

AHARON OPPENHEIMER

Between Rome
and Babylon

*Texts and Studies in
Ancient Judaism*
108

Mohr Siebeck

Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

Edited by
Martin Hengel and Peter Schäfer

108



Aharon Oppenheimer

Between Rome and Babylon

Studies in Jewish Leadership and Society

Edited by
Nili Oppenheimer

Mohr Siebeck

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To
Yael and Zahi
Hilat and Yoni

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Tel Aviv University, February, 2004

Aharon Oppenheimer

Table of Contents

Abbreviations XIII

Introduction 1

A. Roman Palestine and its Surroundings

Map I: Roman Judaea 11

1. Gedaljahu Alon – zwischen der jüdischen Historiographie
des 19. Jahrhunderts und der modernen historischen Forschung 13

2. Urbanisation and City Territories in Roman Palestine 30

3. Jewish Lydda in the Roman Era 47

4. Tannaitic Benei Beraq: A Peripheral Centre of Learning 66

5. Das Verhältnis der Stadt Akko zum Land Israel und zu Galiläa 83

6. Tyrus, Phönizien und Galiläa 93

7. *Havurot* in Jerusalem at the End of the Second Temple Period 102

8. L'élaboration de la Halakha après la destruction du Second Temple ... 115

9. Rabban Gamaliel of Yavneh and his Circuits of Eretz Israel 145

10. 'Those of the School of Rabbi Yannai' 156

11. Ethnic Groups and Religious Contexts in the Talmudic Literature 166

12. Jewish Penal Authority in Roman Judaea 173

13. Jewish Conscripts in the Roman Army? 183

B. The Bar Kokhba Revolt

Map II: Judaea of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt	195
1. The Revolt of Bar Kokhba: Ideology and Modern Scholarship with Benjamin Isaac	197
2. Die jüdische Bewohnerschaft Galiläas zur Zeit von Jawne und während des Bar-Kochba-Aufstands	225
3. The Ban on Circumcision as a Cause of the Revolt: A Reconsideration	243
4. Subterranean Hideouts in the Judaeian Shephelah: The Evidence of the Sources	256
5. Messianismus in römischer Zeit: Zur Pluralität eines Begriffes bei Juden und Christen	263
6. Bar Kokhba and the Observance of <i>Mitzvot</i>	283
7. Sabbatheiligung im Bar-Kochba-Aufstand	292
8. Betar als Zentrum vor dem Bar-Kochba-Aufstand	303
9. Heiligkeit und Hingabe des Lebens in der Folge des Bar-Kochba-Aufstands	320

C. The Rise of Jewish Babylonia

Map III: Talmudic Babylonia	337
1. The Genealogical Boundaries of Jewish Babylonia with Michael Lecker	339
2. Nehardea und Nisibis bei Josephus (<i>Ant.</i> 18)	356
3. Von Jerusalem nach Babylonien: Der Aufstieg der babylonischen Judenheit in der parthisch-sassanidischen Epoche	374

4. The Attempt of Hananiah, Son of Rabbi Joshua's Brother, to intercalate the Year in Babylonia: A Comparison of the Traditions in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds	384
5. Babylonian Synagogues with Historical Associations	394
6. Beisetzung westlich des Euphrat im talmudischen Babylonien with Michael Lecker	402
7. Beziehungen zwischen Messene und Palästina	409
8. Contacts between Eretz Israel and Babylonia at the Turn of the Period of the <i>Tannaim</i> and the <i>Amoraim</i>	417
9. 'Von Qurtawa nach Aspamia'	433
Places of Original Publication	443
Index of Sources	447
General Index	475

Abbreviations

Periodicals and Books

AASOR	Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research
AJP	American Journal of Philology
AJS Rev.	Association for Jewish Studies Review
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
BGA	Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum
BGU	Ägyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen staatlichen Museen zu Berlin Griechische Urkunden
BMC	British Museum Catalogue
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
CRAI	Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CTh	Codex Theodosianus
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert.
EI ¹	Enzyklopaedie des Islam, 1913–1938
EI ²	The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1966 ff.
ESI	Excavations and Surveys in Israel
FS	Festschrift
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
GLS	Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie
GS	Gedenkschrift
HSCP	Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
IGR	R. Cagnat et al., Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes
ILS	H. Dessau, Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae
INJ	Israel Numismatic Journal
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JDS	Judean Desert Studies
JHS	Journal of Hellenic Studies
JJLG	Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JÖAI	Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes in Wien
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review

JRA	Journal of Roman Archaeology
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
JRGS	Journal of the Royal Geographical Society
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSQ	Jewish Studies Quarterly
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MAMA	Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua
MGWJ	Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums
NESE	Neue Ephemeris für die semitische Epigraphik
NH	(Pliny) Natural History
OCD	Oxford Classical Dictionary
PAAJR	Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
PJb	Palästinajahrbuch
PL	J.-P. Migne, Patrum Latinorum Cursus Completus, series Latina
QDAP	Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine
RB	Revue Biblique
RE	Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft
REJ	Revue des Études Juives
RMD	M. Roxan, Roman Military Diplomats
SBF	Liber Annuus, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum
SCI	Scripta Classica Israelica
SHA	Scriptores Historiae Augustae.
ZDMG	Zeitschrift des Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins
ZGEB	Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde Gebiete
ZPE	Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Sources

äHen	Enoch (Henoeh) Ethiopic Vertion
AJ; JA; Ant.	Antiquitates Judaicae
Apol.	Apologia adversus libros Rufini
BJ; Bell; JW	Bellum Judaicum
BT; b; TB	Babylonian Talmud
Cant. r.	Canticles Rabbah
Chr.	Chronicles
Chron. Hadr.	Chronica (Hadrianus)
Dtn.	Deuteronomy
Exod.	Exodus
Gen. r.	Genesis Rabbah
Gen.	Genesis
HE	Historia Ecclesiastica
Jer.	Jeremiah
Jes.	Isaiah (Jesaja)
Jos.	Joshua
JT; j; y; TJ	Jerusalem Talmud
Jub.	Jubilees
Leg.	Legatio ad Gaium
Lev.	Leviticus
Lev. r.	Leviticus Rabbah
LXX	Septuaginta
M	Mishna
Mac.	Maccabees
Num.	Numbers
On.	Onomasticon
Prov.	Proverbs
Quaest. Conv.	Quaestiones Conviviales
Sech.	Zechariah (Secharja)
T	Tosefta
Thr. r.	Lamentations (Threni) Rabbah
Vit.	Vita

Introduction

The last generation or two have seen an increasing interest in the history of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple (AD 70), both in their own land and, to a lesser extent, in the Diaspora. This period is now often called the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud partly because the Talmudic literature is our main Jewish source for the historical processes which took place then, a time when Palestine was part of the Roman and Byzantine Empire (which accounts for the alternative name for the period). This period ends with the Moslem conquest around the year AD 640. Earlier research was influenced by the *Weltanschauung* of Protestant scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, who saw the destruction of the Temple in the year AD 70 as the beginning of the Exile in Jewish history. This outlook was not without apologetic elements, for the same period saw the rise of Christianity, which viewed the exile as concomitant with the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the messiah. Moreover it was seen also as vindication of the new Christian creed. Further historical analysis rejected this theological approach to the history of Judaism, and made it clear that, just as part of the Jewish people were already to be found in the Diaspora at the time of the Second Temple, so too some characteristics of independent existence as a people in their own land continued even after the destruction of the Temple, primarily thanks to the existence and activities of self-governing leadership institutions. These were the *Bet haVa'ad*, the leadership of the rabbis, and eventually the patriarchal dynasty which stood at its head. Together they worked towards ensuring continuing religious and national survival without Jerusalem and in the absence of the Temple; they solved problems in the social and economic sphere and even, to some extent, provided leadership for Diaspora Jews. The survival of the Jewish people was the result of processes and developments which occurred after the destruction of the Temple, but while elements of autonomy were still in place in Palestine. During the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud, between independence and exile, Judaism was formed anew and developed the armour which preserved it in the difficult conditions of total exile in the Middle Ages, and into the Modern Period, through different times and in different countries. The principal motif which guided the leadership institutions was setting the *Torah* and its study at the top of the scale of Jewish values, in place of the rituals of the Sanctuary and all that was associated with it, which had been the focus of national life while the Temple still stood.

The structure and organization of this book also reflect these views of Jewish history in the period under consideration. It forms the basis for the

three sections of this book, for it opened the way to in-depth study and renewed analysis of subjects such as the activities of the leadership institutions after the destruction of the Temple, and the organization of settlements in Palestine and its neighbours. Thus the book continues to widen the scope of research into various aspects of the Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–135/6), which is no longer related to as a mere epilogue of the Jewish War of AD 66–70, but as yet another hard-fought and bloody war against the Romans on a larger scale than the Jewish War itself. Finally, it develops the interest in the history of the Jewish centre in Babylonia, for after the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt and the repressive legislation which followed it, many of the refugees from the war joined the Jewish Diaspora community in Babylonia, the only significant Diaspora community outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Even at this early date there are clear signs in Babylonia of the beginning of the exilarchate and the *yeshivot*/academies which comprised the leadership institutions which characterized the autonomous Jewish presence there. Some time before the time of Rav's going down to Babylonia in AD 219, the Mishnah was redacted by R. Judah haNasi and eventually arrived in Babylonia. Following this, the centre in Babylonia gradually took the place of the centre in Palestine as the focus of authority for the Jewish people. It was there that the Babylonian Talmud was produced, based on the Mishnah, which became the decisive source of authority for *halakhah*/Jewish religious law throughout the generations up to our own time.

Recent decades saw a remarkable increase in archaeological exploration. At the same time, a change took place among archaeologists in Israel, who had previously been concerned mostly with pre-historic and Biblical sites, but now began to take an interest in sites from the period of the Mishnah and Talmud as well. Thus in the last forty years archaeologists have worked in uncovering sites definitely Jewish; mixed settlements; pagan and Christian sites, and roads and tombs from the Roman and Byzantine periods. In this context they have uncovered cities like Sepphoris/Diocaesarea in Lower Galilee, Bet She'an/Scythopolis in the Bet She'an valley, and Caesarea, the seat of the Roman governor on the Mediterranean coast; the major part of settlements like Qatzrin in the Golan and Chorazin north of the Sea of Galilee; and many synagogues in various parts of the country. They have conducted excavations at the fortress of Herodium south of Bethlehem, and preliminary excavations at Betar, Bar Kokhba's last fort, south-west of Jerusalem. Subterranean hideouts and caves used for refuge during the Bar Kokhba revolt have been found, as well as the letters of Bar Kokhba himself and the archive of Babatha; roads and milestones have been revealed, as well as inscriptions and remains of buildings; vessels and clothing; coins minted by the Romans and by Bar Kokhba; weapons and tools, and much more. The archaeological finds give a vivid impression of the Jewish settlement in Palestine at the time of the Mishnah and the Tal-

mud. They elucidate and clarify events and processes indicated in the literary sources from a different perspective and naturally assist us in reconstructing every day life. It is now necessary for the historian of the period to combine the many pieces of evidence from archaeological finds with the evidence found in literary texts, before coming to final conclusions and descriptions of historical processes.

It is self-evident that research into the history of the Jewish people, or any other people, cannot rely only on internal data disconnected from general history. This is certainly true for research into the history of the Jews in the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud, when the land of Israel and its inhabitants were under Roman and Byzantine rule, with all that this implies. It is clearly advisable to conduct the examination of the Talmudic sources and non-Jewish sources in parallel, analysing and commenting on them together insofar as possible. In this respect I have had the good fortune to be able to work in co-operation with Professor Benjamin Isaac from the Department of Classics at Tel Aviv University, for nearly thirty years. He has found and commented on sources from the works of Greek and Roman historians and the Church fathers, as well as information deriving from archaeological finds. Thus he has contributed a great deal to a better understanding of the sources from the Talmudic literature, and much of what I have written in my books and papers originates in the knowledge I have accumulated during our years of co-operation. My research on *Provincia Judaea/Syria-Palaestina* would have been far more provincial without the invaluable contributions of Ben's talent and erudition.

The most important, and certainly most comprehensive, source for the history of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel and Babylonia in antiquity is the Talmudic literature with all its branches. This includes a plethora of information on the world of the rabbis; the borders of the Land of Israel and Babylonia with their settlements; relationships with the ruling powers; relations between Jews and non-Jews; the leadership institutions; everyday life; the Diaspora revolt in the time of Trajan; the Quietus revolt; the Bar Kokhba revolt; the revolt under Gallus; law and order; *mitzvot*/religious commandments and *halakhah*; education and the study of *Torah*; study houses and synagogues; the exilarchate and the *yeshivot* of Babylonia; the family; the status of women; the status of slaves; contacts between the Land of Israel and the Diaspora, and much more.

However, using the Talmudic literature as a historical source is fraught with many problems: this literature has no historiographical intent but concentrates on legislation (*halakhah*) or theological didactics (*aggadah*). Historical information appears in the Talmudic literature accidentally and sporadically only. The historical evidence is sometimes presented by a rabbi or in the context of a passage far distant from it in time and place, is sometimes anachronistic, and is sometimes of dubious authenticity. Very often the question arises as to whether the Talmudic text reflects the situation at the time of the rabbi to whom

the tradition is attributed, or whether the rabbi is describing in his own name a situation prior to his own time, or whether the text as we have received it is the result of a continuous process of tradition and editing. To this is connected a further question: how much freedom did the final editors allow themselves in relation to the statements of the rabbi? There is also evidence in the Talmudic literature of attempts to solve questions related to a historical process by using theological or philosophical means.

In spite of all this, in my opinion the Talmudic evidence must be a cornerstone for historical research of the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud – it sometimes even has the advantage of making statements in innocence of their historical implications. However, we must at all times be aware of alternative systems of interpretation that undermine this way of approaching Talmudic literature as a historical source as used by myself and others. Experience has taught me that, after questioning the historical significance which can be extracted, in my opinion, from the Talmudic literature, often the alternative proposed seems even further from the *Sitz im Leben*, and raises new questions which are even more problematic. There are, then, a number of ways of conducting research into Talmudic sources with different approaches to drawing historical conclusions. It is not my intention to present these different approaches or to tackle them in this introduction, just to clarify my own methods of historical research.

The common factor in all the papers in this collection is the concern with sources from the Talmudic literature, and the desire to extract historical meaning from them. (Some of the papers were originally lectures at conferences, as will be clear from the fact that they have fewer footnotes, and sometimes more detailed explanations). Generally, I follow in my research the system of Alon, and try to find the historical kernel in the source, always paying attention to the place where it was produced – Palestine or Babylonia – noting whether it is tannaitic or amoraic, halakhic or aggadic, whether it is quoted as an anonymous tradition or attributed to a named rabbi, whether it is Hebrew or Aramaic, close to the time of the events described or far from them, and so on. These criteria are not absolute, and should not be used as such. It is sometimes the case that a Babylonian source is more authentic about an event which happened in Palestine than a Palestinian source, and vice versa, although these are of course exceptions. Gedalyahu Alon himself, who died untimely a little more than fifty years ago, identified to a certain extent with the subject of his research. He himself was rather like a Talmudic sage, who spoke in the language of the rabbis and thought like them. He also brought with him to his research on the world of the rabbis his Jewish nationalist outlook, as will be clear from the paper which opens this collection. In my early years of working on Talmudic literature I too followed Alon in this attitude to some extent, but looking back it seems to me that I have freed myself from it in the years which followed.

This collection is divided into three sections which include those papers from my various fields of interest which could be usefully collected together. There are interconnections between the three sections, which I will note in the second part of this introduction. More than half the papers were originally written and published in Hebrew, and appear for the first time in a European language in this collection.

Section A: Roman Palestine and its Surroundings

1. *Gedaliyahu Alon*

Naturally the first paper in this collection is about the comprehensive book of Gedaliyahu Alon, *Toledot hayehudim beEretz Yisrael biteqfat haMishnah vebaTalmud* (translated as *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age*) I–II, (Tel Aviv, 1953–6), reviewing it in the light of the fifty years which have elapsed since its publication. Alon was a pioneer in establishing the basis of the scientific methodology for the use of sources from the Talmudic literature for historical research. In many cases he stood out against the viewpoints of Schürer and Graetz, contending that they included no small measure of apologetics. However, it is clear that he himself was caught up to a certain extent in a nationalist ideology, apparently influenced by the Holocaust, the Israeli War of Independence and the establishment of the State of Israel, which occurred at the time that his ideas were forming and crystallizing. It should be noted that Alon was one of the first to combine general history with Jewish history but, as sometimes happens with pioneer scholars, fell here and there into slips which deflected his conclusions from the correct historical perspective.

2. *Poleis and settlements*

Paper 2 is a general paper which discusses the links between the processes of urbanisation and the changes which occurred in the Roman administrative division of Palestine. Here I stress the combination of the Severan urban initiative and the policy of Rabbi Judah haNasi who was associated with them, which raised the legal status of the cities of Palestine and led to an increase in their Jewish population. This significant change in status can be seen in the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius.

Papers 3 and 4 deal with towns in the Land of Israel and their links with the rabbis. Lod/Lydda (Diospolis from AD 199/200 when it became a *polis*) was an important centre of teaching and even temporarily the site of the *Bet haVa'ad*/leadership council, while Benei Beraq was the site of Rabbi Aqiba's *Bet Midrash*/study house and hence a peripheral teaching centre.

Papers 5 and 6 discuss cities outside the borders of Judaea and Syria-Pal aestina, but close to them, their contacts with the Land of Israel and Jewish settlement there.

3. *The rabbis and social history*

All the other papers in this section represent attempts to use Talmudic sources for the information they contain as regards the reality of Jewish life under Roman rule. Papers 7 and 10, however, are concerned with internal Jewish developments without reference to the non-Jewish surroundings.

4. *Roman rule and the Jews and their leaders*

This group includes papers 9, 11, 12 and 13. Paper 11 was conceived and written as a lecture held in 1985, before the current very active interest in ethnic identity and ethnicity manifested itself. The paper was eventually published in 1995, but written before the publication of Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge, MA 1993), a work which is much concerned with the ethnic communities in the region. A somewhat more recent volume of conference proceedings has no article devoted specifically to Palestine: Graeme Clarke (ed.), *Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998).

Section B: The Bar Kokhba Revolt

As observed in each study on this war, there is hardly any literary historical record. Yet the revolt and its leader are mentioned frequently in Talmudic sources. It is therefore extremely important to see what this material can contribute to our understanding of the revolt. This contribution should not be sought in some specific forms of factual information, such as the composition of the Roman army that suppressed the revolt, precise chronological information etc. It should be noted that the Bar Kokhba revolt is an episode that has been much discussed in numerous books and articles over the past decades, and most recently at a congress held in Princeton in 2002. The earliest of the following papers (no. 2) was written before the revolt became a popular research topic, and published in 1977. Thus it was actually written just before the monograph by Shimon Applebaum, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132–135), BAR Supplementary Series 7* (Oxford 1976), which was the first major publication since Shmuel Yeivin's *The Bar-Kokhba War* (Jerusalem 1946 [1957²] in Hebrew). Yeivin's book had been the first to follow the work of the Swedish Protestant bishop Friedrich Münter, *Der jüdische Krieg unter den Kaisern Trajan und Hadrian* (Altona-Leipzig 1821).

The articles that deal with the revolt may be divided in several groups.

1. Paper 1 is a general paper which aims to give a survey of various approaches to the revolt in the modern literature.

2. Papers 2 and 4 are concerned with two discrete subjects: the question as to whether the Jews of the Galilee took part in the revolt, and the subterranean hideouts that have been discovered in great numbers in various parts of the country.

3. Paper 3 is concerned with the essence of the revolt: its cause. Was it a ban on circumcision or just the refoundation of Jerusalem as a Roman colony?

4. Papers 5, 6 and 7 deal with the status and personality of Bar Kokhba as seen in the sources from the Talmudic literature and the Bar Kokhba letters. Two questions in particular are discussed: the first, what sort of messianism is attributed to Bar Kokhba – supernatural and eschatological, or realistic and earthly? The second asks whether Bar Kokhba was a kind of ‘secular’ leader far removed from the world of the *Torah* and the *mitzvot*, or whether he was a God-fearing leader who took great care to observe the *mitzvot* and was responsive to the rabbis.

5. Paper 8 on Betar might also have been grouped with the articles on towns in Section A, as it concerns the significance of the site in the period before the Bar Kokhba revolt, which partially explains why it became the last stronghold of the Jewish forces fighting against Rome.

6. Paper 9 looks at the repressive legislation which the Roman authorities instituted after the Bar Kokhba revolt, and the ways in which Jews responded to it. It deals with the creation of the phenomenon of *qiddush haShem*/martyrdom as a Jewish solution at a time when there was a threat to the observance of the *mitzvot*. It also looks at the evidence for navigation between the alternatives of martyrdom and the method of observing *mitzvot* with some sort of changes, in order not to be caught by the Romans and thus to preserve in this way *qedushat haḥayim*/the sanctity of life.

Section C: The Rise of Jewish Babylonia

The Jews in Babylonia formed the largest, most cohesive and most productive community in the Diaspora. Literary and historical sources on Parthia and the Sasanian kingdom are scanty and problematic. The Babylonian Talmud thus forms a major source, although one not easy to interpret, for the history of the Jews in the region. Some of these papers are offshoots of my book (in collaboration with Benjamin Isaac and Michael Lecker), *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden 1983).

1. Papers 3 and 4 deal with the rise in importance of the Jewish Diaspora community in Babylonia after the Bar Kokhba revolt, the developments in

leadership and society, the first budding of the institutions which characterized Talmudic Babylonia – the exilarchate and the *yeshivot* – and with the Palestinian reaction to the growing strength of Jewish Babylonia.

2. Papers 1, 2 and 9 discuss aspects of the historical geography of the Jewish communities in Babylonia: the way in which the Jews of Babylonia fenced themselves in to preserve their purity of lineage, and the creation of genealogical borders, as well as with the historical significance of burying Jews from Babylonia on the west bank of the Euphrates.

3. Paper 5 deals with the attribution of excessive antiquity to synagogues in Babylonia and the historical significance of this.

4. Papers 7 and 8 are concerned with the contacts between the Jews of Palestine and those in Babylonia.

A. Roman Palestine and its Surroundings

Index of Sources

Biblical Sources

Genesis		11:13	134
9:6	169	11:32–33	384, 386
14:1	43	12:3	88
15:19	434	13:18	88, 149, 231
17:5	168	14:1	169
17:13	249	14:15	243
17:14	249	16:20	56, 66, 367, 385
25:30	42	22:11	294
32:22–24	98	26:3	167, 171
36:16	42	26:5–9	74, 125
46:13	169	27:21	140
		28:52	312
Exodus		28:56	86
3:8	82	Joshua	
20:6	289, 322	15:3	41
21:29	175	15:48	42
31:17	296	19:38	44
		19:45	67
Leviticus		I Samuel	
11:16	243	28:4	41
18:5	137, 170, 322		
20:15	175	I Kings	
20:16	175	9:11	42
22:32	322		
23:40	118	Isaiah	
23:4, 37	369	1:21	106, 311
Numbers		2:3	370, 386, 387, 393
9:11	124	8:2	271
15:38	294	10:13	171
21:24	42	11:3	273
24:17	270	28:8	111
25:11	131	50:10	434
29:1–2	120	57:8	135
34:11	42		
		Jeremiah	
Deuteronomy		6:9	311
6:5	325	9:9	310
7:2	127		

26:18	271	Canticles	
30:10	433	1:3	326
31:6	31	1:8	26, 28
49:6	171	1:12	81
50:21	370, 391	5:9	326
Ezekiel		Lamentations	
23:23	370, 391	1:16	257
41:22	110, 111	3:16	235
Hosea		3:51	311, 313, 314
6:6	171	4:18	308
Amos		4:20	280
7:17	419	Ecclesiastes	
9:14	171	7:2	108, 112, 113
Micah		10:8	136
4:2	370	Esther	
Zechariah		7:8	153
2:11	397	Daniel	
8:4–5	271	7:5	366, 426
Psalms		9:24–27	303
1:3	162	I Chronicles	
2:3	289	4:22	275
9:17(18)	171	24:9	398
16:11	287	II Chronicles	
50:23	164	31:15	398
102:15	396	Septuaginta (LXX)	
116:9	94	Joshua	
122:3	102, 138	15:59a	305, 306
Proverbs		I Chronicles	
4:2	169	6:44	305, 306
5:8	135		
5:13	235		
17:5	308		
17:25	235		
20:17	236		

Apocrypha and Pseudoepigrapha

I Maccabees		13:51	119, 286
11:28	31	II Maccabees	
11:34	48	10:1–9	119, 286

Sirach			Enoch	
50:29–30	123		10, 17	272
Jubilees			Sibylline Oracles	
16, 31	118		v, l. 46–50	211, 251
23, 28	272			

Dead Sea Scrolls

The Rule Scroll (ed. Licht)			Damascus Document	
6, 2–8	139–140	109	vii, 18–20	270
6, 14–23	149–151	138		

Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period

Bar Kokhba's Letters			<i>Eretz-Israel</i> 9 (1967),	
<i>IEJ</i> 11 (1961),			pp. 46–50	206
no. 1	41–42	222	<i>JDS</i> II (1989),	
no. 8	44–45	285, 293	no. 12	30
no. 14	47–48	222, 285	no. 16	173
no. 15	48–50	285, 294	Rental Contracts	
<i>DJD</i> II (1961),			<i>DJD</i> II (1961):	
159–161	240, 277		124–128, 131	222, 285
161–163	285, 293			
Babatha Archive				
<i>IEJ</i> 12 (1962),				
p. 259	215			

New Testament

Matthew			Acts of the Apostles	
4:15	42		2:9	425
23:1–5	284		5:37	94
Mark			9:32	48
14:61–62	267		12:20	95
John			18:2–17	135
12:13	119, 286		Philippians	
			3:2–3	243

Talmudic Literature

Mishna		x, 5	124
		x, 6	73, 125, 272, 290
Berakhot		Sheqalim	
iv, 3	144	iii, 1	358
iv, 4	144	iii, 4	358, 424
iv, 7	107		
Pe'ah		Yoma	
i, 1	72	i, 6	389
		iii, 10	422
Demai		vi, 9	125
ii, 2	137		
ii, 3	137	Sukkah	
		ii, 5	18
Shevi'it		iii, 12	105, 118, 287
vi, 4	81	iv, 4	118
Ma'aser Sheni		Betzah	
iv, 11	290	ii, 7	73, 124
Hallah		Rosh haShanah	
iv, 11	434	i, 2	185
		i, 6	57
Bikkurim		ii, 8	55, 153, 425
i, 4	167	ii, 9	153, 425
iii, 2	31	iv, 1	120
iii, 3	138	iv, 3	105, 118, 121, 287
		iv, 4	122
Shabbat		iv, 5	121, 241
i, 4	55	iv, 7	121
vi, 2	258, 300		
xviii, 3	246	Ta'anit	
xix, 1	246, 297	iv, 6	314, 317
'Eruvin		Megillah	
i, 2	253	i, 1–2	46
iii, 5	300	iv, 8	332
x, 1	332		
x, 10	147, 230, 237	Hagigah	
		i, 8	292
Pesahim		ii, 7	130
iv, 3	126	iii, 6	103
vii, 2	73, 124	iii, 7–8	103, 138
vii, 13	109		
viii, 8	112	Yevamot	
x, 4	73	xvi, 7	363, 388, 394, 425

Ketubbot		iii, 3	111
iv, 12	226	iii, 10	140
		iii, 11	251
Sotah		iii, 14	169
v, 2–5	171		
ix, 15	228	Horayot	
		iii, 2–3	279
Gittin			
i, 1–2	84	Menahot	
i, 5	143, 150, 168, 230	x, 5	121
iv, 6	126		
v, 6	128, 240	Bekhorot	
vii, 7	151	i, 1	126
ix, 8	178	iv, 4	50, 181
		viii, 7	97
Bava Qamma			
vii, 7	128	Karetot	
viii, 6	180	iii, 7–9	154
Bava Metzi'a		Tamid	
iv, 3	51, 78, 104	v, 1	133
		vii, 2	123
Bava Batra			
iii, 2	433	Miqva'ot	
		vii, 1	253
Sanhedrin			
i, 2	178	Makhshirin	
i, 4	175	i, 3	227
iii, 3	141, 299		
vi, 6	112	Zavim	
vii, 1	312	iii, 2	110
viii, 2	109		
		Yadayim	
'Eduyot		iii, 5	171
i, 14	130	iv, 3	56
iii, 11	73, 124	iv, 1–4	171
vi, 1	176		
vii, 7	174, 363, 425		
		Tosefta	
'Avodah Zarah		(ed. Zuckerman, ed. Lieberman)	
i, 6	126		
i, 8	126	Berakhot	
iii, 4	88, 136, 149, 231	ii, 13 8	79, 327
v, 6	299	iv, 15 21–22	74, 153
		v, 2 25	90, 153
Avot			
ii, 5	140	Pe'ah	
		iv, 16	108

Demai			iii, 11	154	75, 151, 372
i, 10	64	95	x, 10		104
ii, 2–iii, 15			x, 11	198	74
66–77		137, 138	x, 12	198–199	51, 57, 72, 124, 151
v, 24	93	74, 143, 150, 168, 169,	Sukkah		
		230	i, 7	257	330
Terumot			ii, 1		59
ii, 13	115	146, 229	ii, 2		148
iv, 12	126	168	ii, 10	265	104
iv, 14	127	169	Yom Tov (Betzah)		
Shevi'it			i, 22		104
iv, 17	183	81	ii, 6	287	299
vii, 9		108	ii, 12		153
viii, 1	200	131	iii, 8	295	103
Kil'ayim			Rosh haShanah		
i, 4	203	231	i, 11	307	185
Ma'asrot			ii, 11	316	241
ii, 1	230	19	Ta'anit		
Ma'aser Sheni			i, 13	328	227
v, 16		55	ii, 5	56	78
Bikkurim			Megillah		
ii, 8		31	ii, 4	349	330
Shabbat			ii, 8		59
ii, 5		51, 59	ii, 17	352	107
iii, 3	11–12	77	iii, 15	357	103, 112
vii, 17	28	230	iii, 30	362	332
xiii, 2	257	147, 230	Mo'ed Qatan		
xiii, 5	58	135	ii, 15	372	89, 147–8, 230
xv, 9	71	249	Hagigah		
'Eruvin			ii, 13		51
iv, 11	100	238	iii, 34–35		
v, 24	117	247, 296	393–394		103
vi, 8		400	Yevamot		
ix, 2		51, 59	xii, 13	44	178
Pesahim			xiv, 8	54	312
i, 27		147	Ketubbot		
i, 28		147	v, 10	74	86
ii, 11		58, 104	xii, 6	99	97
ii, 13	145	168			

Sotah		Menahot	
vii, 8	193 123	x, 26	121
vii, 9	193 66	Me'ilah	
xv, 8	241–242 89, 136, 145, 230	i, 5	228
xv, 10	242–243 253		
Gittin		Kelim (Bava Metzī'a)	
iii, 10	257–258 128, 240	ii, 1	59, 228
Bava Qamma		Kelim (Bava Batra)	
viii, 3	39 28	ii, 2	233
viii, 10	39 128	Ahilot	
viii, 13	39–40 129, 329	iii, 9	124
viii, 14	40 129	iv, 2	50, 57, 78
Bava Batra		xvi, 12	230
vi, 13	107	xviii, 4	35
ix, 1	159 425	xviii, 18	50, 62, 80, 90, 124, 131, 152
Sanhedrin		Para	
ii, 6	226, 425	vii, 4	18, 58, 75, 151
ii, 8	79	Niddah	
ii, 13	60	vi, 3	36, 61, 80
iii, 10	45	Miqva'ot	
xii, 9	251	i, 17	51
xiii, 2	171	iv, 6	18, 58, 75, 151
'Avodah Zarah		vi, 3	88, 152, 228
i, 8	101	vi, 13	228
iii, 5	136, 146, 230	vii, 10	53
iii, 15	126	vii, 11	53, 58
iii, 19	126	Tohorot	
iv, 3	385	viii, 1–9, 12	138
v, 2	136	Yadayim	
Horayot		ii 16	50, 56
i, 5	252	Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael (ed. Horovitz-Rabin)	
Hullin		Piša vi, 19	74
ii, 20	313	xviii, 74	74
ii, 22	136, 321	vaYehi i, 89	184
ii, 23	136, 321		
ii, 24	135		
iii, 10	18, 58, 75, 151		
xiii, 18–22	309		

Shira iii, 127 326
 Amaleq i, 177 56
 vaYissa iv, 169 295
 baHodesh i, 203 86, 154
 vi, 227 119, 255, 289, 296, 312,
 323

Neziqin xviii,
 313 327
 Khaspa xx, 335 167
 Shabta i, 343 323, 332

**Mekhilta deRabbi Shimeon
 Bar Yohai**
 (ed. Epstein-Melamed)

Bo 12:48 37 122, 167
 beShlah
 14:7 51 184
 15:3 79 326
 17:8 120 56
 Yitro 19:17 143 114
 Mishpatim
 21:29 181 175, 176

Sifra
 (ed. Weiss)

Aharei Mot
 ix 86b 170, 321, 322
 Emor ix 99d 234
 x 100c 121
 beHuqotai
 vii 112b 260

Sifre Numbers
 (ed. Horovitz)

cviii 112 122, 167
 cxii 121 251
 cxvi 133 130
 cxxiv 158 53

Sifre Zutta
 (ed. Horovitz)

xviii 293 130

Sifre Deuteronomy
 (ed. Finkelstein)

xvi 26 154
 xli 85 51, 54, 58, 114
 xliii 95 271
 li 117 37
 lxxvi 141 296, 323
 lxxx 146 101, 368, 380, 384, 386,
 426
 ccxviii 251 368, 426
 cclix 318 167
 cccv 325 86
 cccvii 346 313, 324
 cccxliiii 400 329
 cccxliv 401 148, 174, 230
 ccclv 421 94

Midrash Tanna'im
 (Hoffmann)

12:23 53-4 296
 26:3 172 167
 26:9 173-4 36, 80
 20:14 121 173

Jerusalem Talmud
 (Venice)

Berakhot
 i, 2c 280
 i, 3a 50
 i, 3c 134, 268
 ii, 5a 275, 286
 ii, 5d 110, 154
 iii, 6a 101, 279
 iv, 7c 144, 153
 iv, 7d 68, 144, 153
 iv, 8a 133

iv, 8c	107, 161	Ma'asrot	
v, 9a	63, 84, 158	ii, 49c	157, 159
vi, 10b	74, 159	ii, 49d	19
vi, 10c	159	Ma'aser Sheni	
vii, 11b	168	v, 56a	48
viii, 12c	40	Hallah	
ix, 12d	400	iv, 60b	90
ix, 14b	79, 325	Bikkurim	
Pe'ah		i, 64a	168
i, 16b	252	ii, 65a	229
vii, 20a–b	81, 419	Shabbat	
viii, 21b	64	i, 3c	132
Demai		i, 3d	372
i, 22a	36, 95, 132	ii, 4c	99
ii, 22c	34, 90, 131	ii, 5b	246
ii, 22d	137	iii, 6a	77
ii, 23a	156, 160	vi, 7d	69, 136, 146
iii, 23b	19	vi, 8a	259, 300
iii, 23c	168	vi, 8c	177
iv, 25d	168	vii, 9c	303
Kil'ayim		viii, 11a	157
vi, 30c	154, 227	xii, 13c	63
viii, 31b	163	xvi, 15c	135, 279
ix, 32b	34, 404	xvi, 15d	227
ix, 32c	94, 402, 419	xix, 17a	249
xi, 32b	349	'Eruvin	
Shevi'it		i, 19c	154, 227
iii, 21b	322	iii, 21b	300
iv, 35a	137, 186, 300, 321, 322	v, 22b	100, 238, 400
v, 35d	62, 156	v, 22c	303
vi, 36b	83, 158, 434	vi, 23c	63
vi, 36c	34, 38, 40, 62, 80, 90, 91, 124, 152, 158	viii, 25a	159
vi, 36d	35	ix, 25c	247, 296
vi, 37a	90, 92, 434	Pesahim	
vii, 36c	131	i, 27b	143, 168
viii, 38b	157, 159	i, 27c	436
ix, 38d	261	iii, 30b	54, 114, 158
Terumot		iv, 30d	89, 127, 148, 413, 422
viii, 46b	63	iv, 32b	183, 186
x, 47a	158	v, 32a	231, 372
		vii, 34a	73

x, 37b	90, 153	iii, 73d	106
x, 37d	104	iii, 74a	179
		iv, 75c	332
Yoma		Hagigah	
i, 38d	62	i, 75d	66
i, 38c	309	i, 76c	114
i, 39a	40	ii, 77b	229, 299, 332
		ii, 77d	111
Sheqalim		iii, 78d	70, 234, 240, 258, 261, 314, 328
v, 47a	237	iii, 79d	102
v, 48d	315	ix, 79d	138
v, 49b	64		
Sukkah		Mo'ed Qatan	
ii, 53a	148	iii, 81c	100, 423
iii, 54a	104, 106, 118		
v, 55b	258, 309	Yevamot	
Rosh haShanah		i, 3b	352, 410, 413, 423
i, 57b	57	ii, 4a	99
iv, 59c	121, 331	vii, 8a	35, 62, 80, 90, 124, 131, 152
iv, 59d	120	viii, 9a	249
vii, 59c	241	viii, 9d	143, 168
		xii, 12d	79, 327
Betzah		xii, 13a	35, 154
i, 60c	177, 300	Sotah	
iii, 62a	53	iii, 18d	66
iii, 62b	103	iv, 19c	368, 426
Ta'aniot		v, 20c	79, 325
ii, 66a	56	ix, 24a	28, 129, 329
iii, 66b	132	ix, 24c	266
iii, 66c	132		
iv, 68d	71, 201, 221, 222, 223, 251, 258, 268, 273, 274, 276, 283, 294, 295, 303, 311, 317	Ketubbot	
iv, 69a	222, 251, 258, 276, 283, 294, 303, 304, 308, 311, 313, 324	iv, 28d	25
iv, 69b	201, 310, 312	iv, 29b	226
iv, 69c	279	v, 30c	86
		xii, 35a	349, 404
		xii, 35b	419
Megillah		Nedarim	
i, 70b	56	vi, 40a	60, 369, 380, 387, 392
i, 71a	363, 394	vi, 40c	427
i, 72b	303	viii, 40d	56
ii, 73b	99, 311	Gittin	
		i, 43c	38, 90, 91, 169

I, 43d	293, 364, 389	ii, 41a	136, 321
v, 47b	128, 240	ii, 41d	372
vi, 48a	350	ii, 42a	99
ix, 50d	178	iii, 42c	55
Nazir		v, 44c	159
vii, 56a	68, 97, 279	v, 44d	95
vii, 56b	69	Horayot	
Qiddushin		iii, 47a	177
i, 60b	158	iii, 48c	55
i, 61d	434		
ii, 63a	389	Babylonian Talmud	
iii, 64a	293, 364	Berakhot	
iii, 64d	99, 372	6b	383
iv, 65c	143, 168, 352, 410, 413, 423	7b	69
Bava Qamma		8a	117
iii, 4b	148, 173	8b	425
vi, 6a	102	12a	134
vii, 6a	128	16b	55, 177
ix, 7b	274	17b	410
Bava Batra		19a	124
v, 15a	154	19b	104
ix, 17a	81	24b	397
x, 17c	156	27b	144, 153, 273
Sanhedrin		28a	144, 153
i, 18c	37, 61	28b	133, 144
i, 18d,	60, 61	30a	372
i, 19a	27, 60, 76, 328, 369, 380, 387, 392, 427	30b	137
i, 19b	175	31a	137
ii, 19d	177	37a	74, 153
iii, 21b	137, 156, 163, 185, 300, 321	38b	419
vi, 23c	111	42b	405
vii, 24b	179	47b	161, 168, 284, 331
viii, 26b	110, 368, 426	55a	110
x, 27c	252	57b	400
'Avodah Zarah		61b	79, 325, 326
i, 39d	87, 96, 127	62a	433
i, 40a	147	63a	369, 370, 380, 387, 392, 427
i, 40d	127	63b	69, 241, 314, 328, 369, 380, 387, 392, 427
ii, 40d	136, 321	Shabbat	
		21b	330, 420
		33b	240, 261
		34a	261

37b	415, 424	100a	90, 153
40a	77	101b	110
41a	397	116a	104
43a	415, 424		
43b	415, 424	Betzah	
46a	61, 80	5a	55
47b	159	11b	102
49a	332	16a	232
52b	228	16b	372
60a	259, 300	23a	124
115a	147	36a	415, 424
116a	135, 181		
116b	137, 181	Rosh haShanah	
125b	36	18b	56, 279, 317
130a	56, 163, 246, 247, 248, 296, 298, 323, 332	19a	298
145b	46, 310	21b	122
147b	18	22a	57
		23a	414
'Eruvin		24b	364, 395
3a	420	25a	37, 51, 61, 279, 425
6b	362, 395, 407	27a	227
13a	253	29b	19, 46, 120
21a	400	30b	52
29a	229	31a	34, 52
32b	142	31b	34, 55, 122, 123, 126, 167
34b	362	32b	121, 331
45a	362		
53b	58, 231	Yoma	
54b	81	11a	407
64b	147	20b	363
65a	372	39b	266
83a	430	54a	310
85a	430	72b	164
91a	247, 296	77a	414
Pesahim		Sukkah	
3b	368	11b	420
7a	436	12a	420
21b	436	26a	148
34b	232	28a	228
49a	58, 75, 111	41b	104, 106
49b	68, 140, 141	43b	419
50b	414	49a	104
51a	89, 148	49b	104
53a	124		
57a	309	Ta'anit	
62b	372	5a	281

14b	430	66b	86
18a	298	67a	86
20a	164	75a	232
20b	164, 362, 395	103b	34, 279
22a	364	104a	34
29a	255, 314, 317	106a	382
		110b	397
Megillah		111a	339, 365, 397, 398, 401,
5a	279		402, 411, 419
5b	279, 397	111b	82, 142, 346
6a	346, 403	112a	346, 403
11a	280		
26a	107	Nedarim	
27a	108	22a	416, 427
27b	81, 108	49b	232
28a	81	50a	68
29a	365, 395		
		Nazir	
Mo'ed Qatan		52a	50
12b	162, 438		
16a	158, 429	Sotah	
22a	351, 407	22a	161, 284, 331
		25a	368, 426
Hagigah		42a	230
3a	66	45a	229
5b	36	48a	130
22a	130	49b	136, 145, 314
22b	130		
26a	102	Gittin	
27a	110	10a	168
		14a	364
Yevamot		14b	364
17a	410	36a	132
62b	70	44a	126, 127
63a	433	55b	317
72a	249	56a	317
96b	147, 237	56b	18
108b	368	57a	201, 258, 283, 294, 303,
115b	433		311, 317
122a	312	57b	201, 222, 303, 311, 312
		58a	201, 303, 311
Ketubbot		59a	283, 430
11b	65	61a	399
17a	113	65b	350
21a	82	76b	84
49b	25	88b	181
62b	68, 69		
63a	68, 69		

Qiddushin		143a	39
20a	229	154a	78
33b	63, 162	155a	78
39b	333		
40b	54, 114	Sanhedrin	
49b	410	5a	429
69b	339, 365, 376, 401, 411	5b	158
70b	360, 410	11b	60
71a	339, 365, 401, 411	13b	70, 129, 180, 328
71b	339, 340, 343, 344, 351, 352, 366, 376, 401, 403, 405, 406, 409, 411, 422, 435	14a	27, 70, 129, 180, 261, 328
72a	340, 353, 366, 405, 426, 431	17b	315, 362
72b	245, 278, 410	19a	399
75b	169	25b	141
76a	168	26a	163, 186, 299
		32b	19, 56, 66, 227, 367, 385
		33a	50
Bava Qamma		38a	279
23b	420	59a	170
38a	148, 170	68a	246
43a	136	74a	54, 137, 321, 322
79b	128	88b	368, 426
80a	28, 129, 329	93b	222, 268, 272
83a	362	94a	267
97a	423	94b	70, 267
97b	423	95a	304, 306
103b	129	96b	80, 167
113a	173	97a	228
113b	173	97b	221, 278, 303, 310
117a	364	98b	161, 279
		99a	251
		Makkot	
Bava Metzi'a		14a	154
63a	126	24b	271
86a	382		
		Shevu'ot	
Bava Batra		6b	378
8a	40, 142, 165		
10b	170	'Avodah Zarah	
11a	422	3a	170
14a	104, 157	8b	129, 179, 180, 328
22a	395	10a	34, 49
56a	434	10b	245
58a	179	11b	37, 87
60b	252	13a	101
111a	164	15a	127
111b	164		

16b	135	Bekhorot	
17a	135	5a	56
17b	236, 313, 324	30b	137
18a	236, 313, 324	31a	137
19b	162		
21a	127	'Arakhin	
25b	236	30b	229
27b	136, 137, 321, 322		
34a	425	Temurah	
34b	92	15b	28, 129, 329
35a	127		
36a	254, 372	Karetot	
43b	364, 395	9a	122, 167
70a	138, 377	13b	399
70b	362		
		Me'ilah	
Horayot		17a	298, 332
3b	254		
10a	154	Niddah	
11b	279	5b	415, 427
13b	55, 371, 38	13a	395
		30b	433
Zevahim		34a	102
22b	62, 156	47b	61, 80
23a	62	61a	235
		68a	420
Menahot			
29b	73		
41b	55	Avot deRabbi Nathan	
97a	110	(ed. Schechter)	
110a	100		
		Version A	
Hullin		iii, 14–15	180, 273
4a	168	iv, 21–24	18, 171, 266
6b	34, 131	vi, 28–30	68
7b	36	xii, 55–56	161, 228
26b	397	xvii, 65	86
44a	82	xxv, 80–81	246
51a	425	xxvi, 87	251
56b	37, 61	xxxvi, 109	161
68b	415, 427	xxviii, 114–115	312
82a	165		
91b	154	Addition B to Version A	
92a	142	viii, 163	68
94a	107		
132b	398	Version B	
		v, 19	18

xii, 28–30 68
 xxvii, 56 161, 228
 xxix, 59 18
 xxxi, 66 266

Soferim
 (ed. Higger)

v, 15 161 147

Semahot
 (ed. Higger)

ii, 5 103–104 78
 ii, 13 103 51
 iv, 7 118 321
 iv, 12 125 68
 viii, 12 157 313, 324
 xi, 2 187 108
 xi, 6 189 113
 xii, 4 195 108
 xii, 5 195–196 103 108, 113
 xii, 13 199 236, 324
 xiv, 13 209 108

Mekhilta Aharite deEvel

ii, 3 231 112, 113, 253

Kallah Rabbati
 (ed. Higger)

ii, 14 209 142, 165

Derekh Eretz
 (ed. Higger)

iv, 2 114 329

Kutim
 (ed. Higger)

ii, 7 66 169

Seder ‘Olam Rabbah
 (ed. Ratner)

xxix 67a–b 310
 xxx 73a–74b 221, 272, 310

Seder ‘Olam Zuta
 (ed. Grossberg)

22–76 365
 35–45 349, 404
 47 366
 52 438
 72, 75 349, 404

(ed. Neubauer)

72 366

Megillat Ta’anit
 (ed. Noam)

128–130 Scholion
 to 28th Adar 298

Genesis Rabbah
 (ed. Theodor-Albeck)

iii, 4 22 40
 vii, 2 51 99
 xv, 7 140 92
 xvi, 3 145 347, 403
 xxiii, 3 305 429
 xxxiii, 3 306 349, 404
 xxxiii, 5 310 425
 xxxvii, 8 350 410, 413, 423
 xli, 4 409 183
 xlv, 23 446 434
 xlvi, 13 470 249
 xlvii, 9 477 87
 xlix, 6 504 310
 lx, 1 640 434
 lxi, 3 660 70
 lxiv, 7 710–712 85, 234
 lxv, 11 720–721 189
 lxx, 8 807 183

lxxiv, 1	857	402
lxxvi, 6	903	183
lxxvi, 8	906	36
lxxvii, 2	910	98
lxxviii, 5	923	63, 84, 158
lxxix, 6		
941–945		261
lxxx, 2		
969–972		35, 154
lxxxii, 8	984	329
lxxxviii, 6		
1084		183
xciv, 7		
1178–1179		63, 169
xciv, 9		
1184–1185		63
xcv (Vat. MS)		
1232		69
xcvii (שיטה חדשה)		
1220–1221		34, 52
c,10	1295	68

Exodus Rabbah

li, 5		219
-------	--	-----

Leviticus Rabbah

(ed. Margulies)

i, 1	4–5	163
iii, 6	68	433
ix, 3	176–178	142, 164
xvii, 2	349	160
xxi, 8	384–387	69
xxix, 2	670	310
xxix, 3	672	433
xxix, 12	686	120
xxx, 2		
694–695		119, 287
xxx, 12	709–71	142, 165
xxxii, 1	735	119, 255, 289, 296, 312, 323, 330, 332
xxxiv, 17	812	126
xxxv, 12		
830–831		50
xxxvii, 2		
861–862		147

Numbers Rabbah

iv, 20		119, 287
xiv, 4		66

Deuteronomy Rabbah

ii, 33		144, 168
iii, 3		40
iii, 13		219

(Lieberman [Oxford MS 147])

vaEthannan, 84		40
Egev, 8		260, 300
Egev, 89		219

Ecclesiastes Rabbah

vii, 7		18
ix, 9		157
x, 2		177
xi, 6		70

Canticles Rabbah

ii, 3		314
ii, 5		70, 241
ii, 8		183
ii, 13		228, 310
ii, 15		189
ii, 16		261, 303, 328
iii, 6		98
iii, 10		159
v, 12		106
v, 13		158
viii, 9		429

Lamentations Rabbah

Petikhta xii		106, 311
Petikhta xvii		301
Petikhta xxx		303
Petikhta xxxiv		310

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| i, 31 | 18 | (ed. Buber [Oxford MS 20]) |
| i, 45 | 257 | Hayyei-Sara, |
| i, 51 | 275 | viii 123 70 |
| ii, 4 | 71, 106, 201, 251, 268,
273, 275, 283, 284, 293,
294, 295, 303, 308, 311,
313, 317, 324 | Pequde, iii 128 219 |
| iii, 6 | 236, 324, 371 | Tzav, vii 17 154 |
| iv, 3 | 317 | Pequde, iii 128 219 |
| v, 18 | 271 | Yelamdenu haQadmon
(L. Ginzberg, Genizah Studies) |
| (Buber [Rome MS, Bibl. Casanatense
J.I.4]) | | i, 46–47 28, 129, 329 |
| Petikhta xii | | Pesiqta Rabbati
(ed. Friedmann) |
| 6a–b | 106, 311 | ii, 4b–5a 330 |
| Petikhta xxx, | | viii, 29b 65 |
| 17a | 303 | xv, 71b 183 |
| Petikhta xxxiv, | | xv, 75b 228 |
| 20a | 310 | xxix, 140a 86 |
| i, 16 41b | 234 | xxx, 142a 276 |
| ii, 2 50b | 311 | |
| ii, 2 51a | 268, 284, 303, 317 | |
| ii, 2 52a | 308 | |
| ii, 2 52b | 311, 313 | |
| ii, 2 50b–55a | 201, 221, | |
| ii, 2 51a | 71 | |
| ii, 2 51a | 268 | |
| ii, 2 51b | 274, 275 | |
| ii, 2 51b–52a | 276 | |
| ii, 2 52b | 258 | |
| iii, 9 63a | 48 | |
| iv, 2 71b–72a | 317 | |
| Esther Rabbah | | |
| iii, 7 | 261 | |
| vi, 1 | 55 | |
| Tanhuma | | |
| vaYera, x | 310 | |
| Hayyei-Sara, vi | 70 | |
| Pequde, iv | 219 | |
| Tzav, v | 35, 154 | |
| Ki Tavo, ii | 326 | |
| | | (ed. Buber) |
| | | xxvii, 176b 69 |
| | | Midrash Samuel
(ed. Buber) |
| | | x, 3 77 372 |
| | | xiii, 9 88 168 |

Midrash Psalms

(ed. Buber)

i, 19	19	45
ii, 5	26	289
xii, 5	109	296
xiii, 3	11	290
xxv, 13	214	56
ciii, 7	434–435	332
cvi, 3	454	55
cxxii,	508	102

Midrash Proverbs

(ed. Buber) [ed. Visotzky]

ix, 2	61–62	
	[67–69]	326
xv, 30	79–80	
	[125–126]	18

Genesis Rabbati

(ed. Albeck)

xvii, 1	73	254
xxii, 2	86	278

Midrash Canticles

(ed. Greenhut)

i, 5a	28, 129, 329
xii, 14a	65

Aggadat Bereshit

(ed. Buber)

xl, 3	82	188
-------	----	-----

Leqah Tov

(ed. Buber)

Exodus, xxvi		
136		296

Pirka deRabbenu haQadosh

(ed. Schönblum)

Bava de-Arba'ah,		
iv 21b	141, 165, 172	

Yalqut haMakhiri

(ed. Buber)

Isaiah		
3:13	29	329

Micah

3:12		271
------	--	-----

Zechariah

2:11		398
------	--	-----

Psalms

107:12	176	346
--------	-----	-----

Yalqut shim'oni

Genesis

(ed. Hyman-Shiloni)

62	229	410
82	341	249
112	534	85
133	663	84
136	700	329
161	844–845	34

Leviticus

(ed. Hyman-Shiloni)

587	560	170
611	594	66, 367

Deuteronomy

(ed. Hyman-Shiloni)

946	649–650	275, 276, 283, 284, 294
-----	---------	-------------------------

I Samuel

123		272
-----	--	-----

Isaiah
263 329
390 106

Ezekiel
347 414

Zechariah
581 296

Psalms
659 296

Canticles
982 86

Midrash HaGadol

Genesis
(ed. Margulies)
27:22 476 306
32:26 570 296
49:13 846 346

Pirqoi Ben Baboi (L. Ginzberg, Genizah Studies)

ii, 53 426
ii, 563 366

Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon (ed. Lewin)

p. 12 368
p. 13 71
p. 14 371
p. 59 399
p. 61 418
pp. 72–73 364, 365
p. 73 397
p. 74 363
p. 78 380
pp. 78–80 394
p. 82 362

Leviticus
(ed. Steinsaltz)
11:35 285 228
25:38 714 398, 411

Numbers
(ed. Rabinowitz)
17:2 282 414
36:6 602 306

Deuteronomy
(ed. Fisch)
6:3 125 82
8:10 175 306
26:9 589 80
28:52 621 312
28:52 623–624 283, 294, 306

Bet haMidrash (ed. Jellinek)

iv 146 314

Geonica

Iggeret Shenit

p. 125 181
p. 130 372

Rav Hai Gaon

Teshuvot Geonim Qadmonim

p. 61 274

Teshuvot haGeonim Harkavy I, 4

p. 141, §280 351, 406
p. 141, §285 341

Otzar haGeonim

Qiddushin, haTeshuvot
72a 178 366, 426

Miscellaneous

Maimonides – Mishne Torah		Responsa of R. Asher ben Yehiel (<i>R-O-SH</i>) (ed. Philippowski)	
Sefer Zemanim, Hilkhot Ta’aniot, v, 3	276	p. 51	438
Sefer Shofetim, Hilkhot Mela- khim, xi, 3	71, 276		Sefer Yohasin haShalem (ed. Philippowski)
Benjamin of Tudela (ed. Adler)		p. 159	438
65 p. 42	401		Sefer haDorot (ed. Maskil leEitan)
66 p. 43	401		
69 p. 46	397	p. 24	438

Greek and Latin Authors

Ammianus Marcellinus		Celsus Medicus	
<i>Res Gestae</i> xix, 11, 7	184	<i>De Medicina</i> vii, 25, 1	249
Appianus		Digesta	
<i>Syriacus Liber</i> 50, 252	203, 219	xxvii, 1:15:6	39
		xlviii, 8:4:2	244
		xlviii, 8:11	244
		l, 2:3:3	39
Cassius Dio		l, 15:1:3	92, 93
<i>Historia Romana</i>		l, 15:8:4	93
lxix, 11–15	239, 269		Fronto
lxix, 12	316		<i>De Bello Parthico</i>
lxix, 12,1–14,3, 15,1	202, 207, 221		2
lxix, 12, 2–3	257		203
lxix, 13, 3	258		
lxxi, 25, 1	190		

Josephus

Antiquitates Judaicae

iii, 244	118
xi, 133	356, 374
xiii, 127	48
xiv, 159	94, 159
xiv, 197	96
xiv, 202	299
xiv, 203,	96
xiv, 208	48
xiv, 227–228	187
xiv, 231–232	187
xiv, 275	48
xiv, 415,	261
xiv, 420–430	261
xiv, 422	261
xv, 342–348	262
xvi, 27–28	187
xvi, 60	187
xvi. 142–143	70
xvi, 162–165	187
xvii, 271–272	94
xviii, 4–11	94
xviii, 36–38	226
xviii, 261–268	90, 226
xviii, 277–309	356, 357
xviii, 310–379	394
xviii, 311–314	427
xviii, 312	356, 385
xviii, 314–379	358, 374, 384
xix, 211	96
xix, 238–240	187
xix, 335–337	96
xx, 17–96	374, 384, 421
xx, 34–35	412
xx, 102	94
xx, 118–124	261
xx, 130	48
xx, 179–181	309
xx, 205–214	309

Bellum Judaicum

i, 204	94
i, 305	261
i, 309–313	261
i, 398–400	262
i, 422	96

ii, 56	94
ii, 117	94
ii, 128–142	109
ii, 232–235	261
ii, 241–245	48
ii, 447	94
ii, 515–516	47
ii, 567	48
ii, 573	156
ii, 588	94
ii, 592	97
iii, 29,	85
iii, 39–40,	93
iii, 55	49
iii, 64–69	85
iii, 409	85
iv, 130	316
iv, 443–444	49, 52, 316
vi, 288–309	266
vii 216	23, 127

Vita

62–63	226
188	156

Livy

Ab Urbe Condita

xliiii, 1:17	210
--------------	-----

Modestinus

Regulae (apud: *Digesta*)

vi	244
----	-----

Pausanias

Graeciae Descriptio

i, 5, 5	203
---------	-----

Philo

Legatio ad Gaium

xxxii, 216	357
------------	-----

De Migratione Abrahami
xcii 251–252

De Specialibus Legibus
ii, 188 120
ii, 204–209 118

Pliny the Elder

Naturalis Historia
(ed. Ian – Mayhoff)
v, 17, 76 98
v, 69–70 32, 49
vi, 32, 145–146 411
vi, 32, 154–155 436

Plutarch

Quaestiones Convivales
vi, 6, 2 118

Scriptores Historiae Augustae

Vita Hadriani
4, 2 202, 243

Strabo

Geographica
xvi, 2, 23 98
xvi, 2, 25 98

Tacitus

Historiae
v, 4, 1 244

Vegetius

Epitoma rei militaris
(ed. Önnersfors)
i, v, 1 15 189

Christian Authors

Chronicon Paschale
(ed. Dindorf)

1, 3–9 474 87, 221

Epiphanius

Panarion Haeresium
(ed. Holl)
xxix, 9, 1 133
xxx, 12, 2 347 237

Eusebius

Chronica Hadr.
(ed. Schöne)
xvi ii, 1 221

Onomasticon
(ed. Klostermann)

6, 17–20 43
14, 18–20 42
20, 10 44
24, 3–5 41
28, 22–24 45
34, 8–10 45
36, 1–3 314
62, 8 42
62, 13–16 314
70, 10–11 70
72, 18–21 42
78, 5–7 45
78, 8–11 44
102, 7–10 42
102, 23–25 42
104, 13–18 42
108, 5–7 45

116, 20–22	45
130, 21–22	44
136, 16–17	44
138, 24–25	45
140, 1–2	45
140, 3–5	45
156, 23–24	42
158, 11–12	45
158, 13–14	45
160, 13–14	41
168, 16	44

Historia Ecclesiastica

iv, 5, 2	219
iv, 6 (GCS 9, p. 306)	200, 221, 222, 277, 304, 306,
v, 12	219

Demonstratio Evangelica

vi, 18, 10	219
------------	-----

Jerome

In Habacuc

(PL vol. xxv, col. 1363; CCSL lxxvi A, p. 610)	
2, 1	65

In Ieremiam

(PL vol. xxiv, col. 877; CCSL lxxvi, p. 307)	
31:15	88

In Joel

I, 4	221
------	-----

In Zachariam

(PL xxv, col. 1547; CCSL lxxvi A, p. 820)	
ii, 8:18–19	318
(PL. xxv col. 1573, CCSL lxxiv A. col. 851)	
11:4–5	88

In Daniele

(CCSL lxxv, p. 889)	
9:24–27	303

Apologia adversus Libros Rufini

(PG xxiii, col. 480)	
iii, 31	222

John Chrysostom

Homilia Adversus Judaeos

PG xlvi, col. 845	243
-------------------	-----

Justin Martyr

Dialogus cum Tryphone

46	284
----	-----

Origenes

Epistula ad Africanum

14, PG xi	
pp. 82–84	176

Arabic Literature

Abu l-Fida'

Kitab taqwim al-buldan

169	348
-----	-----

al-'Ali, S. A.

Al-Mada'in fi l-masadir l-arabiyya

51–52	440
-------	-----

al-A'sha

Diwan

(ed. M. Husayn)

nos. 25,3; 55,35 350

al-Baladhuri

Ansab al-ashraf

(ed. S. D. Goitein)

v, 297 344

Futuh al-Buldan

(ed. M. de Goeje)

254 349

275 440

Bakri

Mu'jam ma sta'jam

(ed. Mustafa al-Saqqā)

s.v. Anbar 354

s.v. Baniqia 347, 348, 403

s.v. Nahrawan 352

al-Dahabi

Tadhkirat al-huffaz

i, 92–93 400

al-Dimashqi, Shams al-Din

*Nukhbat al-dahr fi 'aja'ib al-barr
wa-l-bahr*

(ed. A. Mehren)

94 348

Hamza al-Isfahani

Ta'rikh sini muluk al-ard

(ed. I. Gottwaldt)

52 341, 348, 440

al-Himyari

al-Rawd al-mi'tar fi khabar al-aqtar

(ed. Ihsan Abbas)

s.v. Baniqia 403

s.v. Iraq 354

s.v. Maysan 410, 435

s.v. 'Ukbara 342, 348, 352

Hudud al-alam

(ed. V. Minorsky)

140 342

Ibn 'Abd al-Haqq al-Baghdadi

*Marasid al-ittila 'ala asma' al-amkina
wa-l-biqā'*

(ed. Ali Muhammad al-Bijawi)

s.v. Awana 342, 352

s.v. Shilj 436

Ibn Abi Usaybi'a

Tabaqat al-atibba',

(ed. A. Müller)

77 345

Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani

Kitab al-buldan(ed. M. de Goeje, *BGA* V)

161–162 354

Ibn Hawqal

Kitab surat al-ard

(ed. J.H. Kramers)

208–209 354

Ibn Khurradadbiḥ

Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik
(ed. M. de Goeje)

6; 12 342
173 354

Ibn Qutayba

'Uyun al-akhbar

i, 214 354

Ibn Rusta

al-A'laq al-nafisa

(ed. de Goeje, *BGA* VII)

90 352

Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi

Kitab al-jughrafiya

(ed. Isma'il al-Arabi)

156 354

Idrisi

*Kitab nuzhat al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq
al-afaq*

vi, 658 342

Istakhri

Kitab masalik al-mamalik

(ed. M. de Goeje, *BGA* I)

71–72 354

al-Mas'udi

Kitab al-tanbih wa-l-ishraf,

(ed. M. de Goeje, *BGA* VIII)

53–54 410

Muruj al-dhahab wa-ma'adin al-jawhar
(ed. C. Pellat)

[=ed. E. Barbier de Meynard &
Pavet de Courteille]

i, 53 352

i, 39 354

i, 117–120 [= i,

215–223] 348, 403

i, 265 [=ii, 115] 400

Mustaw

*The Geographical Part of Nuzhat al
Qulub*

(ed. G. Le Strange)

ii, 44 400

Nasr b. Muzahim

Kitab Siffin

(ed. Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun)

126–127 349, 404

Nuwayri

Nihayat al-arab fi funun al-adab

267 348

Qazwini

Athar al-bilad wa-akhbar al-'ibad

304 400

464 344, 435

Qudama

Kitab al-kharaj

(ed. M. de Goeje)

238, (and cf.

p. 235) 342

252 354

al-Qurtubi

al-Masalik wa-l-mamalik
MS Nur Osmaniya,
fol. 59a 400

Sam'ani

Kitab al-ansab
(ed. D.J. Margoliouth)
s.v. 'Ukbari 342

al-Samhudi

*Kitab wafa' al-wafa bi-akhbar dar al-
mustafa*
(ed. Muhammad Muhyi al-Din 'Abd
al-Hamid)
iv, 1256 343, 435

Shabushti

Diyarat
(ed. Kurkis Awwad)
97 341

Suhrab

Kitab 'aja'ib al-aqalim al-sab'a
(ed. h.v. Mzik)
118 341, 352

Susa, A.

*Rayy Samarra fi 'ahd al-khilafa al-
abbasiyya,*
192–194 341

Tabari

Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk,
(ed. Muhammad Abu I-Fadl Ibrahim)
[ed. M. de Goeje]
iii, 461, 464–465
[=i, 2185; 2190–1] 349, 405
iii, 472 [=i, 2201] 405
vi, 590 [=iii, 10–12] 344
vii, 410; 412 [=ii, 1395] 342
ix, 321; 325 [=iii, 1605–6;
1612] 351, 405

al 'Umani

Masalik al-absa
(ed. Ahmed Zaki Basha)
i, 232 400

Ya'qubi

Kitab al-buldan,
(ed. M. de Goeje)
309 348
309 403

Yaqut

Mu'jam al-buldan
s.v. Anbar 354
s.v. Bajisra 352
s.v. Baniqia 403
s.v. Bait Farit 344
s.v. Dimimma 405
s.v. Famiya 410, 435
s.v. Firuzsabar 407
s.v. Hira 403
s.v. Iraq 342, 343, 347, 348, 351,
352, 354
s.v. Jukha 353
s.v. Manazir 354
s.v. Shumia 404
s.v. Shilj 437

al-Zabidi

Taj al-'arus,

s.v. Nqy

403

General Index*

- Abba *see* Avuha diShemuel
 Abba (Ba), R. 418, 422
 Abba of Akko, R. 92
 Abba bar Bar Hana, R. *see* Rabbah b. Bar Hana
 Abba bar Hana, R. *see* Rabbah bar Bar Hana
 Abba Saul b. Botnit 103
 Abba bar Rav Yitzhaq 100
 Abba Yose Choliqofri 227
 Abbahu, R. *see* Caesarea
 Abbaye 345, 353, 365, 397, 381, 398, 418, 420, 433, 438
 Abbin (Abbin), R. 228, 287, 322, 418, 419, 420
 Abraham 251, 252, 347, 348, 403, 404, 434
 Acha *see* Aha
 Achi *see* Ahi
 Achziw *see* Keziv
 Acrabbitene 31, 32, 41
 Acrabeta 31, 32, 41
 Acre *see* Akko
 Ada bar Maniume, Rav 362, 422
 Addara 41
 Aden 350
 Adiabene / Hadyav 366, 374, 384, 411, 412, 421, 422, 423, 426, 427, 429
 – Hananiah (merchant) 412, 421–422
 – Helena, queen of 412, 421
 – Izates 412, 421–422
 – Monobazus II 422
 – *see also* Conversion
 Aelia Capitolina *see* Bar Kokhba revolt
 Afeq 70
 Agama, ford of 354
 Agnatus 175
agoranomos see Markets
 Agriculture and Farmers 80–82, 127–129, 132, 157, 186
 – artichokes 430
 – cattle, large 25, 127
 – cattle, small 128–129, 130
 – cedar 317
 – chickens 256
 – cistern 307
 – cock 57
 – *coloni* 186
 – corn fields 104, 157, 388, 393
 – dates 18, 153
 – *etrogim* 285–287
 – figs 132
 – flax 98
 – goats 82, 130
 – grapes 80, 132
 – honey (figs) 346
 – lupine 99
 – millstones 307
 – olive groves 132, 157, 159, 160
 – orchards 157, 162
 – palms 285
 – peasants 209
 – pigeons (*columbarium*) 307
 – threshing floor 306
 – vegetables 81, 92, 150
 – vineyards 55, 81, 146, 157, 341
 – wheat 96, 285, 436
 – *see also* R. Yannai; Food
 Agrippa I 95, 96, 187, 262
 Agrippa II 96, 103, 262
 Aha, R. 61
 Aha, (of Hutsal), Rav 399
 Ahi beRabbi Joshiah, R. 364
 Ahijah 387, 389, 390
 Ailath / Ailam 43
 ‘Ain Arrub *see* ‘Ein Arrub
 ‘Akhbara / ‘Akbara 156, 160–162, 165
akhsaniah see Taxation
 Akiba *see* ‘Aqiva, R.

* b. = ben; R. = Rabbi

- Akko / Ptolemais 83–92, 93, 97, 98, 147, 155, 215
- centurial stone 86
 - *colonia* 38, 83, 86, 92, 93
 - crossroad and port city 63, 66, 83–85, 93, 158, 234, 236, 238
 - idolatry 83, 86, 87
 - impurity 91
 - *midbaha (nitbara)* 86, 87
 - mixed population city 35, 83, 90, 91
 - and Rabban Gamaliel 88, 147, 148, 153, 230, 231
 - and Rabbi Judah haNasi 34–40, 90–92
 - veterans 37, 83, 85, 86, 91, 92
 - *see also* Urbanisation; Boundaries: *tehume Eretz Israel*
- Alexa 50
- Alexandrians, Synagogue of 106
- Alush 430
- Amaziah (priest of Bet El) 419
- 'amei haAretz* 166, 172, 191, 284, 331
- and commandments 102, 131, 138–140, 150, 160, 161, 191, 292
 - and Torah Study 68, 72, 111, 140, 141, 142, 143, 161, 163, 165, 180
- Ammi, R. 81, 159, 418
- Ammianus Marcellinus 184
- Ammonites 166, 171, 430
- Amos 171, 258, 419
- Amulets 330, 332
- Ananias *see* Hananiah (merchant)
- 'Anat / 'Ana* 361
- Anbar / Pumbedita *see* Pumbedita
- angaria see* Taxation
- Anilaeus *see* Hanilai
- Animals 154
- bear 175
 - cock 57
 - chickens 256
 - donkeys 285
 - fox 271
 - goats 279
 - horse 26, 86, 370, 387, 391
 - large cattle 25, 127
 - leopard 175
 - lion 175
 - ostriches 243
 - ox 173, 175
 - panther 175
 - pigeons 307
 - pigs 243
 - sheep 347–348
 - small cattle 128–130
 - snake 175, 276
 - wolf 175
- Antioch 85, 234, 372
- Antiochus Epiphanes 250, 298, 320
- Antipatris 33, 34, 47, 49, 50, 70
- Antonine dynasty 244, 320, 391
- Antoninus *see* Caracalla
- Antoninus Pius 220, 244, 245, 297
- Apamea 85, 343, 352–355, 362, 409, 410, 434–441
- Apameia (on the Orontes) 434
- Aphaerema 31, 48
- Aphrodite / Venus 88, 89, 137, 149, 153, 231
- Apollodorus of Damascus 203, 221
- Appian 203, 219
- 'Aqiva, R.* 27, 50, 53, 54, 66–82, 89, 135, 142, 145, 148, 153, 154, 161, 169, 173, 175, 180, 216, 241, 245, 246, 247, 253, 270–272, 315, 320, 368, 387, 388, 426
- and Bar Kokhba 67, 171, 181, 201, 216, 221–223, 230, 270, 271, 275, 277, 278, 284, 290, 294, 302
 - Beni Beraq 57, 66–82, 326, 385
 - descendant of Sennacherib 80
 - his journeys 370, 388, 391, 394, 425,
 - Lod 56, 57, 74, 78
 - martyr 71, 79, 325, 327
 - Passover 57, 67, 73, 71–77, 82, 125, 126, 151, 272, 290
 - in prison 79, 325, 326, 327, 368
 - his pupils 67, 69, 70, 71, 236, 253, 327–329, 368, 369, 426
 - and Samaritans 74, 144, 150, 169
 - his wife 67–68
 - Yavneh 71, 74
 - *see also* Bene Beraq
- 'Aqiva from Mesene, Rav* 415
- Aqra deTulbanqe 84, 344, 346, 354, 355, 403, 405
- Aquileia (Italy) 187, 210
- Arabia, province 35, 206, 268, 345, 436

- Arabian Peninsula 348, 350, 376, 411, 440
 Arabs 26, 275, 307, 400
 Aramaic *see* Nabatean
 Araw ('Arabe) 227–228
arbba'at haminim 17, 104, 105, 119, 120, 223, 255, 285–289, 294, 323, 330, 331
 Arbel 42, 261, 280
 Arbela (across the Jordan) 42
archontes 309
 Ardeshir *see* Be Ardeshir
 Argiza *see* Be Argiza
 'Aris *see* Bet 'Aris
 Ariston 434
 Ark of the Covenant 287
 Armenia 439
arnona (annona militaris) *see* Taxation
 Arqelis *see* Maximian (Herculius)
 Artabanus III 358, 374
 Asher ben Yehiel 438
 Ashi, Rav 399, 415, 424
 Ashqelon / Ascalon 42, 67, 84, 96
 – and Rabban Gamaliel 88, 89, 149, 152, 155
 – idolatry 87
 – mixed population city 34, 88, 152
 – purification of 34, 35, 36, 61, 62, 80, 90, 125, 132
 – Tsrifá 86
 – *see also* Urbanisation; Boundaries: *tehume Eretz Israel*; Commandments
 Asia 18, 75, 314, 434
 Asinaeus *see* Hasinai
 Asinius Quadratus 396
 Aspamia 433–435, 439–441
 Assi, R. 159, 418
 Assi, Rav 397, 398, 415, 424
 Assyrians 391
 Asuru 67
 Atonement, the Day of *see* *Yom Kippur*
 Augustus 186, 187, 262
aurum coronarium *see* Taxation
aurum tironicum *see* Taxation
av bet din 255, 289, 371, 388, 389
 Av, 9th of 279, 308, 309, 317, 319
 Avidius Cassius 190
 Avimi of Be Hozai 415, 416, 427
 Avina, R. 350
 Avira, Rav 425
 Avtalyon 80, 167
 Avuha diShemuel 364, 372, 395
 Awana (Tulul Wana) 84, 340–342, 354, 355, 362
 Ba, R. *see* Abba
 Ba'al Bek *see* Heliopolis
 Ba'al Hatzor 234
 Ba'alat 60
 Babatha 30, 32, 173, 197, 205, 215
 – *see also* Judaeen Desert; Bar Kokhba revolt
 Babylon 380, 400, 401
 – *see also* Idolatry
 Babylonia *see* Diaspora
 Babylonian academies *see* *Yeshivot*
 Babylonian Talmud *see* Talmud, Babylonian
 Bagda 340, 341
 Baghdad 340, 341, 345, 352, 366, 406, 407, 426, 441
 Bait Farit 344
 Bajisra (Bab Kisra) 353
 Balkan 304
 Banaah, R. 179
 Banditry 71, 207, 212, 235, 236, 261, 262, 324
 Banighya *see* Nighya / Banighya
 Baniqia / Tarbiqna 344, 345, 347, 348, 350, 403, 406, 407
 Bar Daroma 283, 294
 Bar Kokhba Revolt 2, 3, 6, 256, 257, 310, 316, 322
 – sources 23, 24, 197–208, 214, 243
 – prior unrest 21, 85, 174, 209–217, 235
 – ban on circumcision 6, 200, 202, 209, 211, 243–255, 323
 – Aelia Capitolina 6, 38, 92, 199, 206, 209–211, 217, 220, 239, 255, 269, 281, 309
 – Bar Kokhba 6, 33, 120, 200–202, 206, 212, 214, 220–223, 236, 239, 251, 268, 270, 271, 273–276, 283–285, 288, 293–295, 301, 317, 378
 – messianism 6, 71, 200–222, 251, 256, 268, 270, 271, 275–277, 279, 280, 378, 379

- *Nasi* 117, 221, 277, 280
- letters and documents 2, 7, 15, 30, 173, 198, 206, 219, 221, 222, 239, 240, 274, 275, 277, 285, 286, 288, 293, 294, 331
- and commandments 283–302
- geographical scope 6, 33, 71, 200–202, 206, 208, 210, 216–218, 232, 255, 258, 285, 286, 304, 305, 318
- Samaritans 144, 168, 169, 202, 203, 274, 303
- Roman forces 25, 203, 212, 214, 217, 220, 256, 257, 268, 304, 307, 308
- coins 2, 120, 197, 205–207, 210, 211, 218, 219, 221, 274, 288, 295, 307, 331
- subterranean hideouts 2, 198, 206–208, 217, 256–262
- refuge caves 2, 198, 206–208, 223, 257–261, 275, 277, 284
- repressive legislation 2, 6, 54, 68, 79, 120, 127, 142, 144, 216, 223, 224, 236, 241, 245–250, 252, 254, 255, 259–260, 289, 290, 291, 296–300, 311–313, 321–324, 326–333, 366, 368, 369, 385, 386, 418
- martyrdom / martyrs 6, 54, 66, 68, 79, 130, 180, 224, 258, 296–298, 313, 320–333
- aftermath 26, 46, 59, 65, 87, 88, 101, 101, 127, 132, 180, 181, 218, 223, 241, 257, 258–260, 278, 281, 306, 311, 316, 318, 326–333, 384–386, 402, 417, 418, 426, 428
- *see also* Betar; Herodium; Markets; *Sandal mesumar*; R. Aqiva; Jerusalem; *Ma'asrot*; Christians / Christianity; *Taqqanot*; Commandments
- Barnaba 23, 30
- Barnesh (Khan Birnus) 400
- Bar Qamtsa 317
- Bar Qappara 62
- Bashan 430
- Bastard 375, 430
- Batei Midrash*
 - Babylonia 66, 367–373, 380, 382, 385–387, 390, 391, 397, 399, 426
 - Palestine 1, 3, 50, 53, 55–57, 61, 62, 64, 66, 67, 69–70, 72, 76, 79, 82, 84, 104, 106, 113, 118, 126, 131, 145, 147, 151, 153, 156–158, 161, 165, 166, 171, 179, 184, 227, 231, 232, 296, 310, 380, 383, 385, 386, 411, 412, 417, 419, 420, 429
- Phoenice 100
- Rome 66, 367
- Batanea 31
- Baths / Bathhouses 56, 63, 77, 89, 137, 149, 152, 153, 231
- Batyra *see* Bene Betera
- Baytos b. Zonin 57, 72, 151
- Be Ardeshir 345
- Be Argiza 345
- Be'er-Sheva 70
- Be Hozai 353, 411, 412, 415, 416, 427
- Be Kube 345, 346
- Be Mikhse 346
- Be Perat *see* Gishra deBe Perat
- Ben Aflul 240
- Ben Azai 229, 284, 315
- Ben Hakhinai 315
- Ben Kalba Savua 67, 68
- Ben Meir 392
- Ben Pazzi 63
- Ben Zaza 51
- Ben Zoma 315
- Bene Betera 17, 19, 121
- Benei Beraq 66–82
 - descendants of Haman 80, 167
 - identification 67
 - R. Aqiva's *Bet Midrash* 5, 57, 64, 66, 67, 70–74, 76, 326, 327, 367, 385
 - and Rabbi 36, 80, 81
 - visits by sages 77, 80–82
 - *see also* R. Aqiva; *batei Midrash*
- Benjamin the *centenarios* 187
 - *see also* Roman army
- Benjamin of Tudela 396, 401
- Beror Hayil 19, 66, 367, 385
- Beruria *see* Bruriah
- Berytus / Beirut 87, 91
- Bet Alpha 288
- Bet 'Anat 228
- Bet 'Aris 51
- Bet Dagan / Bit Dagan 67, 125
- Bet Din see Bet haVa'ad*
- Bet El in Judah / Bethel 257

- Bet Geludah 51
- Bet Guvrin / Eleutheropolis 33–35, 37, 42, 49, 62, 90, 132, 150, 204, 205, 305
– *see also* Urbanisation; Boundaries: *tehume Eretz Israel*
- Bet Hillel 267
- Bet Horon 258
- Bet haKerem Valley 228
- Bet Liqia *see* Kefar Leqitaia
- Bet Midrash see* Batei Midrash
- Bet Netofah Valley 227, 234, 258
- Bet Nitza 51, 54, 55, 320, 323
- Bet Rimmon Valley 234, 240, 258, 314, 328
- Bet Saida 95, 99
- Bet Shammai 132, 213, 267, 273
- Bet Shean / Scythopolis 2, 15, 238, 306, 423
– mixed population city 2, 35–36
– and Rabbi Judah haNasi 34, 35, 38, 62, 91
– idolatry 38, 91
– *see also* Urbanisation; Boundaries: *tehume Eretz Israel*
- Bet She'arim 34, 35, 66, 154, 155, 227, 233, 349, 367, 385, 402, 404, 416, 424
– *see also* R. Judah haNasi; Burial
- Bet haVa'ad* 36, 52, 54, 63, 68, 154, 155, 162, 171, 223, 225, 227, 231, 234, 240, 241, 258, 268, 280, 316, 317, 328, 367, 375, 391, 392
– Yavneh 1, 3, 5, 13, 14, 18, 121, 138, 145, 273, 324, 367
– Lod 5, 47, 51, 54, 56, 58, 60, 61, 67, 73–76, 234, 316, 321, 322, 367
– Betar 216, 234, 313–316, 318
– Ushah 34, 52, 55, 70, 90, 149, 155, 174, 225, 230, 238, 240, 241, 278, 289, 310, 313, 322, 328, 329, 357, 367, 388, 428
– Shefaram 27, 28, 34, 52, 328, 329
– Bet She'arim 34, 367
– Sephories 34, 84, 157, 158, 389, 429
– Tiberias 34, 52, 111, 158, 159, 229, 415, 418, 424
– relations with the patriarch 145, 146
– patriarchate, separation of 34, 62, 156, 158
– *see also* R. Judah haNasi; Leadership institutions
- Betar (Battir) 2, 6, 201, 203, 205, 216, 223, 251, 258, 274, 284, 294, 301–319, 324
– agriculture 306, 307
– archaeological finds 204, 205, 304–308
– – *balistra's* stone 307
– – catapult stones 308
– – slingstones 308
– – wall and towers 204, 307, 318
– leadership institutions 67, 215, 316
– Patriarch's family 213, 215, 216
– Roman army 273, 307, 311, 312
– – *charqom* 312
– – inscription 304
– *see also* Education
- Bethlehem 2, 27, 258, 275, 285, 305
- Bevai, Rav 433, 437
- Biq'at Rimmon *see* Bet Rimmon Valley
- Birat 'Araba *see* Qiryat 'Arbayah
- Birat Malka (near Bethlehem)
- Birqa 430
- Birta deSatya 431
- Body-guards 177
- Bonyos 430
- Borsif 87, 88
- Bostra 35
- Botna, *see* Markets
- boule* 24, 30, 39, 40, 173, 176, 300
- Boundaries of
– Eretz Israel
– – *tehume Eretz Israel* 3, 37, 38, 83, 84, 87, 92, 101, 152, 288, 372, 402
– – *baraita de tehumin* 37, 38, 101
– – Rehov inscription 101
– – *gevulot hahavtahah see Burial*
– – *see also* Commandments; *Shevi'it; Ma'asrot; Taqqanot*; Eretz Israel
– Babylonia Judaica
– – genealogical boundaries 339–355, 405, 431, 435, 439, 441
– – eastern border: the Tigris 340
– – western border: the Euphrates 376
– – north eastern border on the Tigris 340–343
– – south eastern border on the Tigris 343–344, 376, 409–410, 434

- – north western border on the Euphrates 344–346, 377
- – south western border *see* Burial
- – *see also* Purity of lineage; map III, 337; Burial
- Britain 203, 318, 268
- Bruriah 58, 231
- Bun, R. *see* Abbin
- burgarii* 27
- burgi 26–27, 238, 400
- Burial 2, 50, 51, 348, 397, 398, 402–408, 428
 - bringing the dead to Eretz Israel 349, 402, 404, 406, 407, 416, 419, 422, 424
 - burial on the west bank of the Euphrates 348, 349, 351, 352, 406
 - *gevulot hahavtahah* 340, 347, 349, 350–352, 403, 404, 406–408
 - cemeteries 97, 99, 348, 349, 351, 402–404, 406–408, 416, 424
 - *mitzvot* and customs 50, 68, 78, 79, 97, 99, 103, 104, 108, 112, 113, 271, 279, 306, 350, 386, 406–407
 - inscriptions 349, 402, 404, 416, 424, 349
 - *see also* Boundaries; Hai Gaon, Rav; Eretz Israel; Diaspora
- Busra 341
- Buzurg Sabur *see* ‘Ukbara

- Cabanus *see* *Sukkot*
- Caesarea 2, 15, 47, 49, 92, 97, 148, 179
 - provincial capital 38, 44
 - Roman governor, seat of 63, 85, 95, 158, 177, 179
 - Rabbi Judah haNasi 34–40, 62, 90, 132
 - ‘*rabbanan deQisrin*’ 63, 156, 158, 179
 - Rabbi Abbahu 50, 54, 144, 158, 177, 179, 387, 413, 418
 - *see also* Eusebius, Bishop of; Redaction; Urbanisation; Boundaries: *tehume Eretz Israel*
- Calendar 17, 379, 380, 387, 389–392
 - proclamation of the month 16, 37, 60, 61, 110, 121, 279, 370, 380, 387
 - intercalation of the year 37, 60, 61, 79, 328, 363, 364, 369–370, 384–394, 424, 425, 427, 428
- *see also* Patriarch / Patriarchate; Exilarch; *Bet haVa’ad*; R. Aqiva; Av, 9th of; R. Hananiah son of R. Joshua’s brother
- Caligula 199, 356
- Canatha / el-Qanawat (inscription) 262
- Caparcotna *see* Kefar ‘Otnai
- Caracalla / Marcus Aurelius Antoninus 34, 39
- Cardava (Arabia) 436
- Cassius 49, 53
- Cassius Dio 24, 190, 200, 202, 203, 209, 210, 214, 216, 217, 219, 222, 223, 239, 243, 255–257, 269
- Caves 261, 262
- Celsus 249
- centurion 46, 187
- Césarée *see* Caesarea
- Cestius Gallus 47, 48, 64
 - *see also* Jewish War
- Chalafta *see* Halafta
- Chaldeans 391
- Chama *see* Hama
- Chammaiten *see* Bet Shammai
- Chana *see* Hana
- Chanan *see* Hanan
- Chananja *see* Hananiah
- Chanilai *see* Hanilai
- Chanina *see* Hanina
- Chanukka *see* *Hamukkah*
- Charax Spasinou *see* Spasinou
- Charity 54, 108, 113–144, 170, 171, 266
 - comforting of mourners 54, 107, 108, 112–114
 - family celebrations 54, 103, 107–109, 112, 114, 252, 253
 - *se’udat mitzvah* 109–113
 - Torah study or action 54, 72, 113, 114, 166
 - visits to the sick 104, 106, 107
 - *see also* Haverim / *Havurot*; *Hasidim*; R. Yannai; Meals; *Batei Midrash*; Jerusalem: *qehala qadisha*
- Chasinai *see* Hasinai
- Chassidim *see* *Hasidim*
- Chaverim *see* *Haverim*
- Chawiw *see* Haviv

- Chemouel *see* Shemuel
 Chija *see* Hiyya
 China 348
 Chirbet *see* Hirbet
 – *see also* Khirbet
 Chisda *see* Hisda
 Chorazin *see* Korazin
 Christianity / Christians 1, 2, 64, 77,
 109, 134–136, 138, 142, 144, 181, 197,
 225, 263, 265–267, 280, 281, 284, 311,
 312, 375, 400, 421
 – *minim see* Prayer
 – and Bar Kokhba 210, 219, 268, 277
 – *see also* Jeuses; Medicin; Bar Kokhba
 Revolt
 Chusistan *see* Khuzistan
 Chuzpit, R. *see* Huzpit
 Cilicia 184, 190
 Circumcision 16, 56, 99, 111, 112, 166,
 167, 243–255, 289, 296–298, 323
 – *epispasmos* operation 249–251
 – *meshukhim* 249–252
 – *peria'a* 249
 – *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt
 City territories *see* Urbanisation
 Claudius 83, 356
 Closing *see* Redaction
 Codex Theodosianus 16:8:24 187
 – *see also* Roman legislation
 Coins 2, 15, 84, 93, 97, 98, 120, 215, 237,
 288, 307, 309
 – *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt; Jewish
 War
coloni see Landownership
colonia 3, 36, 38, 40, 49, 83–87, 91–93,
 210, 269, 309, 426
 – *ius italicum* 92
 – *see also* *Duovirat*, Urbanisation
 Comes 46
 Commandments
 – related to the produce of the Land of
 Israel 16, 34–40, 62, 72, 74, 84, 91,
 92, 101, 108, 144, 150, 222, 223, 226,
 377, 388
 – social implications 108, 132, 159, 161,
 163
 – *see also* *Ma'asrot*; *Shevi'it*; *Taqqanot*;
 R. Judah haNasi
 Concordia (Italy) 187
conductores see Landownershship
 Constantine 184
 Constantius II 184
 Conversion / Converts 80, 121, 123, 172,
 244, 274, 384, 412, 421, 422
 Cordoba 433, 436
 Cosmus 187
 Cremona 210
 Crown tax *see aurum coronarium*
 Ctesiphon, Parthian capital 357, 358,
 360, 361, 380, 381, 440
 Cypros fort 257
 Cypros river / Wadi Qelt 257
 Damascus 434
 Dan 70
 Daniel, synagogue of 280, 400, 401
 Daniel's den 400
Darom see South
Daroma 70
 David, house of 120, 198, 270, 271,
 274, 275, 279, 286, 295, 365, 378,
 379
 Dead Sea *see* Judaeen Desert and
 Dead Sea
decapitatio 255
 Deineus *see* Elazar b. Dinai
 Demetrius II 31, 48
 Diaspora 1–3, 7, 73, 85, 100, 116, 118,
 153, 166, 167, 174, 197, 198, 214, 223,
 264, 310, 348, 356, 367, 373, 374, 394,
 395, 404, 438
 – and Bar Kokhba Revolt 213, 216, 232,
 255, 348, 367, 373, 375, 378, 379, 384,
 385, 399, 403, 417, 421, 428
 – Babylonia and Eretz Israel, rela-
 tions 2, 66, 82, 271, 339, 349, 353,
 358, 367–370, 373, 375, 376, 379, 380,
 383, 384, 386–391, 397, 400, 401, 403,
 404, 407, 408, 417, 424, 430, 431
 – Babylonians' environs and Eretz
 Israel, contacts 5, 409, 411–416, 421,
 425–430
 – Babylonians' environs and Baby-
 lonia 376, 412
 – Jews in the Roman army *see* Roman
 army

- Sages' visits 100, 216, 363, 369–370, 372, 387, 389, 425
- *see also* Burial; *nahotei*: Purity of lineage; Boundaries; Synagogues
- Diaspora Revolt (115–117) 3, 23, 51, 54, 76, 130, 149, 229, 231–234, 237, 247, 258, 262, 310, 313, 316, 318, 321, 373
- didrachma see* Taxation
- Diglat *see* Tigris
- Dimi, Rav 86, 322, 418, 420, 430
- Dimi of Nehardea, Rav. 87, 326, 395
- Dimimma 351, 405
- Dimimma bridge 344, 350, 405
- Diocaesarea *see* Sepphoris
- Diocletian 96, 99
- Diospera 61, 80
- Diospolis *see* Lod
- Disqos 51
- Diva Sabina 212
- Diyala, river 352
- Domitian 146, 229
- Dora 44
- Dosa b. Hyrcanus, R. 141
- dough *see* *Ma'asrot*
- Dress, items of
 - amulet 300
 - armour 260, 300
 - black shoes 364
 - boots 260, 300
 - cloak 163
 - hair cover 95
 - helmet 260, 300
 - linen 284
 - nailed sandal *see* *sandal mesumar*
 - *qamar* / belt 371, 378, 388
 - Sabbath shirt 301
 - sandals 300
 - silk 98, 372
 - *Tzitzit* 284, 331
 - wool 284
 - *see also* *Sha'atnez*
- Dschubba *see* Jubba
- Dschukha *see* Jukha
- ducenarius* 214
- al-Dujayl, Nahr (Sumaika) 342
- duovirat see* *colonia*
- duoviri see* *strategoi*
- Ecdippa *see* Keziv
- Economy 25, 34, 35, 59, 65, 80, 93–95, 127–129, 131, 132, 209, 278, 291, 348, 363, 388, 391, 428, 429
- *see also* Agriculture; Occupations; Landownership; Urbanisation; *Taqqanot*
- Edessa 411
- Edom 31, 32, 42, 366, 426
- Education 3, 78, 79, 417
 - schools 51, 79, 310, 311, 319
 - teachers 311, 313
 - *see also* Greek and Greek Wisdom
- Egypt 31, 43, 57, 73, 88, 125, 126, 151, 187, 199, 214, 268, 290, 331, 395
- 'Ein 'Arrub 275, 285
- Ejn Bechi *see* Heliopolis
- 'Ein Tavi / Tav 50, 55, 61, 127
- Elagabalus 33, 93, 244
- Elam 339, 376, 409, 410
- Elazar b. Arakh, R. 18
- Elazar b. 'Azariah, R. 19, 68, 72, 76, 77, 107, 126, 154, 171, 172, 233, 234, 246, 271, 273
- Elazar haCohen 274
- Elazar b. Dama, R. 137, 321
- Elazar b. Dinai 261
- Elazar Hisma, R. 154
- Elazar b. Hittah 285, 293
- Elazar b. Mattia, R. 315
- Elazar haModa'i 251, 252, 274, 275, 283, 294, 303
- Elazar (b. Pedat), R. 110, 419–420
- Elazar haQappar, R. 62
- Elazar (b. Shamu'a), R. 37, 110, 121, 137, 142, 237, 328, 367, 368, 386, 419, 426
- Elazar beRabbi Shime'on, R. 189
- Elazar b. Yair 94
- Elazar beRabbi Zadoq, R. 58, 75, 86, 103–109, 111–113, 152, 254
- Eleutheropolis *see* Bet Guvrin
- Eliezer b. Elisha, R. 259
- Eliezer (b. Hyrcanus), R. 50, 55, 56, 59, 60, 64, 69, 72, 76, 78, 127, 135, 136, 145, 151, 154, 175, 181, 228, 245–248, 297, 298, 315–367, 385
- Benei Beraq 76

- banishment 56
- *Bet Midrash* in Lod 56, 66, 367
- Eliezer b. Ya'aqov, R. 70, 181, 241
- Eliezer b. Rabbi Yose haGelili, R. 241
- Eliezer Ze'ira 364
- Elijah 63, 271
- Elishah ben Avuya 299, 333
- Emesa (Syria) 187
- Emmaus / Nicopolis / Hammata 26, 31, 33, 48, 49, 86, 153–155, 207, 257
- 'En Gedi 31–32, 206, 222, 285, 293
- Enoch 272
- Epiphanius 23, 237
- epispasmos* see Circumcision
- Eretz haAmim* 35, 36, 80, 419
- Eretz Israel 59, 84, 116, 127, 128, 347, 371, 386, 387, 401, 402, 413, 419, 423, 428
- settle in 384, 385, 368, 369, 397
- halakhic boundaries of see Boundaries: *tehume Eretz Israel*;
- *gevulot hahavtahah* see Burial
- Esbon 42
- Eshtori haFarhi 304
- Essenes 48, 109, 267
- Esther, Scroll of see *Purim*
- ethnarch* 176, 221
- Etrogim* / citrons 285–287
- Eunuchs 177
- Euphrates, river 84, 212, 237, 340, 344, 345, 347–351, 354–357, 359, 360, 362, 373, 376, 380, 385, 401–403, 405, 406, 408, 430
- Eusebius 41–45, 200, 210, 304, 306
- Bishop of Caesarea and Palaestina 41
- *Martyrs of Palestine* 64
- *Onomasticon* 33, 41–46, 50, 70
- Excommunication 73, 387, 389
- Exilarch (*resh galuta*) 270, 271, 279, 349, 363–364, 371, 373, 377–379, 388–390, 404, 433, 437–440
- in Persian hierarchy 50, 377–379, 388
- *qamar* 371, 377, 388
- and taxes 379
- law court 364
- capital cases 364, 379
- appointments 379
- Nehardea and Mahoza, seat of 363, 371, 373, 386, 394, 395
- Sages and 371, 379
- Babylonian Jewry and 378–379
- *agoranomos* see Markets
- see also David, house of; Landownership
- Exile (= Babylonia) see Diaspora
- Ezekias see Hezekiah
- Ezekiel the Prophet, Synagogue of 401
- Ezra (the Scribe) 273, 339, 376, 397, 404
- Fairs see Markets
- Falluja 351
- Fam al-Silh 343, 410, 435
- Family see Charity
- Famiya 343, 354, 410, 434
- Far East 417, 440
- Fasts 50, 56, 279, 371
- see also Av, 9th of
- Fils de Béthira see Bene Betera
- Fire 343, 409, 435
- Firi (= Firuz) Sabur / Anbar 351, 406
- see also Pumbedita
- First Revolt see Jewish War
- Flavia Optata 187
- Flavians 19
- Flavius Boethus 90
- Flavius Josephus see Josephus, Flavius
- Food 223, 243, 292, 298
- artichokes 430
- bread 185, 257, 405
- chickens 57, 256
- corn 104, 293, 388
- dates 18, 153
- figs 132
- goats milk 82, 130
- grapes 80, 132
- honey (figs) 82, 346
- lambs 109, 124
- lupine 99
- meat 73, 92, 252
- olives and olive oil 132, 157–159, 372
- ostriches 243
- pepper 96
- radishes 81
- vegetables 81, 92, 150
- wheat 96, 285, 436

- wine 86, 95, 106, 147, 159, 252, 279, 341, 377
- *see also* Agriculture and farmers; Commandments;
- four species of *Sukkot* *see arba'at haminim*
- Fronto 203

- Gabalene / Edom 42
- Gadya 55
- Galia (France) 433
- Galilee / Galileans 30, 37, 42, 49, 58–60, 62, 83, 85, 95, 96, 154, 184, 208, 235–242
 - and Bar Kokhba Revolt 59, 70, 129, 214, 215, 217, 223, 232, 236, 239, 240, 255, 316, 324, 330, 385
 - and Judaeans 58, 61–63, 80, 17–150, 226, 228–232, 240, 241
 - and Tyre coins 93, 94, 97, 98
 - Jewish majority 35, 95
 - *see also* Tyre; Sidon; Landownership
- Gallus, revolt under 3, 65, 184, 300
- Gallienus 90, 345
- Gamala 31, 32
- Gamaliel beRabbi, Rabban (son of Rabbi) 89, 147, 149
- Gamaliel (of Yavneh), Rabban 17–19, 71–83, 89, 109, 125, 126, 131, 135, 138, 145–155, 181, 271, 314, 362, 367, 372, 425
 - and Roman authorities 18, 89, 137, 145, 146, 148, 149, 155, 173, 174, 178, 230, 363
 - and Samaritans 74, 144, 150, 153, 168
 - deposition 68, 126, 145, 171, 233, 273
 - Diaspora 19, 57, 75, 145, 153, 216, 370, 388
 - head of the *Bet haVa'ad* 55, 57–59, 66, 67, 117, 123, 145, 148, 153, 269, 385
 - his circuits 57, 61, 71, 72, 75, 8, 88, 145–155, 174, 229–230, 237
 - his wife 68, 69
 - slave (Tavi) 73
 - son's 55, 154, 230, 313
 - *see also* Greek and Greek wisdom; *qomi*; Yavneh; Passover; *Taqqanot*; Lod; Patriarch / Patriarchate; Calendar
- Gamaliel Zuga, Rabban 159
- Gamliel *see* Gamaliel
- Gat-Rimmon 67
- Gaulanitis 31, 32
- Gaza 87, 88, 317
- Genealogical boundaries 39, 84, 339–355, 360, 376
 - *see also* Boundaries; Burial; Purity of lineage
- Geniza 134, 141
- Gennesar 229
- Gennesaret, Lake 95, 99
- Germans 177
 - *see also* R. Judah Nesiah
- Gevat / Gabata 70
- Ginneigar 154, 227, 233
- Gorgius, son of 51, 79
- Gevavai / Guvai 410
- gevulot hahavtahah* *see* Burial
- Gezer 48
- Ginzaq / Ganzaq 425
- Gishra (= bridge) deBe Perat 344, 345, 405
- Gizma crossing 344, 346, 353, 354, 405
- Gophna 31, 32
- Goths 177
 - *see also* R. Judah Nesiah
- Grand Pardon *see* Yom Kippur
- Great Revolt *see* Jewish War
- Greek and Greek wisdom 89, 137, 145–147, 314
- Grosse Aufstand *see* Jewish War

- Habur river *see* Khabur river
- Hadrian 44, 85, 87, 144, 152, 155, 199, 200, 203, 205, 209, 219, 221, 234, 237–239, 244, 245, 250, 251, 255–258, 269, 273, 297, 303, 311, 317–322, 325
 - in Egypt 256
 - in Judaea 204, 210, 211, 216, 221, 239
 - inscriptions 221, 238
 - hellenizing policy 39, 211, 213, 237, 239, 250, 251, 255
 - *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt
- Hadyav *see* Adiabene
- half-Sheqel *see* Jerusalem

- Hai Gaon, Rav 274, 351, 406–408
- Hair and haircut 56, 69, 78, 86, 89, 137, 180, 298, 420
- Halafta, (of Sepphoris) R. 147, 227, 233
- Hama, Rav 362
- Hama bar Haninah 64
- Hama b. ‘Uqba, R. 353
- Haman, descendants of 80, 167
- Hammat Gader 63, 258
- Hammat Tiberias 288
- Hammata *see* Emmaus
- Hamnuna, Rav 400
- Hanah and her seven sons 320
- Hanan bar Rav Hisda, Rav 86
- Hanan bar Rava, Rav 86
- Hananiah (merchant) *see* Adiabene
- Hananiah b. Hakhinai, R. 69–70
- Hananiah son of R. Joshua’s brother, R. 66, 367–369, 380, 384–393, 426–428
- *see also* Calendar
- Hananiah of Ono 60
- Hananiah Pappi, R. 418
- Hanilai (Anilaeus) 14, 356–358, 363, 373, 374, 384, 394
- Jewish kingdom 356–358, 361, 374, 394
- Hanina bar Hama, R. 46, 56, 60, 63, 84, 100, 158, 389
- Hanina (Hananiah) ben Teradyon, R. 58, 66, 227, 231, 298, 311, 324, 367, 385
- his son 235–236, 324
- Hanina b. Rabbi Yose haGelilee 241
- Hanukkah* 56, 286, 298, 309, 419
- candels 309, 330
- *see also* Victorious joy
- Har hamelekh* 312, 317
- Haran / Harran (Carrhae) 366, 426
- Hasidim* 36, 63, 108, 113, 165, 228
- *see also* *Haverim* / *Havurot*
- Hasinai (Asinaeus) 14, 356–358, 363, 366, 372, 374, 384, 394
- Jewish kingdom 356–358, 361, 374, 384, 394
- Hasmonaeans 116, 120, 211, 268, 288, 295
- Haverim* / *Havurot* 72, 102–114, 138–140, 146, 160, 161, 192
- sages 111, 140, 160, 165
- *see also* Meals; *Hasidim*; Jerusalem; *hever ir*
- Haviv* 274
- Hebron 87, 207, 208, 218, 275, 305, 389
- Helena, queen of Adiabene *see* Adiabene
- *see also* Conversion
- Heliopolis / Ba’al Bek (En Bekhi)
- *colonia* 91
- *nitbaha* 87
- veterans 91
- Helzon / Helwan 366, 426
- Henoch *see* Enoch
- Herculius *see* Maximian
- Herod 70, 140, 258, 261, 262, 310
- Herod *see* Agrippa I
- Herod *see* Agrippa II
- Herodium / Herodion / Herodis 31–33, 208, 286, 288
- Hever ‘ir* 107, 113
- Hezekiah 94
- Hezekiah, King of Judah 267, 398
- Hieronymus *see* Jerome
- Hilla 400
- Hillel, R. 140
- Hillel the Elder 68, 117, 140, 161
- Hilwan *see* Helzon
- Hindiyya canal 344, 345, 347, 351, 407
- Hira 345, 407
- Hirbet al-Yahud 403, 404
- *see also* Betar
- Hirbet Umm ar-Rummamin 258
- Hirbet* *see also* *Khirbet*
- Hisda, Rav 100, 399, 400, 418
- Historia Augusta* *see* *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*
- Hit *see* Ihi deQira
- Hiyya, R. 61, 98, 159, 179, 274, 279, 280, 389, 429
- Hiyya b. Abba, R. 96, 97, 418
- Hiyya bar Ami 118
- Honorius 187
- *see also* Roman legislation
- Hosha’aya, R. 64, 106, 158, 310
- Hosha’aya, Rav 62
- Hud 404
- Humaniya 430

- Huna, Rav 382, 400, 418
 Huna, Rav (the Exilarch) 349, 371, 389, 404
 Huna of Sepphoris, Rav 425
 Hurvat 'Eqed *see* Khirbet al-'Aqed
 Hutsal 365, 395, 397–401
 – of Benjamin 397, 398
 – of Minyamin 398
 – of Miyamin 398
 Huzpit, R. 233
 Hyrcanus II 48, 96
- Iazer 42
 – *see also* Peraea
 Ibn-Ibraq / Hiriya 67
 Idolatry 37, 83, 86–87, 137, 149, 223, 230, 237, 321, 322, 377
 – temples
 – – Bet Bel in Babylon 86
 – – Bet Nebo in Borsif 86
 – – Nishra in Arabia 86
 – – Tar'ata in Mapag 86
 – – Tsrifa in Ashqelon 86
 – *see also* Markets; Heliopolis / En Bekhi
 Idumaea / Edom (Esau) 31, 32, 42
 Ihi deQira / Hit 346, 353, 354, 430
 Il'ai, R. 25, 147
 Il'ai b. Elazar, R. 259, 260
 Immersion 166, 167
 – *see also* Proselytes
 Immi, R. 179, 183
 Imperial crisis of the third century 26, 27, 46, 87, 94, 100, 159, 161, 186, 348, 375, 402, 417, 428, 432
 – *see also* Taxation
 India 43, 348, 411, 414, 422
 institutions dirigeantes *see* Leadership Institutions
 Ionia (Asia Minor) 187
 Iran 427
 Iraq 345, 347, 362, 404
 Isaac *see* Yitzhaq
 Isfahan 436
 Ishmael (b. Elisha), R. 62, 78, 112, 113, 137, 138, 252–254, 321, 322, 327, 399
 Ishmael b. R. Yosec, R.
 Issachar 169
- Issi, R. 389
Itinerarium Antonini 50, 155
Itinerarium Burdigalense 50
 Iudaea *see* Judaea
 Ivya, Rav 328
 Izates *see* Adiabene
- Jacob / Jakob
 – *see also* Ya'aqov
 Ja'qubi *see* Ya'aqubi
 Jaffa (Joppe / Iope) 31, 47, 48, 67, 187, 349, 402
 Jamnia *see* Yavneh
 Jannai *see* Yannai
 Jaqut *see* Yaqut
Jarcho Kalla see Yarhe Kallah
 Jawne *see* Yavneh
 al-Jazira (between the rivers) 346, 353, 354, 430
 Jehoiachin, King 365, 396
 Jehonathan 222, 293
 Jehoschua *see* Joshua
 Jehozadaq *see* Yehotzadaq
 Jehuda *see* Judah
 Jeremiah 370
 Jeremiah, R. 60–61, 170, 418, 420
 Jeremiah bar Abba, Rav 350, 400, 404
 Jericho 31–32, 55, 153, 155
 Jerome / Hieronymus 41–45, 65, 87, 318
 Jerusalem 1, 13, 14, 30, 32, 42, 47, 53, 57, 62, 65–66, 73, 79, 116, 117, 120, 156, 167, 176, 179, 197, 200, 201, 204, 210, 211, 215, 219, 220, 226, 234, 239, 251, 252, 255, 256, 264, 269, 271, 272, 275, 280, 283, 286, 288, 304, 305, 311, 316–318, 365, 374, 386, 390, 396, 397, 422, 426, 434
 – Pilgrim Festivals 26, 47, 57–59, 72, 85, 102–105, 118–119, 139, 151, 167, 226, 234, 357, 368, 374
 – half Sheqel 26, 97, 357, 361, 394
 – Jerusalemites 67, 68, 86, 102, 105, 106, 108, 112–114, 308, 309
 – *neqiyei hada'at* 108, 109, 113, 114
 – *qehala qadisha debiyerushalem* 103, 157, 160, 161
 – *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt: Aelia Capitolina; *Haverim / Havurot*

- Jeschebaw *see* Yeshevav
 Jeschua *see* Yeshua; Joshua
 Jesus 1, 13, 21, 111, 120, 135–138, 225, 267, 275, 286, 321
 – *see also* meals; Christianity
 Jewish Revolt *see* Diaspora Revolt
 Jewish War (AD 66–70) 2, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 24, 26, 32, 46, 49, 53, 59, 65, 86, 94, 106, 112, 117, 120, 126, 127, 133, 197, 204, 207, 213, 256, 262, 264, 268, 307, 316, 320, 372, 373, 374
 Jews and non Jews 26, 30–40, 89, 91, 92, 95–97, 137, 146–149, 153, 166, 170, 172–174, 181, 182, 185, 186, 229, 230, 300, 301, 309, 317, 368, 426, 428
 – *see also* Rabban Gamaliel
 Jezreel Valley 208, 218
 Jirmija *see* Jeremiah
 Jischmael *see* Ishmael
 Jizchak *see* Yitzhaq
 Job, book of *see* Greek and Greek Wisdom
 Jochanan *see* Yohanan
 Johannes *see* Yohanan
 John Chrysostom 243
 John the Essene 48
 John of Gischala *see* Yohanan of Gush Halav
 Jojachin *see* Jehoiachin
 Jonatan *see* Yonatan
 Jonathan 31, 48
 – *see also* Yonatan
 Jordan river 262
 Jordan Valley 207
 Joschija *see* Joshiah
 Joseph, Rav 345, 382, 418
 Joseph (priest) 100
 Josephus, Flavius 16, 23, 30–33, 41, 47, 48, 52, 64, 94, 97, 127, 156, 204, 261, 262, 309, 356, 358–363, 366–369, 371, 373, 374, 384, 385, 394, 412, 421, 427
 Joshiah, R. 367–369, 399, 426, 427
 Joshua 397
 Joshua (b. Hananiah), R. 19, 56, 66, 68, 72, 76, 145, 153, 154, 170, 172, 228, 234, 246, 271, 315, 329, 367, 385
 Joshua b. Levi, R. 56, 61, 63, 84, 102, 158, 253
 – his son and the Patriarchate 63
 Joshua b. Qevusai, R. 152
 Joshua b. Qorhah, R. 260
 Joshua of Sikhne, R.
 Jossi *see* Yose
 Jovian 366
 Jubba 411
 Jubilees 272
 Jubilee year 296
 Juda der Fürst *see* Judah haNasi, R. (= Rabbi)
 Judaea / Syria Palaestina 15, 38, 59–61, 66, 70, 76, 79, 83, 90, 94, 216, 223, 238, 255, 304
 – *see also* Palaestina
 Judaeen Desert and the Dead Sea 223, 260, 286, 308
 – caves 261, 284, 294, 308
 – documents 15, 30, 33, 41, 173, 198
 – sects 94, 102, 109, 133, 138, 160, 222, 267
 – *see also* Babatha; Bar Kokhba revolt: letters and documents
 Judaeen Shephelah 42, 208, 256–258, 261, 262
 Judah, Rav 100, 311, 314, 315, 328, 360, 397, 401, 410, 411, 418, 419
 Judah b. Bava, R. 27, 28, 130, 176, 179, 328, 329
 Judah b. Betera, R. 66, 101, 366–373, 384–387, 391, 399
 Judah b. Hananiah, R. 25
 Judah son of Hezekiah 94
 Judah (b. Il'ai), R. 59, 70, 77, 83, 90, 92, 95, 107, 130, 146, 153, 167, 172, 180, 228–241, 247–250, 296, 297, 310, 328, 413, 414, 423
 Judah b. Pappus, R. 154
 Judah bar Pazzi, R. 61
 Judah b. Shamu'a 298
 Judah b. Ya'aqov b. Yitzhaq b. Abraham 404
 Judah haNasi, R. (= Rabbi) 103, 143, 146, 147, 149, 158, 168, 176, 177, 189, 245, 278–281, 315, 369, 378, 385, 399, 417, 425, 429, 430
 – ties with the Severan dynasty 5, 33, 46, 49, 61, 89, 278, 428, 429

- Roman taxes 24, 39, 40
- and urbanisation 5, 33–40, 45, 46, 125, 132
- *Taqqanot* 34–40, 90, 127, 132, 159
- wealthy 95, 430
- circuits 35, 36, 61, 80, 90
- calendar 60, 61, 386
- opposition 19, 62, 279
- move to Bet Shearim and Sephoris 34, 66, 155, 367, 385
- law court and capital cases 155, 176, 177, 180
- ties with the Diaspora 386, 388, 413–415, 422, 425, 428–432
- closing the Mishnah 2, 201, 204, 278, 283, 363, 380, 381, 384, 417
- his death and funeral 279, 430
- *see also* Patriarch / Patriarchate; Burial, Urbanisation; Ordination; Galilee; David (house of), Mishnah; Commandments
- Judah Nesiah, R. 34, 163, 177, 372
- Judan *see* Yudan
- Judanes son of Elazar 32
- Judas Maccabaeus 120, 286
- Jukha 351, 406
- Jukha, Nahr 353
- Julianus *see* Pappus and Yulianus
- Julius Africanus 176
- Julius Caesar 48, 96, 185
- Julius Severus 254, 257, 268, 318
- Jupiter Capitolinus, Temple of 269
- Justin 188
- *see also* Roman legislation
- Justinian 188
- *see also* Roman legislation

- Kadmonites 434
- Kaff al-Imam ‘Ali, Tel 341
- Kafri 401
- Kahana, Rav 364
- Kairawan *see* Qairawan
- Kalender *see* Calendar
- Kallah see Yarhei Kallah*
- Karga / poll-tax* 382
- Kefar Harevah 222, 283, 294
- Kefar Leqitaia 257, 258
- Kefar Nevorayah / Nabratayn 99

- Kefar ‘Otnai / Legio 144, 150, 155, 230
- *see also* Legio
- Kefar Sama
- Kefar Sikhnein *see* Sikhne
- Kefar Tavi *see* ‘Ein Tavi
- Kenites 434
- Kenizzites 434
- Keziv 95, 146, 147, 155, 229, 236
- Khabur, river 346, 360, 425
- Khan Birnush 400
- Khaniqin 353
- Khirbet al-‘Aqed 207, 258
- Khirbet al-‘Arrub 207
- Khirbet Kuweizibe 275, 285
- Khurasan 353
- Khuzistan 353, 411, 412, 426
- klerouchiai* 30
- Koa 391
- Korazin 2, 15
- Korykos 361
- Ktesiphon *see* Ctesiphon
- Kufa 345, 347, 349–350, 354, 355, 362, 376, 403, 405, 408
- Kurdafadh 437, 439–441
- Kurdistan 436
- Kut al-Imara 343, 352, 353, 410, 435
- Kutim see* Samaritans

- Land of Israel *see* Eretz Israel; Judaea; Palaestina
- Languages 166, 172, 410, 435
- *see also* Greek and Greek wisdom
- Landownership 22–23, 85, 127, 157, 228, 240, 308, 309, 318, 433
- *coloni* 186
- confiscation 85, 218
- imperial estate 52, 53
- leasing of land 197
- – and Bar Kokhba 218, 288, 293
- – *conductores* 23, 227, 228
- *siqariqon* 23, 127–129, 218
- *see also* Bet Shearim; *Taqqanot*
- Laodicea 234
- Lasthenes 48
- Law courts, Jewish 36, 173, 175–177, 179–181, 328, 332
- Roman recognition of 173, 174, 177, 178, 181, 182

- *see also* Patriarch; Exilarch; Jews and non Jews
- Leadership Institutions 1–3, 37, 39, 51, 54, 56, 58–59, 63, 66, 67, 70, 83, 116, 117, 123, 145, 150–153, 155–158, 163, 165, 181, 198, 213, 216, 222, 223, 227, 232, 233, 261, 266, 267, 287, 290, 313–317, 320, 328, 332, 367, 369, 374, 375, 387, 389, 391, 392, 402, 427, 428, 431
- *see also* *Bet haVa'ad*; Patriarch / Patriarchate; Betar
- Legio / Maximianopolis 45, 85, 155, 214, 238
- *see also* Kefar 'Otnai
- Legions 53, 83, 155, 187, 214, 233, 237, 257, 307, 308
- I *Italica* 220
- II *Traiana* 215, 220, 238
- V *Macedonica* 220, 304
- VI *Ferrata* 214
- X *Fretensis* 43, 53, 215, 316
- XI *Claudia* 220, 304
- XII *Deiotariana* 220
- *see also* Roman army
- Letters 290, 379, 386–390, 420, 424–426
- *see also* Bar Kokhba revolt: letters
- Levi 364, 395
- Levi, R. 248
- Levi b. Sisi 35, 154
- Levites 118, 131, 132, 170, 274, 288, 294, 305, 387, 398
- *see also* Minyamin
- lictos* 179
- Lista'ut Medinit* *see* Banditry
- litorin* 179
- Lod / Lydda / Diospolis 31, 36, 37, 45, 47–65, 67, 68, 71–73, 84, 104, 127, 151, 316, 372
- Christian community (4th century C.E.) 65
- city status 33
- city territory 41, 50, 52
- center of instruction 47, 50, 51, 53–59, 64, 65, 72, 150, 152, 156–158, 321, 372, 385
- main intersection 47, 48, 50, 65, 66, 155, 205, 231
- Roman authorities trials place 48
- tax-collection center 48
- *see also* 'South'; Rabbi Judah haNasi; Martyrdom; Calendar; *Taqqanot*
- Lot 347, 403
- Lucius Verus 414, 466
- Lulav* *see* *arbba'at haminim*
- Lullius Urbicus, Quintus 221
- Lusius Quietus 214, 233
- Lyyda *see* Lod
- ma'amad* 31
- Ma'asrot* / tithes 35, 74, 108, 130, 144, 150, 153, 159–163, 214, 286, 289, 285, 288, 290, 291, 293, 294, 339, 375, 377
- *see also* Commadnents; Bar Kokhba revolt; R. Judah haNasi; *Taqqanot*
- Machosa *see* Mahoza (Babylonia)
- Madaba 253
- Mada'in 437, 440
- Magdiel 44
- Magic books *see* Christianity
- Magician 325
- Mahoza (Babylonia) 351, 359, 381, 407, 415, 427, 439, 440, 441
- Mahoza (Dead Sea) 32
- Maimonides 71, 276, 277
- Makesin 346
- Mana, R. 92, 183–185
- Mana b. Tanhum, R. 99
- Marcus Aurelius 190
- Marcus Aurelius Antoninus *see* Caracalla
- Mark 266
- Mar Zutra revolt 430
- Mari b. Rav Huna 400
- Marianus 234
- Markets and fairs 46, 96, 153, 154
- *agoranomos* 379, 380
- Akko 87, 88
- Botna (Mamre; Bet Ilanim) = haEla / Terebinth 87
- Gaza 87, 88
- Tyre 96
- *see also* Idolatry; Bar Kokhba Revolt
- Marta, daughter of Boetus 86
- Martyrdom / Martyrs 6, 27, 28, 54, 180, 224, 296, 320, 323

- *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt
- Masabalah (b. Shimeon) 222, 285, 293
- Masada / Mezadah 94, 198, 204, 318
- Masgarya 430
- Mashmahig / Samahig (Muharraq / Bahrain) 414
- Mata Mehasya 399, 415, 424
- *see also* Sura
- Matenah, R. 135
- Mattia b. Harash, R. 66, 367, 384, 385
- Maximian (Herculius) 96
- *see also* Diocletian
- Meals, communal 73, 104, 108–113, 162
- Essenes 109
- Jesus and his disciples 111
- Nabatean 109, 206, 348, 411
- *Se'udat mitzvah* 109–113
- *the Yahad* 109
- *Zimun* 109
- *see also* *Haverim* / *Havurot*; R. Yannai; Jerusalem; *shevua haben*; *shevua habar*; Prayer
- Media 310, 376, 409, 410, 427
- Exilarch 439
- and Jerusalem 424, 425
- Nahum the Mede 424, 425
- and sages of Yavneh 424, 425
- Yose the Mede, R. 425
- *see also* Diaspora
- Medicin 90, 130, 249
- Christian Physicians 137, 321
- Theodorus (Todrus, Todos) the Physician 50
- Medina 339, 343, 345
- Megido 144
- Meir, R. 27, 70, 79, 84, 141, 161, 169, 170, 241, 253, 326, 328, 388
- Menahem (the Zealot) 94
- mer Morte *see* Judaeen Desert and Dead Sea
- Mesene / Meshan 409, 411–413, 416, 421, 439
- 'Jewish Babylonian' border 339, 344, 376, 410, 411, 434
- Sasanian border 343, 344, 413, 434, 435
- international trade centre 411, 414, 416, 440
- – Jews had a share in 412–416, 422
- – Mesha 413, 422, 423
- contacts with Eretz Israel 339, 344, 411, 412, 414, 415, 422, 424, 425, 427
- Rabbi Judah haNasi 413, 415, 422, 425, 428
- R. Yohanan 411, 414–416
- *see also* Palmyra; Mashmahig; Purity of lineage
- Meshukim see* Circumcision
- Mesopotamia, Province 343, 360, 361, 385, 411, 141, 426, 427, 434, 439, 440
- Messianism / Messiah 1, 161, 263–282, 368
- *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt; R. Judah haNasi
- Mesures
- *as* 95, 180
- *egg* 430
- *modius* 430
- *parasang* 343, 346, 365, 395, 397, 400, 401, 406, 409, 435
- *qav* 157
- Roman Mile 304
- *seah* 86, 311
- *tehum Shabbat* 27, 99, 238, 239, 328, 329, 400
- Mezada see* Masada
- Mezuzah* 331, 332
- Migdal Afeq 47
- Mihragan* 382
- Mihran 349, 405
- Milestones 204, 238
- inscriptions 44, 238
- Minim see also* Prayer 172, 181
- Minyamin (the Levite) 398
- *see also* Hutsal
- Miriam, daughter of Shimeon
- b. Guryon 86
- Mirror 89, 137, 145, 146
- Mishnah 310, 432
- Rabbi and the closing of 2, 201, 241, 278, 283, 300, 380, 381, 384, 417, 429
- of Bar Qappara 62
- *matnita min daroma* 67, 156
- of the *Hasidim* 63
- *see also* *nahote*; Talmud, Babylonian

- Miyamin (a priest) *see* Priests / Priest-
 hood; Hutsal
 Moabites 166, 171
 Modestinus 244
 Modi'in 274
 Moesia Inferior 220, 304
 Monobazus II *see* Adiabene
 Mordechai 280
 Moses 68, 135
 Moshe *haDarshan* 255
 Moshkani / Maskin 84, 340, 342
 Mosul 429
 Mt. Scopus 271
 Mutilation 243
 Mygdonios, river 360, 385, 425
- Nabatean 109, 206, 348, 411
 Nabratein 99
 Nadschaf *see* Najaf
 Nahal Hever 198, 206, 285
 Nahalal 35, 155
 Nahman, Rav 404, 412, 418
 Nahman b. Yitzhaq, Rav 180, 415, 427
 Nahrawan canal *see* Nehar Yo'ani
 Nahr Maysan 344, 410, 435
nahotei 418–420, 427, 428, 430, 431
 Najaf 345, 347, 348, 350, 403
 Naqdimon ben Guryon 86
 Narbata 31
 Narbone 255
 Nash papyrus *see* Prayer
Nasi see Bar Kokhba revolt; R. Judah
 haNasi; Patriarch / Patriarchate
 Natan, R. 255, 278, 289, 296, 322, 324,
 331, 370, 371, 378, 386, 388–390
 Natronai Gaon, Rav 436
 Nausa 430
 Nave 185, 430
 – *rabbanan deNave* 156, 185
 – Rabbi Judah haNasi 430
 Neapolis / Shechem 32, 33, 215, 309
 Nebuchadnezzar 167, 318, 400
 Nehar Anaq (Naq) 350, 405, 406
 Nehar 'Azeq 351, 406
 Nehar Danaq 351, 406
 Nehar Malka *see* Royal River
 Nehar Peqod 369, 386, 390–392
 Nehar Yo'ani 352
 Nehardea / Tall Nihar 356–373, 380,
 384–386, 391, 394–401, 404, 407
 – *amoraim* from 362
 – judges from 362
 Neharpania 350
 Nehemiah, R. 70, 241, 328
 Nehonyon 386, 389, 390
 Nerva 229, 238
neqivei hada'at see Jerusalem
 Netzibin, Netzivin *see* Nisibis
 New Year *see* *Rosh haShanah*
 Nicopolis *see* Emmaus
 Niger *see* Pescennius Niger
 Nighya / Banighya 345
 Nihar, tal 360
nimurah 184
 Nineveh 429–430
 Niqya 345
 Nisibis / Netzibin (near Nehardea) 66,
 101, 229, 356–358, 360–362, 366–373,
 385–387, 391, 394, 399, 426, 427
 Nisibis on the Mygdonios / Nusay-
 bin 360, 366, 370, 385, 425, 439
 Nomads 362
nomoi 31
 – *see also* Urbanisation
noruz 382
 Nuchaila *see* Nukhayla
 Nukhayla 404, 405
 – *see also* *Shumya*
numerus 184
 – *see also* Roman army
- Occupations
 – bakers 50, 185
 – butchers 399
 – farmers 157, 186
 – glass makers 98
 – linen weavers 51, 65
 – lawyers 188
 – merchants 51, 411, 421, 422
 – judges 424
 – oil-makers 157, 306, 307
 – purple-dyeing 98
 – scribes 104
 – sea farers 413–415, 422, 423
 – shepherds
 – shoemakers 96

- shopkeepers 103
- silk traders 98, 372
- silver smiths 179
- wine-makers 306, 377
- *see also* Dress, items of; Agriculture and farmers
- officium* 179
- Ono 61
- Ordination 27, 28, 69–71, 76, 154, 180, 181, 328, 329, 429
 - *see also* Patriarch / Patriarchate
- Origen 176
- Orine 32, 42
- Ostriches 243
- Oucha *see* Ushah

- Palestina 1–2, 14, 30–31, 38, 41–45, 49, 52, 339, 348, 351, 366
 - *see also* Urbanisation; Syria Palestina
- Palmyra 411
 - Palmyrans and Nehardea 362, 373, 380, 395
 - control over the sea trade via Mesene 414
 - protected caravan routes 191
 - *see also* Nehardea; Mesene
- Paltom / Paltanea 384
- Pannonia (Hungary) 187
- Papa bar Shemu'el, Rav 343, 409, 435
- Papa the Elder, R. 339, 376, 409
- Pappus b. Judah 325
- Pappus and Yulianus 85, 234
- Pâque *see* Passover
- Parembolē (Egypt) 187
- Parthians 340, 357, 358, 360, 361, 374, 379, 394, 405, 409, 414, 425
 - war 233, 238
- Pashhur b. Immer 410
- Passover 57, 58, 67, 71, 77, 82, 104, 109, 121, 124–126, 151, 152, 185, 255, 289, 290, 298, 323, 330, 331, 368, 388
 - *see also* R. Aqiva; Rabban Gamaliel
- Patriarch / Patriarchate 1, 3, 60, 63, 116, 117, 129, 140, 145, 216, 225, 235, 241, 253, 271, 314, 318, 369, 375, 378, 386–388, 392, 417
 - appointments 35, 154
 - and *Bet haVa'ad*, separation of 34, 62, 156
 - circuits 35, 36, 61, 80, 89, 90, 145–155
 - law court and capital cases 148, 173–176, 178
 - opposition 76, 147, 153, 163, 164, 279, 371, 378, 388
 - and Roman authorities 34–46, 56, 61, 84, 89, 148, 314, 318, 340, 428
 - and taxes 39, 40
 - *see also* Greek and Greek wisdom; *qomi*; Betar; Calendar; Ordination
- Paul 243
- Pausanius 203
- Pazzi 50
- Peddler 160
- pelekh / pelakhim* 31, 45
- Pella 31, 42
- Peqi'in 66–68, 76, 367, 385
- Peqi'in (Galilee) 94
- Peraea 30, 42
- Peras *see* Euphrates
- Perfume 86
- Peri'ah* 249
 - *see also* Circumcision
- Periri, (or Perida), R. 81
- Persia 366, 417, 426
- Persian Gulf 347, 348, 350, 354, 376, 403, 411, 414, 421, 440
- Pescennius Niger 33, 61
- Pessach *see* Passover
- Petra 30, 32, 42, 109, 173, 176
- Pharisees 102, 114, 133, 138, 139, 267
- Phasaelis 207
- Philadelphia 42
- Philo 119, 121
- Phoenice, province 38, 91–93, 96, 100
 - Jews 95–101
 - and Galilee 94–100
 - *see also* Sidon, Tyre
- Phylacteries *see* *Tefillin*
- Pidyon haben* 252
- Pictists *see* *Hasidim*
- Pilgrim festivals *see* Jerusalem; *Sukkot*; Passover
- Pinhas, R. 106, 310
- Pinhas b. Ya'ir, R. 36, 62, 80
- Pirqa* 383, 421

- Pirqoi ben Baboi 366, 426
 Placentia 210
 Pliny the Elder 31, 33, 41, 436
 Plutarch 119
polis, status of 30–33, 49
 Post-station 341
 Prayer 104–107, 109, 122, 145, 157, 241, 296, 359, 395, 396
 – benediction of the *minim* 134, 166, 213, 268
 – Decalogue 134–135, 268
 – grace before and after meals 74, 153, 159, 164
 – Nash papyrus 135
 – for rain 429
 – reading the *Shema* 57, 72, 73, 79, 151, 268, 325–327, 329, 331
 – reading the *Torah* 247, 248, 255, 323, 324, 331, 390
 – Shemuel haqatan 134
 – *see also* Christians / Christianity; *Haverim* / *Havurot*; Meals; Synagogues
 Priests / Priesthood 17, 31, 53, 91, 97, 99, 100, 106, 110, 111, 121, 131, 132, 134, 152, 159, 279, 288, 295, 305, 375, 389, 410, 419
 – Akko 38
 – Amaziah 419
 – Elazar haCohen 274, 295
 – High Priest 124, 126, 170
 – R. Issi 389
 – Joseph 100
 – Pashhur b. Immer 410
 – Priestly courses 31, 218
 – – inscription 218
 – – Miyamin 398
 – Uriah 271
 – *see also* Hutsal
 Prisons 364, 396
 Proclus of Naucratis 88
 Proconsul 179
 Procurators 214, 262
 Proqla (Proclus) 185
 Proqlas ben Philospos 88, 149, 231
 Proselytes / Proselytism 80, 166, 167, 171, 250, 375
 – Judah 171
 – Onqelos 152
 – synagogue 167, 168
 Ptolemais *see* Akko
 Ptolemy 359
 Pumbedita / Anbar 82, 344–346, 350, 351, 354, 362, 365, 377, 380, 381, 395, 405, 407, 408, 419, 420
 Purim 46, 200, 397
 – Esther, scroll of 46, 280, 330, 397, 398
 – *see also* R. Aqiva
 Purity and Impurity 34–40, 50, 53, 61, 62, 72, 80, 84, 91, 97, 100–102, 110, 118, 125, 130, 136, 139, 156, 160, 161, 226, 279, 292, 296, 332, 339, 354, 372, 374, 387, 394, 420
 – *see also* 'Amei haAretz; Boundaries; Urbanisation
 Purity of lineage 339, 353, 355, 360, 362, 375, 401, 402, 405, 408–410, 422, 423, 430, 431, 434
 – *see also* Boundaries: genealogical boundaries
 Puva 169
 Qairawan 405
qamar see Exilarch
 Qamtsa 317
 Qardu 436
 Qartara 436
 Qartigne 100
qasdor 79, 327
 Qatzrin 2
 Qedesh 93
qehala qadisha debiyerushlem see Jerusalem
Qiddush haShem see Martyrdom / Martyrs; Bar Kokhba revolt: martyrdom
 Qiriyat 'Arbayah (Birat 'Araba) 275, 285
 Qirtava (*qir tava*) 436
 Qisrin *see* Caesarea
 Qitus (Quietus) Revolt *see* Diaspora Revolt
 Qobi (el-Qabu) 304
qomi see Exilarch
 Quadratus Ummidius 48, 83
quaestor 79, 327
 Quba' 343, 435
 Quintus Marcius Turbo 214

- Qumran 135, 138
 Qurdanita 436
 Qurtava 433, 437, 439–441

 Rabbah 382, 418
 Rabbah bar Bar Hana, R. 87, 274, 346, 429
 Rabbies *see* Sages
 Rabbin *nahota* 322, 418–420
 Rabun [Rabin] 322, 420
 Ramathaim 48
 Rami bar Yehezkel 82, 259
 Rammun (south east of Ba'al Hatzor) 258
 – *see also* Bet Rimmon Valley
 Rav 2, 80, 100, 258, 297, 315, 328, 329, 339–345, 347, 350–353, 359, 362–364, 372, 380, 382, 384, 395, 397, 398, 400, 403–405, 409, 412, 415, 417, 418, 429, 431
 Rava 340, 351, 381–383, 407, 415, 418, 420, 424, 427, 433, 438
 Raymund Martini 272, 273
 Rech Lakish *see* Resh Laqish
 Red Sea 43, 212, 436
 Redaction and Closing 62, 63, 92, 201, 225, 241, 278, 283, 320, 380, 399
 – Mekhilta of R. Ishmael 399
 – Sifre to Numbers 399
 – *Sifre Zuta* 92
 – three *Bavot* of the Jerusalem Talmud 63
 – *see also* Mishnah; R. Judah haNasi; Talmud, Babylonian
 Rehov inscription *see* Synagogues; Boundaries
 Reqem 83
 Resh Galuta *see* Exilarch; Yitzhaq *resh galuta*
 Resh Kenishta 371
 – *see also* Synagogues
 Resh Laqish / Shimeon b. Laqish, R. 35, 94, 144, 160, 168, 228, 419–421, 431
 Resh Metivta 438
 Reuben *see* Reuven
 Reuven b. Istrobili, R. 298
 Roman army 6, 24, 53, 85–87, 148, 173, 174, 183–191, 203, 205, 214, 215, 230, 238, 239, 257, 260, 299, 300, 304, 305, 307, 311, 318, 319, 345, 366
 – Avidius Cassius 190
 – R. Elazar beRabbi Shimeon 190, 191
 – guard posts 257–258
 – Jewish soldiers 186–188, 190
 – police functions 148, 149, 173, 174, 185, 190, 191
 – in settlements 184, 185, 299–300
 – Vegetius on conscripts 189
 – *see also* Roman legislation; Taxation; Legions
 Roman authorities 23, 30, 32, 48, 49, 52, 57, 61, 63, 70, 71, 75, 76, 79, 83–86, 89, 90, 94, 116, 120, 126–127, 133, 136, 145–149, 153, 161, 173–179, 183, 186, 209, 212, 214, 217, 218, 223, 224, 233, 237–240, 254, 255, 260, 266, 289, 298, 308, 311, 314, 316, 317, 320, 323, 324, 332, 366, 377, 417
 – *see also* Roman legislation; Bar Kokhba revolt
 Roman legislation 244–253
 – Jews in public service 187, 188
 – imperial and municipal administration 33, 39, 188
 – lawyers 188
 – repressive legislation *see* Bar Kokhba revolt
 Roman roads 2, 26, 44, 47–50, 67, 85, 147, 150, 154, 155, 204, 205, 214, 215, 233, 238, 305, 309, 310, 317, 360
 Rome 63, 66, 73, 84, 96, 112, 153, 154, 158, 243, 367, 385, 411, 417
 – *see also* Roman legislation; Bar Kokhba revolt
 Rosh haSanah 45, 118, 122, 124, 141, 287, 331
 – *kiveneron* 185
 – *see also* Taqqanot; Yohanan b. Zakkai, Rabban; Gamaliel, Rabban
 Royal river 360
 Rufail river 405
 Rummana (south east of Bet Netofa) *see* Bet Rimmon Valley

 Sa'adiah Gaon, Rav 392
 Sabbath 17, 19, 50, 56, 58, 61, 75, 77, 89,

- 90, 99, 110, 121, 122, 128, 136, 140,
142, 147, 148, 152, 185, 223, 228, 230,
237, 238, 245–248, 258–260, 285, 289,
292–302, 328, 329, 379, 382, 400, 414,
415, 419, 420, 423
- *see also* Bar Kokhba revolt: Com-
mandments
- Sabbatical year *see* *Shevi'it*
Sabina Augusta 211
Sacrifices *see* Jerusalem
Sadducees 267
Safed 156
Safir 42
Safra, Rav 84, 387
Sages 2, 3, 5, 18, 40, 50, 53–57, 66, 73,
140, 153, 156, 159–161, 181, 248, 259,
265, 284, 287, 301, 302, 311, 384–386,
405, 417
- *shimush hakhmim* 68, 69, 111, 156,
161, 253
 - *talmide hakhmim* 59, 69, 111, 140,
143, 329
 - *see also* Haverim / Havurot; R. Yannai
al-Sahar, Tel *see* Sanit, Tel
- Samaria 30, 32, 48, 144, 238
Samaritans 21, 60, 160, 188
- Jews and 48, 83, 143, 150, 153, 166,
168, 216
 - and tithes 74, 144, 153
 - R. Aqiva and 74, 144, 153
 - Rabban Gamaliel and 74, 144, 150,
153, 230
 - *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt
- Samuel *see* Shemuel
Sandal mesumar 258–260, 300
- *see also* Bar Kokhba Revolt;
Taqanot, Sabbath
- Sanim (Sunam, Shunem) 41
Sanit, Tel (Tel al-Sahar) 341
Saracens 362
Sasanians 39, 84, 340–342, 364, 376,
382, 409, 411, 425
- *see also* Law courts, Jewish; Exilarch
- Sawad 343, 345
Schagaluta *see* Shagaluta
Schaliniya *see* Shaliniya
Schalem *see* Shalem
Schammaiten *see* Bet Shammai
Schela *see* Shela
Scherira *see* Sherira
Schildsch *see* Shilj
Schime'on *see* Shimeon
Schimon *see* Shimeon
Schum Temaja *see* Shum Temaya
Schumia *see* Shumya
Scriptores Historiae Augustae 202, 203,
209, 210, 222, 243–245
Sebaste 32–33, 41
Secharja *see* Zechariah
Segavyon / Sevyon 146, 147, 229
Seleucia on the Tigris 31, 358–360
Sennacherib 67, 167, 171, 306
Sepphoris / Diocaesarea 15, 27, 34, 37,
39, 45, 46, 63, 64, 66, 84, 85, 97, 99,
135, 136, 147, 157, 158, 160–161, 183–
185, 214, 215, 227, 233, 234, 237, 238,
240, 330, 358, 359, 367, 385, 400, 429
Septimius Severus 33, 39, 44, 49, 61, 93,
414, 426
Severans 33, 46, 49, 180, 428
Severus Alexander 187
Sewid of Nehardea *see* Zevid, Rav
Sha'atnez 284, 286, 294
- *see also* Dress, items of
- Shadh Hurmus 342
Shaf'VeYatev synagogue (Nehardea) 364,
365, 394–398, 401
- *see also* Statues
- Shagaluta / Shaliniya 438
Shalem, Tel 238
Shapur I 341
Shapur II 341
Shefaram 27, 28, 34, 52, 328, 329
Shela, Rav 363, 380
Shema' *see* Prayer
Shema'iah 80, 167
Shemuel 53, 259, 260, 311, 314, 340, 341,
344, 345, 347, 348, 352, 359, 362–365,
372, 380, 394, 397, 398, 401, 403–405,
411, 412, 415, 418, 424, 431, 434
Shemuel, Rav 343, 409
Shemuel bar Nahmani, R. 135, 418
Shemuel haQatan *see* Prayer
Shemuel bar Shilo (or Shilat), Rav 80
Shemuel's father *see* Avuha diShemuel
(Abba)

- Sherira Gaon, Rav 71, 181, 315, 316, 362, 364, 365, 368, 371, 394, 396–399, 418, 426
- Sheshet, Rav 418
- Shevi'it* / Sabbatical year 26, 81, 92, 128, 132, 133, 159–163, 173, 185, 186, 285, 293, 296, 299, 339, 377
- *see also* Commandments; *Taqqanot*
- Shevu'a haben* 103, 108, 112, 252
- *see also* Meals, *Haverim* / *Havurot*
- Shevu'a habat* 112, 253
- Shilj 437
- Shimeon b. Elazar, R. 78, 164
- Shimeon b. Gamaliel, Rabban 18, 55, 90, 98, 117, 145, 148, 153, 168, 169, 184, 216, 241, 253, 254, 311, 313–315, 318, 369, 371, 378, 388, 428
- Shimeon b. Guryon 86
- Shimeon ben Halafta, R.
- Shimeon ben Koseva *see* Bar Kokhba Revolt
- Shimeon ben Laqish *see* Resh Laqish
- Shimeon ben Nanos, R. 53
- Shimeon ben Yehotzadaq, R. 54, 96, 321
- Shimeon (bar Yohai), R. 27, 60, 69, 70, 99, 111, 121, 142, 143, 159, 165, 168, 238, 241, 260, 270, 327, 328, 395, 400, 434
- Shimeon ben Yohanan 96, 280
- Shimeon beRabbi, R. 98
- Shimeon haPaqoli 144
- Shimeon Shezori, R. 130
- Shimeon haTemani 315
- Shimron 169
- Ships 348
- Shoa 391
- Shomronim see* Samaritans
- Shum Temaya 349, 350, 404
- *see also* Burial; Boundaries
- Shumya 349, 350, 404
- Shut Mishut 354
- al-Shutaita 342
- Sibylline Oracle 211, 251
- Sichni / Siychne *see* Sikhne (Sakhnin)
- Sidon 93, 100, 238, 269, 384, 386, 400, 414
- archisynagogue 101
- *colonia* 93
- glass making 98
- Julius Caesar 96
- provincial capital 93
- Roman wheat granary 96
- trade 414
- port city 93, 423
- and R. Judah haNasi 95
- and Galilee 95
- *see also* Tyre; Galilee; Taxation (*arnona*)
- Sikhne (Sakhnin) 59, 66, 227, 235, 385
- Silk *see* Dress, items of
- Simlai, R. 161, 163, 231, 372, 433
- Simon *see* Shimeon
- Simon Maccabaeus 120, 286
- *see also* *arbba'at haminim*; Victorious joy
- Simonya / Tel Shimron 35, 154, 155
- Sippar 359
- Siqariqon see* Landownershship
- Sisera, descendants of 80, 167
- Slaves 3, 87, 128, 375, 410, 428, 261
- Sodom 310
- Solomon (the King) 198, 286, 314
- South (= *Darom* / Lod) 36, 62, 80, 231, 368, 372, 426
- 'elders of the' 62, 63, 80, 231, 368, 372, 426
- '*matnita min Daroma*' 67, 156
- 'the southerners say' 62, 156
- *see also* Lod; *Batei Midrash*
- Spain 433, 436, 440
- Spasinou [Charax] 412, 421
- Spondilla (Pannonia) 187
- Statues 89, 137, 153, 356, 364, 394, 395
- stratego* (duoviri) 24, 39, 40, 309
- Subterranean Hideouts *see* Bar Kokhba Revolt
- Sukkot* 47, 105, 118–127, 148, 223, 286–287, 289, 293, 330, 358, 379, 424
- *see also* Victorious joy, *arbba'at haminim*
- Sumeiriya 86
- Sura 80, 351, 359, 380, 382, 384, 389, 399, 401
- Susanna and the Elders, story 176
- Susya 389

- Sycamina / Shiqmona 238
- Synagogues
- Babylonia 364–366, 371, 394–401
 - Palestine 2, 3, 15, 50, 64, 101, 104–107, 110, 114, 122–124, 140, 141, 145–147, 229, 237, 259, 265, 268, 288, 310, 311, 313, 332, 389, 390, 394, 429
 - – inscriptions 101, 389
 - other places 100, 101, 187
 - – inscriptions 187, 389
- Syria 48, 83, 93, 129, 145, 146, 174, 190, 212, 215, 229, 234, 254, 256, 268, 341, 360, 362, 363, 385, 434
- Syria Palaestina 15, 38, 83, 90, 94
- *see also* Palaestina; Judaea
- Tabari 405
- Tabernacles, Feast of *see Sukkot*
- Tabor Mt. 45
- Tabula Peutingeriana* 49, 50
- Tacitus 23
- Tadmor *see* Palmyra
- Talbush / Tilbis 361
- Talmidei hakhamim see* Sages
- Talmud academies *see Yeshivot*
- Talmud, Babylonian 2, 362, 383, 420, 421, 423
- Tamar 179
- Taqqanot*
- Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai 13–29, 105, 117–124, 145, 166, 170, 269, 287
 - Yavneh (Rabban Gamaliel) 13–29, 117, 123–132, 151, 269
 - in the wake of the Bar Kokhba revolt 240, 259, 260, 300, 428
 - R. Judah haNasi 34–40, 45, 46, 80–81, 84, 90, 129, 132–133, 340
 - R. Judah Nesiah 372
- Tarbiqna 345, 347–349, 403, 404
- *see also* Baniqia; Burial; Boundaries
- Tarfon, R. 50, 51, 53, 55, 56, 58, 72, 76, 126, 127, 131, 135–137, 181, 235
- Tarsians 50
- Taxation 24, 31, 38, 92, 96, 132, 163, 183, 218, 253, 428
- collection by the army 46
 - *akhsaniah* 185
 - *angaria* 26, 185, 253, 299
 - *arnona (annona militaris)* 96, 163, 185, 186
 - *aurum coronarium* 39, 40
 - *didrachma* 176
 - poll tax 26
 - *tironiah* 183–191
 - *aurum tironicum* 184, 185
 - *see also karga*; Roman Army
- Tefillin* 163, 268, 300, 311, 331–332
- the Decalogue 135, 268
- Temple Mt. 271
- Teqo'a 293
- Terebinth *see* Markets
- Thamna 31, 41, 48, 52
- Thamnitica 41
- Theodorus *see* Medicin
- Theodosius II 184, 188
- *see also* Roman legislation
- Thieves 176, 377
- Tiberias 13, 24, 33–35, 37, 39, 40, 42, 45, 49, 52, 97, 99, 147, 148, 155, 157, 179, 215, 230, 237–238, 240, 309, 314, 349, 400, 402, 404, 415, 418, 424
- *colonia* 34, 40
 - *see also* Urbanisation; *Bet haVa'ad*
- Tiberius Alexander 94
- Tigris, river 84, 340–344, 346, 352, 354–355, 359, 362, 376, 380, 381, 407, 409, 410, 429, 434, 435, 437, 439–441
- Tineius Rufus 202, 214, 221, 254, 255, 314, 318, 325, 326
- tironiah see* Taxation
- Tithes *see ma'asrot*
- Titus 318
- Tiv'on 227
- Todos 73, 125
- Tola 169
- toparchies 23, 30–32, 41–46, 48
- *see also* Urbanisation
- Torah study *see Batei midrash*
- Totes Meer *see* Judaeen Desert and Dead Sea
- Trachonitis 31, 262
- Trajan 237, 238, 247, 309
- his wife 309
 - *see also* Diaspora Revolt
- Tsippori *see* Sepphoris
- Tsrifa *see* Ashqelon

- Turkey 385, 360, 425
 Turnus Rufus *see* Tineius Rufus
 Tyre 92–101, 147, 155, 238, 400, 414
 – port city 93, 423
 – *colonia* 38, 93
 – Julius Caesar 96
 – Diocletian 96, 99
 – trade with Galilee 93–96
 – Roman wheat granary 96
 – purple-dyeing 98
 – tyrian currency in Galilee 97
 – fair 96
 – flax 98
 – Jews 98–101
 – archisynagogue 100
 – *see also* Markets; Idolatry; Boundaries; *arnona*
- ‘Ukba *see* ‘Uqba
 ‘Ukbara / Buzurg Sabur 84, 340–343, 353, 355, 362, 437, 440
 ‘Ukhbarah *see* ‘Akhbarah
 ‘Ulla, R. 227–228, 231
 ‘Ulla (bar Ishmael) (‘Ulla *nahota*) 416, 418, 419, 427
 ‘Ulla bar Qoshev (Qosher) 63, 64
 Ulpian 38, 39, 92
 Ummidius Quadratus *see* Quadratus
 ‘Uqba from Mesene, Rav 415, 424
 Urbanisation 65
 – Severan initiative 5, 33
 – Rabbi Judah haNasi and 5, 33–40, 90, 132
 – administrative division of Judaea 5, 30–46, 48
 – *see also poleis*; Villages; *colonia*
- Uriah (the Priest) 271
 Urmiya, Lake 425
 Ushah 18, 25, 27–28, 54, 55, 59, 117, 127, 148, 155, 159, 174, 225, 230, 310, 322, 330, 367, 385, 386, 389, 399
 – *see also Taqqanot*
 ‘Uziel haLevi 274
- Valentinian 189
 Valentinian III 188
 – *see also* Roman legislation
 Vegetius 189
- *see also* Roman army
 Vespasian 30, 49, 52, 53, 85, 106, 310, 318
vexillatio 24, 25, 220
 Victorious joy 120, 122, 286, 287, 289, 291
 – *see also Sukkot, arbba’at haminim*
 Villagers / Villages 24, 32, 33, 41, 46, 50, 157, 160, 168, 308, 309
 Vologaeses I 359
 Vologesias / Valashpat 411
- Wadi Daliya 207
 Wadi Murabba’at 33, 198, 208, 219, 288
 Wadi Qelt *see* Cypros River
 Wadi Suweinit 208
 Wasit 344, 410, 435
 ‘War of Qitus’ *see* Diaspora revolt
 Weak of the son *see Shevu’a haben*
 Week of the daughter *see Shevu’a habat*
 Wine *see* Food
 Wologesias *see* Vologesias
- Ya’aqov bar Aha, R. 96, 331
 Ya’aqov hamin 136
 Ya’aqov of Kefar Nevorayah 99
 Ya’aqov of Kefar Sama 136, 137
 Ya’aqov of Kefar Sikhnin 135, 137
 Yannai, R. 186
 – his daughter 157
 – farmers 157
 – *Havurah* of Sages 157
 – observance of *Shevi’it* and *Ma’asrot* 159–163
 – olive presses 157–158
 – ritual purity 97, 160–161, 163
 – ‘those of the school of ...’ 156–165
 – wealthy sage 157
 – *see also* Jerusalem; *haverim* / *havurot*; *Qehala Qadisha debiyerushalem*; *arnona*
- Yarhei Kallah 382, 421
 Yarqon river 70
 Yase, R. 179
 Yavneh 15, 19, 31, 45, 49, 52–54, 56–59, 66, 67, 73, 75–77, 80, 86, 89, 104, 114, 117, 118, 121, 145, 148, 151, 152, 174, 213, 227, 231, 233, 234, 241, 266, 273, 278, 283, 284, 287, 315, 316, 331, 367, 385, 424, 425

- *see also* Yohanan b. Zakkai, Rabban; Gamaliel, Rabban; *Taqqanot*
- Yavneh period 49, 50, 55, 59, 66, 82, 114, 130, 131, 232, 268, 294, 302, 316, 367, 385, 387
- Yehonatan bar Ba'ayan 285, 293
- Yehoshua *see* Joshua
- Yéhouchoua *see* Joshua
- Yéhouda *see* Judah
- liYeshua haben see pidyon haben*
- Yehud 67
- Yehudah bar Menashe 285
- Yehudah *see* Judah
- Yeshevav, R. 233
- Yeshivot* / Talmud academies 2, 3, 82, 231, 360, 362, 363, 366, 373, 377, 380, 381–384, 386, 390, 394, 395, 398, 399, 403, 411, 415, 417, 419, 420, 424, 427, 429, 438
- Yeshua b. Galgula 222, 239, 285, 293
- Yeshua b. Pantera *see* Jesus
- Yeshua b. Tadmoraya 293
- *see also* Jesus; Christians / Christianity
- Yitzhaq, R. 46, 163, 370, 386, 390
- Yitzhaq, Rav 438
- Yitzhaq b. Avdimi, R. 179
- Yitzhaq bar Joseph, Rav 39
- Yitzhaq Nappaha 418
- Yitzhaq *resh galuta* 433, 436, 437, 439–441
- *see also* Exilarch
- Yohanan b. Beroqa 241
- Yohanan b. Godgada, R. 154
- Yohanan of Gush Halav 94, 97
- Yohanan (b. Nappaha), R. 25, 54, 69, 70, 87, 96, 110, 111, 158, 159, 163, 229, 260, 281, 321, 322, 331, 339, 344, 346, 356, 353, 354, 365, 366, 376, 383, 405, 411, 414, 415, 418–421, 423, 424, 426, 431
- Yohanan ben haNazuf 147, 227, 233
- Yohanan b. Nuri, R. 154, 227, 231, 233, 241, 330, 424
- Yohanan haSandlar 70, 367, 368, 386, 426
- Yohanan b. Torta, R. 270, 271, 279
- Yohanan b. Zakkai, Rabban 13–29, 55, 67, 68, 86, 106, 145, 154, 167, 168, 171, 175
- from Jerusalem to Yavneh 15, 16, 20, 52, 117, 118, 152, 266, 287, 316
- ‘vineyard of Yavneh’ 52
- imperial estate 52
- opposition 17, 19
- Beror Hayil 66, 311
- *see also* Patriarch / Patriarchate; Yavneh; *Taqqanot*
- Yom Kippur* 118, 124, 126, 142
- *see also* Yohanan b. Zakkai, Rabban; Gamaliel, Rabban; *Taqqanot*
- Yonah, R. 159
- Yonatan, R. 231
- Yose beRabbi Bun 87
- Yose haGalilee, R. 53, 54, 136, 180, 231, 240
- Yose b. Halafta, R. 62, 66, 90, 100, 147, 153, 237, 241, 250, 251, 290, 308, 310, 328–330, 367, 385
- Yose b. (Rabbi) Hanina, R. 25, 353
- Yose beRabbi Judah, R. 92, 95
- Yose b. Kippar, R. 387, 389
- Yose the Mede, R. 425
- Yose b. Qisma, R. 237, 324, 325
- Yudan, R. (R. Hanania's brother) 254, 314
- Yudan b. Rabbi Shimeon 159
- Yulianus *see* Pappus
- Zadoq, R. 61, 181
- Zaora, Rav 159
- Zealots 48, 94, 133, 267
- Zechariah 271, 272
- Zechariah b. Jeberechiah 271
- Zechariah b. Qebutal 387, 389
- Zehnten *see* *Ma'asrot*
- Ze'ire 339, 366, 367, 411
- Zera (Ze'ira) R. 61, 159, 418
- Zeugma *see* Gisma
- Zevid of Nehardea, Rav 362
- Zippori *see* Sephhoris
- Zizit see zitzit*
- Zoar / Zoara 32
- Zonin (Rabban Gamaliel's deputy) 58, 75, 151
- Zor *see* Tyre

Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism

Alphabetical Index

- Albani, M., J. Frey, and A. Lange* (Ed.): *Studies in the Book of Jubilees*. 1997. *Volume 65*.
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