

Chapter XVIII

The Sabbath Year of 43/42 B.C.E.

Confirmation that a Sabbath year occurred in 43/42 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, is found in a decree issued by Gaius Julius Caesar and published by Josephus in his work entitled, *Antiquities of the Jews*. The decree reads as follows:

Gaius Caesar, Consul for the fifth time, has decreed that these men shall receive and fortify the city of Jerusalem, and that Hyrcanus, son of Alexander, the high priest and ethnarch of the Jews, shall occupy it as he himself may choose. And that IN THE 2ND YEAR OF THE RENT-TERM one kor shall be deducted from the tax paid by the Jews, and no one shall make profit out of them, nor shall they pay the same tribute.¹

This decree is dated to the 5th consul term of Gaius Caesar, i.e., the year 44 B.C.E.,² and is most assuredly to be associated with the Roman Senate decree of that same year, which is specifically dated “3 days before the Ides of April” (April 11, 44 B.C.E.).³ The Senate decree also deals with privileges to be granted to the Jews in the empire and reads well within the context of the Roman recognition of Jewish rights under Caesar. During that same year, Caesar made a speech concerning the rights of the high priest Hyrcanus, the son of Alexander, expressing the thanks of the Roman government towards the Jews for their loyalty and benefits conferred on the Romans.⁴

The decrees of Caesar and the Senate, along with Caesar’s speech, all dated to 44 B.C.E., strongly indicate that all were part of one episode. They are explained as an effort on the part of the Roman government in the spring of 44 B.C.E. to solidify the alliance with their Judaean vassal.

The reduction in taxes during the “2nd year of the rent-term,” as well as the statement that “no one shall make profit out of them, nor shall they pay the same tribute,” is nothing less than a reference to the Jewish observance of the Sabbath year. This fact is made even clearer when we take into account

¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:10:5.

² Dio, 43:49; Senator, *Chron.*, l. 535; MGH, 11, p. 134; and see the list of Roman Consuls in HBC, p. 96, and in CD, s.v. *Consul*.

³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:10:10.

⁴ Ibid., 14:10:7.

the prior and formal recognition and consent of the Roman government, allowing the Jews to observe the Sabbath year. A decree from Gaius Caesar, dated to the year 47 B.C.E., for example, reveals this consent:

Gaius Caesar, Imperator for the second time, has ruled that they (the Jews) shall pay a tax for the city of Jerusalem, Joppa excluded, every year except in the 7th year, which they call the *σαββατικὸν* (*sabbatikon*; Sabbath) year, because in this time they neither take fruit from the trees nor do they sow. And that in the 2nd year they shall pay the tribute at Sidon, consisting of one fourth of the produce sown, and in addition, they shall also pay tithes to Hyrcanus and his sons, just as they paid to their forefathers. . . . It is also our pleasure that the city of Joppa, which the Jews had held from ancient times when they made a treaty of friendship with the Romans, shall belong to them as at first; and for this city Hyrcanus, son of Alexander, and his sons shall pay tribute, collected from those who inhabit the territory, as a tax on the land, the harbor and exports, payable at Sidon in the amount of 20,675 *modii* (grain baskets) every year EXCEPT IN THE 7TH YEAR, WHICH THEY CALL THE SABBATH YEAR, wherein they neither plow nor take fruit from the trees.⁵

The “2nd year of the rent-term” mentioned in the decree of Caesar and dated to his fifth consul term clearly spells out that during this period there would be a reduction in the tax paid by the Jews and that “no one should make a profit of them, nor shall they pay the same tribute.”⁶

Taken in context with Roman recognition of the Jewish observance of the Sabbath year, this decree serves as an important piece of evidence for the Sabbath-year cycle. The 1st year of the rent-term has to be the year of the decree: the year in which the rights and privileges were formally granted. In this year Caesar served as Consul for the 5th time. The Sabbath year, therefore, fell in the year that followed.

The evidence from the speech of Caesar and the Senate decree strongly indicates that these above arrangements were agreed upon in April of 44 B.C.E. As a result, the year 44/43 B.C.E. (Nisan reckoning) would be the 1st year of the rent-term, while 43/42 B.C.E. (Nisan reckoning) would represent the 2nd year, being the Sabbath year. Adding more force to this evidence, the year 43/42 B.C.E. exactly fits the cycle of Sabbaths thus far demonstrated: from the 15th year of King Hezekiah to the 178th Seleucid year.

⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:10:6.

⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:10:5.

Ralph Marcus (System "C"), in his translation of Josephus, recognized this connection between the words of Caesar's decree and the Sabbath year. He writes:

If the "second year of the rent-term" here coincides with a sabbatical year (as one naturally supposes), it confirms the dating of the document in 44 B.C., as the sabbatical year would be that which extended from Oct. 44 to Oct. 43.⁷

Though Marcus agrees that the 2nd year of the rent-term is a Sabbath, he erroneously concludes that the Jewish Sabbath year during this period should be counted from the 7th month, Tishri. As this study has already adequately demonstrated, this is simply not true. Since the Sabbath year was counted from Nisan (Abib), this Sabbath year, equated with the "2nd year of the rent-term," would not begin until the spring of 43 B.C.E., ending in the spring of 42 B.C.E. Furthermore, for the view of Marcus (who adheres to System "C") to be correct, Caesar and the Senate would have made their statements halfway through a year that began with Tishri. The 1st year of the rent-term, accordingly, would already have been half over. This circumstance would hardly make sense. A decree discussing the conditions of the "rent-term" would not be issued halfway through the first rent-term but, rather, at its beginning.

Those advocating System "B" also will find no support from Caesar's proclamation. According to that system, the Sabbath year must begin with Tishri 1 of 45 B.C.E. until the next Tishri 1 of 44 B.C.E. If such were the case, the Sabbath year of the 2nd rent-term would have already been half over when the decree was issued. Since the normal time for Judaea to pay tribute was in Tishri,⁸ the time for tribute had also already passed. Caesar would have been too late for his decree to have made any impact. These details dismiss System "B" as a viable possibility.

System "D" is also frustrated. Since Caesar was proclaiming Judaean rights in April of 44 B.C.E., it is clear that the 1st year of this rent-term began in the spring in 44 B.C.E. It hardly makes sense that Caesar would proclaim the year of his decree as the 2nd year of the rent-term.

Conclusion

When all the details are considered, the decree issued by Caesar in the spring of 44 B.C.E.—which limited his tax base but solidified a close alliance with the Jews—only makes legal and practical sense if the 2nd year of the rent-term, being the Sabbath year, was 43/42 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. It, therefore, fully supports the System "A" arrangement (see Chart C).

⁷ Marcus, *Jos.*, vii, p. 555, n. d.

⁸ A Tishri year was retained "for selling and buying and other ordinary affairs" of Jewish life during this period (*Jos., Antiq.*, 1:3:3). Included among these ordinary or nonreligious affairs would be the payment of taxes to the Jewish state and Roman government.

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