

"TURMOIL IN THE FIFTIES"

(Acts 24:1-27)

(Paul Barnett)

The formal recognition in Jerusalem of Paul's "apostolate" to Gentiles in c. 47 occurred at a time when Jews in Judea were profoundly unsettled. The death of a popular Jewish King, Agrippa I, in 44 was followed by the return of the Roman legions. Matters were to deteriorate further. In 49 Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. In Judea under Procurator Cumanus (49-52), Jewish religious scruples were repeatedly violated. A soldier blasphemously exposed his genitals in the temple precincts during Passover. Another publicly tore up a scroll of the Torah. Galilean pilgrims to Jerusalem for the Passover were killed by Samaritans, with no Roman reprisals.

In the time of Felix (52-60) affairs in Judea were to worsen even more. Felix began in the twilight of Claudius's principate and continued throughout the early years of the young and inexperienced Nero. A former slave, Felix had actually married the Jewish princess, Drusilla, something deeply offensive to Jews. There are hints that Felix harbored aspirations to royalty. Tacitus comments that "Felix played the tyrant with the spirit of a slave."

Felix's procuratorship was marked by a harsh campaign against the banditry that had flourished in consequence of the protracted famine that began in the forties. Josephus states that "of the brigands whom [Felix] crucified, and of the common people who were convicted of complicity with them and punished by him, the number was incalculable." Even allowing for some overstatement we are left with a grim picture. Tacitus notes that Felix "plunged into all manner of cruelty and lust." The problems of Felix's incumbency were compounded by the character of the notoriously corrupt high priest Ananias, who held office from 48 to c. 55 and who seized sacrifices from the temple for his own use.

Josephus mentions three "movements" that arose in Felix's time and that which he appears to connect with the governor's extreme policies. First, he describes the rise of the *sicarii* faction, whose modus operandi was to murder eminent Jews known to be sympathetic to their Roman masters.

Second, Josephus writes of a number of "prophets" at that time. "*Under the pretense of divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes, they persuaded the multitude to act like madmen, and led them out into the desert under the belief that there God would give them signs of liberation.*"

Josephus does not say what those promised "signs" were. Given that the locale was the "desert"—so evocative in the salvation history of Israel—it is likely that the "signs" included those performed by Moses and Joshua at the time of the exodus-conquest. The "liberation" would have been a reenacted conquest—in the manner of Joshua—over the enemies of the moment, the Roman occupying force.

Third, Josephus refers to some kind of an alliance between these apocalyptic prophets and various brigands in actions of a political, but religiously inspired, nature. In a frenzied manner these organized themselves in companies threatening to kill any who submitted to Roman rule. They moved through the countryside murdering those who supported Rome, putting fire to many houses.

Such was the world of Judea in the later forties and into the fifties when James continued his leadership of the church in Jerusalem. It was also the period in which Paul moved even more emphatically westward toward the Gentile heartland, Rome, the great enemy of the covenant people. In this period of religious nationalism and apocalyptic fervor, anti-Pauline feeling ran high.

