

THE SLIDE TO RUIN

When Aristobulus I, son of John Hyrcanus, died in 103 B.C. after a brief reign of only a year, it seemed as though the future of the Jewish state was guaranteed. The Seleucid kingdom of Antioch was so torn by struggles between rival claimants to the throne, that once Antiochus VII (Sidetes) had died, there was nothing to be feared from there. John Hyrcanus had occupied Idumea, i.e. that part of southern Judea that had been settled by Edomites, and offered the inhabitants the choice of accepting Judaism or exile. Later he captured Samaria, destroying the temple on Mt. Gerizim, but he did not interfere with their religion otherwise. Aristobulus occupied Galilee and part of Iturea in the foothills of Lebanon. Here too the inhabitants were given the choice of Judaism or exile. This policy was to be followed later by Alexander Jannai, at least in some of his conquests. It was not dictated either by fanaticism or political motives alone. In all these areas part of the population stemmed from the poorer Judean and Israelite elements that had not gone into exile, so there was a considerable knowledge of the Mosaic revelation diffused among the people. This, and the conviction that Palestine, both the original Judean territory and the areas conquered by the Hasmonean priest-kings, was Jehovah's land made conformity easy for the majority. Since, however, there is no suggestion in first century A.D. Jewish sources that heathen beliefs and practices had lingered on in these areas, it seems probable that Judaism had been quietly making its way both in Idumea in the south and Galilee in the north quite a time before their conquest.

The Hasmonean rulers could not foresee that they were providing some of the high explosive that was to destroy the second Jewish commonwealth.

Alexander Jannai (103-76 B.C.)

Alexander Jannai, or Jannaeus, was Aristobulus' eldest brother. He was a man filled with the joy of battle and the lust for conquest. When he died, his territories stretched down the Mediterranean coast to the frontiers of Egypt, thus making Philistia Jewish for the first time. East of Jordan he had captured most of the Decapolis as well as Gilead and the ancient territories of Moab as well as part of northern Edom. Yet his acquisitions had been dearly bought. He suffered four major defeats, and some of his victories were almost as costly in lives as his defeats. His forces consisted mainly of mercenaries, whose support necessitated heavy taxation. For six years he was involved in a bitter civil war, and it was finally only the fear of foreign domination that rallied his subjects to him.

Though defeat and heavy taxation played their part, the chief reason for his

unpopularity was religious. It was not deliberate on his part, but he acted as the catalyst to bring the growing tensions and divisions among the people to a head.

From all the accounts we have of him, it is hard to believe that he had much, if any, genuine religion. He was essentially "a man of blood", and it offended every genuine susceptibility that such a man should function as high priest. In addition he had married Aristobulus' childless widow, Alexandra Shelom-Zion or Salome. While this would have been justified by the law of levirate marriage (Deut. 25: 5-10), it was expressly forbidden to the high priest (Lev. 21: 13, 14, cf. Ezek. 44: 22). The ruling in the Mishnah, "The king . . . may not contract levirate marriage nor may his brothers contract levirate marriage with his widow" (*San.* 2: 2), is probably intended to rule out the possibility of any repetition of his action on the plea that the king took precedence over the priest. The bitter dislike shown by some of his subjects against him as priest is shown by the fact that in the year 90, when he was preparing to officiate at the altar during the feast of Tabernacles, he was pelted with the *etrogim* (citrons) the festival pilgrims were carrying and insulted by shouted insinuations against the legitimacy of his birth. He displayed his character by turning his guards loose on the demonstrators. Josephus claims that about six thousand were killed (*Ant.* XIII. xiii. 5).

All this was rendered even worse for some by his support of the Sadducees, a policy inherited from his father. It will be remembered that this was more or less forced on John Hyrcanus, because the Pharisees objected to his having assumed the position of king.

As we saw in the previous chapter, this led the Teacher of Righteousness and his disciples to withdraw to Qumran and to abandon the political community as beyond hope of regeneration. The Pharisees and their supporters, on the other hand, decided to fight, even though some of their number will have tried to hold aloof. It was probably in this period that the support of the common man, who had little interest in religious parties, switched decisively to the Pharisees. Quite apart from other weaknesses the Sadducees had become compromised by their close association with the hated King Jannai.

Josephus estimates that 50,000 Jews were killed in the fighting that followed (*Ant.* XIII. xiii. 5). The ill success of the rebels caused them to call in Demetrius III of Antioch to their help. The very magnitude of Jannai's defeat at Shechem caused a revulsion of feeling among the more nationalistic. Demetrius withdrew and the Pharisaic party was crushed.

Jannai's revenge was terrible. Let Josephus tell how he dealt with the captured leaders. "As he was feasting with his concubines, in the sight of all the city, he ordered about eight hundred of them to be crucified, and while they were living ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes" (*Ant.* XIII. xiv. 2). We need not be surprised that some eight thousand of the survivors chose voluntary exile until after the king's death.

There is some excuse for Jannai. His father had disliked him, possibly with good reason, and had shown his feelings by designating his younger brother Aristobulus as his successor. He had grown up in Galilee, where he had

received a thoroughly Hellenistic, i.e. largely pagan, education. Contemporary kings probably commended his strong-arm methods.

S. Zeitlin summarizes the reason for the Pharisaic opposition as follows:

They believed he had made Judaea a secular kingdom. They regarded him as a Hellenistic ruler who was a Judaeans only by birth. They also opposed his conquest of new territories and his forcing of the inhabitants to accept Judaism. This, to them, was a travesty of religious belief. The Pharisees favoured proselytism, but only by propaganda and teaching, not by force. Furthermore they feared that the conquest of new territories, inhabited by Syrians and Greeks, would have a demoralizing influence on the Judaeans.*

The Pharisees might believe that it was wrong to spread Judaism by force, but they had yet to learn that they must not impose their views on their fellow-Israelites by similar methods. Some of the more spiritual will have learnt from the disaster that had struck them, but most were embittered and bided their time until they could hit back at those who had smitten them so grievously.

Alexandra Salome (76–67 B.C.)

On his death-bed, because of the youth of his sons, Jannai passed the throne on to his wife. Josephus is probably correct in saying that he advised her to “put some of her authority into the hands of the Pharisees”. If tradition is correct, and there is no reason for doubting it, she was the sister of Shimon ben Shetah, one of the Pharisaic leaders, and so she needed no urging to carry out her husband’s advice. Indeed she so handed over authority to the Pharisees, that Josephus could say, “She had indeed the name of the ruler, but the Pharisees had the authority” (*Ant.* XIII. xvi. 2).

It is comprehensible that the Pharisees could not restrain their desire for revenge. The Sadducees found their traditions set aside, traditions of a religious nature sincerely held and for the most part probably far older than those of the Pharisees, who in this period seem very often to have been the innovators, even if the innovations were often religiously wise and progressive. The greater the loyalty of a Sadducee to Jannai had been, the more his life was in danger. Their leader, Diogenes, and others were murdered by the Pharisees. In estimating such accusations, it should not be forgotten that Josephus, our authority, was himself a Pharisee.

What the outcome might have been need not be speculated on. The future was shaped by the fact that the queen’s elder son, Hyrcanus, was a supporter of the Pharisees, while the younger, Aristobulus, was regarded by the Sadducees as their only hope. This division in outlook was no mere natural by-product of the rivalry between the brothers but was an expression of their character and outlook. Hyrcanus, as the elder, had become high priest and was the heir apparent. He was a quiet and unambitious man, and there is no evidence from his tragic life that he desired high position. Aristobulus, however, showed his father’s character, and the queen was merely recognizing the facts of the situation when she appointed him commander in chief of the army.

When the ageing queen was confronted with a Sadducean deputation,

* *The Rise and Fall of the Judaeans State*, Vol. I, p. 328.

which included Aristobulus, which claimed that their existence was being threatened, she allowed them to occupy some of the most important fortresses in the country. This would, almost certainly, have brought civil war, then and there, had the queen not been fortunate enough to die at the ripe age of seventy-three after nine years on the throne.

The queen's favour had made the Pharisees not merely ministers and lawmakers but also the judges. So later generations, dominated by the Pharisaic outlook, looked back to her reign as the golden age of Hasmonean rule, the more so as the land had at long last rest from war. In addition we may well assume, since there is no evidence to the contrary, that it was only on the Sadducees and not on the common people that their hand lay heavily. The Talmud relates that under her rule, "the grains of wheat were as large as kidneys, the grains of barley like olive-kernels, and the beans like golden denarii" (*Taan.* 23). The bitter truth is that even a much stronger ruler could not have averted the sorrows to come; she made them certain.

For all that, to whomever the credit should be given, her reign was the Indian summer of the period that had started so gloriously with the heroic struggle against Antiochus Epiphanes. It was natural, therefore, that men should look back to this period with longing and that even nature should be credited with exceptional bounty. We find the same, when many in Britain look back to the allegedly halcyon days of Edward VII and Queen Victoria.

Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II (67–63 B.C.)

Hyrcanus automatically followed his mother on the throne, but Aristobulus was able almost immediately to collect an army and attack him. When the armies met near Jericho, so many of the royal troops deserted to Aristobulus, that Hyrcanus fled to Jerusalem. When his brother followed him, he gave up both crown and high-priesthood, probably with great relief, on the sole condition that he could enjoy his personal estate so long as he did not meddle in public affairs.

Well would it have been for him and for the Jews, if he had been allowed to follow his natural desires and to sink into obscurity. But just because Aristobulus was the champion of the Sadducees, who had returned to power through him, many of the Pharisees looked to Hyrcanus to restore the favoured position which they had enjoyed under Queen Salome.

The decisive influence came, however, from another source, viz. a wealthy Idumean called Antipater. As the father of the famous, or infamous, Herod the Great he has shared in the glorification or vilification of his son. Hence all statements about his birth are suspect. S. Zeitlin sums up all that can be said with reasonable certainty:

The chief schemer to place Hyrcanus back on the throne was Antipater, whose father, also named Antipater, was the *strategos* (military governor) of Idumaea at the time of Jannaeus Alexander and Salome Alexandra . . . Antipater was born in Idumaea and was a Judaeen by religion. Whether his father was one of those Idumaeans whom John Hyrcanus I had given the choice of accepting Judaism or going into exile, or simply a native Judaeen who had settled in Idumaea, makes no difference to

his religious status. According to the view of the Pharisees, a person whose ancestors were proselytes was a Judæan of equal religious status with a native of ancient lineage. Only the Sadducees held otherwise.*

If Antipater the elder was really a proselyte, he must have been an exceptional man to obtain such an important position. It seems more likely that he was a Jew by birth. This seems the more likely because other stories were invented to cast discredit on Herod's birth.

There is little to be gained by speculating about Antipater's reasons and motives. F. F. Bruce is probably correct, when he says:

At any rate, Antipater was one of those men who are wise enough in their generation to realize that it is much more important to have the substance of power than its titles. His idea was that Hyrcanus should regain the titles of power in order that he himself, as the power behind Hyrcanus' throne, should enjoy the substance.†

Antipater joined hands with Aretas III, king of the Nabateans, whose interest it was that a weak king should sit on the throne in Jerusalem. Both brought pressure to bear on Hyrcanus to convince him that his life was in danger from Aristobulus. Though there is no grain of evidence to support this, so many brothers of kings in that period met a premature and violent end, that Hyrcanus can be excused for believing the worst about Aristobulus' intentions. Finally he fled to Petra, Aretas' capital. Aretas placed a large army at his disposal at the price of twelve cities, which had earlier been captured from the Nabateans.

Aristobulus was heavily defeated and besieged in Jerusalem. So deep had the party spirit gone, so bitter were the feelings it had aroused, that many Jews went down to Egypt. Josephus (*Ant.* XIV.ii.1) calls them "the principal men", which here probably means the more devout, who placed godliness before the support of party. The supporters of Hyrcanus laid hold on an old man, Onias "the Circle-maker", famous for his power in prayer. They brought him to their camp outside Jerusalem and demanded that he curse Aristobulus. When threatened with death he prayed, "O God, King of all the people, since those standing beside me are Thy people, and those who are besieged are Thy priests, I beseech Thee not to hearken to the others against these men, nor to bring to pass what these men ask Thee to do to these others". His reward was to be stoned to death.

If at all possible, worse was to come. The besieged priests needed sacrificial animals for the Passover sacrifices. They offered high prices for them, but the money was received and the animals withheld. The Talmud adds the picturesque detail that the besieged discovered that the one animal they were hoisting up was a pig (*Men.* 64) and that God showed his displeasure by an earthquake. The more moderate account by Josephus that God "sent a strong and vehement storm of wind that destroyed the fruits of the whole country, till a modius of wheat was then bought for eleven drachmae", in other words more than the famine price given in Rev. 6:6, is more likely to conform to reality, the more so as the wind was probably an aggravated example of the

* *op. cit.*, pp. 344f.

† *Israel and the Nations*, p. 178.

sha'arav, or *hamsin*, which so often blows at that time of year and is capable of doing severe damage to the crops.

There was no future now for the Hasmonean kingdom, but God mercifully shortened the days of anguish by bringing in the Romans. They had become involved in the area by their war against Mithridates. When Pompey's lieutenant Scourus came to Damascus, he heard of the troubles in Palestine. Drawn like a vulture to the prey, he marched there to see if he could turn matters to Rome's and above all his own advantage. Both sides appealed to him, offering him large bribes; he decided in favour of Aristobulus. Two years later (63 B.C.) Pompey decided to settle matters himself. Aristobulus aroused his suspicions and then tried desperately to defy the Roman power. When Pompey appeared outside the walls of Jerusalem, he thought better of it and surrendered to the Romans. The supporters of Hyrcanus opened the gates of the city to the Romans, but some of Aristobulus' followers resisted in the Temple for three months.

Finally on a Sabbath, which may well have been the Day of Atonement, it was stormed. Josephus estimates the Jewish casualties at 12,000, but he is seldom trustworthy, when he is dealing with high numbers. The priests on duty allowed themselves to be cut down as they carried out their duties. Pompey entered the Holy of Holies only to find to his surprise that it was empty. The Jews were probably equally surprised, when he spared the Temple treasures, but this was the only token of mercy shown to Judea. The ring-leaders of the opposition were executed, though Aristobulus was spared. Judea lost the Greek cities of the coastal plain and its control over Samaria and Transjordan. What was left became a vassal of Rome.

The Religious Situation

For the devout, Pompey's entry into the Holy of Holies must have been as serious a blow as Antiochus Epiphanes' desecration of the Temple just over a century earlier (169 B.C.). They could interpret it only as a sign of God's deepest displeasure.

Those who had withdrawn to Qumran must have seen it as a vindication of their policy and of the teaching of the Teacher of Righteousness, and many must have shared their view. We cannot doubt that the Pharisaic leaders were sickened by the blood that stained their hands and the desecration of the Name to which they had contributed so much. Doubtless they were represented among those who asked Pompey that Judea might revert to its former status under the high priests without political independence (Josephus, *Ant.* XIV. iii. 2). Certainly they rapidly developed an increasingly pacifist policy.

Among the people in general two tendencies began to develop rapidly, tendencies which were in themselves not incompatible. The Hasmonean successes had stirred Messianic hopes. Their collapse made many believe that this was merely the necessary preliminary to the coming of the Messianic deliverer, the darkest hour before the dawn. In addition there was a growing conviction that not devotion to the Torah but to the national liberty of the people was God's prime desire. It does not mean that those who later became known as the Zea-

lots were opposed to the Torah, but that they considered that what they held to be the welfare of the people of God took precedence over the observance of the law of God, should any clash between them arise.

Whatever the origins of the Synagogue, it was the degradation of the Temple and its services under Jannai that first made it a power in Palestine. Whereas it had been a centre for the study of Torah and a kind of substitute for the Temple for those who could not go there, it now began unofficially to replace the Temple in men's affections. This was not overt and deliberate, but an expression of the deep revulsion felt by many. Since the Sadducees could not be expected to favour such an attitude, the leadership in most synagogues slipped into the hands of the Pharisees, though this is truer of Judea than of Galilee.* They welcomed this for the opportunity it gave them of teaching their views, and this made them, as we find in the New Testament, the most respected of the religious teachers. The ordinary man might well seek to dodge the stricter rules they made, but he would seldom challenge their decisions. In practice, especially in Galilee, their main rivals were the Zealots, not the Sadducees.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

The Synagogue

The origins of the Synagogue are in fact wrapped in obscurity. There are some, mostly Jews, who would trace them back to the period of the monarchy, but most scholars confidently place them in Babylonia during the exile. It is fair to suggest that their confidence is equalled only by their lack of evidence. It was pointed out in ch. 2 that the conditions for it, or for any other major religious development, were far from propitious. Particularly important is that no evidence for the existence of the Synagogue, even in an embryo stage, can be found in Ezekiel, or in those parts of Isaiah which most scholars place in the exilic and immediately post-exilic periods.

Before we can argue for even the first beginnings of the Synagogue, we have to bring evidence for reasonably regular religious activities unlinked with a sanctuary, which at least in theory were open to all Israelites. In spite of the lack of much positive evidence, we may reasonably assume that in both priestly and prophetic circles small groups will have met from a very early date from time to time for study, discussion and prayer, but we cannot deduce any continuing tradition from this.

The earliest certain mentions of the Synagogue come from Egypt from the period 247–221 B.C. Against this we have to set their non-mention in Esther and Tobit. The latter's silence is particularly important because of the picture it gives of Jewish piety in the Eastern dispersion in the late Persian period, cf. p. 61. In fact the only certain pre-Christian mentions in Jewish literature are Enoch 46:8; 53:6, probably early first century B.C. The Gospels and Acts are sufficient evidence that both in Palestine and the Western dispersion the Synagogue had become a regular feature of communities both large and small by

* Geza Vermes, *Jesus The Jew*, pp. 55ff.

the time of Christ. A passage like Acts 15 : 21 shows that they had existed long enough to be taken for granted.

Wherever and under whatever conditions the Synagogue may have started, we can be reasonably certain that it had little influence until it had been accepted in Jerusalem and Judea. There the foundation for it must have been laid by Ezra's work, which demanded that all male Jews must know something of the Torah. It was pointed out in ch. 8 that Ezra had separated his reading of the Torah from the Temple courts (p. 47). No one can doubt that a necessary sequel was the setting up of a "school", where the implications of the Torah were studied by the scribes and the leisured. With this agrees the considerably later tradition, which attributed most of the older Rabbinic regulations to the men of the Great Synagogue, the founding of which was looked on as Ezra's work. Clearly this was not a synagogue but a house of study (*bet-ha-midrash*) for the intensive study of the Torah. This is often confused with the Synagogue, because at a later date it might well be held on synagogue premises, and later still served as a synagogue for those who studied there. There is little evidence for its existence in the time of Christ outside Jerusalem and a few centres in the Eastern dispersion.

The Synagogue proper will have begun as an answer to the need of teaching Torah to the ordinary man. Its services were originally confined to the Sabbath and centred round the reading and exposition of the Books of Moses, but a reading from the Prophets and a simple service of worship were soon added. The services were then extended to Mondays and Thursdays, the traditional Palestinian market days, and then gradually daily prayers became the norm. This was doubtless taken over from the house of study. That attendance was not compulsory is shown by Luke's remark that Jesus went to the synagogue "as His custom was" (4 : 16). Both for our Lord and Paul their recorded synagogue visits are always on the Sabbath.

Apparently there was an attempt to link the Synagogue with the Temple worship. Though few details are known, it seems that the country was divided into twenty-four districts to parallel the twenty-four orders of priests and Levites. They were expected to send their "lay" representatives to Jerusalem for a week at a time to share in the national worship. Those who were unable to go were expected to have special prayers in the local synagogue. If this system really functioned, it will have played a considerable part in the development of the regular synagogue prayers.

There is ample evidence that the Synagogue did not become really prominent in Palestine until about 100 B.C. There will have been two main reasons for this. The proselytizing of Idumea and Galilee by force made the teaching of the Torah to the new Jews a matter of real urgency. Then also the same excesses of the Hasmonean priest-kings, which caused the Qumran community to withdraw to the desert, will have caused the ordinary religious man to prefer the atmosphere of his home synagogue led by honoured members of the local community.

Apart from Jerusalem and Rome there was normally only one synagogue for a Jewish community. Alexandria came to have more than one, but they

evidently would have preferred to have only the one. It was so big, that it is claimed that men with flags had to signal when the congregation was to say Amen—with a more or less fixed liturgy the failure to hear was not so important. In places where the Jewish community was predominant the seven men who headed the community were also responsible for the synagogue, and the building served as the community school house as well. Even where the Jews formed only a minority, they were expected to build and maintain a synagogue.

Normally a synagogue had only three officials. The ruler of the synagogue was always one of the most respected members of the community. He was responsible for seeing that qualified persons read, led in prayer and expounded the portion which had been read. Then there was the controller of alms, who had to see to the needs of the poor, sick and suffering. Finally there was the attendant, who had to look after the scrolls, keep the building clean and maintain order. He might well be the schoolmaster as well. All three were chosen on the basis of personal merit and not of birth or wealth. While a synagogue would welcome the presence of a man well versed in the Torah, this was not essential; if such a man, later dignified by the title Rabbi, was available, he was not one of the officials. Indeed, as may be seen even today, the only power he possessed for enforcing his rulings came from the quality of his life and character.

When the Temple and its priesthood vanished, the local synagogue offered a rallying point for the community. Its fairly fixed liturgy and generally accepted methods of understanding the Torah meant that no very great divergence grew up between community and community or country and country. For a few centuries Jewry officially longed for the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of sacrifices, but little by little the Synagogue came to be accepted as the ideal.