The Sicarii: Ancient Jewish "Terrorists"

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Two widespread and influential misconceptions continue to haunt the study of Jewish history and New Testament times, namely, that there was an organized religiopolitical movement called "the Zealots" which, from the time of its founding by Judas the Galilean in 6 C.E., agitated for Jewish liberation until it provoked the massive Jewish revolt against Rome in 66–70; and that *sicarioi,* like *lēstai,* was just another name for the members of this organized liberation movement.

One would think that Morton Smith's sharp rebuttal would have laid these misconceptions to rest,[1] especially after Kirsopp Lake and Solomon Zeitlin had previously pointed to the lack of evidence for these notions.[2] Unfortunately, they have become enshrined in important professional handbooks and dictionaries in the field.[3] And influential scholars persist in their misreading of Josephus's accounts, still concluding that Josephus uses the terms *zēlōtai, sicarioi,* and *lēstai* interchangeably for the Jewish rebel movement[4] and labeling the Jewish "freedom movement" (whatever the differences between the separate groups) as "the Zealots."[5] It is virtually impossible, argues Hengel, "to elucidate the

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[1]Morton Smith, "Zealots and Sicarii: Their Origins and Relation," *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971): 1–19. Smith has provided an extensive and highly critical review of nearly all of the pertinent literature; I will presuppose Smith's critique and his extensive references. Smith's critique applies also to George Wesley Buchanan, "Mark 11:15–19: Brigand's in the Temple," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 30 (1959): 169–77. See also Marc Borg, "The Currency of the Term 'Zealot,' " *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1971): 504–12. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar list the Smith article in their notes to the new version of Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* ([Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973] 383, n. 128; cf. p. 462, n. 29), but presumably the "new Schürer" was not the appropriate context to deal with the implications of Smith's argument.

[2]Kirsopp Lake and Foakes Jackson, "Appendix A: The Zealots," *The Beginnings of Christianity,* 5 vols. (New York, 1920–33), 1, pt. 1:421–25; Solomon Zeitlin, "Zealots and Sicarii," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 395–98, a sharply critical review of Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten* (Leiden: Brill, 1961).

[3]For example, K. H. Rengstorf, "Lēstēs," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* pp. 257–62; Otto Betz, *"Sicarios,"* ibid., pp. 278–82; K. Wegenast, *"Zeloten," Real Encylopedie,* 2d ed., pp. 2474–99, which repeats Hengel.

[4]Matthew Black, "Judas of Galilee and Josephus' 'Fourth Philosophy,' " *Josephus-Studien,* ed. Otto Betz et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 1974) pp. 45–54, esp. p. 51.

[5]Martin Hengel, "Zeloten und Sikarier: Zur Frage der Einheit und Vielfalt der jüdischen Befreiungsbewegung 6–74 n. Chr.," in Betz et al., pp. 175–96, esp. pp. 178, 189, 193.

often dark and uncertain representations of Josephus on the Jewish 'freedom movement.' "[6]

But Josephus is not that obscure in his reports. Generally speaking, the terms *zēlōtai, sicarioi,* and *lēstai* refer to three separate phenomena. As Smith has made abundantly clear, Josephus knows the Sicarii and the Zealots as totally different groups, involved at different times and places during the Jewish revolt.[7] Moreover, although Josephus refers (separately) to both Sicarii and Zealots as "bandits" *(lēstai),* most of the bandits which Josephus describes were neither Sicarii nor Zealots. Smith has cleared the air with regard to Josephus's straightforward and precise portrayal, in *Bellum Judaicum (The Jewish War* [hereafter cited as *BJ*]) 4.128–61, of the emergence of the Zealot party in Jerusalem during the winter of 67–68.[8] In a previous essay I have attempted to explain that Josephus's use of *lēstai* usually refers to actual Jewish social banditry, a form of "primitive rebellion" often found in conditions such as those in Jewish society under Roman rule.[9] It remains, therefore, to examine and explain how precise Josephus is in his portrayal of the Sicarii. I will attempt to demonstrate, with the aid of recent studies of modern anticolonial movements, that the Sicarii can be best understood as ancient Jewish "terrorists."

TOWARD A MORE PRECISE CONCEPTUALIZATION: THE SICARII AS TERRORISTS

The Sicarii emerged in Jerusalem during the 50s. They received their name from the weapons they used, that is, "daggers resembling the scimitars of the Persians in size, but curved and more like the weapons called by the Romans *sicae*" *(The Jewish Antiquities* [hereafter cited as *Ant.*] 20.186). Josephus's accounts of this distinctive group are both precise and consistent.

But while the countryside was thus cleared [of brigands], a different type of bandits [*heteron eidos lēston*] sprang up in Jerusalem, the so-called *sicarii,* who murdered men in broad daylight in the heart of the city. Especially during the festivals they would mingle with the crowd, carrying short daggers concealed under their clothing, with which they stabbed their enemies. Then when they fell, the murderers would join in the cries of indignation and, through this plausible behavior, avoided discovery. The first to be assassinated by them was Jonathan the High Priest. After his death, there were numerous daily murders. [*BJ* 2.254–56]

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[6]Hengel, "Zeloten und Sikarier," p. 196.
[7]Smith, pp. 14–19; see also S. B. Hoenig, "Qumran Fantasies: A Rejoinder to Driver," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 63 (1972–73): 249–52.
[8]Smith, pp. 15–17.
[9]Richard A. Horsley, "Josephus and the Bandits," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (Fall 1979).

Josephus's parallel account in the *Antiquities* (20.164–65) is very similar. Although it does not include the explicit name *sicarii,* his reference back to this passage when he does explain the *sicarii* (20.185–87) clearly indicates the special "bandits" to which he was referring: "Some of these brigands went up to the city as if they intended to worship God. With daggers concealed under their clothes, they mingled with the people about Jonathan and assassinated him. As the murder remained unpunished, from that time forth the brigands with perfect impunity used to go to the city during the festivals and, with their weapons similarly concealed, mingle with the crowds. . . . They committed these murders not only in other parts of the city but even in some cases in the Temple" (*Ant.* 20.164–65).

These reports of Josephus have often been understood to mean that the Zealots now turned to agitation in the city since the Roman procurator, Felix, had been effectively suppressing their activities in the open countryside—on the assumption that *lēstai* referred to "the Zealots," who were now being called "sicarii" because of their new tactics. But there was no such organized movement called the Zealots at this time, and Josephus says quite explicitly that, in contrast to the ordinary banditry which was being suppressed in the countryside, another type of bandit had now emerged. Moreover, Josephus indicates exactly how this new type is distinct from ordinary banditry.

Banditry proper is a rural phenomenon, and virtually endemic to peasant societies. Eric Hobsbawm has provided an illuminating portrayal of social banditry in European societies.[10] Given certain circumstances of hardship in a peasant society, and trouble with landlords and/or the authorities, outlaws emerge and form gangs of various sizes. They live by robbing the well-to-do, i.e., merchants, government officials, or landlords. Except perhaps in the case of Chinese banditry,[11] bandits attack their fellow peasants only when they are unusually desperate. Not only would their poor fellow peasants have nothing for them to rob, but the bandits depend on the goodwill and protection of the local peasants. Although they carry out armed robbery for a livelihood, they do not usually commit murder unless forced into a fight. Bandits are ordinarily well known, both to the officials, who attempt to capture or kill them, and to the peasants, who protect them and often view them as popular heroes, as champions of true justice and the common good. Since they are well known to the officials, bandits must retreat to their hideaways,

[10] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965), chap. 2; and *Bandits* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969), esp. chaps. 1–3, 6–7.

[11] The attempt to apply Hobsbawm's portrayal of European social banditry to Chinese material appears less convincing in Jean Chesneaux, *Peasant Revolts in China, 1840–1949* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), pp. 34–35; see rather Talbot Huey, "*Shui-Hu Zhuan* in the Political Culture of Chinese Bandits," in *Asian Bandits and Revolutionaries,* ed. Paul C. Winther (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Association for Asian Studies, in press).

often mountain strongholds, in which most of their (brief) life is spent. Josephus's reports of the *lēstai* indicate that the Jewish banditry of the Roman period fits the same basic pattern and displays the same general characteristics as the banditry in similar situations of more recent times.[12]

The Sicarii, however, were a different type of bandit, as Josephus says. They were not a rural phenomenon, but urban. They operated in the heart of the holy city of Jerusalem, even in the Temple. They did not commit armed robbery at all, but murder, assassination. In contrast to bandits, who made attacks and then fled to their hideaways because their identity was already known only too well, the Sicarii, although operating in broad daylight and in public places, assassinated their victims surreptitiously. Because of this clandestine manner of operation, no one knew who the assassins were, and they could continue to lead normal public lives in the city.

Hengel has labeled the operations of the Sicarii "guerrilla tactics."[13] But we can and should be much more precise with our descriptive and analytical concepts. Distinctions should be made between three related but distinguishable phenomena: "banditry," "guerrilla warfare," and "terrorism." The early stages of the Maccabean revolt can properly be described as "guerrilla warfare," in which a small military force, with a minimally secure rural base, the support of the peasantry, and maximum mobility, makes surprise attacks against a larger, more powerful force at selected points (e.g., 1 Macc. 2:28–30, 43; 3:16, 23–24; 2 Macc. 8:5–7).[14] But, far from being an appropriate label for the primarily urban assassinations by the Sicarii, the term "guerrilla tactics" is hardly applicable even to the widespread banditry under the later procurators (e.g., *Ant.* 20.255; *BJ* 2.253, 278). Of course, as banditry escalates in scope and focuses more deliberately on a political goal, it can pass over into "guerrilla warfare," as occurred at the outbreak of the massive Jewish revolt in 66 (e.g., *BJ* 2.510–11, 541, 588–89). Indeed, the term for "guerrilla warfare" in Josephus's Greek vocabulary, "bandit-like warfare" (*lēstrikon polemon, BJ* 2.65; cf. *Ant.* 17.285) which he applies to the operations of the popular messianic rebellions that broke out at the death of Herod in 4 B.C.E., points to the similarity in tactics between bandits and guerrillas.

In contrast, the appropriate term for the deliberate and organized assassinations, primarily in the city, by the Sicarii is "terrorism."[15] Because terrorism has been such an important weapon used by anticolonial

[12] Horsley.

[13] Hengel, "Zeloten und Sikarier," p. 193.

[14] See the imaginative treatment by Elias Bickermann, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), pp. 112–16; and Thomas H. Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974, p. 79–83.

[15] Greene, pp. 77–79; H. Edward Price, Jr., "The Strategy and Tactics of Revolutionary Terrorism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19 (1977): 52–65.

movements of national liberation in the twentieth century, social scientists have devoted considerable attention to the phenomenon, especially in the last several years.[16] "Terrorism is the weapon of the weak"—or so goes Brian Crozier's now famous generalization.[17] Although terror is also used by established governments, often when they are weak or threatened, it is the natural weapon of insurgents. It is especially well suited to the struggles of colonized peoples against foreign domination, since the "normal" means of "legitimate" coercion have been closed to them. Terror is particularly tempting for small conspiratorial groups that lack a power base among the people. Often it is directed primarily against fellow nationals who are collaborating or at least cooperating with the foreigners, rather than against the alien rulers themselves.[18] Terrorism can be "an effective instrument of social mobilization . . . in the initial stages of revolutionary activity . . . where the general population is sympathetic to the goals of the revolutionaries. This of course is most likely to be the case in underdeveloped societies dominated by a foreign state, and where the large majority of the population is unorganized and unrepresented in the policy-making apparatus of government."[19] All of these generalizations about modern terrorist groups also fit the ancient Jewish "dagger-men." Insights from the study of modern terrorist movements, such as the Zionist Irgun Zvai Leumi or the Algerian Front de liberation nationale (FLN), may prove helpful therefore in understanding the tactics and strategy of the Sicarii and the circumstances and effects of their acts of terrorism.

THE TERRORIST TACTICS OF THE SICARII

The terrorist tactics of Sicarii were threefold, according to Josephus's reports: selective, symbolic assassinations; more general assassinations along with destruction or plundering of the property of the wealthy and powerful; and kidnapping. Other common tactics of terrorist groups, such as sniping and sabotage against the military or indiscriminate attacks in public places, are not mentioned by Josephus. In all cases the attacks by the Sicarii appear to be highly discriminate and always directed against fellow Jews, not against Roman soldiers or civilians.

Selective assassinations by the Sicarii appear to have made the greatest

[16]The most influential study has been by Thomas Perry Thornton, "Terror as a Weapon of Political Agitation," *Internal War*, ed. Harry Eckstein (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 71–99. But see the important and well-taken critique in Lawrence Stone, "Theories of Revolution," *World Politics* 18 (1966): 161, 175; and in Price, pp. 53–54.

[17]Brian Crozier, *The Rebels: A Study of Post-War Insurrections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 159.

[18]As in the cases of the Mau Mau among the Kikuyu in Kenya and the EOKA in Cyprus; Crozier, p. 170.

[19]Greene, p. 77.

impression on Josephus. Particularly where it has been discriminate, assassination has usually been done for its "demonstration" effect and wider reverberations among the ruling groups or the masses of peoples. Thus terrorists often have chosen targets with a maximum of political or religious symbolic value—as Thornton says, symbols of "the normative structures and relationships that constitute the supporting framework of the society."[20] The Sicarii deliberately inaugurated their campaign of terror with the assassination of the High Priest Jonathan. That is, they chose *the* symbol of the sacerdotal aristocracy's collaboration with the alien Roman rulers and its exploitation of the people.

The demonstration effect of the assassination of such symbolic figures as the high priest and other representatives of the ruling group in Jerusalem would have been aimed in two directions simultaneously— both at other members of the ruling groups and at the common people.[21] For the sacerdotal aristocracy and the Jewish notables the Sicarii probably intended the tactic of selective assassination as a punishment for previous exploitation of the people and collaboration with the Romans, and as a deterrence from future repression and a warning about the implications of their continuing collaboration. This tactic surely demonstrated to the pro-Roman upper class their own vulnerability. Another purpose of the assassinations may have been to provoke retaliatory terrorism by the ruling groups. It certainly had that effect, as we shall see.

The selective assassinations would have had some of the same effects on the common people, but from the opposite point of view. Thus they saw their religious and political-economic overlords being punished, deterred, and warned. These assassinations would not only have demonstrated the vulnerability of the established order but also would have forced the people, who held ambivalent feelings toward the sacred yet exploitative sacerdotal aristocracy, to confront their own conflicting feelings. Such assassinations also tended to remove alternative leadership, although this is less a symbolic demonstration effect than a practical one.

In a second and closely related tactic the Sicarii extended their activities from Jerusalem into the countryside where the estates of the pro-Roman gentry were located, eliminating the Jewish notables and destroying their property. From the duplication in *Ant.* 20.187–88, it is clear that Josephus is referring to the Sicarii in his polemical reports in *Ant.* 20.172 and *BJ* 2.264–65. Thus, according to Josephus's somewhat exaggerated account, "the brigand-like elements encouraged many people to revolt, exhorting them to assert their independence [*eleutheria*]

[20]Thornton, pp. 77 and 81; Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 16 (1971): 385, 388.
[21]On the following discussion, see esp. Robert Moss, *The War for the Cities* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972), p. 33.

and threatening with death any who submitted to Roman domination. . . . Distributing themselves in companies [*kata lochous*] throughout the countryside, they murdered the notables [*dynatoi*], plundered their estates, and set their villages on fire" (cf. *BJ* 7.254). This tactic, obviously not so clandestine as the assassinations during the festivals in Jerusalem, would have had many of the same purposes as the selective assassinations: punishment, warning, and deterrence. It clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of the pro-Roman notables, both to themselves and to the peasants. Indeed, this may have been an important device to help split the tenant farmers and landless day laborers from their loyalty to and fear of the wealthy landowners on whom they had been absolutely dependent for a livelihood.[22] Some of the peasants must have been thus forced into choosing sides, or at least frightened about cooperation with the pro-Roman notables and frightened into cooperation with the Sicarii. By this means, perhaps more than through the more symbolic assassinations, the Sicarii eliminated the alternative, established leadership in the society.

The third typical terrorist tactic employed by the Sicarii was the kidnapping of an important personage in order to extort the release of some of their own number who had been taken prisoner by the authorities. During the administration of the procurator Albinus, again at the time of the festival,

the *sicarii* entered the city by night and kidnapped the secretary of the [Temple] captain Eleazar, the son of the High Priest Ananias, and led him off in bonds. They then sent to Ananias saying that they would release the secretary to him if he would induce Albinus to release ten of their number who had been taken prisoner. Ananias under this constraint persuaded Albinus and obtained the request. This was the beginning of greater troubles; for the brigands contrived by one means or another to kidnap some of Ananias' staff and would hold them in continuous confinement and refuse to release them until they had received in exchange some of the *sicarii*.

This highly pragmatic tactic, well known from modern terrorism, perhaps requires no special comment.

Thus, as Greene says of modern urban-based rebels, the Sicarii "deserve more the label of 'terrorist' than 'guerrilla.'" They have limited forces and mobility and no fixed base for revolutionary operations and government. Their "assassination . . . or kidnapping of public officials or wealthy citizens to secure the release of imprisoned partisans . . . represent more of a harrassment to the regime than a revolutionary threat."[23]

[22]On the question of land tenure and the types of holding, see Joseph Klausner, "The Economy of Judea in the Period of the Second Temple," *The World History of the Jewish People*, ed. Abraham Schalit (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1975), vol. 7, *The Herodian Period*, ed. Michael Avi-Yonah.

[23]Greene, p. 87.

THE PURPOSE AND STRATEGY OF THE SICARII

How did the Sicarii understand the purpose of their assassinations and other terrorist tactics? Josephus says explicitly (*BJ* 7.253–55) that the Sicarii were the continuation of what he called the "Fourth Philosophy" of the Jews, which had been started by Judas of Galilee and the Pharisee Zadok in 6 C.E. when, with the imposition of their direct rule, the Romans conducted a "census" to determine how much tax revenue could be extracted from the province. He represents the Sicarii as following the same general principles as the Fourth Philosophy (*BJ* 7.255) and he regularly emphasizes the continuity in leadership, from Judas of Galilee, who founded the movement of resistence to Roman taxation in 6 C.E., to Menahem, the son (or grandson) of Judas, who became the leader of the Sicarii at the beginning of the Jewish revolt in 66, and Eleazar ben Jair, another descendant (perhaps also a grandson) of Judas, who led the Sicarii on Masada through the duration of the revolt.[24]

If the Sicarii are a continuation of the earlier movement of resistance to the Roman census, then we can deduce their understanding of their purposes from what Josephus says of the Fourth Philosophy. Although Josephus is at pains, especially in his earlier writing, on the Jewish War, to portray the Fourth Philosophy as a disastrous departure from traditional Jewish "philosophy" and customs, he explains in his later work (*Ant.* 18.23) that the new philosophy agreed in virtually all respects with the views of the Pharisees. Indeed, one of the cofounders of the groups was a Pharisee, a member of the progressive party of learned interpreters of the Mosaic Law. Moreover, Josephus regularly calls Judas himself a *sophistēs*, that is, a learned teacher (*BJ* 2.118, 433; cf. the *sophistai* Matthias and Judas in 4 B.C.E., *BJ* 1.648; *Ant.* 17.149). Thus the leadership, and very likely the other members as well, were from the Jewish "intelligentsia."[25]

The Fourth Philosophy articulated a very coherent "ideology"— judging from Josephus's accounts, at least. Their advocacy of rebellion against Roman rule was apparently rooted in four interrelated ideas. First, the Roman census carried with it a status for the Jews of downright slavery, whereas the Jews as a people should be exerting their claim to liberty (*eleutheria, Ant.* 18.4).[26] For the Jews themselves were the cho-

[24]*BJ* 2.433, 447; 7.253; Josephus also mentions that Tiberias Alexander (procurator 46–48 C.E.) had two of Judas's sons, James and Simon, crucified, although he does not mention their relation to a group such as the Fourth Philosophy.

[25]See now Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Prophecy and Priesthood in Josephus," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974): 260, who concludes that *sophistēs*, "in the context, must imply exegetical skill," along with connotations of inspired prophecy. On the role of intelligentsia generally, see, e.g., Greene, pp. 22–24.

[26]Hengel, *Die Zeloten,* pp. 132–45. This attitude continues into the Church Fathers such as Tertullian, who viewed the Roman land and head tax levied on the basis of the census as *notae captivitatis* (Tertullian *Apologia* [hereafter cited as *Apol.*] 13.6).

sen people of God, called by Him into freedom from foreign overlords. Moreover, there was explicit biblical tradition against a census for the people of Israel in 2 Sam. 24.

Second, the tax would mean slavery to the Jews because they had been called instead to live directly under the kingship of God,[27] which was expressed in the Law (as interpreted, of course, by just such scribes and teachers as Judas, Zadok, and other Pharisees). "You shall have no other gods beside me." Thus, reports Josephus, "they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master (*hegemōn, despotēs; Ant.* 18.23). Hence Judas challenged his fellow Jews not to tolerate "mortal masters *(thnētous despotas)* since they had God as their Lord" (*BJ* 2.118 and 433).

Third, Judas, Zadok, and their followers also shared with the Pharisees a belief in "synergism" with God, that is, working with God in the accomplishment of his purposes.[28] They differed from the Pharisees, however, in their "unconquerable passion for liberty" and, to borrow Jesus' words from the Gospel of Matthew, they actually "practiced and observed what [the Pharisees] said, and not what they did" (Matt. 23.2). Thus, whereas the Pharisees "preached but did not practice," their more activist brothers were willing to "submit to death and [to] permit vengeance to fall on kinsmen and friends if only they may avoid calling any man master" (*Ant.* 18.23). For they firmly believed that God "would be their zealous helper" if they stood firm and did not shrink from whatever measures might be necessary (*Ant.* 18.5).

Fourth, although Josephus does not explicitly mention that the members of the Fourth Philosophy are caught up in an intense eschatological anticipation, it is almost necessary to presuppose this in order to explain the intensity of their "passion for liberty" and the sole lordship of God. This would also explain some allusions which Josephus makes in veiled, Hellenistic language. If Judas and company, like the Essenes at Qumran and certain others of their Jewish contemporaries, believed that "the kingdom of God was at hand," that God's final age of peace and justice was actually imminent,[29] it would explain why they were so ready to submit to torture and death (*Ant.* 18.23; *BJ* 7.417–19). Moreover, Josephus's statements in *Ant.* 18.5 are surely allusions to just this eschatological mentality. "They urged that in case of success the Jews would have laid the foundations of prosperity [*eudaimon*]," translated from Hellenistic style into the language of Jewish apocalypticism, would mean that Judas and Zadok proclaimed that by carrying out the eschatological will of God they would participate in bringing about the final Kingdom of God. And "if they failed to obtain any such boon, they

[27] Hengel, *Die Zeloten,* pp. 93–114.
[28] See *BJ* 2.163; cf., in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 1 QM i.9–11 and xii.7.
[29] As articulated, e.g., in apocalyptic visions such as that in Dan. 7.

would win honor and renown for their lofty aim," similarly translated, would mean that if apprehended, tortured, and killed before the final realization of the Kingdom, they would become glorious martyrs to the purposes of God (cf. Dan. 11:34–35; 12:1–3; 1 En. 47.2; 2 Macc. 6:12–31; 7:9).[30]

Thus, assuming that there was continuity of "ideology" as well as of leadership between the Fourth Philosophy in 6 C.E. and the Sicarii who emerged during the 50s, the Sicarii would have understood the purposes of their terrorism in similar terms. Their goal was the eventual liberation of the Jewish people from the illegitimate rule of Rome, and they understood their own actions as consonant with the eschatological will of God, their only true ruler.

Given that the Sicarii, like the Fourth Philosophy, included a number of politically reflective intellectuals, and judging from the accounts of Josephus, their terrorist tactics were not simply spontaneous expressions of their intense "passion for liberty." They were, rather, the execution of a deliberately planned strategy for liberation from Roman rule. Again we have helpful comparisons from modern anticolonial movements in which revolutionary terrorism is a deliberate strategy. Nascent liberation movements often find all ordinary (legitimate) channels of political expression denied to them, as to all natives, by the colonial government or by a client regime. As revolutionary propaganda points out, terrorism is the only appropriate and only available means left for those who have decided that the current situation is no longer tolerable.[31] For the rebels, the decision to use terrorism is a choice, not between violent and nonviolent means, the latter having been denied them by the regime, but a choice among violent means. As the Algerian FLN leader Ouzegane explained, "urban terrorism like guerrilla warfare is the only method of expression of a crushed people."[32] Also, particularly for a group which lacks a well-organized power base and is as yet few in number itself, terrorism may be the only method which it is actually capable of carrying out. Ironically, although terrorism must appear irrational and unpredictable in order to be effective, it is usually a very rational strategy, calculated in terms of predictable costs, benefits, and consequences.

The basic strategy of many modern anticolonial terrorist organizations has been to convince the government and people of the occupying power that the costs of maintaining their rule by violent repression will be intolerable, or at least greater than the benefits of continuing their colonization. In a very important facet of the modern situation, a vast

[30]See further H. Strathmann, "martyrs, etc." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, pp. 486–88; William R. Farmer, *Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), pp. 65–68.
[31]Hutchinson, p. 394.
[32]Amar Ouzegane, *Le Meilleur Combat* (Paris: Julliard, 1962), p. 257.

demonstration effect can be obtained by terrorist violence through the sensationalist reporting of the contemporary mass media. Both the Greek Cypriot EOKA and the Jewish Zionist Irgun Zvai Leumi implemented this strategy aimed at the colonial power with considerable success against the British.[33]

The strategy of the Sicarii appears to have been somewhat different. Although the ultimate goal of the Sicarii was the elimination of Roman rule from Palestine, they do not appear to have focused much attention on the Romans themselves. The popular messianic movements which sprang up spontaneously at the death of Herod had attacked Roman strongholds and troops, and a group of brigands had robbed an imperial servant on the Beth Horon road a few years prior to the rise of the Sicarii (*BJ* 2.55–65, 228; *Ant.* 17.271–85; 20.113). But Josephus gives not the slightest indication that the Sicarii ever attacked a Roman official or a Roman military object. In fact the Romans did not on a regular basis maintain much of a visible presence in Judaea, so a strategy focused principally on the Romans themselves may not have been very appropriate anyhow.

The strategy of the Sicarii was apparently focused on the Jewish ruling groups, the sacerdotal aristocracy, the royal family, and other notables. This is only to be expected in a rationally calculated strategy; for in Jewish Palestine, as elsewhere in the empire, the Romans ruled largely through the upper classes who collaborated in the imperial system. Thus the obvious way to "destroy the old system and hamstring the elite that gave it life"[34] was to focus on the high priestly families and other dominant groups. By means of terrorist attacks on these persons they could both demonstrate the vulnerability of the established regime and cause intense anxiety (terror!) among the ruling circles.

PRECONDITIONS AND PRECIPITANTS: PRELUDE TO THE JEWISH REVOLT

Although the Sicarii apparently stand in continuity with the Fourth Philosophy, the distinctive thing about the Sicarii was their implementation of a new strategy. Despite his possible ambiguity in *BJ* 7.254–55, Josephus makes it very clear in his principal accounts of the Sicarii (*BJ* 2.254–57, 264–65, and *Ant.* 20.163–65, 187–88) that the terrorism of the Sicarii was a new phenomenon in the 50s. But why should a group which had lain dormant, perhaps even gone out of existence in any coherent way, suddenly spring back to life with an unprecedented strategy of terrorism just at this time? Josephus offers no direct explanation. But perhaps some light can be shed on this question by placing the

[33]Price, pp. 57–58; Crozier, pp. 171–87.
[34]Carl Leiden and Karl M. Schmitt, *Revolution in the Modern World* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 62; cf. the Algerian FLN (Moss, pp. 55–56).

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emergence and operations of the Sicarii in the broader context of the general Jewish hostility to Roman rule which eventually erupted in the widespread revolt of 66–70—and by analyzing the preconditions and precipitants of the nascent popular rebellion.[35]

As political scientists have pointed out, no rebellion is truly spontaneous. The materials for unrest, the mass discontent and dissatisfaction, must first exist before leadership and a movement can emerge.[36] The Jews, of course, had been under foreign rule since the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. But it must have meant a special shock to the vast majority of the Jewish people in Palestine to face accelerated, forced Hellenization under Antiochus Epiphanes and then, long after that had been beaten back, under Herod the Great, the epitome of the Hellenistic-Roman client king. Herod effectively ended any real Jewish participation in the internal political process—even if such participation had been largely symbolic at times during the Hasmonean monarchy—and imposed a largely new landed gentry and an "illegitimate" new sacerdotal aristocracy loyal to himself, both of which continued into the period of direct Roman rule.[37]

Herod's ambitious building projects and his beneficence to foreign cities and the imperial family placed a considerable burden on the backs of the Jewish farmers and day laborers.[38] Under the direct rule of Rome the Jews were subjected even more explicitly to a double taxation, the Roman head and land taxes in addition to the tithe for support of the Temple and priesthood. An increasing amount of the land was incorporated into large landed estates owned by the royal family or, later, the imperial family and by wealthy gentry, including the sacerdotal aristocracy. Indeed, the general preconditions of the Jewish revolt thus resemble those in a number of modern cases of peoples ruled by colonial powers, such as the Vietnamese and Algerians ruled by the French and the Palestinian Arabs and the Kikuyu (in Kenya) ruled by Britain. These peoples all experienced varying degrees of land hunger, enforced urbanization, the disintegration of village life and native culture, continu-

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[35]Chalmers Johnson, *Revolution and the Social System* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution, 1964), pp. 5–12; Harry Eckstein, "On the Etiology of Internal War," *History and Theory* 4 (1965): 140; Leiden and Schmitt, pp. 37–53.

[36]Martin Oppenheimer, *The Urban Guerrilla* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 92; Leiden and Schmitt, p. 76.

[37]On the social, political, and economic conditions at this time, see now Avi-Yonah, esp. chaps. 2 and 4 by M. Stern and chap. 5 by J. Klausner; and *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern, 2 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974–76), chaps. 5, 6, and 11 by Stern, and chap. 12 by S. Applebaum. On Herod's regime, see esp. Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes, Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969) esp. chap. 4.

[38]On the situation of the peasantry, see, eg., Klausner, "The Economy of Judea in the Period of the Second Temple," pp. 189–96, 205; Harold Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), chap. 5; H. Kreissig, *Die Sozialzusammenhänge des jüdischen Krieges* (Berlin: Akademie, 1972), pp. 17–56.

ing exploitation by foreigners (and their collaborating native gentry, especially in Vietnam), and not least of all, the stirrings of nationalism.[39]

Another important precondition of the Jewish revolt was the long-standing tradition among Palestinian Jews of rebellion against foreign and/or despotic rulers, especially against those who dared to impinge on the free maintenance of the Mosaic traditions. Beginning with guerrilla warfare under the leadership of the "Maccabees" (Hasmonean family), the Jews had already once successfully carried out a war of national liberation against the Seleucid Empire. The memory of this successful resistance clearly revived as the Romans turned out to be rapacious masters and as Herod either eliminated or effectively neutralized the last of the Hasmoneans. Although Herod maintained tight control of Jewish society himself, at his death the whole countryside erupted in spontaneous rebellion led by messianic pretenders in each of the principal districts, Galilee, Peraea, and Judaea (*BJ* 2.55–65; *Ant.* 17.271–85). Then throughout the period of direct Roman rule various popular charismatic movements emerged, with prophets promising apocalyptic deliverance to their followers as they gathered in anticipation of new, eschatological mighty acts by God himself (e.g., *Ant.* 20.97–98, 169–72; *BJ* 2.261–63). Also, banditry flared up periodically throughout the Roman period and, escalating to epidemic proportions, became a major factor in the outbreak of full-scale rebellion.[40] All of these phenomena, of course, were spontaneous popular movements. Although some or all may have shared a similar eschatological expectation, none were organized for an enduring resistance to the Romans.

Besides the tradition of popular resistance, moreover, there was also a tradition of organized resistance to foreign rule among the religiopolitical intelligentsia. The Hasidim had actually been the first to organize resistance to the Hellenistic reform carried out by the Jerusalem aristocracy and to the forced Hellenization imposed by Antiochus Epiphanes.[41] The theology of martyrdom developed in that struggle (e.g., in Dan. 11:33–35; 12:1–3; cf. 2 Macc. 6–7) may be what Judas of Galilee and Zadok were drawing on in their exhortation to resist the Roman census.[42] During the subsequent rule of the Hasmonean dynasty successors of the Hasidim organized as the Pharisaic party attempted to ensure the proper theocratic rule (as they saw it) of the Jewish people. In particular they resisted the arbitrary use of power and

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[39]Leiden and Schmitt, p. 32; note that none of these peoples seem to have found a way to force its views on the government it rejected except through terror.

[40]William R. Farmer, esp. pp. 129–32, 175–86.

[41]Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1970), pp. 196–98.

[42]Farmer, pp. 60–68; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), pp. 44–48.

authority by Hyrcanus and Jannai.[43] It is surely in this tradition of the religiopolitical "sages" that we find the Pharisee Shammaiah speaking out against the nascent Herodian tyranny (*Ant.* 14.172–74). Similarly, forty years later, as Herod was finally dying, in 4 B.C.E., the *sophistai* Matthias and Judas conspired with their students to pull down the hated Roman Eagle from over the gate of the Temple—an action for which they were burned alive by the feverish but furious Herod (*BJ* 1.648–50; *Ant.* 17.149–51, 167). Certainly not all Pharisees took the same political positions, and few perhaps became active in outright resistance. In their struggles with rival Hasmonean factions the Pharisees may actually have invited the Romans in[44]—although they very quickly regretted it, when Pompey plundered the Temple. And some of "the leading Pharisees" joined with the priestly aristocracy in attempting to head off the revolt and then, when it erupted anyhow, attempted to contain and control it (Josephus *Vita* [Loeb Classical ed.], pars. 20–23; 28–31; 62–69; 73, 77–79; *BJ* 2.563–71). But Pharisees and other teachers of the people had carried on a tradition of opposition to foreign and unjust rule.[45] Judas, Zadok, and company were not the first to believe that it was up to them to do something about their "dependence" on alien or despotic government.[46] The "alienation of the intellectuals" is not only a modern phenomenon. The Sicarii emerged from circles not only potentially inclined to resist but also quite capable of organizing resistance to what they saw as an intolerably oppressive order.

One of the precipitants of the Jewish revolt was the implementation of a terrorist strategy by the Sicarii. However, since some of the other precipitants of the revolt may also have been factors leading to the initiation of this "new type of banditry" by the Sicarii, we should examine these other precipitants first. We have very little clearly connected evidence to go on, but two or three factors would seem to have set the stage for the resort to terrorism by concerned Jews.

First, amid the domination and exploitation by foreign rulers and their own religious aristocracy, the Jewish people suffered a disastrous drought and famine in the late 40s.[47] This would undoubtedly have been especially hard on those peasants whose hold on their land was already tenuous. We know that banditry increased dramatically in the years following the famine (*BJ* 2.228; *Ant.* 20.124). And we know that tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans, and between the Roman rulers and the Jewish village elders, erupted into violent conflict under the

[43] Gedalyah Allon, "The Attitudes of the Pharisees to the Roman Government and the House of Herod," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 7 (1961): 53–78, esp. 57–71.

[44] *Ant.* 14.41; Martin Noth, *The History of Israel,* 2d ed. (London: Black, 1960), p. 403.

[45] Allon, pp. 70–78.

[46] Cf. further, Leiden and Schmitt, p. 39.

[47] Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 140–45; *Ant.* 20.101.

procurator Cumanus (48–52), whose attempts to restore order only in-
tensified the conflict (*BJ* 2.229–31, 232–40; *Ant.* 20.113–17, 118–23).
The famine would appear to be a crucial event from which the disorders
increased dramatically.

Second, both Cumanus and Felix (procurator 52–60) took sharply re-
pressive measures, not only against the brigands but, in the unusual
circumstances, against numbers of the general peasantry as well. At least
twice Cumanus, once by violent overreaction and once by inaction,
caused minor incidents to escalate into major conflicts involving large
numbers of people, then felt it necessary to crush the disorders with
brutal military action (*BJ* 2.228–29, 232–36; *Ant.* 20.113 f., 118–22). The
next procurator, Felix, implemented a systematically repressive policy,
capturing and crucifying not only many bandits—including the famous
outlaw leader Eleazar ben Dinai—but numerous people who were sus-
pected of complicity with the bandits (*BJ* 2.253; *Ant.* 20.160–61). The
situation may have seemed to call for a desperate new strategy.

Third, as political scientists have pointed out, although it is not un-
common for the ruling elite to be estranged from the people and both
incompetent and brutal, "what is ultimately fatal is the compounding of
errors by intransigence."[48] If it blocks all peaceful means of social ad-
justment, then it drives the opposition to its last resort, violent resistance.
Until the administration of Cumanus the errors of the regime were not
yet seriously compounded by intransigence. Mass protests and official
delegations by the Jews seem still to have resulted in at least minimal
symbolic redress of grievances, from Cumanus himself or from the em-
peror Claudius in response to the subsequent intransigence of Cumanus
(*BJ* 2.230–31, 245–46; *Ant.* 20.116–17, 134–36). After the time of
Cumanus, however, we hear of little or no action by the Jewish elite in
representing the concerns of the common people, and the Roman pro-
curators are intransigent as well as repressive and rapacious.

There were undoubtedly other factors, of which we have not historical
record, which helped precipitate the formulation of the terrorist strategy
by those who came to be called the Sicarii. But these three are sufficient
to enable us to perceive how concerned Jews of the time could have come
to believe that their situation was so desperate as to call for a strategy of
selective violence against the chief priests and notables who were in close
collaboration with the Roman government. As Chalmers Johnson com-
ments about a related revolutionary phenomenon, "in dysfunctional
conditions some persons possess an effective sense of dysfunctional con-
ditions before others."[49] It is these who may form a subversive brother-
hood. How the operations of such an underground terrorist group serve

[48]Stone (n. 16 above), pp. 165–66.
[49]Johnson, p. 51.

as a precipitant to wider rebellion can be seen in the effects which the activities of the Sicarii had on Jewish society in the years leading up to the revolt against Rome.

THE EFFECTS OF TERRORISM BY THE SICARII

Josephus provides a dramatic portrayal of the effects of the selective clandestine assassinations of the High Priest Jonathan and others by the Sicarii: "The panic created was more alarming than the calamity itself; every one, as on the battlefield, hourly expecting death. Men kept watch at a distance on their enemies and would not trust even their friends when they approached. Yet even while their suspicions were aroused and they were on their guard, they fell; so swift were the conspirators and so crafty in eluding detection" (BJ 2.256–57). The Sicarii thus created an intense feeling of fear and anxiety among the ruling groups who were their targets. The effects of such terrorism are to break down the customary framework of social images and assumptions which members of a society depend on and trust. There results a general feeling of insecurity and distrust, each person feeling that he may be next.

Beyond this general feeling of fear and disorientation, moreover, the assassinations also created a fragmenting effect within the Jewish ruling elite. Whatever coherence it may have had now dissolved, and there remained anomic individuals, each concerned only with personal safety—"they would not even trust their friends when they approached," said Josephus. That is, rather than having stimulated cooperation among the threatened ruling families, the terrorism provoked division within the ruling elite.[50] Beginning possibly during the time of Felix (52–60), but at least by the time of Albinus (62–64), the chief priests and members of the royal (Herodian) family collected gangs of ruffians about them (Ant. 20.181, 206–7, 214). Whether they intended it or not, the Sicarii had touched off a cycle of escalating violence.[51] For these "servants" of the chief priests and royal scions served not just as bodyguards but as private "storm troopers" for their employers. Thus, for example, the "goon squad" of the High Priest Ananias, whose staff members were being kidnapped by the Sicarii, "would go to the threshing floors and take by force the tithes [intended] for the [ordinary]

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[50]Similar to the situation in Algeria, as sketched by the governor general there in 1955, Jacques Soustelle, Aimee et souffrante Algerie (Paris: Plon, 1956) 121. Josephus's report in Ant. 20.162–63 that Felix had hired the brigands or Sicarii to murder the High Priest Jonathan would fit well into this picture of dissension among the ruling elite. But this is surely a tendentious account in the Antiquities (contrast BJ 2.254–57) and is paralleled by Josephus's account in the Antiquities of the struggles between Jews and Greeks in Cesarea, as noted by Lee I. Levine, "The Jewish-Greek Conflict in First Century Caesarea," Journal of Jewish Studies 25 (1974): 384.
[51]Oppenheimer, p. 75; Hutchinson (n. 20 above), p. 388.

priests; nor did they refrain from beating those who refused to give. The high priests were guilty of the same practices as his slaves, and no one could stop them." (*Ant.* 20.206–7). Similarly, the gangs of the royal scions, Costobar and Saul, "were lawless and quick to plunder the property of those weaker than themselves" (*Ant.* 20.214).

The assassinations thus indirectly stimulated repressive violence by the ruling groups, but instead of its being a cooperative effort to repress the terrorism, it was an escalation of the violence, a contribution to the breakdown of the social structure and its assumptions on which all depended for any semblance of social order.[52] If there is any value in Kropotkin's analysis of the cycle of violence, the effect of the repression by the elite's counterviolence would have been to stimulate the insurgent movement.[53]

For the masses of people, terrorism demonstrates how vulnerable— and perhaps changeable—the established ruling elite actually is. Similar to the effect of the assassination of the village notables led by Nguyen Binh in Vietnam after World War II, the Sicarii thus demonstrated how limited the powers of the Jewish notables actually were and branded many of them as traitors to the Jewish cause.[54] The attack on the symbolic religiopolitical figures, such as the high priest, is particularly important with respect to the masses in a nascent revolutionary situation, for the Sicarii thus attacked the religiopolitical symbols which held the social structure together. The effect, given the ambivalence of the people's feelings about the high priests who exploited them as well as symbolized their religious loyalties, was bound to be a lessening of the "habit of obedience" on which any government depends for its monopoly of power. With the breakdown of this habit of respect and obedience to symbols of power and authority, the government loses its monopoly of power. In contrast to certain modern situations, however, there is no evidence that the Sicarii or any other insurgent group was able to exercise any power in opposition to that of the established order.[55] As we shall see, the Sicarii certainly did not command a very extensive following at the outbreak of the revolt.

It is possible, perhaps, to infer two further, more specific, effects—the effect on those involved in the terrorism and the effect on other intellectuals—on the basis of comparative material, even though we have no evidence from Josephus or elsewhere which bears directly on these aspects. The former leader of the Algerian FLN, Ouzegane, suggests that "urban terrorism" functions as a safety valve, "controlling militant

[52]Cf. Germaine Tillion, *Les Ennemis complementaries* (Paris: Minuit, 1960) 52–53.
[53]Thornton (n. 16 above), p. 87.
[54]Crozier, *The Rebels,* 163.
[55]On the breakdown of the "habit of obedience," etc., see Peter Amann, "Revolution: A Redefinition," *Political Science Quarterly* 77 (1962): 36–53.

impatience and relieving the tensions caused by inaction on a broader front, which might well be suicidal and hopeless."[56] Finally, the terrorism forces especially those who might be somewhat reflective regarding the situation to confront a polarized situation and to decide which side they will support. Again quoting from an Algerian: "the very violence of terrorism has made no small number among us leave our ease and our laziness in order to reflect, . . . to make an examination of his conscience."[57] One wonders about the corresponding effect which the Sicarii may have had on Pharisees in first-century Palestine.

The general effect of the terrorism by the Sicarii during the decade leading up to the Jewish revolt, especially as it bore on the ruling elite, was that it became a major precipitant of a "revolutionary situation." There were certainly other major precipitants, such as the increasing banditry in the countryside and the sharply escalating conflicts between Jews and Gentiles in border towns and Hellenistic cities such as Caesarea, as well as the three precipitants discussed above. But Josephus is surely correct in viewing the activity of the Sicarii as one of the principal factors leading Jewish society into rebellion; for the Sicarii had precipitated one of the three principal symptoms of a "revolutionary situation." According to Lenin's classic study of insurrection, a revolution is possible only when, among other factors,

it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the "upper classes," a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for the "lower classes not to want" to live in the old way; it is also necessary for the "upper classes to be unable" to live in the old way.[58]

This is an apt description of the ruling classes of Jewish Palestine in the 60s c.e. The high priestly families, the scions of the royal family, and other notables were fragmented among themselves and were quarreling with both Agrippa II and the Roman procurators, especially Florus, the last one before the revolt. The Sicarii had clearly helped create an extremely unsettled situation which was ripe for a more widespread popular rebellion. As Josephus portrayed the situation, in typically polemical terms:

So universal was the contagion, both in private and in public life, such the emulation, moreover, to outdo each other in acts of impiety towards God and of

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[56]Ouzegane, p. 261.

[57]Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal, 1955–1962* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), p. 47, as quoted in Hutchinson, 391.

[58]V. I. Lenin, "The Collapse of the Second International," *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1967), 21:213; Moss (n. 21 above), pp. 64–65.

injustice toward their neighbors; those in power [the notables = *dynatoi*] oppress-
ing the masses, and the masses eager to destroy the powerful. These bent on
tyranny, those on violence and plundering the property of the wealthy. The
Sicarii were the first to set the example of this lawlessness and cruelty to their
kinsmen, leaving no word unspoken to insult, no deed untried to ruin, the
victims of their conspiracy. [*BJ* 7.260–62]

THE ROLE OF THE SICARII IN THE JEWISH REVOLT

Ironically, once the revolt finally erupted on a massive scale, the Sicarii
played a very brief and very limited role. It is important to attend closely
to what Josephus says and does not say in this connection because the
Sicarii (usually understood as identical with the Zealots) are often
viewed—perhaps wrongly—as having taken the leading role in the initial
stages of the revolt in Jerusalem. Three cautionary points in particular
should be mentioned.

First, Menahem, the son or grandson of Judas of Galilee, was not
necessarily the recognized leader of the Sicarii in all their actions at the
beginning of the popular rebellion in Jerusalem early in the summer of
66 C.E. Josephus does not mention Menahem as involved in the original
capture of Masada (*BJ* 2.408; cf. 433–34), and he describes the Sicarii as
already active in the hostilities in Jerusalem (*BJ* 2.425–32) before
Menahem's assumption of the leadership (433–34). Josephus's portrayal
of Menahem contrasts with his usual narrative, in which he concentrates
heavily on the leaders' roles, as in the cases of Eleazar ben Ananias the
Temple captain, Simon bar Giora, John of Gischala, or Menahem's
father/grandfather, Judas of Galilee. We cannot expect Josephus to be
completely consistent in his portrayals, but it is at least curious that he
does not allow Menahem the same prominence as other leaders. Thus,
especially considering the spontaneity and rapidly changing complexion
of the rebellion in the early summer of 66, perhaps Menahem did no
more than Josephus says he did.

Second, it was not necessarily the Sicarii (with or without Menahem's
leadership) who captured Masada. At first sight, *BJ* 2.408 and 2.433–34
might seem like duplicate reports of the same event, but this is probably
not the case. Although the phrase "some of the most ardent promoters
of the war" in 2.408 might seem an allusion to the Sicarii, it is clear that
by this time there were plenty of other "rebels" *(stasiastai)* and "revolu-
tionaries" *(neoterizontes)* besides the Sicarii already active in fomenting
rebellion (e.g., *BJ* 2.407). Moreover, two different activities are described
in these separate reports. The first, 2.408, describes how the rebel forces
stormed the fortress, gained possession by stratagem, killed the Roman
garrison, and established their own in its place (cf. 2.484–86). The Sicarii
are not mentioned—nor had they been in the habit of attacking Romans
directly. The second report, 2.434, explains how Menahem was able to

break into Herod's armory on Masada in order to provide arms for his associates (surely the Sicarii are meant, although Josephus does not use the word) and other "brigands," and thus to return to Jerusalem to assume leadership of the rebels besieging the royal place. (*BJ* 4.400 and 7.297 both describe yet a third incident, when the Sicarii, fleeing Jerusalem [2.447], themselves captured Masada by treachery, presumably from the rebel garrison which had been installed there [2.408], after which they remained there throughout the rest of the revolt.)

Third, the Sicarii did not inaugurate the acts of popular rebellion in Jerusalem. Only after many of the Sicarii, along with some feebler folk, were able to slip into the Temple during the feast of woodcarrying did they join the rebels who were already besieging the chief priests and notables in the upper city (*BJ* 2.425 vs. 422–24). Thus the "attackers" who set fire to the house of Ananias and the royal palaces and burned the archives in order to destroy records of debts (2.426–27) included numbers of Sicarii, but this was hardly an action carried out only by the Sicarii. These actions accord perfectly with the program of the Sicarii, but any number of the common people and of the regular priests could be expected to have done the same things. For, as Josephus explained in his later work (*Ant.* 20.206–7), it was Ananias's gang of ruffians who had, by strong-arm tactics, deprived the ordinary priests of the tithes which were rightfully theirs. Josephus would have been delighted to place the blame on one small group and thus exonerate other Jews. But, although their terrorism may have gradually precipitated such actions, the Sicarii were hardly the only ones who participated in these first incendiary acts of rebellion against the Romans and their own ruling class.[59]

Once the Sicarii had joined the insurgents in Jerusalem they did play an aggressive role in the hostilities, but only very briefly, because the other insurgents, along with some of the "citizens" of Jerusalem, soon turned against them. It is only to be expected that the Sicarii would have been among those most anxious to capture the High Priest Ananias. Josephus only implies that they participated in the killing of Ananias and his brother Ezechias (*BJ* 2.441–42). But their assistance in these executions would only have been a continuation of their long-standing campaign to assassinate such figures. Of course, this (along with the basic struggle for power) would also explain why the other principal rebel leader at this stage, the temple captain Eleazar, who was the son of

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[59] In his use of terms referring to the insurrectionists engaged in these actions Josephus does not distinguish between "the bandits" (*lēstai,* which is used elsewhere at a few points in reference to the Sicarii) and "the rebels" (*stasiastai*). Thus (e.g., in *BJ* 2.431–32 and 441), "the rebels" who are carrying on the siege include the Sicarii along with the followers of Eleazar, and "the brigands" who fall beneath the walls include others besides the Sicarii. Indeed, at this point he uses the term almost synonymously.

Ananias, would now turn against Menahem and the Sicarii. Even if he were strongly alienated from his father and the rest of his family, he would undoubtedly have built up strong resentments against the terrorists who had previously kidnapped his secretary and now aided in the murder of his father. It may not have been entirely fortuitous, therefore, that it was Eleazar and his associates who now turned other insurgents and the heretofore dormant bulk of the Jerusalem "citizens" against the "tyrant" Menahem and the Sicarii.

Menahem was apparently posturing as a messianic pretender. Once he had armed his followers, says Josephus, he returned "like a veritable king [messiah] to Jerusalem" (*BJ* 2.434), where he assumed leadership of the revolt. There were certainly other leaders—the besieged garrison negotiated with "Menahem and the leaders of the insurrection" (2.437)—but he was, at least for a time, the most prominent. He even began to comport himself in a grand style appropriate to the royal office he had assumed. His pattern of behavior must already have become stylized and familiar by the time the partisans of Eleazar formed their conspiracy: "They laid their plan to attack him in the Temple, for he went up there to worship, arrayed in royal robes and attended by his suite of armed fanatics" (*BJ* 2.443–44).[60] Probably his messianic claim, along with his tyrannical leadership, annoyed the followers of Eleazar (largely priests?) and many of the citizens of Jerusalem. For, judging from Josephus's account, their attack on the Sicarii focused at least symbolically on Menahem, the messianic pretender.

The subsequent history of the Sicarii involves an apparent inconsistency: They passively withdrew from the rest of the Jewish revolt, but then they agitated in Egypt and Cyrene. The Sicarii who were able to escape the attack by the partisans of Eleazar ben Ananias and the Jerusalem citizenry fled to Masada (*BJ* 2.447).[61] Yadin and others have glorified the heroics of "the Zealots' last stand" on Masada.[62] But it was clearly not the Zealots proper but the Sicarii who had occupied Masada.[63] Here, moreover, under the leadership of Eleazar ben Jair, the Sicarii sat out the rest of the great revolt against Rome. They could have

[60] For a discussion of this as the proper translation of *tous zēlōtas,* see Smith (n. 1 above) pp. 7–8.

[61] Thus the "biryoni" referred to in (Babylonian Talmud) *Gittin* 56a cannot be identical with the Sicarii, nor can they have been "precursors of the *sicarii,*" as suggested by J. Nedava ("Who Were the 'BIRYONI,' " *Jewish Quarterly Review* 63 [1972–73]: 317–22); they are, rather, one of the factions still involved in the active resistance to the Romans during the siege of Jerusalem.

[62] See, e.g., Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966).

[63] See esp. Solomon Zeitlin, "Masada and the Sicarii," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 55 (1964–65): 302, 315–17; and S. B. Hoenig, "The Sicarii in Masada—Glory or Infamy?" *Tradition* 11 (1970): 5–30.

organized resistance in the countryside, as did Simon bar Giora (another messianic pretender),[64] who eventually became the most powerful leader in Jerusalem during the prolonged Roman seige. While taking refuge with the Sicarii at Masada at an earlier stage in the revolt, Simon had attempted to persuade them to venture back into more active resistance (*BJ* 4.503–7). But the Sicarii merely remained in Herod's stronghold without contributing further to the rebellion. They did, of course, contribute to the general disorder and suffering. To support themselves during the long years of the war's duration, they became predators on the villages surrounding Masada (*BJ* 4.399–405, 506–7). At one point they raided as far as the town of Engaddi, ten miles to the north of their fortress. They gathered numerous recruits from all quarters, says Josephus (4.405), but he gives no indication that these recruits, along with the refugees from Jerusalem, were shaped into a fighting force. Even when the Romans finally got around to attacking Masada itself in 73, the Sicarii offered no active resistance (*BJ* 7.309–14). This nonresistance by the Sicarii at the siege of Masada stands in striking contrast with the vigorous resistance by the Zealots and others at the siege of Jerusalem. The Sicarii merely held out as long as possible—and then committed mass suicide: 960 men, women, and children (*BJ* 7.320–88, 389–401).

On the other hand, following the final mass suicide of those who remained at Masada, other Sicarii began to agitate against Roman rule in Egypt and Cyrene. In their Egyptian activity we find a familiar pattern (*BJ* 7.409–19). The Sicarii admonished the Jews to esteem God alone as their lord and to assert their liberty. They assassinated certain Jews of rank. But then the people under the leadership of the elders turned against the Sicarii and killed them or drove them out. Those who were captured by the Roman officials, however, held fast to their sacred principles even under intense torture.

The behavior of the Sicarii during the revolt, sitting idly by throughout in their stronghold at Masada, appears to conflict with their earlier (and later) ideals of resistance to Roman rule and their program of terrorism against the Jewish ruling groups who collaborated in the unjust and intolerable Roman domination. Why, in the summer of 66, did the Sicarii suddenly withdraw? There are several possible explanations, none of them mutually exclusive of others and none of them completely satisfactory as an elucidation of the inactivity by the Sicarii during the revolt. Some possibilities:

First, many of their number having been slain and the rest thrown out

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[64]Otto Michel, "Studien zu Josephus: Simon bar Giora," *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967–68): 402–8.

of Jerusalem by the citizenry and the partisans of Eleazar, the Sicarii first
had to recoup their strength. But then they found no opportunity to
reassert their leadership in the resistance and were not inclined to rejoin
the revolt which they could not lead.

Second, they may indeed have viewed Menahem as the messiah and/or
the revolt which started in the summer of 66 as the climactic
eschatological war, hence they had to recalculate their eschatological
anticipations when their messiah was killed and/or they themselves, the
saints of the last times, were slaughtered by the very people they were
supposed to lead.

Third, closely related to the previous possibility—and giving some
credence to the great exhortation to mass suicide which Josephus places
in the mouth of Eleazar ben Jair (*BJ* 7.320–88)—perhaps the Sicarii
viewed their rejection by the people in Jerusalem as a rejection of God's
program of liberation of which they were the instruments. Hence they
may have viewed further resistance to Rome as without divine assistance
and viewed the Roman reconquest of Palestine and their destruction of
Jerusalem as God's punishment of his people for their lack of faith and
responsiveness to his eschatological initiative.

Whatever their reasons for withdrawing from the hostilities, the Sicarii
had been one of the major precipitating factors of the Jewish revolt
against Rome. In 6 C.E. a number of Pharisees and perhaps other "in-
tellectuals" had organized what Josephus called the Fourth Philosophy
to resist the direct Roman taxation, which for them was tantamount to
enslavement by an illegitimate foreign ruler. Then for several decades
the movement apparently lay dormant. But it sprang to life again during
the deteriorating economic and political conditions of the 50s. As these
Jews, intensely concerned for the liberty of the chosen people to live
under the direct rule of its only legitimate Lord and Master, reflected on
the increasingly oppressive circumstances, they concluded that the situa-
tion called for a desperate and unprecedented strategy. Hence they
implemented a program of what today would be called terrorism, assas-
sinating important symbolic figures and others of the Jewish ruling
groups who were collaborating in the Roman rule.

The Sicarii thus set in motion a cycle of violence which contributed
greatly to the breakdown of the established social-political order and
hastened the outbreak of mass rebellion. The Sicarii almost certainly
shared some of the same apocalyptic fervor which we find elsewhere in
this period, particularly in popular prophetic and messianic movements.
In contrast to the Jewish brigands with whom they have often been
confused, they were hardly "prepolitical" or "primitive rebels." They
were, rather, an organized group with a religiously motivated yet politi-
cally conscious strategy and deliberately calculated tactics. As is often the

case with modern terrorist groups, however, they did not have and could not build, through terrorism alone, a social-political base among the people. And, of course, they had set themselves not just against their own sacerdotal aristocracy and other gentry, but ultimately against the military might of the Roman empire still at the height of its strength. In such circumstances the only possible result was for the Sicarii to become another dramatic group of martyrs to the radical faith in the one true Lord of History.