

Zealots and Zealotry: From the Bible to the Maccabees to the Rabbis

1. The Great War and Internal Strife – War 4:131 – Every city was now agitated by tumult and civil war, and the moment they had a respite from the Romans they turned their hands against each other. Between the enthusiasts for war and the friends of peace contention raged fiercely. Beginning in the home this party rivalry first attacked those who had long been bosom friends, then the nearest relations severed their connections and joining those who shared their respective views ranged themselves henceforth in opposite camps. Faction reigned everywhere...

2. Josephus, Ant. 18:2ff. – Quirinius also visited Judaea, which had been annexed to Syria, in order to make an assessment of the property of the Jews and to liquidate the estate of Archelaus (son of Herod, who was banished in 6 CE). Although the Jews were at first shocked to hear of the registration of property, they gradually condescended yielding to the arguments of the High Priest Yoazar...to go no further in opposition. ..But a certain Judas, a Gaulanite from a city named Gamala, who had enlisted the aid of Saddok a Pharisee, threw himself into the cause of rebellion. They said that the assessment carried with it a status amounting to downright slavery, and appealed to the nation to make a bid for independence. They urged...that Heaven would be their zealous helper to no lesser end than the furthering of their enterprise until it succeeded...if they...did not shrink from the bloodshed that might be necessary...(In this)...they sowed the seed from which sprang strife between factions and the slaughter of fellow citizens...

3. Josephus, ibid., 23 – As for the fourth of the philosophies, Judas the Galilean set himself up as the leader of it. This school agrees in all other respects with the opinions of the Pharisees, except that they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master. They think little of submitting to death in unusual forms and permitting vengeance to fall on kinsmen and friends, if only they may avoid calling any man master.

4. I Macc. 2:23-27- ...When he (Mattathias) had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modi'in, according to the King's command. When Mattathias saw this, he burned with **zeal** and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. Thus he burned with **zeal** for the law just as Phineas did against Zimri son of Salu. Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: "Let every one who is **zealous** for the law and supports the covenant come out with me..."



5. ibid., 2:53 - ...Phineas our ancestor, because he was deeply **zealous**, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood...Elijah because of great **zeal** for the law was taken up into heaven (cf. I Kings 18:40 - ...and Elijah took them (the prophets of Baal) down to Wadi Kishon and slaughtered them there; cf. I Kings 19: 10 He (Elijah) replied "I am moved by **zeal** for the Lord" - (קנא קנאתי לה' אלוהי צבאות)



6.Biblical Antiquities (Pseudo-Philo) chap. 48 At that time, Pinchas was verging toward death, and the LORD said to him, “Behold you have passed the 120 years that have been established for every man [see Gen 6:3]. Now rise up and go from here and dwell in the desert on the mountain and dwell there many years. I will command my eagle, and he will nourish you there (cf. I Kings 17:6 where Elijah is fed by ravens), and you will not come down again to mankind until the appointed time arrives and you will be tested at the appropriate time; and then you will shut up the heaven [from rain], and by your mouth it will be opened up. Afterward you will be raised up to the place where those who were before you were raised up, and you will be there until I remember the world. Then I will bring you, and you will get a taste of death.

7.Numbers 25:6-13 – Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family... When Phineas son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest saw it, he got up from among the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. ... The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Phineas the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them (בְּקִנְיָאֵן אֶת קִנְיַתִּי בְּתוֹכֵם) on my behalf, that in my jealousy (בְּקִנְיָאֵן) I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say: ‘I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites’.



8. Josephus, Antiquities 4:152 – Phineas, a man superior in every way to the rest of the youth besides being exalted above his fellows by his father’s rank – for he was son of Elazar the high-priest [and grandson of the brother of Moses] – being deeply distressed at the deeds of Zambrias, determined, before his insolence gained strength through impunity, to take the law into his own hands and to prevent the iniquity from spreading farther afield, should its authors escape chastisement. Gifted moreover with an intrepidity of soul and a courage of body ...Phineas repaired to the tent of Zambrias and smote him with his broadsword, along with Chosbia, and killed them. Thereupon all the young men who aspired to make a display of heroism and of love of honour, imitating the daring deed of Phineas, slew those who were found guilty of the same crimes as Zambrias. Thus, through their valiancy, perished many of the transgressors...

9. Josephus, Ant. 12:270 – But when he (Mattathias) ceased speaking, one of the Jews came forward and in their midst sacrificed as Antiochus had commanded, whereupon Mattathias in rage rushed upon him with his sons, who had broad knives, and cut down the man himself, and also made an end of Apelles, the king’s officer...

10. Josephus, Jewish War 4:161 – Their efforts were supported by the most eminent of the high priests, Jesus son of Gamalas, and Ananus son of Ananus, who at their meetings vehemently upbraided the people for their apathy and incited them against the Zealots; for so these miscreants called themselves, as though they were zealous in the cause of virtue and not for vice in its basest and most extravagant form.

11. Ibid., 7:268 – In this the so-called Zealots excelled, a class which justified their name by their actions; for they copied every deed of ill, nor was there any previous villainy recorded in history that they failed zealously to emulate.
12. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version A, chap. 6 – and why was he called Calba Savu'a? For any one who entered his house hungry as a dog left his house full. And when Vespasian came to destroy Jerusalem the Zealots (קנאים) attempted to burn all that beneficence
13. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version B, - it was said about Calba Savu'a that he had enough food to supply each person in Jerusalem for three years. And when the Sikarin burned the supplies in Jerusalem...
14. Numbers 5:14-15 – If a spirit of jealousy (רוח קנאה) comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself. Then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring the offering required for her...for it is a grain offering of jealousy (minhat kena'ot)
15. BT Sotah 3a - The School of R. Ishmael taught: A man does not warn (חקנא) his wife unless a spirit enters him, as it is said: “And the spirit of jealousy came upon him and he was jealous of his wife” (ועבר עליו רוח קנאה וקנא באשתו). What is the [nature of the] spirit? The rabbis declare: It is a spirit of impurity (רוח טומאה), but Rav Ashi declares: It is a spirit of purity.
16. Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:6 – If one stole a service-vessel, or cursed [the name of God] by enchantment, or had sexual intercourse with an Aramean woman, the zealots may harm him (קנאים פוגעים בו).
17. PT Sanhedrin 9:27b – It is written: “And Phineas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the Priest saw”. What did he see? He saw the act and was reminded of the halakha: “One who has intercourse with an ‘Aramean’ – Zealots may harm him”. It was [further] taught: This is not in accordance with the will of the Sages. But was Phineas [acting] against the will of the sages? R. Judah ben Pazi said: They wished to excommunicate him, were it not for the Holy Spirit that came upon him and declared: “It shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood [because he was zealous for his God]”. (Numbers 25:13).

18. BT Sanhedrin – Rav Hisda said: If one comes for advice (about carrying out a zealot’s role against a sinner) – they do not instruct him (to act out the role of the zealot). It was also stated: Rabbah bar bar Hannah in the name of R. Yohanan said: If one comes for advice they do not instruct him. Moreover, had Zimri withdrawn and Phineas slain him, he (Phineas) would have been executed on his account. And had Zimri turned around and slain Phineas, he (Zimri) would not have been executed because of him, for he (Phineas) was a ‘pursuer’ (*rodef*). . “And Phineas stood up and executed judgment” (לַיִּפְּלוֹ; Ps. 106:30). R. Elazar said: It is not stated “And he prayed” (לַיִּפְּלוֹ) but rather “he executed judgment”. This teaches that he entered into a judgment, as it were, with his Maker (arguing about the punishment to be meted out to Israel). The ministering angels wished to push him away. He (God) said to them: Leave him be, He is a zealot the son of a zealot. He his one who deflects wrath, the son of one who deflects wrath. The tribes [then] began to scorn him (Phineas): “Look at that son of Puti whose mother’s father (i.e. Jethro) fattened calves for idol worship, and he [now] killed a chief of a tribe of Israel”! And so scripture came and recorded his genealogy: “Phineas the son of Elazar the son of Aaron the priest”. And so God told Moses: Greet him (וְשַׁלְּמוּ לְוִיִּם לְוִיִּם). As it is written: “Wherefore say: Behold I give to him my covenant of peace” And this atonement [which Phineas achieved through his zealotry] is fit to atone [for the sins of Israel] forever.

19. Pesikta Rabbati 4 – You find that two prophets rose up for Israel out of the tribe of Levi; one the first of all the prophets, and the other the last of all the prophets: Moses first and Elijah last, and both with a commission from God to redeem Israel. Moses, with his commission, redeemed them from Egypt, as is said “Come now, therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh” (Ex. 3:10). And in the time to come, Elijah with his commission will redeem them, as is said “Behold I will send you Elijah the Prophet” (Mal. 3:23)...You find that Moses and Elijah were alike in every respect: Moses was called “Man of God” (Deut. 33:1) and Elijah was called “Man of God” (I Kings 17:18)...Moses exterminated idolaters: “Put ye every man his sword upon his thigh” (Ex. 32:27), and Elijah exterminated idolatry, when he seized the prophets of Ba’al and slew them. Moses was zealous for the Lord: “whoso is on the Lord’s side let him come unto me” (Ex. 32:26); and Elijah was zealous for the Lord: “Elijah said unto all the people...” (I Kings 18:30).

20. Josephus, War 6:312 – But what more than all else incited them to the war was an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world. This they understood to mean someone of their own race, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it. The oracle, however, in reality signified the sovereignty of Vespasian, who was proclaimed Emperor on Jewish soil (cf. Tacitus, Hist. 5:13)

21. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishma'el - Beshalah -"And the children of Israel went up armed (*chamushim*) from the land of Egypt" (Ex. 13:18)— one out of five (['chammishah'] ... Others say: one out of fifty ('*chamishim*'). Others say: one out of five hundred ('*chamesh me'oth*'). ...many of the Jews having died in Egypt. When? In the three days of darkness, of which it is written (Ex. 10:23) "One man did not see another." They (the Jews) were burying their dead, and they gave thanks and praise to the Holy One Blessed be He that their foes did not see and rejoice in their downfall.

22. Exodus Rabbah 14:3 –Why darkness?...because of the sinners of Israel who had patrons among the Egyptians and they had there honor and wealth (var. and they disclosed Israel's secrets to the Egyptians) and they did not want to leave Egypt. God said: If I bring upon them a plague in the open and they die, the Egyptians will say that just as we suffered so did they. Therefore he brought darkness among the Egyptians for three days so that Israel could bury its dead and the Egyptians would not see them...

23. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishma'el, Ba-hodesh – “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God”(אֱלֹהֵינוּ לֵאלֹהִים קַנְיָן). Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] said: A God above jealousy. I rule over jealousy, but jealousy has no power over me...Zealously do I extract punishment for idolatry, but in other matters I am merciful and gracious...A certain philosopher asked Rabban Gamaliel: It is written in your Torah: “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God”. But is there any power in the idol that it should arouse jealousy? A hero is jealous (אֱלֹהֵינוּ לֵאלֹהִים קַנְיָן) of another hero, a wise man is jealous of another wise man, a rich man is jealous of another rich man, but has the idol any power that one should be jealous of it? Rabban Gamaliel said to him: Suppose a man

would call his dog by the name of his father, so that when taking a vow he would vow: “By the life of this dog”. Against whom would the father be incensed? Against the son or the dog? (cf. BT Avodah Zarah 55a: The general Agrippa asked R. Gamaliel: It is written in your Torah: “For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire, a jealous God”. Is a wise man jealous of any but a wise man, a warrior of any but a warrior, a rich man of any but a rich man? He replied: I will give you a parable: To what might this be compared? To a man who marries an additional wife. If the second wife is the first one’s superior, the first will not be jealous of her; but if she is her inferior, the first wife will be jealous of her.

24. Julian, Against the Galileans 155 – But as for the commandment “Thou shalt not worship other gods” he surely adds a terrible libel upon God. “For I am a jealous God” he says, and in another place again “Our God is a consuming fire”. Now when a man is jealous and envious you think him blameworthy, whereas if God is called jealous you think it a divine quality? How is it reasonable to speak falsely of God in a matter that is so evident? For if he is indeed jealous, then against his will are all other gods worshipped, and against his will do all the remaining nations worship their gods. But how is it that he did not himself restrain them, if he is so jealous and does not want that the others should be worshipped, but only himself? Can it be that he was not able to do so, or did he not wish even from the beginning to prevent the other gods from being worshipped? The first explanation, that is to say he was unable, is impious; while the second is in accordance with what we (i.e. pagans) do ourselves. Lay aside this nonsense and do not draw down on yourselves such terrible blasphemy. For if it is God’s will that none other should be worshipped, why do you worship this spurious son of his, of whom he has never yet recognized nor considered as his own...