Rome versus Jerusalem
The great Jewish revolt and its causes

5. Leadership failures

Peter L. Osborne

The final article in this series shows how bad leadership from the emperor, the Roman governors and the high priests contributed to the outbreak of the revolt of A.D. 66–73.

The previous articles have discussed how economic problems and a widespread hope for the coming of Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of God provided impetus for the Jewish revolt. If the administration of Judea had been competent, the economic problems could have been effectively addressed and the revolutionary influences in Judean society contained.

There were three layers of government responsible for the administration of Judea:
- imperial (based in Rome)
- the Roman governors within the province
- the native Jewish leadership.

All three layers of administration were inept in the years leading up to the revolt. In this we can perceive the hand of Providence.

Failure of the imperial administration

From A.D. 54 to A.D. 68, Nero reigned as emperor over the Roman Empire. It seems that for the first five years of his reign his administration was sound, owing largely to the influence of those around him. However, in A.D. 59, after he had his mother stabbed to death because of her opposition to his affair with a woman he adored, his restraints began to be removed.

Increasingly, he was preoccupied with indulging his personal aspirations in the arts rather than paying attention to good government. He performed as a singer, harpist and charioteer in the quinquennial (five-yearly) games in A.D. 60. In A.D. 61 he built a gymnasium and baths, and he appeared on the stage in Naples in A.D. 64. In A.D. 66, the year of the revolt, Nero travelled to Greece to perform in all the Greek games.

Political events also served to distract him from government. The burning of Rome in A.D. 64 led to widespread dissatisfaction with Nero. In A.D. 65 he discovered a conspiracy involving several senators and other members of the wealthy classes. Increasingly insecure after this, he ordered the deaths of a series of prominent figures, whom he perceived as threats, over a period that lasted until after the Judean revolt had commenced. Nero’s attention was elsewhere as the situation in Judea deteriorated into revolt.

The imperial administration, even before Nero, underestimated the potential for trouble in Judea and so failed to give the province the attention it needed. The size of the military force was inadequate and its composition hostile to Jewish interests. In A.D. 44, when Judea and Galilee were incorporated as one province, the territory essentially doubled but the garrison was not enlarged. The troops were from Caesarea and Sebaste, which was a mistake, for many were hostile to the Jews. Josephus rightly indicates that this contributed to the revolt. The soldiers provoked trouble on two occasions.

Moreover, according to Josephus, Nero “held the nation in contempt”, perhaps because he was distracted by other things. A number of Nero’s decisions regarding the province were influenced by the personal interests of those close to him rather than by a considered strategy. For example, when the leaders of the Jewish community of Caesarea complained to Nero about Felix (the Roman governor mentioned in Acts), their com-
plaints were dismissed because of the influence of Pallas, Nero’s freedman (ex-slave) and Felix’s brother. Again, Nero annulled a grant of equal civic rights to the Jews of Caesarea after the Syrians of that city bribed a high official to influence him. According to Josephus, the civic-rights issue in Caesarea was one of the factors that triggered the revolt.

Failure of the governors
One could not expect the emperor in Rome to manage the day-to-day affairs of each province. Administering the provinces was a matter of delegation. The emperor’s competence lay in understanding the province and appointing the right man to be governor. It was in this crucial area that Nero and some of his predecessors failed. The men appointed to be governors were quite lowly members of Rome’s hierarchy. Tacitus implies that the Roman knights and freedmen (ex-slaves) appointed as governors of the province tested the endurance of the Jewish people.

The five governors who administered the province in the years preceding the revolt proved incapable of effectively containing the increasing unrest. Josephus records three incidents during the administration of one of them, Cumanus, which led to considerable loss of Jewish lives.

The last incident required the intervention of the Syrian governor. Cumanus was sent to Rome to face an inquiry, where he was found guilty of misconduct and exiled.

The performance of Felix, the next procurator, was no better. Felix’s administration was characterised by increasing unrest. Tacitus accuses him of exercising “the power of a king in the spirit of a slave” and asserts that he “stimulated disloyal acts” by “ill-timed remedies”. Some of Tacitus’s upper-class snobbery is at work here, because Felix was a freedman. But his assessment of Felix’s competence seems to be confirmed by events.

The high priest, Jonathan, frequently admonished him to improve his administration. According to Josephus, Felix arranged for the Sicarii to assassinate Jonathan, an act that evidently compromised his campaign against the revolutionaries, since Josephus indicates: “As the murder went unpunished, from that time forward the brigands [acted] with perfect impunity”.1 Jonathan had influenced the appointment of Felix, and this likely placed Felix under an increasingly odious obligation to Jonathan.

Again, Felix’s handling of the tension between Syrians and Jews in Caesarea was less than even-handed, one example of his provocative “ill-timed remedies”. He was unable to quell the increasing tension over the issue, and, when street warfare broke out over it, Felix sent in his troops, a number of whom were Caesarean Syrians, natural enemies of the Jews. Not unexpectedly, many Jews were killed and their houses plundered.

Little is known of Felix’s successor, Festus, also mentioned in Acts, but Josephus is scathingly critical of the two procurators who administered the province just before the outbreak of the revolt. Of Albinus he states, “there was no form of villainy which he omitted to practise”.2 Josephus’s criticism should be treated with caution, because much of his hostility derives from the fiscal measures that the procurator had to introduce.3 Nevertheless, the procurator appears to have adopted measures that involved the release of revolutionaries from jail, with the result that “the prison was cleared of inmates and the land was infested with brigands”.4

Florus, the next procurator, is the subject of even more invective from Josephus. Again some exaggeration is likely here, since Florus was the last procurator before the revolt, and it was in Josephus’s interests to attribute blame to Florus, rather than the Jews, for its outbreak. Nevertheless, Tacitus seems to support Josephus’s assessment by suggesting that the Jews reached the limit of their endurance of corrupt and inept procurators under Florus. His appointment seems to be a clear case of a lack of due care on the part

2. Wars of the Jews, 2.272.
3. See article 3, Mar. 2005, p. 82.
of the emperor. According to Josephus, Nero was influenced in his choice by his wife Poppæa, who was a friend of Florus’s wife. Florus’s provocative and violent management of the increasing unrest was one of the factors that triggered the revolt.

**Failure of the Jewish rulers**

The competence of the Jewish ruling classes was of equal importance to that of the Roman administrators. The Romans typically relied on the native administration to manage the day-to-day affairs of the province. With this end in view, they aimed to Romanise the local élite. The local rulers were expected to keep order, gather taxes and act as an interface between the Roman administration and the native population. In Judea the high priest was entrusted with this role. He seems to have been supported by the Sanhedrin, a council whose exact role is unclear. From the New Testament and Josephus, however, it is plain that the high priest consulted with this body.

The problem faced by the Romans when they annexed Judea was that no long-standing and widely respected élite existed to entrust with power. Herod had eliminated from the ruling classes his enemies of the previous régime and promoted his supporters. He had to keep any possible areas of opposition weak, so he appointed nonentities to the position of high priest. When the Romans took power, Herod’s sycophants must have dominated the remaining élite. It was these, therefore, to whom the Romans had to entrust power.

However, the people hated Herod, and his supporters were not popular. When he died, the Jews wanted Herod’s favourites punished and the high priest appointed by him to be deposed. Hence the ruling élite that was in place before the revolt lacked the all-important support of the people.

The high priest’s authority was further undermined because non-Jewish interests controlled the office. From A.D. 6 to A.D. 44, with the exception of the short reign of Agrippa, the Roman governor appointed the high priests. He also held the high priest’s vestments, essential to the performance of his duties. In A.D. 44, Herod of Chalcis was able to convince Claudius to give him the right to appoint high priests. This is further evidence that the emperors who reigned immediately before the revolt had little or no awareness of the sensitivities of the province.

Thus from A.D. 44 until the outbreak of the revolt, Herodian princes controlled the appointment of the high priest, and the choice of office-bearer rested with princes, who had no direct control over Judea. The authority of the office was further compromised by the frequency with which high priests were deposed. In the ten years before the revolt, the high priest was changed at least six times. In the event, the office became so politicised that it appears from a passage in the Mishnah that the high priests sometimes did not know how to perform temple rites.

However, the high priests had not commanded the respect of the people from the time when the province of Judea was first established in A.D. 6. Although the high priest Joazar bar Boethus was able to convince some Jews to submit passively to the census of A.D. 6, Josephus indicates that “the populace . . . responded gladly” to the appeals of Judas of Galilee to resist the Romans because of it. Soon after, Joazar was deposed “by popular faction”.

**Ineffective high priests**

The complete inability, or unwillingness, of the high priests to maintain order was demonstrated many times in the years leading up to the revolt. The people’s willingness to resort to mass protest in dealing with issues involving the Romans shows the lack of sway that the high priests had with the population. Mass protests occurred when Pilate brought a legion bearing images into Jerusalem, when Gaius attempted to place a statue of himself in the temple and when a scroll of the Law was publicly desecrated by a soldier during Cumanus’s administration. In each of these cases, there is no mention of involvement by the high priest, in either protesting to the Romans or attempting to quell the unrest. During the crisis that arose over Gaius’s statue, Petronius, the Roman general who had the task of placing the statue in the temple, negotiated with civic leaders, Aristobulus, and directly with the crowd of protesters, but never with the high priest.

The people again responded with mass action to retaliate against the Samaritans for the murder of Galilean pilgrims during the administration of Cumanus. The Galilean leaders went directly to Cumanus to complain when the incident first occurred, bypassing the high priest. When Cumanus failed to do anything about it and the Jews took up arms against the Samaritans, Josephus writes that those who in Jerusalem were “in authority”

---

The Testimony, May 2005

(Antiquities), or “the magistrates” (Wars), possibly the Sanhedrin, attempted to mollify the crowd. Though it is possible that the high priest was included in the group mentioned by Josephus, he does not mention this. In any case, the crowd “paid no heed” to the group.

It was only after Cumanus and his troops had largely subdued the Jewish fighters that the Jerusalem leaders were able to convince the Jews to lay down their arms and go home. The high priest finally makes an appearance in Josephus’s narrative after this when he and the notables complained to Quadratus, the Syrian governor, about Cumanus’s conduct. Later Quadratus sent the high priest, ex-high priest and captain of the temple to Rome in chains “to render an account of their actions”. This indicates that the governor held the high priest responsible for failing to prevent the outbreak of disorder.

Though the high priests opposed the revolt, they proved unable to deal with the escalating unrest that led to it. Again, in the final months before the outbreak, Josephus indicates that it was not the high priests but the crowd of Passover pilgrims that protested to Cestius Gallus, the Syrian governor, about Florus. Mass protests occurred that the high priests seemed unable to prevent or control, and Florus treated the somewhat belated intercessions made by the high priests on behalf of the people with contempt. When at last the high priests did intervene to prevent unrest, the people were reluctant to comply and unrest quickly broke out again.

In the end, when the temple captain refused to accept sacrifices on behalf of the emperor, so signalling the beginning of the revolt, the high priests pleaded at length for the sacrifices to be recommenced, but their pleas were in vain. The contempt in which the revolutionaries held the position is shown by how the Zealots eschewed the “claims of those families from which in turn the high priests had always been drawn” and “appointed to that office ignoble and low born individuals”.8

The inevitable outcome

So the administration of Judea, the Jewish rulers, Roman governors and emperors were unable to prevent the inevitable onset of the revolt. It was the foreordained retribution for the Jewish rejection of their God and their Messiah, and the hand of Providence can be seen in the inept leadership of Judea in the years leading to the revolt. However, Judea of Christ’s day was more directly the author of its own dissolution. The Jerusalem elite, through their greed and avarice, contributed largely to the economic troubles that played such an important part in bringing on the revolt. The Law enjoined them to alleviate poverty (Deut. 15:7,8), but it seems they did little to prevent rural poverty from flourishing, and they were unwilling to relieve the burden of Roman taxation. To many of them, a better solution was to remove Rome’s rulership. How could they be successful in overthrowing a much more powerful nation? By precipitating a revolt against Rome they would force God’s intervention and so bring on the Kingdom of God.

Their fundamental problem was that they were rooted in the present material world, not the spiritual, and they had an inflated opinion of God’s regard for them. This ultimately led to the dissolution of the nation, but it was also a primary reason for their rejection of Christ’s message. They saw no need for repentance, nor did they understand the moral aspects of his redemptive work. They rejected Christ because he threatened the status quo. So the attitudes which led them to reject Jesus precipitated the revolt and their own destruction.

But God has not forgotten His promises to their fathers. Israel will be humbled and will accept their Messiah. A temple and priesthood will be established at Jerusalem. But it will be on the sure foundations of moral redemption wrought by Jesus and the spiritual temple he is now building.

(Concluded)

Selected further reading


8. Ibid., 4.147–9.