WHO WERE THE SICARIII?

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The fourth philosophy that was later called Sicarii¹ is the best known among the various anti-Roman movements in Judea. We can follow their history along few generations, whereas the other anti-Roman groups have played a role only for a short time. Such is the case of Simon bar Giora’s and John of Gischala’s factions; of the Zealots with their collective leadership; of Eleazar, son of Dineus (B.J. 2.235 + Alexander; A.J. 20.121, 161) who was active along a somewhat more extended period of time; of the rebels’ leaders after Herod’s death (Anonymous in Idumea [B.J. 2.55]; Simon in Perea [B.J. 2.57–59]; Athronges and his brothers [B.J. 2.60–65]) and some ephemeral “messianic” figures (Annibas and other leaders of the Perean Jewish neighbors of Philadelphia [A.J. 20.2–5]; Tholomeus, an archileistes in Idumea [A.J. 20.5]; Theudas [A.J. 20.97–98]; the Egyptian prophet [B.J. 2.261–263; A.J. 20.169–172; Acts 5:37]; Anonymous impostor [A.J. 20.188]).

Not only did the Sicarii have the longest history among these groups but their activity spread also outside Judea. Their roots were in Galilee; their activity took place mainly in Judea and centered on Jerusalem; after taking over Masada they tried to lead the revolt in Jerusalem but were expelled and were entrenched in Masada; finally they steered commotion in Egypt and Cyrene. Their history stretches then over about one hundred and twenty years (45 B.C.E.–75 C.E.) and their activity covers also the eastern part of North Africa.

It may even be reasonable to guess that the Sicarian ideology did have some impact on the other rebels in Eretz Israel as well as on the rebels in the Diaspora under Trajan. At least it must be admitted that geographically this revolt took place principally in the same countries

¹ Sicarii is a given byname to the sect as well as “the fourth philosophy.” The last one was given by Josephus and the first either by the Roman authorities or by Josephus who either adopted or invented it. On the term Sicarii see M. A. Brighton, The Sicarii in Josephus’s Judæan War: Rhetorical Analysis and Historical Observations (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 58–59.
where the Sicarii continued to inflame the spirit of revolt at the aftermath of the Great Revolt in Judea.²

Yet the almost only source about them is Josephus’ writings and as always, though they are essential for us, they are equally problematic.³ Undoubtedly Josephus hated the Sicarii on ideological and socio-political grounds.⁴ To scrutinize them we have to sift the data included in Josephus’ War and Antiquities and to consider it in detail. Generally speaking his attitude towards the Sicarii is less personal in comparison to his attitude towards John of Gischala, and they were not directly involved with the siege of Jerusalem or the destruction of the temple and they play a lesser part in the revolt of 66–70/73 except at its very beginning and at its end. Personally then he was better placed to judge them without bitter personal animosity. Yet, certainly, they play a part in the role of the rebels as a keynote argument displayed by Josephus against a revolt against Rome and against stasis that disrupts the social order.⁵

² Mesopotamia is the only exception. Cyprus, like Cyrene, was part of the Ptolemaic empire of old and should be considered to a certain measure as an extension of Egypt.

³ See the recent monograph of Brighton, The Sicarii in Josephus’s Judaean War. The major theme and contribution of his book is its analysis of the War, but I disagree with Brighton’s historical observations about the Sicarii (144–50) that are too skeptical and hesitant. For example, what conclusions can be drawn from the fact that “Josephus makes no mention at all of any philosophy teachings or activities of these two characters” (146)? Usually he does not volunteer information about his hated opponents’ ideology (as noted by M. Black, “Judas of Galilee and Josephus’s Fourth Philosophy,” in Josephus-Studien: Untersuchungen zu Josephus, dem antiken Judentum und dem Neuen Testament: Otto Michel zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet [ed. O. Betz, K. Haacker, and M. Hengel; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974], 45–55) and doing so about the fourth philosophy is exceptional. I also doubt that the leading family of this sect aspired to kingship (basileia), which meant messianism according to Menahem Stern and Richard Horsley who suggested that they followed their predecessors, the Hasmoneans, and regarded themselves as instrumental for the delivery of Israel (see the references in n. 35 below). See also B. Bar-Kochva, Judas Maccabaeus: The Jewish Struggle against the Seleucids (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 214–15, on 1 Macc 3:19, which is similar to the idea that God helps those who strive themselves to achieve their goals.

⁴ The sole personal conflict between Josephus and a Sicarian activist was with Jonathan of Cyrene who tried to incriminate him in anti-Roman activity (B.J. 7.448; Vita 424–425).

⁵ Josephus’ concern was to highlight stasis as a cause for disrupting society. This, with few other key terms, is a major theme of Brighton, The Sicarii in Josephus’s Judaean War.