

JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE FALL OF JERUSALEM.

CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF A HISTORICAL EVENT

To my colleague and friend Gottfried Hammann

What are the grounds on which biblical scholars and historians can meet if not on the question of *what makes history*? I mean the way in which historiography shapes its truth. How, with what means (explicit or unmentioned), using what arguments, does the historian prove the veracity of his discourse? My intention here is not to explore the rhetorical aspect of the question, that is to say, the historian's construction of narrative with its plot, characterization, time and space management, etc.¹ It is not surprising that historians are often excellent story tellers – and the person to whom this article is dedicated is one of them.² Rather, I intend to study the way in which a historian constructs the truth of his discourse.

It is rarely mentioned that the historian's word must always abide by two rules. First, it must respect documentary veracity by treating source documents (literary, epigraphic and archaeological) respectfully, but also critically. Secondly however, historical truth is also of hermeneutical nature, since historiography works to provide the facts with meaning. If only the first requirement about documents is fulfilled, it would support the illusion the positivists have of history: it merely provides the *bruta facta*. On the other hand, respecting only the second rule, hermeneutics, would imply eliminating any distinction between historiography and fiction. Even though it is true that the job of a historian is to compose fictional history, I continue to believe – contrary to post-modernists – that there is a distinction: the fiction writer is only required to respect historical realism, by avoiding anachronisms for example; whereas the historian must respect all the evidence of his sources and provide a plausible interpretation. What distinguishes one historical discourse from another can be the difference in how reliable the sources appear to be; yet certainly this difference comes from the hermeneutic perspective the historian has taken.

To evaluate the hermeneutical perspective, in other words the point of view adopted by a historian, it is necessary to compare several historiographical discourses. However, concerning Antiquity, this comparison is usually impossible: rarely has an event of this period been conveyed by a variety of sources; there is most often only one. Moreover the ancient historiographer is often the voice of the dominator: be it Herodotus or Polybius, Tacit or Denys of Halicarnassus, the author of the Act of the Apostles or Eusebius of Caesarea, all of them wrote to bolster the culture, the religion or the authority that they were serving. No one has the chronicles of Vercingetorix, but rather the *Gallic Wars* by Julius Cesar. The voice of the conqueror is the only one left.

¹ On this subject refer to my book *The First Christian Historian. Writing the Acts of the Apostles* (SNTS.MS 121), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, ppb 2004, in particular p. 1-25.

² A French version of this article has been published in the volume dedicated to Prof. Gottfried Hammann: *Histoire et herméneutique. Mélanges G. Hammann*, Martin Rose ed., (Histoire et société 45), Genève, Labor et Fides, 2002, p. 249-268

But it so happens that the fall of Jerusalem – set in the rabbinic memory on 9 *av* of the Jewish calendar³, 29 August 70 – is an exception to this rule. Knowledge and interpretation of this tragedy have come down to us through three different traditions: Roman, Jewish and Christian. Roman historians, rabbis, Apocalypse authors, a Jewish historian, a Christian Gospel writer: the variety of their discourses makes it interesting to investigate the tragedy of 70 from different interpretations.⁴ Is it allowed to speak about a multiplicity of historiographical perspectives? The term is accurate concerning Roman history and the Christian narrative, as well as the great *Jewish War* by Josephus; it is however less appropriate when considering the rabbinic discourse which is not historiographic, or the Jewish apocalypse which is a theological narration of history. Nonetheless, three distinct cultures have passed down considerations of this event, trying to explain the disaster, pointing out the actors, analysing the repercussions.

I intend to compare these interpretations and analyse their hermeneutical categories. How are the causes of the disaster analysed? What is the result of their search of causality, the αἰτία, which has determined the historiographical quest since Herodotus? What effects are brought out? Is it possible to find out connections, or even genealogies between these discourses?

The section on Roman historiography (I) will be short, as the reason will immediately appear. I concentrate on Jewish and Christian interpretations of the event. Regarding the New Testament, I will not study Jesus' famous phrase about the Temple: "I will destroy this Temple that is made with hands..." (Mk. 14.58 and parallels) I am more interested in the connection between the fall of Jerusalem and the interpretation of history; therefore Matthew's Gospel is more appropriate (II)⁵. I will then consider the rabbinic (III) and the apocalyptic (IV) interpretations, and it will be interesting to compare them to Matthew's in order to determine what points they agree on. After that I will point out from the *Jewish War* by Josephus (V) what caused him to become an outcast for the Jewish tradition, whereas he was accepted by Christians from a very early date.

³ This date was established in rabbinic memory because it coincides with the first capture of the Temple: (see the report in Pierre BOGAERT, *L'Apocalypse syriaque de Baruch I*, Paris, Cerf [Sources Chrétiennes 144], 1969, p. 169-176).

⁴ Among the studies devoted to this theme: Hans-Jürgen BECKER, «Die Zerstörung Jerusalems bei Matthäus und den Rabbinen», in: *New Testament Studies* 44, 1998, p. 59-73; Samuel G.F. BRANDON, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*, London, SPCK, 1957; Heinz-Martin DÖPP, *Die Deutung der Zerstörung Jerusalems und des Zweiten Tempels im Jahre 70 in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten n. Chr.*, Tübingen, Francke (TANZ 24), 1998; Philip F. ESLER, «God's Honour and Rome's Triumph. Responses to the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE in three Jewish Apocalypses», in: *Modelling Early Christianity* (Philip F. ESLER ed.), London-New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 239-258; Lloyd GASTON, *No Stone on Another. Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels*, Leiden, Brill (Novum Testamentum Supplement 23), 1970; Charles H. GIBLIN, *The Destruction of Jerusalem according to Luke's Gospel*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press (Analecta Biblica 107), 1985; Mireille HADAS-LEBEL, «La prise de Jérusalem selon Flavius Josèphe. L'événement et son interprétation juive, romaine et chrétienne», in: *Procès de Jésus, procès des Juifs ?* (Alain MARCHADOUR ed.), Paris, Cerf (Lectio Divina hors-série), 1998, pp. 155-164; Simon LAUER ed., *Tempelkult und Tempelzerstörung (70 n. Chr.). Interpretationen*, Bern, Lang (Judaica et christiana 15), 1994, in particular pp. 53-117; Michael E. STONE, «Reactions to Destructions of the Second Temple», in: *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 12, 1981, pp. 195-204. I want to thank my assistant Emmanuelle Steffek for her documentary research, especially in the difficult task of identifying the rabbinic sources.

⁵ In Luke's Gospel, Jerusalem is punished for killing the Messiah (13.34-35; 19.41-44; 21.20,24; 23.27-31). Luke, like Matthew, dissociates the destruction of the city and the calendar of the end of time; likewise, he considers the end of Jerusalem as a historical event and not an eschatological one (contrary to Mark 13.1-4). However the first Gospel explicitly links the history of Israel and the events of 70 (Mt. 22.7; 23.33-39). Concerning the interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem in Luke-Acts, see Lloyd GASTON, *No Stone on Another*, pp. 244-369 and Charles H. GIBLIN, *The Destruction of Jerusalem according to Luke's Gospel*.

I. Roman interpretation: a minor event in history

I will go through the Roman historians very briefly in so much as they use the discourse of the conqueror who considered the Jewish resistance as no more than an unpleasant episode that only illustrated Roman supremacy. The military campaign is clearly treated in an off-handed manner by Suetone, who in passing, mentions that Titus “*slew twelve of the defenders with as many arrows; and he took the city on his daughter's birthday*”⁶. The biography of the emperor is more relevant than the tragedy of Jerusalem.

Tacit devotes a little more attention to the event. To begin with there are rational explanations for the Jewish defeat: the supremacy of the Roman army is obvious, and internal conflicts have weakened the defence of the city. However the Roman historian then goes into the religious dimension mentioning celestial signs that the Jews were unable to interpret and an ambiguous oracle that had encouraged them to resist (Tacit, *Histories* V, 13,1-2). Among these signs was the cry of a superhuman voice “the Gods are departing”⁷, which shows that Tacit, in spite – or rather because – of his obvious scorn for Jewish “superstitions” interprets the end of the Temple as the result of the divine withdrawal from the sanctuary. It can be noted that he agrees here with the Jewish and Christian interpretations of the event in that they all establish a relation between the debacle of 70 and the withdrawal of God. However the Roman historian merely comes to the conclusion that the Jewish rebellion was futile: the political perspective dominates. In Josephus’s work as well, we will find this very Roman motive of ignoring bad omens. The moral of this historiographic discourse is : not only the Empire is strong, but it even has the gods on its side.

II. Matthew’s interpretation: the end of Israel’s privileged history

The fall of Jerusalem and his Temple appears twice in the first Gospel, written in my opinion in Syria, probably Antioch, just after 70.

The first occurrence is in the parable of the invitation to the royal dinner (22. 1-14). The evangelist rewrote a parable coming from the Q source (cf. Lk. 14. 16-23), which is about the rejection of the first invitation to a dinner, followed by the reiteration of the invitation to new guests. Matthew allegorised the parable to make it fit into the scenario of salvation history; he put it in the parable trilogy about how the chosen people rebuffed God’s offers. 21.28 – 22.14) In his version, the host is a king celebrating his son’s wedding (22.1): the reference to Christ is clear from the beginning (21.37-38). But twice the invited guests reject the invitation to the messianic wedding feast, they even mistreat the servants bearing the invitations. Refusing a royal invitation is surprising enough, but using violence to show this rebuttal is totally foolish. The king’s response to this violence is even more excessive: *The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city* (Mt. 22.7).

Punishing the refusal to participate in a feast with a military attack is completely disproportional: does it mean that the king will organise his feast on the smoking ruins of the

⁶ Suetone, *De Vita Caesarum. Divus Titus* 5 (transl. J. C. Rolfe).

⁷ “Prodigies had occurred, which this nation, prone to superstition, but hating all religious rites, did not deem it lawful to expiate by offering and sacrifice. There had been seen hosts joining battle in the skies, the fiery gleam of arms, the Temple illuminated by a sudden radiance from the clouds. The doors of the inner shrine were suddenly thrown open, and a voice of more than mortal tone was heard to cry that the Gods were departing. At the same instant there was a mighty stir as of departure.” (*Histories* V,13,1, transl. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb).

city? This is entirely out of perspective in the story, unless we perceive the allegorical effect referring to the recent events of the Jewish War of 66-70. *Pace* K. H. Rengstorf's opinion that this is in fact a conventional narrative exaggeration⁸, there is every reason to believe that, in the parable, this episode represents the horror of the burning of Jerusalem and its Temple. The parallel in Luke only mentions anger (ojrgivzesqai : Lk. 14.21; cf. Mt. 22.7). Luke no longer contended that the end of the Temple was an eschatological event, as Mark had (Mk. 13.1-4), it was for him a historical event to be reflected on.

Let's go back to Matthew. What does the royal anger sanction in his text? Twice the servants were sent to invite the guests to come to the feast (22.3-6) : the first time the invitation was rejected, and the second time the servants were mistreated (uJbrivzein) and put to death. Most commentators refer to the prophets of Israel. But because of the reference to Christ set beforehand, it seems more probable to me that it pertains to the two times Christ sent out messengers: first when he sent the disciples, and secondly the sending of Christian missionaries in the post-Easter period.⁹ The people of Israel, underlying the character of the rebellious guests, abuse and kill these second messengers. Therefore, for Matthew, the fall of Jerusalem is divine punishment for rejecting Jesus and his messengers; it evens the score after the failure of the Q preachers' mission to Israel. Through his reinterpretation of the parable, Matthew can pass judgement on history: the rejection of the Gospel, painfully imprinted in the fate of the Christian missionaries, caused the disaster of 70.

Synthesising the attitude of Israel rejecting God's messengers, was not invented by Matthew, he is only repeating a Jewish *theologoumenon*, the Deuteronomy tradition of the violent fate of prophets.¹⁰ But whereas the traditional pattern climaxes with a call to conversion, Matthews subverts it: the failure of the invitation to Israel justifies the fall of Jerusalem and the new invitation to others. It is ordered that new guests be found at the outskirts of towns, indicating a distant horizon: the servants are mandated to explore the diexovdoi tw`n oJdw`n (22.9) which are not intersections but rather the end of roads. According to the allegoric scenario of the parable it follows that the mission opens to pagans: those invited at first, having refused, will receive no other invitation, and new guests, whoever they be, are gathered from the thoroughfares (22.10).¹¹

It is most surprising that Matthew's parable does not conclude with this happy ending. Contrary to Luke's version, it bounces back with the episode of the guest without a wedding garment who is thrown out of the wedding hall by the king. The expulsion means eschatological condemnation :

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. 13Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and

⁸ Karl H. RENGSTORF considers that it is a traditional sapiential pattern: «Die Stadt der Mörder (Mt 22,7)», in: *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche. Festschrift J. Jeremias* (Walter ELTESTER ed.), Berlin, Töpelmann [BZNW 26], 1960, pp. 106-129.

⁹ See my study of this text in *Le jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu*, Genève, Labor et Fides (Monde de la Bible 6), 1995, pp. 324-344, particularly p. 336.

¹⁰ The use of this pattern was identified by Odil H. STECK, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten*, Neukirchen, Neukirchener (WMANT 23), 1967.

¹¹ As far as the historical situation of the composition of Matthew, I agree with the definition of Ulrich Luz: the Gospel dates from the historical turning point when Mathew's community, having been thrown out of the Synagogue, understood that their future mission was to pagans: «L'évangéliste Matthieu: un judéo-chrétien à la croisée des chemins», in: *La mémoire et le temps. Mélanges P. Bonnard* (Daniel MARGUERAT, Jean ZUMSTEIN ed.), Genève, Labor et Fides (Monde de la Bible 23), 1991, p. 77-92. However the evangelist thinks entirely in Jewish theological categories, which can be observed by his theology of the Torah, as well as (in our case) the arguments used which come from discord within Judaism. See my article: «Le Nouveau Testament est-il anti-juif?», in: *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 26, 1995, pp. 145-164.

foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 14For many are called, but few are chosen. (Mt. 22.11-14)

It is easy to understand why the story says that the new invitation concerns “both good and bad” (Mt.22.10) The image of Matthew’s community, as depicted here, is one made up of a variety of believers, a *corpus mixtum* of good and bad, for whom eschatological judgement has yet to be pronounced (cf. 13.24-30). The wedding garment is not a metaphor for baptism, but more likely it represents the requirement of “justice” constantly present in the Gospel, of “good deeds” (5.6) that believers must show the world.¹²

In conclusion, the trauma felt in the Matthean community brought on by the events of the year 70, led to a double interpretation. On one hand, this tragedy was God’s punishment of the people who rejected the Messiah and his messengers. And on the other hand, it served as an example: the Christian community was not exempt from similar judgement; if they did not live up to their mission, if they could not meet up to the requisites of Christian life, they would be excluded from salvation. From this disaster, Matthew learned the hardest of lessons: grace received does not spare one from the fall. He directed the threat of punishment similar to that of 70 at his Church: Christians would also learn at their own expense that “many are called, but few are chosen”.

The second text where the events of 70 are implied, is in chapter 23, after a lengthy denunciation of the Scribes’ and Pharisees’ hypocrisy.

33You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, 35so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

37‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38See, your house is left to you, desolate. 39For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”’ (Mt 23.33-39)

In this case Matthew has combined two sayings from the Q source: an oracle of misfortune for the rejection of the messengers (Q 11.49-51), and the lamentation over Jerusalem (Q 13.34-35)¹³ This combination links Israel’s rejection of the Christian missionaries (underlying the violence directed against the messengers is again the failure by the missionaries of Q to their mission, cf. 22.3-5) to the abandonment of the house, that is the Temple. Once again the end of the Temple is interpreted as being divine punishment for rejecting the Gospel. It is important to note the implication of this word, which in the plot of the first Gospel is the last that Jesus addresses Israel: Jesus will never again summon the people. Directly following is the prediction of the destruction of the sanctuary (24.2) Forsaking the Temple is a Jewish theme which goes back to Ez. 9-11 (the glory of God has forsaken the Temple); it is also to be found in 2 Bar. 8.2 and in Josephus (*BJ* 5.412; 6.299); however it has also appeared in Tacit which proves that it was quite a universal idea in Antiquity.

Compared to the parable in Mt. 22, here the sentence is more serious because it recapitulates “all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of

¹² Inventory of the suggestions identifying the wedding garment in Ulrich LUZ, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 18-25)*, Zürich/Neukirchen, Benziger/Neukirchener (EKK 1/3), 1997, pp. 248-249 et William D. DAVIES, Dale C. ALLISON, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, III, Edinburgh, Clark (ICC), 1997, pp. 204-205. The latter of these authors chose another opinion: the garment represents the resurrected body.

¹³ About this arguable point, see : Daniel MARGUERAT, *Le jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu*, pp. 355-357.

Zachariah son of Barachiah". The murder of Zachariah refers to the episode in 2 Ch. 24.17-22 where Joash, king of Judah, has the priest and prophet Zachariah son of Yehoyada lapidated in the court of the Temple for having protested against idolatry. However, Matthew seems to have confused this Zachariah with the biblical book author, Zachariah son of Barachiah (Za. 1.1; Is 8.2).¹⁴ In any case, this long Jewish tradition of violence regarding the righteous comes to a climax with the bad treatment inflicted upon the Christian messengers, and sets off the punishment of 70. The blood shed, and not atoned for all through Israel's history, calls for vengeance (cf. Gen. 4.10); now it falls upon the people. The result is that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (Mt. 21.43); here the people is not the Church as such, rather, it can only be the Church on condition that she remain faithful and obedient to God.

In summary, Matthew relates the tragedy of 70 according to a retribution schema of fault/punishment, Israel's infidelity comes to a climax when they reject those sent them by God. The evangelist adopts here the Deuteronomist theory of the violent fate that befalls prophets. Nevertheless he does not confuse the judgement of Israel with its eschatological condemnation; the sentence here is intra-historical putting an outright end to the privileged history between God and Israel, without anticipating the final judgement. This will take place when Israel acclaims Christ at his coming; this is my interpretation of 23.39 which is taken from a psalm of Hallel (Ps. 118.26), to show the coming of Christ-Judge for Israel.

I have previously mentioned that Mathew did not innovate by using these interpretive categories. Besides borrowing the Deuteronomist pattern in analysing Israel's behaviour as their reaction in rejecting the messengers, the evangelist brings up another recapitulation theme: the blood shed and not atoned for from Abel to Zachariah. This theme can be found in rabbinic literature, precisely when accounting for the fall of the Temple. However, as we will see, the rabbis use it quite differently from Matthew.

III. The rabbinic interpretation: logic of the fault

Interpreting the end of the Temple using retribution theology which blames Israel is a hermeneutic schema that predates the year 70. Elaborated at the time of the Exile it was successively used for the destruction of the first Temple in 587, then for the profanation of the second Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 and again by Pompeii in 63 BC.¹⁵ I have chosen one example per date: Judith 5.17-18 attributes the destruction of 587 to the fact that the Hebrews sinned against God; 2 Maccabees 5.17-20 perceives the profanation of Antiochus as God's anger directed against "the sins of those who lived in the city"; the 2nd Psalm of Solomon sees Pompeii's act of treading the soil of the Temple as the "wages" that God bestows on sinners "according to their sins, which were very wicked" (*PsSol.* 2.16; cf. 2.1-3). To the repeated profanations of the Temple which question faith in theodicy, Israel traditionally responded by admitting its guilt. The coincidence in the calendar dates of the destruction of the first and second Temple is brought out by the rabbis (*JTaanit* 4,5) as well as Josephus (*BJ* 6.250; 268); it confirms the tenacity of this explanation : the two events are correlated, not only in the dates, but also in the theological interpretation that they suggest.

What faults can be at the origin of this divine punishment?

¹⁴ The problem stems from the fact that the author of the book of Zachariah did not die a violent death. Odil H. STECK suggests that it is a reference to Zachariah son of Baris who Josephus wrote about in *BJ* 4.334-344. (*Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten*, pp. 39-40). Report in Ulrich LUZ, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 18-25)*, pp. 373-374.

¹⁵ Good remarks by Michael E. STONE, «Reactions to Destructions of the Second Temple», particularly pp. 195-198.

A frequently found pattern is that of the corruption of the Temple clergy. The symbolic and dramatic scene where the sanctuary keys are given back God has several variants in the Talmud (*Pesiqta Rab.* 26; *Lev. Rab.* 19,16; *bTaanit* 29a; *ARN A* 4), in *2 Baruch* 10,18 and in the *Paralipomenes of Jeremiah* 4,3-4¹⁶. I have quoted it in the *BTaanit* 29a version

Avot rabbi Nathan B5 found the clergy guilty because they suspended daily sacrifices during the siege of Jerusalem.¹⁷ But this text adds: “_____”. *Yoma* 3 includes also the sin of the people, but morally: they respected the Torah and observed the tithe; however they loved money and hated each other without reason. Therefore the rabbis hesitate in determining who is responsible, the Temple clergy who have failed in their task and offended God, or the people as a whole who have sinned. Finally everyone proposes his own explanation: “_____” (*Shabouot* 119b)

The question of Zachariah’s murder returns in a very interesting passage from *JTaanit* 4,5:

The situation this Haggadah refers to is the destruction of Solomon’s Temple by Babylonia; the text goes on to mention Nebuzaradan who was the Babylonian general.¹⁸ However the question that preoccupies the rabbis after 70 is not the disappearance of the first Temple: the reasons were recorded in the Scriptures and were acknowledged by the tannaite generation; on the other hand, the end of the second Temple requires explanation. The context takes into consideration the chain of events pertaining to the war against the Roman.¹⁹

It is interesting to find the mention of the murder of Zachariah claimed to be “priest, prophet and judge”. The sin committed at that time by the “Israelites” (note the generalisation) is conveyed by using Ez. 24.7-8 which is part of a judgement oracle against Jerusalem: the blood shed by this city that spread it over the bare rocks rather than pour it on the ground, is still in her midst, awaiting expiation. The blood is calling for vengeance and God has avenged it on the Temple. The logic here is absolutely identical to Mt. 23: the murder of Zachariah in the Temple is considered as emblematic of the people’s misdeeds for which God is demanding vengeance. Notice that Ez. 24 as well as Mt. 23 articulates this motif with a judgement oracle against Jerusalem and her sanctuary (Ez. 24.6-14; Mt. 23.37-38). In the Talmud as in Matthew, the fault linked to the name of Zachariah is generalised to all the people; it legitimises God’s punishment of Israel, of which the disappearance of the Temple is the signature.

However if the hermeneutical categories are the same, Matthew’s development differs. Whereas the Haggadah mentions Zachariah, Matthew (23.25) adds Abel and summarises all of Israel’s history under the sign of blood unjustly shed: all the Scriptures, from the first book (Gen) to the last (2 Chr), is surrounded by the inclusion of the fault. Whereas the Haggadah in the end appeals to God’s mercy,²⁰ the Gospel seals the fault of Israel with the people’s terrible statement at the Passion: “*His blood be on us, and on our children*” (Mt. 27.25) To state it more clearly, the interpretive categories of history are identical: the end of the Temple is attributed to a fault for which Israel is responsible; however the Matthean community has no part in this fault. Christians do not perceive themselves as children of guilty parties but rather

¹⁶ Study of these variants and their diachronic relationship in Pierre BOGAERT, *L'Apocalypse syriaque de Baruch*, pp. 234-241 and Heinz-Martin DÖPP, *Die Deutung der Zerstörung Jerusalems und des Zweiten Tempels im Jahre 70 in den ersten Jahrhunderten n. Chr.*, pp. 92-99.

¹⁷ On this subject refer Josephus’ rendering in *BJ* 2.93-110.

¹⁸ *Jer.* 52.12-16; *2 K* 25.8-12.

¹⁹ Hereafter my reference is the study by Hans-Jürgen BECKER, «Die Zerstörung Jerusalems bei Matthäus und den Rabbinen», particularly p. 64ss.

²⁰ The text quotes Dt. 4.31: “Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you.”

as descendants of the injured prophets (23.31,34). They reread history from the victims' point of view and attribute the role of the tormentor to Israel.

Each party has therefore identified himself to a character of the drama: the rabbis have taken on the fault, Matthean Christians have rejected it. To put it in other words, the rabbis' position is that of an actor from within the history of Israel and her people, the view of an insider. Matthew looks on from outside. Of course this Christian position finds its roots in Christology : Jesus, the Emmanuel, "God with us" (1.23) was rejected by those to whom he was sent; therefore his disciples, whose destinies are assimilated in the Gospel to that of the Master, identify themselves with the rejected in the history of the chosen people. The failure of the Q mission, still fresh in the memory of Antioch Christianity, confirmed this interpretation.

In reality, the Talmud makes sparse reference to the end of the Temple. What is the reason for this silence? Perhaps the rabbis who were engaged in the perspective of rebuilding identity for Israel, were loath to sounding mournful lamentations over Zion. They were concentrating their efforts on finding substitutes for the Temple service (*abodah*)²¹. Nevertheless the rare references are still coherent in their interpretations of the event. However the situation is quite different when considering the apocalyptic texts which react directly to the disaster of 70 and thus refer to it explicitly; at the same time, they partially abandon the logic of the fault.

IV. The apocalyptic in shock after 70: imagining the future

To demonstrate my point I have chosen two texts written about the ruins of the Temple: the fourth book of Ezra and the Syriac apocalypse of Baruch (*2Bar*), which can both be dated from the last decade of the first century.²² Both books react to the shock instilled by the catastrophe of 70, they reread history theologically by pointing to a futuristic development of the end of time. The question they are up against is: does God still have control over history?

The interpretation determined by the retribution pattern encountered above, is present here as well. The answer to the theodicy question implied by the end of the Temple seems to crystallise around Israel's sin. The discourse of *2 Baruch* is fictionally set in 587, but the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar is analysed typologically as the model for the disaster that the author himself experienced 500 years later. "Hast thou seen all that this people are doing to Me", God says to Baruch at the beginning of the book "that the evils which these two tribes which remained have done are greater than (those of) the ten tribes which were carried away captive? For the former tribes were forced by their kings to commit sin, but these two of themselves have been forcing and compelling their kings to commit sin. For this reason, behold I bring evil upon this city, and upon its inhabitants" (*2Bar* 1.2-4a) Confronted with the destruction of Jerusalem, the people cry out : "For we have sinned against Him who made us, and we have not kept the commandments which he commanded us, yet he hath not chastened us as we deserved" (*2Bar* 79.2).

Parallel to this line of interpretation, is another one which extends beyond the first: the emergence of an apocalyptic perspective. The visionary receives the announcement of the eschatological reestablishment of Jerusalem and its Temple: "For the time comes when

²¹ Matty COHEN («Les substituts du culte du Temple après 70», in: *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 54, 1997, p. 21-36) enumerates these substitutes: practicing goodwill and the insistence on the cultic virtue of studying the Torah and praying. The rabbinic consideration is transmitted by the axiom from Simon the righteous: "On three things (*debarim*) the world is stayed; on the Torah, on the Worship (*abodah*), and on the bestowal of Kindnesses" (*Pirque Avot* 1,2)

²² Joseph Klausner groups these two texts under the heading "lamentations over the destruction of the second Temple". Both *4Ezra* and *2Bar* are generally dated to the last years of Domitian (81-96), the first text precedes the second. Clemens Thoma examines the historical as well as the ideological similarities between these texts in his article: «Jüdische Apokalyptik am Ende des ersten nachchristlichen Jahrhunderts», in: *Kairos* 11, 1969, pp. 134-144.

Jerusalem also will be delivered for a time, until it is said, that it is again restored for ever” (2Bar 6.9) Taking a surprising shortcut, the two destructions of the Temple and its final reestablishment are declared to be the divine programme of history: “Because after a little time the building of Zion will be shaken in order that it may be built again. But that building will not remain, but will again after a time be rooted out, and will remain desolate until the time. And afterwards it must be renewed in glory, and perfected for evermore” (2Bar 32.3-5). The everlasting aspect of the sanctuary is in fact symbolised by the conservation of the sacred utensils that were put in safekeeping by an angel from heaven (2Bar 6.7-8); this same model is to be found in *Paralipomenes of Jeremiah* 3.2 where Jeremiah himself hides the sacred Temple objects. Whereas the Talmud places its hope in God’s ultimate mercy, the apocalypticist concretizes the presence of grace in the scene of the final restoration of Israel and the act of judgement, prerequisite to the final resurrection. Punishment and pardon are also deferred, the first will be within history, and the second is the horizon of history.

The 4th Ezra goes a step further in my opinion; not satisfied with considering conjunctively the retribution dogma and hope in the final restoration, it casts doubt on the first for the sake of eschatological hope. The author starts with a pronouncement against the retribution interpretation declaring that Israel is not guiltier of sin than the pagan nations. “Are their deeds then any better than inhabit Babylon, that they should therefore have the dominion over Sion?” (4Ezra 3.28). Babylonia is in this case the code name for Rome.²³ In the same manner as Job, Ezra protests against claiming that Israel is responsible for this tragedy; the sin of the Romans is proportionally even much greater than that of Israel (3.31,34-36) ! Therefore Ezra casts doubt on God’s morality, based on the fact that sin exists in all of humanity, so how is it possible, because of fault, to sentence Israel to be punished more than another group. Again, like Job, Ezra interrogates God on his justice in the first three visions of the book (3.1–9.25). He gets no answer other than the unattainable mystery of divine justice.

The famous vision of the widow in mourning, the fourth vision (9.26–10.59), marks a turning point in the argumentation. About this, M. Stone speaks of a “conversion” of the author,²⁴ correctly in my opinion : in fact this vision as told in the book marks a turning point, a change in perspective – let us say, a modified interpretation – regarding the question of Israel’s misfortune. The two important incidents in this sequence are the encounter with the mourning woman (9.38–10.28) and the angel’s interpretation of the vision (10.38-59) Ezra works around a traditional model: the image of Zion deserted and crying is well-known.²⁵ The crying woman is a metaphor for Jerusalem.

The vision begins with a contradiction noticed by Ezra: God gave the fathers the Law, but they were incapable of observing what had been sown in their hearts (9.31-33). Here again is the question of theodicy, but in a different form: the Law remains but men die; why? The position adopted by the rabbis acknowledging divine punishment for Israel’s sin while counting on the everlasting nature of the Torah, is obviously jeopardised by the visionary. Ezra protests using an analogy from nature: when a seed is planted in the soil or food put in a jar, even if what was put there is destroyed, the container remains. However “with us it hath not happened so. For we that have received the law perish by sin, and our heart also which received it. Notwithstanding the law perisheth not, but remaineth in his force” (9.35b-37). Who is this God who saves his Law and sacrifices his creatures?

At that moment Ezra sees a woman lamenting piercingly, her clothes torn and her head covered with ashes. The woman is mourning the death of her only son, born after thirty years

²³ Cf. Michael E. STONE, *Fourth Ezra*, Minneapolis, Fortress (Hermeneia), 1990, p. 56.

²⁴ Michael E. STONE, «Reactions to Destructions of the Second Temple», p. 203: «The experience described here is analogous to a religious conversion. Suddenly the problems and concerns that have beset Ezra and the questions, that he has asked, are resolved. »

²⁵ Michael E. STONE (*Fourth Ezra*, p. 321) refers to 2Bar 3.1; 10.16 and *Pesiqta rabbati* 26.

of sterility; it was at her son's wedding, at the moment he entered the nuptial chamber that the son died. In the angel's interpretation of the vision, the thirty years represents the three thousand years that separate creation from the construction of the first Temple (10.45-46). In fact, seeing the woman's suffering, Ezra changes roles. Whereas in the first three visions he was the plaintiff searching for consolation, he now becomes the consoler.²⁶ Ezra then tries to console the woman by comparing the pain she endures for her son with the misfortune of the numerous dead sons of Zion. "Who then should make more mourning than she, that hath lost so great a multitude; and not thou, which art sorry but for one?" (10.11). However the woman remains inconsolable and he persists with what is perhaps the most moving Jewish lament for the fall of Jerusalem. (10.21-22)²⁷

*For thou seest that our sanctuary is laid waste,
Our altar broken down,
Our Temple destroyed;
Our psaltery is laid on the ground,
Our song is put to silence,
Our rejoicing is at an end,
The light of our candlestick is put out,
The ark of our covenant is spoiled,
Our holy things are defiled,
And the name that is called upon us is almost profaned:
Our children are put to shame,
Our priests are burnt,
Our Levites are gone into captivity,
Our virgins are defiled,
And our wives ravished;
Our righteous men carried away,
Our little ones destroyed,
Our young men are brought in bondage,
And our strong men are become weak.*

By encouraging the woman to abandon her excessive suffering in view of a misfortune much greater, the woman is metamorphosed: "And I looked, and, behold, the woman appeared unto me no more, but there was a city builded, and a large place shewed itself from the foundations" (10.27). The woman is transformed into the new Jerusalem for Ezra to see. In the interpretation of the vision, the misfortune that overburdens the woman is interpreted as being the ruin of Jerusalem. "For now the most High seeth that thou art grieved unfeignedly, and sufferest from thy whole heart for her, so hath he shewed thee the brightness of her glory, and the comeliness of her beauty" (10.50).

The meaning of this reversal is not clear at first. What causes the metamorphosis of the woman, and then the revelation Ezra has of the new Jerusalem? Could it be because Ezra himself changed into the consoler? Is it the acknowledgement of God's "righteous claim" (10.16), which Ezra encourages the woman to accept, and that affects him?²⁸ My opinion is that underlying the vision, the visionary is in fact confronted with his own distress, his own mourning. The vision form made it possible for him to step back and dialogue with himself. The excessiveness of his pain occurred to him along with the need to detach himself from it in

²⁶ This change of roles was perceived well by Egon BRANDENBURGER, *Die Verborgenheit Gottes im Weltgeschehen*, Zürich, Zwingli Verlag (ATHANT 68), 1981, see p. 81.

²⁷ Other occurrences of this theme see 1 Macc 2.7-12 or 4 Q179.

²⁸ Michael E. STONE (*Fourth Ezra*, p. 319-320) accepts this interpretation, considering that Ezra is led to ratify the "axiom" of God's righteousness which he contested at the outset of the first vision (*4Ezra* 3)

order to appreciate the novelty of what God was preparing for Jerusalem. Therefore the vision had the effect on Ezra of diverting his attention from his own distress in face of the tribulations of history; he was then able to open up to the “mysteries” (10.38) of God’s coming favour for Israel. If this apocalyptic providence on God’s part is acknowledged, then lamenting can cease. It is true that the superb and tragic text I have just mentioned is the final protest in the plot of the fourth Ezra.²⁹

The change of perspective compared to the retribution schema is considerable. In the rabbinic mentality, the disaster of 70 is the penalty to pay for infidelity and the faithful are encouraged to protect themselves against it by strict obedience to the Torah. In the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (*2 Bar*), both awareness of divine punishment and eschatological hope are present; the salutary outcome of history is reaffirmed. In *4Ezra*, the Holy City’s unfathomable misfortune must be accepted; but the world is blind to God’s righteousness. The city’s misfortune does not encourage giving into a verdict, rather it arouses emotion for undeserved grief. This is exactly the opposite of Matthew: full empathy for Jerusalem’s sorrow. When Ezra consoles the woman by showing her the scene of misfortune, he discloses another truth: divine providence is not extinguished; it can be perceived but only as a futurist vision: that of the New Jerusalem, planned by God, built by God alone, without any human intervention (10.53-55).

Hope in a new world means going through times of tears and even refusing what is at the heart of the retribution system: the idea that God’s justice took place in history, even in that of Jerusalem.

V. Josephus: God changes side

The fifth type of interpretation is completely different. Whereas the rabbinic mentions of the fall of Jerusalem are rare, whereas Matthew and the apocalyptists include the event in the global structure of history, Josephus on the other hand, devotes a historiographic text “Jewish War” to the tragedy of 70. His work comes out between 76 and 79 (after the first Aramaic version). The author’s intention, as stated in the prologue, is to report the events with the unique advantage of speaking for both sides (1.3). He also claims to be a trustworthy ocular witness as well as one deeply moved by the tribulations of his people (1.10)³⁰. However this deontological statement is a front for another goal: to denounce the actors of this misfortune accused of being robbers, charlatans, criminals, impostors, false prophets, who led the people astray and precipitated the ruin of Jerusalem (see in particular 2.254-266). The analysis is political: the zealot movement and the mass messianic uprising are mainly responsible for the tragedy.

Who is present in Josephus’s voice ? the Roman (Flavius) or the Jew (Josephus)? Why did he entitle his work “Jewish War” instead of “The Great Revolt”?³¹ His work which was immediately rejected by the Jewish tradition was passed on, from ancient times, by Christian copyists. From the following it will become clear why Christians were interested in reading Josephus, however it will also be demonstrated that these interpretive categories did not differ greatly from those of the rabbis.

²⁹ Well demonstrated by Hermann LICHTENBERGER, «Zion and the Destruction of the Temple in *4Ezra* 9-10», in: *Gemeinde ohne Tempel/Community without Temple*, Beate EGO, etc. ed., Tübingen, Mohr (WUNT 118), 1999, pp. 239-249, particularly p. 245.

³⁰ “I shall faithfully recount the actions of both combatants ; but in my reflexion on the events I cannot conceal my private sentiments, nor refuse to give my personal sympathies scope bewail my country's misfortunes”. JOSEPHUS, *Jewish War* I.4.

³¹ However it is true that the original *Aramaic* title is unknown and also that the term stavsi" (uprising) is derogatory

What explanations for the fall of Jerusalem does Josephus adopt?

I have listed a few reasons which seem to hold to a secondary apologetic function in the text as a whole: a) the guilty are the Temple clergy, mainly John of Gischala who suspended the perpetual sacrifice alleging a shortage of lambs (*BJ* 6.94-97;100-102)³² ; b) a legionnaire personally took the initiative to set fire to the sanctuary, it was not an official order (*BJ* 6.252); c) actually Titus did not want to burn the Temple and he tried everything to prevent this sacrilege (*BJ* 6.249-266).

Josephus's theological explanation is to be found elsewhere. "_____ " (*BJ* 6.395). More than an apologia of the Roman authority, I detect here a type of reasoning that the rabbis, in their own way, also used: the tribulations of Israel are the result of its sin. What impiety is in question? I have found the clearest answer not in *Jewish War* but rather in his monumental work which came out twenty years later, *Jewish Antiquities*. He finds the zealots guilty using the epitaph lh/staiv, robbers.

*Certain of those robbers went up to the city, as if they were going to worship God, while they had daggers under their garments, and by thus mingling themselves among the multitude they slew Jonathan and as this murder was never avenged, the robbers went up with the greatest security at the festivals after this time; and having weapons concealed in like manner as before, and mingling themselves among the multitude, they slew certain of their own enemies, [...] And this seems to me to have been the reason why God, out of his hatred of these men's wickedness, rejected our city; and as for the Temple, he no longer esteemed it sufficiently pure for him to inhabit therein, but brought the Romans upon us, and threw a fire upon the city to purge it; and brought upon us, our wives, and children, slavery, as desirous to make us wiser by our calamities. (*AJ* 20.164-166)³³.*

This is striking after having read extracts from the Talmud: moral laxity soiled the city and rendered it guilty before God: and fire played the role of a purifier. This ethic interpretation is treated in conjunction with a political analysis: the zealot pressure is responsible for this state of sin. Nevertheless the retribution schema functions here as it does for the rabbis. In the sanction description, the Roman legions are shown to be the armed hand of God. Josephus says so much in *Jewish War*: "It is God, therefore, it is God himself who is bringing on this fire, to purge that city and Temple by means of the Romans, and is going to pluck up this city, which is full of your pollutions". (*BJ* 6.110) This brings to mind other instances when the Hebrew Bible considered Israel's enemies as being instruments of God's judgement.³⁴ In his first speech to the besieged of the Holy City, at the foot of the ramparts, he develops the argument in a particularly provocative phrasing: God is now on Rome's side.

*"Men may well enough grudge at the dishonour of owning ignoble masters over them, but ought not to do so to those who have all things under their command; for what part of the world is there that hath escaped the Romans, unless it be such as are of no use for violent heat, or for violent cold? And evident it is that Fortune (τύχη) is on all hands gone over to them; and that God, when he had gone round the nations with this dominion, is now settled in Italy." (*BJ* 5,366-367)³⁵.*

This pragmatic proof of divine preference – evidence by success – will not convince a Jew; the argumentation is Roman, like the rest of this first speech (5.362-374). Likewise, the inventory of the omens predicting the end of the Temple is coherent with the Roman fondness

³² The clergy's responsibility is indicated using the traditional pattern: the sanctuary keys are relinquished, see above page XX.

³³

³⁴ See Is 45.1-8 (Cyrus); Jer.20.1-6 (the Babylonian king); etc.

³⁵

for auspices.³⁶ This shows the cultural ambivalence of this author who is protected by the Flavians. However the first speech to the besieged is followed by a second, which is clearly a much more Jewish type of argumentation (5.375-419). It is a process of rereading Jewish history, from Abraham passing by the exodus from Egypt, the theft of the ark, Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylonia and Pompeii's entry into Jerusalem, to demonstrate the following theme: it is useless to resist God. He, and not the force of Israel, has always determined victory or defeat. Whenever Israel has taken arms, it has always been defeated (5.399). This generalisation of Israel's history is a take off on the biblical theme of man's weakness in the face of God, and makes use of it in the basic objective of the speech: "*that you may be informed how you fight not only against the Romans, but against God himself*" (BJ 5,378) Such a speech is like a prophetic oracle of misfortune.

It is easy to understand that Josephus's interpretation was, in Antiquity, completely ignored by the Jews. At the same time it is understandable that he was the Christians' favourite Jewish author. In fact, as early as the third century, the *Jewish War* was read carefully by Christian authors. Not only was his text interpolated by Christians³⁷ but it could be interpreted from Gospel based assumptions. Origene in *Against Celsus*, accuses Josephus who was "seeking after the cause of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple", of not pursuing his quest further: "he ought to have said that the conspiracy against Jesus was the cause of these calamities befalling the people, since they put to death Christ, who was a prophet" (1.47).³⁸ Here is a typical Matthean interpretation (if not to say an annexation) of the War. From the time of Eusebius of Caesarea, Josephus's account becomes, so to say, the rule in Christianity, as well as a "treasure chest" of useful apologetic arguments in the debate against the Synagogue³⁹: "For it was right that in the very days in which they had inflicted suffering upon the Saviour and the Benefactor of all, the Christ of God, that in those days, shut up "as in a prison," they should meet with destruction at the hands of divine justice". (*Ecclesiastical History* III.5.6) Here the Christian historian is trying to make the two events, the fall of Jerusalem and the cross, coincide however he makes an error in calendar.⁴⁰

Josephus reports that the besieged said something that brought dishonour to the Temple. They answer Titus that "it does not matter if they die, since, as he said they were to be destroyed, they were not concerned about it; the world itself was a better Temple for God than this" (BJ 5,458). Clearly Josephus does not ratify this remark considering it arrogant and irresponsible; it was said only to hid the contempt that the besieged had for the fate of the people, the city and its Temple. Strangely however this argument recurs with Christian authors but in order to justify the fall of the Temple. The Letter of Barnabas, written around 130, explains that the

³⁶ Six signs are enumerated : 1) a bright light blazed for half an hour during the night around the altar at the feast of unleavened bread (BJ 6.290); 2) a cow gave birth to a lamb in the middle of the Temple (6.292); 3) the massive east door opened on its own during the night (6.293); 4) war chariots and an armed army appeared flying through the air (6.298); 5) an earthquake shook the courtyard of the Temple during the Pentecost feast (6.299); 6) Jesus, son of Ananias, prophesied the ruin of Jerusalem and the Temple (6.300-309)

³⁷ In the Slavonic version of the War, Josephus's words to the besieged, which is a Christian interpolation, are: " " "

³⁸ Origene continues "nevertheless, being, although against his will, not far from the truth--that these disasters happened to the Jews as a punishment for the death of James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus (called Christ), the Jews having put him to death, although he was a man most distinguished for his justice". (*Against Celsus* 1.47) As for Josephus, he is stunned by the execution of James, but does not make the tie with Jesus' death. (*AJ* 20.200-201) The same statement is repeated by Eusebius of Caesarea as reported speech (*Ecclesiastical History* II.23.19-20). Did Origene push his interpretation? Or did Origene take it for Heggesippe (cf. *Ecclesiastical History* II.23.18) ?

³⁹ Heinz SCHRECKENBERG, «Josephus und die christliche Wirkungsgeschichte seines *Bellum Judaicum*», in: *ANRW* II, 21.2 (Wolfgang Haase ed.), Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 1984, p. 1131.

⁴⁰ Eusebius takes one for the other: Josephus's count of the war victims and the census Cestius makes a day of Pesach, which is the author's way of accounting for such an enormous figure (BJ 6.420-427).

Jews “almost like the gentiles” locked God within the sacred walls of the Temple (16.2a); but God sentenced the sanctuary to be destroyed in order to live “truly in our houses within us” (16,8). This is the first appearance of a theme that will become very popular: the opposition between the material temple of the Jews, now destroyed, and the spiritual temple which is the Christian community, the Church.

VI. Conclusion

My purpose was to demonstrate how, and with what arguments, the Jewish and Christian historians constructed the truth of their discourses about the fall of Jerusalem. We noticed how the retribution schema was used by them all in their interpretations. For the rabbis, the apocalyptists, Matthew, Josephus, the basic hermeneutics are really the same: the end of the Temple is punishment for a fault, which because it concerns the Temple strikes the whole nation. The theme of the abandonment of the Temple is recurrent, even Tacit, the Roman, used it. However although the hermeneutic category is the same, the interpretive conflict is of a theological order (political in the case of Josephus). In the minds of the rabbis and the apocalyptists, the theological tragedy stems from their refusal to dissociate themselves from the guilty parties by accusing others. Even Ezra and Baruch, though they deny that Israel was more sinful than the pagans, accept the nation’s guilt and take it upon themselves.

On the other hand Josephus and Matthew think that the future of God lies outside Jerusalem. In my opinion the resemblance between these last two authors is fascinating. In his own way Josephus reiterates Matthew’s theological theory: for him the fall of Jerusalem reveals the separation between God and the chosen people. The justification obviously diverges however: Josephus establishes the reasoning of the victory of the strongest, of the strategic error and moral depravation; Matthew evokes the hard-headedness of Israel, though without giving it the benefit of any mercy: by rejecting Jesus, then aggravating that with the violent rejection of his messengers, the chosen people have sealed their failure. The evangelist like the historian has combined the retribution interpretation with the rejection of any responsibility; for both, participation in guilt is unacceptable. However the positions of both historians are not the same : Matthew is speaking from within and for a community which claims to be the historical heir of Israel, whereas Josephus is pleading from within and for an exile. The truth of the discourse justifies the identity and vice versa.