CHAPTER SIXTEEN
ZEALOTS AND SICARII,
THEIR ORIGINS AND RELATION

[1] It has long been the common opinion that the Zealots were the party founded by Judas the Galilean—so Graetz and Jost, for instance, writing in the middle of the past century.1 Derenbourg, it is true, observed that the term “Zealots” was not applied to the opponents of the Romans before the revolt, but when he came to the events of the revolt he made a descendant of Judas, Menahem, the leader of the Zealots and so apparently assumed the connection of the party with Judas.2 Schürer’s adherence canonized the common opinion, and also the common description of the Sicarii as a more fanatical fraction of the party—though the sources contain nothing to suggest that the party had split before the Sicarii appeared.3 Hence, with only minor variations, Eduard Meyer,4 Bousset,5 Baron,6 and Yadin’s7 account of the Zealots in Masada,8 to name only the largest studies.8 [2]

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1 H. Graetz, Geschichte der Juden, 5 ed., ed. M. Braun (Leipzig, 1900-1905), III.i, 250, 258; III.ii, 431f., 458ff.; J. Jost, Geschichte des Judentums und seiner Secten, I Abt. (Leipzig, 1857), 327, 436, 443. Jost differs with Graetz by denying the Zealots’ relation to the Shammaites (p. 327) and in other details, but accepts the connection of the party with Judas.

2 J. Derenbourg, Essai sur l’histoire et la géographie de la Palestine, ... I, Histoire de la Palestine ... (Paris, 1867), 195 n. 2; 238ff.; 260f.; 472f.

3 E. Schürer, Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi, 3-4 ed. (Leipzig, 1901-1911), 4 vols.; I, 486f. (with bibliography); 573ff, etc.; I, 487 n. 139 is contradicted by III, 300—the author of The Assumption of Moses was not a Zealot, after all.

4 Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums (Stuttgart, 1921), 3 vols.; II, 402ff. (contrary to Schürer, Judas the Galilean and Judas the son of Hezekiah were not identical).


7 Y. Yadin, Masada, Herod’s Fortress and the Zealots’ Last Stand (N.Y., 1966).

A new trend, however, set in just after Schürer’s work, at the beginning of the present century. Kohler tried to date “a league of Kanna‘im or Zealots” back to Maccabean times, though he did not put the organization of the political party before the time of Herod. His attempt to connect their forerunners with the Hasidim was unfortunate, since one of the few things we know about the Hasidim is that they abandoned the Maccabees and went over to the Seleucid High Priest, Alcimus, an action incompatible with Judas the Galilean’s teaching that Jews may recognize no ruler save God. However, Kohler did succeed in showing that the admiration of “zeal” (exemplified by the murders committed by Phineas and those instigated by Elijah) was widespread in Judaism from Maccabean times on, that imitation of Phineas and Elijah was often spoken of, and that such thought and practice was closely connected with resistance to foreign rule. Enthusiasm for his subject and neglect of distinctions led Kohler to absurd conclusions—“Josephus was sent by the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, composed chiefly of Zealots”; the Idumaeans were Zealots, too, and so were all the leaders in Jerusalem, in spite of their hostility to each other—but the recognition of the wide extent of the [3] terminology and of its background both in literature and in practice was a major contribution, most important because it indicated that private individuals might often have adopted the ideal on their own. Accordingly we cannot suppose that every individual who claimed to be a “zealot,” or was called so by his neighbors, was a member of an organization.

Kohler’s observations were taken up by Schlatter (whose theological romanticism carried him even beyond Kohler in glorification of these heroes who fought “for freedom alone”), and later by Farmer who worked out in detail the relations between the Maccabees and later representatives of the tradition of zeal—whom he

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10 JE XII, 640.
11 Festschrift ... Harkavy, 13.
12 1 Macc. 7:13ff.
13 Josephus, Ant. 18.23.
14 Numbers 25; 1 Kings 18:40; 19:10.
15 JE XII, 643.
16 A. Schlatter, Geschichte Israels von Alexander dem Grossen bis Hadrian, 3 ed. (Stuttgart, 1925), 261ff. (his attempt to rearrange Josephus has won no praise); Die Theologie des Judentums nach dem Bericht des Josephus (Gütersloh, 1932), 214ff.
17 Theologie, 224; contrast Momigliano’s realistic evaluation of the economic motives of those who resisted Roman rule, CAH X, 853.