

The Bar Kokhba Revolt

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Bar Kokhba was the nickname of Shimeon ben Kosiba, leader of the third great revolt against Rome. For this unconventional dating, see Hugo Mantel, "The Causes of the Bar Kokhba Revolt," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, Vol. 58 No. 3 (Jan. 1968), pp. 237-242. (119? – 136 AD). In 117 Hadrian succeeded Trajan, whom he'd helped to end a revolt by Diaspora Jews (115-117). No sooner had it been quelled than preparations for yet another revolt began in Judea itself. These revolts, like the one of 66-70, were sparked by a belief, held by many Jews then, that the time of the birthpangs had come to its climax and redemption was about to occur. We have no Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus, however, for the last two revolts; the sources are scanty and dubious.

The shift to full-fledged war, according to the later Roman historian Cassius Dio (69.

12.1), was triggered by Hadrian's decision, in 130 AD, to transform the site of Jerusalem into a Roman colony named Aelia Capitolina (Aelia after himself, Capitolina after Jupiter Capitolinus); apparently the emperor intended in this way to end forever any Jewish hopes for restoration of the Temple - and hence the Jewish disturbances. The effect was the opposite, for the Jews placed their hopes in God, not in "facts on the ground." Perhaps the Jews of Judaea were also encouraged to revolt by the following circumstance: thinking to consolidate the empire and make it more defensible, Hadrian had pulled the Roman army out of all the lands conquered by Trajan east of the Euphrates. (The same policy had led to the building of his wall in England.) The spectacle of a unilateral Roman withdrawal may have fired the Jews into thinking that they could make their land into a "hot potato" and gain the same liberation. Yet it is remarkable that the Jews of Judaea would again challenge Rome, especially in 132 AD, when no other wars were underway that might have drawn off the full brunt of Roman might.

The belief in God's intervention was personified in the rebel leader, for "Bar Kokhba" means "son of a star," from the prophetic verse of Balaam, "a star will come out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). His great contemporary, Rabbi Akiba, quoted this verse in relation to him, adding, "This is the King Messiah." Another rabbi retorted, "Akiba, grass will grow in your jawbones, and he still won't have come." After the failure of the revolt, the rabbis tended to call Shimon "Bar Koziba," "son of the lie."

According to Cassius Dio (69.12,13), the Jews prepared the revolt with care, digging underground passages in Judaea from which they could spring to attack the Romans, who—if they tried to pursue them back into the holes—would be trapped like Winnie the Pooh. (We can crawl through some of these today in the Shephelah; the best are at Khirbet Midras.) Engaged in weapons manufacture for the Romans, the Jews deliberately botched some, which they then took for themselves and repaired. In 132 they attacked, at first with great success. It is thought that they may have wiped out a legion. But against the Roman army of that time, nothing failed like success. Given the peace elsewhere, Hadrian was able to concentrate his forces on Judaea. The underground passages were of little help when the Romans

besieged the towns containing the rebels' women and children.

Yet the victors had been badly hurt. In writing to the Senate when it was over in 135 or 136, Hadrian could not employ the usual formula: "I and the legions are in health." He celebrated no triumph. From this time forth, where the Romans were concerned, the negative connotation of "Jew" would be irreversible. The Jews were banned from Aelia (and would remain banned through the Byzantine period, when it was called Jerusalem again). Circumcision was banned in Judaea. In fact the name of the province was changed to "Syria Palaestina," honoring Israel's old enemy, the Philistines. Such a name change was unprecedented in the empire: "Only the Iudaei ceased to have a homeland because of what they had done" (Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*, London: Penguin, 2007. (Goodman, p. 494). "Many, perhaps most, of those

Jews who survived in the new province of Syria Palaestina must have reacted to the defeat of Bar Kokhba by ceasing to think of themselves as Jews" (ibid., p. 501).

Those Jews who wanted to stay Jewish had to leave Judaea, and many moved to Galilee. Among them were the members of the Sanhedrin, who eventually resettled in Sepphoris and then Tiberias. But contrary to widespread belief, the Romans never exiled the Jews from the land as a whole. We find, for example, the ruins of more than a hundred synagogues dating between the 3d and 8th centuries.