

Two Profiles of Robbers in the Ancient World

A. VIEWPOINT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT

1. Robbery was committed blatantly in the open; theft, in secret, a minor offense.
2. Robbers were outsiders and were therefore outside the protection of the law; theft usually occurred within the society.
3. Robbers usually acted with greater force and violence than did thieves.
4. Robbers acted in a group or band (hence, they are called “bandits,” highway-men, brigands); thieves acted alone.
5. Robbers were organized in professional groups. Usually bands of 15 to 40 men, but one had 10,000 men. They often had their own leader, code, priests, and so on, sometimes drawing together dissidents, foreigners, and social outcasts.
6. Robbers bound themselves together with oaths and sacrifices, making them heretics as well as criminals.
7. Robbers kept their hideouts secret, accentuating their sinister reputation.
8. Robbers operated with raids, assassinations, and terrorism.
9. Robbers would harass the highways or disrupt commerce, primarily to weaken local governments.
10. Robbers posed a great military threat to the society.
11. Robbers often demanded ransom or used extortion.
12. Robbers were considered outlaws and could be dealt with under martial law or no law at all.
13. The government bore the duty to clear the highways and keep the bands of robber in check. These bands were usually short-lived.
14. Robbers could be executed; thieves could not.
15. Captured robber leaders were treated especially harshly.
16. Robbers were considered instruments of God’s wrath afflicting a wicked nation.

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B. VIEWPOINT OF THE DISENFRANCHISED

1. Social banditry emerged from circumstances that were perceived by the masses to be unjust and intolerable, including administrative inefficiency, sharp social divisions, economic crises, famines, or prolonged wars.
2. These movements were often rural, giving the poor effective methods of social agitation.
3. These robber groups were often led by marginalized military or political figures.
4. Bandits usually enjoyed the support and protection of their village.
5. Robbers drew strength from people who had been dislocated, displaced, or otherwise alienated from mainstream society.
6. Social brigands were frequently heroes among the poor, defenders and champions of the common people, sharing the basic values and religion of the peasant society.

ROBBERS MENTIONED IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

1. Casting out the money changers, Jesus used the phrase “den of robbers” [KJV, thieves] (Mt 21:13).
2. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the man fell among robbers [KJV, thieves] (Lk 10:30).
3. The Good Shepherd guards his sheep against thieves and robbers (Jn 10:1, 8).
4. At his arrest, Jesus asked, “Are you come out as against a robber?” [KJV, thieves] (Mt 26:55).
5. Barabbas, a robber, was released instead of Jesus (Jn 18:40).
6. Jesus was crucified in between two robbers [KJV, thieves] (Mt 27:38).
7. On his journeys, Paul was in peril of robbers (2Cor 11:26).

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Explanation

Chart 3-12 gives two profiles of brigands or robbers in the ancient world. Since “robbers” are mentioned seven times in the Greek New Testament (sometimes inaccurately translated as “thieves”), this subgroup on the fringes of the world of the New Testament needs to be understood carefully. From the viewpoint of the dominant government, robbers were vile outlaws; but from the viewpoint of the marginal elements of society, they were heroic Robin Hoods. An understanding of these two profiles explains how Jesus or Barabbas could have been seen as a robber, either favorably or unfavorably, depending on one’s social viewpoint. It also discloses important ways in which Jesus and his followers did not conform completely to either of these two profiles.

References

Kent P. Jackson, “Revolutionaries in the First Century,” *MWNT*, 129–40.
John W. Welch, “Legal and Social Perspectives on Robbers in First-Century Judea,” *MWNT*, 141–53.