

Rome and Jerusalem – The Clash of Ancient Civilizations by Martin Goodman.
Allen Lane 2007.

Every so often a work of history comes along that achieves such a high standard of excellence that it sets a benchmark to which all others should aspire and few will ever achieve. Rome and Jerusalem, a title that consciously echoes the title of the famous book by Moses Hess, the 19th century German Jewish philosopher, is a monumental history of the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Jewish people, a history which, as Goodman shows all too convincingly, has shaped the view and treatment of Jews in Europe for the last two thousand years.

Rome and Jerusalem is divided into three sections: A Mediterranean World, Romans and Jews, and Conflict. In the first section the histories of Rome and Jerusalem are juxtaposed, as well as the major events that gave them their character and importance. The second section compares Romans and Jews as people, looking at areas such as Identity, Community, Lifestyle, Government and Politics. The third section details the conflicts that blew the once harmonious congruence between Rome and Jerusalem asunder, covering the period between 37 BCE and 312 CE, and especially the wars/revolts/uprisings of 66-70, 115-117 and 132-135 CE.

Martin Goodman quotes copiously and judiciously from contemporary historians such as Josephus, Tacitus, Eusebius and others and though the text is detailed the pace of the narrative never flags.

In his epilogue, Goodman sets out clearly and convincingly the origins of anti-semitism, setting them firmly in the Roman Empire following the victories of Vespasian and Titus in 70 CE, when the Temple was destroyed and their victory over the Jews steadily transmuted from fact to imperial legend. When Constantine embraced Christianity it was inevitable that many of the long-standing prejudices against Jews that were intrinsic to Roman thought would enter mainstream Christian thinking, and subsequently influence a great deal of modern history, up to and including the Holocaust.

Rome and Jerusalem is as fine an investigation of its subject as one might wish to read, and one of the best works of popular history that I have read for many years.

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