

Titus (79-81 AD): Great Promise Cut Short

Titus' reign was short but successful. As the second emperor of the Flavian Dynasty, he lived and is remembered under the shadow of his father, Emperor Vespasian. Vespasian had a distinguished career as a general before becoming emperor, and Titus served as his father's right-hand man in these early years. When the Jews rebelled in 66 AD, Vespasian and Titus together led the Roman army against them. In the middle of the war, Vespasian was declared emperor and departed for Egypt and then Rome, leaving his son Titus in charge of finishing the war. Titus succeeded brilliantly, though he gained a reputation for brutality in dealing with the Jewish rebels. In 69 AD Titus and his men captured and razed the Jewish capital and holy city of Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed, and the Jewish Temple, the holiest place in Judaism, was destroyed. Great treasures were taken from the city, including the golden Menorah, and a great triumphal arch built in Rome celebrating Titus' victory depicts these spoils being carried away by the Romans.

When Titus returned to Rome, he resumed his place as the right-hand man of his father Vespasian, who was now emperor. Titus did the dirty work, presiding over trials and ordering executions of suspected traitors, thus allowing his father to preserve a reputation of kindness and clean hands. At the same time, Titus acted as a patron to historians, and his generosity towards them meant that they were inclined to write about him and his father in a positive light. One such historian was Josephus, who was a Jew captured in the war against the Jewish rebels, but who embraced Greco-Roman life and became one of antiquity's greatest historians. Another refugee from the Jewish rebellion was the Jewish Queen Berenice. Titus began a love affair with Berenice, but this was unpopular with the Roman people. They feared that this foreign queen would make Titus abandon his Roman ways and become "Orientalized," as Cleopatra had done to Mark Antony.

When Vespasian died in 79 AD, Titus was his obvious successor. However, many feared that Titus would become a tyrannical emperor because of his reputation for brutality and his association with a foreign queen. Instead, Titus became known for his mildness, and is remembered as perhaps the most popular of all emperors. He halted treason trials, and he did not have a single senator executed during his reign. He sent away the unpopular Queen Berenice, and continued his father's popular policies in Rome.

During the reign of Titus there were two notable disasters. In 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted south of Rome, destroying the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. An estimated 16,000 citizens died, including the great writer Pliny the Elder. The following year, a terrible fire broke out in Rome that destroyed many districts. Titus organized relief efforts for the surviving victims of these tragedies, and even sold some of his own furniture to raise money to help alleviate the suffering. The Flavian Amphitheater, now known as the Coliseum, was completed under Titus' reign, and games were first held there for the Roman people to enjoy.

Ultimately Titus' reign was cut short. His final act as emperor was to preside over the opening games of the Coliseum in 81 AD. Several days later he died of a fever, at the age of only 41. With a reign of little over two years, his great potential was never realized. He is remembered as one of the kindest and most temperate emperors; had he lived longer, he may have been remembered as one of the greatest. On the other hand, his short reign meant that the Roman people never got the chance to tire of him or grow to hate him. He died



before his popularity faded, and posterity remembered him as Rome's most beloved emperor. We have no idea what might have happened if he lived longer. What we do know is with his untimely death he was succeeded by his less popular brother Domitian, who would be the last emperor of the Flavian Dynasty.

Lesson Summary:

- Titus was the right-hand man of his father, Vespasian, and when his father went off to claim the throne, Titus finished the war against the Jews by sacking Jerusalem.
- During Vespasian's reign, Titus continued to act as his right-hand man, and when Vespasian died, Titus was his natural successor.
- Under Titus' reign, the two most important events were the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and a fire in Rome. He acted to alleviate the suffering from both these disasters.
- Titus died young, and his great potential was never realized.

