

The Bar-Kokhba Revolt

(132-135 C.E.)

by Shira Schoenberg

The Bar Kokhba revolt marked a time of high hopes followed by violent despair. The Jews were handed expectations of a homeland and a Holy Temple, but in the end were persecuted and sold into slavery. During the revolt itself, the Jews gained enormous amounts of land, only to be pushed back and crushed in the final battle of Bethar.

When Hadrian first became the Roman emperor in 118 C.E., he was sympathetic to the Jews. He allowed them to return to Jerusalem and granted permission for the rebuilding of their Holy Temple. The Jews' expectations rose as they made organizational and financial preparations to rebuild the temple. Hadrian quickly went back on his word, however, and requested that the site of the Temple be moved from its original location. He also began deporting Jews to North Africa.

The Jews prepared to rebel until Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah calmed them. The Jews then satisfied themselves with preparing secretly in case a rebellion would later become necessary. They built hideouts in caves and did shoddy work building weapons so that the Romans would reject the weapons and return them to the Jews.

The Jews organized guerilla forces and, in 123 C.E., began launching surprise attacks against the Romans. From that point on, life only got worse for the Jews. Hadrian brought an extra army legion, the "Sixth Ferrata," into Judea to deal with the terrorism. Hadrian hated "foreign" religions and forbade the Jews to perform circumcisions. He appointed Tinneius Rufus governor of Judea. Rufus was a harsh ruler who took advantage of Jewish women. In approximately 132 C.E., Hadrian began to establish a city in Jerusalem called Aelia Capitolina, the name being a combination of his own name and that of the Roman god Jupiter Capitolinus. He started to build a temple to Jupiter in place of the Jewish Holy Temple.

As long as Hadrian remained near Judea, the Jews stayed relatively quiet. When he left in 132, the Jews began their rebellion on a large scale. They seized towns and fortified them with walls and subterranean passages. Under the strong leadership of Shimon Bar-Kokhba, the Jews captured approximately 50 strongholds in Judea and 985 undefended towns and villages, including Jerusalem. Jews from other countries, and even some gentiles, volunteered to join their crusade. The Jews minted coins with slogans such as "The freedom of Israel" written in Hebrew. Hadrian dispatched General Publius Marcellus, governor of Syria, to help Rufus, but the Jews defeated both Roman leaders. The Jews then invaded the coastal region and the Romans began sea battles against them.

The turning point of the war came when Hadrian sent into Judea one of his best generals from Britain, Julius Severus, along with former governor of Germania, Hadrianus Quintus Lollius

Urbicus. By that time, there were 12 army legions from Egypt, Britain, Syria and other areas in Judea. Due to the large number of Jewish rebels, instead of waging open war, Severus besieged Jewish fortresses and held back food until the Jews grew weak. Only then did his attack escalate into outright war. The Romans demolished all 50 Jewish fortresses and 985 villages. The main conflicts took place in Judea, the Shephela, the mountains and the Judean desert, though fighting also spread to Northern Israel. The Romans suffered heavy casualties as well and Hadrian did not send his usual message to the Senate that “I and my army are well.”

The final battle of the war took place in Bethar, Bar-Kokhba’s headquarters, which housed both the Sanhedrin (Jewish High Court) and the home of the Nasi (leader). Bethar was a vital military stronghold because of its strategic location on a mountain ridge overlooking both the Valley of Sorek and the important Jerusalem-Bet Guvrin Road. Thousands of Jewish refugees fled to Bethar during the war. In 135 C.E., Hadrian’s army besieged Bethar and on the 9th of Av, the Jewish fast day commemorating the destruction of the first and second Holy Temples, the walls of Bethar fell. After a fierce battle, every Jew in Bethar was killed. Six days passed before the Romans allowed the Jews to bury their dead.

Following the battle of Bethar, there were a few small skirmishes in the Judean Desert Caves, but the war was essentially over and Judean independence was lost. The Romans plowed Jerusalem with a yoke of oxen. Jews were sold into slavery and many were transported to Egypt. Judean settlements were not rebuilt. Jerusalem was turned into a pagan city called Aelia Capitolina and the Jews were forbidden to live there. They were permitted to enter only on the 9th of Av to mourn their losses in the revolt. Hadrian changed the country’s name from Judea to Syria Palestina.

In the years following the revolt, Hadrian discriminated against all Judeo-Christian sects, but the worst persecution was directed against religious Jews. He made anti-religious decrees forbidding Torah study, Sabbath observance, circumcision, Jewish courts, meeting in synagogues and other ritual practices. Many Jews assimilated and many sages and prominent men were martyred including Rabbi Akiva and the rest of the *Asara Harugei Malchut* (ten martyrs). This age of persecution lasted throughout the remainder of Hadrian’s reign, until 138 C.E.
