

**The world of Jesus-**  
**Life in 1<sup>st</sup>. century Palestine study 2**  
Politics: Herodians, Zealots, Sicarii - Galilee



The 1<sup>st</sup> century AD is one of the most violent in the whole history of Israel, culminating with the destruction of the Temple (70AD); the mass suicide at Masada (73AD) and the final doomed revolt of Bar Kochba -“son of the star” cf Num.24v17, (132-135AD).

**“In the blue corner...”**

**The Herodians**

They are on the opposite end of the scale from the hot heads and revolutionaries. As their name suggests they are supporters of the Herodian dynasty. They are not an organised party but rather men who share a particular outlook, i.e. those who support the status quo and who favour accommodation with Rome but an accommodation made more palatable by being mediated through the Jewish ruling family. Hence they come to the fore in Herod Antipas’ reign, rather than that of his father Herod the Great.

They are mentioned in connection with the healing of the man with the paralysed hand on the Sabbath (Mk.3v6) and in the debate over paying taxes to Caesar (Mt.22v16; Mk.12v13). Both times they act in conjunction with the Pharisees, which is highly unusual. Basically the Herodians (and Sadducees) are pro-Roman, pro-Hasmonean and pro-Herodian, whereas the Pharisees are anti-Roman, anti-Hasmonean and anti-Herodian. However their common antipathy to Jesus makes them temporary allies. The politically loaded question about paying taxes is clearly an attempt to push Jesus into the anti-Roman (pro-Zealot?) camp, or at the very least to seek to portray Him in that light. That Herodian aid is also called upon on the purely religious question of keeping the Sabbath probably occurs because the Pharisees are looking for another group of influential people in Galilee with whom to ally against Jesus (and the only other alternative - the Sadducees, are mainly to be found in Jerusalem).

Jesus makes passing allusion to what the Herodians stand for in Mk.8v15, which when taken with Mt.16v6,12 may suggest that some Herodians at least were Sadducees – the party of priests and the aristocracy.

**“In the red corner...”**

**Three Ways of Responding to Oppression**

1. The Discontent and Dispossessed: cf Adullam’s cave (1 Sam.22v1-2).
2. The Zealot: cf Phinehas (Num.25v1-13).
3. The Martyr: cf Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan.3v8-18).

**Why do the resistance movements arise in Judea?**

- Oppression and Corruption.
- Debt, Poverty and Unemployment, with many peasant farmers landless and homeless.
- Hellenisation
- A Compromised indigenous leadership (both civil and religious)
- A perceived erosion of the faith
- Hopelessness

**“Bandits” – (Gr. *Lestes*)**

This is the word that Josephus always uses of those who resist the authorities.

**1. Economic “Bandits”**

There had always been the landless and the dispossessed in Israel, as David had used to his advantage. Now, powerless and oppressed first by Herod and his cronies and then by Rome, groups of *lestes* begin to emerge. These are often peasant farmers, dispossessed of their ancestral lands due to poverty and debt (NB the number of Jesus’ parables about unemployment and debt). Their primary motivation is economic – witness the fact that the first action that the Zealots take on conquering Jerusalem is to destroy all the records of debt held in the Temple. Later, one of their number will announce the emancipation of all Jewish slaves. However such actions are not simply economic or self-serving, for many see themselves as in some way helping in the establishment of the Messianic kingdom.

The declaration of manumission is also a deliberate echo of Isa.61v1. Such movements as that led by Hezekiah, during and after the reign of Herod the Great, form the seed bed of the movement that comes to be known as the Zealots.

Following the accession of Archelaus as Ethnarch of Judea, he proves to be worse than his father Herod the Great. Not only is his mother is a Samaritan but even before his rule is ratified by the Emperor in Rome, he sets his troops upon pilgrims worshipping in the Temple and kills 3,000. Then whilst he is in Rome and Jerusalem and the country is in an uproar, the Roman governor in Syria moves in to keep the peace and also unleashes his troops upon the city and the Temple. Thus in the space of 50 days, the Temple is looted and desecrated twice. Fertile recruiting ground for a resistance movement.

### **Religious “Bandits”**

When Herod is appointed to Galilee, he undertakes a vigorous campaign against a well-known *Istes*, named Hezekiah, finally capturing and executing him along with many others. His conduct gives rise to a formal complaint and Herod is summoned before the Sanhedrin to answer for his behaviour. He is acquitted but the fact that these complaints were listened to and gave rise to a formal trial, indicates that some (at least) of Hezekiah’s band including he himself, were not simply dispossessed peasants but were people of some social standing.

It is unlikely that they are simply “Robin Hoods” but rather are in fact reacting to the perceived encroachment of pagan, foreign ways into the life of the nation. In that sense in a direct line from the Maccabees. Herod himself exacerbates the situation when king by his policy of introducing athletic games, sacrificing in honour of the Emperor etc. and many devout Jews believe that as an Idumaeen (or “Edomite”), Herod has no right to be king anyway. Significantly, Jews will give the name “Edom” or “Edomite” to Rome’s rule of the world.

## **2. Zealots - Judas the Galilean.**

*“Everyone who sheds the blood of godless men is like one who offers a sacrifice”*

These take the person of Phinehas as their inspiration, seeing themselves as the avenging hand of God upon Gentiles and those Jews who do not obey God’s Law. In time they will become the worst sort of punishment from God that a person could think of: *“If a man stole a sacred vessel, or cursed by the name of God, or took a [non-Israelite] as his wife, may Zealots fall upon him”* [m.Sanh.9.6].

Some think that Judas is the son of the Hezekiah whom Herod had executed and who some 10 years earlier had led a revolt in the Galilean capital of Sepphoris. Now, some 10 years after the death of Herod and when Archelaus is in exile, Judas once again leads a revolt against the attempt by the Roman authorities in 6AD to impose a census (Acts 5v37). A census only takes place for the purpose of raising taxes, and to pay taxes to Caesar is to acknowledge his lordship over God’s Promised Land and his lordship over those whose king is the Lord. Judas’ co leader is a Pharisee named Sadduq, which suggests a radical wing of the Pharisaic party gives not just its support but supplies a theological rationale to their actions. The fact that Judas is known by the nickname, Judas the *Galilean*, also suggests that the disturbances go further afield than simply Galilee. (You are only described as being a Galilean when you are no longer in Galilee).

Eventually the Zealots will form the backbone and heart of the revolt against Rome and the final stand both in Jerusalem and later at Masada. However they are far from being a unified, organised movement and much of their energy will be spent – even in the very last hours of the siege of Jerusalem – in seeking to destroy one another, in bitter and bloody conflict.

### **The Sicarii**

The *Sicarii* are so named after their weapon of choice, a curved dagger which was easy to conceal inside a person’s long, flowing clothes (Latin: *sica* – a dagger). The word *sica* itself is derived from the Latin word *sicarius*, which means *murderer* or *assassin* cf Acts 21v38 lit. *sicarii*. They are part of the overall Zealot movement, either a small splinter group of the Zealots (cf the IRA; the Provisional IRA; the Real IRA), or a separate and distinct party, or maybe simply distinguished by their chosen method of assassination. It may be they who, unsuccessful in the internecine feuding in Jerusalem, flee to Masada and there finally commit mass suicide. Where they most differ from the typical Zealot, is that they operate mainly in or from the towns and cities, whereas most Zealot bands operate out of the fastness of their caves and strongholds deep in the countryside.

Although it will be a decade or so after Herod the Great's death that the Sicarii make an appearance, their roots are already clear. Because of his disregard for the Law and support of Hellenisation, ten men bound themselves by oaths in an unsuccessful attempt on the king's life.

The Sicarii take as their inspiration Ehud in Judges 3v12-30, and target Romans and Jewish "collaborators", including on one occasion a high-priest. Because they are so hard to identify or to track down, the Sicarii become a particular nightmare both to the Roman occupying forces and also to those who choose to work with the Romans, in particular the urban rich and the wealthy landowners living in their isolated and vulnerable farmsteads. It may be that it is a group of Sicarii who take it upon themselves to murder Paul. The sort of threat that a group of religiously motivated Jews prepared to use violence to attain their ends poses (whether Sicarii or not), is illustrated by the extreme lengths to which the Roman commander goes to keep Paul safe (Acts 23v12-15, 20-21, 23-24).

### **Galilee**

As the place from which the founder of the Zealot movement had arisen and as a district which had risen on more than one occasion against Herod the Great, Galilee was considered to be a troublesome and somewhat lawless place. There is some evidence to suggest that by Jesus' day, to be called a "Galilean" might not simply have been a comment about where a person came from geographically but also about where they stood politically. In a document concerning a supposed discussion between a Zealot and a group of hostile Pharisees, the Zealot is described by the Pharisees as being "a Galilean heretic." And the Greek writer Epictetus (55AD–13AD) also describes the Zealots as *Galileans*.

### **The War against Rome 66 – 73 AD**

An increasing pattern of insurrection followed by brutal oppression, inevitably leads to the final showdown with Rome. Fuelled by Messianic expectations which begin to see Rome as the final Gentile power to be overthrown by God ("the rock not made by human hands" of Dan.2v34,44-45), various "prophets" arise as second Moses, or Joshuas or Elijahs, precursors of the Messiah and of his kingdom. e.g. Theudas leads his followers to the Jordan in the belief that at his word it will miraculously part before them (Acts 5v36): an Egyptian appears on the Mount of Olives, claiming that the walls of Jerusalem will fall flat as the walls did at Jericho and usher in the kingdom of God (Acts 21v27ff).

Eleazar, the captain of the Temple takes the first step by refusing to offer the daily sacrifice made for the Emperor. The Jews are allowed to sacrifice *for* the Emperor, rather than *to* the Emperor – a fine distinction to a Zealot! This is tantamount to a declaration of rebellion and a few days later the Antonine fortress is taken and the Roman garrison massacred. Almost immediately the Jewish party is split three ways, between a peace party seeking accommodation with Rome, even at this late stage; the priests and others, led by Eleazar; and a group of Zealots, led by Menahem, the last surviving son of Judas the Galilean who led the revolt against the census some sixty years before. In a bitter power struggle, Eleazar attacks Menahem and his followers whilst they are worshiping in the Temple, and many are killed including Menahem himself.

The Roman procurator (Florus) is powerless and even when the legate in Syria comes south with a whole legion, he is forced to withdraw, realising that he cannot subdue the city. His withdrawal and subsequent costly retreat convinces many in Judea that the time of Messiah is coming and fatally weakens the peace party. However the Romans inevitably return in 69AD and this time under the command of an experienced general, Vespasian, at the head of three legions and auxiliaries – 60,000 men. He quickly subdues Galilee and marches on Jerusalem. However, once again there appears to be divine intervention, when the Emperor Nero commits suicide and Vespasian has to return to Rome (eventually becoming Emperor himself). Instead of taking the time to consolidate their position, the resistance movement in Jerusalem continues to pursue its destructive course of internecine violence.

In 70 AD Vespasian's son Titus invests the Jerusalem and this time there will be no reprieve. However so confident are many Jews of the outcome, that just prior to the siege, the city becomes flooded with pilgrims who have come up to celebrate the annual Passover festival. The added number of inhabitants adds to the horrors of siege – famine – cannibalism – disease. (Their desperate situation still does not prevent the defenders from killing each other as well as the besieging Romans.) Eventually the city begins to fall bit by bit and on August 29<sup>th</sup> 70AD (the anniversary of the sack of the first Temple by the Babylonians in 587BC), the Temple is seized and destroyed. The Roman legions sacrifice to their standards in honour of the Emperor – another "abomination of desolation" – and 700 of the inhabitants who survive the sack of the city and Temple are taken into slavery or death in Rome. The rebellion finally ends at Masada 73 AD.

## Jesus and the Zealot Movement

In the challenge of paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus' enemies are clearly trying to corner Jesus into giving a statement that could be interpreted as supporting the Zealots in their refusal to pay taxes to Rome. He is arrested as if a rebel leader (Mt.26v47,55) and is executed as a "King of the Jews" (Jn.19v19-22). On occasions He has indeed uttered things which might be interpreted as supporting the Zealot movement (Mt.10v34; Lk.22v36). In fact of course Jesus' teaching and lifestyle are in complete and utter contrast to the Zealot's violent opposition to their oppressors (e.g. Lk.6v27-30; Jn.18v33-38).

### Did Jesus' have ex-Zealots amongst His disciples?

Simon the *Zealot* (Lk.6v15; Acts 1v13): a.k.a Simon the *Cananean* (Mt.10v4; Mk.3v18, though translated as *Zealot* in the NIV), where the Greek *ho kananaois* is a translation of the Aramaic *qan'an* i.e. Zealot. He is, however, clearly an ex-Zealot, otherwise Matthew the tax collector wouldn't have survived more than five minutes!

Simon *Bar-Jona* (Mt.16v17): which is clearly a patronymic, derived from Simon son of John (Jn.1v42; 21v15). However the Babylonian Talmud calls the rebels in Jerusalem by a specific name – *Barjone*, probably meaning a *rebel* or an *outlaw*. So at the very least a somewhat awkward name for Peter to possess! (*Talmud* = a compendium of rabbinic law, edited 500AD but containing much older material)

Galilee: becomes a centre for Jewish nationalism and resistance first to Herod and then to Rome. It is in Galilee that Hezekiah had first operated and it was to rebel twice more against him as king. On one occasion he fines the cities of Galilee 100 talents both to discourage them from giving aid and support to the *Istes* but it is also an indication of how widespread was their support is for the resistance movement. As the first "proper" Zealot leader is Judas the Galilean and he is given special support in Galilee, on occasions his followers appear to have been called *Galileans*. If this surmise is correct then it gives added impetus both to the accusation and to Peter's panicked denial in the high-priest's courtyard (Mk.14v70-71).

Jesus is crucified in the company of *Istes* (Mt.27v38; Mk.15v27) & Bar-Abbas (Jn.18v18; Mk.15v7).

## 3. Martyrs

A view of martyrdom both as the ultimate way of honouring God in the face of persecution but also as prayer begins to surface in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (cf Gen.4v10; Ex.22v22-24).

- Martyrdom is seen as part of the eschatological time of great distress, where Israel is tested by God's refining anger.
- Martyrdom is seen as a call upon God to avenge the death of the righteous. e.g. The death of the innocent was viewed as one way in which Antiochus Epiphanes was ultimately defeated.
- Martyrdom is seen as bringing about God's mercy for an individual or for the whole nation. One of the rabbinic models is that of – the *Akedah*, or *Binding of Isaac* (Gen.22). In one writing Abraham actually offers up Isaac and pious Jews would implore God to impute to them the righteousness of their ancestors and especially of Abraham who surrendered his son in obedience to God's command, in the *Akedah* or the Binding of Isaac.
- Martyrdom is seen as being connected with resurrection and immortality. Two rabbis encouraged some of their students to remove a golden eagle which Herod had set up in the Temple. Their willingness (even desire) to be martyred is evident by their actions.
- Martyrdom is seen as preferable to imprisonment, where it would be impossible to keep the Law; where women might suffer degradation and where children would be brought up as pagans. Thus suicide comes to be seen as a kind of self-martyrdom.

## In Conclusion

Jesus is born into and ministers into a country which is on the edge of erupting into violence, fuelled by economic and political oppression, poor government, weak leadership and by increasingly powerful dreams and hopes of the coming of the Messiah.

He emerges out of Galilee – the hotbed of revolutionary fervour – with a message of the coming of the Kingdom of God, gathering followers around him and doing what the Messiah does: healing the sick, feeding the hungry and driving out demons.

Within his band of disciples is at least one from the Zealot party and when Jesus rides in triumph into Jerusalem to cleanse the Temple, it is small wonder that the Jewish authorities are so alarmed, fearing for their own position and the wrath of Rome.

