

FOR THE FREEDOM OF ZION: THE GREAT REVOLT OF JEWS AGAINST ROMANS, A.D. 66–74

(GUY MACLEAN ROGERS)

January 9, 2023

Let's talk about the Jews. No, not about how the Jews supposedly run the world (although there is some truth buried in that claim, to which we will return). I mean about the actual Jews, the past and present people who have been, arguably, more central to the story of mankind than any other people. This book, Guy MacLean Roger's *For the Freedom of Zion*, exhaustively narrates the First Jewish-Roman War, A.D. 66–74, in which the Romans defeated a Jewish revolt, and during which the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. From it we can take both fascinating history and useful thoughts for today.

This war, sometimes called the Great Jewish Revolt, was one of three Jewish rebellions against Roman rule in the first centuries A.D. The others were the Kitos War (A.D. 115–117) and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (A.D. 132–135). These wars should not be confused with the earlier revolt, in the 160s B.C., of the Maccabees against their Seleucid Greek rulers, who were descendants of Alexander the Great's generals, the Diadochi. The Maccabees became the Hasmonean rulers of Judea and the surrounding region, who ruled until they were defeated by the Romans some decades before Christ.

The deep backdrop for the Great Revolt was the rule of Herod the Great, who lived (probably) from 71 B.C. to A.D. 1. As Rogers makes clear, Roman control of the provinces of the Roman East was complex, largely conducted through client kings such as Herod, but also through a variety of Roman officials with overlapping remits. This meant the exact interplay of authority was not always clear, even to those at the time, much less to us now. While Herod and his successors were wholly dependent on Rome for their authority, they could act independently, when not directly given orders from Rome with respect to a particular matter.

Herod ruled because he, and his father, had smoothly navigated the Roman civil wars, sequentially supporting winners. Augustus gave him large territories in the area south of Roman Syria and north of Egypt. Herod had a fascinating, and brutal, career, which Rogers covers in some

detail, but for our purposes today, he matters because he managed to keep order in his lands, unlike his successors, and because he overhauled the Temple to please the Jews and to aggrandize himself. This was the Second Temple, which had been rebuilt in the sixth century B.C. after the original Temple, Solomon's Temple, had been destroyed. Herod also expanded the Temple Mount, the giant earthwork on which the Temple and its grounds stood (now occupied by two Muslim holy places, the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque). Christians, quite rightly, revile Herod as the man who, trying to kill the baby Christ, ordered the murder of infants, the Holy Innocents, in and around Bethlehem. He is a different Herod than his son Herod Antipas, also known as Herod the Tetrarch, who murdered John the Baptist and who repeatedly intersects with the work, life, and death of the adult Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Herod was Jewish, more or less. He was actually Idumean (an Edomite, in Biblical parlance, and thus theoretically a descendant of Esau), from south of Judea, and the Hasmoneans had conquered and forcibly converted the Idumeans before Herod was born. Whatever his personal religious beliefs, and keeping in mind that a great many non-Jews lived in his lands, Herod was careful to not offend the Jews, while keeping even more careful to please the Romans, and most careful of all to kill off anyone who might threaten his throne, which mostly meant any Hasmonean he could get his hands on, including his wife and his sons by her. He spent vast sums all across his domain to build fortresses, palaces and monuments, and heavily patronized pagan shrines, along with the Temple. It is this success in ruling that Rogers contrasts with later rulers who were unable to competently manage Herod's lands, ending in the Revolt.

After Herod's death, and after some unrest, including the putting down in A.D. 4 of a minor rebellion by Publius Quinctilius Varus, famous for later committing suicide after losing three legions to the Germans in the Teutoburg Forest in A.D. 9, Augustus split up Herod's kingdom. Two of his sons, Archelaus and Herod Antipas, got the areas where most of the Jews lived—the former got roughly one-half of Herod the Great's kingdom, including Jerusalem and most of the major cities, and the latter one-fourth (hence his moniker “the Tetrarch”). The Tetrarch ruled the Galilee, that is, the smaller northern portion (which included

Nazareth, where Christ grew up and near which he began his public ministry). Archelaus proved a bust, from the Roman perspective, so his portion was, within a few years, turned into a Roman province, of Judea. As a province, it received a Roman procurator, or governor, appointed from Rome, and at least partially responsible to the proconsul of Roman Syria. These men rotated, and were quickly replaced if they appeared not up to the job. One was Pontius Pilate, from A.D. 27 to A.D. 37 (who I recently discovered, though it is not mentioned here, is revered as a saint in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church, and is generally regarded more favorably in the East than in the West, due to a tradition he converted and was later martyred).

Rogers spends the first third of the book describing the run-up to the war, skillfully interweaving places and people to give the reader a granular feel for the area. The reader feels like a fly on the wall. There are a lot of places and people, though; this book is not a casual read. The Great Revolt began in A.D. 66, after something more than a century of Roman rule, and it appears to have begun with civil conflict in the port city of Caesarea, fifty miles northwest of Jerusalem. (The attentive reader quickly notices how very small the Galilee is. And to a Christian, it is interesting how locations relevant to the Gospels show up in a secular context, from Emmaus to Mount Tabor.)

In many cities in the Galilee and Judea, including Caesarea, Jews were not the majority, or even were only a small minority, and there was constant conflict between Jews and non-Jews, much of it over symbolic and religious matters. According to Rogers, a relatively minor conflict just spiraled out of control, due to a complex set of circumstances, including unclear lines of authority among the Romans and their client kings (by this time, Herod's great-grandson, the last of Herod's dynasty, ruled part of the relevant area) and longstanding grievances, both religious and nationalistic, of the Jews against the Romans. These included not only religious beliefs related to taxation being paid to Gentiles, but attempts by Roman governors to extract more money, and infighting and jockeying for position among the Jews themselves.

It seems pretty clear that Rogers glosses over many debated matters tied to this era. But that's his prerogative as author, and not a defect of the book, any more than is his occasionally-evident anti-Christian animus. Still, the reader is never really clear, maybe because it wasn't clear even

at the time, what exactly the Jews wanted, or rather what the Jews who wanted to fight wanted. William Wallace-style freedom? Just to be left alone from interference, or financial exaction, or religious profanation? Dominion over Greater Israel? I'm just not sure.

As Rogers makes clear, many Jews at this time did not believe in any kind of coherent afterlife. Some did; the split between Sadducees and Pharisees, familiar to Christians from the Gospels, was in part a split over this question. This makes it even more impressive that the Jews were willing to die, often to the last man, and that they, or at least the fighting men, maintained extremely high morale. Perhaps this is not so surprising; mere freedom, aside from the promise of salvation, has been a powerful driver of men's willingness to fight, at least in the West. This tendency seems to have been killed by the Enlightenment, along with much of the heroism in Western societies, for the freedom promised by the Enlightenment is not the freedom sought by the Jews. The freedom they wanted was not the freedom to do whatever they might feel like doing, which meant dying young would make your struggle pointless. It was instead ordered freedom, the freedom not to be a slave to a people not your own, for the nation to set its own destiny.

In any case, it is doubly hard to answer this question because we have only one major source for the history of the war, which otherwise would be nearly totally opaque to us, like so much in the ancient world. This source is Flavius Josephus, a Jew born in Jerusalem, of the priestly class. In the early days of the war, the Jews appointed Josephus general of the Galilee, and he ended up (as did the Jews during the war in almost all instances, seemingly unable to change tactics) besieged by the Romans, who were nothing if not expert siege engineers. Josephus (barely) survived the siege, though he was captured, and then through a combination of ingratiating and accurate prophecy he was spared, ultimately switching sides and attaching himself to the Romans. Later he wrote a detailed set of histories (and other books, such as *Against Apion*, a defense of Judaism), and it is those from which we draw most of our knowledge about the war. Josephus wrote for Jews, primarily, and his main message was that the defeat of the Jews was God's will and God's punishment, a focus which conveniently excused his going over to the Romans. No doubt he slanted his histories to support his premise, but in most of his details he has been proven accurate, or accurate enough.

Among the Jews, there were continual vicious struggles before, during, and after the war. Rogers refers to, for the entire eight years of the war, a parallel “civil war among Jews.” The Jewish leaders all seem to have been extremely ruthless, driven by religious and quasi-religious ideology more than practical concerns. Occasionally these power struggles touched those not directly involved; the High Priest Ananus, as Josephus relates, ordered the judicial murder of James the Just, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ,” in A.D. 62. (Christians appear little in these pages, however. They were still few, and it appears the Christian community in Jerusalem left before the final siege of the city, departing to, according to tradition, the village of Pella, now in Jordan.) But even as the Romans besieged Jerusalem, whose fall would seal the fate of the Revolt, the Jews (including the large party of Zealots) fought day and night among themselves inside the city, dividing it effectively into gang-controlled territories, when not sortieing out with fanatic bravery to attack the Romans. This failure of unity not only made the job of the Romans much easier at Jerusalem, it was a constant weakness of the Jews throughout the war. They seemed nearly totally unable to put aside internal differences to achieve a united front.

Rogers gives a year-by-year, blow-by-blow account of the campaign, which was originally (after a Jewish defeat of the Roman proconsul of Syria, in his failed attempt to snuff the rebellion by capturing Jerusalem with too few men) led by the general Vespasian, who then went to Rome to become Emperor, and left his son Titus (also later Emperor) to finish the job. Sometimes, perhaps, Rogers gives too much detail; he is a little strangely obsessed, both in the text and in detailed appendices, with precisely quantifying food and water used by the Romans. The Jews lost, but they made the Romans pay for every gain—the Romans ultimately devoted something like fifteen percent of all their fighting forces to crushing the Revolt.

Finally, however, the Romans overwhelmed Jerusalem, and they destroyed the Temple, in A.D. 70, while massacring thousands of men, women, and children. Why they destroyed the Temple, by whose order, and whether it could have been prevented are questions impossible now to answer. Rogers seems to think it was inevitable, given the nature of ancient sieges and Roman frustration at months and years of grinding siege warfare, and he is probably right. He finishes with the history of

the Roman reduction of remaining fortresses, most notably Masada, located next to the Dead Sea, in southern Judea, in A.D. 73, signaling the effective end of the war. Masada is famous for being where the Jews, seeing inevitable defeat as Roman engineers raised a giant earth ramp toward their walls, killed their wives and children, drew lots for killing each other, and the last man killed himself. Maybe it didn't happen exactly that way; maybe it did—though the earth ramp still exists, so that part at least is true.

The Romans looted everything worth looting in Jerusalem, and as shown on the Arch of Titus, took their spoils (including many slaves) back to Rome, celebrating a triumph. They executed a lot of Jews, too, but without any of the modern concept of “war guilt” or “war crimes,” even if Rogers occasionally nods at the idea, accusing Vespasian, for example, of “war crimes” for the massacre of prisoners. The idea that defeated enemies, or their leaders, should be punished for moral reasons after a defeat is a purely late modern one. Of course, the Romans executed some leaders of defeated peoples, either simply as a danger or as part of triumphs. But most leaders, and all common soldiers, who survived and were not sold into slavery were simply left to their own devices. In the modern world, we have absorbed the insane belief that anyone who loses a war, except for those pushing globohomo, is guilty of “war crimes.” It's tedious.

What were the long-term effects of the Revolt? Ultimately, it and the two later failed revolts led to major Jewish depopulation of the Galilee and Judea, and the beginning of the Jewish diaspora (although the Jews for a long time maintained power centers in parts of the Middle East, including around what is today Yemen). And as Stephen De Young explains in *The Religion of the Apostles*, Jewish religious practice today, rabbinical Judaism, is quite different in both form and substance from many aspects of Second Temple practice. That practice revolved, naturally, around the Temple itself, so when it was destroyed, the history of Judaism became much different than what came before, and from what it might have been.

Quite logically, therefore, Rogers asks, “Will a trumpeter some day stand again at the southwest corner of another Temple on the Temple Mount and blow his silver trumpet at the beginning and end of Shabbat, telling Jews when to cease their work and begin it again?” That's a good

question. As a Christian, I don't think the Messiah of the Jews is coming, or rather He has already come and will return to ring down the curtain of our world. (In fact, Christians, given the words of Christ, tend to take the destruction of the Temple as a sign of God's displeasure with the Jews, and confirmation of Christ being the New Temple.) But today, after two thousand years, the Jews rule Jerusalem again, and at least some of them think that rebuilding the Temple is necessary for the Messiah to come, so what are they waiting for? This is not history Rogers explores in detail, but it is my understanding that Moshe Dayan, the atheist Israeli general responsible for the recapture of the Temple Mount (and all of East Jerusalem) during the 1967 Six-Day War, fearing Muslim reaction and not fearing God, pulled back from allowing Jews to occupy the Temple Mount after it was captured. The Jews instead allowed a Muslim foundation, a *waqf*, which since the Muslims unfortunately defeated the Crusaders in 1187 had controlled the Temple Mount, to maintain complete authority, with some minor Israeli policing presence. The Israelis, to this day, forbid anyone other than Muslims from praying on the Temple Mount, forcing Jews to only pray at the external base of the Western Wall, a retaining wall built by Herod the Great as part of his renovation. In other words, the Jews let their mortal enemies dictate their own religious practices in lands the Jews conquered and own by right. And the Muslims regularly engage in violence to ensure their supremacy over the Mount is never threatened, and they are not punished, rather catered to, by those in authority among the Jews.

Why? I don't get it. To the victor go the spoils. No Christian holy place is on the Temple Mount, so I have no deep personal feeling about what should be done there. But my general sympathies lie with the Jews. I am strongly in favor of the Jews running the Middle East. Judaism is far more compatible with Christianity than Islam, and while no doubt if Greater Israel ruled the Levant, we might not always see eye-to-eye, we will generally get along. That is, and always will be, impossible with Islam. If I am honest, it certainly wouldn't upset me if the Jews demolished the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, and then rebuilt the Temple, though to be sure the blowback would be spectacular, and very dangerous for the Jews. Short of that, it seems strange to me the Jews don't just kick the Muslims off the Temple Mount, and tell them who's boss, allowing a handful of adequately obsequious Muslims up

to the Mount on alternate Mondays. I'm sure it's a lot more complicated than that in terms of Israeli politics, about which I don't understand the first thing, though I do grasp it does not map neatly onto ours. No doubt there is not majority political support for such an action. But still, we can be sure the Muslims would do the exact same thing the Romans did, if the Temple still existed and the Muslims conquered it, and toadying to one's enemies doesn't seem sensible to me. It is never rewarded.

And, finally, let's talk about the Jews in America. I get occasional comments complaining that I ignore the malign influence and power of Jews in the West, which to these commenters is manifest. Usually this is phrased as demands for me to address "the Jewish Question." My usual response is that there isn't a Jewish Question. "The Jews" is not an explanatory device for history; that Jews are an ethnocultural group of great importance is part of the mix, to be sure, but neither determinative nor something that requires or deserves obsessive focus. (Although, it also doesn't deserve none, which is what it gets for the most part.) But denying there is a "Jewish Question" is not the same thing as denying the Jews are a people apart—they most definitely are. What does that mean for America?

It's not just America, but every society, where Jews are a people apart. This has always been true, and it's why there are Jews today at all. As Hilaire Belloc said, "Did you ever see a Hittite walking down Main Street?" Jews have maintained a unique culture through thousands of years, which is an impressive accomplishment. Of course, being a people apart means that conflicts necessarily arise with the rest of whatever society Jews live in. These are exacerbated by that Jews are smarter and in many ways better than most people in most societies, and clannish, prioritizing other clan members, so they are almost always disproportionately successful wherever they are. For any such group to survive over time, it can never be fully absorbed into any society in which they live. This leads often, or always, to friction within the society, just as, say, Chinese success in Malaysia does (or for that matter Asian success in America), but to a greater degree. In more than one Western society, Jews have come to dominate elite professions to a degree that is societally corrosive. Moreover, as Paul Johnson points out in his *A History of the Jews*, the Jews, or some Jews, simply can't help being resentful

and coming into conflict with the rest of their society, something he ascribes, in part, to the culture of Jews, not just to competency-related structural factors.

That said, I just don't think that Jews as Jews have some unduly malign influence on American, or European, politics. Certainly, individual Jews are extremely destructive (e.g., George Soros), and their being Jewish is not incidental. But there is no conspiracy of Jews; there is a conspiracy of the Left, that some Jews have joined. It's a close call who is more destructive—Soros, or the Koch Brothers. Jews have certainly been over-represented in every Western destructive left-wing movement, because resentful Jews are attracted to them. And many Right movements exclude those seen as alien to the society, fairly or not. This is a tactical problem, in that it means a Right movement can appear to be in conflict with Jews more generally, even if that is not necessarily the case. But that a minority that sometimes feels itself outsiders joins destructive movements doesn't mean that they created those; certainly, Jews did not create the Enlightenment, which is the root cause of our civilization's discontents. If the Jews had disappeared in A.D. 74, our civilization would likely be in very much the same place we are now.

True, it is unfortunate that Jews don't collectively disown truly disgusting men such as Jonathan Greenblatt, head of the so-called Anti-Defamation League, who presents himself as representing all Jews, and Jews who do not vocally disown and attempt to destroy Greenblatt and his many accomplices should not be surprised when anti-Jewish sentiment results. And it is also true that Jews often have dual loyalties. But so does anyone of concrete ethnic extraction. I would put Hungarian interests above any other than American interests, and I would interpret those interests as being as little in conflict as possible. Jews just do the same thing more, and more vigorously, than everyone else. That's why they're still here. You just have to understand that, as with any other human motivation, and work with it.

So that's today's discussion, of Jews past and present. As for the future? Well, we'll see, won't we?