DRY BONES IN THE JUDEAN DESERT:
THE MESSIAH OF EPHRAIM, EZEKIEL 37, AND THE
POST-REVOLUTIONARY FOLLOWERS OF BAR KOKHBA

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1. Introduction

The second Jewish revolt against Rome ended in tragedy for the revolutionaries. Rabbinic legend retains the stories of the painful end of the revolt itself, as well as echoes of the subsequent castigation of its leader, Simon Bar Kokhba.1 He is called ben Koziba, liar or disappoenter, to combat the effects of the appellation bar Kokhba/ben Kokhav, son of the star. As Aharon Oppenheimer puts it,

the name Bar Kokhba is ... the nickname, apparently suggested by Rabbi Akiba when citing the verse “A star rises from Jacob” [Num 24.17; cited in y. Taan 4:8, 68d] customarily applied to leaders [see CD 7:19-20]. Some scholars distinguish between the forms Bar Kosva and Bar Kozva, arguing that the original name was Bar Kosva, and just as he was called Bar Kokhba when there was a desire to stress his messianic royalty, so he was called Bar Kozva when the hopes in him were disappointed.2

However, this figure and the revolt which he led remained largely the stuff of these rabbinic legends until the discovery of several caves that

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1 Two passages where open opposition is expressed are in y. Taan. 4:8, 68d, paralleled in Lam. Rab. 2:5 (ed. Buber 51a), where Johanan b. Torta replies to Rabbi Aqiba’s messianic proclamation of Bar Kokhba with “Aqiba, grass will grow in your cheeks and the Son of David will not come”. The second immediately follows the first, telling the story of the fall of Bethar, the headquarters of Bar Kokhba’s campaign. Rabbi Eleazar, despairing in the final days of the siege, is killed by an angry kick from Bar Kokhba, and his death precipitates the fall of the city. Bar Kokhba is killed, but not by man—he is found dead with a venomous snake wrapped around his leg (which, presumably, had been the one with which he killed Eleazar).

had served as refuges for the revolutionaries. These caves yielded many artefacts and documents which have given us a great deal of insight into the revolt, the people who carried it out, and especially about its last days.\textsuperscript{3} Frustratingly, beyond clarifying Bar Kokhba's name, this material has not given us much specific information about him, nor about the beliefs of those who followed him.\textsuperscript{4}

There may, however, be a corollary between some of the archaeological remains in the Nahal Hever/Wadi Ḥabra and an interesting tradition in rabbinic literature concerning the so-called Messiah of Ephraim, which may, in turn, provide some insight into these same archaeological remains.

2. The Layers of Tradition Concerning the Messiah of Ephraim

The story of the Messiah of Ephraim is an interesting one in rabbinic literature. Once hailed as a "curious aberration,"\textsuperscript{5} it is now clear that this messianic figure was simply one of many such figures in second Temple Judaism.\textsuperscript{6} There are two basic forms of the Messiah of Ephraim tradition: one where he is a victorious heroic warrior,\textsuperscript{7} and another where he is slain in battle.\textsuperscript{8} In addition, two other layers of

\textsuperscript{3} This material is available in P. Benoit, J.T. Milik and R. de Vaux, \textit{Les Grottes de Murabbaṭ} (2 vols.; DJD 2; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) 1.29-48, and the several reports in \textit{IEJ} 11-12 (1961-62), as well as other sources dealing with more specific texts or archaeological artefacts, too numerous to list.


\textsuperscript{6} Cf., for instance, the two messiahs (one from Levi, one from Judah) in the \textit{T. 12 Patr.} (\textit{T. Reub.} 6:7-8, 10-12; \textit{T. Levi} 18:1-4; \textit{T. Jud.} 24; \textit{T. Levi} 8:11-19), or the two messiahs at Qumran (cf. 1QSa ii 20 for the Aaronic messiah; 4Q285 for the Davidic, and possibly even a prophetic messiah, expected along with the other two in 1QS ix 11 [for a further discussion of these three figures, see G. Vermes, \textit{The Dead Sea Scrolls in English} (4th edn.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995)]).

\textsuperscript{7} In exposition of the vision of the four craftsmen in Zech 2:3ff.: \textit{b. Sukk.} 52b; \textit{Pesiq. Rab. Kah.} 5.9 (ed. Buber 51a); \textit{Pesiq. R.} 15 (ed. Friedman 75a); \textit{Cant. Rab.} 2.13; \textit{Num. Rab.} 14.1. Other passages, such as \textit{Tg. Ps.-J.} Exod 40:11; \textit{Tg. Ket.} Cant. 4:5; 7:4; and \textit{Midr. Ps.} 87:6, speak of two messiahs: one ben David, one ben Ephraim. Another text which does not mention the Messiah of Ephraim by name, but seems to refer to him, or to the tradition concerning him is \textit{Gen. Rab.} 75:5-6. For discussion of these sources, see J. Heinemann, "The Messiah of Ephraim and the Premature Exodus of the Tribe of Ephraim", \textit{HTR} 68 (1975) 1-15.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{B. Sukk.} 52a (two passages) and the marginal reading in Codex Reichalianus of \textit{Tg. Zech} 12:10.