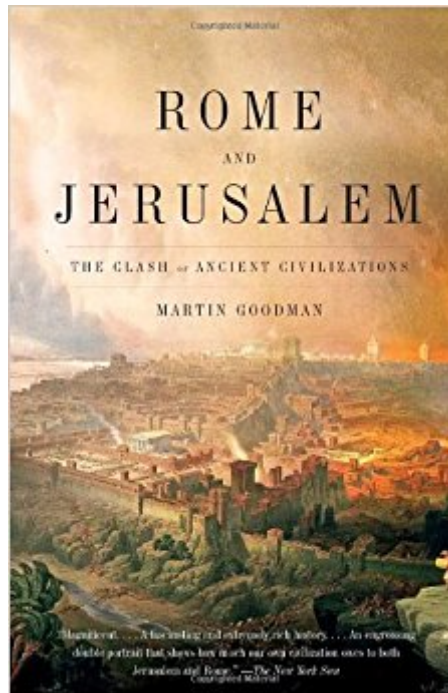


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Rome And Jerusalem: The Clash Of Ancient Civilizations



Synopsis

A magisterial history of the titanic struggle between the Roman and Jewish worlds that led to the destruction of Jerusalem. Martin Goodman "equally renowned in Jewish and in Roman studies" examines this conflict, its causes, and its consequences with unprecedented authority and thoroughness. He delineates the incompatibility between the cultural, political, and religious beliefs and practices of the two peoples and explains how Rome's interests were served by a policy of brutality against the Jews. At the same time, Christians began to distance themselves from their origins, becoming increasingly hostile toward Jews as Christian influence spread within the empire. This is the authoritative work of how these two great civilizations collided and how the reverberations are felt to this day.

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Customer Reviews

The title of this book and the Prologue about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE might lead one to expect that this book would focus on the direct relationships between Rome and the Judean provinces over which it acquired formal or informal control from about 63 BCE onwards. Had it done that, it would have been much shorter than it is. We will indeed learn what brought the two societies into such violent conflict in the end; but for the most part the Romans tolerated great differences in the life-styles and institutions in the empire they controlled. With the exception of Caligula, they even allowed the Jews freedom from Emperor worship, and they exempted Jews from having to pay taxes in Sabbath years (one in seven) when Jewish law insisted that farm land remain fallow. Even when the ultimate authority was vested in the procurators, the Romans

generally preferred to rule through the local Jewish authorities: High Priests, client kings or tetrarchs. These, or more particularly their Jewish subjects, did not like to have the ultimate authority vested in an alien power and may have disliked the culture of these aliens, but as long as their rule was not too intolerable, the two cultures rubbed along reasonably well. It did become intolerable in the end, and about a sixth of this immensely long book will deal with the Jewish revolts and the violent Roman repression. But for its first 400 pages or so, with a formidable display of detailed knowledge of Roman and Jewish society, it is simply interested in comparing and contrasting them, without suggesting that these differences made the final showdown inevitable.

You can be sure that any book which includes on its cover the words "magisterial" (twice), "monumental" and "massive" is not going to be a quick read. Martin Goodman's 550 plus page analysis of the relationship between the Jews and Rome is clearly a work of scholarship. His knowledge of both Rome and the Jews during the Roman Empire is prodigious. His conclusion is not new that the Jews, prior to the destruction of the temple in 70, had actually been treated relatively well under the Romans and given, in many ways a privileged position compared to other conquered people. The Romans, like most world powers (the British and now Americans) were arrogant and sure that their ways must be the best - the God or Gods must be on their side! However, he shows convincingly that the strength of the Roman response to the various Jewish revolts and the subsequent opprobrium were driven more by political needs of Vespasian and his successors in Rome than any underlying prejudice to the Jews. He also clearly shows how the longer term anti-Jewish sentiments were created more by the Christians as they tried to separate from what were now the "impious" and "malodorous" Jews and establish that the destruction of the temple was God's punishment for the Jews' murder of Jesus, as he had prophesied. In its Prologue ("The Destruction of Jerusalem") and its Epilogue ("The Origins of Antisemitism"), Goodman shows his ability to write succinctly and clearly. Many parts of the rest of the book can be more of a struggle as he includes multiple quotes and diverts off the main theme. Just one example of this is his section "Diversity and Toleration".

When I saw that Martin Goodman had written a book devoted to events surrounding the so-called "Jewish war" of 66-70, I expected to be impressed. I have not been disappointed. Goodman writes as an historian. This means, among other things, that he makes a serious effort to bring the past before us for its own sake, and at least partly for the mere delight of examining it. So, in the former part of his study, he offers lucid and informative chapters on the nature and makeup of the Roman

Empire at this period; on parallels, differences, and at times surprising similarities between Jewish and Roman identities and communities; on their sensitivities and lifestyles; and on their understandings of law, government, and politics. Each of these chapters is a major essay in its own right, as well as a mine of fascinating and often overlooked information. But while Goodman evidently has a historian's delight in this material, he does also have a specific purpose. The thread that runs through all is the question, What caused the war of 66? Cutting clean across much that has been written on this subject within recent decades, particularly from within the New Testament guild, Goodman's conclusion is, put simply, that there was no particular hostility between Roman and Jew before 66. Romans and Jews were certainly different from each other, but being different does not have to mean being in conflict. Particularly good here is Goodman's use of Josephus, which (contrary to what some critics have suggested) is judicious and apt. It is, as Goodman observes, "remarkable that Josephus' detailed narratives of those sixty years make so little mention of any consistent anti-Roman ideology at the heart of all the variegated disturbances he describes." Why is that remarkable?

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