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The Sacarii

By Jim Myers

At the time of Yeshua (Jesus), an extremist sect called the **Sacarii** (Zealots) existed in Israel. It was a political-religious movement that required its members to unequivocally reject any foreign ruler over Israel. They taught that Yahweh required absolute obedience, which included active resistance against all foreign powers. They held that only after these requirements were met would Yahweh intervene and establish the Messianic Age.

They did not hesitate to use intrigue, violence, force and deception to achieve their ends. The Sacarii resisted foreign rule by refusing to pay taxes; harassing and murdering government officials; and, rebelling against the use of the Greek language. *They interpreted the writings of certain biblical prophets to mean that they were living in the time of Messianic salvation.*

Scholars are not in agreement about the origin of the Sacarii. Some conclude that their roots go back to the second century BCE, when Jewish priest-kings called the **Hasmoneans** (**Maccabees**) attempted to restore Israel to its Davidic boundaries and glory. It was one of the few times of independence for Israel when there were no superpowers ruling over them. The Hasmoneans brought wealth and prosperity to Jerusalem, as confirmed by archaeological evidence of a wealthy, aristocratic neighborhood from that period.

During this period, centralized Temple worship flourished in Jerusalem and prospered. During

this period many non-Jews converted to Judaism. However, it must be noted, that the Hasmoneans forced many of the inhabitants of regions they conquered to convert to their form of Judaism. In spite of such incidents, it was still one of the brief periods in Jewish history in which the Jewish people were in control of their own land. The nation was expanding and they felt they had their own kingdom for the first time since the Babylonian captivity. This became a golden period in the psyche of generations of Jews.

It came to an abrupt end when Israel became part of the Roman Empire as a result of an embassy of Jews who appealed to Pompey at Damascus in 65 BCE. They declared that Rome had long been the protector of the Jews and had thus enjoyed autonomy. It was their position that the head of Jewish state should be a High Priest and not a king. They also charged that the present Hasmonean rulers had enslaved the Jewish people, destroyed their ancestral constitution and maintained their position of power only by the terror created by their armies.

As a result of their visit Pompey decided to intervene in the civil war between the two Jewish rivals for the throne. In the spring of 63 BCE Pompey and his troops came to Damascus. He was supported by **Hyrchanus** and began a siege of Jerusalem. In the fall of 63 the fortress was stormed and its defenders subdued. Judea became a vassal principedom of the Romans and **Hyrchanus II** was at its head. Israel was now ruled by a High Priest and not a king. As such,

he lost the entire non-Jewish part of his realm, the acquisitions of **Hyrchanus I** and **Jannaues**. His principedom still included Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Idumea, but was completely cut off from the sea by the coast cities liberated by Pompey. Most of the Trans-Jordan was also lost to the Jews.

One of the primary sources of information about this period in Jewish history is **Josephus**. It must be pointed out that he is considered a very biased source, since **he was a pro-Roman Jew**. *Many Jews considered him to be the "Benedict Arnold" of Israel.* However, he is one of the few sources of information from either a Jewish or Roman source.

It is from the writings of Josephus that much of the confusion concerning the origin of the Sacarii (Zealot) derive. In his first book, *The Wars of the Jews*, (Wars II. 4. 1; IV 4. 1), he says that the Zealot movement began during the reign of Herod the Great (d. 4 BCE), rebelling against a heavy foreign tax. Later, in Josephus' volume, *Antiquities*, written in his retirement and old age, he contends that the Zealot movement technically began as early as 67 BCE, on the first day of the Roman occupation. Either way, during the time of Yeshua it was a well-known and controversial movement.

In order to better understand the Gospels, we must recognize the movement's influence and the location of its strongholds around the Sea of Galilee. One was located at a secure site in what is today the Golan Heights. It was in one of the many east-west canyons, northeast of the Sea of Galilee where there is a steep, isolated mountain called **Gamla**, which means "camel hump." For three or possibly four generations Gamla served as their base.

One early leader, **Judas of Gamla**, (also known as **Judas the Galilean**, (Acts. 5:37), initiated the resistance movement at the time of the census (6-7 BCE). His group was called *Sicarii* (later Zealots) which means "**dagger carrier**," and they promoted their political and religious views through violence.

Gamla influenced many villages around the Sea of Galilee. These were the same villages that Yeshua visited and called disciples. A century before, this was the same area that the Hasmoneans conquered and introduced their deep religious and political convictions about the land and God. Thus, the inhabitants' hearts were open to the Sacarii's message. Some compare them to the settlers in Israel today who have rebuilt ancient biblical communities in Judea and Samaria and live in them despite much opposition.

Another stronghold can be found on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee in the **Canyon of Pigeons** in the vertical cliffs of **Mt. Arbel** (which overshadows **Magdala**, home of Mary Magdalene). This 1,500 foot (461 meter) cliff is visible from all parts of the Sea of Galilee and was a constant reminder of resistance to the Romans and their vassal, Herod the Great, and his descendant rulers. When Yeshua was teaching on the **plain of Geneseret** below Arbel and saying, "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" the people could probably hear the faint clanking of workmen's hammers as they forged weapons to be used in the coming confrontation with Rome.

One of Yeshua's disciples was **Simon**, who was a member of this party before Yeshua called him (Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13). Some scholars believe that **Judas Iscariot** was also a Zealot. While some interpret Iscariot as meaning, "man of Kerioth," others believe it is a form of Skarioth, possibly taken to reflect the Latin, *sicarii*.

In **67 CE** the Romans arrived at Gamla and there was a terrible siege and battle in which Josephus says 5,000 Jews jumped to their deaths into the surrounding canyon rather than surrender. In **70 CE**, after the destruction of Jerusalem, Zealot leader **Eleazar ben Yair**, retreated to **Masada** with 960 Zealot men, women and children. There, they held out against and defied the Romans for three years. Rather than surrender they killed their families and drew lots to slaughter themselves, feeling it was the lesser of two evils (Wars, 8:275-401). **BHC**

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