A Bad Joke in Josephus*

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By April A.D. 66 tension in Judaea had reached a high pitch as the struggle between Jews and Greeks in Caesarea intensified. Jews throughout the province were hostile to the Roman procurator Florus for his failure to support their Caesarean compatriots. Even the richer Jews, on whom the Roman governor could normally rely for support, felt aggrieved, for Florus had accepted a large bribe from one of them, a tax-collector in Caesarea called John, but, instead of taking the action promised in return for the money, he had arrested twelve of the Jewish dunatoi on the footling charge that they had carried off a copy of the Law from Caesarea (BJ II 292). Further, Florus had indicated his lack of confidence in the Jewish ruling group in Jerusalem by removing twelve talents from the Temple treasury in lieu of the tribute which it was their task to collect (BJ II 293). Since these same actions also demonstrated Florus's greed, they gave rise to the joke that followed: according to Josephus (BJ II 295), some of the Jewish malcontents not only abused Florus but also carried round a basket asking for small change for him as if he were a destitute beggar. I shall argue that these jokers came from the aggrieved Judaean upper class, and that as a result their action had wide repercussions, proving to be the crucial catalyst which led to the outbreak of the Great Revolt.

The evidence for this assertion comes entirely from a careful reading of Josephus' text. In narrating the incident, he describes the men responsible for the joke as stasiantōn, "men prone to rebellion", which is not in itself very illuminating, but much further information can be derived from examining his account of the events which followed immediately after the affair.

Florus, says Josephus, was horrified at the insult and marched to Jerusalem (BJ II 296). On arrival in the city he ordered the chief priests, nobles and most eminent men—that is, the local elite according to the Roman view—to present themselves before his tribunal (301). He then instructed them to hand over the men who had joked at his expense (302). The normal and expected reaction of a provincial elite to such a request from a Roman governor was to comply without hesitation: their function consisted precisely in thus using their local knowledge and roots in the


2 That the insult to which Florus refers at BJ II 302 was the joke and not the rest of the behaviour of the Jerusalem Jews is clear from his use of the word skōptein in his reply to the citizens who had come to meet him on his way to Jerusalem (BJ II 299).
community to spot troublemakers and give adequate information to the Roman authorities to deal with them. So the actual reaction of the Jerusalem rulers is extraordinary. In their reply to Florus they refused to identify the delinquents and, instead, implored pardon for them (302-304). Such courting of Florus’s displeasure was extremely rash, for his violent reaction, described in 305 ff., can hardly have been unexpected given his earlier behaviour and explicit threats (302). There must have been a good reason for their folly.

Yet the reason they professed according to Josephus (303) is feeble in the extreme. They claimed, Josephus says, that “it was impossible to pick out the delinquents as everyone was now penitent and would, for fear of the consequences, deny what he had done”. A strange excuse which, if regularly advanced, would paralyse the administration of justice altogether. It was not beyond the abilities of these Judaean rulers to discover the perpetrators of so public an act. Nor was it reasonable to expect a Roman governor to accept so blatant an affront to his dignity. The danger to which the Jews alluded, that innocent citizens would suffer because of the actions of a few reckless youths (304), was far more probable when the youths were not identified and punished than if they had been. The suggestion that a denial of guilt would prevent conviction for a crime (303) was valid neither in Roman nor in Jewish law, for the evidence of the numerous witnesses would suffice.

Florus at any rate was not impressed by such reasoning. He let loose his soldiers against the inhabitants of Jerusalem in general (305) and against the upper class in particular: he tried, scourged and crucified before his tribunal Jews who were Roman citizens of equestrian rank (308), that is, Jews who, because of their wealth, were automatically considered as part of the local elite by Rome.

So a different explanation for the rulers’ behaviour is clearly needed. They were evidently concerned to cover up for the perpetrators of the joke. For some reason these young men were too important in the eyes of their elders to be handed over to the procurator for punishment. Only one group of youths sufficiently anti-Roman to insult the procurator but also sufficiently close to the Jerusalem rulers to be protected by them suggests itself. When a few months later, in July or August A.D. 66, the revolt truly

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2 The manuscripts at BJ II 303 read δι' ᾧ δὲ δῆμος Θεοῦ, meaning “on account of what he had done”, and the conjectured reading δὲς θείς is not strictly necessary, but both readings have the same general sense.


4 Josephus only says vaguely (BJ II 303) that the troublemakers were “too rash and foolish because of their age” (δὲν ἀνείπετο γεγονός), but in comments of this sort folly is more likely to be associated with youth than with any other time of life.
got under way, its beginning was marked by the cessation of the loyal sacrifices in the Temple. The instigator of this decisive anti-Roman act was Eleazar b. Ananias, the son of the ex-High Priest Ananias b. Nedebaueus whose influence in the Jerusalem ruling group is described by Josephus as paramount in this period (AJ XX 213). Eleazar himself is described at BJ II 409 as a νεανίας θρασύτατος; it seems very likely that he had been one of the jokers three months earlier—Josephus calls them θρασύτεροι καὶ δι’ ἡλικίαν ἄφρονοι (303) — and that, out of natural affection, the father protected the son from the procurator's wrath.

Such an invocation of family solidarity will not however solve the problem of the rulers' rash stubbornness without further discussion, for it becomes less obvious that Ananias should risk so much for the wayward Eleazar once it is realised that, when the loyal sacrifices did cease, Eleazar was strongly opposed precisely by his father, his uncle and his brother (418, 429). It would be wrong, however, to see their opposition then as necessarily motivated either by basic disagreements over the desirability of Roman rule or by personal dislike, for their clash can be just as well understood in the context of the factional struggle for power which had for some years been fiercely contested within Judaean ruling circles. Thus in July A.D. 66, Eleazar b. Ananias was part of a faction of whom at least two, Judas b. Jonathan and Ananias b. Sadok, were to turn up later during the war as prominent friends of the so-called "moderate", Ananus b. Ananus, while in support of Ananias' faction in 66 were members of the Herodian family, Saul, Antipas and Costabar (BJ II 418), although these same politicians are attested as struggling against each other for influence since at least the late 50s (cf. AJ XX 214 on Saul and Costobar in A.D. 62-64, when they were opposed to Ananias). I want to suggest that the possibility of revolt from Rome acted only as one extra element in this strife between factions of the Jewish ruling group: the rebels sought power through the popular support of the people, who were enraged by Florus' behaviour, while those remaining faithful to Rome hoped, in vain as it turned out, to be rewarded for their loyalty by winning greater power in Jerusalem under the procurator's aegis.

Such factional struggle had developed its own rules by A.D. 66. There were things that could, and could not, be done to opponents. Bribing the procurator and the high priest was a frequent and accepted method (cf., e.g., AJ XX 205). So was the use of violence in the streets (AJ XX 179-81) — the picture of urban gangs in the early 60s is reminiscent of Rome in the 50s B.C. (AJ XX 204-214). Factional realignments in the search for power were evidently common; thus, in A.D. 62 even Eleazar b. Ananias had himself been in alliance with his father despite their opposition four years later (AJ

7 BJ II 451 and 628.
XX 208-209). But the limit of acceptable behaviour was clear. The sanctity of human life overrode considerations of factional advantage.

This limitation is easiest to show from the two occasions when the relationship between Eleazar b. Ananias and his father is most explicitly described by Josephus. In A.D. 62 Eleazar’s secretary was kidnapped by sicarii in order to put pressure on Ananias to request the procurator to release other sicarii from prison. Ananias acceded to the pressure; evidently the safety of an individual, even one of low social status, was paramount (AJ XX 208-210). In A.D. 66 Eleazar was prepared to show his new hostility to his father by burning down his house (BJ II 426) – an act which would hardly destroy his opponent, for Ananias was notoriously rich (AJ XX 205, 213) – but when a group of sicarii under Menahem b. Judas, who had arrived in Jerusalem from Masada and attached himself to Eleazar’s faction, actually killed Ananias and Eleazar’s uncle, Eleazar reacted with revulsion and, turning against Menahem, killed him with almost all his supporters (BJ II 441-448). Destruction of property was an acceptable weapon, but endangering life was not.

If this is correct, it is not surprising that Ananias, who with the rest of his faction was presumably prominent among the Jewish rulers approached by Florus after the perpetration of the joke, was unwilling to hand over his son to an almost certain death at the governor’s hands. Nor is it surprising that Josephus chose to remain so reticent about the reasons just outlined for this intransigence, for he is at pains throughout the Bellum to suggest as far as he plausibly can that his own class was not responsible for the outbreak of the war. He prefers, therefore, to leave the jokers anonymous and to depict Florus as monstrously unreasonable. It is even possible that Josephus himself was connected with the rash youths who began the revolt, for he claims to have sought asylum in the Temple during the struggle between Eleazar and Ananias (Vita 20), even though the Temple was precisely the headquarters of Eleazar’s faction (BJ II 422). Silence and vagueness suited him better than writing the precise details which he surely knew.

For Josephus would also be well aware that this cover-up for a silly joke was a direct cause of the rebellion. Florus assumed that the refusal of the Jewish rulers to hand over the culprits showed that they opposed him, and

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9. Success in this first use of blackmail led to further kidnaps (AJ XX 210). It seems likely that the sicarii here, as perhaps on other occasions before A.D. 66, were acting as the agents of protagonists in the faction struggle within the ruling Jewish group. If they were simply bandits or anti-Roman fanatics, as is usually believed, it is hard to see why Albinus was persuaded to permit their release; if committed revolutionaries they would anyway have been executed rather than held in confinement. Josephus implausibly blames Albinus’ evil intentions for deliberately leaving such criminals unpunished in order to cause havoc, cf. AJ XX 215.
therefore Rome. In a desperate attempt to reinstate their position as loyal allies of Rome without sacrificing the jokers, some of the upper-class Jews went in a mass to Agrippa; but he only berated them for their folly (BJ II 336-8), refusing to bring a complaint to Nero against Florus on the grounds that it would be odious (epiphthonon) to choose a delegation to carry such a message (343). Successful deputations had been sent to higher Roman authority to denounce previous procurators, so the hesitation on this occasion is most likely to have been caused by the Jews' awareness of their own guilt.

As a result no effective steps could be taken to heal the breach between the Jewish rulers and the governor, despite continuing attempts by some of the Jewish factions to protest their loyalty (BJ II 420). The mutual trust with the local elite on which the provincial governor with his very small staff relied was broken. With Roman support removed the best chance left to the Judaean upper class of keeping even a vestige of their past power was by posing as champions of the populace in the temporary anti-Roman excitement caused by Florus's sacrilege and massacres. Many of the Jewish rulers thus took the path of revolt. It was their leadership which made the unrest in A.D. 66 look to the Romans to be different from the riots and disturbances of the previous sixty years. This was the first time that the Judaean upper class had not co-operated with Rome in crushing disorder. Once involved they found it hard to stop, and they were to remain as leaders of the uprising for the next four years. Rome thus could not afford to treat this unrest as a minor affair but only as a full-scale rebellion. Its suppression was to include the destruction of the Temple and the whole structure of Jewish society in Judaea.

10 Cf. AJ XVIII 88-89 on the removal of Pilate after a deputation to Vitellius by the Samaritans.
11 On the importance of this break, see also T. Rajak, Josephus: the Historian and his Society (1983), pp. 65-77.
12 The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Jewish rich lacked the natural authority within Jewish society that the Romans, who assumed that wealth was the single most important element in acquiring social status, believed wrongly that they must possess; cf. my paper "The origins of the Great Revolt: a conflict of status criteria" in the proceedings of the conference on Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel (Haifa and Tel Aviv, March, 1985), forthcoming. Without Roman backing the members of the Judaean ruling group became nonentities in Jewish eyes – unless they espoused the popular course of leading the revolt.
13 The number of upper-class Jews whose defection from the rebels to the Roman side as late as the summer of A.D. 70 is celebrated by Josephus demonstrates their devotion to the rebel cause up to that time, despite Josephus' attempt to portray the Jewish leadership after his own departure to the Romans in A.D. 67 as comprised of lower-class fanatics beneath contempt. For fuller arguments, see my paper cited in note 12.