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World History I
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Jews in the Roman Empire

Edict of Augustus on Jewish Rights, 1 BCE

Caesar Augustus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: Since the nation of the Jews and Hyrcanus, their high priest, have been found grateful to the people of the Romans, not only in the present but also in the past, and particularly in the time of my father, Caesar, imperator, it seems good to me and to my advisory council, according to the oaths, by the will of the people of the Romans, that the Jews shall use their own customs in accordance with their ancestral law, just as they used to use them in the time of Hyrcanus, the high priest of their highest god; and that their sacred offerings shall be inviolable and shall be sent to Jerusalem and shall be paid to the financial officials of Jerusalem; and that they shall not give sureties for appearance in court on the Sabbath or on the day of preparation before it after the ninth hour. But if anyone is detected stealing their sacred books or their sacred monies, either from a synagogue or from a mens' apartment, he shall be considered sacrilegious and his property shall be brought into the public treasury of the Romans.

Edict of Claudius on Jewish Rights, 41 CE

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: . . . Therefore it is right that also the Jews, who are in all the world under us, shall maintain their ancestral customs without hindrance and to them I now also command to use this my kindness rather reasonably and not to despise the religious rites of the other nations, but to observe their own laws.

Riots and Disturbances

As this excerpt from [Josephus](#) shows, relations between the Romans and the population of Judea continued to deteriorate in the years leading up to the Great Revolt of 66 CE. Violence was always seething beneath the surface as incident after incident threatened to erupt into full-scale war.

Under [Cumanus](#) troubles began which resulted in another large loss of Jewish lives. It happened that when the people gathered together in Jerusalem for [the Feast of Unleavened Bread](#), and as the Roman troops stood over the porticoes of the Temple (for they always were armed and kept guard at the festivals to prevent any disorders), one of the soldiers pulled back his garment, stooped down in an indecent manner, and turned his backside to the Jews, and made such a noise as you might expect upon such a posture.

At this the entire multitude was indignant and cried out to Cumanus to punish the soldier, while the rasher part of the youth and such as were naturally the most tumultuous fell to fighting, picked up stones, and threw them at the soldiers. Upon this Cumanus was afraid lest all the people should make an assault upon him, and so he sent for more armed men who, when they came in great numbers into the porticoes, caused the Jews very great consternation. Being beaten out of the Temple, they ran into the city, and the urgency with which they crowded to get out was so great that they trod upon each

other and squeezed one another until ten thousand of them were killed, so much so that this feast became a cause of mourning for the whole nation, and every family lamented [their own relatives]. . . .

Now there followed after this another calamity. . . in which a certain soldier found in one village [a sacred book of the law](#), tore it to pieces, and threw it into the fire. Thereupon the Jews were in great disorder, as if their whole county were aflame, and so many of them assembled in their zeal for their religion as by some instrument and ran together with united clamor to Caesarea, to Cumanus, and made supplication to him that he not overlook this man who had offered such an affront to God and to his law, but punish him for what he had done. Accordingly, perceiving that the multitude would not be quiet unless they had a suitable answer from him, he gave an order that the soldier be executed. After this was done, the Jews went their ways.

Roman Misrule in Palestine

A brief account of Roman rule in Palestine is given here by Tacitus, a 1st-century Roman historian. In his account, we can see the path that would lead to the Judean revolt of 66-73.

Because Herod's successors were not able to keep the peace, the Romans introduced their own governors, known as procurators, to administer Palestine directly. The manner in which these procurators ruled grew progressively more odious until the patience of Judeans was exhausted.

Antony gave the throne to Herod, and Augustus, after his victory, increased his power. After Herod's death, a certain [Simon assumed the name of king](#) without waiting for Caesar's decision. He, however, was put to death by Quintilius Varus, governor of Syria; the Jews were repressed; and the kingdom was divided into three parts and given to Herod's sons. Under [Tiberius](#) all was quiet. Then, when [Caligula](#) ordered the Jews to [set up his statue in their Temple](#), they chose rather to resort to arms, but the emperor's death put an end to their uprising. The [princes](#) now being dead or reduced to insignificance, [Claudius](#) made Judea a province and entrusted it to Roman knights or to freedmen; one of the latter, [Antonius Felix](#), practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave; he married Drusilla, the granddaughter of Cleopatra and Antony, and so was Antony's grandson-in-law, while Claudius was Antony's grandson. Still the Jews' patience lasted until [Gessius Florus](#) became procurator: in his time war began. . . .

Josephus Explains Origins of Revolt

This passage from [Josephus](#) lays out the background for the Jewish revolt against Rome of 66 CE, which ended with the destruction of the Temple four years later. According to Josephus, the uprising was a reaction to the corrupt, unscrupulous administration of Florus, the last Roman procurator (54 -68).

Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*

Now Gessius Florus, who was sent as successor to Albinus by [Nero](#), filled Judea with an abundance of miseries. . . . Florus was so wicked, and so violent in the use of his authority, that the Jews found [Albinus](#), in retrospect, to have been practically their benefactor; so excessive were the mischiefs that Florus brought upon them. Albinus had concealed his wickedness and was careful that it might not be discovered to all men; but Gessius Florus, as though sent on purpose to show his crimes to everybody, made a ostentatious display of them to our nation, never omitting any sort of violence, nor any unjust sort of punishment. He was not moved by pity, and was never satisfied no matter how much gain he acquired; nor had he any more regard to great than to small acquisitions, but he became a partner with the robbers themselves.

A great many turned to robbery without fear, having him as security, and depending on him to pardon them for their crimes. There were no bounds to the nation's miseries. The devastations of the robbers drove people from their homes, and sent them fleeing in the belief that they could dwell more easily anywhere else in the world than in their own country. What more need I say upon this head? It was Florus who drove us to take up arms against the Romans, for we preferred to be destroyed all at once rather than little by little. Now this war began in the second year of the government of Florus, and [the twelfth year of the reign of Nero](#).

The Judean Historian Criticizes the Revolt

The offensive conduct of the Roman procurator Gessius Florus (64-66 CE) brought resentment of Roman rule in Judea to a fever pitch. On the brink of armed revolt, the populace urged Agrippa II, a descendant of Herod who ruled over certain territories north of Jerusalem, to send an envoy to the Roman emperor Nero to denounce Florus.

This speech attributed to Agrippa by Josephus is thought to reflect Josephus's own attitudes toward the revolt.

"I am well aware that many wax eloquent concerning the injuries that have been offered to you by your procurators and concerning the glorious advantages of liberty. . . . let us take it for granted that the Roman ministers are injurious to you and are incurably severe. Yet it is not all the Romans who thus injure you; nor has Caesar, against whom you are going to make war, injured you. It is not by their command that any wicked governor is sent to you, for they who are in the west cannot see those who are in the east, nor indeed is it easy for them at a distance even to hear what is done in these parts. Now it is absurd to make war with a great many for the sake of one, to do so with such mighty people for a small cause. . . . Indeed, such crimes as we complain of may soon be corrected, for the same procurator will not continue forever, and it is probable that his successors will come with more moderate inclinations. But as for war, once begun, it is not easily ended, nor borne without calamities. . . ."

"Moreover, there are ten thousand other nations who had even greater reason than we to claim their liberty from Rome and

yet do submit. You are the only people who think it a disgrace to be servants to those to whom all the world has submitted. What sort of an army do you rely on? What are the arms you depend on? Where is your fleet to sweep the Roman seas, and where is the treasury which will be sufficient for your undertakings? . . . for the power of the Romans is invincible in all parts of the habitable earth. . . . Now, when almost all people under the sun submit to Roman arms, will you be the only people that make war against them? . . ."

"What remains, therefore, is only recourse to divine assistance, but this is already on the side of the Romans, for it is impossible that so vast an empire should be built up without God's providence. . . ."

The Battle for Jerusalem

The siege of Jerusalem was the last major confrontation in the Judean war with Rome, the rest of Judea having been quickly subdued by the Romans. In this document, Josephus states that the Romans were suppressing an anarchic civil war that pitted some Judeans against the revolutionaries and different revolutionary groups against each other.

Whereas beforehand the several parties in Jerusalem had been dashing one against another perpetually, the war from outside, which had now suddenly come upon them in a violent manner, put a stop to their contentions one against another. The rebels now saw with astonishment the Romans pitching three different camps, so they began to think of an awkward sort of alliance and said one to another, "What are we doing here, and what do we mean when we allow three fortified walls to be built to coop us in so that we will not be able to breathe freely? The enemy is securely building a kind of city in opposition to us while we sit still within our own walls and become mere spectators of their actions, with our hands idle and our armor laid by as if they were doing something that was good for us. We are, it seems," so did they cry out, "only

courageous against ourselves, while the Romans are likely to gain the city without bloodshed because of our strife." Thus did they encourage one another when they had gotten together. Instantly they took their armor and ran out against the Tenth Legion, falling eagerly and with a great cry upon the Romans who were fortifying their camp.

These Romans were caught in different groups, organized for their various tasks, and they had, therefore, mostly laid aside their arms, for they thought the Jews would never venture to make a sally upon them. And had they been disposed to do so, they supposed that their dissension would distract them. So the Romans were put into disorder unexpectedly. Some left their work and immediately marched off, while many ran to their arms but were struck and killed before they could turn back upon the enemy.

A Judean Witnesses the Siege

The Roman siege of Jerusalem caused enormous suffering. Jerusalem's inhabitants faced starvation if they remained in the city and execution if they tried to flee.

This description of the siege written by Josephus, the Judean aristocrat and historian, is the only eyewitness account we possess, for Josephus was with the Roman troops at the time of the conflict. Though it is clear that he empathized with the non-combatants, he reveals his sympathies for the Roman general Titus, his friend and protector.

So all hope of escaping was now cut off from the Jews, together with their freedom to go out of the city. The famine then widened its progress and devoured whole houses and families. The upper stories were full of women and children dying by famine, and the alleys of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged. Children and young men wandered about the marketplaces like shadows, all swollen with the famine, and fell down dead wherever their misery seized them. As for burying them, those who were sick themselves were unable to do it, and those who were healthy and well were deterred by the great multitude of dead bodies and by the uncertainty of how soon they would die themselves. . . .

buried out of the public treasury, for they were not able to endure the stench of the dead bodies. But afterwards, when they could not do that, they had them cast down from the walls into the valleys below.

When Titus, in making his rounds along those valleys, saw them full of dead bodies and the thick putrefaction running from them, he groaned. Spreading out his hands to heaven, he called God to witness that this was not his doing. Such was the sad case of the city itself. But the Romans were very joyful since none of the rebels could now make sallies out of the city because they were themselves disconsolate. The Romans, meanwhile, had a great supply of grain and other supplies from Syria and the neighboring provinces. Many of them would stand near the wall of the city and show the people what great quantities of provisions they had, and so make the enemy more aware of their famine by the superabundance which they had themselves. However, when the rebels still showed no inclination of yielding, Titus, out of his commiseration for the people who remained and his earnest desire to rescue those who still survived, began to raise his earthworks again although materials for them were hard to come by. . . .

A Roman Reports on the War

The Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 56 - ca. 118 CE) provides an account of the Roman siege of Jerusalem that contrasts with that of Josephus.

According to Josephus, Titus had hoped to end the siege as soon as possible in order to preserve the lives of any survivors inside. Tacitus ascribes less kindly motives to the Roman general.

Tacitus, *Historiae* (5:9)

Titus pitched his camp before the walls of Jerusalem and displayed his legions in battle array: the Jews formed their line close beneath their walls, being thus ready to advance if successful, and having a refuge at hand in case they were driven back. Some horse and light-armed foot were sent against them, but fought indecisively; later the enemy retired, and during the following days they engaged in many skirmishes before their gates until at last their continual defeats drove them within their walls.

The Romans now turned to preparations for an assault; for the soldiers thought it beneath their dignity to wait for the enemy to be starved out, and so they began to clamor for danger, part being prompted by bravery, but many were moved by their savage natures and their desire for booty. Titus himself had before his eyes a vision of Rome, its wealth and its pleasures, and he felt that if Jerusalem did not fall at once, his enjoyment of them was delayed.

The Temple Burns

The siege of Jerusalem ended with the taking of the Temple Mount. These excerpts from [Josephus's](#) eyewitness account describe the destruction of the Temple. He consistently portrays his friend the Roman general Titus as humane and compassionate.

In order to gain entry to the Temple precincts Titus ordered his troops to set the gates on fire.

... and the silver that was over them quickly carried the flames to the wood that was within, whence it spread itself all on the sudden, and caught hold of the cloisters. . . . This fire prevailed during that day and the next also; for the soldiers were not able to burn all the cloisters that were round about together at one time, but only by pieces.

But then, on the next day, Titus commanded part of his army to quench the fire and to make a road to facilitate the marching up of the legions while he himself gathered the commanders together. . . . Titus proposed to these that they should give him their advice what should be done about the holy house. Now, some of these thought it would be best to act according to the rules of war [and demolish it] because the Jews would never cease rebelling while that house was standing, for it was there that they used to gather together. Others were of the opinion that if the Jews would leave it and

none of them would lay their arms up in it, he should save it. But if they mounted it to fight any more, he ought to burn it because it must then be looked upon not as a holy house, but as a citadel. The impiety of burning it would then belong to those who forced this to be done and not to them. But Titus said, "Although the Jews should mount that holy house and fight us from it, yet we ought not to revenge ourselves on things that are inanimate instead of on the men themselves," and that he was not in any case for burning down so vast a work as that was because this would be a loss to the Romans themselves, as it would be an ornament to their government if it stood. . . .

Despite Titus's determination to preserve the Temple, some of his soldiers set it aflame.

And now, since [Caesar](#) was in no way able to restrain the enthusiastic fury of the soldiers, and the fire proceeded on more and more, he went into the holy place of the temple with his commanders, and saw it with what it contained which he found to be far superior to what foreigners had reported, and

not inferior to what we ourselves boasted of and believed about it. As the flame had not as yet reached its interior but was still consuming the rooms that were around the holy house, Titus supposed that the house itself might still be saved, and he came in haste and endeavored to persuade the soldiers to quench the fire and gave orders to Liberalius, the centurion of his bodyguard of spearmen, to beat with staves the soldiers who disobeyed orders and to restrain them. Yet their passions were too strong for the regard they had for Caesar and . . . when Caesar ran out so hastily to restrain the soldiers, one of those who went into the place threw the fire upon the hinges of the gate in the dark. Then the flame burst out immediately from within the holy house itself, and when the commanders withdrew, Caesar with them, nobody any longer forbade those who were outside to set fire to it. Thus the holy house burned down without Caesar's approval

Titus Destroys the Temple

Sulpicius Severus, a Christian historian who lived from ca. 363 to 420 CE, wrote a history of the world entitled [Chronica](#). In it he claimed that the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 56 BCE-120 CE) recorded that Titus, the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem, favored destroying the Jerusalem Temple to help uproot the Jewish and Christian religions.

His view of Titus, quoted here, contradicts the account of Josephus who was present at the siege. Josephus described Titus as wanting to spare the Temple. It is impossible to judge for certain the accuracy of the various accounts.

It is said that Titus summoned his council, and before taking action consulted it whether he should overthrow a sanctuary of such workmanship, since it seemed to many that a sacred building, one more remarkable than any other human work, should not be destroyed. For if preserved it would testify to the moderation of the Romans, while if demolished it would be a perpetual sign of cruelty. On the other hand, others, and Titus himself, expressed their opinion that the Temple should be destroyed without delay, in order that the religion of the Jews and Christians should be more completely exterminated. For those religions, though opposed to one another, derive from the same founders; the Christians stemmed from the Jews and the extirpation of the root would easily cause the offspring to perish.

The Siege of Masada

After the Romans took Jerusalem in 70 CE, the last remaining pocket of resistance was the mountaintop fortress of Masada in the Judean desert near the Dead Sea. According to Josephus, after years under siege by the Romans, Masada finally fell in 73 CE when the rebels decided to take their own lives rather than forfeit their freedom to the Romans. In recent years, scholars have cast doubt on the historical accuracy of Josephus's account.

Once the fall of Masada is certain, Eleazar ben Jair, the rebel leader, decides to persuade the garrison that mass suicide is their only option. Josephus attributes to Eleazar a long, stirring exhortation, only the beginning of which is reproduced here.

However, neither did Eleazar once think of flying away, nor would he permit anyone else to do so; but when he saw their wall burnt down by the fire, and could devise no other way of escaping, or room for their farther courage, and setting before their eyes what the Romans would do to them, their children, and their wives, if they got them into their power, he consulted about having them all slain. Now, as he judged this to be the best thing they could do in their present circumstances, he gathered the most courageous of his companions together, and encouraged them to take that course by a speech which he made to them in the manner following: "Since we, long ago, my generous friends, resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself, who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice. . . ."

When Eleazar finishes speaking, the rebels prepare to carry out their plans for mass suicide.

Even as Eleazar was exhorting them, they all cut him off short and made haste to do the deed, full of an unconquerable impulse, and moved with a demoniacal fury. So they went their ways each endeavoring to outdo the other, and thinking that this eagerness would be a demonstration of their courage and good conduct if they could avoid appearing among the last. So great was their zeal to slay their wives and children and themselves also! . . .

For the husbands tenderly embraced their wives, took their children into their arms, and gave the longest parting kisses to them with tears in their eyes. Yet at the same time they completed what they had resolved upon as if they had been executed by the hands of strangers, and they had nothing else to console them but the necessity they were in of doing this execution to avoid that prospect they had of the miseries they would suffer from their enemies. . . . Yet there was an old woman and another who was related to Eleazar, superior to most women in prudence and learning, with five children, who had concealed themselves in the subterranean aqueducts, and who were hidden there when the rest were intent upon the slaughter of one another. Those others were nine hundred and sixty in number, including the women and children. This calamitous slaughter occurred on the fifteenth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan].

The Romans expected that they would be fought in the morning. Accordingly, they put on their armor and laid bridges of planks upon their ladders from their embankments to make an assault upon the fortress. But they saw nobody as an enemy, only a terrible solitude on every side with a fire within the place as well as a perfect silence. So they were at a loss to guess at what had happened. At length they made a shout, as if it had been at a blow given by the battering-ram, to try to see whether they could bring anyone out who was inside. The women heard this noise, came out of their underground cavern, and informed the Romans of what had been done. One of the two clearly described all that was said and what was done and the manner of it. . . .

Bar Kokhba Revolt

Dio Cassius was a Roman author who lived from approximately 160-230 C.E. He is the author of a history, written in Greek, that relates a number of events concerning the Jewish population of the Roman Empire. In his Roman History, Dio Cassius writes about another Jewish revolt against the Romans, which takes place from 132-135 CE. At the time, the Roman emperor was Hadrian. The revolt is apparently led by a man named Simon Bar Kochba, who many claim is a "Messiah," sent by God to redeem the Jews from their oppressors.

At Jerusalem, Hadrian founded a city in place of the one which had been razed to the ground, naming it Aelia Capitolina, and on the site of the temple of the [Jewish] god, he raised a new temple to Jupiter. This brought on a war of no slight importance nor of brief duration, for the Jews deemed it intolerable that foreign races should be settled in their city and foreign religious rites planted there.

So long, indeed, as Hadrian was close by in Egypt and again in Syria, they remained quiet, save in so far as they purposely made of poor quality such weapons as they were called upon to furnish, in order that the Romans might reject them and they themselves might thus have the use of them. But when Hadrian went farther away, they openly revolted.

At first, the Romans took no account of them. Soon, however, all Judaea had been stirred up, and the Jews everywhere were showing signs of disturbance, were gathering together, and giving evidence of great hostility to the Romans, partly by secret and partly by overt acts.

Then, indeed, Hadrian sent against them his best generals. First of these was Julius Severus, who was dispatched from Britain, where he was governor, against the Jews.

By depriving them of food and shutting them up, he was able -rather slowly, to be sure, but with comparatively little danger- to crush, exhaust and exterminate them.

Very few of them in fact survived. Fifty of their most important outposts and nine hundred and eighty-five of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out.

Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate, a result of which the people had had forewarning before the war.