

THE LONG SHADOW OF ROME

The immediate effect of Rome's intervention in Palestine was to reduce the Jewish kingdom (Judea) to little more than a rump state. It was made dependent on the Roman governor of Syria and had to pay a heavy tribute. Hyrcanus II was allowed to continue as high priest and civil head of state, but he lost all those territories won by the Hasmoneans where the Jews did not form the majority of the population, viz. the whole coastal plain, most of Samaria, the Decapolis, which included Scythopolis (Bethshan) west of Jordan. All that was left to Hyrcanus was Judea (including Idumea), Perea, the stretch beyond Jordan from south of Pella to the Dead Sea, and most of Galilee, which was, however, isolated territorially from the south.

From many points of view the Jew had much to gain. Religiously his territory had lost most of its heathen and sectarian (Samaritan) inhabitants, and so Judaism could have developed without much fear of heathen corruption. Then there was peace for the first time since 168, if we ignore the nine years of Alexandra Salome's reign. The heavy tribute to Rome—Josephus says above ten thousand talents “in a little time”—must have been far less than the cost of incessant warfare and the upkeep of an extravagant court.

Longer term implications showed themselves more slowly. Persia's conquests under Cyrus and Cambyses enlarged the geographical area forming the background of the Jews and of Biblical history, but did not fragment it. The same is true of Alexander's conquests. Even the frequent wars between the Ptolemies and Seleucids do not seem to have had much effect on Jewish unity. Indeed, these wars in large measure had much of the nature of civil war. The position changed drastically with the Roman take-over of the Seleucid empire, or rather of the remains of it in Syria, for the eastern portion had fallen into the hands of the Parthians, who became Rome's main enemy in the East. Not until the third century A.D., apart from a brief interlude in A.D. 115–117, was Rome able to push its frontier east of the Euphrates and to incorporate Mesopotamia into its empire. This meant that Judea was separated from the Eastern diaspora by a hostile frontier, and this, in turn, greatly increased the importance of the Western diaspora.

The tension between Rome and the Parthians largely cut the age-old trade routes of the Near East and so strengthened the magnetic pull of the city of Rome. Though the saying “all roads lead to Rome” and its earlier formulations do not seem to have a Roman origin, they express a historical fact. Throughout the Roman empire old trade routes, unless they served the commerce of Rome, became secondary. Hence under the shadow of Rome Palestine became a dead

end, for the traffic between Egypt and Mesopotamia had lost much of its importance. That is the main reason why Rome treated Judea as it did other isolated areas and allowed it to be ruled by nationals whom it could trust. Hence it never experienced the advantages of the best Roman rule; when finally it had to come under direct rule, those employed were generally third-rate material, interested mainly in self-enrichment.

The Rise of Antipater

We cannot identify with certainty the circles that had sent a deputation to Pompey in 63 B.C. asking for the same position under Rome as they had enjoyed under Persia and the Greeks before the Hasmoneans came to power. Presumably they represented the more important priests and elders and some of the wiser Pharisees; it is not impossible that Qumran also had its delegates. They were prepared to surrender all political freedom provided they had complete religious freedom and autonomy. They had learnt in one way or another through the fiasco of the Hasmoneans that political freedom was not to be won by man's wisdom and strength. The bulk of the people, however, regarded the Hasmonean dynasty with almost as much veneration as their ancestors had the Davidic kings, and they were prepared to die for it. Though they recognized Hyrcanus II as legitimate ruler and high priest, they could not help realizing that he was little more than a puppet of the Romans, and that Antipater exercised the real power in their interest.

In 57 B.C. Alexander, son of Aristobulus II, raised a revolt without much success. The result was that Hyrcanus was deprived of civil power, and the country was divided into five districts governed by "an aristocracy" (Josephus, *War I. viii. 5*). The next year Aristobulus and his other son Antigonus escaped from Rome and raised a revolt, which was quickly suppressed. In 55 B.C. Alexander, encouraged by the absence of the Roman legate, had another try, which was equally unsuccessful. The defeat and death of Crassus at Carrhae at the hands of the Parthians in 53 B.C. led to a revolt by a military leader who had espoused Aristobulus' cause, but again it was quickly suppressed. According to Josephus' estimate the number of men killed and enslaved must have exceeded 50,000, to say nothing of the losses among the Jews serving Hyrcanus and the Romans.

Throughout this troubled time one man stood unwaveringly on the side of the Romans. Antipater did all he could to help them, both in their general campaigns and in their suppression of the revolts in Judea. He may have been motivated by his knowledge that only under Hyrcanus could he hope for power and position, but there can be little doubt that he recognized, as did Josephus a little more than a century later, that Rome was bound to triumph. It might not be very interested in what might happen in Judea, but it could not afford to risk the Parthians gaining a foot-hold there.

When civil war broke out between Julius Caesar and Pompey in 49 B.C., Antipater first aided Pompey, whose generals were in control in Syria, but after Pompey's decisive defeat at Pharsalus, he threw all his weight on Caesar's side. When Caesar found himself in difficulties in Egypt, Antipater's help was

of great value to him. All this had been done in Hyrcanus' name, so he was confirmed in the high-priesthood and given the title of Ethnarch, one step below King. Permission was given for the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem. Taxes were remitted, religious freedom confirmed, in matters concerning Jews alone they were to be judged by their own courts, they were freed from military service and Roman troops were withdrawn. Jewish territory in the coastal plain and Galilee was increased, and the port of Joppa was returned under special terms. Even the tribute for Joppa was remitted in the Sabbatical year. Wide-reaching privileges were given to Jews in the diaspora, who were put officially under the protection of the high priest. Perhaps most important for the future was that Judaism became a *religio licita*, which enabled the Synagogue to spread to the extent we find in the New Testament. Details of Caesar's decrees are given by Josephus (*Ant.* XIV. x. 2-8), though the text is generally held to be in poor condition.

The use of the term *religio licita* in such a context is strictly speaking an anachronism.* What Caesar did was to arrange for "the senate to exempt synagogues from a general ban on associations".† He also confirmed the freedom of worship and the autonomy of Jewish communities in Phoenicia and Asia Minor. This helps to explain why Paul always tried to make his first public appearance in the synagogue of the towns he visited.

We need not wonder that the Jews mourned Caesar's death as greatly as they had rejoiced over Pompey's, which they regarded as God's judgment on him for having entered the Temple.

It is not easy to give the reasons why the Jews should receive such favoured treatment. They were never liked by the Romans who may in part have been merely continuing a situation they found in existence. More likely Caesar realized that in their dispersion the Jews formed an alien element, which would not so easily take the side of their neighbours, should they rebel.

Antipater's reward was that he was made procurator of Judea and a Roman citizen, and was relieved of taxation. Julius Caesar had realized that Hyrcanus was merely an indolent, weak and largely unwilling figurehead, and that Antipater was Rome's best and most trustworthy friend. While Judea had not reverted to its status under Simon the Hasmonean of *socius*, i.e. ally of Rome, it was free of taxation by Rome, while it had the right to impose its own.

While Judea could not have avoided being involved in the turmoil that shook the Roman world after the assassination of Julius Caesar, it could have enjoyed relative quiet and prosperity with a far wider territory and greater degree of self-government than it had ever had under the Persians. As already pointed out Rome had no real interest in involving itself in Jewish affairs or in annexing the country. It is now that we see the first indubitable signs of the madness that was to destroy the Jewish state in less than four generations.

The hatred of Antipater by his Jewish contemporaries is not easy to understand fully. Even if his father had been an Edomite who had accepted Judaism in the time of John Hyrcanus (as we saw, this cannot be proved), Antipater, the

* S. Benko & J. J. O'Rourke, *Early Church History*, p. 256.

† Michael Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World*, p. 58.

son of a Jewish mother, ranked as a Jew without question, except perhaps among the Sadducees. It seems far more likely that the stress on his alleged Edomite origin was merely a motivation for something deeper.

Sadducean hatred is easy enough to understand. Hyrcanus was the champion, at least in name, of the Pharisees, and it was Antipater's refusal to acquiesce in Aristobulus' usurpation of power that had prevented the Sadducees from resuming the exercise of religious power they had enjoyed from the later years of John Hyrcanus to the reign of Alexandra Salome. But what are we to say of the popular attitude supported by many of the Pharisees?

Here Antipater was doubtless in part to blame, for he ceased to hide adequately behind Hyrcanus. Once he had been made procurator he immediately appointed Phasael, his eldest son, governor of Jerusalem, and Herod, his second, governor of Galilee. According to Josephus (*Ant.* XIV. ix. 2) he was only fifteen at the time, but since, when he died about forty-five years later, Josephus claims that he was about seventy (*Ant.* XVII. vi. 1), almost all historians amend the text to twenty-five. Even so it was clear that his appointment was not on merit but intended to strengthen the position of Antipater and his family. This increased the opposition of the rich aristocrats.

Trouble in Galilee

Herod soon ran into deep trouble in Galilee, and indeed from this time on the chief centre of Jewish disaffection was to be found here, though obviously its influence was felt in Judea as well and reached out far into the diaspora. There were two main reasons for this. Unlike the bulk of the inhabitants of Judea, who had known "the yoke of the Law" from the time of Ezra, if not before, most Galileans had taken it upon themselves only about half a century earlier in the time of Aristobulus I. To the ordinary man the idea of nationalism, of being a member of God's chosen people, appealed far more strongly than the Pharisaic careful and minute adherence to the details of the Torah. So even during the first century A.D. Pharisaic influence in the Galilean synagogues was relatively weak, cf. p. 96. The maintaining of the national freedom, which the Hasmoneans had won at such a cost, became a holy duty for many of the Galileans. It could be suggested that they had also had less opportunity of being disgusted by the realities of national freedom as displayed in Jerusalem.

There was perhaps ultimately a deeper reason. There is ample evidence that when Aristobulus conquered Galilee much of the land passed into the possession of large estate owners from Jerusalem and Judea, who squeezed out as much as possible as absentee landlords, a situation mirrored in a number of Christ's parables. As a result the general level of prosperity was much lower than in the South, the number of landless and workless very much higher, cf. the parable of the labourers (*Matt.* 20: 1-16). In the final struggle against Rome in A.D. 66-70 one of the Galilean leaders John of Gischala would have been called a revolutionary left winger today, though he did not go so far as Simon bar Giora, who was probably a Judean.

A careful reading of the New Testament would suggest that the majority of cases of demon-possession among Jews which are recorded were in Galilee.

This would suggest the extreme tension and misery that existed there.

When Herod came to Galilee, he found that a large band of "robbers" under a leader called Hezekiah was terrorizing not merely Jewish Galilee but also the adjacent Syrian areas. By vigorous measures Herod succeeded in capturing him and many members of his band. He had them all executed. Josephus (*Ant. XIV. ix. 2-5, War I. x. 6, 7*) tells us that this gained not only the gratitude of the Syrians but also of Sextus Caesar, the governor of Syria. But "the chief men among the Jews" urged Hyrcanus to call Herod to account, for he "has transgressed our law, which has forbidden to slay any man, even though he were a wicked man, unless he had been first condemned to suffer death by the sanhedrin". The mothers of those who had been executed "continued every day in the temple, persuading the king and the people that Herod might undergo trial before the sanhedrin for what he had done". Hyrcanus felt compelled to comply.

It should be obvious that Hezekiah was no ordinary brigand, and that the inability of the Romans to deal with him satisfactorily was due to his enjoying the sympathy of the local Jewish inhabitants. Even to hit at Antipater through his son the aristocrats of Jerusalem would hardly have taken up the cudgels for ordinary bandits. The fact is that Josephus, who was a great upholder of law and order, regarded religious terrorists as brigands and robbers, cf. the story in *Ant. XIV. xv. 5*. Zeitlin expresses it succinctly: "Galilee at the time of Herod's governorship bordered on Syria, and claimed that many cities on the border rightfully belonged to her. A man named Ezekias, with a group of other Judean patriots, overran the cities, seeking to restore them to Judea. The Romans, who had established the boundaries in the area, looked upon these men as bandits".*

Here we discover that the Hasmoneans had started a fire that could not be quenched. There were many who believed that while a Jew might go and live in the diaspora under heathen rule, if he wished, the soil of Israel was holy, and heathen rule there an abomination. At all costs the foreigner and the Quisling had to be driven out. They were men who had entirely failed to learn the lessons of the exile and, indeed, of the centuries of Persian rule. We have already seen that it is not by chance that we first meet them in Galilee.

This national fanaticism was increased by the effects of poverty. In the hundred and twenty years that had passed between the beginnings of the Hasmonean revolt and Julius Caesar's confirmation of Hyrcanus in religious and civil power the land had been bled white of its best manhood. It had been repeatedly ravaged, and taxes, tribute and bribes had removed its riches. Judea had suffered heavily but the position in Galilee was even worse. Such a combination of religious enthusiasm and grinding poverty normally creates an explosive mixture. Had the Jews been successful in the Great Revolt from Rome, it would almost certainly have brought a major upheaval in society with it.

Let us return, however, to Herod. He realized that the summons to appear before the Sanhedrin was serious. He had Sextus Caesar send a letter to Hyrcanus, who was *ex officio* the presiding judge of the Sanhedrin, demanding that

* *The Rise and Fall of the Judaean State*, Vol. 1, p. 372.

he acquit Herod. On his father's advice Herod returned to Jerusalem with a strong body of armed men. On the day of the trial he entered the court in military dress, surrounded by a bodyguard.

By Jewish law Herod was not liable to the death penalty, for he had not personally killed the men. At first it looked as though his show of force would silence the members of the court, but Shemaiah, "a righteous man", demanded the death penalty, warning the court that Herod would execute its members, when power fell into his hands. (Josephus tells us that this forecast was actually fulfilled for all but Shemaiah, whom Herod respected because of his courage). The court would probably have followed his advice, had not Hyrcanus postponed the case, probably on the grounds that the sentence could not be given on the day of the trial.

Herod hastened back to Sextus Caesar, who made him governor of Coele-Syria and apparently of Samaria also, thus making him one of the most powerful men in the area. He marched on Jerusalem to exact vengeance, and it needed the arguments of Antipater and Phasaël to make him desist.

Antigonus

The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. threw the Roman Empire into a period of chaos, which did not come to an end until 31 B.C., when Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra at Actium; Judea was inevitably involved, the more so as the Parthians tried to take advantage of the confusion.

First Cassius and then Antony extorted huge sums of money from the country. A friend of Hyrcanus, Malichus, hoped to replace Antipater as the power behind the throne and so had him poisoned—so most probable rumour had it—in 43 B.C., but Phasaël and Herod simply took over their father's place. In 41 B.C. Antony even appointed them joint tetrarchs, which meant that Hyrcanus lost even the shadow of political power. Unfortunately for the Jews Antigonus, the surviving son of Aristobulus II, was standing in the shadows waiting.

When Cassius left Syria in 42 B.C. to meet his end at Philippi, Antigonus tried to win the throne with the help of his brother-in-law, the king of Chalcis, and of the governor of Tyre, but Herod had no difficulty in defeating him. Thanks to Antony's involvement with Cleopatra, the Parthians were able briefly to occupy Syria. Antigonus used their presence to make himself king and high priest in Jerusalem.

It is most doubtful whether he ever had any chance of regaining his father's throne, but his inability to read the situation brought him ruin and death. The Romans might have thrown over the sons of Antipater, had they been convinced that some other Jew would rule the land more efficiently. But for a man who had brought in their worst enemy, the Parthians, there could be neither mercy nor compromise.

Antigonus seized Hyrcanus and Phasaël by treachery, but Herod, being suspicious, was able to save his life by flight. Phasaël committed suicide in prison. Antigonus mutilated his uncle Hyrcanus, so that he could no longer function as high priest, cf. Lev. 21: 17-21; he either "bit off his ears with his own teeth"

(*War* I. xiii. 9), or "he cut off his ears" (*Ant.* XIV. xiii. 10). Even if we query Josephus' former version, the very fact that it existed shows the reputation Antigonus had among his contemporaries.

After considerable vicissitudes Herod reached Rome, where he was welcomed by Antony and Octavian; they caused him to be declared king of the Jews by the Senate. Since he was already engaged to Mariamne, granddaughter of both Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, this gave him some claim to the throne, though less than Aristobulus III, Mariamne's young brother. It will depend largely on our estimate of his character, whether we believe that this was his goal all along, or whether, as Josephus says, he was hoping that the crown would be given to his brother-in-law, in which case he would have played the same role as Antipater had under Hyrcanus, the more so as Aristobulus was far too young to be an efficient ruler. Josephus' statements about Herod are hard to evaluate. Sometimes he is simply repeating the statements of Nicolas of Damascus, Herod's court historian. At other times he is torn between loathing and admiration. In a case like this he is likely to be giving the facts.

It took Herod three years to win what the Romans had given him. Finally, besieged in the citadel of Jerusalem, with his kingdom ruined, Antigonus fell at the feet of Sosius, the Roman general helping Herod, and begged for mercy. He did not yield to Herod because he knew that his hands were stained with Phasael's blood and so he could expect no mercy. Sosius called him Antigone, a coward and a woman, and took him in chains to Antony in Antioch. Josephus tells us that Herod bribed Antony to put him to death. Since, however, Dio Cassius tells us that Antony had Antigonus scourged while bound to a cross, a punishment "which no other king had suffered at the hands of the Romans", before having him beheaded, Zeitlin may well be right when he says, "The inhuman punishment expressed Antony's scorn, not only for Antigonus the king, but towards the Judaeans and their religion, of which Antigonus was high priest."* It may be true that Herod had bribed Antony, but it is probable that the money was not needed. The Romans knew that a warning and example to the petty rulers along their eastern frontier was needed, in case others also might be tempted to have dealings with the Parthians.

Aristobulus III and Mariamne were to play their part in Herod's domestic troubles along with their mother Alexandra, Hyrcanus' daughter, but the death of Antigonus meant the effective end of the house of Hasmon. It had brought forth deliverers for Israel, whose name should be held in honour, but power had corrupted it, and in its corruption it corrupted Israel also. For those who had eyes to see, none could now lead Israel into the paths of peace apart from the Messianic King from the house of David, but the sight of Israel was so corrupted that few recognized Him when He came.

* *op. cit.*, p. 411.