

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

REVENGE

of the

PHIABIS

The Age of
Slaughter

By Olaf H. Hage III

It was an epoch of madness. People who had no right to rule had simply lied and murdered their way into power. It mattered not how you did it, as long as you succeed.

The flimsy gauze of legalism was draped over the most vicious of thuggery, the slimiest of political betrayals. No act was too heinous or too depraved. Pontiffs and priests would bless any evil for the privilege of clinging to power. Kings would behead any loved one for another day on their thrones. No throat was too regal nor too lovely to slit. No temple too sacred to loot.

In the days of the Phiabi priesthood, between 37 B.C. and *A.D.* 135, there were no police as we would understand them. The only law enforcers were the Temple guards, but only if a crime occurred within their precincts. The Kings hired spies and assassins to mingle with the crowds and eliminate their enemies. Whenever the Herodians could not suppress the people, the occupying Roman Army would attempt to maintain order.

The Romans knew of only a few punishments. They would rip the flesh off a man's body by scourging him, they could crucify him, they could banish or exile him, or they would enslave him. Imprisonment as we think of it was not a punishment, but merely a way to hold an accused person until their trial. Josephus tells us that people were arrested and held for trial as a way for the Roman authorities to extort bribes from them.

The fact that the Romans allowed poor street thugs to go unpunished meant that the wealthy Phiabi priests were bribing the Roman Procurator to protect these gangs. Indeed, that is precisely what Josephus, our eyewitness, says happened again and again, as each new Procurator took over in Judea. The levels of violence kept growing as the priests and Procurators grew more and more corrupt. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:9:2-7)

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The Zealots were furious at both the Romans and the corruption of the Roman-bloodline chief priests of the Phiabi line. Even before the war, Zealots had assassinated corrupt Phiabi High Priests and ex-High Priests. Once they had power, the Zealots executed more of the Phiabi priests. Then, in October of *A.D.* 67, a year into the war, the Zealots installed a High Priest chosen by lot from what they insisted was a legitimate Zadokite line, even though the man was otherwise said to be an obscure stonemason. (Jeremias 1975, p. 192) He served for three years until the Roman victory.

Although scholars generally note the Zealot anger over the illegitimacy of the Phiabi priests, they fail to realize that it was the link back to the Roman family line of the Fabii that was the real issue. For all we can determine, the obscure priest the Zealots appointed was of a lower caste of the line of Zadok than the Boethian line into which the Phiabis had by then married into. But unlike all the Phiabi-related priests, the new Zealot priest had no Roman ancestry. He was legally a pure Israelite.

Unless the Phiabi line was tainted by its Roman intermarriage to the Fabii, there is no explanation for the century-long Zealot fury against the Phiabi priesthood. The Zealots, as their name shows, were purists. Even when some Phiabis had been honest priests, the Zealots opposed them. The Zealots first arose in the same period that Herod had emerged. King Herod I was an Edomite ruling over Israelites! As purists, the Zealots could not accept King Herod I or the Phiabi priests. For Zealots, it was always about bloodlines.



King Herod I

The House of David had a legitimate bloodline. So, it should not surprise us to find that the Apostles of Jesus included a man named Simon the Zealot from Cana. He seems to have been a brother-in-law of Jesus, married to a young sister of His, perhaps at the wedding feast in Cana, where the servants obeyed Jesus' mother (John 2:1-5). This would mean that Simon was only a teenager at the time, the normal age for marriage. Simon's involvement with the Zealots would then have come from his family, and Galilee was the territory where the Zealots had first appeared, not long before Herod had been made king by the Romans. So, the Zealots must have regarded the family of Jesus as a desirable bloodline into which to marry. By contrast, any family that married into the Phiabis would have been considered traitors. The Zealots would have been furious at the Phiabis when they began systematically persecuting the family of Jesus.

After Ishmael ben Phiabi (Hebrew: **ישמעאל בן פיאבי**) became High Priest *circa A.D.* 58, he chose his son Hilkiah as Chief Treasurer of the Temple, in charge of tithes. But like his father-in-law, Ishmael was greedy, and fearful the Zealots might assassinate him. He was making a fortune with his control of the gangs of Jerusalem, raking in tithes and extortion. But Ishmael overestimated his power, and pushed the Romans too far. He built a wall to block the view of activities in the Temple area. The result was the arrest of Ishmael and other priests by the Romans in *A.D.* 62. (Josephus, *The*

Life of Flavius Josephus 2014, ¶3) A delegation of twelve top officials, including Ishmael and his son, set sail for Rome. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:8:11)

Josephus, our only source for this story, was their lawyer. He met a Jewish actor named Aliturus, who was a close friend of Poppaea, the new wife of Nero. (Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 2014, ¶3) She may have been a convert to Judaism. Nero had made her Empress. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:8:11) Josephus knew Ishmael and his sons were stealing tithes. Yet Josephus pleaded the case for the release of everyone including Ishmael and Hilkiyah.



Flavius Josephus

(Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:8:11)

But Poppaea ordered Ishmael and Hilkiyah held as hostages at her suburban Roman estate. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:8:11) This implies she had Jewish servants who served food from a kosher kitchen. It would explain why she lived outside the city, separate from Nero, who had his own palace in Rome. Josephus said Ishmael and Hilkiyah were reduced to "supporting themselves with figs and nuts." (Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 2014, ¶3) This may reflect food shortages after the fire, when Poppaea was killed and her servants freed in the summer of *A.D.* 65, as the estate's fig and nut trees ripened.

When Josephus reported the pre-war events at the end of *The Antiquities of the Jews*, he said he was going to write an autobiographical work about what had happened to him and his family from just before the war until *A.D.* 93: (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:9:3)

And now... I (will) treat briefly of my own family and of the actions of my own life... (Josephus' *Life*, his censored autobiography, was completed as promised, but he omitted the fire of Rome or what exactly he did while in Rome.), with which accounts I shall put an end to these *Antiquities*. These are contained in 20 books, and 60,000 verses (which we appear to have complete). And if God permits me, I will briefly run over this war again, with what befell us therein to this very day. (He wrote these words in *A.D.* 93, but his second account of the war of *A.D.* 66-73 and what happened to the Jewish people constitutes over 90% of his supposed autobiography, and he says almost nothing of the momentous events of his time in Rome). (Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 2016, p. 426b)

That expected account of the major happenings he witnessed in Rome, and of the events from after the war until *A.D.* 93, is missing. But we know of a general censorship of events of the reign of Emperor Domitian imposed after his assassination in *A.D.* 96:

The Senators... thronged to denounce the (recently assassinated) dead Domitian in the (Senate) House with bitter and insulting cries. Then... they... ended by decreeing that all inscriptions referring to him (Emperor Domitian) must be effaced, and all records of his reign obliterated. (Suetonius 1979, 1957, Domitian, 23)

Josephus, seeking official approval, had just sent Domitian his original hand-written texts of his books and his autobiography was apparently then censored as part of Domitian's papers. The timing of the censorship in *A.D.* 96 would be right for when Josephus would have completed the promised personal account. (Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 2014, 65, 76)

The thirty-year gap between the final events related in the *Antiquities* (*circa A.D.* 63-65) and the date of Josephus' writing them (*A.D.* 93) sound like a "blotting-out" period of two fifteen-year generations (the time on average between the birth of sons in successive generations at that time). Could a relative of Josephus have been blotted out?

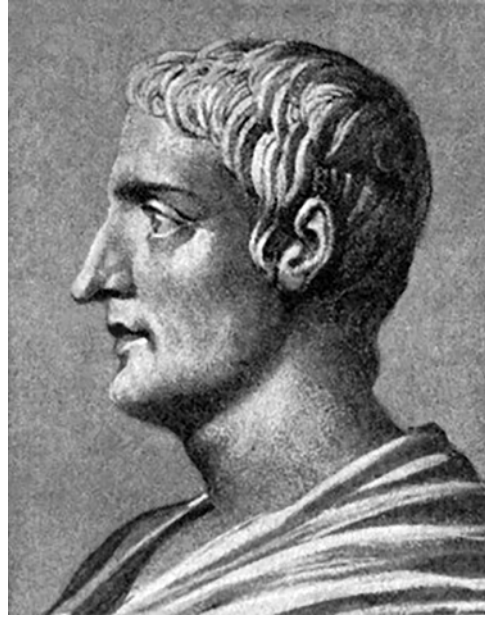
At the Passover of *A.D.* 63, the High Priest Ananus ben Ananus ordered the arrest and execution by stoning of the Apostle James the Less, half-brother of Jesus and then current head of the church. Along with James, "several others" were also executed. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1977, XX:9:1) If members of Josephus' family had been caught up in the arrests, he would not have been able to write about them for 30 years. The fact that in *A.D.* 93, he terminated his *Antiquities* as of *A.D.* 63-65 suggests that events in *A.D.* 64, the year of the fire, had triggered a blotting-out of parts of his history of that and the following period.

There are five especially glaring omissions in the historical volumes Josephus left us about this period: He says not one word about these five major events: the fire of Rome in the summer of *A.D.* 64, and the persecution of Christians that followed. He also omits the Piso Conspiracy and executions, the murder of his friend Poppaea, and the exile of his legal client, Ishmael ben Phiabi, all during *A.D.* 65. Since Josephus had personally witnessed these things, it is very odd that he wrote about this timeframe three times without ever mentioning these major events that he was privy to in Rome. But his *Wars of the Jews*, his *Antiquities of the Jews*, and his *Life* were all completed by *A.D.* 95.

It appears that all five of these major historical events were covered by Nero's official declaration of "clemency" to which he attached a ban of silence in *A.D.* 65:

Nero... summoned the Senate, addressed them in a speech, and further added a proclamation to the people, with the evidence which had been entered on records... that by the Emperor's clemency had been hushed up (officially silenced) or forgotten (blotted-out). (Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus* 1942, XV: 73) (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, p. 397-398)

Fortunately, we have the Roman historian Tacitus' account of the fire. Still, only a single incomplete manuscript of his account survived, and it only surfaced in Italy in the fourteenth century. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, p. 23) Since this is where it originated, and it seems not to have been much known at all, we may ask if some sort of early censorship had kept it out of public view. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, p. 23) For example, the section of Tacitus' *Annals* from A.D. 29-32 (the period of the preaching, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the original persecution by Saul), had been *entirely removed* from the manuscript. (Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus* 1942, p. 191n)



The Roman Historian Tacitus

Tacitus wrote his *Annals* around A.D. 115, but he was relying on someone else's eyewitness story of the A.D. 64 fire. When the famous British classical historian Michael Grant wrote the introduction to his translation of Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome*, he commented that:

(Tacitus) took a great deal of care in selecting his (source) material. But where did he find it? Here we are lost. We often have no external check on what he says. And, we still know very little about his sources. He himself does not greatly enlighten us. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, p. 20)

No alternate sources have survived. Why not? We have just cited the evidence from Suetonius that even emperors were being censored. Even the rather uncontroversial Emperor Claudius was told what to write and what not to (Suetonius, "Claudius" 41).

Could it be that Tacitus had somehow obtained the now-missing censored history of the fire recorded by Josephus? Could that eyewitness version by a Jewish historian have been ruled too inflammatory to be quoted in a work published in A.D. 116?

That was when Jewish people in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia Minor had revolted, and supposedly had slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people in cities and provinces far and wide. (Conzelmann 1992, pp. 33-34) It was hardly the right moment to publish a controversial account of arsonists burning Rome barely fifty years earlier. Moreover, 116 was the 50th anniversary of the Jewish War of A.D. 66.

It was in Tacitus' history of the fire that we have the first uncontested Roman mention of Christianity and the persecutions. However, the phrasing in Tacitus is curious; it has the same basic data that one finds in the controversial mention of Jesus in Josephus' *Antiquities*. Compare these two excerpts:

Nero fastened the guilt...on a class... called "Christians" by the populace. Christus, from whom the name (Christian) had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. And (that) most mischievous superstition, thus checked for a moment, again broke out, not only in Judea... but even in Rome." (Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus* 1942, p. 380)

Now, there was about this time, Jesus... He drew over to himself both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was (called) "Christ." And when Pontius Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us (the Phiabi priests), had condemned him to crucifixion, those that loved (followed?) him at the first did not forget him. For (he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and) the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day." (Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 2016, XVIII:3:3)

The second quote is from Josephus' *Antiquities*, written by *A.D.* 93, except for one section, which many scholars dispute as a later addition by an overzealous scribe who wanted to make Josephus into a Christian evangelist.

Note that the text would have been erroneous if Josephus had actually written it that way. The New Testament makes it quite clear (as did Old Testament prophecy) that when Jesus was crucified, His followers did forsake Him (even Peter denied Him) and they scattered (Zechariah 13:7, Matthew 9:36, 26:31, 34-35, 75, Mark 14:27, 30-31, 72; Luke 22:34, 61, and John 16:32, 20:24-29). Indeed, it was not until the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost that the Apostles received the courage to testify about Jesus in public (Acts 1:8).

If we remove the "red" sections inserted into Josephus' text, which sound very unlike Josephus, the sentence reads more naturally and makes perfect sense. But it then seems similar to what Tacitus wrote 22 years later. Note the underlined portions of both texts. They sound as if they had somehow drawn upon a common historical source.

The first text is taken from right after Tacitus' description of the fire of Rome. We are not maintaining that he is quoting *Antiquities*. Rather, it may be that Tacitus is using another text by Josephus, now missing. Josephus said, in *A.D.* 93, that he was going to write his autobiography next. He did. But he failed to discuss the five topics mentioned above, the five he had apparently been forbidden to raise until that time.

What Tacitus tells us is that the fire was blamed on the Christians, but that they were probably not guilty of arson, but rather, were condemned as "haters of mankind." (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:44) This description seems odd, and some translators have sought to render it in reverse: "hated by mankind." (Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*

1942, p. 365n2) But the real question might better be: Why would Romans associate Christian teaching with hating mankind?

Peter and John Mark had been preaching dire warnings from Revelation just prior to the fire, telling people to flee or burn (Revelation 18:4-9, 20-24). Those who did not grasp the Christian spiritual message felt that Christians expected non-Christians (= all the rest of "mankind") to be destroyed by terrible plagues or go to hell forever. From the pagan point of view, Christians (a tiny minority at the time) appeared to hate mankind.

Moreover, paganism was essentially a Wiccan type of philosophy. That is, they felt that, if one believes in a prophecy, that in itself could cause it to come true. In other words, pagans thought Christians were wishing ill on mankind simply by believing that the events in Revelation would occur. "Believing makes it happen" summarizes the idea. It's a kind of magical thinking: People can magically control events with their minds.

Pagans did not understand (as many people still don't) that Christian faith is quite different. Christians have faith that God determines our destiny (Ephesians 1:3-23, 2:1-22) and that prophecy relates what will happen regardless of what we may or may not wish. We cannot hurry or prevent or slow down God's plans. As Jesus put it, when asked by the Apostles if He was going to "at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?":

"It is not for you to know (much less, change in any way) the times or the seasons, which the Father has put under His own power." (Acts 1:7)

Peter himself had heard Jesus utter these words. He would not turn around and preach the opposite, urging Christians, for example, to set fire to Rome in order to force the prophecy to come true on Peter's schedule. The fact that John Mark gave his life to warn Alexandrian believers to flee less than two years later shows he believed the fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy was out of his control. If Tacitus meant that Peter and his fellow Christians were executed for somehow 'willing' their prophecies to come true, then Christians were being persecuted for something they did not believe in.

Who sets the fires? Tacitus says, "men acting under orders" (*i.e.* given by someone in authority) had been setting fires. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:38, 44) Suspicion was quickly directed at Nero by someone who apparently feared being blamed for the fire. He would otherwise not dare blame an Emperor noted for vengeance upon his slightest critics. The excuse given was Nero's secret plan to burn Rome and rebuild the city with a much larger palace for himself. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, p. 363) (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15: 40) Nero may well have revealed his building ideas to his wife Poppaea. However, she was in regular contact with her Jewish house guests Ishmael and Hilkiyah (and likely also Josephus). (Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 2014, ¶3)

Although historians assume this "rebuilding" excuse for blaming Nero came much later, Tacitus indicates that it preceded the persecution of the Christians, and must, therefore, have been voiced right after the fire (or even during it). (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:40) Given the fact that Nero rebuilt the city almost immediately and seemed to have his grandiose plans for his

golden palace ready much too quickly, there may well have been some truth behind the accusation of pre-planning. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:42-43)

However, not everyone was ready to dismiss the Jews of involvement in arson. Stephen Benko, formerly a professor at California State University at Fresno observed that, in *A.D.* 66 AD, Antioch in Syria, then rivaling Rome in size, accused Jews of a plot to burn down the entire city in one night. (Benko 1984, p. 17) Josephus said the accuser, a man called Antiochus, was born into a prominent Jewish family. He was the apostate son of the top Jewish leader in Antioch. The son claimed he had personally heard several Jews, and his own father, plotting to set this fire. The accused men were then promptly condemned for attempted arson. One may assume the young man knew that the standard method of arson execution was burning alive. That suggests the son harbored a deep personal grudge against his father. It is worth quoting what Josephus wrote about this conspiracy scandal:

For as the Jewish nation is widely dispersed... it... had the greatest multitude in Antioch... wherein (the Jews there lived in their own section) undisturbed... (with) equal privileges as citizens... They both multiplied to a great number, and... continually made converts of a great many of the Greeks (possibly Hellenized Jews of the *Diaspora*). But (in late *A.D.* 66) when the present war began... and all had (abruptly) taken up a great hatred against the Jews (due to "fear," he said), then it was that... Antiochus, (a man) of the Jewish nation (whose ancestors were not converts to Judaism), and greatly respected because his father was governor of the Jews at Antioch (showing they lived in their own section of the city) ...came to the amphitheater when the people of the city were assembled together. And he became an informer against his father. And he accused both him and others. (He testified) that they had resolved to burn the whole city in one night. He also delivered up to them some Jews that were foreigners as partners in their resolutions. When the people heard this... they commanded that those...should (be) all burnt... immediately. They did also fall violently upon (the rest of) the multitude of the Jews (in their part of Antioch), believing that, by punishing them suddenly (attacking them by surprise), they could save their part of the city (from an imminent Jewish arson)." (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII:3:3)

We know that Antioch was one of the very first outposts of Christian converts and that by this time, in *A.D.* 66, Christianity had flourished there for at least 35 years. It was the city where the Holy Spirit had been quite active, first officially proclaiming the God-given name "Christian" upon believers by the witness of its many Spirit-led prophets (See the Greek wording

of Acts 11:26). Paul's ministry began there. The Jewish sector of the city must have been full of Spirit-filled Christian converts, meeting in secret. It may be that Antiochus suspected his father of betraying his people by being a secret Christian.

In support of this is the fact that he accused certain "Jews that were foreigners" of being part of the arson plot. And as soon as the assembled people (including Jewish citizens of Antioch) "heard this...they commanded" that all the accused "immediately" be burned alive. It was this mention of conspiring Jewish "foreigners" that alarmed the crowd. Why was this?

Recall that Christianity had originally come to Antioch via "Jewish foreigners" and that Christians were continually sending delegations from Jerusalem and elsewhere to bring messages to the believers at Antioch (*e.g.* Acts 15:22-23). Christians were not only converting many Jews in Antioch, but also Gentiles. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII:3:3) So, both the Jewish and gentile leaders had been seeing decades of erosion of their power-base in the city. For both of these groups, the idea that the leader of the Jewish district might be secretly plotting with foreign Jewish Christians to burn the city would have been horrifying.

But what would all this have to do with a plot to burn down the city in one night?

By *A.D.* 66, the Revelation 18 "Babylon the Great" prophecy had been carried by Peter to Rome, by Mark to Cyrene and Alexandria, and by the Apostle John to Jerusalem, to warn Jews and Christians to flee before their cities burned. The same dire message was certainly also brought to Antioch by late *A.D.* 66, the time of this supposed plot involving "Jewish foreigners" accused of resolving to burn the city "in one night."

Where could young Antiochus have overheard such talk? Perhaps it was during a secret meeting between the Jewish Christians in Antioch with the leader of the Jewish people, namely Antiochus' father, in whose large home they had privately attempted to warn him of this prophetic message in Revelation. The Jewish leader may well have taken the warning seriously because Rome, Alexandria and Jerusalem had all suffered fires and other calamities during the previous two years and more were imminent, now that war was beginning. The prophecies seemed to be coming true. Had such meeting occurred (and the book of Revelation virtually commanded the Christians to also warn the Jews), then they would have "resolved" to warn their people to evacuate the city:

I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "come out of her, my people" (Revelation 12:17 defines God's people as, "those who keep the commandments of God (Jews) and the testimony of Jesus (Christians)") lest you partake in her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached up to heaven, and God has remembered her (previous) iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works. In the cup which she has filled, fill to her double... So much torment and sorrow give her, for she says in her heart, "I sit a Queen and am no widow, and I shall see no sorrow (i.e. 'no mourning')." Therefore, shall her plagues come in one day, death and mourning and famine. And

she shall be utterly burned with fire. For strong is the Lord God who judges her... And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her... "Alas, alas! that great city, wherein were made rich all that had ships in the sea, ...is made desolate. Rejoice over her, heaven, and your holy apostles and prophets. For God has avenged you upon her. (Revelation 18:4-6,11,19-20)

If Antiochus were not paying strict attention, he might think God was ordering His people to burn the city. But, the text says God Himself is the One who takes vengeance on the city. There is no command for us to burn anything! In fact, it says God's plan is that ten future kings not then in power would burn Babylon. (Revelation 17:16-17)

Also, note that Babylon is to be burned "in one day." This detail is most odd. The fire that burned Rome two years before had lasted nine days! These two cities were of similar size. Antiochus specified that the fire was to last "only one night." Short-lived fires were not the common expectation in those days. Antiochus assumed the fire would begin at night because fire risk was greatest at night. The fire of Rome had started well after dark, after the usual fires for cooking and evening illumination had been kindled.

The young Antiochus could have overheard Jewish Christians from Jerusalem or elsewhere, who were then visiting Antioch to warn both Jewish and Christian leaders of this prophecy. Since Nero had issued a "silencing" of Christians and he was still alive, there is no question that any such warning had been delivered under strictest secrecy in private homes. For this reason, Christians tended to choose large private homes for their meetings. The homes of wealthy people allowed for larger gatherings.

In Antioch, the home of the Jewish district's governor was ideally suited for such a large private gathering. Only a person who lived in the house was likely to overhear it. Hence, Antiochus overheard what his father and the others were discussing in secrecy. To Antiochus, it sounded as if his father and these foreigners were conspiring together to set fire to his home and his friends' homes. Feeling betrayed, the young man "informed" on his father and the others. He was so terrified he lost his religious faith altogether.

This fearful prospect would explain why a general assembly of the city was called to deal with the matter. The civil authorities would have summoned everyone to the meeting. The Jewish leaders and the Christians may have been caught off-guard, not realizing that the young man had come to such a dangerous misunderstanding. Josephus' account implies that everyone had come to the amphitheater voluntarily.

The story shows pagans believed in Jewish conspiracies to set fire to Gentile cities as of *A.D.* 66, shortly after Rome burned. Similar massacres of Jews had occurred at the seaport of Caesarea in Palestine, Scythopolis in Syria, Tyre, and elsewhere several weeks prior to the Antioch debacle. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, II:18:1-9) Either these cities were all panicking over the Babylon prophecy or else there was some gossip abroad blaming the Jews for the fire of Rome. When Antioch did in fact burn in *A.D.* 70, the mob immediately blamed the Jews; but debtors had started the fire to destroy the city's hall of records. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII: 3: 4) Benko himself suggested that Jewish leaders in Rome, specifically via their

contacts with Poppaea, may have deflected blame from themselves by accusing the Christians, perhaps because Jews had been suspected first. (Benko 1984, pp. 17-20)

Ishmael and Hilkiah might have fingered the Christians as the culprits in the fire of Rome in order to protect the Jews there from a charge of arson. (Benko 1984, pp. 17-20) Yet, Ishmael had never shown any hesitation in spilling Jewish blood prior to this time. More likely, he was worried about his own blood. Living safely outside Rome, he had reason to worry he might be blamed for ordering the fire in order to frame the Christians for it.

His first inclination was to blame Nero. Perhaps Poppaea had told him of Nero's plans for rebuilding the city. (Suetonius 1979, 1957, Nero: 38) If Nero wanted to set fire to Rome, he could have kept his secret rebuilding plans safely outside the city, at Poppaea's estate. Did his architects set up a model of the new Rome at her house? Ishmael could have learned of Nero's plans, making him a candidate for the rumor accusing Nero of the fire.

But why would Nero burn the city? The fire was less than three months before he was to celebrate his tenth anniversary of becoming Emperor. He was out of town at the time of the fire. He came rushing back to direct the firefighting. The final stage of the fire was surely arson, but it burned his friends' estates, most likely as an act of revenge by those who already blamed Nero for the fire. Nero then spent much of his own money rebuilding other people's homes. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:43) Nero simply does not seem to be guilty.

But if not the Christians, nor Nero, who else had the power to control those "men acting under orders" cited by Tacitus?

Another person with a motive was Poppaea. She had just become pregnant and as Empress, and as possibly a Jewish convert, there was the talk of her child being the expected Messiah. (Martin 1991, p. 26) Astrologers suggested the seat of the empire would move to Jerusalem after the fire of A.D. 64. (Suetonius 1979, 1957, "Nero" 40) Could anyone have seriously thought that an openly bisexual pagan like Nero could be the literal father of the long-prophesied holy Messiah?

But what if Nero was not the father of Poppaea's unborn child? Or, at least, what if the real father was privately assumed to have been one of the Jewish persons staying at her estate? And keep in mind that thousands of Jews were also at this very time prepared to believe in a virgin-born Messiah, namely Jesus (Acts 2:41).

We know of four Jewish men who spent time at her estate: The popular Jewish actor Aliturus, and his friend Josephus (who stated that he was of high Levitical stock, and who felt that he had a better bloodline than Ishmael). (Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 2014, ¶1) And of course, the High Priest Ishmael ben Phiabi himself, and his high-ranking priest-son Hilkiah.

We can likely eliminate the actor as the father, since he was not of royal stock. Josephus' Hasmonean Levitical line had no Messianic pretensions. Ishmael himself was already married. His son Hilkiah would have had a more legitimate bloodline than he had, because the Phiabis were continually "marrying up" to minimize their Fabian heritage.

So, Hilkiah was a possible "Messianic" father for Poppaea's child. Even if Nero were the father, it is not hard to imagine gossipy Romans tempting Nero to jealousy by false accusations. Tacitus seemed to regard Poppaea as promiscuous. Sexual relations between the Roman elite

and the Phiabi family, as we noted, were already indicated by the family name itself. Even if Hilkiyah were accused, Ishmael may have taken the blame.

Josephus would not have dared even to hint at any Jewish adultery with the wife of Nero, or the prospect of such a Roman-born Messiah. Nor would he have elaborated on Jewish links to the fire or any other events with such a negative Jewish connection. It is curious that Tacitus also omits to discuss most such issues. Yet scholars themselves have difficulty avoiding these kinds of questions. (Benko 1984, pp. 16-29, see notes)

The one act of arson plotting that Nero was able to confirm was a plot to burn down Nero's own palace—with Nero in it. If the two Phiabis had been hoping to remove Nero by setting fire to his palace, Josephus could be implicated since he was also staying at Poppaea's estate at the time. But the plot was actually hatched by a Roman aristocrat who hoped to set fire to Nero's palace and kill him if he tried to flee. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:50) It is now referred to as part of the Piso Conspiracy, which eventually involved dozens of Roman nobles and their wives, some of whom might have been converts to Judaism.

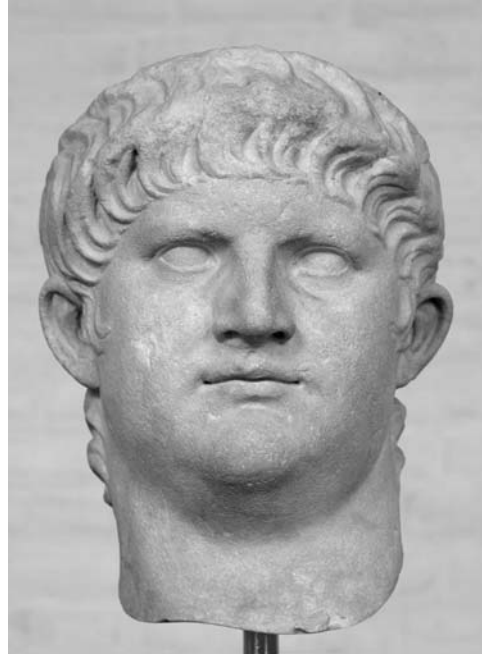
When Nero found out about the Piso Conspiracy early in *A.D.* 65, he spent a few weeks torturing and interrogating people until one fateful day when he discovered evidence that made him suddenly halt the tortures and wrap up the entire investigation. He unexpectedly ordered the Senate into special session, read a formal proclamation, and declared an official "clemency," Nero also ordered everyone (including the Senate itself) to cease any discussion about all that had happened since the fire started. (Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 1971, 15:73)

This seems odd. Why would Nero let any of the conspirators awaiting trial for plotting his assassination escape alive? Why did he issue an amnesty just at the moment, in mid-*A.D.* 65, when he was just learning about the main instigators of the conspiracy?

Nero's next move is unclear. We know, more or less, what he did about that time, but the exact sequence is uncertain. In any case, it was around this very time that Nero killed his wife Poppaea and stomped her unborn child to death in her womb. Now that timing hardly seems to have been a coincidence.

He was astonishingly merciful to those who wanted him burned to death, but strangely furious toward his sole heir that his wife was supposedly then bearing him.

But what if he had decided, rightly or wrongly, that the whole plot was actually about this baby? What if Nero suspected the real plot was to circumcise the baby, kill Nero, and make the child the new Emperor, while Poppaea ruled Rome with Ishmael and Hilkiyah as advisors, until the child came of age to rule?



Emperor Nero

Lest anyone think this absurd, it is almost exactly how Nero himself became Emperor. His mother had Nero by a low-born father and then she married the Emperor, got him to adopt Nero as if he were his own son, and then she poisoned the emperor. She had effectively ruled the empire with two behind-the-scenes advisors (one of whom, Seneca, has been suspected of Jewish leanings and complicity in the Piso Conspiracy). She reigned until Nero grew old enough to rule on his own. So, it is easy to see why Nero could have believed Poppaea was plotting to kill him and rule as regent for the child.

But there is a yet more sinister scenario. What if Ishmael and Hilkiah actually had been involved in setting the city on fire to implicate Christians and eliminate Nero (which would immediately have freed the two Jewish leaders)? These were two strong motives.

Josephus was at the estate, yet, had he learned of such a plot, he dared not stop it. Furthermore, if such a plot were exposed, an enraged Nero might kill thousands of Jews, perhaps including many friends of Josephus. Whatever Josephus might have known about such a conspiracy, he felt he could not divulge it. We also know Josephus tried to defend Jews against charges of burning cities. (Benko 1984, p. 17)

There was another problem. As soon as the fires ended, one glaring fact stood out: The fires had spared the Jewish districts. The Jews desperately needed a way to explain this. (Benko 1984, p. 20) The Christians then became a convenient scapegoat. Their policy of taking the Gospel first to the Jews meant that there were many Christians then living in the Jewish neighborhoods of Rome. Paul himself had helped convert some of these new Jewish Christians just prior to the fire (Acts 28:17-31, Romans 16:11-13). Clement of Rome is one of Paul's converts, and he too was present at the fire, yet did not describe it.

Thousands of innocent people died horribly in the fire. If the Phiabis and Poppaea were in some way responsible, then they would have had a powerful motive to divert Nero's wrath away from themselves and toward the Christians. (Benko 1984, pp. 19-20)

But if Nero later learned that Poppaea and Ishmael had conspired to kill him and have her child substituted, and he believed it, we can understand why Nero was content to halt the persecution and let Christians like Clement go free. We can also see why Nero simultaneously became furious at his Jewish wife and her now-suspect unborn child. Ishmael was promptly exiled to Cyrene by the fall of 65, and the following year, Ishmael was beheaded, presumably at Nero's personal order.

The exact date of the beheading of Ishmael is unknown, but we know that Nero banished him a few weeks after Nero killed Poppaea and her baby. The exile to Cyrene kept Ishmael from going back to the city of Jerusalem. Ishmael would have been held under house arrest in Cyrene. The beheading happened sometime after Nero learned of the revolt in Judea in late 66. Ishmael was being held hostage against the possibility of a revolt by the Jews; and Nero, angry or not, knew that Ishmael was too valuable a hostage to kill until the war actually broke out, as it did in A.D. 66.

One cautionary point should be made. Nero certainly would not want anyone to know if he had been cuckolded by his wife and one of her Jewish housemates. Holding Ishmael hostage against the outbreak of war provided Nero with a convenient excuse for killing Ishmael later.

Josephus observed that each new Procurator Nero appointed was worse than his predecessor. Yet, if Nero's goal had been to deliberately provoke the war, his plan worked

perfectly. Josephus was especially amazed by the actions of the final Procurator Gessius Florus, who was dispatched about the same time Poppaea was killed by Nero. Over and over again, Josephus kept insisting that Florus was deliberately provoking the Jews to war. Josephus said Florus had devised a specific plan to bring about the war.

Florus... had the purpose of showing his anger at the (Jewish) nation, and procuring a war upon them... For he expected that if... he could procure them to make a revolt, he should divert their laying lesser crimes to his charge... He therefore did every day augment their calamities, in order to induce them to a rebellion. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, II:14:3)

However, Florus contrived another way to oblige the Jews to begin the war (that is, to be blamable as the ones who started the conflict)." (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, II:16:1)

Did Nero send Florus for the purpose of getting the Jews to revolt so that Nero could get his revenge by destroying Jerusalem, the Temple, and then, enslaving the Jews?

The Zealots probably realized Ishmael would be executed if they started a revolt. In fact, they were at that very time executing relatives of Ishmael. They would have beheaded him themselves if they could have gotten their hands on him. By holding Ishmael hostage, Nero was giving the Zealots an extra incentive to revolt. It is not out of the question that Nero perceived this and provoked a war so as to extend his vengeance to the whole Jewish nation. He would have loved to take credit for such malevolent genius.

The summer of *A.D.* 66 was crucial. The Zealots had not yet seized Jerusalem, and the Phiabis were still clinging to power. The Apostle John, having smuggled the book of Revelation out of Alexandria, convinced not only all of the Christians of Jerusalem, but also many of the Jewish residents, to flee the city and to leave the rest of Judea and Galilee as well. Most of the Christians ultimately settled at Pella beyond Jordan. (Eusebius 1979, III:5) Little Pella could shelter so many new residents because it had just been annihilated by the Jews. The following account, which is from the weeks and days immediately before the war began, helps explain why John was able to easily persuade believers and skeptics alike that they needed to flee the whole region:

"Now the people of Caesarea had slain the Jews that were (living) among them on the very same day and hour (the sixth day of Elul, *circa* early September, *A.D.* 66) ...So that in one hour's time, more than 20,000 Jews were killed, and ALL of Caesarea was emptied of its Jewish inhabitants. For Florus captured those who escaped and condemned them as slaves to row chained in the Roman galleys. Upon learning of this slaughter at Caesarea, the whole Jewish nation was outraged. So, they divided their forces and laid waste to the villages of the

Syrians (kin of those in Caesarea) and their neighboring cities, including Philadelphia, Sebonitis, Gerasa, and Pella, and also Scythopolis, Gadara, Hippos, and the province of Gaulonitis. Some cities they depopulated; some they set afire. Then they went on to Kedasa of the Tyrians, and Ptolemais and Gaba, and (finally they arrived) at Caesarea... An immense slaughter was made... However, the Syrians were equal to the Jews in the multitude of the men whom they slaughtered... It was common to see cities filled with dead bodies, still lying unburied, and the bodies of old men mixed with infants, all dead and scattered about together; women also lay among them, without any covering for their nakedness. Scythopolis (and) other cities rose up against the Jews that (dwelt) among them. Those of Ascalon slew 2,500 Jewish civilians, and those of Ptolemais 2,000... Tyre also put a great number to death... (and so on)." (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, II:18:1-5)

Caesarea may have been among the cities that had a "Babylon the Great" arson panic in *A.D.* 66. If Jerusalem were Babylon, then its chief seaport, Caesarea, had to be doomed with it (Revelation 18:17-18, 21). Caesarea's pagans feared their local Jews and Jewish Christians were about to destroy the city "in one hour" (Revelation 18:10). So, they struck first. The Jews retaliated by killing every Syrian they found in Galilee and its neighbor region.

Then in the days following, the survivors of the Jewish retaliation murdered every Jewish man, woman and child in their lands. The Jews had destroyed not only Caesarea, but also every city, town, and village within a two-day gallop of Caesarea. When it was over, the borders of Syria and Galilee were a smoldering ruin stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the far side of the Jordan Valley. Paradise had become *Gehenna* (hell).

One of the towns the Jews burned was Pella. It was here in tiny Pella that the Christians would "hole up" for the duration of the war. Apparently, they arrived literally at the last moment, mere days before the war began in earnest.

It is not hard to understand how the people of Antioch just north of this devastated landscape felt. They were dwelling with the largest Jewish and Christian population of any city by the fall of *A.D.* 66. Tensions between the Syrian capital's pagan citizens and its Jewish residents must have been extreme. Virtually every other city of any size had either killed or driven out its Jewish and Christian population by the end of *A.D.* 66. It was in that climate of fear that young Antiochus became terrified by his father's actions and felt betrayed enough to hand him over to be burned alive. This reveals the fierce anxiety in Antioch at the time. By *A.D.* 70, Antioch finally was set ablaze by its debtors, seeking relief. The Jews were blamed first, but later exonerated. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII: 3: 4)

As far as the war itself was concerned, the Romans rather thoroughly defeated the Zealots. They eventually executed all their leaders, although Josephus reports that some fled to North

Africa for a time and tried to stir up the Jewish residents there, especially in Alexandria and Cyrene. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII: 10-11)

The cities around Judea used this disastrous war as an opportunity to take additional vengeance upon any Jewish survivors. Josephus described the initial slaughters that had triggered the wave of bloodshed in *A.D.* 66, out of which the war had erupted, by inventing a supposed "speech" given by the Zealot leader Eleazar at Masada, at his final Passover in Herod's besieged fortress, in the spring of *A.D.* 73:

The Jews of Caesarea were slain... while keeping their seventh day (Sabbath), and did not so much as lift up their hands against the citizens of Caesarea, yet did those citizens attack them in large mobs and slit their throats and the throats of their wives and children... Scythopolis ...ventured to wage war with us... (and their Jews) were slain, they and their whole families after the most inhumane manner... There was not even one Syrian city which did not slay their Jewish inhabitants... Even those of Damascus... filled their city with the most barbarous slaughter of our people, and cut the throats of 18,000 Jews, with their wives and children. And as to the multitude of those who that were slain in Egypt, and that was accompanied by tortures as well, we have been told there were more than 60,000."

(Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII: 8: 7)

In addition, after the war, Catullus, the Roman governor of Libya, executed "all the rich and wealthy Jews" of Cyrene, "no fewer in all than 3,000." (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VII: 11: 1-2) As waves of slaughter swept through the Jewish world, like so many red-tides of death and destruction, there were fewer and fewer Jews left to kill, nor left to avenge them.

Remember the names of these cities, and mark them well: Rome and Alexandria, Antioch and Cyrene, Caesarea and all the towns of Christianized Galilee. They shed the blood of Jewish women and children. They defiled a generation. They created a vendetta that would not go unpaid.

Elisha and his brothers did not view these slaughters as the inevitable reaction of the pagans to the Jewish retaliatory attacks on these same areas in the summer of 66 AD. Rather, they believed those retaliations by the Jews had been fully justified as revenge for the massacre of Caesarea's 20,000 Jews, the entire Jewish population of that city. With schoolyard logic, Elisha and the Phiabi family argued, "They started it!"

But why? For what reason had the residents of Caesarea abruptly decided that it was far too risky for them to go to bed with Jews alive and well in their city? What had happened late in the summer of *A.D.* 66 that made such a bloodthirsty decision one that a whole city of pagans could no longer resist?

Virtually every witness was dead within days. So, we may never know exactly what triggered the original massacre. But, it hardly seems coincidental that they timed the massacre to last exactly one hour. Nor, that they seemed to have killed Jewish Christians as well as all other

Jews in the city. Nor, that it was at this exact moment that the prophecy of Babylon the Great was being used to stir both Jews and Jewish Christians to flee the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding region. It was inevitable that Jerusalem's main seaport, Caesarea, became a focus of that same prophetic expectation.

Why didn't Jews in Caesarea flee in time? It may be that they were indeed about to leave, and that a date for a mass exodus had actually been set. But if the city's pagans had discovered that date, it might have been misinterpreted, as happened at Antioch that same year. The Caesarians may have thought that the date the Jews were leaving was supposedly the same date they were plotting to torch the city. After all, that was exactly the false impression Antiochus seems to have derived from Revelation. The idea was that God's people were to flee the city and repay her "double" by torching it on their way out.

Never mind that vengeance is God's job, not ours, just as the Revelation prophecy itself plainly says. Non-Christians, and those who are Christian in name only, always fail to read the text in that Spirit. No doubt, that is because they themselves believe vengeance is man's task. (The text also says that ten future kings burn the city.)

Revelation then becomes a kind of Rorschach Test. Everyone sees it in their own distorted ink-blot. Minds darkened with "Fear and Vengeance" cannot grasp its spiritual meaning. They look for villains upon whom to vent their rages. "Kill the Beast! Burn Babylon! Stop the Antichrist!" They think they are avenging angels. And if they see their own city condemned, then they turn to the book itself and look for Jewish or Christian scapegoats whose blood they hope will let them sleep peacefully again.

So, pagans panicked in Rome, Alexandria, Caesarea, and Antioch and wherever someone concluded, "We're Babylon! We're the target!" The fire of Rome in *A.D.* 64 let them claim Jews or Christians might actually do such things. It was pagan paranoia about Christianity and pagan anti-Semitism that triggered the massacres, wars, and fires, and inspired all the retaliations, vendettas, exiles and endless persecutions and inquisitions.

Yet, with all these frenzied massacres spreading around the region, the Romans had a very different attitude toward the Phiabis and the scribes allied with them. Titus allowed several of the chief priests to leave Jerusalem safely; along with certain scribes, provided they settled in Yavneh/Gobna on the seacoast road. He also promised to restore their property to them, but Josephus never says if he kept that promise, nor what little such ruins may have been worth after the war. (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1977, VI: 2: 2) (Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 2014, ¶ 78)

So, when the wind-borne battle dust finally shifted to the ground, most of the priests who survived were congregating among the residents of Yavneh. We know for a fact that at least one family, including three sons of Ishmael ben Phiabi himself, managed to leave Jerusalem intact. Elisha rescued Ishmael's sacred High Priestly robes. We know this, as we said, because of Ishmael's grandson, Ishmael ben Elisha, claimed to still possess these robes some 65 years later. (Jeremias 1975, pp. 196, 233)

So, the Phiabi family expected not only to rebuild the Temple, but to return as its High Priests as well. Ishmael ben Phiabi's grandson, Ishmael ben Elisha, was both a Yavneh scribe and also (the rabbis claimed) a High Priest around the time of the Bar Kochba War from *A.D.* 132

to *A.D.* 135. (Jeremias 1975, p. 196n) This Ishmael ben Elisha is also later proclaimed one of "the ten holy martyrs" of the Jewish people.

However, the favorable view of Ishmael ben Elisha by the Talmudic rabbis was not shared by everyone. The Romans executed him around *A.D.* 135-136 as one of the ringleaders of the revolt. Moreover, one version of the lament that we have attributed to a possible Jewish son of the Apostle John reads, "Woe to me because of the house of Elisha. Woe to me because of their fists!" (Jeremias 1975, p. 195n) This later revision is a clear indication that the family penchant for brutality did not die with Ishmael ben Phiabi, but continued down through at least *A.D.* 135.

In order for the Phiabi's plans to be carried out, the Jews would have to rebuild the population of militant young men able to fight for and carve out a new Judean state. An independent Judea would be impossible unless they could somehow deal a deathblow to their enemies, who were now alerted to the militancy of the Jewish leaders and their followers. The Phiabis were convinced that the vast, scattered Jewish population needed a truly independent Judean homeland, one that the Phiabis planned to rule.

One tactic the Phiabis now knew would not succeed was burning Rome itself. It burned twice within the six years before the destruction of the Temple (in *A.D.* 64 and *A.D.* 69). Yet, Rome was quickly rebuilt bigger and better than before. Rome's rapid reconstruction was due to its ability to import large numbers of slaves from the provinces. This supply of cheap labor made it fruitless to burn the capital. After the fire of *A.D.* 64, Nero rebuilt most of the city in a few months. Moreover, he rebuilt it to be as fireproof as possible.

The nagging fear that Christianity and its prophetic scriptures had somehow caused the pagans to destroy Phiabi Judaism would also not be forgotten. So, Elisha and the Phiabi family began to plot their revenge. It would not come quickly, but it would come, on a schedule, with perfect timing. And, it would strike places of their choosing and in a manner so brilliant that it is almost a shame few know of the **Revenge of the Phiabis** and how they achieved it, as we shall discover next, in *Part II: The Golden Armada*.

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