

THE BAR KOKHBA REVOLT

by AHARON OPPENHEIMER

The Bar Kokhba revolt, which took place in 132–135 C.E., was the last serious attempt in antiquity to restore the independence of the Jewish people in its own country. The revolt was characterized by the unity of the people and their virtually unanimous concurrence in Bar Kokhba's leadership, in contrast to the power struggles that marked the earlier revolts in the days of the Second Temple. As a result, the revolt was intense as regards the number and strength of the participants, and to suppress it the Romans were compelled to utilize eight to nine legions and numerous auxiliary units gathered from all over the Empire, and the greatest of their commanders, Julius Severus, governor of Britain; apparently Emperor Hadrian himself served as commander of the Roman forces for a time. The aftermath of this revolt was also more drastic than that of the preceding ones, not only because of the number of casualties and captives sold into slavery, but also because of the ensuing persecution and martyrdom, and the dire economic crisis as the population of Judaea diminished and the center moved to Galilee, and emigration from Eretz Yisrael to the Diaspora increased.

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”מרד בר־כוכבא, ייחודו ומחקרו,” מתוך *מרד בר־כוכבא*, ערך אהרן אופנהיימר, ירושלים, מרכז זלמן שזר, חש”ם, ע’ 9–21.

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Despite these facts, the Bar Kokhba revolt was long neglected by historical research, and has only recently begun to be dealt with, to a considerable extent thanks to the discovery of the Bar Kokhba letters. The previous lack of attention can be attributed to two factors:

a. We have no literary-historical work dating from the revolt and describing it first hand. In other words, this revolt is not blessed with a Josephus Flavius, to provide a report as comprehensive and meaningful as his was of the revolt against the Romans in 66–70 C.E. in the course of which the Temple was destroyed. The absence of any such source compels scholars to reconstruct the revolt from a mosaic of partial, fragmentary evidence, at times contradictory and at times tentative, found in talmudic literature, in the works of Roman authors, in statements of Fathers of the Church, in the Samaritan Chronicles, and to interweave the implications of archeological findings. Even all of these together do not provide a clear, full picture of the course of the revolt, or an unequivocal solution to the cardinal problems such as what the territorial extent of the revolt was, how Jerusalem fared while it was in progress, whether the Temple was rebuilt, and so on.

b. It was customary to view the period of the dispersion in the history of the Jews as beginning with the destruction of the Second Temple. That view is not untinged by apologetic elements based on the desire of scholars of the last century and the early part of this one to present the destruction of the Second Temple as punishment for the Jewish people, and concomitantly the appearance of Christianity as the faithful successor to Judaism. Naturally such a point of departure made it impossible to deal with the Bar Kokhba revolt and stress it, for the revolt is an instance of impressive political and military activity, only sixty-two years after the destruction of the Temple. The fact is that the period following the destruction of the Second Temple displayed more features of freedom than of dispersion. This was the case in particular as regards the institutions of leadership maintained by the sages which directed the life of the nation not only on the religious plane, but also in the areas of economics and culture, and consequently constituted a national leadership of high quality with a degree of hegemony over the Jews of the Diaspora as well. That leadership did a great deal to rehabilitate the nation after the destruction of the Temple, by filling the resulting gap, and so made religious-national life possible without Jerusalem and the Temple. The unity of the nation in the Bar Kokhba revolt and the military and political strength of the revolt were the apogee of that process, and reflected the vitality of the nation in the generations immediately succeeding the destruction of the Second Temple.

Underlying the Bar Kokhba revolt was the refusal to become reconciled to Roman rule. Throughout the Second Temple and mishnaic periods, the Jewish people and its leaders never acceded to the legitimacy of foreign control of Eretz

Israel. The government tax collectors were “coercers” and the land-leasers were “oppressors.” In cases where the authorities were selling land they expropriated, the sicaricon law, stipulating that only the original owner was allowed to buy it, was applied. Thus the sages ranked the rejection of the authorities and the denial of their legitimacy above the supreme value of settling the country. Regardless of what the direct causes of the Bar Kokhba revolt may be, the basic motivation was the refusal of the Jewish people to merge into the Hellenistic-Roman regime, and their desire to retain their individualism and yearning for independence.

Between the “War of Kitos” and the Bar Kokhba Revolt

The key to understanding the causes of the Bar Kokhba revolt is undoubtedly a judicious appreciation of the history of Eretz Israel during the Jewish Rebellions (115–117 C.E.) in Trajan’s reign and the subsequent period till the start of the Bar Kokhba revolt (132 C.E) and a thorough examination of Hadrian’s policy on provinces in general and Eretz Yisrael in particular. The trouble is that the points mentioned raise many questions.

There has been a widely-held opinion that the Jewish Rebellions in Trajan’s day — in Egypt, Cyrene and Libya at least — were connected with messianic fervor and hopes of redemption. The sources make mentions of a messianic figure that headed the revolt in Cyrene and moved from there to Egypt,¹ thus drawing a parallel between that revolt and the Bar Kokhba revolt whose messianic character is indubitable. The relatively short space of time between the two and their similar roots bring up the question of the relation between them. There is a prior problem, however: How did it happen that at the time of the Jewish Rebellions, Eretz Yisrael was the scene of only sporadic manifestations of terror and rebellion known as the “War of Kitos” after Lusius Quetus, who after taking part in the cruel suppression of the revolt in Mesopotamia was appointed governor of Eretz Yisrael.² In contrast, it was in the reign of Hadrian — who ordered Quetus executed, and was generally considered a peace-seeking, enlightened emperor who had retreated to the Euphrates to restore peace with the Parthians — that the Bar Kokhba revolt broke out in Eretz Yisrael.

In talmudic literature Hadrian is on the one hand depicted as an emperor avid for knowledge holding discussions with Rabbi Joshua b. Hananiah and seeking to understand the essence of Judaism,³ and on the other cursed: “may his bones be

1. Andreas, according to Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* (Epitome) LXVIII 32, 1 (Boissevain ed., p. 206), henceforth “Cassius Dio”. Lukaus, according to Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV 2 (Schwartz ed., p. 300).

2. But see the assumption made by D. Rokeah, “The War of Kitos: Towards the Clarification of a Philological-Historical Problem,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972): 79–84.

3. Genesis Rabbah X 3, Theodor–Albeck ed., p. 75; T.B. Shabbat 119a; Pesikta Rabbati 21, Ish-Shalom ed., 99a.

pulverized.” Rather than reflecting an ambivalent attitude to Hadrian, the references express the people’s frustration and anger at Hadrian’s political measures. Initially Hadrian’s reign was marked by a series of steps that revived optimism and raised hopes. He ordered the execution of Lusius Quietus, supported the Alexandrian Jews that survived the Jewish Rebellions, gave the impression that he took an interest in Judaism, and may even have promised to rebuild Jerusalem as a Jewish city.⁴ It is reasonable to suppose that the expectations were unwarranted: the execution of Quietus, for instance, was a response to his political intrigues, and unrelated to his cruelty to Jews. Naturally, then, the knowledge that Jerusalem was being built as a Gentile city, with a temple of Jupiter instead of the hoped-for Temple, produced profound feelings of frustration, discontent and bitterness which kindled the flame of the revolt.

An analysis of the meager sources on the period between the two revolts together with the archeological findings can lead to a better, albeit partial understanding of what preceded the Bar Kokhba revolt. It appears that in the inter-revolt period there were already manifestations of terrorism against Roman rule, whose beginnings may well be sought in the “War of Kitos” itself.⁵ Hadrian for his part started trying to suppress and prevent such activity at an early stage. This aim is evident in the municipal organization of Tiberias and Sepphoris, the chief cities of Galilee, in the despatch of an additional legion to Palestine besides the Tenth that was stationed in Jerusalem, in the erection of camps and the paving of roads for the military. These measures seems to have been adopted in the early years of Hadrian’s reign, as indicated by a coin of the city of Tiberias, minted in the year 101 of that city (119/120 C.E.) showing a temple of Zeus considered to be the Hadrianeon⁶ and milestones from 120 C.E. on the Legio-Sepphoris and Acre-Sepphoris roads.⁷ Legio itself (Kfar Otnay) in the neighborhood of Megiddo was the main camp of the additional legion Hadrian brought to Palestine. The Jews residing in Tiberias and Sepphoris apparently accepted Hadrian’s measures in silence, and it is possible that the influential among them, some of whom were

4. Some sources even seem to imply that Hadrian promised to rebuild the Temple, e.g., Genesis Rabbah LXIV 29, Theodor-Albeck ed., pp. 710–711, and see H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1956, II, 393–402. But see G. Alon, *Toldot ha-yehudim be-Eretz Yisrael bi-Tekufat ha-Mishnah ve-ha-Talmud*, vol. 1, Tel-Aviv, 1958, pp. 270–289, who convincingly expresses doubts about the authenticity of those sources. In regard to Genesis Rabbah, see the section below on “Forces Attached to Bar Kokhba’s Troops,” where the Samaritans are discussed.

5. Especially the testimony on “political banditry” in Galilee — T.B. Niddah 61a; Lamentations Rabbah III 6 (and cf. Semahot XII 13, Higger ed., pp. 199–200); T.B. Avodah Zarah 25b. For other sources see A. Oppenheimer, “*Ha-Yishuv ha-Yehudi ba-Galil bi-Tekufat Yavneh u-Mered Bar Kokhva*,” *Cathedra* 4 (1977): 58–63, and the bibliography there.

6. G.F. Hill, *BMC Palestine*, London 1914, p. 8 Nos. 23–28; A. Kindler, *Matbe’ot Tveriyah*, Tiberias 1962, pp. 48, 101 (coin no. 7).

7. B. Isaac & I. Roll, “Judaea in the Early Years of Hadrian’s Reign,” *Latomus* 38 (1979): 54–66.

leading members of the municipal institutions, were even pleased with them. Those were Jews with assimilationist inclinations including the "stretched," that is, men who stretched their foreskins so that they should appear to be uncircumcized. Probably the absence of opposition in Tiberias and Sepphoris and the satisfaction revealed by the notables encouraged Hadrian in his endeavor to turn Jerusalem into a pagan city with a temple of Jupiter. At the same time, it would be an oversimplification to claim that Hadrian did not understand that he was offending the Jews, and intended to do no more than carry out the procedures he had applied to the other provinces, whereby a civilian settlement develops near a military base and is sometimes granted the privileges of a city. It is unthinkable that Hadrian, who traveled widely and was naturally curious, did not understand that he was taking action against Judaism. Furthermore, the construction of a city around a military base so that there was a legion stationed within a Roman colony, as happened in Jerusalem, was unique in the history of Rome.⁸

The establishment of Jerusalem as a pagan city was the main reason for the Bar Kokhba revolt.⁹ The actual construction was accomplished after the revolt, for during it Jerusalem was held by the rebels who certainly left no trace of the Roman project. Another reason for the Bar Kokhba revolt may have been the prohibition against circumcision, but it is not possible to determine from the sources whether that prohibition preceded the revolt or was promulgated after it, as part of the persecutions.¹⁰

8. B. Isaac, "Moshavot Romiyot bi-Yehuda — Yisuda shel Aelia Capitolina," *Perakim be-Toledot Yerushalayim bi-Yemei ha-Bayit ha-Sheni* (A. Schalit Memorial Volume), Jerusalem 1980, pp. 340–360.

9. Cassius Dio, LXIX 12, but cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV 6, and see M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1980, pp. 390–405. On the connection between the establishment of Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina and the Bar Kokhba revolt see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (eds. G. Vermes and F. Millar), vol. 1, Edinburgh 1973, pp. 540–542; Sh. Applebaum, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Second Jewish Revolt*, Oxford 1976, p. 8; E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews in the Roman Empire*, Leiden 1976, pp. 432–434; M.D. Herr, "Sibotav shel Mered Bar Kokhva," *Zion* 43 (1978): 1–11; P. Schäfer, "The Causes of the Bar Kokhba Revolt," *Studies in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 74–94, and the bibliography there. The numismatic finds confirm Cassius Dio's statement that the reconstruction of Jerusalem as a non-Jewish city antedated the revolt; see Y. Meshorer, "Matmon ha-Matbe'ot be-Ezor Har Hebron," in *Har Hebron Leket Ma'amarim u-Mekorot, Ha-Mador li-Yedi'at ha-Aretz ba-Tenuah ha-Kibbutzit*, Tel Aviv 1970, pp. 67–68.

10. See *Historia Augusta (Vita Hadriani)* XIV 2; see also E.M. Smallwood, "The Legislation of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius against Circumcision," *Latomus* 18 (1959): 334–347; idem., "Addendum," *Latomus* 20 (1961): 93–96; G. Alon, *op. cit.* in n. 4, vol. 2, Tel Aviv, 1961², pp. 10–13; H. Mantel, "The Causes of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt," *JQR* 58 (1967–1968): 224–242, 274–296; idem., "Postscript," *JQR* 59 (1968–1969): 341–342; J. Geiger, "Ha-Gezerah al ha-Milah u-Mered Bar Kokhva," *Zion* 41 (1976): 130–147, and the bibliography there. See also in the references in n. 9.

The Bar Kokhba revolt did not erupt spontaneously, but was preceded by careful preparations. The Roman historian Cassius Dio, as epitomized by the Christian monk, Xiphilinus, provides the most reliable and comprehensive documentation in regard to the Bar Kokhba revolt,¹¹ and on the extent of the preparations for it as well. He indicates several ways in which the Jews prepared for the revolt: they manufactured arms deliberately below Roman standards so that they would be rejected by the inspectors and remain in Jewish hands; they dug outposts, well-planned subterranean hiding places, and fortifications; and they scheduled the war to start after Hadrian and company had left Palestine. At first it appeared that Cassius Dio was exaggerating in order to excuse the Roman difficulties in suppressing the revolt, especially in his description of the reinforcement of walls and caves. But the findings gradually being uncovered in the areas of the revolt fit in perfectly with Cassius Dio's report and confirm it. At Herodium, which was evidently the rebel administrative center, and at Ḥirbat al-Arrub near the Bethlehem-Hebron road which can reasonably be identified with Kiryat Arabaya in the Bar Kokhba letter, archaeologists found underground caves containing finds from the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt.¹² Networks of such caves have been found at Ḥirbat Naqiq, Ḥirbat Etun, Ḥirbat Kishor and other places several kilometers south of Amatzia (some with apertures for ventilation), which have granaries, rooms, water holes and shafts, all underground. The dating of these systems to the Bar Kokhba revolt seems reasonable.¹³ These underground networks, which were attached to the village houses, made clandestine activity possible when necessary. It does not seem likely that such ambitious networks could have been prepared in the throes of the revolt itself, and Cassius Dio's report that they were dug within the framework of preparations for it appears to be confirmed.

Betar is also connected with preparations for the Bar Kokhba revolt. It is identified with the Arab village of Batir, ten kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. Northwest of that village is a steep hill on which there is a field of ruins which the Arabs call Ḥirbat al-Yahud (= the ruin of the Jews). The key question regarding the function of Betar in the Bar Kokhba revolt is why it was selected to be the rebel stronghold. While the place is suitable from the topographical and strategic points of view, there are many other just as suitable places in the Judean Hills. The answer to the question is that Betar was not just the rebels' last stronghold, but an important Jewish center throughout the entire revolt, and before it as well, where a considerable proportion of the preparations were concentrated. Sources

11. Cassius Dio, LXIX 11–15.

12. See Y. Tsafirir, "Me'ara mi-Yemei Bar-Kokhva le-yad 'Ain-'Arrub," *Qadmoniot* 8 (1975): 24–27.

13. See the preliminary report of these shafts in "Me'arot Seter mi-Yemei Bar-Kokhva bi-Shefelat Yehuda," *Ḥadashot Arkheologiyot* 73 (1980): 30–32.

from talmudic literature indicate that Betar was an important Jewish center in the period preceding the Bar Kokhba revolt. Apparently the Sanhedrin was transferred to there as the revolt was imminent, and it became the residence of Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel who was to head the Sanhedrin after the revolt, as well as of other members of the Patriarchal family.¹⁴ The fortifications of Betar and the increase in its population in the course of preparations for the revolt as well as the removal of the leading institutions to there were certainly related to its propinquity to Jerusalem whose liberation was the principal aim of the revolt.

Some scholars claim a connection between Rabbi Akiba's many journeys abroad and the preparations for the revolt; in view of his involvement in the Bar Kokhba revolt they believe his travels were aimed at mobilizing support in the Diaspora for the revolt, both in money and in manpower. There are however no grounds for such a claim, as the testimony on the trips contains not the slightest hint that they had other than the conventional purposes: visiting Jewish communities, giving public sermons, answering questions on halakhic points, etc. Furthermore, on some of those journeys, Rabbi Akiba was a member of a delegation headed by Rabban Gamaliel, who seems to have died before 115 C.E., and it is not reasonable to suppose that the Bar Kokhba revolt was planned before the Jewish Rebellions that took place during Trajan's reign. Presumably then, Rabbi Akiba's many journeys and the reports of them were due to his prominence; the sources likewise cite a large number of his rulings, interpretations and sayings, and exhibit a tendency to stress every detail connected with his words and deeds.¹⁵

Bar Kokhba, Leader of the Revolt

The place Bar Kokhba occupies in the history of the revolt is much greater than that of a purely military leader. He directed the entire life of the nation, and the title he was given was that of king, or more accurately, messiah king. The Talmud speaks of the "reign of Ben Koziva" and the coins and letters bear the title *nasi*, denoting an ideal king, as in Ezekiel's vision of the end of days. The strongest expression of Bar Kokhba's status is indicated in Rabbi Akiba's words: "Rabbi Simeon b. Yoḥai taught, my master Akiba used to expound 'A star (= *kokhav*) rises from Jacob' as 'A Kozva raises from Jacob.'... Rabbi Akiba, when he saw Bar Kozva, would say, 'That is the messiah king'."¹⁶

14. See T.J. Ta'aniyot IV 69a; T.B. Gittin 58a, Sotah 49b, Sanhedrin 17b; *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, Lewin ed., p. 10.

15. See I.A. Halevy, *Dorot ha-Rishonim*, vol. 4, Jerusalem 1967 (photo edition), pp. 622-626; S. Safrai, *Rabbi Akiva Ben-Yosef, Hayav u-Mishnato*, Jerusalem 1970, p. 30.

16. T.J. Ta'aniyot IV 68d ("...Rabbi Akiva when he saw Bar Kozva used to say, This is the messiah king") and cf. Lamentations Rabbah II 4; see also the Buber edition based on the Rome MS, 51a, where the designation is attributed to Rabbi Johanan (and see n. 57* there).

The testimony on Bar Kokhba's activities reflects leadership in various areas of life. The letters describe him seeing to it that the precept of the "four species" was carried out on the Feast of the Tabernacle, leasing lands that apparently were previously controlled by the Roman authorities, collecting the tithes from them, etc. If Bar Kokhba had a permanent place of residence during the revolt, it was probably Herodion, which had earlier been a district center and was during the revolt the administrative capital of Bar Kokhba's state.

The main question that arises in regard to Bar Kokhba's leadership revolves around the traits and qualifications that enabled him to achieve the lofty status of a messiah king. For while it is known that after the destruction of the Second Temple the leadership of the nation was in the hands of sages, there is no evidence that Bar Kokhba was a scholar, and no rulings, laws or interpretations are attributed to him.

The fog around the figure of Bar Kokhba is so thick that until the discovery of the letters even his name was not clear. Not all scholars identified the name Simeon that appears on the coins with Bar Kokhba, and some thought it referred to Simeon b. Gamaliel who headed the Sanhedrin after the revolt. Many believed that Bar Kokhba was part of the rebel leader's original name, and Bar Kozva was the nickname applied to him when the revolt failed and he disappointed (= *KZV*) the people. The discovery of the Bar Kokhba letters, some of which he himself signed Simeon b. Kosva, has clarified his true name. Thus the name Bar Kokhba is actually the nickname, apparently suggested by Rabbi Akiba when citing the verse "A star rises from Jacob" customarily applied to leaders.¹⁷ Some scholars distinguish between the forms Bar Kosva and Bar Kozva, arguing that the original name was Bar Kosva, and just as he was called Bar Kokhba when there was a desire to stress his messianic royalty, so he was called Bar Kozva when the hopes invested in him were disappointed.¹⁸

The evidence in talmudic literature describes Bar Kokhba's legendary strength. Thus, for instance, "What would Ben Koziva do? He would receive ballestra stones on one of his knees and throw them and kill several people with them."¹⁹ In other words, he would catch the ballestra missiles the Romans threw and hurl them back at the enemy. The cumulative testimony on Bar Kokhba indicates that he must be viewed as a charismatic leader,²⁰ and that explains the absence of in-

17. Cf. the Book of the Covenant of Damascus, 7:19–20.

18. See Y. Yadin, *Bar Kokhva*, Tel-Aviv, 1971, p. 29. In any case, Bar Kokhba's appellation was given a pejorative interpretation: "Rabbi Johanan said... Do not call *Kokhav* (= star) but *Kozev* (= liar), Lamentations Rabbah, II 4.

19. Lamentations Rabbah II 4.

20. T.J. Ta'anivot IV 68d; Lamentations Rabbah, *ibid.*; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV 6.

formation on his descent and his status before the revolt, for the charismatic leadership that emerges in time of crisis by nature differs from the conventional order of leadership and society. Characteristic too are the legendary traditions regarding Bar Kokhba's end, brought about by no human hand. Unwillingness to admit natural death in charismatic leaders is quite traditional as well. Thus one of the version says that Bar Kokhba was found dead with a snake twined around his knee.²¹ The stories resemble those about Samson — certainly one of the outstandingly charismatic figures of the Bible — whose strength vanished when his hair was cut. Here too Bar Kokhba's death involves damage to the part of his body that more than anything else represented his legendary strength in the midst of battle.

The letters illuminate the image of Bar Kokhba as a commander. They do not draw a broad comprehensive picture of the progress of the revolt. They are vital in noting the trivia of his daily life. A case in point is the Bar Kokhba letter found at Naḥal Ḥever, addressed to a local commander: "From Simeon Bar Kosva to the Ein Gedi people, to Masabala and Jonathan b. Ba'ayan, Greetings. You are sitting pretty, eating and drinking of the goods of Israel, and not concerning yourselves about your brothers in anything... from a ship at your place and the port."²² Ein Gedi was the rebel port, and Bar Kokhba in this letter is scolding Masabala and Jonathan for behaving like officers in the rear and failing to deal quickly enough with the cargo of one of the boats that arrived probably from the eastern or southern part of the Dead Sea and was undoubtedly destined for troops at the front. In another Bar Kokhba letter found at Wadi Murabba' at the leader threatens the troops of one of his units, the one commanded by Yeshua b. Galgula, "... that I will place chains on your legs as I did to Ben Aful..."²³ These letters and others of the same ilk do not appear to have been written when the rebels were desperate; they simply reflect a situation obtaining universally in the wartime military, and show Bar Kokhba to have been a commander well aware that attention to details is one of the preconditions to success.

A point in dispute is the relationship of sages to the Bar Kokhba revolt in general and to Bar Kokhba in particular. Talmudic literature includes on the one hand the opinion of Rabbi Akiba who declared that Bar Kokhba was the messiah king, and on the other testimony that sages killed him after examining him and ascertaining that he did not have the attributes of a messiah.²⁴ The key to resolving this contradiction lies in distinguishing between sources reflecting the sages' attitude to

21. Lamentations Rabbah II 4, Buber ed., 51b–52a (and see n. 67 there).

22. Y. Yadin "Expedition D," *IEJ* II (1961), 46–47.

23. P. Benoit, J.T. Milik & R. de Vaux, *Les Grottes de Murabba'at (Discoveries in the Judaean Desert)*, vol. 2, Oxford 1961, pp. 159–162.

24. T.B. Sanhedrin, 93b.

Bar Kokhba at the time of the revolt, and those containing post factum criticism. A number of traditions state that Bar Kokhba was accustomed to saying “Master of the world, do not help and do not shame.” In other words, he avowed that he did not need divine help, and asked only that God should not contribute to his disgrace, in the sense of “none of your honey, none of your sting.” It is however unthinkable that Bar Kokhba, who gained the unconditional support of Rabbi Akiba, should have expressed himself in such terms, and purported statements like the one cited must be deemed anachronistic fabrications seeking to justify the defeat of the revolt.

Of the sources reflecting the sages’ attitude to Bar Kokhba during the revolt, only two reveal some opposition. In one, Johanan b. Torta tells Rabbi Akiba, “Akiba, weeds will grow in your cheeks and the son of David will not come.”²⁵ This assertion proves nothing about Rabbi Johanan b. Torta’s attitude to the revolt, and only embodies his objection to the wish to consider Bar Kokhba the messianic king. The second source is the description of the final days of Betar, in which Rabbi Eleazar ha-Moda’i appears “sitting on sackcloth and ashes, praying daily and saying, Lord of the universe, do not sit in judgement today, do not sit in judgement today.”²⁶ Some scholars identify Rabbi Eleazar ha-Moda’i with Eleazar the priest who is depicted on the coins of the Bar Kokhba state. That identification is possible, for there is no doubt that Rabbi Eleazar’s behavior at besieged Betar must be explained against the background of the circumstances and atmosphere of the last days of the revolt. It may thus very well be that the sage who served as an authority alongside Bar Kokhba showed signs of despair when the fall of Betar was a matter of days.

In general, the position of Rabbi Akiba, who is rightly considered the spiritual leader of the revolt, reflects the prevailing attitude of the sages to the revolt and to the man who headed it. Only the unreserved support of the leading sages can explain the power of the revolt and the unity of the nation behind its leadership. Probably the story of the death of 24,000 of Rabbi Akiba’s disciples does not refer to disciples in the usual sense of the word — there was no sage who had so many — but to men who took part in the revolt in answer to Rabbi Akiba’s call.²⁷ There is evidence for this construction in Rav Sherira Gaon’s *Iggeret*: “And Rabbi Akiba produced many disciples, and annihilation came to the

25. T.J. Ta’aniyot IV 68d; the parallel in the Midrash has “And the son of David has not come yet” (Lamentations Rabbah II 4, Buber ed., 51a).

26. T.J. *ibid.*, Lamentations Rabbah, *ibid.*

27. Genesis Rabbah LXI 3, Theodor-Albeck ed., p. 660; and cf. Ecclesiastes Rabbah XI 1; T.B. Yevamot 62b; Tanḥuma *Hayei Sarah*, VI.

disciples of Rabbi Akiba..."²⁸ and "annihilation" is death at the hands of the authorities.

Maimonides describes the Bar Kokhba revolt as follows: "For Rabbi Akiba was a great sage of the mishnaic sages, and he was the arms bearer of Ben Koziva the king, and used to say about him that he was the messiah king, and he and all the sages of his generation imagined he was the messiah king till he was killed for his sins."²⁹ Presumably Maimonides took the designation of Rabbi Akiba as "arms bearer" from some source at his disposal which has not come down to us. He seems to have dwelt on the Bar Kokhba revolt in order to deter his contemporaries from believing so readily in false messiahs.

Outline of the Course of the Revolt

The literary sources and archeological findings combined are insufficient to allow a complete picture to be drawn of the course of the revolt. The attempts that have been made to describe the course of the revolt are marked more by the possible than by the certain, more by the negative than by the positive. Anyone wishing to lay aside speculation must necessarily be content with general lines, illuminating a few points of the revolt.

Information on the initial stages of the revolt is very meager, for Cassius Dio, the main source for the history of the revolt, does not elaborate on them, most likely because the rebels were then winning.

At the start of the revolt the rebels apparently defeated the Tenth Legion (Fretensis) stationed in Jerusalem. The survivors fled the city, and Jerusalem itself fell to the rebels. The legions or parts of legions rushed to Jerusalem from adjacent provinces were likewise repulsed. Especially disastrous was the fate of the Twenty-Second Legion (Deiotariana) from Egypt. No mention of it appears anywhere after the Bar Kokhba revolt, so that it was either totally annihilated by the rebels, or dissolved because of its failure and erased from the register of Roman legions.

The conquest of Jerusalem was undoubtedly the high point of the revolt, for the main cause of the revolt was the reconstruction of Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina, and the liberation of the city was the symbol par excellence of renewed political independence. This is stressed in the coins of the revolt, for more than half of the types throughout the three years of the revolt bear the name "Jerusalem" or "for

28. *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, Lewin ed., p. 13, the Spanish version. (The French version does not have the sentence "...עקיבא של ר' עקיבא" at all.)

29. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim* II:3.

the liberation of Jerusalem.”³⁰ It is reasonable to suppose that the rebels conquered Jerusalem, but there is considerable doubt regarding the extent to which Bar Kokhba and his people were able to restore the city and rebuild the Temple.³¹ As noted, the administrative center of the revolt was at Herodion, while the principal fortress was at Betar, and the impression is that the rebels did not manage to redeem Jerusalem from its ruins. Nor is there any decisive proof that the Temple was rebuilt and religious ceremonies resumed there. The coin showing the façade of the sanctuary does not necessarily testify to the renewal of the Temple and may merely reflect a vision of the future. While the reconstruction of the Temple was certainly the rebels’ chief desire, they were apparently unable to turn their attention to that task during the stormy days of the revolt.

Research on the Bar Kokhba revolt has not yet settled the matter of the territorial extent of the revolt. The main question is whether the revolt was confined to Judaea or spread as well to Galilee and parts of Transjordan. It is sometimes difficult to decide the locations of places mentioned in the sources on the Bar Kokhba revolt. Thus, for instance, Kfar Haruva, referred to as the place where the revolt started, is identified by some with Kfar Haruv, south of Susita, and by others with a place of the same name between Lod and Sha’alvim.³² The crucial fact is that after the Bar Kokhba revolt, Judaea was almost entirely depopulated, with some of the refugees moving to Galilee along with the revived community institutions. While there is some testimony on manifestations of revolt in Galilee and Roman punitive action, and there were some Galileans among Bar Kokhba’s troops, there is no indication of a general uprising such as occurred in Judaea.³³

The question arises as to why Galilee did not rebel as Judaea did, particularly since it has been shown that in that period the Judaeans and Galileans did not differ in character. The main reason is undoubtedly the relative remoteness of Galilee from Jerusalem, which was both the motive and goal of the revolt. Furthermore, it appears that in the days preceding the revolt, Galilee was subjected to constant Roman supervision and control which made an all out rebellion impossible.³⁴ The Romans took pains in particular to keep Galilee and Samaria

30. See Y. Meshorer, *Matbe’ot ha-Yehudim bi-Yemei Bayit Sheni*, Tel Aviv 1966, pp. 60–63; A. Kindler, “Matbe’ot Milhemet Bar Kokhva,” *Mered Bar Kokhva (Sugiyot be-Toledot Am Yisrael)*, publ. by the Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem 1980, pp. 159–177.

31. See S. Yeivin, *Milhemet Bar Kokhva*, Jerusalem 1957², pp. 75–86; G. Alon, *op. cit.* in n. 10, pp. 31–32.

32. T.J. Ta’anivot IV 69a; and cf. Lamentations Rabbah II 4.

33. On the dimensions of the Bar Kokhva revolt in general see A. Büchler, “Die Schauplätze des Barkochbakrieges,” *JQR* 16 (1904): 143–205; Applebaum, *op. cit.* in n. 9, pp. 22–34; Alon, *op. cit.* in n. 10, p. 23 and the bibliography there.

34. See Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, in n. 5, pp. 53–66, and the bibliography there; M.D. Herr, “*Ha-im Nishtatef ha-Galil be-Pulmus shel Kitos o be-Mered Ben-Kosva*,” *Cathedra* 4 (1977): 67–73.

separated, preventing the creation of a continuous front, and blocking the roads to Judaea. The camp set up at Legio near Megiddo for the extra legion Hadrian brought into the country, and the camp at Tel Shalem (some six kilometers south of Bet She'an) also evidently built before the revolt, testify to that Roman intention.³⁵

Cassius Dio provides a description of the final stages of the Bar Kokhba revolt.³⁶ He indicates that Julius Severus, apparently taking a lesson from the failures of his predecessor, preferred to avoid risking a frontal clash with the rebels, and instead surround them and finish them off slowly. Those tactics are confirmed in talmudic literature which reports that the Romans built fortresses and positions in order to surround rebel forces and capture them group after group. For example, "Adrianus, may his bones be pulverized, stationed three units, one at Ḥamata (= Emaus) and one at Kfar Lakitia and one at Bet El de-Yehud, saying whoever escapes from that one will be caught by this one, and whoever escapes this one will be caught by that one."³⁷

Julius Severus' method proved successful and eventually the rebels were pushed back to Betar where the Romans laid a close and unremitting siege. The siege of Betar was the last decisive phase of the revolt, and thus left a deep impression in talmudic literature. One of the relevant passages states: "For three and a half years Adrianus surrounds Betar³⁸ (that seems to be the form of the name that was current in Eretz Yisrael, while Betar was the abbreviated Aramaic form, similar to Beshan for Bet She'an). The source ascribes to the Betar campaign the duration of the entire revolt, certainly an exaggeration, but also an indication of the significance for the rebels of the fall of Betar.

Tannaitic literature likewise contains a source relating to the siege of Betar: "Again a case of sixty men who went down to the ramparts of Betar, and not one of them came up, and the case was submitted to sages and they allowed their wives to marry."³⁹ Indeed remnants of the ramparts and the Roman camps around the besieged area can be seen at Betar.⁴⁰ The halakha quoted deals with

35. On this subject and the Roman legions in the country during the Bar Kokhba revolt see B. Isaac & I. Roll, "Judaea in the Early Years of Hadrian's Regim," *Latomus* 38 (1979): 54–66; idem., "Legio II Traiana in Judaea," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 33 (1979): 149–156.

36. Cassius Dio, LXIX 13.

37. Lamentations Rabbah I 45. Cf. Buber ed., p. 82.

38. T.J. Ta'anivot IV 68d, and Lamentations Rabbah II 4.

39. Tosefta, Yevamot XIV 8, and cf. Avot de-Rabbi Natan, Version A, XXXVIII, Schechter ed., pp. 114–115.

40. Dr. B. Bar-Kokhva has suggested that the Hebrew כרקום is derived not from Latin *circumvallatio*, the usual explanation, but from Greek χαράκωμα. The suggestion seems more suitable not only phonetically but also in view of the contents of the source, dealing as it does with sixty troops. That number shows that the rebels did not intend to infiltrate through the ramparts, but to

the release of deserted wives, and incidentally unfolds a picture of the siege of Betar. It turns out that the rebels were not reconciled to it and sought to breach it, to deceive the Roman forces, or make contact with the outside world. The remains of the Betar ramparts are double in some places, with more than three meters between the two parapets, showing that the Romans were aware of the sorties made by Bar Kokhba forces and tried to prevent them.⁴¹ A Latin inscription carved in a rock not far from the Betar spring mentions “the centurions of Legion V Macedonica and Legion XI Claudia.” Those were the legions brought from the Balkans to suppress the Bar Kokhba revolt.⁴² The tannaitic tradition places the capture of Betar on the Ninth of Ab.⁴³ Whether or not that was in fact the date, the purpose of adopting it is clear — to show that the fall of Betar was comparable to the destruction of the Second Temple.

A kind of epilogue to the revolt was the attempt of Bar Kokhba’s men in the Ein Gedi district to flee and find a hiding place in caves among almost inaccessible rock crevices along the gulleys going down from the Judean desert to the Dead Sea. The fate of the cave refugees was similar in a way to that of the Massada people at the end of the Great Revolt. Their hiding place was discovered by the Romans, who played a waiting game in the camps whose vestiges are still discernible, and though unable to attack directly, laid a close siege and succeeded in preventing supplies from reaching the Jews there.⁴⁴

Forces Attached to Bar Kokhba’s Troops

Cassius Dio’s description suggests that Bar Kokhba’s forces were augmented by Jews from the Diaspora and non-Jews from Eretz Yisrael. As to the Diaspora Jews, it is hard to imagine that they took an active part in the revolt. The onerous aftermath of the Diaspora revolt in Trajan’s time resulted in the almost complete annihilation of the Jewish communities in Roman provinces close to Eretz Yisrael. The punitive measures adopted after the Bar Kokhba revolt were applied only to the Jews of Eretz Yisrael, not to those of the Diaspora, and that too is an indication that the involvement of Diaspora Jewry in the Bar Kokhba revolt was insignificant. Perusal of Cassius Dio makes it clear that his report is by no means unequivocal evidence that Diaspora Jews participated in the revolt, for he speaks of Jews who caused unrest in all parts of the country *Καὶ οἱ ἀπανταχοῦ ἦν*

break into the Roman camp and attack the forces inside. And see already S. Krauss, *Lehnwörter*, vol. 2, Berlin 1899², pp. 300–301.

41. On the archeological finds at Betar (which has not yet been thoroughly excavated), see W.D. Carroll, “Bittir and Its Archaeological Remains,” *AASOR* 5 (1923–1924): 70–103.

42. C. Clermont-Genneau, *Archaeological Researches in Palestine*, London 1873–1874, pp. 463–470.

43. Mishnah Ta’anit, IV 46.

44. See Y. Aharoni, “Expedition B. The Cave of Horror,” *IEJ* 12 (1962), 195–199.

Ἰουδαῖοι and it is reasonable to suppose he meant the Jews all over Eretz Yisrael and not all over the world. What Cassius Dio says about the non-Jews of Eretz Yisrael who joined in the revolt is reasonable as well. There is a basis for the assumption that some elements of the Gentile community in the country, hopeful of profit and greedy for spoils, cooperated with the rebels as long as the latter were winning.

A most complex problem is the question of whether the Samaritans took part in the Bar Kokhba revolt. To an extent their fate resembled that of the Jews at the time. There is testimony that the Samaritans too were forbidden to perform circumcisions, and that a pagan temple was built on Mount Gerizim. But it is not clear that as a result the Samaritans rebelled against the Romans or joined in Bar Kokhba's revolt.⁴⁵ The talmudic tradition blames the Samaritans for the defeat at Betar.⁴⁶ It tells of a Samaritan at Betar who was a kind of fifth column and sowed discord between Bar Kokhba and Rabbi Eleazar ha-Moda'i. Some scholars have taken that tradition literally and sought to utilize it to support the view that the Samaritans refrained from helping in the revolt and possibly even assisted the Romans in suppressing it. On the other hand, if the Samaritans were in fact opposed to the revolt, what was a Samaritan doing in besieged Betar? The story of a Samaritan contributing to the fall of Betar seems bereft of any historical value so far as the revolt is concerned and merely reflects the deterioration in Samaritan-Jewish relations after it. After the revolt some of the Samaritans left Samaria and spread southwards to Judaea and westwards to the coastal region. That expansion caused a breach between Jews and Samaritans, and the halakha began to regard them as Gentiles. The reasons for the schism may also be that when they left their home district, the Samaritans also abandoned their devotion to compliance with precepts. The sages may very well have feared that Samaritan influence would grow as a result of their intermingling with Jews in the Jewish settlements, and economic competition could have been a factor in the hostility as well. At any rate, it is doubtful whether the worsening relations between Jews and Samaritans can be ascribed to Samaritan conduct during the revolt, and certainly the Samaritan attitude to the revolt cannot be deduced from these disrupted relations. It is reasonable to suppose that the sources making accusations against the Samaritans — such as that the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt was due to a Samaritan tale-bearer, or that a Samaritan was responsible for the defeat at Betar — are merely anachronisms reflecting the deterioration that took place in Jewish-Samaritan relations in the period following the revolt.⁴⁷

45. Samaritan Book of Joshua 47; Eusebius, *Theophania* IV 23, Gressmann ed., p. 201 (in the Syriac version). See also Yeivin, *op. cit.*, in n. 31 above, pp. 175–178; Alon, *op. cit.*, in n. 10 above, pp. 24–26.

46. T.J. Ta'aniyot IV 68d-69a; and cf. Lamentations Rabbah II 4.

47. Genesis Rabbah LXIV 9, Theodor-Albeck ed., pp. 710–712, and see Alon, *op. cit.* in n. 4, above, pp. 272–275.

Most probably the Christian elements in Palestine did not take part in the Bar Kokhba revolt. While it is true that at the time the Christians were persecuted more severely by the Romans than the Jews were, the believers in the messianism of Jesus could not take part in a revolt aimed at the restoration of Jerusalem and led by a messiah. Church fathers testify that Bar Kokhba punished and even executed Christians for not joining the rebel army.⁴⁸ Although Bar Kokhba had instituted a kind of draft, it cannot be assumed that he applied it to Christians as a whole. If the reports are authentic, evidently he sought to mobilize heretical elements or Christian-Jews who still felt close to Judaism, and punished those of them who failed to answer his call. It is well known that Christianity and Judaism drew further and further apart in the Jabneh period. The Bar Kokhba revolt can be viewed as the culmination of that process and its termination, as even Christian sects that had still wished to maintain some connection with Judaism were kept at a distance.

Results of the Revolt

Cassius Dio described the results of the Bar Kokhba revolt as follows:

Fifty of their most important outposts and nine hundred and eight-five of their most important 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 desolate,... Many Romans, moreover, perished in this war. Therefore Hadrian in writing to the senate did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by emperors, "If you and your children are in health, it is well; I and the legions are in health..." This, then, was the end of the war with the Jews.⁴⁹ (trans.: E. Cary, LCL)

Even if the numbers cited by Cassius Dio seem exaggerated, the description in general is a faithful reflection of the ruinous results of the Bar Kokhba revolt. There is no doubt that casualties were enormous on both sides, and that many settlements were totally destroyed, and Judaea as a whole almost devastated.

Talmudic literature depicts the defeat in the blackest colors, and testimony on it paints a gloomier picture than the traditions on the war in 70 C.E. For example:

And they went on killing them until the horse waded in blood to his nose. And the blood rolled rocks weighing forty *seah* till the blood went into the sea four miles; if you say it [Betar] is close to the sea, but it is forty miles from the sea. They said, they found three hundred brains of infants on one stone...Adrianus the Evil has a large vineyard, eighteen miles by eighteen miles as from Tiberias to Sepphoris, and he fenced it with the dead of Betar standing erect and arms out, and did not order them to be buried...⁵⁰

48. Eusebius, *Hieronimi Chronicon*, an. 133, ed. Helm; *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, LI 6, 4, ed. Chabat, p. 172f.

49. Cassius Dio, LXIX 14–15, trans. E. Cary, LCL.

50. T.J. Ta'aniyot IV 69a, and cf. *Lamentations Rabbah* II 4.

Such description of Roman atrocities indicate the intense despair that prevailed as a result of the failure of the revolt.

Literary sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, stress the large number of captives taken among the rebels and sold into slavery. They were so numerous that the price of slaves declined all over the Roman Empire, and in Eretz Israel itself, according to one source, fell so low that it was no more than the cost of one portion of fodder for a horse.⁵¹ This report applies to the slave market in Mamre (=Botna; Bet Ilanim) north of Hebron in rebel territory. Others were sold in the Gaza market and the remainder were sent to be sold overseas. The large number of captives sold into slavery is reflected as well by the rulings of the Usha generation dealing with the redemption of captives. The enslavement of the prisoners of war taken in the revolt left the nation with such a heavy heart that at the start of the amoraic period about a hundred years later, when Jews and Gentiles had evolved some rapprochement, and the rabbis allowed Jews to enter markets where there was heathen worship, certain markets were absolutely forbidden, first and foremost "the fair of Botna."⁵²

In the wake of the Bar Kokhba revolt the Romans promulgated a series of anti-Jewish measures known as the "persecutions." They prohibited various practices such as wearing phylacteries, fringes, fixing the mezuzah to doorposts, eating unleavened bread on Passover, lighting candles on Hanuka, etc. They also banned the ordination of sages, and gathering in study houses and synagogues, and any assembling for the study or teaching of the Torah. The purpose of these prohibitions was to undermine the elements of Judaism that have nationalist implications, and destroy the internal leadership of the Jewish people.⁵³

The response of the sages and nation to these decrees was by no means uniform. Some tried to practice the precepts either with some modification, or in secret.⁵⁴ Others disregarded the prohibitions openly, and were prepared to be killed for doing so.⁵⁵ In fact, the concept of "the sanctification of God" (= martyrdom for faith) is based on deeds during those days of the persecutions, and exemplified above all by Rabbi Akiba, who before being executed in the prison at Caesarea,

51. *Chronicon Paschale*, Dindorf ed., vol. 1, p. 474; see Yeivin, *op. cit.* in n. 31 above, p. 186.

52. T.J. Avodah Zarah I 39d.

53. See M.D. Herr, "Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972): 85-125; S. Lieberman, "Redifut Dat Yisrael," *Sefer ha-Yovel li-Khvod S. Baron* (Hebrew section), Jerusalem 1975, pp. 213-245; D. Rokeah, "He'arot Kozviyot," *Tarbiz* 35 (1966): 122-132.

54. E.g. Mishnah, Ma'aser Sheni IV 11; Mishnah, Eruvin X:1; Tosefta Sukkah I 7; T.B. Sukkah 14b; Tosefta, Eruvin VIII 6, Tosefta Megillah II 4; T.B. Shabbat 21b.

55. E.g. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Jethro VI, Horovitz-Rabin ed., p. 227; and cf. Leviticus Rabban XXIII 1, Margulies ed., p. 735.

the seat of the governor, said the “Shema” prayer, in defiance of one of the principal prohibitions in those edicts.⁵⁶ Another literary-historical example of martyrdom was the traditions about the ten martyrs, although not all the sages listed belong to the period of the post-Bar Kokhba revolt decrees.⁵⁷ There were, however, other reactions as well. Among them was the case of Elisha b. Abuyah who came to be known as “different” (*aher*).⁵⁸ It is hard to know whether his case was unique or representative of a more general situation. At any rate, dread of the persecutions and of martyrdom led Elisha b. Abuyah, a leading sage, to abandon Judaism.

While the edicts were strictly enforced only during Hadrian’s lifetime, that is, till 138 C.E., the Bar Kokhba revolt had longer-lasting results. Among them was the reconstruction of Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina, which Jews were forbidden to live in or even approach. Another effect was a grave depression, arising partly from the wholesale devastation and partly from the heavy taxes levied by the Romans. Much of the population was unable to cope with the economic crisis, and a considerable emigration ensued. Most of the emigrants left for Babylonia, which already had a Jewish population established since the destruction of the First Temple, and which was outside the Roman Empire. The evolution of the Babylonian center in competition with the center in Eretz Yisrael began in the period following the Bar Kokhba revolt. The Usha sages made a great effort to stop the emigration and formulated a long series of regulations designed to do so.

After the Bar Kokhba revolt the center of gravity of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael shifted to Galilee. Out of the general confusion, the devastation and the economic crisis, Galilee became the region where the Jewish community was rehabilitated; Judaea also began to recover, but only slowly and partially, and the leadership institutions — the Patriarchate and the Sanhedrin — were revived in Galilee.

The main aspect of the rehabilitation of the Jewish community in Galilee after the Bar Kokhba revolt was the permanent reactivation in Usha of those leadership institutions. The “constituent assembly” of the Usha center is attested to in a unique source:

56. T.B. Berakhot 61b, nd see also Tosefta Berakhot מ' 13; T.B. Berakhot 61b; Tosefta Sanhedrin II 8; T.J. Yevamot XII 12d; T.B. Yevamot 108b; Masekhet Semahot VIII 9, Higger ed., p. 154.

57. See S. Krauss, “*Asara Harugei Malkhut*,” *Haschiloah* 44 (1925): 10–22, 106–117, 221–233.

58. T.J. Hagigah II 77a; and cf. T.B. Kiddushin 39b.

At the end of the persecution, our rabbis met in Usha, and they were Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Simeon b. Yoḥai and Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean, and Rabbi Eliezer b. Jacob. They sent to the elders of Galilee and said, Everyone who is learned should come and teach, and everyone who is not learned should come and learn. They came and studied and did what was needed...⁵⁹

Immanuel 14 (Spring 1982)

59. Canticos Rabbah II 5.