

Jewish Attitudes to Roman Rule

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When Pompey walked triumphantly into Jerusalem after a siege of three months, ending a hundred years of Jewish independence, there were many different attitudes towards the Romans. Today, there continues to be much debate about these Jewish attitudes. For example, Cohen¹ claims the Jews were very accepting of their Roman overlords, the Romans listened to Jewish complaints and the Jews only revolted three times under Roman rule. This is true to a certain extent, but the problem is that Cohen only allows the major revolts to be counted; most scholars would follow the likes of Schürer and Hengel, saying there was much popular discontent with Roman rule and this frequently manifested itself in skirmishes or even whole cities revolting. This study will try to give a balanced view in an attempt to find out the range and diversity of Jewish attitudes towards Roman rule. By doing this, we will attempt discover what Jewish attitudes to pagan rule were, how well the Romans governed Judea, and Jewish populations elsewhere, and how the Zealots could cry “No king but God!” and yet have a structured organisation. This is important if we are to attempt historical reconstructions of any events happening while Rome ruled over the Jewish people, because all texts are coloured by their authors' views and experiences.

But this task is by no means easy. The main problem is that we only know the views of those whose writings were lucky enough to

1 Cohen 1987, p.29

survive, and we do not know to what extent these reflect the views of the normal Jewish populace. Because of this, we will focus on Palestine between Pompey's conquest in 63bc and the destruction of the Temple in 70ad, as we have more information on this period and providence of early Jewish history than any other (e.g. Josephus, NT, pseudepigraphical writings, inscriptions, and some Roman historians). We will also include evidence from the diaspora and times either side of this period as space permits. In looking at this evidence, we will also aim to discover to what extent Josephus, our main source on Jewish history of this era, is representative of Jewish thought after the destruction of the Temple.

The first official encounter between the Palestinian Jews and the Roman empire is around 160bc. Our earliest text is 1 Maccabees 8, which is probably the source Josephus uses.² Some scholars think the whole sequence of treaties with Rome is implausible,³ and it is true that there was never a strong alliance and some recorded facts are wrong. However, this text reveals a Jewish admiration of Rome despite their pagan practices, retelling their successes in war against countries such as Spain, Macedonia, and Asia. It also stresses their friendship with nations who cooperate with them (8:12-3) and their system of democracy. The Third Sibylline Oracle⁴, written in Egypt⁵

2 Schürer 1.50

3 Sherwin-White 1984, p.77 cf Gruen 1984, 2.751

4 Gruen 1998, Collins in Charlesworth 1.354-80

5 But referring to the Mithridatic war in Asia

before Pompey's conquest of Judea, contrasts this positive attitude by saying that Rome is the nurse of wild beasts (464-88), the Romans (with other Gentile nations) are moral transgressors and indulge in homosexuality (596-600), and prophesying that Rome will be reduced to a street because of its sin against the east (350-64). Thus we see that even before the Roman conquest, there was a wide range of Jewish attitudes towards them.

Pompey did not originally intend to invade Jerusalem,⁶ but whilst he was in Syria on a campaign, Aristobulus and Hyrcanus came to him, arguing about who should be the king of the Jews. A third party, comprised of disgruntled Jews, asked him to condemn both brothers. Eventually, Pompey's patience wore thin and he marched upon Jerusalem. Some citizens opened the gate to welcome Pompey because they thought the Roman rule would be better than the Hasmonean infighting, but Aristobulus and some others barricaded themselves inside the Temple. Pompey laid siege to it, working on the Sabbath so the Jews would not fight back. When it was taken after three months, twelve thousand Jews had died, many more were taken as slaves, and Pompey walked triumphantly into the Holy of Holies. Many Jews were outraged and fearful at this act,⁷ one wrote:

Gentile foreigners went up to your place of sacrifice;

⁶ Collins 2005 pp.203-4; Schürer 1.236-8

⁷ 1 Mac 6 tells how God struck down Antiochus Epiphanes after trying a similar feat. Why had He not done so with Pompey? PssSol answers that He caused him to die in an undignified manner (2:25-9)

they arrogantly trampled (it) with their sandals.

PssSol 2:2

As if this was not enough to disgust the Jews, Pompey then shrunk the boundary lines of the Jewish territory, causing Jerusalem to swell with refugees.⁸ This doubtless caused the Jews to hate the new Roman occupiers even more. However, the Jews offered twice-daily sacrifices in the Temple for the emperor⁹ to show loyalty, a tradition which did not cease until the beginning of the Great Revolt. The Hasmonean brothers continued to squabble; Aristobulus and his sons escaped from jail in Rome and caused many revolts (usually with the help of a neighbouring king). These never amounted to much but they show that there was always some hope of revolution amongst Jewish people during the 50bc's.

With the invasion, the Romans improved on the work of the Greeks before them, bringing many good things to Judea, including proper roads and more trade. This pleased both the common people and some religious sects, notably the Pharisees, because as a result of the Roman takeover they had higher mobility within the empire to win converts and start synagogues.¹⁰ Before the Roman occupation travel was unsafe, mainly because of banditry, but afterwards, the young Herod, using Romans troops, flushed out these λησταῖς, killing a

8 Tomasino 2003, p.249

9 This ceremony was designed to show loyalty to the emperor as the Jews were exempt from emperor worship. This was unofficial at first under the Romans, but after Caligula, Claudius made it official (*Ant.* 19.278-91, cf Schürer 2.311)

10 e.g. Mt 23:14. Debates surround the amount of Pharisaic missionary activity.

great number. Everyone had to say that this was an improvement, but many of the rural community would have supported these robbers as they only robbed the rich.¹¹ Flushing out bandits was necessary for the Romans because they were usually the focal point of any opposition movement.

Some groups, particularly the Qumran sect, always fiercely hated the Romans. The only Roman named in their writings is Aemilius (4Q324a), the Governor of Syria at the time of Pompey's conquest, but it is generally accepted that the *Kittim* of the commentaries are the Romans.¹² Quoting Habakkuk 1:17 the author writes:

... [the *Kittim*] cause many to perish by the sword – youths, grown men, the aged, women and children – and even take no pity on the fruit of the womb.

1QpHab 5:10-12

We come now to Herod the Great. He tried to be all things to all people but ended up being seen negatively by many; most Judean Jews saw him as Roman or Idumean, and the Romans, Jewish. However, some saw him as the Jewish protector, for example those in Caesaria, a city he founded, and also those living in gentile-dominated cities along the coast or in the diaspora. Herod was made a client-king by Rome for several political reasons, and Rome always had a friendly disposition towards him, mostly thanks to his father

¹¹ Cf Horsley 1985

¹² In the War Scroll, they are (probably) anonymous eschatological allies of Satan.

Antipater. Herod was very politically astute, able to remain in friendship with Rome even during turbulent political times. Despite probably preferring to rule Judea independently, he knew that without Roman rule he would have been lost many times, for example before becoming king,¹³ he led some offensives against bandits in Galilee, executing many. The council in Jerusalem felt threatened by Herod's power and charged him with murder because he had killed the bandits without their permission. When the trial started to go against him, he bribed a Roman official for greater military command and started to march against Jerusalem. Upon becoming king, he turned the council into a puppet organisation, and murdered many scholars because he felt threatened by them.¹⁴ This caused most people to dislike Herod and hence Roman rule, especially the aristocracy because they had now lost almost all their power.

Herod was a great advocate of Jewish rights, a fact which most Jews probably didn't realise. He travelled around the empire and sponsored games and building projects in many Pagan cities. This caused anger amongst some Jews, who thought that their high taxes were paying for pagan buildings. This was true to a point, but it helped win favour towards Jews throughout the empire. Herod also collected vast amounts of taxes, which although not crippling to many people, did nothing to help their attitude towards him. During his rule,

¹³ *Ibid.* p.254

¹⁴ Aberbach 2000, p.25

Herod collected the taxes and paid money directly to Rome but after his death, Palestine was split into three kingdoms (Judea was later governed directly). The census for tax purposes in 6ad¹⁵ caused a popular uprising, lead by Judas the Galilean. This was not so much because there were taxes, but because they were being paid directly to the Romans. We also see in Jesus' day¹⁶ that it was not the tax or even the image on the coin that was the problem, but what it stood for: do we acknowledge that the Romans are ruling over us?

During Herod's reign, not many people dared to revolt as he was notoriously heavy handed, but when he was close to death, Judas and Matthias¹⁷ incited some young men to to tear down the golden eagle (a Roman imperial symbol) from the Temple entrance. Herod ordered the ring-leaders to be burnt to death and forty people who had been arrested at the Temple were executed by the Romans for being revolutionaries. When Herod died,¹⁸ there was a riot caused by the execution of those involved in the eagle incident, quashed by Archelaus, one of his sons, killing about a thousand people, and after Herod's sons had gone to Rome to argue over their inheritance, there were many more revolts (e.g. Judas the Galilean and Simon from Perea who was declared "King of the Jews"). The turmoil was so bad that Varus, the Governor of Syria, had to come with a large army to

15 *War* 2.118, *Ant.* 18.1-9

16 Mk 12:13-17 & pars.

17 *War* 1.647-655, *Ant.* 17.149-163

18 The following in *War* 2.1-79, *Ant.* 18.206-298

put down the insurrection, finally crucifying two thousand Jews. This was very heavy handed and these events only caused Jews to hate the Roman rule even more. For the next sixty years, the three provinces had rulers and governors who ranged from mediocre to appalling; the only exception being King Agrippa I, of whom the Jews shouted "Our brother art thou!"¹⁹ These incompetent governors and rulers caused Jewish hatred and disillusion to keep mounting. Even Tacitus, a Roman historian, was surprised that the Great Revolt took so long to come.²⁰

Despite this growing hatred, the Jews did on occasion use the official Roman channels for their complaints. For example, both Jews and Samaritans travelled to Rome to complain about the awful rule of Archelaus. After this hearing, he was deposed and exiled, and the province of Judea put into the hands of governors. Some Jews were also able to rise quite high in the Roman hierarchy, for example Tiberius Julius Alexander (Philo's nephew) rose to be governor of Judea, later being made prefect of Egypt,²¹ and brought troops in to quash the Great Revolt. Certainly if you didn't mind working with the Romans, you were able to go far.

However, almost all Jews had certain values or laws which they would not allow to be transgressed. When Pilate entered Jerusalem,²²

19 *mSotah* 7:8

20 *Hist.* 5.10

21 Tomasino 2003, p.280

22 *War* 2.169-74, *Ant.* 18.55-9.

his troops carried ensigns bearing images of the emperor, which the Jews understood to be a transgression of the second commandment. They protested for five days, then Pilate called them together and told his soldiers to kill any who refused to accept Caesar's image. Josephus says they “flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready rather to die than to transgress the law”. Pilate was shocked and ordered the standards to be removed. During Gaius' brief reign, Petronius was sent with three legions and a Syrian auxiliary unit to erect his statue in the Temple.²³ The Jews explained it was illegal to erect the statue and said they were ready to be killed before they would allow it to be put up in the Temple.

We have thus traced the main points of Palestinian history during the time of Roman occupation, but what can we learn from the more popular movements about their attitudes towards Roman rule? The first movement we will study is the Messianic one. Qumran probably had Messianism before the Roman conquest, however the Psalms of Solomon was written in direct response to the invasion, and concludes with two chapters about a glorious Messiah who will rule the world (PssSol 17-18). Daniel was also interpreted by many as being about God's eventual victory over Rome, the two most illustrating sections being the stone which smashes the fourth part of the statue to pieces,

²³ *War* 2.184-203, *Ant.* 18.257-309

and the Ancient of Days who slays the fourth beast.²⁴ The massive rise in Messianism during the Roman occupation, displayed in many texts (including the NT), shows people hoped for God's king to come and deliver Israel from her pagan rulers. Even after 70ad, Daniel's visions are reworked, saying the 'lion' will crush the 'eagle'; symbolism for the Messiah crushing Rome.²⁵ This Messianic hope was not so much because of Roman oppression, but rather wanting Israel to be free to serve YHWH under His rule. Towards the end of the war, many people fled to the Temple and stayed there even whilst it was burning down,²⁶ showing there was great popular hope that God would rescue his people.

The second movement is the much debated “fourth philosophy”,²⁷ not necessarily independent of the Messianic movements. Some scholars like Farmer see this as a continuing group (“the zealots”, with a revolutionary wing called the Sicarii) through our period, but others like Sanders see it as many different groups with common aims.²⁸ My own viewpoint is similar to Sanders, because it seems that Josephus wants to make the “fourth philosophy” into a scapegoat for any anti-Roman feeling. He sets out the three main Jewish groups (Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes) and compares them with

24 Dan 2:40-45, 7:7-14,23-27

25 4 Ezra 11-12

26 War 6.233-4

27 Thus named by Josephus, *Ant.* 18.11-25

28 Farmer 1956, Sanders 1992, p.281-3

respected Greek groups. He then isolates the revolutionaries into one group for which he gives no parallel in Greek philosophy and claims they were the group to blame for the Great Revolt. Farmer is certainly right to see that there were common key features between all of these revolutionary sects, for example zeal for Torah, but this was a theme running all through the Bible.²⁹ A modern day analogy is terrorist groups; there are perhaps several terrorist groups who have roughly similar aims and have great zeal for their cause. Outside, there are many supporters and even more who agree with their demands. Despite being only a few full members, their deeds are known throughout the world (although in the Roman world this would be through “Chinese whispers”). Their common cry was “no ruler but God!”, but what does this mean? Sanders suggests it meant “die rather than tolerate heinous transgression”,³⁰ in other words, their aim of “freedom from the Romans” would be accomplished whether they succeeded or died. These groups were the people who objected to Roman rule so strongly they would fight it even when they knew they would surely be killed. The last stronghold of Masada was taken around May 73ad and those holding it committed suicide rather than be taken alive.³¹

There is a final movement which seems strange compared to all

²⁹ Farmer 1956, p.49. Cf Num 25:7-8, 2Ki 10:16-27, etc.

³⁰ Sanders 1992, p.283

³¹ *War* 7.389-401

the others: pacifism. Whilst some have said that the Essenes were pacifists because they did not make weapons, they were probably waiting for the right time to fight (i.e. the eschatological age³²) and Josephus records Essenes fighting in the Great Revolt.³³ The only sect which really advocated pacificism was Christianity. Jesus taught a 'principled pacifism'; blessing even those who curse you, and treating gentiles as equals. His new sect of Christians left racial barriers behind and taught people to respect the emperor and pray for those in authority.³⁴ Indeed, there are a great number of references to submission in the NT, which indicates that many believers had difficulty with this idea.

After the Great Revolt, many Jewish people, including Josephus and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, appealed to scripture to show that the Romans were divinely ordained to rule the world at the present time, but sooner or later would be answerable to YHWH himself.³⁵ This view submits to the current Roman rule, but allows for future hope of a Jewish empire. Yohanan was highly respected by the later rabbinic tradition, which shows that most rabbis' views were close to his. There were other uprisings, notably in the diaspora (115-8), and in Palestine under bar Kosiba (132-5). This last revolution was on a much smaller scale and not supported by many rabbis; the Jewish

32 1QS 10:19-21

33 *War* 3.11

34 e.g. Rom 13:1-7, 1 Tim 2:2

35 *War* 5.367, bGittin 56a-b

spirit was crushed or crucified, and they realised victory was impossible. Some literature still contains a revolutionary spirit, for example one author claims that the destruction of Pompeii in 79ad was God's revenge on the Romans for the destruction of Jerusalem.³⁶

There is much more that could be said about Jewish attitudes to Roman rule, and it would be especially interesting to be able to piece together our limited diaspora evidence and see how it influences and is influenced by Palestinian Judaism. However, we have seen that within Palestine there were a very broad range of views. Josephus and the rabbinic tradition (i.e. the leaders of the new Judaism), realised that resistance was futile, but thought that sooner or later, God would return the Jews to power. These views are probably similar to those of most Jews, who realised that revolt was stupid. They didn't mind paying taxes as long as they were allowed peace and security for their families, homes and livelihoods, and freedom to worship their God.

³⁶ Sib. 4.115-134

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