Fractured Vision: Josephus and Tacitus on Triumph and Civil War

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After the War is Over

In the aftermath of a war, it might seem reasonable to infer that victors and defeated will experience polarised emotions: relief, pride and euphoria on one side, contrasted with bitterness, shame, and sadness on the other. In a Roman context, it was the visual splendour of the triumph which above all served as the focal point for such collective responses amongst the victors, particularly after 19 BCE, when full-blown triumphs were reserved for members of the imperial family.¹ The feelings engendered by that single glorious occasion were then further bolstered, both by erecting victory monuments and statues which immortalised the general’s achievements and promulgated the glory of Rome more permanently, and by crafting polished literary monumenta through res gestae and histories which kept the achievement alive long after the war had ended.² The result is a series of concentric celebratory circles, moving through time and space from the initial point of victory, all working together to foster long-lasting pride in national identity (provided that the defeated enemy was foreign, or conveniently recast as such).³

Yet the Flavian triumph of 71 CE, celebrated in Rome to mark (however misleadingly) the end of the Jewish war must have been viewed in an unusually

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² Thomas 2004: 24–6 comments usefully on how victory monuments ‘punctuated’ the history of Rome’s centre. See Ando 2000: 296–303 for more on victory monuments. Yet as Brilliant 1999: 212 reminds us, ‘Nothing, however, was so immediately felt, so spectacular, so visually and psychologically demanding as the celebration of the triumph itself’.

³ In the opposite direction, see Wardle 2011 for the evolution of a powerful strategy for handling military defeat (designating a military disaster by the commander’s name).
complex way even by the victorious Romans. Coming so soon after the self-destructive civil wars of 68–9 CE, perceptions of the Jewish War must have been filtered through contemporary experiences of the civil wars. At the very least, the suppression of the Jews, culturally so different from the Romans, potentially offered onlookers a refreshing distraction from the uncomfortable ‘mirroring’ between (all too similar) enemies which marked the civil wars. Here finally was an opportunity for Romans to feel good about themselves once again. Nonetheless, even if the fledgling Flavian dynasty was now directing Roman military might towards a superficially more appropriate target, contemporaries could hardly forget that before the Jewish war, the Flavians’ robust martial credentials had been bolstered by defeating fellow-Romans in Italy. Any celebration of the Roman victory in Judaea therefore was probably viewed in complex ways because of fresh memories of the internal conflict which brought Vespasian to power. In addition, after Judaea was annexed under Augustus in 6 CE, Jerusalem had been governed by a string of Roman procurators for decades before the rebellion of 66 CE. Vespasian was hardly celebrating a straightforward conquest over barbarian outsiders or the acquisition of fresh territory, even if his spectacular triumph deployed techniques of staging which were historically associated with precisely that sort of victory. We should remember too that under the early empire, one of the largest concentrations of Jews outside Judaea was in Rome itself, and the city had its own synagogues. If Jews were outsiders, at best they were the outsiders within.

All in all, a great deal was at stake for the new Flavian dynasty in celebrating this triumph. As Noreña observes, ‘A prominent announcement of foreign conquest—for that is how the Romans chose to represent the suppression of provincial rebellions against Roman rule—was also useful to Vespasian for publicizing the military credentials of the upstart dynasty, an important step in establishing the political legitimacy of the new regime’. Vespasian must have hoped that the triumph would prompt his fellow citizens to forget about the

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4 The Jewish war properly ended with the fall of Masada (Joseph. BJ 7.252–406) in either May 73 CE (Rajak 1983: 174) or May 74 CE (Cohen 1982: 401; Campbell 1988: 158). Cotton 1989 surveys the evidence for both dates. Either way, Masada fell significantly after the Flavian triumph.

5 See Curran 2005 for a historical survey of relations between Rome and Judaea.

6 See Williams 1998 on the structure and organisation of the Jewish community in Rome during this period. At Satire 1.9.69–70, Horace’s companion Fuscus alludes to a (possibly fictional) Jewish festival (the thirtieth Sabbath), which at the very least suggests that Jewish rituals were sufficiently well-known to be casually mentioned in conversation.

7 Noreña 2003: 35.