

# A Time of Conquest and Crucifixion

Whatever desire the people of Judah may have had for full independence was doubtless tempered by the tolerance shown them by their Persian overlords. This, however, did not last. After Alexander the Great defeated Persia in 332 B.C.E., Judah was among the provincial realms subject to the conqueror's "Hellenizing" impulse. Alexander wanted to remodel the whole world in the Greek image, and his early death did not stop this process. It continued under the Macedonian General Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's chief lieutenants, and then under the monarchs of the Seleucid Empire, which encompassed Anatolia (much of modern Turkey), the Levant, Mesopotamia, Kuwait, Persia, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and northwestern India.

## One God in a Land of Many

Religious conflict with the Jews was inevitable after Hellenization because the people of the Seleucid Empire worshipped either the Zoroastrian deity or the pantheon of Greek Olympian gods, and they did not tolerate the free worship of the God of Abraham. In 166 B.C.E., Mattathias, of the Hasmonean Dynasty (descendants of Asamoneus), led Judah in revolt against the Seleucids, whose power at this time was in decline. After Mattathias's son Judah succeeded his father, the Seleucids compromised, allowing the Jews religious freedom and a degree of political autonomy. Soon after this, the Seleucid Empire collapsed entirely, and the land called Judah was renamed Judea, an independent Jewish state under Hasmonean rule.

For some eight decades, Hasmonean Judea prospered, regaining the territory Israel and Judah had occupied during the reign of Solomon.

### In This Chapter

- The Jews under Seleucid, Persian, and Roman rule
- The birth and ministry of Jesus
- Jewish internal disunity and anti-Roman revolt in Judea
- The emergence of Christianity
- Bar Kokhba's revolt ends in another Jewish diaspora

## The Legions March In

The Roman Republic had come into existence in 509 B.C.E. and was approaching its transition to empire by 63 B.C.E., when Pompey, consul of the republic, sent his formidable legions to take and occupy Jerusalem.



### DID YOU KNOW?

We often speak loosely of the Roman Empire, but for nearly 500 years, Roman civilization was governed as a republic. It came into being with the overthrow of the Roman monarchy about 509 B.C.E. and endured until 27 B.C.E., when, two years after the death of Julius Caesar (assassinated because some feared he intended to make himself emperor), the Roman Senate proclaimed Octavian “Augustus,” and henceforth Octavian ruled as Caesar Augustus—for all practical purposes an emperor. The Roman “Empire” thus created endured until 476 C.E. in the West and from 330 C.E. to 1453 C.E. in the East.

## Pompey Enters the Temple

Josephus, a Romano-Jewish historian who lived from 37 C.E. to about 100 C.E., wrote of how the legion routed the Jewish defenders and of how the Roman soldiers committed “no small enormities” in and about the sacred Second Temple in Jerusalem. He noted, however, that Pompey touched nothing of the many treasures within the temple, including “two thousand talents of sacred money”—a single talent of silver was the equivalent of nine years’ pay for skilled labor. According to Josephus, Pompey forbore in this manner “on account of his regard to religion.” Moreover, he restored the high priest Hyrcanus to his priesthood—partly in return for his agreement to intervene in any rebellion against him.

## Herod takes the Throne

Indeed, Pompey, allowed the Hasmonean kings to retain titular reign over Judea. Yet, in truth, they ruled as the puppets of his governors, and this sat well with neither the ordinary citizens of Judea nor the kings themselves, who sometimes allowed, sometimes abetted, and sometimes instigated anti-Roman uprisings. Judea soon earned a reputation as the most unruly province of the Roman Empire, and in 37 B.C.E., Roman authorities seized and executed King Antigonus II Mattathias and then, formally annexing Judea to the empire, installed Herod, a convert to Judaism from Idumea (a region just south of Judea), as a Roman “client” king.

In the New Testament’s Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Herod is portrayed as a tyrant of literally biblical proportions. Given relatively little power by his Roman overlords, he is depicted as concerning himself with two things: the building of monuments—most famously the expansion of the Second Temple—and the extermination of rivals and potential rivals.

The Gospel relates that “wise men from the East,” having been alerted (by the appearance of a new star in the heavens) to the impending birth of a future “king of the Jews,” called on Herod to inquire of the whereabouts of the event. Herod asked his priests, who told him that the child would be born in

Bethlehem. Herod asked the wise men to find the infant and then report to him so that he, too, might pay homage. Shortly after finding Jesus, however, the Magi received, in dreams, a warning to make no report lest Herod kill the infant. Joseph had a similar dream, and so Joseph and his family remained quietly in Bethlehem until Herod died. Before his death, however, Herod preemptively ordered the mass execution of all male infants in and around Bethlehem, on the assumption that one of them had to be the infant Jesus, a future usurper of the Judean throne.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

There is historical basis for much of Herod's ruthlessness toward rivals and potential rivals, but there is nothing in history to support his involvement in the so-called Massacre of the Innocents described in the Gospel. Indeed, it is by no means certain that Herod made any effort to locate, let alone kill, the infant Jesus.

## Jesus Preaches

The biblical story of the life and teachings of Jesus—or Jesus Christ, *christ* being the Greek word for “anointed one”—is found mostly in the New Testament gospels of the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, with additional material included in the Epistles, 1 Corinthians, Acts, and 1 Timothy. The consensus among secular historians is that Jesus was a Galilean Jew, born between 6 and 4 B.C.E.—near the very end of Herod I the Great's life and reign. It is generally believed that Jesus died, by judicial crucifixion, between 30 and 36 C.E., as authorized by the Roman provincial prefect (governor) Pontius Pilate.



#### DEFINITION

Jesus of Nazareth is commonly called Jesus Christ. Christ is a word derived from the Greek *christos*, meaning “anointed.” *Christos*, in turn, is a translation of the Hebrew “messiah,” which, in modern times, is understood as “savior” rather than simply “anointed.”

The Gospel of Matthew (13:55) identifies Joseph as a carpenter, and so it has been widely assumed that this was also the vocation Jesus himself pursued. But when he reached the age of about 30—sometime between 27 and 29 C.E.—Jesus began a career of itinerant preaching in Judea. He appointed 12 apostles early in his ministry, which was marked (according to the New Testament) by a number of miracles, including turning water into wine, quieting a storm, feeding 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish, walking on water, raising the dead, and restoring sight to two blind men.

Yet it was his ministry—his preaching, his teachings—that had the most enduring and consequential effect. Presenting himself as the son of God (the one and only God of the Jews) as well as the Messiah, he preached God's love for humankind and proclaimed that the “kingdom of God” existed in the here and now, not in some heavenly hereafter. He charged his followers to love God and to love their fellow man as they loved themselves. In contrast to the long-prevailing doctrine of *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—Jesus taught forgiveness, charity, humility, and a general pacifism.

## Religion or Rebellion?

Whether due to the content of his message, his personal charisma, his use of disciples, divine inspiration, or a combination of all of these, Jesus won followers and drew the attention of local authorities. It is likely that Jesus was being described by some as the “king of the Jews”—Herod I the Great’s very title (though not a title shared by his son and successor Herod Antipas). This alone could have put the preacher’s life in danger.

However, Jesus also challenged the Jewish elders by presenting himself as God’s son and as the Messiah. He additionally created outrage within the secular community—assuming the historicity of the Gospel story of the “Cleansing of the Temple,” in which Jesus forcefully drove the money changers from the Second Temple, protesting that they were turning the sacred place into a “den of thieves.” In short, both the Roman-appointed authorities and powerful people in Judea’s religious and secular communities were eager to see an end to Jesus’s ministry.

### Herod I the Great

It is easy to confuse Herod I the Great (73/74 B.C.E.—4 B.C.E.) with his son Herod Antipas (before 20 B.C.E.—after 39 C.E.). Herod I the Great was born in Idumea, south of Judea. An Edomite who had converted to Judaism, he was elected “king of the Jews” by the Roman Senate in 40 or 39 B.C.E. A puppet of Rome, he had little actual power, but is portrayed in the New Testament as a tyrant who was ruthless in his elimination of rivals and potential rivals. In this spirit, according to the Gospel of Matthew but uncorroborated by secular historical sources, he ordered, at the time of Jesus’s birth, the slaughter of all infants in and around Bethlehem. This was in response to rumors that Jesus was being hailed as the new “king of the Jews,” and Herod I the Great was willing to go to any lengths to eliminate a future rival.

In any case, Herod I the Great died shortly after the birth of Jesus. His son, Herod Antipas, succeeded him—albeit not as “king of the Jews” but as tetrarch (“ruler of a quarter”), the Roman ruler of Galilee and Perea.

In the New Testament account, Herod Antipas was attacked by the itinerant preacher (and baptizer of Jesus) John the Baptist for having married his niece, Herodias, a union deemed incestuous under Jewish law. At the urging of his daughter (not named in the New Testament, but traditionally called Salome), he reluctantly ordered the execution by beheading of John the Baptist. It was not long after this that Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect (governor) of Judea, sent Jesus to him for trial on a charge of treason for having claimed to be “king of the Jews.” According to the New Testament, Herod Antipas did not convict Jesus, but sent him back to Pilate, who was likewise reluctant to order his execution.

Herod Antipas was removed as tetrarch by the Roman Emperor Caligula on charges of conspiracy against him and was sent into exile in 39 C.E., possibly in what is today the French city of Lyon. He died in exile sometime later.

## A Prophet Tried and Condemned

In the biblical account, Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem by a “crowd” that included Jewish priests and elders in addition to people brandishing weapons. His identity was betrayed to the crowd by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who, having been paid 30 pieces of silver by the Jewish priests, kissed him by way of revealing him to the mob and the authorities.

In custody, Jesus was hauled before the Sanhedrin, a religious court, which mocked and abused him before finding him guilty of blasphemy. From here, he was taken to the court of Pontius Pilate, the Roman-born prefect (governor) of Judea. The Jewish elders asked Pilate to condemn him for having claimed to be king of the Jews. Although Jesus did not deny the charge, he declared to Pilate that his “kingdom is not from this world.” In any event, Pilate declined to pass judgment himself, but instead turned Jesus over to Herod Antipas (son and successor of Herod I the Great), who, after subjecting him to mockery, decided that he had insufficient evidence to convict Jesus and therefore returned him to Pilate. In contrast to his father, who morbidly feared any and all rivals, Antipas evidently did not find Jesus particularly dangerous or capable of inciting rebellion among a people with a long history of rebellion. For his part, Pilate, retaking custody of Jesus, informed the Jewish elders that he had not found the man guilty, either. The New Testament account portrays only the Jewish elders as insistent on executing Jesus, and therefore implies that neither Antipas nor Pilate attempted to block execution. Indeed, since crucifixion is a Roman form of judicial execution, the implication is that Antipas or Pilate or both authorized it.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Thirty pieces of silver was no paltry sum at the time of Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus. It has been calculated to be equivalent to four months' wages for skilled labor.

## Resurrection

The story of Jesus Christ does not, of course, end with his death. The New Testament holds that he rose from his tomb three days after interment. This reported resurrection persuaded his followers of their teacher's divinity, and the event became the catalyst that created a new monotheistic religion. Ultimately, surviving Roman attempts to suppress it, Christianity became not only the state religion of Rome, but one of the world's most influential religions and a major force in history, culture, and civilization.

## The Jews Go to War Against Rome

Although the life, death, and reported resurrection of Jesus would, in the fullness of time, have profound effects throughout the Middle East and far beyond, for most Judeans and their neighbors, Christ's ministry and execution were probably little noticed. Of far greater immediate consequence was the growing unrest in Rome's Jewish province.

Paranoid in his fear of rivals, Herod I the Great left no lasting legacy to Judea, aside from a collection of Hellenistic monuments and his own evil reputation. The son, Herod Antipas, proved even more unpopular than the father. On his watch, Judea grew ever more rebellious—so much so that, in 6 C.E., Rome abandoned even the pretext of ruling through a puppet king and effectively annexed Judea, putting it under the direct administration of the central Roman government (which is why Antipas held the title of tetrarch rather than king). The Sanhedrin, a Jewish deliberative body primarily devoted to matters of religious conduct, was given a hollow legislative voice, but no real authority.

The New Testament implies that “the Jews” of Judea were more eager than the Roman administrators to destroy Jesus. Insofar as Jesus questioned and attacked the Jewish elders, including their permitting commerce in the temple itself, there is probably historical truth in the depiction of Judea’s religious establishment as opposed to and even fearful of a charismatic upstart preaching in their midst. Yet it is abundantly clear that, in the first place, “the Jews” of Judea hardly behaved as a single bloc. In the years following Jesus’s birth, ministry, and execution, dissent and disunity among the people of Judea was the rule rather than the exception. This was not the result of Jesus’s preaching, but his ministry can certainly be viewed as a symptom of the prevailing discontent.

## Jewish Dispute and Disunity

Many Judeans were unhappy with Roman rule as well as with the Jewish administrators Rome had installed. In addition to the injustices and hardships imposed on Judeans, there was profound outrage among some over being forced to live under the authority of an empire based in the polytheistic worship of false gods.

As the Romano-Jewish ancient historian Josephus explains, there were, in what modern scholars of Jewish history call the Second Temple period, three principal Jewish sects. The sect called the Pharisees emphasized wisdom and a will to do good as the foundations of religious and moral conduct. They identified with and represented the common people and were opposed to the sect known as the Sadducees, who came of and were identified with the aristocratic class of Judean society. This conflict of class was central to the dispute between the two sects, but there were also specific theological differences.

For example, although the Pharisees believed in free will, they also saw God as all-knowing, thereby introducing a strong element of predestination; the Sadducees, in contrast, denied fate and asserted the absolute and total free will of humanity. The Pharisees shared with the early Christians a belief in the immortality of the soul and resurrection of the dead; the Sadducees flatly rejected these tenets of faith, along with the idea of reward and punishment in the afterlife for earthly deeds. Whereas the Pharisees accepted both the Torah (the written body of Jewish law) and “oral law” (a body of belief created and accepted by the larger community of faithful), the Sadducees accepted only the Torah as a source of divine authority. Differences of class and theology created often bitter differences in the interpretation of law and social governance.



### VOICES

Everyone ought to worship God according to his own inclinations, and not be constrained by force.

—Flavius Josephus, *Life of Flavius Josephus*

A third sect was the Essenes. A much smaller group than the Pharisees or the Sadducees, these Jews congregated in communities that practiced asceticism (sometimes including celibacy), voluntary poverty, and daily ritual immersion in cleansing water. Many Essenes were mystics. Never a large group, the Essenes were essentially contemplative and somewhat removed from the world, which meant that, by definition, they had fairly little influence over the course of Jewish society and life. They would likely have disappeared in the historical mists were it not for the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls discovered between 1946 and 1956.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

The “Dead Sea Scrolls” are 972 texts, the first of which was discovered in 1946 by Bedouin shepherds in the caves of Qumran near the Dead Sea on the West Bank, and the last in 1956 in the same general location. Written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Nabataean, the manuscripts have been dated to between 408 and 318 B.C.E. and are the earliest-known manuscripts of material included in the Hebrew Bible. Also included are religious texts not found in scripture. Although the Dead Sea Scrolls have long been attributed to the Essenes, some recent scholars argue that they were written by others, possibly Sadducee rabbis.

## The Zealots

It is important to recognize that many—probably most—Jews of the Second Temple period belonged to none of the three sects. Nevertheless, the existence of and disputes among those sects suggest substantial unrest within the Jewish community. The most dramatic expression of the discord came from what Josephus called the “fourth sect,” the *Zealots*, who were organized by Judas of Galilee (also known as Judas of Gamala and not to be confused with the treacherous disciple of Jesus, Judas Iscariot) together with a Pharisee named Pa Zadok.

The Zealots came into being in 6 B.C.E. as a group of protesters against Roman taxation. They believed that paying tribute to Rome impinged on their liberty as well as on their acknowledgement of God and God alone as their ruler and lord. This, by the way, was politically more radical than what Jesus would later advise his followers, namely to “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21): to obey secular authority in matters secular but to obey divine authority in matters spiritual. Other than in their recognition of God as their only master, the Zealots followed Pharisee doctrine.



#### DEFINITION

**Zealot** is the name given to members of a first-century Jewish political movement (the historian Josephus called it a sect) advocating rebellion against the Roman Empire. The group originally formed in opposition to Roman taxation. The term *Zealot* was used not by the group itself, but by Josephus, as the Greek equivalent of a Hebrew word, *kanai*, meaning one who is a zealous follower—in this case, of God. The modern English word *zealot*, describing any enthusiastic, even fanatical, follower, is derived from Josephus’s coinage.

Over the years, the Zealots staged relatively small rebellions, the first precipitated when the Roman Emperor Caligula (reigned 37–41) erected a statue of himself inside the Second Temple. Next, between 46 and 48, two of the sons of Judas of Galilee, Jacob and Simon, led another anti-Roman revolt, for which Tiberius Alexander, Judea’s Roman procurator (governor), executed them. The final straw was the Emperor Nero’s introduction of the so-called imperial cult—the doctrine that Roman emperors ruled essentially by divine right and sanction. Widely perceived by many Jews as a direct affront to the one true God, they rallied behind the Zealots in the Great Jewish Revolt of 66 to 73, also known as the First Roman War.

## Titus Destroys the Second Temple

Initially, the Zealots and their followers enjoyed great success against local Roman forces, quickly taking over Jerusalem, which they held until 70, when Emperor Vespasian sent an army under his son Titus to retake Jerusalem and restore order.

As the Roman historian Tacitus recorded in his *Agricola* (ca. 98), it was once said of the Roman legions, “They make a desert and call it peace.” Certainly, this describes Titus’s approach to the suppression of rebellion in Jerusalem. His soldiers retook the city, largely destroying it in the process, and then deliberately reducing to rubble the Second Temple.



### DID YOU KNOW?

The Western Wall—the so-called Wailing Wall—is located in the Old City of Jerusalem and is part of the ancient wall that surrounded the courtyard of the Second Temple. It is not, as some believe, the vestige of the temple wall itself, but has been a site of Jewish pilgrimage, prayer, and lamentation from at least the fourth century C.E. as a remnant of the destruction of the Second Temple and a reminder of the sufferings of the Jewish people. It is also revered by Muslims, who believe that Muhammad tied Buraq—a mythological heavenly steed that served to transport the prophets—near the wall on his spiritual “Night Journey” from Mecca to Jerusalem and back.

## Masada

The desolation of Jerusalem and the utter destruction of the Second Temple generally ended the Great Jewish Revolt—except among the Zealots. They continued to attack local Romans and Greeks while a related group, the Sicarii, targeted Jews they deemed to be Roman collaborators. It is possible to see the Zealots and Sicarii as uncompromising freedom fighters. It is equally possible, however, to judge them as terrorists, killing with little discrimination and mainly for the purpose of forcing other Jews to join the rebellion.

Nevertheless, after the arrival of Titus and his legion, the Zealots and their followers were forced into retreat. The Sicarii withdrew to a special place. Back in the reign of Herod I the Great, sometime between 37 and 31 B.C.E., the ruler took over a rock formation high above the Judean desert near the Dead Sea called Masada. It had been partially fortified by the Hasmonean kings, and then Herod



the Great additionally fortified it, intending to use it as a place of refuge in the event of a general revolt. Nearly a hundred years later, in 66 C.E., at the very start of the Great Jewish Revolt, the Sicarii quickly brushed aside the small Roman garrison defending Masada and took it over as their stronghold under the command of Eleazar ben Ya'ir. Four years later, in 70, more Sicarii arrived—not just warriors this time, but their families as well, all of whom had been expelled by those Jews they had been terrorizing. Still more Sicarii arrived—in addition to some other Jewish families—after the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

By 72, the Sicarii and others at Masada were the last holdouts of the Great Jewish Revolt. The current governor of Judea, Lucius Flavius Silva, sent a Roman legion, together with auxiliaries and Jewish prisoners of war, to lay siege to the nearly impregnable fortress. It was a force of some 15,000 against fewer than 1,000 people gathered in Masada.

Time was on the side of the legionnaires. They had ready access to food and water, whereas the Masada holdouts did not. Slowly, meticulously, in traditional Roman military fashion, the legionnaires pressed their prisoners and auxiliaries into service as laborers, building around Masada a circumvallation wall, which provided the attackers with cover while also ensuring that none of the Masada group could escape or secure food and water. Once the wall had been built, the legion soldiers and the others began construction of a massive siege ramp against the western face of the plateau that was topped by Masada. By the spring of 73, after perhaps two or three months of siege, the Romans built a great siege tower equipped with a battering ram. When this was completed, it was hauled up the long incline of the ramp even as the legionnaires assaulted the wooden Masada wall using flaming torches.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

The Roman legions were famed and feared for their ability as military engineers, but siege towers were not Roman innovations. These great structures, built to a height just beyond that of the fortress wall under attack, mounted on wheels, and pulled by men and animals to the wall, often via a siege ramp, were first used during the ninth century B.C.E. by forces of the Assyrian Empire. They were used as late as the Renaissance.

On April 16, 73 C.E., the wall was breached and the legionnaires entered. What they found inside appalled even veterans hardened by many battles. The fortress of Masada was, in the words of Josephus, “a citadel of death.” Everything, except for food storage structures, had been burned down, and everyone—save two women and five children, who had hidden themselves inside a cistern—lay dead. It was not mass suicide, at least not exactly. Jewish law forbids killing oneself; therefore, the people (according to the two survivors) had drawn lots and killed each other in turn. Only the last man standing actually dispatched himself. They had chosen to die rather than serve a lord other than God.



#### VOICES

Masada shall not fall again.

—Oath taken by all inductees into the modern Israel Defense Forces, the Israeli military

## The Revolt of Bar Kokhba

The Roman victory in the Great Jewish Rebellion did not forever extinguish the spirit of rebellion. Hadrian came to the Roman imperial throne in 117 C.E. It was the height of what historians call the Pax Romana, the first two centuries after the birth of Christ, during which Rome's influence on the realms it had either conquered or subdued was largely beneficial in that much of the world enjoyed a peace and prosperity previously unknown.

Hadrian stood in welcome contrast to the likes of Caligula and Nero. He was a man of significant learning and rationality, who ruled wisely and well. He resisted the urge to conquest that had driven so many of his predecessors, preferring instead to consolidate the empire. Immediately abandoning the costly campaigns of conquest the Emperor Trajan (53–117) had begun east of the Euphrates, Hadrian offered peace to the Parthians, who, at the time, controlled much of Mesopotamia. Of Trajan's conquests, Hadrian retained only Armenia, which Parthia did not contest.

On his return from peace negotiations in Parthia, Hadrian visited Judea, where he paused to survey Jerusalem, still in ruins from the Great Jewish Revolt, which had been suppressed more than four decades earlier. Moved by what he saw, Hadrian promised to rebuild the city. Initially, the pledge was met by the Judeans' gratitude—until they learned that Hadrian intended to rebuild the holy Jewish city as a distinctly *Roman* metropolis, raising upon the ruins of the Second Temple a new temple dedicated to Jupiter, chief among the many gods of Rome.

Whereas Caligula had erected his statue in the Second Temple out of sheer contempt, Hadrian sincerely, if misguidedly, believed that rebuilding Jerusalem in the image of Rome would gradually transform the Jews into obedient, provincial Romans without more bloodshed. Hedging his bet, however, Hadrian augmented the Legion X Fretensis, stationed in Judea, with another legion, the VI Ferrata, as reconstruction got under way in 131—the very year Hadrian replaced *Jerusalem* with a new “proper” *Roman* name: Aelia Capitolina.

Rebuilding and renaming Jerusalem in the Roman image was highly provocative, but the final straw was the so-called “plowing up of the Temple,” which was accompanied by Hadrian's proscription against the supremely sacred practice of circumcision. In this climate of outrage, one Simon ben Kosba came forth. He believed himself descended from the House of David, and at the time of Hadrian's building and decrees, Rabbi Akiva, whom the Talmud celebrates as the “Head of all Sages,” anointed Simon, bestowing upon him a new surname, bar Kokhba—in Aramaic, “Son of a Star.” It was a strong reference to the “Star Prophecy” found in the Old Testament book of Numbers (24:17): “A star has shot off Jacob.” By this name, Rabbi Akiva identified Simon bar Kokhba as the Messiah, the savior of the Jews.

## The Birth of “Christianity”

It is not known whether Simon bar Kokhba himself claimed to be the Messiah, but even the suggestion of such a claim was enough to alienate the small number of Judeans who professed to follow Jesus Christ, whom the Romans had crucified almost exactly 100 years earlier. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, and the claim of another, on the eve of a new Jewish revolt against Rome,

definitively split the fledgling Christian religion from the Jews. Thus, we may see the beginning of Bar Kokhba's Revolt as a historical turning point at which Christianity became a new religion separate from Judaism as opposed to merely another sect within that faith.

## The Liberation and Loss of Jerusalem

Simon bar Kokhba was mindful of the earlier rebellion of 66 to 73 C.E., and he thought through a plan to avoid repeating defeat. He reasoned that the Romans, for all their might, were merely foreign occupiers and, as such, depended on uninterrupted lines of supply and communication. Disrupt these, and the legions could not hold out for long.

To achieve his strategic objective of cutting the Roman lifelines, bar Kokhba resolved to ensure that his revolt would be fully coordinated, in contrast to the earlier effort in which Jewish forces often contended against one another. He therefore assumed absolute authority over all Jewish warriors, and, in 132, led a brilliant assault against garrisons and supply lines in central Judea. He deliberately avoided attacking the center of Roman power, Jerusalem, but instead took action to cut it off. By early 134, not only had bar Kokhba defeated the Jerusalem garrison, he had succeeded in wiping out one entire Roman *legion*, including its auxiliaries.



### DEFINITION

The **legion** was the basic Roman army unit recruited (typically) from Roman citizens exclusively. Although numbers varied, the typical legion consisted of 5,400 soldiers, divided into 10 cohorts of 480 men each, with each cohort divided into 6 centuries of 80 men.

Bar Kokhba boldly minted coins in his name, the very first issue dated “Year 1 of the liberty of Jerusalem.” Receiving news of the rebellion, Emperor Hadrian left Rome and returned to Judea. Judging the situation to be critical, Hadrian summoned Sextus Julius Severus from distant Britain, of which he was Rome's governor. The British tribes had a reputation of being ungovernable. Yet Severus was governing them. That fact, Hadrian believed, made him the perfect candidate for command in Judea.

Initially, Hadrian gave Severus 35,000 legionnaires to use against bar Kokhba. Before the Severus counteroffensive was over, the Roman emperor would send in fully a dozen legions—a total of 60,000 men, representing somewhere between one third and one half of the entire Roman armed forces. It was nevertheless a supremely difficult fight. Despite their numbers, the Romans were outnumbered in every engagement. They suffered heavy losses before finally retaking Jerusalem, which Severus wasted no time establishing as his headquarters.

And now the Roman commander changed his strategy. The fight for Jerusalem, though victorious, proved too costly a victory to repeat. Severus decided, therefore, to avoid any more of the great “showdown” battles for which the legions were best known. Instead, he used Jerusalem as a base from which he waged war not against opposing armies, but against the civilian population of Judea—old men, women, and children included. His objective was to terrorize and demoralize the Jews until their will to fight had been undermined and destroyed.

## Attrition, Terror, and a New Diaspora

All around him, everywhere he went, Simon bar Kokhba saw people—his people—dying of want and hunger as the Roman legions destroyed farms and food stores. Hoping to build up his forces, bar Kokhba retreated to concentrate them in the fortress town of Betar, southwest of Jerusalem in what is today the Palestinian village of Battir. After a prolonged siege, Betar fell and all of its defenders, Simon bar Kokhba included, were killed. By this time, Severus's legions had taken a genocidal toll. According to Roman sources, they had killed 580,000 Jews. The Talmud counts even more.

Determined to make his victory total, Severus ruthlessly suppressed the few remaining pockets of Jewish resistance, and Hadrian, the formerly enlightened Roman ruler, expanded these mop-up operations into a comprehensive policy of rigorously oppressive occupation intended to wipe both Jews and Judaism from the face of the earth. The emperor now deemed that faith unalterably incompatible with Roman rule. The minority of Judeans who survived the suppression of the rebellion and the genocidal mop-up that followed were exiled. They were banned first from Jerusalem, but soon they were banished from all Judea. It was another diaspora.

## Resilience

The catastrophe that followed the Revolt of Simon bar Kokhba reinforced the Jewish self-identity as God's "chosen people" who were yet doomed to suffer one exile from their divinely decreed homeland after another. This motif would become the touchstone of Jewish nationalism—or Zionism, as it would come to be known in the late nineteenth century.

About a century and a half after the suppression of Bar Kokhba's Revolt, Constantine I, the first Christian emperor of Rome (reigned 306–312), gave Jews permission to return to Jerusalem—but only on Tisha B'Av, so that they might weep at the Wailing Wall in mourning of their own destruction as a people.

Constantine's gesture was cruel but inaccurate. Even in the exile of diaspora, neither the Jews nor Judaism had been destroyed. Babylonia, in which most of the exiled generations would settle, became the center of Jewish life in the ancient world. Some Jews began returning to the former Judea and even to Jerusalem itself from the second through the fourth centuries. Others settled elsewhere, all over the world. Wherever they took up new lives, the Jews adapted, and in the end Hadrian's genocidal response to the revolt against Rome only proved the resilience of the people and their faith.

## The Least You Need to Know

- The Jews were oppressed under Seleucid rule, liberated to a degree after the Persian conquest of the Seleucids, and once again oppressed under Roman domination.
- The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth unfolded in a remote Roman province over the course of only three years, but resulted in the founding of the second of the world's major monotheist religions.
- Though torn by internal disunity, the Jews of Judea repeatedly rebelled against Roman rule, culminating in the Great Jewish Revolt of 66 to 73 C.E. and the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132 to 136 C.E.