The Roman–Jewish Wars and Hebrew Cultural Nationalism

Also by Moshe Aberbach

LABOUR, CRAFTS AND COMMERCE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

JEWISH EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF THE MISHNA AND THE TALMUD

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IMPERIALISM AND BIBLICAL PROPHECY 750–500 BCE

REVOLUTIONARY HEBREW, EMPIRE AND CRISIS

SURVIVING TRAUMA: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis

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Moshe Aberbach
Professor Emeritus
Baltimore Hebrew University

David Aberbach
Associate Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature
McGill University, Montreal
and
Visiting Academic
London School of Economics

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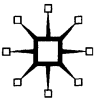

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To Shoshana

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Moshe Aberbach, Jerusalem
David Aberbach, London

Foreword

John Hutchinson[1]

This important book throws light on many of the seminal themes of the history of the 'West': the rival legacies of Hellenism and Judaism; the origins of anti-Semitism; the rise of rabbinical Judaism and the development of many of its fundamental religious texts, rituals and educational practices; the religious critique of Empire; and the split between Judaism and Christianity. Its primary value, however, lies in its contribution to the understanding of a neglected aspect of nationalism: that of cultural nationalism which focuses on the moral regeneration of the community, rather than the securing of an independent state. Too readily scholars have overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant cultural nationalists who assert a distinctive collective identity, evoked by historical memories and exemplified in a cherished way of life – for example in a language, literature, religion, educational practices, style of architecture, and customs.

This study breaks with two prevalent assumptions in the scholarship on nationalism. Firstly, it rejects the reductive approach to the role of ideas, which tend to be seen as a legitimation of interests, socio-economic and political. In a world apparently governed by the Realpolitik of states, it seems quaint to study what are often small-scale movements of intellectuals who maintain that moral ideas can overturn the powers of this world. To most scholars it is the analysis of power that matters, and states above all are the engines of power. This book makes clear that ideas can have more lasting power than states. A second and related assumption is that nationalism is really a movement associated with 'modernity', and with the bringing into being of political societies characterized by an adherence to universalistic scientific norms, conceptions of popular sovereignty and citizenship, and ideals of economic progress. From this perspective the fascination of cultural nationalists with golden ages and with the preservation of continuities with earlier generations seems backward-looking and merely sentimental. As Ernest Gellner (1996) would put it, nations have no 'navels' in the ancient world.

But questions of collective identity do matter. All too often scholars of nationalism have grossly overestimated the givenness of states and their capacity to provide meaning for and to exercise dominance over their populations. Cultural nationalist intellectuals – historical scholars, artists, philologists, educationalists, journalists, religious and social reformers – have 'recreated' and diffused a national identity to Germans, Irish, Poles, Finns, Czechs, Jews, and many others despite the assimilating pressures of hostile states. Their primary theme is of moral and social regeneration, one that challenges established social and political elites, who have 'failed' the nation. Although often few in numbers, they provide maps of collective identity at times of crises which can mobilize larger social constituencies. States throughout the modern period, whether long established empires or avowedly nation-states, have periodically been shaken or even destroyed by warfare, economic crises, migrations and demographic shifts, ecological changes, and ideological challenges. These largely unforeseen events may enhance the ideals of cultural nationalism – such as communal self-help and the recreation of social and political institutions from below – particularly among the educated young who often become the shock troops of a new order.

There are no more striking illustrations of the latent power of cultural nationalism than the recent breakup of the USSR, the world's second superpower, into separate nation- or would-be nation-states, whose programmes were developed among small groups of underground nationalist intellectuals working with little expectation of success in their lifetime. A combination of increasing military pressures from competition with the USA, economic decline, moral disillusion with the legacy of communism, and the resurgence of religious sentiments often tied to a sense of ethnic election, was the seedbed of national revolt. But the heroic energy and capacity for self-sacrifice were inspired by myths, symbols, and memories jealously guarded by the nationalist 'priesthood' itself. In the modern world a sense of nationality supplies through its evocation of ancient memories a sense of rootedness that guards against unpredictability. It fulfils a range of important functions which populations require and cannot satisfy by the secular doctrines of the Enlightenment, with its basis in 'cold' reason, universal norms, and utility.

Nationality, particularly when yoked to a distinctive communal religion, partakes of the sacred in characterizing the community as 'primordial', immortal and life-giving, rich in imagery of fatherland and motherland, and in celebrations of its fertile soil. Membership of a nation holds out the promise to individuals that their fleeting lives are given meaning by participation in the story of an 'eternal' nation. Nationality, in the perception of its adherents, is prior to the state (a mere human artifact). It is due to the primary allegiance of individuals and cannot be extinguished by the disappearance or subordination of the state. Moreover, since the focus of national revivalists is on the nation in the long historical view, which included eras of crises, defeat and enslavement, nationalism emphasizes the capacity of communities to overcome external disaster by mobilizing an inner world of spiritual energies. After the national calamity befalling the Danish state in 1864 when Prussia seized the southern provinces of Holstein and Schleswig, the Danes, adopting as a slogan 'What is lost outwardly shall be won inwardly', inaugurated a popular cultural revival and set about reclaiming their wastelands and marshes. History tells us, the nationalist claims, that no nation will ever die if it remains true to its traditions. Such convictions act to preserve a national community in spite of all odds, with Poles under the Soviet yoke remembering the survival and resurrection of their nation despite two centuries of division and occupation by mighty empires.

Perhaps no group more exemplifies the importance of this 'inner' or moral dimension to communal existence than the Jews. After the final destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE and the dispersal into exile, the rabbis reconstructed a Judaic identity based on the Hebrew language, and a religio-literary 'revival' centred on Midrash and Mishna (and later the Talmud). Moshe and David Aberbach analyse with nuance and fascinating examples how the rabbis, faced with national disaster, assumed leadership of a stricken people, making sense of the trauma in religious terms, and elaborating forms of moral regulation and ritual observance that sustained a Jewish diaspora for two millennia in spite of persecutions.

A particularly valuable aspect of this study is that it identifies and addresses a case of cultural nationalism in the ancient world,

and it thereby undermines those explanations of nationalism which conceive of it as a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It lends support to the ethno-symbolic framework pioneered by John Armstrong (1982) and Anthony Smith (1986) which interprets post-eighteenth-century nationalism as a modern manifestation of a much older cycle of ethnic resurgence and decline in world history. In other words, nationalism is to be understood in *la longue durée*, and contrary to the modernists, the mythic, symbolic and cultural aspects are at the core of ethnicity and nationality. Ethnic and national movements have as their primary concern the creation and reproduction of meaning and purpose. The myth–symbol complexes they form ensure the long-term survival of ethnic communities.

I have already cited as triggers of ethno-national revivals in the modern period warfare, immigration, religious and cultural 'invasions', and sudden economic disruptions. These are not confined to the modern period but can be found throughout history. Armstrong and Smith highlight several such catalysts of ethnic persistence and revival. Recurring interstate wars have intensified a sense of difference in communities *vis-à-vis* significant 'others', including communities settled across major trade routes or in 'shatter zones' between contesting empires, such as the Armenians and Jews in classical antiquity. The modern establishment of state capitals has also solidified collective identities much as Rome, Athens and Jerusalem did in the ancient world. The monumental architecture of a Constantinople or Paris embodied the power and sacral mission of a politicized ethnic community over many centuries, and a stable administrative centre allowed the formation of unified administrative elites who spread the dominant ethnic language and culture. The formation of a distinctive religion has also been of great significance for the survival of ethnic groups. Such religions have endowed many with a sense of divine election. They provided a clerical strata devoted to the custody of group traditions and furnished sacred centers that act as foci of collective ritual even in exile, and a unique holy language and vernacular culture. Ideological or religious wars between proselytizing communities also produced an ethnic mobilization of populations. Colonizations, or indeed, large-scale dispersals from the homeland into exile have engendered

ethno-national geneses and ethnic revivals. Nostalgia for a beloved homeland has stimulated intense diaspora nationalism among many communities, including the Jews, Armenians, and Greeks. Unexpected natural changes – diseases, famines, ecological disturbances, shifts in fertility patterns – contributed at times in intensifying competition for scarce resources, creating ethnic polarizations.

Many of these factors are relevant to the Jews under the Roman empire. It is the achievement of the authors in their discussion of short-term and long-term causes to provide an integrated explanation of the Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE and its cultural aftermath. In their analysis we find many of the typical ingredients of ethnic and nationalist revolts. One of the key factors in cultural nationalist movements is a reaction against what is seen as a homogenizing state, seeking to undermine local individualities in the name of constructing a common collective identity. In this case the authors identify as central the drive of the Roman state to impose common customs (emperor worship) as part of an attempt to unify a diverse empire, and Roman suspicion of resistant groups, particularly those in strategically sensitive areas near its Parthian rival. Related to this is an ideological war between cosmopolitan Hellenes and Jews over the 'soul' of the empire, heightened by demographic pressures. What is fascinating is the analysis of the outcomes of this battle, namely, on the one hand, the rise of a tradition of anti-Semitism, and, on the other, the crystallization and elaboration of rabbinic Judaism. Nonetheless, the authors argue, such wars rarely result in 'either–or' choices: the rebels from within this threatened minority are often deeply imbued by the culture which would assimilate them, and who, even in the act of resistance, internalize many of its central assumptions. The reformation of a Judaic morality was not *sui generis:* it was part of a wider search for meaning and purpose beyond the hedonism of imperial life, manifest in the rise of Greek neo-Stoicism, and later of Christianity.

In exploring the drive for understanding, this book brings out the innovative and radical qualities of cultural nationalism: the rise of a new intellectual leadership; the articulation of an alternative vision of the community as part of a critique of the powers that be; and the development of novel cultural forms and strategies

to disseminate the national ideal. In charting the pre-66 CE origins of this vision, the authors analyse with subtlety the class and status divisions between the Jews, and, in particular, the splits between a Hellenizing and collaborationist upper clergy and a more radical 'lower' priesthood. Faced with the collapse of the traditional monarchical institutions and the discrediting of the high priests, the rabbis in common with the biblical prophets had to reconcile for a traumatized community the discrepancy between their sense of chosenness and the disasters that had befallen them. The study illustrates the sense of bewilderment in the paradoxical and at times enigmatic aggadah; the radical implications of writing down what was previously oral knowledge; the attempts to stabilize and preserve the community by the elaboration and codification of religious law; and the establishment of an extended educational training aimed at all classes, perhaps the first in recorded history.

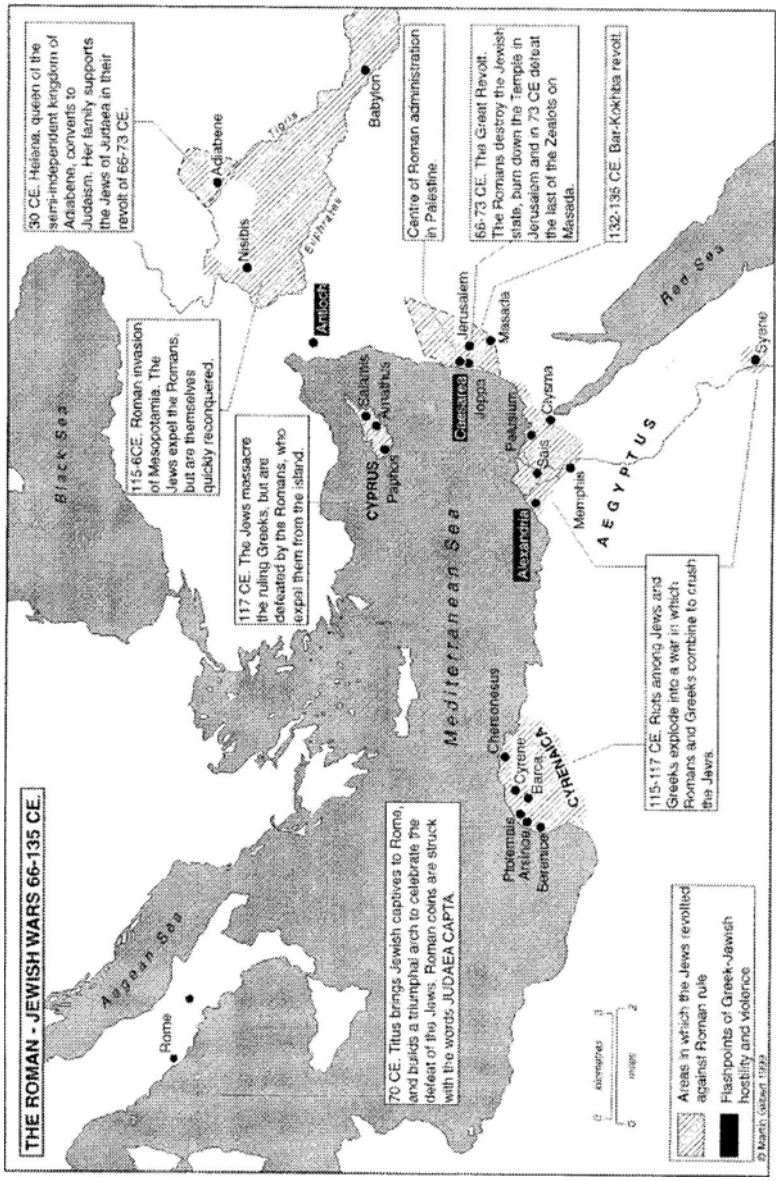
Here again, there are parallels with many modern nationalist revivals, where lower clergy, close to the people, play an important intellectual and mobilizing part, in antagonism to ecclesiastical superiors tarnished by complacency or even accommodation with 'foreign' authority. In modern Greece this religious stratum, in opposition to the more ecumenical ethos of the Orthodox Patriarchate, supported the war of independence against the Ottoman Turk. In late nineteenth-century Ireland, Irish Catholic priests were active at the national and local level in the Gaelic revival, one of whose targets was the complicity of the Church in the anglicization of Irish society. Other instances include the *Bernacina* movement of lower clergy in late eighteenth-century Slovak territories, the Grundtvig 'meeting movement' of Lutheran pastors in nineteenth-century Denmark, and the *Arya Samaj* in nineteenth-century India. All these movements were dedicated to both religious and national reform: their leaders were highly educated and imbued with a meritocratic achievement ethos, impatient with the obscuranticism and careerism of their official leaders; and they aimed to create an educated self-reliant and literate lay community. But let us note, well before the era of modern print culture which Benedict Anderson (1983) argues was a precondition for making possible the imagining of the nation, the Jews of antiquity had developed an intellectual aristocracy,

a culture of the book, and an elaborate educational system deeply democratic in its reach into the community.

This period of antiquity, it could be argued, prepared the ground for the Holocaust. The conditions which made the Holocaust possible – the segregation of the defeated Jews as a hated pariah people – were largely created in the Roman empire, and continued with theological justifications in Christian countries. In many ways, then, this study asks us to rethink our modernist prejudices as it recounts the central elements in the recreation of a Jewish identity that survived for two millennia, even as an often separate and persecuted diaspora community, in exile from its ancestral homeland.

Modern Zionists had to break with this religious conception of the Jewish community, ultimately associated with the European ghettos and *shtetls*, to ensure the survival of Jews in the face of an even greater set of disasters falling upon them from the late nineteenth century until 1945. Faced with spiralling modern racial anti-Semitism in much of Europe, pogroms in Eastern and Central Europe, and finally the rise of National Socialism culminating in the 'Final Solution', Zionists attacked what they saw as the otherworldliness of the ghetto in favour of a mobilized secular idea of Jewishness focused on a modern homeland in the historic territories of ancient Israel. Powerful religious forces shaped the character of this Zionist nationalism, but the cultural nationalism of an Ahad Ha'am or a Bialik, though it built upon the past, was of a very different character from that described in this book.

In the modern world cultural nationalism is undoubtedly secular: its major proponents are humanist intellectuals; its *Weltanschauung* is imbued with a romantic historicism, which infuses the conceptions and goals even of religious reformers; its core constituency and leading cadres are drawn from a professional intelligentsia; and its concerns are this worldly. In short, there are significant differences between the cultural nationalisms of the ancient world and those emerging in the late eighteenth century which remain to be clarified. One of the many strengths of this book is to raise such issues for future exploration.


THE ROMAN - JEWISH WARS 66-135 CE.
Black Sea
Aegean Sea
Rome
Mediterranean Sea
CYPRUS
Paphos
Salamis
Amathus
CYRENAICA
Cyrene
Barca
Berenice
Ptolemais
Arsinoe
Chersonesus
Alexandria
Caesarea
Joppa
Jerusalem
Masada
Pelusium
Sais
Cyrsma
Memphis
AEGYPTUS
Red Sea
Syene
Nisibis
Adiabene
Tigris
Euphrates
Babylon
Antioch
70 CE. Titus brings Jewish captives to Rome, and builds a triumphal arch to celebrate the defeat of the Jews. Roman coins are struck with the words JUDAEA CAPTA.
115-6CE. Roman invasion of Mesopotamia. The Jews expel the Romans, but are themselves quickly reconquered.
117 CE. The Jews massacre the ruling Greeks, but are defeated by the Romans, who expel them from the island.
115-117 CE. Riots among Jews and Greeks explode into a war in which Romans and Greeks combine to crush the Jews.
30 CE. Helena, queen of the semi-independent kingdom of Adiabene, converts to Judaism. Her family supports the Jews of Judaea in their revolt of 66-73 CE.
Centre of Roman administration in Palestine.
66-73 CE. The Great Revolt. The Romans destroy the Jewish state, burn down the Temple in Jerusalem and in 73 CE defeat the last of the Zealots on Masada.
132-135 CE. Bar-Kokhba revolt.
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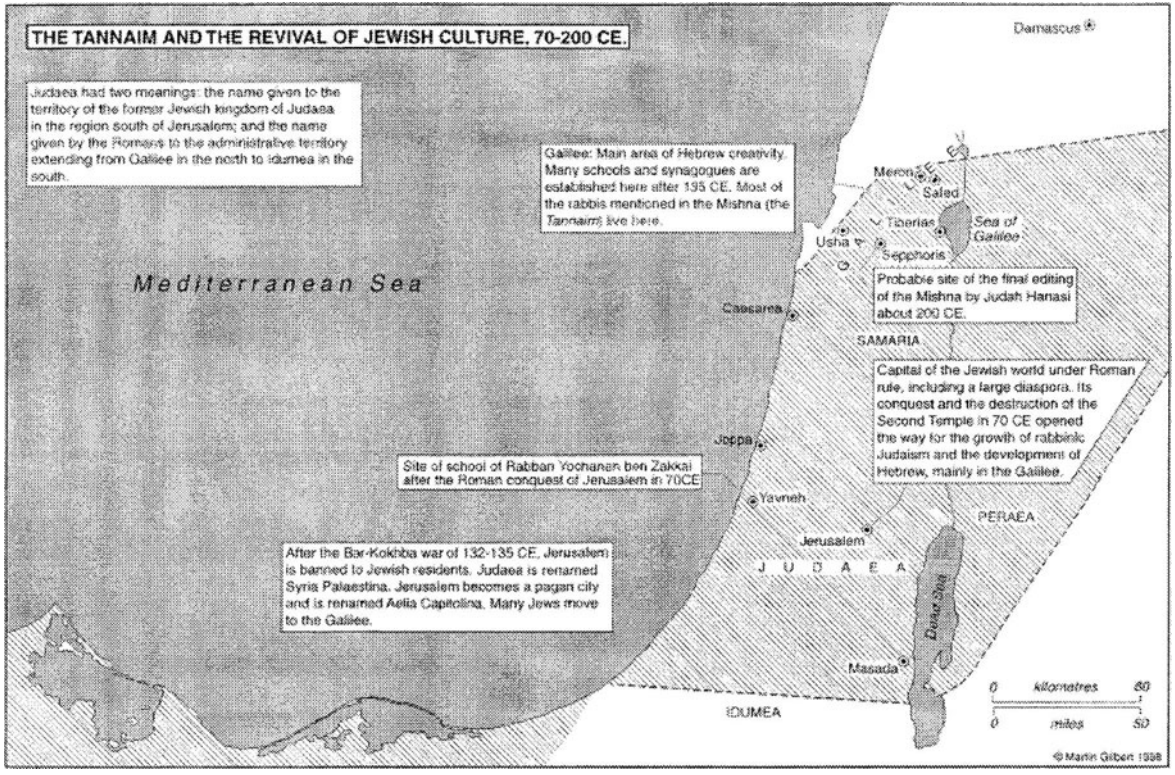
Areas in which the Jews revolted against Roman rule
Flashpoints of Greek-Jewish hostility and violence
© Martin Gilbert 1993


THE TANNAIM AND THE REVIVAL OF JEWISH CULTURE, 70-200 CE.
Judaea had two meanings: the name given to the territory of the former Jewish kingdom of Judaea in the region south of Jerusalem; and the name given by the Romans to the administrative territory extending from Galilee in the north to Idumea in the south.
Galilee: Main area of Hebrew creativity. Many schools and synagogues are established here after 135 CE. Most of the rabbis mentioned in the Mishna (the Tannaim) live here.
Mediterranean Sea
Damascus
Meron
Safed
Tiberias
Sea of Galilee
Usha
Sepphoris
Probable site of the final editing of the Mishna by Judah Hanasi about 200 CE.
Caesarea
SAMARIA
Capital of the Jewish world under Roman rule, including a large diaspora. Its conquest and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE opened the way for the growth of rabbinic Judaism and the development of Hebrew, mainly in the Galilee.
Joppa
Site of school of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70CE
Yavneh
PERAEA
Jerusalem
J U D A E A
After the Bar-Kokhba war of 132-135 CE, Jerusalem is banned to Jewish residents. Judaea is renamed Syria Palaestina. Jerusalem becomes a pagan city and is renamed Aelia Capitolina. Many Jews move to the Galilee.
Dead Sea
Masada
IDUMEA
0 Kilometres 80
0 Miles 50
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The minority is always right.

Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*