire, the right to send money to Jerusalem for the upkeep of the Temple, the so-called Temple tax. All adult male Jews were required to

---

<sup>14</sup> Josephus, *War*, 1.146-1.149.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 1.152.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, 1.153.

<sup>17</sup> Tacitus, *The Histories books IV-V, the Annals books I-III*, C. H. Moore and J. Jackson trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1931) 5.9. Note also that Cicero, who was actively trying to speak against Jews in his speech defending the actions of Flaccus, acknowledges Pompey's decision to respect the sanctity of the Temple. Philo, *Flaccus*, F. H. Colson trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1941) 28.67-28.68.

pay an annual tax of a half shekel, irrespective of where they resided.<sup>18</sup> There is evidence that Jewish communities from various parts of the Empire collected and sent the tax to Jerusalem: including Cyrenacia, Asia, Egypt and Rome.<sup>19</sup> On some occasions the collection was disputed and interrupted, with the most famous possibly being the case of Flaccus, as proconsul of Asia in 62 BC.<sup>20</sup> Flaccus confiscated a large sum of gold that the Jews residing in Asia had collected for the purpose of sending to Jerusalem, presumably for the upkeep of the Temple. Such isolated actions, however, took place on a local level; they were never sanctioned as an Empire-wide decision to cease the practice. In effect, the right of Diaspora Jews to collect and send the tax showed that Rome recognised that the Temple existed as a separate entity, even though it lay within the boundaries of the Empire.

The third indicator is the solution Herod provided for how the Jews could accommodate to the emerging imperial cult. Primarily centred in the eastern parts of the Empire this new cult was gaining popularity. New shrines were dedicated for the worship of the Emperor, his family and for the well-being of Rome. Herod constructed three such temples in strategic locations within his kingdom, at Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste and Panias. As such, any Roman visitor to the Jewish homeland would find what was becoming increasingly common in the region, shrines dedicated to the Emperor. At the same time, a safeguard was put in place to help ensure the Temple would remain safe as a place dedicated to Jewish worship. Each day, two sacrifices would be made to the God of the Jews that were intended for the well-being of the Emperor and Rome.<sup>21</sup> Josephus claims the sacrifices were paid for by the Jews while Philo claims it was Augustus who provided the funds to cover the cost.<sup>22</sup> Josephus is probably correct

---

<sup>18</sup> Exodus 30.11-30.16.

<sup>19</sup> For Cyrenacia see Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.169-70; for Asia see Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.162-16.168, 16.171-16.173; for Egypt see Philo, *Special laws*, 1.76-1.78; and for Rome see Philo, *The embassy to Gaius*, F. H. Colson trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1962) 157, 291, 312-313. Collections are also attested from outside the Empire, to the East, from Parthia and beyond. See Philo, *Embassy*, 216 and Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.312-18.313.

<sup>20</sup> Philo, *Flaccus*, 28.66-28.69; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.162-12.168.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.197; Josephus, *Against Apion*, H. St. J. Thackeray trans. (Cambridge, Mass. 1926) 2.76; Philo, *Embassy*, 317.

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *Apion*, 2.77; Philo, *Embassy*, 157, 317.



given that he was a priest with actual first hand knowledge of what took place in the Temple. This initiative meant Herod could claim that the one place where Jews offered sacrifices to their God also honoured Rome and that this was a practice initiated by the Jews.<sup>23</sup> Apart from one brief moment when Gaius was Emperor this solution to the issue of Emperor worship remained in place.<sup>24</sup>

The fourth indicator is what occurred during the two periods of direct Roman rule, 6-41 and 44-66 AD. At the outset, the governor was given two very significant responsibilities regarding control of the Temple: appointing the serving high-priest and being custodian of the high-priest's robes worn on the day of atonement, when the latter entered the Holy of Holies. Both of these tasks did encroach on the sense in which the Jews retained control of the Temple. It also gave scope for a number of governors to feel at ease about asserting their authority, changing the incumbent high-priest as they thought appropriate. However, with one exception, the governors did not try to lay claim to control of the funds or other treasures within the Temple.<sup>25</sup> The notion that the Temple itself remained a 'no go' zone continued to prevail; it was outside the sphere of Roman control. Indeed, various senior Roman officials reinforced this situation by instituting changes regarding the administrative structure in place in the territory. When petitioned by the Jews that the high-priest's vestments be returned to their direct control, Vitellius, the legate of Syria, agreed to the request.<sup>26</sup> Later, at the start of the second period of direct rule in 44 AD, when the governor Fadus tried to reclaim control of the vestments, the Emperor, Claudius, confirmed the right of the Jews to retain

---

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Josephus readily makes use of this initiative by Herod when he seeks to defend the Jews against accusations of not showing their loyalty to Rome. See Josephus, *Apion*, 2.76-2.77. If the Emperor did provide the funds it only reinforces the extent to which the Romans did not try to divert Jewish resources away from their intended purpose. The new, additional sacrifices for the benefit of Rome would be paid for by the Romans.

<sup>24</sup> Note also the depiction of Marcus Agrippa when he visited Jerusalem: he showed due respect to the sanctity of the Temple. See Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.12-16.15 and Philo, *Embassy*, 294-297.

<sup>25</sup> Pilate did use funds for the construction of an aqueduct but these had been provided by the priests. Josephus, *War*, 2.175; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.60.

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.90-18.95.

ownership of them.<sup>27</sup> It is also notable that Claudius decided to place responsibility for appointing the high-priest in Jewish hands. As described by Josephus, the Emperor was responding favourably to a request made by Herod of Chalcis, the brother of the recently deceased Herod Agrippa I.<sup>28</sup> In effect, therefore, during the period of direct rule Rome reduced its role regarding the functioning of the Temple rather than increased its involvement.

The final indicator of Rome not claiming authority over the Temple is probably the most significant one: Jews were granted the right to execute anyone who defiled the sanctuary. A balustrade separated the outer court of the Temple complex from the various inner courts. Only Jews in a state of ritual purity were allowed to proceed beyond the balustrade, with warning signs indicating death would follow for all those who were not permitted to enter.<sup>29</sup> Josephus notes the importance of this privilege when he depicts Titus speaking to the rebels while besieging the city: the Jews were allowed to execute Romans if they went beyond the balustrade.<sup>30</sup> Although not explicitly stated, it appears Titus was referring to citizens, people who were normally protected from summary execution, and certainly from suffering such punishment at the hands of provincials like the Jews. In other words, the Romans had not only afforded the Jews a privilege, they had even been willing to forgo one of the significant privileges of Roman citizenship.

It is clear the Romans acted with prudence in regard to asserting their control of the Jewish homeland. They consistently recognised the importance of allowing the Jews to retain control of the Temple and did not try to encroach on its activity, let alone attempt to gain materially from its wealth. In turn, the vast majority of Jews were able to accommodate to living under Roman rule and remaining faithful to their distinctive way of life. Given the actions of Pompey at the very outset, it appears the Romans had sufficient information at their disposal to make wise choices about how best to accommodate to the sensitivity of the local population regarding the Temple. Over time, changes in how the territory was administered meant

---

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.6-20.14.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 20.15-20.16.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *War*, 5.193-5.194; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.417; Philo, *Embassy*, 212. One such warning inscription survives, written in Greek. See P. Segal, 'The penalty of the warning inscription from the Temple of Jerusalem', *Israel Exploration Journal* 39 (1989) 79-84.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *War*, 6.124-6.126.

the need for negotiation about how best to retain order. Generally, this was successfully managed by both sides.

### **Conflict between Empire and subjects**

Outlined above is a Roman approach to ruling the Jews that indicates tolerance and a willingness to hold back from trying to assert total ownership, especially in terms of the Temple. How then did a situation arise that resulted in a war taking place some sixty years after direct Roman rule was introduced and over hundred and twenty years after Rome first asserted its control of the territory? There were instances of minor disputes, occasions where a governor made mistakes in how he interacted with the Jews, such as when Pilate decided to bring troops into Jerusalem bearing iconic images.<sup>31</sup> These were soon resolved. An earlier, more substantial occasion where Jews and Romans clashed occurred in 4 BC, in the aftermath of Herod's death. Several concurrent factors were at work: rivalry among Herod's descendants seeking power; other Jews trying to claim authority; and the activities of Sabinus, a Roman official sent to assess the finances of Herod's estate. The latter appears to have assumed that he held complete authority over the estate and, possibly, the wealth of the Temple.<sup>32</sup> Although military force was required to restore order there was no attempt to claim ownership of the Temple. There were also some Jews who saw the Romans as a source of evil who would in due course suffer the wrath of God. The latter, however, remained on the margins of society and/or were quickly removed from the public landscape.<sup>33</sup> Our attention

---

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.169-2.174; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.55-18.59.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.16-2.19, 2.41, 2.50; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.221-17.222, 17.253, 17.264.

<sup>33</sup> For example: the people responsible for the Psalms of Solomon; the literature found at Qumran; and, such figures as Theudas and the Egyptian prophet. While much attention has been placed on the so-called 'fourth philosophy' as a long standing cause of protest and resistance against the Romans it is not supported by the available evidence. See James S. McLaren, 'Constructing Judean history in the Diaspora: Josephus's account of Judas' in: John M.G. Barclay ed., *Negotiating Diaspora. Jewish strategies in the Roman Empire* Library of Second Temple Studies 45 (London 2004) 90-108 and Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem. The clash of ancient civilizations* (London 2008) 412-417.

needs to be placed on the two occasions of serious conflict between Rome and the Jews: the order of Gaius in 40-41 AD and the war of 66-70 AD. At the centre of these two conflicts was control of the Temple.

In his later years as Emperor, Gaius Caligula actively encouraged worship of himself as a god. It is not a surprise, therefore, that when he received news of incidents where that practice had been hindered he would exact revenge by reasserting the right of such Emperor worship. Although the precise details are not clear from the account in Philo, he does acknowledge that Jews residing in Jamina destroyed an altar built for the worship of Gaius.<sup>34</sup> The Emperor decided to punish the Jews, ordering that a huge statue of him be erected in the Temple.<sup>35</sup> Gaius knew this order crossed the line; that it would mean the Temple was now Roman and under Roman control. As such, he gave responsibility for carrying out his order to the senior Roman official in the region, the legate of Syria, Petronius. The Emperor instructed Petronius to take two legions and auxiliaries to assist in the task of ensuring that the Jews complied with the order.<sup>36</sup>

The plan was deliberately confrontational and it was expected the Jews would not accept the statue without being placed under pressure. Indeed, the Jews did protest, immediately on hearing of the order, and in very large numbers. They travelled to meet Petronius at Ptolemais and then at Tiberias, pleading that the legate not carry out the order. The precise details of what follows are not clear. Tacitus and Philo claim the Jews took up arms, while Josephus refers to various non-violent protests, including an agricultural strike and prominent members of the community continuing to negotiate with Petronius.<sup>37</sup> What is apparent is that Petronius viewed the situation as grave and that rather than risk a full scale war he made the decision to write to the Emperor asking that the latter reconsider the

---

<sup>34</sup> Philo, *Embassy*, 199-202. It is interesting that Josephus does not mention the incident at Jamina. The only explanation he offers is the Emperor's impiety and his anger that the Jews did not honour him as a god. See Josephus, *War*, 2.184 and Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.184.

<sup>35</sup> Philo, *Embassy*, 203; Josephus, *War*, 2.185; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.261.

<sup>36</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.262; Philo, *Embassy*, 207 cf. Josephus, *War*, 2.186 [three legions].

<sup>37</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 5.9; Philo, *Embassy*, 208 cf. Josephus, *War*, 2.199-2.201 and Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.272-17.275.

appropriateness of carrying out the order.<sup>38</sup> Fortunately for Petronius and the Jews, Gaius was murdered before anything further could happen and the new Emperor Claudius did not pursue the matter.<sup>39</sup> The order was an exception to the normal situation. Until then, it had been the only occasion that the Emperor himself had tried to claim ownership of the Temple and the only occasion war between Rome and the Jews appeared to be imminent.

The other serious expression of conflict was the war of 66-70 AD. In many ways the situation in 66 AD appears to have been far less traumatic than in 40 AD when Gaius issued his order. The incident concerns the ad hoc actions of the governor of the province rather than an order by the Emperor. However, irrespective of the circumstances behind each incident there was one crucial common element, the issue of who controlled the Temple. The relatively new governor, Gessius Florus, was concerned that there was a shortfall in the amount of tribute that had been collected in the province; a concern probably associated with a recalculation based on a recent census.<sup>40</sup> The governor's solution to this problem was to order that the arrears be paid immediately from the Temple treasury.<sup>41</sup> In other words, Florus either explicitly claimed, or implied, through his order that the Temple and its resources belonged to Rome. The Jewish response was immediate. They protested and tried to prevent Florus from gaining further access to the Temple. Some Jews tried to negotiate with Florus in the hope that the situation would not deteriorate any further. The governor took further action to assert his authority, ordering more troops to be despatched to Jerusalem, requiring the Jews to disperse and to declare their loyalty to Rome in public. He even tried to suppress the protests by summarily

---

<sup>38</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.201; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.276-17.278; Philo, *Embassy*, 248. It is possible Petronius did not see the value of the order. Worship of the living Emperor was not a long established practice and had yet to find favour among the Roman elite.

<sup>39</sup> Josephus and Philo describe how the case of the Jews was pleaded in Rome. It is possible Gaius was persuaded to rescind the order by Herod Agrippa I and his colleagues and/or by the advice of Petronius. However, Josephus does claim that Petronius received a letter announcing the death of Gaius before the letter dispatched by Gaius ordering his death. Josephus, *War*, 2.203; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.304-17.309.

<sup>40</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.405, 6.422.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.293.

executing Jews who held Roman citizenship. Still, his efforts to try to capture the Temple were met by armed resistance.<sup>42</sup>

War followed quickly. Florus had gone too far, his actions were viewed as a claim that the Temple belonged to Rome. The governor clearly believed he could use its resources to balance the books regarding the amount of tribute due from the province. Once his bold attempt to gain control of the Temple was repelled, some Jews took their complaints to the legate of Syria and to Agrippa II in the hope that the issue would go before the Emperor.<sup>43</sup> Others, however, decided on a different path of action, one that publicly asserted the Temple belonged to God, not to Rome. Prominent Jews connected with the running of the Temple decided to stop offering the daily sacrifices made for the well-being of the Emperor and Rome.<sup>44</sup> They also set about the task of acquiring weapons and making preparations for the expected military response.<sup>45</sup> As noted by Josephus, these were explicit acts of war and the subsequent massacre of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem simply confirmed the need for the Empire to respond.<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, the Roman reaction to all that had taken place only exacerbated the situation. Rather than wait to gather a larger force in the spring of 67 AD the legate of Syria, Cestius, marched on Jerusalem in late 66 AD with the twelfth legion and a combination of other troops in an effort to restore order quickly. It was unwise. The Roman force was never large enough to capture the city by siege, especially given the time of year. Enough Jews had taken up arms so that the walls of the city could be easily defended. Furthermore, as the Romans commenced their retreat they found themselves in difficult terrain and soon were routed by the largely civilian Jewish army that had been hastily put together. The loss of honour associated with the capture of the twelfth legion's standard only reinforced the necessity of Rome to make a more substantial response in the following year.<sup>47</sup> Any further negotiation to take place would be only when Rome

---

<sup>42</sup> Josephus, *War*, 2.330-2.331.

<sup>43</sup> Although holding no direct authority regarding affairs in Judea it is likely that Agrippa II was approached in his capacity as the person responsible for appointing the high-priest.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.409.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.408.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.409, 2.449-2.456.

<sup>47</sup> Suetonius, *Vespasian*, J. C. Rolfe trans. (rev. ed.; Cambridge, Mass. 1997) 4.5.

held the upper hand; hence Vespasian was dispatched, commanding three legions and various allied troops, in the spring of 67 AD.<sup>48</sup> Whatever possible offence Florus might have committed was now long overshadowed by the way the Jews had behaved. From the Roman perspective it was not up to the Jews to decide whether they could opt out of the Roman Empire, let alone take punitive action against the behaviour of a single governor.

Misunderstanding on the part of both Jews and Romans possibly played a part in the way the dispute turned into a war. On the Roman side, a report to Cestius that the Jews had refused to pay the full tax levy and had taken up arms as the governor tried to carry out his duty sounded like rebellion.<sup>49</sup> For the Jews, the impetus for the war was the abuse carried out by Florus. Whatever his real purpose, it was viewed as an attempt to assert that the Temple belonged to Rome. Even if Florus had seen his action merely as a practical solution to an immediate financial problem that was not how it was interpreted.<sup>50</sup> Nor was this viewed as a simple case of attempted robbery. To the Jews it was a direct challenge regarding ownership of the Temple. The response was to renounce any connection with Rome.<sup>51</sup> Those Jews who rebelled were no longer interested in negotiating with Rome; they believed the only way to secure the Temple as belonging to their God was to stand independent of foreign rule. This passion and commitment to the cause did not diminish after the initial action of ceasing the sacrifices offered for the well-being of the Emperor and Rome. Although Josephus tries to depict the war administration as initially eager to force Rome to negotiate a peace, its actions declared a very

---

<sup>48</sup> Josephus, *War*, 3.64-3.69.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, 2.333-2.335.

<sup>50</sup> Note that when Josephus introduces Florus into the narrative, it is claimed the governor was motivated by a desire for personal wealth. It is not substantiated by what Josephus describes as taking place while Florus was governor. See ibidem, 2.277-2.279.

<sup>51</sup> It was a response not all Jews supported. Agrippa II, numerous Jews in Jerusalem, including the serving high-priest and various other members of the community opposed the decision to stop trying to negotiate with Rome. Indeed, Agrippa II placed those troops who remained loyal to him at the disposal of the Romans in the fight against the rebels. See ibidem, 2.421. In the Diaspora very few Jews appear to have offered support for the cause. Many Jews, however, actively supported the war. See ibidem, 2.566-2.568, 6.420-6.432.

different agenda. Before the end of 66 AD they minted the first coinage of the new state: high quality silver coinage.<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 3: A shekel from the first year of the revolt (66 AD). Inscribed on the coin is 'Shekel of Israel', 'one' (observe) and 'Jerusalem the Holy' (reverse). Source: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org).

The inscriptions on the coins declared a new era for the Jewish people; it was year 1 of the new state, Israel. The script was paleo-Hebrew, the coins were identified as 'shekel of Israel' and they were ready for use to pay the Temple tax before the next Passover festival in the spring of 67 AD. Silver coinage was minted for the following four years and the minting of bronze coinage commenced in year two. The war was not intended as a temporary measure. It was meant to be a complete break away from any allegiance to, or association with, Rome. This was a new, independent state with the Temple as a key symbol and rally point.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Josephus, *War*, 4.319-4.325. See James S. McLaren, 'The coinage of the first year as a point of reference for the Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE)', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003) 135-152. Although not as numerous as the shekel, other denominations of silver coinage were produced in year one, for example half and quarter shekels.

<sup>53</sup> In this context note also the documents from the war using the newly instituted dating system. See H. Eshel, 'Documents of the First Jewish Revolt from the Judean desert' in: A. Berlin and J.A. Overman ed., *The First Jewish Revolt. Archaeology, history and ideology* (London 2002) 157-162.



## Conclusion

The Roman actions in the immediate aftermath of the war clearly show they understood that the Temple had been the central factor in what had occurred. The Roman political circumstances in which the war concluded were very different from the situation at the start of the war. A major civil war had taken place that involved death and destruction in the city of Rome itself. The victors in this civil war, the Flavian family, were outsiders. Now Vespasian was Emperor and he had good reason for his son Titus to press home the assault against the Jews with particular vigour. If Nero had not committed suicide in 68 and Vespasian had pressed home the attack on Jerusalem, the manner in which the war ended may have differed. However, even allowing for the propaganda benefits associated with the Flavian celebration of the victory, their focus on the Temple was deliberate. Whether or not Titus instructed that the Temple be set on fire, he did allow it to happen. Furthermore, he then ordered that what remained of the Temple be demolished after it was captured.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein Titus participated in the offering of sacrifices on the site of the Temple, setting up Roman standards near the eastern gate<sup>55</sup> and he ordered the execution of priests who had been captured.<sup>56</sup> The new tax imposed on all Jews, in part replacing the Temple tax, was used to help cover the costs of rebuilding the Temple of Jupiter in Rome. Finally, in the public celebrations held in Rome, numerous precious items taken from the Temple were part of the parade and were later placed on display in the new Flavian Temple of Peace.<sup>57</sup> All these measures related directly to the place where the war commenced, the Temple in Jerusalem. In 70 AD the Romans completely changed the landscape. No longer was there a sacred space in existence in Judea where it could be debated as to who had control. The subject people had made its

---

<sup>54</sup> Josephus, *War*, 7.1. Note also that the Temple in Leontopolis, which had no connection with the war, was ordered to be demolished. See *ibidem*, 7.420-7.421.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.316.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.321-6.322.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 7.148-52, 7.161. Several of these items are depicted on the extant Arch of Titus that Domitian constructed, including the large lamp stand and showbread table. On the argument that the Temple was recognised by the Romans as the key issue in Roman-Jewish relations also see J. Rives, 'Flavian religious policy and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple,' in J. Edmondson et. al., *Flavius Josephus*, 145-166.

bold attempt to secure the autonomy of the Temple but the Empire responded loudly and forcefully. The destruction of the Temple meant it became a non-issue. Removed from the physical landscape, questions of loyalty and allegiance to Empire and God ceased to revolve around control and ownership of the Temple. The Romans won the argument, if you try to render to God and yet not continue to heed to Caesar, you will lose.