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Judaism and the rise of Christianity

Spiritual and temporal

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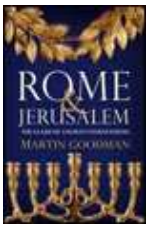
An Oxford historian's attempt to compare two wildly differing cultures—Rome and Jerusalem —meets with only partial success

Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations
By Martin Goodman



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Bridgeman

IN THE Year of Our Lord 70, as it was later called, a place that had been associated for a thousand years with supreme holiness—the Temple in Jerusalem—underwent an orgy of destruction. Four years into a revolt by local Jews who were enraged by an imperial governor pilfering their Temple's funds, the Roman army burst into the courts of the sacred building and set it on fire, destroying it so thoroughly that disputes have raged ever since over where precisely it was.

The sacking of the Temple (pictured above in an 1867 painting by Francesco Hayez) was the biggest milestone, though not the only dramatic moment, in a series of military engagements between the Jews and Romans. These ranged from the conquests of Pompey, who about 130 years earlier had turned Judea into a

vassal kingdom, to the final Jewish revolts that broke out at the start of the second century.

The consequences of these battles were felt all over the Roman empire. Having lost their locus of holiness, Jews were dispersed even more extensively than before across the Mediterranean world; some members of the widening Jewish diaspora embraced the Christian understanding of the Hebrew scriptures while others rejected it. As Christianity gained ground across the empire, and eventually became the state religion, disputes over how to read the scriptures (of which the Christian-Jewish argument was the bitterest, but certainly neither the first nor the last) were played out in a much larger arena.

To this extent, the subtitle of this impressive, scholarly book, "The Clash of Ancient Civilizations", seems justified; it is true that Romans and Jews crossed swords in ways that had major consequences for world history. But in today's parlance, the idea of a "clash of civilisations" has taken on a fresh resonance, and that is presumably why the subtitle was chosen. With its (mostly subconscious) allusions to the cold war and the uncertain relationship between Islam and the West, the world "civilisational" contest has come to be reserved for a titanic clash of values as well as arms. Much credit for this shift in meaning goes, of course, to Samuel Huntington, an American professor who saw the post-cold-war future as a stand-off between half a dozen geopolitical blocks, defined in religious as well as ethnic terms.

To elaborate a little, a "clash of civilisations" has come to imply not just sieges and bombardments, but also a systematic, long-term rivalry between alternative world views, metaphysical ideas and understandings of what it is to be human. In such a contest, each camp tries to galvanise not just its own supporters but also the bystanders who might be attracted by one view or other. For such a contest to be worth analysing at great length, there has to be a minimum of symmetry between the contenders: they have to have comparable aims and be competing in the same strategic arena. And on this count, it is not clear that Rome and Jerusalem fit the bill: Rome was a world power, with a genius for conquest, administration and construction. Jerusalem was a spiritual and cultural centre which served as capital of one small state (sometimes two) which had no aspiration to conquer distant lands or bend others to its will.

As Martin Goodman—an Oxford historian who has edited prestigious journals of Jewish and Roman studies—demonstrates quite well, some interesting comparisons can indeed be made between the ideologies that prevailed in Rome and Jerusalem. Both cities set great store by foundation stories that were believed to have unfolded many centuries earlier. But they had different ideas about later events.

Educated Romans liked to see their polity as a sort of secular democracy in which office-holders were responsible to the people and subject to frequent rotation. In practice, power rested with a hereditary plutocracy, but it was expected to earn its privileges through public service. In Jerusalem, of course, authority was theocratic: it could not be otherwise in a place of encounter between man and God.

As Mr Goodman shows, Roman sexual mores and family law were remarkably liberal, earthly and pragmatic; at the same time the way that law and custom entrenched the privileges of aristocrats over plebeians, free men over slaves, and men over women often sounds shocking to the modern ear. Jewish law was far more conservative in its attitude to sexual behaviour and nudity—and unyielding in its assumption that the highest source of legislation was divine.

Mediterranean mind-wrestling

All that is interesting as far as it goes, but ancient Rome and ancient Jerusalem were such different sorts of polity that questions arise about the legitimacy of the comparison. Surely the great cultural antinomy of ancient times was not between Rome and Jerusalem, but between Hellenism and Judaism? This, arguably, was the contrast that every great Mediterranean mind had to wrestle with for several centuries before and after the life of Jesus Christ.

As Mr Goodman lists the main features of Rome and Jerusalem (politics, ideology, law), he finds himself observing repeatedly that Romans and Jews reacted to Hellenism in different ways. The question is bound to arise when so much of Rome's art, literature and religion was derived from Hellenic sources. Indeed, part of what Rome's military power imposed on Judea was Hellenic culture. So in any discussion about Rome and Jerusalem, Athens shimmers in the background.

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" That was the famous question posed by Tertullian, an early Christian

thinker, and it presents a real and unavoidable dilemma which has never ceased to preoccupy the Western world's collective mind. To paraphrase the question, Tertullian asks what relationship exists between the world of revealed religion—in which God's self-manifestation is the ultimate source of knowledge—and the free intellectual inquiry of Greek philosophy.

One may conclude, like Tertullian, that Athens and Jerusalem are in the end separate worlds, separate ways of apprehending reality. But his inquiry is a real and pressing one, whereas it is not so clear that anybody needs to ask the question, "What (in a fundamental sense) does Jerusalem have to do with Rome?"

The latest public figure to wrestle with that dilemma was a man from Rome—Pope Benedict XVI, who in last year's controversial Regensburg address gave a closely argued presentation of the relationship between Hellenism, Judaism and revelation. He asserted that Greek rationalism and Abrahamic spirituality had fused, a couple of centuries before the coming of Christ, in a providential synthesis. This synthesis paved the way for Christian civilisation; the Islamic world, he implied, was the poorer for not having seen such an encounter between reason and revelation.

Mr Goodman would certainly regard that view as too optimistic: his book's final section presents Christianity—with its "usurpation" of the word Israel to mean a world-wide community of believers—as incorrigibly hostile to Judaism. In Mr Goodman's view, the children of Abraham's revelation are too bitterly divided among themselves to fuse seamlessly with anyone or anything. And there are many other grounds on which Pope Benedict might be challenged. Of all the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity, some of the most arresting are works like Wisdom of Sirach, whose apocalyptic tone reflects the shock of the Jewish religious establishment at the encounter with Hellenic culture. A seamless fusion this was not.

But the main point is this: whether Jerusalem is being compared with Athens or any other centre of Hellenised culture, there is a great deal more for modern scholars to say about the elusive and all-important question of how Hellenism and Judaism interacted as value systems.

As for the comparison between Rome and Jerusalem, readers of Mr Goodman's sweeping compendium will learn many new things—but not all will agree that this particular comparison is fundamental enough to justify 600 pages.

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