

In 332 B.C. Alexander the Great managed to make a peaceful entry into Jerusalem, taking the city without strife from the Persians. This bloodless capture was to prove singularly unique in the history of a turbulent land. Upon Alexander's death control of Judaea passed first to the Greek dynasty of the Ptolemies of Egypt and then to the Greek Seleucids of Syria. Finally, in 65 B.C., Jerusalem, the city of the prophets, was taken by Pompey the Great and became a client state of Rome. Pompey's intervention at this time was of critical importance not only in shaping future relations with Rome but also in guiding the very development of Judaism itself.

Judaea, with its fierce monotheism, was bound to clash with the prevalent pantheism of the Greeks and Romans. In the 2nd century B.C. the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV had tried to stamp out Judaism, something that the Romans never quite came to themselves, and had lost Judaea to a nationalist, Maccabee rebellion. When Pompey intervened in Judaea in 65 it was between two quarreling Jewish factions and their leaders, the conservative, aristocratic Sadducees and the more popular teachers and interpreters of the Torah, the Pharisees. By favouring the Phariseean Rabbis, Pompey unwittingly prepared Judaea for survival in the coming centuries. At first the Romans wisely ruled Judaea through client kings who were Jews themselves. The greatest of these monarchs was Herod, first appointed by the triumvirs, Antonius, Octavian, and Lepidus in 37 B.C., who brought prosperity and good order to his kingdom, albeit he was a cruel and tyrannical overlord. The Herodean period ended in 7 A.D. when the kingdom was turned into a minor Roman province controlled by a Roman governor of equestrian rank, called a procurator, who ruled from the coastal city of Caesarea. Under Roman officials things did not go at all well and there grew up a fierce, nationalistic movement led by the zealot sicarii (dagger men) who burned to throw the foreign devils out of the promised land.

Emperors like Caligula did not help soothe the situation for in 40 A.D. he had ordered his statue placed in the Temple at Jerusalem, and only his timely death prevented a rebellion at this time. The Emperor Claudius, for a while, restored control in Judaea to a native prince who died in 44 A.D., ending the experiment. In fact, by their standards the Romans were reasonable masters in Palestine and fair to the Jewish religion. Both Caesar and Augustus had recognized Judaism as a legitimate religion, allowing the construction of synagogues, the celebration of the sabbath, and the collection of a Temple tax. Nevertheless, the Romans rather looked down on the Jews as difficult and alien easterners, and the dislike was generally reciprocated.

Amid serious rioting in Jerusalem a general rebellion against Rome finally broke out in 66 A.D. while Nero was preparing his great artistic trip to Greece. After the failure of the governor of Syria to take Jerusalem, a general of modest birth and accomplishments named Vespasian was given the job of crushing the revolt. This he did with relative dispatch, though the actual capture of Jerusalem in August of 70 A.D. was left to his son, Titus (Vespasian had successfully gained the throne of Rome after a devastating civil war in 69 A.D.). The Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Temple tax was now to be paid to Jupiter; otherwise there was no official repression of Judaism per se.

The revolt itself smoldered on until May of 73 A.D. because of the occupation of Masada by a band of zealots under Eleazar ben Yair. This nearly impregnable fortress, a palace-fort built by Herod on a 1300 foot butte near the Dead Sea, held out against Flavius Silva's X Legion Fretensis (7,000 legionaries with auxiliaries) for 6 months. Eight siege camps, a monumental ramp built to the top, and impressive siege artillery finally forced the defenders to a mass suicide (2 women and 5 children survived out of c. 1,000).

Judaea flared up once again (132 - 135 A.D.) under Bar Cochba while Hadrian was Emperor at Rome. Though the Temple had been destroyed, the rabbinical period was well underway with its center at Jabneh in Palestine, and Jewish hatred of the pagans was still strong. There was massive devastation now in Judaea and Jerusalem was forbidden to Jews. Hadrian even attempted to put an end to circumcision (a ban relaxed by a subsequent emperor). Indeed Jerusalem was rebuilt as a pagan city with the Roman name Aelia Capitolina, and the province's name was changed to Syria Palaestina. These changes proved in vain, and the stubborn tenacity of a people who refused, at great cost, to be assimilated was in the distant end greeted with success, and once more Jews live in Jerusalem under their own government. The Romans had once issued a coin Judaea Capta, Judaea captured, but just as the captive Greeks had defeated the Romans by successfully Hellenizing them, so the Jews had outlasted the Romans and won the final victory.