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978-0-521-44782-9 - The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66-70

Martin Goodman

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

i THE PROBLEM

The Roman emperor Augustus created the province of Judaea in A.D. 6 by subjecting to direct Roman rule the central part of the domain once ruled by the Jewish king Herod the Great. Herod's kingdom had proved unruly on his death in 4 B.C. when the widespread resentment he had evoked was able to surface, and a series of revolts then had been suppressed only after intervention by the Roman governor of Syria. Herod's son Archelaus had nonetheless been permitted to inherit control of the area around Jerusalem, although he was granted the title merely of ethnarch. But by A.D. 6 even this appointment no longer seemed satisfactory in the eyes of his Roman patron. Archelaus was sent into exile in Gaul, and Judaea was incorporated into the Roman empire.

The following sixty years witnessed many crises in the relationship of the Jewish population to the Roman government. They ended with the great war of A.D. 66-70 which is the main subject of this book.¹ Hostility to Rome was shown from the foundation of the province. Violent opposition to the imposition of a census was quelled only with difficulty, and in the following years a variety of issues led to frequent riots and demonstrations.

The main grievances voiced were against alleged breaches of Jewish religious susceptibilities. When the Roman procurator Pilate brought the standards revered by the legionary soldiers into the holy city of Jerusalem, there was an outcry; when he abstracted sacred funds from the Jerusalem Temple to build an aqueduct, his sacrilege led to violence; an incident when a Roman soldier exposed himself indecently in the sight of the Temple precincts provoked disorder in

¹ For a clear narrative of these events, see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. G. Vermes *et al.*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1973-87) I, pp. 336-513; E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden, 1976), pp. 144-200, 256-330.

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which much blood was shed. Most of these riots flared up during the pilgrim festivals, which were celebrated on three occasions in each year. It was then that the city was filled almost to overflowing with a mass of worshippers in a state of religious excitement.

In A.D. 40 such more minor infringements of Jewish religious feelings were put into the shade by a serious assault. The emperor Gaius Caligula, in somewhat megalomaniac mood, determined that his statue should be erected in the Jerusalem Temple as it had been in shrines throughout the rest of his realm. For Jews, this was a direct attack on their monotheistic and aniconic faith; Caligula's statue in the Temple implied Caligula's claim to divinity. Their opposition was absolute. The imperial legate who was governing Syria at the time proved unable to carry out the command. Only Caligula's death prevented the Jews resorting to war, and the anger and suspicion of Rome provoked then was slow to dissipate.

The new emperor Claudius attempted in A.D. 41 to alleviate the hostility of the province by giving control of the Jerusalem cult and Judaea to the Jewish king Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod. This practical policy was evidently successful in restoring peace, however briefly. Claudius was motivated by gratitude as well as good sense, for Agrippa's machinations in Rome had been largely responsible both for his (Claudius') survival after Caligula's assassination and for his rapid elevation to supreme power in its aftermath. It is possible that the imperial favour gained by Agrippa through his aid in the tangled politics of the Roman court did not survive his assumption of the role of a powerful client king: Claudius put a stop to plans to strengthen the fortifications of Jerusalem, and in A.D. 44 a friendly conference between Agrippa and other eastern rulers allied to Rome was abruptly broken up by the governor of Syria. But any serious confrontation between Agrippa and Claudius was preempted by the former's untimely death in the same year. Claudius returned Judaea to direct Roman control under a procurator responsible both to himself and to the governor of Syria.

Within a few years, however, the troubles of the province became palpably worse. Sporadic riots continued and there was also endemic banditry in the countryside.² From the early fifties A.D. the atmosphere of violence spread to the capital city, where dagger men, sicarii, used the cover of the pilgrim crowds to terrorize the urban populace. Some citizens were sufficiently intimidated by A.D. 64 to

² For the argument that revolutionary banditry was not common before c. A.D. 50, see D. M. Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution: 6-74 C.E. A political history based on the writings of Josephus* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 47-93.

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The Problem

seek safety abroad. It was already apparent to one Jerusalemite, Josephus, that an explosion was imminent (*Vita* 17).

The incident which eventually set the revolt in motion arose from long-standing hostility between the Jews and the local gentiles in the coastal city of Caesarea. Caesarea had been founded by Herod primarily for a non-Jewish population, as he had indicated by building there a great temple to Rome and Augustus, but the Caesarean Jews had nonetheless frequently appealed to Roman authority to be granted greater rights within the city. In A.D. 60 the emperor Nero had given judgement decisively in favour of the gentiles, and when in A.D. 66 some gentile youths, presuming upon this evidence of imperial favour, taunted the local Jews by ostentatiously sacrificing a cock in front of a synagogue on a sabbath, the result was a riot.

The current Roman governor of Judaea, the procurator Florus, suppressed this disorder only after displaying blatant bias against the Jews. Anger was thus already intense at this outrage when he compounded the Jews' hostility by confiscating money from the treasury of the Jerusalem Temple, probably in lieu of tribute. The tumult in Jerusalem which resulted was checked only with much bloodshed. In disgust a few Temple priests decided to suspend those sacrifices which had traditionally been offered up each day in Jerusalem in honour of the Roman emperor. From the Roman point of view such an action constituted rebellion, and the situation was now too serious for Florus to manage. The imperial legate Cestius Gallus marched down from Antioch in Syria with three legions and many auxiliary troops. When he too was met with determined resistance and suffered a disastrous defeat on his retreat from outside Jerusalem, Nero was forced to treat the suppression of the revolt as a major campaign. He sent one of his most experienced generals, the future emperor Vespasian, to fight in Judaea in his name.

The war lasted from A.D. 66 to A.D. 73 or 74, when the last pocket of resistance on Masada was finally overwhelmed. The Roman forces were not always fighting with full intensity: in June A.D. 68 Vespasian called a halt to his campaign on hearing of the death of Nero, in whose name he was commander of his troops, and in July A.D. 69 he again cut short his attack on the Jews, this time in order to concentrate on his own bid for supreme power in Rome. But the main reason for the long duration of the war was the strength of the Jewish resistance. When Vespasian's son Titus, also a future emperor, finally captured the walled city of Jerusalem, it was at the cost of many Roman as well as Jewish lives. Many Jews were enslaved or crucified, and Jerusalem, one of the finest cities of the east-

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ern part of the empire, was devastated. On the 10th Ab (July/August) A.D. 70 the Temple was burnt down. The structure of Jewish religion and society in Judaea was totally destroyed, never to be restored in the same form. It is the aim of this book to explain why the revolt, with its terrible consequences, occurred.

For Roman historians, the problem is worth study partly because the small province of Judaea deserves consideration in its own right, and partly also because an understanding of what went wrong in Judaea may help to illuminate Roman methods of provincial administration employed elsewhere in the empire with greater success. More evidence survives for Roman Palestine in the first century A.D. than for any other province apart from Egypt, and because this evidence emanates from a wide variety of contemporaries who held quite different views on the problems of their time it is possible to build up a uniquely rounded picture of their society. Not all the insights about Judaea presented by such evidence will be directly useful in comprehending other provinces, for some Judaeon history was determined by specifically Jewish religious factors, but a full analysis of the Roman government's reaction to this alien society may elucidate the history of unrest and revolt in other areas under Roman control.

For students of Jewish history and society no argument is needed to stress the importance of the war of A.D. 66–70. The failure of the revolt led to the destruction of the last independent Jewish state in Palestine until the establishment of Israel in 1948; only the seizure of power by the military government of a certain Bar Kochba in a final desperate rebellion against Rome under Hadrian testifies to the continued ambitions of the Jewish people for self-rule. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and with it the possibility of expiation for sin through sacrifice led to enormous religious changes. Judaism has developed since A.D. 70 in a variety of ways, but all of them are in some sense a reaction to the fact of exile and the breaking of the link to the divine which had once been provided by the Temple cult.³

The events of the first century A.D. have a slightly different but no less important significance for students of early Christianity. The background to the revolt formed also the background to Jesus' teaching and the growth of the early Church in Jerusalem.

³ Cf. M. E. Stone, 'Reactions to destructions (*sic*) of the Second Temple', *JSJ* 12 (1981) 195–204; J. Neusner, *First-Century Judaism in Crisis: Yohanan ben Zakkai and the Renaissance of Torah* (New York, 1982); G. Alon, *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1980–4).

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ii THE CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

The belief that it is important to discover the causes of the catastrophe is not new. The first historian known to have attempted to tackle the problem was the contemporary writer Josephus, who himself took part in the war and provides the fullest account of its course. Many of his serious, reflective comments on the destruction of his own society deserve, and have been accorded, a high value by modern students.⁴

Acceptance of Josephus' analyses is not at first sight unreasonable. His account of events seems essentially truthful, both because it often has the support of other surviving sources and because he apparently made no thorough attempt to iron out internal inconsistencies within his narrative.⁵ He was an eye witness of, and a participant in, much of the history he describes. He was trying, as he insists (*B.J.* 1.1–18), to write political history in the style and with the acute interest in causation of Thucydides.

Yet a moment's reflection reveals the dangers in too great a trust. Josephus blames the war on a wide variety of causes. The modern historian needs criteria to judge whether, for instance, the attempt to raise the Levites to equality with the priests in the Temple service really was – as Josephus suggests in claiming that such a sin was bound to make the Jews liable to punishment (*A.J.* 20.218) – no less important a factor in causing the war than others that he stresses. Thus Josephus reckoned that a major reason for the disaster was divine wrath directed against Israel for her wickedness – he evidently liked to portray himself as a latterday Jeremiah – but to the modern secular mind such a belief is naturally dismissed as the product of the contemporary author's primitive intellectual equipment. However, once some elements of Josephus' considered analysis have been rejected, it is not logically justifiable simply to pick and choose from the rest whatever is congenial to the modern historian's prejudices.

One solution which would have the merit of consistency would be simply to accept the whole of Josephus' view about who was responsible for the war, but this would hardly be satisfactory. It was pre-

⁴ For Josephus' analysis of the causes of the war, cf. P. Bilde, 'The causes of the Jewish War according to Josephus', *JStJ* 10 (1979) 179–202.

⁵ I follow T. Rajak (*Josephus: the historian and his society* (London, 1983), p. 106 n. 3) in finding unduly pessimistic the view of some eminent scholars that Josephus' story must either be reproduced as it stands, with varying degrees of credulity, or dismissed in its entirety. I hope that my approach to the evidence, outlined below, is coherent, but I am aware that it cannot be *proved* correct.

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cisely when Josephus stood back from the canvas of his history and pronounced in summary passages such as *B.J.* 7.254–74 his considered view of the factors and people most to be blamed that he may be at his least trustworthy. When in the midst of narrative he exclaimed at the dire consequences of some episode he had just described, it is probable that he gave the reader his honest opinion. But when he tried to pull together his views into an overall ascription of responsibility for the disaster it is all too likely that his instinct for apologetic overcame his conscience as a historian.⁶

For there were many reasons for such apologetic. Eye witnesses may record details accurately, but they are unlikely to gain the deeper understanding which comes from perspective. Josephus in the *B.J.* was trying to describe and to analyse one of the most traumatic events in his nation's history less than ten years after it had occurred. Furthermore, he had himself been too deeply involved in the war to be objective. In A.D. 66 he had been elected as one of the leading generals of the Jewish rebels. In A.D. 67 he had changed sides, becoming first a Roman captive and then an honoured friend of Titus, destroyer of the Temple.

Josephus was proud of his career, and of the social success in Rome after A.D. 70 which set him apart from the rest of the Judaeian ruling class from which he had sprung. But his apologetic was intended not so much to justify his own tortuous political progression as to try to show to his gentile readers, particularly those of the *B.J.*, that Jews of the richer class like himself were, despite the revolt, just like other aristocrats in the Greek East of the empire. Above all, he wanted to demonstrate that they should be entrusted again with the Jerusalem Temple and the flourishing Judaeian society of which they had lost control in A.D. 70.⁷ Clearly, although understanding the causes of the revolt must depend on Josephus' narrative, it is unwise to assume the accuracy of any of his analyses of the events through which he lived.

In practice, though usually with little theoretical justification, modern historians have tended to accept an amalgam of some of the causes proposed by Josephus. But they do so usually only after careful scrutiny of each alleged cause in the light of the ancient author's known bias. Every factor put forward by Josephus is accepted as

⁶ Cf. Bilde, 'The causes of the Jewish War', for a more detailed analysis. For Josephus' presentation of himself as a Jeremiah figure, see *B.J.* 5.391–3; D. Daube, 'Typology in Josephus', *JJS* 31 (1980) 20.

⁷ For a full and excellent account of Josephus' self-representation, see Rajak, *Josephus*, pp. 104–73.

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valid except when either his political apologetic or his religious ideology seems to provide the most obvious explanation for his wish to mention it. Conversely, other causes ignored by Josephus are agreed to merit serious consideration only when good grounds for his silence can be postulated.

Such use of Josephus' evidence has come up with five major explanations of why Judaea rebelled.

a. The incompetence of the Roman governors

Josephus considered the incompetence and malice of the Roman governors of Judaea to be a prime cause of the revolt. His judgement is significantly echoed from the Roman side by Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.12). The greed, bravado and recklessness of a procurator like Pilate are remarkable not least because he evidently thought he could get away with such behaviour – as, indeed, he did for ten years or more to A.D. 36. Many of Pilate's actions, such as the minting of coins which carry a pagan sacrificial ladle and other religious emblems, seem designed almost deliberately to annoy the Jews.⁸ Equally tactless was the action of Felix, procurator probably from A.D. 52 to 60, in, for instance, taking the Herodian princess Drusilla from her husband and marrying her himself without converting to Judaism. Roman recognition of the unsatisfactory nature of the governors can be seen in the way some of them were summarily deposed from office. Most of them, including Pilate, Cumanus and Festus, disappear altogether from the records of the Roman governing hierarchy after their rule over Judaea. Even in Roman eyes, then, these governors were not impressive men. As in other non-senatorial provinces, apart from Egypt, any really difficult task which might require superior military power was handled not by the procurator but by a senatorial governor of a neighbouring region; in the case of Judaea, this was the governor of Syria.⁹ Also in favour of taking these governors' incompetence as a serious cause of provincial unrest is the fact that administrative brutality was responsible for revolts elsewhere in the early empire, in Gaul and in Britain.¹⁰ The procurators of Judaea were appointed by the emperor through a patronage system which often took little or no account of merit in selecting for such posts. Appointments could be of any duration. Since the governor's power

⁸ Smallwood, *Jews*, p. 167.

⁹ On the relationship of the procurator of Judaea to the legate of Syria, see Schürer, *History* I, pp. 360–1.

¹⁰ S. L. Dyson, 'Native revolts in the Roman empire', *Historia* 20 (1971) 239–74.

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depended directly and only on imperial support, he often might himself lack prestige as an individual; it is perhaps significant that for some of the early procurators after Coponius (A.D. 6–9) nothing more than the name is known. At least one governor, Felix, was of quite exceptionally low Roman status, for he was an ex-slave;¹¹ if Josephus is any guide, Jews were as aware as any Roman aristocrat of his servile origins.

The Judaean governors' authority was weakened not only by this low Roman status and by their lack of administrative experience but also by the fact that the governors of Syria had the right to intervene in Judaean affairs and sometimes did so. They thus undermined the procurators' façade of control over Judaea without, because of their prior commitment to their own province, taking over full responsibility themselves. Similarly unsettling for the procurator was the knowledge that an embassy to the emperor could, if successful, at any time remove him from his post and into obscurity. It is hardly surprising that most of the governors felt able to deal with local dissent only by swift suppression or by ignoring the signs of disaffection. What they feared most was not a crisis in the province but the possibility that the emperor might come to hear of such a crisis.¹²

Josephus accused the governors of Judaea not simply of incompetence but also of malevolence towards the Jews, and in this too he may in some cases have been right. Doubtless any such antisemitism may have been simply an irrational dislike of people with idiosyncratic customs, but it may be relevant that most of the procurators were from the Italian gentry and will have known about Jews mostly from the Jewish diaspora in Rome. There a large community had been settled since at least the mid first century B.C., most of them originally brought to Rome as slaves. These freedmen and descendants of freedmen were mostly poor and were, like much of the plebs of the city of Rome, prone to violence. It would not be surprising if most of the governors thus came to Judaea with an unfavourable image of Jews. It was an exceptional thing to learn more about the inhabitants of a province before setting out to govern it (cf. Philo, *Leg.* 245), and no ordinary man could be expected to understand the minutiae of Jewish religious practice without considerable study.

¹¹ Smallwood, *Jews*, pp. 268–9; only one other freedman governor before A.D. 70 is attested. See in general R. P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge, 1982), especially pp. 79–111.

¹² Cf. P. A. Brunt, 'Charges of provincial maladministration under the early principate', *Historia* 10 (1961) 189–227, and F. G. B. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 B.C.–A.D. 337)* (London, 1977), pp. 375–85, on embassies sent by provincial communities direct to the emperor.

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There is no evidence that the governors of Judaea made even a token effort.¹³

b. The oppressiveness of Roman rule

But even if the governors were bad, there is much evidence – though it is naturally not stressed by the pro-Roman Josephus – that the roots of their problem lay much further back in long-standing Jewish hostility to Roman rule and many Jews' belief that that rule was in essence oppressive. There were indeed many reasons why a Jew of the first century A.D. might harbour unfriendly feelings towards Rome.

Roman brutality to the inhabitants of Judaea had begun in the mid first century B.C. If there had been a formal treaty of alliance between Rome and the fledgling Jewish state of Judaea which, led by the Maccabees, broke away from the kingdom of the Seleucids in the mid second century B.C., that treaty must have lapsed by 63 B.C. when Pompey's conquest of Syria brought him into direct confrontation with the Hasmonaeans, whose dynasty was descended from the Maccabees.¹⁴ With skilful exploitation of dynastic feuds, Pompey contrived to instal a puppet Hasmonaean monarch on the throne of a diminished state. In the process he conquered Jerusalem and earned himself undying Jewish hatred by wantonly desecrating the Holy of Holies in the Temple, slaughtering many defenders of the capital and enslaving thousands of others; when the Jewish rebels in Egypt desecrated his tomb 178 years later in A.D. 115 they may have done so deliberately in revenge.

The hostility engendered by this first unhappy contact between the Jews and the might of late-republican Rome was to be compounded in the following quarter of a century. Aulus Gabinius in 57 B.C. experimented wilfully with the complete abolition of the Hasmonaean monarchy, leaving only a High Priest shorn of secular power and creating a non-Jewish enclave between Judaea and Gali-

¹³ Of the two non-Italian governors, Tiberius Julius Alexander faced special antagonism as a renegade Jew. Gessius Florus, although probably of Italian descent, came from Clazomenae. Appointed because his wife was a friend of the empress Poppaea, he may have been prejudiced against Jews by his experience of the large and powerful Jewish communities in Asia Minor, cf. Smallwood, *Jews*, p. 272.

¹⁴ On the treaty and its lapse, see Smallwood, *Jews*, p. 11; E. R. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, 2 vols. (Berkeley and London, 1984) II, pp. 745–51; see also A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Foreign Policy in the East: 168 B.C. to A.D. 1* (London, 1984), pp. 70–9, who argues against any formal treaty between Rome and Judaea before the time of Hyrcanus.

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lee. Crassus in 55 B.C. robbed gold from the Temple treasury to pay for his Parthian campaign. Perhaps in response to Crassus' disastrous defeat and death, the Jews under a certain Pitholaus rose in revolt against Rome in Galilee; C. Cassius Longinus, Crassus' quaestor and the future liberator of the Roman people from Julius Caesar, suppressed the uprising and sold thousands of Jews into slavery. Jewish support for Caesar against the hated Pompey in the civil war from 49 B.C. was rewarded with somewhat more favourable treatment, recorded in detail, for apologetic purposes, by Josephus (*A.J.* 14.190–222). But Caesar's death brought Cassius again to the East and Roman oppression to something of a peak: the inhabitants of four small towns were sold as slaves to raise cash for the civil war against Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavian. It was hardly surprising that a Parthian invasion of Palestine in 40 B.C., with the establishment of a Hasmonaean king in Jerusalem under their protection, was greeted with enthusiasm by the Jews; nor that this Hasmonaean's removal in 37 B.C. by the Roman governor of Syria and, after yet another bloody siege of the capital city, the installation as a puppet-king of the half-Jew Herod, were deeply resented. At least on this occasion the Roman general, out of deference to Herod, forbore from desecrating the Temple and called off his troops before all the riches of Jerusalem were plundered. Yet he too carried off thousands to Rome in slavery and celebrated a triumph for his victory.¹⁵

All these things of course took place over a century before the outbreak of revolt in A.D. 66. But memories were long, as the hatred of Pompey testifies, and more recent cause for grievance could be found for those inclined to look. Taxation was, or felt, excessive under the procurators' rule: it is debated whether taxes were heavier after A.D. 6 than they had been under Herod, but Tacitus records a complaint against the tax burden in A.D. 17 (*Ann.* 2.42). There was, moreover, a general increase in Roman exactions throughout the empire under Nero, and an extraordinary levy of taxes in Judaea under the procurator Albinus in the early sixties A.D.¹⁶ The whole notion of efficient Roman taxation ruthlessly exacted was anyway deeply objectionable: the Jews who caused unrest when the first

¹⁵ For a detailed account of all of this, see Smallwood, *Jews*, pp. 1–59.

¹⁶ For the debate on the weight of Roman compared to Herodian taxation, see Rajak, *Josephus*, p. 122. For the increased pressure on taxpayers under Nero, see *ibid.* pp. 125–6. On Albinus, see R. A. Horsley, 'Ancient Jewish banditry and the revolt against Rome, A.D. 66–70', *CBQ* 43 (1981) 419–20. A sales tax on agricultural produce was also consistently unpopular, cf. *A.J.* 18.90.