

## THE LAST JEWISH REVOLT AGAINST ROME: A RECONSIDERATION<sup>1</sup>

Almost three hundred years after the Great Rebellion of 66–73 and the destruction of the Temple, and over two hundred years after the disaster of the Bar-Kochba revolt, the Jews of Palestine once again took up arms against the Roman rule. The evidence for the revolt of the Jews during Gallus Caesar's rule in the East is scanty, its evaluation difficult. Though on certain issues, like that of the extent and spread of the rebellion, some progress has been made in recent years, the central questions pertaining to the causes, leadership and main events of the revolt are still in need of a satisfactory solution: the more so as the fullest and best known modern treatment of the problem cannot be accepted as it stands.<sup>2</sup> In the following, after a brief resumé of the less controversial points a discussion of the main issues will be attempted.

### a. *Date*

The ancient evidence points probably to the year 351, while 352 is not impossible (see synopsis in Avi-Yonah). If 351 is correct, the cruelty of Gallus Caesar, elevated to the throne on March 15th 351 and sent consequently to the East, could hardly have been a cause of the revolt: on the contrary the situation in the East was conducive towards Constantius II's change of heart towards Gallus.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A survey of the Jewish rebellions under the Roman Empire was one of the last projects of Alexander Fuks. The present paper is offered in memory of a beloved teacher, to whom the present writer owes more than can be said here.

<sup>2</sup> M. Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine* (Oxford 1976) 176 ff. There are no essential differences in the Hebrew (*In the Days of Rome and Byzantium*<sup>4</sup> (Jerusalem 1970) 153 ff.) and the German (*Geschichte der Juden im Zeitalter des Talmud* (Berlin 1962) 181 ff.) versions. Acquaintance with this narrative will be assumed in the following. S. Lieberman, *Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries*, *JQR* 36 (1945/6) 336 ff. raised a dissenting voice, anticipating to some extent the results arrived at here.

<sup>3</sup> A decisive factor of chronology is the whereabouts of Ursicinus (cf. *infra*). He is certainly the *magister equitum* mentioned in *Amm. Marc.* 14.2.20 in 353 (cf. *PLRE s.v.*) but I find it difficult to establish whether he might have been in Palestine at the time.

b. *Geographical extent*

Our Greek Christian sources<sup>4</sup> are unanimous that the centre of the revolt was Diocaesarea (= Sepphoris) and that the town was destroyed in the event<sup>5</sup>; Jerome<sup>6</sup> adds to Diocaesarea also Tiberias and Diospolis (= Lydda) "plurimaque oppida". References in Rabbinic literature offer corroboration: the places mentioned in connexion with events of the revolt include Sepphoris<sup>7</sup>, Sennabris near Tiberias<sup>8</sup> and perhaps Tiberias itself<sup>9</sup>, as well as Naveh in the Transjordan<sup>10</sup>. A more controversial text is a *Midrash*<sup>11</sup> describing the sufferings of Akko, Lydda, Sepphoris and Tiberias, but devoid of any historical or chronological clue.

New evidence seems to confirm Jerome's claim of a more widespread destruction. Recent excavations and numismatic finds both at Chorazin and at Beth-Shearim attest the destruction of these important Jewish towns at a date that can be identified fairly confidently with that of the revolt under Gallus<sup>12</sup>. Far less certain are the historical references of a fragment from the *Genizah* in Cambridge, bewailing the destruction of Jewish communities in Palestine<sup>13</sup>. This fragment, part of an acrostic poem (*piyyut*) in which the places are mentioned in geographical order, contains details about 'Kfar Hebrona', Ono, Lydda (cf. Jerome!), Jaffa, Husifa (= Usefiya) and Haifa.

There is much hope that the present spread and intensity of archaeological excavations will clarify the picture in the not too distant future.

<sup>4</sup> Socr. *HE* 2.33 (*PG* 67.296); Sozom. *HE* 4,7 (*PG* 67.1124 f); *Theoph. a.m.* 5843 (I p. 61 Bonn); Cedrenus I p. 524 Bonn.

<sup>5</sup> This is almost certainly exaggerated. Theodoretus *HE* 4.22 (GCS 19.259f) attests that the town was settled (and Jewish) under Valens. Also the references in the Palestinian Talmud to Ursicinus and Proclus belong apparently to the occupation of the town after the revolt (*Yebamoth* ch. 16 fol. 15c = *Sotah* ch. 9 fol. 23c; *Sanhedrin* ch. 3 fol. 21b).

<sup>6</sup> Jerome, *chron. a.* 355 (*PL.* 27.686).

<sup>7</sup> *Pal. Yebamoth* ch. 16 fol. 15c = *Sotah* ch. 9 fol. 23c; *Sanhedrin* ch. 3 fol. 21b.

<sup>8</sup> *Pal. Megillah* ch. 3 fol. 74a.

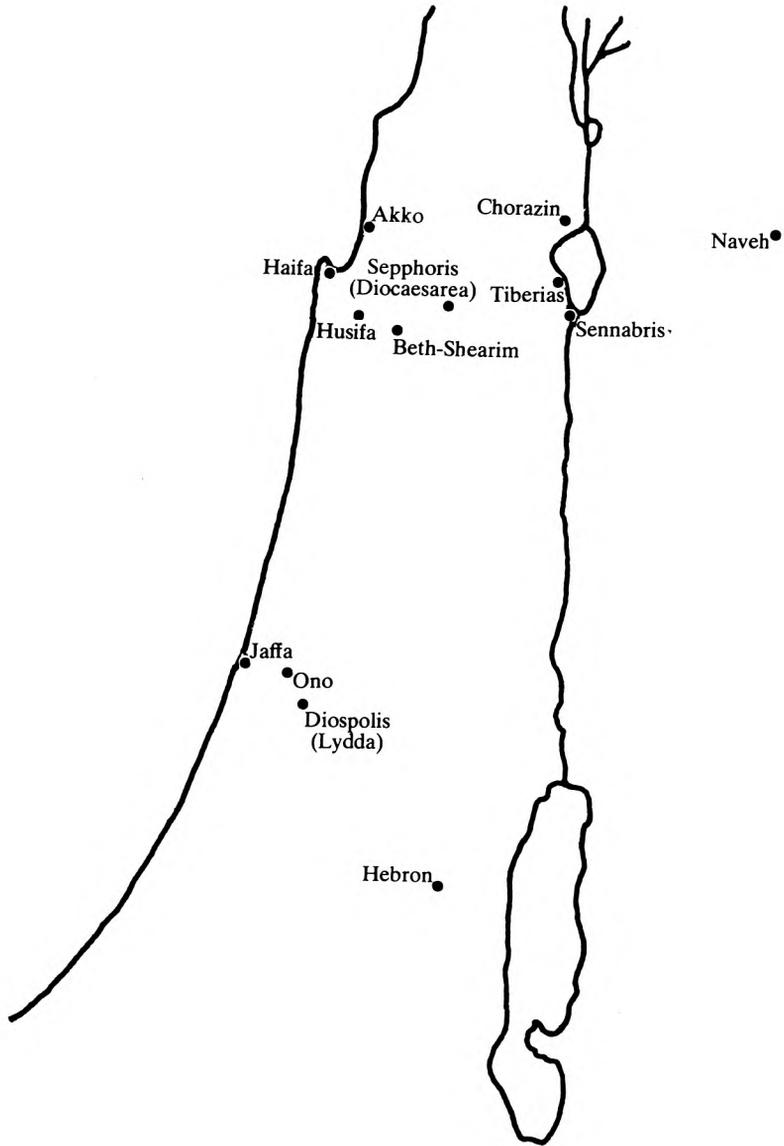
<sup>9</sup> *B'reshith Rabbah* 31.11; *Pal. Pesachim* ch. 1 fol. 27a.

<sup>10</sup> *Pal. Sanhedrin* ch. 3 fol. 21b.

<sup>11</sup> *P'siktha Rabbathi* ch. 8 p. 29b Friedmann.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Yeivin, The Excavations at Chorazin 1962-4, *Eretz-Yisrael* 11 (1973) 144 ff. (Hebrew); Y. Meshorer, The Numismatic Finds at Chorazin, *ibid.* 158 ff. (Hebrew); B. Mazar, *Beith She'arim* I (Jerusalem 1973) 19.

<sup>13</sup> S. Assaf, An Elegy on the Destruction of Jewish Communities in Palestine, *Yedioth* 7 (1940) 60 ff.; S. Klein Some Remarks on ..., *Ibid.* 107 ff. (both Hebrew).



### c. *Causes, Leadership and History of the Revolt*

Christian and Jewish writings as well as archeological evidence all contribute to the geographical picture of the revolt: the discussion of its leadership — and, implicitly, causes — must set out from the sole unbiased historical source referring to the event. In default of Ammianus Marcellinus, whose account is lost<sup>14</sup>, Aurelius Victor (*Caes.* 42.11), writing in 360, provides us with the most reliable, if, alas, succinct, description of the revolt: *Et interea (viz. while Constantius II defeated Magnentius in Gaul) Iudaeorum seditio, qui Patricium nefarie in regni speciem sustulerant, suppressa.* Such is the meagre account from which the investigation of the main issues of the revolt has to start. It is not possible to identify Patricius with any known person. On first sight the name seems to point to a Roman rather than a Jew, though of course the reverse is not impossible<sup>15</sup>. If a Jew he could have born also another, typically Jewish, name. More significant is the *regnum*: does this refer to a Jewish 'king' or a pretender to the Imperial throne?<sup>16</sup> There is absolutely no basis for the contention of Avi-Yonah that Victor's language can not apply to a usurper. Quite the contrary is true, this is exactly the language Victor uses in another case of a pretender of 334 (*Caes.* 41.11): *Calocerus magister pecoris camelorum Cyprum insulam specie regni demens capessiverat.* Needless to say, *regnum* and related words are Victor's most usual expressions referring to the Roman Empire<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand both Victor and the Christian sources expressly speak of a rebellion of the Jews. Yet there is nothing inherently impossible in a pretender whose main, or even exclusive, support comes from one ethnic element. One may recall with profit the

<sup>14</sup> J. Geiger, Ammianus Marcellinus and the Jewish Revolt under Gallus; A Note, *LCM* 4 (1979) 77.

<sup>15</sup> *CIJ* 266, a Latin inscription in Greek characters from the via Appia in Rome, mentions a lady called Aelia Patricia; *CIJ* 350 (Rome, via Portuensis) contains the letters *IIAT* which may refer to a Patricius. But it is only fair to mention the Jewish 'king' in Cyrene who led the rebellion against Trajan; his name was Andreas according to Dio 68.32.1 and Lucuas according to Eus. *HE* 4.2.4; at the same time the leader of the rebellion in Cyprus was a certain Artemion: Dio 68.32.2.

<sup>16</sup> For such pretenders at the time in the East not known to us by name see Amm. Marc. 14.9.9.

<sup>17</sup> Vict. *Caes.* 3.20; 4.14; 11.12; 13.13; 15.13; 17.7; 20.27; 23.3; 27.6; 29.4; 33.9; 37.6; 39.1; 39.48; 41.11.

insurrection of the Bagaudae in 286: these, though termed by our sources *rusticani* and *agrestes ac latrones*, may well have formed an ethnic base of support for the usurpers Aelianus and Amandus<sup>18</sup>.

But there is no need to go far for parallels: during the civil war in the East between Septimius Severus and Pescennius Niger the Jews took up the party of Severus and the Samaritans supported Niger<sup>19</sup>. The evidence for this episode is circumstantial and fragmentary and there is no telling whether the conflict between the Jews and Samaritans was the primary factor or only concomitant to the support of the two communities for the rival contenders. For all we know the difference between the two cases under consideration may have been that in 193/4 the Jews supported the contender who was victorious in the event while in 351 they adopted the cause of an officer who eventually proved to have been a pretender without a real chance.

Patricius may have used — or abused — the special problems of the Jews of Palestine for his own ends. Cedrenus alone among our sources mentions that the Jews killed many among the neighbouring 'Hellenes' and Samaritans: whatever the ultimate provenance of this information<sup>20</sup>, it may point to a situation not dissimilar to that prevailing at the beginning of Septimius Severus' reign. Certainly the Jews may have had justified grievances against the Romans, whether Gallus or his predecessors in the East. Needless to say, support for usurpers was a most likely reaction to Roman misgovernment.

To resume: our main evidence, Victor supported by the Christian writers, does not of necessity mean that Patricius was a Jewish 'king' rather than a usurper to the throne. To this should be added the *argumentum e silentio* which in the present case is exceptionally powerful.

<sup>18</sup> Eutrop. 9.20.3; Vict. *Caes.* 39.17; cf. Paneg. Incert. 10.4.2–3; 7.8.3. 'Bagaudae' may have been originally an ethnic designation: see J. Whatmough, *The Dialects of Ancient Gaul* (Cambridge Mass. 1970) 178. I am grateful to Dr. Zeev Rubin who drew my attention to this parallel.

<sup>19</sup> The best analysis of this obscure episode is to be found in G. Alon, *History of the Jews of Palestine in the Times of Mishnah and Talmud* (Tel Aviv 1961) II 95 ff. (Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup> The total lack of independence of Cedrenus (cf. K. Krumbacher, *Gesch. der byz. Lit.* (München 1897) 369) renders it unlikely that our information was not contained in his sources.

Were Patricius a Jewish 'king' it is difficult to figure him otherwise than as the head of a Messianic movement, not a secular king, but God's Anointed announcing the fullness of time<sup>21</sup>. And yet our copious Rabbinic sources for the period — the Palestinian Talmud and an abundance of *Midrashim* — do not so much as hint at such a Messianic movement. One should compare this with the Rabbinic evidence for the controversy surrounding Bar Kochba: the silence about Patricius is roaring. Nor is this a conspiracy of silence, like the one that seems to obscure the attempt of Julian to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem: events connected with the rebellion and Ursicinus' army in the Galilee are freely discussed in the Palestinian Talmud without the slightest hint at more fatal things looming in the background. Also the Christian sources do not rejoice at yet another proof of Jewish false beliefs and misdirected hopes.

There is also the argument from probability. Nothing is easier to assume than a usurper, hoping to take advantage of the emperor's commitment in Gaul and the absence of strong authority in the East, who in the event was suppressed without great difficulty. On the other hand a Messianic movement, or at any rate a movement headed for national independence appears so unlikely at this time that one should hesitate to accept it without at least some definite proof. Similarly, the absence of any hint at a planned collusion with the Persians should make us wary not to draw parallels with a situation that prevailed four hundred years earlier at the time of the last Hasmonean Antigonus.

The evaluation of Rabbinic evidence for historical purposes is notoriously difficult: our case is no exception. One piece of precious information not attested elsewhere concerns the fact that the Roman general in charge of the operations in Palestine was Ursicinus, while a certain, otherwise unknown, Proclus seems to have been one of his officers. As to the more general questions pertaining to the background causes and leadership of the revolt, our evidence is at best circumstantial<sup>22</sup>. All we learn from it is that certain persons went into

<sup>21</sup> This has been seen clearly by O. Seeck, *Geschichte des Unterganges der antiken Welt* (Stuttgart 1922) 124 f.: "Bei den Juden scheinen sich in dieser Zeit wieder einmal Messiashoffnungen geregt zu haben."

<sup>22</sup> In some Hebrew books of a popular character (O. Avissar, *Sefer T'veria*, (Jerusalem 1973) 87 f.; D. Bahat, *The Continuity of the Jewish Settlement in the Land of Israel*

hiding from the Roman authorities in Sepphoris<sup>23</sup> and perhaps in Tiberias as well<sup>24</sup>; that the sages allowed the baking of bread on the Sabbath and of leavened bread on the Passover for the Roman troops<sup>25</sup>, that the Scroll of the Law was damaged by fire at Sennabris (though the damage was evidently minor, as the question arose whether it was fit for use in the synagogue service<sup>26</sup>); and finally that the leading Sages R. Yonah and R. Yosse were received with great honour by Ursicinus in Antioch<sup>27</sup>.

There is nothing in this evidence that accords better with Avi-Yonah's solution (viz. that the Jewish extremists were led by their 'king' Patricius while the moderate Sages opposed the revolt) than with the alternative that has been put forward here: even if the pretender Patricius' support came mainly, or exclusively, from the Jews, there is no reason to believe that in this case of all cases Jewish opinion, and action, were unequivocal. The Sages' apparently good relations with the Roman commanding officer can easily be harmonized with the latter hypothesis. Moreover, as Avi-Yonah has correctly seen, the incidents recorded in our sources seem to provide proof that there was no persecution of the Jewish religion after the suppression of the rebellion: the Sages authorized the baking of bread on the Sabbath and of leavened bread on the Passover as matters of emergency — there is no hint of Roman compulsion to transgress the Law; the incident at Sennabris seems to have been local and perhaps unauthorized, and in any case the damage

(Ministry of Defence 1978) 23) I have encountered the interesting hypothesis (given there as fact) that the sources mentioning Ursicinus relate to the events preceding the revolt and eventually causing it. This seems to me highly improbable, as there is no reason whatsoever neither for the presence of a Roman officer of the rank of Ursicinus in Palestine at the time, nor for his conduct regarding the observance of the Law — which in that case would ill accord with his (later) good relations with the Sages R. Yonah and R. Yosse. Neither is it quite clear whether the hypothesis is possible at all on chronological grounds (cf. n. 3 supra).

<sup>23</sup> *Pal. Yebamoth* ch. 16 fol. 15c = *Pal. Sotah* ch. 9 fol. 23c. It is interesting to note that Sepphoris might have been a hiding place for people involved in the rebellion under Trajan: see *Tosephta Kelim Baba Bathra* 2.2 and cf. J. Geiger, *Sepphoris and the War of Kitos?* *Kathedra* 8 (1978) 69 f. (Hebrew).

<sup>24</sup> *Pal. Pesachim* ch. 1 fol. 27a; *B'reshith Rabbah* 31.11.

<sup>25</sup> *Pal. Betsah* ch. 1 fol. 60a; *Pal. Shebi'it* ch. 4 fol. 35a; *Pal. Sanhedrin* ch. 3 fol. 21b.

<sup>26</sup> *Pal. Megillah* ch. 2 fol. 74a.

<sup>27</sup> *Pal. Berachoth* ch. 5 fol. 9a.

caused was slight; the Sages rendering the verdict on the Scroll of the law were the very same R. Yonah and R. Yosse who later composed the delegation to Ursicinus in Antioch (probably to exert their influence with him on behalf of participants in the rebellion).

Fierce persecution of the Jewish religion was the outcome of the Bar-Kochba rebellion<sup>28</sup>: incidents connected with it and legends growing out of it are numerous in Rabbinic literature (and constitute to the present day part of the Yom Kippur liturgy); the Great Rebellion caused the banishment of the Jews from the Holy City and the establishment of the Fiscus Judaicus: are we to believe that the Roman government in the fourth century, undoubtedly less tolerant towards the Jewish religion than its pagan predecessors, would not have encountered a Jewish national, let alone Messianic, rebellion by some form of inhibitions on the practice of the Jewish faith?

There seems to prevail a not unaccountable trend among contemporary Jewish historians to seek persecutions of the Jewish religion and, on the other hand, Jewish rebellions, even where they do not exist<sup>29</sup>. An objective reconsideration of the available evidence for the rebellion against Gallus should leave the question open, at least.

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<sup>28</sup> See J. Geiger, the Ban on Circumcision and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, *Zion* 41 (1976) 139 ff.; contra M.D. Herr, *The Causes of the Bar Kokhba War*, *Zion* 43 (1978) 1 ff. (both Hebrew).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. S. Lieberman, *op. cit.*, (n. 2 supra) 329 ff. Recently (On Persecution of the Jewish Religion, *Festschrift S. Baron* (Jerusalem 1975) 234 ff. (Hebrew)) he has dealt effectively with some non-existent persecutions discussed by I. Baer, Israel, the Christian Church and the Roman Empire from the Days of Septimius Severus to the 'Edict of Toleration' of 313 C.E., *Zion* 21 (1956) 1 ff. (Hebrew). In the pages of a number of books there still lurks the ghost of a rebellion under Constantine the Great — though it is uncertain whether it is worth while to lay it.