

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11327-5 - The Destruction of Jerusalem in Early Modern English Literature

Beatrice Groves

Excerpt

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Introduction

When Wegg has finished reading *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* for the edification of Mr Boffin in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, he embarks on 'the Wars of the Jews'.¹ The placing of Josephus's *Jewish War* alongside Gibbon in Mr Boffin's plan of reading suggests the, now lost, cachet of the work in Victorian London (probably everyone who knows *Our Mutual Friend* will remember that Wegg reads *Decline and Fall*, but most will have forgotten the recitation of *The Jewish War* which follows). The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by Titus and Vespasian in AD 70 is no longer part of the general British consciousness – one recent art historian even places Poussin's *Conquest of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus* among his 'most obscure subjects'² – but in the early modern period this was seen as one of the most important events in world history. The Christian Hebraist John Lightfoot wrote in 1655 of the fall of the Temple:

this desolation is phrased in Scripture as the desolating of the whole world . . . it will appear no wonder, if we consider that it was the destroying of the old peculiar Couenanted people; of the Lords own habitation . . . And a new world [as it were] now created, a new people made the Church, a new Oeconomy, and *Old things past, and all things become new*, 2 Cor.5.17. We are now upon a very remarkable and eminent Period: where should I write an Ecclesiasticall History, I should begin, as at the beginning of a new world.³

¹ Wegg reads 'Rollin's Ancient History' immediately after Gibbon, but when it is found to possess lethargic properties, he embarks on Josephus's *Jewish War*: Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 476.

² Jonathan Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting: Pictorial Narrative and the Legacy of Tasso* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 52.

³ John Lightfoot, *The Harmony, Chronicle and Order of the New Testament . . . With an Additional Discourse Concerning the Fall of Jerusalem and the Condition of the Jews in That Land Afterward* (London: Simon Miller, 1655), Aav (the square brackets are Lightfoot's own). See also the 'Chronology of Years, from the Creation, to the Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus Vespasian' appended to: John Lloyd, *A good help for weak Memories: Or, the Contents of every Chapter in the Bible in Alphabetical Dysticks* (London: Thomas Helder, 1671), 101–10.

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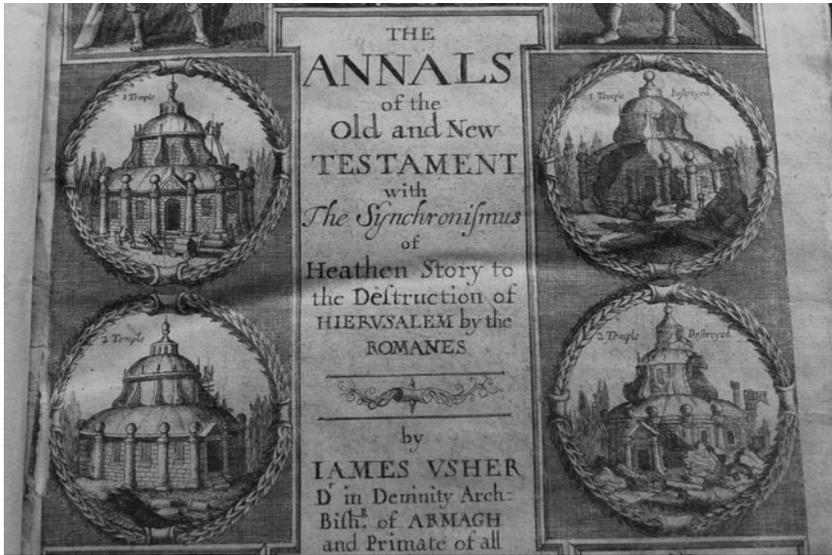


Figure 1 Image of the destruction of the first and second Temples on the title page of James Ussher, *The Annals of the World* (1658). The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, 361 Uss [fol.], frontispiece.

The foremost chronologer of the period, James Ussher, did indeed chart history in his *Annals of the World* (1658) from the origin of time to the destruction of Jerusalem (Figure 1). But while it remains a seminal event in Jewish studies, classics and theology, it is rarely mentioned by literary critics.⁴ It is only medieval texts on this topic – such as *The Siege of Jerusalem* (c. 1370–80) or the ‘Vengeance of Our Lord’ plays – which have generated book-length studies, and the references to renaissance texts in such works generally treat them as a dying coda to a medieval efflorescence.⁵ Louis Feldman states in his bibliography of Josephus that ‘very little has been written on the subject of Josephus’s influence on English literature, even though this influence had been vast and pervasive in almost every period’.⁶

⁴ For a major recent work in this field, see for example: Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

⁵ See: Bonnie Millar, *The Siege of Jerusalem in its Physical, Literary and Historical Contexts* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000); Suzanne Yeager, *Jerusalem in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Stephen Wright, *The Vengeance of Our Lord: Medieval Dramatisations of the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1989). The section in Wright’s book on renaissance English plays is entitled ‘The Final Echo: The Vengeance of Our Lord in England’ (190).

⁶ Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937–1980)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 862.

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For Dickens the *Jewish War* remained at the heart of the canon. Even more telling is that Dickens calls Josephus's work 'the Wars of the Jews'. Josephus's original title is ἱστορία ἰουδαϊκοῦ πολέμου πρὸς ῥωμαίους ('the history of the Jewish war against the Romans'⁷). Flavius Josephus was a Romanised Jew, a client of Titus, and his title indicates that his work records the Flavian triumph in Judea (just as Caesar's *Gallic Wars* had recorded the Roman victory in Gaul). A work written from a purely Jewish perspective would have been called 'the Roman War', but the slight semantic change from 'the Jewish war against the Romans' to 'the Wars of the Jews' encodes a fundamental change of perspective: Josephus's text was read in Protestant England as a document of Jewish, rather than Roman, history.⁸

Prior to the Reformation, the fall of Jerusalem had been understood by Christians as a narrative about God's vengeance for the Crucifixion and Rome's glory.⁹ The Roman Catholic Church fostered belief in the continuity between the authority of pagan and Christian Rome (through, for example, the Donation of Constantine, which claimed that the papacy had inherited the emperor's land and authority in the West).¹⁰ In popular Catholic accounts of the fall of Jerusalem – such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* – Christian Rome was projected back 200 years prior to the conversion of Constantine. Vespasian became a Christian convert who besieged Jerusalem as an act of retribution for the Crucifixion. The popular versions of the story that circulated in Middle English were influenced by a number of continental models – the eighth-century *Vindicta Salvatoris*, the eleventh-century *De Pylato* and twelfth-century *La Venjanse Nostre Seigneur* – which fused the story of the fall of Jerusalem with the Veronica

⁷ *Josephus: The Jewish War*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). All subsequent references to *The Jewish War* are to this edition; translations will be from: *The Famous and Memorable Workes of Iosephus*, trans. Thomas Lodge (London: Simon Waterson, 1620) (hereafter 'Lodge').

⁸ Dickens takes the title given to Josephus's work in nineteenth-century editions of William Whiston's influential translation: *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1864). There were numerous nineteenth-century printings of this work; this edition came out in the year of *Our Mutual Friend*'s serialisation.

⁹ As David M. Olster argues: 'Vespasian's victory over the Jews was a sign that even when pagan, the Romans were God's chosen people, and that the destruction of Jerusalem foreshadowed the Romans' greater glory to come as Christians': *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 32–3. In Gregory Nazianzenus's play *The Passion of Christ* Mary predicts the fall of Jerusalem and declares that after this punishment of the Jews, God will transfer his favour to 'another nation': Grégoire de Nazianze, *La passion du Christ: Tragédie*, ed. André Tuiler (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969), ll. 1565–7.

¹⁰ Jean Gaudemet, 'Donation of Constantine', in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. André Vauchez, Barrie Dobson and Michael Lapidge, trans. Adrian Walford, 2 vols. (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2000), vol. 1, 445.

legend.¹¹ In this legend Vespasian is healed and converted by St Veronica and her famous relic of the Passion (the Vernicle). The Roman siege of Jerusalem is transformed from a political act – the suppression of a revolt – into one motivated by faith: ‘it is good and right to avenge the shame and gret iniurie that thei haue done to Iesu Crist’.¹² The fifteenth-century *Siege of Jerusalem in Prose* clearly illustrates the Christianising myths that became attached to Josephus’s history: it interweaves the stories of the mission of Nathan, Veronica’s cure of Vespasian and the death of Pilate with its narrative of the destruction of Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s tragedy is set within a narrative frame of a miraculous cure and conversion which links the hegemony of classical Rome with that of the Roman Catholic faith.

While the Catholic identification with Rome fostered an interpretation of Titus and Vespasian as heroic avatars of Christian crusaders, Protestant antagonism to Rome encouraged identification with their enemies. In T. D.’s popular poem *Canaan’s Calamity, Jerusalem’s Misery and England’s Mirror* (1618) the Roman general is no longer a ‘wurthy knight’¹³ but one who ‘seeks this Holy City to defile’.¹⁴ Samuel Rolle ends a long comparison of Jerusalem’s fall and the Great Fire of London with the suggestion that ‘*Jerusalem* was set on fire, by *Romans*: and, as is strongly suspected, *By Romanists* too was *London* burnt’.¹⁵ Later in the seventeenth century Gilbert Burnet (preaching on Luke 19.41–42) found specific parallels between the actions of the Roman attack on Jerusalem and James II’s attempt to regain the English throne:

This was certainly such a Day of Visitation, as *Cestius Gallus* his shewing the Roman Army was to *Jerusalem*. The *Jews* did not any more fear that Enemy, because they had strength enough once to stand it out against so faint an Attempt; but the next return of the Romans was more formidable and proved in Conclusion fatal to them. If we . . . grow to have milder Thoughts of our Enemies the modern Romans . . . we may be soon undeceived.¹⁶

¹¹ For more on these and other sources, see: *The Siege of Jerusalem in Prose*, ed. Auvo Kurvinen (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1969), 13–19.

¹² *The ME Prose Translation of Roger d’Argenteuil’s Bible en françois*, ed. Phyllis Moe (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1977), 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ T. D., *Canaan’s Calamity, Jerusalem’s Misery and England’s Mirror* (London: Thomas Sharp, n.d.), C3v. This poem is of uncertain authorship, but is generally now attributed to Thomas Deloney.

¹⁵ Samuel Rolle, *Shlohavot, or, The burning of London in the year 1666* (London: Nathaniel Ranew and Jonathan Robinson, 1667), 182 (mispaginated as 821).

¹⁶ Gilbert Burnet, *A Sermon Preached at Bow-Church, before the Court of Aldermen, on March 12, 1689/90* (London: Richard Chiswell, 1690), 14–15.

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These texts overtly parallel England's Protestants with the besieged Jews, and the first-century Roman aggressors with the Catholic powers – 'the modern Romans'.

Many early modern texts on the fall of Jerusalem cluster around times of plague when Josephus's history, with its combination of terrifying admonition and memorably grotesque stories, promoted cohesion in a society fracturing under the pressure of a contagious disease.¹⁷ The situation of England and, more especially, London in the late sixteenth century – besieged by internal pressures of famine and plague and externally by the threat of Catholic invasion from abroad – encouraged the telling of the history of the siege of Jerusalem, but it also altered the way the story was perceived. A perception of Protestant England as a nation likewise vulnerable to (Roman) invasion promoted identification with the besieged Jews.¹⁸

Despite the constantly evolving dynamic of theological opinion in the late Elizabethan and seventeenth-century Church, Protestant Englishmen from very different theological and political backgrounds responded to this history in strikingly similar ways. The destruction of Jerusalem transcended the boundaries of genre in early modern England: it was recounted by travel writers, pored over by scholars, expounded by poets, enjoyed by the semi-literate audiences of puppet shows and ballad-peddars, preached from Paul's Cross in the heart of London and played out on the stages which peppered the suburbs. The attitude to Josephus's history demonstrates a striking homogeneity across these genres. Preachers, poets and players reworked the history of Jerusalem's fall under the influence of the *zeitgeist*: national pride tempered by anxiety in an England confident of God's favour yet beleaguered in a predominantly Catholic Europe. The preachers at Paul's Cross and the didactic entertainers who wrote ballads, pamphlets and plays on this theme were all drawn by the emotionally compelling drama of the catastrophe and the moral which they argued it held for the contemporary audience.

In contradistinction to the medieval and continental versions of the story, these retellings connect the audience with the judgment meted out on those within the besieged city. The focus of the story switches from victorious Romans to suffering Jews, and triumphalism is replaced by an uneasy

¹⁷ See: Beatrice Groves, 'Laughter in the Time of Plague: A Context for the Unstable Style of Nashe's *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem*', *Studies in Philology* 108.2 (2011): 238–60.

¹⁸ In reformed propaganda the persecutions of the papacy were identified with those of pagan Rome: Katharine R. Frith, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 36ff.

empathy. The history of the destruction of Jerusalem ties together different strands of the literary expression of English Protestantism – popular and elite, radical and conservative – in their shared desire to embody the New Jerusalem, and their shared perception of the difficulties that menaced this task.

Despite being overlooked by critical studies of the early modern period, the Roman fall of Jerusalem was a moment in history that held immense sway over the early modern imagination. George Herbert wrote that Jesus' prediction of the destruction, and Josephus's confirmation of it, were among the strongest proofs of Christ's divinity:

The destruction of *Jerusalem*; of which our Saviour said, that that generation should not passe, till all were fulfilled, *Luke* 21. 32. Which *Josephus's* History confirmeth, and the continuance of which verdict is yet evident . . . Now a prophesie is a wonder sent to Posterity, least they complaine of want of wonders. It is a letter sealed, and sent, which to the bearer is but paper, but to the receiver, and opener, is full of power. Hee that saw Christ open a blind mans eyes, saw not more Divinity than he that . . . sees *Jerusalem* destroyed.¹⁹

The destruction of Jerusalem was read in the early modern period as 'a letter sealed, and sent' to posterity, both in the sense that its full meaning was not understood until that time, but also because it was a message to the faithful of the future. The message contained in the fall of Jerusalem concerns Christ's divinity, but it is also an admonition to the faithful of God in every age to fly from sin 'else *Jerusalem's* punishment may be also yours'.²⁰ As Thomas Nashe admonished in 1593, '*London*, looke to thy selfe, for the woes that were pronounced to *Jerusalem* are pronounced to thee. Thou, transgressing as grievously as shee, shalt be punished as grievously.'²¹

The Destruction of Jerusalem in Early Modern English Literature addresses the way that early modern literature's response to the fall of Jerusalem was conditioned by, and elucidates, England's sense of itself. As James Shapiro has influentially argued, 'the English turned to Jewish questions in order to answer English ones'.²² John Lawrence's sermon *A Golden Trumpet* (1624) declares:

¹⁹ *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 282–3. See also: Thomas Tenison, *The Creed of Mr Hobbes Examined; In a feigned Conference Between Him, and a Student in Divinity* (London: Francis Tyton, 1670), 231.

²⁰ Nathan Vincent, *The Day of Grace* [. . .] (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1669), 5.

²¹ *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow and F. P. Wilson, 5 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), vol. II, 112. All subsequent references to Nashe are to this edition.

²² James S. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

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If the Iewes so smart, Gods eldest sons, what shall the Gentiles looke for, his youngest seruants? I dare boldly say, and that with a reioycing heart, that England yet enjoyes the speciall presence of the Lord . . . [but] iniquity growes so fast, that it hath couwed the whole Land . . . [and] drawes teares afresh from the eyes of the Sonne of God, and makes him for want of a *Ierusalem* to weepe ouer *London*, as though it would proue a second *Ierusalem*, to crucifie his body againe.²³

The destruction of Jerusalem had long fascinated English readers, but in the early modern period there was a subtle shift in its application.

This study brings a new perspective to the interaction of early modern literature with the culture of its time. Part I (Chapters 1 to 3) will look widely at the destruction of Jerusalem in early modern literary, dramatic, theological and visual culture, before bringing this analysis to bear on specific readings of canonical texts in Part II (Chapters 4 to 7).

The opening chapter argues for a change of perspective between medieval and early modern treatments of the fall of Jerusalem. It demonstrates that while the medieval version of the story celebrates a Romano-Christian triumph over a place and people believed to be guilty of the Crucifixion, early modern accounts draw their audience into recognising kinship with the stricken citizens of Jerusalem. The popular medieval ‘Vengeance of Our Lord’ version of the history was reformulated, and an identification with God’s people replaced the complacent reading of the Jews as the righteously destroyed ‘other’. Protestantism’s enthusiasm for origins – for Hebrew, the Old Testament and the early church – created a new responsiveness to Judaism which is reflected in, and perhaps fostered by, a more nuanced and empathetic reading of the fall of Jerusalem.

The second chapter argues for evidence of this empathetic approach in theatrical representations of the destruction. It illustrates a fundamental shift, amidst other performative continuities, between medieval and early modern dramatic responses to Jews. This chapter presents evidence from the three extant Jerusalem plays, and analysis of the performance records of Coventry’s lost 1584 play, to argue that these Jerusalem plays, through encouraging audiences to empathise with the citizens of Jerusalem, challenge the critical consensus which views ‘the stage Jew’ of this period as a comic villain.

The third chapter argues for the relatedness between early modern sermons and plays about the destruction of Jerusalem. It argues for the performative aspects of destruction sermons, and drama that draws on the

²³ John Lawrence, *A Golden Trumpet, to Rouse Vp a Drowsie Magistrate . . . Drawne from Christs Coming to, Beholding of, and Weeping Ouer Hierusalem* (London: John Haviland, 1624), C2r–3v.

preacherly habit of finding parallels between Jews and Englishmen. This evidence for a shared outlook between pulpit and stage complicates and challenges traditional critical understandings of the relationship between the two genres, and draws out some underlying connections in the way that both genres reconciled admonition with entertainment and communicated moral truths through a performative medium. The destruction of Jerusalem – arguably the most important world event attested in detail by both scriptural and non-scriptural texts – holds the unique position of a topic which could be fully explored by both pulpit and stage. Players performed irreproachably secular Josephan history without relinquishing the unique power of biblical narrative, while preachers were able to illustrate the relatively sparse biblical account of the siege with lurid and affecting Josephan detail.

The second part of the book will look at specific, canonical texts in more detail. It begins with Chapter 4, an analysis of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* which argues that its reference to the destruction of Jerusalem is evidence for that play's exploration of the cultural imperialism of Christianity towards its Jewish precursor. It contends that Barabas's catalogue of loss metonymises the Christian appropriation of Judaism's claim to be the chosen faith. Barabas notes that it was the fall of Jerusalem which first enabled Christians to claim the ascendancy, but in doing so he is articulating a distinctively Christian idea. Barabas's reading of the destruction of Jerusalem as a foundational event for the Christian Church is an example of what New Historicists have read as Marlowe's 'Christianising' of Barabas's identity. The extortion practiced on Barabas, and his submersion in the Christian culture in which he lives, sublimates the Christian appropriation of the ideological wealth of the Jews. In creating a Jewish protagonist who cannot identify himself without invoking Christian scripture nor express himself except through Christian concepts, Marlowe performs an ironic reversal of the truth that Christianity found its identity through the terms of its predecessor and its texts.

The fifth chapter argues that, after the Armada, the typological parallel between Romans besieging first-century Jerusalem and Roman Catholics laying siege to England was widely exploited. Josephus's conservative reading of the fall of Jerusalem as a story about the necessity of unity was strikingly popular in the dominant discourse of the period (frequently reiterated, for example, in episcopal sermons). In Shakespeare's *King John*, however, Josephus's cautionary tale is presented in an unconventional way. Although the Bastard ends Shakespeare's play with a ringing endorsement of unity, his Josephan reference at the siege of Angiers exposes the

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self-serving way that the discourse of power quashes dissent. The Bastard in *King John* is a character who challenges the orthodoxies of Shakespeare's time and, as an illegitimate newcomer on the stage of state, questions the rhetoric of power. The Bastard dramatises the radical idea that those who rebelled against conformity could yet be passionate in their fidelity to the English crown. This chapter, by revealing the unique aspect of the Bastard's allusion to Jerusalem's united factions, sheds new light on *King John*'s subversive questioning of the rhetoric of religious and political control.

The sixth chapter looks at the relationship between this trope and London's proud designation as the New Jerusalem. Protestantism, which found its first and foremost following in urban centres, was drawn to Josephus's history of urban apocalypse. Early modern writers explored the conditions of city life through the history of Jerusalem's siege. This chapter explores the presentation of Miriam in Nashe's *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem* and Dekker's plague pamphlets, and argues that she is a figure through which these writers explore anxiety about the growth of England's metropolis.

The final chapter argues that the way that Milton utilises the history of the destruction of Jerusalem undergoes a radical change between his 1640s pamphlets and *Paradise Lost*. It ceases to form a parallel which London must resist and is transformed into a Christian counterpart to the fall of Troy (a symbol of devastation that is followed by renewal). The allusions to the Roman siege of Jerusalem in *Paradise Lost* imbue destruction with hope of renewal, for the rejection of the earthly city enables a more wholehearted desire for the New Jerusalem. For Milton, the fall of the old Jerusalem (like the destruction of Eden and the failure of revolutionary London) can be understood as regenerative if it enables a more profound engagement with spiritual truth. Early modern Englishmen understood the destruction of the Temple as divine repudiation of the physical aspects of worship. The fall of Jerusalem, for Milton, underscored the warning against place-centred worship implicit in the loss of Eden, and through it Milton's epic – his dreams of a holy commonwealth in tatters – seeks to understand the regenerative possibilities of loss.

The conclusion considers in greater detail a thesis which underlies this work: that anti-Semitism in the early modern period, though it remained pervasive, was nuanced through the Protestant identification with Israel. It argues in particular for the decrease in the power of the blood libel and for positive depictions of contemporary Jews in early modern texts. *The Destruction of Jerusalem in Early Modern English Literature* brings a new perspective to this argument through illustrating one neglected but detailed literary engagement with post-biblical Jews. To attend to the destruction

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of Jerusalem is to pay attention to the moment when the biblical history of the Jews ended: its protagonists are not patriarchs, living prior to the Incarnation, but precisely those who traditionally stood accused of rejecting Christ. The early modern response to the destruction of Jerusalem is part of a new English identification with post-biblical Jews, and a change in attitude towards these Jews responded to, and enabled, a change in mindset towards contemporary Jewry.