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7.1 “Nations by the Thousands . . . Serve the Masters of the Entire World”: What Held the Roman Empire Together

One of the most comprehensive overviews of the geographical extent of the Roman Empire and its military power appears in the form of a speech the Jewish historian Josephus attributes to King Herod Agrippa, who was trying to restrain Josephus' countrymen from revolting. Judaea had suffered at the hands of some particularly poor Roman governors, the last of whom, Gessius Florus, was one of the worst. The country boiled with plots for rebellion. Although Herod does the speaking, the substance of the speech probably reflects the speech Josephus himself gave at the beginning of the war when he found himself in similar circumstances and had to try to dissuade the countrymen of his district from rebelling.

The speech reveals the kind of knowledge of the Romans a provincial upper-class individual such as Josephus possessed at the time of the Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66–70). It also reveals the kinds of predicaments people in the provincial upper classes could find themselves in vis-à-vis their hotheaded countrymen. Josephus rather readily went over to the Romans and, as a result, was hated by his countrymen who joined the revolt.

He begins by reminding his hearers that their forebears, although much better organized, had not resisted the Romans effectively in their first encounter with them in 63 B.C. While Josephus/Herod's knowledge of geography and the battle order of the Roman army is

*impressive, it is hard to believe that people set on revolt would be impressed by this kind of academic approach.*¹

“Your ancestors . . . , the Athenians . . . , the Spartans . . . , the Macedonians—nations by the thousands, who had greater passion for liberty than you, have yielded. Will you alone refuse to serve the masters of the entire world? What troops, what weapons do you rely on? Where is your fleet to sweep the Roman seas? Where are the financial resources for your revolt? You must think you are going to war with Egyptians or Arabs! Are you blind to the magnitude and extent of Roman power? Why do you refuse to weigh your own weakness? Our forces have often been defeated even by our neighbors, while theirs are undefeated throughout the world! Indeed, they want even more. They are not content with the Euphrates as a frontier in the east, the Danube in the north, Libya and the desert beyond to the south, and Cadiz on the west. They have sought a new world beyond the Ocean and fought the previously unknown Britons!

“Face up to it! You are not richer than the Gauls, stronger than the Germans, smarter than the Greeks, more numerous than the people of the inhabited world. What gives you the confidence to tackle the Romans? ‘It is cruel to be enslaved,’ someone will say. How much more so for the Greeks, who are the most talented of peoples and occupy such a vast territory. Yet they must obey the six fasces [*the bundle of rods symbolizing authority*] of a Roman magistrate! A similar number control the Macedonians, who, more justly than you, are due their liberty. What of the five hundred cities of Asia? Without a garrison they prostrate themselves before a single governor and his consular fasces. Is it necessary to speak of the peoples around the Bosphorus, Black Sea, the Sea of Azov . . . ? Previously these peoples did not recognize a ruler even from among themselves, but now they are subject to three thousand legionaries. Forty war ships keep the peace in that formerly unnavigable, dangerous sea. What powerful claims to freedom might be made by the peoples of Anatolia; yet they pay what they owe without the compulsion of arms.

“Then there are the Thracians, a people spread over a country [*Bulgaria and part of Greece*] five days’ march in width and seven in length. Their land is more rugged and much more easily defended than yours. Its icy cold repels invaders, but do they not obey two thousand Roman guards? Their neighbors the Illyrians, who live in the land stretching from Dalmatia to the Danube frontier [*i.e., Yugoslavia*], yield to two legions and even cooperate with the Romans to repel the raids of the Dacians [*from Romania*]. . . .

“But if any nation might be excited to revolt by its natural advantages it is surely the Gauls. Nature provides them with the ramparts of the Alps to the east, the River Rhine in the north, the Pyrenees mountains in the south, and the Ocean in the west. Although surrounded by these defenses, with a population of three hundred and five tribes, and prosperity welling as it were from the land and flooding the rest of the

¹Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2. 358–388.

world with its products, they nevertheless allow themselves to be treated by the Romans as a source of taxes. They have their own good fortune served back to them by their conquerors. And they accept this, not because of weakness of will or meanness of spirit: they fought for their freedom for eighty years. But they are overawed by the power of the Romans and their good fortune which wins them more victories than their arms. That is why the Gauls are enslaved to twelve hundred soldiers—hardly more than the number of their cities!

“As for Spain—neither the gold from its mines nor the vast stretch of land and sea which separates it from the Romans were sufficient to protect it in its struggle for freedom. Nor for that matter did the Lusitanian and Cantabrian tribes with their passion for war, nor the neighboring Ocean, whose tides terrify even the native, make any difference; the Romans, advancing beyond the Pillars of Hercules and traversing the cloud-capped Pyrenees, enslaved all these peoples. The guard for this remote nation of hard fighters is a single legion!

“Who among you has not heard of the populous German nation? You have seen their huge and powerful figures on many occasions since everywhere the Romans have them as their captives. This people occupies a vast territory. Their spirit surpasses the size of their bodies and disdains death. Enraged they are fiercer than wild beasts. Yet the Rhine stops their expansion. Tamed by eight Roman legions, those captured are enslaved and the whole nation seeks safety in flight.

“You who put your trust in the walls of Jerusalem consider what a wall the Britons had! The Ocean surrounds them; they live in an island as big as our whole Mediterranean world. Yet the Romans crossed the Ocean and enslaved them. Four legions now secure that vast land. But why say any more when the Parthians, the most warlike of peoples, rulers of so many nations and secure by the possession of such great power, send hostages to the Romans? Under the pretext of seeking peace, the elite of the East may be seen in Italy bowing in submission.

“When almost every nation under the sun prostrate themselves before the arms of Rome will you alone make war against them? Consider the fate of the Carthaginians, who boasted of the great Hannibal and the nobility of their Phoenician origins. They fell to the hand of Scipio. . . . This third part of the whole inhabited world [*i.e.*, *North Africa*], whose peoples are hard to enumerate, bounded by the Atlantic Ocean and the Pillars of Hercules and stretching to the Indian Ocean, supporting as it does the countless Ethiopians—they have it all under their thumb. Besides their annual harvest, which feeds the Roman people for eight months, these peoples over and above pay tribute of all kinds. Unlike you, who see outrage in the demands of Rome, they readily contribute to the needs of the Empire, although only a single legion is garrisoned among them.

“Why look so far afield to demonstrate the power of Rome when we can find it in Egypt, our closest neighbor? Egypt stretches as far as Ethiopia and Arabia Felix and is the point of departure for India. It has a population of seven and a half million, not counting the inhabitants of Alexandria. This is shown by the individual tax returns. Yet this country does not spurn the rule of Rome. What an incentive to revolt it has in Alexandria, with its huge population, its great wealth and size! . . . The tribute

Egypt sends to Rome exceeds in one month what you send in a year! The land is protected by impassable deserts, seas without harbors, rivers, and swamps. Yet none of these assets were sufficient to resist the Fortune of Rome. Two legions stationed in Alexandria curb the remotest parts of Egypt and the proud Macedonian elite to boot.

“What allies do you hope for in the coming war? You must expect them from the uninhabited wilds, for the inhabited world is all Roman. . . .”