

Divided We Fall: The Roots of the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome

Robert Eisenberg

During the Roman occupation of Judea, lasting from 6-638 CE,¹ the well-being of the Jewish population was hardly guaranteed. For the early part of this period, the Judean Jews were given a large degree of autonomy over their own affairs, and Rome allowed them considerable religious freedom. However, between 66-73 CE (and again in 132-135 CE), the province of Judea engaged in active revolt against Roman rule. During this time, Judean society was factionalized, therefore the decision to revolt was not unanimous, but it was instead divided into three camps. A small minority, called the *Kanaim* (Zealots), was composed of radicals who actively campaigned for revolt from the outset of hostilities. The second group was the old aristocratic, *Tzdokim* (Sadducees), who wanted peace at all costs, and the last group was composed of the mainstream *Prushim* (Pharisees), who initially did not favor revolt, but who became active participants once the rebellion was underway.

The major divide between the advocates and opponents of the war can be drawn along the line of class and religious belief. In general, it was the lower-class, faced with severe economic and religious oppression by

both the upper-class Jews and by the Romans, who turned to the dangerous belief of imminent messianism and supported revolt. Conversely, the entrenched aristocracy preferred to maintain the status quo, either because they saw revolt as futile, or more likely in order to protect their wealth and social standing.

In the early first century CE, Judea was an economic backwater of the Roman Empire, and the Judeans relied heavily on small scale subsistence agriculture. However, with the coming of direct Roman rule, the Judean economy became integrated into the wider Mediterranean market system. This new system helped to bring about the decline of the small landowner class, resulting in a small number of wealthy Jewish landowners. Many of these ex-farmers were forced into wage labour due to the loss of their land and the financial obligations imposed by both the Roman Imperial taxes and the Temple tithes.² The onerous tax burden compelled the individual farmer to borrow money from the wealthy in order to work his own land. The failure to repay a loan resulted in the confiscation of land by the landowner and the creation of a “landless proletariat ripe for revolution.”³

The loss of private land and the ensuing economic dependency was a direct result of the taxes imposed on the peasantry by the Judean upper class and by the Romans. Historical records do not show that the Jews were forced to pay a higher tax than any other people in the Empire during the period in question. However, it seems likely that the increase in Jewish animosity towards these taxes can be attributed to two factors. The Judeans had always paid their taxes through local officials; however, once the Romans changed their policy, the Jews were forced to pay their taxes directly

to Rome. This caused Jewish animosity towards Rome, since they had not been required to pay taxes directly to a foreign power since the Hasmonean liberation in 140 BCE.⁴ This tax burden was compounded by the Temple tithes, which were required of every Jew to maintain the upkeep and operation of the Temple. This resulted in a greater dependence of small farmers on loans from the Sadducees and their subsequent indebtedness and loss of land.

While resentment over paying high double taxes led to enmity of the peasant class towards the Romans and upper class, the taxes alone did not drive the Jews to revolt. Both the Romans and the Sadducees oppressed the lower class, albeit through different means. While the Romans embarked on a policy of religious intolerance and injustice exacerbated by inept procurators, the Sadducees began to exploit the lower class, leading to a class struggle that bred bitterness and violence.

As oppressive as the Roman Empire was in later years, originally, it granted the Jews significant religious freedom. The *Edict of Augustus on Jewish Rights* (1 BCE) states that “the Jews shall use their own customs in accordance with their ancestral law...and their sacred offerings shall be inviolable and shall be sent to Jerusalem.”⁵ This attitude of religious tolerance was repeated in the *Edict of Claudius on Jewish Rights* (41 CE), whereby it was stated that “it is right that also the Jews, who are in all the world under us, shall maintain their ancestral customs without hindrance and to them I now also command...to observe their own laws.”⁶ The liberal attitude shown by Rome towards the Jews went a long way towards ensuring Judean compliance and loyalty during early Roman rule. However,

these affirmations of Jewish rights were not representative of the period immediately preceding the Great Revolt (66-73 CE).

After the failure of the ethnarch, Herod Archelaus, to properly govern the land, Emperor Augustus made Judea a Roman province in 6 CE and instituted a series of procurators.⁷ In fact, it was precisely these procurators who aggravated the situation between Romans and Jews in Judea. These procurators often had low status in Rome and showed a lack of respect towards Jewish religious practices and even met Jewish disturbances with excessively brutal force.⁸ The Roman historian Tacitus provides a vivid example of how Jews were perceived at this time, when he claimed, “Jewish ritual is preposterous and morbid.”⁹ The procurators were tasked with maintaining order in their province, and more importantly, collecting taxes. They were obligated to collect a fixed sum for Rome, and any money collected above that figure they were allowed to keep. This led many procurators to extract heavier taxes from the populace in order to enrich themselves. Moreover, procurators did not generally undertake public projects, yet when they did, they often embezzled public money.¹⁰ An example of such extraction can be found in the case of the procurator Pontius Pilate. During his governance (26-36 CE), there arose concern over Jerusalem’s water supply. Pilate decided to build an aqueduct to supply the city, and in order to finance his project, he confiscated funds from the Temple treasury.¹¹ The result was a protest that resulted in the slaughter of the defiant Jews. As abhorrent as Pilate’s actions were to the Jews, they only resulted in minor disturbances. The final sting that pushed the Judeans to war was the appointment of Gessius Florus as procurator of Judea.

Florus was appointed procurator of Judea in 64 CE and served until the outbreak of the Great Revolt two years later. Florus continually ruled unfairly against the Jews, in favour of the Greek population, and consistently accepted bribes as a means of resolving conflicts. As Josephus writes, “Gessius Florus...filled Judea with an abundance of miseries...Florus was so wicked, and so violent in the use of his authority...as though he had been sent on purpose to show his crimes to everybody...he was not moved by pity, and never was satisfied with any degree of gain.”¹² Furthermore, it has been argued that Florus intentionally provoked the Jews to defy Rome, thereby hoping to conceal his own unjustified cruelty and ineptness in governance.¹³ Additionally, Florus had accepted a bribe from the Jews to hear one of their complaints. Yet, after taking the money, he refused to hear their argument and ruled arbitrarily in favour of the Greeks.¹⁴ In fact, Florus’ governance was deemed unfit by Rome and he was removed from his post shortly after the war began.

While Jewish displeasure with Rome was at a level hitherto unseen, there was also animosity directed against the Sadducee upper class. Since the time of the Hasmonean Dynasty (140-37 BCE), there had been a transition of the ruling class of Judea from one of a legitimate, peasant supported priesthood, to one of Hellenized aristocrats, owing their status directly to the rulers.¹⁵ Moreover, since the time of King Herod (37-4 BCE), the prestigious positions in the Temple had been filled by foreign Jews from Babylon and Egypt, rather than by local Jews who might undermine the Judean ruler’s authority. When the Romans came to power, they left the old Jewish aristocracy in place, knowing that they were politically impotent and could

only maintain power through continued Roman support.¹⁶ The elites thus needed to maintain the role entrusted to them by the Romans, namely to collect taxes and maintain order. Over time, the Sadducees became more rapacious and built extravagant homes while maneuvering the Judean peasants into indebtedness so that they could exploit their labour and produce.¹⁷ This extortion grew to such a point that the elites sent “their servants into the threshing-floors, to take away those tithes that were due to the priests, inasmuch that it fell out that the poorest sort of priests died for want.”¹⁸

Once it became apparent that war was imminent, the tensions between rich and poor were exacerbated. After the carnage brought by Florus, the Sadducees attempted to calm the peasants, and pleaded with Roman authorities to intervene.¹⁹ As tensions rose, each Jewish group attempted to gain influence over the others. However, according to Josephus, “the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious, while the Pharisees have the multitude on their side.”²⁰ When hostilities actually broke out, the Hellenized Sadducees were as much of a target as the Romans, and there are numerous instances of attacks against them. As claimed by Josephus, the rebels

carried the fire to the place where the archives were repositied, and made haste to burn the contracts belonging to their creditors, and thereby to dissolve their obligations for paying their debts; and this was done in order to gain the multitude of those who had been debtors, and that they might persuade the poorer sort to join in their insurrection with safety against the more

wealthy.²¹

Such actions possibly served to further alienate the Sadducees from their fellow Jews and only pushed them to further depend on Rome. In fact, after this incident, there was no recording of any Judean elites becoming actively involved in the revolt, and, in fact, some of the High Priests (of the Sadducee sect) attempted to betray Jerusalem to the Romans, but were only prevented from doing so by the arrival of rebel fighters from the countryside.²² Furthermore, there are instances where certain Judeans attempted to surrender to the Romans “which they did out of the desire they had of peace, and for saving their effects, because many of the citizens of Gadara were rich men.”²³ The Sadducees and Pharisees were weakened by their conflict with each other and as a result, the Zealots were able to initiate the uprising by ending the Temple sacrifices on behalf of the Roman Emperor.

Another point of conflict between the classes was the possibility of victory against the Roman Empire. One leader who articulated the futility of fighting against Rome was Herod Agrippa II (r.48-100 CE). Agrippa elaborated at length the perceived senselessness of engaging Rome in warfare while also criticizing the state of Judea’s military.²⁴ He continued by illustrating that since the Romans had never lost in battle, it was clear that God had decided to favour them over the Jews, and so the Judeans could not depend on God’s help in battle. He concluded by pleading with the Jews to stay at peace and thereby save Jerusalem and the Temple from destruction by a vastly superior and apparently invincible foe.²⁵

While the probability of victory seemed remote, the Jews did indeed

decide to rebel. A driving force which gave courage and justification to the entire uprising may have been the belief that the coming of the promised messiah was imminent and that God would lead His chosen people to victory as He had done throughout history. The Jewish people have a history dating back to the biblical period of trusting in God to deliver them from their foes. In fact, it was references to such events from biblical times, coupled with a resounding military success at Beth-Horon that convinced most Jews to support the extremist cause of war.

The chaotic events in Jerusalem during the period leading up to the revolt, included the protests against Roman authority and the violence of the radical *sicarii*, an extremist group of Jews who assassinated those accused of collaborating with the Romans by stabbing them in crowds. These events convinced many of the peasant Jews that the End of Days and subsequent Messianic Age were imminent, that Rome would soon be overthrown, and that Israel would be reunited and live under a Davidic king.²⁶ Furthermore, the Jews looked back into their own recent history, by equating the revolt of the Maccabees (167-164 BCE) with their current predicament. They believed that God would guide them to victory against Rome just as He had against the Seleucids. Additionally, the Jews followed “an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, ‘about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.’ The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular.”²⁷ The Roman historian Tacitus also commented on this oracle, yet he believed that “this enigmatic prophecy really applied to Vespasian and Titus. But men are blinded by their hopes. The Jews took to themselves the promised destiny,

and even defeat could not convince them of the truth.”²⁸ Moreover, once the revolt had begun and the Jews were told that the Temple would be spared if they surrendered, one of the rebel leaders replied to the offer saying that “he did never fear the taking of the city, because it was God’s own city.”²⁹ Clearly, history and religious beliefs played important roles in facilitating the revolt.

As convincing as prophecy and faith may have been for some Jews, they did not persuade the majority to support the rebellion. In fact, the majority of Jews remained skeptical as to the divine promise of victory. It was only after October of 66 CE that the majority of moderate Jews were convinced to participate in the revolt. It was during this month that the Romans sent out an expeditionary force under the governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, to capture Jerusalem and end the insurrection. However, Gallus’s professional army of 36,000 men met with unexpected defeat at the hands of 14,000 Jewish skirmishers and light infantry at the pass of Beth-Horon. This resounding military success, in which a Roman Legion’s eagle standard was captured, drew many of the heretofore ambivalent moderate Jews into active support for rebellion, as it affirmed their belief that they could defeat Rome, and that God was on their side.³⁰ It was not that the Judeans had won a battle that convinced most moderate Jews, but rather it was the location of this victory. In fact, it was at the very site of Beth-Horon that Judah the Maccabee achieved one of his greatest victories over the Syrian general Seron. As it is written in the Book of Maccabees,

And when [Seron] came near to the going up of Beth-

Horon, Judah went forth to meet him with a small company... Now as soon as [Judah] had left off speaking, he leapt suddenly upon them, and so Seron and his host was overthrown before him. And [Judah] pursued them from the going down of Beth-Horon unto the plain, where were slain about eight hundred men of them.³¹

It was only because of the history associated with Beth-Horon that the extremists were able to attach religious significance to their victory, and thereby convince the majority of Jews to join their cause. However, it is relevant to note that not all scholars are in agreement as to the role that messianism played in the Great Revolt. Historian Tessa Rajak believes that there is insufficient evidence to support the claim that the revolutionaries were motivated by messianic hopes.³² Interestingly, Josephus also does not mention messianism as a cause for rebellion, possibly because he did not wish his readers to believe that the Jews had any noble or religious reasons to revolt.³³

The Great Revolt was not the result of a single event, but was rather the culmination of events over a longer period of time that had turned Judea into a powder keg, ready to ignite at any moment. The support for the rebellion came from lower class Jews, who had little to lose, and who were keen to throw off the oppressive yoke of both their Roman and Sadducee masters, while maintaining the belief in divine aid. The Jews who opposed the revolt came instead from the upper class. They saw revolt against Rome as futile, and furthermore, did not wish to lose their wealth and social status,

which were dependent on Roman patronage. However, the majority of Jews did not fall into either of these two camps, but instead remained indifferent until the success of the Battle of Beth-Horon convinced them that victory was possible and would come with the aid of God. While historians have often inquired as to what caused the revolt, or who supported it, a more interesting thought might be whether the Jews could have succeeded in their revolt had all the factions acted together from the outset in trying to achieve the common goal of national freedom.

Endnotes

¹ This span includes both the rule of the Roman Empire and that of the Byzantine Empire which succeeded Roman rule in Judea/Palestine.

² Jack Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (London, 1997), 136.

³ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵ Joseph. *AJ.* 16.6.2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.5.3.

⁷ Pastor, 136.

⁸ Sean Freyne, "The Revolt From a Regional Perspective," in *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology*, ed. Andrea M. Berlin & J. Andrew Overman (London: 2002), 45.

⁹ Tac. *Hist.* 5.5

¹⁰ Pastor, 141.

¹¹ F.J. Foakes-Jackson, *Josephus and the Jews: The Religion and History of the Jews as Explained by Flavius Josephus* (New York, 1930), 163.

¹² Joseph. *AJ.* 20.1.1.

¹³ Foakes-Jackson, 182.

¹⁴ Abba Eban, *My People: The Story of the Jews* (New York, 1968), 91.

¹⁵ Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against*

Rome A.D. 66-70 (Cambridge, 1987), 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-45.

¹⁷ Richard A. Horsley, "Power Vacuum and Power Struggle in 66-7 C.E.," in *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology*, ed. Andrea M. Berlin & J. Andrew Overman (London: 2002), 103.

¹⁸ Joseph. *AJ*, 20.8.8.

¹⁹ Horsley, 104.

²⁰ Joseph. *AJ*, 13.10.7.

²¹ Joseph. *BJ*, 2.17.6.

²² Horsley, 104-05.

²³ Joseph. *BJ*. 4.7.3.

²⁴ Foakes-Jackson, 184

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183-84.

²⁶ Thomas A. Idinopulos, "Israel's War with Rome," *Jewish Civilization in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, ed. Shemaryahu Talmon, (Sheffield, England: 1991), 59.

²⁷ Joseph. *BJ*. 6.5.4.

²⁸ Tac. *Hist.* 5.12.

²⁹ Joseph. *BJ*. 6.2.1.

³⁰ Paul K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to the Present*, (Oxford: 1999), 71-78.

³¹ 1Macc. 3:16-24.

³² Tessa Rajak, "Jewish Millenarian Expectations," in *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology*, ed. Andrea M. Berlin & J. Andrew Overman (London: 2002), 182.

³³ Idinopulos, 59.

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