

## Tacitus *Histories* 5.1-13 (on Judeans)

Source: Rhiannon Ash and Kenneth Wellesley, eds., *Tacitus: The Histories*, Revised edition (London: Penguin, 2009), with adaptations by Harland (replacing Jews with Judeans).

### *The Judeans (Jews)*

1. At the start of the same year Titus Caesar, who had been chosen by his father to complete the conquest of Judaea, and who already enjoyed a fine military reputation when he and his father were still private citizens received added support and recognition, as provinces and armies vied in displaying their enthusiasm. Titus, wanting to acquire a fine reputation notwithstanding his elevation to power, set about presenting himself as an honourable and enterprising soldier. His affable and courteous conversation inspired devotion, and he often mixed with the ordinary soldiers as they did their duties or on the march, but without compromising the respect due to a general

Awaiting him in Judaea were three legions that had long served under Vespasian – the Fifth, Tenth and Fifteenth. The emperor also allotted him the Twelfth from Syria and the detachments from the Twenty-Second and the Third brought over from Alexandria. He was attended by twenty cohorts of allied infantry and eight regiments of cavalry, as well as by the two kings Agrippa and Sohaemus and the auxiliary forces offered by King Antiochus. Then there were strong contingents of Arabs, who felt for the Judeans the hatred common between neighbours, and many individual adventurers who had come from Rome and Italy, each in the hope of ingratiating himself with an emperor who was yet to choose his favourites. Accompanied by these forces, Titus entered enemy territory, advancing in an orderly manner, using scouts to explore the whole area and keeping his troops ready for battle. Not far from Jerusalem, he set up camp.

2. Since I am now about to record the final days of a famous city, it seems appropriate to shed some light on its origins. The Judeans are said to have been refugees from the island of Crete who settled in the remotest parts of Libya at the time when Saturn was violently ejected from his kingdom by Jupiter. This is a deduction from their name: there is a famous mountain in Crete called Ida, whose inhabitants, the Idaei, had their name lengthened into a foreign word, Judaei. Others believe that in the reign of Isis the surplus population of Egypt was evacuated to neighbouring lands under the leadership of Hierosolymus and Juda. Many think that the Judeans are descended from those Ethiopians who were driven by fear and hatred to leave their homes during the reign of Cepheus. Some say that a group of Assyrian refugees, lacking their own land, occupied a part of Egypt, and then built cities of their own, inhabiting the lands of the Hebrews and the nearer parts of Syria. Others again posit a famous ancestry for the Judeans in the Solymi, a tribe celebrated by Homer in his poems: these people allegedly founded Jerusalem and named it after themselves.

3. Most authorities, however, agree on the following account. Throughout Egypt there arose a wasting disease which caused bodily disfigurement. So King Bocchoris went to the oracle of Hammon to ask for a cure, and was told to purify his kingdom by expelling the victims to other lands, as they were hateful to the gods. Therefore, a crowd of sufferers was rounded up, herded together, and abandoned in the wilderness. While the other exiles were numb and weeping, one man, Moses, urged his companions not to wait passively for help from gods or men, for both had deserted them: they should rely on their own leadership and accept as heaven-sent whatever guidance first helped them to escape from their present sorrows. They agreed, and set off in complete ignorance along a random route. However, nothing tormented them more than their lack of water. They were already close to death and had collapsed all over the plains when a herd of wild asses left their pasture and made for the shade of a wooded crag. Moses followed them and after making a deduction from a grassy patch of ground, he discovered some abundant

channels of water. This relieved their thirst. They travelled on for six days without a break, and on the seventh they drove out the natives, took over their lands and there consecrated their city and temple.

4. In order to strengthen the bond with his people in the future, Moses prescribed for them novel religious rites which were quite different from those practised by other mortals. Among the Judeans everything that we hold sacred is regarded as sacrilegious; on the other hand, they allow things which we consider immoral. In the innermost part of the Temple, they dedicated an image of the animal who had guided them and ended their wandering and thirst after sacrificing a ram, apparently to show their contempt for Hammon. They also offer up bulls, because the Egyptians worship that animal as Apis. They abstain from eating pork in memory of their adversities as they themselves were once infected with the disease to which this creature is subject. They still fast frequently as an acknowledgement of the hunger they once endured for so long, and as a symbol of their hurried meal, Jewish bread is unleavened. People say that the seventh day was set aside for rest because this marked the end of their toils. Later, the charms of idleness made them devote every seventh year to indolence as well. Others say that this is a mark of respect to Saturn, either because they owe the basic principles of their religion to the Idaei, who, we are told, were expelled together with Saturn and became the founders of the Jewish race, or because, among the seven stars that rule mankind, the one that moves in the highest orbit and exerts the greatest influence is Saturn. A further argument is that most of the heavenly bodies complete their path and revolutions in multiples of seven.

5. Whatever their origin, these observances are sanctioned by their antiquity. The other practices of the Judeans are sinister and revolting, and have entrenched themselves by their degeneracy. All the worst types abandoned the religious practices of their forefathers and donated tribute and contributions to the Judeans in heaps. That is one reason why the resources of the Judeans have increased, but it is also because of their stubborn loyalty and ready benevolence towards fellow-Judeans. Yet they confront the rest of the world with a hatred reserved for enemies. They will not eat or sleep with gentiles, and despite being a most lecherous people, they avoid sexual intercourse with non-Jewish women. Among themselves nothing is barred. They have introduced the practice of circumcision to show that they are different from others. Converts to Judaism adopt the same practices, and the very first lesson they learn is to despise the gods, shed all feelings of patriotism and consider parents, children and brothers as readily expendable. However, they take trouble to make sure that their numbers increase. It is a deadly sin to kill any surplus children, and they think that the souls of those who die in battle or by execution are eternal. This explains their passion for having children and their contempt for death. Rather than cremate their dead, they prefer to follow the Egyptian custom and bury them, and they have the same concern and beliefs as the Egyptians about the underworld, although their conception of the divine is quite different. Whereas the Egyptians worship a variety of animals and half-human, half-bestial forms, the Judeans believe that there is just one divine power which exists only in spiritual form. They regard it as sinful to make idols of gods in human form from perishable materials: that most lofty and eternal god of theirs cannot be portrayed by human hands and will never pass away. Therefore they do not set up effigies of him even in their cities, still less in their temple, and they do not use statues to flatter their kings nor to honour the Roman emperors. Since, however, their priests used to chant to the sound of flute and drums, and wore wreaths of ivy, and a golden vine was discovered in the Temple, some observers have concluded that the god being worshipped was Father Liber, the conqueror of the East. Yet the two cults are diametrically opposed, for Liber founded a festive and joyous cult, whereas the ritual of the Judeans is discordant and degrading.

6. Their country is bordered on the east by Arabia, on the south by Egypt and on the west by Phoenicia and the sea; on the Syrian frontier they have a distant view to the north. The physical health of the Judeans is good, and they can endure hard work. A dry climate and a fertile soil enable them to grow all the crops familiar to us, and in addition balsam and palm. While palm groves are tall and imposing, the balsam is a small tree. From time to time its branches become swollen with sap, but if you apply an iron blade to them, the sap channels contract so the best way of opening them is with a fragment of stone or pottery. This sap is put to medicinal uses. The most imposing of the mountains rising in that land is Lebanon, a shady place which unfalteringly keeps its covering of snow (a remarkable phenomenon in such a hot climate). This same mountain feeds the tumbling waters of the Jordan. This river does not empty itself into the Mediterranean, but flows through two lakes without losing its identity until it is finally absorbed in a third. This third lake has a vast circumference and resembles a sea, but its water is even nastier to the taste and pestilent to the local inhabitants because of its unhealthy smell. It is never ruffled by the wind, and neither fish nor the usual water birds can live there. The sluggish water bears the weight of objects thrown onto it as if it were solid, and swimmers and non-swimmers find it equally buoyant. At a fixed season of the year the lake discharges bitumen. Experience teaches every skill, including how to gather this substance, too. In its natural state a black liquid, it solidifies when sprinkled with vinegar, and floats on the surface of the water. Those who have the job of gathering the bitumen take hold of it with their hands and haul it on deck. Thereupon, with no further help, it streams in and loads up the boat until you stop the flow. However, you cannot sever it with any tool of bronze or iron, although it does shun blood or a cloth stained with a woman's menstrual discharge.

This is the story told by ancient writers; but those who know the locality personally say that the floating masses of bitumen are propelled by hand over the water and dragged to shore. Then, after it has dried out on the hot soil or in the blazing sun, it can be cut up with axes and wedges as if it were timber or stone.

7. Not far from here are plains which people say were once fertile and full of large, densely populated cities, but they were then set ablaze by lightning-bolts. It seems that traces of these cities still remain, and that the very earth looks scorched and has lost its fertility. All natural vegetation and all crops sown by humans, whether in leaf, in flower or apparently fully developed, are black and barren growths which virtually shrivel into dust. Although I am quite prepared to concede that these once-famous cities were consumed by some cataclysmic fire sent by the gods, I still think that it is the exhalation from the lake which infects the ground and poisons the atmosphere above it, and that this is the reason why the young corn and the autumn harvests rot, since both soil and air are unfavourable. Another river which flows into the Jewish Sea is the Belius around whose mouth are sands which are collected and fused with soda ash to form glass. The beach concerned is small but inexhaustible, however much sand people remove.

8. A large part of Judaea is peppered with villages, but they also have towns. Their capital is Jerusalem. Here stood their Temple with its enormous riches. An external ring of defensive walls surrounded the city, then there was the royal palace, and the Temple was enclosed by its own inner fortifications. Only Judeans were allowed to approach the gate of the Temple, but they could not cross the threshold unless they were priests.

While the Assyrian, Median and Persian empires dominated the East, the Judeans were considered to be the lowliest element of those enslaved. After the Macedonians became dominant, King Antiochus made efforts to eliminate their superstitious cult and bring in Greek customs, but he was prevented from changing this most abominable people for the better by the outbreak of war with Parthia, for this was the

moment when Arsaces rebelled. Then, while Macedonian power was dwindling and the Parthians had not yet developed into a great power (Roman dominance, too, was still far away), the Judeans established a dynasty of their own. These kings were expelled by the fickle mob, but they restored their tyrannical regime by force and committed outrageous acts – banishing fellow-citizens, sacking cities, murdering brothers, wives and parents, and committing all the other outrages typical of despots. The kings cultivated the superstitious cult of the Judeans, for they assumed the office of High Priest as a way of bolstering their power.

9. Gnaeus Pompey was the first of the Romans to conquer the Judeans and to claim the right to enter their Temple as victor. This is how word got out that there was no image of any god, that the shrine was empty and the innermost sanctuary was vacant. Although the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed the shrine remained intact. Later, as civil war was raging amongst us and after the eastern provinces had come under the control of Mark Antony, the Parthian king Pacorus seized Judaea, only to be killed by Publius Ventidius. The Parthians were driven back across the Euphrates, while Gaius Sosius curbed the Judeans. Antony gave the kingdom to Herod, and it was enlarged by the now victorious Augustus. After Herod's death, without waiting for Caesar's intervention, a man called Simon usurped the title of king. He was punished by the governor of Syria, Quinctilius Varus while the Judeans were disciplined and divided up into three kingdoms ruled by Herod's sons. In Tiberius' principate all was quiet. Then, after being ordered to put up a statue of Gaius Caesar in the Temple, the Judeans chose to fight instead, although the rebellion came to nothing since the emperor was assassinated. As for Claudius, since the Jewish kings had either died or had their sphere of influence reduced, he entrusted the government of the province to Roman knights or freedmen. One of these, Antonius Felix, exercised the authority of a king with the spirit of a slave plunging into all manner of cruelty and lust, and marrying Drusilla, granddaughter of Cleopatra and Antony. This meant that while Claudius was Antony's grandson, Felix was his grandson by marriage. 10. Nevertheless, the Judeans patiently endured such harsh treatment until Gessius Florus became governor. It was in his tenure that war broke out. Cestius Gallus, the governor of Syria, tried to repress the movement but this led to indecisive battles and more often to defeats. When Gallus died a natural death (or perhaps he committed suicide), Nero sent out Vespasian. Thanks to good luck, a distinguished record and excellent subordinates, within the space of two summers he was holding all the plains and cities except Jerusalem with his victorious army. The next year was focused on civil war and passed quietly enough as far as the Judeans were concerned, but once peace was established in Italy the anxieties about troubles abroad returned. There was increasing anger that by this time only the Judeans had failed to submit. It also seemed advisable that Titus should remain in control of the armies to confront all developments affecting the new dynasty, whether these were good or bad.

11. So after encamping, as I have said, before the walls of Jerusalem, Titus displayed his legions in battle formation. The Judeans drew up their forces close under their walls, poised to advance further if they were successful, but with a refuge to hand in case of defeat. Titus sent against them cavalry and some lightly armed cohorts, but the encounter was indecisive. Then the enemy gave ground, and during the next few days they engaged in a series of minor clashes just in front of the gates. Finally, repeated losses drove them behind the walls. The Romans then concentrated on an assault. After all, it seemed beneath them to wait for hunger to do its work on the enemy, and the troops were actually courting danger. Some did so from real courage, many from mere bravado and a desire for rewards. As for Titus, a vision of Rome, wealth and pleasures danced before his eyes, but these dreams would be deferred if Jerusalem did not fall in the immediate future.

However, the city occupied a commanding position, and it had been reinforced by engineering works so huge that they might have made even a flat site impregnable. Two extremely lofty hills were enclosed by walls skilfully built with projecting or retreating angles so as to leave the flanks of any attackers exposed. At the edge of the rocky crags was a sharp drop, and there was a series of towers, 60 feet high where the rising ground helped, and 120 feet high on the lower contours. These were a marvellous sight and appeared from a distance to be the same height. There were further walls inside around the palace, and a conspicuous landmark was the lofty castle of Antonia, so named by Herod to honour Mark Antony

12. The Temple was like a citadel and had its own walls, which had been built even more laboriously and skilfully than the rest. The porticoes around it constituted in themselves an excellent defensive position. In addition, there was a spring of water which flowed all the time, chambers cut in the living rock and tanks and cisterns for the storage of rainwater. Its builders had foreseen only too well that the Judeans would face constant wars as a result of their strange practices. Hence everything was available for a siege, however long. Moreover, after Pompey's capture of Jerusalem, fear and experience taught them many lessons. So, taking advantage of the greedy instincts of the Claudian period, they bought the right to fortify the city, and during peacetime they built walls meant for war. Already the home to a motley crowd, its population had been swollen by the fall of the other Jewish cities, for all the most determined types had fled there, and thereby added to the turmoil. There were three different leaders and three armies. The long outer perimeter of the walls was held by Simon, the central part of the city by John and the Temple by Eleazar. John and Simon could rely on numbers and equipment, Eleazar on his strategic position. However, it was against one another that they directed battles, ambush and fires, and great stocks of corn went up in flames. Then John sent off a party of men, ostensibly to offer sacrifice, but actually to slaughter Eleazar and his followers, and so he gained control of the Temple. Thus Jerusalem was divided into two factions, until – since the Romans were approaching – the prospect of a war against foreigners made them cooperate.

13. Various prodigies had occurred, but a nation steeped in superstition and hostile to proper religious practices considered it unlawful to atone for them by offering victims or solemn vows. Clashing battlelines with glittering arms were seen in the sky and a sudden flash of lightning from the clouds lit up the Temple. The doors of the shrine abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure. Few people saw this as reason to be afraid. Most were convinced that, according to the ancient writings of their priests, now was the time when the East would triumph and from Judaea would set out men destined to rule the world. This mysterious prophecy really referred to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, true to the selfish ambitions of mankind, thought that this mighty destiny was reserved for them, and not even their calamities opened their eyes to the truth.

We are told that the number of the besieged, old and young, men and women, amounted to 600,000. All who could carry weapons did so, and far more were ready to fight than one would expect from their numbers. The women were no less determined than the men, and the thought that they might be forced to leave their homes made them fear life more than death.

This, then, was the city and people which Titus faced. Since the nature of the place made a headlong assault and surprise attacks impossible, he decided to use earthworks and moveable defences. Each legion had its allotted task, and there was a lull in the fighting while they prepared every conceivable device for storming cities, whether invented long ago or by modern ingenuity.