

Menahem Mor, *The Second Jewish Revolt. The Bar Kokhba War, 132–136 CE (The Brill Reference Library of Judaism – vol. 50)*, Brill: Leiden–Boston 2016, 594 pp., ill.,
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The Bar Kokhba Revolt is an event that has long represented a serious cognitive problem for scholars. The main reason for this is that only few written sources are available, and those that we do have are brief. The most extensive account is the epitome of an excerpt from the 69th book of the historical work of Dio Cassius by Xiphilinus, a Byzantine monk who lived in the 11th century. For a long time this formed the basis of all analyses of the origins, course and effects of the revolt. This situation changed only with the discovery, many years ago, of documents on the rebellion in the Judaeian Desert.¹ These threw new light on the situation in the insurgents' camp, but also on the fate of the residents of the areas in which fighting took place. The discovery of these documents also provided a strong impulse for development of archaeological research, which considerably added to the knowledge on various aspects of the revolt – as well as studies on the rebels' coinage and Roman epigraphic documents. Research to date has resulted in a long list of publications, many of which have seen the light of day in the last decade or two. The majority of these are studies focusing on selected issues connected to the Bar Kokhba Revolt. But there is also no shortage of works whose authors aim to present all the issues involved with the history of the revolt. Menahem Mor's newly published book *The Second Jewish Revolt. The Bar Kokhba War, 132–136 CE* is an example of this category.

Mor has been a familiar figure for some time to all scholars interested in the Bar Kokhba Revolt – he first began analysing its various aspects some 35 years ago. He published his first book on the revolt in Hebrew in 1991 (*The Bar-Kokhba Revolt: Its Extent and Effect*, Jerusalem). This new offering aims to present, analyse and criticise all new discoveries and publications of sources as well as views and findings proposed in research since this time (see p. 10), accompanied by the author's own reflections. As early as the *Introduction*, for example, Mor indicates that he has changed his mind on the matter of the direct cause of the revolt itself, apportioning its outbreak to its leader's character and activity (pp. 10–11).²

Mor's latest book faithfully sticks to the structure of his previous one. Like its predecessor, it has six main chapters: 1. *The Causes for the Outbreak of the Bar Kokhba Revolt* (pp. 13–145); 2. *The Territorial Expansion of the Revolt: Participants and Opponents*

¹ Cf. Y. Yadin *et al.*, *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters*, vol. 1: N. Lewis, *Greek Papyri*, Jerusalem 1989; vol. 2: *Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabatean-Aramaic Papyri*, Jerusalem 2002.

² "...I attribute the main cause for the revolt to the personality and leadership of Bar Kokhba." (p. 11)

(pp. 146–288); 3. *The Roman Army in Judaea during the Revolt* (pp. 289–362); 4. *Attitude of the Non-Jewish Population in Palestine to the Second Revolt* (pp. 363–402); 5. *Leadership of the Revolt* (pp. 403–467); 6. *The Results of the Revolt* (pp. 468–485). These are followed by a concise *Epilogue* (pp. 486–492).

The arrangement of the contents makes it clear that the author's focus is on problems of fundamental importance for indicating the causes, course and effects of the revolt and evaluating it. In the first chapter he presents at length and gives a critical appraisal of all the causes of its outbreak identified in academic literature to date. These include the consequences of the presence of the Roman army in Judaea after 70 CE, the social unrest, socio-economic causes associated with the difficult agricultural situation and high tax burdens, as well as national and religious motifs. Mor argues that an analysis of the sources on the revolt leads to the conclusion that some of them, contrary to certain scholars' opinions, do not refer to the Bar Kokhba Revolt at all – instead concerning either a previous rebellion or a situation from a much later period. None of them too answers the question about the immediate reason for the outbreak of fighting. We can therefore surmise that there were many reasons. A social mood favouring taking up arms against Rome only came with the arrival of a charismatic leader in the form of Bar Kokhba.³ Yet the author firmly rejects the view that his leadership was a messianic one (cf. pp. 136–144).

A matter of contention for a long time has been the revolt's territorial range. Written sources do not contain reliable information on this subject. We can discuss it with more certainty, however, thanks to archaeological works conducted after 1990 as well as numismatic data. The state of the facts we know is appraised in Chapter 2. According to Mor, they leave no doubt that Judaea was the main arena of the war. Furthermore, the archaeological and numismatic sources definitely exclude the possibility that the rebels might have taken Jerusalem. The Talmudic references to Hadrian's alleged destruction of the Jerusalem Temple should also not be regarded as credible (cf. pp. 249–288).

Chapter 3 covers the scale of Rome's military engagement in the quelling of the revolt. In the last decade or two this issue has been a matter of lively discussion between the representatives of the two positions – one of which we might call traditional, and the other minimalistic. The proponents of the former, including Werner Eck, believe, based on Dio Cassius' account of the revolt (Dio 69, 12, 2–3) and epigraphic evidence, that it was not only units stationed in Judaea who were involved in the war, but also those from neighbouring provinces, and moreover many units from other regions of the Roman Empire. Mor has long disagreed with this point of view. He argues in favour of the need for revision and criticism of the traditional image of the battles against the Bar Kokhba Revolt, since the Roman engagement in this was in fact somewhat limited. In terms of size it was comparable with that of the time of the Jewish Revolt of 66–73 CE. This is why epigraphic evidence does not paint a fully credible picture of the fighting, as much of the information it contains is not directly linked to the revolt in Judaea.

In the next chapter, the author moves on to Jewish and Christian sources on the positions of the Samaritans, Christians and non-Jewish population of Judaea regarding

³ “The causes were therefore of a continuous nature, and the charismatic leadership of Bar Kokhba swept up his followers who joined the war against the Romans” (p. 145). See also pp. 403–429.

the revolt. Analysis of these leads him to the conclusion that, with possible individual exceptions, these groups did not have the slightest reason for active engagement on the side of the revolt.

Among the particularly important issues concerning the way the organisation of the revolt and how it proceeded is that of its leadership. This is the subject of Chapter 5. Mor concentrates on the figure of Bar Kokhba himself as well as Eleazar the Priest, along with the question of the spiritual leadership of the revolt, local leadership, opposition to the insurgence and rebel factions.

The author goes on to consider the effects of the revolt, examining its political, religious and socio-economic results. He argues that the political consequences were considerably smaller than is usually thought, as many of them were in fact the outcome of Hadrian's policy which began even before the outbreak of the rebellion, aiming to integrate Judaea with the rest of the empire. Among the results of this policy was the establishment of Colonia Aelia Capitolina around 130 CE (pp. 468–474). In religious terms, the defeat of the revolt influenced the weakening of messianic moods, and this in turn led to a greater readiness among the Jewish population to reconcile themselves with Roman rule (pp. 475–478). Mor's reading of the revolt's socio-political consequences is distinctly different from that of most scholars, who see the results for the Jewish population as being mainly negative. He considers it necessary to differentiate between those within the lands involved in the revolt, like Judaea, and those outside of it, such as Galilee, which were not affected by the repressive steps of the Roman powers after the fighting ended. We cannot be certain whether even in Judaea itself the repressions were applied to an equal degree (pp. 479–485).

The Epilogue contains a concise review of the most important conclusions presented over the course of the book.

That Menahem Mor's work is the most extensive and detailed presentation of various aspects of the Bar Kokhba revolt published to date is beyond doubt. It is undoubtedly to the author's credit that he analysed all available sources – Roman, Jewish and Christian – in great detail and with a critical eye. This made clear what many scholars have tried to demonstrate previously – that all sources on the revolt and its leaders in Talmudic and Christian literature are not only unreliable, but in fact do not contain any valuable content. The virtues of Mor's book also include his thorough discussion of the views of Israeli scholars on various issues related to the revolt, previously relatively unknown as they have only been presented in Hebrew. Also valuable is the discussion of the results of archaeological work carried out in recent years at numerous sites scattered throughout Judaea and Galilee and published in local academic periodicals that are hard to access outside of Israel. Furthermore, the extensive bibliography at the end of the book (pp. 493–527) and the bibliographical annex featuring a list of publications concerning the revolt from 1990–2015 (pp. 528–566) will both be of undoubted great use to researchers interested in the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Many of the opinions expressed by Mor will no doubt encounter criticism – mostly as they differ from widely accepted views and conclusions. One of the factors that might lead to such a reaction is the author's extremely critical (and sometimes even hyper-critical) position on the views of other scholars, especially regarding issues of the revolt's military aspects, or even the very evaluation of its significance. This position is also

characterised by a tendency to diminish the importance of these two areas.⁴ The problem is that, in taking this position, Mor is unable to provide convincing answers to the whole series of questions that must be answered in order to understand the course of the revolt. It is worth pointing to some of these. Since the underground corridors and caves were solely places to give people shelter, where were the operational bases and storehouses with supplies allowing the rebels to conduct lengthy battles? It seems unlikely that Herodium or Bethar were the only such examples. Since from a military point of view the Bar Kokhba Revolt was a minor local conflict, why did the Roman army – assuming that it had the same forces available as during the 66–73 revolt – and moreover fighting in an area four times smaller – need as many as four years to defeat its weakly armed and militarily untrained opponent? The author's answer to this question is hardly satisfactory.⁵

Irrespective of the reaction of scholars to Mor's unconventional views on various aspects and appraisal of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, however, there is no doubt that his book will serve as a point of reference for any discussion on events concerning this issue for a long time to come.

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⁴ See p. 488: "... it may be said that some scholars who dealt with the Second Revolt and regarded it, mainly by its outcome, as one of the events that changed the course of Jewish history in the ancient World, gave this revolt more historical importance than it deserves."

⁵ P. 362: "The revolt lasted almost over four years, and information on the Roman losses was described by Fronto and Dio Cassius. Their remarks indicate the difficulties the Romans faced in suppressing the rebels, but that issue should be separated from the issue of the number of Roman soldiers who crushed the revolt. During the first phases of the war, Rome's failures stemmed from the fact that they used tactics that were not appropriate to counter the Jewish guerilla style of warfare. When Julius Severus, who was experienced in mountain warfare arrived in Judaea, the Romans adapted their tactics to the local conditions. Severus succeeded in crushing the revolt, not because he used large numbers of soldiers, but because he used small units and effective strategies to rebut the Jewish rebels." Cf. p. 491.