

The Age of Jesus

In 1906 Albert Schweitzer solemnly declared the quest for the historical Jesus to be an unattainable task, yet despite his eloquent funeral oration the Jesus of history has refused to lie down or disappear. In fact, with the exception of a handful of inveterate doubters, most present day scholars go to the other extreme and take the existence of Jesus so much for granted that they do not bother to inquire into the meaning of historicity. Yet the truth is that Jesus and the movement which arose in his wake did not exist *in vacuo*: they were integral parts of first-century Jewish society, a society formed by the forces and influences of previous generations and by the impact of Hellenism and of the political power of Rome. These Jewish and Graeco-Roman influences interacted and created the matrix out of which Christianity emerged.

The purpose of this book is to make the reader aware of the amalgam of ideas, inspirations and impulses that penetrated the age of Jesus.¹ To achieve this purpose in a vivid fashion, I have chosen to present a series of biographical vignettes. The wider world will be made tangible through the depiction of individuals, who in their various ways were influential in the making of history. *Who's Who in the Age of Jesus* portrays personalities from the New Testament, from the works of first-century Jewish writers, from rabbinic literature and from the sources of Graeco-Roman history. These personalities occasionally appear in various records. Rulers of Judaea, Jewish leaders and Roman dignitaries such as Herod the Great, Antipas, Annas and Caiaphas, Gamaliel the Elder, Augustus, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, etc., are mentioned in the New Testament, and some New Testament characters (Jesus, John the Baptist, James the brother of the Lord) make a

fleeting appearance in Josephus and in the accounts of Roman historians like Tacitus. Other Jewish characters like Hillel the Elder, Honi and Hanina ben Dosa, Jesus son of Ananias, who are recorded in Josephus or in rabbinic literature, shed important light on the Gospel story. In consequence, a multi-pronged approach to the age of Jesus promises to open up unexpected fresh vistas.

The broader scope thus conceived demands also an elastic definition of the time scale of the inquiry. The net will be cast wider than the presumed life span of Jesus (c. 6/5 BCE–30 CE). One reasonable starting point would be the Maccabean revolution against the Seleucid (Syrian) Greek Empire in the 160s BCE, when Jews first experienced religious persecution. The forceful and ultimately successful Jewish resistance to Hellenistic tyranny led to the creation of an independent Jewish state, which was governed for the best part of a century (152–63 BCE) by the priestly family of the Maccabees-Hasmonaeans. However, to call 150 years of the pre-Christian era the age of Jesus seems something of an exaggeration. Hence it is preferable to choose instead the next significant watershed in Jewish-international history, the switch from the Seleucid-Greek to the Roman rule in Palestine, inaugurated in 63 BCE by Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem. This happened less than two generations before the birth of Jesus. The ideal finishing line would lie roughly two generations after the crucifixion. However, the absence of any remarkable event in the closing years of the first century CE prompts one to opt for the end of the second Jewish uprising against Rome in 135 CE. These two boundary posts encompass one of the very crucial periods of the intellectual and religious history of the western world.

The 200 years in question can neatly be divided into five stages.

- 1 From Pompey to the end of the Hasmonaeon priestly rule (63–37 BCE).
- 2 The reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BCE) and the birth of Jesus; Herod Archelaus (4 BCE–6 CE); Roman prefects (6–41 CE), Herod Antipas (4 BCE–39 CE) – the public ministry and death of Jesus (29–30 CE).

- 3 Agrippa I (41–44 CE); Roman procurators (44–66 CE); First rebellion (66–70 [73/4] CE) – the beginnings of Judaeo-Christianity and career of St Paul.
- 4 From the fall of Jerusalem to the end of the second rebellion under Hadrian (70–135 CE) – the departure of Christianity from its Jewish social setting.

The Rise and Glory of the Hasmonaeans (164 – 67 BCE)

After two and a half centuries of Babylonian and Persian domination, followed by Greek overlordship introduced by Alexander the Great's conquest of the Near and Middle East, in 164 BCE the Jews recovered their independence and complete self-government owing to their successful armed resistance to the cultural and religious Hellenization imposed on them by the Greek monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE). The Hasmonaean Jewish priestly family of Mattathias and his sons, surnamed the Maccabees, triumphed over the Seleucids of Syria and restored the Jewish worship, which had temporarily been transformed by Antiochus into the cult of Olympian Zeus, whose statue he had installed in the holy place in Jerusalem. The upheaval caused by the Hellenists aided and abetted by Jewish upper class allies inaugurated a feverish anticipation of the final age, of the eschatological and apocalyptic era, which was expected to culminate in the arrival of the final Redeemer, the king Messiah, foretold by the biblical prophets and anxiously awaited by the pious Jews who were dreaming of freedom under God. The victorious Judas Maccabaeus (164–161 BCE) and his brother Jonathan (161–143/2 BCE) defeated the enemy and restored a Jewish state. Jonathan, though not a scion of the sacerdotal dynasty which held the pontificate since the time of King David, proclaimed himself high priest in 153/2 BCE, and Simon, another of the Maccabee brothers, established himself as hereditary religious and political head of the Jewish nation in 143/2 BCE.

His son John Hyrcanus I (135/4–104 BCE) and John's successors, Judas Aristobulus I (104–3 BCE) and Jonathan or Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE) extended the frontiers of the new Jewish

state and compelled the neighbouring peoples, the Idumaeans in the south and the various foreign clans in and around Galilee, to recognize them as their rulers and embrace Judaism as their religion. This entailed submission to circumcision as far as the male population was concerned. Their Judaizing missionary activity did not stop these Hasmonaean priest kings from practising harsh secular tyranny at home. Alexander Jannaeus is in particular notorious for his cruelty in wreaking vengeance on his political opponents, the Pharisees. He ordered 800 of them to be crucified while he and his mistresses, eating, drinking and merrymaking, were mesmerized by the unholy spectacle.

On Alexander's death his widow, the pious Shelamzion or Alexandra Salome, a great friend of the Pharisees, occupied the royal throne with her elder son, John Hyrcanus II inheriting the high priesthood (76–67 BCE). His more vigorous and envious younger brother Judas Aristobulus II was however determined to dispossess him of his office. When Queen Alexandra died, civil war broke out between the two priestly rivals and with the ensuing conflict opens a new era leading to the age of Jesus.

From Pompey to the End of the Hasmonaean Priestly Rule (63–37 BCE)

The attempt by Aristobulus II to unseat Hyrcanus II, the legitimate holder of the high priesthood, and the forceful riposte by Hyrcanus, backed by the clever Idumaeen strong man Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, and the Nabataean king Aretas III, formed the preamble to the Roman invasion of Judaea by Pompey in 63 BCE. The trio of Hyrcanus, Antipater and Aretas laid siege to Jerusalem where Aristobulus was forced to withdraw. The innocent victim of the battle was the renowned miracle working man of God, Honi, whom the partisans of Hyrcanus stoned to death for refusing to put a curse on Aristobulus and his party. Here we are faced with a politically motivated murder with religious undercurrents. The trend repeated itself in the case of John the Baptist, Jesus, James, the brother of the Lord and others.

The stalemate between the two forces induced both Aristobulus and Hyrcanus to ask for Pompey's intervention. Each hoped to find favour with him. Instead, Pompey, accompanied by the army of his general Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, conquered Jerusalem and without further ado they turned the Hasmonaean state into the Roman province of Judaea. Hyrcanus was reinstalled in the high priesthood, but the title of king was removed from him, while the deposed Aristobulus was sent to Rome as a prisoner. A little later he escaped and began to organize resistance to Rome at home, but he was soon arrested and returned to captivity in the imperial capital. At the start of the Roman civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, Caesar released him as he saw in Aristobulus a potential ally, but the Jewish leader was poisoned by Pompey's partisans before he could set sail and support Caesar in Syria.

After the battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE, where Pompey was defeated, Hyrcanus and Antipater switched their allegiance to the victor. Caesar, who generally showed himself sympathetic to the Jews both in Palestine and in the diaspora, rewarded them by reappointing Hyrcanus II as nominal head of state or ethnarch of the Jews and placing the administration of the province in the hands of the Idumaeen Antipater, who shared his duties with his two sons, Phasael and Herod.

While governor of Galilee, the young Herod overstepped the boundaries of legality and ordered without trial the execution of the rebel leader Ezechias and his men. He was summoned before the Jewish Sanhedrin, but with Roman help and the connivance of Hyrcanus, the president of the court, Herod escaped conviction and was confirmed in his position by Caesar's colleague Mark Antony, the Roman plenipotentiary in the eastern Mediterranean provinces. In 40 BCE the mighty Iranian tribe of the Parthians invaded Judaea and gave their patronage to Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus II, and a rival of Hyrcanus II. On his coins, Antigonus called himself high priest and king. To ensure his position as high priest, he maimed his uncle Hyrcanus, apparently by biting off one of his ears, with a view to making him unfit to act as a pontiff. However, the ephemeral rule of Antigonus came to an end in 37 BCE, when the Romans captured and beheaded him by order

of Antony, who in 40 BCE had already nominated Herod as king of Judaea. In 37 BCE, after his conquest of Jerusalem with the helping hand of Sosius, the Roman governor of Syria and of his legions, Herod, the Idumaeen upstart, actually became the ruler of the Jewish nation and terminated the century-long dominion of the Maccabaeen-Hasmonaeen dynasty.

The Reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BCE) – The Birth of Jesus (c. 6/5 BCE)

The reign of Herod covers the decades of Jewish history which directly open the ‘age of Jesus’, who was born shortly before Herod died. The friendly Roman oversight of the government of Judaea and the iron fist of the new monarch substantially affected the Jewish society in which Jesus lived. Herod was a cross between a genius and a monster; he was a master tight-rope-walker whose steps seem to have constantly been protected by Fortune. His climb to power was hard. Suspect as the protégé of the Roman Mark Antony, Herod was first looked on with suspicious eyes by the Jews, but he managed to gain their approval thanks to the help of Pharisees, whose leaders, Samaias and Pollion, spoke up for him out of gratitude for sparing their lives when Herod took revenge on the judges of the Sanhedrin who had tried him in Galilee. The clever king also succeeded in softening the opposition of the pro-Hasmonaeen Sadducee upper classes, for whom he was no more than a ‘half-Jew’, by marrying the Jewish princess Mariamme, the granddaughter of the ethnarch and high priest Hyrcanus II. In addition to the Pharisees and Sadducees, Herod was also on good terms with the Essenes, a by then long-established community, first mentioned in Josephus in mid-second century BCE. They owed this favourable treatment to the prophecy of the Essene Menahem who foretold Herod’s elevation to the kingship of Judaea. With the death of Antigonus and Hyrcanus II, the Hasmonaeen hereditary pontificate came to an end and Herod, being the secular head of state, arrogated to himself the right to appoint and dismiss Jewish high priests. This right was granted

in New Testament times to his grandsons, Agrippa I and Agrippa II, by the emperor, and exercised in the meantime by the Roman governors of Judaea between 6 and 41 CE.

To secure his position, Herod had to ensure friendly relations with Rome and overcome the continuing hostility of some members of the Hasmonaean family. Remaining on good terms with Mark Antony became rather tricky because of the influence of Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen, on Herod's patron. This *femme fatale*, first the lover and later the wife of Antony, had cast an envious eye on the Judaeian kingdom. Herod succeeded in minimizing his territorial losses, only some coastal towns and the area of Jericho were annexed to Egypt, while briefly contemplating, but wisely abandoning, the idea of a love affair with Cleopatra which he thought might provide him with an opportunity to get rid of her. The deteriorating relationship between Antony and Octavian, the future Augustus, created a new dilemma for Herod, but with his customary good luck he contrived to gain first the trust and later the close friendship of Augustus.

His feud with the Hasmonaean royalty was harder to settle as it was kept alive by the continuous intrigues of the female members of the court led by the king's Idumaeian mother Cyprus and his sister Salome on the one hand and, on the other, his Hasmonaean wife Mariamme, with whom he was passionately in love, and her mother Alexandra. The outcome was bloody for the Hasmonaeans. The long list of family members executed by Herod include his beloved wife Mariamme and her two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus; her brother, the young high priest Aristobulus III, drowned in an arranged swimming pool accident; Mariamme's mother and her old grandfather, the harmless former high priest Hyrcanus II. The king's sister Salome also used her brother's good services to get rid of three of her husbands, one of them Herod's own uncle. Nevertheless, shortly after the execution in 4 BCE of Antipater, Herod's eldest son by the first of his ten wives, Salome and her fourth husband frustrated the dying king's final mad murder project by setting free a large group of Jewish notables whom they had been instructed by Herod to assassinate on his death so

as to guarantee widespread mourning at the moment of the royal funeral in 4 BCE.

Herod the Murderer, a suitable model for the man who stands behind the Gospel legend of the massacre of the innocents, was nonetheless also Herod the Great. His foreign policy was outstandingly successful despite the fluctuations of fortune in the Roman world, and he was quite often solicitous and generous towards his Jewish subjects too. He went so far as to introduce substantial tax cuts to help the national economy after the severe famine of 25 BCE! He was a great promoter of Greek culture and, above all, he excelled in grandiose building projects at home and abroad. Among his achievements with New Testament relevance should be mentioned the construction of the port and the city of Caesarea, named after Caesar Augustus, the seat of the Roman governors of Judaea in the first century CE where St Paul spent two years in prison. He restored the city of Samaria and renamed it *Sebaste*, again in honour of Augustus. He erected a pagan temple in Caesarea Philippi, the city where the apostle Peter was to confess the Messiahship of Jesus. But above all, his greatest architectural memorial was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem sanctuary, known as Herod's Temple, some of whose remains, especially the Western or Wailing Wall, still stand today.

The life of Jesus began in the closing years of the reign of Herod the Great; this is one of the few points on which the Infancy Gospels of Matthew and Luke agree. But the main events which happened during the final year of Jesus' career (29/30 CE) belong to the next period of Jewish history.

Herod Archelaus – Herod Antipas – Roman prefects (4 BCE–41 CE) – The Public Career and Death of Jesus (29/30 CE)

Jesus did not bring peace into his world. His early years coincided with quarrels about who would be the heir of Herod and with political turmoil caused by a series of uprisings. The succession, confused by contradictory wills of the dying king, was decided by Augustus: the realm was divided into three parts among the surviving sons of Herod with Archelaus being put in charge of Judaea, Idumaea and

Samaria (4 BCE– 6 CE), Antipas of Galilee (4 BCE–39 CE), and Philip of the territories north and east of Galilee (4 BCE–33/4 CE). None of them inherited the royal title. Archelaus was made an ethnarch and the other two were given the lower rank of tetrarch. But while the settlement was still in the making, the death of the strong ruler encouraged revolutionary forces to come into the open. The Peraean Simon, the giant shepherd, Athronges, and especially Judas' son Ezechias revolted, but they were soon overcome by the army of Archelaus and especially by the legions of Varus, the Roman governor of Syria, who after crushing the rebellion crucified 2,000 Jewish revolutionaries outside Jerusalem, thus foreshadowing the harsher times to come in the first century CE.

No doubt this same Judas from Gamala, nicknamed Judas the Galilean, raised again the flag of rebellion in 6 CE, when as a preliminary to the annexation of Judaea as a Roman province after Archelaus's dismissal, Quirinius, the governor of Syria, organized a property registration with a view to reassessing taxes. This is the census of 6 CE, the date of which is clearly stated by the Jewish historian Josephus. Quirinius's census is the event that the Gospel of Luke wrongly places to the reign of Herod the Great in association with the legendary journey of the parents of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The uprising of Judas the Galilean petered out, but the Zealot movement, which he launched in association with a Pharisee called Zadok, persisted throughout the next 60 years; it was responsible for most of the subsequent political unrest among Jews, and culminated in the catastrophic war, which between 66 and 70 CE devastated the country and destroyed Jerusalem together with all the Jewish state institutions. The eschatological discourse attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 13; Matt. 24; Luke 21) is the echo of those dreadful events.

In 6 CE the political landscape of Palestine underwent a marked change. Galilee, where Jesus was growing up, continued its apparent political independence. As long as its ruler Herod Antipas maintained peace and paid his tribute to the emperor, he was allowed to rule unmolested. In Judaea, by contrast, after the deposition and banishment of Archelaus the government of the country was transferred to a Roman prefect, appointed by the emperor.

Rome in general preferred to delegate administrative power (the keeping of the peace and the collection of taxes) to the Jewish ruling classes, the chief priests and the Sanhedrin. Rome also abstained from direct interference with Jewish religious life. Indirectly the extensive powers of Roman governors included the appointment and dismissal of Jewish high priests. Most of them remained in office only for a short period, one year or a couple of years, with the exception of two, both of whom played an important part in the trial of Jesus: the former high priest Annas (6–15 CE) and his son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas, who sat on the pontifical throne from 18 to 36/7 CE. Annas interrogated Jesus and Caiaphas delivered him to Pilate. The Roman governors kept also the vestments of the high priest under their custody and thereby controlled the functions, which required the wearing of certain ceremonial robes. The Pharisee teachers, mostly active in Jerusalem and in the Judaeen cities, enjoyed full freedom. Three famous masters, Hillel, some of whose ideas are reflected in the teaching of Jesus, Shammai, Hillel's opposite number, and Gamaliel the Elder, who is mentioned with approval in the Acts of the Apostles, flourished during the life time of Jesus in the early decades of the first century CE. There is no doubt that the ascetic Essenes, described by the writers Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, and represented by the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, were pursuing their reclusive religious existence at Qumran and elsewhere. They influenced Jewish life more by their fame and moral authority than by direct impact: the instruction of non-members was forbidden by their rules. Nevertheless their community may have served as a model for the organization of the first Christian church in Jerusalem, which like the Essene sect described by Josephus, Philo, Pliny the Elder and the Community Rule of Qumran, lived out of a common kitty administered by the apostles. Some of the charismatic rain makers and healers-exorcists like the grandsons of Honi, Abba Hilkiah and Hanan, and the Galilean man of God Hanina ben Dosa, also belonged to the same century, and lived in the period preceding the first Jewish war.

The public activity of Jesus neatly fits into the reign of the emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE). It occurred during the governorship of Pon-

tius Pilate (26–36 CE) and the high priesthood of Caiaphas (18–36/7 CE). According to Luke, John the Baptist appeared on the scene in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (29 CE), and was soon followed by Jesus. Of the two great Jewish authors of the first century CE, Philo (20 BCE–40 CE) was Jesus' contemporary and Flavius Josephus (37–c. 100 CE) belonged to the next generation, which witnessed the beginnings of the Jewish-Christian community. The information about John the Baptist and Jesus contained in the *Jewish Antiquities* of Flavius Josephus, which sometimes does, and sometimes does not tally with the story contained in the Gospels, is judged authentic by the best scholarly opinion of today.

By the end of this period (41 CE), Augustus and Tiberius were already gone, but the insane Gaius Caligula was still there to make a nuisance of himself in Jewish affairs by insisting that his statue be installed in the Temple of Jerusalem and that he should be venerated as a god. Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate were simultaneously sacked by the Romans and sent to exile in southern France. Caiaphas was also removed from the high priesthood. The leadership of the Christian movement in Judaea was in the hands of Peter and James the brother of the Lord, soon to be dominated outside the Land of Israel by the towering figure of Saul of Tarsus, St Paul. The Jesus movement was still rooted in Palestinian Jewish society, but was almost ready for a unilateral declaration of independence and for devoting itself to the evangelization of the Gentile world in the Roman Empire.

Agrippa I – Roman Procurators – First Rebellion (41–73/4 CE) – The Beginnings of Judaeo-Christianity and Career of St Paul

The period from the Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great who was appointed king of the Jews by Caligula in 41 CE to the fall of Jerusalem and Masada at the end of the first war against the Romans (66–73/4 CE) attests a steadily worsening political situation. The Roman procurators in charge of the Jewish state from the death of Agrippa I in 44 CE until the outbreak of the rebellion in 66 CE were rarely able to exercise full control. Nor

was the expert and willing help offered by Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I, the reformed playboy of Roman high society, to whom the emperor Claudius assigned the kingdom of Gaulanitis, Batanaea and Trachonitis, sufficient to resolve the troubles. The murderous faction of Jewish revolutionaries known as *Sicarii* (dagger-men) made life impossible. They remained unaffected by the example made of two of the sons of Judas the Galilean whom Tiberius Julius Alexander, Roman governor of Judaea, caught and sentenced to crucifixion. The incompetent and corrupt last procurators further aggravated matters.

Nascent Christianity, too, had its ups and downs during those years. In Judaea two leading figures of the Palestinian church met with violent death. For reasons untold by the author of the Acts, the otherwise notoriously mild Agrippa I is said to have condemned James the son of Zebedee to decapitation, a secular form of death penalty no doubt for a secular crime, and the high priest Ananus, son of Ananus, ordered – unjustly according to Josephus – the execution by stoning of the saintly James, the brother of the Lord for having ‘transgressed the law’. Church tradition places the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul to the final years of Nero, whose reign ended in 68 CE. On the positive side the preaching of the gospel to Palestinian Jews continued, though without spectacular progress, but the decision of the council of the apostles in Jerusalem in 49 CE gave the green light to Paul and Barnabas for their remarkably efficacious mission among the Gentiles of the diaspora once the precondition of the acceptance of Judaism was cancelled and non-Jewish men could be baptized without being obliged first to undergo circumcision. Paul and his helpers were proclaiming the gospel among the inhabitants of Asia Minor and mainland Greece between 49 and 58 CE and the Pauline letters were all written in the fifties and possibly in the early sixties of the first century CE. Events of Paul’s career neatly fit into Roman history. His appearance before the tribunal of Gallio, the brother of the philosopher Seneca, took place in Corinth between 51 and 53 CE, while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, and Paul was arrested in Jerusalem in the closing years of the procuratorship of Felix (52–60 CE). As he was still a prisoner in

Caesarea two years later when Festus replaced Felix in 60 CE, his captivity must have begun in 58 CE. He was transferred to Rome for trial before Nero after surviving a shipwreck close to Malta at the end of 60 CE.

The storm clouds were gathering and despite the initial efforts of the Jewish upper classes the catastrophic war against the Roman Empire became inevitable. We know all the details from Josephus who at the beginning was himself a half-hearted leader of the revolt. Soon the command passed to men of violence, like John of Gischala and Simon bar Giora, and the most stubborn among them the captain of Masada, Eleazar son of Jairus, the grandson of the revolutionary patriarch, Judas the Galilean. But they were no match for the Roman forces of two future emperors, Vespasian and Titus. The fight was bloody. Captured Jews were crucified daily by their hundreds. The city was destroyed and the Temple reduced to ashes. Not even the seemingly impregnable stronghold of Masada could stop the men and the war machines of the Roman governor Silva in 73/4 CE. The discerning defenders preferred self-inflicted death to Roman torture and crucifixion.

According to Jewish tradition Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabban Gamaliel settled, with Vespasian's permission, in the coastal town of Jamnia or Yavneh and, surrounded by a dedicated group of rabbis, set out to redefine, and thus save, a Jewish religion without Temple, high priest and Sanhedrin.

The state of the Jewish-Christian church is sketched in the eschatological discourse of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Christian theological tradition, recorded centuries later by the historian Eusebius, interpreted the ruin of Jerusalem as divine punishment visited on the Jews 'for their abominable crimes against Christ and his apostles'. Eusebius further asserts that the members of the Jerusalem church, warned by a prophetic oracle before the outbreak of the war, migrated from the capital and settled in the town of Pella in Transjordan. We lack external support for his statement. Neither are we told about the future fate of those who had migrated to Pella although another Christian legend, referring to the persecution of the church by the leader of the second Jewish rebellion, Simeon bar Kosiba or Bar Kokhba, implies that

the refugees of Pella re-crossed the Jordan after the end of the war and settled again in the Land of Israel.

From the Fall of Jerusalem to the End of the Rebellion under Hadrian – The Departure of Christianity from its Jewish Social Setting (70–135 CE)

The aftermath of the first failed rebellion against Rome brought hardship to both Jews and Christians. The victorious emperor Vespasian treated the whole conquered territory as his private property and in addition to the loss of the national and religious institutions, all the Jews in Palestine and the diaspora were subjected to the humiliation of having the annual poll tax, which they willingly paid for the upkeep of the Jerusalem sanctuary, confiscated and converted to a yearly tribute, known as *fiscus Iudaicus* or Jewish tax, which was to support of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. It was collected with particular harshness under Domitian (81–96 CE), though apparently the severity was relaxed according to a coin minted by his successor, the emperor Nerva (96–8 CE). Conversion to Judaism, considered as the adoption of atheism, was also strictly prohibited. The rebellion of the Jews in Egypt and Cyrene in 115 CE under Trajan added further fuel to the virulent anti-Judaism of the Romans and the major conflict of the second war (132–5 CE) was already looming on the horizon.

The causes of the Jewish uprising inspired and led by Simeon bar Kosiba or Bar Kokhba during the reign of Hadrian have long been a subject of debate, but the circumstances of the war and the revolutionary administration of the country have become better known now thanks to the archives of legal documents and letters discovered in the caves of Wadi Murabbaat and Wadi Seiyal in the Judean desert in the 1950s and early 1960s. The Roman governor of Judaea, Tineius Rufus, was unable to stand up to the guerrilla forces of Simeon, the self-proclaimed imperious head of state – he called himself Prince (*Nasi*) of Israel – and it took three years of strenuous struggle with much blood shed on both sides before Julius Severus, the greatest general of Rome urgently summoned from far-distant Britain, managed to quell the revolt in 135 CE.

For years persecution reigned, famous rabbis, among them Akiba, lost their lives and the practice of the Jewish religion was prohibited under the pain of death. Jews in droves were expelled from Judaea and their ancient capital, lavishly rebuilt by the emperor as a pagan city, was even deprived of its name and became *Aelia* in honour of the triumphant Publius *Aelius* Hadrianus. But outside Judaea, and especially in Galilee, Jewish life continued and thanks to the zeal and persistence of the rabbinic leaders Jewish religion, re-codified in the Mishnah and the Palestinian or more exactly Galilean Talmud, gained a new lease of life.

The Palestinian Jewish members of the Jesus movement, a small Judaeans sect in Roman eyes, continued to exist after the destruction of Jerusalem. Church fathers refer to them as Ebionites or Nazoraeans. They were treated as heretics for resisting the developed Christian doctrines of the divinity of Jesus and his virginal conception, and strictly observing the traditional Jewish way of life. Little evidence has survived concerning them, but occasional anecdotes preserved in rabbinic literature, such as the offer of the Jewish-Christian Jacob of Kefar Sekhaniah to heal a rabbi in the name of Jesus and the legendary admission of the noted Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus of having accepted a teaching of Jesus suggest that the two groups were still on rather unfriendly speaking terms.

If Christian tradition handed down in the fourth century by Eusebius can be trusted, Roman search for Jewish revolutionaries from the time of Vespasian until Trajan affected also the family of Jesus, suspected of propagating hopes in the return of the Messiah. No doubt the cooling down of the expectation of an imminent Second Coming soon removed the threat of Roman retaliation, though not before the grandsons of Jude, the grandnephews of Jesus, were put on a political blacklist under Domitian and Symeon son of Clopas, the cousin of Jesus and the successor of James the brother of the Lord as bishop of Jerusalem suffered a martyr's death under Trajan in the first decade of the second century CE.

The outlook for the non-Jewish Christians of the churches founded by Paul in the Roman world was equally gloomy. Already under Nero they were seen as members of a pernicious superstition and many of them were crucified in Rome and, while

membership of the church was not held to be a sufficient ground for prosecution under Trajan, it carried a *prima facie* suspicion of criminality. In the course of the two centuries following the defeat of Bar Kokhba the situation of the Jews in the Roman Empire quietly improved while that of the Christians subject to successive persecutions, if anything, worsened. However, the victory of the emperor Constantine at the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE reversed the process and gave Christianity the upper hand.

This survey of Jewish and Judaeo-Christian history in a nutshell from the annexation of Judaea as a Roman province in 63 BCE to the end of the second Jewish rebellion against Rome in 135 CE, and the *Who's Who* itself, are intended to advance a dynamic understanding of Jesus in his time. He stands in the middle of 200 eventful years: he died roughly 100 years after Pompey's entry into Jerusalem and 100 years before the defeat of Bar Kokhba at the battle of Bether.

It is my sincere hope that the historical perspective opened up through these vignettes will enable the reader to grasp the historical reality of the leading figures of the New Testament and to understand better their link with the Jewish and Roman protagonists of the society of their age.

Note

1 Geza Vermes, 2006, *Who's Who in the Age of Jesus*, London: Penguin.