Chapter XXXII

"Year 4" of the Redemption of Israel

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

Our last item of evidence comes from a document found at Murabba'at and dated "Tishri 21, Year 4 of the Redemption of Israel."[1] This land deed has caused much confusion because the advocates of Systems "B," "C," and "D" contend that, since it is dated by an era of the war, it proves that the war for all Judaea must have lasted well into the 4th year, thereby confirming that the war had been 3½ years long.

Rather than providing evidence for Systems "B" through "D," this document actually serves as a paradox and a contradiction.

All agree, for example, that Beth Thera fell on Ab (July/Aug.) 9 of 135 C.E. and that this date was, for all intents and purposes, the end of the war. Yet Tishri (Nov./Oct.) 21 of that year would be 2½ months beyond the fall of Beth Thera even if the war lasted 3½ years. That the Jews would continue to date by an era of a war that had disastrously failed as if it was "business as usual" makes no sense. Recognizing this flaw, the advocates for a 3½ year war are left with explaining away the ramifications of the very document they cling to as proof.

Kanael (System "B"), for example, tries to rationalize the implications of this document by holding out the possibility that "the scribe erred," mistakenly beginning a new year with Tishri of "Year 3" of the revolt.[2] But if the scribe erred with this it would have been just as possible for him to have incorrectly written "Year 4" instead of, let us surmise, "Year 2." Another possibility, Kanael argues, is that, "After the fall of Bethther, some of the insurgents retreated finally to caves, including those in which the above-mentioned documents were found." He adds, "in such out of the way spots, the use of the era Of the Redemption of Israel appears to have continued, even though the war essentially was over."[3]

Wacholder (System "C"), who does not believe that the scribe erred, likewise holds that this document "may have been composed in a provincial town, whose scribe continued to date according [to] the era of 'the Redemption of Israel in Jerusalem' even after the fall of the Holy City."[4]

Nevertheless, logically speaking, it would make no sense even for remnants from the conflict to continue to date documents by an era of a failed revolt now months passed. Further, the document deals with a man and his

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1 DTJD, 2, no. 30, pp. 144f; IEJ, 21.1, p. 45.
2 IEJ, 21.1, p. 45, n. 42.
3 Ibid., p. 45.
4 HUCA, 44, p. 179, n. 96.

wife and their ownership of a piece of property. This hardly seems a topic for men hiding out in caves wishing to continue an effort in a lost war whose messiah was already dead. Further, the caves of Murabba'at, where the "year 4" deed was found, is near Bethlehem, not exactly as "out of the way" as Kanael and Wacholder would lead us to believe. This region would most certainly have been under Roman control after the fall of Beth Thera. Neither should we doubt that among the first places to come under the iron boot of the Romans would have been the home territory of Bar Kochba, no doubt the region where this deed was relevant.

The Year of Redemption

The inconsistency of interpreting this document as belonging to the 4th year of the era of the revolt for all Judaea is further buttressed by a close examination of the caption, "Year 4 of the Redemption of Israel." This heading is clearly not appropriate for the final period of the Second Revolt. Even Kanael was forced to admit, "The fact that the document of the Year Four revived the era Of the Redemption of Israel, even after Bar Kokhba's faction had abandoned it in the Year Three, is quite surprising."[5] It not only is surprising, it is totally inconsistent with the facts.

The era "of the Redemption of Israel" is only in accord with the coins and documents from the first two years of the Second Revolt for all Judaea. Proof is provided by comparing the records of the First Revolt (66–70 C.E.) with those of the Second Revolt. For example, Kanael discusses the change in the coin inscriptions from "Year Three....Freedom of Zion" in the 3rd year of the First Revolt (68/69 C.E.) to "Year Four....Redemption of Zion" in the 4th year of the First Revolt (69/70 C.E.). He writes:

> The date "year four of the *redemption* of Zion" seems to form a contrast with the former era dated to the "*freedom* of Zion." Redemption seems to infer Messianic hopes current among the adherents of Bar Gioras, inspired by the fact that after the assassination of Nero several Emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian) followed each other in rapid succession. The feeling was strong in Judea that the Roman Empire was crumbling to pieces as divine punishment for its assault on Judea. The era "Freedom of Zion" had probably implied only political freedom.[6]
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> In the opinion of the present writer, Bar Gioras succeeded in seizing the reins of government in that year ⟦69 C.E.⟧, because his movement was messianic,

5 IEJ, 21.1, pp. 44f, n. 38.
6 BA, 26.2, p. 59.

> riding the crest of a wave of messianic enthusiasm which had swept the Jews in the year 69. . . . The era of reckoning used on his coins "Year Four....of the redemption of Zion" in place of the preceding "Year Three....freedom of Zion," throws light on the differences between Simon and John; John strove only for political freedom, while Bar Gioras stood at the head of a Messianic movement; hence his coins bear the inscription "redemption of Zion." We need not emphasize that *redemption* in this context means vastly more than *freedom*, the former being religious and Messianic while the latter mainly political.[7]

Meanwhile, during the Second Revolt, coins and documents also underwent a similar change. During the 1st year the legend "Year 1 of the Redemption of Israel" appears on both coins and documents. Towards the end of that year, we also find a document dated, "On the 10th of Shebat, Year 1 of the Freedom of Israel."[8] In the 2nd year we find, "Year 2 of the Redemption of Israel" on documents written by the supporters of Bar Kochba but on the coins published by the Sages and other officials, "Year 2 of the Freedom of Israel."[9] In the 3rd year, on the other hand, the legend on the coins became "of the Freedom of Jerusalem" and corresponded with the phrase "Year 3 of the Freedom of Jerusalem" on documents.[10] The phrase "of the Redemption of" no longer appeared.

Kanael concludes, and correctly so, that sometime during "Year 2" of the revolt, in order for Bar Kochba to maintain political power, he was forced to compromise with those rabbis and other Jews who, from the latter part of the 1st year of the revolt for all Judaea, did not recognize him as the messiah but whose support he needed:

> It would follow that at the time of the great assembly in Jerusalem, Bar Kokhba agreed formally to relinquish the title of *Nasi* and Eleazar that of (*High*) *Priest*. Consequently, the supporters of Bar Kokhba abandoned the era *Of the Redemption of Israel,* which clearly had messianic connotations. The Bar Kokhba faction agreed to the formal changes reflected in the coins of the second and third years of the revolt in order to preserve national unity.[11]

The term "Redemption," therefore, is only properly used in relationship with a messianic movement. Bar Kochba's people had abandoned this label

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7 BASOR, 129, pp. 19 and 20.
8 DTJD, 2, no. 23, p. 122.
9 AJ, pp. 60f; IEJ, 21.1, pp. 41.
10 AJ, pp. 62f; IEJ, 21.1, p. 45.
11 IEJ, 21.1, p. 44, cf. pp. 41–44.

at some point during the 2nd year of the revolt by all Judaea and the movement became one built upon a political rather than messianic intent. If the document in question belonged to "Year 4" of the Second Revolt over all of Judaea, why would the phrase "Redemption of Israel" reappear over 2 months after Bar Kochba had been executed and some 2 years after the term "Redemption" had been dropped and the movement had been altered from a messianic into a political quest for freedom?

That this document could not belong to a 4th year of the revolt of all Judaea is also supported by the fact that there are no other documents or coins known which are also dated to the 4th year of such an era. Indeed, as we have already seen, and despite the claims to the contrary, neither are there any known documents dated beyond the month of Ab in the 3rd year of the era of the Second Revolt by all Judaea. In fact, the key to separating these two methods of dating Bar Kochba rests with the coins, which reflect only the dating of the revolt as it pertains to all of Judaea (i.e., beginning with the Sabbath year of 133/134 C.E.).

If, for the sake of argument, one were to accept the construed evidence that some documents were dated beyond the month of Ab (July/Aug.) in the 3rd year of the revolt for all Judaea, then he must contend with the fact that the land deed of "Tishri 21, Year 4 of the Redemption of Israel" was composed several months beyond the latest known of these, i.e., the document suggested as belonging to the month of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.) of "Year 3 of the Freedom of Jerusalem."[12] This would still leave a gap of some 11 months unaccounted for in which no documents or coins were published. This fact alone makes the document in question an anomaly and should have immediately thrown suspicion upon the theory that it belonged to the late stages of the Bar Kochba period.

This evidence forces us to conclude that the document in question was not referring to the 4th year of the era of the revolt of all Judaea, since the term "Redemption" is improper after the 2nd year of that era.

The Two Eras for Bar Kochba (Kosiba)

There is only one proper solution to this problem: the document dated to the 21st day of Tishri in "Year 4" of the Redemption of Israel actually belongs to a different era than the coins and documents counted from the time when all of Judaea joined the revolt in 133 C.E. It is in fact based upon the same reckoning as the land deeds discussed in our last chapter,[13] which counted into the 3rd year of Bar Kochba (Kosiba) at En-gedi. This alternate era began when Bar Kochba won independence from the Romans for his local district in late 131 C.E. The 4th year of this era is equal to the 2nd year of the era of the revolt for all of Judaea (i.e., 134 C.E.), when the term "Redemption" was still relevant (see Chart I).

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12 See above Chap. XXXI, pp. 413–416.
13 Ibid.

The "Year 4" date, therefore, does not reflect a scribal error. As we have already seen, documents dated to the 3rd year of Bar Kochba's local rule over En-gedi mention his title as Nasia (Nashia, Nasi), a title which was dropped after the 2nd year of the era of the revolt by all Judaea. If Bar Kochba was beginning his 3rd year as a local king when he was nominated as leader of all Judaea—i.e., at the start of the 1st year of the era of the revolt by all Judaea—all of the details come together.

One must not become confused by the fact that "Year 4" is associated with the term "Redemption." This coupling does not mean that "Year 4 of the Redemption" must follow those coins and documents dated to "Year 1" and "Year 2 of the Redemption."

The coins and documents of the First Revolt demonstrate this principle for us. In the First Revolt "Year 1" through "Year 3" were referred to as the "Freedom of Zion," to be followed by "Year 4" and the "Redemption of Zion." The term Redemption was applicable because only in "Year 4" of that era did the Jews believe that the revolt was inspired by the messiah. "Year 4" means only the year of the revolt.

The same is true in the Second Revolt. Years 1 through 3 of the local revolt were simply labeled, "of Simeon ben Kosiba, Nasia of Israel, at En-gedi." The 4th year of this era also used the "Redemption of Israel" because in that year, being the 2nd year of the revolt for all of Judaea, Bar Kochba was still officially recognized as the messiah by his followers. Therefore, it is perfectly natural that "Year 4" of one era is equal to "Year 2" of another and that both would be labeled "the Redemption of Israel."

In the document mentioning "Year 4" of the Redemption of Israel, loyal followers of Bar Kochba from his home district, who saw Bar Kochba both as their messiah as well as their ruler, dated a deed to the 4th year of their king's local rule, which also happened to be the 2nd year of the Redemption as counted from the time when Bar Kochba became the acknowledged leader over all Judaea.

Bar Kochba had first won local autonomy from the Romans before he became "the messiah" for all of Judaea. His victories and his military prowess convinced men like Rabbi Akiba to proclaim him the messiah and soon "all Judaea had been stirred up" against the Romans in a revolt under his leadership.

From this perspective, the fourth year was counted from the year 131/132 C.E. by many in Bar Kochba's home regions, which was the first to openly revolt and win independence. But for all of Judaea, which did not openly revolt until Nisan of 133 C.E., the "Redemption of Israel" was not appropriate until Bar Kochba was recognized as leader of the entire nation.

A probable scenario for this unusual document is suggested by its date, Tishri 21. The 21st of Tishri (Sept./Oct.) was the last non-Sabbath day for the Festival of Tabernacles of the year 134 C.E., falling on a Sunday night, Monday day (Sept. 27/28).

This festival in 134 C.E., lasting from the 15th to the 22nd of Tishri,[14] would represent the last "great assembly" of the Jewish people at Jerusalem before

14 Lev., 23:34–44; Num., 29:12–40.

the Roman onslaught took its heaviest toll. Although the spring festivals of Passover and Pentecost in the year 135 C.E. were yet to occur, they fell in the last 4 months of the war when the Jews suffered their worst losses. In the year 134 C.E. the great assembly spoken of by Kanael was held. It was then that the agreement was reached between the supporters of Bar Kochba and the other Jews who did not support him as the messiah that Bar Kochba would remain leader of the revolt but would relinquish his title as Nasia.[15]

Late in this same year (134/135 C.E., Nisan reckoning) the messianic term "Redemption" was also dropped by the supporters of Bar Kochba and the political expression "Freedom" was everywhere adopted. Tishri 21, therefore, would have been the last time that the term "Redemption" would have been officially used in contracts by Bar Kochba's supporters, and this during a high festival celebration. Die-hard supporters, in a last expression of their faith, tied together the 4th year of Bar Kochba's local rule with the messianic expression "Redemption."

The lack of documents dated to "Year 5" of the local uprising is not surprising. There seems little reason to doubt that by the early spring of 135 C.E. Hadrian's army had recaptured most of the outlying districts surrounding the toparchy of Jerusalem. The massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews by this time destroyed many of the followers of Bar Kochba, those believing he was the messiah being the first to sacrifice themselves against the Romans. Few were left in Bar Kochba's home district to resist, let alone carry on normal business practices and to continue dating documents by an era of a king now confined to his fortress at Beth Thera and the Jerusalem district.

Meanwhile, most Jews did not recognize Bar Kochba as the leader of all Judaea or as the messiah until the revolt broke out and gained popular support in the Sabbath year of 133/134 C.E., being the 3rd year of Bar Kochba's local rule. At that time, the Judaean nation began to date coins and documents by the era of the war for all of Judaea. Only in this way is "Year 4" on the document in question accounted for as well as the use of the messianic expression "the Redemption of Israel," which was abandoned, along with the title "Nasia," after "Year 2" of the era of the revolt of all Judaea. The following is an accounting of these two eras (cf. Chart I):

- 131/132 C.E. (Nisan reckoning), beginning in or about February of 132 C.E.: "Year 1" of Simeon bar Kochba at En-gedi.
- 132/133 C.E. (Nisan reckoning): "Year 2" of Simeon bar Kochba at En-gedi.
- 133/134 C.E. (Nisan reckoning): "Year 3" of Simeon bar Kochba at En-gedi = "Year 1" of the Redemption of Israel (over all Judaea) and, by Shebat (Jan./Feb.) of this year, "Year 1" of the Freedom of Israel over all Judaea.

15 IEJ, 21.1, p. 44.

- 134/135 C.E. (Nisan reckoning): "Year 4" of the Redemption of Israel (at En-gedi and Herodium) = "Year 2" of the Freedom of Israel (over all Judaea) and "Year 2" of the Redemption of Israel (over all Judaea until the great assembly in Jerusalem, when Bar Kochba relinquished his title as Nasia).
- 135/136 C.E. (Nisan reckoning, until the 9th of Ab, 135 C.E., when Beth Thera falls): "Year 3" of the Freedom of Jerusalem.

The assumption made by the proponents of Systems "B," "C," and "D," that the deed in question belongs to the 4th year of the era of the Second Revolt of all Judaea, is without any sound foundation. The main reason that this false construct has remained alive is the need for some kind of evidence that would allow for the Second Revolt to have continued into the 4th year of the revolt of all Judaea in an effort to push the Sabbath year back 1 year. Yet without any such evidence it behooves us to drop the theory of a 3½ year war for all Judaea and return to the strong testimony that the length of the conflict for all Judaea actually lasted only about 2½ years.

Considering these details, it is very possible that the earliest source for the claim that the Bar Kochba revolt lasted 3½ years for all of Judaea may have been based upon Bar Kochba's original revolt in his home district. This figure was then misapplied as the period for the revolt of all Judaea.

Counting back from Ab (July/Aug.) 9 of 135 C.E., we find that Bar Kochba would have achieved independence in about Shebat (Jan./Feb.) of the year 131/132 C.E. (Nisan reckoning), which fits the time frame mentioned by Dio for the first phase of the revolt shortly after Hadrian left Syria. Confusing the two different eras used in the war, some of the later rabbis forced their interpretation of Daniel, 9:27, about the messiah being cut off in the middle of the week (i.e., 3½ days = 3½ years), on the events of the Second Revolt.

The period of 3½ years, on the other hand, only counted the years of the revolt of all Judaea, which began with the opening of the Sabbath year of 133/134 C.E. The coins were dated in accordance with this method.

Conclusion

A detailed analysis of the evidence has shown that Bar Kochba, as a local ruler, openly revolted from the Romans in or about February of 132 C.E., successfully winning local autonomy. Stirred up by his valor and success, all Judaea joined Bar Kochba in the spring of the Sabbath year 133/134 C.E., Nisan reckoning.

Bar Kochba, acclaimed by many as the Jewish messiah, then held Jerusalem and the fortress at Beth Thera during these 2½ years. In the first 2 years of the revolt of all Judaea (133/134 and 134/135 C.E.), Bar Kochba was able to retain his title as Nasia and the era was counted by years of the redemption because of his status as the messiah. Yet with losses mounting and the Romans gradually gaining the upper hand, in the latter part of the 2nd year of his rule over all Judaea, and in an effort to maintain support, Bar Kochba

gave up his title of Nasia and lost his official status as the messiah. The movement was altered from a redemption to solely a political quest for freedom. On the 9th of Ab in the year 135 C.E., in the 3rd year of the revolt for all Judaea, the Romans successfully took Beth Thera and executed Bar Kochba, effectively ending the war and any Jewish hopes for freedom.

The rental contracts from the end of the 2nd year of the Bar Kochba revolt for all Judaea (134/135 C.E.)[16] confirm that 5 years hence was the eve of a new Sabbath year. Therefore, the next Sabbath year was 140/141 C.E., Nisan reckoning. This fact being established, it is also true that the 1st year of the revolt (133/134 C.E., Nisan reckoning) was a Sabbath year and the 2nd year (134/135 C.E., Nisan reckoning) was a Jubilee, which is in perfect accord with the System "A" Sabbath and Jubilee cycle (see Chart C). This important moment was chosen by Bar Kochba and his followers as the prophesied time that the messiah would deliver Jerusalem from the hands of its pagan enemies.

16 Discussed in Chap. XXIX.