
Two Eternal Cities on a Collision Course?

ERICH S. GRUEN

The confrontation of Rome and Jerusalem cannot but quicken heartbeats, trigger associations, stir memories, and spark curiosity. No other cities parade the combination of great antiquity, tenacious traditions, turbulent history, complex cultures, and compelling narratives. Rome may possess the conventional crown of the “eternal city.” But Jerusalem has at least as strong a claim on it. In 66 ce conflict exploded between them, the so-called “Great Jewish Revolt” (a label, of course, affixed from the Roman perspective) that took on unexpectedly monumental proportions at the time and produced reverberations that continue to re-echo.

Martin Goodman’s recent book, *Rome and Jerusalem*, demands attention.* Rightly so. Few scholars have the *auctoritas* to switch confidently and effortlessly between the cultures. Few have written as cogently and convincingly on each of them separately and on both in combination. A sweeping survey of the subject by such a scholar, intended to reach an audience beyond the specialist researcher and the academic expert, marks an event of real significance. It would have received a wide welcome on any reckoning.

But that was not enough for the publisher. A subtitle was added, “The Clash of Ancient Civilizations.” The contemporary allusion is patent—and blatant. Samuel Huntington put the phrase in play a decade and a half ago with his *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, a controversial book much praised and much pilloried, widely

* Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Knopf, 2007), xiv + 598 pages, \$35.00.

cited if not widely read. The thesis forecast a mighty contest between Western civilization and the cultures of Islam and Asia, a boost (whatever the intention) for neocons, and a target for their opponents. A link to that controversy would certainly capture notice. The publisher's move was a prescient one. Anthony Pagden's *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle between East and West* (2008) came out at a propitious time. It traced the recurring conflict back to antiquity, thus conveniently fanning the flames and giving the ancient world conspicuous currency. Tensions between European culture and the nations of the Near East—not to mention open warfare—made the topic temptingly topical. Knopf's editors knew a good thing when they saw it.

But Goodman is too good a historian to go in for facile generalizations or simplistic stereotypes. The book, in fact, is not about a clash of civilizations at all. Readers who salivated when spotting the subtitle will be disappointed. The phrase appears on just one page of this monumental volume (perhaps also at publisher's prompting?). At that point (410) we are more than two-thirds of the way through the book. And even then the words herald a clash to come rather than one that has hitherto featured in the story.

Goodman opens with drama. The outbreak of revolt and its course, culminating in the destruction of the great Temple of Herod, a calamity of titanic proportions, constitute the prologue of the book. It plunges the reader directly into the centerpiece of the study. Goodman summarizes key events and supplies vivid verbal illustrations of the fighting. A most effective beginning. The prologue concludes with some pointed questions that the book proposes to answer: Why did the disaster come about? Was there anything intrinsic in Jewish and Roman society that made it impossible for Jerusalem and Rome to coexist? Did the tensions already surface in the time of Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of a Roman governor? Did the conflict of Jews and Romans spill over into relations between Jews and Christians in the Roman world? Perfectly reasonable questions, and very important

ones. But they do not touch on clashes of civilizations. And any relevance to contemporary events is indirect and remote.

The first question has gripped scholars and students for many generations. A solution by Goodman is devoutly to be desired. (He offered a different one in the past but has come to reconsider the matter). Yet the issue is shelved—for 350 pages. The subject considered in the interval is a very different one: a comparison and contrast between ancient Romans and ancient Jews. Goodman discusses the physical environment of their cities, their ecology and economy, their populations, their intertwined political history in the early Roman Empire (highly condensed), their trade networks (mostly Roman trade networks), their respective attitudes to Greek culture, their internal social relations, their writers and intellectuals (mostly Roman), their sense of identity and place in the Mediterranean world, their attitudes toward the past and the future, their conceptions of politics, governance, and law, the roles played by kinship and communal organization in each society, the connections between social status and political power, their anthropological preconceptions, their cosmologies and theologies, their ethical precepts, their attitudes toward the body and sex, their leisure-time activities, and almost anything else one can think of.

This lengthy section is a tour-de-force in itself, a remarkable assemblage of parallels and distinctions between the societies. Goodman ingeniously turns up practices, customs, and opinions, whether on moral precepts, judicial procedures, slavery, family relationships, divorce regulations, bodily fluids, abortion, creation myths, the afterlife, food, drink, and sex, a veritable kaleidoscope that allows each culture to reflect illuminatingly upon the other. So, for instance, Romans could be monotheists as well as polytheists, but Jews, unlike Romans, imagined realms of angels and demons. Romans embraced the Greek notion that the body was an incarnated soul, whereas Jews saw the soul as an animated body. On a more mundane level, Romans (particularly the elite) frequently adopted children for political or economic

purposes; Jews, so far as we know, never did so for any purpose. Goodman might also have added that Jews welcomed conversion by pagans to Judaism; but there was no such thing as “paganism” to which Jews could convert. Goodman tends to find more contrasts than similarities, sometimes pushing the point beyond what the traffic can bear. He exaggerates, for example, the differences between Jewish and Roman esteem for their nations’ martial heroes (331), and the importance of lineage and ancestry in the leadership of each state (335–36). He buys Juvenal’s stereotype of “bread and circuses” as a principal item in the state budget (46). He represents Romans as regarding the “barbarian” as the opposite of civilized society and outside the bounds of true humanity (148). He believes that Romans in the Republic thought of themselves as fighting only defensive wars (318). Each of these overstates the case. And one may be surprised to learn that, according to Goodman, the Jews had no sense of humor (298)! On rare occasions, when Goodman finds more parallel than contrast, he can overdo that too—as when he portrays both Jews and Romans as despising the Greeks (103). But these are small lapses. Goodman is, with few exceptions, admirably judicious as well as assiduous. The chapters on this subject (well over half the book) provide a cornucopia of instances and information, most of it known to either Roman historians or to Jewish historians, but rarely to both, and never juxtaposed in so engaging and enlightening a fashion.

We can be grateful for all this. Scholars and teachers from each side of the divide will learn much about the other (and often about their own). And not only that. The interested and intelligent lay reader will have considerable substance to chew on. One may hope that discussions among Jews from Los Angeles to Tel Aviv will be enlivened by the enticing tidbits contained in these pages. But what has any of it to do with the motives and reasons for the Great Revolt of Jews against Romans—let alone with a clash of civilizations? This part of the work could stand on its own as an independent

contribution, even a separate publication. It bears little relation to the ostensible objective of the study.

It is only when we get to the final third of the book that Goodman approaches the subject on which he had embarked at the beginning. A few pages intervene, offering some reflections on Roman attitudes toward Jews generally. And then the initial question is reiterated and reframed: why did Roman control of Jerusalem end in the destruction of the city (379)?

Why indeed? Those who might have inferred from the subtitle that the confrontation between two very different and hostile civilizations had been simmering for decades, finally to boil over in conflagration, will be surprised. Goodman's patient, reasonable, and scrupulous reconstruction of the events soundly subverts the proposition. Fruitful collaboration between Rome and Jerusalem held through the lengthy reign of Herod from 37 to 4 bce. And in the years that followed there was far more reason to expect a continuation than a termination of good relations. The ostensibly nasty comments made by Roman writers and intellectuals about Jews expressed only ridicule or disdain for bizarre customs. Expulsions of Jews were rare, brief, and largely symbolic. Caligula's effort to install a statue in the Temple was an idiosyncratic aberration. On the whole, Romans were tolerant or indifferent. Certainly they had no reason to regard Jews as dangerous to state and society or a threat to the stability of the empire. To be sure, there was the occasional outburst. Judaea could be a restive region. But in the long period between 4 bce and the eruption of rebellion in 66 ce troubles arose only in exceptional cases, from specific, fleeting causes, and generally represented internal conflicts rather than anti-Roman behavior. There were some bad apples among Roman governors of Judaea, short-tempered, vengeful, or simply incompetent characters. But no anti-Jewish policy emanated from the government. The fact that Jews felt confident in appealing to the legate of Syria or even to the Roman emperor against the misbehavior of wayward governors suffices to establish that. No Roman garrison (of

any size) sat in Jerusalem in this period, a decisive clue to Rome's lack of worry about this minor province. Josephus' accounts of the background to the war (almost our sole source) aimed to trace its causes. Hence he naturally seized upon every minor disturbance or upheaval to advance his historical agenda. What is remarkable is how few, rather than how many, he could dig up.

All this is set forth by Goodman in masterly fashion. The eruption of war, therefore, did not stem from an incompatibility of cultures or an accumulation of bitterness. Unforeseen events, accidents, escalating internal tensions, hotheaded actions by a few, and an inadequate response on the part of the governor of Syria resulted in an ambush and the loss of nearly six thousand Roman troops. After that there was no turning back. Retaliation by Rome would be massive, fearsome, and destructive. None of it was predictable, none of it inevitable. Many historians will find the analysis unpalatable. The idea that incompetence, blunders, miscalculations, or accidents can trigger major wars seems to most unsatisfactory and disturbing. We like to think that there must be deeply rooted causes to be uncovered, extended grievances, intransigent animosities, broad and sweeping explanations that determine the turning points of history—not to mention latent clashes of civilizations awaiting the occasion to burst to the surface. But wars among the ancients (indeed among the moderns) were, with some frequency, triggered by inadvertence rather than by calculation. Goodman's case is a powerful and plausible one.

The reasons for war and ferocity, however, are not the same as the reasons for the destruction of the glorious Temple of Herod. Why not leave it as a monument to Roman supremacy and magnanimity? In Goodman's view, accident enters here as well. The Romans had no long-standing policy to wipe out Jerusalem. A combination of unrelated events conspired to effect the outcome: the death of Nero, civil war in the empire, Vespasian's contested ascent to power, Titus' need for a speedy victory, and then the most unanticipated accident of

all. Titus, commander of Rome's forces and son of the newly crowned emperor Vespasian, conducted the siege of Jerusalem in 70 ce. The historian Josephus, who was present in Jerusalem at the time of the siege and had access to sources close to Titus, offers an intriguing narrative of the event. For Josephus, Titus did not intend to destroy the Temple; it could serve as an ornament of the empire. A debate ensued in the commander's council, some opting for preservation, others for destruction. But events took their own course. A Roman soldier, acting without orders, hurled a torch into the magnificent structure. Flames swiftly spread. Others joined suit in fanning them. Titus sought in vain to halt the conflagration. His men either did not hear him in the din or chose not to do so. They ignored the commander, slaughtered victims, and burned down Judaism's holiest shrine. Most scholars dismiss Josephus' account, a biased version designed to ingratiate himself with the Roman imperial household. Goodman bucks the tide and buys the story (420–23). Skeptics will resist. But the argument has force and deserves a hearing. If Josephus were concerned to exculpate Titus, this would hardly do it. The tale attests less to Titus' broadmindedness than to his inability to control his troops—not much of a recommendation for the general. The account then may well be true. Accident strikes again to determine an event of lasting magnitude.

Whatever the reasons, the fact alone was calamitous. For Goodman, we have at last reached the turning point. Matters went precipitously downhill thereafter. Romans cracked down hard. No more tolerance, no more indifference, no more congeniality. The reaction would be unmistakable. Vespasian and Titus celebrated a spectacular triumph parading Jewish spoils through the streets of Rome, including the lavish remnants of the Temple. The captured booty helped to fund Vespasian's magnificent Temple of Peace, fitted out with gold vessels from Jerusalem, and very possibly the Colosseum itself. Not only was the Temple destroyed; it would stay destroyed. Vespasian imposed a tax on all Jews everywhere: the annual contribution that they had previ-

ously made to the Temple would now revert every year to Rome, there to support the cult of Jupiter Capitolinus, the city's principal deity. The symbolic value was potent. Traditional Jewish homage to Yahweh became transmogrified into an image of subjugation to Rome. Worse still, Roman dictate prohibited the rebuilding of the Temple, thereby eradicating indefinitely the central emblem of Jewish identity. What engendered such fury and ferocity? Goodman's answer rings true: the need felt by a new Roman dynasty, the Flavians, the family of Vespasian, to establish its credentials and entrench its authority. Lacking, as they did, the pedigree of their predecessors, the heirs of Augustus, they sought to magnify the victory in Judaea, to present the conquest of the Jews as the toppling of a fearsome foe, to fill the city with tokens of the triumph, and to underscore the enduring nature of that achievement.

The reconstruction makes sense. The Johnny-come-lately Flavians went to great lengths to pronounce their legitimacy as appropriate heirs to Roman conquerors of old. The depiction of *Judaea capta* as if it were equivalent to the conquests of Carthage, Macedon, or Gaul had its political uses. But Goodman goes beyond this. The fall of the Flavians brought no change in policy or posture (with the exception of a brief blip under Nerva). Trajan kept it going. Jews were reckoned as natural enemies of the Roman state (452). Uprisings in various diaspora communities under Trajan reinforced the perception. And Hadrian determined to adopt a decisive solution. The foundation of a new Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, on the venerable site of Jerusalem, would leave no room for doubt. The decision helped to generate the bloody revolt of Bar Kokhba from 132 to 135 ce, and its crushing led to what would seem to be the most definitive of acts: not only had Jerusalem become Aelia Capitolina but the province of Judaea became that of Syria-Palestina. The removal of the names aimed to signify the elimination of memory.

In Goodman's conception, the real hostility to Jews and Judaism reared its ugly head in this period. They were reck-

oned as wicked and impious, foes of Rome, abominable and depraved, even, for good measure, malodorous. Yet one must wonder whether Roman attitudes, hitherto generally aloof, distant, or mildly amused, could turn around on a dime. That the Flavians would wish to hammer home the grandeur of their achievement by branding Jews as a major menace and exhibiting the spoils of conquest is clear enough. The case is solid. But comparable motivation for Trajan or Hadrian, part of a new dynasty that supplanted the Flavians, is hard to find. Goodman attempts to account for Trajan's attitude by noting that his father had been a general and strong supporter of Vespasian—not one of his more persuasive arguments. That would hardly justify the thesis that Trajan perpetuated the image of Jews as natural enemies of the Roman state. No campaign to stamp out Judaism is evident anywhere. Jews in Rome went on with their lives as before. Satirists like Juvenal and Martial might sneer at them (as they did at everybody). Tacitus might grumble about Roman converts to Judaism abandoning their traditions, gods, and families. But plainly Jews were still around in numbers, perhaps increasing numbers. Converts would not likely be attracted to a sect branded as beyond the pale. Discontents in certain Jewish communities of the east (without support from Jerusalem) provoked scattered disturbances which were ruthlessly crushed under Trajan, and the Palestinian resistance of Bar Kokhba (without support from the diaspora) resulted in utter defeat. But no hint survives of a Roman crusade to extinguish Jewish beliefs or believers. Jews certainly suffered in the wake of failed rebellions. Aelia Capitolina rose where once the Temple had stood. But diaspora communities in general seem largely unaffected. The Romans did not implement a "final solution." And a "clash of civilizations" is beside the point.

Real deterioration, according to Goodman, occurred with the advent, or rather the ascendancy, of Christianity. The subject appears only in the last part of the book. Goodman points out plausibly that Christians had an interest in distin-

guishing themselves most sharply from Jews after the destruction of the Temple, thereby to escape the taint of guilt by association. Just when or why (or even if) there came a parting of the ways, a subject much discussed of late, Goodman does not explore. His treatment of sporadic Roman persecutions of Christians is a useful survey but not directly relevant to the book's main story. Tensions between Jews and Christians did not boil over until Constantine established Christianity as the official state religion in the fourth century ce. The new emperor deployed anti-Jewish prejudices to advertise his rule that his pagan predecessors did not require. But the route taken to reach this point, with which Goodman concludes his study, remains muddy and circuitous. It is not easy to believe that a scramble by Christians to deny their Jewishness in the wake of the Temple's destruction would suffice to determine Christian theological discourse in the second and third centuries, let alone animate Constantine two and a half centuries after the fall of Jerusalem. The notion that Christians built upon and exploited pagan animosities to Judaism is a provocative hypothesis, but lacks attestation in our evidence. If the truly meaningful contest was that between Jews and Christians, we are further than ever from a clash of civilizations.

What were the origins of anti-Semitism? The question frames Goodman's epilogue. The answers remain altogether elusive. It is ironic perhaps that Goodman's own commitment to thorough and scrupulous scholarship exposes the very pitfalls, difficulties, and frustrations involved in even seeking such answers. Among the book's many virtues, that may be its greatest.