בס"ד

**Introduction**

In the year 132 CE, Jews in the Land of Israel staged a revolt against Rome; they were led by Simon Bar Kosiba, known as Bar Kokhba. This was the third Jewish rebellion in 70 years. The Great Revolt of the Jews of the Land of Israel (66-70) ended in the destruction of the Second Temple. The Quietus War (115-117), a Jewish rebellion in the Diasporas of Cyprus and Egypt, ended in the destruction of Jewish presence in these areas. The Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136) ended with the devastation of the Jewish population in Judea. Despite the revolt’s intensity, literary sources attesting to it are sparse. The revolt did, however, leave a mark in the form of numerous, unique archaeological findings.

Since the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, many Jews doubtless expected and yearned for its rebuilding. These hopes were the main driving force behind the rebellion. However, the immediate cause of its outbreak was likely Roman emperor Hadrian’s (117-138) decision to turn Jerusalem into a Roman colony. Alongside the shock elicited by the emperor’s plans, it is likely that messianic expectations developed, embodied in the persona of the revolt’s leader, Simon Bar Kosiba. It is almost certain that his appellation in the Jewish and Christian literature, Bar Kokhba, “son of the star,” attests to these hopes.

Understanding the great advantages enjoyed by the Roman army in open battles, Bar Kokhba chose to engage in guerrilla warfare. Hundreds of hideout systems were dug across Judea. These systems served as staging areas for battle, from which the rebels would sully forth to surprise attack Roman units. It soon became clear to the Romans that the revolt’s scale would require a significant military effort. Julius Severus, was appointed commander of the Roman forces, being recalled from Britain. At the height of the military campaign, eleven Roman legions were deployed in Judea, around a third of the entire Roman army! Despite their initial successes, it is does not seem that the rebels succeeded in conquering Jerusalem; they did, however, manage to establish sovereignty in areas of Jewish habitation, administering civilian life during this period. Julius Severus advanced cautiously and conquering the countryside village by village, while locating and destroying rebel hideout systems. The thorough conquest resulted in the complete annihilation of the Jewish population in Judea. After about four years of fighting, the Romans managed to conquer the rebels’ stronghold in the city of Betar and to quash the rebellion. Some Jewish survivors, refugees of war, took refuge in caves in the Judean desert. They brought with them belongings and documents, which serve as first-hand sources about the rebellion. After the revolt was quashed, the Romans changed the province’s name from *Judaea* to *Palestina*. For some time afterwards, Jews were prohibited from carrying out religious rituals in public. Jewish literature has preserved the memory of these religious persecutions, as well as the names of martyred Sages, chief among them Rabbi Akiva, the most outspoken scholar to support the revolt. Jerusalem was turned into a typical Roman colony, dubbed Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were barred entry into the city. The center of Jewish life shifted to the Galilee and aspirations for the messianic age were relegated to prayers for the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

**General overview**

The complex nature of the sources for the Bar Kokhba Revolt requires expertise in various fields: Roman history, archaeology, proficiency in reading talmudic sources, and more. The scholarly compilations published from time to time, containing summaries of scholarship and up to date findings are important in this regard. Two volumes in Hebrew published around 35 years ago provide a good picture of the state of the research at that time (אופנהיימר 1980; רפפורט ואופנהיימר 1984). An additional volume in Hebrew dealing mainly with the rebellion’s archaeological aspects was published 15 years later (אשל וזיסו 2001). The complex nature of the sources and the history of the revolt are discussed in a volume edited by שפר 2003. A detailed bibliography of the research over the past 30 years can be found in מור 2016. In recent years, a number of monographs have also been published, which describe the revolt and its aftermath, providing a meticulous analysis of the sources from a number of different perspectives. A historical perspective is offered by מור 2016. This is an updated and revised version of his previous book (מור 1991). Mordechai גיחון 2016 describes the rebellion from an archaeological perspective, as does the book by זיסו ואשל 2015. An interesting attempt to connect the Bar Kokhba Revolt to the Diaspora Revolt which preceded it was made by Horbury 2014. The Roman perspective of the revolt has been studied by Werner Eck in a number of articles, which draw attention to the rebellion’s strength (see especially Eck 1999). Some of his research is collected in the edited volume (אק 2014; אק 2007). The Roman policy in Judea from the Great Revolt until the Bar Kokhba Revolt is further clarified by (אק 2014; אק 2007).

**Literary sources for the revolt**

Unlike the Great Revolt which had its own historian, Josephus, the Bar Kokhba Revolt lacks a chronicler. Literary sources about the rebellion are sparse. The primary account of the rebellion itself is that of Cassius Dio (155-~230) in his work *Historia Romana.* However even this description has only been preserved in the from of an epitome written by Xiphilinus, a Byzantine monk from the eleventh century. This source and additional Greek-Roman writers who mention the revolt can be found in שטרן 1974. Due to their great importance, Cassius Dio’s writings have been extensively analyzed (איזק 1998; אליאב 1997). The revolt is also mentioned by a good number of Christian writers. Despite the tendentiousness of the writings of Eusebius (265-~339) and his chronological distance from the events he describes, his work is still important, at least as far as the Christian point of view is concerned. Epiphanius’ account (310-402) has many issues, but still remains an important source for the revolt’s background and even its causes (Baker 2012, Di Segni 2014). For a discussion of the ensemble of Christian testimonials, see Bauckham 1998. The talmudic literature has preserved a number of stories and episodes from the time of the revolt. In the Palestinian Talmud there is a long, detailed story about the rebellion and its failure – the result of Bar Kokhba’s sins. In the past, these stories were treated as mostly reliable (Yeivin 1957). In recent decades, however, these sources have been considered by many researchers to be devoid of historical value (Schäfer 1981; Schäfer 2003; Novenson 2009). Despite these negative evaluations, it appears that they have nevertheless preserved some real historical details (Sperber 1967).

**Archaeological sources**

In contrast to the sparse literary evidence, an abundance of archaeological findings of various kinds provide many details about the course of the revolt and its causes. In contrast to the Great Revolt, which primarily left its mark in the form of destroyed cities and citadels (e.g., Jerusalem, Gamla, Masada), the imprint of the Bar Kokhba Revolt is evident throughout Judea. To this day more than 390 hideout systems have been found in the Judea region, extending from Nahal Shilo in the north (around 20 km north of Ramallah) to Beersheba in the south. The Western limit of the hideout systems is found on the border between the coastal plain and the first hilly range, and in the East the Jordan River is the natural border. Amos Kloner and Yigal Tepper conducted a detailed survey of the hideout systems (Kloner and Tepper 1987), and every few years, updated surveys are added, following the discovery of additional hideout systems (the last one is Kloner and Zissu 2014). In recent years further hideout systems have also been discovered in the Galilee (Shivtiel 2014) demonstrating that this area may also have been part of the rebellion. Most of the hideout systems discovered are empty, but in some cases artefacts from the revolt have been found, such as coins and military equipment (Stieble 2009). A distinction must be drawn between the hideout systems which were used by the fighters in the Bar Kokhba Revolt to launch attacks against the Roman army, and the caves used by refugees fleeing the war. The refuge caves are natural caves where the refugees came with their belongings and documents, and these serve as a valuable source for understanding their world and even certain aspects of the rebellion itself (Eshel and Amit 1998; Eshel and Porat 2009).

**Numismatics**

Already at the beginning of the revolt, the Bar Kokhba administration began minting its own coins. The raw materials were the Roman coins in circulation, which were re-minted with symbols and expressions chosen by the Bar Kokhba administration (Mildenberg 1984; Hendin 2012). One of the important discoveries made from these coins was the first name of the revolt’s leader – Simon. The symbols and slogans imprinted on the coins are a window into the propaganda of Bar Kokhba and the hopes of the rebels. A catalog of the coins of Bar Kokhba has been put together by Meshorer 2001. The most common symbols are an architectural elevation which has been identified as the Temple (Adler 2007-2008; Patrich 1993/4; Tendler 2012), and on some of the coins images of Temple vessels have been added (Goldstein 2003). The symbol on some coins may be that of a star, and some people link this to the messianic hopes which were bound up with the persona of Bar Kokhba (Newman 2001). In addition to the coins, traces of the Bar Kokhba administration have been found in a system of weights which it approved (Zissu, Boaz, and Ganor 2006). Likewise, the distribution of the coins teaches us a great deal about the rebellion’s geographical extent (Zissu and Eshel 2000-2002; Amit David, and Bijovsky 2007).

**Epigraphy**

Epigraphic evidence for the Bar Kokhba Revolt is rich and varied. Two imperial inscriptions help us to date the revolt: one from the year 130 describes Hadrian’s arrival in Jerusalem, and is probably connected to the outbreak of the revolt (Avner et. al. 2015). Another inscription, from Tel Shalem, is a victory inscription from the end of the revolt, probably from the year 136 (Eck and Foerster 1999; Eck 2003); not all scholars consider it a significant finding (Mor 2013). Important conclusions can be drawn about the scale of the Roman forces engaged in putting down the revolt, from Roman military diplomas. These release papers of legionary soldiers, distributed across the whole of the Roman Empire, provide information about a legionary’s life, and from these we can surmise whether the legion he belonged to was involved in quashing the rebellion. Relevant diplomas have been extensively analyzed by Eck (Werner and Pangerl 2006; Eck 2011)

The most surprising and important findings are letters written in the name of Bar Kokhba to his men, containing orders and instructions in both logistical and ritual matters, shedding important insights on Bar Kokhba’s as a person. These letters were discovered by Yigael Yadin (Yadin 1971). Alongside them, legal documents were discovered, pertaining to the financial and marital issues of the refugees who had fled from Judea to the refuge caves. The letters of Bar Kokhba and these documents were published as part of the DSD series, and elsewhere (Cotton and Yardeni 1997;Yadin et. al. 2002; Yardeni 1991). Among the many documents, a special place is held by the archive of Babatha. The archive contains 35 documents from which we can learn about the persona of a well-off woman who lived in Ein Gedi. For a survey of the archive, see Isaac 1998. Hiding together with her in the cave was Saloma Komaise. Her archive is smaller, containing just seven letters (Cotton 1995). These two archives have served as a basis for research into aspects of Roman law, Jewish ritual law, and local customs (Czajkowski 2007; Czajkowski 2017; Friedman 1996; Ilan 1993); many scholars have even tried to use them to reconstruct the circumstances of Babatha’s life (Eshel 2003; Goodman 1991; Esler 2017). The scale of the destruction is also evident in epigraphic findings from the revolt’s aftermath. A bill of sale, written four years after the revolt had been suppressed, counts the years “from the destruction the House of Israel” (Eshel et. al. 2009). These archives also contribute greatly to our knowledge of the Hebrew language in this period (Mor 2015), and even help to establish the level of literacy among the Jewish population (Wise 2015), for questions arising from these two books see Bar-Asher Siegal 2016

**The causes of the revolt**

The two main sources for the Bar Kokhba Revolt provide divergent explanations for the rebellion’s outbreak. Cassius Dio writes that the revolt broke out as a result of Hadrian’s desire to establish a pagan city on the ruins of Jerusalem, named Aelia Capitolina. By contrast, father of church history Eusebius writes that the cause of the revolt was the banning of ritual circumcision, i.e., that religious persecution of Jews sparked the revolt, and that the establishment of Aelia Capitolina was an act of retribution in its aftermath. For many years opinions of the subject were divided (הר 1978; רבלו 1995; אופנהיימר 2003; מור 2016; מור 1991; Oppenheimer 2003). A key issue in the matter is the date of Aelia Capitolina’s establishment. Over the years, several coins have been found, minted to mark the establishment of the city; on them Hadrian can be seen officiating the *sulcus primigenius* ceremony. However, these coins do not bear a date, and as such dating of them relies on indirect evidence. Since a coin from the establishment was found alongside coins minted by the Bar Kokhba administration, Hanan Eshel has concluded that Aelia Capitolina had already been established at the time of the revolt. (אשל וזיסו 2002; אשל 2007). In recent years, archaeological excavations have further traced the route of Aelia Capitolina’s eastern cardo shedding light on the period of its constructions. Excavators argue that cardo’s construction began in the 120s, and the work also included the building of a pagan complex on the Temple Mount (Weksler-Bdolah 2014). These findings strengthen the assumption that Aelia Capitolina had already been established before the revolt and was its catalyst (סולומון 2015). Sheppard 2017 has added to this evidence an enigmatic passage from a letter from Barnabas which describes the rebuilding of the Temple under Roman sponsorship. Sheppard explains that this excerpt describes a rumor, rife among the Jews, that the Romans were planning to rebuild the Temple. When this rumor was proven false, the ensuing disillusionment led to the outbreak of rebellion.

In any case, these events were probably only the revolt’s immediate causes. The deeper causes leading to it can be found in Jewish society and the values it held in the aftermath of the Great Revolt. Despite the grave results of the Great Revolt, the rural population was probably not harmed and evidence of its existence, even in the vicinity of Jerusalem, has been uncovered in recent years (בר נתן וסקלר-פרנס 2007). Some have claimed that the population’s economic and agrarian situation was problematic after the Great Revolt (Appelbaum 1977), leading to bitterness, frustration and revolt. Recently Mor, too, has adopted an economic explanation – levies and taxes which were imposed on the Jewish population during Hadrian’s campaign in the Land of Israel in the year 130 may have contributed to the revolt (Mor 2016). Nevertheless, there is no real evidence for the importance of this economic component, and it remains in the realm of scholarly conjecture. It seems that throughout the period there was an expectation and hope for revenge against Rome and the rebuilding of the Temple (מאך 2014; Deines 2011). Some of the mourning practices over the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 may also have been meant to express hope for the swift rebuilding of the Temple (שחר 2003; בן שחר 2016). It seems that a combination of circumstances, the expectation of redemption and the Romans’ violation of Jerusalem provoked the rebellion.

**The Figure of Bar Kokhba**

Both the Jewish and Christian sources note the centrality of the revolt’s leader, whom they call Bar Kokhba. The letters found together with the numismatic findings tell us that his name was Simon Bar Kosiba. The origin of the name Bar Kosiba is unknown, and various assumptions have been proposed. The most probable is that the name Bar Kosiba points to the village in which he was born. This is most commonly identified as the village as Kuweizibe or Khirbet Kuziba located north of the hills of Hebron, next to Halhul. Others have identified his place of birth as Khrbet ‘En el-Kizbe in the Judean plains (Zissu and Gass 2012). When it became clear that the name Bar Kokhba was an epithet, this strengthened the assumption that it was linked to the messianic hopes that were ascribed to him (ניומן 2001). Bar Kokhba’s title in his letters is *Nasi* (Prince) *Israel*, and there are those who connect this title to the messianic hopes he embodied. (Evans 1995; Witulski 2010; Choi 2013).

Most scholars tend to reduce the messianic expectations ascribed to Bar Kokhba and see his leadership and the messianic phenomenon in a more terrestrial light (אופנהיימר 1984; גיחון 2016; מור 2016). Some actually argue that the title *Nasi Israel* demonstrates a distancing from any messianic expression (חבס-רובין 2008). Others have linked the name to the influence of the priestly class in the revolt (גודבלאט 1984). The strongest link between Bar Kokhba and the messianic ideal can be found in the words of Rabbi Akiva, who interprets the verse “there shall come a star from Jacob,” as a reference Bar Kokhba, and calls him the King Messiah. Some have seen this as evidence of a warm relationship between Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kokhba (Evans 1995; ריינהרץ 1989; בן שלום 1983), and some have found signs of an admiration of the revolt in the words of other Sages (אופנהיימר 2005 a; חכם 2005). The prevailing trend in contemporary scholarship is to treat rabbinic stories about the revolt with great caution, some even denying that they have any historical value (שפר 1978; שפר 2003; נובנסון 2009). Nevertheless, it must be noted that Bar Kokhba’s assertive character is conveyed by both the rabbinic sources and the epigraphic ones, as is his halakhic observance (אופנהיימר 1993; אופנהיימר b2005).

**The course of the war**

The chronology of the Bar Kokhba Revolt is uncertain; it is based on the writings of the church fathers, Cassius Dio, and archaeological findings, and they do not all accord with each other. Scholars agree that the revolt broke out in the year 132, following Hadrian’s journey to the Land of Israel (Eshel 2003, אבל ראו ההצעה של פלדמן תשע"ז). The revolt probably lasted for four years and ended in 136(Eck 1999). Meticulous preparation preceded the rebellion, including equipping the rebels with weapons which were made in Judea and the digging of many hideout systems (שטיבל 2009; גיחון 2016: 134-126). Bar Kokhba used guerrilla warfare tactics: his soldiers would enter the hideout systems, whose entrances were located in villages, and from these they would also launch surprise attacks against the Romans forces (Gichon 2007; Dar 2016).

The distribution of these hideout systems is continually being updated. The latest update, from Zissu and Kloner 2014, marked the northern border at Nahal Qana and even further north (around 5 km south of Nablus). The southern border of the revolt passes just north of Beersheba. In the west, we can note a hideout system which was discovered in Gush Dan, in today’s Ramat Gan (קלונר וזיסו 2014). The location of scores of hideout systems and items hidden within them in the Galilee in recent years has led some of the researchers to believe that the Jews of the Galilee were also involved in the revolt (שבטיאל 2012; שבטיאל 2012: 229-104). Uzi Leibner, who excavated Khirbet Wadi Hamam, next to Tiberias, found a layer of ruins in the town which he dated to the Bar Kokhba Revolt (Leibner 2011;2013 Leibner and Bijowsky). Nevertheless, the Galilee's involvement in the rebellion remains uncertain (Mor 2016: 152-173).

The archaeological findings also provide some information about the method of deployment of Bar Kokhba’s army. In general, the fighters in the Bar Kokhba Revolt employed guerrilla tactics based on sallying forth in surprise attacks against the Roman forces. This way the Romans were unable to wield the power of their legionaries in open warfare. However, in certain places a different method was preferred. At Herodium, the rebels set up a fortified stronghold which served as an administrative base, and later a fortress for larger scale attacks against the Roman forces (פורת ואחרים 2016).

We lack any clear information about the sites of significant battles. The only way to track the force of the revolt is through the journeys of the legions. It seems that the Twenty-Second Legion suffered heavy losses; after the Bar Kokhba Revolt it no longer appears in lists of Roman legions (Keppie 1990). We can also understand the revolt’s scope and the fear it inspired from the fact that Julius Severus was called in from Britain to command the Roman forces, as the local command was not considered sufficient. At the height of the revolt more than ten Roman legions were deployed in the Land of Israel, as well as various auxiliary forces (אק 1999; גיחון 2016: 239-223). Nevertheless, the archaeological and literary evidence is not unequivocal, and some lower estimates maintain that only three legions and auxiliary forces were deployed (Mor 2016: 289-327). To this lower estimate we can add the argument that the rebellion was also geographically limited. Those who maintain that the revolt was relatively small, claim that it was concentrated in the Judea region, in particular in the area between Betar and Hebron, even if its repercussions were felt further afield (Mor 2016: 213-249)

There is a fierce debate among scholars as to whether Jerusalem was conquered by the rebels and sacrificial rites resumed. Some note that the impetus of the revolt and the importance of the city made Jerusalem the most important target. They claim that the city was indeed conquered, and that the sacrifices might well have been resumed for a short period of time, perhaps by Elazar the Priest, whose name appears on coins from the revolt’s first year (Kanael 1971; Gichon 2016: 265-260). Most researchers believe that the almost complete lack of Bar Kokhba coins found in Jerusalem, in addition to a lack of any other evidence, demonstrates that the rebels failed to conquer the city (אשל 2007; Mor 2016: 249-288. However, see Zlotnik 2008 for attempts to explain this and to justify the claim that Jerusalem was conquered by the rebels).

The revolt came to an end in the city of Betar, the site of Bar Kokhba’s headquarters. The ruins of Bar Kokhba’s fortifications have been discovered (Ussishkin 1993) as well as plunder which had fallen to Bar Kokhba over the course of the battles (Eshel 2013). There are also traces of the siege imposed by the Roman army, and inscriptions indicating the presence of the some of the military forces deployed there (Ussishkin 1993: 94-95). The massacre of the rebels who were protecting Betar is described in detail in rabbinic sources, and even fictitious and exaggerated motives which point to the wide-scale massacre and cataclysmic disaster which befell the Jews (Hacham 2005).

The last phase of the war was the Roman army’s pursuit of the Jewish refugees. To this day, around 30 refuge caves have been found, containing evidence of the flight. Most of the caves are located in eastern Judea, from Wadi Dalia in the north, down to the south of the Dead Sea (Eshel and Amit 1998; Eshel and Porat 2009). In recent years a number of refuge caves have been discovered in the western area of Judea as well (Eshel and Porat 2009: 397-518; Zissu et. Al. 2011). The refugees took with them valuable belongings, deeds of purchase and documents pertaining to their personal status and even some luxury items. Of these, the archives of Babatha (Isaac 1998) and of Salome Komaise (Cotton 1995) are particularly worthy of note. Some of women even brought with them make-up and beauty kits (Amar and Sukenik 2018). Among the letters that the refugees took with them was also official correspondence between Bar Kokhba and his men, bills of sale and more (see the summary of findings in the chapter about the epigraphic evidence). In some of the caves the final testimonies of the struggle of the rebels were discovered. The remains of Roman camps were found above the Cave of Letters and above the Cave of Horror at Nahal Hever (Yadin 1971: 49-49). In some of the caves military equipment was found, attesting to a violent struggle which took place therein (Stiebel 2009). In a number of the caves the skeletons of some of the rebels and their families were found. In some sites it is clear that the families of the rebels arrived later on and gave them a proper burial in the refuge caves, perhaps an expression of their messianic hopes (Person 1998)

**The consequences of the revolt**

The revolt ended with a complete Roman victory. The three commanders of the revolt, Julius Severus who had come from Britain, Gaius Publicius Marcellus, governor of Syria, and Haterius Nepos, governor of Arabia, received the Roman triumph honors. This, according to Werner Eck, attests to the intensity of the fighting (Eck 1999). An additional indication of the significance of the revolt to the Romans can be seen on the huge triumphal arch erected next to Bet She’an, the remains of which were discovered at Tel Shalem (Eck and Foerster 1999. However, see an opposing interpretation in Mor 2013). The immediate and most dramatic effect of this harsh war was demographic. The Jewish population in the Judea region was significantly affected. Some areas were depopulated of Jewish inhabitants, though in others strong communities remained (Safrai 1984; Schwartz 1984; Mor 2016: 479-485). Punitive measures inflicted by Hadrian were both symbolic and practical. Hadrian changed the name of the province from Judaea to Palestina (Eck 2012). Worse than this were the substantial prohibitions imposed on the Jews, for example, the prohibition against entering Jerusalem. It is not clear if the prohibition was imposed by Hadrian himself or the local Roman administration. In any case, no significant Jewish population dwelled in Jerusalem throughout the Roman-Byzantine period; Christian writers attributed the start of this prohibition to Hadrian (Irshai 1995). From talmudic sources we also learn that Jewish religious practices were prohibited, including circumcision, observing the sabbath, and Torah study. They also recount the execution of Sages (Herr 1972; Liberman 1975). In recent decades, these descriptions have been called into doubt on multiple occasions (Mor 2016: 475-478). It is almost certain that the religious decrees were only relevant in one locality. As for the issue of martyrdom, there is no doubt that many Jews were sentenced to death over the course of the revolt and in its aftermath. However, the ideal of martyrdom was probably only formed in a later period, in the context of Judeo-Christian debate (Boyarin 1999; Stemberger 2014). In any case, the willingness of the Sages to attribute this ideal to the Bar Kokhba Revolt demonstrates the power of the traumatic memory of the revolt. Together with the quashing of the revolt, the Jewish hope of achieving renewed political independence through violent means was dashed. Messianic hopes were transferred from the real world to eschatological expectations of God’s direct intervention on behalf of his people (Herr 1985). From many points of view, the quashing of the Bar Kokhba Revolt represents a watershed in Jewish history, after which the Jews effectively exited the stage of history (Herr 2009; Herr 2010).