Carson Bay, 2025

On the Destruction of Jerusalem: One Narrative Bedrock of the Historiographical Construction of the Jews

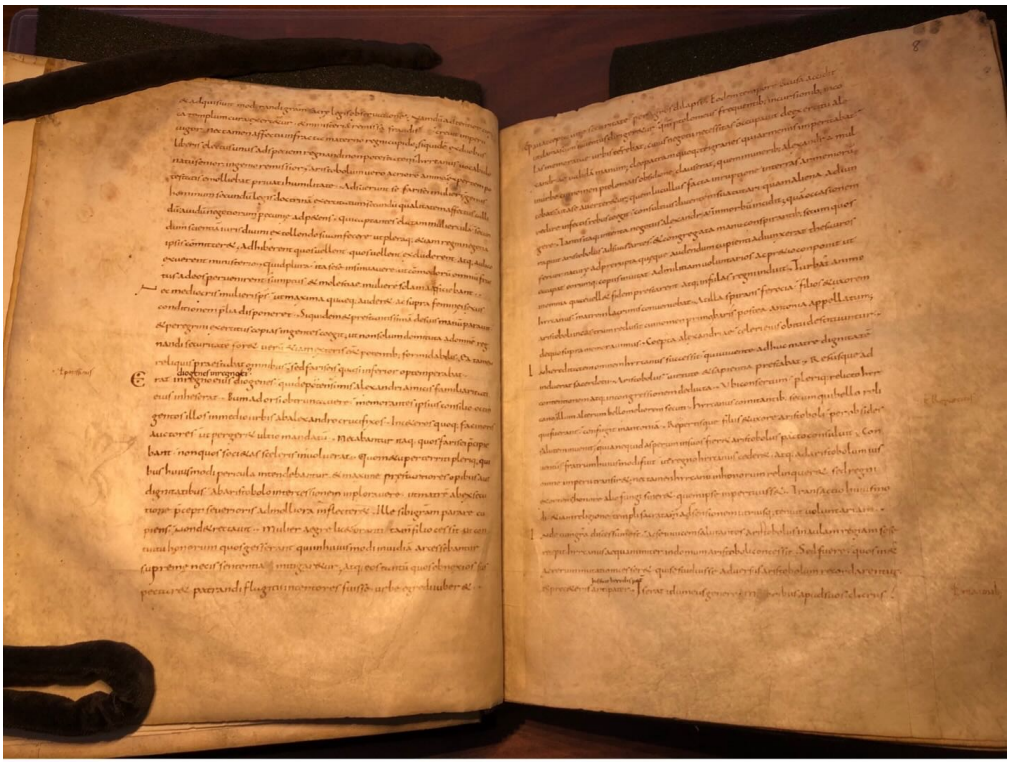


Figure 1: Codex Bernensis 180, aka manuscript "B" (saec. IX), fol. 7v-8r (= *De excidio* 1.12.2–2.14.1), Bern Burgerbibliothek (photo by author). Note the typical features of the manuscript: marginal notes on both folios, a light paratextual decoration on the left page, intertextual emendations (in darker ink) on both pages, the ornate "*E*" of Erat in the middle of the left page.

Probably in the early 370s of the Common Era there appeared a Latin text that is often dubbed *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* (*De excidio Hierosolymitano*), but which may have simply been called the *Historiae* initially. Scholarship has long debated whether the Christian bishop Ambrose of Milan wrote the text, but despite recent arguments for Ambrose (Zwierlein 2024; Somenzi 2009), there exists no consensus as to the work's author, often dubbed "(Pseudo-)Hegesippus" based on a name—(H)egesippus—that begins to appear on manuscripts of the work in the Early Middle Ages (see Figure 2). Where the work was written or where its author was from we do not know. This text is a Latin Christian adaptation of Flavius Josephus' Greek work, the *Jewish War*, written around 75 CE (Bay 2023; Bell 1977). Both in conception and in reception, what this text does with Josephus' narrative lays a bedrock for how Jews came to be understood as a people vis-à-vis their history.

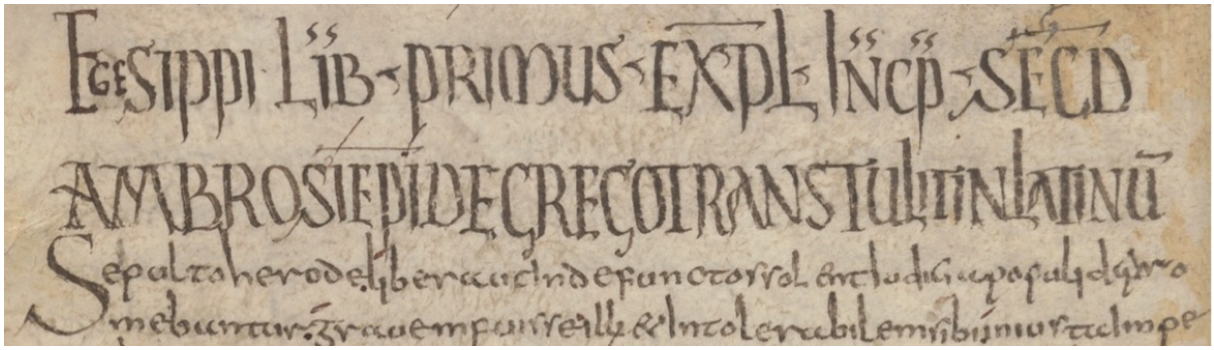


Figure 2: Codex Ambrosianus C 105 inf., aka manuscript "M" (saec. V-VI), fol. 67v (= *De excidio* 1.15.2), Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana (photo by author). Here you can see that Ambrose is credited with having translated the work into Latin. You can also see in the top left that "*I*[*o*]" has been turned into "*Ege*" such that what used to read *Iosippi* ("of Josephus") now reads *Egesippi* ("of Hegesippus").

Josephus' *Jewish War* had provided the authoritative account—at least for Romans and Christians—of how Jerusalem and its temple came to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE following the Roman-Jewish War (66-70 CE). *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* basically adopts Josephus' narrative, excising a few sections and condensing a bit, thereby carrying forward Josephus' imputed authority as an eyewitness to the events recorded, a Jew and an expert in Jewish history, and a historical actor who had engaged meaningfully with Jewish/Judean philosophy, religion, and politics as a priest, self-proclaimed Pharisee, Judean general, and then Jewish-Roman historian. At the same time, our Latin Christian account dresses the skeleton of Josephus' historical narrative in the garb of Christian supersessionism and theodicy, stressing the point (already present in Josephus) that Jerusalem's destruction was divine chastisement for infidelity, and tacking on the Christian ideas that this infidelity had taken the specific form of rejecting and crucifying Jesus Christ and that the Jerusalem temple's 70 CE destruction was permanent, never to be followed by a rebuilding (as was the first temple after its destruction in 587/6 BCE).

These features of *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* have prompted scholars to dub the text "anti-Jewish" inasmuch as it attempts to 'write the Jews out of history' by effectively locating the end of Jewish history around 70 CE (Bay 2021). The very last chapter of the work recounts the mass Jewish suicide atop Mount Masada, thus ending its narrative with the deaths of what are implicitly presented as the last Jews left alive. Inasmuch as historiography about a group conveys an identity to that group, *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* renders the Jews a pluperfect people: the Jews *had been* a great people, the people of God, a historically and theologically important people, etc. But they were no more.

What makes the narrative of *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* a bedrock of such historiographical cancel culture vis-à-vis the Jews? A number of things, including 1) its appearance within a crucial epoch for Christian historiography and Jewish-Christian relations, namely the era not long after the Emperor Constantine and shortly after the reign of the Emperor Julian, 2) its genre, 3) its combination of classical historiography with a distinctly Christian theology of history, and 4) its reception. *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* did not invent the narrative according to which God destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and permanently rejected his former people, the Jews, because they rejected him in the person of Jesus—these ideas were already present in Justin Marytr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160 CE) and Tertullian's *Against the Jews* (c. 200 CE), and partially appear in nascent form in some passages of the New Testament Gospels (e.g. Matt 22:7ff; Luke 13:34–35; Luke 19:41–45; 21:20–28; but cf. Rom 11:1–2). But *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* did articulate these ideas at a critical early point: within half a century of Constantine, as Christianity was coming to dominate the later Roman world, a period sometimes called the "patristic golden age" for its influence on subsequent

Christian culture (and probably in the wake of the Emperor Julian 'the Apostate' attempting abortively to rebuild the Jerusalem temple). Thus, as soon as a fully-fledged Christian tradition formed in late antiquity, it had in *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* a template for understanding Jewish identity historically and theologically. The precise contexts within which *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* emerged had everything to do with its subsequent impact.

The genre of this work is also important, because historiography was in late antiquity as today a primary means of describing the past (and therefore present) world as it was actually thought to have been. The way that peoples of Greco-Roman antiquity understood themselves and others was deeply influenced by the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus (to name a few). For a Christian work to convey in such a communicative medium, and in Latin, the past of the Jewish people and its meaning represented a literary move that was poised to pick up the authority and to play on the authenticity of the Classical world's weighty historiographical tradition, though now supplemented (some might say tainted) by Christian ideas of divinity and causality. Inasmuch as historiography was in antiquity apprehended as a genre apt to provide real-world descriptions of the past *as it really was* (or could have been)—to borrow the language of Leopold von Ranke (and the caveat of A. J. Woodman)—*On the Destruction of Jerusalem* leveraged a medium of cultural *gravitas* to say something serious about Jewish history-and/as-identity.

Whether due to its genre, its content, its contexts, or some combination thereof, that *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* came to wield major influence is attested by the more than 200 extant manuscripts and fragments of *On the Destruction of Jerusalem*, and by the enormous number of later works and authors that drew upon it for doing historical-theological work vis-à-vis Jewish identity (see Pollard 2015; Bay 2023, 25–45). There is a massive amount of textual evidence illustrating that the narrative of *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* was accepted within and beyond Western Christianity as an authoritative account of the Jews, depicting them as a people with a storied past that effectively ended, ignominiously, with God's destruction (via the Romans) of their city and temple in the generation after Jesus.

On the Destruction of Jerusalem represents a bedrock of the conceptual production of Jews over the past 1,650 years. It does not represent the *only* bedrock. The ways in which Jews have been theorized and understood, by themselves and others, is manifold—one cannot trace its roots to a single text, figure, era, or idea any more than one can limit the utilization of the "hermeneutical Jew" to the Middle Ages—Cohen 1999 shows how the medieval image(s) of Jews served largely as rhetorical foils, often with no meaningful correspondence to Jews in the real world—or the phenomenon of anti-Judaism to the ideological extremes of the Western tradition (Nirenberg 2014 shows that anti-Judaism is a widespread, foundational part of the Western intellectual tradition). Yet *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* provided, at length and in a manifestly popular form, a way of reading Jewish history-as-identity that became at least an option, often a norm, in subsequent tradition(s). Augustine, for example, whether or not he knew *On the Destruction of Jerusalem*, articulated another highly influential iteration of this understanding in the subsequent generation (*City of God* 20.5; *Expositions on the Psalms* 40:12).

Nor was the influence of *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* limited to Christian spheres. This work was the primary source for the early medieval Jewish history called *Sefer Yosippon*, which itself had a notable impact and afterlife (see Yonatan Binyam's source study here). While rejecting the Christian work's theological understanding of Jerusalem's destruction, this Hebrew text followed its source in identifying Jerusalem's

destruction as a historical crux for understanding the Jews. The ripple effects of *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* even touched Islamic circles: Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064) was familiar with an Arabic translation of *Sefer Yosippon*, and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) created his own translation from a Coptic (i.e. Christian) Arabic version (cf. Figure 3). Also, already in the Qur'an we find inflections of a perspective that links Jerusalem's destruction to Jewish disobedience/failure and divine response (17:4–7; cf. 2:243) and God's condemnation of the Jews to "killing the prophets unjustly" (4:155) and falsely boasting of killing the messiah, Jesus (4:157). (Jesus is listed among the prophets in the Qur'an: 4:163; 19:30; 33:7.) This is not to say that *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* somehow influenced the Qur'an, but it did codify and concretize certain ideas about Jewish history/identity replicated in the Qur'an in the formative years of recently-imperialized Christianity (on the Arabic tradition, see further the study of Vollandt 2014 and the edition and studies of Sela 2009).

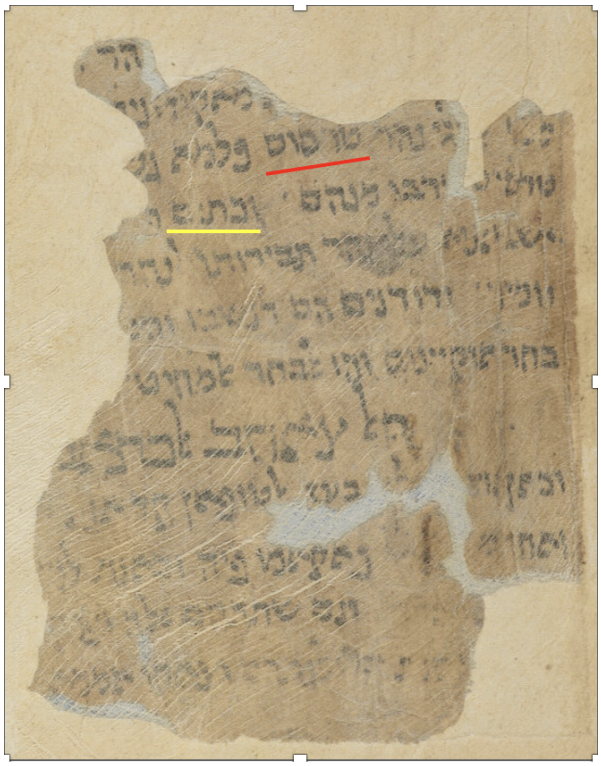


Figure 3: Manuscript Add. 1246, a Cairo Genizah fragment (saec. XV-XVI), beginning with *Sefer Yosippon* 1 (ff), University of Cambridge (Public Domain). This Judeo-Arabic fragment of Sefer Yosippon (i.e., a version in Arabic language written with Hebrew letters) testifies to the movement of the work between Hebrew and Arabic during the Middle Ages. The underlined texts—Tarsus, a place (red), and "Kittim," the way that the work refers to the Romans (yellow)—signal the heavily toponymic and ethnonymic nature of the first chapter of *Sefer Yosippon*.

In the end, the reason that *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* is important for understanding how Christians, Jews, and Muslims have at times conceptualized Jewish identity vis-à-vis history is not that it is some genetic origin-point for a particular theory of historicized Jewish identity; it is that it realized a particular version of such a theory at a particular—and demonstrably significant—time and place. The version read: 'the Jews are the *former* people of God because they rejected and/or killed Jesus, for which reason God destroyed Jerusalem and its temple via the Romans.' One need not trace the genealogy of these ideas back to *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* to affirm the work's importance for the historical conceptual co-production(s) of Jewishness vis-à-vis history among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The work did directly influence later authors and texts, but at a more basic level it represents by the simple fact of its existence the *possibility* of 'reading' the Jews within the framework of Jerusalem's 70-CE destruction. (And indeed, this possibility was to some extent pre-structured within the Deuteronomistic theology of the Christian Old Testament, which routinely predicted

Jerusalem's destruction as a result of Jewish infidelity and disobedience.) This text is important for how Jews have been theologized and historicized not only as the start of a tradition but also as the representative of what was possible, perhaps even probable, within such a domain of thought.

What is most striking about such a framework is its staying power. To this day, the absence of a temple in Jerusalem is understood within portions of Christianity—and of Islam—to signal God's disapprobation of the Jews' once and perennial rejection of Jesus, their would-be messiah. Many such traditions—but not all—eagerly await the eschatological reversal of such a state of affairs.

Bibliography

Bay, Carson, *Biblical Heroes and Classical Culture in Christian Late Antiquity: The Historiography, Exemplarity, and Anti-Judaism of Pseudo-Hegesippus* (Cambridge 2023)

Bay, Carson, "Writing the Jews out of History: Pseudo-Hegesippus, Classical Historiography, & the Codification of Christian Anti-Judaism in Late Antiquity," *Church History* 90 (2021) 265–85

Bell, Albert A., Jr., "An Historiographical Analysis of the *De Excidio Hierosolymitano* of Pseudo-Hegesippus" (PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977)

Cohen, Jeremy, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley 1999)

Nirenberg, David, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York 2014)

Pollard, Richard Matthew. "The *De Excidio* of 'Hegesippus' and the Reception of Josephus in the Early Middle Ages," *VIATOR* 46 (2015) 65–100

Sela, Shulamit*, The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion: Texts in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic with a Hebrew Translation and Introduction*, 2 Volumes (Tel Aviv 2009) [Hebrew]

Somenzi, Chiara, *Egesippo – Ambrogio: Formazione scolastica e Cristiana a Roma alla metà del IV secolo* (Milan 2009)

Ussani, Vincenzo, *Hegesippi qui dicitur Historiae libri v – Pt. 1: Textum criticum continens*, CSEL 66.1 (Vienna 1932)

Vollandt, Ronny, "Ancient Jewish Historiography in Arabic Garb: Sefer Josippon between Southern Italy and Coptic Cairo," *Zutot* 11 (2014): 70–80

Zwierlein, Otto, *Das >Bellum Iudaicum< des Ambrosius* (Berlin 2024)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.48620/96277

License: CC BY 4.0