

ANARCHY, ROYALTY AND THE *ODIUM REGNI* IN *IUDAEA* (4 BCE - 6 CE)*

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1.- *Pax Romana*

The narrative of Flavius Josephus, as is well known, both in *Bellum Iudaicum* and *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, constitutes a very valuable source regarding the history of Judea, especially for the period from the rise of Herod to the throne (37 BCE) to the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE).

From what we know, his testimony is generally considered very reliable regarding the events described, as his works were published with imperial approval. He knew he would be read and examined and had no interest in fabricating false stories that could easily be disproved, especially by Roman and Greek-speaking readers. It is to be assumed that the judgment of the Jews, given the irreversible break with his community of origin, concerned him much less. Few among them would have read him anyway, and he was aware of that.

However, this is especially true for the events close in time to when he wrote (the years immediately after 70 for *Bellum*, and after 80 for *Antiquitates*), and certainly when Judea had already been reduced to a Roman province (6 CE), as there were many direct testimonies in Rome about those events. The narrative about earlier periods, especially the reign of Herod (37-4 BCE) and the subsequent decade of Archelaus' ethnarchy (4 BCE - 6 CE), must be considered less reliable, as testimonies were fewer. This part of the story (which is almost identically repeated in both *Bellum* and *Antiquitates*) should be read and interpreted with greater caution, in light of the apologetic intentions of the historian.

The main purpose of Josephus' story, as is well known, was to glorify the beneficial and saving work of the Roman Empire, the only power capable of bringing peace, security, and well-being to the world. The Jews were a great people, but they made the mistake of not accepting the *pax Romana*, influenced by violent and fanatical minorities (also stirred up by the last two inept and corrupt Roman procurators). Augustus had inaugurated an era of universal peace and happiness, and his task would be continued by all of his successors. Vespasian, the leader of the army that would destroy the Temple, would in fact be the Savior, the Messiah, but the Jews failed to understand this.

At the heart of Josephus' narrative lies a decidedly pessimistic view of human nature. Men, abandoned to themselves, inevitably fall into greed, oppression, and violence. They are incapable of self-governance without a strong power to restrain their predatory and evil instincts.

This power, in the history of Israel, took various forms, up to the last phase of relative sovereignty, that of Herod's kingdom. Josephus' description of this kingdom is decidedly surreal, as if it were an age of absolute terror, marked by the madness of a sadistic and psychopathic tyrant, terrified by the idea of falling victim to conspiracies and attacks, to the point of making massive and systematic use of torture against anyone and sentencing three of his sons (Alexander, Aristobulus, Antipater) to death, suspecting them of conspiring against him.

This narrative expresses the idea of the historical end of the era of kingdoms, of all kingdoms, now devoid of a legitimate principle. In the era of *pax Romana*, *nulla salus extra Romam*. Only under the shadow of Rome could the nations find peace, security, and justice.

2.- The ship of fools

After the death of Herod, the kingdom was divided into three parts. The largest (corresponding to half of Herod's kingdom, including Judea [with Jerusalem], Samaria, and Idumea) was given, with the title of ethnarch (not king, as Josephus specifies, A.I. XVII. 317), to the eldest of Herod's surviving sons, Archelaus, while the other regions were given as tetrarchies to his other two sons, Antipas (Galilee and Perea) and Philip (Batanea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis) (B.I. II. 2, 20, 93-96, 167, 668-669). The two tetrarchies were meant to last over time, while the ethnarchy lasted only ten years, after which Augustus, following complaints from the provincials, had Archelaus tried and exiled, confiscating his property (B.I. II. 112, A.I. XVII. 344). This led to annex his territory to the Roman senatorial province of Syria (B.I. II. 118, 167, A.I. XVII. 355), entrusting it to a *praefectus* of the equestrian order (the first one was Coponius), submitted to the *legatus Augusti propraetore* of Syria (B.I. II. 117).

If the account of Herod's years resembles a horror film, marked by the cruelty and imbalance of a mad criminal, the account of the years under Archelaus' ethnarchy instead resembles a description of a bizarre and violent carnival, in which the strangest things happen in that odd land. Archelaus lacked the strength to govern, and uncontrolled violence erupted within his territory, with the most unlikely individuals stepping forward to seize power, using the most unusual tactics.

"It was a period of madness that took hold of the nation" (A.I. XVII. 277), "Judea was full of lawlessness" (A.I. XVII. 285), and "it had become ungovernable" (A.I. XVII. 250), writes Josephus. Not only a military anarchy, but a true collective madness, a collective loss of any inhibitions.

First of all, immediately after Herod's death, continuous bloody popular uprisings broke out, which the ethnarch and his brothers were unable to quell, and they were forced to seek the help of the Romans, who also faced great difficulties in dealing with them (B.I. II. 39-55, A.I. XVII. 206, 213-217, 250-270). This is a decidedly implausible and forced narrative: it's unclear why the Jews, who were docile and submissive under the extremely cruel Herod, would suddenly have become so warlike against his mild and blameless sons.

Then, a man named Judas, the son of a famous outlaw leader, attempted to seize power by storming the royal arsenals, arming a large band of rebels (B.I. II. 56, A.I. XVII. 271-272). A slave named Simon, relying solely on his looks and physical prowess, crowned himself with the royal diadem and, leading a gang of troublemakers, set fire to the Jericho palace and other noble buildings, before being intercepted and killed (B.I. II. 57-59, A.I. XVII. 273-276). Even a shepherd, named Astrongus, proclaimed himself king, basing his claim on the sole qualification of being physically strong, with four brothers who were equally robust (B.I. II. 60-65, XVII. 278-281). There was even a man who, based on a vague physical resemblance, pretended to be Alexander, one of Herod's sons whom he had put to death, claiming to have escaped the execution through a trick. The skilled and daring imposter even managed to meet with Augustus, boasting of his rights to the throne. The emperor, who had personally known the real Alexander, discovered the deception and laughed, sending the false heir to row on a ship, while sentencing his accomplice to death (B.I. II. 101-110, A.I. 324-338).

Children of outlaws, handsome slaves, strong shepherds, reckless actors... The field of pretenders to the throne during those turbulent years resembled a grotesque Barnum & Bailey Circus, a great ship of fools.

3.- The *odium of kingship*

In this story, whose historical plausibility is close to zero, there is, however, a deeper meaning that the skillful and unscrupulous narrator sought to convey.

If the hallmark of the story of King Herod's reign is cruelty, the decade of Archelaus is marked instead by the dual themes of weakness and anarchy. A weak power is an oxymoron, and it inevitably leads to anarchy. Herod is a strong but unjust king, while his son Archelaus is a mild but weak ruler. Both bring their land to ruin. And, above all, both had the flaw of exercising power over a limited territory, something no longer accepted in the times of a united world. A local ruler may be mad or weak, but this can never be allowed in the universal empire of Rome, which symbolizes strength and justice. The representatives of Rome may make mistakes, certainly, but their errors will be corrected, either by themselves or by the emperor: for example, Pontius Pilate makes the mistake of imposing the display of the prince's image in Judea, but, upon the protest of the Jews, he realizes his mistake and immediately revokes the unjust order (B.I. II. 172-174). Rome is not just just; it is justice itself, brought to Earth.

Therefore, Josephus' account contains a specific political message in favor of the establishment of the universal principate. Outside of Rome, there is only chaos, where kings are sadistic and cruel, or ridiculous adventurers.

The *odium regni*, the cornerstone of the ideology of the principate, is expressed by Josephus, in narrative form, with vivid effectiveness. One can read in the historian's account a clear reference to the Book of Judges, where the spread of violence (such as the episodes of...) is shown as a consequence of the fact that "there was no king in the land" (Judg. 17.6, 18.31, 21.24) and "everyone did what he wanted" (Judg. 17.6, 21.24). Indeed, Josephus also notes that the nation "did not have a true king who with his authority would watch over and keep the people in check" (A.I. XVII. 277). But—contrary to what one might infer from reading the Book of Judges—Josephus does not at all regret the era of kings, because the royal title had already been shattered forever by the monstrosity of Herod. He is the quintessential king, and he will remain so forever. "Anyone could become king as the leader of a band of rebels," writes the historian (A.I. XVII. 285). Only such figures can now be kings: the heads of gangs, the leaders of brigands. Not only has every principle of legitimacy disappeared, but the very idea of kingship has been forever degraded. It is incompatible with the irreversible establishment of the universal government of the new Lord of the World.

The idea of *odium regni*, elevated by the literature of the principate to the first foundation of the free *res publica*, and artificially retro-dated to the same moment as the expulsion of the perfidious Etruscan monarchs—when Junius Brutus allegedly made his fellow citizens swear that they would never again allow anyone to "rule in Rome" (*Romae regnare*: Liv. 1.59.1)—was developed, as is known, during the Augustan years, to support the new ideology of the principate, which sees the *princeps* excel only in prestige and *auctoritas*, distancing himself from any hint of the despicable royal title. However, this is a distinctly Latin and Western ideology, which would not have been understood in the Hellenistic Eastern world, where power had always been synonymous with kingship.

Josephus—a Romanized Jew who had delivered his works, originally written in Aramaic, to be translated into Greek so they could be read by a Greek-speaking audience—universalizes *odium regni*, presenting it as a universal, eternal, and irreversible value. He does this not as a Jew or Greek, but as a Roman, a courtier of the Emperor of Rome.

4.- The stories of destiny

It is interesting to note that the historian recounts how Augustus was reluctant to take direct control of Judea, preferring to allow local authorities (obviously, allies and loyal to him) to govern it themselves. He would have been forced by events to make the decision in 6 A.D. On this point, it is reasonable to assume that the account is plausible. Rome paid a high price—both in money and in human resources—to subdue the unrliest of its provinces, and it is hard to believe that the tax revenues would have justified such a great expenditure of energy.

But the *pax Romana* allowed no exceptions; any price had to be paid to clarify this concept to everyone. Augustus and all the rulers of the powerful imperial machine had to acknowledge this. What was spent

on Judea was, in practice, also spent on fully pacified provinces, such as Africa, Egypt, or Gaul. For the same reason, Rome did not hesitate to use all available means to eradicate, in 73 A.D., the tiny resistance enclave of Masada, despite the fact that it posed no military threat whatsoever. The underlying message of the three stories—the reign of Herod, the ethnarchy of Archelaus, and the brief, tragic ‘kingdom’ of Eleazar ben Yair (leader of the resistant Zealots)—is, in the end, the same. They are three confirmations of the one, inevitable destiny that awaits all the peoples of the world.

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SOMMARIO

Flavio Giuseppe, tanto nelle *Antiquitates Iudaicae* quanto nel *Bellum Iudaicum*, dà una rappresentazione del regno di Erode come un’età segnata da sadismo, follia e crudeltà, mentre i tratti distintivi del successivo periodo della etnarchia di Archelao sono la debolezza e l’anarchia. Nella sua descrizione, un potere politico non può mai essere debole, perché ciò porta inevitabilmente all’anarchia. Perciò, il racconto dello storico contiene un evidente messaggio politico a favore del principato universale di Roma. Fuori di Roma può esserci solo il caos e solo il comando di re sadici e crudeli o di ridicoli avventuri.

ABSTRACT

In the *Antiquitates Iudaicae* and in the *Bellum Iudaicum*, Flavius Iosephus describes the story of King Herod's reign as marked by madness and cruelty, and the decade of Archelaus' ethnarchy by the dual themes of weakness and anarchy. A weak power, in Iosephus' view, is an oxymoron, and it inevitably leads to anarchy. Therefore, Josephus' account contains a specific political message in favor of the establishment of the universal principate. Outside of Rome, there is only chaos, where kings are sadistic and cruel, or ridiculous adventurers.

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Flavio Giuseppe
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