

Revolutionaries in the First Century

Kent P. Jackson

Zealots, terrorists, freedom-fighters, bandits, revolutionaries—who were those people whose zeal for religion, for power, or for freedom motivated them to take on the Roman Empire, the greatest force in the ancient world, and believe that they could win? Because the books of Flavius Josephus are the only source for most of our understanding of the participants in the First Jewish Revolt, we are necessarily dependent on Josephus for the answers to this question.¹ His writings will be our guide as we examine the groups and individuals involved in the Jewish rebellion.²

In some popular literature today, all the revolutionaries who participated in the rebellion and war against the Romans are lumped together under the title *Zealots*. Although this use of the term *Zealots* is widespread, it is an erroneous identification. Josephus discusses five distinct groups of revolutionaries and applies the name *Zealots* to only one of them.³ From his writings, we can see that each of the five groups had independent origins, objectives, and histories. In some instances, they shared common beliefs and even worked together. But more often they are described as independent and motivated by different goals. They were frequently at odds—and even at war—with each other. The five groups were the Sicarii, the Zealots, John of Gischala and his followers, the Idumean militia, and Simon bar Giora and his followers.

The revolt against Rome broke out in the summer of A.D. 66 when lower priests, in defiance of the high priests, ceased the sacrifices that had been offered at the temple in behalf of the Roman emperor.⁴ A civil war erupted in Jerusalem for control of the Jewish state. Those lower priests, joined by many from the disgruntled

urban populace and others from the countryside, fought against the national leadership—the high priests and their confederates—who governed the land as clients of Rome. The rebels initially seized the temple and the lower city while the government remained in control of the upper city. Eventually, the rebels were able to remove the government from power and take control. Afterwards, they slaughtered the Roman garrison, even though they had promised the soldiers safe passage out of the city.⁵

In response to those overt acts of rebellion against Rome, the governor in Syria, Cestius Gallus, marched to Jerusalem with an army in October 66. After a short siege, he abandoned his design to retake the city. As he retreated, the rebels attacked his forces, driving them out of the country and seizing large quantities of weapons and supplies. This decisive victory seems to have been what the rebels needed to gain popular support for their cause. Most of the Jews, both in Jerusalem and throughout the country, now favored revolution and joined the effort. Even the high priests and the traditional leadership supported the rebellion. A new provisional government was established with the high priest, Ananus, at its head. The traditional rulers were once again in power, this time to guide the revolution against Rome.⁶

The Sicarii

Josephus, strongly critical of those who participated in the civil wars and the revolt against Rome, reports that the revolutionaries were involved in “every kind of wickedness”—to the point that no one could imagine a vice that they had not tried. “First to begin this lawlessness and this barbarity” were those who belonged to the group called the Sicarii.⁷

The Sicarii were led by a man named Menahem and other descendants of Judas of Galilee, who had incited rebellion against Rome in A.D. 6. They were motivated theologically by Judas’s belief that Jews should acknowledge no overlord but God.⁸ Putting that philosophy into practice, the Sicarii received their name from the *sica*, a dagger that they employed in the murder of fellow Jews—hence the name *Sicarii*, or “dagger-men.”⁹ In the fifties and sixties, these terrorists used assassination as a political

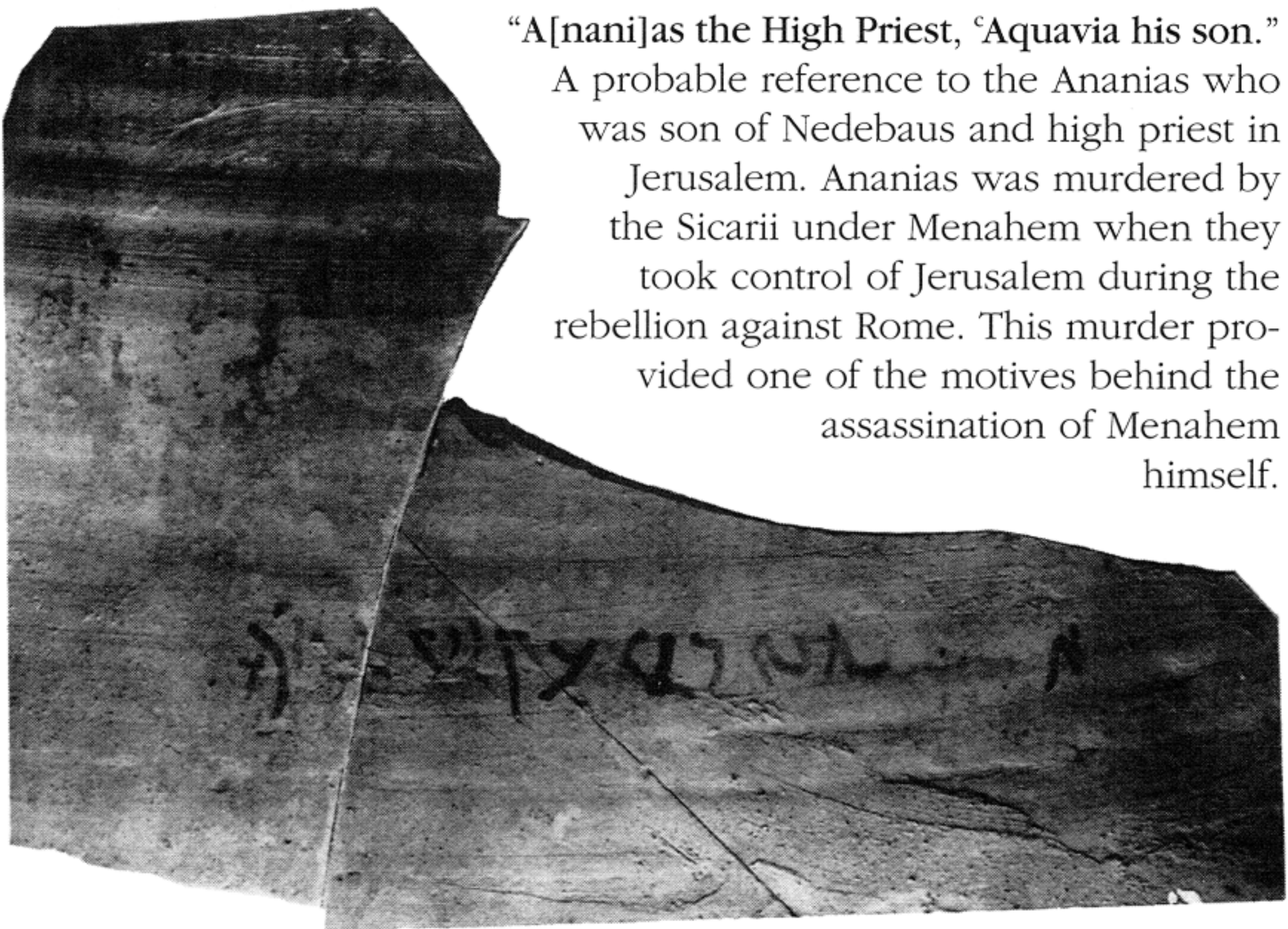
tool to spread discontent against the Roman occupation and to incite the people to revolution.

In 66, near the time when the revolution against the high priest's government broke out, Menahem and his followers captured Masada from the Romans. They killed the small garrison of Roman troops there and took possession of the supplies and armaments that Herod, and later the Romans, had stockpiled.¹⁰ Some of the Sicarii stole into Jerusalem and fought with the revolutionaries against the Jewish government, enabling the revolutionaries to prevail.¹¹ Menahem arrived in Jerusalem and for a time took control of the revolutionary efforts, waging war against wealthy Jews and continuing the work of political assassination. When Menahem entered the temple dressed in the clothing of a king, the other revolutionaries wanted no part of him, so they killed him. His followers were then driven out of Jerusalem and forced to retreat to their stronghold at Masada, where they stayed for the duration of the war.¹²

While the Sicarii were at Masada, they did not participate in the defense of Jerusalem or assist other Jews in the war against Rome. Josephus tells us that they instead raided and plundered

"A[nani]as the High Priest, 'Aquavia his son."

A probable reference to the Ananias who was son of Nedebaus and high priest in Jerusalem. Ananias was murdered by the Sicarii under Menahem when they took control of Jerusalem during the rebellion against Rome. This murder provided one of the motives behind the assassination of Menahem himself.



Jewish villages in the countryside, taking the spoils to Masada.¹³ After Jerusalem had fallen and the war was over, the Roman clean-up operation brought the army of the procurator, Flavius Silva, to Masada. Masada was militarily insignificant, but it had been a continuing source of terrorist activity. In a siege, the stronghold fell. Some Sicarii had already fled to Alexandria, where they continued their terrorism, mostly in the form of the assassination of highly placed Jews who were friendly toward Rome. In due time, the Jews in Egypt were able to eradicate them.¹⁴

After its destruction by the Romans, Masada lay virtually untouched until the twentieth century. Excavations there in the 1960s revealed the remarkable palaces and auxiliary buildings of its Herodian period. They also revealed evidence of the occupation by the Sicarii, as well as of the Roman siege.¹⁵ Sadly, however, Masada's history and the character of its inhabitants have been distorted since the late 1940s for modern political purposes. The terrorist assassins, who preyed on Jewish victims and who for the most part were feared and despised by their Jewish countrymen, were transformed into a national symbol of freedom. Fortunately, a clearer understanding of Masada and the Sicarii has prevailed and is becoming more widely known.¹⁶

The Zealots

Josephus is our source for the term *Zealot* in the context of the First Jewish Revolt. He uses the word in a few instances to mean "fanatic,"¹⁷ but he does not apply it to a revolutionary group or individual revolutionaries until 68, midway through the revolt. At that point, a group named Zealots was organized to contend for power against the provisional government in Jerusalem.

Josephus tells us that a man named Eleazar bar Simon, a priest, gained popularity among the citizens of Jerusalem during the time of the provisional government. Claiming that the rulers were traitors who sought reconciliation with Rome, in the winter of 67-68 he led a group of followers in a coup against the government and took control of the temple. This revolutionary group is the one that Josephus calls the Zealots.

The Zealots appear to have continued some of the aims of those who started the revolt in the summer of 66. Among their number were lower priests and revolutionaries from Jerusalem's lower classes. But most appear to have been from outside Jerusalem—refugees from Vespasian's conquests of the land and bandits from the countryside. The Zealot agenda was militantly religious and militantly nationalistic. It was also decidedly antiaristocratic. They chose their own high priest by lot to lead the state, a man whom Josephus characterizes as ignorant and totally unfit.¹⁸

From the temple, which served as their fortress, the Zealots preyed on their opponents in Jerusalem, imprisoning or killing many of the aristocracy and committing outrages against the people of the city, particularly those whom they suspected of anti-revolutionary sympathies. In his disdain for extremists, Josephus tells us that the Zealots were zealous not for anything good, but instead "for all that was vile—vile beyond belief."¹⁹ In their "utter lawlessness," "no one could equal the Zealots; . . . there was no crime in the records that they did not zealously reproduce."²⁰

Before long the people of Jerusalem grew tired of the Zealots' atrocities and laid siege to the temple to oust them. But, with the help of a revolutionary army from Idumea, Eleazar and his followers were able to break the siege and conquer all of Jerusalem. The city was looted and thousands were killed, including Ananus, the high priest, and others of his government. In due time, the Idumeans could no longer abide the Zealot terror, so they withdrew from the city. The Zealots stayed in Jerusalem and continued the purge against their enemies.²¹

The Zealots were engaged in constant civil war while they were in Jerusalem, fighting against Simon bar Giora, the Idumean militia, and John of Gischala. Eventually, however, they were persuaded to fight under John's command.²² As a result of this constant warfare and shifting loyalties, they gradually decreased in number. By the time of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, they were a fairly small group. Though they fought through the duration of the war against Rome, they did not play a major role. Josephus notes their final fate when the conquerors took Jerusalem: "Each of them found a fitting end, God sentencing them all to the penalty they

deserved. Every torment mankind can endure fell upon them to the very end of their lives. . . . Yet it would be true to say that they suffered less misery than they had caused: to suffer what they deserved was impossible.”²³

John of Gischala

Josephus viewed John of Gischala as a rival, and thus our information about him must be viewed as containing some bias. Even so, John’s motives and actions in Josephus’s writings appear to be less extreme than those of either the Sicarii or the Zealots, although Josephus classifies him as worse. Unlike the Sicarii and the Zealots, John seems not to have been motivated by religious zeal. Instead, at least in Josephus’s description, personal ambition seems to be what drove John. Still, it is clear that he was fiercely nationalistic and believed that God would vindicate the Jews’ cause.²⁴

John led a revolutionary bandit army in Galilee at the time Josephus was trying to consolidate his own position as commander of the Jewish forces there. When the provisional government in Jerusalem sided with Josephus, John withdrew to Gischala, his hometown, until the Romans took that city. John and his followers fled to Jerusalem, where they were welcomed as needed reinforcements. Soon they became embroiled in the politics of the city.²⁵

John sided with the provisional government of the high priest Ananus. When the Zealots broke from the government and tried to take over the city, John professed outward loyalty to the government but secretly conspired with the Zealots to overthrow it. John and the Zealots conquered Jerusalem, and John’s Galilean soldiers joined the Zealots in the killing and looting. When Simon bar Giora entered the city to remove John and his Zealot allies, John broke with the Zealots, defeated them in battle, and soon took control of them.²⁶

During the siege of Jerusalem, the Zealots fought under John’s command against the Romans. When the city fell, John was taken by Titus to Rome, where he was sentenced to imprisonment for life for his participation in the revolt.²⁷ Josephus’s summation is that John, who had a “morbid craving for a fight,”²⁸ was more wicked than even the Sicarii and “subjected his country to countless woes.”²⁹

The Idumean Militia

Idumea was the territory south of Judea and west of the Dead Sea that included the southern half of the Judean Hills. Since the Babylonian exile, it had been inhabited by a combination of Edomites, Arabs, Jews, and others. Conquered by John Hyrcanus in 129 B.C., Idumea's non-Jewish population converted to Judaism, and the territory was added to the Hasmonean kingdom.³⁰ Beginning in A.D. 6, Idumea was part of the Roman province of Judea.³¹

By the time of the First Jewish Revolt, the Idumeans were thoroughly Judaized and zealous for the independence of the Jewish state. In Josephus's writings, they are characterized as fiercely nationalistic and ready to fight against any foe who promoted appeasement with Rome. That characteristic made them important contributors to the war effort, but it also made them susceptible to extremism.

In the winter of 68, the Zealots were confined in their temple fortress in Jerusalem and were under siege from the government and the populace of the city. They appealed to the Idumean militia for help by telling them that the high priests and the government were traitors who wanted to surrender Jerusalem to Rome. Believing that the Zealots were the true "champions of liberty,"³² the Idumeans came to their assistance and liberated them.³³ "We Idumaeans will defend the House of God and fight for our common country," said one of their leaders, "firmly resisting both the enemy from without and the traitors within."³⁴ They then joined the Zealots in the looting and killing that followed their victory. Josephus tells us that it was the Idumeans who killed Ananus, the high priest.³⁵

But the Idumeans soon became suspicious of the Zealots' objectives and disbelieved their claim that the high priests had intended to betray the city. So they abandoned the Zealots, liberated two thousand persons held in Zealot prisons, and left Jerusalem to ally themselves with Simon bar Giora.³⁶ Some of the Idumean militia remained in Jerusalem, first to become allies of John of Gischala and then to fight against him. Having come to Jerusalem to overthrow the high priests and the government, the Idumeans now joined them and invited Simon bar Giora into Jerusalem to remove the Zealots and John.³⁷ The Idumeans then

allied themselves with Simon and fought under his command for the rest of the war.³⁸

Simon bar Giora

As the social and economic order in Palestine began to unravel midway through the first century A.D., lawlessness became rampant and both the Romans and the Jewish central government began to lose control. Among other things, the fragmentation of society invited opportunists to gather followers and even to create small armies. Motivated more by personal ambition than by religious fervor, these militia groups were able to sustain themselves by acts of banditry and terrorism.³⁹

Simon bar Giora was the leader of a militia group prior to the outbreak of the war. Josephus first mentions him as attacking the retreating army of Cestius Gallus and capturing large quantities of Roman supplies.⁴⁰ Simon became successful conquering the countryside and taking booty from the wealthy. When Ananus sent out an army to capture him and end his banditry, Simon fled to Masada and sought temporary refuge with the Sicarii there. After Ananus's death and the fall of the provisional government, Simon left Masada and continued his conquests. He soon gained control of other areas, including Idumea.⁴¹

Simon presented himself as a champion of the lower classes, attacking the rich and proclaiming "liberty for slaves and rewards for the free."⁴² In his actions, some have seen messianic overtones.⁴³ As he gained territory and popularity, Simon attracted an ever-growing army of loyal followers, which now included freed slaves, the remnants of other bandit groups, and also "many respectable citizens who obeyed him like a king."⁴⁴ As upper-class persons fled from the Zealot terror, they flocked to Simon and sought his leadership to remove the Zealots and John of Gischala from their strongholds in Jerusalem. The Idumeans who had quit their alliance with the Zealots and left Jerusalem joined Simon and became a major part of his army from that point on. In the spring of 69, Idumeans still in the city, who were now at war against John and the Zealots, joined with the remnants of the provisional government and let Simon's forces into the city. There he was hailed as their "deliverer and protector" and "master of Jerusalem."⁴⁵

Simon set about to eradicate John and his Zealot allies so he could rule the nation by himself and lead the revolt against Rome. The civil war that ensued involved armies with thousands of men fighting in city streets. It lasted more than a year and even continued after the Roman siege began.⁴⁶ Simon gained the upper hand and controlled most of Jerusalem, but he was never able to dislodge his enemies. The toll of this conflict was extremely heavy, with thousands of civilian casualties and the deliberate destruction of most of the supplies that had been laid in store to sustain the city during the Roman siege.⁴⁷ As usual, both sides in the conflict terrorized the civilian population.⁴⁸ Josephus reports, "The entire City was the battleground for these plotters and their disreputable followers, and between them the people were being torn to bits like a great carcase. Old men and women, overwhelmed by the miseries within [the city], prayed for the Romans to come, and looked forward to the war without, which would free them from the miseries within."⁴⁹

As the Roman siege was underway, Simon and John belatedly suspended their civil war and fought to defend Jerusalem. Josephus characterizes Simon as a strong and decisive leader who ruled as a dictator. He commanded an army of fifteen thousand men, including ten thousand of his own troops and five thousand from the Idumean militia. John had six thousand of his own soldiers and over two thousand Zealot allies under his command.⁵⁰ When Jerusalem had fallen and the city was destroyed, Simon, dressed in white robes, came out from hiding and surrendered to the Romans.⁵¹ Viewing him as the leader of the Jews, the conquerors took him to Rome as the chief trophy in Titus's triumph. After the celebration, he was executed.⁵²

The Revolutionaries and the New Testament

Since Jesus and his earliest "zealous" followers lived in the generation that preceded the revolt against Rome, in order to avoid confusion it is appropriate to ask whether there are connections between them and the other revolutionary movements of the first century. The New Testament mentions a Galilean revolutionary named Judas (Acts 5:37), who presumably was the same who incited rebellion in A.D. 6 and whose descendants and followers

founded the Sicarii. But nothing of what we have seen regarding the revolutionaries and their actions during the Jewish War bears any resemblance to the teachings or actions of Jesus and the early Christians as depicted in the New Testament.

Both Judaism and Early Christianity had an appreciation for those who demonstrate zeal for righteous causes. Old Testament figures such as Phinehas (Num. 25:11) and Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:9–10) served as models for later believers by being “zealous” (*qn'*) in God’s cause. Thus it should not surprise us that Paul describes himself in his preconversion days as “exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers” (*zēlōtēs*; Gal. 1:14) and “zealous toward God” (*zēlōtēs*; Acts 22:3). One of Jesus’ twelve Apostles, named Simon, is surnamed *zēlōtēs*, “zealous,” in Luke (Luke 6:15; also Acts 1:13). In Matthew and Mark, Simon is surnamed *ho Kananaîos*, “the Canaanite” in the KJV (Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:18). The word *Kananaîos* actually transliterates the original Aramaic term *qan'ānā'*, “zealous.”⁵³ The text gives us no indication as to why Simon was called “zealous,” and there is no reason to believe that it had anything to do with revolutionary things, especially given the New Testament doctrine of submission to civil authority (see Luke 20:22–25; and Rom. 13:1–7). More likely, “zealous” characterizes his commitment to his calling as a servant of Christ.⁵⁴

Kent P. Jackson is Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

¹Josephus’s account of the First Jewish Revolt, including the events that led to it, is found in three sources: *Jewish Antiquities*, *The Jewish War*, and *Life of Josephus*. An accessible English translation of *The Jewish War* is G. A. Williamson, trans., *The Jewish War* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1980). English translations in this article will be from Williamson.

²Josephus’s work is of indispensable value for our knowledge of the war and of those involved in it. Yet most historians today recognize that his writing was not without bias and self-interest. He was a participant in the war and thus was contemporary with the events he describes and in several instances knew personally (and had strong feelings about) the principal characters. Since what we know about those persons comes from Josephus, ours is undoubtedly an incomplete

view of them. Two recent studies that have dealt responsibly with the historiographic issues are David M. Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution: 6-74 C.E.: A Political History Based on the Writings of Josephus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); and Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985).

³See Morton Smith, "Zealots and Sicarii: Their Origins and Relations," *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 1 (1971): 1-19; and Marc Borg, "The Currency of the Term 'Zealot,'" *Journal of Theological Studies* 22, no. 2 (1971): 504-12.

⁴Those sacrifices had been instituted in the days of Augustus and Tiberius as a compromise in lieu of sacrifices to the deified emperor that were offered elsewhere in the Roman world. See Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.197.

⁵Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.417-56.

⁶Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.499-565.

⁷Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.259-62; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 380-81.

⁸Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.118.

⁹Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.186.

¹⁰Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.408-9.

¹¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.425-32.

¹²Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.433-48. For more on Menahem's messianic aspirations, see Richard A. Horsley, "Menahem in Jerusalem: A Brief Messianic Episode among the Sicarii—Not 'Zealot Messianism,'" *Novum Testamentum* 27, no. 4 (1985): 334-48.

¹³Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.399-405.

¹⁴Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.407-19. For Sicarii terrorism in general, see Richard A. Horsley, "The Sicarii: Ancient Jewish 'Terrorists,'" *Journal of Religion* 59, no. 4 (1979): 435-58.

¹⁵Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966).

¹⁶For example, Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

¹⁷For example, Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.444, 564.

¹⁸Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.155; see also Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.130-61.

¹⁹Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.161; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 236.

²⁰Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.268-70; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 381.

²¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.193-235, 283-365.

²²Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.577-84.

²³Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.271-72; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 381. Horsley provides a detailed overview of the Zealots in Richard A. Horsley, "The Zealots: Their Origin, Relationships, and Importance in the Jewish Revolt," *Novum Testamentum* 28, no. 2 (1986): 159-92.

²⁴Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.99.

²⁵Josephus, *Life* 43-194, 304-8; Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.84-120.

²⁶Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.121-28, 208-32, 389-97; 5.98-105.

²⁷Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.278-79, 439-41; 6.15-110, 432-34.

²⁸Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.95.

²⁹Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.263. Josephus accuses John of various sacrilegious acts. Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.264. See Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution*, 134, and the references cited there.

- ³⁰Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.257-58, 395-96.
- ³¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 3.52-55.
- ³²Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.272.
- ³³Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.228-309.
- ³⁴Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.281; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 246.
- ³⁵Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.310-17, 326-44.
- ³⁶Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.345-53.
- ³⁷Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.566-76.
- ³⁸For example, Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.92.
- ³⁹See Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 48-87.
- ⁴⁰Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.521.
- ⁴¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.652-54; 4.503-37.
- ⁴²Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.508; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 264. See Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.652; 5.439-40.
- ⁴³See Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 119-27.
- ⁴⁴Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.509-10; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 264.
- ⁴⁵Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.575, 577; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 268. See Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.353, 566-76.
- ⁴⁶Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.255.
- ⁴⁷Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.21-26.
- ⁴⁸Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.27-35, 251, 439-41; see Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.1-38.
- ⁴⁹Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.27-28; Williamson, *Jewish War*, 278.
- ⁵⁰Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.248-50.
- ⁵¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.28-29.
- ⁵²Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.153-55.
- ⁵³See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 619; and John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35A: Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 271.
- ⁵⁴For an overview of the issues relevant to Jesus and revolutionary movements, see Edwin Yamauchi, "Christians and the Jewish Revolts against Rome," *Fides et Historia* 23, no. 2 (1991): 11-30.