Perspectives

“JERUSALEM: CAPITAL OF THE JEWS”:
THE JEWISH IDENTITY OF JERUSALEM IN GREEK AND ROMAN SOURCES*

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For ancient Greek and Roman pagan authors, Jerusalem definitely was a Jewish city. This article draws on references to Jerusalem from nearly twenty different sources, dating from the third century BCE to the third century CE, which are included in the late Professor Menahem Stern’s comprehensive anthology, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism. An examination of these texts indicates the unanimous agreement that Jerusalem was Jewish by virtue of the fact that its inhabitants were Jews, it was founded by Jews and the Temple, located in Jerusalem, was the center of the Jewish religion. In these sources, Jerusalem appears in several contexts: foundation narratives, descriptions of and links to the Temple, historical events, usually relating to invasions and captures of the city, physical descriptions, and the derogatory use of the term “Solyma” by Roman writers after its destruction by Titus in 70 CE. It is noteworthy that despite the negative views of Jews and Judaism expressed by authors such as Manetho, Apion, Tacitus and Juvenal, the Jewish identity of Jerusalem is always clear and never a subject of dispute. These ancient texts, therefore, disprove recent attempts by Muslims and others to deny the historic connection of the Jewish people to Jerusalem and the location of the Temple in Jerusalem through fabrications and lies.
The Jewish identity of Jerusalem as recorded in the writings of Greek and Roman authors of classical antiquity is a subject worthy of study in its own right. This article draws on references to Jerusalem in nearly twenty different sources dating from the third century BCE to the third century CE, roughly six centuries.

An examination of the sources indicates their authors’ complete and unanimous agreement that Jerusalem was Jewish by virtue of the fact that it was founded by Jews, that its inhabitants were Jews and that the Temple, located in Jerusalem, was the center of the Jewish religion. Despite the fact that some of these authors had distinctly negative views about Jews and Judaism, they were all in agreement about the Jewish identity of the city. These texts possess an importance which transcends their purely academic and cultural content. Newcomers to the historical stage and their apologists have based their political claims upon historical accounts which they have fabricated. For example, in his lengthy account of the Camp David Summit of July 2000, chief American negotiator Dennis Ross attributes much of its failure to the late Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat who not only repeated “old mythologies” but invented “a new one … [that] the Temple did not exist in Jerusalem but in Nablus.”

While one may dismiss Arafat’s outrageous statement as a fabrication invented to promote his political agenda, this lie and similar assertions make up part of ongoing Muslim efforts to negate Israel’s claim to Jerusalem, challenge an essential element of the Jewish faith and attack historical truth. Scholarly refutations of such false historical claims have usually drawn upon ancient and medieval Jewish and Christian sources, modern scholarship and archeological excavations. Despite the fact that the ancient pagan Greek and Roman sources have been known for centuries, they have not received a level of attention commensurate with their importance. The references to Jerusalem in these classical texts not only demonstrate the historical attachment of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, but also contribute to our knowledge of Jews and Judaism in the ancient world. It should be noted that such information, particularly of the negative variety regarding Jewish history, society and religion influenced later Christian and Western views of the Jews.

The Sources

The major source for most of the Greek views on the Jews is the treatise Against Apion written by the Jewish historian Josephus some time after 93CE in Rome. Apion, a Greek grammarian and intellectual in Alexandria, was active in the mid-first century CE in the struggle against
the civic rights of Jews in his city, and a notorious defamer of Jews and Judaism. In *Against Apion*, Josephus presents lengthy citations from the works of numerous Greek writers and intellectuals from the third century BCE through the first century CE. In several instances, such writings are extant only in Josephus’ work.

While several sources are neutral or even positive toward Jews, many accounts portray the Jews and the Jewish religion negatively and are replete with lies and calumnies. Josephus meticulously and successfully debunks these anti-Jewish tracts and provides a vigorous defense of Judaism, pointing out its strength and greatness in contrast to Greek and Roman pagan beliefs and life style.\(^7\)

Selections from other Greek and Latin works which are no longer extant may be found in other pagan anthologies, in the writings of Church Fathers such as Origen or Eusebius of Caesarea, and in later Byzantine texts. In addition, the writings of major authors, such as the Roman orator Cicero and the historian Tacitus exist independently and provide information on the Jews.\(^8\)

The entire corpus of texts in their original languages and English translation, with learned introductions, commentaries and explanations is available to the public in the form of the excellent comprehensive three-volume collection by Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*.\(^9\) The texts used in this article, quoted in English translation, come from Professor Stern’s magnum opus, which includes 554 selections of varying length and content, dating from the fifth century BCE to the sixth century CE.

**General Background**

The Greeks probably were the first to record information about the customs, life styles and societies of the different peoples they encountered or heard about during their travels in various parts of the world. Jews were one of the many peoples they met and observed.\(^10\) The “father of history,” Herodotus, who visited Egypt under Persian rule in the 450s BCE, wrote extensively about the Egyptians and referred to the “Syrians of Palestine” who were circumcised and were assumed to be the Jews.\(^11\) In fact, it is likely that it was Herodotus who coined the name “Palestine,” namely, the area of the Land of Israel, as his encounter was with the descendants of the Philistines who inhabited the coastal towns of Gaza, Ashdod, and Ashkelon. The Jews inhabited the landlocked region of Jerusalem and its surrounding hills, known as Judea.\(^12\)

During the decades and centuries following the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great in the 330s and 320s BCE, Greek soldiers...
and civilians populated and colonized the entire area, established major cities such as Alexandria in Egypt, and spread their system of local government, language, culture, art, religion, and way of life throughout the region. The Greeks promoted and advocated the adoption of their life style and mores; namely, Hellenization, which in contemporary parlance may be termed the first manifestation of “globalization.” All the peoples they ruled and amongst whom they lived, including the Jews in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora (a Greek term), had to contend with the challenge of Hellenization through assimilation, adaptation or resistance.13

In the late fourth century BCE, several texts portray Jews in a complimentary fashion, as philosophers.14 Throughout the third century BCE, however, less favorable comments about the Jews circulated throughout Ptolemaic Egypt, which had undergone rapid Hellenization. Outstanding among the anti-Jewish accusations was an alternative to the Biblical narrative of the Exodus.15 One of the anti-Exodus tales, presented by the Egyptian priest Manetho (mid-third century BCE) portrayed the Jews as foreigners, descendants of shepherd-kings who had taken over Egypt and had joined with others who were ridden with disease and killed the animals which the Egyptians venerated as gods.16 Subsequently, they were expelled from Egypt and established their own polity under their leader Moses who gave them a way of life which differed from that of the rest of mankind. Hence, the Jews were accused of xenophobia and disrespect for the gods of other nations and were viewed as practitioners of a strange way of life.17

Some writers recall distinctive Jewish customs, such as the absence of representations of the deity, male circumcision, dietary laws and the observance of the weekly day of rest, the Sabbath. Indeed, in 167 BCE, the Greek Seleucid King Antiochus IV ordered Jews to place an idol of Zeus in the Temple, outlawed circumcision, demanded the sacrifice of swine and forbade Sabbath observance (I Maccabees 1:41–50). He thus wanted to eliminate those unique features of the Jewish religion which had been noted by pagan writers.

Anti-Exodus narratives and accusations of Jewish sacrilege against other nations’ gods emerged in times of political and cultural crises and may have been a reaction to the fact that Judaism was attractive to many Greeks and Romans.18 By the middle to late first century BCE, the Romans dominated much of the known world west of the Euphrates, with its large Greek and Jewish populations. The Romans adopted many of the Greek charges against the Jews, to which they added accusations of insubordination to Roman rule.

So embedded were the Greek libels that, even several decades after the brutal suppression of the Jewish revolt against Rome (66–70 CE) and the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (70 CE), the Roman
historian Tacitus repeated the standard anti-Exodus canard and expressed himself as though the Jews were still a major threat to Imperial world domination, as follows: “… Moses introduced new religious practices, quite opposed to those of all other religions. The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor.”

Jerusalem in Context

Most Greek and Roman items on Jerusalem, therefore, must be viewed within the context of the general background described above. This applies to the texts quoted in Josephus’ Against Apion and in later works and to the books which survived as independent works, such as the Histories of Tacitus.

Mention of Jerusalem occurs in several contexts. First, it is the climax of the largely pejorative foundation narratives of Judea and the Jewish people, which begins with the expulsion from Egypt. Second, Jerusalem is associated with the construction and the existence of the Jewish Temple and the Temple cult and practices, which Greeks and Romans viewed with fascination, despite the fact that they may have found them highly distasteful and offensive. Josephus devotes much attention to presenting and refuting the foundation narratives and the calumnies against Judaism and Temple practices.

Third, depending on the date of their works, several authors record historical events, namely invasions of Jerusalem by Greeks or Romans. The major captures of the city were the seizure of the Temple by the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV in 167 BCE, the invasion of Jerusalem and entry into the Temple by the Roman general Pompey the Great in 63 BCE, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Titus during the Great Revolt against Rome in 70 CE.

Fourth, physical descriptions of Jerusalem appear in geographical and ethnographical works, with or without the occasional historical fact. Finally, in several Roman sources the term “Solyma” (Jerusalem) appears as part of an insult. Some authors combine several of the features listed above: foundation narratives, focus on the Temple, historical events, physical descriptions and use of name of the city in an demeaning manner.

Jerusalem in Foundation Narratives

The Greeks and Romans explored their own origins and the beginnings of the peoples, countries and cities which they conquered and ruled.
Furthermore, they attempted to explain to their readers how existing locations, shrines and customs came into being and to answer possible queries as to when and under what circumstances contemporary events and customs began. Therefore, they presented and repeated foundation narratives. The earliest Greek material on the construction of Jerusalem appears as part of the conclusion of the anti-Exodus narratives mentioned above.

According to Manetho, for example, after Pharaoh expelled the sacrilegious Jews, a tribe of the usurper shepherd-kings called “Hyksos” dominated the land. They were joined by others who were afflicted with leprosy and diseases. “They journeyed over the desert… they built in the land now called Judaea a city large enough to hold all those thousands of people and gave it the name of Jerusalem.” In a subsequent section, Josephus again quotes Manetho as stating that after the Jews “were driven out of the country, [they] occupied what is now Judea, founded Jerusalem, and built the temple.” While Josephus wrongly cites Manetho’s history as attributing to Moses the building of the Temple, he mentions that Manetho notes that Moses “who framed their [the Jews’] constitution and their laws” was a native Egyptian.20

In an account by Hecataeus of Abdera (c. 300 BCE), Jerusalem appears toward the conclusion of his anti-Exodus account and before his description of Jewish society and practices. He attributes the expulsion of the Jews to the pestilence which the Egyptians blamed upon the presence of foreigners, not only Jews, who caused the natives to falter in religious observance. “Therefore, the aliens were driven from the country.” While some went to Greece, most “were driven into what is now called Judaea … at that time utterly uninhabited … on taking possession of the land, he [Moses] founded, besides other cities, one that is the most renowned of all, called Jerusalem. In addition, he established the temple that they hold in chief veneration, instituted their forms of worship and ritual, drew up their laws and ordered their political institutions.”21

Hecataeus and other writers designate Moses as the founder of Jerusalem, builder of the Temple, and architect of the Jewish religion. This point differs substantially from the Hebrew Bible which names King David as the conqueror and builder of the city and his son King Solomon as the builder of the Temple (II Samuel 5:6–12; I Chronicles 11:4–9; I Kings 6:1–38; 7:15–51; II Chronicles 2:1–5:2). For a Greek, however, it would make sense that Moses built the Temple. Logically speaking, the first major leader of people, conqueror of its land and creator of its laws and social norms had to be regarded as the founder of its most important city and shrine. It is noteworthy that Moses “the Lawgiver” figures prominently as the founder of Judaism both in Greek
and Roman writings and in Josephus’ defense of Judaism in the second half of his Against Apion.\textsuperscript{22}

The link between the expulsion from Egypt and the building of Jerusalem appears in later sources which have a more negative view of the Jews and Judaism. This change took place after the invasion of Jerusalem and desecration of the Temple by Antiochus IV and his subsequent defeat by the Jews. For example, in his Bibliotheca Historica, the compiler Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE) recycles the essential anti-Exodus plot of Manetho. Here, the Jews were driven out of Egypt because they “were impious and detested by the gods.” They were joined by others “with leprous marks on their bodies... The refugees occupied the territory round about Jerusalem, and having organized the nation of the Jews had made their hatred of mankind into a tradition, and on this account, had introduced utterly outlandish laws...” Later on, Diodorus refers to “Moses, the founder of Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{23}

In a similar vein, Josephus includes an excerpt from Lysimachus (possibly first century BCE), whose work exhibits an anti-Jewish bias close to that of Apion. Lysimachus relates that after the leprous Jews were expelled from the Egyptian temples, where they took refuge, “a certain Moses” taught them “to show goodwill to no man” and “to overthrow any temples and altars of the gods...” They eventually “came to the country now called Judaea where they built a city in which they settled. This town was called Hierosyla because of their sacrilegious propensities. At a later date ... they altered the name to avoid the disgraceful imputation and called the city Hierosolyma and themselves Hierosolymites.”\textsuperscript{24}

In circa 110 CE, several decades after the defeat of the Jews by the Romans in 70 CE, the Roman historian Tacitus included a brief excursus on the Jews in his Histories. The Great Revolt against Rome and the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, which make up the major part of this section of Tacitus’ work, appear in the context of his extensive treatment of the Flavian dynasty, the theme of his work. Tacitus openly declares that Jerusalem is “the capital of the Jews.” Before his description of its devastation, he gives a terse account of its origins and some of its history. Tacitus refers to the origin of the Jews as either from “Ida” in Crete or from Ethiopia or Assyria and their leaders as “Hierosolymus and Iuda.” He adds that “others say that the Jews are of illustrious origin, being the Solymi, a people celebrated in Homer’s poems, who founded a city and gave it the name Hierosolyma.”\textsuperscript{25}

A version of the Greek anti-Exodus story follows in which Tacitus notes that Moses, with his fellow exiles, seized a country, expelled the former inhabitants, founded a city and dedicated a temple. Afterwards, he launches a vicious attack against Moses’ xenophobic laws and way of life which persisted even to his own times.\textsuperscript{26} A brief geographical
description of the country and of Jerusalem precedes a terse summary of the history of Judea, its domination by Rome and the events leading up to the Great Revolt, the defeat of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem.27

In conclusion, Jerusalem clearly is the major city of the Jews, founded by a people expelled from Egypt under inauspicious circumstances. The Jews were either oppressive foreigners or carriers of a plague or leprosy or both. Their leader Moses turned them against humanity with strange customs and laws, founded a city, Jerusalem, and built a Temple. Its interior and cultic practices will be discussed below. By the early second century CE, when Tacitus wrote his history, it is clear that this narrative of the circumstances of Jerusalem’s foundation had become a standard depiction among Greeks and Roman writers.

The Centrality of the Temple

The Temple of the Jews was a famous building, although it was not one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. According to Greek and Roman sources, it definitely was located in Jerusalem, a city founded and inhabited by Jews. While the narratives noted above feature Moses as the founder of the Temple, three relatively obscure sources of the second century BCE link the Temple to King Solomon and point out his association with King Hiram of Tyre, who assisted in its construction. These sources are brief and contain no historical background or material on the Jews.28

Several of the selections in Against Apion which include the anti-Exodus narrative also provide descriptions of the interior and exterior of the Temple and some of its rituals. For example, Hecataeus states that in the center of the city is an enclosure where there is “a square altar built of heaped up stones, unhewn and unwrought.” The Temple itself is “a great edifice containing an altar and a lamp stand, both made of gold ... upon these is a light which is never extinguished ... there is not a single statue or votive offering, no trace of a plant in the form of a sacred grove, or the like.”29 And in his account of Titus’ siege of Jerusalem, Tacitus describes the Temple as “… built like a citadel, with walls of its own … the very colonnades made a splendid defense. Within the enclosure is an ever-flowing spring.”30

In addition to physical descriptions, the authors mention the religious aspect of the Temple which differed radically from Greek and Roman paganism. In the text preserved by Diodorus, Hecataeus mentions the priests and their duties in the Temple and even describes a worship service and sacrifice.31 Similarly, the first century Roman historian Livy remarks that the Jews do not state “to which deity pertains the temple
at Jerusalem, nor is any image found there, since they do not think the
God partakes of any figure.”

In the same vein, Tacitus reports that “there were no representations
of the gods within, but … the place was empty and the secret shrine
contained nothing” and “only a Jew may approach its doors, and that
all save the priests were forbidden to cross its threshold.” Cassius
Dio (c. 200 CE) recalls that the Jews “never had any statue of him
the deity] even in Jerusalem itself.” The latter states that their temple
“was extremely large and beautiful, except in so far as it was open and
roofless.”

Hecataeus, Livy, and Cassius Dio explain the absence of
representation as part of Jewish “otherness” in a factual manner. Several
Greek writers, however, interpret the fact that there were no statues of the
gods in the Temple not only as unusual, but also as barbaric and indicative
of Jewish misanthropy. In their view, it would be inconceivable that a
sacred shrine would be empty. Therefore, several authors offered their
versions of what exactly stood in the Temple. Diodorus (first century
BCE) writes that when “Antiochus, called Epiphanes, on defeating the
Jews had entered the innermost sanctuary of the god’s temple, where it
was lawful for the priest alone to enter. Finding there a marble statue
of a heavily bearded man seated on an ass, with a book in his hands,
he supposed it to be an image of Moses, founder of Jerusalem … who
had ordained for the Jews their misanthropic and lawless customs. …
Antiochus … sacrificed before the image of the founder and the open-
air altar of the god a great sow.” Diodorus asserts that what stood
in Judaism’s holiest place was ridiculous and revolting; namely, the
presence of a statue of an ass, a lowly beast of burden, whose rider had
established Jewish xenophobia, and that Antiochus sacrificed an animal
known by all to be forbidden to the Jews in their holiest shrine.

Apion (mid-first century CE) conveys a malicious and defamatory
description of the contents of the sanctuary in Jerusalem. In order to
give his anti-Jewish arguments greater authority, Apion attributes
this account to the well known Greek philosopher and ethnographer
Posidonius (c.135–51 BCE) and the rhetorician Apollonius Molon (first
century BCE). As in the case of Diodorus, the invasion of Antiochus
Epiphanes serves as the point of departure for the description, as follows:
“Within the sanctuary … the Jews kept an ass’s head [made of gold],
worshipping that animal and deeming it of deepest reverence.”

The narrative continues with an astonishing calumny. Apion relates
that when Antiochus entered the sanctuary, he discovered a Greek
imprisoned inside, on a couch next to a table laden with excellent food.
The Greek hailed Antiochus as his savior. For, according to Apion, the
Jews kidnapped a Greek annually, brought him to the sanctuary, fattened
him up with sumptuous meals, sacrificed him, ate his flesh and then
swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks. While Josephus dismisses this canard as malicious rubbish and baseless lies, it is clear that the fact that Jews had no statues in their Temple in Jerusalem served as the background for the fabrication of accusations of kidnapping, human sacrifice, cannibalism and misanthropy on the part of the Jews. This libel provided a basis for the attempts to deprive them of their civic rights which were contested in Alexandria in the first century CE by figures such as Apion. Hence, the Temple appears as a salient feature of pagan anti-Judaism.

In addition, the fact that Jews contributed annually to the Temple, thereby filling it with silver and gold objects and monies was considered as a point of contention. In 59 BCE, the great Roman orator Cicero defended Flaccus, when the latter sought to prevent the Jews of the Empire from sending large sums of money to Jerusalem. Cicero describes the collection of vast amounts of gold and calls Judaism a “barbaric superstition.”

Tacitus also adds a financial dimension to his critique of Judaism and the Temple, complaining that other peoples join the Jews, “renouncing their ancestral religions … sending tribute and contributing to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews.” While both Cicero and Tacitus mention Jerusalem as the destination for the contributions of the Jews, it is clear from the context that their intention is the Temple, which the latter describes as “possessing enormous riches.”

In conclusion, descriptions of the Temple form part of the accounts on Jerusalem and on Judaism. They range from the factual to the libelous and bizarre. For the Greeks and Romans, Jerusalem was famous for its Temple which served as the focal point of the xenophobic, strange and possibly menacing rites of the Jews whose contributions brought much gold into the city. The latter may have encouraged a certain amount of envy among Gentiles. After its destruction in 70 CE, the memory of the Temple persisted in the retrospective histories by Tacitus and Cassius Dio.

**Historical Events**

Jerusalem and the Temple also appear as the site of several major historical events, mainly invasions of Greek monarchs and Roman generals. We have seen the significance of Antiochus IV Ephiphanes’ entry into Jerusalem and his despoliation of the Temple which served as the pretext for anti-Jewish descriptions of the interior of the sanctuary, distortions of Judaism and slander of the Jews. Antiochus appears favorably in the works of Diodorus and Apion, cited above. Similarly, Tacitus presents Antiochus positively as the prototype of a leader.
who attempted to “abolish Jewish superstition and to introduce Greek civilization.”

It is noteworthy that an earlier capture of Jerusalem by the Greek-Egyptian King Ptolemy, son of Lagus, provided an opportunity for the obscure Agatharchides of Cnidus (second century BCE) to remark about the fact that “the people known as Jews, who inhabited the most strongly fortified of cities, called by the natives Jerusalem” lost their city because they would not defend it on the Sabbath. Josephus includes this selection in *Against Apion* as one of the early pagan critiques of the Jewish Sabbath which Agatharchides deemed as “folly,” “dreams,” and “traditional fancies about the law.”

In this instance, the capture of Jerusalem serves as background for the author’s unfavorable comments on the Sabbath. Similarly, Cassius Dio attributes the capture of the Temple by the Roman general Pompey the Great in 63 BCE to the fact that the Jews, given their “superstitious awe” did not defend the city on “the day of Saturn” (the Sabbath). Cassius Dio, however, concentrates on Roman victories and accomplishments and mentions the issue of the Sabbath in passing.

The biographer Plutarch (mid-first-early second century CE) notes the siege of Jerusalem by the Seleucid monarch Antiochus VII Sidetes in 133–132 BCE at the time of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. The author describes this festival at length in another work. According to Plutarch, Antiochus VII provided the sacrificial animals for the Temple and allowed a seven day truce, after which the Jews submitted to him. From this passage, it is clear that the inhabitants of Jerusalem are the Jews, that their Temple is located there and that their religious practices affect the outcome of the invasions of Greek rulers.

Jerusalem also serves as the venue for eliciting praise of Roman figures or glorifying the victories and history of Rome. The invasion of Jerusalem and the Temple by Pompey the Great in 63 BCE appears in several Roman sources. Livy erroneously states that Pompey was the first to capture Jerusalem and the Temple. Other authors focus on the fact that Pompey neither damaged the Temple nor removed any of the gold or vessels of the Temple.

While Jerusalem and the Temple are important in these sections, they serve as the background for praise of the Roman invader. Similarly, in the works of Tacitus and Cassius Dio, the city of Jerusalem and its destruction form part of the history of the Roman Empire, and in the case of Tacitus, the accomplishments of the Flavian dynasty. These historians assume Roman cultural superiority and political hegemony throughout the world and the conquest and subjugation of Jerusalem supported this world-view.

An outstanding example of the role of Jerusalem as the location for a minor event in the life of an emperor may be found in Suetonius’ *The
Twelve Caesars, a work replete with intimate details on the public and private lives of the first twelve Roman emperors. In his biography of Titus, then commander of his father Vespasian’s Imperial forces and later emperor, Suetonius writes that “in the final attack on Jerusalem he slew twelve of the defenders with as many arrows; and he took the city on his daughter’s birthday, so delighting the soldiers and winning their devotion …”51 In this case, “the personal is political” and Jerusalem serves as the location for commemorating an event in the private life of Titus.

Finally, Cassius Dio’s indispensable account of the Jewish revolt against the Emperor Hadrian (132–135 CE) designates the following as a cause of the revolt: “At Jerusalem he [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 god, he raised a new Temple to Zeus [Jupiter].”52 Dio then proceeds with his report of the revolt of the Jews and its methodical suppression by the Romans.

Although the source concentrates on the course of the revolt against Hadrian, the founding of a pagan city on the ruins of Jerusalem and a pagan temple on the Temple Mount is presented as a historical fact and not simply as background for the author’s views on the Jewish religion or his praise of a particular emperor. Once again, Jerusalem, the Temple and the Jews are linked together in the major Roman historical work, written over more than a century after the destruction of the city and its holiest place.

Physical Descriptions

Greeks and Romans displayed a keen interest in their own surroundings, distant lands, natural phenomena and landmarks, among them Jerusalem. Some of the descriptions of Jerusalem precede details about the Temple and Judaism and others occur within the context of historical events, such as the siege of Titus in 70 CE. Generally speaking, Jerusalem appears as a strongly fortified city with a temple which is difficult to capture. A few writers note that it has sources of water and several authors provide measurements of its area. Despite the tendency in the ancient world to exaggerate figures, it is clear that Jerusalem was relatively large and populous.

The selection by Hecataeus, cited in Against Apion, describes the city as follows: “The Jews have … only one fortified city, which has a circumference of about fifty stades and some hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants; they call it Jerusalem. Nearly in the centre of the city stands a stone wall, enclosing an area about five plethra long and a hundred cubits broad, approached by a pair of gates.”53 He then proceeds to describe the Temple.
Agatharcides notes that Jerusalem is “the most strongly fortified of cities.”54 The obscure Greek writer Timochares (late second century BCE) states that: “Jerusalem has a circumference of 40 stades. It is hard to capture her, as she is enclosed on all sides by abrupt ravines. The whole city has a plenitude of running waters, so that the gardens are also irrigated by the waters streaming from the city.”55

In the anonymous Schoinometresis Syriae, possibly written by Xenophon of Lampsacus (c. 100 BCE), the writer notes that: “Jerusalem is situated on high and rough terrain; some parts of the wall are built of hewn stone, but most of it consists of gravel. The city has a circumference of 27 stades and in that place there is a fount from which water spouts in abundance.”56

Similarly, in his famous Natural History, the Roman polymath Pliny the Elder (d. 79 CE) recorded that the Dead Sea “is faced … on the south by Machaerus, at one time, next to Jerusalem the most important fortress in Judaea….” and that “Engeda [the oasis of Ein Gedi was] second only to Jerusalem in the fertility of its land and in its groves of palm-trees, but now like Jerusalem, [is] a heap of ashes.”57

Both Tacitus and Cassius Dio provide details about Jerusalem in their accounts of Roman conquests of the city. Despite the fact that the city had been destroyed, Tacitus uses the present tense as if it were still standing. Prior to his lengthy section on the Great Revolt, he gives a brief summary of the history of the city which he introduces as follows: “…The first line of fortifications protected the city, next the palace, and the innermost wall the temple.”58 At the time of Titus’ siege of Jerusalem, Tacitus describes its defenses:

…the city stands on an eminence;… the two hills that rise to a great height had been included within walls that had been skillfully built … The rocks terminated in sheer cliffs and towers rose to a height of sixty feet where the hill assisted the fortifications, and in the valleys they reached one hundred and twenty; they presented a wonderful sight … An inner line of walls had been built around the palace, and on a conspicuous height stands Antony’s tower … in the hills are subterraneous excavations, with pools and cisterns for holding rain-water.59

Cassius Dio briefly states that at the time of Titus’ siege, some Romans thought that the city was impregnable and went over to the other side. Its strength lay in the fact that it “had three walls, including one that surrounded the temple” and that the Jews “had tunnels dug from inside the city and extending out under the walls”, from which they attacked the Roman water carriers.60 Both Tacitus and Cassius Dio emphasize the fortifications of the city and thus show the great achievement of the Romans in capturing and devastating Jerusalem. The physical descriptions clearly are subordinated to the aggrandizement of the Roman Empire.
The Use of the Term “Solyma”

Several Roman writers after 70 CE use the term “Solyma” (Jerusalem) in a derogatory manner. As discussed above, the explanation for the etymology of the name of the city was part of the foundation narratives of Lysimachus, Plutarch and Tacitus. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the term “Solyma” seems to have acquired a pejorative meaning used in personal insults and accusations and not associated with its etymology. This use of the term connotes both the derision of Judaism and a link with a defeated people and a destroyed city, whose capture was difficult for the Romans.

Apparently, despite the fact that Jerusalem was in ruins and its inhabitants killed, exiled or sold into slavery, Judaism continued to be a source of attraction for the Romans. In the late first century CE, both Valerius Flaccus and Martial, the well-known coiner of epigrams, insult their non-Jewish rivals and opponents by linking them with “Solyma.” In his diatribe against Domitian, the former notes that he is “foul with the dust of Solyma.” The latter contemptuously likens his rival to one who “comes from Solyma now consumed by fire, and is lately condemned to tribute.”

The term appears in the Satires of Juvenal (60–130 CE), who penned several barbs against Judaism, which he viewed as superstitious nonsense and as destructive to Roman society and family life because of its widespread popularity. He labels Jews as false prophets and beggars and ridicules “a palsied Jewess” who is “an interpreter of the laws of Jerusalem” (Latin, legum Solymarum). In this instance, “Solyma” or “Jerusalem” means the despised religion of Judaism.

Conclusion

For ancient Greek and Roman pagan writers, Jerusalem was a Jewish city and the site of the Temple, the holy place of the Jews. It was founded in the remote past by ancient Jews, possibly by Moses, who led a pariah people, expelled from Egypt, and established its theology, laws and customs, which were and continued to be inimical to most of humanity.

The Temple was the religious center of the Jews where their hostility to others was reinforced. Jerusalem was a strongly fortified and fertile city, attacked on several occasions by Greeks and Romans. Although difficult to capture, because of its natural circumstances and its fortifications, the Romans invaded it and later destroyed both the city and the Temple. All Jews were linked to Jerusalem, through historical origins, financial contributions to the Temple, or religious observances which derived from that city and its founder.
As Judaism was considered a type of xenophobic superstition, innately hostile to the pagan gods and to the Greek and Roman way of life, and a threat to the Roman society because of its appeal to many, the memory and term “Solyma” or “Hierosolyma” occasionally became a synonym for all that was Jewish and abhorred by various Roman authors. Thus, the sole identity of Jerusalem was its status as the “capital of the Jews.”

Notes

* To Isaac Jacob Meyers (1979–2008) In Memoriam Perpetuam. My cousin, Isaac Jacob Meyers of New York, was a doctoral candidate in Classics at Harvard University. An observant Jew, Isaac loved Jerusalem, Judaism, Hebrew, Latin and Greek. His untimely death in a traffic accident is a great personal loss and a loss to scholarship. May his memory be blessed.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. David Zwebner and Mr. Menahem Lewinsky of the Hazvi Yisrael Synagogue in Jerusalem who invited me to address the congregation at the Jerusalem Day commemoration on 1 June 2008, where I gave a lecture in Hebrew on this subject which served as the inspiration for this article.

1. Tacitus, Historiae V, 8:1, in Menahem Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Vol. II, No. 281, 1980), 21, 28. The Latin reads: “Hierosolyma genti caput.” The term “gens” refers to the people of Judea, the Jews, mentioned in the first part of the sentence. All sources in this article are from Stern’s anthology, see note 9.

2. Dennis Ross, The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 694, 699. It is noteworthy that the pagan town of Nablus (the Arabic pronunciation of the Greek “Neapolis”) was founded by the Roman Emperor Vespasian several years after his victory over the Jews and the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Neapolis, located in Samaria near the Biblical town of Shechem, had a pagan population. For a brief popular summary of officially supported and sanctioned rewriting and falsifying of the ancient history of Jerusalem and the region by the Palestinian Authority, to negate their Jewish past, deny Jewish claims and replace them with those of Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians, see Itamar Marcus & Barbara Crook, “Anti-Semitism among Palestinian Authority Academics,” Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism 69, 1 June 2008.

3. The vehement negations of the existence of a Jewish pre-Islamic past in the history of Jerusalem and numerous counter-narratives claiming that the Temple was built by Adam or Abraham and later renovated by King Solomon and Herod have been collected and analyzed by Yitzhak
Reiter, From Jerusalem to Mecca and Back: The Muslim Rallying Around Jerusalem (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2005). [Hebrew] For a summary in English see Nadav Shragai, “In the Beginning was Al-Aqsa,” Ha-Aretz, 27 November 2005. For the use of Muslim arguments in promoting plans for the division of Jerusalem see Nadav Shragai, “Jerusalem: The Danger of Division,” 1–6 (Hebrew) www.jcpa.org. On Islamic appropriation of the Biblical Jewish past see Jacob Lassner, “The Origins of Muslim Attitudes toward the Jews and Judaism,” Judaism, 39, 4 (Fall, 1990), 494–507. According to Lassner, “… the Muslim response to the Jews and Judaism stemmed from an intense competition to occupy the center of a stage held sacred by both faiths. The story of the Jews was a history that Muslims appropriated in the Qur’an, its commentaries and other Islamic texts,” 497–98. The history of Jerusalem seems to belong to this category as well.


5. Martin Goodman emphasizes the intense anti-Judaism of the Flavian dynasty (69–96 CE) which owed its prestige to the decisive and brutal victory against the Jews. Furthermore, after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Flavians initiated an anti-Jewish policy to show that “the conquest was being celebrated not just over Judea but over Judaism.” Goodman argues that this Imperial policy was a source of Christian anti-Judaism. Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 453 ff., 582 ff. Similarly, Rene S. Bloch relates the negative statements of Tacitus to the anti-Jewish discourse of the Flavian era and their influence on Western attitudes to Jews and Judaism. Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum: Der Judenexcursus des Tacitus im Rahmen der Griechisch-Roemischen Ethnographie (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002), 221–223. [German]


9. Menahem Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, I-III (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974–84). My teacher and master, Professor Menahem Stern, of blessed memory, was professor of Jewish History of the Second Temple Period at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Stern, a prolific scholar and expert in Greek and Latin texts, was murdered by a Palestinian terrorist while on his way to the Hebrew University and National Library in Jerusalem in 1989. For an earlier, smaller anthology of Greek and Latin texts see Theodore Reinach, Textes d’auteurs grecs et romains relatifs au Judaisme (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1895). [French]


According to Bloch, passim, 222, Greek and Roman ethnographers related to the Jews differently than they did to other ancient peoples whose dress, habitations, climate and weaponry were discussed at length.

11. Herodotus, Historiae II, 104:3; Stern, I, No. 1, 2.

12. On the twentieth century Palestinian Arab adoption and use of the terms “Palestine” and “Palestinian” as labels of ethnic identification, which originally and for millennia were geographical terms see Bernard Lewis, “The Palestinians and the PLO: A Historical Approach,” Commentary, Vol. 59 (January, 1975): 32–48. Lewis notes that the Roman renamed Judea “Syria-Palestina” and Jerusalem as “Aelia Capitolina” in 137 CE, in order to “stamp out the embers not only of the [Bar Kokhba] revolt but of Jewish nationhood and statehood … with the same intention — of obliterating its historic Jewish identity,” 32.


15. On the anti-Exodus narrative as a major motif of Greco-Roman anti-Semitism: Van der Horst; Schaefer, 15–33. Momigliano, 91–95, holds that the Greek authors either did not know of the account of the Exodus in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah or refused to acknowledge its historicity. In contrast, Erich S. Gruen maintains that these tales were not part of a concerted pagan anti-Jewish campaign and they “do not derive from Egyptian distortion of Jewish legend, but the reverse, Jewish inventiveness expropriated Egyptian myth.” (“The Use and Abuse of the Exodus Story,” Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41–73, especially 71–73. Gruen’s argument, however, is neither relevant nor convincing as it is clear that the oft-repeated anti-Exodus tales indeed formed part of the essential underpinning for anti-Judaism and Jew-hatred in the Greco-Roman world. For a reaction to Gruen, see John J. Collins, “Reinventing Exodus: Exegesis and Legend in Hellenistic Egypt,” Jewish Cult and Hellenistic Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 44–57 and 191–193.


17. Van der Horst, op.cit.

18. Daniel R. Schwartz, “Introduction,” Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity (Tuebingen: Mohr, 1992), 10–15, attributes the wide-spread phenomenon of conversion to Judaism, a way of life and set of beliefs which transcended territorial boundaries, to the influence of the massive acculturation to Hellenism throughout the Mediterranean world, whereby one could become Hellenized without living in Greece. On the attraction of Judaism and the success of proselytism among Greeks and Romans see Feldman, 177–341. J.H. Lewy, “The Second Temple Period in Light of Greek and Roman Literature”, op.cit., 3–14, argues the crises which stimulated anti-Jewish writing were the influx of Jews into Ptolemaic Egypt during the third century BCE, the triumph of the Hasmonean dynasty (mid-late second century BCE) against the Greek Seleucids, Hasmonean policies toward Greeks, the subjugation of formerly Greek dominions to the Romans, and the crisis fomented by Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula’s insistence on worshipping his statue. Later Roman intellectuals perceived attraction to Judaism and Jewish missionary activity as undermining their traditional way of life. Repeating the anti-Exodus material in order to support his campaign against the rights of Jews, Apion led the Greek delegation to the Emperor Gaius Caligula (37–41 CE) during the period of inter-ethnic crisis in Alexandria, aggravated by the Imperial policies and the pogrom of 38 CE. On Alexandria, see Van der Horst op.cit; Schaefer,


20. Manetho's references to Jerusalem come from his Aegyptiaca, refuted by Josephus in Against Apion I, 90; I, 93; I, 228; Stern, I, X, No. 19, 68–69; No. 20, 74–75; No. 21, 78, 81, 83.

21. Hecataeus, in Stern, I, V, No. 11, 26–28. According to Stern (I, 20–24), Hecataeus wrote in c. 300 BCE. His Aegyptiaca comes down to us from the first century B.C.E. work of Diodorus Siculus via the tenth-century Bibliotheca of Photius. Diodorus may have altered the original text. In Against Apion I, 183–204, Josephus includes a selection entitled “On the Jews” by Hecataeus, which was regarded as the earliest Greek description of the Temple and Jerusalem. Several scholars have challenged the authenticity of the passages in Josephus. Stern presents the commonly accepted opinion that “Josephus had before him a Jewish revision, however slight” which was more pro-Jewish than the original Hecataeus (I, 23–24). However, an exhaustive study of the material which Josephus attributes to Hecataeus asserts that it was written by an Egyptian Jew of the late second–early first century BCE and not by Hecataeus at all, see Bezalel Bar Kochba, Pseudo-Hecataeus’ On the Jews: Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), especially 110–121, 249–252. This view suits Erich S. Gruen’s later thesis (Note 15), although it is not universally accepted. See also Bloch, 29–36.

22. On Moses in pagan writing see Feldman, Jew and Gentile, 232–287. On the Greek logic behind the identity of the founder of the religion, conqueror of the land and builder of the shrine see Bloch, 34, Note 38. Josephus, Against Apion II: 154–178, 352–365. Josephus argues that Moses is the oldest legislator in human history and that his laws are superior to those of other peoples and they are accessible to all.


   Bloch, 102–107, points out correctly that Tacitus devotes hardly any
   attention to the political history of Judea prior to the Great Revolt, the
   siege of Jerusalem by Titus. It simply did not interest him. The otherness
   of the Jewish religion, which he knew from the Jews of Rome, however,
   merited his critique (Bloch, 222–223).
28. Menander of Ephesus, in *Against Apion I*, 126; Stern, I, XX, No. 35, 120–
   121; Dius, in *Against Apion I*, 114–115; Stern, I, XXI, No. 36, 124–125;
   Laetus, in Stern, I, XXIII, No. 39, 128–129. Perhaps these authors were
   acquainted with the Biblical account which describes the relationship
   between Solomon and Hiram and the latter's role in providing materials
   for the Temple, or obtained their information from an unknown Phoenician
   source.
   12, 36–37, 39. See Note 21 on the problems relating to this passage. Bar
   Kochba, 153–154, 160–168, states that the author, Pseudo-Hecataeus, an
   Egyptian Jew at the turn of the first century BCE, based his description on
   Greek literary models of temples and was acquainted with pagan temples
   and their surroundings. Therefore, the Temple in Jerusalem is not the
   structure described in the text.
31. Hecataeus, in Diodorus, *Aegyptiaca, Bibliotheca Historica* XL, 3, 4–6;
   Stern, II, XCII, No. 281, 21, 28. Tacitus relates that only after Pompey’s
   invasion of the Temple in 63 BCE did the emptiness of the sanctuary
   become common knowledge. He does not repeat the Greek calumnies and
   rumors about the sanctuary.
34. Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, XXXIV:2–4; Stern, I, XXXII, No. 63,
   182–183. On the pagan accusation of Jewish ass worship see Schaefer,
   58–62.
35. This account differs from the Jewish versions of Antiochus IV’s invasion
   of Jerusalem and desecration of the Temple in I and II Maccabees. While
   all stress Antiochus’ attempts to abolish Jewish practices, Diodorus
   states that after taking tribute from the Jews and dismantling the walls
   of Jerusalem, he left the Jews alone. He does not mention the Jews led
   by Judah the Maccabee taking the Temple from Antiochus’ soldiers and
   supporters and consecrating it.
36. Posidonius, in *Against Apion II*, 80, 89–96; Stern, I, XXVIII, No. 44,
   145–146; Apollonius Molon, in *Against Apion II*, 80, 89–96; Stern, I,
   XXIX, No. 48, 12–154; Apion, in *Against Apion II*, 80–90–96; Stern, I,
   LXIII, No. 170, 408–412.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. An explanation of the origins of Apion's accusation of cannibalism on the
part of the Jews may be found in Stern, I, 412, Note 89. See also Schaefer, 62–67. Periodic kidnapping and killing of a Gentile, of course, occurs in the medieval blood libels, the first of which took place in Norwich, England in 1144. There are vast differences between Apion’s claims and the context of blood libels in Europe, in which innocent Christian children appear as the victims, murdered by Jews who use their blood for Passover rituals.

40. Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28:66–69; Stern, I, XXXIV, No. 68, 196–201. On Cicero’s attitude to the Jews see J. Lewy, “Cicero and the Jews in the *Pro Flacco*,” op.cit., 79–114. According to Feldman, 70, the Jews were so loyal to Jerusalem and the Temple that they were prepared to defy a Roman edict and send large sums of money to the Temple.

41. Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 5:1; Stern, II, XCII, No. 281, 19, 26. Both Bloch, 93 and Feldman, 110, state that the fact that numerous proselytes also paid the annual half-shekel to the Temple in Jerusalem resulted in the accumulation of vast sums of money collected throughout the Empire and sent to the Temple treasury, thus causing Gentile envy of Jewish wealth and antipathy toward converts to Judaism.

42. Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 8:1; Stern, II, XCII, No. 281, 21, 28.

43. Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 8:2; Stern, ibid.


47. Plutarch, *Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata*; Stern I, XCI, No. 260, 563–564. For a similar reference to the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII Sidetes on the Feast of Tabernacles see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIII, 242–248. Josephus, however, points out that Antiochus withdrew the siege, whereas Plutarch states that the Jews were amazed and placed themselves in his hands.


49. Cicero states that Pompey “‘laid his victorious hands on nothing in that shrine,’” *Pro Flacco* 28:67; Stern, I, XXXIV, No. 68, 196–197; Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 9:1; Stern, II, XCII, No. 281, 21, 28, notes that during Pompey’s invasion “the walls of Jerusalem were razed and the Temple remained standing.” Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* XXXVII, 15:2:1–4; Stern, II, CXXII, No. 406, 349–350, briefly describes the difficulty of capturing the Temple, but unlike the others, writes that “its wealth was plundered.” In both the *Jewish War* I: 152–153 and *Jewish Antiquities* XIV: 72, Josephus praises Pompey’s virtuous character and the fact that he touched none of the gold and Temple vessels.

50. Tacitus; Stern, II, XCII, Nos. 273–294, 1–93; Cassius Dio; Stern, II,


53. *Against Apion* I: 197; Stern, I, V, No. 12, 36, 39. Bar Kochba, 110–113, argues that this description of a walled and fortified city serves as part of the proof of a later date and a different author of the passage attributed to Hecataeus by Josephus.


56. Xenophon of Lampsacus, in *PE* IX: 36:1; Stern, I, XXVI, No. 42, 138.


58. Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 8:1; Stern, II, XCII, No. 281, 21, 28. On Tacitus’ physical description of Judea and Jerusalem compared to his geographical data about other locations, see Bloch, 101–102.


