



BSFL: John 10:7-16



# Thieves and Robbers

"A THIEF COMES ONLY TO STEAL AND TO KILL AND TO DESTROY. I HAVE  
COME SO THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE AND HAVE IT IN ABUNDANCE"

*John 10:10, HCSB*

View from Patmos;  
the Romans would  
send political pris-  
oners into exile on  
the island.

By Timothy Trammell

**M**Y FAMILY AND I had gone to church on that spring Sunday morning. Everything seemed to be right with the world. But when we returned home, we found the back door broken, clutter strewn about, and valuables stolen. A thief had broken into our home. Some stranger had chosen to help himself to what was ours. We felt violated. Furthermore, we were angry.

Insurance covered the loss, but one item could never really be replaced. That item was a silver tea service given to us by a church we had served. Our family still vividly remembers the day a thief took what was valuable to us.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day faced similar dangers. The key word of the Jewish culture in the first century was *poverty*. The Jews were a poor people. As a consequence, the evil activity of robbers and thieves was quite widespread.

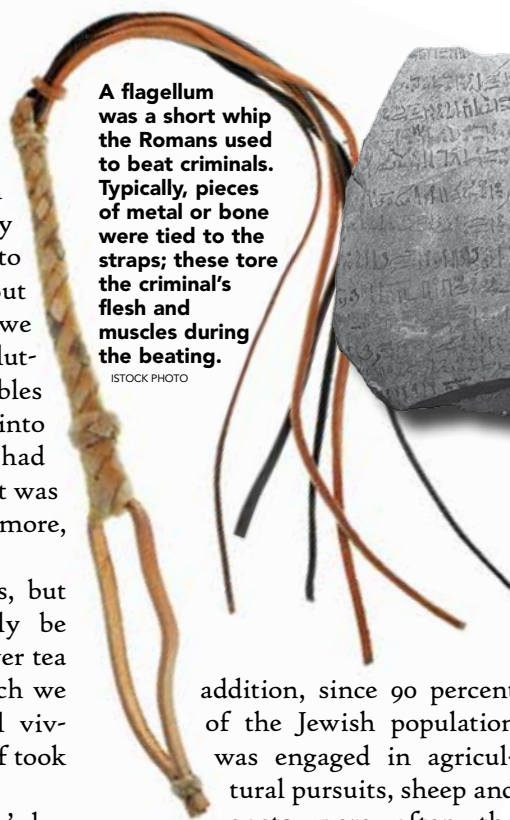
### Thieves: A Definition

We tend to view the terms "thieves" and "robbers" as interchangeable, but Jewish law technically distinguished between them, as does the New Testament. The Greek word for "thief" is *kleptes* from which we derive our English term "kleptomaniac." Appearing 16 times in the Greek New Testament, *kleptes* consistently describes a non-violent criminal who perpetrates his crimes stealthily and in secret. This is the term in John 10:1 and 10:10.

Jesus used the term *kleptes* in His warning in the Sermon on the Mount about storing up earthly treasures. Treasure in the ancient world would usually consist of precious metals or expensive garments—items a thief would prize. In

A flagellum was a short whip the Romans used to beat criminals. Typically, pieces of metal or bone were tied to the straps; these tore the criminal's flesh and muscles during the beating.

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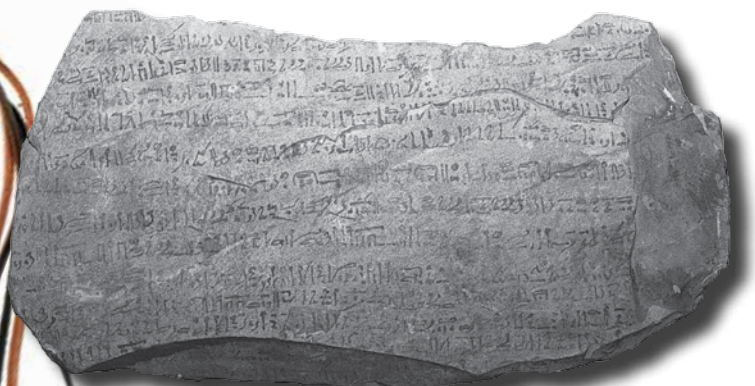


addition, since 90 percent of the Jewish population was engaged in agricultural pursuits, sheep and goats were often the target of thieves.

### Robbers: A Definition

John 10:1 also uses a second term. The Greek word for "robber" is *lestes* and primarily describes the armed bands of brigands who were intentionally brutal in carrying out their activities. These were marauders who usually operated outdoors attacking caravans and individual travelers. The word appears 15 times in the New Testament and underscores the element of violence. Both *kleptes* and *lestes* are also in John 10:8.

Jesus set the scene of His parable of the good Samaritan east of Jerusalem in the rugged Judean hills. In Luke's recording of the parable, he used *lestes*, robber, to tell of those who accosted the traveler. These robbers, usually in sizeable bands, would often use such terrain as their hunting ground. Consequently, the wise traveler would seek safety in numbers, especially if he were carrying goods



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (534/28)

Above: Dated to Egypt's 19th–20th Dynasties (1295–1069 B.C.), a limestone ostrakon from Thebes inscribed with a letter. In it, the writer

denies stealing precious objects that had belonged to the pharaoh and begs to be released from the imposed penalty of forced labor.

or valuables, for the violent nature of these bands was well known.

Another aspect of these robber bands is also significant. The Jewish people were under the domination of the Roman Empire in the first century. Both the Roman overlords and the Jewish land-owning elite exploited the peasants. Economic crises caused by famine, high taxation, and social injustice fostered the development of groups seeking to right these wrongs.<sup>1</sup> When foreign conquest was accompanied by the exactions of an unsympathetic ruling class, the rural people saw the bandits as their protectors.

To be more specific, the regressive policies of Herod the Great contributed to the rise of such groups. Although his reign brought an end to much of the political turmoil, his ambitious building projects, with Rome's excessive taxation, made the people's poverty more severe. Payments to the Romans were a continuing burden, as were tithes for the priesthood and the temple in Jerusalem. Josephus recorded that upon Herod's death, the Jewish aristocracy pled with Caesar for a change from "kingly government." They told of the multitudes that





On the far side of the ravine, this part of the winding path that ran through Israel's Western Mountains was the old Jericho Road.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE (13/19/10)

had perished during his reign, of the estates he had stolen, and that he had “filled the nation with the utmost degree of poverty.”<sup>2</sup> Not only had the nobility suffered at the hands of Herod—the poor even more so. Such injustice had forced some people to look to robber bands for redress.

### **Banditry and the Revolution**

The first half of the first Christian century was marked by famine, inflation, high taxation, and theft of the people's land. Consequently, banditry escalated to epidemic proportions. This growth had its beginning in approximately A.D. 6 with the activities of Judas of Galilee (not to be confused with Judas Iscariot). In discussing the various parties in Judaism, Josephus recorded that Judas founded “the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy,” also known as the “Fourth Philosophy.”<sup>3</sup> This Fourth Philosophy was foundational to what followed, namely the Jewish rebellion or revolt against Rome.

The Jewish rebellion brought with it an explosion of banditry. Josephus told of one Tholomy, who headed quite a large group of bandits. They raided mainly in Idumea until the Roman procurator Fadus (A.D. 44-45) captured and executed him, “but not till he [Tholomy] had done a world of mischief to Idumea and the Arabians.”<sup>4</sup> However, this crusade to capture and punish such leaders and groups led only to the outbreak of more banditry.

Many of these bands operated for only a brief time, for banditry was a lonely profession, away from family and society at large. In addition, most procurators made an intense effort to capture and punish these lawbreakers. One exception was a zealot named Eleazar ben Dinai, who operated for 24 years from a secure base in the mountains. He led a sizeable group on a large number of bold raids. The procurator Felix finally captured him, sending him and a number of his associates to Rome for execution.<sup>5</sup>

In the 50s and 60s, while Cumanus (A.D. 48-52), Felix (A.D. 52-60), and Festus (A.D. 60-62) were procurators of Judea, banditry increased dramatically. More and more of the population were drawn into open opposition to Roman authority in both Galilee and Judea. Some have argued that banditry was the principal cause for the revolt against Rome. “Banditry had increased to such proportions that, in effect, it became a Jewish peasant revolt.”<sup>6</sup> John, son of Levi, and Jesus, son of Sapphias, were the principal leaders of brigand groups in Galilee.<sup>7</sup>

In Judea the brigands played less of a role when the revolt against Rome first began—but this soon changed. When “the Roman army advanced from Galilee into [northwestern] Judea, banditry escalated into peasant revolt....peasants in village after village [turned] to banditry.”<sup>8</sup> The groups increased both in number and in size. As the conflict continued, they fled to Jerusalem, forming the heart of the





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (48/3313)



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**Left: The Arbel Cliffs** rise on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. When the Roman army retaliated in response to the Jewish revolt, many Jewish women and children hid in the caves on the sides of the cliffs. Not to be deterred, Roman soldiers had themselves

lowered over the side of the cliffs in large baskets. When they were even with a cave, the soldiers would pull the women and children from the caves to kill or capture them.

**Lower left: Jewish coin** from the 5th year of Nero; obverse shows a standing tree with inscription; reverse has an inscription

mentioning Festus. Thievery increased during the time of his rule.

**Above: Close-up of Herod the Great's tomb**, which was discovered in 2007 on the side of the Herodium, which is 8 miles south of Jerusalem. During Herod the Great's reign, both theft and the number of bandit groups increased.



Jewish resistance during the Roman siege. According to Josephus, this coalition of bandit groups formed the party called the Zealots, "for that was the name they went by, as if they were zealous in good undertakings."<sup>9</sup>

## Punishment

Forms of punishment and those who administered them were quite varied. The mood or the judgment of the magistrate, the nature of the crime, and extenuating circumstances could affect the resultant penalties. The governor of a province was often involved because of his responsibility to maintain public order; local officials, though, handled the smaller legal matters. Lengthy

imprisonment was uncommon in the first Christian century. Prisons were primarily places of detention for those awaiting trial or punishment. Exile took the place of incarceration.

Leaders and members of robber bands could be beaten severely with a *flagellum*, a vicious flail tipped with pieces of bone or metal. Notable prisoners might be tied to a stake naked, whipped with rods, then blindfolded, made to kneel, then beheaded with a sword. Crucifixion was always an option. Matthew recorded (27:38) that the two men crucified with

Jesus were "robbers" (*lestes*)—that is, they were vicious bandits. **B**

1. Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 49-50.

2. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 17.11.2 in *The Works of Josephus, Complete and Unabridged* [WORKS], trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 472.

3. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.6 in WORKS, 477.

4. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.1.1 in WORKS, 525.

5. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 2.13.2.

6. Richard A. Horsley, "Ancient Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66-70," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (July 1981): 427.

7. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 4.2.1; *Life* 27.

8. Horsley, "Ancient Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome," 429.

9. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 4.3.9 in WORKS, 672.

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