



Author of *The War That Made the Roman Empire*

BARRY STRAUSS

JEW vs. ROME

TWO CENTURIES of
REBELLION AGAINST *the*
WORLD'S MIGHTIEST EMPIRE

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THE WORLD'S MIGHTIEST EMPIRE

BARRY STRAUSS

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*For our children
Michael and Sylvie*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ancient names are, with a few exceptions, spelled following the style of the standard reference works: Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (New York: Columbia University, Center for Iranian Studies, 1996); Sander M. Goldberg, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 5th ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA in association with Keter Publishing House, 2007).

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For ancient places that are well-known modern cities I have used the modern names, e.g., Athens, Jerusalem, Rome.

“Judea,” sometimes spelled “Judaea,” has several different meanings. On the one hand, it refers either to a country that was first an independent kingdom and then a province in the Roman Empire. On the other hand, it refers to a region within that country, namely, the region of Jerusalem and its hinterland. To avoid confusion, I refer to the province and kingdom as Judea and to the region as Judah. Both are the same word in Hebrew, *Yehudah*, or in Latin, *Iudaea*.

CHRONOLOGY

Pompey conquers Jerusalem 63 BCE

Hezekiah raids Roman Syria 46

Pacorus invades Judea 40

Herod the Great rules Judea 37–4

Varus suppresses revolt in Judea 4 BCE

Rome annexes Judea 6 CE

Judah the Galilean and Zadok lead Tax Revolt 6

Pontius Pilate is prefect of Judea 26–36/37

Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth ca. 30

Caligula demands his statue in Jerusalem Temple 39/40

Agrippa is king of Judea 41–44

Tiberius Julius Alexander is procurator of Judea 46–48

Sicarii active in Judea 50s–60s

Roman defeat by Parthia at Rhandaia 62

Florus is procurator of Judea 64–67

Outbreak of Great Revolt 66

Battle of Beth Horon 66

Conquest of Jotapata and Gamala 67

Year of the Four Emperors 69

Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple 70

Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai founds Academy at Jabneh ca. 70

Triumph of Vespasian and Titus 71

Fall of Masada 74

Berenice in Rome 75–79

Trajan's Parthian War 115–117

Diaspora Revolt 116–117

Hadrian refounds Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina 130

Bar Kokhba Revolt 132–136

Mishnah completed ca. 200

Gallus Revolt 351–352

Palestinian (Jerusalem) and Babylonian Talmuds completed ca. 400–ca. 500

Sasanians, Byzantines, and Muslims in turn conquer Jerusalem 614–638

CAST OF CHARACTERS

POMPEY (GNAEUS POMPEIUS MAGNUS), 106–48 BCE. A leading Roman general and statesman, Pompey conquered Judea in 63 BCE and ended its independence.

PACORUS (PAKUR), Parthian prince, who possibly ruled as Pacorus I, d. 38 BCE. He invaded the Roman Near East and put a pro-Parthian king on the throne in Judea.

HEROD THE GREAT, ca. 73–4 BCE, king of Judea 37–4 BCE. Ambitious, tyrannical, and murderous ruler, famous as a builder, Herod tried to make Judea the most loyal of Rome's client states, but faced Jewish opposition.

AUGUSTUS (EARLIER, OCTAVIAN), 63 BCE–14 CE. The brilliant Augustus ended an era of civil war and became Rome's first emperor. He treated Herod as a valuable partner in the Roman East.

AGRIPPA (also known as Herod Agrippa, whose Roman name was Marcus Julius Agrippa), 10 BCE–44 CE, r. 41–44 CE. Grandson of Herod the Great, he was educated in Rome, helped make Claudius emperor, and was rewarded with the kingship of Judea. An assertive and popular ruler, he died prematurely amid rumors of poison.

TIBERIUS JULIUS ALEXANDER, ca. 15–after 71 CE. Member of an elite family of Alexandria, he turned away from his Jewish heritage and rose high in Roman ranks. Among other offices, he served as procurator of Judea (46–48 CE) and as Titus's chief of staff in the siege of Jerusalem (70 CE).

HELENA, QUEEN OF ADIABENE, d. ca. 60 CE. Wife and mother of kings of Adiabene, a Parthian client state. Helena and her sons converted to Judaism. She lived in Jerusalem and forged ties that later led to Adiabenean participation in the Great Revolt.

NERO (NERO CLAUDIUS CAESAR DRUSUS GERMANICUS), 37–68 CE, emperor 54–68, notorious for his decadence, but not without statesmanlike qualities. His greed and favoritism to the Greek population of Judea sparked the Great Revolt by Jews against Rome.

JOSEPHUS (JOSEPH SON OF MATTATHIAS, LATER T. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS), ca. 37–after 100 CE. Born into the Jerusalem aristocracy, Josephus first fought for the rebels and then defected to the Romans. He spent the rest of his life in Rome with the financial support of the emperor. Josephus wrote the *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*, among other books.

JOHN OF GISCALA, d. after 70 CE. After leading the opposition to Rome in his home city in Galilee, John fled to Jerusalem, bringing his supporters with him. He was a major figure among the rebels until the end.

SIMON SON OF GIORA, d. 71 CE. A Jewish commander in the Great Revolt, 66–70, he engaged both in civil strife and in the defense of Jerusalem. Considered by the Romans to be the leader of the rebels.

VESPASIAN (TITUS FLAVIUS VESPASIANUS), 9–79 CE. Roman general who reconquered most of rebel Judea in 67–68, Vespasian emerged victorious in the Year of the Four Emperors (69 CE) and was the founding emperor (r. 69–79) of the Flavian dynasty.

TITUS (TITUS CAESAR VESPASIANUS), 39–81 CE, Vespasian's son, he conquered Jerusalem in 70 CE and destroyed both the city and the Temple, for which he celebrated a Triumph with his father in 71. Titus reigned as emperor 79–81.

BERENICE, b. 28 CE. Officially Julia Berenice but better known as Berenice, she was daughter of King Agrippa and queen by virtue of her marriage to the king of Chalcis. In 66, she tried to prevent the Great Revolt, without success. Afterward she supported the Romans. Berenice had a long-term love affair with Titus.

VOLOGASES I (BALSH OR WALGASH IN PARTHIAN), r. ca. 51–79 CE. One of Parthia's more successful rulers, he reasserted control of Armenia from Rome but declined to intervene in Judea against Rome during the Great Revolt.

RABBI JOHANAN BEN ZAKKAI, first century CE. Jewish tradition considers him the leading sage at the time of the destruction of the Temple. He is said to have escaped Jerusalem under siege and won permission from Vespasian to found an academy at Jabneh, where he instituted some of the practices that allowed Judaism to survive.

TRAJAN (MARCUS ULPIUS TRAIANUS), ca. 53–117 CE, reigned as emperor 98–117. He invaded Parthian territory and tried to conquer Armenia and Mesopotamia (115–117), but failed, in part because of a revolt in the Jewish Diaspora that sprung up during his campaign.

SIMON BAR KOKHBA, d. 135 CE. He led a revolt in Judea that broke out in 132. Born Bar Koseva (sometimes Ben Koseva), he was acclaimed by some as the messiah, leading to his appellation of Bar Kokhba, literally, "Son of a Star."

HADRIAN (PUBLIUS AELIUS HADRIANUS), 76–138 CE. Emperor, r. 117–138, Hadrian decided to rebuild ruined Jerusalem as a pagan, Roman colony. That probably sparked the bloody Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136).

RABBI JUDAH THE PRINCE (YEHUDAH HA NASI), later second–early third centuries CE. The greatest rabbi of his generation, he and his students redacted the Mishnah, which, along with the Talmud a few centuries later, is the foundation text for rabbinic Judaism.

GALLUS (FLAVIUS CONSTANTIUS GALLUS CAESAR), d. 354, suppressed a Jewish insurgency in Palestine, sometime in 351–352, that is remembered as the Gallus Revolt.

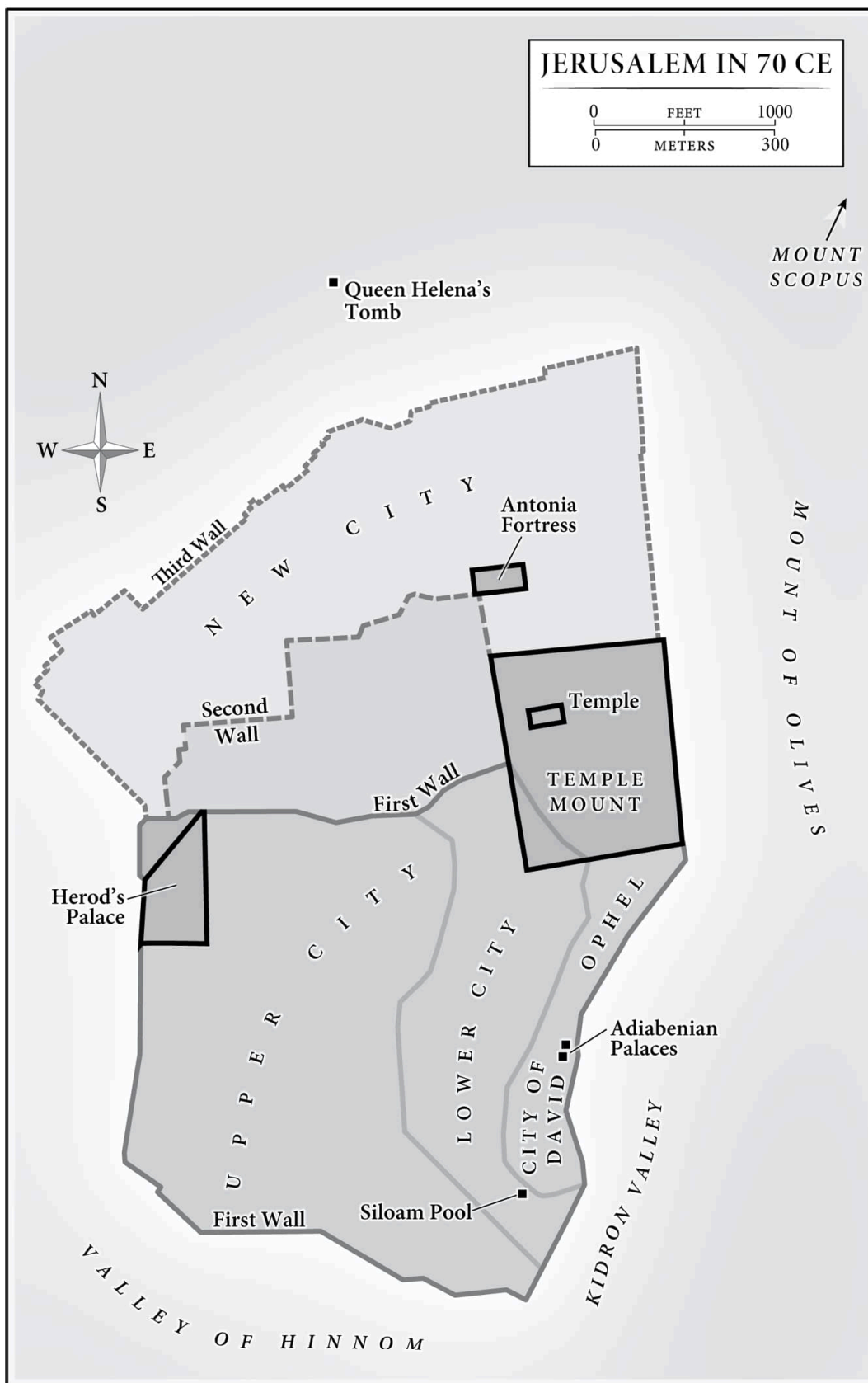
PATRICIUS, Jewish leader in the Gallus Revolt of 351–352, possibly regarded by some as the messiah.

KHOSROW II, ca. 570–628, r. 590–628, ambitious Sasanian monarch whose armies conquered much of the Eastern Roman Empire, including Palestine.

HERACLIUS, ca. 575–641, Eastern Roman (Byzantine) emperor, r. 610–641. Heraclius won back the territory conquered by Khosrow II, including Palestine, only to lose it to the rising new power of Islam.



Description 1



[Description 2](#)



[Description 3](#)

PROLOGUE

It was an age of unscrupulous intrigue and messianic longing, of empire and insurrection, and of geopolitical warfare that still has modern echoes.

The era from 63 BCE to 136 CE marked two centuries of violence and revolution. They witnessed the decline and fall of the Roman Republic, the rise of Rome of the Caesars and its continuing wars for dominance against the Iranian empire of Parthia, the only imperial rival to Rome left after the conquest of Carthage and the Hellenistic kingdoms. Caught in the middle, both geographically and politically, was the cauldron of tiny Judea—home of Rome’s most determined insurgencies and the soil from which the seedlings of both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity would begin to grow.

Judea was fighting for its survival as a religion, a people, and a nation. It was caught between countries and empires many times its size and strength, negotiating among ever-changing allies and enemies and facing mutual hostility with its neighbors. Because Judea was not a unified state it faced ethnic conflict within its own borders. Meanwhile, the dominant group in Judea, the Jewish people, fought among themselves for power, influence, and their own conceptions of a holy life.

For today’s reader, this story may seem painfully familiar. Certainly, the names of many battlefields are eerily the same in today’s news as in the pages of this book. The names of our story’s protagonists remain renowned, and the historical consequences of this era live on with us today. Nor were the challenges that confronted Judea two thousand years ago unique to that era. Small countries, and large countries, too, still face them in our time.

It is my hope that the history of this period, these people and these struggles, will offer context for the clash of civilizations we are witnessing today and forge a deeper understanding of the forces that propel them.

It would be hard to exaggerate the degree of excitement, anticipation, anxiety, and bloodlust that echoed in this era. What an explosion of creativity and destruction! These were two of the most dramatic and consequential centuries in history. And for the Jewish people in particular, these centuries were cataclysmic.

For the Jews, it was an era of revolution—many small uprisings during more than a century, culminating in an era of three great wars: the Great Revolt, also known as the Jewish War, 66 to 74 CE; the Diaspora Revolt, 116 to 117; and the Bar Kokhba Revolt, 132 to 136. And against whom did the Jews revolt? Only against perhaps the greatest empire in history: Rome.

From the Scottish Highlands to the Atlas Mountains, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Euphrates River, and for a moment, even to the Persian Gulf, Rome ruled a vast realm. It governed what a Roman writer called “the immeasurable majesty of the Roman peace.”¹ Fifty million people lived under Roman rule in what was then, along with Han China, the largest empire on earth. Among its other achievements, Rome conquered all the people around the Mediterranean Sea and united them under one government for the first and only time in history.

And yet during the space of seventy years, the Jews, one of the many peoples under Roman rule, revolted not once but three times. No other people in the empire—and there were many other rebel nations—had such a record. Two of the rebellions took place in the Jewish homeland, Judea, the third in the Diaspora, the emigrant communities of Jews.

Today people argue over the names Israel and Palestine, but that is nothing new. They argued over the country’s name in antiquity as well, with both Israel and Palestine attested long before Rome came on the scene. In the Roman era the country was commonly called Judea. The more ancient Jewish name for the country, which some patriots preferred, was Israel. It is attested as early as the thirteenth century BCE.²

Most rebellions occurred in recently conquered provinces. Judea was different. It was not newly conquered. In fact, Rome subdued Judea in 63 BCE, more than 120 years before the Jewish revolt of 66 CE. And Judea had first become a Roman ally even earlier, in 160 BCE. Close observers should have seen the storm coming, what with so much

unrest in Judea in earlier years. But in Rome, far away and preoccupied with other, bigger provinces, it came as a surprise.

The rebels of 66 CE humiliated the Roman legions. They first threatened, and then succeeded in contributing to a Roman defeat at the hands of the only rival empire that Rome still feared. They cost the legions a huge expenditure of blood and treasure before finally the rebellions were put down. A vengeful Rome responded with a savagery not seen since the destruction of Carthage two centuries earlier.

The rebels were freedom fighters, daring and heroic, and to that extent they deserve our admiration. But they were also murderous and deluded. The revolts were magnificent, but misguided. How could the rebels hope to defeat the mighty Romans? They represented a great tide of anger and violence that sometimes turned on itself, at least in the Great Revolt, because that Jewish war against Rome was also a war of Jew against Jew: it was a Jewish civil war.

For Jewish history, the rebellions against Rome mark a major turning point. They cost hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives and sent many of the survivors into slavery and exile. They reduced the Jewish people to secondary status in their own homeland. Indeed, the revolts put the future of Jewish survival there in question, although they did not end it. It's a common misconception to think that the Romans finished the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. They did not, but they did do an enormous amount of damage. Rome destroyed the Jewish capital, Jerusalem, and its crowning glory, the Temple. Rome ended the daily sacrifices that marked the heart of Judaism and ruined the priesthood who carried them out. Rome decimated the largest and most prestigious Jewish Diaspora community in the Roman Empire, the Jews of Egypt. As if to add insult to injury, the Romans changed the name of the country from Judea ("land of the Jews") to Syria Palaestina, or simply Palestine ("land of the Philistines"). In no other case did the Romans punish a rebellious province by changing its name. Then again, no people had rebelled as often as the Jews.

There is a holy fire, burning in the hearts of warriors, that leads to glory or oblivion. For two centuries it burned in the hearts of the nation that is the subject of this book, the Jewish people. Messiahs added to the conflagration. Even priests, resistant at first, grew dazzled by the white-hot light. Sober men saw the fire's destructiveness and tried to douse the flames. None succeeded. It was left to the Romans to drown the blaze in rivers of