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The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple as a Trauma for Nascent Christianity

Abstract

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. is considered to be one of the most traumatic events in Jewish history, having an impact on Jewish groups across the entire spectrum of Second Temple Judaism. Yet scholarly opinions are divided as to whether 70 constituted a trauma for communities of Jewish Christ-believers. Some suggest that the event had relatively little impact on nascent Christian communities, while others view the event as both traumatic and formative in the development of Christianity. Scholars on both sides of this debate use the language and concept of trauma to describe the impact of 70 in the development of Christianity. Missing from the discussion, however, is a consideration of what exactly constitutes a trauma. On the basis of Jeffrey Alexander’s theories about communal trauma, this paper will argue that the destruction was experienced as a trauma by at least some Jewish followers of Christ. This response was, however, negated or denied by church leaders who argued that the event had been foretold and indeed was the deserved punishment for the Jewish role in Jesus’ crucifixion, and therefore should not be traumatic for Christ-believers, even those of Jewish origin.

In the year 70 C.E., after several years of conflict with Jewish rebel forces, the Roman army besieged, conquered, and sacked the city of Jerusalem, and destroyed the Jerusalem temple. Almost two thousand years later, this event still resonates in Jewish liturgy, literature and practice. The daily and weekly prayer services, as well as the traditional grace after meals, express hope for the restoration of the temple and its sacrificial cult. On the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, many Jews observe a day of fasting; they gather in synagogues, where they sit on the floor, read the biblical book of Lamentations by candlelight, and mourn the loss of the temple, as one of the most important of many national tragedies.¹

¹ The destruction of the temple stands alongside the Holocaust as one of the most traumatic events in Jewish history and the impact of and responses to this event have been studied from many different perspectives. See, for example, Stein, "Collapsing Structures"; Aken-son, Surpassing Wonder; Wimpfheimer, Narrating the Law.
The trauma of 70 is palpable at the most revered site in the Jewish world: the Western Wall—sometimes called the Wailing Wall—which stands at the western side of the temple mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. There one can still see the huge Herodian stones strewn on the plaza in front of the wall. Jews from all over the world come there to pray, to slip petitions to God into the cracks between its stones, to imagine the majesty of the temple in the days of Herod and thereby to place themselves at the center of this quintessentially Jewish sorrow. Many tourists go on to visit another site, a short distance away from the Western Wall, known as the Burnt House. At this site, they can watch a dramatic sound and light show that dramatizes the events of 70 as experienced by the priestly family that apparently occupied this house: armed conflict, confusion, noise, fire, armed conflict, injury, exile, and death. Nor was the trauma confined to Judea, for the temple's destruction horrified Diaspora Jews who, despite their geographical distance from Jerusalem, nevertheless "presumed the central importance of the Temple in Jewish worship."

But what about those Jewish groups whose identification with the temple and temple cult was more ambivalent? In the case of the Dead Sea Community, which left Jerusalem in part due to its opposition to the current temple establishment, we will never know; this group apparently ceased to exist after the Jewish Revolt, or, to be more precise, no evidence for their post-70 existence has yet been discovered. In the case of nascent Christian community, however, we are more fortunate. Not only are there references to and interpretations of the temple's destruction in patristic writings from the second century onwards, but there is also evidence within the New Testament itself that can be dated to the period of the revolt and its aftermath. The question before us is therefore as follows: was the destruction of the temple a traumatic event for those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God? Scholarly opinions are divided as to whether 70 constituted a trauma for communities of Christ-believers. Richard Bauckham, for example, suggests that for this non-militant messianic movement, "the loss of the temple was no kind of problem." Others, however, view 70 as both traumatic and formative in the development of Christianity. S. G. F. Brandon insisted that: "It would … not be an exaggeration to say that Christianity was in a certain sense reborn as a result of the Jewish catastrophe of A.D. 70." More recently, Jonathan

2 Goodman, “Diaspora Reactions,” 27. Other scholars, however, minimize the impact of the war on Diaspora Jews. See Aberbach, Roman-Jewish War, 8; Collins, Between Athens and Jerusalem, 117. For further detailed discussion, see Marshall, Parables of War, 98–120.
3 E.g., Gärtner, Temple and the Community; Haber, They Shall Purify Themselves, 106–24.
4 For a measured exposition of the problems in using the term “Christian” with regard to first-century believers in Christ, see Lieu, Neither Jew nor Greek?, 192–209.
5 See Marshall, Parables of War, 5–6.
6 Bauckham, Jewish World, 188.
7 Brandon, Fall of Jerusalem, 249.
Draper has argued that “the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. must rightly be seen as the major turning point in the development of the Jesus movement from a movement for the physical restoration of Israel into something else.”

In his study of the Gospel of Mark, Philip Cunningham comments that “Mark’s Christians must have shared in the trauma of Jerusalem’s conquest and the destruction of the temple … They would have been among the vast throng that lined the streets of the city to witness the triumphant return of the victorious Titus as he marched through the capital city.” Andreas Köstenberger argues that the destruction of the temple—not the putative expulsion of the Christ-confessors from the synagogue—constitutes the historical matrix for the Gospel of John.

As the above quotations show, scholars on both sides of this debate use the language and concept of trauma to describe the impact of 70 in the development of Christianity. Missing from the discussion, however, is a consideration of what exactly constitutes a trauma. On one level, of course, the word is common parlance, the concept is well-understood, and the experience is universal. In ordinary language, trauma is a label that objectively identifies certain experiences—car accidents, terminal illnesses, genocides, tsunamis, wars—that happen to people, communities, or nations. Certainly the destruction of the temple qualifies as one such event.

But this common sense understanding may not be a precise enough foundation for addressing the question. Indeed, in the view of cultural sociologist Philip Alexander, events as such are not inherently traumatic. Rather, “trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction. Sometimes, in fact, events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have happened at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred.” He continues: “Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of harmfulness or abruptness per se, but because they are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity.” In other words, traumas are socially constructed; what is at stake is identity. Only events that are perceived as threats to group identity—which Alexander defines as a group’s “sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go”—are described as

8 Draper, “Mystical Experience,” 264.
9 Cunningham, Mark, 66.
10 Köstenberger, “Second Temple.” See also Kerr, Jesus’ body.
11 This view is contrary to the usage of the term in numerous studies, which conceive of trauma as an objectively identifiable event. For one example among many, see Kaplan, Trauma Culture, 1–2.
12 Alexander, “Cultural Trauma,” 8.
traumas. According to Alexander, “cultural construction of trauma begins with a claim to some fundamental injury, exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative of some horribly destructive social process and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution.”

Alexander argues that the process that results in such a construction is initiated by agents who interpret and respond to the event at hand.

Alexander’s work suggests that the destruction of the temple will be seen as traumatic for nascent Christianity if reliable agents declare that the event violated a fundamental value of the community and therefore required restitution and reparation; and that it disrupted group identity, requiring a change in a group’s sense of their raison d’être, origins and direction.

The most explicit ancient Christian responses to the destruction of the temple are to be found in the writings of the Church Fathers beginning in the second century. Justin Martyr, a second century father, made several references to 70 in his Dialogue with Trypho. In Dial. 16.4, for example, he argued that the destruction and suffering were foretold by the Hebrew scriptures: “For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.” Justin further asserts that the tragedies that the Jews have experienced “have happened to you in fairness and justice, for you have slain the Just One, and His prophets before Him; and now you reject those who hope in Him, and in Him who sent Him—God the Almighty and Maker of all things—cursing in your synagogues those that believe on Christ.” Dialogue 51–52 similarly associates 70 with the Jews’ role in Jesus’ death, after which “you ceased to exist under your own king, your land was laid waste, and forsaken like a lodge in a vineyard.”

The point that the Jews brought the destruction upon themselves, by their treatment of Jesus, is made most forcefully in Origen’s treatise Contra Celsum 4.22: “Any one who likes may convict this statement of falsehood, if it be not the case that the whole Jewish nation was overthrown within one single generation after Jesus had undergone these sufferings at their hands. For forty and two years, I think, after the date of the crucifixion of Jesus, did the destruction of Jerusalem take place.”

13 Ibid., 10.
14 Ibid., 11.
15 Ibid., 12.
16 All patristic quotations are taken from http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/.
According to Origen, the fact that the expulsion has continued for so many years demonstrates Jesus’ divinity, which is the very point that the Jews refuse to acknowledge. He points out that prior to the destruction of the temple, the Jews had never been expelled from their land for such a long period of time, “for if at any time they appeared to be abandoned because of their sins, they were notwithstanding visited (by God), and returned to their own country, and recovered their possessions, and performed unhindered the observances of their law.” For this reason, the length of this expulsion stands out: “One fact, then, which proves that Jesus was something divine and sacred, is this, that Jews should have suffered on His account now for a lengthened time calamities of such severity.” Furthermore, this expulsion will last forever, “for they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind, in conspiring against the Saviour of the human race in that city where they offered up to God a worship containing the symbols of mighty mysteries.” The destruction of Jerusalem was a fitting punishment for these terrible acts that took place in the holy city: “It accordingly behooved that city where Jesus underwent these sufferings to perish utterly, and the Jewish nation to be overthrown, and the invitation to happiness offered them by God to pass to others—the Christians, I mean” (4.22).

Other church fathers, perhaps implicitly acknowledging the chronological difficulty inherent in viewing the destruction in 70 as divine punishment for an event that occurred some forty years prior, point instead to the stoning of James, the brother of Jesus, on the basis of Josephus’ account in Antiquitates Judaicae 20.200–201, which states that James was stoned by the order of Ananus ben Ananus, a Herodian-era High Priest—and the youngest brother-in-law of Caiaphas—who died c. 68 c.e. This view is expressed in graphic detail by Eusebius (263–339) in his Church History 2.23.16–20:

So they went up and threw down the just man, and said to each other, 'Let us stone James the Just.' And they began to stone him, for he was not killed by the fall; but he turned and knelt down and said, 'I entreat you, Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). And while they were thus stoning him one of the priests of the sons of Rechab, the son of the Rechabites, who are mentioned by Jeremiah the prophet, cried out, saying, 'Stop. What are you doing? The just one prays for you.' And one of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head. And thus he suffered martyrdom. And they buried him on the spot, by the temple, and his monument still remains by the temple. He became a true witness, both to Jews and Greeks, that Jesus is the Christ. And immediately Vespasian besieged them. These things are related at length by Hegesippus, who is in agreement with Clement. James was so admirable a man and so celebrated among all for his justice, that the more sensible even of the Jews were of the opinion that this was the cause of the siege of Jerusalem, which happened to them immediately after his martyrdom for no other reason than their daring act
against him. Josephus, at least, has not hesitated to testify this in his writings, where he says, "These things happened to the Jews to avenge James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus, that is called the Christ. For the Jews slew him, although he was a most just man."

The connection between the death of James and the destruction of the temple is made also in apocryphal texts attributed to James. In the First Apocalypse of James (36:16–18) God tells James that after his death "immediately war will be made with this land."\(^{17}\) The point is reiterated in 2 Apocalypse of James 10, 12–22, in which James prophecies on God's behalf: "Behold, I gave you your house, which you say that God has made—that (house) in which he promised to give you an inheritance through it. This (house) I shall doom to destruction and derision of those who are in ignorance. For behold, those who judge deliberate [...]."\(^{18}\)

Origen, however, disputes this interpretation, which he attributes, with some admiration, to Josephus. In Origen's words, Josephus "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" but at least Josephus was on the right track in attributing the disasters to the Jewish rejection of the Christian faith (Contra Celsum 1.47). Even Eusebius ultimately connects the destruction to the Jews' treatment of Jesus: "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" (Church History 3.6).

Finally, the Pella legend, according to which Jewish believers in Christ managed to escape Jerusalem before the destruction, provides a compelling reason for the lack of trauma: they simply were not there, and therefore were not personally affected. In book three of his Church History, Eusebius tells the following story:

After Nero had held the power thirteen years, and Galba and Otho had ruled a year and six months, Vespasian ... was proclaimed sovereign in Judea and received the title of Emperor from the armies there. Setting out immediately, therefore, for Rome, he entrusted the conduct of the war against the Jews to his son Titus. 2. For the Jews after the ascension of our Saviour, in addition to their crime against him, had been devising as many plots as they could against his apostles. First Stephen was stoned to death by them, and after him James, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John, was beheaded, and finally James, the first that had obtained the episcopal seat in Jerusalem after the ascension of our Saviour, died in the manner already described ... 3. But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouch-

\(^{17}\) Schoedel, "Gnostic Interpretation," 174–75.
\(^{18}\) http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/2ja.html; translation by Charles Hedrick.
safed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men” (Hist. eccl. 3.5).

This story provides yet another explanation as to why the Jewish believers in Jesus were not—or should not be—traumatized by the temple's destruction: thanks to a prophetic revelation, they left Jerusalem before the worst of the fighting took place.19

In Philip Alexander’s terms, Justin, Origen and Eusebius act as agents who interpret the events of 70 to their audiences. These agents agree that the destruction of the temple was not a trauma for Christians, for it did not alter the identity of Christians in any way; on the contrary, it served to vindicate their belief that God was on their side, for it was God who had visited punishment upon the Jews on account of their persecution of Jesus and James. Furthermore, these agents insist, while the destruction may have been traumatic for Jews, it should not have been unexpected, for it was prophesied both by Jesus and by their own scriptures. Indeed, it was entirely in keeping with the well-established biblically-based worldview that political and military failures, as well as disasters natural and otherwise were consequences of sinful behavior, in this case, the Jews’ behavior towards Jesus, the leaders of the Church, and rank-and-file Christians themselves.

These writers, however, lived a century or more after the events they are interpreting. What about those communities of Christ-believers who lived at the time of the destruction or in the decades that immediately followed? Whether they experienced the destruction as a trauma is much more difficult to assess, but nevertheless there are some New Testament materials that provide at least some hints as to how 70 was perceived in, and interpreted by, Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah.

Perhaps the earliest relevant passage is found in Mark’s Gospel. The Gospel of Mark, thought by most New Testament scholars to have been a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, is usually dated to around 70.20 Chapter 13, known as the Little Apocalypse,21 includes a prophecy of the temple's

19 The historicity of this account is uncertain; see Lüdemann, “Pre-70 Christianity,” 172. See also Bourgel, “Jewish-Christians’ Move,” 129, 135.
20 The literary relationships among the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke constitute the so-called “Synoptic Problem.” For a good introduction, see Goodacre, Synoptic Problem.
21 Mark 13 is often referred to as the “Little Apocalypse” due to its use of motifs held in common with other examples of apocalyptic literature such as the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. For an account of the debate, see Hogeterp, Expectations of the End, 143–52.
destruction: “As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2 Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’” (13:1–2) The continuation of the passage describes the terrifying signs that will herald the end times: “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (13:7–8). The overall structure of the passage suggests that the destruction itself is the beginning of the end, a time of suffering that will herald God's final intervention into history on behalf of the faithful.

Ullucci comments that “through an ingenious interweaving of apocalyptic prophecies from the book of Daniel the author of Mark suggests that the temple's destruction is (1) a clear sign of the imminent end of the world, and (2) vindication of Jesus' true identity as the Messiah and the son of man in Daniel's prophecy.”

Matthew adopts Mark's view that the temple's destruction is a sign the end of the world is coming soon but Luke tones down these apocalyptic forebodings. For Luke, “the temple's destruction cannot indicate the imminent end of the world both because Luke, writing much later, knows that the world did not end soon after 70 and because Luke does not believe Jesus was preaching an impending apocalypse. Luke does not draw any implications from the temple's destruction … they [Luke and his audience] did not have a clear explanation for why God had allowed the temple to be destroyed … [because they] were far removed from the context of Judea; the war in 70 and the temple's destruction were far away in space and time … it took other forces to get such Christians thinking about the temple again.”

Allusions to the destruction are also found in the Fourth Gospel. Like Luke, the Gospel of John dates from close to the end of the first century, that is a generation or more after 70. Even more than the Synoptics, John reflects quite directly on the temple and its significance in relationship to Jesus. The theme is introduced in the Prologue, which identifies Jesus as God's dwelling place on earth: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). Jesus is the new tabernacle, the locus of God's presence, and therefore the focus of worship.

That Jesus replaces or supersedes the temple is made clear in John's version of the temple cleansing, in which Jesus objects to those who would make the temple—his father's house—a marketplace. After he has thrown out all

22 Ullucci, Christian Rejection, 79.
23 Ibid., 84.
24 Ibid., 88.
the merchants, the Jews challenge him: “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body” (John 2:18–22). Whether or not this passage is based on a historical event, the fourth evangelist interprets this scene in light of his conviction that Jesus, or his body, is the new, improved divine temple. Whereas the historical temple destroyed in 70 was not rebuilt, Jesus was resurrected, an act which confirms the Gospel’s Christology and therefore the notion that faith in Jesus as the messiah is now essential in order to remain in covenantal relationship with God.

This theme continues in John 4:19–23, in which a Samaritan woman tells Jesus: “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem…. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” Here, the Johannine Jesus prophesies that soon both the Jerusalem temple and the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim will be irrelevant for true worship of God; because Jesus will replace them both, worship will henceforth not be tied to a specific geographical and cultic location.

The final, and most important, passage for our theme is John 11:47–52. In the aftermath of Jesus’ dramatic resurrection of his dead friend Lazarus, “the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.’ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed’” (11:47–50). The narrator then explains that Caiaphas “did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death” (John 11:50–53).

The “holy place” is the temple;25 but why the leadership (or John) believes that Jesus’ behavior would lead the Romans to destroy the temple is not at all clear. One possibility is that (as John portrays it), the Jews are convinced that widespread belief in Jesus would signify a loss of attachment to God, which in turn would lead God to use Roman might to inflict punishment on the na-

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tion, just as in earlier days God sent the Assyrians and Babylonians to punish the Jews for turning away from the covenant. In the Maccabean era, a similar explanation was used for the ability of Antiochus IV to desecrate the temple (2 Maccabees 5:15–20). A second possibility is that widespread belief in Jesus might make Rome fear rebellion or civil war, and therefore prompt Rome to move quickly by moving against the temple. The Romans were indeed often motivated by fear of rebellion and turmoil, as indicated in Acts 21:38, in which a Roman tribune asks Paul whether he is “the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness,” and in the writings of Josephus (A.J. 20.97–99; 20.169–72; 20.188; B.J. 2.258–63).

These passages in John imply some sort of response to the events of the destruction, although the Gospel itself is thought to have reached its final form in Ephesus, far from Judea. The worries of the Jewish leaders ring ironically in the aftermath of the destruction, which could then be interpreted as a consequence of the Jews’ action against Jesus—though not for the reasons that the Jews themselves might have proposed.

That faith is concentrated now in Jesus is a theme developed in greatest detail in the Letter to the Hebrews, which portrays Jesus as the high priest par excellence. As stated in Hebrews 10, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds…. [S]ince we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:16–22).

This brief overview hints at a perspective similar to that of the Church Fathers who wrote one or more centuries later. New Testament and patristic authors emphasize that the destruction itself was foreseen by Jesus and it was part of the divine plane communicated by prophets including Jesus. The destruction itself is not to be seen as a negative event, for since Jesus came as a God’s tabernacle in the world, worship must be focused on him rather than

26 See, for example, 2 Kings 21:14–15, in which God responds to Judea’s idolatry under King Manasseh by prophesying its destruction, and John 12:10–11, in which belief in Jesus is seen as desertion of Judaism;

27 See Schwartz, Jewish Background, 31–34; Gray, Prophetic Figures, 112–44; David M. Miller, "Whom Do You Follow?" 173–83. For more detailed discussion, see Reinhartz, Caiaphas, 40–44.

28 Although there is no “hard evidence” for the Gospel’s provenance, the ancient witnesses are unanimous in situating the Gospel in Ephesus, a conclusion that is supported, though not conclusively, by internal evidence. For detailed discussion and bibliography see Brown and Moloney, Introduction, 199–206.
on a cult that can take place in only one geographical location. In other words, the evangelists as well as the author of Hebrews, like the church fathers, acted as agents to interpret the destruction of the temple as an event that was not traumatic for Jewish believers in Christ because their focus had already shifted—or needed to shift—away from the temple and towards Christ.

Does the fact that the New Testament writers find a benign explanation for 70 mean that they are arguing against others who did view 70 as a trauma? The canonical evidence does not provide a basis for answering this question in one direction or another, with one possible exception: the Book of Revelation. Revelation is a work of apocalyptic literature usually dated to the era of Domitian, in the last decade of the first century. Yet at least one scholar, John Marshall, has argued that Revelation is in fact war-time literature written during the revolt but before the actual destruction of the temple. If so, the air of destruction, dread, and chaos that emerges from some sections of the book may reflect the anxieties of Jewish believers in Christ who fear for their own lives, and for the divine judgment that was generally associated with disasters whether natural or humanly made.\(^\text{29}\) Marshall looks at four text-complexes: synagogue of Satan (Rev 2:9; 3:9); those who keep the commandments of God (12:17; 14:12); the 144,000 people drawn from Israel or gather on Zion (7:4ff.; 14:1ff.), and the vision of the trial of holy city and the destruction of the great city (11:1–14). For example, with respect to Rev 11:1–2, Marshall notes that “the temple and the city were surrounded by a substantial Roman force, and there was little reason for confidence in a Jewish victory by military means. Within the context of the period of the cessation of hostilities, from late 68 to early 70 c.e., Rev 11:1–2 communicates the expectations that although the city and the outer courts of the temple may fall [sic], such a defeat would only be temporary.” In the view of John of Patmos, it was not Israel that would be punished, but Rome that will face the consequences of rejecting the emissaries of God.\(^\text{30}\)

### Conclusion

It seems possible, perhaps even likely, that the destruction of the Temple in 70 c.e. was experienced and understood as traumas by at least some Jewish followers of Christ, especially if, as many scholars now argue, such Jews did not yet position themselves outside of and over-against other Jews. Yet from a very early point, it would seem that the leaders of the church—the agents

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29 Marshall, *Parables of War*. See also Pagels, *Revelations*.

whose activities, including the writing and transmission of scriptures, shaped Christian identity as it came into being—carefully constructed an interpretation that not only avoided but actively counteracted the potential interpretation of 70 as a traumatic event. The destruction was domesticated through arguments that it was foretold by scripture and by Christ himself; that it was an inevitable punishment for Jewish transgressions such as the killing of Christ, Stephen and James, and that it had no impact at all on the beliefs and practices of Christ-confessors, whose focus had already turned from the sacrificial cult localized in a temple towards Christ as the universal savior.

Jeffrey Alexander’s insights into trauma as a “socially mediated attribution” draws attention to the role of agents, or community leaders, in interpreting events to their followers, and thereby in defining whether events are to be seen as traumatic, or not. This approach allows for clarity and precision in the debate concerning the significance of 70 for those communities who eventually defined themselves as Christian.

The attempts of New Testament and patristic writers to steer their audiences away from viewing the temple’s destruction as traumatic has important implications for one of the most vexed issues in the study of early Christianity: the “parting of the ways” between Christianity and Judaism. In recent years, the consensus view that Christianity began to define itself as distinct from Judaism in the period after 70 has been questioned, with many scholars pushing the date into the fourth century C.E. or even later. The claim that Christ-confessors do not, or perhaps better, should not, view the destruction as a trauma already implies the development of an identity quite distinct from the Jews who did. While the arguments that have been marshaled against a first-dating for the separation of the Christ-confessors from the Jewish community have much to commend them, the distancing of nascent Christianity from this central Jewish trauma suggests that some process of differentiation was already underway.

Bibliography


For discussion of the controversy on the dating and process of the “parting of the ways,” see for example, Becker and Reed, Ways that Never Parted; Boyarin, Border Lines; Reinhartz, “Fork in the Road.”


