Arch of Titus: A Cameo
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Prologue
This paper is a Cameo based upon an artifact. As such it is experimenting in at least two different ways. I am in search of the proper tone and expression for scholarly book addressed to the general public interested in these issues. Secondly, I am experimenting in changing or shifting the language we have traditionally employed to understand what has been called Christian origins. The Christianity Seminar has explicitly rejected the notion of a master narrative of Christian origins in favor of a series of stories, sketches of movements, and conflicts between various groups. In this Cameo I am searching for language to bring this new understanding into focus. This will not have the character of a formal seminar paper but is more of an exploration of what might appear in our proposed book. There will be a bare minimum of footnotes and references and other scholarly paraphernalia.

In searching to tell ancient stories in new ways, traditional language can become problematic. For example, I have employed Judean instead of Jewish. This is not an effort to deny that religion is involved nor to hide the connection of ancient Judeans to modern Judaism. But it entails an acknowledgement that in the period under discussion Judaism as well as Christianity were still embedded in some larger reality, family, tribe or nation and were not yet separate and distinct religions. This issue is so difficult that it itself will require its own independent treatment.

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Memorial
In the Roman Forum is a monument that reminds us that a political event was a major factor in the eventual separation of the children of Abraham into the followers of Moses and the followers of Jesus and then on into Jews and Christians, two separate religions.

The Arch of Titus was built shortly after the death of the emperor Titus in 81 CE by his brother the new emperor Domitian. Before we proceed too far, the reader may need a short list of characters. The three emperors Vespasian (69-79), and his two sons, Titus (79-81) and Domitian (81-96) form the Flavian family. All told, they ruled Rome for 27 years.

Domitian’s first act as emperor was to deify his dead brother. There is a certain irony in this in that Titus’ last reported words were “I have made but one mistake.”¹ The ancients debated whether Domitian poisoned his brother or just abandoned him when

¹ Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVI.26; Suetonius, The Lives of Twelve Caesars, Life of Titus
he fell ill. Titus’ one mistake may have been not executing his brother Domitian when he found out Domitian was plotting against him, so maintains the ancient historian Dio.

The Arch memorializes Titus’ great accomplishment—the siege and sacking of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple of the Judeans. Monuments often have stories to tell and this one is no less complicated, at times obscure and unclear, but nevertheless important. Since so little survives from the ancient world, that this Arch of all arches should have survived is amazing.

Before the Arch

What we know about the movement that traced itself back to Jesus before the building of the Arch of Titus is very limited and often buried in the obscurity of myth and legend. The first construction of a myth of origins for the group, the Gospel of Mark,\(^2\) was most likely written about the time of the Arch’s construction and the story of the origins of the group, the Book of Acts, does not occur until well after the building of the Arch, according the Acts Seminar in the first quarter of the second century.\(^3\)

Paul and the Q-Gospel give us our only look at how these groups viewed themselves before the Arch of Titus. Paul was neither founding nor joining a new religion, but his problem was how to get the members of the nations into the covenant, or what he calls a new covenant. He does not see this new covenant between the God of Israel and the nations replacing the covenant between God and the people of Israel, but rather as the final fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that he should be the father of many nations. Paul remains a Judean and those members of the nations who trust in Jesus the Anointed become children of Abraham. While Paul never refers to members of the nations who trust in Jesus the anointed as “Judeans,” that some form of Judean identity is at stake is evident from the recurring issue of circumcision. Surely those who have themselves circumcised think they are becoming Judean. Paul’ argument is that for members of the nations circumcision is not necessary in order to obtain the benefits the covenant.

The Q-Gospel envisions its mission within the people of Israel and so the problem as it occurs in Paul does not present itself for this community. It must deal with the people of Israel rejecting its mission and so it turns to an apocalyptic solution. It becomes the true successor of Israel in the line of the prophets, a solution that will be repeated with variations often in the future.

What we see in the period before the building of the Arch of Titus are various groups attached to Jesus negotiating for identity within the people of Israel. There is no one set way of working out this negotiation. Rather their identity is liminal, not really clear because it is on the boundaries. That is why it is being negotiated. That negotiation will go on for a long time.


The Judean Revolt

In 66 CE a revolt broke out in Judea. Whether we call this a “war” or “revolt” depends on your point of view. We are well informed about this because a participant, Flavius Josephus as he is known,\(^4\) wrote a history of the events that have come down to us. Notice his name. “Flavius” indicates that his patrons are the Flavians, the family name of the very general, Vespasian, that Nero placed in charge of putting down the Judean revolt. He was born Yosef ben Matityahu (Joseph son of Matthias). Josephus was clearly not a neutral observer. He was a priest and reports that he was a Pharisee. When captured, he went over to the Romans and became an advisor to Vespasian and Titus, who in turn became his patrons. His allegiances to say the least are complicated.

For our purposes a detailed history of the Judean revolt is not necessary. But several moments are because they effect the story we are following.

Vespasian was not a brilliant general, but Nero did not fear him and he was competent. After several Roman disasters in putting down the revolt, Vespasian arrived on the scene with four Roman legions and supporting allies. He began the slow, gradual, and grinding reduction of the revolt. It was in the early stages of “pacification” that Josephus was captured. Vespasian was in no hurry to end the revolt because the Judeans needed to be punished as an example of why to revolt against Rome was unwise. But also, Nero’s grasp on power was tenuous and interesting opportunities might present themselves to a Roman general with so many legions under his command.

Nero’s suicide in 68 CE led to the year of four emperors, the last of whom was Vespasian. As things began to crumple, Vespasian saw his opportunity and seized it. In short order his troops proclaimed him emperor, he turned against the third emperor Vitellius, made quick alliances with other generals in the eastern part of the empire, took Egypt, and defeated Vitellius. On December 21, 69 CE, the day following the defeat of Vitellius, the Senate proclaimed him emperor.

With Vespasian in control of the empire and the title of emperor, he needed a military victory to bolster and solidify his claims to authority. After all, what made an emperor an emperor was military might and victories. The title *emperorator* originated in a proclamation by the troops after a great military victory and the title always retained a strong overtone of military victory. Vespasian dispatched his son Titus to bring the revolt in Judea to an end and sack Jerusalem.

Titus quickly bought the main elements of the revolt to a conclusion. But resistance had been long-term and fierce. Jerusalem had been in the hands of the rebels since 66 CE, that is, for four years. The city was strongly fortified by three walls. According to Josephus, more than 1,000,000 were killed in the siege and sacking of Jerusalem and around 100,000 were taken into slavery. Numbers are very unreliable in ancient accounts, but needless to say, the number of people killed and starved in this siege were extreme.

When the Roman legions broke through the city walls, the rebels fortified the Temple walls and compound. According to Josephus, Titus’ intention was to bring the

\(^{4}\) Titus Flavius Josephus was his Roman name.
revolt to an end and to end the siege of Jerusalem. He did not intend to destroy the Temple.

Titus proposed to these [his generals] that they should give him their advice what should be done about the holy house. Now some of these thought it would be the best way to act according to the rules of war, [and demolish it,] because the Jews would never leave off rebelling while that house was standing; at which house it was that they used to get all together. Others of them were of opinion, that in case the Jews would leave it, and none of them would lay their arms up in it, he might save it; but that in case they got upon it, and fought any more, he might burn it; because it must then be looked upon not as a holy house, but as a citadel; and that the impiety of burning it would then belong to those that forced this to be done, and not to them. But Titus said, that "although the Jews should get upon that holy house, and fight us thence, yet ought we not to revenge ourselves on things that are inanimate, instead of the men themselves;" and that he was not in any case for burning down so vast a work as that was, because this would be a mischief to the Romans themselves, as it would be an ornament to their government while it continued.5

Given Josephus’ complicated and compromised relationship with the Flavians, especially Titus, some historians have doubted his view of Titus’ motives. But Martin Goodman has mounted a strong defense of the accuracy of Josephus’ report. After elaborating a number of arguments to support Josephus, he concludes: “Josephus’ assertion looks odd in the light of Titus’ celebration of the Temple’s demise once it had burned down, but that gives reason to believe the assertion, not dismiss it.”6

During the night, before the final attack,

one of the soldiers, without staying for any orders, and without any concern or dread upon him at so great an undertaking, and being hurried on by a certain divine fury, snatched somewhat out of the materials that were on fire, and being lifted up by another soldier, he set fire to a golden window, through which there was a passage to the rooms that were round about the holy house, on the north side of it. As the flames went upward, the Jews made a great clamor, such as so mighty an affliction required, and ran together to prevent it; and now they spared not their lives any longer, nor suffered any thing to restrain their force, since that holy house was perishing, for whose sake it was that they kept such a guard about it (Jewish War, 6.4.5).

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5 Josephus, Jewish War, 4.4.6, translator William Whiston.
After the fire got started, things just got out of hand. And the Temple was destroyed by accident.

Arch of Titus

The current Arch of Titus is not the first Arch of Titus, nor is it the triumphal arch celebrating Titus’ victory over the Judean revolt, although it is often referred to as Titus’ triumphal arch. That arch was in the Circus Maximus. The current Arch of Titus was built by his brother Domitian to commemorate Titus’ *consecratio* (official deification) or apotheosis after his death. It sits astride the highest point on the Via Sacra, marking a prominent entrance into the Roman Forum. The Arch is 50 feet high, 13.5 feet wide and 15.5 feet deep.

Inscription

On the attic of the Arch is the original inscription.

![Inscription Image]

**SE**
**NATVS**
**POPVLVSQVE ROMANVS**
**DIVO TITO DIVI VESPASIANI F(ILIO)**
**VESPASIANO AVGVSTO**

Translation: The Senate and the Roman People [dedicate this] to the divine Titus Vespasian Augustus son of Vespasian.

VESPASIAN- and AVGVST- apply to both Titus and Vespasian (the father), the case ending -O indicates that here it applies to TITO (Titus), thus the inscription makes an efficient sight/wordplay by putting father and son in third line and shared title in fourth.

North Panel

The interior of the arch consists of three panels. The north panel, a marble relief, pictures Titus as *triumphator* in his triumphal procession after the victory in Jerusalem. This triumphal march took place in 71 CE and was a joint triumph for both Vespasian and Titus.\(^7\) Vespasian is, of course, missing from this depiction.

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\(^7\) Josephus, *Jewish War*, 5.3-6, is the most extensive description of a Roman triumph extant. Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph*. Cambridge: Harvard, 93-101, discusses the importance of Josephus for the historical understanding and reconstruction of the Roman triumph. Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 428—33, deals with the political significance in Vespasian and Titus’ triumph on Roman and Jewish relations.
Prominently on view accompanying Titus in the chariot is the goddess Winged Victory who is crowning him with a laurel wreath. The depiction of the victorious chariot, the quadriga, and Winged Victory is a trope frequently found on coins, etc. But in the standard mythology of the triumph there is a slave behind the triumphator whispering to him, “Look behind you. Remember you are a man.”

Significantly in this version of the mythology, there is no slave and the goddess Winged Victory is crowning Titus.

Leading the quadriga is the goddess Roma in battle gear symbolizing Rome’s military might and standing beside the chariot are two allegorical figures. The semi-nude male represents the people of Rome and the man in the toga is the Senate. Lictors lead the procession.

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8 Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 2007, 85-92, thoroughly deals with this aspect of the triumph. She sees it as an important part of the mythology of the triumph, but not actually occurring very often.
The route of the triumphal procession was fixed. It began at the Campus Martius, moved on the Circus Maximus and then to the Roman Forum and finally ended at the most important temple in Rome—the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill. During the procession the *triumphator* was a temporary divinity and this frieze shows Titus among the gods.

**South Panel**

The south panel, immediately opposite the first one, depicts the Roman legionnaires carrying in the triumphal procession booty from the Temple in Jerusalem which will eventually be placed in the newly built Temple of Peace in the Forum of Vespasian.

Prominent among the trophies of war is the Menorah, the golden trumpets and the Shew bread table. Recent work on this panel has indicated that the Menorah and trumpets were painted golden (yellow ochre) and the background was blue. The placards would have contained the names of the conquered cities.

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The Vault
The final panel in the vault of the arch depicts the apotheosis of Titus. Zeus in the form of an eagle bears him into the heavens.

This panel in the center of a deeply coffered ceiling arch shows the apotheosis of Titus. This is the point of the Arch and Domitian’s point in the construction of the Arch—to announce the divinity of this brother and by association his family and himself.

Titus is borne into the heaven by the eagle Jupiter. While the divinity of the triumphator was temporary, the divinity proclaimed by the Arch was permanent. Titus was now one of the gods and by implication so is Domitian. One of his favored titles was Lord and God, probably ironically referred to in John 20:28.

Originally the arch would have been topped by bronze Quadriga.

Logic of the Arch
The Arch of Titus tells the story of Titus’ apotheosis, but this story implies an imperial logic. Titus is a god, as depicted first in the north panel (triumphal procession) and then in the panel in the vault (apotheosis), because he triumphed over the God of
Israel as evidenced in the south panel (the booty from Judean Temple). The defeat of the Judeans featured prominently in the propaganda of the Flavians. All three of the Flavians issued coins with the legend *Judea Capta*, Judea Captured.

* A sesterius of Vespasian minted in 71 CE, with the inscription *JUDEA CAPTA*, Judea captured. The reversus shows a palm tree with a Judean male captive with his hands tied behind his back and woman sitting mourning. At the left of the man are captured weapons.

* A denarius of Titus from 79 CE with the reversus showing a kneeling Judean captive in front of a trophy of arms.
The Arch of Titus was situated in proximity to the Colosseum, known then as *Amphitheatrum Flavium*. The Arch of Titus marked the entrance into the Forum and the Colosseum, the largest building ever built in the ancient world, lay immediately outside the Forum. This architectural complex served several goals for the Flavians. Initially it began to wipe out Nero’s Golden House and erase his memory. Nero’s colossus stood in front of the Flavian Amphitheater and much later gave its name to the building, Colosseum. The Amphitheater itself replaced Nero’s artificial lake. But this building was also part of Flavian propaganda. According to a recent reconstruction of the original dedication, the cost of building the Amphitheater came from the *ex maubiis*, Vespasian’s share of the booty from the sack of Jerusalem. Furthermore, many of the 20,000 Judean slaves Titus brought back to Rome were involved in the quarrying of the stone for the Amphitheater and the actual construction of the Amphitheater. One of the most famous edifices of the Roman world, prominent on many coins, it was intimately associated with the defeat of the Judean revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem’s Temple.

A Sestertius of Titus celebrating the inauguration of Flavian Amphitheater. Nero’s colossus can be seen on the left side of the coin.

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Entanglements

Judean entanglements with the Flavians are often astounding yet give witness to the close involvement of Judeans with the empire. As noted above, Josephus, the most famous Judean historian of the period, whose histories give us a better knowledge of the Judean revolt than any other revolt against the Romans, was not only a leader of the revolt and commander in Galilee, but then went over to the enemy and became a friend of Titus. He came to prominence with the family when he prophesied that Vespasian would become the future emperor. He eventually took as his Roman name Titus Flavius Josephus. He wrote his histories while residing in Rome under the patronage of the Flavians.

Tiberius Julius Alexander was born into a prominent Judean family of Alexandria, Egypt. His uncle was the famous Judean philosopher Philo. While the prefect of Egypt, he facilitated Vespasian’s rise to becoming emperor. Later in Titus’ siege of Jerusalem, he was second in-command. His relationship to his Judean religion is unclear. Josephus in the Antiquities (20.100) describes him as abandoning his ancestral traditions.

Titus himself had a famous entanglement. During the siege of Jerusalem, Titus apparently fell in love with the Judean princess Berenice. She was the daughter of Herod Agrippa and her brother was Agrippa II. (In Acts 25:23-27, Paul appears before Agrippa and Berenice.) Her first husband was Marcus Julius Alexander, the older brother of the above-mentioned Tiberius Julius Alexander. The connections become almost dizzying. During Vespasian’s ascent to becoming emperor, she used her wealth and power to support him.

Her brother Agrippa with herself in tow pleaded with those in Jerusalem to surrender, arguing that they could not win. The rebels in turn burned down their palaces.

Following the destruction of the Temple, Titus returned to Rome for his triumph and Berenice remained in Judea. Four years later she and her brother came to Rome and the affair with Titus resumed. According to Dio (Roman History 60.15), she lived with him as his wife. Following the death of Vespasian in 79, Titus sent her away as part of a series of moves to restore his reputation among the people of Rome. She then disappeared from history.

Even while the revolt was ongoing, there was considerable entanglement between Romans and Judeans. The binding of the empire was strong, the tension was always a push and pull, attraction and repulsion. But we must remember that these entanglements, while significant and testifying to long-term relations between Romans and Judeans, are between elites. We should not assume that entanglements at other levels of society were similar but, given Judea’s and the diaspora’s long engagements with the Empire, at least since 161 BCE when Judah Macbee sent a delegation to Rome, neither should we conclude that they were not extensive. Twenty-thousand slaves taken to Rome suggest otherwise. Mary Beard in her video “Meet the Romans” traces out the implications of three Jewish names on a tombstone on the Appian Way. She argues that these men, Baricha, Zabda, and Achiba, were part of the Judean rebellion, were brought
to Rome as slaves by Titus, sold to a Roman citizen by the name of Lucius Valerius, who eventually freed them and gave them Roman citizenship. They became Romans who maintained their Jewishness identity.¹¹

Outcomes

While Josephus may well be right about Titus’ intention not to destroy the Temple, once it was destroyed, he doubled down on it. Its destruction now had to be presented as a great Roman victory, hence Vespasian and Titus’ Triumph, the building of the Flavian Amphitheater, multiple coins celebrating *Judea Capta* (Judea’s capture) and the Arch of Titus. The Flavian propaganda machine was on a roll.

Not rebuilding the Judean Temple was against long standing Roman policy. Romans did not go to war against a nation’s gods, but against the people. Destroyed temples were always rebuilt. Conquered people’s gods were invited into the Roman pantheon. The emperor and the Empire brought benefits.

In Josephus’ extensive description of Titus’ triumph, he enumerates the piles of booty from the conquering of Judea and the many golden vessels from the wasted Temple of Jerusalem, “and the last of all the spoils, was carried the Law of the Jews” (*Jewish War*, 7.6.6). Martin Goodman in his magisterial *Rome and Jerusalem* concludes:

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[T]here was no mistaking the symbolic significance of the last of all spoils of victory: “a copy of the Jewish Law,” that is, a scroll of the Torah. There could not be a clearer demonstration that the conquest was being celebrated not just over Judea but over Judaism (431-32).

Vespasian and Titus’ triumph and the non-rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple set policy not only for the Flavians but also for the remainder of antiquity. Upon the death of Domitian in 96 CE, Nerva and the Antoine dynasty continued the Flavian policy. After that, it became set in stone, almost literally. Tensions remained strong in Judea, especially as Roman settlement increased and Jews were forced out. They reached a crisis with Hadrian’s construction of a new city at the site of the destroyed Jerusalem renamed Aelia Capitolina. Aelia is from Hadrian’s family name Aelius. Aelia Capitolina remained the official name for Jerusalem until the Arab conquest (638 CE). The Arab name for the city, Iliyā’, is derived from the Roman name Aelia. Hadrian escalated tensions yet again when he began the construction of a temple on the site of the old Judean Temple which he dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus, named after the temple in Rome which was the final destination of Vespasian and Titus’ triumph and the principal temple of that city. The intended insult could not have been more direct. This was a Roman erasure of Jewish presence. This appears to have been the direct provocation of the third Jewish War, the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-36 CE).

What had been the policy of the Flavians towards the Judeans became the policy of succeeding emperors throughout antiquity and then of the Christian church towards Jews. All of this from a military accident. A fire accidentally started, a sacking of city that got out of hand.

The political environment created by the Flavians and continued by Nerva and the Antonines is context in which all the gospels were written and much of what later became the New Testament. The empire’s toward Judaism also effected, shaped, and distorted the emerging Jesus movements as they interacted with their fellow inheritors of Israel’s traditions and eventually transmogrified into the Christian church. All from an accident, all from an unintended consequence.

**Strange After-Life**

In the medieval period the Arch of Titus was viewed as the symbol of the transfer of the church from Jerusalem to Rome and Jews refused to walk under the Arch. During the counter-reformation Pope Paul IV in 1555 created the Jewish Ghetto in Rome and issued an extremely anti-Semitic Paul Bull, *Cum Nimis Absurdum*. He furthermore required the head of the Jewish community of Rome to annually take an oath of submission to the Pope and Christendom while standing under the Arch. This practice continued long after the Pope’s death.

At the creation of the modern state of Israel, when searching for a symbol for the new nation, the Menorah inscribed in the Arch of Titus provided the model and inspiration.