

## 15 | The Severans and Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi

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Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi's patriarchate was a golden age for Jewish life in Roman Palestine. The main reason for this was the excellent relationship with the Roman authorities. Before his time the Antonine emperors had been in power, and while they had allowed the leadership institutions to rehabilitate themselves after the persecutions which followed in the wake of the Bar Kokhba revolt, Roman policy in the province had still been a policy of repression. One of the factors leading to the improved relations between the Severan emperors and the Jews was presumably a result of the stance of the Jews in the struggle for the imperial throne which took place in the years 193–4, mainly in the east of the empire, between Septimius Severus and Pescennius Niger, the governor of Syria. In this struggle the Samaritans supported Niger. The two Roman legions stationed in Palestine at the time, the Tenth Fretensis and the Sixth Ferrata, also took an active part in the struggle between Severus and Niger. The Tenth Legion supported Niger, while the Sixth supported Severus. It was apparently as a result of this that Septimius Severus gave the Sixth Legion Ferrata the title of *fidelis constans*, true and firm. Similarly he took the status of *polis* away from Neapolis [Shechem], the city of the Samaritans.<sup>1</sup>

One of the results of the change of dynasty was mutual recognition between Jews and Romans. An example of this sort of recognition was the *de facto* permission for Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi to judge capital cases, even though this was not usually left in the hands of local leaders in the provinces. Roman recognition of the right to judge capital cases can be seen from the evidence of the Church Father Origen, in his letter to Julius Africanus, a Christian writer at the turn of the second and third centuries CE. Julius Africanus claimed that the story of Susannah and the Elders, an addition to the Book of Daniel in the Apocrypha, was a forgery. One of the reasons why Julius Africanus contends that it is a forgery is the fact that it

<sup>1</sup> There are some scholars who claim that, in contrast to the Samaritans who supported Pescennius Niger, the Jews supported Septimius Severus. See, e.g., Graetz 1908: 206. In the opinion of Menahem Stern, there is no mention of Jewish support for Septimius Severus, and the only evidence shows merely that the Sixth Legion joined Severus, while the Tenth Legion which was stationed in Jerusalem did not support him: Stern 1974–84: vol. II, 623; Ritterling 1925: 1592–3.

tells of a death sentence under foreign domination. Origen rejects this claim in his reply:

And even now, under Roman rule, when the Jews pay the two dinars in tax, the ethnarch acts as the authority for the Jews, and, as it were with the connivance of the emperor, he is in no way different from a king over his people. For cases are tried surreptitiously according to the [Jewish] law, and people are even condemned to death, albeit not entirely openly, but certainly not without the knowledge of the emperor. Indeed we learned this and ascertained it when we lived in their land for many days.<sup>2</sup>

Origen, who came from Alexandria, stresses in his letter that he is relying on direct evidence obtained as a result of living in Palestine, and indeed we know that he was in the country during Rabbi's patriarchate, in the years 215–19. He gives evidence that in spite of the fact that the Jews were subject to the tax of two *denarii* after the destruction of the Temple,<sup>3</sup> the power of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi was so great *de facto* that he could even enforce the death sentence. In spite of the many scholars who have doubted this testimony and proposed alternative explanations,<sup>4</sup> there is no real reason to doubt its reliability. This is contemporary evidence; and Rabbi's special status in relation to the Roman authorities and in relation to the Jews certainly fits the possibility that the authority given to the patriarch to judge capital cases was a sort of silent connivance,<sup>5</sup> especially since it was at this very time that the Romans granted permission to the free *poleis* to exact punishment. It is reasonable to suppose that this was a sort of kangaroo court, whose judges were perhaps aided by the sort of police force which was kept by the patriarch to carry out his death sentences.<sup>6</sup>

There is evidence of Jewish gratitude to Septimius Severus and his family from a Greek inscription found in Katziun in Eastern Upper Galilee (near

<sup>2</sup> Origen, *Ad Africanum de Historia Susannae*, 14 (*Patrologia Graeca*, xi, cols. 81–4).

<sup>3</sup> This tax was imposed on the Jews of Palestine and all the rest of the empire after the destruction of the Temple, and sent to the *fiscus Iudaicus*, the Jewish tax collection at Rome, in honour of Jupiter in place of the half shekel which Jews had paid to the Temple treasury, and was therefore perceived as especially insulting by the Jews.

<sup>4</sup> For scholars who have doubted the reliability of this evidence, see Habas Rubin: 64–71; 265–73; see discussion and a survey of scholarship on the issue in Jacobs 1995: 248–51 and bibliography *ad loc.*

<sup>5</sup> Alon 1977: 123–4.

<sup>6</sup> The Jewish origins for this sort of punishment without due legal process can be found in the 'sin of Baal Peor', when Pinchas, son of Eliezer son of Aaron the High Priest killed the Israelite Zimri b. Salu and the Midianite Cozbi b. Zur with his spear, out of zeal for his God, and thus stopped the plague among the children of Israel (Numbers 25.1–15; Psalms 101.28–31).

present-day Rosh Pina) and dated to the end of the second century CE, which probably came from a synagogue:

For the salvation of our lords, the rulers and emperors: Lucius Septimius Severus the pious, the strong, the august, and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus [known as Caracalla] and Lucius Septimius Geta his sons, for a vow, the Jews [dedicated this inscription].

On the left, there is a further part of the inscription, inside a wreath:

And Iulia Domna, Augusta.<sup>7</sup>

This inscription is the only one of its kind from this time.<sup>8</sup> There can be no doubt that it was set up to show what was, from the Jewish point of view, the special network of relationships which developed between the Jews and their Roman rulers in the Severan period (i.e. in the days of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi). It mentions three emperors, for the two sons of Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, were co-emperors with their father during the years 198–211.

General imperial policy in the time of the Severans was to encourage leaders and institutions, especially in the east of the empire, which was the cradle of the Severan dynasty. Eastern religions, and sages and philosophers from the east enjoyed wide popularity in Rome. The cultural syncretism which was part of this all-embracing policy set as its goal the merging of the Greek east and the Roman west of the emperors. The peak of this policy came in 212, in a law which gave Roman citizenship to almost all the inhabitants of the empire. This was one of the legal initiatives of the emperor Caracalla. According to this law, known as the *constitutio Antoniniana*, Roman citizenship was granted to all the free inhabitants of the Roman Empire.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen as an important stage in the development of the legal status of the inhabitants of the empire, and a basis for unifying the Roman world.

In the Talmudic literature there are around a hundred traditions which tell of the close relations between Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi and the 'Emperor Antoninus'. It is true that there are also traditions about meetings of other rabbis with a Roman emperor or with the 'great men of Rome', such as, for example, the conversations between Joshua b. Hananiah and the Emperor Hadrian; or Rabbi Akiva and Tineius Rufus, the Roman governor of

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of this inscription, see Roth-Gerson 1987: 125–9.

<sup>8</sup> There is a similar inscription from the fourth century found at Mughar. See Stepansky 2000: 169–71 (Heb.).

<sup>9</sup> *Digesta* 1, 5, 17; Cass. Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXII 5; Pap. Giessen 40. See Jones 1936: 223 at seq.

Palestine; or Rabban Gamaliel and his colleagues who held talks during their visit to Rome with senators and people in power, but the accounts of these meetings can be summed up as vague expressions relating to the *Torah*, *halakhah* (religious law) and *aggadah* (narrative traditions). In contrast, in the traditions dealing with meetings between Rabbi and 'Antoninus', there are conversations on subjects where 'Antoninus' takes Rabbi's advice on business affairs, foreign and internal policy, and entertainment. These traditions are found in both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. No few scholars have spent much time and effort in debating the identity of 'Antoninus'. The general consensus is that this title refers to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, known as Caracalla. The friendly relations between Caracalla and the Jews is clear from the commentary of the Church Father Jerome on a verse from the book of Daniel (11.34), *Now when they shall fall they shall receive a little help*. Jerome writes: 'There are Jews who relate this to Severus and his son Antoninus.'<sup>10</sup> It should be remembered that at this time Septimius Severus and Caracalla gave Jews the right to take significant positions on city councils. It is possible that Caracalla came to the East and even visited Palestine at least once. There is a tradition that 'Antoninus' converted to Judaism, and in the Jerusalem Talmud there is a tradition that he was circumcised.<sup>11</sup> In the eyes of the rabbis, the pagan 'Antoninus' is worthy of a place in the World to Come.<sup>12</sup> Another fantastic tradition mentions a tunnel which led from the house of 'Antoninus' in Rome to Rabbi's house. Every day, we are told, 'Antoninus' would come through it, to consult with Rabbi. 'Antoninus' set a slave at each opening to this tunnel, and each of them was killed after each visit so they could not reveal what had happened.<sup>13</sup>

A considerable part of the wealth of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, which enabled him to attain his special status among the Romans and also among the elite of Jewish society, came to him from the Romans themselves, and in particular from 'Antoninus'. There is no reason to cast doubt on the Talmudic sources which give evidence about the lands which Rabbi received from 'Antoninus' as a gift, or on lease (although it is possible, of course, that in some of the places where the Emperor is mentioned as bestowing the gift, in fact it was given by the governor or another high Roman official). Thus Rabbi owned the lands of Bet She'arim, and the lands of Mahlul (biblical Naḥalal). A tradition in the

<sup>10</sup> Com. in Dan. *PL* xxv, col 570 ed. Glorie, *CCSL* lxxv, p. 924.

<sup>11</sup> *PT* Megillah ii, 72b, col. 754; iii, 74a, col. 764; *PT* Sanhedrin x, 29c, col. 1326.

<sup>12</sup> *PT* Shevi'it vi, 36d, col. 199, Vatican MS p. 133. <sup>13</sup> *BT* 'Avodah Zarah 10b.

Jerusalem Talmud notes that ‘Antoninus gave Rabbi two pieces of fertile [lands] in Arisut’.<sup>14</sup>

From the context it appears that these lands were in the Golan. Rabbi also owned lands in the territory of Tiberias and in the Bashan, and in the area of Lod as well. Other texts give evidence that Rabbi had the right to grow *apharsimon*, balsam – a plant which produced an aromatic oil, called *opobalsamum*, when gashes were made in its bark. This was widely regarded as the best perfume. Growing balsam was generally an imperial monopoly, but it is clear that Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi had lands in the area of the Jordan valley or the Dead Sea which included balsam plantations. Another tradition tells us of Antoninus’ thoroughbred cattle, which were brought in to fertilise Rabbi’s herds.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to these, there are other sources on the relations between Rabbi and ‘Antoninus’ which are clearly no more than legends and folk tales and do not belong to historical fact.<sup>16</sup>

Ulpian, one of the most outstanding Roman jurists, who originated in Tyre and was mostly active in the first quarter of the third century CE (i.e. in the time of Rabbi), notes legislation by Septimius Severus and Caracalla on the subject of the status of Jews in the cities, which has been preserved in the *Digesta*:

The divine Severus and Antoninus allowed those who follow the customs of the Jewish religion to take offices, but they also subjected them to obligations, albeit ones that did not interfere with their religion.<sup>17</sup>

From this it is clear that until the permission given by Septimius Severus and Caracalla, official positions were closed to the Jews, and from the context it is clear that this referred to the city councils. In his time, Hadrian had organised the cities of Roman Palestine in order to keep Jews out of positions in the city leadership. By contrast, Septimius Severus and Caracalla ruled that Jews were allowed to serve in these positions, for example, to be a member of the city *boule*. In parallel, Jews

<sup>14</sup> PT Shevi’it vi, 36d, col 199. Vatican MS 133 does not have the word *alfin*, lands. These territories were apparently in the Golan, because of the discussion as to whether to absolve the Golan from the laws of the Sabbatical year. See on this: Klein 1939: vol. I, 26, s.v. Gevalan, Gavlon= Golan; Alon 1980: Vol. I, 206–52.

<sup>15</sup> *Antoninus’ herds were passing by and they brought them to fertilise Rabbi’s herds*: Genesis Rabbah 20, 6 (Albeck and Theodor 1903: 190).

<sup>16</sup> E.g. BT ‘Avodah Zarah 10b: *Every day he [Antoninus] served Rabbi, fed him and brought him drink, and when Rabbi wanted to go to bed, he knelt down next to the bed and said to him: Get up on me to your bed*. Also, PT Megillah iii, 74a, col. 764 and parallels: *Antolinus* [sic] converted [to Judaism].

<sup>17</sup> *Digesta*, 50:2:3:3 (Mommsen and Krüger 1870: 896).

had to take upon themselves the liturgies (i.e. to fulfil certain civic demands), as long as it did not interfere with their religious practice.

According to the legislation of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, Jews could be members of the institutions of city leadership. As a result, in the cities where the majority of inhabitants were Jews, the leadership institutions were also manned by Jews. Both the Talmuds discuss a case where *aurum coronarium* was imposed on the institutions of the city leadership, apparently in Tiberias. This tax had originally been imposed when a new emperor succeeded to the throne, but over time it developed into a tax which was also imposed on other occasions. At first this tax was paid in the form of a golden crown given to the emperor, as its name implies, but over time it was changed to a sum of money like any other tax.<sup>18</sup> The *boule* and the *stratego*i were divided over whether each side had to pay half the sum, or the *stratego*i, who were also members of the *boule*, should pay half the tax, while the members of the *boule* should pay only one half of the sum. The case was brought before Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, and he ruled that the members of the *boule* should pay half the sum required, while the *stratego*i should pay the other half.<sup>19</sup>

Many scholars have debated the question of what exactly the institution of the *stratego*i was. The word is not common in the Talmudic literature, so that it is necessary to examine the contexts in which it appears in the city administrations in other Roman provinces. This investigation reveals that *stratego*i was a Greek term parallel to the Latin *duoviri*, a term used for the two highest offices in the administration of a city which had acquired the status of a *colonia*. They were parallel to the two consuls who held the highest office in the city of Rome during the republic.<sup>20</sup> It is known that this governing body, the duvirate, existed in various different cities in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor. The term *strategos* is mentioned, for example, in an inscription from Gerasa across the Jordan, as well as in a basilica from the Severan period which was discovered in Sebaste, the central city in the Samarian hills, to which Septimius Severus granted the status of a *colonia*. *Stratego*i are also mentioned in connection with the cities of Gaza and Petra. When Tadmor/Palmyra became a *colonia*, they followed the accepted custom of appointing *duoviri*, and during the years 224–62 these two top city officials were called *stratego*i. The institution of *stratego*i is also mentioned in a document recording a sale written in Edessa

<sup>18</sup> Millar 1977: 139–44. <sup>19</sup> See PT Yoma i, 39a, col. 564.

<sup>20</sup> Mommsen 1871–88: vol. II; Gizewski 1997: 3, 20, cols. 843–5.

in north Mesopotamia, which was discovered in the excavations at Dura Europos.<sup>21</sup>

Given this peaceful atmosphere, the good economic situation and the autonomy given to the Jews in general and to their leadership institutions in particular under Severan rule, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi felt that there was no longer any need to fast on the fast days commemorating the destruction of the Temple, even though the Temple had not been rebuilt, and the Jews did not have complete autonomy. His attempt to cancel the fasts of 17 Tammuz and 9 Av, which are an expression of mourning for the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jerusalem, can be seen as a definitive expression of this political concept and the way in which he saw his own time as the 'beginning of the redemption', a vision which he wished to communicate to the people. Thus Rabbi gave a personal example, by going to bathe in the springs of Sepphoris on 17 Tammuz. Bathing is one of the enjoyments prohibited on a fast day, but in spite of this, Rabbi bathed in public on 17 Tammuz, the fast day which commemorates the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem by Titus.<sup>22</sup> Rabbi's attempt to cancel the fast of 9 Av as well was a reformatory move that was even more significant, for 9 Av is the day when, according to the rabbis, Jewish suffering was redoubled: the fast commemorates the destruction of both the First Temple and the Second Temple as well. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel, Rabbi's own father, had said:

[A]nyone who eats and drinks on 9th of Av, it is as if he had eaten and drunk on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.<sup>23</sup>

The rabbis of the generation of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi were not prepared to accept this ruling, and when he saw that he could not persuade them, he cancelled his own ruling. There is confirmation for the suggestion that the clement political climate of his time was one of the reasons behind Rabbi's attempted reformatory rulings. The Babylonian Talmud preserves a tradition that distinguishes between the days of *shemad* (repressive legislation) and the days of peace (political independence), and between the days when there is neither repression nor peace (i.e. foreign domination without repression). From this tradition – although it is cited in the name of Rav Papa, a Babylonian *amora* who lived in the mid fourth century – it is

<sup>21</sup> Oppenheimer 1991: 74, nos. 55–9.

<sup>22</sup> BT Megillah 5a-b: *Rabbi Elazar said Rabbi Hanina said: ... and he bathed in the spring of Sepphoris on the 17th Tammuz.*

<sup>23</sup> A *baraita* in BT Ta'anit 30b.

clear that the criterion for fasting or not fasting in memory of the destruction of the Temple was, in fact, the political situation.<sup>24</sup>

The Roman recognition of the Jewish courts in Palestine was expressed in the fact that the Roman authorities themselves were apparently also involved in the violent enforcement of legal sentences regarding personal status ruled by the Jewish courts, as is stated expressly in the Mishnah:

A divorce given under duress – If it is a Jewish [court] it is valid, but if it is a non-Jewish court it is not valid. If the non-Jews beat him and say to him: Do what the Jews tell you, it is valid.<sup>25</sup>

From this we learn that there were cases where the Romans forced a husband to give his wife a divorce, according to the instructions of a Jewish court, and they were simply helping to carry out the sentence of the Jewish court.

The date of this law has not been ascertained, but a similar pattern of behaviour is seen also in a *baraita* which is clearly from Severan times – to be more exact, from the time of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, for it is stated by Rabbi Hiyya, a contemporary of Rabbi's:

There is a *baraita* about Rabbi Hiyya: If non-Jews enforced the ruling of a Jewish law court – it is valid.<sup>26</sup>

The involvement of the Roman authorities in enforcing sentences dealing with personal status in Jewish courts is also seen in the following source:

*Halitzah* (release of a woman from marriage to her dead husband's brother) enforced in a Jewish court is valid. Among the non-Jews they beat him (the brother-in-law who refuses to release the widow) and say to him: Do what Rabbi So-and-So says to you.<sup>27</sup>

In his *Tosefta Kifshuta, ad loc.*, Lieberman discusses this passage, and distinguishes between *halitzah* imposed by a Roman court, which is not allowed, and a case where the non-Jews violently force a Jew to release his brother's widow following a decision by the rabbis: in this case the *halitzah* is permitted.

The emperors of the Severan dynasty were very active in raising the status of towns in the Eastern provinces (Asia Minor) and the North African provinces to the level of a *polis* or *colonia*. The founder of the dynasty, Septimius Severus, gave Lod [Lydda] the status of a *polis* in

<sup>24</sup> BT Rosh haShanah 18b. <sup>25</sup> M Gittin ix 8, according to the Kauffman and Parma MSS.

<sup>26</sup> PT Gittin ix, 50d, col 1094. <sup>27</sup> Tos. Yevamot xi, 13 (Lieberman 1955–73: 44).

the year 199/200,<sup>28</sup> and the city received the name Diospolis; Bet Guvrin received the name Eleutheropolis;<sup>29</sup> and apparently even before this the emperor gave Sebaste, which was already a *polis*, the status of a *colonia*. I have already noted how he temporarily lowered the status of Neapolis [Shechem] which lost its status as a *polis* because of its support for Pescennius Niger in 194, his rival in the struggle for the imperial throne. Elagabalus gave the status of *polis* to Emmaus, which received the name Nicopolis,<sup>30</sup> and the same status was granted to Antipatris.<sup>31</sup> Both of them raised the status of these cities in the time of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, but also acted similarly in other provinces.

It is possible that Tiberias was also granted the status of a *colonia*. There are a number of reasons for thinking so: the institution of the two *strategoi* which we have identified with the *duoviri* in Tiberias, and this was an institution which was found only in *coloniae*. One of the traditions in the Babylonian Talmud on the relations between Rabbi and ‘Antoninus’ appears in a legendary context which deals with making Tiberias a *colonia*.<sup>32</sup>

And if it is a problem for you that one does not appoint a king’s son as king, [such an appointment] would be made at [the king’s] request, as was the case with Aseverus son of Antoninus who became the ruler. Antoninus said to Rabbi: I want my son Aseverus to reign after me, and Tiberias to be made a *colonia*, and if I ask them [the Senate] one of these, they will do it for me; if I ask them both things, they will not do it. [Rabbi] brought in a man riding on another man, and put a dove in the hand of the man on top, and said to the man below: Tell the man above to release the dove from his hand. [Antoninus] said, Understand from this, that he hinted to me as follows: You ask them for Aseverus my son to succeed me, and tell Aseverus that he should make Tiberias a *colonia*.<sup>33</sup>

Yaakov Meshorer, indeed, claimed that an inscription on one of the coins of Tiberias from the time of Elagabalus includes the letters COL, for *colonia*.<sup>34</sup> This would indeed have been enough to demonstrate that

<sup>28</sup> On Lod/Lydda, see Hill 1914: nos. 1–2; Rosenberger 1975: 28–31; id. 1977: 80; Kindler and Stein 1987: 96–9.

<sup>29</sup> On Bet Guvrin/Eleutheropolis, see Spijkerman 1972: 369–84, Pls. 1–4; Kindler and Stein 1987: 112–5.

<sup>30</sup> On Emmaus, see Jones 1971: 279, and n. 67; Schürer 1973: 512–3, n. 142; Kindler and Stein 1987: 177–9.

<sup>31</sup> There are seven types of coin known from Antipatris, all of them from the time of Elagabalus. See Hill 1914: 11, xv–xvi; van der Vliet 1950: 116–7, nos. 11–2; Meshorer 1984: 54, nos. 149–52; Kindler and Stein (n. 29), 41–2; Schürer 1979: 167–8.

<sup>32</sup> Krauss 1910: 52–5. <sup>33</sup> BT ‘Avodah Zarah 10a. <sup>34</sup> Meshorer 1985: 35.

Tiberias did in fact become a *colonia*, and would have given it a date for when it occurred. Meshorer based himself on the Latin letters COL which he tried to identify on the coins, but these coins clearly have Greek letters on them. Thus this coin cannot be relied on for evidence that Tiberias was a *colonia* at the time it was minted, for in that case the whole inscription would have had to have been in Latin. The only place in which Tiberias is mentioned as a colony is a marriage contract from the year 1035, which was found in the Cairo Genizah, where there is a record which reads: *Medinta Tiberia Colon[ia]*.<sup>35</sup> This terminology would appear to show that there was a tradition that Tiberias had indeed been a *colonia* in earlier times.

The possibility that Tiberias did indeed receive colonial status in Severan times in the days of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi goes some way to explain the reasons for, and the significance of the move of the Jewish leadership institutions from Diocaesaria (Sepphoris) to Tiberias in the first half of the third century. The leadership institutions – the patriarch and the *Bet Va'ad* (the rabbinical leadership) – grew in power, from their first rehabilitation in the little towns of Ushah and Shefar'am following the repressive legislation after the Bar Kokhba revolt, through their move to Bet She'arim and Sepphoris/Zippori in the days of Rabbi. The move to Bet She'arim, which was imperial land given to Rabbi, demonstrates the way he was recognised by the Roman authorities, while the move to Sepphoris, which was a *polis*, is evidence for the submission of the urban elite to his authority. This was the beginning of the settlement of the Jewish leadership in the cities. The final station of the Jewish leadership institutions was Tiberias, and after the city apparently received colonial status, it became the central and most important city in Galilee. The move to Tiberias happened after the process of separation between the patriarchate and the *Bet Va'ad*, which followed the death of Rabbi and took place in stages: first the *Bet Va'ad* moved to Tiberias in the middle of the third century, when it was headed by Rabbi Yoḥanan bar Napha. After this, the patriarchate moved as well, at the latest in the time of Rabbi Judah Nesia the second –the great-great-grandson of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. At any rate, in the time of Diocletian, who succeeded to the imperial throne in 284 CE, the patriarchate was already sited in Tiberias. Thus this gradual process, which had taken about a hundred years, came to an end, having begun in the little town of Usha and ending in Tiberias, the chief city of Galilee.

The increased number of cities appears to have changed the Roman administrative division of *Palaestina*. In the time of the Second Temple,

<sup>35</sup> See Friedman 1981: 207–12; Miller 1987: 7.

there was only one city in the territory of Judaea, Jerusalem, and even this status is not agreed on by scholars. In Galilee too there were few cities. A further city was Jaffa, which Vespasian made into an autonomous city called Flavia Ioppe. The province was divided into 24 toparchies, each centred on a settlement which did not necessarily have the status of a city. We know about these toparchies from Josephus, Pliny the Elder and the documents from the Judean desert from the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Hadrian made Jerusalem into a *colonia*, and as a result, the city received the name of Aelia Capitolina. Hadrian also actively promoted the Hellenisation of the Galilean cities Tiberias and Sepphoris – which with its rise to city status appears to have received the name of Diocaesarea. In other words, he gave them a pagan character and transferred the city government from Jewish to pagan hands.

We have seen that the impetus for the process of urbanisation took place in the time of the Severans and that of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. We can understand the Roman administrative organisation of Palestine in their time from the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius, whose lists do not mention any villages belonging to the territories of other villages, but only villages in the territory of cities. The root of this administrative development in the context of which a city was the centre of each toparchy is based on the urban initiative of the time of the Severan emperors. In other words, at the time of this dynasty the process by which toparchies were set up centred on a village came to an end, and from now on territories were centred on cities only.

There is a considerable amount of overlap between the urbanisation policies of the Severans, and Rabbi's policies and halakhic rulings in relation to the cities. Thus he exempted cities with a Jewish minority of inhabitants from the religious obligations of tithes and the sabbatical year:

Rabbi exempted Bet Shean, Rabbi exempted Caesarea, Rabbi exempted Bet Guvrin, Rabbi exempted Kfar Tzemah.<sup>36</sup>

Rabbi stressed that it was not his intention to remove these cities from the halakhic borders of the Land of Israel, and they were still subject to the purity laws of the halakhic Land of Israel. This step, therefore, was in order to encourage Jews from the countryside to settle in these cities, rather like the fact that in Israel today the inhabitants of Eilat are exempt from VAT, and people living in the countryside and the occupied territories have tax concessions. With these rulings Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi was cooperating with

<sup>36</sup> PT Demai ii, 22c, col. 121.

the urbanisation policies of the Severans, especially as one of the cities mentioned, Bet Guvrin, actually received the status of *polis* from Septimius Severus in the time of Rabbi himself. In his time the process began of granting Ascalon exemption from observing the religious obligations of tithes and the sabbatical year. It should be noted that Rabbi did not absolve his home city of Sepphoris from the observance of the commandments relating to the produce of the Land of Israel, nor Tiberias or Lod, because the majority of their inhabitants were Jews.

To conclude: In the time of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, there was a revolution in the relationship between the authorities and the Jews in Palestine. There can be no doubt that this revolution was linked with the special personality of Rabbi, and his way of leadership, as well as the succession of the Severan dynasty to the imperial throne, and Roman policy in the provinces in general in the time of the Severans. After the Severans came the imperial crisis, which left its mark especially on the eastern provinces, which were subjected to such a heavy economic burden that many Jews emigrated to Babylonia, the home of the largest Jewish diaspora community outside the borders of the Roman Empire.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> For most of this period, the Jewish diaspora community in Babylonia was outside the circle of the direct influence of Hellenistic-Roman culture. Babylonian Jewry was the earliest community, and the only large one, outside the borders of the Roman Empire. The Jewish community in Babylonia had an identifiable influence not only on the rest of the Jewish diaspora, but also on the national centre in Palestine. Over the years, Babylonian Jewry and all its institutions took over the leadership of world Jewry, and its doctrines penetrated every corner of the Jewish world. For generations the Babylonian Talmud has been the basis for the patterns of Jewish life and Jewish belief in the Land of Israel and the diaspora up to and including the present day.

