

***Bar Kokhba and the Bar Kokhba Revolt***, entry in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, by Benjamin Isaac

**BAR KOKHBA.** The name given to Simon bar Kosiba, leader of the unsuccessful Jewish revolt against Rome ca. 132–135 C.E. Today the name is often used as an adjective to modify this “Second Jewish Revolt” or “Bar Kokhba Revolt” (the first being the Jewish War of 66–70 C.E.), as well as a cache of documents discovered in the Judean desert that were written at the time of this war, including some letters written by Simon himself (i.e., “Bar Kokhba Letters”). Rabbi Akiba, who considered Simon bar Kosiba to be the Messiah, called him “son of the star” (Aram *kôkbā*), perhaps suggesting a messianic interpretation of Num 24:17. In rabbinic writings the *s* in the name is usually changed to a *z* (bar Koziba), implying in derogatory fashion that Simon was regarded as “the son of a lie” (i.e., a liar).

***BAR KOKHBA REVOLT***

Jewish armed resistance against Roman rule in Judea reached its culmination and exhausted itself in the Revolt of Bar Kokhba (132–35 C.E.). Great numbers of rebels participated in the insurrection, employing guerrilla tactics, and large reinforcements were needed to suppress it. The rebels were united under the leadership of one man: Simeon Bar Kokhba. The revolt resulted in the emergence of a short-lived independent state marked by the organization of local authorities, the issue of coinage, and the leasing of state land.

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**A. Evidence**

**1. Talmudic Sources.** The revolt of Bar Kokhba is mentioned rather extensively in Talmudic literature. Most references to the revolt are found in three groups: *j. Ta’an.* iv

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ca. *circa* (about, approximately)

C.E. common (or Christian) era

Aram Aramaic

*Ta’an. Ta’anit*

68d–69b; *Lam. Rab.* ii 4; and *b. Giṭ.* 57a–58a. They focus on (1) Bar Kokhba's leadership; (2) the attitude of the sages toward the rebellion and Bar Kokhba himself; (3) the fall of Bethar; and (4) the aftermath of the revolt. Talmudic sources must be taken into account especially when considering the geographical scope of the war and the possible conquest of Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the temple by the rebels. For discussion see Alon 1980–84:430–60, 570–637; Schäfer 1981; Isaac and Oppenheimer 1985.

**2. Greek and Latin Sources.** The account of Cassius Dio forms the only consistent survey of the war, but the text is preserved only in the medieval epitome of Ioannes Xiphilinus, a monk of the 11th century (*D.C.* lxix 12.1–13, 111 15.1). It is to be noted also that this is a general description of the war, not a chronological account. It must also be noted that Xiphilinus produced not so much a *précis* of Dio's work as a selection usually but not always keeping to the original order and retaining much of Dio's wording. It is therefore quite likely that we have most of what Dio wrote on the subject. The *Historia Augusta* is the only source to mention a ban on circumcision preceding the revolt as the cause of the revolt (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae, vita Hadriani* 14.2). There are altogether four contemporary references to the war: Appianus, *Syriaca* 50.252; Fronto, *de bello Parthico* 2; Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio* 15.5; and Apollodorus of Damascus 8.10. The last does not even refer to the revolt specifically. Christian sources, remote in time and antagonistic toward the Jews, yet have features in common with the Talmudic sources: references (1) to Bar Kokhba as leader of the revolt, (2) to Tineius Rufus the legate of Judea, and (3) to the fall of Bethar (for the Greek and Latin sources see Stern 1980, nos. 332; 342; 353; 340).

**3. Samaritan Chronicles.** The Samaritan Chronicles have not been discussed systematically. They date to the Middle Ages and are very probably influenced by the relationship between Jews and Samaritans as it developed in the period after the revolt. See discussion by Alon 1980–84:603–7.

**4. Archaeological Exploration.** Archaeological evidence is immediately relevant for the study of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the more so given the paucity of literary sources. Particularly important is the coinage, now fully treated by L. Mildenberg (1984). Coin hoards help to determine the geographical scope of the revolt (Barag 1980:30–3). The great size of the Bar Kokhba coinage, and the quantities of coins issued, give an impression of the organization of the rebel government and of the population and the economy of Judea at the time of the revolt. The legends and symbols on the coins embody the only extant contemporary pronouncements of the values and objectives of the insurgents. Among the most spectacular discoveries are the hiding places in the Judean desert with personal belongings and documents of insurgents (see Bar Kokhba Letters below). Also of interest are the numerous subterranean hiding places, some of which were certainly used during the revolt of Bar Kokhba.

## B. Causes of the War

The modern literature disagrees on the origins of the war. The following causes or combination of causes are found in recent publications:

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*Lam.* Lamentations

*Rab. Rabbah* (following abbreviation for biblical book: *Gen. Rab.* = *Genesis Rabbah*)

*Giṭ. Giṭṭin*

- (1) The revolt was caused by Hadrian's decision to transform Jerusalem into a pagan city, as stated by Cassius Dio.
- (2) It was caused by a ban on circumcision as indicated in the *Historia Augusta*.
- (3) These sources are combined. The revolt was then caused by the decision to found Aelia Capitolina and by a ban on circumcision.
- (4) Hadrian declared, or was believed to have decided, that the temple in Jerusalem might be rebuilt. When it appeared that he would not permit this the Jews rebelled.
- (5) Various scholars have suggested that the destruction of the temple created a psychological climate which led to renewed violence, irrespective of any decisions which may have formed the immediate cause of the revolt.
- (6) It has been suggested that the economic situation contributed to the outbreak of the revolt (Alon 1980–84:572–77; Applebaum 1976:385–95).

Most scholars advocate the third alternative in one form or another. Several consider the foundation of Aelia Capitolina the sole cause of the revolt. The various opinions are listed in Isaac and Oppenheimer (1985:44–46). The alleged permission given by Hadrian to rebuild the temple, subsequently withdrawn, is not now ever considered a primary cause of the revolt, but some contemporary studies are not prepared to reject the theory absolutely and assume there may be some truth in it. In this connection the importance of the coinage must be emphasized. The coin legends “Jerusalem” and “For the Freedom of Jerusalem” and the design of the temple on the coinage are to be considered programmatic declarations (Mildenberg 1980:325; 1984:29–31). This evidence does not allow a determination as to whether Jerusalem was taken by the insurgents, but the coins are the only extant contemporary pronouncements regarding the values and objectives of the rebels. They provide clear evidence of the central importance of Jerusalem in the war.

Far more obscure is the testimony of the fifth Sibylline Oracle, composed by a Jew before the end of Hadrian's reign. Lines 46–50 contain praise of Hadrian which has been variously interpreted (1) as confirmation that Hadrian was popular among the Jews early in his reign (Alon 1980–84:453) or (2) as an indication of the attitude of the Jews toward Hadrian at the time of his visit in Judea in 130 C.E. (Bowersock 1980:134). Note also the different view of Schäfer 1981:48–50.

The date of the formal foundation of the Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina before the outbreak of the war can still be inferred only from the testimony of Cassius Dio. Archaeological excavations in Jerusalem have so far produced few remains of the Roman city and certainly do not allow any chronological conclusions as regards the foundation of the colony. Attempts to resolve the problem once and for all with the help of numismatic evidence are unconvincing (Mildenberg 1980:333). The lack of proof naturally does not justify conclusions to the contrary, for Cassius Dio still contains the only explicit pronouncement on the subject.

It may be added that the various opinions expressed in the modern literature on the causes of the revolt often reflected and still reflect varying attitudes toward the Roman empire, the Jewish people, and resistance to imperial authority. Another factor which often determines interpretations is the evaluation of Talmudic sources, considered by some unsuitable as historical source material, by others valuable if judiciously interpreted.

### **C. Prior Unrest**

There is no historical source which offers a running account of the period between the first revolt in 70 C.E. and the Bar Kokhba war, and recourse must be had to Talmudic literature and isolated items such as inscriptions and archaeological material. It is likely that there existed a connection between the activities of the Jewish authorities at Jabneh and the outbreak of the revolt, notably their emphatic expectations of the speedy reconstruction of the temple and the unity of the Jewish people (Alon 1980–84:111–8; 253–65; 288–307). The fierce rebellion of the Jews in the Diaspora in 115–117 C.E. is well attested, but it is a matter of debate to what extent the Jews in Judea participated (Isaac and Oppenheimer 1985:50, n. 70). One Roman action is certain and may be relevant: the Roman garrison was strengthened well before the outbreak of the revolt, possibly in or after 117 C.E. (Isaac and Roll 1979:54–66). This definitely shows that the garrison left by Titus in 70 C.E. was insufficient after several decades and that there was serious unrest in Judea.

The only explicit statement in any historical source is again found in the work of Cassius Dio, who tells that preparations for the war were made during the period between Hadrian's visit to Judea (in 130 C.E.) and the outbreak of the revolt. The latter is dated 132 according to Eusebius' *Chronicle* (see Schürer *HJP*<sup>2</sup> 1:542, n. 126).

#### D. Course of the War

Given the paucity of literary sources, any attempt to describe the course of the war is speculative. We know nothing of the first stage of the revolt beyond the fact that it was successful enough for a provisional administration to function, as reflected in the documents discovered in the Judean desert. Another major project realized by the rebel government was the reissue of great quantities of local city coinage (Mildenberg 1984).

**1. The Geographical Scope of the Revolt.** The available evidence relates almost exclusively to Judea in the narrow and proper sense. A number of references in Talmudic sources may point to incidents in Galilee, but otherwise there is no clear proof that the war spread to that region. There is, however, no consensus on these matters (various opinions cited in Isaac and Oppenheimer 1985:53, n. 88). Nevertheless it is indisputable that all hoards containing Jewish coins of the revolt were discovered in Judea, notably in the Hebron mountains, west of Jerusalem, and in the Judean desert (Barag 1980). Further confirmation of the fact that the focus of rebellion was in Judea is found in Talmudic sources which contain enactments dealing with the acquisition by Jews of landed property, confiscated by the Romans (*siqārîqôn*). These were temporarily annulled in Judea, but not in Galilee. This is best explained by assuming that it was a response to large-scale land expropriations by the Romans. The intention was to preserve Jewish occupation of the land in Judea, while there was apparently no need for such measures in Galilee (*j. Giṭ.* v 47b).

After the revolt the focus of Jewish life was transferred to Galilee and the authorities established themselves at the village of Ushah (Alon 1980–84:663–80). The movement of refugees from Judea to Galilee is illustrated by the organization in settlements in Galilee of priestly courses which were in Judea in the period of the Second Temple (Klein 1967:62–68; Avi-Yonah 1962:137–9; Kahane 1978–79:9–29).

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n. note(s)

*HJP*<sup>2</sup> E. Schürer. *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. G. Vermes et al. Edinburgh, 1973–87

**2. Conquest of Jerusalem.** There is no decisive evidence to show whether Jerusalem was captured by the Jews in the revolt. The best source, Cassius Dio, is silent on the subject. Appianus and Christian authors lend support to the view that the city fell into Jewish hands and was reconquered by Roman troops (Appianus, *Syriaca* 50.252; Eusebius, *d.c.* vi 18.10; *h.e.* iv 5.2; v 12.1). The coin legend “For the Freedom of Jerusalem” has been explained as celebrating the capture of the city, and the legend “Jerusalem” has been interpreted as a mint indication. Both, however, may equally well be considered programmatic statements, expressing hopes or aims rather than achievements (Mildenberg 1984:29–31). Serious doubts are raised by the archaeological evidence, for in the excavations carried out in the Old City of Jerusalem since 1967 almost no coins of the Bar Kokhba revolt have been found (Applebaum 1976:27; more recent publications have not altered the validity of this observation).

**3. The Roman Forces.** Since there is no literary source which gives a full list, at least of the legions involved in the suppression in the revolt, we must have recourse to random information derived from epigraphic discoveries. As a result it is impossible to estimate the numbers of troops in Judea at any stage of the war (Schürer *HJP*<sup>2</sup> 1:547–9, n. 150; further references in Isaac and Oppenheimer 1985:56, n. 102). The governor of Judea at the outbreak of the war was Tineius Rufus (Eusebius, *h.e.* iv 6.1; *Chron. Hadr.* xvi; see also the Talmudic sources). He was a consular by that time (*HJP*<sup>2</sup> 1:518). Fronto, *de bello Parthico* 2, refers to great numbers of Roman soldiers killed under Hadrian in Britain (ca. 118 C.E.) and in the Jewish rebellion. Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio* 15.5, another contemporary author, mentions the Jewish war as the only event to disturb the peace in Hadrian’s reign. Cassius Dio states that Hadrian sent his best officers to Judea under the supreme command of Julius Severus (Ixix 13.2; cf. the career inscription *ILS* 1056) and also notes the great number of Roman casualties (14.3). Finally it may be considered certain that Hadrian himself traveled to Judea during the war. This may be inferred from Dio (*loc. cit.*), Hadrian writing to the Senate, and from a letter written by Appollodorus of Damascus to Hadrian about siege implements (Stern 1980:136, no. 322; also: Jerome, in *Joel* i 4; *Chronicon Paschale* i). It is proved by several inscriptions: *ILS* 1065, which mentions Q. Lollius Urbicus as legate of Hadrian; and *CIL* vi 974, which refers to Hadrian himself. Finally there is evidence of the participation of praetorian cohorts in the war which presumably indicates that these accompanied the emperor to Judea (*ILS* 2081).

#### **E. Bar Kokhba, Leader of the Revolt**

It is no coincidence that the revolt of Bar Kokhba was the only Jewish war fought against foreign rule in antiquity to have been named after one leader (for instance: *S. Olam Rab.*: “the war of Ben Koziba” ). In Talmudic sources he is given the titles *nāšî’* (“ruler” or “prince” ) and “Messiah, ” and the years of his reign are described as

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cf. *confer*, compare

*ILS Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*, ed. H. Dessau. 3 vols. in 5 pts. Berlin, 1892–1916.

Repr.

*loc. loco citato* (in the place cited)

no. number

*CIL Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*

*S. Olam Rab. Seder ‘Olam Rabbah*

“kingship” (for instance, *b. Sanh.* 97b). In his letters he assumes the title *něšî’ yisra’el*, and on coins he appears as “*šim’ôn něšî’ yisra’el*.” The title *nāšî’* has been interpreted in various ways. It has been explained as denoting a limited form of authority, lower in status than that of king and comparable to that of ethnarch, the title of the first Hasmonaean rulers (Alon 1980–84:622). Others assume that it refers to the ideal king as in Ezekiel’s vision of the end of Days (Oppenheimer 1982:51).

R. Akiba declared of Bar Kokhba, “This is the King Messiah” (*j. Ta’an.* iv 68d; cf. *Lam. Rab.* ii 4). The role of messiah, attributed to him, has also been variously interpreted as a divine and supernatural savior and redeemer, and as a general and leader of ordinary human stature whose title merely emphasizes his royal rank (see Oppenheimer 1983, with further references).

Bar Kokhba is not mentioned by Cassius Dio or in the *Historia Augusta*. In literary sources he appears only in Talmudic literature and in Christian sources. These describe him as a murderer and a bandit, but at the same time they attribute to him miracles and supernatural signs (Eusebius, *h.e.* iv 6, 2; Jerome, *Apol.* in *Libr. Rufini* iii 31; and Alon 1980–84:ii.34).

Talmudic sources refer to Bar Kokhba ambivalently. On the one hand they emphasize his legendary strength, R. Akiba’s admiration for him, and even his obedience to the sages. On the other, they criticize his addresses to God, “Do not help and do not humiliate,” and it is said that he was put to death by the sages when it appeared that he was a false messiah. The Talmud recalls him as Ben Koziba, “son of a lie,” a pejorative play on his actual name, Bar/Ben Kosiba (as found in the Bar Kokhba letters). He apparently was designated Bar Kokhba, “son of a star,” (a messianic designation) by his supporters.

Bar Kokhba’s letters, discovered in the Judean desert, give a partial but genuine impression of his personality. He seems to have been a forceful general and ruler who dealt in person with details of discipline and daily life in his army units. His leadership extended beyond the sphere of military matters, for part of his letters are concerned with the leasing of lands on his behalf. It can be seen that he insisted on the observance of religious commandments such as those of the Sabbath, the four types of tree branches for *sūkkôt* (the Feast of Tabernacles), and precepts connected with the produce of the land.

## F. The Aftermath

Talmudic literature gives vivid and extensive descriptions of the horrors of the Jewish defeat, and much is written about the bitter fate of the besieged at Bethar (*j. Ta’an.* iv 69a; *Lam. Rab.* ii 4; archaeological evidence from the “Cave of Horrors,” Aharoni 1962:186–99). Cassius Dio emphasizes the extent of the destruction in Judea, the numbers of those fallen in battle and the destruction of forts and settlements. After the revolt the Romans issued a series of disciplinary decrees, the nature of which has been much debated (Herr 1972; Lieberman 1939–44; 1975; Schäfer 1981:194–235).

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*Sanh. Sanhedrin*

*IEJ Israel Exploration Journal*, Jerusalem

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*INJ* Israel Numismatic Journal, Jerusalem

Pp. pages; past

Vol. volume

ed. editor(s); edition; edited by

*ScrHier* Scripta Hierosolymitana, Jerusalem

*HSCP* Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Cambridge, MA

*JJS* Journal of Jewish Studies, Oxford

et al. et alii (and others)

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<sup>1</sup>Freedman, David Noel: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York : Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S. 1:598