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# ”The Paradoxical Similarities between the Jews and the Roman Other”

Katell Berthelot

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# Perceiving the Other in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity

Edited by  
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Mohr Siebeck

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# The Paradoxical Similarities between the Jews and the Roman Other

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The question raised in this essay is both simple and intricate: in which way(s) was the Roman “other” perceived as a different “other” than previous enemies of Israel known from Jewish scriptures and from the Second Temple period, such as the Philistines, Edomites, Babylonians, and the Greeks? In particular, what made the Roman Empire different from other empires which had once subjugated Israel?<sup>2</sup>

To answer this question, I focus on rabbinic evidence from the Land of Israel, starting with a few remarks on the well-known identification of Rome with Esau or Edom, before examining the wider historical context in which the violent interactions between the Romans and the Jews took place. I argue that the Roman Empire did in fact represent a unique challenge for the Jews due to the similarities in how Romans and Jews each conceived of themselves as a people with a divine calling and a universal mission, and that this challenge became all the more problematic in the face of repeated Jewish defeats at the hands of Rome in the first two centuries CE.

## Esau/Edom: Christian Rome or Pagan Rome?

The identification of Rome with Esau, Jacob’s twin brother, found repeatedly in rabbinic literature, is based on a paradoxical choice. If one was looking for a biblical character or a people exemplifying the arch-enemy of Israel, why not identify Rome with Babylon, another city representing an empire that destroyed Israel’s Temple?<sup>3</sup> Why

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I wish to thank the participants of the conference on “Perceiving the Other: Ancient and Modern Interactions with Outsiders” at Ben-Gurion University for the helpful discussion of the paper I presented there.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of the encounters between Israel and different empires, see, for example, Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter, *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism*, ed. Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> This is, in fact, the case in Jewish apocalypses, such as *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*. See, for example, Kenneth R. Jones, *Jewish Reactions to the Destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70: Apocalypses and Related Pseudepigrapha*, JSJSup 151 (Leiden: Brill, 2011). On the various representations of Rome in

not choose to identify Rome with Amalek, who was a descendant of Esau? The rabbis, however, mainly chose to identify Rome with Esau himself, Israel's twin brother.

As Carol Bakhos correctly emphasizes, the reference to Esau in rabbinic literature serves different purposes. Esau may in some cases represent an ultimate "other" with no particular historical background, so that not all references to Esau or Edom are to be read in connection with Rome.<sup>4</sup> Many, however, can be shown to be closely linked to Rome.

The identification of Rome with Esau/Edom has been explained in reference to King Herod, who was a client king of Rome and whose ancestors were Idumeans, or Edomites, as the Idumeans were considered the descendants of the Edomites.<sup>5</sup> This explanation, however, is not particularly convincing, especially in light of Josephus's account in *The Jewish War*, according to which the Idumeans, who were integrated into Judea by Hyrcanus I at the end of the second century BCE, fought alongside the Judeans and against the Romans to protect the Jerusalem Temple during the war of 66–70.<sup>6</sup> This remarkable display of patriotic loyalty could hardly have been forgotten by the rabbis, at least not in the late first and second centuries CE.

Several scholars have proposed a different explanation based on the prophecies of Edom's doom, which are numerous in the Bible.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Gerson Cohen has emphasized the particular relevance of the passages concerning the Edomites in the Lamentations of Jeremiah in connection with the destruction of the First Temple in order to understand the identification of Rome with Edom following the destruction of the Second Temple.<sup>8</sup>

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Jewish writings, see Nicolas de Lange, "Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire," in *Imperialism in the Ancient World*, ed. P. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 255–81; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Jérusalem contre Rome* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 433.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Bakhos, "Figuring (out) Esau: The Rabbis and Their Others," *JJS* 58 (2007): 250–62. See also Friedrich Avemarie, "Esau's Hände, Jakobs Stimme: Edom als Sinnbild Roms in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur," in *Die Heiden: Juden, Christen und das Problem des Fremden*, ed. Reinhard Feldmeier, WUNT 70 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 177–208.

<sup>5</sup> See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 5:272, n. 19: "The use of the name Edom, Seir, Esau, and similar ones, to describe Rome is very old, and was probably coined at the time of Herod, whose designation 'the Idumean' was applied to his masters, the Romans." This hypothesis, however, has been rejected by almost all scholars working on this topic during the last half century, one notable exception being Irit Aminoff, "The Figures of Esau and the Kingdom of Edom in Palestinian Midrashic-Talmudic Literature in the Tannaic and Amoraic Period" (PhD diss., Melbourne University, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> See Flavius Josephus, *War* 4.224, 229, 566–576; 5.248–249; 6.378–383; Alan Appelbaum, "The Idumaeans' in Josephus' *The Jewish War*," *JSJ* 40 (2009): 1–22; Israel Ronen, "Formation of Jewish Nationalism Among the Idumeans," Appendix B in *Jews, Idumaeans, and Ancient Arabs: Relations of the Jews in Eretz-Israel with the Nations of the Frontier and the Desert during the Hellenistic and Roman Era (332 BCE – 70 CE)*, by Aryeh Kasher, TSAJ 18 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 214–39, esp. 224–39.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular the Book of Obadiah, which, with 21 verses, is very short but is directed exclusively at Edom. See also Gerson D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19–48, esp. 24–25; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Jacob et Esau ou Israël et Rome dans le Talmud et le Midrash," *RHR* 201 (1984): 369–92, esp. 377–78.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, "Esau as Symbol."

The explanation put forward by Jacob Neusner differs from earlier theories, because he claims that, prior to the fourth century, Rome was just a place and an empire among others, with no particular significance for the rabbis: “To invoke a modern category, Rome stood for a perfectly secular matter: a place, where things happened. Rome in no way symbolized anything beyond itself.”<sup>9</sup> According to Neusner, the identification of Rome with Esau was a late phenomenon, closely linked to the Christianization of the empire, because “Christian Rome posed a threat without precedent.”<sup>10</sup> In rabbinic literature, Esau or Edom would thus refer to a Christian Rome, and ultimately to Christianity itself.

Some scholars disagree with Neusner and claim that the identification of Rome with Esau/Edom occurred well before the fourth century CE. Israel Yuval, for instance, dates the identification to the first half of the second century CE.<sup>11</sup> Neusner’s theory has also been challenged by Adiel Schremer, who, in his book *Brothers Estranged*, argues that “Constantine’s conversion and the resulting Christianization of the Roman Empire were, from the rabbinic point of view, of relatively little significance.” According to Schremer, the link between Edom and Rome can already be found in Tannaitic literature.<sup>12</sup>

The main problem with the identification of Rome with Esau/Edom in rabbinic sources is methodological: the *rabbis* who actually identify Rome with Edom date back at least to the third generation of Tannaim in the second century CE. However, the earliest *sources* in which the sayings of these rabbis are mentioned, the Jerusalem Talmud and *Genesis Rabbah*, date from the fourth or fifth century CE. During the fourth and fifth centuries CE, Rome progressively became Christian. Therefore, some scholars who, like Neusner, disregard the identification of the rabbi to whom a particular saying is attributed and focus on the date of the last redaction of the work as a whole, argue that one should not interpret Edom or Esau as referring to

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 77.

<sup>10</sup> Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> See Israel J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 10–11. His main reference is to *y. Ta’anit* 4.8, 68d, which builds upon Num 24:17–19, an oracle pertaining to the Messiah: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Seth. And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly. Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remains of the city.” During the revolt of 132–135 CE, this prophecy seems to have been applied to Bar Kokhba and, as a consequence, Edom in Num 24:18 was meant to refer to Rome. This interpretation may have been strengthened by the reference to the city (*‘ir*) at the end of Num 24:19, which could be interpreted as referring to the *Urbs*. Yuval actually follows Gerson Cohen’s article published in 1969, and Cohen himself refers to George Foot Moore’s *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 2:116, 329.

<sup>12</sup> Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 22 (for the quotation). See *ibid.*, 131–34 and 227 n. 61 for early examples of the identification of Rome with Edom, and Chapter 6 for his analysis of the impact of the empire’s Christianization.



the Roman Empire during the second or third century CE, but rather to the Christian Roman Empire, or to Christianity itself.

In this debate, I tend to side with those who want to balance Neusner's approach by considering the attribution of a saying to a particular rabbi while acknowledging that, of course, this must be done critically.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, some ancient sources, including Tannaitic texts and not merely Tannaitic figures, while admittedly more allusive than later sources, tend to corroborate the view that Rome was identified with Esau or Edom from at least the third century CE onward, and perhaps already during the first century CE.<sup>14</sup>

*Sifre Deuteronomy* § 343, which comments upon Deut 33:2, needs to be taken into account in this regard.<sup>15</sup> The biblical verse states: "And he said, YHWH came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints: from his right hand went a fiery law for them" (trans. NRSV). The midrashic interpretation is as follows:

*And he said, YHWH came from Sinai.* When the Holy One Blessed be He revealed himself to give the Torah to Israel, He did not reveal himself in one language only, but in four languages. *And he said, YHWH came from Sinai.* This is the Hebrew language. *He rose up from Seir unto them.* This is the Roman language [i. e., Latin]. *He shined forth from Mount Paran.* This is the Arabic language. *He came with ten thousands of saints.* This is the Aramaic language.<sup>16</sup>

The passage from Deuteronomy deals with the revelation of the Torah, described as "a fiery law," at Sinai. Yet, strangely enough, in addition to Sinai, the biblical verse mentions two other places, Seir and Paran. In the Bible, Mount Seir is consistently associated with Esau and Edom, whereas Mount Paran is the territory of Ishmael, later considered the ancestor of the Arabs. This gives rise to the proposition that the biblical verse alludes to the possibility that God revealed the Torah in Arabic.<sup>17</sup> Now, in the

<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, Seth Schwartz (*Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001], 8), who aptly writes: "To insist on questioning the accuracy of 'attributions' in rabbinic literature [...] on the grounds that later rabbis and/or the editors of the documents had some motivation to falsify them, and may in any case simply have misremembered, is salutary. But to conclude that we must assume the falsity of attributions, that therefore(?) the documents are essentially pseudepigraphic and can be assumed to provide evidence only for the interests of their redactors, is in fact no longer a skeptical but a positivist position and is less plausible than the one it replaced." See also Christine E. Hayes, "Halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai in Rabbinic Sources: A Methodological Case Study," in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, BJS 326 (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2000), 61–117.

<sup>14</sup> A passage from *4 Ezra* is particularly interesting in this respect (see *4 Ezra* 6.7–10). The interpretation of the passage is disputed, but it is very probable that, in this context, Esau represents the Roman Empire, to which the kingdom of Israel shall succeed. See Michael Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 159–61.

<sup>15</sup> Another Tannaitic text that corroborates the idea that Rome was identified with Edom already during the Tannaitic period is *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha (Bo)* 14 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 52), which refers to the exile to Edom as the last exile in the history of Israel. I thank Yael Wilfand for drawing my attention to this passage.

<sup>16</sup> Author's translation, based on the edition of Louis Finkelstein, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2001 [first edition 1939]), 395.

<sup>17</sup> On Seir and Esau/Edom, see Gen 32:3; 33:14, 16; 36:8–9; Num 24:18; Deut 2:4; etc. On Paran and Ishmael, see Gen 21:21. On Arabs as descendants of Ishmael already during the Second Temple

case of Seir, in order to make sense of the association between Seir, Esau, and Edom on the one hand, and the Roman language on the other, one must presuppose the identification of Edom with Rome. This is the only interpretation that can explain the text. Moreover, a subsequent passage in *Sifre Deuteronomy* § 343 alludes to a future vengeance of God against Seir/Edom, which in this case can only designate Rome.<sup>18</sup>

Since the final redaction of *Sifre Deuteronomy* is dated from the third century CE, this passage represents a clear example showing that the identification of the Roman Empire with Esau or Edom predates the Christianization of the empire. Hence the question: if the identification of Rome with Esau/Edom was not originally based on the rivalry between Jews and Christians, what prompted Jews to identify the Roman Empire with Israel's twin brother?

## The Similarity of the Roman Other

### *An Encounter between Two Peoples*

Beyond "Rome," there was a city and there was a people. From the point of view of many Romans, the city, the *Urbs*, was meant to grow and progressively include the entire world, the *orbs* or *orbis*, into its *imperium*. As Ovid explained, "The land of other nations has a fixed boundary, [whereas] the territory of Rome is identical to that of the City and that of the world (*Romanae spatium est Urbis et orbis idem*)" (*Fasti* 2.684).<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, according to biblical and Jewish representations, the destiny of Israel was also closely associated with that of a city, Jerusalem, toward which all peoples were expected to gather and congregate at the end of times in order to offer their tribute to the God of Israel.<sup>20</sup> From the Jewish perspective, it was Jerusalem that was the center of the earth, *tabur ha-aretz* or *omphalos tēs gēs*.<sup>21</sup> During the Second Temple period, Jerusalem was conceived of as a temple city with a universal dimension and a universal vocation. When the Jews encountered the Romans, they were to a certain extent confronted with a city with a rival claim to universalism.

Moreover, beyond the city of Rome, there was also a people. An obvious, but generally overlooked, element of the answer to the question "What prompted Jews to identify the Roman Empire with Israel's twin brother?" lies in the fact that for

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period, see Israel Eph'al, "Ishmael and 'Arab(s)': A Transformation of Ethnological Terms," *JNES* 35 (1976): 225–31; Fergus Millar, "Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus and the Origins of Islam," *JJS* 44 (1993): 23–45; Erich S. Gruen, "Kinship Relations and Jewish Identity," in *Jewish Identities in Antiquity: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, ed. Lee I. Levine and Daniel R. Schwartz, TSAJ 130 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 101–16.

<sup>18</sup> See Finkelstein, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 397.

<sup>19</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Isaiah 60.

<sup>21</sup> See Ezek 38:12, *Jub.* 8.19, and Moshe Weinfeld, "Jerusalem: A Political and Spiritual Capital," in *Capital Cities: Urban Planning and Spiritual Dimensions*, ed. J. Goodnick Westenholz (Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum, 1998), 15–40.

Israel, the confrontation with Rome was originally a confrontation with another people, the *populus Romanus*. Israel had to face several empires in antiquity, but the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Macedonian Empires were those of kings. They did not belong to a people, nor was conquest carried out in the name of a people.

The fact that the Romans had no king impressed the author of the First Book of Maccabees, who, after describing Roman imperialism and Roman victories against their enemies at length, concluded with the words: “And in all this not even one of them has put on a crown nor have they wrapped themselves in purple so as to show their power by it” (1 Macc 8:14).<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the Roman rejection of a monarchy-like type of government ended with the founding of the Principate in 27 BCE and the growing importance and sacrality of the emperor and the imperial family during the centuries that followed. Yet the testimony of Augustus’s *Res Gestae* indicates that the Roman people and the Senate remained very present in imperial discourse even after the end of the Republic and that the *princeps* presented his actions as subordinate to the will of the people and the Senate. At least one of the inscriptions on which the text of the *Res Gestae* is preserved opens as follows: “Below is a copy of the achievements of the deified Augustus, by which he made the world subject to the rule of the Roman people, and of the expenses which he incurred for the state and people of Rome, as inscribed upon two bronze columns which have been set up at Rome.”<sup>23</sup> In § 26.1 of *Res Gestae*, we also read: “I enlarged the boundaries of all provinces of the Roman people, which had as neighbors peoples that were not subject to our rule.”<sup>24</sup> The close association between Augustus and the Roman people is apparent also in the statement at § 26.4 that “Cimbri and Charydes and Semnones and many other tribes of Germans sought through embassies my friendship and that of the Roman people.”

Even after Augustus, as Clifford Ando aptly notes, “the notional sovereignty of the *populus Romanus* remained integral to imperial ideology and received expression in the continued holding of elections through the early third century.”<sup>25</sup> The references

<sup>22</sup> Trans. George T. Zervos, NETS, 490.

<sup>23</sup> Trans. Alison E. Cooley, *Res gestae divi Augusti: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 58. Cooley’s translation is based on a composite text of both Latin and Greek versions, which takes into account the inscriptions from Ancyra, Pisidian Antioch, and Apollonia. For a detailed edition and French translation of the different versions of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, see John Scheid, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: Hauts faits du divin Auguste* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Cooley, *Res gestae divi Augusti*, 91. See also §§ 13, 27.1, 30.1–2, 32.2. As Andrew Erskine (*Roman Imperialism* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010], 10) notes, “The most forceful expression of Roman power and the ideology of empire ... is surely the voice of the emperor Augustus himself as recorded in the inscription known as the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*.” On the double meaning of *imperium*, see J. S. Richardson, “Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power,” *JRS* 81 (1991): 1–9.

<sup>25</sup> Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 28. Ando relies on the work of Jean Béranger published in collaboration with François Paschoud and Pierre Ducrey in *Principatus: Études de notions et d’histoire politiques dans l’Antiquité gréco-romaine*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l’Université de Lausanne 20 (Genève: Droz, 1973), 209–42 and 261.

to the Roman people in texts, inscriptions, or coins were not merely a rhetorical aspect of imperial discourse, but a truly ideological one.

As early as the first century BCE, numismatic representations of the *Genius Populi Romani*, the personification of the Roman people, can be found that display him as a man seated on a curule chair, holding a sceptre and a globe, and crowned by Victoria, the personification or goddess of victory.<sup>26</sup> This is a very explicit iconographic representation of the Roman people's rule and domination over the world.<sup>27</sup> Similar representations of the *Genius* of the Roman people can be found on later imperial coins, as well as on provincial coinage from different cities in the empire.<sup>28</sup> Under Nero, for example, billon tetradrachms were minted in Alexandria with the inscription *dēmos Rōmaion*, the "people of the Romans" in Greek, on the reverse side, together with a representation of the *Genius* of the Roman people standing holding a sceptre and a cornucopia.<sup>29</sup> The coins offer just one example of how the dominion of the Roman people, implying their superiority, was proclaimed and represented visually on a great variety of objects and monuments.<sup>30</sup>

### *A Rivalry of "Election" and "Vocation" between Israel and Rome*

Roman imperial ideology presented a challenge for Israel not merely because Rome stood for a people, but because of what could be perceived, from a Jewish perspective, as a rivalry between Rome and Israel over the issues of election and vocation. As Gerson Cohen has aptly described it: "Each considered itself divinely chosen and destined for a unique history. Each was obsessed with its glorious anti-

<sup>26</sup> See Michael H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1:409, no. 397, which consists of a denarius minted by P. Cornelius Lentulus Spinther in 74 BCE. See also Crawford, no. 393, for another clear iconographic association between the *Genius Populi Romani* and worldly domination.

It should be emphasized that the *Genius Populi Romani* became the focus of a cult as early as the end of the third century BCE (as early as 218–217 BCE, according to Livy 21.62.9). As J. Rufus Fears ("Ο ΔΗΜΟΣ Ο ΡΩΜΑΙΩΝ *Genius Populi Romani*: A Note on the Origin of *Dea Roma*," *Mnemosyne* 31 [1978]: 274–86, esp. 280–81, and 286 for the quotation) notes, "the concept of *Genius Publicus-Genius Populi Romani* provided a traditional context through which the Romans could absorb and propagate such a fundamental element in Hellenistic statecraft as the ruler cult;" in other terms, the Roman people took the place of the Hellenistic king.

<sup>27</sup> On the iconography of the *Genius* of the Roman people, as well as that of the Senate or the emperor, see Hille Kunckel, *Der Römische Genius* (Heidelberg: F. H. Kale Verlag, 1974).

<sup>28</sup> Under Antoninus Pius, for instance, coins with the *Genius* of the Roman people standing and holding a sceptre and a cornucopia can be found (RIC III no. 70, 71, 682, 683). Under the reign of Julian the Apostate from 361 to 363, one still finds a coin with the inscription *victoria Romanorum*, "the victory of the Romans," and the representation of Victory with VOT XX inscribed in two lines on a shield supported by a small winged *Genius* (RIC VIII no. 207).

<sup>29</sup> See BMC Alexandria 19; RPC I nos. 5214, 5243.

<sup>30</sup> The *Genius Populi Romani* was represented on reliefs of monuments, such as the Cancelleria reliefs, dating from the period of Domitian and Nerva. Moreover, the *Genius* was also found on precious objects such as cups; see for example, the Boscoreale silver cup representing the triumph of Tiberius, dated from the first half of the first century CE. See François Baratte, *Le trésor dorfévrier romaine de Boscoreale* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1986).

quity. Each was convinced that heaven had selected it to rule the world. Neither could accept with equanimity any challenge to its claims.”<sup>31</sup>

Both the Romans and the Jews had a clear sense of bearing a unique historical destiny that was the result of the will of the gods or of God. Beginning with the period of the Principate, Roman authors were particularly keen to emphasize the Romans’ Trojan origins, proving that the gods had planned Rome a very long time in advance.<sup>32</sup> As Moshe Weinfeld has argued, Aeneas’s story shows similarities with Greek founding myths, but there are also striking parallels between Virgil’s epic and the biblical narrative of Abraham.<sup>33</sup> Both Aeneas and Abraham are called upon to leave their fatherlands in order to receive a new land and give birth to a new people, which is fated ultimately to prevail over all others and rule the world.

Moreover, one of the main characteristics of both Aeneas and Abraham is their piety. Of course, Roman *pietas* – the fact that the Romans kept their obligations toward the gods and were scrupulous in performing religious rites – is not the equivalent of the Hebrew *hesed* or *yirat YHWH*.<sup>34</sup> However, Aeneas’s exemplary *pietas*, which later came to characterize the Roman people as a whole, may to some extent be compared to the exemplary piety or obedience of Abraham, which made him a worthy partner of God’s covenant, and was emulated by his descendants through the observance of the Torah.<sup>35</sup> While a Greek writer like Polybius took note of the Romans’ extraordinary piety but did not see in it the decisive factor in their victories against other nations, Roman authors firmly made such a connection.<sup>36</sup> Roman *pietas* was regarded as the source of the gods’ support for Roman imperialism. Horace, for example, makes the point very clear when he writes: “[O Roman,] It is because you hold yourselves inferior to the gods that you rule. For every beginning seek their approval; to them attribute its outcome.”<sup>37</sup> Cicero makes a similar point:

Who, once convinced that divinity does exist, can fail at the same time to be convinced that it is by its power that this great empire has been created, extended, and sustained? However good be our conceit of ourselves, conscript fathers, we have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigor, nor Carthage in versatility, nor Greece in art, nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in religion, and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, “Esau as Symbol,” 25.

<sup>32</sup> See Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278–279, 6.851–853, etc.; Tibullus, *Elegies* 2.5.39–2.5.62. The representation on coins of the *palladium*, a statue of Pallas, whose preservation was believed to ensure the safety of Troy, played a similar function, since it symbolized the Trojan origins of the Romans.

<sup>33</sup> See Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of the Land of Canaan by the Israelites* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2–22.

<sup>34</sup> In Isa 11:2 and 33:6, the expression *yirat YHWH* (“fear of God”) is translated by *eusebeia*, the Greek term for piety.

<sup>35</sup> On Roman piety, see Pierre Boyancé, “Les Romains, peuple de la *Fides*,” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* 23 (1964): 419–35 (see 419 in particular); on Romans’ scrupulous care for religious rites, see John Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire: les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris: Aubier, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> See Polybius, *Histories* 6.56.

<sup>37</sup> *Odes* 3.6.5–6, trans. Niall Rudd, LCL, 163.

the world is swayed and directed by divine disposal, we have excelled every race and every nation.<sup>38</sup>

According to Cicero, the Romans excelled not only in fulfilling their obligations toward the gods and in performing religious rites, but also in understanding Providence's designs. From a Roman perspective, these designs clearly favored Rome, which had been granted a worldly dominion by the gods themselves!<sup>39</sup>

However, from a Jewish perspective, the repeated affirmations that the Romans excelled in piety and had been granted a universal empire by divine providence amounted to claims that competed with their belief in the election of Israel, the truly pious people, chosen by the only true God, whose designs the Jews understood better than did the idolaters. Hence, Josephus, for example, insists on presenting the Jews as particularly pious. In *Against Apion* 1.60, he writes: "above all we take pride in raising children, and make keeping the laws and preserving the traditional piety that accords with them the most essential task of our whole life."<sup>40</sup> As John Barclay comments, "The preservation of tradition parallels Roman conservatism in relation to *mos maiorum*, but Josephus' superlatives (the 'most essential' task of our 'whole' life) suggest a Judean superiority in this regard."<sup>41</sup> The comparison with the Romans is implicit but highly probable in Josephus's context. Finally, as far as the understanding of Providence's designs is concerned, it is well known that Josephus claimed a special expertise in this respect, and even suggested a certain resemblance between himself and the prophet Jeremiah.<sup>42</sup> More generally, from Josephus's perspective, biblical prophecy showed that Israel, or at least the priests versed in Jewish scriptures, had been granted by God a special knowledge of his designs. However, after the defeat against Rome, and the rebels' erroneous interpretation of certain heavenly signs reported at length by Josephus himself, it was difficult for him to argue that the Jews excelled in understanding God's plans.<sup>43</sup>

This rivalry of election between Israel and Rome – a rivalry in the Jews' perspective, rather than in that of the Romans – went hand in hand with a rivalry of vocation or mission. From at least the period of the Principate onward, Rome was presented as a power that brought peace and order to the world, and in the Romans' perspective this order was predicated on law and not on military force alone. The

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<sup>38</sup> *De haruspicum responsis* 19, trans. N.H. Watts, LCL, 339–341 (very slightly modified): *sed pietate ac religione atque hac una sapientia, quod deorum numine omnia regi gubernarique perspeximus, omnes gentes nationesque superavimus.*

<sup>39</sup> On the iconographic manifestations in urban space of the idea that Providence was supporting the Romans, see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 203.

<sup>40</sup> *Flavius Josephus, Against Apion: Translation and Commentary*, trans. John M. G. Barclay, FJTC 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 43. See also *Against Apion* 1.212, 2.146, 170–171, 181, 291, etc.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> See Shaye J.D. Cohen, "Josephus, Jeremiah, and Polybius," *History and Theory* 21 (1982): 366–81.

<sup>43</sup> See Josephus, *War* 6.288–315 for examples of signs that were given but misinterpreted by most of the Jews.

passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* in which Anchises foretells to Aeneas the fate of the people to whom he will give birth ascribes this mission to the Romans:

Others, I doubt not, shall with softer mould beat out the breathing bronze, coax from the marble features to the life, plead cases with greater eloquence and with a pointer trace heaven's motions and predict the risings of the stars: you, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to establish law with peace, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud.<sup>44</sup>

Some Jewish sources echo this Roman discourse, and do not reject it outright. In the *Legatio ad Gaium*, for example, Philo praises the peace that prevailed during Augustus's Principate:

This is he who not only loosed but broke the chains which had shackled and pressed so hard on the habitable world. This is he who exterminated wars both of the open kind and the covert which are brought about by the raids of brigands. This is he who cleared the sea of pirate ships and filled it with merchant vessels. This is he who reclaimed every state to liberty, who led disorder into order and brought gentle manners and harmony to all unsociable and brutish nations, who enlarged Hellas by many a new Hellas and hellenized the outside world in its most important regions, the guardian of the peace, who dispensed their dues to each and all, who did not hoard his favours but gave them to be common property, who kept nothing good and excellent hidden throughout his life.<sup>45</sup>

This passage has a clear rhetorical dimension: Augustus is described as a good emperor in order to contrast him with Caligula, the bad emperor who did not respect the rights of the Jews. Moreover, in this specific passage, Philo aims to discredit the Alexandrians by showing that they did not honor Augustus in the way they sought to honor Caligula, despite the former's superiority over the latter. Philo's assessment of Roman imperial power is complex, as I have shown elsewhere, and his praise of Augustus should not be taken entirely at face value.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the fact remains that Philo mirrors some aspects of Roman imperial ideology and of pro-Roman Greek discourse.<sup>47</sup>

Similar echoes can be found in other first-century Jewish texts or early Christian texts quoting Jewish speakers. In the Book of Acts, for example, the high priest Ana-

<sup>44</sup> *Aeneid* 6.847–853, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. by G. P. Goold, LCL, 593 (slightly modified). Latin text: 847 *excudent alii spirantia mollius aera / (credo equidem), vivos ducent de marmore vultus, / orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus / 850 describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent: / tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento / (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem, / 853 parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.*

<sup>45</sup> *Legatio* 146–147, trans. F. H. Colson, LCL, 75.

<sup>46</sup> See Katell Berthelot, "Philo's Perception of the Roman Empire," *JSJ* 42 (2011): 166–87; eadem, "Philo on the Impermanence of Empires" (forthcoming). For a different perspective on this passage, see Maren Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, TSAJ 86 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 113–18.

<sup>47</sup> In this particular passage, Philo uses *topoi* that were penned by Greek authors who praised Rome. His insistence on the Hellenization of barbarian countries and peoples in the context of empire, for example, is typically Greek and not Roman. Roman imperial discourse was about peace and order, not about Hellenization or civilization; see Hervé Inglebert, "Les processus de romanisation," in *Histoire de la civilisation romaine*, ed. Hervé Inglebert (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), 421–49, at 438–40.

nias and the elders are reported to have addressed the Roman governor, Felix, with the help of a spokesman named Tertullus, in the following terms: “Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your provision, most excellent Felix, reforms are introduced on behalf of this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude” (Acts 24:2–3, trans. NRSV). The historical accuracy of the account is of course questionable, and in any case, the discourse may be dismissed as mere flattery or *captatio benevolentiae*, but the very fact that the high priest and the elders are described as speaking to the governor in such terms is significant.

Interestingly enough, some late rabbinic texts also reflect the discourse about the benefits of the *Pax Romana* and of the Roman legal order. In *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, in connection with Gen 1:31 (“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” [וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כֹּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד]), the following opinion is attributed to Resh Laqish:

Resh Laqish says: *Behold, it was very good*: this is the kingdom of heaven. *And behold, it was very good*: this is the earthly kingdom. How is the earthly kingdom very good? How strange! Only because it exacts justice for the creatures [for human beings]. *I made the earth and created man/Adam/Edom upon it* (Isa 45:12).<sup>48</sup>

Resh Laqish seems to interpret the presence of the *waw* in וַיַּרְא, the “and” in “And behold ...,” as meaning that two things were declared very good: the kingdom of heaven and the earthly kingdom. The expression *malkhut ha-aretz*, literally, kingdom of the earth, can designate any worldly government, but in the context of the Palestinian rabbis, this kingdom was the Roman Empire. Moreover, the surprise expressed in the commentary at the possibility that the earthly kingdom might be considered good also corroborates the identification of the latter with Rome, rather than with a general and vague entity. In rabbinic literature, Rome was in fact frequently described as “the evil kingdom.” If we understand *malkhut ha-aretz* as designating Rome in this context, then it is possible to consider that Resh Laqish’s use of Isa 45:12 is not based on the reading *adam*, or human being, but rather, with a different vocalization, on the reading *Edom*, which designates Rome.<sup>49</sup> The verse may then be understood to mean that God created the Roman Empire and established its power over the nations of the earth. According to the midrash, the explanation for such a paradoxical divine decision lies in the fact that the Roman Empire “exacts justice for the creatures.” In other terms, it establishes a proper legal order. This passage is exceptional in rabbinic literature and quite revealing.<sup>50</sup>

The problem with the Roman definition of Rome’s mission of peace, law, and universal rule was that it displayed similarities with the mission ascribed to Israel in biblical and Jewish tradition, which states that all the nations are to be blessed in Abraham, and that through Israel the nations are called to discover God’s law, to

<sup>48</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 9.13 (author’s translation, based on the Theodor-Albeck edition, 73–74).

<sup>49</sup> See the commentary of Albeck in the Theodor-Albeck edition, 74.

<sup>50</sup> As correctly noted by Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 56. This passage from *Genesis Rabbah* may be compared with *m. Avot* 3.2, which is also positive about the Roman order, but in a more minimalist way.



submit to God and finally to live in peace with one another, possibly in the messianic age.<sup>51</sup> The Book of Isaiah, for example, describes the eschatological peace resulting from universal recognition of the God of Israel. And even Philo, who rarely indulges in eschatological conjectures, expects Israel and its laws to be universally recognized at the end of days.<sup>52</sup> From a Jewish perspective, the quasi-universal peace promised by Rome could sound like a claim to be fulfilling the covenant God had made with Israel. In other terms, by promoting a Roman messianic age, Rome could be perceived as taking the place of Israel.

### Conflict, Military Victory and Substitution

With the violent clashes between the Romans and the Jews at the end of the first century and during the second century CE, the Roman claim of bringing peace to the world was to prove extremely bitter for the Jews. The three revolts that occurred in less than seventy years failed and led to national disasters, resulting in a deep despair.<sup>53</sup> Beyond the heavy losses of Jewish lives, the destruction of the temple and of most of Jerusalem, I would like to point to an aspect of the defeats that deserves particular attention and that, in my view, contributed to the rabbinic perception of the Romans as rivals who threatened Israel's place and role in the world.

First, the Jewish defeat at the end of the first revolt led to the creation of the *fiscus Judaicus* for the collection of a tax of two *denarii* to be paid every year by all Jews, men and women alike, apparently from the age of three until the age of 62

<sup>51</sup> See Gen 12:1–3; Isa 11:1–10; Isaiah 60; and Daniel 7. See also 4Q246 frag. 1, col. ii, 1–9.

<sup>52</sup> On Philo's eschatological or messianic expectations, see *De Praemiis et Poeniis*, esp. §§ 163–171; *QE* 2.76; Erwin R. Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo Judaeus: Practice and Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 115–20; J. de Savignac, “Le messianisme de Philon d’Alexandrie,” *NovT* 4 (1960): 319–24; Yehoshua Amir, “The Messianic Idea in Hellenistic Judaism,” *Imm* 2 (1973): 58–60; Ray Barraclough, “Philo's Politics: Roman Rule and Hellenistic Judaism,” *ANRW* 2.21.2:417–553, esp. 480–81; Peder Borgen, “There Shall Come Forth a Man: Reflections on Messianic Ideas in Philo,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 341–61; idem, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time*, *NovTSup* 86 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 261–81; James M. Scott, “Philo and the Restoration of Israel,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1995 Seminar Papers*, ed. J. H. Lovering, SBLSPS 34 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1995), 553–75, esp. 567–75.

<sup>53</sup> See Gedalyahu Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age*, trans. and ed. Gershon Levi, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 2:648; Moshe David Herr, “Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days,” *ScrHier* 23 (1972): 85–125; Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 15, and Part 2, in which Schwartz aims “to provide a description of a society that disintegrated under the impact of an imperialism sharpened by the failure of the two Palestinian revolts” (103); Schremer, *Brothers Estranged*, Chapter 1, esp. 42–44. For an attempt to reconsider the impact of the defeat of 70 CE, see Jacob Neusner, *How Important Was the Destruction of the Second Temple in the Formation of Rabbinic Judaism?* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006); Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss, in collaboration with Ruth A. Clements, eds., *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple*, *AJEC* 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2012). According to Herr (“Persecutions and Martyrdom,” 116), the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt was even more devastating than the outcome of the first revolt.

for women, and perhaps even until death for men.<sup>54</sup> According to Josephus (*War* 7.218), this tax replaced the tax of the half-shekel that used to be paid annually to the Jerusalem temple by Jewish men over the age of twenty. Moreover, part of the money gathered through the  *fiscus Iudaicus*  may have initially contributed to fund the rebuilding of the Capitoline temple of Jupiter in Rome, which had burnt down in 69 CE during the civil war between the pretenders to the throne.<sup>55</sup> The Capitoline temple thus replaced the Jerusalem temple as the beneficiary of the tax before the money was used for other purposes by the Roman state.<sup>56</sup>

Second, the founding of the Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina led to the replacement of the center of Jewish cultic life by a Roman city replete with pagan temples.<sup>57</sup> If the Capitoline temple to Jupiter was built on the Temple Mount, as many scholars argue, then the replacement of Israel's institutions and symbols by Roman ones was all the more striking.<sup>58</sup> The name of the colony, Aelia Capitolina, was in itself

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<sup>54</sup> See *CPJ* 2:204–208, no. 421, dated from 73 CE (Arsinoe papyrus). Apparently the tax was also due for slaves owned by Jews. On the Jewish tax, see E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian*, *SJLA* 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 371–78; Martin Goodman, “Nerva, the *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Jewish Identity,” *JRS* 79 (1989): 40–44; idem, “The *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome,” in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–77; Silvia Cappelletti, *The Jewish Community of Rome: From the Second Century B.C.E. to the Third Century C.E.*, *JSJSup* 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 100–17 (or through 139 to include the discussion of Domitian's policy). Cappelletti (117) concludes: “The tax [...] assumed a political and ideological value that, in many Jews' view, overlooked the heavy economic burden.”

<sup>55</sup> See Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 65.7.2. In *War* 7.218, Josephus writes that all Jews now bring to the Capitole what they had previously paid to the Jerusalem temple. However, Josephus's formulation is ambiguous; see Mason, *Josephus. Judean War* 2, *FJTC* 1B (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 170–71, n. 1282. On the Jewish tax and the Capitoline temple, see Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, 374–75; Marius Heemstra, *The Fiscus Iudaicus and the Parting of the Ways*, *WUNT* 2/277 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 10; Christopher B. Zeichmann, “Martial and the *fiscus Iudaicus* Once More,” *JSP* 25 (2015): 111–17 (with arguments supporting the understanding that the Capitole in Josephus's account refers to the Capitoline temple).

<sup>56</sup> According to Origen, *Ep. ad Africanum* 20 (14), the Jewish tax was still in force in the middle of the third century CE, and its abolition may have occurred only in the fourth century, during the emperor Julian's reign.

<sup>57</sup> On the cults in Aelia Capitolina, see Nicole Belayche, *Iudaea-Palaestina: The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> Not all scholars agree on the Capitoline temple's location, however. Some of them claim that it stood where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would later be built. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 69.12.1–2 (transmitted through a late Byzantine author), is the only author who explicitly locates the Capitoline temple on the Temple Mount at the place where the Jewish temple stood. Among authors who favor locating the Capitoline temple on the Temple Mount but not necessarily at the place where the Jewish temple stood, see Amos Kloner, “The Dating of the Southern Decumanus of Aelia Capitolina and Wilson's Arch,” in *New Studies on Jerusalem (Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies)*, ed. E. Baruch, Z. Greenhut, and A. Faust (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2006), 2:239–47 (in Hebrew); Hillel Newman, “The Temple Mount of Jerusalem and the Capitolium of Aelia Capitolina,” in *Knowledge and Wisdom: Archaeological and Historical Essays in Honour of Leah Di Segni*, ed. Giovanni C. Bottini, L. Daniel Chrupcała and Joseph Patrich (Milano: Edizioni terra santa, 2014), 35–42. For the opposing view holding that the Capitoline temple was built in the higher part of the city near the Golgotha, see in particular Nicole Belayche, “Du Mont du Temple au Golgotha: le Capitole de la colonie d'Aelia Capitolina,” *RHR* 214 (1997): 387–413.

a reminder that Jerusalem was no more and had been supplanted by a city reproducing Roman institutions and cult places. As a result, the Roman victories over the Jews meant not only death, slavery, and increased taxes, but also the replacement of Jewish norms, institutions, and buildings by Roman ones and the substitution of Rome for Israel in the very heart of Israel's cultic life, Zion-Jerusalem.

These defeats at the hands of Rome must have been resented all the more bitterly by the Jews as they occurred during a period of expansion and stabilization of the empire, characterized by considerable economic and urban development and the creation of new provinces, such as *Germania inferior* and *superior* under Domitian, *Pannonia inferior* and *superior* in 105, Arabia in 106, Dacia in 107, replaced by three Dacian provinces in 129, Mesopotamia briefly in 115, etc. The second century CE is in fact often described as a golden century, a period of peace and prosperity under the Antonine dynasty. A certain optimism prevailed, the empire seemed unshakable and discourses about the eternity of Rome and Roman rule abounded. As a matter of fact, the idea of the eternity of Roman rule dates back to the period of the Principate. In a well-known passage of the *Aeneid*, Jupiter promises Venus that the descendants of Aeneas, the Romans, will rule over an "endless empire" (*imperium sine fine*).<sup>59</sup> From the reign of Vespasian onward, the imperial coinage repeatedly proclaimed the message of Rome's eternity to the empire's inhabitants, either by an explicit inscription or through the representation of Aeternitas, and provincials occasionally reproduced this discourse too.<sup>60</sup> Thus, numerous pro-Roman Greek authors, from Dionysus of Halicarnassus to Aelius Aristides, claimed that the Roman Empire distinguished itself from all previous empires in terms of both geographical expanse and duration.<sup>61</sup> Such discourses raised the question of whether Israel had been displaced by Rome not only from a spatial point of view, but also from a temporal one, the Romans having become the truly chosen and eternal people instead of Israel.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278–279. On the *aeterna urbs*, see, for example, Ovid, *Fasti* 3.71–72; Tibullus, *Elegies* 2.5.23; Livy, *History of Rome* 5.7.8.

<sup>60</sup> On coins, for example, the expressions *Roma perpetua*, *Roma aeterna*, *aeternitas imperii*, or simply *aeternitas* can be found. See Harold Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum. II. Vespasian to Domitian* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 86, nos. 423–24; RIC II (2007), 839, BMC 272–74 (Vespasian); RIC II, 218–20 (Titus); RIC II, 38, 48, 81, 263, 265, 597 (Hadrian); RIC III, 621–23, 664, 1051 (Antoninus Pius); etc. The reference to the eternity of Rome or of the empire is particularly frequent on coins minted during the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, and then under those of Septimius Severus and his sons. Provincial echoes of the idea of Rome's eternity may be found in literary sources (see following footnote), in inscriptions and on provincial coinage. See, for example, the inscription from Cyprus published by Terence Bruce Mitford ("A Cypriot Oath of Allegiance to Tiberius," *JRS* 50 [1960]: 75–79), which mentions *tēn aenaon Rōmēn*.

<sup>61</sup> Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.2.1 and 1.3.3–5; Appian, *Roman History*, § 8 of the Preface; Aelius Aristides, *Roman Oration* 28–29, 108.

<sup>62</sup> A certain anxiety about the duration of the Roman Empire is perceptible in the famous passage from the midrash *Lev. Rab.* 29.2 that interprets Jacob's vision of the ladder and the angels ascending and descending (Gen 28:12) in terms of empires that have oppressed Israel, but have then fallen. In the midrash, Jacob asks about the angel representing the Prince of Edom (Rome): "Is it possible that this one will never be brought down?" On Jews who embraced the idea that God

## Conclusion

Thus, at both the level of ideological discourse and that of the reality on the ground, Rome threatened the Jews in a very particular way, and could be perceived as taking Israel's place in the world. Long before the Roman Empire became Christian, the issue of substitution was already a major one. This aspect of Israel's encounter with the Roman Empire was clearly recognized by the Jews who chose to identify Rome with Esau. In order to describe what could be seen as a struggle between Israel and Rome for first place in God's plan, "what more appropriate picture could come to mind than Jacob and Esau contending for the same blessing?"<sup>63</sup> The Roman other was all the more threatening since he was perceived to be particularly close; a conclusion that applies to other historical contexts as well.

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had sided with the Romans, although not necessarily forever, see Julia Wilker, "God is with Italy now': Pro-Roman Jews and the Jewish Revolt," in *Jewish Identity and Politics between the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba: Groups, Normativity, and Rituals*, ed. Benedikt Eckhardt, JSJSup 155 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 157–87.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," 25–26.