

The Great Revolt

An Overview

Uriel Rappaport The revolt by the Jews of Eretz Israel under Roman rule broke out in 66 CE. The revolt was the result of processes that had lasted for several generations, going as far back as the beginning of Roman control of Judaea in 63 BCE with its conquest by the Roman general Pompey; in other words, 130 years. Following are some of these processes and their causes:

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- A. The Roman occupation met with resistance from the outset. Many of the Jews of Eretz Israel did not resign themselves to the loss of the freedom that the Hasmoneans had achieved. The independent Jewish state that they had established had maintained its sovereignty for some 80 years (142–63 BCE).
- B. In the early years of Roman rule of Judea, the country's boundaries were reduced in size and Gentile settlements that the Hasmoneans had conquered were rehabilitated. This step renewed and even intensified friction and confrontation between Jews and non-Jews and became a permanent cause of tension and struggle between the two populations (Rappaport 1978).
- C. The economic situation of the rural Jewish population worsened in the years under Roman rule. A cut of the land area at the disposal of the Jewish peasants owing to a constriction in the territory of Judea itself, on the one hand, and a large natural population increase on the other hand, limited opportunities and caused a progressive diminution in assets in the course of bequeathing patrimonies from generation to generation. The taxes that had to be paid to Herod and to the Roman government also weighed heavily on their ability to support themselves by working the land. The result of this situation was that many peasants lost their land and their property. A class of hired day-laborers was created who crowded into the cities, especially Jerusalem, and became an angry and troubling factor.
- D. The uniqueness of the monotheistic Jewish religion and its dissimilarity from all other commonly accepted religions of the period created permanent tension and misunderstanding between the Jews and their environment. This tension existed both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora.
- E. In Judea, movements arose that cultivated a stance of non-acquiescence to servitude to Rome and began carrying out acts of rebellion against the authorities. Prominent in its determined opposition to Roman rule was the movement, called by Joseph ben-Matityahu (hereafter, Josephus) "the Fourth Philosophy", later known as the Sicarii (from the Latin *sica*=dagger; *sicarius*=murderer). The various messianic movements, which promised miraculous redemption and drew many followers, also agitated feelings. These movements greatly intensified the disquietude in Judea (Stern 1991 [Hebrew]).
- F. The weakening of the Jewish internal leadership, which had begun with struggles among members of the Hasmonean dynasty and continued with Herod's



Fig. 1: Head of Agrippa I, diademed; Greek inscription: "The great King Agrippa, the Friend of Caesar". Struck at Caesarea in 43 CE. (Museum Hecht Collection)



Fig. 2: Young Agrippa II riding a horse. Greek inscription: "Agrippa son of the King". Struck at Paneas in 38 CE. (Museum Hecht Collection)

ascension to the throne in Judea (37–4 BCE), brought extremists to the fore. Herod debased the High Priesthood, which was an important institution at the head of Jewish society; he also brought about changes in the composition of the Jewish nobility, which now tended to acquiesce to Roman rule. Accordingly the estrangement between the majority of the Jews of Eretz-Israel and their leadership increased. Because of this, the ability of the Jewish leadership/nobility to lead the Jews of Israel in moderate policies weakened increasingly, while those who favored revolt gathered strength.

G. The Roman governors, in particular those stationed in Judea in the second period of direct Roman rule – that began after the death of the popular Jewish king, Agrippa I, (who ruled all of Judea from 41–44 CE and was the grandson of Herod and of the Hasmonean Miriam), were hostile to the Jews and greatly increased agitation and rebelliousness in Judea (Stern 1991, especially pp. 204–205 [Hebrew]) (Figs. 1, 2).

These developments and events, which occurred close to the time of the revolt, led to its outbreak in 66 CE. The events that acted as catalysts for the start of the revolt were as follows:

1. Bloody clashes between Jews and Gentiles in the ethnically mixed city Caesarea. These clashes inflamed further riots of the Jews against the Gentiles in many of the other mixed cities in Judea and its environs.
2. Elazar ben-Hananya, a priest who filled an important function in the Temple, managed to bring about the cancellation of the daily sacrificial Temple offering for Rome and Caesar that was customary, and that was an expression of the Jews' acceptance of Roman rule. The offering had replaced swearing fealty, and the ritual honoring Rome and the Caesar that was customary in the other parts of the Roman Empire. This act was tantamount to a declaration of rebellion against Rome.

The start of the Revolt was vacillating and opposed by the Jewish nobility, who wanted to put a stop to it. However, the military advance of the Proconsul of Syria, Cestius Gallus, which was meant to suppress the rebellion and punish the rebels, ended unexpectedly in the crushing defeat of the Roman army. The Romans lost more than 5,000 soldiers, and the influence of the rebels and their power intensified. There were those who saw in the defeat of the Roman army a positive sign for the future and so joined the supporters of the rebellion despite the warnings of the moderates regarding the consequences.

After this tremendous victory, an assembly that gathered in Jerusalem chose a government that would lead the continuation of the battle against Rome. Amazingly, this government was composed of the heads of the aristocracy who had objected to the revolt, but changed their position prior to the convening of the assembly and pretended to support the revolt and to lead the battle against Rome. It was an empty pose by a government whose members strived to halt the revolt in order to prevent the ruinous consequences that the moderates estimated would result; and in the guise of the leadership of the revolt, their objective was to continue to hold onto the reins of control (Rappaport 1992). Additionally, command of the Judean districts was given over to those who saw eye to eye with the government. One of these



Fig. 3: Bulla from the excavations at Kadesh. (Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Kadesh Excavations – S. Herbert and A. Berlin)

personalities was Josephus, who was appointed governor of the Galilee, and in due course became the historian who made known the details of the Great Revolt.

Josephus relates in two works, *The Jewish War* (hereafter, *BJ*) and *Life of Josephus*, his activities in the Galilee from the time of his arrival there to the time he fell captive to the Romans (from the winter at the end of 66 CE to the conquest of Yodfat in the summer of 67, a period of some seven months). His two works differ in literary genre and were composed far apart in time from each other. They are not the subject of this article, so a general description of what happened in the Galilee will be adequate.

When Josephus arrived in the Galilee, he found that several population groups had already been in violent confrontation, especially the Jews and the Gentiles. Gush Halav in the Upper Galilee had been attacked by people from Tyre and, in retaliation, John (Yochanan) of Gishchala (Gush Halav) had led a force against the near-by Tyrian settlement of Kadesh (Fig. 3). In Tiberias, one of the city's leaders,¹ took command in action against Gentile settlements to the south. Meanwhile, property damage and acts of slaughter were carried out against the Jews of various neighboring cities. The worst episode was the slaughter of the Jews of Beit Shean, which was deviously executed, regardless of the fact that the Jews of this city had cooperated with its Gentile residents (*BJ* II: 466–476).

There were even clashes among the Jews of the Galilee themselves. Although many of the peasants supported the revolt, there were moderates who opposed it. Prominent among the latter because of its firm and consistent objection to the revolt was the city of Sepphoris (Tzippori), which kept the rebels away from its borders and cooperated with the Romans. Because it was a wealthy city with many privileges, similar to the Greek cities known as *poleis* – in other words, a kind of city-state whose status was higher than the rest of the settlements in the area – Sepphoris was hated by the peasants of the Galilee, and this hostility was manifested in acts of violence. In Tiberias, too, which enjoyed a status similar to Sepphoris as a kind of a *polis*, the wealthy of the city objected to the revolt, and a struggle between them and the advocates of revolt in the city transpired. Those who favored revolt were, according to Josephus' narrative, the fishermen, the lowest class. This confrontation between the rich and poor of Tiberias was decided in favor of the moderates only when the Roman legions reached the gates of the city (*BJ* III: 453–461).

Josephus relates that he prepared the Galilee for war. Most of his stories, however, deal with struggles that he waged with his opponents in the Galilee, and the preparations he made for the confrontation with the Romans. These however were limited; moreover, their results do not indicate that he had made a serious effort as governor of the Galilee. The main action that he attributes to himself in this connection was erecting fortifications in more than ten settlements in the Galilee (Fig. 4). Some of these settlements were indeed surrounded by a wall, but one not built by Josephus. He had no access at all to what went on in Gush Halav and Sepphoris, and the fortification of the latter city, which was friendly toward Rome, does not at all fit in with preparations for a war with Rome. In sum, it seems that we have here a case of posturing on the part of Josephus, one of many, stemming from various motivations that were an adjunct to his writing.



Fig. 4: Roman Conquest of Galilee

Josephus' pretensions in the matter of fortifying the Galilee and preparing it for war do not match the results. Regarding the army, which he claimed to have prepared and trained (*BJ* II: 576–584) – numbering either 100,000 soldiers (#576) or 60,000 soldiers (#583), supposedly trained according to the Roman military doctrine – it did not appear on the battlefield at all to contend with the enormous power of the Roman legions, and the Roman military efforts were limited to just a few locations. In effect, the Romans met with real opposition only at Yodefata and Gamla. Several other places saw marginal clashes (such as Har Tabor; *BJ* IV: 54–61) or punitive actions at Vespasian's orders (at Gabara/Araba, for example; see *BJ* III: 132–134), or there was nothing at all. The story of the siege of Yodefata should be critically examined, and in my view it is doubtful whether Josephus had a part in it as he

would like us to believe (Rappaport 2007: 74–76).

When Vespasian and his legions landed at Acre (Akko), the Galilee was unprepared and incapable of stopping the course of putting down the rebellion or delaying the Roman advance to Jerusalem. Doubtless there was no small number of sympathizers with the revolt in the Galilee who came from the lower classes in the main: peasants, fishermen, and even refugees who had fled the nearby Greek cities; however, the important cities of the Galilee – Sepphoris, Tiberias, Migdal/Tarichaeae, and even Gishchala – did not oppose the Romans at all. Only at Yodefāt and Gamla were the Romans forced to invest significant military effort in order to conquer them (we do not know why they were the most dedicated to the revolt). Other rebels showed but brief opposition and, as did John of Gishchala, hurriedly retreated to Jerusalem in the hope it could not be conquered and with faith that the God of Israel would save them from the Romans.

So it happened that Judaea absorbed most of the war damage, in particular Jerusalem, which was totally destroyed. Jewish life in the Galilee went on; and after the Bar-Kokhba rebellion, this district became the center of Judaism of the Land of Israel for many generations.

Note

1 On Justus, see the article by P. Stern in this catalogue.