

SECTION VI

THE BAR KOCHBA PERIOD

MUR 24E

382

Chapter XXIX

Dating the Contracts

Part I of the Sabbath Years of 133/134 and 140/141 C.E.

The last pre-Seder Olam records presently in our possession that can date a Sabbath year are rental contracts composed during the Bar Kochba revolt (133 to 135 C.E.). These contracts, found among the papers of the archives in the caves of Wadi Murabba'at near Bethlehem, are dated to the 20th day of Shebat (Jan. /Feb.) in the 2nd year of the revolt. They speak of the next Sabbath year as 5 years hence.

Wacholder makes the claim that these rental agreements substantiate his System "C" Sabbath cycle.¹ Wacholder also writes:

Since each of these twelve contracts, written in Hebrew, apparently contained both the same date of issuance and the clause relating to the Sabbatical year, they are crucial for this study.²

Wacholder then reproduces the document labeled "Mur 24E," partly but plausibly restored on the basis of the parallel fragments of papyri, as transcribed by J. T. Milik in his book entitled *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*.³ This study agrees with the overall translation offered by Milik and Wacholder (the small differences are minor points which have no bearing on the conclusions).⁴ Our translation is as follows:

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| 1. [On the 20th of She]bat of Year
Tw[o] for the Redemption of | [בעשרין לש]בט שנת שת[ים]
לגאלת | 1. |
| 2. [I]srael by Simeon ben K[osi]ba,
(Bar Kochba) the Nasia of | [י]שראל על יד שמעון בן כוס[בא]
נסיא | 2. |
| 3. [Is]rael. In the camp which is lo-
cated in Herodium. | [י]ש[ר]אל במחנה שיושב בהרודיס | 3. |

¹ HUCA, 44, pp. 176–179.

² Ibid., pp. 176f.

³ DTJD, no. 24, pp. 122–134, esp. p. 131, D, and 2, pt. 2, Plate XXXVI. Also see Fig. 3.

⁴ Wacholder's translation is as follows:

1. [On the twentieth of She]vat of the year tw[o] of the Redemption of
2. [I]srael by Shimeon ben K[os]ba, the prince of
3. [Is]rael. In the camp which is located in Herodium,
4. [Ye]hudah ben Raba' said to Hillel ben Gry's:
5. "I of my free will have [re]nted from you today the
6. land which is my re[n]tal in 'Ir
7. Naḥash which I hold as a tenant from Shimeon, the Prince of Israel,
8. This land I have rented from you today

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 4. [Ya]hudah ben Rabah said to Hillel ben Geryis: | 4. [י]הודה בן רבא אמר להלל בן גריס |
| 5. "I of my own free will have [re]nted from you this day | 5. אני מרצוני [ח]כרת המך היום את |
| 6. the field which is my re[n]tal in Ayr | 6. העפר שהוא שלי בח:כרתי בעיר |
| 7. Nakhsh which I hold as a tenant from Simeon, the Nasia of Israel. | 7. נחש שחכרת משמעון נסיא ישראל |
| 8. This field I have rented from you this day | 8. [א]ת עפר הלז חכרתי המך מן היום |
| 9. until the end of this side of the <i>Shemithah</i> , producing years | 9. עד סוף ערב השמטה שהם שנים |
| 10. complete, years of evaluation, five of tenancy; | 10. שלמות שני [מ]כסה חמש תחכיר |
| 11. [that I wi]ll deliver to you in [Her]odium: wheat, | 11. [שאה] א מודד לך ב [הר]ודיס חנשין |
| 12. [of good and pure quality,] th[ree kor]s and a lethekeh, | 12. [יפות ונקיות] שלו[שת כור]ין ולתך |
| 13. [from which a 10th part of the tithe] of these | 13. [מעסרת מעסרת] ת אלה |
| 14. [you will deliver to the silo of the treasury.] And [I am obli]gated | 14. [שתהא שוקל על גג האוצר] ו[נק]ים |
| 15. [in regard of this matter thusly]." | 15. [עלי לעמת ככה] |
| 16. [Yahudah ben Rabah, in person.] | 16. [יהודה בן רבא על נפשה] |
| 17. [Simeon ben Kosiba, by dicta- tion.] | 17. [שמעון בן כוסבא מן מאמרה] |

9. until the end of the eve of *Shemithah*, which are years

10. full, [fi]scal years, five, of tenancy;

11. [that I wi]ll deliver to you in [Her]odium: wheat,

12. [of good and pure quality,] th[ree kor]s and a *lethekeh*,

13. [of which a tenth part of the tithe] of these

14. [you will deliver to the silo of the treasury.] And [I am obli]gated

15. [in regard of this matter thusly]

16. [Yehudah ben Raba', in person]

17. [Shim'on ben Kosba', by dictation.]

Lines 8–10 can more flowingly be translated as, “This field I have rented from you this day until this side of the *Shemitah* (year of release, i.e., the seventh year, the Sabbath year),⁵ an evaluation of 5 complete producing years of tenancy.” Combined with this statement is the opening remark that the document was published, “On the 20th of Shebat (Jan./Feb.) in Year 2 of the Redemption of Israel by Simeon ben Kosiba.”

Wacholder calculates that, contrary to what is stated, these documents point to “five years, six months, and ten days” and not to “five full years.”⁶ Wacholder arrives at this conclusion because he has presumed that the Sabbath year started with the 1st of Tishri. His conclusion is inaccurate for several reasons.

To begin with, the contract clearly spells out the fact that the rental was to last only “five complete producing years of tenancy,” not 5½ years. Also, coins from this period prove that during the Bar Kochba revolt the Jews used the 1st of Nisan as the beginning of their year, not Tishri.⁷

The Bar Kochba revolt was predicated upon the hope of bringing back lost Jewish glory. Not only had the Jews intended on rebuilding the Temple, but they brought back into use the ancient palaeo-Hebrew alphabet, the 1st of Nisan as the beginning of their year, and the practice of keeping the Sabbath years—all apparently stripped away from them by the Romans upon the collapse of the First Revolt in 70 C.E.

The leader of this Judaeen revolt against the Roman Empire was a man called Simeon ben Kosiba (Kosibah, Koziba, etc.), also known as Simeon bar Kochba (Kokhbah, Kokhba, Kochebas, etc.). It makes little sense that those involved in the Second Jewish Revolt (which the men participating in the rental contracts, including Simeon ben Kosiba himself, certainly were)—whose effort was to bring back lost Jewish glory—would determine their contracts by anything less than a 1st of Abib (Nisan) year as commanded by the Torah.

The contract can only be understood in one of two ways: (1) it either began on the 20th of Shebat in the 2nd year of the redemption of Israel and was to continue until the 20th of Shebat 5 years later; or (2) it was understood that the 1st of the year was at hand and that the contract, concluded on the 20th of Shebat, was to take effect on the 1st of Nisan and end 5 years later on the eve of that same date.⁸

Regardless of which way one understands the 5 complete years, the contract points to Nisan 1 as the beginning of the year. The date Shebat 20, which would occur 5 years later, would also lay just “on this side” of (or about 40 days away from) the beginning of the next Sabbath year. What is important

⁵ See above Chap. XIV, ns. 2 and 3.

⁶ HUCA, 44, p. 179.

⁷ IEJ, 21.1, pp. 39–46.

⁸ Since the 20th of Shebat was only about 40 days away from the first day of the new year, a 1st of Nisan understanding for the year system is the most probable. All that could have been accomplished before the end of the present year, anyway, was some late planting, which would have been of little significance for a wheat crop. As we shall later show, the present year was in fact a Jubilee (Chap. XXX, pp. 398–401).

for our study is the fact that the beginning of the next Sabbath year in these contracts was just 5 complete years after “Year 2 of the Redemption of Israel.” The key to dating the Sabbath year of these contracts is to correctly pinpoint which year represents “Year 2 of the Redemption of Israel.” To accomplish this task we must closely examine the chronology of the Second Revolt.

The Second Revolt

Those who adhere to System “B” give two different views about when the Bar Kochba revolt started. Milik, who correctly reads the document but tries to make it conform to a Tishri (Sept./Oct.) year, starts the revolt in the year 131/132 C.E., Tishri reckoning.⁹ Yet Milik’s view is now generally set aside. Those after Milik, like Baruch Kanael, recognized that the year during the Second Revolt actually began with the 1st of Nisan (April). They date the 1st year to 132/133 C.E., Nisan reckoning, yet insist on a Tishri beginning for the Sabbath year itself.¹⁰ Those holding to System “B,” as a result, conclude that the year 133/134 C.E., Nisan (March/April) reckoning, was the 2nd year of the revolt of all Judaea. Yet the upcoming Sabbath year mentioned by these documents from Wadi Murabba’at are made to belong to 138/139 C.E., Tishri (Sept./Oct.) reckoning, as found on Zuckermann’s chart.¹¹

Wacholder, who professes System “C,” also makes the 1st year of the revolt 132/133 C.E., Nisan reckoning, and as with the others begins the Sabbath year with Tishri.¹² Yet unlike those of System “B,” Wacholder makes Shebat 20 fall at the end of the Nisan year 133/134 C.E. (i.e., in Feb. of 134). He concludes that the 5-year period mentioned in the contract points to Tishri 1, 139 C.E. as the beginning of the next expected Sabbath year.

System “D” makes Year 2 of the redemption equal 133/134 C.E. and the next Sabbath year 139/140 C.E., Nisan reckoning.

System “A” demands that the upcoming Sabbath year mentioned in these contracts begins on the 1st of Nisan in 140 C.E. Therefore, the 2nd year of the redemption of Israel would equal 134/135 C.E., Nisan reckoning.

We must next examine the two most important historical notices of this war (during which time the contracts in question were composed): those from Eusebius and Dio. Eusebius reports the war and its conclusion as follows:

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

⁹ DTJD, p. 125.

¹⁰ IEJ, 21.1, pp. 39–46.

¹¹ TSCJ, p. 61.

¹² HUCA, 44, pp. 176–179.

at that time led by a certain Bar Kochabas, 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 18TH YEAR of the reign of Hadrian in Beth Thera, 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 then commanded that by a legal decree and ordinances the whole nation should be absolutely prevented from entering from thenceforth 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 honor of the reigning emperor Aelius Hadrian was called Aelia.¹³

Dio's *Roman History* tells this story as follows:

At Jerusalem he (Hadrian) founded a city in place of the one which had been razed to the ground (i.e., in 70 C.E.), naming it Aelia Capitolina, and on the site of the Temple of the deity (Yahweh) he raised a new temple to Dios (Jupiter/Zeus).¹⁴ This brought on a war of no slight importance nor of brief duration, for the Jews deemed it intolerable that alien nations should be settled in their city and alien 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 would reject them and they themselves could thus have the use of them; but WHEN HE WENT AWAY, THEY OPENLY REVOLTED. To be sure, they did not dare try conclusions

¹³ Eusebius, *H.E.*, 4:6.

¹⁴ That Hadrian began to build the city of Aelia Capitolina prior to the outbreak of the Bar Kochba revolt is demonstrated by an Aelia Capitolina coin of Hadrian's found among a hoard of Bar Kochba coins from the northern region of the Judean desert (JCST, pp. 92f).

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 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 JUDAEA 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 could 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 any one 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. 50 of their most important outposts and 985 of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. 580,000 men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate, a result of which people 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 their 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."¹⁵

¹⁵ Dio, 69:12–14.

Dating the Second Revolt

When did the first year of the revolt by “all Judaea” actually begin? Only by this date would the Jews begin publishing coins by the revolt. For Systems “B,” “C,” or “D” to work, the revolt by all Judaea must have begun in the spring of 132 C.E.; but System “A” demands its commencement with the spring of 133 C.E. To solve this dispute, the records for the Second Revolt must be closely examined.

The beginning and ending years for the Second Jewish Revolt are found in the works of Eusebius. In Jerome’s version of the *Chronicorum Canonum* of Eusebius, the beginning of the revolt is dated to the 16th year of Hadrian.¹⁶ He further dates the end of the revolt to the 18th year of Hadrian.¹⁷ In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius writes that “up to the siege of the Jews by Hadrian the successions of the bishops (of Jerusalem) were 15 in number.” After naming these 15 bishops, he adds that, “The war reached its height in the 18th year of the reign of Hadrian in Beth Thera, which is a strong citadel not very far from Jerusalem.”¹⁸

Hadrian came to power on August 10, 117 C.E.¹⁹ Yet we do not know which year system was utilized by Ariston of Pella, the source used by Eusebius. Pella was a Jewish region located in Peraea, on the east side of the Jordan, opposite Beth-Shean. Yet just before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., thousands of Jewish Christians left Jerusalem and settled in Pella.²⁰ That Eusebius, a devout Christian born in Palestine, would have used a Jewish Christian source would be quite in keeping with his methods. If that were the case, it is very likely that Hadrian’s year was judged by the ancient Judean method, i.e., using Nisan 1 reckoning.

Only three possible dating systems are applicable for dating Hadrian’s 16th and 18th years if any of our four possible Sabbath-cycle systems are to work.

- If the Roman *dies imperii* was used, then Hadrian’s 1st year would extend from August 10, 117 until August 10, 118 C.E.
The 16th year would extend from August 10, 132 until August 10, 133 C.E.
The 18th year would run from August 10, 134 until August 10, 135 C.E.
- If the Macedonian-Seleucid year system was used then Hadrian’s 1st year would run from October, 117 until October, 118 C.E.
The 16th year would extend from October, 132 until October, 133 C.E.
The 18th year would run from October, 134 until October, 135 C.E.

¹⁶ Helm, *Chronik*, p. 200, 282F:17–24.

¹⁷ Helm, *Chronik*, p. 201, 283F:9–14.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *H.E.*, 4:5–6.

¹⁹ Spartianus, *Had.*, 4:6–7; cf. Ptolemy, *Can.*, the last year being the 460th of the Greek Era.

²⁰ Eusebius, *H.E.*, 3:5.

- If Ariston of Pella was a Judaeen or Judaeen Christian and used the old Judaeen system, then Hadrian's 1st year was from Nisan of 118 until Nisan of 119 C.E.

The 16th year of Hadrian would be Nisan, 133 until Nisan, 134 C.E.

The 18th year, therefore, would be from Nisan, 135 until Nisan, 136 C.E.

Our next source of evidence for dating the Bar Kochba revolt comes from the Seder Olam. This text, written only a few decades after the revolt, gives us the following information:

From the conflict with Asvarus (Varus) until the conflict with Vespasian: 80 years, while the Temple existed. From the conflict with Vespasian until . . . the conflict with Quietus: 52 years. From the conflict with Quietus until the war of Ben Kozibah (Kochba): 16 years.²¹

The Judaeen conflict, which caused the Roman general Vespasian to become involved, began with the First Revolt of the Jews against Rome. This conflict flared up during the month of Artemisius (Iyyar; i.e., April/May), in the 12th year of Nero, being the spring of 66 C.E.²² Technically, Vespasian did not actually invade Judaea until the spring of the following year, i.e., 67 C.E.²³ Yet it is clear that the Seder Olam refers to the war itself.

From the beginning of the conflict which came to involve Vespasian until the end of the conflict with Quietus was 52 years, i.e., the years 66/67 to 117/118 C.E., Nisan reckoning. This date is correct. Towards the end of the reign of Trajan, the Emperor suspected that the Jews in Mesopotamia would attack the inhabitants there and ordered Lusius Quietus to clean them out of the province. Quietus organized a force and murdered a great multitude of the Jews, and "for this reform was appointed governor of Judaea."²⁴ These events are said by Eusebius to have taken place in the 18th year of Trajan (116 C.E.).²⁵ In turn, his appointment as governor of Judaea brought about unrest in Judaea. Spartianus, the biographer of emperor Hadrian, points out that upon Hadrian's succession to the Roman throne (Aug., 117 C.E.) the Jews of Palestine were in a state of revolt.²⁶

The trouble in Palestine, therefore, occurred after the calamity which took place in Mesopotamia. As the result of the oppression of the Jews in Judaea by Quietus, emperor Hadrian recalled Quietus and later executed him.²⁷ The conflict with Quietus, accordingly, ended shortly after Hadrian came to the throne in August of the Jewish year 117/118 C.E., Nisan reckoning.

²¹ S.O., 30; and see App. N. Also see the Hebrew text of the סדר עולם (Seder Olam) in MJC, 2, p. 66; SORC, 2, p. 547, 3, pp. 441f; also given in HJP, 1, p. 534, n. 92.

²² Jos., Wars, 2:14:4.

²³ See Chap. XXVII, pp. 361–364.

²⁴ Eusebius, H.E., 4:2.

²⁵ Helm, Chronik, p. 196, 278F:18–23.

²⁶ Spartianus, Hadr., 5:2.

²⁷ Spartianus, Hadr., 5:8, 7:2.

From the end of the conflict with Quietus until the beginning of the Bar Kochba war was 16 years: i.e., from the year 118/119 C.E. to the year 133/134 C.E., Nisan reckoning. It is of no little consequence that the 16 years mentioned in the Seder Olam would equal the 16th year of Hadrian, which thereby confirms the date given by Ariston of Pella, as recorded by Eusebius, for the beginning of the Bar Kochba revolt. Once again the year 133/134 C.E., Nisan reckoning, is indicated as the beginning of the Second Revolt.

Finally, in all the best manuscripts of the Seder Olam "the war of Ben Kozibah (Bar Kochba) was 2½ years" in length.²⁸ Since the war began within the 16th year after the conflict with Quietus, 2½ years more brings us to the 18th year. The dates reported by Eusebius (from Ariston of Pella), which begins the war in the 16th year of Hadrian and ends it in his 18th year, are thereby confirmed.

The Bar Kochba war began in the spring of the year. This fact is proven by a document from this period dated: "On the 1st of Iyyar, Year 1 of the Redemption of Israel by Simeon Bar Kosiba, נשיא (Nashia; Prince)²⁹ of Israel."³⁰ Since Iyyar (April/May) is only the 2nd month of the Jewish year, it is clear that this document was composed very shortly after, if not immediately after, the formal beginning of hostilities for all Judaea.

Evidence also exists for the month in which the rebel fortress at Beth Thera and the city of Jerusalem fell to the Romans, which marks the end of the 2½ years of conflict. The Mishnah informs us that "Beth Thor (Beth Thera) was captured and the City (Jerusalem) was plowed up" on the 9th of Ab (July/Aug.).³¹

It is now known that Emperor Hadrian's second acclamation as imperator took place sometime between April and December of 135 C.E.³² This acclamation was as a direct result of his victory in Judaea.³³ This detail fits very well with the Mishnah's report that Beth Thera was overthrown in the month of Ab, the 5th month of the Jewish year. This information confirms that, regardless of which year system is used, the fall of Beth Thera and Jerusalem occurred in the month of Ab in the year 135 C.E. On this point all can agree. Since the war ended near the middle of the year of 135/136 C.E., the beginning of the war, 2½ years earlier, must be dated on or very near the beginning of the year 133/134 C.E., Nisan 1 reckoning.

Conclusion

Based upon all the possible ways of dating the reign of Hadrian, the beginning of the revolt, which took place in the 16th year of Hadrian, could not have occurred before August 10 of 132 C.E., the Roman *dies imperii* for his 16th year.

²⁸ SORC, 2, p. 547, 30:81.

²⁹ There are two forms of this title, נשיא (Nashia) and נסיא (Nasia), see SEC, Heb. #5387, "an exalted one, i.e. a king or sheik"; HEL, p. 174, "chief . . . chief of a tribe among the Israelites . . . prince."

³⁰ IEJ, 12.3/4, p. 249; IEJ, 21.1, p. 39, n. 6, p. 41, n. 15.

³¹ Taan., 4:6.

³² JQR, 34.1, pp. 61–63.

³³ Ibid.

Further, the war did not officially start for all of Judaea until the spring, confirmed by a document mentioning the 1st of Iyyar (April/May) in “Year 1 of the Redemption of Israel.” Therefore the 1st year of the revolt of all Judaea was 133/134 C.E., Nisan reckoning.³⁴ As shall be demonstrated as we proceed in this examination of the Bar Kochba war, there was an earlier local conflict that had begun in late 131/132 C.E. but it did not spread to all Judaea until the beginning of the Sabbath year of 133/134 C.E., Nisan reckoning. The evidence will also leave little room for doubt that Bar Kochba was officially recognized and the war was officially declared for all Judaea against Rome on, or very shortly after, Nisan (March/April) 1, 133 C.E.

The Judaeans would not consider it Hadrian’s 16th year until Nisan 1 of 133 C.E., which further supports this year as the beginning of the revolt. Even if we use the Roman system and date the years of Hadrian’s reign from August to August, the 1st of Iyyar—which represents roughly the beginning of the revolt, in the 1st year of the era of the Redemption of Israel—still must fall in the spring of 133 C.E. Since the Jews used a Nisan year at that time, there is no other conclusion except that the year 133/134 C.E. was for them the beginning of the war (Chart I).

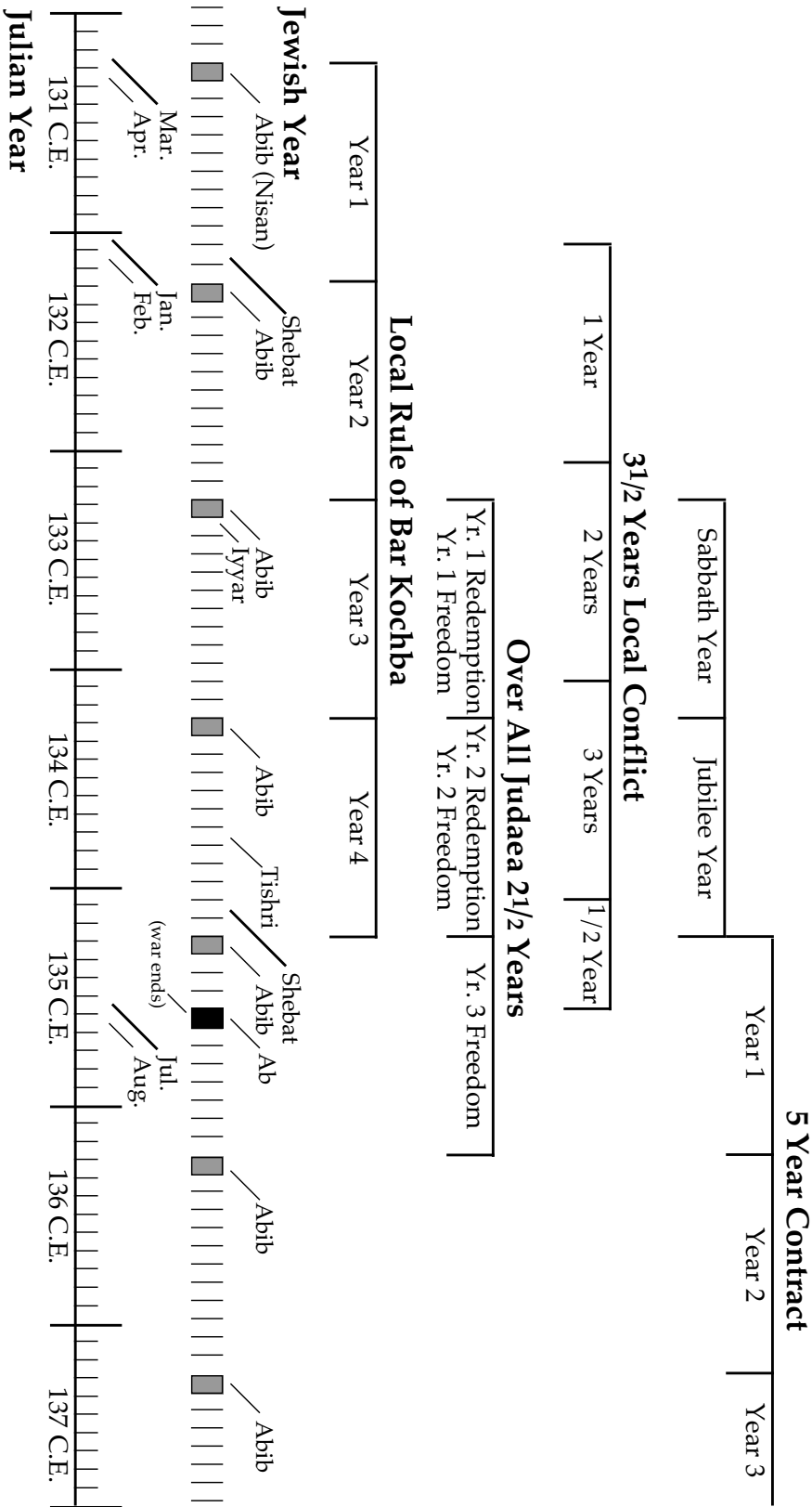
Based upon this data, it is clear that the year 134/135 C.E., Nisan reckoning, would be the 2nd year of the revolt by all Judaea. That being the case, the 20th day of the month of Shebat, on which day the rental contracts mentioning the Sabbath year were composed, would belong to the latter part of that year (Feb., 135 C.E.).

The “5 complete producing years of tenancy,” therefore, could not end before Shebat 20 of the year 139/140 C.E., Nisan reckoning, or about February, 140 C.E. The Sabbath year which followed only 40 days hence, as a result, would start with the 1st of Nisan in 140 C.E. A Sabbath year for 140/141 C.E., Nisan reckoning, conforms perfectly with the System “A” cycle (see Chart C). We therefore have one more confirmation that System “A” is the true and correct Sabbath cycle.

³⁴ Joseph Jacobs correctly regards the year 133 C.E. as the official beginning of the revolt and 135 C.E. as the fall of Beth Thera (Bethar) (JE, 4, p. 71).

CHART I

The Chronology of the Bar Kochba Revolt



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