

The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered

Edited by PETER SCHÄFER

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Mohr Siebeck

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The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered

New Perspectives on the Second
Jewish Revolt against Rome

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PETER SCHÄFER

Mohr Siebeck

In Memoriam
Leo Mildenberg
1913–2001

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Table of Contents

<i>Peter Schäfer</i>	
Preface	VII
<i>Peter Schäfer</i>	
Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis.....	1
<i>Martin Goodman</i>	
Trajan and the Origins of the Bar Kokhba War	23
<i>Yoram Tsafir</i>	
Numismatics and the Foundation of Aelia Capitolina: A Critical Review	31
<i>Benjamin Isaac</i>	
Roman Religious Policy and the Bar Kokhba War	37
<i>Aharon Oppenheimer</i>	
The Ban of Circumcision as a Cause of the Revolt: A Reconsideration	55
<i>Ra'anan Abusch</i>	
Negotiating Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kokhba Revolt ...	71
<i>Hanan Eshel</i>	
The Dates Used during the Bar Kokhba Revolt	93
<i>Menahem Mor</i>	
The Geographical Scope of the Bar Kokhba Revolt	107
<i>Hannah M. Cotton</i>	
The Bar Kokhba Revolt and the Documents from the Judaean Desert: Nabataean Participation in the Revolt (<i>P. Yadin 52</i>)	133

<i>Werner Eck</i>	
Hadrian, the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and the Epigraphic Transmission.	153
<i>Glen W. Bowersock</i>	
The Tel Shalem Arch and P. Naḥal Hever/Seiyal 8	171
<i>Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu</i>	
Hiding Complexes in Judaea: An Archaeological and Geographical Update on the Area of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. . . .	181
<i>Yuval Shahar</i>	
The Underground Hideouts in Galilee and Their Historical Meaning.	217
<i>Yaron Z. Eliav</i>	
The Urban Layout of Aelia Capitolina: A New View from the Perspective of the Temple Mount.	241
<i>Yael Zerubavel</i>	
Bar Kokhba's Image in Modern Israeli Culture.	279
Index of Sources	299
Modern Authors	303
Index of Names and Subjects	309

Preface

The Second Jewish Revolt against Rome, the so-called Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 CE), considerably changed the political and cultural landscape of Jewish Palestine. When the Romans gained victory after approximately three years, Judaea was heavily devastated; the Jews were no longer allowed to inhabit Jerusalem, and Jewish life shifted from Judaea to the Galilee. But the Roman victory, achieved with all the military force that Roman power could afford, was won at great cost. It is certainly not a coincidence that Hadrian, the Roman Emperor who had to grapple again with the rebellious Jews – some sixty years after the catastrophe of the First Jewish Revolt – refrained from concluding his report to the Roman Senate with the customary formula *Mihi et legionibus bene* (“All is well with me and the legions”).

Unlike the First War to which a multi-volume book by an eyewitness, the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, is dedicated, the Second War did not find its contemporary historian. Much evidence is still covered by the shrouds of history, and many questions regarding the precise circumstances of the war remain unanswered – despite even stunning new archaeological discoveries, mainly in the Judaeian desert. At least we know now that the leader of the revolt was a certain Shimon ben/bar Kosiba, that the revolt lasted for more than three years, that it affected a relatively clearly defined geographical area in Judaea, and that its suppression wasn’t an easy task for the Romans. But we do not know much about the origins of its military leader, his ideological-religious background, his supporters, or his fate after the war. We still do not know whether or not he captured Jerusalem and began to rebuild the Temple, although his propaganda machine decidedly focused on Jerusalem, with the Temple cult at its center, as we can see from his coins. We still do not know for sure whether the geographical area of the revolt was indeed limited to Judaea proper or whether it extended beyond the territory of Judaea, perhaps into the Galilee. We do not know much about the military strategy and the course of the revolt, how and where precisely the Roman and the Jewish forces met each other, whether or not they fought decisive battles, or whether the Jews succeeded by relying on guerilla

tactics, as suggested by the many underground hideouts discovered so far. And last but not least, we are still in the dark as to what finally caused the outbreak of the revolt and why Hadrian, the Emperor of peace and renewal, stumbled into such a war so devastating that he needed his full military force to crush it.

Not that all these (and many more) open questions can now be answered; we are still far from a scholarly consensus regarding most of the questions related to the Bar Kokhba Revolt. But nevertheless, after some early attempts in the 1970s and 1980s to draw a new picture of the revolt after the sensational discoveries in the Judaean desert,¹ the time is now more than ripe for a new evaluation of the *status quaestionis* – not least because of the new archaeological findings since the discoveries by Yadin and his colleagues. Towards this goal, scholars working on the Bar Kokhba period gathered in November 2001 in Princeton to share their ideas and to discuss the present state of the subject in light of the most recent excavations and research. It was the aim of the conference – and is the purpose of this book resulting from it – to re-evaluate the historical importance of the Bar Kokhba Revolt and its repercussions for the subsequent history of the Jews in Roman Palestine.

The volume opens with “Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis” by Peter Schäfer. The author attempts to put Bar Kokhba and his uprising into the context of the emerging Rabbinic movement of the second century CE. He asks to what degree Bar Kokhba’s ideology can be explained from the background provided by the Rabbis, whether or not he understood himself as part of the religious program soon to be codified in the Mishna, and whether or not the Rabbis belonged to his ardent followers. Contrary to the opinion of many scholars he argues that Bar Kokhba and his revolt remain conspicuously out of place within the ideal picture that the Rabbis draw of themselves and that the Rabbinic sources do not support theories about the revolt’s popularity among the Rabbis. The documents from the Judaean desert, on the other hand, allow a much sharper profile of the revolt and its leader. Although Bar Kokhba presents himself here as someone who is concerned about religious precepts, it is not the Rabbinic Halakha that motivates him but rather the law as

¹ Y. Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Last Jewish Revolt against Imperial Rome*, London-Jerusalem 1971; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C.–A. D. 135): A New English Version*, rev. and ed. by G. Vermes and F. Millar, vol. I, Edinburgh 1973, pp. 514–557; A. Oppenheimer, ed., *The Bar Kokhva Revolt* (Hebr.), Jerusalem 1980; P. Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand. Studien zum Zweiten Jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom*, Tübingen 1981; A. Oppenheimer and U. Rappaport, *The Bar Kokhva Revolt: A New Approach* (Hebr.), Jerusalem 1984; L. Mildenberg, *The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War*, Aarau–Frankfurt a. M.–Salzburg 1984.

preserved in the earlier, pre-70 traditions. As the *Nasi* (“Prince”) he is much closer to the Maccabees, the Qumran community, and the Zealots than to the Rabbis. This image of Bar Kokhba, as a hero reviving the Maccabean ideals, fits well the priestly connotations of his movement.

The next contributions discuss the problem of the causes of the revolt. Although we do not have much new evidence, scholars continue to debate the various options suggested by the literary sources and the numismatic data: the foundation of Aelia Capitolina, the prohibition of circumcision (or a combination of both), and the withdrawal of the permission to rebuild the Temple. Martin Goodman in his essay “Trajan and the Origins of the Bar Kokhba War” stresses the need for a broader perspective, which includes the decades before the war in any investigation of its causes. He sees the foundation of Aelia Capitolina by Hadrian, probably in 130 CE, as the peak of an almost continuously and deliberately anti-Jewish policy on the part of the Roman Emperors since Vespasian (interrupted only by the short-lived pro-Jewish policy of Nerva). Hadrian, he argues, completed only what Vespasian had begun by forcing the Jews to contribute their regular half-shekel offerings for the Jerusalem Temple to the rebuilding of the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol. With the establishment of Aelia Capitolina and the substitution of the Jupiter Capitolinus for the Jewish God he enacted a well-considered measure, the “final solution for Jewish rebelliousness” (the use of the term “final solution” is not accidental but deliberately chosen by the author): “Hadrian’s solution was to ensure that Jews could never again expect to have a temple on their sacred site in Jerusalem, by founding a miniature Rome on the site of the Jews’ holy city.”

Yoram Tsafrir (“Numismatics and the Foundation of Aelia Capitolina: A Critical Review”) concurs with Goodman that Hadrian and the imperial administration intentionally suppressed Jewish national feelings when they decided to rebuild Jerusalem as the Roman colony *Aelia Capitolina*, instead of using the traditional name *Hierosolyma* (as they also did by changing the name of the province *Judaea* into that of *Syria Palaestina* and by expelling the Jews from Jerusalem and its region). He proposes, however, that this decision was made only after the revolt, not yet during Hadrian’s provincial tour of 128–130 CE, when he still had in mind the restoration of the old and famous Jewish city Hierosolyma. The numismatic evidence that has come to light so far does not speak, according to Tsafrir, against such an interpretation of the sequence of events. This applies also to the two Aelia Capitolina coins, which were recently discovered at the el-Jai cave in Nahal Mikhmarsh (Wadi es-Suweinit) northeast of Jerusalem and which, according to their

discoverers, were minted before 135 CE (because they were found together with four Bar Kokhba coins).

Benjamin Isaac (“Roman Religious Policy and the Bar Kokhba War”) opens a series of articles that direct our attention to the prohibition of circumcision as possibly a major factor in provoking the revolt. He briefly surveys the Roman attitude towards foreign cults, particularly towards the Egyptian religion and the Jews, summarizes the legal status of the Jews in Rome and the provinces, and finally turns to the Roman concepts and stereotypes about the Jews. Significant among the latter, he posits, was the matter of conversion (for it was regarded as threatening to the Romans), and it was the question of circumcision that played an exceptionally sensitive role within this whole discussion about conversion. Conversion and circumcision are inextricably linked, and Roman legislation against circumcision was motivated above all by the attempt to prevent the Jews from filling their ranks with converts who did not belong to the Jewish *ethnos* by birth. So in the end, since there was never a general ban on circumcision for Jews, such a ban cannot have been the cause of the revolt (and Isaac explicitly rules out the possibility of a hypothetical Hadrianic law banning circumcision generally and allegedly modified by Antoninus Pius’ famous rescript, which permits the Jews to circumcise only their sons).

Aharon Oppenheimer (“The Ban on Circumcision as a Cause of the Revolt: A Reconsideration”) re-evaluates the question of whether the ban on circumcision was issued by Hadrian before the Bar Kokhba Revolt (and was thus its cause), or whether it was part of the repressive legislation which followed it. He agrees that Antoninus Pius’ rescript was directed at converts and that it is highly dubious that there existed official Roman legislation concerning circumcision before the war. Instead, he focuses on the talmudic sources that have been adduced to prove that the Romans banned circumcision before the outbreak of the revolt. He concludes from his survey of Mishna Shabbat 19:1, Tosefta Shabbat 15:9, and Mishna Avot 3:11 “that also according to the talmudic sources the ban on circumcision belonged to the repressive legislation following the Bar Kokhba Revolt and has no connection with the cause or the causes of the revolt.” The only cause that remains, therefore, is the rebuilding of Jerusalem as the pagan city Aelia Capitolina, as claimed by Dio Cassius. Oppenheimer adds that, since a ban on circumcision must be regarded as ethnic and not as territorial, the limited territory of the revolt (namely, Judaea proper) speaks against such a general ban.

Ra’anan Abusch (“Negotiating the Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kokhba Revolt”) continues this discussion, but he proceeds from a completely different angle.

Starting from the assumption that no Hadrianic prohibition of circumcision ever existed in any form (either before or even after the war) and that Hadrian's successor Antoninus Pius was the first to ever address the legal status of circumcision in Roman imperial legislation, he proposes that Antoninus Pius' rescript must be seen and judged "within the imperial legislative policy to address the maltreatment of slaves." Abusch reviews the Roman legislation and argues that already the earliest legislation against castration under Domitian and Nerva was closely connected with the attempt to tighten restrictions on the treatment of slaves. Hadrian's legislation, he claims, belongs in this context and has nothing to do with any interest on the part of the emperor in circumcision in general or Jewish circumcision in particular. The same is true for Antoninus Pius, who "did not issue his rescript with the aim of reversing his predecessor's legal innovations, as some would have it, but instead his law demonstrates his abiding commitment to protect slaves from their owners." Also the Rabbinic sources with their mention of the prohibition of circumcision among other anti-Jewish measures (prior, during, and after the revolt) "in no way indicate the existence of imperial legislation specifically targeting circumcision"; rather, Abusch suggests, they result from the power of *coercitio* of the provincial governor, Tineius Rufus, and were thus "limited in their temporal and geographical scope."

Turning now to the revolt itself, Hanan Eshel ("The Dates Used during the Bar Kokhba Revolt") tries to determine the exact time frame of the revolt. Unlike the First Revolt, whose years were counted from the spring, i. e., from the month of Nisan, we do not know the dating system used during the Second Revolt. The dated documents from the Bar Kokhba war (none of the letters is dated) refer to the day and the month and to the first, second, and third year of the revolt only, and in order to establish an absolute chronology one needs to know the month from which the years of the revolt were counted. Of the three possibilities – the first of Nisan (March/April) 132 CE, the first of Tishri (September/October) 132, or the time when Bar Kokhba came to power, i. e., the summer of 132 – the author rules out Nisan and opts for either the summer or Tishri of 132. He arrives at this conclusion from a relative chronology of the documents, which he establishes according to the amount of money involved in land leases and house sales in the territory under Bar Kokhba's control: arranged in such a manner, he maintains, the documents reflect a steady worsening of the economic situation during the years of the revolt.

"The Geographical Scope of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt" is the subject of the paper by Menachem Mor. Mor evaluates the major factors that have been brought up in favor of the magnitude of the revolt, in particular

with regard to its territorial extent, and he comes to the following conclusions:

1. The transfer of Julius Severus from Britannia to Judaea may well reflect Hadrian's response to a state of emergency in Judaea; the irregular appointment of Publius Mummius Sisenna as his replacement in Britannia should not be seen, however, as a sign of an empire-wide emergency.
2. The conspicuous frequency of military recruitment in different regions of the empire should not be interpreted as evidence for a shortage of soldiers resulting from military defeats in Judaea during the revolt.
3. The bestowing of the *ornamenta triumphalia* on the governors of the provinces of Syria and Arabia may well prove the massiveness of the revolt; it cannot be used, however, as evidence that the revolt extended to the neighboring provinces.
4. The Tel Shalem inscription does not prove that a decisive battle took place in the vicinity of Tel Shalem; nor can we conclude from it the involvement of Galilee in the Bar Kokhba Revolt.
5. The length of the revolt does not point to its territorial extent. As far as military tactics are concerned, we need to distinguish between two phases: first, a guerilla war, during which the Romans suffered heavy losses; and second, a change in the balance between the Romans and the rebels after the arrival of Julius Severus, who adopted the guerilla tactics and finally succeeded in crushing the revolt.

Hannah M. Cotton in her contribution "The Bar Kokhba Revolt and the Documents from the Judaean Desert: Nabataean Participation in the Revolt (*P. Yadin* 52)" reexamines some important documents from the Judaean desert:

(a) *P. Murabba'at* 29 and 30, Cotton reaffirms, can no longer be assigned to the Bar Kokhba Revolt but both belong to the first revolt; accordingly, these two papyri do not prove that Jerusalem was in the hands of the rebels.

(b) *P. Murabba'at* 114 does not prove that the Roman authorities maintained a military presence in the caves of Murabba'at in the second half of the second century CE; rather, the document, which must be dated before 130 (or at the latest before 132 CE), belonged to "Jewish refugees from the area near Jerusalem, who escaped into the cave with their documents during the second revolt."

(c) *P. Se'elim* 4 is not a list of Bar Kokhba's soldiers but is an extract from census declarations and refers to men liable probably to manual liturgies. Such lists, Cotton argues, "may give us an idea of how the Romans could have come by precise numbers for the casualties incurred by the Jews during the Bar Kokhba revolt."

(d) The famous and much discussed *P. Yadin 52* suggests Nabataean participation in the revolt. Soumaios, the writer of the document, is not a Jew (and definitely not Shimon b. Kosiba, the leader of the revolt) but a Nabataean. His admission that he and his men could not write *Ebraïsti* does not refer to the Hebrew or Aramaic *language* but to the Hebrew and Aramaic *script*. The participation of Nabataeans in the revolt must be viewed, Cotton posits, in the light of Cassius Dio's statement that "many outside nations, too, were joining them [the Jews] through eagerness for gain." Although she accepts the possibility that the "eagerness for gain" could refer to Nabataean mercenaries who joined Bar Kokhba in their greed for gain, she prefers a different explanation or rather speculation, as she herself admits: the Nabataeans participated in the revolt because they possibly shared with the Jews "a cultural inheritance and common sensitivities" and felt "threatened and excluded by the Cosmo-Hellenistic policy of the Emperor"; moreover, it is even possible that, just as the foundation of Aelia Capitolina shattered the Jewish dream, so too was the Nabataean dream shattered by a similar event in Arabia: "the transfer of the capital from Petra to Bostra."

Werner Eck ("Hadrian, the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and the Epigraphic Transmission") reviews once again the epigraphic evidence pertaining to the revolt. He starts with some methodological observations (the inscriptions "contain mostly statements of facts" as opposed to the "subjective interpretations" of the literary sources) and discusses first the inscriptions from the province of Judaea referring to Hadrian – chief among them the Tel Shalem inscription, which has become famous through some of Eck's previous publications. He defends his view that the triumphal arch with its remaining inscription was built in the context of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (and not during Hadrian's visit to the province around 130 CE), that it was erected by order of the Roman Senate (and not by one of the two legions serving in Judaea at the time of the visit), and that it commemorates a decisive victory towards the conclusion of the revolt. His main argument for the dating of the arch is the restoration of the *imp. II* (Hadrian's second acclamation as *Imperator*) on the inscription: "There is an inescapable correlation between the end of the revolt, Hadrian's acclamation as *imperator II*, and the erection of the arch at Tel Shalem – all three events are inextricably connected; each of them presupposes and assumes the other two. Thus it seems difficult to deny, or even doubt, the logic of restoring of *imp. II* in Hadrian's titulature in this inscription."

Eck then continues by considering epigraphic texts from Rome that, he claims, support his interpretation of the Tel Shalem inscription. Among them is the fragment of an inscription, which must have be-

longed to a monument bearing a statue of Hadrian “like the Tel Shalem arch.” The site at which the fragment was found – the slope of the Capitoline hill, directly beneath the *templum divi Vespasiani* – testifies to the importance of the monument: “the temple of *divus Vespasianus* in Rome and its immediate surroundings were probably used to present Hadrian as Vespasian’s successor in Rome’s war against its Jewish rebels.” The second fragmentary inscription he discusses in this context is an inscription which connects a *bellum Iudae[icum]* or *Iudae[orum]* with some marine warfare involving ships: since we know from another inscription that Sex. Cornelius Dexter, *praefectus classis Syriacae*, received *dona militaria* on the occasion of a *bellum Iudaicum* it is safe to conclude that marine warfare was indeed part of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. As to the possible sites of marine action (the Mediterranean, the Sea of Galilee, and the Dead Sea) he cautiously suggests the possibility “that parts of the Syrian fleet under the command of Cornelius Dexter were stationed on the Dead Sea in order to cut off communications between groups of Jewish – perhaps also Nabataean – rebels and interrupt their supply-lines” but nevertheless prefers the Mediterranean Sea as the ultimate scene of major sea battles.

In the last part of his contribution Eck reconsiders the monuments and inscriptions commemorating the award of the *ornamenta triumphalia* to three of Hadrian’s commanders in their respective home towns (Publicius Marcellus, the governor of Syria; T. Haterius Nepos, the governor of Arabia; and Sex. Julius Severus, the governor of Judaea). Eck does not venture an explanation of the remarkable fact that “all three governors who led the fighting in the Bar Kokhba revolt were celebrated in their own *patriae* and apparently took an active part in the celebration” (whereas in all other known cases “the *virī triumphales* were honoured only at the centre of empire, in Rome itself”); he is nevertheless convinced that at least two of the honorees were present at the Senate meeting at which the decision was made. Moreover, Eck posits, it was at this exact meeting that the Senators of Rome decided to honor Hadrian with the monumental arch near Tel Shalem: if its meaning at this godforsaken place eludes us today, *they* certainly knew what they did.

The meaning of the magnificent arch is taken up in Glen W. Bowersock’s contribution “The Tel Shalem Arch and P. Naḥal Hever/Seyal 8.” Referring to Eck’s major argument in his earlier *JRA* 12, 1999, article (the *imp. II* on the inscription), Bowersock begins by cautioning us that “not all imperial acclamations can be correlated with strenuous or even worthy achievements” and that “the issuance of military honors at home in the capital has throughout history, both ancient and modern, not always been a secure indication of what actually happened in the

field.” In his own reconstruction of the inscription Bowersock is in complete agreement with Eck as regards the first two lines, but he arrives at a very different conclusion regarding the reading of the crucial third line. First, he contests Eck’s insertion of *imp. II* into the reconstruction of the third line by arguing that the “vertical hasta before COS belongs to the number for the tribunician power” rather than to *imp. II*, as Eck prefers: “IMP II is introduced because we are told to expect a late date, and then towards the end of the article IMP II is brought back as proof of a late date. This looks like *petitio principii*.”

With the *imp. II* gone there is also no need to advocate a late (136 CE) date for the arch and the inscription; rather, Bowersock opts for the possibility, explicitly dismissed by Eck, that the arch was erected during Hadrian’s visit to the Near East in 130 CE. This leads, secondly, to Bowersock’s conclusion that instead of Eck’s reconstruction of the SPQR at the end of the inscription (from which follows that the Roman Senate must have been the initiator of the arch) it is more likely to presume that the arch was put up by the legion near whose camp the fragments were found (with the *X Fretensis* as the slightly preferable candidate). A comparable example, unnoticed by Eck, is the even more monumental Latin inscription at Petra which, as Bowersock argues, was most likely dedicated by the Roman governor and his legion. “Certainly,” he concludes, “the Senate and People of Rome cannot be imagined to have set up a great monument inside Petra to celebrate some unknown victory. It is equally impossible to believe that an overwhelming victory warranting the erection of a significant commemorative arch from the Roman Senate and People took place in the vicinity of the legionary camp near Scythopolis without leaving the slightest trace in our sources.”

The second part of Bowersock’s article is devoted to considering possible Nabataean involvement in the revolt and hence suggesting “a greater spread of hostilities than had formerly been thought.” He refers to some inscriptions at Gerasa from which the name of Haterius Nepos, the governor of Arabia, was erased – an act which may be taken as a reflection of zealous local reaction against Nepos in the wake of the Bar Kokhba Revolt – to a Safaitic graffito which mentions a “Safaitic tribesman who rebelled (*mrd*) for three years against Nepos the tyrant,” and finally to the Hebrew and Aramaic papyrus XHever/Seiyal 8, a deed of sale from the village Kfar Baru (*brw*). Bowersock accepts the identification of this village with the site near Machaerus on the Madaba map and opts for “the extension of the Jewish revolt into northern Transjordan and an additional reason to consider the spread of local support among Safaitic tribes and even at Gerasa.” Another indication of Nabataean involvement, he argues (following Hannah Cotton), is the Nabataean

name Soumaios in P. Yadin 52. Altogether, Bowersock concludes, we lose a battlefield in the vicinity of Scythopolis, but we gain “at least the north-western part of the province of Arabia” as part of the “realm that proclaimed the freedom of Israel.”

The following two articles turn to the underground hiding complexes connected with the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu (“Hiding Complexes in Judaea: An Archaeological and Geographical Update on the Area of the Bar Kokhba Revolt”) summarize our present knowledge of the hideouts in Judaea. They describe the features of the hiding complexes (the typical linking of “preexisting chambers by means of ramified networks of underground burrows” that could easily be blocked from inside and “neutralize the superiority of a trained military unit ready for face-to-face combat”) and provide a sophisticated classification of the various types (12 altogether). As for the dating of the complexes, there can be no doubt that the phenomenon starts as early as the Hellenistic period; they caution, however, not to confuse some early finds with the antiquity of the entire system. Despite the fact that the hiding complexes played an important role during the First Jewish Revolt, it is their firm conclusion that “the hiding-complex phenomenon seems to have reached its peak of sophistication and geographical range between the revolts and during the Bar Kokhba Revolt.” They do not see any evidence, however, to support the view that the revolt spread into Galilee. The last part of the article gives an up-to-date survey of the distribution of the hiding complexes throughout the entire province of Judaea, with an emphasis on the new information available. The authors conclude their survey by stating that “all Judaea, in its maximal geographical extent, was under Bar Kokhba’s administration and took part in the war. We assume that Cassius Dio’s report that ‘all Judaea had been stirred up’ accepts its full confirmation from the up-to-date archaeological research.”

As for Galilee, the findings are similar, but their historical evaluation leads to quite different conclusions. Yuval Shahar (“The Underground Hideouts in Galilee and their Historical Meaning”) surveys the whole range of hideout complexes that have so far come to light in Galilee, and he discovers important similarities with the respective complexes in Judaea: the characteristic features that distinguish hideouts from other places of refuge and the typical combination of (earlier) sites of “peaceful underground rural culture” such as cisterns, *columbaria*, oil-presses, store chambers etc., with emergency additions such as tunnels, burrows, blocked entrances and so on. Despite the identical typology of the Galilaeen and Judaeen hideouts, the major difference, however, remains: no single Bar Kokhba coin has been discovered in Galilee, either in one of

the hideouts or elsewhere. This archaeological fact calls into question the origins and, above all, the actual use of the hideout complexes in Galilee. Reviewing the geographical distribution of the hideouts and comparing it with the archaeological and literary data of the First Jewish War, Shahar comes to the conclusion that the Galilaean hideouts did not originate in the First Jewish War; rather, they were developed as *preparations* for the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

But why then were they apparently never used during the Second Jewish War? Shahar accepts the opinion of the majority of scholars that Galilee was never part of Bar Kokhba's independent Jewish state and that there is no reason to believe that any major military action took place in Galilee (also not in the Scythopolis area). On the other hand, he posits that during Bar Kokhba's uprising, unlike the First Jewish War, all of the Jewish people – in Judaea and Galilee alike – were united in a “national Jewish consensus” against the Roman oppressors. Against this background the differences between Judaea and Galilee are all the more striking. Refuting the often quoted cliché of a fundamental ideological gap between the Jews of Galilee and Judaea, Shahar suggests that the *casus belli* – the foundation of Aelia Capitolina – dictated Judaea as the geographical focus of the revolt, which was aimed against Jerusalem and the *legio X Fretensis*. The Jews of Galilee shared the spirit and practice of their Judaeic fellow-countrymen; they participated in the preparations for the war, and some of them even fought in Judaea, but they did not get a chance to extend the war to their own soil.

Whether or not it was issued before the war (and accordingly one of the reasons, if not the major reason, for the revolt), there can be no doubt that the decision to rebuild Jerusalem as the Roman colony Aelia Capitolina was implemented with full force after the Roman victory. Yaron Z. Eliav (“The Urban Layout of Aelia Capitolina: A New View from the Perspective of the Temple Mount”) deals with the urban layout of the new colony, particularly with regard to the question of what happened to the devastated Temple Mount. He first reviews the sparse evidence for archaeological remnants from the Roman colony. Most scholars agree about a negative conclusion, namely that Aelia did not have a fortification system during the first century and a half of its existence. Gates and arches most likely marked the boundaries of the colony's territory, two of which are still recognizable beneath or within the architectonic structures built above or around them: the *Porta Neapolitana* under the Ottoman Damascus gate in the north, and what is called today the Ecce Homo arch in the east; both served as entrances to Aelia Capitolina. In addition, remnants of the Roman street system (as illustrated by the Madaba map, which reflects the Roman street plan, although it actually depicts the

Byzantine city of the sixth century), a large Roman bath at the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount, and an arch leading to the central forum of Aelia on the northwestern hill have been unearthed, among other things. Altogether, however, the evidence is less than promising (Eliav is very skeptical with regard to the architectonic structures mentioned in the *Chronicon Paschale* and other literary sources).

To make up for this lack of data, many scholars resorted to the assumption that “the Roman city plan is concealed underneath the intricate disarray of the Ottoman city” and that it is possible to draw “a hypothetical map of Aelia based on the map of the Old City.” Eliav vehemently rejects all such attempts, mainly because of the “great gap between the final result and the findings that presume to substantiate it.” He does not see any reason for the claim – one of the cornerstones of the traditional approach – that the main street of Aelia (the *cardo maximus*) extended into the southern part of the colony as well; and he equally disapproves of attempts by the advocates of the traditional approach to hold on to the southwestern hill as the location of the camp of the Tenth Legion, despite the fact that no remains of the military camp have come to light there.

Designing his own outline of Aelia’s city plan, Eliav comes to the conclusion that “although Aelia Capitolina was situated adjacent to the old Jerusalem, the city of the Second Temple period, it was in many senses a new entity. The location of the Roman forum represents a major transformation in the spatial organization of the city, shifting its core to the northwest. This change was not merely a technical matter but expressed the Roman builders’ intention of abandoning the municipal layout of ancient Jerusalem.” The Temple Mount, Eliav argues, was deliberately left outside the boundaries of the new Roman city. He disputes Cassius Dio’s assertion about a pagan temple built on the Temple Mount, and whether or not a statue or even two statues were set up there – as some literary sources maintain – he is confident that this does not change the picture because two statues alone “do not indicate inclusion of a large area within the city limits.” Answering the question of why the Roman architects abandoned the traditional layout of Jerusalem (i. e., whether for solely logistic reasons or also ideological ones) he opts for purely practical considerations. Finally, as to the area north of the Temple Mount with its “therapeutic installation” going back to the “Sheep Pools” (Probatika) of the Second Temple period and now put under the aegis of Asclepius, he posits that this “medical multiplex” was left outside the municipal boundaries of Aelia Capitolina as well. Altogether, the new Roman Jerusalem emerges as a relatively small colony that stretched over approximately 75 to 125 acres with its new religious and economic center

(forum and city temples) on the northwestern hill and with the Temple Mount left desolate and outside the newly shaped reality.

The last contribution by Yael Zerubavel (“Bar Kokhba’s Image in Modern Israeli Culture”) discusses the reception history of Bar Kokhba and his revolt in modern Israeli society, beginning with “his dramatic rise as one of the most important Zionist symbols of heroism” during the second half of the 19th century. Whereas earlier Jewish attitudes toward the revolt and its leader reveal a tension between deep admiration for Bar Kokhba as a messianic figure and harsh criticism against him as an arrogant person who did not put his trust in God, Zionist memory as well as the national secular culture developed in the Yishuv became highly selective and overemphasized Bar Kokhba’s “positive portrayal as a charismatic leader and a daring hero.” Zerubavel shows how a new memory was created and materialized itself in the shift from Tish’a be-Av (the traditional date of the conquest of Bethar, Bar Kokhba’s last stronghold, and hence of the disastrous outcome of the revolt) to Lag ba-Omer as the new temporal locus for the revolt. Connected in Palestine with an annual pilgrimage to the grave of R. Shimon bar Yohai on Mount Meron and in Europe with R. Aqiva’s students and celebrated as the “Scholars’ Day,” Lag ba-Omer originally had nothing to do with Bar Kokhba. Yet, the secular Hebrew culture has allowed Bar Kokhba to occupy the place of R. Shimon b. Yohai and R. Aqiva and has recreated him as the key figure commemorated by this holiday. The new narrative, which completely left out the defeat of the revolt and stylized Bar Kokhba as the ultimate national hero, was told through scores of school books for children of all grades.

The new archaeological discoveries in the 1960s and 1970s, professionally and successfully marketed by Yigael Yadin, reinforced the patriotic rhetoric connected with Bar Kokhba. The ancient hero appeared now as someone who ultimately gained victory over the Romans with the help of modern Israel – its archaeology and not least its Defense Forces. But things began to change after the traumatic impact of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. In the early 1980s Y. Harkabi harshly criticized the symbolic – and in his view distorted – image of the revolt in Israeli memory and thus initiated a process that gradually strengthened the earlier religious narrative (Tish’a be-Av) against the newly invented secular national narrative (Lag ba-Omer) as well as reshaping the latter in a more humanistic and universalistic sense. Today, Zerubavel concludes, both narratives coexist, and it is still too early to tell whether one of them will emerge as the predominant one: “Yet it is safe to suggest that as long as the Bar Kokhba revolt carries symbolic significance for Israelis that is broader than the history of the event itself, it will continue

to be applied to current political and social reality and is likely to provoke further controversies over its meaning.”

The Princeton conference as documented in this publication certainly did not reach a consensus with regard to most of the pressing questions related to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, let alone to an overall assessment of the revolt's impact on Jewish and Roman history. One striking trend, however, cannot be overlooked: In the 1980s scholars countered an originally maximalist view of the revolt with skepticism, adopting a rather minimalist approach. But now it seems that this minimalist approach is once again giving way to a growing tendency towards a maximalist attitude. Scholars now outbid each other in emphasizing the magnitude of the revolt and the difficulties that the Romans faced in suppressing it; Dio Cassius' report has become the major trustworthy literary source of the uprising, and almost no one still contests a much larger territorial realm of the revolt, including parts of the Provincia Arabica and the Nabataeans, than has previously been assumed. Moreover, the revolt appears now as the result of a long-lasting anti-Jewish policy on the Roman side, and of prolonged and well-planned preparations on the Jewish side. And not least, whereas the minimalist approach was promoted in the past above all by scholars of Roman history (quite in contrast to and reaction against the “blinkered” attitude of Jewish Studies scholars), it is now the Roman historians who seem to take the helm towards the new maximalist approach. The pendulum apparently is swinging back to the opposite direction.

My thanks go to all contributors of this volume, to Johanna Hoornweg for improving the English of some articles, to Dr. Klaus Herrmann for overseeing the printing process, to Thomas Ziem for preparing the Index, and to the publishing house for their ongoing commitment to late antique Jewish history and religion.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Leo Mildeberg (1913–2001), the passionate art collector and eminent numismatist. Born in Kassel, he was driven out of Germany by the Nazis in 1933 and deported by the Russians from Tartu (Estonia) to Kazakhstan in 1941, from where he was released in 1947 to start his new life in Zurich. As the foremost authority on the Bar Kokhba coins, Dr. Mildeberg kindly accepted the invitation to participate in the conference, but unfortunately died on January 14, 2001.

May his soul be bound up in the bond of life!

Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis

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The literature of rabbinic Judaism is not very generous with references to Bar Kokhba and his adventures. Likewise, the documents from the Judean desert do not mention the Rabbis at all. Nevertheless, “Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis” is, I believe, a suitable topic with which to begin our inquiry into where we stand now, in 2002, in our efforts to understand the Bar Kokhba rebellion or war. Insofar as this topic highlights the changes that have taken place in our assessment of rabbinic Judaism, it may help us to get a clearer idea of the status of the revolt as a whole within the history of second-century Judaism.

Most scholars who deal with the Bar Kokhba revolt – at least most Jewish Studies scholars – are concerned with placing the revolt firmly within the emerging rabbinic movement of post-70 Judaism. The general picture painted by these scholars can be summarized as follows:

The Rabbis were the legitimate heirs of the pre-70 Pharisees, who re-established and reorganized Judaism immediately after the catastrophic destruction of both the Temple and the more or less independent Jewish State. Because Shimon b. Gamliel I had compromised himself during the first Jewish war and could not officiate as the patriarch (Nasi) of the Jewish people, it was the “outsider” Yohanan b. Zakkai who stepped in and founded the “academy” at Yavneh (after which the “period” of Yavneh from about 73 until 132 CE is called). As soon as political circumstances allowed, around 80 CE, Yohanan b. Zakkai was replaced by Gamliel II, the legitimate heir of the patriarchal dynasty of the house of Hillel, who held the office until his death sometime before 120 CE. Unfortunately, the patriarchal line was interrupted upon Gamliel II’s death (since his son Shimon b. Gamliel II was too young to succeed him or otherwise disabled).¹ This period of uncertainty saw the rise of Bar

¹ Ephrat Habas (Rubin), “Rabban Gamaliel of Yavneh and his Sons: the Patriarchate before and after the Bar Kokhva Revolt,” *JJS* 50, 1999, p. 36, goes as far as to suggest that at first his son Hanina b. Gamliel was designated as Gamliel’s heir but died soon after his father and that Shimon was too young and still unordained.

Kokhba, the revolutionary figure, who anachronistically called himself Nasi. With the failure of Bar Kokhba's uprising, this disturbing and improper intermezzo came to a close, and Shimon b. Gamliel II could happily come into his inheritance as the legitimate patriarch again, presiding over the period of Usha (from 135 until about 175 CE). The climax of this development was reached, of course, with R. Yehuda ha-Nasi, the patriarch par excellence, who resided in Bet Shearim and Sephoris and supervised the editing of the Mishna, the first major document of rabbinic Judaism.

To be sure, this reconstruction of the history of early rabbinic Judaism is the narrative of the Rabbis themselves. Seen from this point of view, Bar Kokhba and his revolt appear as some kind of mishap, marring the otherwise orderly and successful history of the Rabbis. It remains, however, that modern scholars have been busily and imaginatively at work to fit every available detail into the overall rabbinic framework. In other words, the narrative of the (almost) unbroken rabbinic history between 70 CE and the Islamic conquest of Palestine in the seventh century CE has largely determined the scholarly assessment of the Bar Kokhba revolt and its impact on second-century Judaism.

I.

As a first step in my re-examination of the available evidence, I will survey the few rabbinic texts that display a direct connection between Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis, in other words, the sources that prove that the Rabbis knew of Bar Kokhba and his activity. The most famous among them is R. Aqiva's dictum that bluntly and unmistakably proclaims Bar Kokhba as the Messiah. The version in the Jerusalem Talmud reads:

- (1) R. Shimon b. Yohai taught: "My teacher² Aqiva (עקיבה רבי) used to expound: 'A star shall step forth from Jacob' (Num. 24:17) [in this way:] Kozeba/Kozba (כוזבא)³ steps forth from Jacob."
- (2) When R. Aqiva beheld Bar Kozeba/Kozba, he exclaimed: "This one is the King Messiah (דין הוא מלכא משיחא)." ⁴
- (3) R. Yohanan b. Torta said to him: "Aqiva, grass will grow between your jaws and still the son of David will not⁴ have come!"⁵

² "My teacher" (רבי) in the editio princeps Venice and (as a gloss) in Ms. Leiden.

³ Ms. Darmstadt: כוזבה.

⁴ "Not" is a gloss in Ms. Leiden.

⁵ y Ta'anit 4:8/27 (all quotations from the Yerushalmi according to *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi*, vol. II/5–12, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans-Jürgen Becker, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

This three-part composition is by no means as clear and straightforward, as most scholars would have us to believe. I discussed it at length in my *Bar Kokhba* book and made an argument to throw Aqiva out of the text,⁶ which unfortunately hasn't been noticed by most of my colleagues – presumably because it is in German or rather complicated or both. Let me point to some of the textual problems involved: The attribution “R. Shimon b. Yohai taught: My teacher Aqiva used to expound” is suspicious. It is structured much like the preceding unit, which opens: “It has been taught: R. Yehuda beR. Elai said: My teacher Barukh (ברוך רבי) used to expound.” This appeal to the otherwise unknown Barukh as a/the teacher of Yehuda beR. Elai is dubious. It raises the possibility that “Barukh” is a later addition and that the original reading was just “Rabbi,” meaning either “my teacher” (i. e., Aqiva) or “Rabbi,” understood as the proper name of R. Yehuda ha-Nasi.⁷ Accordingly, one could suggest that the original “author” of our interpretation of Num. 24:17 was R. Yehuda ha-Nasi (= “Rabbi”) and that Shimon b. Yohai was added (together with “Aqiva”) at a later stage of redaction, when “Rabbi” was understood primarily to mean “my teacher,” rather than a proper name.

This line of argument, which seeks to eliminate Aqiva from our text, is not as speculative as it first might seem, since it is supported by the *Ekha Rabba* version of our tradition:

R. Yohanan said: “Rabbi/my teacher used to expound: ‘A star shall step forth from Jacob’ (Num. 24:17) [in this way:] don’t read ‘star’ (כוכב) but ‘liar’ (כוזב).”⁸

Here the tradition is attributed to the Amora Yohanan (and not the Tanna Shimon b. Yohai) and the author clearly is Rabbi (Yehuda ha-Nasi), whereas the interpretation reflects the negative approach of the Rabbis after the failure of the *Bar Kokhba* revolt. But what should we make of the subsequent exchange between Aqiva and Yohanan b. Torta, which is preserved in both *Yerushalmi Ta’anit* and in *Ekha Rabba*?⁹ Should we eliminate R. Aqiva here as well? Not easily, but there is again a reason to be suspicious of the attribution: the middle part (Aqiva’s solemn proclamation) is in Aramaic, while the first and the third parts (the exegesis of Num. 24:17 and Yohanan b. Torta’s repudiation of Aqi-

⁶ *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand. Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1981, pp. 168f.

⁷ This is indeed the reading of the *Yerushalmi* fragment Darmstadt which has instead of “Barukh”: בהלך. This does not make much sense but is clearly not understood as a name. Hence the most likely reading is: “Rabbi used to expound.”

⁸ *Ekha Rabba* 2:4. The exchange between R. Aqiva and Yohanan b. Torta follows.

⁹ The version in *Ekha Rabba*, ed. Buber (p. 101), attributes the interpretation of Num. 24:17 to R. Yohanan and reduces the three-part structure to a two-part composition.

va's exegesis) are in Hebrew. From this observation two contradictory conclusions are possible. One could argue that Aqiva's solemn proclamation in Aramaic is the "original" and "oldest" kernel of the unit or, on the contrary, that it is a later addition to the originally Hebrew dictum, which would have consisted of Aqiva's exegesis of Num. 24:17 and Yohanan b. Torta's protest.¹⁰ I am inclined to prefer the second possibility and to propose the following literary development of the unit:

1. The earliest stage of the tradition was the *positive* interpretation of Num. 24:17 as referring to Bar Kokhba by an unknown author and its immediate repudiation by the otherwise unknown Yohanan b. Torta. This tradition must have originated during the Bar Kokhba revolt.
2. After the failure of the revolt, this positive tradition was reinterpreted *negatively* by Yehuda ha-Nasi.
3. At a time when "Rabbi" was understood to be not a proper name but a title, R. Yehuda's reinterpretation provoked the secondary attribution of the original positive dictum to Shimon b. Yohai and his teacher Aqiva.
4. Finally the Aramaic middle part was added, which emphasizes Bar Kokhba's role as Messiah.

The reason why Aqiva, of all the possible candidates, would have been inserted into the dictum as Bar Kokhba's herald (instead of the unknown and obviously insignificant original author) is simple: Aqiva was the hero of the Yavneh period and, most importantly, his imprisonment, martyrdom and death during the revolt are well established in the rabbinic literature.¹¹ This does not mean, however, that our sources tell us much about the historical circumstances of Aqiva's death. They fail to explain for example, when precisely, how long, and above all why he was imprisoned and finally executed (some mention Tineius Rufus, the Governor, as his judge and Caesarea as the place of his trial and execution). Moreover, none of them explicitly refers to his support of Bar Kokhba and his rebellion. Nevertheless, the fact that he was the most prominent victim of the Roman persecution during and immediately after the revolt made him (at least for later tradents) the ideal candidate to whom to assign the messianic interpretation of Num. 24:17 as referring to Bar Kokhba. However, this occurred after the rabbinic claim to absolute

¹⁰ Something similar to the two-part structure of Ekha Rabba Buber.

¹¹ See Peter Schäfer, "Rabbi Aqiva and Bar Kokhba," in: William Scott Green, ed., *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, vol. 2, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Scholars Press, 1980, pp. 121–124; id., "R. Aqiva und Bar Kokhba," in: id., *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des Rabbinischen Judentums*, Leiden: Brill, 1978, pp. 101–119.

leadership had become well established; only then did it become possible to promote Aqiva as Bar Kokhba's herald.

The following discussion between Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud is evidently a sequel of the controversy between Aqiva and Yohanan b. Torta:

Bar Koziba (כּוּזִיבָא) reigned two and a half years. He said to the Rabbis: "I am the Messiah (אֲנִי מְשִׁיחַ)!" They answered: "Of the Messiah it is written that he smells and judges – let us see whether he smells and judges." When they saw that he was unable to smell and judge, they killed him.¹²

Here Bar Kokhba does not need Aqiva – he proclaims himself the Messiah – and the Rabbis don't just object, but they kill him. The test they use for the true Messiah is based on a literal understanding of the difficult verse Isa. 11:3f.: "(3) He [God] has him [the Messiah] smell the fear of the Lord. Therefore he shall not judge by what his eyes behold, nor decide by what his ears perceive. (4) Rather he shall judge the poor with equity and decide with justice for the lowly of the land." The Rabbis decide that Bar Kokhba does not have the proper smell of justice and hence cannot be the true Messiah. This is a very late tradition, as evident from the immediate context: in their interpretation of Isa. 11:3f. the Rabbis follow their colleague Rava, who headed the academy at Mahoza in Babylonia and died in the middle of the fourth century CE. It is an ironical adaptation of the earlier Aqiva-Yohanan b. Torta controversy and does not help us to illuminate the relationship between the historical Bar Kokhba and his rabbinic contemporaries.

Another tradition, also found in Yerushalmi Ta'anit and in Ekha Rabba, seems to reflect a more positive notion of the Rabbis' attitude towards Bar Kokhba:

Ben Kozeba (כּוּזִבָּא) was there [at Bethar], and he had 200,000 [soldiers] with amputated fingers. The Sages sent him the message: "How long will you continue to mutilate Israel?!" He said to them: "How else is it possible to test them?"¹³ They said to him: "Any one who cannot uproot a Lebanese cedar while riding on his horse shall not be enlisted in your army." And he had 200,000 of these [with amputated finger] and 200,000 of those [who had uprooted a Lebanese cedar].¹⁴

Here the Rabbis criticize Bar Kokhba, but, far from killing him, they cooperate with him. They persuade him to use a less cruel method to test the courage of his soldiers: instead of having them cut off a finger he follows the Rabbis' advice and lets them uproot a cedar from Lebanon. Some scholars, though skeptical of the numerical figures and certain de-

¹² b Sanhedrin 93b.

¹³ I. e., to check their bravery.

¹⁴ y Ta'anit 4:8/28; Ekha Rabba 2:4; Ekha Rabba, ed. Buber, p. 101.

tails, nevertheless find evidence here for popular and rabbinic support of Bar Kokhba.¹⁵ I am less convinced. If we disregard the exaggerated numbers, we are left with a test of courage that is clearly an aggadic motif¹⁶ without any historical value. And this, of course, also applies to the Rabbis as those who persuade Bar Kokhba of the less brutal test for his soldiers.¹⁷

Finally, we should consider the large literary unit in Yerushalmi Ta'anit and Ekha Rabba, which I have called the Bethar complex. This passage contains the only direct encounter between Bar Kokhba and an individual Rabbi – R. Eleazar ha-Modai – who is killed by Bar Kokhba:

For three and a half years Hadrian surrounded Bethar, and R. Eleazar ha-Modai sat on sackcloth and ashes and prayed every day saying: "Master of the Universe, do not sit in judgment today, do not sit in judgment today!" Hadrian was ready to go away,¹⁸ when a Samaritan said to him: "Don't go away because I see what to do that the city will surrender to you." He [the Samaritan] climbed up the underground conduit of the city. He went up and found R. Eleazar ha-Modai standing and praying. He pretended to whisper [something] in his ear. The people of the city saw him, went to Ben Kozeba and said to him: "We saw this old man [the Samaritan] talking to your uncle [Eleazar ha-Modai]." He [Bar Kokhba] said to him [the Samaritan]: "What did you say to him, and what did he say to you?" He said to him: "If I would tell you, the king [Hadrian] would kill me; and if I do not tell you, you will kill me. Better that the king should kill me and not you!" [Therefore] he [the Samaritan] said to him [Bar Kokhba]: "He [Eleazar ha-Modai] said to me [the Samaritan]: I will surrender the city!"

He [Bar Kokhba] went to R. Eleazar ha-Modai and said to him: "What did this Samaritan say to you?" He answered: "Nothing!" – "What did you say to him?" – He answered: "Nothing!" [At that moment] he [Bar Kokhba] kicked him and killed him. Immediately a heavenly voice came out and said: "Woe to the worthless shepherd who abandons the flock! Let a sword descend upon his arm and upon his right eye! His arm shall dry up and his right eye shall go blind" (Zach. 11:17). You have killed R. Eleazar ha-Modai, the arm of all Israel and their right eye. Therefore your arm shall dry up and your right eye shall go blind."

Immediately Bethar was conquered and Ben Kozeba was killed. They went and brought his head to Hadrian. He asked them: "Who killed him?" A Samaritan said to him: "I killed him." He ordered him: "Show me the corpse!" He showed him the corpse and found a snake wound around it. He said: "If God did not kill him, who could have killed him?!" And he applied to him the biblical verse: "Unless their Rock had sold them and their Lord had given them up!" (Deut. 32:30).

¹⁵ Adele Reinhartz, "Rabbinical Perceptions of Simeon Bar Kosiba," *JSJ* 20, 1989, p. 182.

¹⁶ See the parallels in Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand*, pp. 170f.

¹⁷ The same is true for the rabbinic "evidence" of Bar Kokhba's blasphemy (y Ta'anit 4:8/28; Ekha Rabba 2:4; Ekha Rabba, ed. Buber, p. 101) and his bodily strength (Ekha Rabba and Ekha Rabba, ed. Buber, *ibid.*). Bodily strength (and beauty) is a classical prerequisite of a messianic leader; see below, n. 82.

¹⁸ I. e., to give up the siege.

This dramatic story describes the last moment of Bethar, Bar Kokhba's stronghold, and of Bar Kokhba himself. The dramatis personae are Hadrian, the pious Eleazar ha-Modai (a well known Tanna of the Yavneh period), the cunning Samaritan, and the violent-tempered Bar Kokhba. The moral is made abundantly clear: The piety of the model Rabbi, Eleazar, would have saved the city, if only the malicious Samaritan had not interfered and, even worse, if Bar Kokhba had not been taken in by the Samaritan's plot. Hence, here again "the Rabbis" and Bar Kokhba are opponents: Bar Kokhba kills the true Rabbi and deserves to be killed – this time not by the Rabbis but by God himself.

The historical value of this story tends towards zero. Hadrian's personal presence at Bethar is as doubtful as that of the infamous Samaritan; similarly, Eleazar ha-Modai's supposed family relationship to Bar Kokhba is just as historically dubious as the claim that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai was the uncle of Ben Batiah, the Zealot leader active during the first Jewish war,¹⁹ or the claim that the proselyte Aquilas was Hadrian's father-in-law.²⁰ Even more imaginative is the suggestion of some modern scholars that we should identify our R. Eleazar ha-Modai with the Eleazar ha-Kohen mentioned on the coins²¹ – a suggestion wholly based on the accidental identity of the name Eleazar (and ignoring the fact that nowhere is Eleazar ha-Modai called a priest). In sum, this story, like most of the rabbinic stories referring to Bar Kokhba (with the sole exception of the dubious Aqiva dictum), reflects the negative attitude of the Rabbis towards both Bar Kokhba himself and his activities. The meager rabbinic evidence does not help us to integrate the Bar Kokhba revolt into the history of the emerging rabbinic movement of the second century CE. Rather, Bar Kokhba and his uprising remain conspicuously out of place within the ideal picture that the Rabbis draw of themselves. The overall attitude is censorious, and no reliable evidence supports the theory that the revolt was popular among the Rabbis and their followers.

¹⁹ Ekha Rabba 1:31; Ekha Rabba, ed. Buber, p. 66.

²⁰ Epiphanius, *De mens. et pond.*, 14 (PG 43, 260f.).

²¹ Shmuel Yeivin, *מלחמת בר כוכבא*, Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1951, p. 63; Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age (70–640 C. E.)*, transl. Gershon Levi, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 623 (transl. from the 1961 Hebrew edition); Yehuda Devir, *בר כוכבא*, Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1964, pp. 130–149; Shmuel Safrai, art. "Eleazar of Modi'in," in: *EJ*, vol. 6, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971, col. 603.

II.

Turning now to the documents and findings from the Judean desert themselves, our most direct and most reliable evidence on the Bar Kokhba revolt, I will briefly summarize what they tell us about the character and the ideology of the revolt and its leader – and particularly about its connection with the rabbinic movement. The first and most obvious observation made by many scholars is that Bar Kokhba was clearly a military leader with a claim to absolute leadership; the personality shining through the documents could not be further away from the ideal of the pious Rabbi celebrated in rabbinic literature.²²

Typical are Bar Kokhba's letters to Yehonatan bar Ba'ayan and Masabala bar Shimon, the military commanders of Ein Gedi. Thus, for instance, in the so-called "Letter on Wood" he orders Yehonatan and Masabala to confiscate the wheat of a certain Hanun (?) ben Yishmael and to deliver it to Bar Kokhba: "and if you do not accordingly, [be it known to you] that you shall be punished severely."²³ In the same letter he forbids them, under threat of punishment, to give refuge to the men of Tekoa, who probably had ignored his mobilization orders: "Regarding all men from Tekoa who are found with you – the houses in which they are living shall be burnt down and you shall [also] be punished."²⁴ It is apparently these same "shirkers" who are the subject of another letter to Yehonatan and Masabala, in which he instructs: "[See to it] that all men from Tekoa or from any other place who are [residing] with you, you are to dispatch them to me without delay. And if you shall not dispatch them, then let it be known to you that from you I shall exact punishment."²⁵ The "Letter on Wood" concludes with the order to arrest a certain Yeshua bar Tadmoraya and to send him "under guard" and disarmed to Bar Kokhba.²⁶ Even more threatening is the tone of a letter to

²² But it is in concordance with what the Rabbis have to say about Bar Kokhba as the brutal military leader.

²³ Lit.: "That from you punishment will be exacted." Nahal Hever 54: Yigael Yadin, "The Expedition to the Judean Desert, 1960: Expedition D," *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 42; Ada Yardeni, ed. and transl., *A Textbook of Aramaic and Hebrew Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material*, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2000, pp. 171 and 67.

²⁴ Nahal Hever 54: Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba. The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Last Jewish Revolt against Imperial Rome*, London/Jerusalem: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, p. 125; Yardeni, *ibid.*

²⁵ Nahal Hever 55: Yadin, *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 48; *id.*, *Bar Kokhba*, p. 126; Yardeni, *Textbook*, pp. 173 and 67.

²⁶ Nahal Hever 54: Yadin, *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 42; *id.* *Bar Kokhba*, p. 126; Yardeni, *Textbook*, pp. 171 and 67.

another commander, Yeshua ben Galgula: “May Heaven be my witness ... that I shall put your feet in fetters like I did to Ben Aphlul.”²⁷

Most of the orders in Bar Kokhba’s letters are connected with a threat of punishment (פרענותא), and this coarse tone can be attributed just as much to his character as to his increasingly desperate situation towards the end of the revolt. The continuous threat of punishment also indicates that Bar Kokhba must have been anything but successful in his claim of authority over his own men. Another letter to Masabala and Yehonatan sounds almost resigned: “In good (= luxury) you are sitting, eating and drinking from the property of the House of Israel, and caring nothing for your brothers.”²⁸

Despite the predominantly military flavor of the documents, scholars have drawn our attention to another feature, which is less obvious but definitely apparent: Bar Kokhba’s concern to uphold religious precepts. It is here that some scholars wish to see the most direct indication of a close relationship between Bar Kokhba and the rabbinic movement. There can be no doubt, for instance, that Bar Kokhba cared about observing the Sabbath. In yet another letter to the commanders of Ein Gedi he writes: “Shimon bar Kosiba to Yehonatan bar Ba’ayan and to Masabala bar Shimon: You are to send to me Eleazar bar Hitta immediately, before Shabbat.”²⁹ The same is true for a letter to Yeshua b. Galgula in which Bar Kokhba asks him to deposit a certain amount of wheat at his place (?), which he has ordered to be carried away after the Sabbath.³⁰

The most important document regarding Bar Kokhba’s ritual observance is the famous letter concerned with the “four species” of the Sukkot (Tabernacles) festival:

Shimon to Yehuda bar Menashe, to Qiryat Arabaya:

“I have sent to you two donkeys so that you shall send with them two men to Yehonatan bar Ba’ayan and to Masabala so that they shall pack/load and send them to the camp, to you, palm branches (ללבין) and citrons (אתרגין). And you, send others from your place, who will bring you myrtle (הדסין) and willows (ערבין). And prepare/tithe them (ותקן יתהן) and send them to the camp, for the multitude/army (אוכלסה) is large. Be well.”³¹

Here two observations can be made. First, it is clear that the letter deals with the preparation of the Sukkot festival in Bar Kokhba’s camp (Her-

²⁷ Mur. 43; P. Benoit, J. T. Milik, R. de-Vaux, *Les Grottes de Murabba’at (Discoveries in the Judean Desert II)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 160; Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, p. 137; Yardeni, *Textbook*, pp. 157 and 64.

²⁸ Nahal Hever 49; Yadin, *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 47; Yardeni, *Textbook*, pp. 165 and 66.

²⁹ Nahal Hever 50; Yadin, *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 44; Yardeni, *Textbook*, pp. 166 and 66.

³⁰ *DJD* II, pp. 161–163.

³¹ Nahal Hever 57; Yadin, *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 48; Yardeni, *Textbook*, pp. 177 and 68.

odium?). Yehuda bar Menashe is instructed to provide Bar Kokhba with the “four species” needed for Sukkot: the palm branches and citrons are to be supplied from Ein Gedi (which was famous for both) and the myrtle and willows from Qiryat Arabaya (whose exact location is unknown, but Yadin suggested a place in the Bethlehem area, between Bethar and Ein Gedi;³² in any case, it must have been rich of myrtle and willows). And second, Bar Kokhba instructs Yehuda bar Menashe to make certain that the citrons are properly prepared. This has been interpreted by most scholars (following Yadin)³³ as meaning that they should be tithed (i. e., separated for the Levites/priests) according to Biblical and rabbinical law.

That the rebels were concerned with the preparation of the Sukkot festival is corroborated by the Greek letter, provisionally published by B. Lifshitz and others,³⁴ in which a certain Soumaios (presumably a gentile follower of Bar Kokhba) asks Yehonatan and Masabala to provide the “camp of the Jews” with $\theta\upsilon\pi\sigma\sigma\iota$ (most likely meaning לולבין)³⁵ and citrons.³⁶ We do not know the exact significance of the celebration of Sukkot in Bar Kokhba’s camp; we can only conclude from the letters that Bar Kokhba and his followers did celebrate Sukkot and that it was important to them. Especially since we do not know precisely the status of Sukkot in the period under discussion, we certainly cannot just assume that Yohanan b. Zakkai’s ruling regarding the celebration of Sukkot after the destruction of the Temple³⁷ was generally accepted, let alone that Bar Kokhba set great store on following his ruling - and hence on the opinions of the Rabbis. Indeed, Oppenheimer, Lapin and others³⁸ have proposed that Bar Kokhba was so concerned about celebrating Sukkot because of the distinctly propagandistic message of the festival. Throughout the history of Second Temple Judaism, the festival of the Tabernacles was connected with the celebration of victory and the rededication of the Temple, most notably among the Maccabees: after the purification and rededication of the Temple the Maccabees cele-

³² *IEJ* 11, 1961, p. 49.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 48f.; Aharon Oppenheimer, *בר כוכבא וקיום המצוות*, in: A. Oppenheimer and U. Rappaport, eds., *מרד בר-כוכבא. מחקרים חדשים*, Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1984, p. 142 with n. 14.

³⁴ See B. Lifshitz, “Papyrus grecs du désert de Judea,” *Aegyptus* 42, 1962, pp. 241-248; more recently Hayim Lapin, “Palm Fronds and Citrons: Notes on Two Letters from Bar Kosiba’s Administration,” *HUCA* 44, 1993, pp. 11-135.

³⁵ See the commentary in Lapin, pp. 116-118.

³⁶ Text and translation in Lapin, pp. 114f.

³⁷ *m* Sukka 3:12.

³⁸ Oppenheimer, *בר כוכבא וקיום המצוות*, p. 143; Lapin, *Palm Fronds and Citrons*, pp. 130ff.

Index of Sources

1. Bible

Gen	17:13, 14	62
Lev	11:16	56
Num	18:21 ff. 24:17	12 2ff., 16
Deut	14:15 14:22 ff. 32:30	56 12 6
Jdg	6:2	228
1Sam	8:15, 17 14:11 14:22	13 228 228
Ps	17:21 -32	18
Isa	2:15 11:3f.	190 5
Ez	37:24f. 44-46	15 15
Am	7:13	13
Zech	6:9-15 11:17 14:16-20	20 6 11

2. Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

1Mac	13:51 14:47	11 15
2Mac	10:6 10:7	11 11
1Enoch	85-90	18

3. New Testament

John	5:1-9 5:2-4 12:13 19:15	262 261 11 243
Acts	14:13	264
Phil	3:2-3	55

4. Rabbinic Literature

Mishna

Shab	18:3 19:1	58 58, 81
Er	1:2	66
Suk	3:12	10
Taan	4:6	102
Ket	2:9	190
Av	3:11 3:12	64 81
Miq	7:1	66
Nid	4:7	190

Tosefta

Shab	15:9	62
Er	5:24	60
Yev	12:4-5	190
Sot	16:10	67
San	12:9	64

Ed	1:1	22	WaR	32:1	81
Hor	1:5	65	EkhaR	1:15	197
Bekh	2:2	190		1:31	7
				2:4	3, 5f., 64
				2:5	281
<i>Talmud Yerushalmi</i>			MekhY	Ba-Hodesh 6	68, 81
Pea	1 (16b)	65		Ki-Tisa 1	81
Shab	2 (5b)	59			
	19 (17a)	62			
Er	9 (25c)	60	5. Ancient Authors		
Taan	4:8 (68d–69a)	2, 5f., 64, 102, 281	Ammianus Marcellinus		
Yev	8 (9a)	62		18.4.5	74
San	10 (27c)	65	Celsus <i>De Medicina</i>		
				7.25.1	62
<i>Talmud Bavli</i>			Codex Theodosianus		
Shab	130a	59, 61, 81		16.8.1	91
Er	13a	66		16.9.4	91
	91a	60			
RHSh	19a	81	Cornelius Fronto <i>De Bello Parthico</i>		
Taan	18a	81		2	113
	18b	82	Dio Cassius <i>Historia Romana</i>		
	29a	82		39.14.1	142
Yev	72a	62		52.36.2	39
	99a	190		59.12–14	110
Ket	27a	190		60.6.6	44
Ned	50b	82		66.7.2	25
Qid	72b	58		67.2.3	74
BB	10a	82		67.14.1	25
	60b	65		68.1.2	25
San	68a	59		68.2.4	75
	93b	281		68.26.1	164
	99a	64, 81		68.32.3	28
AZ	20a	82		69.11.1	32
	36a	67		69.12.1	31, 231
Hor	3b	67		69.12.2	190, 217
Meila	17a	81		69.12–14	182, 227
				69.13.1 f.	164
				69.13.2	168, 180
				69.13–14	130
				69.14	112
				69.14.4	123
<i>Midrashim</i>			Eusebius of Caesarea		
ARNA	A:26	65		<i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i> IV	
BerR	17:1	67, 82		4:6	31
	46:13	62		6:1	82

De Vita Constantini		8.5	228
3:26	249	9.4	228
John Chrysostom		<i>Contra Apionem</i>	
<i>Homilia adversus Judaeos</i>		13.69–23.218	39
48.845	55	<i>Vita</i>	
Josephus <i>Antiquitates</i>		11.4 (469)	228
5.211	228	37, 187–88	226
6.111	228	67, 373–74	227
6.116	228	Justin Martyr	
6.136	227	<i>Dial. c. Tryphone</i> 16	29
7.142	227	Justinianus <i>Institutes</i>	
14.185–267	13, 43	1.8.1	87f.
14.194f.	43	Juvenal <i>Satires</i>	
14.199	43	14.96–206	77
14.213–6	44	Orosius <i>Historiarum adversum paganos</i>	
14.219–23	44	7.13.5	253
14.241	44	Paulus <i>Sententiae</i>	
15.340	227	5.22.3–4	90
16.160–79	43	5.23.13	76
16.160	44	Philo <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>	
17.271–284	19	23 (155–57)	44
18.257–61	27	203–373	230
18.261–309	230	<i>De migratione Abrahami</i>	
<i>Bellum</i>		92	65
1.18.2	228	Pliny <i>Naturalis historia</i>	
2.10.1–5	230	5.24	267
2.17.6	228	5.70	139
2.17.8	227	Scriptores Historiae Augustae	
2.18.11	227	Heliogabalus	
2.20.6	226	28.4	56
2.56–64	19	Vita Hadriani	
2.434	19	14.2	55, 80
3.2.4	227	Vita Severi	
3.3.1	226	17.1	90
3.7.21	226	Stattius <i>Silvae</i>	
3.54–56	139	4.3.13	75
4.1	227	Suetonius	43
4.1.2	228	<i>Claudius</i>	
4.504	19	25.2	76
5.3.1	228	25.4	44
6.236–66	24	<i>Divus Augustus</i>	
6.7.3	228	32	44
7.1–2	252	93	43
7.29	19		
7.123–62	24		
7.180	179		
7.6.5	228		
7.6.6	231		
7.9.1	227		
8.4	228		

<i>Divus Iulius</i>		<i>Tertullian Apologeticum</i>	
42.3	44	2.6	83
<i>Domitian</i>		<i>Ulpian Digesta</i>	
7.1	74	48.8.3.4	76
12.2	25, 77, 84	48.8.3.5	76
<i>Tacitus Annales</i>		48.8.4.2	56, 75
2.6.1f.	164	48.8.5	78
13.32.2	39	48.8.6	75
15.18.1	160	48.8.11	57, 85f.
<i>Historiae</i>		50.15.3	142
5.4, 1	56		
5.5.1–2	71, 77		

Modern Authors

- Abbadi, S. 126, 148, 164, 178
Abel, E. 49, 245f., 251, 258, 261, 264
Adams, F. 78
Adan-Bayewitz, D. 224, 227
Agnon, Sh. 280
Ahiyah, B. 285
Alföldy, G. 115, 122, 162f., 166f.
Aline, M. 244, 258f.
Alon, D. 59, 66, 114, 196, 200, 217f.
Alon, G. 7, 15
Aly, A. A. 116f.
Amit, D. 34, 104, 181, 197ff., 218
Andermahr, A. M. 167
Andersen, F. G. 194, 200
Applebaum, Sh. 28, 31, 37, 83, 108f.,
112, 118, 120
Arceclin, P. 268
Ariel, Z. 284, 287
Arnould, C. 245
Aronoff, M. J. 293
Ashman, A. 286
Auerbach, P. 286
Avalos, H. 262f.
Avery-Peck, A. J. 87
Aviam, M. 191, 200, 218, 227
Avigad, N. 232, 245, 252, 254
Avishar, A. 287f.
Avivi, B. 287
Avi-Yonah, M. 272
Avni, G. 222
Avramsky, Sh. 282, 288
- Bagatti, B. 221ff., 232, 244, 259
Bagnall, R. S. 126, 142
Bahat, D. 200, 223, 233, 245, 251, 258
Baltrusch, E. 164
Bar, D. 245, 257, 274
Barag, D. 20, 165, 200
Barnes, T. D. 52f., 80, 83
Bartov, Y. 195, 202
- Baruch, Y. 197
Beard, M. 31, 37
Bechert, T. 268
Belayche, N. 29, 175
Ben-Ari, N. 280
Benario, H. W. 80
Benayahu, M. 283
Ben-Gurion, D. 289
Benoit, P. 9, 137ff., 194, 196, 200, 244f.,
259, 262f.
Ben-Shalom, I. 230
Ben-Yehuda, N. 282
Ben-Yosef, O. 279
Bergmann, J. 66
Bernard, J.-E. 43
Betser, O. 288
Bialik, Ch. N. 280
Bijovsky, G. 199f.
Bin-Gurion, M. Y. 288
Birley, A. R. 28, 111ff., 120f., 138, 163,
231
Blackman, D. J. 115f.
Blair, H. 295f.
Blich, M. 284, 287
Bliss, F. J. 191, 200, 219
Bloemers, J. H. F. 269
Blomme, Y. 244
Boatwright, M. T. 29
Bondi, J. 63
Borkowski, A. 75, 78, 85
Bornstein-Lazar, T. 286, 288
Bosch, E. 122
Botermann, H. 45
Bowersock, G. W. 109, 120, 126, 150,
177, 241
Bowman, A. K. 25
Brandenburg, E. 195, 200
Brewer, D. I. 104
Brody, A. 104
Broshi, M. 136, 149, 178, 274, 292

- Brown, P. 71
 Brunt, P. A. 115
 Brusin, G. 122, 166
 Buechler, A. 196, 200
 Buhl, M.-L. 194, 200
 Bull, R. J. 272f.
 Busse, H. 266
- Caballos, A. 154
 Cahan, Y. 280, 284
 Cahill, J. M. 194, 200
 Callaway, P. 136
 Cantineau, J. 180
 Capelli, P. 143
 Cary, E. 110
 Charlesworth, J. H. 18
 Clamer, C. 96, 150
 Clermont-Ganneau, Ch. 244, 246
 Cockle, W. E. H. 93, 133
 Cohen, E. 220, 233
 Cohen, M. 287
 Cohen, S. J. D. 57, 71f., 84, 87, 89
 Cohn, E. W. 252
 Collingwood, R. G. 274
 Conder, C. 222, 260
 Cordier, P. 57, 76f.
 Cotter, W. 44
 Cotton, H. 14, 20f., 27, 68, 93, 104, 118, 125f., 133ff., 143, 150, 153, 155, 160, 165, 178ff., 197, 200, 224, 248
 Crown, A. D. 270
 Crummy, P. 269
 Cuncliffé, B. 42
- Dąbrowa, E. 111, 121f., 169
 Dagan, Y. 187, 200, 218
 Damati, E. 194, 200, 234
 Dar, S. 34
 Davies, P. R. 24, 32, 43
 Den Boer, W. 231
 Derenbourg, J. 63
 Dessau, H. 55
 Deutsch, R. 94
 Devijver, H. 116f., 124, 164
 Devillers, L. 143, 145
 Devir, Y. 7
 Dietz, K. 112
 Dinur, U. 194f., 200
 Disckinson, A. 285
 Dobó, A. 124
 Donfried, K. P. 49
 Drijvers, H. J. W. 89
 Drury, P. J. 269
- Dunn, J. D. G. 27
 Duprez, A. 260, 262f.
 Duval, P. M. 42
- Eck, W. 27, 68, 83, 101, 109, 111ff., 116, 118, 121ff., 137ff., 148ff., 153ff., 164, 171, 174ff., 200, 229, 241, 248
 Edelstein, E. J. 262f.
 Edelstein, L. 262f.
 Edgar, C. C. 89
 Efron, J. 281
 Ehrlich, Z. H. 194, 200
 Eidlin, D. 225
 Eilers, C. 153
 Eldad, I. 292
 Eliav, Y. Z. 32, 111, 241, 248ff., 265, 271
 Eshel, H. 34, 94, 96, 104, 109, 129, 136, 181, 187f., 194ff., 218f., 230, 233
 Ezrahi, M. 286
- Farquharson, A. S. L. 53
 Feig, N. 195, 201
 Feldman, L. H. 46
 Feldstein, A. 195, 201
 Fentress, E. W. B. 267
 Fernández, F. 154
 Filow, B. 120
 Fisher, M. 201, 217
 Fitz, J. 120, 124
 Fitzmyer, J. A. 104
 Fleischer, E. 73
 Flesher, P. V. M. 87
 Foerster, G. 109, 128, 148, 157, 161, 171, 175, 201, 218, 227, 229
 Forni, G. 116
 Frankel, J. 292
 Frascchetti, A. 42
 Friend, W. H. C. 52
 Frerichs, E. S. 57
 Freudenberger, R. 52f.
 Freund, R. A. 14f.
 Frier, B. W. 142
 Frumkin, A. 34, 198
 Fuks, A. 27
 Furstman, S. 286
- Gafni, J. 12, 55, 61, 93
 Gafni, S. 287
 Gagiotti, M. 167
 Ganor, A. 185, 188, 203
 Garnsey, P. 25
 Gatier, P.-L. 124, 178
 Geiger, J. 50, 57, 73, 78, 82, 84

- Gelzer, M. 38
 Germer-Durand, J. 250f.
 Geva, H. 20, 241f., 245f.
 Gibbon 53
 Gichon, M. 227
 Gilliam, J. F. 116
 Goldberg, A. 58f.
 Goldberger, D. 289, 294, 296
 Goodblatt, D. 19f., 94
 Goodman, M. 21, 24, 27f., 42ff., 53, 84, 90, 152
 Gordon, A. E. 111, 122, 125
 Gordon, P. 285
 Goren, Z. 289
 Gould, S. 158, 174
 Grabar, O. 250
 Graf, F. 263
 Green, M. J. 42, 197
 Greenfield, J. C. 93, 96ff., 135
 Griffin, M. 25, 154
 Groh, D. E. 233
 Gros, P. 267f.
 Gruen, E. S. 38, 44f., 49f.
 Gudovitz, S. 222
 Guérin, V. 222
 Gurevitch, Y. 283, 288
- Habas, E. 1
 Hacothen, M. 283, 286
 Haensch, R. 152
 Hagedorn, D. 143
 Halfmann, H. 115, 155, 158, 175
 Halivni, D. W. 55, 61
 Hanin, N. 201
 Hanslik, R. 115f.
 Harkabi, Y. 291f.
 Harpaz, M. 285
 Harries, J. 79
 Helm, R. 93
 Hemelrijk, E. A. 40
 Herr, M. D. 60f., 68, 72f., 81, 85, 201, 241
 Hezser, C. 21
 Hinz, H. 269
 Holm-Nielsen, S. 194, 200
 Holum, K. G. 119, 155, 275
 Hombert, M. 142
 Honoré, T. 78f.
 Horbury, W. 43
 Horshi, A. 284
 Howard, G. 143, 145
 Humphrey, S. C. 53
 Hunt, A. S. 89
- Hurgin, Y. 287
- Iglesias, G. 160
 Ilan, T. 104
 Ilan, Z. 194, 197, 200f., 218f., 234
 Isaac, B. 31f., 37, 49, 55, 111, 127, 149, 153, 155f., 201, 217f., 230f., 241f., 252, 266, 268
- Jacobs, M. 21
 Janai, J. 201
 Jeremias, J. 260
 Jones, Ch. 71, 79f.
 Joukowsky, M. 175
 Jull, T. A. J. 136
 Juster, J. 43
- Kadman, L. 201
 Kaimio, M. 89
 Kamaisky, Y. 201
 Kanael, B. 93
 Kaniuk, Y. 289
 Kaster, R. 71
 Katzoff, R. 134
 Kaygusuz, I. 115
 Kennedy, D. L. 116, 118
 Keppie, L. J. F. 117f.
 Keren-Tal, A. 287f.
 Kidron, G. 201
 Kienast, D. 114
 Kindler, A. 34, 93, 120, 242
 Kipnis, L. 284, 286f.
 Kitchener, H. R. 222
 Klein, S. 193, 201
 Kloner, A. 109, 140, 182ff., 217ff., 222, 224
 Kloppenborg, J. S. 44
 Krueger, P. 75
- Landau, B. 283
 Landau, J. L. 280
 Lapin, H. 10f., 143ff.
 Lapp, N. 194, 201
 Lapp, P. 194, 201
 Last, H. 42
 Lee, P. J. 285
 Lehmann, C. M. 119, 155, 280
 Levick, B. 163, 268, 274
 Levine, B. A. 96ff., 135, 232
 Levinsky, Y. T. 282f., 286, 289
 Levner, I. B. 280, 287
 Levy, E. 65, 90
 Lewis, N. 100, 126, 144, 147

- Lieberman, S. 60f., 67, 72f., 81, 134
 Lifshitz, B. 10, 141, 143ff., 274
 Linder, A. 50f., 57, 72, 85f., 90f.,
 Lipovitz, G. 195, 200
 Littmann, E. 147
 Livingston, D. P. 194, 201
 Lloyd, A. B. 40
 Longstaff, T. R. 233

 Macalister, R. A. S. 191, 200, 219
 MacDonald, W. L. 274
 MacMullen, R. 31, 37, 263
 Magen, Y. 193f., 201, 270f.
 Magnes, J. 242, 245, 252, 256
 Mann, J. C. 114ff.
 Mantel, H. 73
 Marcus, M. 201
 Marks, R. G. 281f.
 Martin, D. B. 87
 Mattingly, D. J. 267
 Mattingly, H. 25
 Mauss, C. 260
 Maxfield, V. A. 119ff., 125
 Mazar, B. 247
 Mazar, E. 247, 252
 Mazar, G. 255
 McKnight, S. 46
 Meshorer, Y. 34, 93f., 227, 242, 248, 261,
 272f.
 Meyer, R. 40
 Mildenberg, L. 11, 17, 20, 29, 95f., 160,
 187, 201
 Milik, J. T. 9, 12, 14, 94, 96, 137, 178,
 194, 196, 200, 231
 Millar, F. G. B. 28, 32, 72, 93, 133, 135,
 268
 Miller, M. 294
 Miller, T. S. 262
 Minzker, Y. 222
 Mitteis, L. 89
 Mócsy, A. 125
 Momigliano, A. 53
 Mommsen, T. 55, 75, 85
 Mor, M. 57, 108, 118, 120, 122, 127, 136,
 231, 270, 272
 Moran, A. 198, 202
 Müller-Luckner, E. 57
 Muqari, A. 202, 220, 232
 Mussies, G. 147

 Narkiss, M. 227
 Navon, Sh. 283, 288
 Nebe, G. W. 143

 Nenci, G. 40
 Netzer, E. 196, 202
 North, J. 31, 37f., 42f., 53

 Obbink, D. 143
 Oliver, J. H. 170
 Oppenheimer, A. 10, 12f., 17, 19, 55, 57,
 60f., 72, 83, 93, 153, 183, 190, 202,
 218, 229ff., 266
 Orrieux, C. 46, 49f.
 Ottaway, P. 267

 Pailler, J.-M. 38
 Pastor, J. 107
 Patrich, J. 20, 195, 202
 Pearlman, M. 290
 Peleg, O. 249
 Persky, N. 284, 287
 Petersen, L. 78, 170
 Petuchowski, J. 73
 Pflaum, H.-G. 117, 120
 Pierotti, E. 244
 Pierre, M. J. 260, 262
 Piggott, S. 42
 Pniel, A. 198, 202
 Polotsky, H. J. 143
 Porat, D. 285, 296
 Préaux, C. 40, 142
 Price, S. 31, 37
 Prieur, J. 115
 Pucci, M. 27, 43
 Puech, E. 147

 Qimron, E. 104, 149, 178
 Quint, E. 280

 Rabello, A. M. 43, 50, 72f., 77f., 85
 Raffaelli, Sh. 114
 Rajak, T. 43, 48
 Rakob, F. 267
 Rappaport, U. 10, 19, 72, 83, 107f.
 Rathbone, D. 25
 Ravitzky, A. 61
 Reich, R. 252
 Reinhartz, A. 6, 17
 Reventlow, H. Graf 17
 Richardson, P. 49
 Richmond, I. 274
 Ritterling 119
 Robertson, R. G. 243
 Rochman 220f.
 Roitman, A. 290, 296
 Rokeah, D. 73, 85, 269, 292

- Roil, I. 127, 201, 217, 230
 Ronen, I. 107
 Rosén, H. B. 143
 Rosensaft, M. 195, 202
 Ross, A. 42
 Roth, C. 94
 Roth-Gerson, L. 123
 Rousée, J. M. 260, 262
 Roxan, M. M. 114, 160
 Rubin, J. P. 62
 Rubin, N. 62
 Rubin, R. 195, 202
 Russell, J. 119
 Rutgers, L. V. 49

 Safrai, S. 7, 32 ff., 193, 202, 230, 242
 Sagiv, N. 191
 Samet, E. 184, 190, 202
 Sar-Avi, D. 188, 202
 Sarig, T. 294 f.
 Sartre, M. 169
 Sasson, J. M. 71
 Savariego, A. 188, 195, 202
 Savignac, R. 246
 Schäfer, P. 2, 4, 6, 15 ff., 24, 38, 45 ff., 57,
 60, 62 f., 71 ff., 80 ff., 102, 109, 114, 143,
 158, 163, 231
 Scheid, J. 43
 Schick, C. 260
 Schiffman, L. H. 14, 34
 Scholem, G. 18
 Schreiber, B. M. 134
 Schremer, A. 104
 Schulman, K. 280
 Schumacher, L. 167
 Schürer, E. 25, 43, 49, 72, 120 ff., 271
 Schwartz, J. 55, 93, 118, 192, 202
 Sensi, L. 167
 Seyrig, H. 227
 Shahar, Y. 55, 138, 191, 193, 202, 217 ff.,
 228, 230, 232 f.
 Shalem, D. 225, 232
 Shamir, Ilana 289
 Shamir, Itzhak 289
 Shapira, Z. 185, 198, 202
 Shatzman, I. 107
 Shelton, J. C. 143, 145
 Sherwin-White, A. N. 52 f.
 Shotter, D. C. A. 25
 Shukron, E. 188, 195, 202
 Sijpesteijn, P. J. 89
 Slingerland, H. D. 45

 Smallwood, E. M. 43, 48 f., 58 f., 63, 72,
 80, 83, 85, 90, 113 f., 119 ff., 243
 Smelik, K. A. D. 40
 Sneh, A. 195, 202
 Sokoloff, M. 11
 Sonnabend, H. 40
 Spaul, J. 164
 Spivak, Y. 285 f.
 Sporta, R. 287
 Stein, A. 170, 242
 Stein, J. P. 46
 Stern, M. 12, 27 f., 32, 38, 45, 48 ff., 111,
 113, 120, 122, 217
 Strange, J. E. 225, 232 f.
 Sturdy, J. 43
 Syme, R. 48, 55, 80, 112, 124

 Talbert, R. J. A. 75
 Tcherikover, V. A. 27
 Tchernikovskiy, Sh. 280
 Tchernowitz, Y. 284, 286 f.
 Teicher, J. L. 231
 Tepper, Y. 127, 182 ff., 217 ff., 232 ff.
 Thomas, J. A. C. 88
 Thompson, L. A. 84
 Thomsen, P. 114, 156, 230
 Torelli, M. 267 f.
 Tov, E. 14, 34
 Tracy, S. 175
 Tsafrir, Y. 32 ff., 188, 196 f., 202, 218,
 241 f., 245, 248, 250 ff.
 Tselsohn, M. 295
 Tzori, N. 128 f.

 Urbach, E. E. 86 f.

 van der Vliet, N. 260
 VanderKam, J. C. 14, 34
 Vanzetti, M. B. F. 76
 Vaux, R. de 9, 137, 194, 196, 200
 Veinberg, A. 294
 Vermes, G. 16, 24, 72
 Viaud, Fr. 221 f.
 Vidman, L. 170
 Vincent, L. H. 245 f., 251, 258, 261, 264
 Vogel-Weidemann, U. 170

 Ward-Perkins, B. 253
 Watson, A. 75
 Weiss, J. G. 87
 White, R. T. 24, 32
 Whittaker, C. R. 267

- Wightman, G. J. 242f., 245, 248, 259, 264, 274
Wilcken, U. 89
Wilken, R. L. 266
Wilkinson, J. 250
Will, E. 46, 49f.
Willems, W. J. H. 268
Williams, M. 44, 48ff.
Williams, W. 88
Wilson, Ch. W. 44, 251, 258
Wiseman, J. 267
Woolf, G. 42
Worp, K. A. 89
Wright, R. B. 18
Wuthnow, H. 147, 180
Yadin, Y. 8f., 14f., 94, 96ff., 135, 143, 146, 197, 202, 218, 282, 288ff.
Yaffe, Z. Y. 285f.
Yardeni, A. 8f., 12, 14, 93, 96ff., 126, 135, 147ff., 178, 197
Yehieli, Y. 286
Yehuda, Z. 280
Yerushalmi, Y. H. 281
Zayadine, F. 126, 148, 164, 178
Zerubavel, Y. 282, 288, 293
Zissu, B. 34, 109, 129, 134, 140, 153, 181ff., 217
Zmygrider-Konpka, Z. 71

Index of Names and Subjects

- Acco-Ptolemais 268
Aelia Capitolina 23, 25, 28f., 31–37, 68,
111, 138f., 152, 227, 230f., 242–245,
253f., 256, 259, 261, 263f., 267, 270,
272f.
Aelius Marcianus 76, 88
Agrippa 41, 144, 148, 189
Akiba/Akiva see Aqiva
Akra 11
Alexandria 27, 35
Ammianus Marcellinus 42, 74
Antonius Pius 50, 56–58, 73, 85–90, 116,
119, 125, 245, 270
Aphrodite 248, 250
Aqiva 2–5, 7, 15–17, 58, 60, 66, 82, 107,
283f., 289, 294f.
Aquilas 7
Aquileia 122, 166f.
Arabia 21, 28, 33, 88f., 100–102, 110,
118–121, 123–127, 129, 133, 141, 147,
149–152, 158, 164–166, 168, 177, 180
Arrian 28
Asclepius 249f., 258, 261–263, 274
Asia Minor 264, 274
Augustus 38–41, 43–45, 168
- Baarou/Baaru see Baru
Babatha 96, 100–102, 104, 124–126, 140,
146, 149, 151f., 164, 180, 290, 296
Bacchanalia 38f.
Bare see Baru
Barnabas 264
Bardaisan of Edessa 89
Baru 96, 99, 103, 149f., 179
Barukh 3
Beit Shean see Beth Shean
Beitar/Beithar see Bet(h)ar
Ben Batiah 7
Bet(h)ar 5–7, 10, 64, 102f., 105, 130, 159,
197, 280, 282, 287
- Beth Shean 127, 156–158, 161, 172, 174,
177, 180, 229
Bethlehem 10, 197, 248
Britain 83, 110f., 114, 121, 125, 166, 269,
274
Britannia 111f., 267
Burnum 168f.
Byzantine 85, 110, 171f., 175, 185, 189,
198f., 202, 220, 225, 232, 246, 252–254,
258f., 261f., 274f.
- Caesar 13f., 39, 43f., 115–117
Caesarea Maritima 4, 150, 155, 201, 203,
215, 268, 275
Caligula see Gaius Caligula
Camulodunum 269f., 273f.
Caparcotna 129
Cardines/Cardo 248f., 251, 253f.
Carthage 267
Cassius Dio 23, 27–29, 31–33, 36f., 39–
41, 44, 48–51, 55, 68, 74f., 107, 110–
112, 122f., 126, 130, 142f., 148, 151,
164, 168, 180, 182, 190f., 199, 217f.,
227f., 230f., 248, 251, 265, 296
Castration 56, 74–78, 80, 86–88, 90
Cave of Letters 14, 96, 98, 100, 135,
148f., 289f., 292
Christ see Christianity
Christian(ity) 17, 27, 39, 50–53, 82–84,
89, 91, 107f., 143, 200, 243, 250, 252,
255f., 266, 272, 275, 295
Cicero 40, 44
Circumcision 46, 49–51, 54–57, 62–64,
67f., 77, 84–90
Claudian see Claudius
Claudius 35, 42, 44, 128, 154, 268–270
Coins 7, 11, 17, 20, 23, 25f., 29, 34–36,
94–96, 99, 138, 160, 163, 165, 187–189,
192, 194f., 197–201, 203, 215, 219f.,

- 222, 225, 227, 229, 232, 234, 242, 247f.,
261, 270, 272f., 284
 colonia 28f., 268
 Colonia Aelia Capitolina see Aelia Cap-
 itolina
 Colonia Claudia Victricensis 269
 Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis 267
 Colonia Ulpia Traiana 269
 Constantine 51, 54, 90f., 246, 254f.
 Constantinople 254
 Corinth 267
 Cornelius Dexter 163–165
 Cornelius Fronto 113
 Cyprus 27f., 123
 Cyrenaica see Legio III Cyrenaica
 Cyrene 27f., 80
- Dacia 83, 111, 117, 121, 132
 Dalmatia 168
 Damascus Gate 243–245, 249–252, 254–
 256, 259, 274
 David 2, 15, 18, 85, 96, 200, 247, 250f.,
 253f., 256, 258, 289, 292
 Dead Sea 101, 164f., 181, 199, 290, 296
 Dio Cassius see Cassius Dio
 Diocletian 90
 Diodorus 45
 Domitian 25f., 35, 48, 74, 189, 225
 Druids 41f.
 Dura-Europos 158, 174f.
- Eburacum 267
 Ecce Homo arch 243–245, 249f., 254–
 259, 263f., 274
 Egypt 27f., 40f., 88f., 116f., 121, 133,
 142, 158, 283
 Ein Gedi 8–10, 96, 98–103, 139, 148f.,
 197
 Elagabalus 56
 Eleazar bar Hitta 9
 Eleazar ben Eleazar 99
 Eleazar ben ha-Shiloni 13f.
 Eleazar ben Levi 103
 Eleazar ha-Shoter 103
 Eleazar ben Shmuel 96, 98, 100–103
 Eleazar ha-Modai 6f., 22, 64f.
 Eleazar the priest 20
 Eliezer 58–61
 Eliezer b. Hyrcanus 58f., 61
 Enoch 18
 epigraphy 128, 153f., 156f., 160, 162f.,
 166, 169, 171f., 191
 epilepsmos 62–64
- ethnarch 43f.
 ethnos 43f.
 Eusebius 27, 31f., 179, 248–250
- Fiscus Iudaicus 25f., 84
 Flavia Domitilla 48
 Flavius see Josephus Flavius
 Flavius Clemens 25, 48
 Flavius Josephus see Josephus Flavius
- Gaius Caligula 27, 230
 Galilee 19, 69, 108, 110, 127, 129f., 164,
 189, 191, 200–202, 217–220, 222f.,
 226–233, 239, 291
 Gallia/Gaul 42, 162, 268
 Gamliel see Shimon ben Gam(a)liel
 Gaza 35f., 93
 Gerasa 33, 177–179
 Gerizim 270–273
 Germania inferior 268
 Germanicus 50, 164
 Germans 41, 164
 Golgotha 249
- Hasmonean 13–15, 186, 189
 Haterius Nepos 121, 124–127, 130, 148,
 150, 152, 164, 166, 170, 177f., 180
 Hebron 34, 181, 185f., 191, 196f., 199f.,
 202
 Herculaneum 14
 Herod 15, 19, 193, 223–225, 232f., 252,
 265f.
 Herodium 10, 12f., 185f., 196f., 202
 High Priest 11, 13, 15, 20
 Hillel 1, 22
 Hillel ben Garis 13f., 102
 Historia Augusta 37, 49, 51, 55–57
 Holy Sepulcher 246f., 250, 255
 Horace 47, 49
 Hyrcanus I 271
 Hyrcanus II 13
- Inscription 28, 95, 116, 118–120, 122–
 130, 148, 150, 153–155, 157–161,
 163f., 167–169, 171f., 174f., 177f.,
 180, 214, 242, 245, 247f., 260
 Ishmael 65–67
 Isis 40f., 49, 53
 Israel 5f., 9, 14, 16, 18, 95, 97–99, 108,
 135f., 149, 160, 171, 179–181, 191,
 200–203, 214, 224, 228, 232f., 242,
 279f., 282–294, 296f.

- Italy 15, 39, 42, 48f., 54, 114–116, 122, 139, 158, 160, 162
 Iudaea see Judaea
 Iulius Severus see Julius Severus
- Jaffa Gate 247, 274
 Jericho 150, 193
 Jerome 190, 201, 249f.
 Jerusalem 2, 11–13, 15, 18–20, 23f., 27–29, 32–34, 36f., 44, 47, 54, 62, 64f., 68, 94–96, 108, 136–140, 156, 181, 187, 191, 193, 195, 200–203, 227f., 231f., 241–244, 246, 249–252, 254–258, 263, 265f., 269–275, 284
 Jesus 11, 17, 143, 243f., 249, 262
 John Chrysostom 55
 Jordan 126, 148, 161, 178, 181, 193f., 199, 218
 Josephus Flavius 13, 19, 24, 27, 39, 43–45, 146, 153, 179, 189, 202, 226–228, 231, 252
 Jotapata 226f.
 Judaea 8, 19, 21, 24–28, 33, 36, 43, 51, 54, 63, 68, 72, 82–84, 89, 101, 107–130, 133, 138f., 141f., 148–151, 153, 155–157, 159f., 162f., 166, 168–170, 171, 181f., 188–193, 196, 199–203, 207, 216f., 219–221, 223–225, 228–231, 239, 266, 285, 287, 291
 Judean Desert 1, 8, 21, 93, 96, 99, 102f., 126, 133–135, 139, 151, 178, 181, 197, 219, 225
 Judah 140, 200
 Judah bar Ilai 59, 61f.
 Julius Caesar see Caesar
 Julius Severus 68, 83, 110–113, 116, 119, 121–123, 130, 150, 166–169
 Jupiter 25, 31f., 249–251, 270
 Jupiter Capitolinus 25
 Justin Martyr 29
 Justinian 75, 79, 85, 87, 254
 Juvenal 46f.
- Kfar Baru see Baru
 Kiryat 'Arabayah see Qiryat Arabaya
- Lag ba-Omer 283–288, 293–295
 Legio see Caparcotna
 Legio I Adiutrix 120
 Legio II Traiana 116f., 155, 230
 Legio III Cyrenaica 118, 120f., 124, 127, 158, 164, 174
 Legio III Gallica 119f.
- Legio IV Scythia 119, 122
 Legio VI Claudia 120
 Legio VI Ferrata 118, 128f., 155, 175, 189, 224, 233
 Legio X Fretensis 83, 94, 113f., 118, 121, 138, 155, 175, 231, 242, 247, 251–253, 258
 Legio X Gemina 120
 Legio XVI Flavia Firma 119
 Legio XXII Deiotariana 113, 118
 lex Cornelia 75f., 85
 lithostroton 244f., 250, 258f., 263f.
 Livy 38
 Lollius Urbicus 170
 Lucius Mummius 267
 lulav 68, 81
 Lystra 264
- Mabatha 271
 Maccabees 10f., 13, 15f., 18, 22
 Machaerus 150, 179
 Maecenas 39
 Madaba 66, 179, 246, 249, 251
 Mahoz Eglatain 149, 151
 Maoza/Mahoza 5, 100–102, 125
 Marcellinus see Ammianus Marcellinus
 Martial 74
 mashukh (meshukhim) 62–65
 Masabala 8–11, 144
 Masada 94, 282, 290, 293
 Mehoza see Maoza/Mahoza
 Meron 283, 285, 294f.
 Mesopotamia 27, 123
 Messiah 2, 4f., 11, 15–19, 21, 281
 Messianic see Messiah
 Minicius Faustinus 168
 Miriam 94, 140
 Modestinus 57, 85f.
 Moses 45f., 48
 Moshe ha-Darshan 68
 Murabba'at see Wadi Murabba'at
- Nabataean(s) 35, 89, 133, 143, 146–148, 151f., 164f., 179f.
 Nahal Hever 96, 125f., 135f., 148–150, 165, 197, 200, 224, 295
 Nahal Mikhmash 34, 195, 201
 Nasi 1f., 14–19, 21, 67, 97, 99, 149, 179, 214, 289
 Natan 59, 65, 68
 Neapolis 270–273
 Nepos see Haterius Nepos
 Nerva 25–27, 35, 74f., 157, 172

- Noviomagus 268f., 273
 Numidia 267
 numismatic see coins

 Old City see Jerusalem
 Orine 138–140
 ornamenta triumphalia 111, 121f., 124f.,
 149f., 164, 166–169, 180

 Palestine 2, 15, 33, 44, 101, 143, 180,
 200, 230, 275, 281, 283
 Panonia 111
 Parthian(s) 113, 119, 158, 164
 Passover 81
 Patriarch see Nasi
 Paul (the jurist) 51, 77, 89f.
 Peraea 19, 149f., 164, 191
 Petra 152, 175, 177
 Philo 44, 65, 230
 Pius see Antonius Pius
 Pliny 42, 52, 79, 83, 267
 polis 28, 116, 118, 127, 149, 156–158,
 161, 172, 174, 177, 180, 227, 229f.,
 267, 270–274
 Pompeii 14
 Pompey 18, 218
 praetorium 155, 244
 Prince see Nasi
 Probatika pool 250, 258, 260–263
 Proselyte(s)/Proselytism 7, 38, 46–51, 53,
 63, 90
 Provincia Arabia see Arabia
 Publicius Marcellus 119, 121, 123, 130,
 150, 166f., 169f.

 Qiryat Arabaya/ʿArabayyah 9f., 145, 197
 Qitos/Quietus 127, 229
 Qumran 16–20, 22, 134, 296

 Rabbi 1–8, 10–12, 14, 21f., 58, 60, 62, 64,
 66–68, 72, 77, 81f., 84, 107, 184, 193,
 283–286, 294f.
 Rome 15f., 23–25, 28, 39–44, 46f., 49–
 54, 56, 63, 65, 72, 84, 119, 151–153,
 157f., 160, 162–166, 168–170, 171,
 174, 177f., 181, 184, 189, 193f., 197,
 202, 227, 288

 Sabbath 9, 58–60, 81, 134
 Saint Anne 247, 249f., 260, 262
 Salome Komaise 140, 149, 164
 Samaria 108, 192, 201–203
 Samaritan(s) 6f., 107f., 196, 270–273

 Sardinia 41, 49
 Scythopolis see Beth Shean
 Second Temple see Temple
 Senate 26, 75, 83, 128, 157–160, 162f.,
 170–172, 177
 senatus consultum 75f.
 Seneca 47
 Sepphoris 2, 220, 223, 225–227, 230,
 232f.
 Septimius Severus 51, 90, 248
 Serapis 40f.
 Shamir 289
 Shammai 22
 Shephelah 181, 188, 191f., 196, 199, 217,
 219, 223
 Shimon bar Yohai 2–4, 283–286, 294
 Shimon ben Gam(a)liel I 1
 Shimon ben Gam(a)liel II 1f., 67
 Siloam pool 248
 Slave(s) 19, 41, 48f., 51, 71–76, 84, 86–
 88, 90f.
 Soumaios 10, 144, 146–148, 180
 SPQR see Senate
 Star 2f., 16f., 281, 294f.
 Strabo 48
 Suetonius 25, 74, 84, 90
 Sukkot 9–11, 81, 144f., 148
 Sybil 64
 Syria 47, 68, 110, 112f., 118f., 121–123,
 129, 142, 149f., 163–166, 168f.
 Syria Palaestina 33, 36, 129, 153, 162,
 168f.

 Tabernacles see Sukkot
 Tacitus 41, 44f., 47–49, 56, 154, 268
 Tekoa 8
 Tel Shalem 110, 127–130, 157, 159–162,
 165, 170, 171f., 174f., 177, 229
 Temple 1, 10, 12f., 15–20, 24, 26f., 31f.,
 36, 44, 65, 82, 94, 157, 175, 182, 184,
 188, 193f., 197f., 201–203, 209, 228,
 230, 241–245, 248, 250f., 256f., 259–
 261, 263–266, 270, 273f., 282, 284,
 288, 296
 Temple Mount 31, 201, 241, 247, 249,
 251f., 255–258, 264–267, 269, 272, 275
 Thamugadi see Timgad
 Theodosius 79
 Tiber 41, 47, 223
 Tiberias 127, 223
 Tiberius 42, 50
 Timgad 267, 274

- Tineius Rufus 4, 67f., 81–84, 112, 121, 130, 155f.
Titus 24–26, 35, 137, 152, 157, 163, 225
Trajan 23, 26–28, 35, 39, 52, 79, 83, 123, 155, 158, 164, 168, 172, 174f., 177, 203, 215, 225, 268f.
Transjordan 96, 100, 149f., 178f., 191
Turnus Rufus see Tineius Rufus
Tyre 188, 190
Tyropoeon 248, 255, 257
tzitzit 81
- Ulpian 75
Usha 2, 59, 61f., 67f.
- Venus 248f.
Vespasian 24–26, 162f., 165, 170, 189f., 231, 268, 271
Via Dolorosa 243f.
Via Valeria Tiburtina 115
- Wadi Murabba'at 94–96, 135–140, 194, 196f., 224f.
- Xanten 269
Xiphilinus 31, 36, 110, 217, 227
- Yavneh 1, 4, 7, 12, 21f., 58, 66, 202
Yehonathan bar Ba'ayan 8f., 144
Yehonathan bar Eli 99
Yehuda bar Menashe 10f.
Yehuda ben Yehuda 99, 102
Yehuda ha-Nasi 2–4, 21, 67
Yohanan b. Torta 2–5
Yohanan b. Zakkai 1, 7, 10
Yonathes son of Beianos see Yehonathan bar Ba'ayan
Yose ben Halafta 62, 64
Yuda(h) 67
- Zealot(s) 7, 19, 22
Zeus 31f., 264, 270f.

Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism

Alphabetical Index

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