



1-1-1974

Bar-Kochba Zigael Yadin

Hugh Nibley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Nibley, Hugh (1974) "*Bar-Kochba* Zigael Yadin," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol14/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Book Reviews

YADIN, ZIGAEEL. *Bar-Kochba*. New York: Random House, 1971. 271 pp. \$15.00.

(Reviewed by Dr. Hugh Nibley, professor of history and religion at Brigham Young University.)

Almost a quarter of a century ago this investigator wrote a study of life in the Arabian desert in ancient times. It first appeared in the pages of the *Improvement Era* under the title of "Lehi in the Desert," and drew almost exclusively on the writings of European visitors to those arid regions during the past 200 years and the works of Medieval and modern Arabic writers. Some years later in a study called "Qumran and the Companions of the Cave," he again explored the subject, this time with extensive flights into the early Arabic writers. (Rev. de Qum. 5 [1965], pp. 177-198). Since the ways of the Beduins are notoriously unchanging, the idea was that the Arabic report of how things were out there would apply in ancient as well as in Medieval and modern times, and thereby supply us with a "control" over Nephi's history of his family's travels and tribulations in those same deserts early in the 6th century B.C. The main reason for using Arabic sources was, of course, that there were no other specialized studies in the field. But just as the articles began to appear, the first copies of the Dead Sea Scrolls began to be available—and that changed everything. We no longer had to ask the Arabs how the Jews may have behaved in the desert in ancient times, since we now had first-hand reports of how they actually did. Those reports have steadily increased in volume, and Prof. Yadin's book now carries the Book of Mormon student far beyond the former speculations.

The reaction to these marvelous discoveries by their finders is convincing confirmation of the Book of Mormon thesis that these new findings were meant to be. The Israeli scholars are understandably moved by the one thing that makes these docu-

ments of supreme importance for them: the fact that they belong to their own ancestors. “. . . we found that our emotions were a mixture of tension and awe,” writes Prof. Yadin, “yet astonishment and pride at being part of the reborn State of Israel after a Diaspora of 1,800 years.” (p. 253) Compare this with Nephi’s moving lines: “And it shall be as if the fruit of thy loins had cried out unto them from the dust; for I know their faith. And they shall cry from the dust . . . even after many generations have gone by them. . . . (2 Nephi 3: 19f) Their own people after all those years! How often has it happened that ancient documents—2000 years old—have been dug up in their own homeland by the very descendants of the men who wrote those documents and, what is still more marvelous, who could still read them on the spot? We know of no other such instance in the history of scholarship. Nephi continues: “For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were out of the ground; and their speech shall whisper out of the dust.” (2 Nephi 26: 16ff) All this talk about dust. Well, anyone who visits the sites or reads Yadin’s books soon finds himself deep in dust. Every text discussed in Dr. Yadin’s new book was found by the searchers deliberately buried under the floor of a very dusty cave. They have not survived accidentally, as most other ancient writings have, but were hidden away on purpose; nor were they simply left behind or misplaced or forgotten by people who moved on and lived out their lives elsewhere—the people who left these records died soon after they buried them and died on the spot the victims of a savage religious war. “. . . For those who shall be *destroyed* shall speak unto them out of the ground. . . .” (2 Nephi 26:16) What do these records contain? Accounts of contemporary affairs in private letters, legal documents, military and civil correspondence, or, in the words of the Book of Mormon, “For thus saith the Lord God: They shall write the *things which shall be done among them*. . . . Wherefore, as those who have been destroyed have been destroyed speedily. . . .” (2 Nephi 26: 17-18) Not only all their letters and legal papers, but their household effects and their bones were left behind in the caves,

for the simple reason that they did not have time to escape. As to their destroyers, "Nothing remains here today of the Romans save a heap of stones on the face of the desert," writes Yadin, "but here the descendants of the besieged were returning to salvage their ancestors' precious belongings." (p. 235) Again the Book of Mormon: ". . . and the multitude of their terrible ones shall be as chaff that passeth away. . . ." (2 Nephi 26:18)

The future of the Book of Mormon is fittingly the subject of prophecy by the first man and the last one to write it. Moroni ends and seals up the book with the prophecy that when its words shall be "like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust" (Moroni 10:27), then shall the invitation go forth to the Jews: "Awake, and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem . . . enlarge thy borders forever, that thou mayest no more be confounded. . . ." (Moroni 31) Which is exactly what they are doing today.

In reading Prof. Yadin's account of the findings of the ancient artifacts and documents in a cave in the Nahal Hever cliffs, we seem to shift back and forth between the refugees and the fighters under Bar Kochba, or, in Book of Mormon terms, between Lehi, the refugee in the desert, and Moroni, the hero, fighting against fearful odds to save his people.

First consider Lehi, warned by dreams and portents of the imminent fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, fleeing by night with his family to the south desert with the intention of founding some sort of community there. His sons, sent back to the city to obtain valuable family documents, hid in nearby caves as they sized up the situation and laid their plans. The caves in which the Bar Kochba documents were found were places of hiding, and the people who wrote and owned them had brought them from home, for they too were refugees from the approaching armies of a mighty world-conquering power determined to hold Palestine and to subdue the Jews for that purpose.

In Lehi's day we find many well-to-do Jews putting their trust in Egypt and finally fleeing thither when things got too hot in Jerusalem. The same sort of thing meets us in the letters of a rich lady named Babata, found in the Cave of Letters; she was all ready to flee to Egypt, where she had property, but unfortunately she did not make it. (p. 248) Lehi

burned his bridges behind him, and did not expect to return to Jerusalem, but to find a "promised land" in the desert; nothing was farther from his mind than crossing the ocean—Nephi was simply staggered when he was commanded to build a ship, and his brothers laughed their heads off at his presumption. On the other hand, it is never hinted that there was anything strange about Lehi's taking to the wastelands, or even proposing that he should found a colony with his son Nephi as its ruler, because that sort of thing was being done all the time. Lehi's story takes place 700 years before Bar Kochba's day, and yet the two tales present astonishing points of resemblance which, we believe, are more than purely coincidental, for the same cave that yielded the Bar Kochba materials also brought forth evidence of much earlier occupations. The diggers working under Bar-Adon in a neighboring cave in the Nahal Mishmar discovered a treasure of 429 metal objects, some of them quite beautiful, and as the things were brought to light the workers spontaneously "burst into a very well-known Hebrew song of the Temple," for the beautiful bronze objects strongly suggested Temple Vessels to their minds. (p. 218) Yet those objects were found by Carbon-14 dating to be no less than 5000 years old! The most plausible explanation of how they got to the cave is that people fleeing from the advances of the first Kings of Egypt into Palestine brought and hid them there (p. 211)—in all probability they were sacred vessels, but what, and whose? Even without an inkling of the answer, it is clear that the practice of people fleeing to these caves with their sacred and profane treasure is far older than Lehi's day. The same caves also yielded objects from the Iron Age of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., i.e., from Lehi's own time, making it "quite clear," according to Yadin, "that these remote caves . . . served as places of refuge for people who were forced by circumstances to flee the rulers of the land." (p. 30) We are also reminded of how Lehi's sons were impressed by the "precious steel" of a sword, that being a time when the stuff was available (iron could not be smelted without a carbon mixture which made it steel) but was still very costly. (1 Nephi 5:9, 16:18)

The most welcome aspect of the new findings is that the families who fled from the town to the desert took along collections of writings with them—legal documents, correspon-

dence, family records, scripture—quite in the manner of Lehi. Unfortunately the modern Beduins of the region, knowing the monetary value of the ancient scrolls, had thoroughly sacked nearly all the caves before the scholars could get to them; but the scraps of writing dropped by them in their hasty departure happen to be passages of scripture which peculiarly fitted the situation of the people in their desert hiding places. Though this may be a coincidence, it does remind us that Nephi in the desert made it a point to read to his people just those scriptures which applied to their present situation: “And I did read many things unto them which were written in the book of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe . . . I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning.” (1 Nephi 19:23) This practice of applying ancient stories and prophecies to their own peculiar condition was found to be a special practice of the religious community at Qumran, who compared themselves to Israel driven into the wilderness and sorely afflicted by Gentile armies in ages past. This is exactly what Nephi did to hearten his people wandering in the sands, and it was the Book of Mormon that first pointed up the practice.

As might be expected, the most interesting and important documents of all to their discoverers were the personal letters, including an autograph of Bar Kochba himself. These take us not into the world of Lehi so much as into that of the great Book of Mormon general, Moroni. Thus we find that Bar Kochba’s people reissued Roman coins with a new stamp upon them bearing slogans of liberty resembling those on the trumpets of the armies in the Battle Scroll. Such devices are, “Year 1, Redemption of Israel,” “Year 2, Freedom of Israel,” or simply “Freedom of Jerusalem.” These slogans were to inspire the people to resistance, inscription money having long been used in the ancient world, especially by the Romans, as a convenient means of spreading government propaganda. Compare this with Moroni’s standards: “In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children.” (Alma 46:12) “. . . And he took the pole, which had on the end thereof his rent coat (and he called it the Title of Liberty). . . .” (Alma 46:13) It has been objected that such talk of Liberty smacks suspiciously of nineteenth-century America rather than ancient Israel, but the

constant recurrence of the word Liberty (Kherut) in the Dead Sea Scrolls, to say nothing of the Bar Kochba coins, shows that it is entirely in order in Moroni's world. But what has that world of circa 70 B.C. in the Western Hemisphere to do with Bar Kochba's world of 131-132 A.D. in Palestine? Surprisingly, a great deal. Not only have the new discoveries shown the Jews to be phenomenally conservative in their ways, but the Book of Mormon itself accounts for Moroni's familiarity with old-world customs. The Title of Liberty which he inscribed on his own cloak was suggested to him, according to his own report, by an ancient tradition which the people had brought with them to the New World: ". . . let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph; yea, let us remember the words of Jacob [when] . . . he saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved. . . ." (Alma 46:24-27) He then goes on to tell a story of how the garment of Joseph was preserved in two parts, which the aged Jacob recognized on his deathbed, weeping for the part one which was defiled, and rejoicing over the other which was miraculously preserved. This was a story that went back to the Old Country which the people were enjoined to remember—it is not in the Bible, and I have not found reference to it in any Jewish source; and though my resources are far from unlimited, still they go immeasurably beyond what Joseph Smith possessed and yet he knew this story, which I have found preserved in the pages of Tha'labi, who got it from an old Jewish informant somewhere in Persia in the tenth century. The point is, that Moroni bases his military practices on the customs of the Jews in the homeland.

The story of Moroni's war of liberation with its Liberty slogans is taken from the Book of Alma in the Book of Mormon, and this provides us with another tangible link to the Old World, namely, the name of Alma, which deserves a momentary digression. The more exotic proper names of the Book of Mormon have been matched up extensively and sometimes quite convincingly with real Egyptian and Semitic names (which is what they claim to be). Such an odd monicker as Paanchi (who ever heard of a double "a" in English?) not only turned up in the Egyptian records a generation after the Book of Mormon came out, but turns out to be a rather prominent and important name in the bargain. And such a very

un-Egyptian, un-Oriental, indeed un-anything name as "Hermonths," was applied by the Book of Mormon Nephites to a region on the extremity of the land where wild animals abounded, a territory whose description perfectly matches that part of the world to which the Egyptians gave the name of Hermonthis. But strangely enough, the name in the Book of Mormon that has brought the most derision on that book, and caused the greatest embarrassment to the Latter-day Saints, especially among those holders of the priesthood who have borne it among the children of men, is the simple and unpretentious Alma. Roman priests have found in this obviously Latin and obviously feminine name (who does not know that Alma Mater means fostering mother?) gratifying evidence of the ignorance and naïvete of the youthful Joseph Smith—how could he have been simple enough to let such a thing get by? At least his more sophisticated followers should have known better! It is therefore gratifying to announce that at the extreme end of the "Cave of Letters," on the north side of the Nahal Hever, between three and four o'clock of the afternoon of 15 March 1961, Professor Yadin put his hand into a crevice in the floor of the cave and lifted out a goat-skin bag containing a woman's materials for mending her family's clothes on their sad and enforced vacation; and stuffed away under the stuff, at the very bottom of the bag, was a bundle of papyrus rolls wrapped in a cloth. These were the Bar-Kochba Letters, and among them was a deed to some land near En-Gedi (the nearest town to the cave) owned by four men, one of whom signed himself, or rather dictated his name since he was illiterate, as "Alma the son of Judah." The deed is reproduced in color on p. 177 of the book, and there at the end of the fourth line from the top, as large as life is A-l-m-a ben Yehudah, which Prof. Yadin sensibly renders "Alma" with no reservations. And speaking of names, it is interesting that the Jews who reissued Roman coins as Bar Kochba coins with their pious patriotic inscriptions gave the coins new names and denominations (p. 176), with the same freedom with which Alma says his people invented new names and denominations of money. (Alma 11)

Bar-Kochba's war, like Moroni's, was a holy war, a "Messianic war," with fanatical concern for the temple. (p. 27) In the struggle for liberation, the hero found his hands full deal-

ing with all kinds of people and problems. For one thing, he found that "some of the wealthier citizens" of a city were "evaders of national duties" in his day, as their ancestors had been in the days of Nehemiah. (p. 125, Nehemiah 3:5) Specifically, they were "disregarding the mobilization orders of Bar Kochba," who became exceeding angry and issued dire threats against them, including even the death penalty. Compare this with Moroni in a like situation: "And it came to pass that whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom . . . he caused to be put to death; and there were but few who denied the covenant of freedom." (Alma 46:35) And who were the Amalickiahites? A coalition of those who "because of their exceeding great riches" opposed government controls (Alma 45:24), those who considered themselves the aristocracy "who professed the blood of nobility" (Alma 51:18ff), the "king men" led by "the lower judges of the land . . . seeking for power" (Alma 46:4), local judges, official and other upper crust bound together by family ties as "kindreds," whose boast was that they had "acquired much riches by the hand of their industry" (Alma 10:4, 3 Nephi 6:27 etc.), and "many in the church who believed . . . Amalichiah" and "dissented from the church." (Alma 46:7) These were no pacifists or draft-evaders, but were armed to the teeth, "those men of Pachus and those kingsmen, whosoever would not take up arms in defence of their country, but would fight against it. . . ." (Alma 62:9-11) These Alma put to death. Bar Kochba had to deal with just such characters and he did it in the same way. To the "brothers" (for so he calls them, as Moroni does all to whom he writes) in the city of En-Gedi he personally wrote a letter in Hebrew that survives to this day: "To Masabala and to Yehonathan; bar Be'ayan, peace. In comfort you *sit* eating and drinking from the property of the House of Israel, and *care nothing* for *your brothers*." Thus Yadin (p. 133): we have italicized certain words to point up the parallels to Moroni's letter from the field: "To Pahoran, in the city of Zarahemla . . . and also to all those who have been chosen by this people to govern and manage the affairs of this war." (Alma 60:1) ". . . . Can you think to *sit* upon your thrones in a state of *thoughtless stupor*, while your enemies are spreading the work of death around you? Yea while they are murdering

thousands of *your brethren?*" (Alma 60:7) To such people Moroni issues a dire threat: "And I will come unto you . . . behold I will stir up insurrection among you, even until those who have desires to usurp power and authority shall become extinct." (Alma 60:27) If this sounds shockingly severe, the provocation was as terrible: Moroni, like Bar Kochba, was holding on by the skin of his teeth: "Whatever we may think of Bar Kochba's harsh tone," writes Yadin, "it is quite clear that Yehonathan (an important leader) was not the most loyal of subordinates," and there were others like him in high office, especially as things grew worse. (p. 134) But if the secret of Moroni's success was his essential gentleness—he always called a halt to the fighting the instant the enemy, whom he called his "brethren," showed the least inclination to parley—it has often been said that Bar Kochba's undoing was the lack of such a redeeming quality. "His brutality, according to some sources, was manifested in the way he killed the revered Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'in . . . who Bar Kochba suspected of betraying the secrets of Bethar (a city under attack) to the Romans. . . . This cruel act, according to the same sources, caused Bar-Kochba's death, and the fall of Bethar. . . ." (p. 26)

When another leader, Galgoula, was called to task for holding out supplies, including a cow, he wrote to his superiors to explain: "Were it not for the Gentiles [the Romans] who are near us, I would have gone up and satisfied you concerning this lest you say that it is out of contempt that I did not go to you." (p. 136) Moroni ran into just such a misunderstanding, when he accused Pahoran of withholding supplies, to which Pahron replied just as Galgoula did. "It is those who have sought to take away the judgment-seat from me that have been the cause of this great iniquity; . . . *they* have withheld our provisions, and have daunted our freemen *that they have not come unto you* . . . in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart." (Alma 61:4, 9)

If the Book of Mormon were a product of our own day, such striking parallels (and there are many others) would be not only a suspicious but a damning circumstance. As it is, one is still forced to ask for an explanation for a phenomenon which can hardly be mere coincidence. The explanation is to be found in the nature and genius of the Jewish people, whose

internal and external history has a way of falling into almost rigid patterns. The kind of squabbles that go on among themselves are typically and thoroughly Jewish and you will find them everywhere; the same temperament or culture places them at odds with the "outside world" in a particular way so that the atrocities committed against them seem to fall into the same mold whether in the first or fifteenth or twentieth centuries and whether in Spain, Germany or Russia. This is the familiar theme of the prophets—rebellion, punishment, repentance, the same old cycle round and round. Just as the Six-weeks war of 1948 broke out, the Battle Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light—it read like a series of editorials to inspire twentieth-century Jews to deeds of heroism, and as such it was joyfully received. The Battle Scroll, now edited by Prof. Yadin, shows to what an amazing degree even in such a technical and dating operation as warfare, the ancient image fits the modern situation.

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it has become plain that one of the constants of Jewish history in ancient times was the small band of pious souls who would leave Jerusalem, which they deemed doomed and corrupted, to go out into the desert to form their own community there and to attempt to carry on in the manner of Israel in the wilderness under Moses. Lehi is a classic example of such an operation, and the tradition was carried over right into the New World, Lehi's descendants forming such groups of pious sectaries from time to time. The most notable of these was Alma's colony, and we are told how it came about. Alma, as a young priest, serving under a corrupt king, became a secret disciple of the prophet Abinadi, who was a master of the old Jewish lore, and a caustic wit; he was a walking Bible, and after he was put to death, Alma hid out in a cave and wrote from memory, and probably from notes, all he could recall of Abinadi's teachings. Then he went out into a desert place to a spot called the Waters of Mormon, and there set up his community, organized in companies of 50 with visiting inspectors, engaging in pious activities, self-supporting and industrious. He initiated members by baptism in the Waters of Mormon. Even down to details his organization resembles very closely the sectaries of the Dead Sea. Yadin points out in his book the presence at Qumran of "numerous cisterns and

ritual baths" (p. 189), the ritual nature of which was stoutly denied by Jewish and Christian scholars alike as being an altogether unlikely circumstance.

Of the thirty-five private letters of the wealthy woman Babata, mentioned above, twenty-three "belonged to the type commonly known as 'double deeds' or 'tied deeds,'" the use of which "is a very old and known practice in the ancient world," though until this, no actual examples had ever been found from ancient times. (p. 229) It was an arrangement by which a legal agreement was written twice on the same piece of papyrus or parchment; the first time very small at one end of the paper which was then rolled into a tight cylinder, sewn closed, and signed over with the participants' signatures; the rest of the sheet, the greater part of it, then received the same writing in bolder letters; it was not sealed, so that it could be freely consulted while the other copy of the text, though on the same sheet, remained tightly sealed until the time came to settle the contract; then it was unrolled and compared with the other writing, and if the two were exactly the same all would be in order. The purpose, of course, was "to safeguard the original deed from falsification, while at the same time to enable its holder to use the lower exterior half for daily reference as required." (p. 230) This is simply an elaboration of the old tally-stick technique which we have discussed at length elsewhere. Very early, strips of parchment or cloth were attached to the sticks and wrapped around them, since there was not room enough on a stick for writing a lengthy contract. This was the origin of the Jewish scroll wrapped around a staff resembling a scepter. The original tally-stick was a staff on which the contract and names of the contracting parties were written; the staff was then split down the middle and one half, the "stock," was kept by one of the parties, while the other, "the bill," was held by the other. When the time came to settle the contract the two parties would bring their sticks together in the presence of the king, and if they matched perfectly, it was plain that neither party had attempted to tinker with the document, and the two would then be bound with a string in the king's hand and laid away in the archives. The Bar-Kochba cave has now produced twenty-three examples of this technique, and this is another score for the Book of Mormon, which claims to be that very

“stick of Ephraim” which in the last days would be joined to the “stick of Judah” so that the two would come together “and they shall be one stick in my hand.” (Ezekiel 37:19) The word of the Lord assures us that it is “Moroni whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon, containing the fulness of my everlasting gospel, to whom I have committed the keys of the records of the stick of Ephraim.” (Doctrine and Covenants 27:5) There are many “sticks” but no more significant joining of sticks than that now taking place between the Jewish and the Nephite records:

And it shall come to pass that the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites, and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel. . . . And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever—2 Nephi 29:13-14.