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THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE ROMAN RULERS AND THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS: A FACTOR LEADING TO THE JEWISH REVOLT IN 66-70 CE

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ABSTRACT



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This study analyzes the factors leading to the Jewish uprising against the Romans in 66-70 CE. The study presupposes that the nexus between the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders is pivotal in the Jewish uprising against the Romans. Some of the issues that are taken into consideration in the study include the socio-economic, religious, political, and military aspects of the nexus between the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans. As a corollary to their nexus, the Romans demanded heavy taxation from the Jews. The high priest became greedy and often failed to engage in his religious duties. Therefore, the unhappy masses rose against the Roman rulers and their associates in 66-70 CE. But one must keep in mind that this study only serves as a general study on the issues related to the nexus between the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans. A detailed study would demand a much longer paper.

Keywords:

Roman imperial administration, Jewish administration, Roman rulers, Jewish religious leaders, agrarian, aristocratic, taxation, corruption.



Introduction

This study attempts to analyze some of the factors leading to the Jewish uprising against the Romans in 66-70 CE. In this regard, the study presupposes that the nexus between the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders is playing a pivotal role in the Jewish uprising against the Romans. Therefore, it is considered important to look at the various aspects that may help in understanding the cause of Jewish uprising against the Romans, namely, the socio-economic, religious, political and military aspects. However, the study will not be able to do justice even as the tension between the Jews and the Romans can involve many other issues. This study only serves as a general observation about the issues involved in relation to the nexus between the Jewish religious leaders and Roman rulers. With this introductory note, the study can be divided into three major parts. Firstly, the study will briefly highlight the Roman imperial administrative system. Secondly, it will present the introduction of the Roman administrative system in Judea, and its meeting with the Jewish administration. Finally, the study will discuss the consequences of the collaboration between the Roman administrations and the Jewish administration which are considered to serve as the factors leading to the First Jewish Revolt.

1. Overview of the Roman Imperial Administration

A brief highlight of the Roman imperial administration is given in this section. Firstly, the Roman administration was an aristocratic empire in which the Emperor acts as “an aristocrat whose word was law and whose relationship with his subjects was highly personalized.”¹ Below him were the senatorial (State Council), the equestrian and the local ruling elites. David G. Horrell compares this hierarchy with a “large pyramid” in which 1 % of the total population ruled the empire.² For Warren Carter, these ruling elites are comprised of 2-3% of the total population, while the rest belonged to the non-elites.³ Therefore, there is no middle class in the view of Carter but only the elites and the non-elites.⁴ The populace can also be divided into citizens and non-citizens of Rome. In this regard, the word often uttered by the

¹Colin M. Wells, “Roman Empire,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992):803.

² David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*, ed. John Barclay, Joel Marcus and John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 65.

³ Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 3.

⁴ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 3.



Roman citizen was *Civis Romanus sum*, meaning "I am a Roman citizen" which functions as a way to get "protections and rights."⁵

Secondly, the Romans establish many provinces which according to Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller accounted more than 40 provinces.⁶ The larger provinces were governed by a "Governor" (a commander – in – chief of any troops), and the smaller provinces were governed by a "procurator" who was a senatorial rank. Both rulers play vital roles in the establishment of a well-defined aristocracy by overseeing the political, socio-economic, religion and military affairs in different provinces.⁷ In these provinces, "legions" or "auxiliary troops" were stationed to enforce the interests of the Roman rulers.⁸ The Roman rulers also maintained healthy relationship with the local rulers for the stability of the Government.⁹ Such cooperation also contributed to their mutual benefits, especially when the local rulers "used their knowledge to collect census statistics and were responsible for the gathering of the taxes so crucial for the consumer society in the city of Rome."¹⁰ In turn, the local rulers could expect:

Roman confirmation and support for their local prestige, but they could also hope to make some profit by creaming off some of the income from tax collection. Eventually they could expect Roman citizenship and would thus merge into the Roman governing class itself, through service in the Roman army or as representatives (procurators) of the emperors.¹¹

Usually, only the rich and high status in the society could qualify for client rulers.¹² Wealthy rulers are needed especially in times when people refused to pay taxes to the Romans,

⁵ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia* (London: Greenwood, 2004), 43-44.

⁶ Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 21.

⁷ Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome A. D. 66-70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35.

⁸ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 4.

⁹ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 33.

¹⁰ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 33-36.

¹¹ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 34. The advantage of becoming Roman citizenship is "exemption from paying most taxes." John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster, 1986), 30.

¹² Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 36.



because they could easily pay from their own resources.¹³ There were times the Roman rulers entrusted these wealthy rulers with the responsibility of collecting taxes.¹⁴

Thirdly, the Roman Empire was an agrarian empire. As agrarian empire, “the wealth and power of the Roman imperial elite was based more in land than in trade and industry.”¹⁵ Land was considered the “safest investment” from which most of the elites’ profits were “derived.”¹⁶ It is reported that the Roman landowners practiced forceful extraction of land production. According to Dennis P. Kehoe, the Roman landowners amassed wealth on their ability to extract a portion of the surplus produced by the poor peasants in rural areas.¹⁷ Such administrative system is what was introduced in Judea.

2. The Introduction of Roman Administration in Judea

In order to understand the effect of the introduction of Roman administration in Judea, it is important to firstly understand the Jewish administrative system prior to the arrival of the Romans. Therefore, the study of this section can be divided into two parts: firstly, the Jewish administration before the Roman invasion of Judea, and secondly, the Jewish administration after the Roman arrived in Judea.

2.1. The Jewish Administration before the Arrival of the Romans in Judea: For the Jews in Judea, the priests held a vital responsibility. Apart from their responsibility “to preserve the [Temple] cult and to administer it,”¹⁸ they served as teachers and administrators of the divinely revealed Law.¹⁹ Their hereditary can also be traced from the Bible (cf. Num. 3:10; Deut. 18:1). The high priest is the chief and most significant member of the priesthood. He is consecrated in the same manner as the other priests.²⁰ The high priest also represents the Jews

¹³ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 33, 35-36.

¹⁴ Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C. – A. D. 135)*, rev. and ed. Geza Vermes & Fergus Millar, vol. I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), 401.

¹⁵ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 24-25.

¹⁶ Wells, “Roman Empire,” 805.

¹⁷ Dennis P. Kehoe, *Law and Rural Economy in the Roman Empire* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁸ Charles Guignebert, *The Jewish World in the Time of Jesus* (New York: University Books, 1968), 56.

¹⁹ Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 118.

²⁰ D. A. Hubbard, “Priests and Levites,” *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. H. Marshall, et al. 3rd edition (Secunderabad: OM-Authentic, 2007):957.



before God (Yahweh). His cultic function involves making “atonement for the sins of the whole people” (Exod. 30:10; Lev. 16) on the Day of Atonement.²¹ Therefore, he is a

Mediator between God and the people, for he is the only one who may enter the holiest place, and that but once a year (Exod. 29:44; Lev. 16:2-5)... (He) is charged with representing the people to God, by supervising the whole sacrificial system and representing God to the people by ensuring that the divine teachings are propagated and observed (Lev. 10:8-11).²²

The ordinary priests assisted the high priest in his cultic activities and sometimes functions in place of the high priest. The high priest serves as supervisor in the censuring and burnt offering, under whose supervision, the cultic acts are performed.²³

With regards to the high priest’s role in Jewish administration, it may be asserted that he enjoys a considerable power. His power can be derived especially after the Babylonian exile in 586-538 BCE when the Jews experienced political instability.²⁴ With the absence of kings and regular prophets, the high priest often functions as both religious and political leader. Steve Mason states that by about 300 BCE or a little earlier, the high priest “became the head of senate or council of elders (*gerousia*).”²⁵ Henceforth, the high priest was regarded as the leader of the nation as well. It is thus possible that the high priest holds certain power even during the Roman period.

2.2. The Jewish Administration after the Arrival of the Romans in Judea: After the Roman administrative system was introduced in Judea, the high priest functions as a presiding officer in the Jewish council or the Sanhedrin. Unlike in the pre-Roman period, the post-Roman period witnesses the high priest’s presiding the council under the restriction of the Roman rulers. In a way, the high priest became puppet at the hands of the Roman rulers. He became a mere “representative of the people of Judea before the procurator,”²⁶ while the procurator controls all the local authorities including religious matters. Therefore, the Jewish priesthood was no longer hereditary after the Roman administrative system was introduced in

²¹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1969), 153. It was a day of fasting, self-denial (on 10th of the 7th month, Tishri) (Lev. 16:29).

²² Mason, *Josephus*, 118-19.

²³ Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible From 500 B. C. to A. D. 100*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 164.

²⁴ Guignebert, *The Jewish World*, 56.

²⁵ Mason, *Josephus*, 119.

²⁶ Reicke, *The New Testament*, 144.



Judea. The procurator holds an authority to appoint and depose the high priest at his will.²⁷ Therefore, it is necessary that the high priest acts according to the supervision of the procurator.²⁸

The procurator was also entrusted by the Roman Emperor to “oversee the revenues flowing into the fisc from the imperial domains and provinces.”²⁹ In other words, the procurator must make sure that taxes are duly collected in and from different provinces and be sent to Rome.³⁰ In Judea, the religious leaders (including the high priest) and the domestic governing body (cf. the Sanhedrin) are expected to be responsible for the returns of the Roman taxes. Charles Guignebert accordingly asserts the possibility of the Jewish Council’s involvement in the raising of taxes for the Roman Emperor.³¹ Therefore, it can be stated that the high priestly office lost its basic function at the implementation of Roman administration in Judea. The Romans turn the high priestly office into a political institution, and also replace the legitimate high priest with the high priest who would serve their interests better.³² As such, the arrival of Romans in Judea marks the birth of aristocracy. As Flavius Josephus reports, “... constitution became an aristocracy, and the high priests were entrusted with the leadership of the nation.”³³

Taxation was also introduced. Roman taxation is of two common types: (i) Tax on agricultural produce, which was paid partly in kind and in money, and (ii) Poll-tax which included various kinds of personal taxes.³⁴ Poll-tax was levied on every male ranging from 14 to 65 years old, and female from 12 to 65 years old.³⁵ There was also tax on water, city, meat and salt, and a house³⁶ and indirect charges on “imports and exports” which include “town

²⁷ Reicke, *The New Testament*, 144.

²⁸ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 110.

²⁹ Reicke, *The New Testament*, 138.

³⁰ Guignebert, *The Jewish World*, 37.

³¹ Guignebert, *The Jewish World*, 54.

³² Mason, *Josephus*, 119.

³³ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish Antiquities*, Book XX, trans. L. H. Feldman, vol. X (London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 20:251.

³⁴ In Syria, a personal tax imposed reaches 1% of one’s property valuation. Schürer, *The History of*, vol. I, 401-02.

³⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988), 53-54.

³⁶ Frederick R. Crownfield, *A Historical Approach to the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1960), 96.



and harbor due, bridge tolls, market fees, and the like.”³⁷ They also collected taxes (civic taxation) for the maintenance of synagogue, schools, public baths and roads, city walls, and gates, and for the support of the poor.³⁸ PHEME PERKINS reports that the number of various taxes crossed hundred.³⁹ It is seemingly that no object, and no sector of the country’s economic life, remained untaxed.⁴⁰ Some of the Jews (e.g. Matthew) are even assumed to take active part in the collection of taxes. Josephus accordingly reported that the Jewish officials went about villages collecting taxes when War was about to begin.⁴¹

3. The Factors Leading to the First Jewish Revolt in 66-70 CE

As a result of the nexus between the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders, the following points can be derived as the factors leading to the first Jewish revolt in 66-70 CE.

3.1. Heavy Taxation: The Romans together with the Jewish religious leaders extracted money with coercion. It is estimated that “altogether Roman taxes, customs, etc., and Jewish religious levies took away 40 percent of a person’s income ...”⁴² Sometimes, collection of taxes was entrusted to the highest bidder. Frederick R. Crownfield asserts that “this system was a breeder of extortion...”⁴³ The Jews suffered from the exploitation of tax – farming because the *publican* collected extra 25% of interest from what they paid to the State.⁴⁴ In this process, the tax collectors always became the beneficiaries and the tax payer the loser.⁴⁵ The sum may be small (8 to 16 talents), but it was sufficient for the *publicans* to procure great wealth.⁴⁶ Sometimes, they are said to have imposed “doubled or tripled” taxation,⁴⁷ charged extra interest for loan, captured the portion of surplus produced by the peasants, and used these agents for personal gain. Gerd Theissen once reported that the priestly aristocracy

³⁷ Guignebert, *The Jewish World*, 39.

³⁸ Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish*, 53.

³⁹ PHEME PERKINS, “Taxes in the New Testament,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12/2 (1984):183.

⁴⁰ Taxes were even collected from slaves. Schürer, *The History of*, vol. I, 403.

⁴¹ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books I – III, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, vol. II (London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 2:405.

⁴² James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 235. Carter posits that the peasants or fisherman gave away about 20 – 40% to the elites. Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 3-4.

⁴³ Crownfield, *A Historical Approach*, 96.

⁴⁴ Albert A. Bell, Jr., *A Guide to the New Testament World* (Pennsylvania: Herald, 1993), 87-88.

⁴⁵ John R. Donahue, “Tax Collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971):43.

⁴⁶ But this example is drawn from the tax farming in Ptolemaic period (ca. 300-30 BC). Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish*, 52.

⁴⁷ Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 88-89.



collected 40 talents while the State demanded only 17 talents. It can then be argued that the peasant revolt and the social banditry in Judean countryside all reflected the oppressive system of taxation.⁴⁸ Because the rich enjoyed life at the expense of the poor peasants, the open protest took place in 66-70 CE.

3.2. Corruption of the High Priest: The Temple received numbers of surplus sacrificial items every year. To mention a few includes grains, lambs, birds, doves, mints, and many more. There were also regular taxes (tithes and first-fruits), shares in the sacrifices, irregular donations.⁴⁹ Theissen questions the way in which these properties were shared and distributed.⁵⁰ Josephus hinted that the high priest did not share with the other priests rather appropriated them for his own.⁵¹ Therefore, other priests who depended on the Temple tithes were “starved to death.”⁵² This phenomenon shows that there was mismanagement of the Temple treasury by the high priest leading to the death of other priests.⁵³

The high priest was also said to have misused his power to procure a large sum of money. He is seen to have practiced “nepotism” by appointing a Temple treasurer or Temple captain from his family members.⁵⁴ Such incident can be drawn from the appointment of Ananus by his father Ananias to be the captain of the Temple, which was the “highest ranking priest after the High Priest.”⁵⁵ Besides, there was “substantial amount that never reached the treasury but was diverted by a horde of tax-collectors and officials, partly as legal perquisites (known as *sportulae*), partly as illegal exaction,” asserts Finley.⁵⁶ Since power was misused for personal gain in all probability, the discontented masses rebelled in 66-70 CE.

3.3. The High Priest’s Failure to Attend to His Religious Duty: The high priest originally received certain privileges out of his religious duty. He had the right to first choose the holy

⁴⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20. 124.

⁴⁹ Donations can be those which are “in connection with oaths and penances.” Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 107.

⁵⁰ Theissen, *Social Reality*, 107.

⁵¹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20. 181.

⁵² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20. 181.

⁵³ Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 99.

⁵⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20. 131

⁵⁵ Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 99, 160.

⁵⁶ M. I. Finley, *Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 90.



things of the temple such as “a sin offering (animal or bird), a guilt offering, a portion of food offering, taken from what remained after the offering had been made on the altar...”⁵⁷ However, when the Romans came to the Judean province in 6 CE, they forced the local rulers to collaborate with them and appointed them as client rulers. The Roman rulers also entrusted them to carry out the State’s interests. The Sanhedrin, in which the high priest acted as a presiding officer, was also said to have participated in the actualization of the State’s interest (e.g., collection of taxes).⁵⁸ Even as the high priest had to serve the Roman rulers and their interest, cultic function does not become the priority of the high priest in the post-arrival of the Romans in Judea. Therefore, the Jews rose up against the Romans.

3.4. The Widening of Social Gap: The Jews believed in theocracy; therefore, there seems to be equality between the rich and the poor in Judean province relatively. However, after the arrival of the Romans in Judea, the Jews largely experienced divisions on the basis of richness and poverty. Thus the Romans widened the gap between the rural dwellers (the poor peasants) and the urban dwellers (the rich). The land productions were brought to the city to be consumed by the elites. Carter posits that “the hard manual work of non-elites and coerced extractions of production sustained the elite’s extravagant and elegant way of life.”⁵⁹ While the elites enjoyed life in cities, the non-elites lived a miserable life in villages where they were vulnerable to different kinds of sicknesses, malnutrition, and the like.⁶⁰ It is estimated that 65% of the land production was shared by the ruling elites of 2-3% of the total population.⁶¹ G. E. Lenski reported that the ruling elites (comprised of 5% of the total population) consumed 50-65% of the land production.⁶² This means that the non-elites comprised of 95% of the total population shared 35-45% of the land production.

The poor peasants suffered the most in times of drought and bad harvest because they had to borrow grain, oil or money from the rich rulers which included the religious leaders as there was no lending bank. Some of the poor peasants may be able to depend on this kind of

⁵⁷ Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 150.

⁵⁸ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 115-16.

⁵⁹ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 11.

⁶⁰ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 10-11.

⁶¹ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 3.

⁶² Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, 2nd edition (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 228, as cited in K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 113.



lending for a short term, but as their debts increased they had no choice but to give up their lands/estates, a son or a daughter into slavery)⁶³ This was how the rich gained their wealth at the expense of the poor peasants suffering from bad harvest.⁶⁴ Worst still was the interests on loan which, according to James B. Adamson, even reached 300% while the Law permits only 12% interest.⁶⁵ The rich rulers, sometimes, demand repayment of debts even “after the Sabbatical Year” whether or not a formal agreement was made.⁶⁶ Therefore, the infuriated Zealots burned the archives in 66 CE in which loans were deposited.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the nexus between the Roman rulers and the Jewish religious authorities has led to the Jewish uprising against Rome. As an imperial state, the Romans established many provinces in different parts of Asia and Europe in which they also introduced new administration. Judea was also one of the provinces which experienced an introduction of Roman administrative system (aristocracy). As a result, the priestly office of the religious administration was turned a secular (political) administration. The main function of Jewish religious leaders becomes carrying out the interests of the Roman Government rather than involving in a religious function. In due course of time, the Jewish religious leaders became greedy and applied every possible ways and means to extract money from their subordinates. Out of greed, they mismanaged the Temple treasury, thereby, leaving the ordinary priests starved to death. Then the poor peasants who were left wanting and infuriated by the greediness of the religious leaders and the Romans, rose against the Romans in 66-70 CE. It can therefore be said that the uprising of the Jewish people against the Romans was the consequence of the nexus between the Roman rulers and the Jewish religious leaders.

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⁶³ Horsley, *Sociology*, 89.

⁶⁴ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 56.

⁶⁵ Jewish Law in fact forbids taking interest (Lev. 25:36-7) though this was exceptional, the Jews could consider up to 12%. Adamson, *James*, 251.

⁶⁶ Goodman, *The Ruling Class*, 57-58.

⁶⁷ E. Bammel, “The Poor and the Zealots,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 113.



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