PROLOGUE

"I WAS ASKING THE GODS FOR YOU"

The story is told of a wonder-working philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana, who refused to set foot in Palestine during the Roman siege of Jerusalem.¹ His reason was that the "land had been polluted by its inhabitants, both through what they had done and through what they had suffered." Throughout the empire, the unruly Palestinian Jews had become a by-word, even before their Temple was destroyed and many of them were enslaved. Vespasian, the conqueror of Jerusalem, was renowned as a man of probity and wisdom, who followed Apollonius' advice "to destroy not the great but the hostile, to be ruled by laws, to serve the divinity, to attend to matters of government as a king but to his body as a private citizen, to teach imperial slaves and free servants appropriate humility, to send out as governors men who at least knew the languages of the territories they were to govern."

When Vespasian met Apollonius in Egypt, he implored him, "Make me emperor."

The latter replied, "I have already done so, for when I prayed for an emperor righteous and noble and temperate and gray-haired and the father of legitimate sons, I was asking the gods for you."

Vespasian answered that he hoped he might rule wise men and be ruled by them. He promised the assembled Egyptians, "You may draw on me as on the Nile."

Such was the man whom Jews have cursed for centuries as the destroyer of Jerusalem, whose son, Titus, burned the Temple.² The wise philosopher praised as righteous, noble, and temperate, a man who, doing his duty, destroyed the Jewish revolutionary armies, and whose troops bravely exterminated the brave defenders of Masada. The great empire, which had brought prosperity to the far corners of the Mediterranean, saw the Jews as a contentious race. Rome regarded their unhappy fate as a justly merited punishment. So deep was the Jews' disaster that their land was seen to be polluted by their blood,

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² On the burning of the Temple, see below, p. 170-1.
as much as by their deeds. The day of their disaster was celebrated as a grand triumph in the imperial city. So ambiguous was the hour that forty generations debated its meaning. How did it come to pass that men thus greatly misunderstood one another? How shall we explain the reverence of some for a man hated and cursed by others?

A Roman centurion landing at Caesarea in the middle of the first century must have wondered at the enmity he saw and felt among the Jews he had come to police. Doing his duty, he met men who thought that duty evil. Come to bring peace, he encountered people who wanted only to create disorder. Temperate and sober, as befitted a centurion of the universal empire, he saw a nation whose excitability bordered on the irrational. To him and his cohorts the Jews seemed never to be satisfied, no matter how carefully the government respected their rights and sensibilities. Jews hardly appreciated that Rome stood not as despotic ruler of internal matters, but as protector of world peace and guarantor of religious freedom. Rome was eager only to find the right men to rule each country in the right way. She had tried every possible means of keeping Palestine’s Jews happy. At first she had ruled through the traditional high priests, then had supported a shrewd and particularly able man, Herod, when he came to power as ally of Rome and protector of Jewry. Herod had done everything within his power to win approval, but all to no avail. When he died, some rejoiced. Few mourned. Seeing the incompetence of his sons, the Romans had sent their own agents, procurators, who also tried to please the people, but with even less success. “What do these Jews want,” the centurion must have wondered, “and what keeps them in ceaseless turmoil?”

A Caesarean Jew, living in a mixed population of Greeks, pagan Semites, as well as Israelites, seeing the Roman debark from his ves-

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1 For a persuasive interpretation of Roman policy, see Morton S. Enslin, “Rome in the East,” in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Religions in Antiquity. Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 125-136. Enslin states (p. 136), “Security was certain; travel was open and expedited; good roads made this possible... Actually the provincials were freer and more secure than they had been under their own kings. And this was gratefully recognized. Emperor worship... was the spontaneous reaction of many of the provincials in grateful recognition of the security and orderly government made possible by the new Genius Roma and her embodiment in Augustus and... his successors.” Earlier accounts of Roman rule in Palestine have been colored by modern, therefore anachronistic, nationalist considerations. I am much struck by the fact that the Jews in Palestine who rejected Roman rule—and they probably were not a majority of the Jewish population—represent an exception to the attitude of most people in most of the eastern provinces at this time.
sel in the crowded harbor, could have provided the answer: “This land is holy, given by God, who made heaven and earth, to the people of Israel, whose seed and offspring we are. It can be governed properly only by those to whom God has given it, not by pagans, whoever they may be, however noble their intentions. Nor can we admit Rome’s intentions to be quite what the Romans claim. A century ago they came to settle a local struggle and somehow never found their way to the door. True enough, we have disagreements within our people. But only those whom Rome has bought deny the wrongness of Rome’s rule among us. Indeed, some among us see the current age as drawing to an end. The coming one will dawn quite soon. Then will we be ruled by God’s anointed as in days of old. Our former glory will be restored. When that day comes, all the good promises of the prophets of yore will come true. In the splendor of our coming king, we shall live in God’s prosperity. Hosts of angels will do battle for us. None will make us afraid. Nations will come to Jerusalem for justice, as now they come to Rome.”

Not all Romans were sober and high-principled, nor were all Jews vividly caught up in the messianic fervor of the age. But so many eagerly awaited the outbreak of the messianic dawn that Palestine proved ungovernable. No matter how scrupulously the Romans avoided offending the feelings of the tense and excitable populace, their very presence was the grandest offense. Their imminent departure through divine intervention seemed to some Jews to be perfectly certain. Had Palestine been situated in a less strategic place, had Rome concerned herself with the West alone, had the Jews modulated their hopes or directed them in other, less worldly paths, the encounter which in a very few years became a disastrous collision would have been avoided.

If that Caesarean Jew had lived to the year 66, he may well have died in the gentile reaction to the Jews’ riots following the rout of a few Roman detachments in the hills. If that Roman soldier had remained in his Palestinian post, he may have fallen in a springtime ambush, or he may have survived to toss a burning torch onto the roof of the Temple’s portico on an August day four years later. Roman and Jew alike would have judged the age to be drawing to a close, as indeed it was. To the Roman, as we have noted, Jewry had polluted its land “by its deeds and by its suffering.” To the Jew, the Messiah must be very near at hand. To both, therefore, whatever might happen henceforward, the past had died and awaited only decent burial. In
all that frenzied generation, Yoḥanan ben Zakkai¹ alone had another perception of matters. It was he who before the war counseled caution in the manner of a sober Roman. Afterward he acted boldly to hold onto the past and preserve it.

¹ I have mostly dispensed with the honorific “R.” or “Rabbi” or “Rabban,” because it is anachronistic to employ such titles before the Destruction. See I. Broyde, “Rabbi,” JE X, p. 294. No disrespect is intended, and where the sources use the title, as they almost invariably do in referring to him, I have, of course, followed in literal translation. I do not, on the other hand, use “Ben Zakkai,” since this usage was considered disrespectful in Talmudic times, b. Sanh. 14 a-b.