The First Jewish Revolt
In honor and memory of Anthony J. Saldarini
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Acknowledgments

This book includes all of the papers presented at a conference organized jointly by Andrea Berlin, of the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and Andrew Overman, of the Department of Classics at Macalester College, St. Paul. The conference took place April 21–23, 1999, with sessions held at both institutions. Anthony Saldarini could not attend, though he had already written his paper for consideration by the other participants, and it is included here. The editors subsequently invited Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Nimrod Getzov to contribute a paper, as their research is specifically pertinent to the topic. The conference benefited from active and engaged discussions between all participants and the large audiences that attended every session. In retrospect, we are sorry that we did not record these exchanges, for they provided wonderful opportunities for productive conversation across generally untraveled scholarly divides. We hope that this volume will allow and encourage similar cross-disciplinary conversations.

A successful conference depends utterly on much hard behind-the-scenes work. Even two years later, we can easily recall the wonderful support provided by Judy Scullin and Kathy Walsh (Doyle) of the University of Minnesota, and Jackie Bennett of Macalester College. We thank them for their tireless care of our seemingly everchanging and often far-flung needs. In the preparation of this manuscript, Barbara Lehnhoff provided substantial assistance by scanning all of the images and creating the accompanying map. The conference received generous financial support from Steven Rosenstone, Dean of the University of Minnesota’s College of Liberal Arts, Classical and Near Eastern Studies Chair William Malandra, the Macalester College Department of Classics, and the Office of the Provost of Macalester College. We received additional support for the preparation of this manuscript from the Dworsky Fund of the University of Minnesota’s Jewish Studies Program. We thank these many contributors, whose work and generosity have made this publication possible.

Andrea M. Berlin and J. Andrew Overman
Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota
May, 2001
Frontispiece  Palestine with administrative divisions in effect from 6 to 44 C.E.
Introduction

Andrea M. Berlin and J. Andrew Overman

Titus, on entering [Jerusalem], was amazed at its strength, but chiefly at the towers, which the tyrants, in their infatuation, had abandoned … “God indeed,” he exclaimed, “had been with us in the war. God it was who brought down the Jews from these strongholds; for what power have human hands or engines against these towers?”

(War 6.409–12)

With these words placed in the mouth of the General Titus, the first century historian Josephus (37–97 C.E.) offered an apology and an explanation for the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Revolt against Rome, which occurred from 66–70 C.E. In this passage, Josephus asserts that God had sided with the Romans during this time and epoch. And the rebels of Judea and Galilee, the so-called “tyrants,” had opposed God and the Romans, through whom God exercised rule. Social conflict, theology, personal hubris—these are only three of the possible causes for what was, for Josephus and his Jewish contemporaries, a momentous event. This famous and provocative first-century historian is the single most vital source of information and interpretation about the Revolt. Josephus produced his corpus between ten to twenty-five years after the Revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem. His first major work was The Jewish War, followed by the exhaustive The Antiquities of the Jews. The former was most likely finished during the short reign of the Emperor Titus (79–81 C.E.), and the latter was written during the longer reign of Titus’ brother and successor, Domitian (81–96 C.E.). Under Domitian Josephus also produced two shorter works, his Life, an autobiography, and a defense and explanation of Judaism called Contra Apionem.

Josephus pursues a number of questions and agendas as writer and historian. He is a defender of Jewish traditions and the Jewish people to a predominantly Roman audience. He often depicts the people of Judea and Galilee as noble, virtuous, fervent in their commitment to their God, and on the whole good citizens of the empire. He was an eyewitness to many of the developments and events surrounding the Revolt and therefore constitutes an invaluable though, as has often been noted, tendentious historical source.
Josephus lived to write about these events, he tells us in *War 3*, by ultimately capitulating and working with the Roman forces in their efforts to quell the unrest in Judea and Galilee and to capture Jerusalem for Rome. His very name, Flavius, denotes his loyalty and service to the imperial family and line, the Flavians. Yet in important respects Josephus attempted to remain true to his role as a leader among his people (in *Life 12* he tells us he was both a priest and a general in the Revolt prior to his capture) though he was ostensibly in the employ of the Emperor Vespasian and his sons. Most notably Josephus believed that his small nation could and should work with Rome and that various popular and rebel leaders should not foment rebellion. This only spelled grief and destruction for the Jewish people. While providing us with the story Josephus also has time to defend himself, explain his own background and qualifications, provide an impressive recital of Jewish history, and exhibit his knowledge of Greek culture, philosophy, and language. His work provides a wealth of information, not just for the Revolt, but for the history of Judaism as well as all of the various forms practiced during the Second Temple period. The Josephan corpus also provides important information and insight into the geography and topography of the ancient Middle East, Roman imperial actions in the Greek east, and the social and political environment that helped shape post-70 C.E. Judaism and Christianity.

Neither Judea nor trouble in Judea were new to Rome by 66 C.E. As early as the mid-second century B.C.E. the Hasmonean rulers in Judea had established official and cordial relations with Rome. I Maccabees 8 details an alliance that the Hasmoneans struck with Rome with the aim of sparing Judea from Seleucid hegemony. Rome could and did effectively scare off the Seleucids. The author of I Maccabees attempts to recite the very treaty agreed upon by mighty Rome and the fledgling eastern Mediterranean client state. By the middle of the second century B.C.E. the Hasmonean kingdom of Judea had obtained the official and advantageous status of “ally and friend of Rome,” a friendship largely comprised of Roman expectations for the client state and king. Henceforth Judea was officially part of Rome’s orbit, concern, and propriety. That relationship proved frail less than a century later, in 63 B.C.E., when Pompey the Great invaded Jerusalem on the pretense of resolving the civil war between two Hasmonean brothers. That event is remembered, albeit from different perspectives, by the Psalms of Solomon and by Josephus (*War 1.141–58*). Judea and Galilee were absorbed into a larger Roman administrative reorganization of the Greek east, conceived by Pompey and engineered by his general Gabinius.

By the middle part of the first century B.C.E. Rome was enthralled in a civil war that shook its foundations. Competing leaders divided the realm and drew various regions into their race for rule. Judea was no exception. Most of Egypt, Judea, and the larger region supported Mark Antony in his struggle with Octavian. Herod served as governor of Galilee in the midst of this struggle, set up initially through the offices and influence of his father
Antipater, and established himself as a firm, if not capricious ruler. Herod became governor of Judea following the murder of Antipater (43 B.C.E.). He was forced to flee to Rome in 40 B.C.E. when a rival leader, Antigonus, was enthroned in Judea as a Parthian client lord.

In 37 B.C.E., however, Herod was back. With Antony's support he secured Jerusalem, thus reasserting Roman interests and cutting off Parthian access and influence. When the Roman civil war concluded after the battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., and Octavian emerged victorious, prospects paled for Herod and all other eastern clients who had backed Mark Antony. Herod hurried to Rhodes to meet with Octavian (soon to be Augustus). Josephus recounts the episode (War 1.388–90), in which Herod presented himself as, fundamentally, a fierce supporter of the throne, as well as someone who excelled at keeping the peace. He was persuasive enough to save his life and keep his job, and he returned to Judea reaffirmed as king and as the new and best friend of the Emperor. Thus began one of the most storied and significant political periods and relationships in Judean history.

Herod's reign was characterized in antiquity as riddled with popular discord. Both Josephus and the Gospel of Matthew present Herod as cunning and ruthless (Ant. 15; Matthew 2). Resentment of Herod's aggressive courting of Roman favor coupled with heavy taxation and selective use or manipulation of the local Judean elite exacerbated tension in Judea and Galilee during his reign. As governor of Galilee, Herod had distinguished himself as someone unwilling to tolerate resistance or rebellion. As client king, Herod ruled with an iron fist (e.g., his slaughter of the brigands hiding out in the cliffs near Arbela, War 1.305), which was simply expected from the Roman imperial point of view. While Herod's reign represented order and productivity to Rome, however, it spelled oppression and hardship for many in Judea and Galilee. Upon his death there was widespread revolt. Some portions of Herod's kingdom sought refuge from his capricious rule with Rome herself. People from Gadara and portions of Iturea asked if they could fall under the rule of the Province of greater Coele–Syria and not Herod's kingdom. The citizens who made this embassy to Augustus to seek his help were rejected by the Emperor and ended up committing suicide rather than return to Herod's kingdom and rule.

Upon Herod's death his kingdom was divided among his three sons. The sons' successes and careers varied. The eldest, Archelaus, ruled Judea for a few short years (he is mentioned briefly in the birth story in Matthew). His rule in Judea is understood by that author as unstable and reckless. In a dream Joseph is told to take Mary and Jesus to Galilee and to settle there, steering clear of Archelaus. Archelaus was recalled by Rome in 6 C.E., probably because he was viewed as a destabilizing presence in the region. The youngest son, Herod Phillip, is depicted by Josephus as noted for his equanimity and the careful manner in which he held court and mediated justice. He would travel his kingdom in northern Galilee and Gaulanitis with a chair from which he could hear court cases, entertain requests, and
allow people to seek relief from misfortune. Phillip and his brother Antipas, Herod's middle son, enjoyed quite successful reigns. Both initiated building projects, though nothing on the order of their father Herod. Neither were characterized in antiquity as either particularly brutal or prone to suppression, again as opposed to Herod.

Nevertheless, tension in Judea and Galilee appears as a consistent feature of life in the first century C.E. The Roman definition of peace was maintained, but at considerable cost to the local population and their traditions. Resistance to Roman rule and presence grew in some quarters. There is little mistaking the good fortune Roman presence spelled for certain local elites. It is a pronounced view of later Talmudic authors that the wealthy in Judea were largely responsible for the Revolt (see Saldarini, Chapter 14 in this volume). Similarly, in his 1987 work, *The Ruling Class of Judaea*, Martin Goodman suggested the failure of the ruling class to execute its responsibilities played a crucial role in the cause of the Revolt. Examination of possible contributing causes should not, however, be limited to issues and developments within Judea or Galilee.

In the years immediately preceding the Revolt in Judea we should recall that Rome was herself poised on a similar precipice. The historian Tacitus describes this period at the outset of his *Histories* as one “rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace” (1.2), and later adds that it was Vespasian who “purged the whole world of evil” (4.3). The instability and disorder of the final days of the Julio–Claudian line are well documented. To many it looked as if Rome would descend once again into the mire of empire-wide civil war, as had happened a century earlier when the Republic gave way to the Empire under Octavian's single control. Enough Roman writers mention the troubles in Judea that we can be confident that the Jewish revolt was far more than the literary creation and manipulation of one author. The Roman elite were aware of the troubles in Judea and the threat that they posed to Rome's entire eastern front. Revolts also occurred in Batavia, along the Dutch–German limes, and in Spain, where the dissident governor Vindex and his rebellion garnered considerable attention from several Roman writers (cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 40). The greatest fear may well have been that the communities and cities on the Euphrates River—the border with Parthia—would catch this rebellious spirit and try to break away from Rome. At one point in the *War* (3.108–9), after a long and detailed description of the Roman army's operations and organization in the field, Josephus unapologetically explains that the digression is intended “to deter others who may be tempted to revolt.” In the *War*’s opening paragraphs, he makes a point of announcing that he has already written a similar account “in my vernacular tongue … [for the] Parthians and Babylonians” (1.3, 6). Thus, whether we can say with Tacitus that “the entire world was convulsed with revolt” at Nero's death in 66 C.E., we may certainly conclude that Roman control was shaky in several quarters of the empire, including but not only Judea. The
instabilities in Judea and Galilee reflect both local issues and broader Roman political problems.

Revolt actually broke out in Judea during the reign of Nero in 66 C.E., and Nero sent his general Vespasian to put it down. Vespasian, who had had experience in Syria and was familiar with the Roman east, arrived in 67 C.E. with his son, the eventual emperor Titus. After marching east from the port of Akko–Ptolemias, he first engaged—and defeated—the Jewish rebels at Jotapata (Yodefat) in Galilee. Jotapata’s fall brought Josephus himself into the hands of Vespasian, who seized the opportunity to express his belief that Vespasian would soon become emperor (War 3.401, though some Roman writers believed that Vespasian was first hailed as Emperor in Egypt; cf. Tacitus Histories 2.79, Suetonius Vespasian 2). Whatever the historical particulars may have been, the general Vespasian decided to make his grab for power and the throne while out east with his troops. Vespasian was only one aspirant to the throne, however; the year 69 C.E. is known as “the year of the four emperors,” highlighting Roman imperial instability. In fact the preceding few years were politically unstable, and it may well have appeared as though the vaunted and expansive Roman Empire might actually fall apart. The instability and tension that Josephus detailed in Judea and Galilee then should be seen as part of widespread instability and uncertainty.

Nonetheless, subsequent history and traditions recall little of the Batavian revolt, unrest in Roman Spain, or even the fortunes and misfortunes of Vindex. It is instead the revolt on the eastern edge of the Roman world, in a province few Romans outside of the political and literary elite would have even known of, that has outlived all others. In part, this is due to the fact that the history of the Jewish revolt was intertwined with the history of the eventual new emperor. When Vespasian emerged as emperor in 69 C.E. he set about the business of restoring order to the empire and encouraging confidence among the people. He wanted to send a message that pax, order, honor, and grandeur had returned to Rome. Vespasian and Titus’ victory over the Jews in the east could, and did, serve as a vital, central piece of that message (see Overman pp. 213ff.). The Flavians allowed, actually encouraged, the memorialization of their Judean victory by supporting Josephus in his writing, by constructing a series of monuments in Rome, and by minting coins that proclaimed the event (the Judea Capta series). The Jewish revolt soon became one of the most significant victories and events of the imperial period.

The Revolt had a profound and enduring impact on the development and shape of Judaism and Christianity (see Silberman in this volume). It is safe to say that had there not been a Jewish revolt in Judea in 66–70 C.E., Christianity and Judaism, as we know them today, would not exist. The forms, structure, and theologies that are part of both of these great religious traditions owe much to the crisis provoked by the Revolt and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Many have argued that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. constitutes the seminal event in the formation