

Bar Kokhba Sources

The class will divide up into 5 groups and each group will read and present one source. Each group will do the following.

1. Describe the nature of the source. Who wrote it? When was it written.? Where was it written? Why do we have this source today?
2. Summarize the contents of the source.
3. None of these sources give us a full picture of the rebellion. The group will describe what aspect of the rebellion its source discuss and from which perspective?
4. Pick 2-3 pieces of information that historians might find especially useful from this source.

While each group presents this information to the class, all other students should take notes on how the source being presented differs from their source.

1. Babylonian Talmud Gittin 57a:

Because of the shaft of a transportation chair Betar was destroyed.

For they had a custom that when a baby boy was born they planted a cedar tree, and for a baby girl they planted a pine tree, and when they would marry, they would cut them down and make a marriage canopy [of the branches]. One day, the daughter of Caesar was passing and the shaft of her transportation chair broke. They cut down a cedar and brought it to her. [The Jews of Betar] fell upon them and beat them. They reported to Caesar that the Jews were rebelling and he marched against them.

“He cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel” (Lam. 2-3). Said Rabbi Zeira, said Rabbi Abahu, said Rabbi Yohanan, “These are the eighty battle horns which they brought into the city of Betar at the time it was captured. And they killed their men, women and children until their blood flowed into the Mediterranean Sea. Lest you think it was near, it was a Roman mile away.”

It has been taught- Rabbi Eliezer the Elder said, “There are two streams in the Valley of Yadayim, one running in one direction, and one running in the other direction, and the sages estimated that they ran two parts water to one part blood.”

It was taught in a baraita- For seven years the Gentiles cultivated their vineyards with the blood of Israel without requiring manure (for fertilizer).

2. Jerusalem Talmud Ta'anit 4:6 (68d-69a): Rabbi Akiva and Bar Koziba

Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai taught, "Akiva, my master, expounded, 'A star will go forth from Jacob' (Num. 28-17), (as) 'Koziba has come forth from Jacob.'" "When Rabbi Akiva would see Bar Koziba, he would say, "This is the King Messiah!" Rabbi Yohanan ben Torta said to him, "Akiva, grass will grow on your cheeks and still the Son of David will not have come."

Rabbi Yohanan said, "At Hadrian's command, they killed 800,000 in Betar...."

Hadrian besieged Betar for three and a half years. Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin used to sit on sackcloth and ashes and pray every day, saying, "Master of the Universe! Do not sit in judgment today, do not sit in judgment today."

Hadrian wanted to go to him. One Samaritan said to him, "Do not go, for I will go and see what can be done to deliver the city to you."

[The Samaritan] went through the city's drain pipe. He went and found Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin standing and praying. He pretended to whisper in his ear. The people of the city saw him and brought him to Ben Koziba. They said to [Ben Koziba], "We saw this old man conversing with your uncle."

[Ben Koziba] said to [the Samaritan], "What did you say to him, and what did he [Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin] say to you?"

He said to him, "If I tell you, the king will kill me, and if I do not tell you, you will kill me. I prefer that the king should kill me, and not you." [The Samaritan continued and] said to him, "He [Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin] said to me, 'I will surrender the city.'"

[Ben Koziba] went to Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin, [and] said to him,

"What did that Samaritan tell you?"

[Rabbi Eleazar] said to him, "Nothing."

[Ben Koziba] said, "What did you say to [the Samaritan]?"

[Rabbi Eleazar] said to him, "Nothing."

[Bar Koziba] gave [Rabbi Eleazar] one kick and he killed him. Immediately, a heavenly voice went forth saying- "Woe to the worthless shepherd who abandons his flock! Let a sword descend upon his arm and his right eye. His arm will wither and his right eye will be

blinded' (Zech. 11-17). You have killed Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin, the arm of Israel and their right eye. Thus, your arm will wither, and your right eye will be blinded." Immediately, Betar was captured and Ben Koziba was killed.

They brought his head to Hadrian. [Hadrian] said, "Who killed him?"

One Samaritan said to him, "I killed him."

[Hadrian] said, "Show me his corpse."

He looked at the corpse and found a serpent coiled around it.

[Hadrian] said, "If God had not killed him, who would have been able to kill him?" He applied to him the verse, "Unless their Rock had sold them, and God had given them over" (Deut. 32-30).

The [Romans] went on killing [Jews] until a horse was sunk in blood up to its nose. And the blood was turning over forty-se'ah boulders, until the blood flowed forty Roman miles into the sea....

They said that the brains of 300 children were found on one rock.

They found 300 baskets of tefillin each of nine se'ahs. And some say nine baskets, each weighing three se'ahs.

It was taught- Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel says, "[There were] 500 schools in Betar and the smallest of them had no fewer than 500 children. [The children] used to say, 'If the enemy comes upon us, we will go out against them with our quills and poke out their eyes.' And as a result of the sins [of Israel, the Romans] wrapped each one in his book, and they burned them. From all of them none remained but me." He applied to himself the verse, "My eyes have caused me grief from all the daughters of my city" (Lam. 3-51). The evil Hadrian had a large vineyard, eighteen Roman miles by eighteen Roman miles, the dimension of the distance from Tiberias to Sephoris. They surrounded it with a wall made of the victims of Betar as high as a man and his extended arms. And he did not decree that they may be buried until a different king arose and decreed that they might be buried.

3. Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History IV, 6

The rebellion of the Jews once more progressed in character and extent, and Rufus, the governor of Judaea, when military aid had been sent him by the Emperor, moved out against them, treating their madness without mercy. He destroyed in heaps thousands of men, women, and children, and, under the law of war, enslaved their land. The Jews were at that time led by a certain Bar

Chochebas, which means “star,” a man who was murderous and a bandit, but relied on his name, as if dealing with slaves, and claimed to be a luminary who had come down to them from heaven and was magically enlightening those who were in misery. The war reached its height in the eighteenth year of the reign of Hadrian in Beththera, which was a strong citadel not very far from Jerusalem; the siege lasted a long time before the rebels were driven to final destruction by famine and thirst and the instigator of their madness paid the penalty he deserved.

Hadrian commanded that by a legal decree and ordinances the whole nation should be absolutely prevented from entering from henceforth even the district round Jerusalem, so that not even from a distance could it see its ancestral home. Ariston of Pella tells the story. Thus when the city came to be bereft of the nation of the Jews, and its ancient inhabitants had completely perished, it was colonized by foreigners, and the Roman city which afterwards arose changed its name, and in the honor of the reigning Emperor Aelios Hadrian was called Aelia. The church, too, in it was composed of Gentiles, and after the Jewish bishops the first who was appointed to minister there was Marcus.

4. Dio Cassius, Historia Romana LXIX, 12-14: A Roman Account of the Bar Kokhba Revolt

At Jerusalem [Hadrian] founded a city in place of the one which had been razed to the ground, naming it Aelia Capitolina, and on the site of the temple of the god he raised a new temple to Jupiter. This brought on a war of no slight importance nor of brief duration, for the Jews deemed it intolerable that foreign races should be settled in their city and foreign religious rites planted there. So long, indeed, as Hadrian was close by in Egypt and again in Syria, they remained quiet, save in so far as they purposely made of poor quality such weapons as they were called upon to furnish, in order that the Romans might reject them and they themselves might thus have the use of them; but when he went farther away, they openly revolted.

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 under ground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light.

At first the Romans took no account of them. Soon, however, 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; many outside nations, too, were joining them through eagerness for gain, and the whole earth, one might almost say, was being stirred up over the matter. Then indeed, Hadrian sent against them his best generals. First of these was Julius Severus, who was dispatched from Britain, where he was governor, against the Jews. Severus did not venture to attack his opponents in the open at anyone point, in view of their numbers and their desperation, but by intercepting small groups, thanks to

the number of his soldiers and his under-officers, and by depriving them of food and shutting them up, he was able, rather slowly, to be sure, but with comparatively little danger, to crush, exhaust and exterminate them.

Very few of them in fact survived. 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 who perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judea was made desolate, a result of which the people had had forewarning before the war. For the tomb of Solomon, which the Jews regard as an object of veneration, fell to pieces of itself and collapsed, and many wolves and hyenas rushed howling into the cities. Many Romans, moreover, perished in this war. Therefore Hadrian in writing to the senate did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by the emperors, "If you and your children are in health, it is well; I and the legions are in health."

5.Bar Kokhba Letters

Letter 1

Simeon Bar Kosiba to Yehonathan and to Masabala, a letter-

That every man from Tekoa and from Tel Adirin who is with you, you shall send them to me without delay. And if you shall not send them, let it be known to you, that I will exact punishment from you. Salisa [son of] Yose, wrote it.

Letter 2

Simeon, son of Kosiba, the ruler over Israel, to Jonathan and Masabala, peace!

That you should inspect and take the wheat which Hanan bar Yishma'el has brought, and send me, after inspection, one hundred. And you should give them with assurance for they have been found to be stolen. And if you do not do this, then retribution will be exacted from you. And send me the man immediately with assurance. And every Tekoan man who is with you, the houses in which they dwell will be burned down, and from you I will exact retribution. (As for) Joshua, son of the Palmyrene, you shall seize him and send him to me with assurance. Do not hesitate to seize the sword which is upon him. You shall send him. Samuel, son of Ammi.

Letter 3

From the Administrators of Beth Mashko, from Yeshua and from Eleazar to Yeshua ben Galgoula chief of the camp, peace.

Let it be known to you that the cow which Yehoseph ben Ariston took from Ya'akov ben Yehudah, who dwells in Beth Mashko, belongs to him [i.e. to Ya'akov] by purchase. Were it not for the Gentiles [i.e. the Romans] who are near us, I would have gone up and satisfied you concerning this, lest you will say that it is out of contempt that I did not go up to you. Be you well and the whole House of Israel.

Letter 4

Simeon to Yehudah bar Menashe to Qiryath 'Arabaya-

I have sent to you two donkeys so that you shall send with them two men to Yehonathan bar Ba'ayan and to Masabala in order that they shall pack and send to the camp, to you, palm branches [lulavin] and citrons [ethrogin]. And you, from your place, send others who will bring you myrtles [hadasin] and willows ['aravin]. See that they are tithed and send them to the camp. (The request is made) since the army is large. Be well.

Letter 5

From Simeon bar Kosiba to the people of Ein Gedi, to Masabala and Yonathan bar Ba'ayan, peace.

In comfort you sit, eat and drink from the property of the House of Israel, and care nothing for your brothers...

...my house... till the end..., [send] me grain, for there is no bread [in their] district...they have [f]ed [to] your father... to the Fortress of the Hasidim. And my brothers in the sou[th]... [Many] of these were lost by the sword... these my brothers...