

The Imperial Unconscious of the Jews

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1.

Cancelled Faces alludes to a historical event – the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The event has a great poetic potential and this potential has already begun being explored in the years following the Jewish defeat. When the Roman army, led by the Emperor's son Titus, broke the walls of the city and burned it to ashes, it gave the cue to the creation of new stories about God, the Empire, the human being and the relationship between them. Naturally, the event had a huge impact on the history of the Jews, but it also played a crucial role in the development of Christianity and influenced Rome's conception of its own imperial power. It constitutes thus an important turning point in the story of the specific cultural, theological and political cluster that we call "the West". We can say it differently and more radically: there is a way to tell the story of the West with the eventful summer of the year 70 as its starting point.

The Jewish war against the Romans started four years earlier, in 66 CE, but Jewish hostility towards the Empire went a long way back. According to the Jewish-Roman historian, Flavius Josephus, the rebellious movement of the zealots (he calls them "the fourth philosophy" of Judaism, next to the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essens) was formed in the year 6 CE, when Quirinius, the Roman legate of Syria, instituted a census of all the habitants in the region under his jurisdiction. Roman soldiers were sent to towns and villages in the land of Israel, in order to count its habitants and transmit the data to the imperial government. Even if the census did not have immediate political consequences, the zealots saw it as a violation of their liberty.

We may define the zealots as radical monotheists: they refused to accept any human government that is not fully accountable to God and his laws. Here is how Josephus describes them: "they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord." - (Antiquities 18:23-5). For the zealots, Rome was a foreign power: not only it occupied their land but it also relied on different gods. Being counted by the Empire meant becoming subjects of a foreign government. It meant having your money spent according to foreign considerations; having your life evaluated according to the standards of someone else.

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Whether or not the zealots constituted an organized movement during the decades that led to the war is not clear. But we know of several Jewish attempts during this period to undermine the legitimacy of Roman power in the name of biblical-monotheistic values. One of these attempts, perhaps the most ambitious, is recorded in Paul's letters from the New Testament. A few decades ago, the German-Jewish thinker Jacob Taubes has proposed to see Paul as a zealot, since his universalistic message is a radical statement about the redundancy of the Empire. In Paul's letters, written between 40 to 60 CE, the story of Jesus is articulated in imperial terms. Paul's Jesus is Anti-Cesar: once he (Jesus) comes back, the Empire will be to no avail.

Between the writing of Paul's letters and that of the Gospels lies a gap of one or more decades. During this time two important events took place: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and Paul died. A third event, so longed for, failed to occur – Jesus did not come back. All this meant that Jesus' message had to change once more. And this time, those who took the job on themselves were not spiritual thinkers such as Paul, but storytellers. Their stories attenuated the nihilistic dimension of Paul's theology in what was probably a natural reaction to the awful display of imperial power. Indeed, from that moment on, mainstream Christianity worked hard to present itself as a religion compatible with the imperial order.¹

The Gospels were not the only stories that were inspired by the Roman victory. The Empire itself had a share in the creative activity that followed the war. In fact, the victory over the Jews occupied an important place in Roman propaganda. Besides the visual depiction of the victory in imperial monuments such as the Arc of Titus in Rome, the Empire issued in 71 a series of coins with the inscription *Judea capta* (Judea conquered) and the image of a woman mourning under a palm tree. The other side of the coin showed, of course, the portrait of the Emperor. The defeat of the Jews became thus a sign of his power. If the coin were a poem, it would read something like this:

The Emperor

His superior authority

The radical monotheist dream of the Jews will never be realized

¹ According to Paul, it was God's job to replace Jerusalem with his heavenly kingdom. When the Empire destroyed the terrestrial Jerusalem, it lent itself to the role of God's helper.

2.

It is impossible to think of the history of the Jews without the concept of the Empire, and not only the Roman one. According to Flavius Josephus, the name “Jews” itself was given to this group of people after the Persian Empire allowed them to repopulate Judea and to establish there a province in the sixth century BCE. But the story goes back farther. Its roots are found already in the ancestral traditions of this people, assembled in the narrative part of the Hebrew Bible.

The main intrigue of the biblical myth can be described as follows: A god named Yahweh chooses a group of people, makes them miracles in order to gain their trust, and then provides them with the two main components that every group needs in order to exist: a place (the promised land) and a law. It is the second component that makes Yahweh a unique god: unlike other national or ethnic gods, he provides something else than guidance, inspiration or protection – he promulgates political, economical and ethical rules of conduct. He gives his people the keys to their perfect government.

Yahweh is “the greatest king over all gods”, as the enthusiastic psalmist repeats several times. The psalmist is a poet. He chooses his words carefully. He doesn’t say that Yahweh is the god of all gods but that he is their king. And he wishes for him to exercise his kingdom forever (146,10). This exhilarated poet isn’t subtle at all when it comes to his message: Yahweh should be superior to all gods and kings.

If the biblical poets had to dedicate so much of their genius to promote Yahweh’s kingship it was because very few people accepted this god as their ruler. In fact, large parts of the biblical narrative demonstrate how hopeless is the agreement signed between the people and its god, how difficult it is to observe. In spite of some punctual success, in the long run it always fails.

Here lies the biblical root of first century zealotry (and also of Paul’s political nihilism) – there is such thing as a perfect law, but it is impossible to follow. The zealot is the one who throw on someone else the full responsibility for this depressing fact. If he cannot fully live according to “his” divine law, the fault is not his or the law’s. It is someone else who prevents him from doing so. This someone else is the Empire, whose representatives and leaders, knowingly or by ignorance, played the part ascribed to them perfectly well.

3.

The fall of Jerusalem did not put an end to the hope to establish a Jewish kingdom governed by Yahweh's law. It is only the colossal defeat of the Jews in the Bar Kokhba war (132-135) that succeeded to temporarily silence the zealots. It became clear that Rome was here to stay, and that no desire for liberty could be realized in a non-imperial world. The categorically negative attitude towards the Empire had to be abandoned.

The formation of rabbinic Judaism dates to this period. The authors of the first rabbinic documents, from around the year 150 CE onwards, created an ideological and legal discourse that allowed the members of Israel to live under both Yahweh and the Emperor. Like the Christians after Paul, they too decided to renounce on the monotheist dream of total independence, and to learn to live inside the imperial world.

A few centuries later, a rabbinic legend about the origin of this renunciation was forged. It told the story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai, a famous Jewish master from the end of the first century, who succeeded to flee Jerusalem before the Romans burned it down. According to the legend, when the Emperor met him outside the walls of the city, he granted him a wish. Yohanan, to whom one rabbinic source refers as "Cesar lover", asked the Emperor to spare "Yavne and its sages".

The legend about Rabban Yohanan indicates that in rabbinic thought the Empire is given an important function: it provides the objective structure necessary to the accomplishment of their project. The ancient rabbis continued to consider Rome as "the evil kingdom", but they also recruited it, without its consent, to the accomplishment of their Jewish desire. This is, in a nutshell, the masochistic solution of the sages of Yavneh. It reduces hope back to its human dimensions, reminding us that alienation is both the problem and the solution.

Yavneh's sages were not poets or historians, but rather masters and judges. Their message should be formulated as an instruction:

If you want to satisfy your desire for liberty, you have to incorporate into it the presence of another person. This person thinks that he has an imperial power over you. Don't be afraid of it! Use it to your satisfaction!

*Don't Truth Me, Unk,
And I Won't Truth You!*

(Kurt Vonnegut / The Sirens of Titan)

