FROM TOLERATION TO DESTRUCTION: ROMAN POLICY AND THE JEWISH TEMPLE

Miriam Ben Zeev Ben Gurion University After four years of war, in the summer of 70 CE the Roman troops entered the Temple of Jerusalem and razed it to the ground. The event is described in detail by Josephus in the sixth book of his War : While the Temple blazed, the victors plundered everything that fell in their way and slaughtered wholesale all who were caught. No pity was shown for age, no reverence for rank; children and greybeards, laity and priests, alike were massacred. . . . The roar of the fl ames streaming far and wide mingled with the groans of the falling victims . . . and then the din— nothing more deafening or appalling could be conceived than that. There were the war cries of the Roman legions sweeping onward in mass, the howls of the rebels encircled by fire and sword . . . but yet more awful than the uproar were the sufferings. You would indeed have thought that the Temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of fl ame, but yet that the stream of blood was more copious than the fl ames and the slain more numerous than the slayers (War 6, 271– 76). Later, in the outer court of the Temple the victorious Roman troops offered a sacri fi ce to their standards (War 6, 316). 1 This was not the only temple destroyed by the Romans. What is exceptional, and perhaps unique, is that the Jerusalem Temple was not restored, as often happened, 2 and that the memory of its destruction has been preserved by Jews through the centuries. The fi rst question we would like to address is whether a harsh policy towards the Temple of Jerusalem had been consistently implemented by the Romans even before the summer of 70, or, as Josephus suggests, the destruction was accidental. He goes so far as to state that in

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One century before, the Jews had fi ercely fought against the Roman conquest of Judaea and the Temple of Jerusalem had been a major point of resistance. After a siege of three months, Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE, he entered the Holy of the Holies but took no step against the Temple, 5 a point emphasized by Tacitus, who points out that “the walls of Jerusalem were razed, but the Temple remained standing” (Histories V, 9, 1). According to both Josephus and a contemporary Latin source, Cicero, Pompey did not touch any of the internal fi ttings and vessels. Both Josephus and Cicero praise Pompey for this, though for opposite reasons. Josephus stresses that Pompey did not touch the treasures of the Temple “because of piety, and in this respect also he acted in a manner worthy of his virtuous character.” 6 Cicero, by contrast, points out that Pompey “laid his victorious hands on nothing in that shrine” only in order to avoid possible criticism at Rome: In that matter he was especially wise— as in many other matters. In a state so given to suspicion and calumny, he left his critics no opportunity for gossip. But I do not think that illustrious general was hindered by the religious feelings of the Jews and his enemies, but by his sense of honor. 7 Cassius Dio writes, by contrast, that when Pompey conquered Jerusalem “all the wealth was plundered.” 8 While this may appear to contradict the accounts of

Josephus and Cicero, it may be referring to the city in general, and not speci fi cally to the Temple. Perhaps it is not accidental that Josephus' focus on Pompey's piety is perfectly in line with Roman propaganda, which is known to us not only through the testimony of Latin literature, but a large number of inscriptions found in the Greek East that preserve Roman letters and senatus consulta . From these we learn that the motif of Roman piety and respect towards the gods, the temples and the cults of the peoples
living within the Empire was a striking feature of Roman propaganda. As early as 193 BCE, the praetor M. Valerius Messalla wrote to the city of Teos: That we wholly and constantly have attached the highest importance to reverence of the gods one can estimate from the goodwill we have experienced on this account from the supreme deity. Not only that, but for many other reasons we are convinced that manifest to everyone has been our own high respect for the divine. 9 Some years later, the Delphians received from a consul (perhaps C. Livius Salinator) the assurance that the Romans "will try always to be the authors of some good for the Delphians because of the god (Apollo) and because of you and because of our ancestral custom to revere the gods and to honor them as the cause of all good things." 10 In the seventies of the fi rst century BCE, a decree of the Roman senate established that some lands of Oropos, in Boiotia, be exempted from taxation, con fi rming a decision previously made by Lucius Sulla "for the protection of the immortal gods (and) their sacred precincts." 11 Similarly, the senatus consultum de Aphrodisiensibus issued in 39 BCE stresses that its decisions have been taken "in accordance with the sense of duty to the gods felt by the Roman people. . . ." 12 Some years later, writing to the city of Mitylene, which suffered severely from a Parthian attack, Octavian denounces the fact that the war had cruelly struck shrines and temples: "The savagery of the enemy neither from the shrines nor from the most sacred of temples was held back. . . ." 13 Even when the decision was taken to destroy a temple, the Romans were skilful at inventing institutional mechanisms to defuse the issue of god-snatching. One example is the quaint ritual of evocatio . The gods of an enemy were 'summoned out' of the besieged city; their 'abandonment' of the community they were supposed to protect, in response
to the offer of 'the same or even more splendid worship among the Roman people' sealed the fate of the city. 14 Pompey's decision to let the Jerusalem Temple stand, therefore, should not surprise us. Moreover, it followed a well known principle of the Roman political policy, which enforced the status quo of subject countries at the moment of the conquest. As for the Jewish Temple, it had enjoyed the protection of foreign rulers since Persian times, when, according to the Book of Ezra, Cyrus the Great had authorized its reconstruction, which was then rati fi ed by Darius the Great. The rights of the Jerusalem Temple were apparently con fi rmed by Alexander the Great after his conquest of Judaea. Josephus writes that Alexander "went up to the Temple, where he sacri fi ced to God under the direction of the high priest, and showed due honor to the priests and to the high priest himself " (Ant . 11, 236). The historicity of this passage has, with good reason, been questioned by modern scholars, 15 but there may be a kernel of truth in it. After all, Alexander implemented the same policy in Egypt, where, after paying homage to the local god Amun at the Oracle of Siwa Oasis in the Libyan Desert, he was pronounced the son of Zeus-Ammon by the Egyptian priests. 16 Moreover, Alexander's policy of respect towards the Temple of Jerusalem was implemented by the Hellenistic rulers who followed. Josephus has Ptolemy II Philadelphus send gifts to the Temple (Ant . 12, 40– 56) and Ptolemy III Euergetes offer sacri fi ces in Jerusalem and dedicate votive gifts (Ag.Ap . 2, 48). At the beginning of the second century BCE, when the Seleucids replaced the Ptolemaic government in Judaea, two letters were written by Antiochus III concerning the Jews and their Temple, quoted by Josephus, which Bickerman has convincingly argued to be
basically authentic. 17 The fi rst provides directions for the reconstruction of those parts of the Temple which had been destroyed in the course of the war between Seleucids and Ptolemies and lists gifts to be provided by the royal treasury to the Temple 18 —a usual feature of the Seleucid policy. The second letter establishes (or rather enforces) purity rules to be followed in the Temple, most probably following the request of the Jews themselves (Ant . 12, 145– 46). Two notable exceptions to this generally tolerant attitude stand out, both occurring in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes in the middle of the second century BCE: the sack of the Temple and its transformation into a pagan shrine. II Maccabees 19 and later Josephus 20 link the plundering of

Jerusalem to the pressing fi nancial situation of the Seleucid government following its defeat by Rome one generation before. The transformation of the Jewish Temple into a pagan shrine is atypical, however, and more dif fi cult to explain. What clearly emerges from these events is that the traditional policy of the Hellenistic rulers towards the Temple could be revoked and its rights cancelled any time and for any reason. Both these events were deemed to a and occurred once again in Roman times. constitute precedent, Setting out for his Parthian campaign, in 54 BCE, the Roman governor of Syria, Marcus Licinius Crassus is described by Josephus as having "stripped the Temple at Jerusalem of all its gold, his plunder including the two thousands talents left untouched by Pompey" (War 1, 179). The situation planned by Emperor Caligula less than a century later, to erect a golden statue of himself in the Jewish Temple, is far more serious. Only Caligula's assassination prevented the erection of the statue, which would have put an end to the Jewish cult— an outcome that was delayed until the summer of 70 CE. That the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the Jewish cult were not accidental, as Josephus would like us to believe, is also borne out by three events which followed: the order issued by Vespasian to raze the remains of the Temple to the ground; the conversion of the annual half-sheqel contribution to the Temple into a tax (the Fiscus Judaicus) meant to fi nance the repairs of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome; and the closure of the temple of Onias in Egypt. Why was this temple closed? It had apparently had no part whatsoever in the agitation which a number of revolutionaries fl eeing from Judaea had tried, but did not succeed, to foment in Alexandria in 73 CE. There was therefore no plausible reason for the decision to put an end to its cult, and Josephus does not conceal that Vespasian was "suspicious of the interminable tendency of the Jews to revolution," and "fearing that they might again collect together in force and draw others away with them, ordered Lupus to demolish the Jewish temple in the so-called district of Onias" (War 7, 421). It is possible that Lupus did not really destroy the temple, since some paragraphs below Josephus tells us that the next Roman prefect of Egypt, Paulinus, "completely stripped the place of its treasures, threatening the priests with severe penalties if they failed to produce them all, prohibited would-be worshippers from approaching the precincts, and, closing the gates, debarred all access, so as to leave thenceforth no vestige of divine worship on the spot" (War 7, 434– 35). It appears that Vespasian took no chances, not allowing a revived Jewish temple cult, which, even if transplanted in Egypt, might have been a potential source of further unrest. 21

Was the total abrogation of the Jewish cult, in Jerusalem and in Egypt, maybe taken to attest a speci fi cally religious anti-Jewish policy? If we consider the Romans' attitude towards Jewish traditional practices and customs, the picture emerging from the sources is ambivalent. Many scholars have de fi ned it as tolerant, which is probably true if we attach to this term the de fi nition given to it by Garnsey, namely, that toleration implies disapproval or disagreement coupled with an unwillingness to take action against those who are viewed with disfavor in the interest of some moral or political principle. 22 The Romans did not particularly cherish Jewish customs and cult, which focused on an unseen, unnamed deity with no cult representation. That is why the rite of the evocatio could not be performed in the case of the Jerusalem Temple. How could the Romans summon a god whose name was unknown? Unknown must have sounded to them the same as "not real," therefore, not-existing. Already Cicero, circa 60 BCE, called Judaism a "barbaric superstition" which was "at variance with the glory of our empire, the dignity of our name, the customs of our ancestors." 23 Later, Augustus shared a scorn of eastern religions that was common to the roman elite. Suetonius' comment that Augustus highly commended his grandson Gaius for not offering prayers at Jerusalem as he passed by Judaea is extremely telling (Divus Augustus , 93). On the other hand, the Romans did not prevent the Jews from observing their traditional customs and even accorded rights and privileges to the Jewish communities, in Rome as well as in other centers of the Mediterranean. Jewish claims on religious issues vis-à-vis their Greek neighbors, too, were often supported in different places in Egypt, Libya and Asia Minor, as we learn from an impressive number of Roman and Greek documents preserved by Josephus. 24 Nor did the Romans object to the pilgrimages to the Temple, when multitudes of Jews from all over the Diaspora streamed off to Jerusalem to perform the requirement of the Torah, 25 or the collection of the tax of the half sheqel, which all the Jewish males, from the age of twenty to that of sixty, were to contribute for the maintenance

of the sacri fi ces of the
Temple, irrespectively of the place where they lived. 26 For their part, the Jews constantly and consistently strove to emphasize their good will and loyalty to their governors. In Persian times, they offered a special sacri fi ce for the well-being of the King and of his family, a custom followed down the ages throughout Hellenistic and Roman times. In the Imperial age, when the cult of the Emperor rapidly spread in the East, the Jews daily offered a sacri fi ce "on behalf and in honor of the Emperor" meant to stress their political loyalty. 27 The Romans acknowledged Jewish good will, and apparently accepted the Jewish way of performing the Emperor cult, even if no formal exception from the emperor cult was likely ever formally issued. 28 May this Roman policy be called 'toleration'? Garnsey emphasizes that for the most part, religious organizations that were viewed as out of step with the mos maiorum were 'allowed' to exist because there was no way of excluding them or stamping them out. "Toleration by default" would seem a possible, if charitable, description of the attitude of the Roman authorities. It appears that governments showed by their inaction an appreciation of the limits of their power or a passive acquiescence in the presence of cults that they could not control. 29 However, there was an additional element, which was extraordinarily important in our case. In Judaea, the resentment and the opposition of the Jews to the Roman government had often manifested itself on the Temple Mount. After the death of Herod, Josephus writes, the Jews rose up with the purpose of having the high priest removed and another appointed, "more in accordance with the law and ritual
purity." It was Passover, when a great number of pilgrims approached the Temple to bring their sacri fi ces. Herod's son, fearing that "something dangerous might grow out of their fanaticism, sent a cohort of legionaries under a tribune to suppress the violence of the rebels": as a result, three thousand Jews were killed in the Temple (Ant . 17, 206– 218; 313). Some weeks later, on Pentecost, the disturbance spread to other Judaean districts and was put down by Varus, ending up with the cruci fi xion of two thousand Jews (War 2, 45– 75). Similar episodes probably took place in the following years, and it comes as no surprise that during the War the Temple served as a fortress. On good grounds, therefore, modern scholarship describes the Temple of Jerusalem "the symbol of Jewish resistance" and "the theological centre of Jewish opposition." 30 No wonder, then, that throughout their reign, the Romans tried to keep the Temple cult fi rmly under their sovereignty, appointing the high priests who would serve Roman interests. They maintained custody of the High Priestly vestments, delivering them to the Jews only when the Feasts approached: a fact that on several occasions raised bitter resentment among the Jews. 31 It appears that the policy implemented towards the Jewish cult was not different from that towards other cults; economic and political rather than religious reasons were often responsible for the fact that the conquerors either eradicated competing religious alternatives or implanted their own model of priesthood and religious authority. 32 In Asia Minor, the local high priests were understood to be dynasts to be rewarded or punished as they served— or did not serve— the interests of Rome, and all eventually turned into standard Greco-Roman magistrates. In Egypt, most sacred land was con fi scated by the Roman state when Augustus seized the kingdom in 31 BCE; the priests were at once forced to depend upon a government subvention, the syntaxis . In one blow their historical privileges were radically weakened. In the western provinces, too, the indigenous priestly class that had existed
prior to Roman conquest was destroyed. The suppression of the Druids and the German prophetesses are only the most visible instances of a much more widespread, if less violent, phenomenon. 33 In Gallia, the Romans discountenanced the druids on the grounds of their subversive political in fl uence and their extremely conservative Gaulish nationalism and anti-Roman bias. From Suetonius we learn that Augustus passed a measure prohibiting druidical practices (religio druidarum) to "Roman citizens," that is to say, to those Gauls who had accepted citizenship in the Empire. Suetonius tells that Claudius "completely abolished the barbarous and inhuman religion of the druids in Gaul, which under Augustus had merely been forbidden to 'Roman citizens'" (Suetonius, Claudius , 25). In spite of these decisions, it appears that their prestige and in fl uence were still strong towards the close of the century, when we hear of the druids inciting the Gauls to a great national rising. They sought, Suetonius suggests, through declamations "of vain superstition," in which they made reference to past history, that the nations "on their side of the Alps" were "destined to become masters of the world" (Tacitus,

Histories 4, 54). 34 Roman measures against the Jewish cult, therefore, do not exist in a vacuum. Approaching the end of this survey, one may wonder whether in the case of the Jews Roman policy achieved successful results. The decision to destroy the Temple and put an end to its cult was probably meant both to bring the revolt to an end and to prevent further revolts, even if not to wipe out Judaism, as scholars have suggested. 35 As Jones puts it, “there were sound strategic and political reasons to limit the possibility of future rebellions: the Temple had to be destroyed.” 36 Without their civic cult centered on the Temple, Jews could be expected to become much more like other groups in the Roman Empire: a people with their own national customs, ancestral philosophy and local ethnic associations, but without any centralizing institution and alternative focus of national allegiance. 37 This Roman assumption was logically sound, but it did not work out as they had planned, just as it had not worked two centuries before. Antiochus Epiphanes had converted the Temple into a shrine of a pagan cult as a means of punishment and in order to achieve some kind of cultural integration of the Jews in the surrounding Hellenistic environment. The Jewish reaction was unexpectedly violent, developing into a revolt, at the end of which the Seleucids had lost control of Judaea. Vespasian’s abrogation of the Jewish cult was probably meant to put an end to Jewish national identity and nationalistic trends, but during the next sixty years two more fi erce Jewish revolts would take place, in the diaspora in Trajan’s days and in Judaea, under Bar Kokhba, in Hadrian’s time. It was not the Temple and Jerusalem that had a unique role impossible to replace, but rather the Scriptures and the Law. The Romans could not have known this, since these features had no parallel in the Greco-Roman religious tradition, but for the Jews, even in the absence of a central cultic focus point, the Scriptures and the Law were to play a determinant role, allowing the continuation and the fl ourishing of their national identity through the ages, down to this very day.