

## HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

### “The Jewish-Roman Wars” (Deuteronomy 28:62-66; Hosea 3:4-5)

The Lord had given the Promised Land to the Jewish people as an everlasting possession (cf. Gen. 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8). However, the occupation of that land in any era of Jewish history was conditional upon their obedience to the Covenant. This land was a blessing to them, as it was “*an exceeding good land*” (Num. 14:7); a “*blessed*” land (Deut. 33:13); and “*the glory of all lands*” (Ezek. 20:6). The Lord promised that He personally always has His eye on this land, “*A land which the LORD thy God careth for: the eyes of the LORD thy God are always upon it*” (Deut. 11:12a).

After 70 AD the Jews were scattered throughout the Gentile world in an amazing diaspora. The Greek word *diaspora* means ‘a scattering of seeds’ and this word is used to describe the scattering of the Israelites to other countries from 70 AD. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD by Titus, tension existed between the scattered exile Jewish communities and the Roman authorities. Further conflict erupted within four decades between them. This took place mainly in the area of Judea and in some diaspora Jewish communities like Alexandria in Egypt. These conflicts led to two significant wars:

- (1) **Kitos War (115–117 AD)**
- (2) **Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 AD)**

#### BACKGROUND PROMISES

There are a number of biblical promises that we must always keep in mind as we study this period of Jewish history up to the present day. We must never forget that God has written in advance in the Bible the history of the Jewish people. Their unique history is an awesome demonstration of God at work, sometimes miraculously, sometimes providentially, in the affairs of men and nations.

The Jews were warned repeatedly that they would be scattered throughout the Gentile nations for their unfaithfulness,

**And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because thou wouldest not obey the voice of the LORD thy God. And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it. And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life. (Deut. 28:62-66; cf. Lev. 26:33)**

**For the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and**

**without teraphim: Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and shall fear the LORD and his goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3:4-5)**

The scattering of the Jews in 70 AD until the present day is irrefutable and unambiguous evidence from the Torah that the Jews are under the judgment of God. This latest exile has been the longest and the greatest in the history of these ancient people. For instance, in 1600 it was reported that only 1% of Jews lived in the borders of the ancient land of Israel, whilst the remaining 99% lived in other countries throughout the world. The partial regathering in the twentieth century in the present state of Israel has not undone all of that widespread dispersion. A Jewish Christian, Ron Elkin pointed out the difficulty this exile has for the present generation of Jews,

Some Jewish people have developed a theology to explain this history of suffering. They believe that the Jews are destined to be a suffering people as a way of atoning for the sins of past generations of Jews, and in some sense for the world. The Jewish Scriptures never teach that God intended for Israel to be a suffering people, He promised prosperity and protection for obedience, and suffering and destruction for disobedience. Our suffering comes as a result of our rebellion against God, our rejection of His Word and his Son.

Elkin goes on to pointedly observe,

If the teachings of Rabbinic Judaism is what God wants Israel to obey, then why has He continued the curses of Deuteronomy 28-30 (please read these chapters yourself)? Instead of looking outside of Judaism for our enemies (i.e. Christians), maybe we need to examine our own relationship with God. While it is true that a great injustice was done against the Jewish people by “Christians” who themselves were being disobedient to Jesus' teachings, the root of our problem has been our national and individual rebellion against God.

Another factor in this dispersion is the promise that they will be left as a remnant, “*And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude...*” (Deut. 28:62) Today the Jewish people make only a fraction of 1% of the world's population. There are only 14 million Jews alive today (around 0.2 % of the World's Population). Indeed, there are virtually no more Jews in the world today than there were 2,000 years ago. Races like the Chinese have rapidly increased in the last two millennia but the Jews have remained a tiny minority. This is repeatedly prophesied in Scripture, “*And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you.*” (Deut. 4:27)

Despite this incredible scattering of the Jews, God has explicitly promised that He would preserve the Jews as a distinct race, “*...the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations*” (Num. 23:9b; cf. Isa. 66:22; Jer. 30:11). No tribe or race in history has remained a distinct people group outside of a national homeland for thousands of years like the Jewish people. The Jews have survived because God has ordained it. We must never forget that, “*Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.*” (Psa. 121:4) The reviled and persecuted Jew has stood at the graveside of every ancient persecutor. The God of Israel has promised,

**And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the LORD their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the LORD. (Lev. 26:44-45).**

The Jews have also been under the yoke of persecution. The hatred and persecution of the Jewish people down the centuries seen once again in the recent rising tide of anti-Semitism in the world today cannot be explained by naturalistic causes like economic envy, racism, or geopolitical movements. The consistency, intensity, and universal nature of this points to a supernatural cause of the hatred. No other national group has experienced such disaster as the Jews. This should not surprise believers as the Bible promised this phenomenon, “*And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind*” (Deut. 28:65). Romans 9-11 warn NT Christians never to rejoice in the misfortunes of the Jews.

Throughout the two millennia, the scattered remnant of Jews has held fast to the ancient promises of a future re-gathering such as Isaiah 11:11-16, Ezekiel 39:27-29 or Hosea 3:4-5. The Passover Seder meal was always concluded with the fervent hope and promise of, “next year in Jerusalem!” This cherished hope is expressed in the song Ha-Tikvah (The Hope), which was the anthem of the Zionist movement,

*As long as deep within the heart  
The Jewish soul is warm  
And toward the edges of the east  
An eye to Zion looks  
Our hope is not yet lost,  
The hope of two thousand years  
To be a free people in our own land  
In the land of Zion and Jerusalem.  
To be a free people in our own land  
In the land of Zion and Jerusalem.*

The Lord promised that not only would these ancient people be restored to their ancient land but there would also come a time when they would dwell there in peace,

**And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen, neither shall the beast of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will raise up for them a plant of renown, and they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of the heathen any more. Thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith the LORD God. (Ezekiel 34:28-30; cf. Ezek. 28:25-26)**

The prophecies of the Bible about the Jews show the God of the Bible to be true and trustworthy. The promises are being fulfilled right in front of our eyes. It is so obvious and clear to see. God's Words will never pass away, "*Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.*" (Luke 21:33) That is why the Jews are often referred to as "God's Prophetic Timepiece."

### **KITOS WAR (115–117 AD)**

This is sometimes referred to as the second of the Jewish–Roman wars. It broke out under the rule of the Emperor Trajan (98 - 117 AD). Trajan's main armies were forced to engage the Parthians over a conflict in Armenia. The Parthians ruled over an Eastern Empire that stretched from Afghanistan to Pakistan. It was an ancient Persian Empire centred in modern Iran.

There was a widespread feeling among the Jews that the end of ages was around the corner and that a Messianic figure would arise to overthrow the Roman conquerors. This apocalyptic view was famously seen in the writings of the Essenes at Qumran. There was also a reported dispute between the Jews and Trajan over a proposed attempt to rebuild the second Temple. This was the background to the outbreak of the Kitos War.

Some of the exiled Jews saw Rome's engagement in this war with the Parthians as their opportunity to revolt. This rebellion began by Jewish forces attacking isolated garrisons of Roman soldiers in scattered parts like Cyrenaica (a region of modern Libya). A Jewish rebel leader, Lukuas or Andreas, who claimed to be a king, massacred Romans and Greeks in the Cyrenaica region and then moved to conquer Alexandria in Egypt. Widespread ethnic cleansing took place in these regions. Lukuas' forces destroyed many Roman temples and idols. This insurrection inspired other cities with substantial Jewish populations to revolt including those in Egypt and Judea. Two brothers with Roman names, Pappus and Julius led the revolt in Judea. They were headquartered in the city of Lod or Lydda (mentioned in 1 Chron. 8:12; Ezra 2:33; Neh. 7:37; 11:35), which is a city 10 miles southeast of modern Tel Aviv.

This rebellion took many legions to defeat. It took a number of years of fierce conflict. Eventually the Romans did so led by the Roman general Lusius Quietus, (the title "Kitos" is a derivation of the name Quietus). Lukuas eventually fled to Judea. The Romans laid siege to Lod and, after they conquered it, they massacred its inhabitants. The scale of violence by the Romans was comparable to the violence inflicted by Titus on Jerusalem in 70 AD.

### **BAR KOKHBA REVOLT (132–136 AD)**

After the end of the Kitos War, the situation between the Jews and the Romans remained tense. The Roman legion effectively abandoned the gains they had made in Mesopotamia against the Parthians and retreated to the port of Caesarea Maritima in Judaea. This brought a measure of stability to the borders of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

After the assassination of Trajan, Hadrian became emperor from 117 to 138 AD. He was initially favourable towards the Jews and even contemplated permitting the temple to be erected in a newly rebuilt Jerusalem. Josephus records that the Holy City was still in ruins at this time, "Jerusalem....was so thoroughly razed to the ground by those that demolished it to its foundations, that nothing was left that could ever persuade visitors that it had once been a place of habitation." The Jews excitedly waited with hope that both the temple and the Holy City would now be rebuilt.

However, several elements are believed to have contributed to the rebellion known as the Bar Kokhba revolt. One Jewish tradition is that Hadrian was persuaded by a Samaritan not to rebuild the temple, as it would lead to sedition. Instead Hadrian decided to build a new Roman city there and dedicated a new shrine to Jupiter on the Temple Mount. The site of the old city of Jerusalem was ploughed up to remove all ancient links to the past and the new city was renamed *Aelia Capitolina* (the name “Aelia” came from Hadrian’s family name, *Aelius*, while “Capitolina” meant that the new city was dedicated to the god, *Jupiter Capitolinus*). This resulted in a deep sense of betrayal and religious insult to the Jews.

In the midst of the tension, a rising star emerged to unite the Jewish people named Simon Bar Kokhba. Rabbinical legends tell many stories of his physical strength, intelligence, religious piety, and charisma. Certainly he was regarded as a possible Messiah. He had active support of most of the prominent rabbis. The leading rabbi of that day, Akiva ben Joseph (c50-135 AD) took the Messianic verse,

**I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. (Numbers 24:17)**

and applied it to Simon. Hence he was named Simon Bar Kokhba (literally “Simon son of star”), as the name “Kokhba,” means “star.”

Simon Bar Kokhba argued that the only way to deal with the Roman invaders was by force. He gathered a large army of almost 350,000. Even some Gentiles joined his force, which wanted to see the Romans overthrown. This army tried to learn from some of the mistakes of the 70 AD rebellion. They took control of Jerusalem for a time but internal dissent eventually contributed to their downfall. The Romans were forced to gather many legions from around the Empire to confront the rebellion. Simon Bar Kokhba’s army even operated using guerilla tactics and inflicted heavy casualties with surprise ambush attacks. These guerillas utilised underground tunnels and caves to hide in. The bitter and bloody conflict lasted for three years before the revolt was brutally crushed in the summer of 135 AD. Roman losses were significant.

The final confrontation happened at the fortress of Betar, southwest of Jerusalem. After a long siege, Bar Kokhba and his forces fell to the Romans. Simon Bar Kokhba and many of the leading Generals and Rabbis were publicly executed after being brutally tortured. The results of the revolt were catastrophic. The Roman historian, Cassius Dio claimed that 580,000 Jews were killed in the overall war, and over a 1,000 towns and villages were completely destroyed. Many more Jews died of famine and disease. The Jerusalem Talmud claims that the Romans “went on killing until their horses were submerged in blood to their nostrils.” Hadrian ordered the dead to be publicly burned rather than buried as one final insult.

The consequences for Judaism were profound. Many trace the worldwide diaspora we see in subsequent centuries of Jews scattered throughout the four corners of the world to this moment. Even today the majority of Jews in the world are outside the State of Israel. The remnant of Jewish people became vagabonds and strangers wandering the earth. Millions eventually settled in the Middle East, North Africa, Russia, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the USA. Jerome reported that there was so many Jews sold into slavery that the price of slaves became less than the price of a horse.

Jerusalem and Judea effectively lost its central place of significance in Jewish life for most of the next two millennia. Hadrian banned the Jews from effectively practicing their religion. He

hoped by eradicating their faith and customs that this would put down any hope of a future rebellion. This was Hadrian's Final Solution for the Jewish problem! The emperor even changed the name of the region from Israel or Judea to *Syria Palaestina* (hence, believed to be the origin of the name Palestine today). He forbade mention of the name Jerusalem. Hebrew scholars were executed, the Hebrew calendar was forbidden, Circumcision and Torah instruction was outlawed, Jews were banned from Jerusalem, and there was an extensive depopulation of Judean Jewish communities. Only Galilee, Beth Shean, and the Golan region retained some Jewish pockets of population. Greek speakers were brought to the new city of Jerusalem to populate it. It was the most ruthless and comprehensive attempt to eradicate Judaism from the face of the earth.

There was also a significant power shift within Judaism. The diaspora Jews now became the centre of Jewish life and faith. Initially, the Babylonian Jewish community became the most influential representation of traditional Judaism. Instead of becoming a visible political national movement, Judaism now transformed itself into a spiritual movement. The compilation of the written Jerusalem Talmud and the subsequent rise of the power of Rabbis would be part of that. There would be no more Simon Bar Kokhbas! This would remain this way until the rise of Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century as a political movement to restore a Jewish homeland in Palestine.