After four years of war, in the summer of 70 CE the Roman troops entered the Temple of Jerusalem and razed it to the ground. The event is described in detail by Josephus in the sixth book of his *War*:

While the Temple blazed, the victors plundered everything that fell in their way and slaughtered wholesale all who were caught. No pity was shown for age, no reverence for rank; children and greybeards, laity and priests, alike were massacred… The roar of the flames streaming far and wide mingled with the groans of the falling victims…and then the din—nothing more deafening or appalling could be conceived than that. There were the war cries of the Roman legions sweeping onward in mass, the howls of the rebels encircled by fire and sword…but yet more awful than the uproar were the sufferings. You would indeed have thought that the Temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame, but yet that the stream of blood was more copious than the flames and the slain more numerous than the slayers (*War* 6, 271–76).

Later, in the outer court of the Temple the victorious Roman troops offered a sacrifice to their standards (*War* 6, 316). This was not the only temple destroyed by the Romans. What is exceptional, and perhaps unique, is that the Jerusalem Temple was not restored, as often happened, and that the memory of its destruction has been preserved by Jews through the centuries.

The first question we would like to address is whether a harsh policy towards the Temple of Jerusalem had been consistently implemented by the Romans even before the summer of 70, or, as Josephus suggests, the destruction was accidental. He goes so far as to state that in

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1 On this sacrifice, which was a deliberate symbol of desecration, see Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, AD 66–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 238.

the council of war preceding the final assault, Titus had expressed the view that the Temple had to be saved.3 According to Josephus, Titus himself was not on the scene when the fire began: he was resting in his tent when one of the soldiers, awaiting no orders and with no horror of so dread a deed, but moved by some supernatural impulse, snatched a brand from the burning timber and, hoisted up by one of the comrades, flung the fiery missile through a low golden door, which gave access on the north side to the chambers surrounding the sanctuary (War 6, 252).

Only then did a messenger rush into his tent with the tidings, and Titus ran to the Temple to arrest the conflagration (War 6, 254). The events, however, took place so rapidly that the total destruction of the Temple was unavoidable.

Should we accept this picture? Certainly Josephus had his own good reasons for excusing Titus’ behavior and for presenting the War as having been caused by a small number of Jewish extremists on the one hand, and by the narrow policy of a few Roman local corrupt governors on the other hand, policy which is put in sharp contrast to that implemented by the central Roman governorship. Many details of Josephus’ account of the destruction of the Temple, however, cannot be taken at face value. Moreover, Josephus is contradicted by a later Christian source, Sulpicius Severus, who probably draws on a lost portion of Tacitus’ Histories. According to this source, in the council of war which preceded the final assault, Titus had expressly held the view that the Temple had to be destroyed.4 It is therefore questionable whether the destruction had been an unpredictable and accidental episode, as Josephus presents it.

In a way, however, Josephus was correct. No armed attack against the Jerusalem Temple had ever before been mounted by the Romans.

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3 Josephus has Titus declare that “even were the Jews to mount it (the Temple) and fight there from, he would not wreak vengeance on inanimate objects instead of men, nor under any circumstances burn down so magnificent a work; for the loss would affect the Romans, inasmuch as it would be an ornament to the empire if it stood” (War 6, 241).