

The Roman Province of Judea: A Historical Overview

John F. Hall

The Coming of Rome to Judea

Rome's acquisition of Judea and subsequent involvement in the affairs of that long-troubled area came about in largely indirect fashion. For centuries Judea had been under the control of the Hellenistic Greek monarchy centered in Syria and known as the Seleucid empire, one of the successor states to the far greater empire of Alexander the Great, who conquered the vast reaches of the Persian empire toward the end of the fourth century B.C. As the decaying Seleucid monarchy disintegrated, Rome was compelled to take control of the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean and its hinterland in order to prevent ambitious petty kings in the region—and more importantly a nascent Parthian empire—from filling the vacuum left with the fall of the Seleucids and so posing a threat to Rome's Mediterranean empire. As a part of this larger region and as a place once ruled by the Seleucids, Judea became a subject area of Rome.

Rome was not interested in Judea per se and for too long did not understand the problems unique to Judea which should have prevented the Romans from dealing with the Jews in the same way they did the other subject peoples in the eastern reaches of the empire. Similarly, the Jews made no effort to become acquainted with their Roman rulers, to whom they regrettably attributed the characteristics of their previous Greek masters, whose efforts to encourage Hellenization entailed a lack of religious toleration which threatened Jewish worship. By contrast, Rome was actually quite tolerant of the religions of all its subject peoples. This mutual misunderstanding of the nature of Judea by the Romans and of

Rome by the Jews clearly made more difficult the administration of Judea. However, by itself it cannot account for the tragic events in Judea, which derived less from any relation to Rome than from the vehement struggle among rival Jewish factions whose ambitions for power harmed their countrymen and ultimately brought an end to Judea as an entity.

In 63 B.C., the territory of Judea for the first time came under the direct administration of Rome. While Rome had been for nearly a century an important determinant in the affairs of this region, increased Roman supervision was the natural result of administrative inefficiency on the part of local dynasts and minor chieftains who governed portions of the Roman Near East as client kings. Local rivalries and ambitions among native rulers sometimes led to outright armed conflict among themselves and occasionally even with their Roman overlords. In the mid-first century B.C., such problems, both in Judea as well as throughout the eastern Mediterranean in general, occasioned a Roman reordering of the entire region.

When a challenge to Roman rule was made by Mithridates of Pontus, who sought to assert control over the whole of Asia minor, murdering Romans, Greeks, and many other local inhabitants in his path, Pompey the Great concluded the conflict with the expected Roman victory.¹ Afterward Pompey turned his attention to reorganizing administratively Rome's eastern holdings. In 63 B.C., Rome attached the territory of Judea to the newly created Roman province of Syria, where a high-ranking Roman governor of proconsular status would exercise ultimate authority over Judea along with Syria and other areas in the vicinity. The action was taken as part of Pompey's general settlement of the eastern Mediterranean and in response to specific disruptive conditions in Judea occasioned by the rivalries of Jewish noble families claiming the high priestly office and with it local rule.² Though not yet organized as a separate province, Roman Judea takes its beginning in these events.

Roman Administration in Judea

Roman interest and involvement in the administrative affairs of Judea actually predates Pompey's arrival. Rome had on several occasions, upon the repeated requests of Jewish rulers, intervened diplomatically to prevent the Seleucid monarchs of Syria from

reasserting their previous authority over Judea and had thereby preserved Judean independence under the rule of the high priest and Sanhedrin.³ Had it not been for rivalry among Jewish noble families vying with one another for the power to rule, Jewish independence may perhaps have continued. However, the chaotic conditions produced by such internal conflict threatened the peace of surrounding territories and mandated Roman intervention to maintain law and order not only in Judea, but throughout the immediate region.

Despite the administrative redistricting of Judea, little change, in fact, transpired as regards the actual day-to-day administration of Judea. In accordance with Roman policy for provincial administration, in Judea as in other provinces the continued influence of local leaders was maintained and as much local governance as possible was placed in their hands. The high priest and nobles continued to direct the internal affairs of Judea, no longer with independent authority, but subject to the oversight of a Roman proconsul in Antioch. However, Antioch was far distant, and as long as problems did not surface, direct Roman concern with the area would have been extremely minimal. Roman policy had long adhered to the perspective that local governance was the most convenient provided the status quo be maintained, including the preservation of law and order, the collection of assessed revenues, and the support of Roman foreign policy with the supply of troops when required.

Rome's major concerns for the provinces were to maintain a peace in which Roman trade and commerce could be conducted and Romans could come and go in safety. Taxes were collected to support the framework of government, including the army as guardians of internal security and providers of protection from the threats of foreign powers or barbaric enemies without the empire. Rome's attitude toward the administration of Judea differed not at all from that of Rome in regard to all its holdings.

Intervention in the domestic affairs of Judea was unavoidable for Pompey. Rivalry among Jewish factions interrupted order and prevented commerce. Moreover, the Jewish conflict threatened to spill over into neighboring areas also under Rome's control. Judea's latest internecine conflict was a struggle for succession between the two sons of Alexander Jannaeus. The rightful heir, Hyrcanus,

had been displaced by his brother Aristobulus, but, with the aid of the Idumean chieftain Antipater, Hyrcanus sought to reassert his rights militarily. Both claimants appealed to Rome for support in much the same way in which rival Jewish factions had appealed for centuries for aid or intervention, military and otherwise, from the Hellenistic monarchs of Seleucid Syria, Judea's ostensible enemies since the time of the Maccabees. In their eagerness for the support of their enemies, Jewish leaders had been willing to concede much. Such willingness extended to making whatever concessions were necessary for Roman support as well. The formal organization of Judea as a Roman territory, while a natural consequence of Rome's acquisition of Seleucid territories and organization of the province of Syria, was also a direct result of internal conflict between Jewish factions. Nevertheless, in establishing Hyrcanus as high priest to continue local administration subject to the direction of the Roman proconsular governor of Syria, standard Roman practice of preferring local government where possible was followed despite the factional rivalry within Judea. Rome obviously did not wish to become too directly involved in Judea.⁴

Hyrcanus did not rule as king, but as ethnarch, a far less important position and as high priest. Antipater continued to cultivate Rome and Roman involvement in the region, receiving in return the ruling power in his native Idumea. Antipater's position as a chief advisor to Hyrcanus and his other involvements in Judean affairs laid the foundation for ruling positions later granted by Roman overlords to himself and his sons Herod and Phasael, chief administrators for Galilee and Jerusalem respectively, so establishing Idumean rulers over Judea.⁵

Roman Affairs around Judea

While Pompey's settlement of Jewish affairs was in the main necessitated by internal happenings in Judea, subsequent Roman actions toward Judea were occasioned by larger events external to Judea. Invasions of Roman territory, including Judea, by a new Parthian kingdom in what had been the Mesopotamian reaches of the Seleucid empire and civil conflicts between Roman factions effected frequent change in the administration of Judea over the next

four decades.⁶ Ultimately Herod was established as client king of Rome in charge of an expanded Judea. The Hasmonean dynasty of the Maccabees, and with it a modicum of self-government by Judeans, was brought to an end with Herod's accession. Continued internal conflict among branches of the Hasmonean family and the intrigue with and appeal to Parthia for aid by the sons of Aristobulus was responsible for yet another Roman intervention and the fall of the Hasmonean dynasty.

The first of these interventions was directed by a lieutenant and supporter of Pompey, Aulus Gabinius, who succeeded Scaurus as governor of Syria. In 55 B.C., Gabinius was forced to intervene militarily to restore order in Judea, where Alexander, son of Aristobulus, had raised his supporters in revolt against the ethnarch Hyrcanus and his Idumean supporters, Antipater and his sons. Aristobulus himself escaped from Rome and joined his son's insurrection. Not only did Rome need to deal with the consequent civil disorder and interruption of commerce, but in this instance, the Roman response to the insurrection had to be especially swift and effective since Rome supported the established government of Hyrcanus. In addition, the rival faction sought to end that support through overthrowing Roman rule entirely by soliciting the military intervention of Parthia against Rome. Because such an act was considered treasonable and violated the most important Roman dictum for provincial noninvolvement in foreign affairs, direct and massive Roman military intervention was dictated. Gabinius and his lieutenant Marc Antony led Roman troops into Judea, defeated the revolutionaries, restored Hyrcanus to power, and increased the authority of Antipater and Herod, who had proven themselves as supporters of Rome. From this time on, Rome's interest in Judea increased and closer attention was paid to the area which bordered the important province of Syria, which was organized as a military province of the first rank and was the key to Roman control over the empire's entire eastern frontier. Thus, Judea comes to have a strategic if not an economic importance for Rome.⁷

The powerful Marcus Licinius Crassus, partner in Rome's "First Triumvirate" with Pompey and Julius Caesar, succeeded Gabinius as governor of Syria in 54 B.C. Eager to equal the military exploits of Pompey in the East and those of Caesar in Gaul, Crassus used

the excuse of Parthian intrigue in areas of the Roman eastern frontier, including Judea, as reason to initiate hostilities against the Parthians. Crassus suffered one of the greatest defeats of Roman arms at Carrhae in 53 B.C.⁸ With this Parthian victory, Roman concern increased over the affairs of her eastern territories, held in large part by only semiloyal client kings. Questions were raised in Rome over the wisdom of its policy regarding the involvement of provincial leaders in governing the provinces. No doubt, the disloyalty and intrigue of Jewish factions contributed to reassessment of the policy. However, Roman action against Parthia and reconsideration of its eastern provincial arrangements were delayed by the great civil war between Pompey and Caesar.

Caesar defeated Pompey at Pharsalus in 48 B.C., essentially ending the civil war, although with a small legionary force Caesar followed the fleeing Pompey to Ptolemaic Alexandria. Upon his arrival, Caesar was presented with Pompey's head by the teenage monarch Ptolemy XII, who was comonarch with his sister Cleopatra. Ptolemy had waged civil war against Cleopatra and driven her from Alexandria. Highly displeased that a leading Roman would be executed at the hand of Alexandrians, Caesar took Alexandria with his small force. He supported the returned Cleopatra, who became his mistress, and ultimately he placed her alone on Egypt's throne. Besieged by Ptolemy's army, Caesar required immediate aid in the form of troops from Rome's client rulers in surrounding territories. Hyrcanus and Antipater were fast to respond and accompanied Roman legions from Syria to effect the relief of Caesar at Alexandria. Their loyalty was well rewarded by Caesar, who increased the territory under Hyrcanus's control, confirmed Antipater as chief minister of Judea, and extended to him and his sons both Roman citizenship and the lucrative tax collection franchise for Judea. Moreover, as undisputed master of Rome, Caesar promulgated laws to protect the religious freedom of Jews throughout the empire, extending to the Jews an unprecedented grant of special privileges.⁹

The support of the Idumean royal family for Caesar not only laid the foundation for their own rule over Judea and other surrounding areas, but also had the added consequence of securing for the Jews as a group the grant of special privilege which protected Jews from Greek anti-Semitism. The privilege also secured

for the Jews special rights of religious worship even beyond those extended to all subject peoples of the empire as part of Rome's general tolerance of religion. Furthermore, Caesar's actions in effect restored the full authority of rule to Hyrcanus. If any necessity of reporting to Syria's governor lingered, it was surely ended in the events following Caesar's assassination with the establishment of Herod as Judean monarch.

Herod's Alliance with Rome

In the struggle for power after Caesar's death, Caesar's lieutenant Marc Antony and Caesar's nephew and adopted son, Octavian Caesar (the future Augustus), emerged as the two primary claimants of power in the Roman world. Antony, who had also served as Gabinius's lieutenant in the East and during his 55 B.C. expedition to Judea, made the eastern provinces his base of operations for the struggle with Octavian. Antony's liaison with Cleopatra is, of course, well known. However, for Judea, Antony's importance cannot be overestimated. For it was Antony who made Judea an independent client kingdom of Rome, ruled over by a king, Antipater's son Herod.

In 42 B.C., when Antony disposed of eastern problems and reassigned territories in the eastern part of the empire, delegations of Jews approached him, demanding the removal of Antipater's sons Herod and Phasael from power. The Idumean brothers reminded Antony of their family's services to Caesar and donated a substantial sum to Antony's war chest. In return they became the *de facto* regents for the aged Hyrcanus, showing respect to the old ethnarch, but, in fact, ruling with the titles of tetrarch.¹⁰

The occasion for Antony's reorganization of Judea entailed another attempt by yet another of Aristobulus's sons, Antigonus, to depose Hyrcanus and with him, the real powers in Judea, the Idumean tetrarchs. Antigonus was aided in his cause by an invading Parthian army which briefly seized control of Judea and areas of Syria before Antony's lieutenants drove the Parthians out of Roman territory. Herod escaped death at the hands of the Aristobulus faction and the Parthians by taking refuge in Idumea in his family's specially prepared stronghold on the heights of Masada.

He subsequently fled to Rome in 40 B.C., where Antony and Octavian agreed to bestow upon Herod the long-vacant title of king of Judea. It is surprising that that direct Roman rule in Judea was not opted for after so direct a challenge to Roman rule in Judea by a Jewish faction seeking their advancement over the faction in power—a challenge which even entailed a Parthian incursion. The fact that Roman control was instead actually loosened with the creation of a full-fledged semiautonomous client kingdom demonstrates Antony's adherence to the principle of local administration for provinces, as well as a definite lack of interest in Judea by comparison with more important areas. Antony's legate Sosius and Herod were entrusted with the responsibility of driving Parthians out of Judea and deposing Antigonus. By 37 B.C., the task was accomplished and Herod's long rule over Judea commenced.¹¹

Judea as a Client Kingdom of Rome

From 37 to Herod's death in 4 B.C. and into the brief reign of Herod's son Archelaus, which came to an end in A.D. 6, Judea was technically not a province of Rome, but rather a dependent client kingdom of Rome administered by Herod and Archelaus as client kings. The dependent kingdom was not unique to Judea but was a standard form of administration for areas under Roman control, particularly in the eastern reaches of the empire. Under this type of administration, Herod would have been subject not to a proconsul in Syria, but directly to the triumvirs Antony and Octavian and, after the establishment of the principate, directly to Augustus.¹²

During the early years of Herod's rule, civil war decided the contest for power between Antony and Octavian. Antony, in control of the eastern parts of Roman territory, enlisted the aid of the many client kings of the East in his struggle against Octavian. Herod chose to support Antony and contributed money and troops to Antony's cause. When Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra in 31 B.C. at Actium and later saw to their deaths in Egypt, Herod, as a loyal supporter of Antony, found himself in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the triumphant Octavian, soon to be elevated Augustus Caesar. Herod protested to Octavian that the loyalty he

had shown was far from criminal, but rather a quality to be sought in a client king. He persuaded Octavian that he would show him as ruler the same loyalty he had demonstrated toward Antony. Herod not only persuaded Octavian to permit him to retain his rule of Judea, but Octavian also added many surrounding territories to Herod's Judean realm, including those which in 63 B.C., Pompey had attached to Syria and other administrative units in the region. For the next twenty-seven years until his death, Herod remained a faithful client to Octavian, now Augustus Caesar, sending his grandson Herod Agrippa, named for Augustus's son-in-law and Herod's friend, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, to be raised in Augustus's own household. In Judea, Herod built the Samaritan city Sebaste (the Greek form of Augustus's name) in honor of the emperor, constructed a Roman amphitheater in Jerusalem dedicated to Augustus, and required all Jews to swear an oath of allegiance to Augustus, the implementation of which violated Jewish religious law. Moreover, Herod was in private, if not in public, a devotee of the emperor's cult.¹³ Needless to say, Herod worried about the ever-increasing antagonism many Jews harbored for him. To protect himself from the occasional anger of his Jewish subjects, the family fortress at Masada was strengthened and improved. In this manner, Herod kept the peace in Judea and served his Roman masters faithfully. Judea was a peaceful, if a poor and insignificant corner of the great empire. Its strategic importance declined as Parthian designs on Rome's eastern reaches retreated before the might of the well-governed realm of Augustus Caesar.¹⁴

Restabilizing Judea after Herod's Death

The stability of Judea as a Roman holding was disrupted at the death of Herod. The problems of factionalism, now not only among Jewish nobles, but also among religious sects and other Jewish ideological factions, reemerged as a source of conflict. Initially Augustus recognized as successors to Herod's fiefdom his declared heirs—his three surviving sons: Archelaus, ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and Philip, tetrarch of Iturea. None succeeded to the office of king, but occupied lesser posts. The now-divided regions of Herod's once

significant holdings again were officially subject to the Roman governor of Syria, as they had been before Herod. Archelaus maintained power in face of Jewish resistance only with the help of Augustus's legate in Syria, Publius Quintilius Varus. Finally, faced with chaotic conditions in Judea, as well as revolt and clamor from the Jews at Jerusalem, who preferred direct Roman government to rule by Archelaus, the unfortunate and ineffective ethnarch was stripped of his titles and exiled to Gaul. Archelaus's holdings were annexed as a province under the administrative oversight of the larger province of Syria in A.D. 6. This act constituted the formal organization of Judea as a Roman province. The new governor of Syria, the Augustan legate Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, sent as his local administrator for Judea one Coponius, who first occupied the office of Judean prefect.

Quirinus himself traveled south with the Roman legions of Syria to restore order in Judea and assure the position of Coponius. The level of Roman interest in Judea had not changed, but the civil disorder created by increased factionalism and Archelaus's inability to govern necessitated a response to the request of leading Jews for the order they rightly believed would accompany direct Roman administration. The establishment of orderly government in Judea was resisted at this time by Sicarii, who for the first time are noted as disruptors of order. They failed to offer a challenge to the disciplined troops of Rome, however, and Coponius's authority was established. The Jews at Jerusalem had the Roman government they had petitioned for.¹⁵

Roman Governors of Judea

The so-called office of Roman governor of Judea was very limited in authority by comparison to the Augustan legates. The legates were governors of major provinces, commanding a large legionary complement, by contrast to the individual cohorts or auxiliary troops which constituted the smaller and less professional military contingent for a place like Judea. The governor of Judea is identified inaccurately by some sources such as Josephus as the minor governor known as the procurator. In fact, his office was even less significant. Inscriptional evidence leaves no doubt

whatever that Pilate and other Judean governors held the position of *praefectus Iudaeae*. While the Roman administrator at Jerusalem was apparently in some fashion subject to the much-higher-ranking governor of Syria, within Judea he nevertheless exercised full civil and criminal jurisdictional powers. The permanent residence of the Roman prefect seems to have been at Caesarea on the coast, rather than at Jerusalem. His authority throughout the province was enforced by Roman troops—not a full legion, but several cohorts of Roman regulars, as well as non-Roman auxiliary troops in Rome's service. In Jerusalem a Roman cohort of six hundred men occupied the Fortress of Antonia, built by Herod adjacent to his temple and named in honor of Marc Antony. Herod's palace and citadel complex in the upper city was also held by a Roman garrison. The prefect's authority, prestige, and power base was sufficient for what Rome considered a small and insignificant province like Judea, at least until the time of the Jewish rebellion. It is important to recognize that Judea was not considered an important province; it had a governor of rather low rank and status. The governor's office would not be filled by the most capable or important Romans; and the lack of prestige or ability on the part of its governors may have ultimately affected adversely the administration of the province.¹⁶

Roman sources, both literary and epigraphic, as well as the writings of Josephus provide us with a good record of the Roman rulers over Judea. Fourteen prefects of Judea served between A.D. 6 and the outbreak of the Jewish War in the year 66. They were not men otherwise known for accomplishments at Rome. Three are mentioned in the account of the New Testament: Pilate, who served as governor from 26 to 36; Felix, who served from 52 to 59; and Festus, who governed from 60 to 62. Of the province's Roman administrators, Valerius (15–26) and Pilate served for far longer terms than other governors who could expect a tenure of only a few years. The longer tenure in office of Valerius and Pilate probably had less to do with the quality of their service and more to do with their service transpiring during the period when Tiberius was emperor. It was a general practice of Tiberius to leave governors in office for long periods of time throughout all the provinces of the empire. The tenure of Roman governors in Judea was briefly

interrupted from 41 to 44, when the emperor Claudius rewarded his boyhood friend, Herod's grandson Herod Agrippa, with the restoration of Herod's kingdom, including not only Judea, Samaria, and surrounding areas once ruled by Herod, but also adding to it additional new lands. The very act of ending the existence of a Roman province, which at that time Judea had been for thirty-five years, and reverting its territory into a client kingdom was extraordinary, but to take additional lands from other Roman holdings to add to the restored client kingdom speaks to both the confidence and affection which Claudius possessed for Herod Agrippa.¹⁷

Benefits of Roman Rule

Once direct Roman government had been established in Judea in A.D. 6, the province benefited not only in terms of freedom from the internal civil conflict and dissatisfactions which had marked its history for centuries, but also came to enjoy a new prosperity which strengthened the allegiance to Rome of at least those who most reaped the wealth deriving from the improved economy.¹⁸ There were no popular revolts of the sort which had threatened the reign of Herod and brought to an end the rule of Archelaus. Roman demands on Judea were not particularly heavy, certainly no heavier than those placed on other provinces. Little change would have occurred in the day-to-day life of people in Judea from the time of Herod's rule to the time of the Roman governors. Most matters relating to Jews would have been administered by local Jewish leaders. The fact that Jesus was subjected to the jurisdiction of high priest and Sanhedrin before that of Pilate highlights Jewish leaders' involvement in provincial administration alongside the Roman governor. Discontent among some segment of society, especially groups like zealots, Sicarii, and others who sought for political power and control, was overshadowed by the relative peacefulness of the general population.

In such a setting, unfolded the events of the ministry of Christ and the acts of the apostles after the Savior's death. Christians, who were themselves the frequent target of zealots and Sicarii, followed Christ's injunction to render unto Caesar. Accordingly, among Christians there is no record of the opposition to Rome which is

found among other Judean groups. Roman overlordship guaranteed the peace and made it possible for Judea to become more completely a full, participating partner in the Roman ecumene, with the increased economic prosperity which derived therefrom. Many Jews eager for the opportunities of personal advancement left Judea, migrating to other parts of the Roman world. Just as the Hellenistic ecumene had proved an attraction for opportunity which resulted in the establishment of the Jewish Diaspora, so too a second Diaspora was established as Jews settled throughout not only the eastern, but also in the western parts of Rome's empire. Similarly, the *pax Romana* provided opportunity for Christians to travel throughout a vast empire to proselyte.¹⁹

Mounting Tensions with Rome

With the inception of the reign of Gaius (Caligula) in A.D. 37, an increased level of tension developed in Judea stemming from two sources. First, as a result of Gaius's policy to increase the scope and function of the client kings administering Rome's holdings in various parts of the eastern segment of the empire, various branches of the Herodian house began to compete with each other for increased authority and power. This climate of heightened political conflict no doubt served in turn to encourage political discontent among various groups within Judea. Second, gentile inhabitants of Judea along with some Jews, as a result of increased emphasis throughout the empire on the maintenance of the cult of the emperor, attempted to erect altars to Gaius. The reaction of other Jews was one of extreme opposition. Gaius, by then beginning to show symptoms of the mental disorder which brutalized Rome and eventually caused most leading Romans to encourage his murder at the hands the Praetorian Guard, acted in a way counter to the usual Roman tolerance for local religious customs by ordering a statue of himself to be erected in the Holy of Holies of Herod's temple. The imperial legate of Syria, Petronius, was ordered to advance into Judea with the legions under his command to assure that Gaius's order was effected. Petronius, aware of the protests and deteriorating civil order in Judea which the order provoked, appealed to the emperor to revoke these instructions,

for which wise request Petronius was instructed to commit suicide. Before this could occur, all was ended by Gaius's death in 41.²⁰

Much of the harm Gaius had caused in all areas of the governance of the empire was set aright by the responsible and concerned reign of Claudius. Discontent in Judea was decreased when Claudius restored his boyhood companion and still close friend, Herod Agrippa, as king of the realm his grandfather Herod had once ruled. Regrettably for Roman aims in Judea, Herod Agrippa died after ruling only three years. Upon Herod's death, Claudius intended to bestow the kingdom of Judea and Samaria on the king's son, also called Herod Agrippa, who was being raised in Claudius's household. Since the younger Herod was only sixteen, however, Claudius's advisors dissuaded the emperor from his intention on grounds that so young a man could never effectively handle the dynastic rivalries raised by his ambitious relatives, nor the political discontents and ambitions of various Jewish factions, nor the everyday administration of an area which was becoming more difficult to rule. Consequently, Judea reverted to its former status as a Roman province. A Roman governor, now for the first time with the title of procurator, assumed the administration of Judea. The stage was set for the two rebellions which would occur as several Jewish factions, each for different reasons, sought to overthrow Roman rule.

The Jewish War against Rome

The circumstances which led to the Jewish War are thoroughly explicated in Josephus's history of the same name. It is important to remember that not all Jews, nor even a majority of the Jews in Judea, participated in the rebellion. Indeed, many Jews and certainly the Christians who fled Judea in large numbers to avoid the atrocities of the zealots directed toward them were as much the target of the insurrectionists as were the Roman and Greek inhabitants of Judea. One of the most important consequences of the Jewish rebellion is that Judea ceased to be the center of the Christian movement. Christians forced from Judea by zealous Jews spread throughout the empire where their proselyting engendered the growth of Christianity.

The war was successfully prosecuted by Rome in two stages: first, the siege and conquest of Jerusalem by the future emperor, Flavius Vespasianus, and following the civil war which brought about Vespasian's accession, by Vespasian's son and heir, Titus; and second, after the rest of the country was pacified, the siege of Masada by Flavius Silva. The detailed events of the rebellion are beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that Rome dealt with Judea as it would any subject province where a small segment of the population had fomented a rebellion, violently seizing power. Moreover, the indiscriminate deaths of many Jews at the hands of the zealots, Sicarii, and other insurrectionists made the rebellion in the eyes of Rome less a political rebellion than a riot where all law and order of any kind disappeared. From the Roman perspective, her opponents in Judea were neither patriots nor simply armed political opponents, but merely criminals engaged as much in pillage and rapine against their own people as attacks upon Romans and Greeks in the area. Rome pursued only those members of Jewish factions in rebellion. Other Jews in Judea were unaffected, as were the many Jews living throughout the empire. As Rome prosecuted the Jewish war, it not only had to root out the hidden strongholds of the rebellious factions, but also secure the protection of the general Jewish population from raids of the zealots. The war in both its stages lasted from 66 to 74. The time no doubt would have been considerably shortened if the Roman legions in Judea under Vespasian had not become involved in the Roman civil war from A.D. 68 to 70, which was resolved with the elevation of Vespasian as emperor.

The result of the war is more important for a consideration of the province of Judea than the events of the conflict. Millar's summary remarks about the effects of the war on Judea are instructive:

It would be impossible to exaggerate the significance, from many different points of view, of the great revolt which broke out in Judea in A.D. 66 and did not end until the suicide of the defenders of Masada in 74. Within the Jewish community it was marked by internal conflicts of unparalleled ferocity, and led to the destruction of the Temple, the disappearance of sacrifice as a central element of Jewish religious practice and the ending of the long line of High Priests.²¹

Not only did the nature of the Jewish entity within Judea change as a result of the war, but Judea as a place of strictly Jewish identity also disappeared. Strong Roman garrisons thereafter permanently occupied the province; new settlers were introduced to the area from throughout surrounding regions of the eastern part of the empire. The province of Judea, in both a cultural and juridical sense, came to an end. Once more, Millar's remarks are instructive in aptly summarizing the final result of the Jewish rebellion:

After the second of those rebellions, the province would be given a new name, "Syria Palaestina," from which all reference to the Jewish character of its population was lacking; it would have a garrison of two Roman legions and be the location of two Roman *coloniae*, Caesarea and Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem). The long hesitation of Roman rule was over.²²

Conclusion

The brief history of the Roman province of Judea reveals a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of the Romans about the passions of the Jewish people. The Jews were in part motivated by religion, but certainly were also motivated by personal ambitions for power, material gain, or individual prestige, at least in the case of the Jewish factions whose struggles against one another not only harmed their own people, but also were instrumental in destroying Judea. Rome dealt with Jewish factionalism for over a century by resorting back and forth to rule by local dynasts or to direct Roman administration, often in response to demands from leading Jews for a Roman presence. Rome, or individual Romans, may have regretted that they had any connection with Judea, a small and poor province, hardly worth its cost in time and material expended on it by Rome. However, once Rome held Judea, a consequence of filling the vacuum left in the region when the Hellenistic monarchies decayed, it had to maintain Judea. What worked so successfully for Rome in the administration of myriad peoples throughout its huge empire did not work in Judea. Accordingly, Rome was compelled to resort to arms to insure the peace when all else failed. Rebellions in the provinces were extremely rare; there simply was not the need to use Roman legions against provincials instead of using them in their assigned role of protecting the frontiers from the barbarians without. However,

the Jewish rebellion clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the legions if they had to be called upon to perform a peacekeeping role. Unfortunately, the efficiency of Roman arms was disastrous for all the many factions of Jews in Judea and even more regrettably for the innocent inhabitants of the province, who were as often the victims of injustice at the hands of their countrymen as at the hands of the Romans.

John F. Hall is Professor of Classics and Ancient History at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

¹For Pompey's succession in command to Lucullus and his prosecution of the final stages of the Mithridatic war, see Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 63-66, 83-86; see also John Leach, *Pompey the Great* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 74-92.

²Pompey's settlement of the eastern empire is discussed in detail by Leach, *Pompey the Great*, 93-101; specific reasons for and actions precipitating the annexation of Judea to Pompey's newly formed standing Roman province in Syria are given in F. E. Peters, *The Harvest of Hellenism: A History of the Near East from Alexander the Great to the Triumph of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 320-24, 336-38.

³Judas Maccabeus in 160 B.C. entered into a protective treaty with Rome when it was particularly interested in limiting the power of Seleucid Syria in the region. Twenty years later the treaty was renewed. On several occasions Rome warned the Seleucid kings from making incursions into Judean territory. The independence of Maccabean Judea was largely a result of Rome's protection. See Michael Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 212-13; and Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 268-70.

⁴Pompey's intervention overturned the previous act of Pompey's chief legate, the newly appointed governor of Syria, Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, who had accepted a huge bribe from Aristobulus to confirm his rule. It may be presumed that Hyrcanus was able to reward Pompey in similar monetary fashion for his support. See Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 321-24.

⁵For discussion of the advance of the Idumean royal family, see Grant, *History of Ancient Israel*, 225-26. Sixty years previous John Hyrcanus, son of Simon Maccabee, had asserted Jewish authority over Idumea requiring the conversion of the area and the forced circumcision of its male inhabitants. Therefore, while they were technically Jewish, the Idumeans were held by devout Jews to be false believers at best. Much of the opposition to Herod's monarchy derives from the

anti-Idumean attitude of not only Jewish nobles but the populace in general. See Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 286–88.

⁶Parthians derived in part from the Scythian Parni who migrated in the third century B.C. from southeastern European steppes to the western territories of the Persian empire settling in Parthava, joining with the local remnants of Persians and laying the political and linguistic foundations of Iran. See Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 343–45.

⁷The events are discussed in detail in Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 336–38. Also see Eva Matthews Sanford, “The Career of Aulus Gabinius,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 70 (1939): 64–92.

⁸Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 341–49; see also T. J. Cadoux, “Marcus Crassus: A Reevaluation,” *Greece and Rome*, 2d ser., 3 (1956): 153–61.

⁹Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 380–82; Grant, *History of Ancient Israel*, 225–27; also see Matthias Gelzer, *Caesar: Politician and Statesman*, trans. Peter Needham (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 239–52. Of course, Caesar’s own *Bellum Alexandrinum* provides an account of the Alexandrian campaign.

¹⁰Antony’s role in these events is analyzed in detail by Eleanor Goltz Huzar, *Mark Antony* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 161–62.

¹¹Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 384–87; Grant, *History of Ancient Israel*, 228; Huzar, *Mark Antony*, 162–66.

¹²For a thorough discussion of the institution as well as the entire Roman system of *clientelae*, see Ernst Badian, *Foreign Clientelae (264–70 B.C.)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

¹³Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 474.

¹⁴Grant, *History of Ancient Israel*, 229–32; Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 387–94; A. H. M. Jones, *Augustus* (New York, Norton, 1970), 50, 57, 63–64; Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 B.C.–A.D. 337* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 27–31, 38–39.

¹⁵Jones, *Augustus*, 70–72; Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 393–94; Millar, *Roman Near East*, 39–49; Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992), 100–103. For the office of *legatus Augusti pro praetore* and the administration of Syria under the Augustan principate, see Millar, *Roman Near East*, 31–36.

¹⁶Millar, *Roman Near East*, 45; John F. Hall, “Procurator,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York, Doubleday, 1992), 5:473–74; John F. Hall, “Antonia, Tower of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:274.

¹⁷Mason, *Josephus*, 100–117, offers a good summary of the role and activities of the Roman governors of Judea, particularly as they are portrayed in the pages of Josephus’s historical record. A more comprehensive discussion of the office and activities of the prefects of Judea is found in Millar, *Roman Near East*, 44–63.

¹⁸Zeev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1994), offers an excellent presentation of the economic aspects of Roman Judea.

¹⁹Millar, *Roman Near East*, 44–63; Peters, *Harvest of Hellenism*, 508–14.

²⁰Millar, *Roman Near East*, 56–59.

²¹Millar, *Roman Near East*, 70.

²²Millar, *Roman Near East*, 61.