CHAPTER THREE
MODELS OF LOCAL CONTROL WITHIN THE ROMAN WORLD

One of the crucial issues that shaped Jewish leadership in Roman Palestine between 70 CE and 135 CE was Roman practice in provincial administration in the Near East.¹ The Romans had the power to impose on Jewish society any leaders that they believed were most capable of protecting Roman regional interests, regardless of any Jewish notions of leadership. The Romans might have chosen one of the indigenous Jewish models for local leadership, for example, the High Priesthood or kingship; or they might have preferred to impose a form of leadership that was alien to Jewish society, such as a city council (βουλή) (either Gentile or Jewish), a client-king, or a colonia.

The Romans could also choose a combination of models. In fact, this is how the Romans had chosen to rule Roman Palestine before 70 CE. The High Priest exercised national leadership as the head of a not-easily-defined Jewish national council, called the Sanhedrin,² which was unknown in other provinces, and may have represented the unique status of Judaea before 66 C.E. At the same time, the Romans entrusted some portions of Palestine to the Herodian client-kings, while coloniae, city councils, and village councils were also allowed to exist as the means of administration. In this chapter, five types of Roman local leadership known at the eve of the Destruction will be examined: city councils, client-kingship, village councils, coloniae, and direct military rule.

Before we examine the five types of Roman local leadership in detail, two general points on Roman provincial administration should be clarified. On the one hand, although the Roman Empire encompassed many different

peoples and cultures,³ Roman government produced no overall strategy for provincial administration.⁴ The number of officials was relatively small, and Roman governance often took the form of local self-administration, with the exception of direct military rule.⁵ Therefore, the flexibility of local self-administration might have depended upon the social, political, religious and cultural backgrounds of the locals.⁶ The ideological basis of Roman rule was the concept of imperium as the issuance of commands by a general (imperator), not the occupation of territory. The aim of imperial expansion, as Polybius (2nd cent. BCE) noted, was to compel obedience.⁷ The practical basis of Roman rule was that the Romans were often dealing with provinces that had previously been governed by monarchs or by well-established institutions in the form of a city (πόλις) or village (κώμη). Thus, when Rome had to choose a type of government, flexibility in local administration was probably the most reasonable means of governing the provinces (or kingdoms) in order to ensure what they wanted: order (by waging war or preventing revolts) and tax revenue.⁸

On the other hand, the lack of an overall strategy did not necessitate a decentralisation of power; quite the opposite.⁹ Even under the Republic, the autocratic power of governors had been circumscribed by a limited tenure of office. Moreover, governors, in theory, could be called back to Rome, and

³ Not only Mediterranean coastal areas, but also Gaul (conquered by Julius Caesar), Dacia and Arabia (by Trajan), Armenia and northern Mesopotamia fell under the control of the Roman Empire.


⁷ Pol. 3.4.2–3; 16.27.2–3 and 34.4; 22.1.3 and 4.9; 23.2.6 and 8.2; 36.9.6. Cf. Lintott, Imperium Romanum (1993), p. 22; Richardson, Roman Provincial Administration, 227 BC to AD 117 (London, 1976), p. 16.

⁸ For details, see Braund, “Client Kings”, pp. 90–91. See also Garnsey and Saller, Roman Empire, pp. 20–21; Braund (ed.), Administration (1988), p. 1.

⁹ For more centralized control by the emperor, see Millar, Empire and Its Neighbours (1966), pp. 53 ff.; Braund, “Client Kings”, pp. 76–77; 82–83; Garnsey and Saller, Roman Empire (1987), pp. 34 ff.; Goodman, Roman World (1997), p. 141. See also, Millar, Roman Near East (1993). One of Millar’s main points is that Rome was strengthening direct control of the Near East in the first few centuries CE.