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Esler, Philip F ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4889-4889 (2026) Babatha, En-Gedi and the Bar Kokhba revolt: A new approach using evidence from the Cave of Letters. Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture, 56 (1). pp. 18-32. doi:10.1177/01461079261420732

Official URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/01461079261420732
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01461079261420732
EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/15119

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BABATHA, EN-GEDI AND THE BAR KOKHBA REVOLT: A NEW APPROACH USING EVIDENCE FROM THE CAVE OF LETTERS

Abstract

This article presents a new approach to when and where the Bar Kokhba Revolt began and to its aftermath by adopting a microhistorical approach to evidence, both papyri and objects, left by Judean fugitives from the Romans, especially Babatha, daughter of Shim‘on, in the Cave of Letters in Naḥal Ḥever. The central argument is based on P. Yadin 27 of 19th August 132 CE to the effect that it is not a receipt but a draft receipt, meaning that Babatha never received the three months' maintenance for her son that is specified in it. That she sought the third month's payment in advance and other factors suggest that the Revolt had broken out in the week before and that she was in a hurry to join it. An array of factors suggests that Bar Kokhba began his revolt with the capture of En-Gedi, which was Babatha's destination when she left her hometown of Maoza, in Arabia on the south eastern corner of the southern basin of the Dead Sea. At the end of the Revolt she was in the cave in Naḥal Ḥever but three men long believed to be there (Yehonathan, son of Bay‘an, Mesabalah, son of Shim‘on, and Eliezer, son of Shemuel) were not.

Introduction

The revolt against Roman rule in Judea in the second century CE unfortunately attracted no historian to record its course like Josephus in relation to the First Revolt. It was led by a man who named himself Shim‘on Bar/Ben Kosiba. People afterwards also called him Bar Kokhba so as to identify him with the messianic figure in Numbers 24:17: "A star (*kōkāb*, Hebrew; *kōkbā*, Aramaic) will come forth out of Jacob." But to comprehend how his revolt began, developed and was quashed by the Romans we must rely on a miscellany of evidence: three brief references in Greco-Roman historical sources (Cassius Dio 69.121-2; Sulpicius Severus, *Historia Sacra* 2.31; *Historia Augusta* 14.2); archaeological remains, especially from the caves in which the rebels hid (see Eshel, Kloner and Boaz 2015 and Kloner and Boaz 2003); studies of the coins they minted and their findspots (see Mildenberg 1984 and Kaufman 2000-2002); papyri from caves around the Dead Sea, including letters from Bar Kokhba himself, the first two in 1952 in Wadi Murabba‘at (Benoit, Milik and De Vaux, O. P. 1961: 159-163) and thirteen more in 1960 in a cave in Naḥal Ḥever (Yadin et al. 2002: 279-348); legal documents drafted during the revolt referring to Bar Kokhba in their dating formulae; inscriptions mentioning Hadrian and personnel in the Roman army (see, for example, see Lehmann and Holum 2000); rabbinic traditions (Schäfer 2003b); and some references by Christian writers (see Mor 2016: 153, 270-271, 399, 471), notably Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260/265 – 339 CE) and also Jerome (c.342/347 – 420 CE) (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.6.1-4; Jerome, *Contra Rufinum,* 3.31; *Homily* 88; *In Isaiah* 2.12-17; *In Jeremiah*, 4.31, 6.31; *In Ezekiel* 24; *In Joel* 1; *In Daniel* 9; *In Habakkuk* 1.2, 12-14; *In Zachariam*, 3). The interpretation of much of this evidence is hotly disputed. Accordingly, debate flourishes on the causes of the revolt, its outbreak, its course, its conclusion and its aftermath (see Mor 2016).

This article is concerned only with two of these issues, the outbreak of the revolt, encompassing when and where it began, and its aftermath. To mount a new argument on these issues, I will utilise evidence from the cave in Naḥal Ḥever excavated by Yigael Yadin in 1960 and 1961 and often called "the Cave of Letters" because letters from Bar Kokhba were found there. That evidence will comprise documents from the Babatha papyri,

especially P.Yadin 27 (from 19th August 132 CE, her last dated document), and the objects found with her papyri, as well as the objects found with the Bar Kokhba letters in a separate place in the same chamber of the cave.

Specifically, I will argue, firstly, that Bar Kokhba launched his revolt with the capture of En-Gedi in the period 11th to 17th August 132 CE. Secondly, I will maintain that while Babatha, having travelled to En-Gedi on or shortly after 19th August 132 CE, was in the Cave of Letters after the revolt had been crushed, Yehonathan, son of Bay'an, Mesabalah, son of Shim'on, and Eliezer, son of Shemuel—who since Yadin's discoveries have been universally regarded as present in the cave—were not. Eliezer entrusted legal documents to Babatha for safe-keeping, while Yehonathan, or (less probably) Mesabalah, entrusted Bar Kokhba's letters to an unknown woman. All three men probably then left En-Gedi to take part in Bar Kokhba's final confrontation with the Romans at Betar. As a result, this article will show the potential of a microhistorical approach for investigating major historical questions via a focus on their small objects; that is, as Magnússon and Szijártó (2013: 5) put it, of a quest "for answers to large questions in small places."

The Starting Date of the Bar Kokhba Revolt

Mary Smallwood observed, without references (1976: 441), that "It is generally accepted that the revolt broke out in the spring of 132." It is, nevertheless, widely accepted that the revolt began in 132 CE. This was the view of Emile Schürer et al. (1973: 542), while Peter Schäfer (and other contributors in his edited volume of 2003) assume 132 CE as the year of the outbreak, as does Mor (2016). Cassius Dio dates the outbreak to after the visit of Hadrian to Jerusalem (*Roman History*, 69.12.1-2), which occurred in 130 CE (Birley 1997: 231-234). Hadrian, travelling south, was in Gaza in July 130 CE (Birely 1997: 234). More specifically, Eusebius records in his *Chronicle* that the revolt broke out in Hadrian's sixteenth year (Helm 1956: 200-201; Yadin 1971: 258). This date may have come from the *Chronographies* of the early third century CE writer, Julius Africanus, a Christian Palestinian writer probably born in Aelia Capitolina, which Eusebius used (Horbury 2014: 20). Hadrian became emperor on 11th August 117 CE (Birley 1997: 77). His sixteenth year was thus 11th August 132 CE to 10th August 133 CE. Numismatics provide solid evidence for the revolt being underway in or after 132 CE—in the form of a coin from Gaza bearing two dates, 131 and 132 CE (in our terms), over-stamped by a Bar Kokhba mint (Mildenberg 1948/1949 and Plate 3, 1980: 318-319). The best evidence that the revolt began in 132 CE, however, comes from P. Mur 24, a collection of related lease documents in Hebrew (Benoit O. P. et al. 1961: 122-134). The leases are dated 20th Shevat in "Year 2 of the Liberation of Israel," and are for a five year term, which ends the day before the (next) Sabbatical Year. Manfred Lehmann (1963: 56) demonstrated that since the next Sabbatical Year fell in 138/139, the year of the document was January/February 134. Using a useful online calendar conversion tool (https://www.fourmilab.ch/documents/calendar/), we know that in 134 CE 20th Shevat fell on 1st February. Reverting to Year Two of the revolt, in 133 CE 20th Shevat fell on 13th January. Unless the revolt started in January 133 CE, which no one appears to have suggested, its outbreak must therefore have been in 132 CE.

Yet there is little agreement concerning the month in 132 CE in which the revolt began. As just noted, Smallwood preferred spring but without citing sources. Hanan Eshel claimed (2003: 93) that Shim'on ben Kosiba came to power in the summer of 132 CE, so June, July or August, although the only evidence he offered was the reference in Eusebius's *Chronicle* to the revolt beginning in Hadrian's sixteenth year. This would only apply if Eshel had in

mind the period from 11th to 31st August 132 CE. Yet later in the same essay he proposed (2003: 105) that Bar Kokhba began to rule between 20 Sivan and the beginning of Av in 132 CE, that is, between 21st May and 30th June 132 CE. One solid factor pointing to later in the year has been raised, however. Mildenberg (1980: 318) referred to a second Gaza coin dated 132/133 that had been overstruck in a Bar Kokhba mint and commented that, since unrestricted flow of coins across the mountains from the coast to the mountains of Judaea was 'hardly possible after the outbreak of the war,' it 'therefore seems unlikely that the hostilities could have begun in the spring of 132; the early autumn of 132 seems more probable.' This is reasonable but would not rule out a date in late summer, in August for example. This brings us to P.Yadin 27 (Lewis 1989: 116-117), one of the thirty five documents Babatha, daughter of Shim'on, left hidden in a crevice in the floor of a cave in Naḥal Ḥever, near En-Gedi, in 135 or 136 CE. Babatha came from Maoza, a town on the south eastern side of the southern basin of the Dead Sea, which was initially in Nabatea but then, from 106 CE, in the Roman province of Arabia.

P.Yadin 27 and the Starting Date of the Bar Kokhba Revolt

Fresh analysis of P.Yadin 27, which is dated 19th August 132 CE and drafted in Maoza,. reveals significant but overlooked evidence for when the Bar Kokhba revolt began. Before considering its text, it is necessary to recount the events in Babatha's life which preceded its composition. Sometime in 123 or early 124 CE Babatha's first husband, Jesus, died, leaving her with a young son (also called Jesus), to whom he bequeathed cash and other property. Early in 124 CE the council of Petra, the metropolis of Arabia, appointed two guardians, Abdobdas, son of Illouthas (a Nabatean), and John, son of Eglas (a Judean) as the boy's guardians to manage his estate, as we know from P.Yadin 12, the council minute of their appointment (Lewis 1989: 47-50). They then began paying Babatha two denarii per month for her son's maintenance. In the second half of 124 CE Babatha complained in a petition to the Roman governor of Arabia (P.Yadin 13; Lewis 1989: 51-53) about the insufficiency of this amount. Her unhappiness with her son's guardians continued into 125 CE and in October of that year she summoned one of the guardians, John, son of Egla, to attend the governor's court in Petra for not having paid maintenance (P.Yadin 14 and 15; Lewis 1989: 54-64). Interestingly, the other guardian, Abdobdas, son of Illouthas, had done so, with a receipt (*apochē*) having been issued to him. This strongly suggests that the estate was split between the two guardians, with each having a duty to provide Babatha with one denarius per month for the boy, upon presentation by Babatha of a receipt. In her affidavit (P.Yadin 15; Lewis 1989: 58-64) Babatha sought to end this problem by seeking to have control of her son's inheritance, to which she would add her own funds and the interest on the combined sum would enable her son to have the upbringing he deserved.

We hear nothing more of this matter in her documents for seven years. Then we have P.Yadin 27, of 19th August 132. Here is my translation of the text, which was written in Greek by the scribe Germanos, except for the italicised section in lines 11-13, which are in Judean Aramaic by Babelis, son of Menaḥem, Babatha's legal guardian for this particular matter. At this point it is worth noting for the argument that follows that P.Yadin 27 refers to three calendars then in use in Arabia: the Roman, the provincial and the Judean (Stern 2024).

1. In the consulship of Gaius Serrius Augurinus and Publius Trebius Sergianus,
2. fourteen days before the kalends of September, according to the new province of Arabia's
3. computation, year twenty-seven, on the first of the month of Gorpiaios, in Maoza,
4. in the district of Zoara. Babathas (*sic*), daughter of Simon, being present with her

guardian and
5. subscribing on her behalf, Babelis, son of Menaḥem, both from the said Ma-
6. oza, to Simon the hunchback, son of John, son of Egla, of the said Maoza, greeting. You having been the second guard-
7. ian appointed …[in place of your father?]… by the council of the Petraians for Jesus,
8. son of Jesus, my orphan son, I have received from you toward the account of subsistence and cloth-
9. ing of the said Jesus, my son, six denarii of silver, (for the period) from the first
10. of the month of Panemus of the said twenty-seventh year until the thirtieth of Gorpiaios,
11. three complete months. *Babatha, daughter of Shim'on, I have received from Shim'on the hunchback, son of*
12. *Yoḥanan, guardian of Yeshu'a, my son, for clothing and food for Yeshu'a, my son, six silver denarii, from the first of Tammuz until*
13. *the thirtieth of Ellul, year twenty-seven, which equals three months. This is what Babelis, son of Menaḥem, wrote*
14. *in relation to ……..*
15. Translation (of the subscription) of Babathas, daughter of Simon: I have received from Simon the hunchback, son of John,
16. guardian of my son Jesus, toward the account of his subsistence and clothing
17. six silver denarii from the first of the month of Panemos until the thirtieth of Gorpiaios, year twenty seven, which are three full months. By her guardian, Babelis, son of Menaḥem.
18. I, Germanos, son of Judah wrote (this).

Before considering the broad nature of this document, we must note the factual situation the document presupposes. Whereas previously Babatha was dealing with two guardians—Abdobdas, son of Illouthas, a Nabatean, and John, son of Eglas, a Judean—she is here dealing with one, namely, Simon the hunchback, son of John, son of Egla. This led Naphtali Lewis to suggest (1989: 116) that "John son of Joseph Eglas had been succeeded by his son Simon in the role of second guardian." This seems likely, with Simon's father having died, or retired from the guardianship. There may have been a transitional period before Simon was appointed. This delay would explain why payment is being requested for three months, when previously payment was being made per month (P.Yadin 13, line 23). Alternatively, perhaps Simon was just late in payment as his father had been before him. That Babatha is looking to Simon for payment at all means that she was unsuccessful in the request in her affidavit of 125 CE (P.Yadin 15) to take over the boy's inheritance and combine it with her own funds.

A further sign of Babatha's failure to get what she wanted from the governor in 125 CE is that it appears the boy is still due the two denarii a month she was then complaining of as being insufficient. On this issue, Tiziana Chiusi has suggested that, since only one guardian is in view here, perhaps the other was also obliged to pay two denarii a month (2005: 116). This seems unlikely. As Kimberley Czajkowski has noted (2017: 50), it would constitute a different arrangement from what Babatha had been suggesting. More fundamentally, however, it would require a return on her son's inheritance twice what was being achieved only seven years earlier. Accordingly, it is more likely that Babatha was looking to Simon to provide the totality of the money due to her son for maintenance. It is not even clear that the other guardian, Abdobdas, son of Illoutha, was still alive at this time. Although Simon is described as "second guardian" (lines 6-7), that could have been a formal title stemming from his appointment that persisted even if the first guardian was dead. Alternatively, Abdobdas

may have stepped back from active guardianship due to age or illness, leaving the responsibility to Simon alone. That Babatha refers to Simon as "guardian of my son Jesus" (line 16), rather than "one of the guardians," suggests that Abdobdas was either dead or inactive in the role. Finally, it is noteworthy that three calendrical systems are employed in the document: the Roman; the local system in the province of Arabia; and the Judean, and I will return to this issue below.

The existence of P.Yadin 27 indicates that Babatha expected Simon to require a receipt from her in return for handing over the money. As noted above, we know that one of the guardians obtained a receipt for payment in 125 CE. That practice had no doubt continued in the seven years thereafter, as Simon would have been informed of it by this father, John, son of Joseph Eglas, when he was serving as a guardian. P.Yadin 27 has certainly been drafted to meet Simon's expectation of a receipt. A competent scribe, Germanos, was employed for this purpose. He methodically set out the date, mentioned Babatha's presence with her guardian, Babelis, recited the appointment of Simon as "second guardian" and specified the three months' maintenance in view. Then Babelis added a summary of the document in Judean Aramaic, which in turn was translated into Greek by Germanos.

This brings us to the broad nature of P.Yadin 27. Hitherto researchers have universally described it as Babatha's receipt for payment of maintenance for her son from John, son of Egla. Thus, according to Lewis (1989: 116), in this document "Babatha acknowledges receipt of three month's maintenance for her orphan son." This meant that "Babatha was here receiving the same amount of money, two denarii a month, that she had years ago complained of as being inadequate" (in P.Yadin 13, lines 23-24, and 15). It is clear that Lewis was interpreting the document as evidence that Babatha had actually received the money. Hannah Cotton (1993: 107) observed that here Babatha "acknowledges the receipt of money from guardians." Tiziana Chiusi also viewed P.Yadin 27 as a receipt for money received (2005: 116). Kimberley Czajkowski stated (2017: 50) that "on 19 August 132 CE, Babatha acknowledged receipt of a maintenance payment from one of Jesus' guardians, Simon the hunchback (P.Yadin 27)." I myself described P.Yadin 27 as a "receipt" to illustrate the existence of receipts in Babatha's setting (*reference withheld in interests of anonymity*). In fact, however, we were all wrong. This view is entirely erroneous, since P.Yadin 27 is not a receipt but a *draft receipt*. Simon the hunchback, son of John, son Egla, did not pay the amount of six denarii mentioned in it, nor did Babatha provide him with a receipt for that amount.

The primary argument for the document being a draft is that it is still in Babatha's possession. If this was the receipt Babatha had prepared to supply to Simon in return for the maintenance, why does she still have it? Faced with this argument, those who take the view that payment was nevertheless made to Babatha would have to argue that P.Yadin 27 was Babatha's "file copy" of the receipt. But such a riposte is untenable. Babatha's keeping an unexecuted and unattested copy of the receipt would have served no useful legal purpose. Once she had received the money, why would she have needed it? In the modern period, people usually keep copies of receipts as proof in relation to income tax liability. But no such liability attached to the money she would, on this argument, have received from Simon. And why would Babatha have paid Germanos to draft an additional copy of the receipt when it would have served no useful, legal purpose? The fact that there are no copies of receipts for any of the payments made by the guardians to her son in the previous eight years among Babatha's archive speaks volumes as to the legal pointlessness of keeping copies of receipts. The only person who needed a receipt was Simon, to prove his payment of the money. But, in addition,

he would not have accepted this document since it is not signed by Babelis on Babatha's behalf and it is not witnessed, as it surely would have been if it had been provided to Simon in return for his payment of the money. He would have rightly demanded this. Why then was P.Yadin 27 among the documents in Babatha's archive? Probably because it served a (fairly trivial) *practical* purpose of providing her with an *aide memoire* of how much Simon owed her if and when she finally returned to Maoza from a period away.

The contents of P.Yadin 27 confirm and take further this argument. The critical factor, unappreciated hitherto (including by myself) is that although the document anticipates payment for three months (from 1st Panemos to 30th Gorpiaios in terms of the provincial calendar and from 1st Tammuz to 30th Ellul in terms of the Judean calendar), in addition to the two previous months it is also requesting payment for the third month *in advance*. That is to say, although the document is dated 1st Gorpiaios (19th August in Roman calendar terms), it seeks payment for the third month, ending on 30th Gorpiaios. This is quite remarkable. In the initial phases of the guardianship payment was being made by the guardians "per month" (*kata mēna*; P.Yadin 13, line 23). But this was surely not payment in advance. Given high mortality rates, the boy could have died in any given month, so why would a guardian not wait until the month's end before handing the money to Babatha?

This factor allows us to develop a realistic scenario for what happened. Babatha, her guardian, Babelis, and the scribe, Germanus, must have gathered at some point on or before 19th August 132 CE to draft the document. Germanus wrote the Greek part and Babelis added his subscription in Aramaic. Babatha and Babelis no doubt hoped that Simon would pay the full amount. They probably met with Germanus and prepared the document without informing Simon in advance. Since he did not in fact hand over the money, it is reasonable to assume that, if he had known in advance what they were planning, he would probably have made his opposition to payment clear to them before they prepared the document. Why would they have expended time and money on its preparation if they knew in advance Simon would decline to pay? We do not know how they brought the matter to Simon's attention (Letting him know by messenger? Going to his house? Meeting him in the market? Etc.). What is clear is that he rejected their attempt to get him to pay maintenance in advance for the month of Gorpiaios (19th August to 16th September).

It seems probable that not only did Simon refuse to pay in advance for Gorpiaios (Elul in the Judean calendar), but he also failed to pay the maintenance already owing for Panemos and Loos (Tammuz and Av in the Judean calendar). If he had been willing to pay for the two months already owing, the present document could have been amended, signed, attested and handed over in return for two months payment. That Babatha kept the document means this did not happen. Even if two months' maintenance were paid, however, it would not undo the fact that Babatha attempted to extract three months' maintenance, with the third month's payment in advance, from Simon on 19th August, and that her attempt failed.

This conclusion bears directly on the starting date of the Second Jewish Revolt. That Babatha presented P.Yadin 27 to Simon, with its audacious bid for a month's maintenance in advance, on the very first day of the month, meaning she did not want to wait another 30 days for payment, suggests she was in a hurry to leave Maoza. She was so determined to leave then that she was willing to abandon her attempt to secure six denarii for her son's maintenance from Simon which she might have obtained if she waited another month (until the end of Gorpiaos). P.Yadin 27 is the latest dated document in her archive. Nothing suggests Babatha was ever present in Maoza after 19th August 132. By integrating these various elements, we

reach the plausible view that on or around 19th August 132 CE Babatha left Maoza to join the Judeans engaged in the revolt, which had by then had already just begun. Thus, we have quite precise evidence for the outbreak of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Correlating this with Eusebius's statement in the *Chronicle*—that the revolt began in Hadrian's sixteenth year, which started on 11th August 132 CE—enables us to pinpoint its commencement to the period from 11th to 17th August 132 CE. This would have allowed two days for the news to reach Babatha, and for her to have the draft receipt prepared and gather the necessary group before approaching Simon in some way on the earliest possible date, 19th August 132 CE. Before proceeding to a consideration of where Babatha went to join the revolt, it is worth considering some factors that help explain her decision to do so.

The Judean Ethnic and Nationalist Sympathies of Babatha, Her Relatives and Friends

There are six areas of evidence for Babatha's allegiance to the ethnic and nationalist aspirations of her people. First, there is insurmountable consideration that she almost certainly ended up in a cave in Naḥal Ḥever with other Judean fugitives from the Romans at the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt and there she was presumably killed or enslaved by them. We know this from her documents and possessions (detailed below) that were found in the Cave of Letters.

Secondly, there is her Aramaic marriage contract with her second husband (P.Yadin 10), which she entered into between 4 December 127 (when, as we know from P.Yadin 16, she was not married to him) and 21 February 128 CE (when, as we know from P.Yadin 17, he was). In P.Yadin 10 Babatha undertook to be a wife "according to the law of Moses and the Judeans" (*kedyn Mosheh veyehudya*; P.Yadin 10, line 5; Yadin et al. 2002: 126). It has, moreover, recently been argued that P.Yadin 10 is actually a copy of Babatha's marriage contract with her first husband, with the date, groom's name and dowry amount changed (Esler 2023). Babatha's repeated use of such a Judean form of marriage contract gains significance from the fact that not all Judean women followed this path. A little later in 128 CE, her own step-daughter, Shelamzion, married her husband, both of them being Judeans, using a contract in Greek that does not mention "Moses" or the "laws of Moses" and states that the groom undertakes to feed and clothe Shelamzion "in accordance with Greek custom" (P.Yadin 18, lines 16, 51; dated 5 April 128 CE), even if there are some Judean features in this document (Oudshoorn 2007: 398-422).

The third indication is that among her possessions found in the Cave of Letters (discussed below) were two bronze jugs, of Roman origin, on which "the images on the base of the handles had been defaced" (Yadin 1962: 232). This indicates Babatha's compliance with the law against images in the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4).

In addition, however, on the basis that one's relatives and friends reflect and have an impact on our attitudes and beliefs, it is worthwhile, fourthly, considering signs of Judean ethnic sympathies among those in her circle. Her second husband, Judah, son of Elazar, who hailed from En-gedi and owned property there (P.Yadin 19; Lewis 1989: 83-87) and in Maoza (P.Yadin 6; Yadin et al. 2002: 257-267) had another wife, Miriam, daughter of Beianos, from En-Gedi, who was probably the sister of a man who was later one of Bar Kokhba's commanders in En-Gedi (see below), Yehonathan, son of Beianos. It is likely that all four En-Gedites shared a commitment to Judean nationalism. Shelamzion, the daughter of Judah and so Babatha's step-daughter, may well have been in the cave with Babatha (see below). The legal documents of Eliezer ben Shemuel, which were found in the same crevice in the

cave as Babatha's possessions, reveal the names of two men from Maoza—Teḥinnah, son of Shim'on, and Allima, son of Yehudah (see P.Yadin 44, line 4 *et passim*; Yadin et al 2002: 42-54)—who were living in En-Gedi during the revolt and who leased land there previously owned by the emperor. They are otherwise unattested, but Babatha may have known them and held similar views on the position of the Judean people vis-à-vis Rome. They may have moved to En-Gedi at the start of the revolt.

Furthermore, fifthly, there is evidence that the scribe Babatha employed to draft P.Yadin 27, Germanos, was also sympathetic to the Judean cause. He was the scribe, writing in Greek, for seven of Babatha's documents. In the first three—P.Yadin 20 (19 June 130 CE), P.Yadin 21 (11 September 130 CE) and P.Yadin 22 (11 September 130 CE)—he describes himself as *Germanos liblarios*, "Germanus, scribe" (with *liblarios* being a Greek form either of the Latin *scriba librarius*, or *libellarius*), but does not add a patronymic. Kimberley Czajkowski has plausibly suggested (2017: 83) that the use of a Latin loanword in Greek for his occupation indicates that he worked in the governor's administration but also "drew up documents for locals in a more independent capacity." She further notes (2017: 83-84) that Germanos does not always use the title *liblarios* and seeks to explain this on the basis that he did not need it in a document headed for the governor's court, only when working for a private client to indicate his status. Yet this view runs up against his use of *liblarios* in P.Yadin 20, a compromise of a dispute which may well have begun in that court (Lewis 1989: 89), and where an elite Roman woman was acting as a supervisor for some of the parties. Also, Czajkowski does not mention a critical factor, namely, the word Germanos employs on the other four documents (all written later than these three), instead of *liblarios*, his patronymic.

Germanos is a form of the Latin name Germanus and, if this was all we knew about the man, we could not have identified his ethnicity. But in all of the other four documents in which his name appears as scribe—P.Yadin 23 (17 November 130 CE), P.Yadin 25 (9 July 131 CE), P.Yadin 26 (9 July 131 CE) and P.Yadin 27 (10 August 132 CE)—he drops *liblarios* and styles himself *Germanos Youdou*, "Germanos, son of Judah," thus making clear his Judean identity. He is, in fact, the only Judean known from this period with the forename Germanos (Ilan 2002: 332). This emphatic shift between 11 September 130 CE and 17 November 130 CE from one consistent style of self-designation linking him to the Roman authorities to another dropping that link and making clear his ethnicity, which his forename would not have revealed, suggests something significant happened relevant to his Judean identity shortly after 11 September 130 CE. A likely cause is the visit of Hadrian to Jerusalem in 130 CE and his creation of the colony of Aelia Capitolina at that time. Hadrian reached Alexandria (via Gaza and Pelusium) in July or August 130 CE (Sijpesteijn 1969), so he could have been in Jerusalem as late as June or even July 130 CE. The strong probability that during this visit to Jerusalem he established there a new city of Aelia Capitolina has long been regarded as one of the causes of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. This was, after all, the reason for the revolt given by Cassius Dio (*Roman History*, LIX 12). Mor (2016: 121-129) doubts Dio on this point, but his reasons are not compelling.

A sixth possible sign of Judean ethnic assertion occurs in P.Yadin 27 on the part of Babelis, Babatha's guardian. As noted above,Three calendrical systems are employed in the document: Roman; the local system in the province of Arabia, which was solar (Stern 2024: 161-162); and the Judean, which was lunar (Stern 2001: 47-48). The question is, why has Babelis, in his Aramaic subscription, used the Judean calendar rather than just transliterating the month names, written in Greek, of the provincial calendar into Aramaic? After all, in line

12 the word he used for "guardian" was *aftrfa*, which is an Aramaised version of the Greek word *epitropos*. His use of Judean month names probably signals increased Judean ethnic sensitivity at a time when he must have known the revolt had started.

En-Gedi: The Place Where the Bar Kokhba Revolt Began

When Babatha left to join the revolt, where did she go, how did she get there and did she go alone? The critical evidence connects Babatha and a number of named Judeans to En-Gedi, since their names appear on documents from the Cave of Letters, located some ten kilometres west of En-Gedi. Babatha is the most well attested of them and virtually all specialists, with one exception (whose position is critiqued below), believe she ended up in the cave at the end of the revolt and, along with other Judeans who had taken refuge there, was killed or captured by the Romans. This view has direct relevance to her destination when she left Maoza on or around 19th August 132 CE, that is, to the place where the Bar Kokhba revolt began.

So, when Babatha left Maoza on or around 19th August 132 CE on an undertaking that would end with her in the cave in Naḥal Ḥever three years later (as argued below), where in Judea did she go? She was an unmarried woman with a son, about eight to ten years old, whom she presumably took with her. It is most unlikely she travelled without adult companions. Possibly Germanos and Babelis travelled with her. Germanos' competence in Greek would have been useful given that some of the rebels were unfamiliar with Aramaic and Hebrew and wrote letters on revolt business in Greek (P.Yadin 52 and 59 ; Yadin et. 2002: 349-366). It is most unlikely, however, that Simon, son of John, who had refused to pay her the maintenance accompanied her. Indeed, her imminent departure to join the revolt may have influenced his decision to refuse payment of the maintenance.

That she went to a place where she had no personal connections to help her, especially with accommodation, is also unlikely. She needed to be able to activate her social networks. A location where one could expect food to be available despite the disruptions of war would also have been desirable. The easier the journey to get there, the better. Among her possessions found in the cave were two sandals, one of which showed signs of a disabled left foot (Yadin 1971: 151-153). Admittedly, a journey by donkey was possible, but if the destination was a town on the Judean shore of the Dead Sea, the easiest way was by boat. The closest place in Judea that satisfied these desiderata was En-Gedi. Prior to the revolt, En-Gedi was "a village of Lord Caesar" (*kōmē Kuriou Kaisaros*; P.Yadin 11, line 1; Lewis 1989: 42), that is, an imperial estate, the private property of the emperor which he nevertheless leased to tenants, while possibly also permitting some land to be owned by others (Cotton 2001). There were many close links between the Judeans of Maoza and En-Gedi (Cotton 2001: 152-154). Babatha's late second husband, who had been active in both En-Gedi and Maoza, must have put her in contact with other Judeans from En-Gedi, and these would have included his nephews' guardian, Jesus son of Besas, from En-Gedi but living in Mazraa, in Arabia (P.Yadin 20, lines 4, 23; Lewis 1989: 91).

En-Gedi was rich in agricultural produce, grown in fields irrigated by springs above it (see below). Since this was summer, the quickest and most comfortable way to get there was by boat, with En-Gedi lying on the western shore of the northern basin of the Dead Sea about fifty kilometres north of Maoza (on the south-eastern corner of the southern basin). With favourable winds the journey would only have taken a day or two. At this time the water level in the Dead Sea was high enough to inundate the sill between the two basins, which constitutes the western end of the Lisan peninsula (Bookman et al. 2004: 568), meaning

direct voyages between places in the two basins were possible. Maoza, a Greek word transliterating the Aramaic word *maḥoza* ("the harbour"), was probably the site of the harbour for nearby Zoara, so she could have sailed from there. Additionally, we know from one of Bar Kokhba's letters that there was a harbour (*maḥoz*) at En-Gedi and he mentions boats used in service of the revolt (Hadas et al. 2005: 301). Thus, the word *maḥoz* appears in the Hebrew letter, P.Yadin 49, line 8, and the word *shefinah* ("boat") in lines 5 and 8 thereof (Yadin et al. 2002: 282). Ancient anchors have been found at En-Gedi (Hadas et al. 2005: 301).

Yet this line of reasoning is predicated upon Babatha having gone off to join the Bar Kokhba Revolt. She certainly ended up in a cave very close to En-Gedi. Yet En-Gedi would not have been Babatha's destination if it was still under Roman control. If the Romans were still there, she would have faced a more taxing journey somewhere else and they would hardly have taken kindly to Judeans passing through to join the rebels. These considerations prompt the thought that En-Gedi was the first place captured by Bar Kokhba and his forces. On this view, Babatha went there at the start of the revolt, lived there until its end, and was finally killed or enslaved by the Romans. A number of considerations allow us to push this hypothesis from possible to probable.

The military case for Bar Kokhba starting with En-Gedi is an extremely strong one. It was a major site for irrigated farming (Hirschfeld 2007: 8-9). Indeed the "vineyards of En-Gedi," which would have required irrigation, are mentioned in Song of Songs 1:14. The town's irrigated plots not only produced edible foods, like dates, grapes, cereals and vegetables, but also the balsam tree. Balsam was an extremely valuable product. Hirschfeld has noted (2007: 10) that "The cultivation of balsam bushes and the sale of their products (perfume and medicines) was the most important source of income of the inhabitants of the Dead Sea region in antiquity." The Judean balsam, high quality dates and the derivatives of both from En-Gedi were commodities of "high value and low or moderate volume and weight" that were exported to urban elites throughout the Roman empire (Rosen and Ben-Yehoshua 2007: 627). According to Josephus (*Bellum Judaicum*, 4.7.2), in the First Jewish Revolt, a Judean rebel force of *Sicarii* from Masada raided En-Gedi, killing over 700 inhabitants and carrying off the ripe fruit. Pliny the Elder wrote (in 77 CE) that, after the Revolt, En-Gedi was, like Jerusalem, a pile of ashes (*Natural History*, 5.73). Bar Kokhba however, was determined to avoid mistakes made in the great revolt seventy years previously. This was most evident in his practice of avoiding direct battles with Romans or getting caught in sieges, opting instead for guerrilla tactics waged from secret underground hiding places. Cassius Dio reported these tactics and they have been confirmed by the discovery of numerous such places by modern archaeology, the so-called "caves of refuge" (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 69.12.3; Kloner and Boaz 2003). Accordingly, Bar Kokhba sensibly decided to utilise the resources available in En-Gedi rather than sacking the town as the *Sicarii* had done. Thus, as early as 1st Iyyar in the first year of the revolt (23rd April 133 CE), Bar Kokhba, through his agents in En-Gedi, leased land to Eliezer ben Shemuel for four years at a rent of 650 denarii per annum (P.Yadin 42; Yadin et al. 2002: 142-149). When we consider that Bar Kokhba no doubt leased many more plots to other tenants in En-Gedi, with the very large sums of money involved flowing to him and not, as previously, to the Romans, we can appreciate just how useful En-Gedi must have been in funding the revolt. En-Gedi, rather than booty, which Mildenberg suggested (1980: 326), may have been the major source of the coins Bar Kokhba minted (by restamping Roman coinage) during the revolt. There is even direct evidence of Bar Kokhba's appreciation of the importance of balsam from En-Gedi in his injunction in an Aramaic letter to two of his agents there: "And (concerning) the spice-garden, let no one come near it"

(P.Yadin 50, lines 12-13; Yadin et al. 2002: 290). In the same letter he directs them to ensure that cattle do not damage the trees (lines 10-11). Bar Kokhba's understanding of En-Gedi's strategic importance for funding his war effort and his early use of it render it likely that it was his initial target. Attacking any other Roman facility, inevitably of less importance than En-Gedi, would have warned the Romans to strengthen its garrison.

The final aspect of this argument is that En-Gedi would probably not have been difficult to capture, because it was neither walled nor on a hill. It was also a long way from the major Roman troop concentrations, with *Legio X Fretensis* based in Jerusalem and *Legio VI Ferrata* at Caparcotna in the Jezreel Valley (Isaac 1992: 279-280, 432-433). Moreover, surprise could have been achieved if Bar Kokhba's forces had arrived by boat. Very probably, however, there was a Roman garrison in the town to contend with. The Romans were certainly in control of En-Gedi on 6th May 124 when P.Yadin 11, a deed of debt, was signed, since the creditor was no other than a centurion of *Cohors I Milliaria Thracum*. A detachment of this cohort was based there, with both its "camp" (*skēnai*) and its "garrison headquarters" (*praisidion*) being mentioned (in lines 18 and 19 respectively), as abutters of a courtyard. A tile stamp from Hebron suggests that was the base of this cohort, which would have comprised approximately 1,000 men led by a tribune (Speidel 1979: 170). En-Gedi would have been too small a place for such a large presence, so that probably only a detachment of one century was stationed there (Speidel 1979: 171). By the time P.Yadin 19 was signed on 16th April 128, however, the location where there had been a camp had now become, as Lewis notes, "an empty lot" (*aurichōron*; P.Yadin 19, line 18). This led him to the view that the "military presence" of four years earlier was "completely gone" (1989: 83). In 1996 Hannah Cotton was also of the view that the fact that tents and the praesidium were listed as abutters in 124 CE (P.Yadin 11) but not in 128 CE (P.Yadin 19) meant that the "detachment of the milliary unit which was stationed in Ein-Gedi moved out between the two dates" (1996: 198). Later Cotton nuanced her view (2001: 149) by taking into account, but then dismissing, the possibility that the detachment, rather than leaving En-Gedi altogether, had "merely changed its location inside the village."

That the Romans, however, would leave so valuable an asset as En-Gedi ungarrisoned was unlikely in the extreme, especially after the unrest at the end of Trajan's reign. Although Smallwood (1976: 422) suggested that the Roman post in En-Gedi may have been established at this time, perhaps it was only strengthened. Cotton noted (2001: 148), but did not further address, the archaeological evidence in En-Gedi of a Roman stone bath house some forty metres long and five metres wide (Mazar and Dunayevsky 1967: 143). G. B. Stiebel has observed (2007: 344) that coins, pottery and glass found at the site suggested it was built in about 117/118 CE and continued in use for about a decade. He notes (2007: 351): "The bathhouse probably went out of use at the beginning of the Second Revolt (132 CE), for the site was clearly under Roman control up to the outbreak of the revolt, or sometime during its course (132–135 CE)." It is most improbable that the Romans would have enjoyed a bathhouse in En-Gedi for nearly two decades while the soldiers stationed there lived under canvas. The legionary fortress in Caerleon in Wales, the best preserved in Europe, contains barracks built for centuries of eighty men (Nash-Williams 1946). One similar to these would have sufficed for a century at En-Gedi. The tents and headquarters mentioned in P.Yadin 11 were either temporary accommodation while their barracks were being built or altered, or such accommodation for another detachment temporarily stationed in En-Gedi.

The Aftermath of the Revolt

Eusebius' account of the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt is generally accepted by scholars (*Ecclesiastical History*, 4.6.3):

> The war reached its height in the eighteenth year of Hadrian (= 135 CE) in Betar, 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.

Archaeological soundings on the site provide confirmation of a siege (Ussishkin 1993).

While this was probably in the summer of 135 CE, Roman operations to eliminate final groups of rebels may have continued into 136 CE. One such group were those in the cave in Naḥal Ḥever. In their case, the Romans built a camp on the plateau above the cave and eventually killed or captured its occupants. It is generally believed that Babatha was among them. There is, however, a significant dissentient voice to the view that Babatha ended up in the Cave of Letters near En-Gedi, namely, that of Tal Ilan. She first notes Yigael Yadin's (plausible) observation that the patronymic of the person (one of Bar Kokhba's commanders in En-Gedi) mentioned in the Aramaic Bar Kokhba letters as "Yehonathan, son of Ba'yan" (and "son of Ba'yah")— and (although not mentioned by Ilan) in one of the two Greek letters from agents of Bar Kokhba as "Yonathēs Beianou" (P.Yadin 52, lines 1-2 ; Yadin et al. 2002: 354)—was to be identified with the patronymic of Miriam (Babatha's co-wife with her second husband Miriam), namely "Beianou," who is mentioned in P.Yadin 26, line 3, as *Mariamēn Beianou Ēnagadēn* ("Miryam, daughter of Beianos, an Engedite;" Lewis 1989: 113). This means that Miriam was probably a sister of one of the leaders of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Then she comments on this (2002: 365):

> This may easily explain why Miriam, Babatha's co-wife, found refuge in the same cave with her brother. Whether her former rival was with them too, or whether Miriam had gained access to Babatha's documents (e.g. via her daughter, Shelamzion) is a topic for novelists and playwrights, but not for historians.

Ilan thus asserts Miriam and Yehonathan were in the cave but implies that Babatha was not. William Horbury gives credit to this implication when he notes that "The possibility that Babatha's documents had come into the hands of her co-wife Miriam, who took shelter in the Cave of Letters, is also envisaged" by Tal Ilan (Horbury 2014: 328, fn. 172). While weighty considerations, as we will now see, count against Ilan's suggestion, considering it provokes new lines of analysis regarding the women in the cave, including Babatha. This analysis further illuminates the experience of women in the caves of refuge (see Taylor 2021).

First, it is most unlikely that Yehonathan, son of Bay'an was even in the Cave of Letters. On 3rd April 1960 Yadin's team found in a crevice in the large, innermost chamber of the cave certain objects and a water skin of goat hide containing many more objects that appeared to belong to a woman (details below) and a bundle of fifteen letters, fourteen on papyrus and one on wood, thirteen from Bar Kokhba himself and two from his agents. Five, possibly six, were sent to Yehonathan, son of Bay'an, and Mesabalah, son of Shim'on, one to Mesabalah and Yehonathan, one to Yehonathan and the rest of the Engedites, and one to Yehonathan alone. One more letter (in Greek) was sent by Bar Kokhba to someone else, but it mentions Yehonathan and Mesabalah and there is a letter in Greek from a Bar Kokhba agent to Yehonathan. Some letters had other addressees. Clearly, Yehonathan, son of Bay'an, and Mesabalah, son of Shim'on, were Bar Kokhba's commanders in En-Gedi for a considerable

period. The bundle of letters was the property of either Yehonathan or Mesabalah, most probably the former, as two of the letters were addressed to him alone. This is the only basis for the view of Ilan and other specialists (beginning with Yadin sixty years ago) that Yehonathan was in the cave with his sister, Miriam.

Let us return to the contents of the crevice and the water skin (see Yadin 1962: 40-41 and 1971: 114-120, with photographs, neither of which alone mentions all the objects). In the crevice was a large metal knife, a glass jug, a small wooden pyxis and a mirror. In the water skin were: balls of wool in varying colours; a silver earing; pierced beads of semi-precious stones for a necklace; various objects of a cosmetic nature (a wooden powder box, a bone handle, a ladle and a glass cosmetic oil container); a baby's tunic; a bundle of dyed unspun wool; fragments of garments and other pieces of textiles; and a kerchief knotted at the ends, inside which were herbs and stones used as protection against the Evil Eye. Beneath all of these objects were the Bar Kokhba letters, in a small bundle tied with cord (Yadin 1962: 41). Yadin plausibly regarded all of the objects as belonging to a woman. He wondered why she had hidden them in the most remote corner of the cave (Yadin 1971: 120). Moreover, the woman appears to have had a baby, judging by the presence of the baby's tunic and the herbs and stones to ward off the Evil Eye, which was thought to be a particular risk for small children (Elliott 2016: 3 and *passim*).

Yadin (and Ilan and many others after him) took the view (1962: 53) that the letters "were brought to the cave by Yehonatan or Masabala when they took refuge in it and were secreted into the water skin which presumably belonged to the wife of one of them." But if that view is correct, why are there no objects referable to a man in the crevice and the water skin? That there are none eliminates the basis for the view that the letters' owner was in the cave, taking refuge with this woman and the other people there. The strong likelihood is that either Yehonathan or Mesabalah entrusted these letters to a woman precisely because they were not going to be in the cave. Otherwise, we would have expected to find the bundle of letters along with the possessions of one of them. But we do not.

Nor is there any reason to suggest, as does Ilan, that Miriam, (probably) Yehonathan's sister, was the owner of the contents of the crevice and water skin. Such evidence could only come from a document or documents belonging to her and there are none, here or anywhere else in the cave. Are we to assume that Miriam deposited Babatha's documents into their cunningly concealed crevice and not her own? There is no evidence that Miriam was ever in the cave. The owner of the water skin could have been the wife of one of Yehonathan or Mesabalah, a female relative by blood or marriage or a friend. We have no way of knowing.

If Ilan was correct in assuming that Miriam was the mother of Shelamzion, Ilan's postulated agent for providing Miriam with access to Babatha's documents in the cave, we would then have a situation where a woman old enough to have a daughter who married in April 128 had an infant child over seven years later. That is not impossible, but it seems unlikely in an era of low life expectancy. There is, however, no evidence that Shelamzion, was Miriam's daughter. Although this is an assumption widely made in the scholarship, it lacks a factual basis. Judah could have had another wife, who was Shelamzion's mother, before he married Miriam and Babatha.

On the other hand, there are two signs of a close relationship between Shelamzion and Babatha that render it unlikely that Shelamzion was Miriam's daughter, or that she would ever have handed over Babatha's documents to anyone else (assuming for the moment she

could get access to them). First, on 21st February 128 CE Judah (Babatha's second husband and Shelamzion's father) borrowed 300 denarii from Babatha (P.Yadin 17;mLewis 1989: 71-75). Only six weeks later, on 5th April 128 Shelamzion was married and pursuant to her marriage contract Judah provided "feminine adornment in silver and gold and clothing" worth 200 denarii (P.Yadin 18, lines 8-10, 40-43; Lewis 1989: 80). It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Babatha lent Judah the 300 denarii to add to Shelamzion's dowry and also to fund the wedding. Babatha's lending her father the money probably endeared Shelamzion to her step-mother. Secondly, the original, witnessed and signed copy of Shelamzion's marriage contract, carefully wrapped in its own sacking (for a photo, see Yadin 1971: 247), was found in Babatha's archive. So too was a legal document settling Shelamzion's ownership of a courtyard in En-Gedi at a time when she and her husband were living in Maoza (P.Yadin 20; Lewis 1989: 88-93). All this suggests a close and trusting relationship between the two women. Furthermore, their presence among Babatha's documents makes it likely that Shelamzion was present with Babatha in the cave—since what woman would put distance between herself and such important documents in tumultuous times—but had entrusted her important legal documents to Babatha for safe-keeping. Lastly, as the present author and another person have argued in an article currently under review with a scholarly journal, Babatha had brothers, with four of them appearing in P.Yadin 8 and 9. They had a direct interest in these documents and would have assisted Babatha in retaining possession of them after Judah's death.

Considering the relationship between the Yehonathan and Mesabalah letters and their findspot and proximate objects prompts the same approach to Babatha's own documents. In the carefully hidden crevice where what were almost certainly her possessions were found, closest to the surface was a basket with the following: a jewellery box; a set of four wooden bowls; a small, curved iron sickle; a pair of sandals, one of them misshapen; three keys (two of them ring keys) and a group of five iron knives (probably for food preparation). The basket was on top of the remains of three water skins. On the slope next to the basket and skins were found: a flat, iron frying pan; two bronze jugs with the images at the base of the handles defaced; a mirror; and an iron key. The goatskins contained rags, sack, pieces of linen, ropes and balls of thread, and the bundle of Babatha's papyri wrapped up in hessian and string. At the bottom of the crevice was a complete roll of unused parchment and six papyri that proved to be the property of Eliezer ben Shemuel. Once again, all these were objects important to a woman, and there was nothing that one would associate with a man, except for Eliezer's documents. This suggests a friendship or relationship between Babatha and Eliezer before she entered the cave. He entrusted her with his documents, and she took them into the cave. The idea that they were close is strengthened by the fact that Babatha did not include the documents of Salome Komaïse, also from Maoza whom she probably knew, in the crevice with those of herself and Eliezer. Salome's papers were either less well hidden or were just left on the floor.

That important figures like Yehonathan, Mesabalah and Eliezer are absent from the cave is probably to be explained by Bar Kokhba having ordered all available men to report to him to strengthen his forces resisting the Romans at Betar. This siege was the one occasion where he abandoned guerilla warfare and adopted the practice of the leaders of the revolt in the previous century, so he would have needed as many men as he could muster. The disastrous outcome was probably inevitable.

Conclusion

Between 11th and 17th August 132 CE Shim‘on bar Kosiba began his revolt against Roman rule in Judea with the capture of En-Gedi by destroying or putting to flight the small detachment of Roman soldiers stationed there. Word of this event soon travelled across or around the Dead Sea to Maoza, in the province of Arabia. There it was received by Judeans of nationalist sympathies. One of them was Babatha. She probably heard the news one or two days before 1st Gorpiaios (19th August 132 CE) but waited till then as the first day when she might reasonably ask Simon, the guardian of her son’s inheritance, to pay him the outstanding money due for the two previous months and to pay for Gorpiaios in advance. At least two of the men who assisted her in requesting the money, the scribe Germanos and her guardian Babelis, appear to have shared her Judean ethnic pride. Simon refused to pay her anything, so she left Maoza and headed for En-Gedi, likely sailing northwards across the Dead Sea. She probably stayed there for the duration of the revolt before entering the cave in Naḥal Ḥever in late 135 or early 136 CE and was, in due course, killed or enslaved by the Romans. She left behind personal possessions, her legal documents and a collection of documents she had been entrusted with safe keeping by Eliezer ben Shemuel. He was not in the cave, but she appears to have had a close relationship with him. Nor was Yehonathan, son of Bay‘an, who entrusted his letters from Bar Kokhba to an unidentifiable woman. Yehonathan, his colleague Mesabalah and Eliezer had probably left En-Gedi to fight with Bar Kokhba in his last stand at Betar. These results show how a microhistorical approach can lead to the discovery of “answers to large questions in small places.”

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