Chapter Eleven

BAR KOKHBA

Sometime, someplace in the Judean Hills in the year 132 the storm broke. It had been a long time coming, but even so it shocked the Romans. It shocked them enough that it may have cost them a legion and possibly the life of the governor of the province of Judea. "May have" is necessary because the sources of evidence are scarce and because the detective work that has gone into reconstructing the war is as conjectural as it is ingenious. And yet, the story is as dramatic as any of the Jewish revolts against Rome and more decisive.

The war was the third of the three major Jewish revolts against Rome. Fifteen years had passed since the end of the Diaspora Revolt and sixty-two years since the destruction of Jerusalem. This third Jewish rebellion is known as the Bar Kokhba War, after the leading Jewish rebel. It lasted for three and a half years, during which the rebels not only created an army but administered an independent state. The revolt was centered in the traditional Jewish heartland, the region of Judah, but it spread into adjacent areas as far as the coastal plain, western Samaria and the Negev. Galilee played only a very small part, but the revolt probably spread into the province of Arabia Petraea and may have involved Arab as well as Jewish rebels against Rome.

The war was a duel between two men, Bar Kokhba and Hadrian. Bar Kokhba took the title of *nasi*, or "prince," of Israel. Hadrian was the Emperor, Imperator Caesar. Both men were hard, violent, and driven by a vision of what each thought was right. Bar Kokhba was a warrior, Hadrian a man of peace—but peace, Roman-style, that is, a peace enforced by armies of occupation, financed by humiliating taxes and presided over by foreign deities. Bar Kokhba was a messiah, Hadrian the son of a god.

Bar Kokhba observed the commandments of Judaism; Hadrian was a pagan. Bar Kokhba honored tradition; Hadrian founded a new religious cult. Although married, Hadrian found the love of his life in a Greek teenage boy named Antinous. When Antinous drowned in the Nile in the year 130, Hadrian had him proclaimed one of Rome's many gods. Bar Kokhba worshipped the one God of Israel. Hadrian built a new city in Egypt dedicated to Antinous. Bar Kokhba dreamed of restoring the Temple in Jerusalem. Hadrian built the Pantheon in Rome, a shrine for all the gods. Bar Kokhba considered Hadrian an idolater; Hadrian considered Bar Kokhba a savage.

No war did more than the Bar Kokhba Revolt to shape the destiny of the Jewish people, and few wars are so poorly documented. The only historical narrative from antiquity is a sketchy account in Cassius Dio, less than two dozen lines long. As with his history of the Diaspora Revolt, the surviving version of his text is an eleventh-century, Byzantine abridgement. Fortunately, that brief text offers a good overview of events from the Roman point of view. Ancient Jewish sources in the Talmud and Midrash offer a mix of fact and legend. Midrash is a type of Jewish interpretation of scriptural texts, often used to support a legal ruling or to undergird a sermon. The revolt is mentioned briefly as well in a few late-antique Christian works. In contrast, there is a great deal of material evidence, and here is where the search for the past gets exciting. It's not just the light from Latin inscriptions nor the shining images and proud legends on the rebel coins. Archaeology has uncovered underground hiding places used by rebel fighters and caves that served as refuges for those fleeing the Romans. The caves have yielded household objects brought by refugees who did not survive to retrieve them. But the most sensational discovery is various letters, found in several caves, and written by Bar Kokhba himself as well as by his fellow insurgents. These documents, in Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew, open a window into a Jewish world in crisis, a culture with one foot planted in its heroic past and another finding its way in a region of clashing cultures, a society whose single-minded war leader, Bar Kokhba, was trying to bend it to his steely will. Hadrian had no less unflinching a resolve, and he also had thirty legions.

Hadrian, Parthia, and the Jews

Hadrian began his reign in that bitterest thing for a Roman, the acknowledgment of defeat. Romans did not end wars: they won wars, but Hadrian ended Rome's war with Parthia without victory. After taking the purple he ordered an immediate withdrawal from the little territory that was left of Trajan's conquests in the Parthian Empire, and he made peace with the Parthian king. Hadrian concluded that Rome's security was best served by keeping its armies on the west bank of the Euphrates. There was no getting around Rome's massive loss of prestige from its failed invasion of Parthia, no way of denying in private that Parthia had won a great victory.

Not that Hadrian would admit the fact in public. He issued coins that identified himself as DIVI TRA(IANI) PARTH(ICI) FILIO, "Son of Divine Trajan Parthicus," with "Parthicus" connoting "Conqueror of the Parthians." The phrase not only glossed over Trajan's defeat but left out Trajan's other military titles as Conqueror of Dacia and Germania. The same title, "Son of Divine Trajan Parthicus," appears on a triumphal arch for Hadrian in Judea, probably erected in 130 by an ingratiating legion to mark the emperor's visit.[1] It also appears on an inscription on a now-missing monument in Jerusalem from the same year. It was a hollow title, of course, since the Parthians drove Trajan out, but Hadrian claimed it anyhow. Worse still, he staged a posthumous triumph for his predecessor. Never mind that Trajan was dead and his victory was dust: Hadrian put an effigy of the late emperor in a chariot that he had pulled through Rome.[2] Coins, arches, and dummies were one thing, armies another. Hadrian had no intention of sending the legions back into dubious battle on Parthian soil.

The new reality is illustrated by Hadrian's response to rumbling on the Parthian frontier early in his reign. The emperor's answer was not military but diplomatic. One ancient source reports that

> War with the Parthians was in prospect at the same time and it was checked by a personal intervention (*conloquium*) on Hadrian's part.[3]

The source for this information, the *Historia Augusta*, is quirky and not always reliable. Still, most historians accept the historicity of the event and date it to 123. Parthian dynastic matters were still an issue between the two empires. Trajan had set up a puppet king of Parthia who Hadrian relocated, probably to a Roman client kingdom in what now straddles northern Syria and southern Turkey. The legitimate Parthian king was Osroes II (also known as Chosroes, the Parthian Khosrow, r. ca. 109–129).[4] The Romans still held Osroes II's daughter, taken captive by Trajan, as well as the royal throne.

Some scholars imagine Hadrian's "personal intervention" as a conference on the Euphrates River, the frontier where Roman and Parthian officials often deliberated. It has even been suggested that Hadrian met Osroes II in person. That would have been a first. Roman emperors sent underlings to meet the Parthian king, but the emperor did not go himself, as he did not want to acknowledge the Parthian ruler as his equal. If Hadrian's meeting with the Parthian ruler did happen, it shows how strong Parthia was in 123. Nor was it the last time that Hadrian had to keep a wary eye on the Parthian frontier. In 129, he traveled east to central Asia Minor, where he inspected the armies of the frontier and met with Rome's client princes.[5] In the end, Hadrian returned the Parthian king's daughter, but only promised the throne. It was still in Roman hands under Hadrian's successor.[6]

Hadrian was prudent but not weak. He devoted a large part of his reign to traveling from legionary base to legionary base, from Britannia to Africa to the Euphrates, where he inspected the troops. Often, he went on maneuvers with them. He also beefed up Roman frontier defenses, most famously in Britannia, where he built Hadrian's Wall to mark the border with the ferocious tribes to the north. And he thought about the problem of Judea.

Hadrian had been governor of Syria in 115 to 117 during Trajan's Parthian War. He knew well that when the legions were fighting to conquer Mesopotamia, Jewish soldiers fought for Parthia against them and Jewish rebels opened a second front against Rome in the rear—in Egypt, Lybia, and Cyprus—and threatened to do the same in Judea. In short, Hadrian knew that the Jews were dangerous to Rome. The solution, he might have concluded, was to be proactive. He had a plan for Judea.

To begin with, Hadrian dismissed Lusius Quietus and replaced him with a new governor, Marcus Tittius Lustricus Bruttanius. Not that Hadrian had any objection to Quietus's brutality, which is what recommended him to Trajan as the man to keep Judea in line. What Hadrian objected to was Quietus's disloyalty, for he was Trajan's man and he likely opposed Hadrian's peace policy with Parthia. Hadrian had Quietus executed, along with three others of Trajan's marshals. It was probably now that Judea was raised to the rank of consular province, meaning that the governor had to be a former consul, as Bruttanius was. In other words, from now on only an official of the highest rank could govern Judea. The new governor of Judea brought with him a second legion for the province. There were an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 legionaries and circa 8,500 auxiliaries. It was a very large occupying force for a province that did not border on enemy territory, but history suggested that rebellious Judea needed a strong Roman military presence.[7]

Bruttanius set the second legion to work building roads. Now for the first time in Judea Rome built a network of proper, well-engineered highways. They would be useful for moving soldiers, whether toward the Euphrates frontier or within the province. One purpose of the new roads was to control movement between Galilee and the Jewish heartland in the Judean hills.

Jerusalem without Jews

Even more dramatic than building roads, Hadrian planned to rebuild the ruined Jerusalem. What was left of the city was the headquarters of the Tenth Legion. There were probably some civilians there, as was usually the case in ancient times with "destroyed" cities. A Christian source mentions seven synagogues in Jerusalem, although he might have meant churches, assuming seven isn't merely a symbolic number (i.e., seven days in a week).[8]

The city's new name was Colonia Aelia Capitolina. The new city would be anything but Jew-friendly. It would be thoroughly Roman, laid out on a grid plan, and named after both Hadrian (whose full name was Publius Aelius Hadrianus) and Jupiter (Capitolinus, after Capitoline Jupiter). Both names in fact recalled Hadrian, since the emperor prided himself on his connection to the Greek

equivalent of Jupiter, the god Zeus. The new city would be a Roman *colonia*, or colony: the first, and for nearly a century the only, Roman colony to serve as a legionary headquarters. The core of its citizens probably consisted of demobilized soldiers from the Tenth Legion. That made the new colony a garrison town. The purpose of Aelia Capitolina, as one scholar puts it, was "to punish and control what they saw as a stubbornly rebellious nation" by planting "a miniature Rome" on the site of their holy city.[9]

One might argue that the purpose of Aelia Capitolina was also to send a message to Parthia. The meaning of the new Jerusalem was clear. There would be no more Jewish uprisings to help Parthia because there would be no more Jewish mother city. No longer would the tribes go up to Jerusalem; no longer would the hills enfold the Holy City. Now it belonged to the legions.

Based on coin evidence, scholars agree that the new colony was probably formally founded in the summer of 130 when Hadrian visited Judea. But archaeology shows that the main thoroughfare of the new city was begun even earlier, near the beginning of Hadrian's reign. Hence, it looks like not long after he came to the throne in 117, Hadrian had already laid plans to rebuild Jerusalem as a pagan city.[10]

Hadrian built many cities during his reign. They lent glory to his name and fostered loyalty to Rome, whose image was mirrored in new temples, forums, arches, and monumental gateways. They reminded friend and foe of Roman power. Aelia Capitolina made crystal clear to the Jews that their fondest wish would not be granted. The Temple would not be rebuilt. Dio says that Hadrian erected a Temple of Jupiter where the Jewish Temple had once stood. The Romans took over the Temple Mount as a sacred place because whatever magic their toughest foes had, the Romans wanted to have, too. It seems that the emperor was worshipped on the Temple Mount during the reign of Trajan, making it logical for Hadrian to build a pagan temple there.[11]

Perhaps some Jews supported Hadrian's building projects, or at least they swallowed hard and told him that they did. But if Hadrian thought that he could get general Jewish acceptance of his plans for Jerusalem, he couldn't have been more wrong. Hadrian was neither the first nor the last Western statesman to underestimate the degree of resistance to outside reformers in the Middle East.

Hadrian's actions were devastating to most Jews; devastating, disappointing, and insulting. History had made Jews optimistic about rebuilding the Temple. When the Neo-Babylonian empire destroyed the First Temple and sent the Jewish elite into exile in 586 BCE, the prophets predicted that God would remember His people within seventy years. Approximately seventy years after the exile, in 516 or 515 BCE, the Jewish community that had now returned to Jerusalem dedicated the Second Temple (later rebuilt on a magnificent scale by Herod). The founding of Aelia Capitolina dashed the hopes of building a Third Temple. Cassius Dio probably states Jewish reaction accurately: "the Jews deemed it intolerable that foreign races should be settled in their city and foreign religious rites planted there."[12] Or, to put it in the vernacular, Jews might have said in defiance: "This is OUR Jerusalem. You can make it a pagan city after we're all dead."

Few people like being occupied. The region of Judah had been under Roman military government for over sixty years, with the soldiers of the Tenth Legion running it directly. Even if every legionary kissed babies and extended a helping hand to the elderly, no doubt there had been ugly incidents. A Josephus, had there been one, could have recorded them. Perhaps some remembered how Roman soldiers massacred Jews not long before in Egypt and Cyrene, Cyprus and Mesopotamia. Now, on top of all that, came Aelia Capitolina.

The sources speak of two other grievances that supposedly sparked rebellion in Judea. Hadrian is said to have reneged on a promise to rebuild the Temple. So states a rabbinical source and an early Christian text, but few scholars consider them historically reliable.[13] The *Historia Augusta* claims that Hadrian prohibited circumcision.[14] It would be understandable if he imposed this as a punishment for revolt, but less so if he decreed such an inflammatory measure in a still-peaceful province, even though many Romans looked down on circumcision as barbarous. Still, there is some evidence in a Christian source that suggests that he did just that.[15] If so, it is another example of an emperor's ignorance of or indifference to local sentiment. But the best-attested and no doubt most incendiary fuel for revolt was the paganization of Jerusalem. Enter Bar Kokhba.

Bar Kokhba

Hadrian was ubiquitous. More statues of him have survived from antiquity than of any other Roman emperor except Augustus. Bar Kokhba is a ghost, but only when it comes to his physical appearance. The ancient sources are generous when it comes to his personality.

With Bar Kokhba, the Jewish revolts against Rome finally had a hero. Josephus builds up Jewish leader after leader only to tear them down one by one. The rebel chiefs of the Diaspora Revolt are mere names. With Bar Kokhba, at last there is the real thing. He was the alpha male in the wolf pack, a charismatic warrior who got a nation to follow him into the valley of death. He called his people brothers.[16] Perhaps calling them children would have been more appropriate, as the letters found in the caves show that he ruled with a very firm hand. He was stern, imperious, and a micromanager. He threatened to put men who didn't obey him into chains.[17] The Christian writer Eusebius of Caesarea calls him "murderous and banditlike"—shades of Josephus![18] Bar Kokhba was an excellent planner and military tactician. He claimed to be the leader of the nation. Not that he lacked detractors among his own people. The letters also show that some men disobeyed his commands, which explain his repeated threats of punishment.

Bar Kokhba joined a long line of rebels against the Roman Empire, all famous in their own countries, and most unknown in the rest of the world. They include Boudicca of Britannia, Viriathus of Lusitania, Tacfarinas of Numidia, two leaders in succession named Bato in Illyricum, Vercingetorix and Sacrovir of Gaul, Civilis of Batavia, not to mention the leaders of the two previous Jewish revolts against Rome. Of the various rebels, Arminius of Germania alone was successful, only to be killed by his own people. We might also include Mithradates, the king of Pontus, who sparked a rebellion across the Eastern Mediterranean that raged from 88 to 66 BCE, although his own country was still free. Queen Amanirenas of Kush defeated the Roman army that invaded her country (25–22 BCE). The queen's forces raided the far south of Roman Egypt in turn, enslaved the inhabitants, destroyed statues of Augustus, and buried a bust of the emperor under the threshold of a Kushite temple, so worshippers would trample it, at least symbolically. Today the bust is on display in London's British Museum. The most famous rebel against Rome was also a dramatic failure, Spartacus of Thrace,

who led, in Italy, one of history's best-known slave revolts between 73 and 71 BCE.

Bar Kokhba joins their ranks. He is famous in Israel, but less familiar elsewhere. First the Zionist movement and then the state of Israel turned him into a hero. Today he is known to every Israeli schoolchild. But not every Israeli agrees about his heroism. To some, Bar Kokhba was an arrogant fool who brought on the worst massacre in Jewish history before the Holocaust. He should never have rebelled against the Romans in the first place, they maintain. Which was Bar Kokhba, hero or fool? Let the reader follow the story below and reach a judgment.

Bar Kokhba was not his original name. The texts discovered in caves in the Judean Desert call him Simon Bar Koseva, or simply Bar or Ben Koseva. "Ben" means "Son of" in Hebrew, while "Bar" means "Son of" in Aramaic, making him Simon Son of Koseva. It is unclear whether Koseva refers to his father, to his family, or to the place (perhaps in the Judean Hills) of his origin. His detractors called him Ben Koziva, "Son of a Liar."[19]

Bar Kokhba is a nom de guerre. It means "Son of a Star." The reference is to a verse in the Torah, "There shall step forth a star [*kokhav*] out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). The implication is that the "star" is the messiah. Whether or not his followers called him Bar Kokhba (a name attested only in Christian sources), they considered him to be the messiah. Remember that in Judaism, unlike Christianity, the messiah was purely human, without divine or supernatural characteristics.[20]

Bar Kokhba (to use the familiar name, as noted above) took the title of *nasi*, "prince," which was clearly linked with the messiah. Both the Prophet Ezekiel and the Qumran community refer to the *nasi* as a warrior and a harbinger of the End of Days. The Dead Sea Scrolls make it clear that the *nasi* will lead the final battle against the Romans, the archenemy of the Jewish people, and establish the Kingdom of God.[21]

The Talmud contains statements both about rabbis accepting Bar Kokhba as the messiah and about them rejecting him. The most famous passage concerns Rabbi Akiva, the most prominent rabbi of his generation:

> Rebbi Simon ben Yohai stated: Akiva my teacher used to preach, *there appeared a star out of Jacob* [Num. 24:17], there appeared Koziba out of

> Jacob. When Rebbi Akiva saw Bar Koziba he said, this is King Messiah. Rebbi Johanan ben Torta said to him, Akiva! Grass will grow from your jaws and still David's son... [will not have] come.[22]

Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish scholar, wrote:

> Rabbi Akiva, the greatest of the sages of the Mishnah, was a supporter of King Ben Koziva, saying of him that he was the king messiah. He and all the contemporary sages regarded him as the king messiah, until he was killed for the sins which he had committed.[23]

Contemporary evidence suggests support for Bar Kokhba from another direction: the priests. Although the Temple was gone, the former priests and their descendants continued to have a strong identity. Bar Kokhba's coins refer to the priests and the Temple.[24] Some of the earlier coins bear the legend "Eleazar the Priest." His identity is unknown, and "Eleazar" may refer to one of Bar Kokhba's allies or to a biblical figure, the son of the first Jewish priest, Aaron.

Bar Kokhba's coins assert the identity of the Jewish people. Many of the coins depict a building that is probably the Temple, and some depict various objects that played a prominent role in the Temple such as the Showbread Table or a seven-branched palm tree, symbolizing the seven-branched candelabra. Some coins may illustrate the golden candelabra that Queen Helena of Adiabene donated and was placed above the door of the sanctuary.[25]

Coins played an important role in getting the rebels' message out. The rebels probably lacked access to adequate tools and metal of their own and so they resorted to overstriking Roman or Greek or Nabatean Arab coins. The legends of the coins recall the Great Revolt. "Year One for the Redemption of Israel," "Year Two of the Freedom of Israel," "For the Redemption of Jerusalem," and "Jerusalem" are among the legends. There is also "Simon," for Bar Kokhba, and sometimes "Simon, Prince [*Nasi*] of Israel." The legends are written in Hebrew, in archaic script, just like the legends of the coins of the Great Revolt. Hebrew was also used on legal documents from the era of Bar Kokhba. Aramaic was the

common language of the Jews of Judea. Hebrew, as noted earlier, was the language of Jewish nationalism and independence.

As in the Great Revolt, so in Bar Kokhba's Revolt the notion of Israel was central. Jews still thought of their country as Israel, an older and more inclusive name than Judea. In addition to the coins, contemporary letters, which survive on papyrus documents, refer to Bar Kokhba as Prince (*Nasi*) of Israel. The letters also refer to the state that he administered as the "House of Israel."[26] Even after the revolt, the term survived. A deed written in 140 (or possibly 139) bears the date "Year 4 of the Destruction of the House of Israel."[27]

Between the emphasis on the Temple, the similarities between some of his coins and those of the Great Revolt, the use of Hebrew, and the title *nasi*, Bar Kokhba presented himself as a great figure of the Jewish past. Legends clung to him. Typical of them is one that says that he caught enemy catapult bolts on his knee and hurled them back and killed his foes.[28]

Bar Kokhba was a powerful personality, a charismatic leader, an impressive manager, and an innovative commander. The foundation of Aelia Capitolina provided a motivation for rebellion. The question remains, though: Why did Bar Kokhba and his followers think they could defeat the mighty Roman Empire? After all, both the Great Revolt and the Diaspora Revolt had brought ruin upon the Jewish people. Be that as it may, history is full of examples of people who talk themselves into believing that "this time is different." Judea had recovered from its previous defeat. A new generation had arisen, full of confidence, its hopes fueled by messianism. Bar Kokhba promised different tactics than the rebels had used in 66 to 70. Rome's utter defeat against Parthia, just fifteen years earlier, was a reminder that the empire was not invincible.

If the Jewish people had been governed by cold-blooded men and women in business suits who sat around a conference table and calculated the odds, then they might have decided not to risk war with Rome. That is the conclusion that the rabbis eventually reached. But in the early second century of our era, the Jews still adhered to a strong military culture. They saw themselves as the heirs of the Maccabees. They fought for freedom, for honor, and for what they saw as the dictates of their God. They certainly were not alone in history for risking everything for national survival. Think of a Native American rebel like Tecumseh,

who went down fighting rather than surrender to the United States. Think of Churchill's response when advised in the dark days of 1940 that England had to agree to make peace with Hitler rather than risk the ravages of the Luftwaffe. He said:

> Nations that go down fighting rise again, but those who surrender tamely are finished.[29]

He also said,

> if at last the long story is to end, it were better it should end, not through surrender, but only when we are rolling senseless on the ground.[30]

Bar Kokhba may well have spoken in a similar vein.

As for Parthia, the sources are silent, but they are also scanty. Did the rebels seek help from beyond the Euphrates, as they did during the Great Revolt? Maybe, just maybe, Cassius Dio hints at this in his statement about the Bar Kokhba Revolt that "the whole world, so to speak, was incited over this."[31]

Not that all of Bar Kokhba's countrymen supported him. The sketchy sources about Bar Kokhba show followers disobeying his orders or not carrying them out well. They do not reveal outright opposition to his revolt, but we can be certain that it existed, nevertheless. There never was and never will be a people that rebels with unanimity, especially not one who could see the price of failure in the ruins of their holy city. Then, too, the Roman way of governing a province always sought out local elites to do business with, and Judea was surely no different. There as elsewhere in the empire some people, especially in the upper classes, cooperated with the Romans. The name of one Jewish soldier who fought with the Romans against Bar Kokhba has survived, and there were surely others.[32]

A famous passage in the Talmud illustrates the range of sentiment that likely existed in Roman Judea.[33] Three rabbis were having a conversation. One of them praised the Romans for establishing marketplaces, opening bathhouses, and building bridges. The second rabbi sat in silence, but the third one struck back. He said that the Romans established marketplaces to put prostitutes in them;

opened bathhouses to pamper themselves; and built bridges to collect tolls. The first rabbi reported the conversation to others, and word eventually got to the Romans. They rewarded the rabbi who praised them and sent the second rabbi into exile from Judea to a city in Galilee. The rabbi who attacked them was sentenced to death. The story was written down long after Bar Kokhba's era. It may be embellished or invented. It refers to the generation after the revolt, but it probably reflects more generally the range of opinion in second-century Judea. (The story may remind some readers of the "What have the Romans ever done for us?" sketch in Monty Python's film *Life of Brian*.)[34]

The Course of the Revolt

According to Dio, the rebels waited until Hadrian had finished his tour of Egypt and Syria. After adding Asia Minor to his itinerary, he landed in his favorite city, Athens. Hadrian lavished rebuilding projects on this Greek city, a much better fit than Jerusalem for the pagan philhellene that he was. It was probably in Athens in 132 that Hadrian got the news: a rebellion had broken out in Judea.

Dio writes that the rebels took the Romans by surprise. Then again, most rebellions took Rome by surprise because the Romans tended to ignore the subjects of their empire except for the local bigwigs who flattered them and did the rulers' bidding, especially by collecting taxes. Roman arrogance usually made it a shock to discover that the natives were unfriendly and that they knew how to fight, even when past experience suggested otherwise. It was even worse when they hit Rome where it hurt, and nothing hurt Romans so much as hit-and-run, guerrilla tactics. Roman history offers a long roll call of generals who knew how to line up the men and fight a set battle or lay siege to a walled city, but who walked clueless into ambushes or got caught with their armor off by raiders.

Bar Kokhba knew how to wrong-foot the enemy. One wonders how he learned the art of war. Could he perhaps have served as a Roman auxiliary or, less likely, as a legionary? Roman ranks did indeed include Jews, and Roman rebels numbered among them such ex-Roman soldiers as Spartacus and Arminius. In any case, Bar Kokhba knew the military art. Apparently, he understood that the

rebels of 66 to 74 had played into Roman hands by depending on fortresses. He intended to employ irregular tactics. Cassius Dio wrote:

> To be sure, they did not dare try conclusions with the Romans in the open field, but they occupied the advantageous positions in the country and strengthened them with mines and walls, in order that they might have places of refuge whenever they should be hard pressed, and might meet together unobserved underground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light.[35]

Archaeology leaves no doubt that the rebels went underground. Investigators have found hundreds of underground hideouts in what is today central Israel as well as smaller numbers in the north. Most of the hideouts are in what were Jewish villages in the first and second century. All the hideouts have similar features. They contain cisterns, reservoirs, storage rooms, olive presses, areas for livestock, and ritual baths. The only way to get from room to room is to crawl through small, narrow, and twisting tunnels. Only a few of the hideouts can be reliably dated, but the uniformity among them makes a good case to place them all in the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Tunnels are not unfamiliar to students of modern warfare. From the Warsaw ghetto to the Vietnam War, and in North Korea, Lebanon, and Gaza, fighters have gone underground. From there they can come out and attack the enemy unexpectedly. As the Bar Kokhba tunnels show, the tactics go back a long way.

The hideouts could serve as launching pads for sudden and surprise attacks on the Romans. Ambushes and raids are classic moves in irregular warfare and they resonate in Jewish history. The Maccabees used irregular tactics in their successful bid for independence in the second century BCE. Cassius Dio also claims that the rebels supplied themselves with weapons by tricking the Romans, who compelled them to supply Roman troops. The Jews purposely made weapons of such poor quality that the Roman army—their customer—rejected them. The rebels kept the weapons and presumably repaired them. There is no archaeological confirmation, but it's a good story and might even be true.[36]

In addition to their underground hideouts, the rebels garrisoned a number of places—no less than fifty of them, according to Dio.[37] These ranged from Herod's citadel at Herodium (near Bethlehem) to Roman guard posts that the insurgents had captured, to fortified villages, to the city of Betar (near Jerusalem).

The rebels did what they could to keep their preparations secret. But the Romans were not blind and surely noticed at least some of what was going on. Nevertheless, as Dio wrote, the Romans "at first considered it to be of no significance."[38] One imagines the usual combination of arrogance and wishful thinking on the part of an imperial power and its well-fed soldiers living in comfortable billets. If anyone sounded the alarm about a rebellion brewing, the officers probably responded: "They wouldn't dare."

Bar Kokhba's was a people's army, probably raised mainly in the rural villages of Judea.[39] His soldiers included, as one historian puts it, "the distressed, the debtors, and the discontented."[40] Country people often make up for what they lack in urbanity by physical sturdiness and inner fortitude.[41]

Bar Kokhba's army consisted largely of light-armed troops. In the dry climate of the Judean Desert some of the rebels' weapons have survived. Slings and arrows were their primary arms, along with spears and daggers, and the occasional sword has been found as well.[42] The rebels manufactured some of these weapons on their own and looted others from the Romans. Choose the right terrain and timing and light-armed soldiers can prove deadly even to the infantrymen of the legions with their shields, body armor, and helmets.

Apparently the first battles shocked the Romans. Although no details survive, we can imagine that the rebels sallied out from their hideouts, ambushed Roman troops, stripped their armor, and plundered their weapons. They could have overrun legionary and auxiliary outposts. The Romans suffered such serious defeats that they needed to bring in soldiers and commanders from other provinces. It is possible that the rebels damaged one of the two legions in Judea beyond repair. One of those legions was the Tenth Legion, whose headquarters was in Jerusalem; the other legion was stationed in Galilee, but its identity is debated. In any case, only the men of the Tenth Legion were decorated for service during the revolt. One can only wonder if the rebels put the second legion out of

commission, just as the rebels of 66 had savaged Cestius's legion in an ambush in the Beth Horon pass.[43]

Before the Romans knew it, as Dio says:

> all Judea had been stirred up, and the Jews everywhere were showing signs of disturbance, were gathering together, and giving evidence of great hostility to the Romans, partly by secret and partly by overt acts.[44]

Dio claims that "many others of foreign races joined them out of a desire for profit and, the whole world, so to speak, was incited over this."[45] Just what Dio means by this last comment is unclear. "The whole world, so to speak" is surely an exaggeration, but perhaps non-Jews in the province of Judea joined the rebellion to gain plunder. A variety of non-Jews, from discontented city dwellers to rural bandits to people who were just looking for trouble might have turned on the Romans. The sources also contain hints of rebellion in the neighboring province of Roman Arabia, and perhaps Dio had that in mind. Two groups there may have joined the rebellion. Both Jews living in the region called Perea and their Nabatean Arab neighbors may have chafed under Roman rule, a generation after Rome had annexed the formerly independent area in 106.

Jewish refugees fled the troubles in Roman Arabia to Judea. Two of them are Babatha daughter of Simon and Salome Komaïse daughter of Levi, who came from a village on the southeastern coast of the Dead Sea. They were both property owners, primarily of date groves, and both women of means. They traveled to En Gedi, where they stayed until it was no longer safe. Then they fled. Improbably, their documents survived, thirty-five of Babatha, wrapped carefully in a leather pouch, and more than a dozen of Salome.

The documents open a window into a world where Jews maintained their own traditions, while making compromises with a complicated and sometimes threatening reality. We know from the documents that Babatha had to deal with the Roman authorities in Arabia, where she originally lived, to fight for her son's inheritance after the death of his father, her first husband. Babatha followed many elements of Jewish law, but also elements of Greek and Roman law. In the Judean

Desert in this era, at any rate, Jewish life was not separate, nor did the rabbis exert the influence they would in later centuries.[46]

Babatha was married twice, the second time to a man from En Gedi. As it happened, he already had a wife at the time. Polygamy was legal, and both his wives eventually outlived him—and fought a court battle over his property. Babatha's husband offers an example of Roman power. He borrowed money from a Roman centurion. The Roman was stationed in En Gedi to supervise the balsam plantations, which belonged to the emperor. En Gedi was the major source of balsam in the empire. Balsam, also known as balm, was a superstar of the ancient economy. It was used to treat wounds and as an antidote to snakebites and scorpion stings. It was an ingredient in holy oil. Above all, it was highly prized for perfume. Anyhow, the officer was generous to Babatha's husband, but not too generous, as the loan was possibly made at a usurious rate of interest, a reminder of the reality of power in an occupied country.[47]

The Empire Strikes Back

No one, it seems, was more shocked by the uprising than Hadrian himself. It is possible but by no means certain that he went back to Judea to participate in the war.[48] Whether he observed the situation in person or not, Hadrian quickly saw the need for a new commander in Judea. He acted with characteristic decisiveness.

First, he sent the governor of Syria to Judea on temporary duty as legionary commander, on one theory, because Judea's governor had been killed in the fighting.[49] Likewise, it is possible that the governor of Roman Arabia was also dispatched to Judea, although his duty might rather have been putting down disorder in his own province. But Hadrian knew that Rome's greatest hope lay in the governor of a far-off province about a month and a half's travel time away. Dio writes:

> And indeed then Hadrian sent his strongest generals against them [the rebels], of whom the foremost was Julius Severus, who was dispatched against the Jews from Britannia where he was governor.[50]

As governor of Britannia, Sextus Julius Severus held one of the two most important military commands in the empire; the other was Syria. Syria bordered Parthia, while Britannia bordered violent Caledonia (roughly, Scotland) and had no shortage of rebels of its own. Normally, a move to Judea would have been a demotion, but this was an emergency, and Julius Severus was the best man for the job. In fact, he probably had been appointed Britannia's governor to put down an uprising in the northern part of the province.[51] Julius Severus knew how to deal with savages, as the Romans thought of them, and he knew all there was to know about the Roman army. Born in a Roman veterans' colony in what is now Croatia, Julius Severus had an outstanding military career. A favorite of Trajan, he commanded a legion and governed two provinces in southeastern Europe before his appointment in Britannia. When he left for Judea, Julius Severus took several talented officers with him, including three future governors of Britannia. No wonder Hadrian decided to entrust the war to him.

Roman casualties in Judea were high. Fronto, a prominent Roman orator in the 160s, wrote, when looking back at an earlier time: "When Hadrian governed the empire, how very many soldiers were killed by the Jews, how very many by the Britons!"[52] Dio is blunt about the Judean war: "Many Romans died in this war," he wrote.[53] "Therefore," he continued,

> when Hadrian wrote to the Senate, he did not use the usual opening for the emperors, "If you and your children are in good health, all is well; I and the army are in good health."[54]

Perhaps Hadrian wrote to the Senate from the front in Judea.

Rome needed more men, so they brought in soldiers from other provinces. To fill the manpower gap, Hadrian drafted soldiers in Italy, an unpopular policy that emperors tried to avoid. Just how many men were sent to Judea and from how many units is debatable, given the uncertainties of the evidence, which comes from various inscriptions recording military careers. At a minimum, Rome sent in a full legion from Syria and vexillations (units, each typically of 1,000 or 2,000 men) from six other legions. Some argue that twice as many vexillations were brought in, as many as twelve or thirteen. Auxiliary troops served in Judea as well.

One historian estimates a total of about 30,000 to 50,000 Roman professional soldiers.[55] It is best to err on the conservative side and choose the lower estimate. That was only half as many men as Vespasian had in the Great Revolt, but the Bar Kokhba war covered a smaller geographical area, nor did it require the siege of a fortress like Jerusalem. Julius Severus's way of war needed manpower but, even more, it required time and patience.

The rebels declared independence and made it stick. Although they did not control the bulk of the Province of Judea, they took a large part of its central region, Judah, away from the Romans and governed it for three years. They passed laws, issued coins, and, above all, fought a war. One of their strongholds, and perhaps their headquarters, was Herodium, located about seven miles east of Jerusalem. This hilltop fortress of Herod the Great, who was buried there, was eminently defensible. As mentioned, the rebels constructed underground passages to facilitate sorties and to serve as refuges, if necessary. Their economic center was probably En Gedi. Ultimately, they would retreat to the fortress of Betar, near Jerusalem. They dreamt of Jerusalem, but never captured it.[56]

Severus arrived in Judea perhaps in late 133 or 134. Dio offers a concise analysis of the general's tactics against the rebels:

> Severus did not venture to attack his opponents in the open at any one point, in view of their numbers and their desperation, but by intercepting small groups, thanks to the number of his soldiers and his lieutenants, and by depriving them of food and shutting them up, he was able, rather slowly, to be sure, but with comparatively little danger, to exhaust them, to grind them down, and to beat them.[57]

A rabbinic source adds that the Romans set up three guard posts to apprehend Jews who came out of hiding late in the revolt.[58]

Severus displayed one of the qualities of a successful commander: the ability to modify orthodox military thinking. He engaged in a counterinsurgency strategy. Dio's text as it stands isn't entirely logical, but we can make sense of it along the following lines: Severus outnumbered Bar Kokhba but, given the steep and rugged Judean terrain, perfect for ambush by the knowledgeable locals, the

Roman chose his battles carefully. He sent his troops on what are now called search-and-destroy missions. When possible, they killed the enemy outright. Archaeology shows that his men overran farming villages in Judea, with burn layers and hastily buried skeletons telling the tale of ruin.[59] In other cases, Severus was satisfied with shutting the rebels in their hideouts and slowly starving them, while no doubt picking off those who ventured out. Starvation was real, to judge from a story in the rabbinic sources about Jews in hiding reduced to eating corpses.[60] Severus's was a gruesome but effective strategy, although, as Dio notes, it was not a quick route to victory. No wonder the war lasted three and a half years.

Intelligence is key in the kind of campaign that Severus waged. He might have obtained information about the enemy from captured prisoners as well as from Jewish and Christian supporters of Rome. More accurately, the latter group should be called Jewish followers of Jesus Christ; scholars sometimes refer to them as Jewish Christians, but Jewish Christ followers is more accurate.[61] In Bar Kokhba's day, many Christ followers, particularly in the Roman East, still considered themselves Jewish. Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah argued that they, and not other Jews, were the true representatives of the people of Israel.

For Jewish Christ followers it would have been blasphemy to accept Bar Kokhba rather than Jesus as the Messiah. Hence Jewish Christ followers in Judea refused to back the rebellion and some were tortured or killed by the rebels as a result. Arguably, the Jewish Christ followers' refusal to support the revolt and Jewish rebel persecution of Jewish Christ followers widened the divide between what ultimately became two separate religions.[62]

Like many guerrillas throughout history, the rebels based their revolt among civilians. From the Viet Cong guerrilla fighters in South Vietnam (1950s to 1975) to the Shining Path revolutionaries in 1980s and '90s Peru to Hamas more recently, a similar pattern is found. One difference is that the Bar Kokhba rebels focused their attacks on Roman soldiers and not civilians. But by living and fighting among Jewish civilians in rural villages, the rebels maximized the ability to surprise the Romans. Unfortunately, they also maximized Roman willingness to bring the war home to the civilian population of Judea. Was anyone innocent

when ordinary people allowed rebels to operate in their midst? So, the Romans might have asked themselves. Rome faced few inhibitions about killing civilians, and it did so with abandon.[63]

Betar

Betar has the same resonance for the Bar Kokhba Revolt as Masada does for the Great Revolt. Although not as famous outside Israel as Masada, Betar, too, signifies Jewish resolve. It was the place where Bar Kokhba made his last stand. It is not surprising that, in modern times, Betar has become the name of several Israeli sports teams as well as of Zionist youth groups.

The ancient sources describe Betar as "a very strongly fortified small city not far from Jerusalem."[64] It was the revolt's last stronghold after the Romans had captured Herodium and En Gedi.

The road to Betar from Jerusalem winds for 5 miles (8 kilometers) through the Judean Hills along the valley of Nahal Refaim, a stream whose name refers to ghosts or giants. The rebels never got closer to the Holy City. Betar occupies a strategic point. It sits on a steep hill that overlooks not only the Nahal Refaim but also the valley of Nahal Sorek running westward to the Mediterranean coast.[65]

Archaeology demonstrates that ancient Betar lies next to the modern Palestinian Arab town of Battir, on a tel (that is, a mound built over several centuries of occupation) called Khirbet el-Yahud, "Ruin of the Jews." The excavators found fortifications, underground halls, and a few significant artifacts such as slingstones and a stone projectile. They might have found more such objects, but the site has been extensively looted for over a century. The tel lies on a hilltop about 500 feet (150 meters) above the Nahal Refaim and about 2,300 feet (700 meters) above sea level. It is surrounded by the valley on three sides, and the rebels dug a deep moat on the fourth side to cut the site off. A spring provides plenty of water. In short, Betar was a promising spot for the defenders. But the Romans were coming.

The Romans laid siege to Betar in their usual, methodical manner. They built five army camps and forts that commanded the neighboring hills. They

surrounded Betar with a 2.5-mile-long (4-kilometer-long) siege wall. They built an assault ramp and filled in the moat. Depending on how many camps were in use at one time, somewhere between 8,000 and 12,000 Roman soldiers took part in the siege.

Eusebius offers a few, scant details:

> The siege lasted a long time before the rebels were driven to final destruction by famine and thirst....[66]

Rabbinic sources say more about the suffering of the siege, if somewhat poetically and in ways that emphasize the horror. One offers the detail that sixty fighters were killed while trying to break through the siege wall. Although not one of them was ever found, their wives were permitted to remarry.[67] Rabbinic sources sometimes exaggerate. When the Romans broke through, the sources say, there was so much blood that it immersed a horse up to its nose; so much blood that it moved heavy rocks and stained the sea (about fifty miles away). Three hundred children's brains were found on one stone. A great rabbi later said that he had been a schoolchild in Betar at the time of the siege. Of a supposed 250,000 or more (!) schoolchildren there, he alone survived.[68]

Dio states succinctly the impact of Roman tactics on the rebel army:

> Very few of them in fact survived.[69]

Bar Kokhba himself was killed. No surviving sources offer a balanced view of the man who raised the banner of freedom so high or so dangerously. Instead, there is only venom. "The instigator of their madness paid the penalty he deserved," wrote Eusebius.[70] A rabbinic text says that Bar Kokhba was killed by a snakebite—and the city fell—as divine punishment for his execution of a rabbi, whose prayers and fasting alone had preserved Betar. When Hadrian heard the news of how the rebel leader had died, he supposedly commented that God alone could have killed Bar Kokhba.[71]

Rabbinic tradition says that Betar fell on the ninth of Av (roughly, August), the same date that the First and Second Temples were destroyed.[72] Modern

scholars accept the summer of 135 as the date of Betar's capture. But the revolt was not quite over.

Surviving rebel commanders and administrators and their families fled to caves, at least some of which had been prepared in advance as refuges. Over thirty such caves have been found in the Judean Desert, with a smaller number in the Judean Hills. Together they have yielded many artifacts, among them: coins, documents, pottery, jewelry, mirrors, cosmetics, sandals, and textiles (preserved in the arid climate). In some of the caves, archaeologists found bronze keys. These presumably belonged to the homes that refugees hoped in vain to return to.

One of the refugees was Babatha. Her co-wife's brother, it seems, was no less a person than Bar Kokhba's commander in En Gedi, and he brought Babatha along with other family members to a cave about 3.5 miles from town.[73] Babatha's fate is unknown, but considering that she never retrieved her valuable documents, she probably did not survive her refuge. More than twenty skeletons have been found in the cave. One of them might have been hers. They were the victims either of starvation or thirst or of Roman attack.

And the Romans did attack. Babatha's cave is located on the side of a cliff and hard to access. But a Roman siege camp has been excavated above it, large enough for an estimated eighty to one hundred soldiers. Good luck to refugees who tried to escape them. Arrowheads discovered embedded in the ceilings of some of the caves may point to Roman invaders. Elsewhere, the Romans may have lit fires below the caves to suffocate the defenders. An educated guess is that the Romans discovered half of the refuge caves and killed most of the people in them.[74] Not until 136 did the Romans succeed in repressing the remaining rebels. Even then there were still sporadic outbursts that continued after Hadrian's death in 138 and into the reign of the next emperor, Antoninus Pius.

The Wages of Defeat

To the Romans went the spoils. Even though Hadrian may never have been physically present in Judea during the revolt, the emperor received recognition for success. Hadrian took the title of imperator, "victorious general," for only the

second time in his reign. He was rewarded with a monument in Rome and a triumphal arch in Aelia Capitolina. His leading generals, Julius Severus and the governors of Syria and Roman Arabia, each obtained Rome's highest military honor, triumphal insignia, the ornamenta triumphalia.

For Jews the consequences of the Bar Kokhba War were horrendous, and far worse than the results of the Great Revolt. Eusebius paints a picture of extreme repression:

> He [the Roman governor] destroyed in heaps thousands of men, women, and children, and, under the law of war, enslaved their land.[75]

Dio describes the results of the war as follows:

> Fifty of their most important outposts and nine hundred and eighty-five of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate....[76]

Ancient historians didn't mind a tall tale or two, and Roman generals thought nothing of inflating their body counts. Nonetheless, archaeological surveys of sites in Israel suggests that Dio's horrendous figures are roughly accurate.[77]

The picture fits the famous description of Rome's extreme pacification policy: "They make a desert and call it peace."[78] Tacitus put these words in the mouth of a Caledonian (Scottish) rebel, but many other peoples in the legions' long path of destruction could have nodded in agreement. Rome preferred, as we might say nowadays, to win the hearts and minds of the conquered nations or at least of their elites; Rome didn't pay much attention to ordinary folk. But make no mistake about it: repeat offenders would be ground into dust. So much for counterinsurgency as public diplomacy, to refer to a contemporary concept. When pushed to the wall, the Romans were ready to pile up skulls in the manner of the Assyrians.

In addition to a massive number of deaths, very many Jewish survivors were enslaved. A Christian source says that there were so many captives that the price of a slave dropped to the mere cost of a day's feed for a horse.[79]

Galilee, which played only a small part in the war, remained largely untouched. The Romans drove most Jews out of their historic homeland in the region of Judah, the central part of the province of Judea, and into Galilee, a northern region. For centuries afterward Galilee became the center of Jewish life in what had been the province. Jewish life also recovered on the edges of Judah, for example, in the city of Lydda. Lydda became a hub of Jewish life and was known for its sages. But in the heart of Judah, the region whose crown had been Jerusalem, the region that gave its name both to the country as a whole and to its people—for "Jew" is derived from the Latin *Iudaeus*, Greek *Ioudaios*, or Hebrew *Yehudi*—the heart of Judah was now largely without Jews.

Aelia Capitolina, which rose over the ruins of Jerusalem, was closed to Jews. If Christian sources are accurate, Jews were forbidden to enter the city, much less worship or live there, except for one day of the year: the ninth of the month of Av. Only on this day that marked the destruction of the Temple were Jews allowed to enter the former Jerusalem and mourn at the Western Wall.

After the revolt Hadrian changed the name of the province of Judea to Syria Palaestina, from which the name Palestine comes. Rome changed the names of other provinces, but never to punish a rebellion. This is the only known case.[80] As one scholar puts it, "Judea was air-brushed out of the map of Roman provinces."[81]

The name "Palestine" is ultimately derived from the Philistines, invaders from the Aegean and Cyprus in twelfth century BCE who intermarried with Canaanites and formed a series of kingdoms on the coast of what is now Gaza and southern Israel. Egyptians, Assyrians, and the Hebrew Bible each used a variant of "Philistine" to refer to the land of the Philistines. Palestine was not a new name, but it was not a name used by Jews, who referred to their country as Judea, the Land of Israel, or simply Israel. It was, however, a name used by Greeks. Greek authors such as Herodotus or Aristotle used the name "Palestine" to refer to Canaan more broadly. One historian suggests that it was the Greek inhabitants of

Judea who lobbied Hadrian to change the name.[82] The bad blood between Greeks and Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean was well known. So was Hadrian's philhellenism. If the name change from Judea to Syria Palaestina wasn't his idea, he might well have approved it with pleasure.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that Greeks in Syria Palaestina and around the Eastern Mediterranean hailed Hadrian's victory over Bar Kokhba. Only one Greek author says so explicitly in his surviving work. Pausanias, the celebrated second century CE author of the *Guide to Greece*, wrote that Hadrian "never voluntarily entered upon a war, but he reduced the Hebrews beyond Syria, who had rebelled."[83] But a uniquely large number of Greek writers penned paeans to Hadrian, and perhaps they included praise of his great military success, the war against the Jewish rebels.[84] In the mixed Greek-Jewish cities of Tiberias and Caesarea, temples of Hadrian were erected, while Gaza, with its similar population, sponsored a Festival of Hadrian. None of these events is securely dated, but they might represent thank-you gifts to the emperor for crushing the Jewish revolt.[85] By the reign of Hadrian's successor, the city of Sepphoris was renamed Diocaesarea, Greek for "Zeus Caesar," a name honoring both the chief pagan god and the Roman emperor.

As a result of the revolt the Romans persecuted Jews, at least in Judea. Tradition attributes the persecution to Hadrian, but perhaps it was work of the provincial governor or individual Roman commanders on the ground. Observance of the Sabbath, teaching of the Torah, and circumcision were prohibited. Sages were persecuted, among them Rabbi Akiva, Bar Kokhba's supporter. He was arrested for openly teaching the Torah, condemned, and tortured to death. Hadrianic persecution includes the tradition of the Ten Martyrs, sages who were killed for their faith by the Romans. They are recalled to this day as part of the liturgy of the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Scholars judge at least some of the details of the persecutions to be legendary. But there were some restrictions. Fortunately for the Jews, the restrictions were lifted in the reign of Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius. Still, Jews remembered even part of Pius's reign as the era of "the Danger."[86]

It is no wonder that the rabbinic tradition cursed Hadrian, saying of him, "May his bones rot!" Of Bar Kokhba, the rabbis were not complimentary, but that was in retrospect. At the time, he is likely to have had support from some rabbis including prominent ones, as the sources show. But the rabbinic movement was still in its early stages in the early second century. In many ways, Jewish society was living on the capital of the previous two centuries.

It was still a society that wanted vengeance on the Romans, still a society that expected the imminent arrival of the messiah, still a society that looked to pick up the fallen sword of the Maccabees. It was not yet clear that Jews would bow to the reality of Roman rule and that, in place of a martial ethos, Judaism would turn inward into the territory of the spirit.

The prophet Jeremiah (31:15) described the voice of Rachel weeping for her children as they were sent into captivity. Writing around 400, Jerome, the Christian scholar, returned to the image of Rachel weeping, this time for enslaved Jews as they were led off from their homeland after the Bar Kokhba Revolt.[87] And tears there might have been for the failure that the revolt represented. Could the revolt ever have succeeded? Given the brutal determination of the Romans, rebellion in 132 was a roll of the dice, even after Rome's humiliating defeat against Parthia, even after years of preparation by the insurgents. In antiquity as today, some criticized Bar Kokhba as a fool who led his country to almost certain ruin. But weeping wasn't the only response. Some gritted their teeth and continued to dream of independence. Some even dared to hope for salvation, at long last, from the far side of the Euphrates River, where there were Jewish brethren and the horsemen of the Parthian king.

The Romans believed they had stamped out the last embers of Jewish revolt. Ruin awaited rebellion: so the legions had drummed into the heads of the Jews with their "incessant revolutionary spirit," as Vespasian once called it.[88] The Jews became good Romans in the end, but only after generations of shedding their own blood and the blood of the legions. The survivors were pacified, at least for the most part. What was left was, in the main, warriors of the spirit and lions of the soul, but Judea, or rather what was now Syria Palaestina, ceased posing a major military threat to Rome.

The rabbis, who knew their countrymen best, believed that the message of Rome's invincible military needed to be repeated often—and better in words than in iron. The rabbis argued against any thought of taking up the sword again. The Jewish nation, as they saw it, would be a kingdom of the spirit. After the failure of Bar Kokhba, the rabbis would come into their own as the leaders of their people. They did everything they could to put the Jewish rebel spirit to sleep. But it woke up again.