

# Popular movements within Judean culture (first century CE)

## KINGS

There was Judas, son of the brigand-chief Ezekias (who had been a man of great power and who had been captured by Herod only with great difficulty). This Judas, when he had organized at Sepphoris in Galilee a large number of desperate men, raided the palace. Taking all the weapons that were stored there, he armed all of his followers and made off with all the goods that had been seized there. He caused fear in everyone by plundering those he encountered in his craving for greater power and in his zealous pursuit of royal rank. He did not expect to acquire this prize by being virtuous, but by the advantage of his superior strength.

(*Ant.* 17.271-72)

At Sepphoris in Galilee, Judas, son of Ezekias (the brigand-chief who once overran the country and was suppressed by king Herod), having organized a sizable force, broke into the royal armories, armed his followers, and attacked the others who vied for power.

(*J. W.* 2.56)

There was also Simon, a servant of king Herod, but otherwise an imposing man in both size and bodily strength, and he was confident of distinguishing himself. Spurred on by chaotic social conditions, he dared to don the diadem. When he had organized some men, he was also proclaimed king by them in their fanaticism, and he thought himself more worthy of this than anyone else. After setting fire to the royal palace in Jericho, he plundered and carried off the things that had previously been taken (and stored) there. He also set fire to numerous other royal residences in many parts of the country and destroyed them, after allowing his followers to take the confiscated goods in them as booty. He would have accomplished something greater had there not been swift intervention. For Gratus, leader of royal troops, took his forces, joined the Romans and went to meet Simon. After a long and difficult

battle, a great number of the Pereans were killed, since they were in disarray and fought with more daring than skill. When Simon himself tried to seek safety by fleeing through a certain ravine, Gratus intercepted and beheaded him. (*Ant.* 17.273-76)

And then there was Athronges, a man whose eminence derived neither from the renown of his forefathers, nor from the superiority of his character, nor the extent of his means. He was an obscure shepherd, yet remarkable for his stature and strength. He dared to aspire to kingship on the grounds that having obtained it he would delight in greater wantonness. When it came to dying, he did not care if he risked his life in such circumstances. He also had four brothers; they too were large men, confident that they would also prevail by virtue of their feats of strength and expecting to provide solid support for his grip on the kingdom. Each of them led an armed band, for a great throng had assembled around them. Although they were generals, they served under him whenever they made forays into battle on their own. Putting on the diadem, Athronges held council on what was to be done, although everything ultimately depended on his own judgment. He held power for a long time, having been designated king and able to do whatever he wanted without interference. He and his brothers pressed hard in the slaughter of both the Romans and the Herodian troops, acting with a similar hatred toward both, toward the royal troops because of the outrages they committed during Herod's rule, and toward the Romans because of the wrongs they were thought to have perpetrated in the present circumstances. As time passed, they became ever more brutal, with no escape for anyone; sometimes they acted hoping to gain booty, and other times simply because they were accustomed to bloodshed. Once near Emmaus they even attacked a company of Romans carrying grain and arms to their army. After surrounding them, they struck down Arius the centurion, who led the brigade, and forty of his best infantry. Those who survived were alarmed by their predicament, but were able to escape when Gratus and his royal troops served as a shield for them; however, they left their dead behind. The brothers continued their guerrilla warfare

for a long time, harassing the Romans to no small degree and ravaging their own nation. Some time later, however, they were caught and taken prisoner, one in an encounter with Gratus, and another in an encounter with Ptolemy. After Archelaus caught the oldest one, the last brother, vexed by the other's plight, and having no other way to save himself—since he was now isolated, extremely fatigued and left defenseless—surrendered to Archelaus after assurances and a pledge of good faith. But this occurred later on.

Judea was infested with gangs of bandits. Whenever seditious bands came across someone suitable, that person could be set up as king, eager for the ruin of the commonwealth, doing little damage to the Romans, but causing extensive bloodshed among their countrymen. (*Ant.* 17.278-85).

## PROPHETS

Impostors and demagogues, under the guise of divine inspiration, provoked revolutionary actions and impelled the masses to act like madmen. They led them out into the wilderness so that there God would show them signs of imminent liberation. (*J.W.* 2.259; see also the parallel in *Ant.* 20.168: For they said that they would display unmistakable signs and wonders done according to God's plan.)

Nor was the Samaritan nation free from disturbance. For a man who had no qualms about deceit, and freely used it to sway the crowd, commanded them to go up with him as a group to Mount Gerizim, which is for them the most sacred mountain. He promised to show them, when they got there, the holy vessels buried at the spot where Moses had put them. Those who thought his speech convincing came with arms and stationed themselves at a village called Tirathana. There they welcomed late-comers so that they might make the climb up the mountain in a great throng. But Pilate was quick to prevent their ascent with a contingent of cavalry and armed infantry. They attacked those who had assembled beforehand in the village, killed some, routed others, and took many into captivity. From this group Pilate executed the ringleaders as well as the most able among the fugitives. (*Ant.* 18.85-87)

When Fadus was governor of Judea, a charlatan named Theudas persuaded most of the common people to take their possessions and follow him to the Jordan river. He said he was a prophet, and that at his command the river would be divided and allow them an easy crossing. Through such words he deceived many. But Fadus hardly let them consummate such foolishness. He sent out a cavalry unit against them, which killed many in a surprise attack, though they also took many alive. Having captured Theudas himself, they cut off his head and carried it off to Jerusalem. (*Ant.* 20.97-98)

At this time, a certain man from Egypt arrived at Jerusalem, saying he was a prophet and advising the mass of the common people to go with him to the Mount of Olives, which is just opposite the city. . . . He said that from there he wanted to show them that at his command the walls of Jerusalem would fall down and they could then make an entry into the city. But when Felix learned of these things, he commanded his soldiers to take up their weapons. Marching from Jerusalem with many horsemen and foot-soldiers, he attacked the Egyptian and his followers, killed four hundred of them and took two hundred alive. The Egyptian himself fled the battle and vanished without a trace.

(*Ant.* 20.169-71)

The Egyptian false-prophet . . . when he arrived in the countryside, though an imposter, made himself credible as a prophet and rallied about thirty thousand dupes and took them around through the wilderness to the Mount of Olives. From there he intended to force an entry into Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison, and become ruler of the citizen body, using his fellow-raiders as bodyguards. Felix anticipated his assault and met him with heavily armed Roman troops, with the whole citizen body joining in the defense. In the aftermath, the Egyptian escaped with a few of his followers, but most of them were killed or captured; the rest scattered and hid out in their homes.

(*J.W.* 2.261-63)

Four years before the war, when the city was enjoying great peace and prosperity, a certain Jesus, son of Hananiah, a simple peasant from the lower classes, came to the festival at which all Jews traditionally make booths to God. Standing in the temple, he suddenly began to cry out, "a voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds; a voice against Jerusalem and the temple, a voice against bridegrooms and brides, a voice against the whole people." He went roving through all the byways with his dirge day and night. Some of the gentry, irritated by his ominous words, seized the man and beat him severely. But without a word in his own defense, even to those who struck him, he incessantly repeated his cry as before. Thus the authorities, thinking his agitation had a supernatural cause, which indeed it did, took him to the Roman governor. There, despite being lashed to the bone he did not plea for mercy or shed a single tear, but, as best he could, mourned with each blow, "woe to Jerusalem." And when Albinus, the governor, questioned him as to who he was and where he came from, and why he cried out like this, he said nothing at all, but only continued to repeat his cry of woe until Albinus, thinking him a madman, released him. During the period before the war, he approached no citizen, nor was he seen conversing; he simply continued his daily lament, "woe to Jerusalem," just as if he were practicing a traditional prayer. He did not curse any of those who daily struck him, nor did he thank those who gave him food; but to everyone he gave the single reply, the same

gloomy omen. He was especially vociferous during the festivals. Thus for seven years and five months he persevered, never falling silent or growing weary. It was only when he saw his forebodings fulfilled with the beginning of the siege that he was made to cease. For as he was going around the walls, crying out with a piercing voice, "again, woe to the city and to the people and to the temple," he added a final word, "and woe also to me." At that point, a stone from one of the missile-engines was let loose; it struck and killed him instantly. Thus indeed he was uttering those laments to the very end. (J.W. 6.300-9)

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's

hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. (Mk. 1:4-6)

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mt. 3:7-10)

John answered them all, “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with [the Holy Spirit and with] fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Lk. 3:16-17)

King Herod heard of it; for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him. . . .” But when Herod heard of it he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” (Mk. 6:14, 16-18)

And though he [Herod Antipas] wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and pleased Herod, so that he promised to give her whatever she might ask. . . . He sent and had John beheaded in prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. (Mt. 14:5-7, 10-11)

It seemed to some of the Jews that God had annihilated Herod’s [Antipas] army . . . for his punishment of John, called the baptist, since Herod had him executed. John was a

good man, who demanded that the Jews be intent on virtue, and conduct themselves with justice towards one another and piety towards God, and to come together in baptism. . . . But when others rallied behind him—for they were greatly stirred up by his speeches—Herod feared that such convincing eloquence among the people might lead to some sort of uprising, for they seemed to heed his every word. Anticipating trouble, he decided to eliminate him before he provoked a rebellion. . . . Thus John, because of Herod's suspicion, was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fortress . . . and executed. (*Ant.* 18.116-19)

## Resistance to Roman control - the so-called Fourth Philosophy

A Galilean named Judas was urging his countrymen to resistance, reproaching them if they submitted to paying taxes to the Romans and tolerated human masters after serving God alone. Judas was a teacher [*sophistēs*] with his own party, in no way similar to the others. (*J.W.* 2.118)

Although the Jews were at first intensely angry at the news of their registration on the tax lists, they gradually calmed down, having been persuaded to oppose it no further by the high priest Joazar son of Boethus. Those who succumbed to his arguments unhesitatingly appraised their property. But a certain Judas, a Gaulanite from the city of Gamala, in league with the Pharisee Saddok, pressed hard for resistance. They said that such a tax assessment amounted to slavery, pure and simple, and urged the nation to claim its freedom. If successful, they argued, the Jews would have paved the way for good fortune; if they were defeated in their quest, they would at least have honor and glory for their high ideals. Furthermore, God would eagerly join in promoting the success of their plans, especially if they did not shrink from the slaughter that might come upon them. The people listened with relish and their daring scheme made real headway. . . . Indeed, Judas and Saddok established an alien fourth school of philosophy among us. When their numbers grew, they filled the nation with unrest, and were at the root of the afflictions which ultimately enveloped it. (*Ant.* 18.3-9)

Judas the Galilean established himself as the leader of the fourth philosophy. They agree with the views of the Pharisees in everything except their unconquerable passion for freedom, since they take God as their only leader and master. They shrug off submitting to unusual forms of death and stand firm in the face of torture of relatives and friends, all for refusing to call any man master. Since most people have seen their unwavering conviction under such circumstances, I can omit further comment. For I have no doubt that anything said

against them will be believed. The real problem would be that the report about them would understate their contempt for suffering pain. The mania that began to wreck the nation from then on was the result of Gessius Florus, the governor, who had driven it to a desperate revolt against the Romans by his outrageous abuse of power. (*Ant.* 18.23-25)