CHAPTER SEVEN

ROMAN EMPERORS AT THE SPAS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

‘The nature of a republican provincial governor’s duties was such that when he was not marching with an army he was traveling from city to city in his province dispensing justice’, wrote Millar in his most important study on The Emperor in the Roman World. He added that not only the Emperor’s imperial journeys within his province, but his travels to and from it, involved for the provincials on the one hand a burden of organizing supplies and stopping-places, and elaborate rituals of greeting, entertainment and farewell, and on the other the possibilities of gaining favour, and for the leading men, of establishing personal links which would be valuable for the future. Such a journey thus involved complex and potentially important choices on both sides.

Our best evidences for the impact of prospective imperial journeys are supported by a reasonable thought and extended activeness. The Romans erected magnificent public baths throughout the Empire. At sites which had hot springs, medicinal baths were erected. These places flourished and attracted many who sought healing for their ills there. Many Roman military and civil officials as well as some Emperors, visited settlements in the East, both during military operations and in times of peace. The Rabbinic literature expresses a gamut of different attitudes towards the projects of the Roman Empire in Palestine as illuminated above. On the one hand, these sources express a negative appraisal of the baths, the theatres, and the various taxes and duties as methods for increasing the state’s income. On the other hand, elsewhere in these sources, one discerns the Sages’ positive opinion about the Roman activities, which introduced the culture of the baths into

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4 See the discussion in chapter 6 on The Daily Life at the Thermo-Mineral Baths according to Rabbinic Literature.
the country. In this chapter the aims and activities of the Emperors Vespasian, Hadrian and ‘Antoninus’—Caracalla at the spas, as reflected in the Classical literature and especially in the Rabbinic sources, will be discussed.

7.1 Vespasian

Vespasian (69–79 CE) was a new kind of Roman Emperor: middle-class rather than patrician, and a man with wide experience in the provinces and the army, rather a mere urban courtier. He gave the Empire a period of stable and efficient government after the disturbances of the year 69 CE. His tolerance and humour won him friends, and his conscientious attention to the welfare of Rome and the provinces set the Empire on a new and firmer footing.

Vespasian served as a military tribune in Thrace, was a quaestor in Crete and Cyrene, aedile in 38 and praetor in 40 CE. He married Flavia Domitilla, by whom he had three children, Titus, Domitian and Domitilla, but his wife and daughter died before he became Emperor. His military career received a boost when he commanded the Second Legion Augusta in the conquest of Britain in 43–47. Vespasian was rewarded with the consulship in 51 CE, then the governorship of Africa some 12 years later. Under Nero he became an official ‘companion’ of the Emperor and traveled with him to Greece. Nero soon had need of him to suppress the rebellion of the Jews. In 67 CE Vespasian was appointed governor of Judaea with an expeditionary force of three legions. He was bringing the war steadily to a successful conclusion when news broke of Nero’s suicide and the events of the fateful year 69 CE were set in train. The capture of Jerusalem brought the Jewish War effectively to a close, though the stronghold of Masada held out until 74 CE, and Vespasian and Titus, celebrated a joint triumph for their victory in June the following year.

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