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# Sons of Israel in Caesar's Service: Jewish Soldiers in the Roman Military

Andrew J. Schoenfeld, MD

The participation of Roman Jewish soldiers in the armies of Imperial Rome often goes unrecognized. This is mainly a result of a lack of recognition on the part of scholars who wish to use Rabbinic sources as the benchmark for Jewish practice in the Imperial Age. It is also difficult to identify Jewish soldiers, many of whom had Greek and Latin names, unless they are specifically identified as Jews or are found in a Jewish context such as dedicatory inscriptions from a synagogue. Nonetheless, by using a variety of sources from the period it is possible to appreciate the depth and breadth of Jewish service in the Roman legions from the time of Caesar down to the early fifth century. There were Jews who served as simple foot soldiers, influential generals like Tiberius Julius Alexander, and Jewish military units such as the *Regii Emeseni Iudaei*. Regardless of their relationship to "orthodox" Jewish communities of the time, the service of Roman Jews in the Imperial armed forces must be recognized.

In the year 69 the Roman province of Judea was consumed by a three-year rebellion that pitted Jewish zealots against the authority of the Emperor and the House of Herod. Not only was the revolt a destabilizing factor in the eastern regions of the Empire but it also posed a significant challenge to the new emperor, Vespasian. In order to quell the Jewish revolt in his eastern marches, Vespasian resolved to send an army under the command of his son, Titus, with explicit orders to crush the insurrection. Although the emperor's young son showed exceptional talent and tact for leadership, he lacked the military

experience deemed necessary for a Roman general. Therefore, the emperor was forced to choose an able commander capable of assisting Titus in the Judean expedition. A great number of prestigious military men were available for the post, including Annianus Vinicianus, son-in-law to the famed general, Corbulo. But Vespasian made the unlikely choice of an Alexandrian Jew named Tiberius Julius Alexander to spearhead the Roman army in its effort to thwart the Jewish uprising. The emperor's decision was to prove fortuitous, as not only did Tiberius Alexander coordinate a Roman victory in Judea but he also became Titus' trusted advisor and may have eventually reached the rank of Praetorian Prefect.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the outstanding military career of this Alexandrian Jew, his name and his legacy are largely unknown outside a small circle of specialists. Likewise, the participation of Jews in the Roman military is a topic that is underemphasized or frankly ignored by historians. Most often, scholars quote the exemptions from military service granted to Jews at Ephesus and Delos<sup>2</sup> or elaborate on the difficulties that Sabbath observance and dietary laws posed to Jewish men interested in serving under the imperial flag.<sup>3</sup> When the issue of Jewish service in the Roman Army is addressed, it is not without a certain degree of skepticism, and Roman Jews in imperial service are often cast in the light of "renegades" or apostates.

Thus, without any documentation of sources, Scharf states that Jews in the Roman army were descended from the bodyguard of the Emesene and Judean royal families who had intermarried and become pagans.<sup>4</sup> Smallwood states that "[m]ilitary service . . . was always bound to cause difficulties for the Jews of the Diaspora because of their dietary laws, which made their inclusion in gentile units impracticable, and their inability to carry out any duties on the Sabbath."<sup>5</sup> Appelbaum claims that Jews in the Roman army were "renegades,"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (Baltimore, 1998), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (Grand Rapids, 1981), 14: 223–230, 236–7.

<sup>3</sup>Edith Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule* (Boston, 2001), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup>R. Scharf, "Regii Emeseni Iudaei: Bemerkungen zu einer spätantiken Truppe," *Latomus* 56 (199): 343–59.

<sup>5</sup>Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule*, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup>S. Appelbaum, "Jews and Service in the Roman Army," *Roman Frontier Studies* 1967 (Tel-Aviv 1971), pp. 181–4.

and Tiberius Julius Alexander is often recast as an apostate even when it is acknowledged that there is no evidence of this fact.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of recognition given to Jewish soldiers who served in the Roman military stems primarily from three main issues: the dearth of inscriptions and manuscripts specifically addressing Jews in the Roman military, the inability to recognize Jews with Greek or Latin names unless they are identified as such, and the tendency of many scholars to rely on rabbinic works in order to reconstitute “normal” Jewish practices in the Roman world.

As a larger corpus of Jewish inscriptions and artifacts from the ancient period has become available, it has become clear that the observance of Judaism in the Roman world was much more variegated than previously supposed. Authors like Levine<sup>8</sup> and Schwartz<sup>9</sup> have now challenged the assertions of prior historians, claiming that Jewish practice in the Imperial period encompassed a broad range of religious activity: from the “orthodoxy” of the rabbinic academies to the syncretism of Jews who had Latin names and employed pagan motifs in synagogal decoration. With these facts in mind, the prospect of active Jewish participation in the military becomes tangible, and upon careful examination of primary sources it is possible to demonstrate the profound extent to which Roman Jews operated in the Imperial Army.

## 1

By the time of Caesar, Jews could already reflect on an illustrious three-hundred-year history of armed service in Persia and the Hellenic East, not to mention the military exploits of the Hasmonean dynasty in the Jewish state proper. Throughout the Ptolemaic period, Jews served in every capacity in the Egyptian army. There were military colonies at Elephantine, border guards at Pelusium and reservists in the *Epigone*. Queen Cleopatra III's top military commanders were both Jews: Chelkias and Ananias, the sons of the legendary High Priest Onias of Heliopolis.<sup>10</sup>

This military tradition continued into the early imperial period; Josephus makes specific mention of Jewish military colonists instrumental in pacifying

<sup>7</sup>Cecil Roth, ed., *Encyclopedia Judaica*, XV (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 1135.

<sup>8</sup>Lee Levine, “Contextualizing Jewish Art: The Synagogues at Hammat-Tiberias and Sephorris,” in *Jewish Culture and Society Under the Christian Roman Empire* (Leuven 2003), pp. 91–132.

<sup>9</sup>Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE* (Princeton, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13: 284–285.

the region of Trachonitis. To this effect, 500 Jewish horsemen from Mesopotamia were settled at Batanaea under the leadership of a captain named Zamaris.<sup>11</sup> These settlers and their descendents continued in their role as a garrison into the second century and supported imperial forces during the Jewish revolt.<sup>12</sup> Careful examination of sources from the Julio-Claudian period reveals a smattering of Jewish soldiers laboring in the imperial army. In the year 19, Emperor Tiberius forcibly conscripted 4,000 Roman Jews for military service on the island of Sardinia,<sup>13</sup> but there is also evidence of Jews serving in a voluntary capacity. Matthaius, a Syrian Jew, served in the Legio I Adiutrix under Nero and received Roman citizenship in 68.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the implementation of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 211, military service was one of the few ways that Jews could achieve Roman citizenship. This was granted after 26 years of service in the auxiliary as recruitment into the legions was confined to those who were already citizens of the empire.

Although dedicatory, funereal, and laudatory inscriptions give us the names of many Jews in the imperial ranks, only in the instance of the above-mentioned Tiberius Julius Alexander can something of a career be gleaned from the sources.

## 2

Tiberius Julius Alexander, the Egyptian Jew who was destined to become one of the most powerful personas in the Empire, was born in the year 16 in Alexandria.<sup>15</sup> His father, Alexander Lysimachus, was a member of the Egyptian gentry and customs chief on the Arabian frontier. Tiberius' uncle was none other than the famous philosopher, Philo. Like many rich assimilated Jews in the city of Alexandria, Tiberius' family had received Roman citizenship during the reign of Augustus and expected their children to assume important posts in the imperial administration. From a young age, Tiberius and his brother Marcus were groomed for a position in the Roman bureaucracy. Their father

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<sup>11</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 17: 2.1 and also see: Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 329–330.

<sup>12</sup>Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, p. 330.

<sup>13</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18:84.

<sup>14</sup>*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XVI, Diploma no. 8.

<sup>15</sup>J. Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Princeton, 1995), p. 185.

eschewed a standard Jewish education and, instead, had his children tutored in the classics.<sup>16</sup> Once the boys reached manhood, Alexander Lysimachus arranged for his sons to enter disparate fields in Roman imperial service. Marcus would become influential in the family's native city of Alexandria and eventually married Princess Berenice, the daughter of King Agrippa I.

Meanwhile, Tiberius began his illustrious career in the Roman army, where his leadership skills and family connections allowed him to secure the post of Governor of the Thebiad in 42. Tiberius' success in this position prompted Emperor Claudius to appoint him Procurator of Judea four years later. At this time, the Province of Judea was a hotbed of revolution as Jewish zealots struggled to throw off the yoke of Roman hegemony. Many of his coreligionists considered Tiberius a turncoat for serving the Roman emperor, but the historian Josephus records that Tiberius' time as procurator was a period of peace in Judea.<sup>17</sup>

Tiberius Alexander left his station in Judea in 48, and by 63 he had risen to become one of the highest ranking officers in the eastern army, a member of Corbulo's general staff. Tiberius conducted himself with honor during Corbulo's Armenian campaign, and in the role of advisor to the fifth legion was instrumental in initiating negotiations with the Armenian King, Tiridates.<sup>18</sup>

His success in the Armenian war secured Corbulo's backing, and with that general's recommendation Nero appointed Tiberius governor of Egypt in 66. Through the time of troubles that followed in the wake of Nero's murder, Tiberius would prove himself a loyal Roman administrator. When the general Vespasian challenged the usurper Vitellius for the imperial purple, Tiberius became an early supporter of the old commander, with whom he had served in the east. Tiberius' backing allowed Vespasian to triumph over Vitellius, and his acclamation of the new emperor in Alexandria became the official date of Vespasian's advent.<sup>19</sup> Tiberius Alexander's Jewish background, personal talents and profound loyalty made him the perfect choice as chief of staff during Titus' invasion of Judea.

As military advisor to Titus, Tiberius experienced the same success that he had enjoyed in Egypt and Armenia. The Jewish insurgency was put down in less than a year, and Titus was hailed a great victor, quickly becoming the

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<sup>16</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20:100.

<sup>17</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20: 220.

<sup>18</sup>Tacitus, *Annals* (Chicago, 1952):15:28.3.

<sup>19</sup>V. A. Tcherikover, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, II (Cambridge, 1957), no. 418a and Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt*, p. 187.

darling of the empire. Although he was merciless in his efforts to put down the Jewish revolt against Rome, Tiberius Alexander seemed to maintain some of his religious sensibilities during the last days of the war. Josephus states that in the final moments of the siege of Jerusalem, both Tiberius and Titus desperately tried to avert the burning of the Temple.<sup>20</sup>

Tiberius Alexander returned to Rome with Titus and, according to an Egyptian papyrus, was eventually appointed to the post of Praetorian Prefect.<sup>21</sup> Although the interpretation of this source has been contested, if Tiberius Alexander indeed attained this position he was undoubtedly the most powerful Jew at the time and must be recognized as one of the predominant Jewish men in military history.

Tiberius reached the pinnacle of his career with the victory in Judea and his possible appointment as prefect. With the death of his friend and patron, Emperor Titus, Tiberius Alexander makes an abrupt exit from the annals of history. In the end, the fate of this illustrious Jew from Alexandria remains unknown. It is possible that, at the ripe old age of 65, the man merely retired from public life, but it has also been postulated that he met a violent end in the purges of Titus' successor, Emperor Domitian. There is, however, no firm proof of Tiberius Alexander's ultimate fate and, until some yet undiscovered evidence comes to light, we are unfortunately relegated to the realm of conjecture.

### 3

Tiberius Julius Alexander was, without question, the most successful Jew to serve in the ranks of the Roman Army, but Jewish participation in the Roman military did not begin or end with this great Alexandrian adventurer. Indeed, from available sources, it would appear that the pinnacle of Jewish participation in the Roman military would not be reached until two centuries after Alexander's death.<sup>22</sup> To the consternation of many rabbis of the period, Jewish men formed a cadre in the Imperial Army from the time of Emperor Caracalla

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<sup>20</sup>Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6: 251–256.

<sup>21</sup>V. A. Tcherikover, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, II, no. 418b.

<sup>22</sup>Gary Gilbert, "Jews in Imperial Administration and its Significance for Dating the Jewish Donor Inscription from Aphrodisias," *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 35, no. 2 (Leiden, 2004): 177. This statement also based on the fact that, considering the primary sources available, most inscriptions and material mentioning Roman Jewish soldiers have been dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. For further reading see: D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, vols. I and II (Cambridge, 1993), D. Noy, A. Panayotov and H. Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vols. I and III (Tubingen, 2004), and Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 BCE to 640 CE*.

down to the reign of the late Christian Emperors. There were even exclusively Jewish units, such as the Royal Emesene Jews.<sup>23</sup>

Many Diasporan Jews were fully enmeshed in Roman culture, used Greek or Latin names, and were active in the civic administrations of numerous cities around the Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> In this respect they approximate modern Reform Jews, and it is not surprising that some men of the Jewish faith would look to establish careers in the Roman military.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, this high level of integration puts the scholar at a certain disadvantage when attempting to identify Roman Jewish soldiers in the historical record. Unless their religion is specifically identified, Jews with Greek or Latin names escape our notice, and it is probable that more Roman Jewish soldiers will be lost to posterity than can ever be identified.

Based on the evaluation of what archeological and historical material is available, most Jewish soldiers seemed to have originated from three distinct regions of the empire. In the later Imperial period, the Jewish community of Italy provided many recruits, but the Hellenic-Jewish populations of Syria and Asia Minor and the Jews of Egypt probably contributed the most to the Roman Jewish military effort. As mentioned above, the Egyptian Jewish community already had a rich military tradition before the advent of Imperial Rome.

Roman Jewish soldiers who are mentioned in inscriptions and artifacts from the first and second centuries are almost entirely of Egyptian or Syrian extraction. An inscription from Jaffa mentions an Egyptian Jew named Thannoum the Centurion,<sup>26</sup> and a military diploma from Dacia speaks of the foot soldier Barsimsus Calisthensus, a Jew serving in the *Cohors I Vindelicorum*.<sup>27</sup> Other artifacts from modern day Romania attest to the fact that many Jews

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<sup>23</sup>Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, I, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup>A number of primary sources attest to these facts. For further reading of inscriptions addressing the preponderance of Greek and Latin names among Jews in the Roman Empire see Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, Noy et al., *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, and H. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia, 1960). A worthy introduction to Jews in the civic administrations of Imperial Roman cities can be found in Tcherikover, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans*, Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, and P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>25</sup>Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup>J. B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, II (Rome, 1952), no. 920.

<sup>27</sup>G. Levenson, "The Little Tailor's Synagogue," in *The Jewish People's Almanac* (Garden City, 1981), p. 542. The military diploma, discovered near the remains of ancient Tibiscum, has been translated as: "Barsimsus, son of Calisthensus from Caesarea, foot soldier."



were stationed in this province during the first century.<sup>28</sup> There was also a significant Jewish military presence in neighboring Pannonia. Two-thirds of all Jewish inscriptions from Roman Pannonia are those of legionaries, primarily members of the I Syrian Archers, Aurelia Antoniana and I Hemesian Archers.<sup>29</sup>

The policies of Emperors Caracalla and Septimus Severus further encouraged Roman Jews to seek careers in the Roman military. Without question, the vast majority of sources addressing Roman Jewish soldiers are from the two centuries following Caracalla's decision to grant citizenship to all free individuals of the Empire. Thus, by the end of the third century, we find several Jews in high military positions, especially in Syria and Asia Minor.<sup>30</sup> A donor inscription from Aphrodisias concerns a Jew named Theodotos who held the high imperial rank of *palatinus*.<sup>31</sup> During this period a Jew from Sardis named Aurelius Basileides was raised to the rank of procurator.<sup>32</sup> Another mosaic from the synagogue of Sardis records a high military functionary and *comes*, the Jew Paulus.<sup>33</sup>

In this period Roman Jewish soldiers achieved success in regions outside of Asia Minor as well. A funereal tablet from the Jewish necropolis at Beth-Shearim in Israel speaks of the palatine Julianus,<sup>34</sup> and a dedicatory lintel from the Sepphoris synagogue tells us of another *comes* named Gelasius.<sup>35</sup> Iosses Maximinus Pannonius was a non-commissioned officer with the V Macedonian Legion at Oescus<sup>36</sup> and a Jewish community member named Cosmius was stationed as the commanding officer of the military post at Spondil.<sup>37</sup> A Greek inscription from Larissa mentions the Jew Alexander who held the rank of *prostates*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>B. P. Hasdeu, *Istoria Tolerantei Religioase in Romania* (Bucharest, 1868), p. 76.

<sup>29</sup>R. Patai, *The Jews of Hungary* (Detroit, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup>Trebilco, *Jewish Communities of Asia Minor*, p. 191.

<sup>31</sup>Gilbert, "Jews in Imperial Administration," p. 176.

<sup>32</sup>G. Hanfmann, *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times* (Cambridge, 1983), fig. 272.

<sup>33</sup>Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 49, inscription 4.7.

<sup>34</sup>Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, II, no. 1006.

<sup>35</sup>Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, III, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup>Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn. *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, I, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup>Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, I (Rome, 1936), no. 677.

<sup>38</sup>Noy, Panayotov and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, I, p. 117. See also: A. Panayotov, "The Jews in the Balkan Provinces of the Roman Empire: The Evidence from the Territory of Bulgaria," in John M. G. Barclay, ed., *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Studies in the Roman Empire* (London, 2004), pp. 38–65.

This era also witnessed the continuation of the Jewish military tradition in Egypt. The names of several Jewish troopers can be found in papyri mentioning their service with the III Oxyrynchan Cohort and Egyptian cavalry.<sup>39</sup> The *legio comitatensis* of the above mentioned troop of Royal Emesene Jews (*Regii Emeseni Iudaei*) was stationed at Alexandria in 356 and participated in the attack on Bishop Athanasius in the Church of Theonas.<sup>40</sup> This same unit can be located in Concordia, Italy in 409<sup>41</sup> and is mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* under the command of the western *Magister Peditum Praesentalis*.<sup>42</sup> At this time the *Auxilia Palatina* of the troop was stationed at Strasbourg.<sup>43</sup>

The third and fourth centuries would see an increase in the number of Jewish soldiers recruited from the communities on the Italian peninsula. A funereal tablet from the Roman catacombs tells us of the Jew named Rufinus who campaigned in the ranks for 25 years before retiring to an allodial settlement near the place of his birth.<sup>44</sup> Other Roman Jews who survived careers in the military and were rewarded for their service included Reginus and his comrade in arms, Agrius Evangelus.<sup>45</sup>

There was also a substantial Jewish presence in the auxiliary, or *limitani*, units that the Romans used as frontier guards. The famous rabbi, Simeon ben Lakish, was a foot soldier in the *limitani* before he retired to more scholarly pursuits.<sup>46</sup> In North Africa an extensive portion of Roman frontier troops was recruited from the native Berber population, among them the Jewish *Jerawa* tribe.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, I, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup>*Patrologia Latina*, 13, 916 and D. Woods, "A note concerning the *Regii Emeseni Iudaei*," *Latomus* 51 (1992): 404–407. "Proba non te, sed Iudaeos destinasse militem ad Alexandriam, Iudaeorum militem obsedissee fores Dei domus, Iudaeorum militum ducem esse Syrianum. Proba Iudaeos ingressos basilicam cum armis, atque certum numerum interfecisse."

<sup>41</sup>Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, III, p. 69. This reference presents the inscription from the sarcophagus of Flavia Optata, the wife of a soldier from the troop of Royal Emesene Jews.

<sup>42</sup>*Notitia Dignitatum*, Or, 6, 49.

<sup>43</sup>Woods, "A Note Concerning the *Regii Emeseni Iudaei*," p. 405.

<sup>44</sup>Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, p. 274.

<sup>45</sup>Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, II, p. 231

<sup>46</sup>R. J. Z. Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, eds. *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (New York, 1965), p. 360.

<sup>47</sup>M. Brett, *The Berbers* (Oxford, 1996), p. 54.

## 4

The ascent of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire would eventually spell the end of Jewish service in the military. However, the position of Jews in the Roman Army was not immediately affected by the declaration of Christianity as the state religion because members of the armed forces were slow to adopt the new faith.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the fourth and early fifth centuries Jewish soldiers and exclusive Jewish units like the Royal Emesene Jews would continue to play a role in the defense of the empire.<sup>49</sup> The letter of Severus of Minorca informs us of several Jews in high military positions in the early fifth century.<sup>50</sup> In 400, the Jew Lectorius was elevated to the rank of *praeses* of the Balaeric islands, and in 418 both Theodore and Caecilianus, Equestrian Jews of Minorca, held the military title of *defensor civitatis*.<sup>51</sup> The late Roman general, Arrian, employed Iturean archers, whose ancestors had been forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmoneans, in his conflict with the Alan tribes.<sup>52</sup>

However, as the Christian church solidified its power in the Roman hierarchy, imperial legislation became more vociferous in its attitude towards Jews, and discontent appears to have developed in Jewish members of the military. Like their more religious brethren, assimilated Jews began to view the Roman Empire as an adversary, and unrest spread amongst the Jewish ranks in the army. Many Jewish soldiers sided with enemies of the Christian government, deserting to the Persians or supporting usurpers like Maximinus and Eugenius.<sup>53</sup>

Both out of a desire to limit the role of Jews in public life and because of suspicions regarding their loyalty to the Christian state, Emperor Theodosius I enacted the first legislation barring Jews from serving as officers in the Roman army.<sup>54</sup> This was shortly followed by an edict of Emperor Theodosius II, issued in 410, that expelled all Jewish soldiers from the Eastern Roman military.<sup>55</sup> Eight years later, the same emperor would openly exclude Jews from

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<sup>48</sup>M. Simkins, *The Roman Army from Hadrian to Constantine* (London, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>49</sup>Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, I, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup>*Epistula Severi* 6, 19:6.

<sup>51</sup>*Epistula Severi* 6, 19:6 and S. Katz, *The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 120.

<sup>52</sup>S. MacDowell, *Late Roman Infantryman: 236–565 AD* (London, 1994), p. 30.

<sup>53</sup>A. Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1986), pp. 97–98.

<sup>54</sup>*Codex Theodosianus*, 16, 8:16.

<sup>55</sup>Williams, *Jews Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 106.

the army in Italy, demanding that "[the Jewish soldier's] military belt shall be undone without any hesitation, and . . . they shall not derive any help or protection from their former merits."<sup>56</sup> In 425 Theodosius II re-issued the same edict for the province of Gaul and, in 439, made it the law for every province in the Roman Empire.<sup>57</sup> With few exceptions, the edicts of Theodosius II effectively put an end to Jewish service in the Roman army, and no large body of Jews would come to serve in such military fashion until the rise of the Khazar state three hundred years after the fall of Rome.

## 5

For the most part, contemporary Jewish scholarship has chosen to de-emphasize or ignore the important contributions of the Roman Jewish community in general and Jewish soldiers in particular. This has occurred partly because of the high level of assimilation enjoyed by these Diasporan Jews, but also because the religious individuals who recorded Jewish history at the time viewed them as traitors. The Roman Empire was responsible for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and religious scholars could not fathom why their coreligionists would want to participate in the instrument of Imperial oppression. Echoing the sentiments of these scholars and rabbis, modern Jewish historians have also tended to view Jewish participation in the Roman military with skepticism, often labeling Jewish soldiers apostates or questioning their attachment to the Jewish community.<sup>58</sup> When considering these statements, it is important to remember that Jewish religious practices across the Roman Empire were extremely variegated, and one cannot attempt to reconstruct a type of "normative" Judaism from the texts of rabbinic scholarship.<sup>59</sup> The Roman Jewish soldiers' attachment to their ancestral faith and involvement in the community is confirmed by the presence of their names in Jewish funereal inscriptions and dedicatory lintels of synagogues. The palatine Julianus was the brother of a rabbi named Paregorius,<sup>60</sup> and Iosses Pannonius,<sup>61</sup> the *principalis* of Legio V Macedonia, was a high synagogue official.

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<sup>56</sup>A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit, 1987), p. 281.

<sup>57</sup>Katz, *The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 121.

<sup>58</sup>Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 95. See also Appelbaum, "Jews and Service in the Roman Army," Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, III, p. 69, and Noy, Panayotov and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, I, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup>J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 416.

<sup>60</sup>Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, II, no. 1006.

<sup>61</sup>Noy, Panayotov and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, I, p. 34.

Based on these examples from primary sources contained in the historical record, it is evident that Roman Jews served in the military from the beginning of the Pax Romana down to the days of the early fifth century. The many sources, papyri, and tablets referenced in this article form a corpus of incontrovertible proof that Roman Jews were active in the armed forces of the Empire. That these Jewish soldiers actually thought of themselves as *Jews* is clear from the fact that they are mentioned as such in their inscriptions, were active as officials and members of synagogues, and were buried in Jewish cemeteries with religious symbols on their tombstones and sarcophagi. Whether these Jews were as scrupulous in their religious observance as the Rabbinic authors of the Talmud and Mishnah is a moot point. Authors who question the authenticity of these soldiers' religious conviction detract from our understanding of Jewish history in the Roman period and render an injustice to the memory of these Roman Jews, who felt strong enough in their faith to participate in their religious community, make dedications in their synagogues and use Jewish markers on their graves.

In summation, various sources from the works of Josephus to sarcophagi and the letters of Church fathers show the varied roles that Roman Jews played in the ranks of the Imperial Army. Roman Jewish soldiers, including influential personalities such as Tiberius Julius Alexander, must be given their place in Jewish history, regardless of their relationship to "orthodox" Jewish communities of the time. This recognition will not only fill a lacuna in the field of Roman military history but will also bring to light part of the brilliant compilation that was the Jewish community in the Imperial epoch.