2. JEWS UNDER ROME: King Herod, the Edomite (37 BCE- 1 BCE)

FIRST REBELLION AGAINST ROME

Previously, we wrote about the process that led Judea (Israel) to losing its independence and becoming a vassal state of the Roman Empire around 63 BCE. In 54 BCE, the Jews tried to rebel against the empire and regain their sovereignty. Alexander, the son of Yehuda Aristobulus, led a rebellion against the new Roman consul: Crassus. But he failed. 13,000 Jewish combatants were killed and 30,000 civilians were captured and sent to Rome as slaves. Many Jewish cities were destroyed and turned into Roman cities. To further weaken the Jews, the Romans invited pagans from across the empire to settle in the land of Israel, offering them reduced taxes with the purpose to outnumber the local Jewish population. Furthermore, the new kings or governors of Judea were appointed by the Roman emperor, and their allegiance was primarily to Rome and not to their Jewish brethren. The best known of these kings was undoubtedly Herod, who reigned from 37 BCE to 1 CE. Herod was born in Judea but was not a Jew but of Idumean or Edomite descent.

THE EDOMITES AND THE JEWS

The history of the Edomites and their relationship with Am Israel is quite complex. Edom descended from Esau, Ya'aqob's brother. This would normally mean that Jews and Edomites should be close allies, distant "cousins." However, for a long time, especially in the days of King David (1000 BCE), Israel and Edom were sworn enemies. The same thing happened at the time of the destruction of the first Bet haMiqdash (Jerusalem Temple, 586 BCE), the Edomites joined our enemies, the Babylonians, and their wickedness and unspeakable cruelty

towards the Jews was explicitly recorded for posterity in the famous Psalm 137 of Tehilim ‘al neharot Babel (137:7). At the time of the Hashmonayim (150 BCE) the Edomites converted to Judaism and many of them fully integrated into the Jewish people and fought in its ranks like many Druzes in the Israeli army today. But Herod was different. His unconditional loyalty to the Romans was also the product of his hatred toward the Jews. Herod fully collaborated with the Romans, collecting very heavy taxes from the Jews, and establishing pagan temples in various cities in Israel, such as Caesarea and others. His greatest provocation was placing the Golden Eagle, the military banner, and a roman “object of religious worship” at the entrance gate of the Bet-haMiqdash.

JEWISH YOUTH vs ROMAN EAGLE

The rabbis encouraged a group of young Jews to physically remove the Roman idol from the Temple precinct. But the mission failed, the young men were seized and brought before Herod. Flavius Josephus records the dialogue that took place at that time. Herod said to them, “Who sent you to remove the eagle?” The young people answered: “The Laws of our fathers”. Herod asked them: “And why do you seem to be so excited and calm at this moment? Don’t you know that I am going to execute you? The young Jews responded: “We know! But we also know that eternal life awaits us in the world to come (‘olam haba).” Herod had these forty young Jews killed along with two of the greatest rabbis of Israel, burning them at a public stake.

FROM A VASSAL STATE TO A ROMAN PROVINCE

In the year 6 of the common era, a few years after Herod’s death, the situation got even worse for the Jews. Augustus, the first Roman emperor, abolished the “Jewish” monarchy and the relatively independent Jewish state was formally turned into a Roman province. In other words, from that moment on there would be no more local Jewish kings or governors: Judea would be “directly” under the jurisdiction of the Roman emperor. This also implied that the Roman religion became the

official religion of Judea. The Romans, like the Greeks 200 years earlier, now expected the Jews to abandon their religion and adopt the Roman gods, “as the rest of the empire had happily done.” And unfortunately, as happened before in the days of the Greek Empire, many Jews, especially those belonging to the higher economic levels, betrayed their faith and their brothers in order to obtain tax exemptions and other benefits for collaborating with the Romans.

Once Judea became a Roman province, the Romans appointed the High Priest (Cohen Gadol) who would slowly begin to make changes to the Jewish Temple Laws, undermining the holiest place of Judaism. The Romans would also have unlimited access to the treasures of the Bet haMiqdash, whose religious objects (kele haqodesh) were made of gold and silver. The well-known Roman prefect Pontius Pilate (26-36 of the common era) stole part of the treasures of the Bet-haMiqdash and with those funds he ordered the construction of an aqueduct in Jerusalem.

This new scenario became increasingly intolerable for the Jews.

And a new idea (suicidal!) began to ferment in the minds and hearts of the Jews: “We must rebel against the Roman Empire and recover our political and religious autonomy, before Judaism disappears completely.” Echoes of an all-or-nothing Jewish rebellion against the invincible Roman army could be felt in the air of Jerusalem…

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