

This paper adduces astronomical data to shed new light on the bloody Jewish revolt that broke out under Hadrian in the summer of 132, lasted 3+ years, and ended in a massive reduction of the Jewish population in Judaea, which lost its identity by being renamed Syria Palaestina. The leader of the revolt was one Shim'on Bar Kosiba, who has come to be better known as Bar Kokhba ("Son of the Star"). The change in name is attributed in Talmudic sources to Rabbi Akiba, who purportedly read Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:17 ("A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel") as foretelling the leader of the revolt. Coins issued by the rebels depict a star above the architrave of the Temple in Jerusalem, and this symbol has commonly been interpreted as complementing the Messianic message conveyed by the name "Bar Kokhba." This paper argues 1) that the name ("Son of the Star") and the star on his coinage do indeed attest Messianic hopes at the time of the revolt, and 2) that the catalyst for those Messianic hopes, contributing to the timing of the revolt itself, was a comet that appeared early in 132. That comet is attested by East Asian sources (Ho nos. 97 & 98) and is most likely identical with the "new star" that is said to have been seen after the drowning death of Hadrian's favorite Antinous in late Oct. 130 (so Ramsey 2006.165). The position assigned to the comet by Chinese sources is in perfect harmony with the placement of the constellation "Antinous" by Ptolemy, writing c. 150.

Two problems will be addressed. First, Mildenberg (1980, 1984) and Schäfer (2003) have cast doubt on the commonly accepted views that Bar Kokhba made Messianic claims and that the star on his coinage advertised that status. I grant that Bar Kosiba himself probably did not present himself as the Messiah, or even make use of the name "Bar Kokhba," since the name "Bar Kokhba" is not found on coins or in any contemporary documents recovered from the Judean desert. However, all Christian sources, including the contemporary witness Justin Martyr (*Apol.* 1.31.6), refer to the rebel leader as Bar Kokhba. Furthermore, the Talmudic sources, albeit late and somewhat confused, clearly point to raised hopes in the coming of Messiah at the time of the revolt. Second, to date no explanation has been offered for what caused the "star" to be added to rebel coins but not until early in the revolt's second year (133), and why after having been consistently displayed on all tetradrachms until near the end of the revolt, the "star" was replaced on obverse dies 16 and 17 by a wavy line (Mildenberg 1984.43-44).

Recently, Robert McIvor (2005) has argued that a "guest star" (nova?) observed from China in December, 125 (Ho. no. 94) played a role in inspiring the propaganda reflected in the name Kokhba and in the star on the coinage. The comet of 132, however, provides a far better candidate because it was observed a mere five months before Kosiba launched his revolt. Presumably time was needed for the initial success of the revolt to inspire Akiba's prophecy concerning the imminent arrival of God's Anointed One, and so the symbolism of the star was not adopted on coinage until early in year two, only to be dropped toward the end of the revolt when it was near collapse and hopes for a Messiah had faded.