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CHAPTER 1



THE SIEGE OF MASADA

(72–73 OR 73–74 CE)

In 72 or 73 CE, 967 Jewish refugees holding out atop Masada watched helplessly as thousands of Roman soldiers surrounded the base of the mountain, cutting off all contact with the outside world. Our story of Masada begins at this critical moment: the siege of the fortress three years after the fall of Jerusalem. In this chapter we examine the Roman siege works and become acquainted with Josephus—the only ancient author who describes the siege of Masada.

THE SIEGE OF MASADA

When the First Revolt erupted in 66, bands of Jewish rebels took over some of Herod the Great's fortified palaces, which had been occupied and maintained by garrisons since the king's death seventy years earlier. Three were still in Jewish hands after the revolt officially ended in 70: Herodium (near Bethlehem), Machaerus (to the east of the Dead Sea), and Masada. The Roman legate (governor) of the newly established province of Judea, Lucilius Bassus, set out to subdue these last holdouts. Limited information from Josephus and archaeological evidence suggest that Herodium was taken quickly. The rebels at Machaerus capitulated before the Romans commenced their assault, although Josephus describes skirmishes between the two sides. The Roman circumvallation (siege) wall and ten or eleven siege camps are still visible surrounding

the base of Machaerus, as is a massive stone assault ramp that was never completed.¹

In 72 or 73, the Roman troops arrived at the foot of Masada, the last fortress held by Jewish rebels. In the meantime, Bassus had died and was replaced as legate by Flavius Silva:

In Judea, meanwhile, Bassus had died and been succeeded in the governorship by Flavius Silva, who, seeing the whole country now subjugated by the Roman arms, with the exception of one fortress still in revolt, concentrated all forces in the district and marched against it. This fortress was called Masada. (Josephus, *War* 7.252)

Silva was a native of Urbs Salvia in Italy, where two inscriptions have been discovered recording his dedication of an amphitheater in 81 or later, after he finished his term as legate of Judea.²

The Roman campaign to Masada took place in the winter-spring of 72–73 or 73–74.³ Although today many visitors are under the impression that the fortress held out against the Romans for three years (after 70), the siege lasted no longer than six months and almost certainly was much shorter—perhaps as little as seven weeks from beginning to end.⁴

The Roman Army

The Roman army was so effective because its soldiers were highly trained career professionals—mostly legionaries and auxiliaries—who enlisted for a lifetime of service.⁵ Legionaries were drafted from among Roman citizens and served primarily as heavy infantry. At the time of the siege of Masada, there were approximately thirty legions in the Roman army, each consisting of about five thousand soldiers.⁶ Auxiliaries were conscripted from among non-Roman citizens, who were awarded citizenship at the end of their term of service. Auxiliaries usually operated as light infantry, cavalry, and archers, that is, the more mobile troops who protected the flanks of the heavy infantry in battle. Auxiliary units were organized into regiments numbering five hundred or a thousand soldiers each.

Approximately eight thousand Roman troops participated in the siege of Masada: the Tenth Legion (*Legio X Fretensis*) and a number of auxiliary cohorts.⁷ The Tenth Legion, now under Silva's command, had

participated previously in the sieges at Gamla (or Gamala) (in the Golan), Jerusalem, and Machaerus. After the fall of Masada, the Tenth Legion was stationed in Jerusalem until circa 300, when the emperor Diocletian transferred it to Aila (modern Aqaba) on the Red Sea. Servants and slaves (including Jews), pack animals, and vendors accompanied the Roman troops at the siege of Masada.

The Roman Siege Camps

When the Romans arrived at the foot of Masada, they constructed a stone wall, 10–12 feet (ca. 3 meters) high and approximately 4,000 yards (4,500 meters) long, which completely encircled the base of the mountain. This circumvallation wall sealed off the fortress, preventing the besieged from escaping and making it impossible for others to join them. Gwyn Davies emphasizes “the clear symbolic message conveyed” by the construction of the siege works, both to the rebels holding out atop Masada and other peoples under Roman rule.⁸ Guards posted at towers along the wall kept watch to ensure that no one scaled it. In addition to the circumvallation wall, the Romans established eight camps to house their troops, which archaeologists have labeled with the letters A–H (fig. 9). The camps surround the base of the mountain, guarding potential routes of escape. Josephus’s description of the circumvallation wall and siege camps accords well with the archaeological remains:

The Roman general advanced at the head of his forces against Eleazar and his band of Sicarii who held Masada, and promptly making himself master of the whole district, established garrisons at the most suitable points, threw up a wall all round the fortress, to make it difficult for any of the besieged to escape, and posted sentinels to guard it. (*War* 7.275)

The sequence of camps begins with A at the foot of the Snake Path and proceeds counterclockwise: Camps A–C on the eastern side of the mountain; D at the northern tip; E–F on the northwest side; G to the southwest; and H perched atop Mount Eleazar to the south of Masada. The camps are connected by the circumvallation wall and by a path called the “runner’s path” which can still be hiked today. In an era before field telephones and walkie-talkies, the runner’s path was the line

of communication, used by runners who carried Silva's orders from camp to camp. The 1981 film *Gallipoli* directed by Peter Weir featured a young Mel Gibson in the role of an Australian runner in that famous World War I battle.

The layout of the siege camps at Masada reflects the efficient and standardized operating procedure of the Roman army. All of the camps are square or roughly square in shape, with the sides oriented to the four cardinal points. In the middle of each wall is a gate that led to two main roads running north-south and east-west, which intersected in the center of the camp. The units within each camp were laid out around these roads, with the most important units (such as the commander's living quarters and the camp headquarters) in the center and other units farther away. Camp B on the east and Camp F on the northwest are conspicuously larger than the others, as they housed the legionary troops, while the other camps were occupied by auxiliary soldiers.⁹ Camp B served as the distribution point for supplies transported by boats from areas surrounding the Dead Sea, which were offloaded at a dock on the shore to the east of Masada. Camp F was positioned so Silva could oversee the construction of the assault ramp, as Josephus describes: "He himself [Silva] encamped at a spot which he selected as most convenient for siege operations, where the rocks of the fortress abutted on the adjacent mountain, although ill situated for commissariat purposes" (*War* 7.277).

A square walled area in the southwest corner of Camp F, called F2, postdates the fall of Masada. Camp F2 housed a small garrison that remained for a short period after the siege ended, until they ensured the area was completely subdued.

The 1995 Excavations in Camp F

Although Yigael Yadin was a specialist in ancient warfare and served as chief of staff of the IDF, his excavations focused on the remains on Masada's summit and largely ignored the Roman siege works. These remained virtually untouched until summer 1995, when I co-directed excavations in the siege works with three Israeli colleagues: Professor Gideon Foerster (at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem); Professor Haim Goldfus (now at Ben-Gurion University); and Mr. Benny Arubas (at the

Hebrew University). We focused on Camp F as it is the better-preserved of the two legionary camps (fig. 10). Our excavations provide valuable information about Roman siege warfare in general and the fall of Masada in particular.¹⁰ The remains at Masada are arguably the best-preserved example of siege works anywhere in the Roman world, for two reasons: (1) they are constructed of stone, whereas in other parts of the Roman world siege works often were made of perishable materials such as wood and sod; and (2) because of their remote desert location, the Masada siege works have never been destroyed or built over.¹¹ The circumvallation wall and camps are clearly visible today, evidenced by heaps of stones that can be seen from the top of the mountain. Although the camps appear barren and sterile, our excavations revealed that the units within them are filled with broken pottery and other artifacts.

The circumvallation wall and the walls of the camps are constructed of dry field stones, that is, unhewn stones collected from the rocky surface of the ground, with no mud or mortar binding. The outer walls of each camp originally stood to a height of 10–12 feet (ca. 3 meters), while the walls of the units inside the camps were about 3–4 feet high (ca. 1 meter). The latter were not actually walls; rather, they were bases or foundations for leather tents, which the Roman army pitched while on campaign in the field. We excavated several units inside Camp F, which consist of one or more rooms, with the interiors usually encircled by a low bench of dirt and stones. The benches were used both for sleeping and as dining couches. The praetorium—the living quarters of the commander, Silva—is located in the center of Camp F, by the intersection of the two main roads. Although most of the stones of the praetorium were removed for use in the construction of Camp F2, the discovery of luxury goods including imported glass vessels from Italy and eggshell-thin painted Nabataean pottery bowls confirm that this was indeed the commander's living quarters. My personal favorite is a stump-based *amphoriskos*—a table jar—painted with ivy leaves, from which I like to imagine Silva's servant poured his wine (fig. 11).

Next to the praetorium is a stone platform, which was a tribunal from which Silva could review and address his troops, who mustered in the open space around it. Nearby is a rectangular pi-shaped structure, oriented so that its narrow end opens toward Masada. This structure was stripped

to the foundations when the wall of Camp F2 was constructed over it. Nevertheless, the plan and location indicate that it was a *triclinium*—the officers’ mess. Triclinium in Greek means “three couches,” referring to the arrangement of dining couches around three sides of a formal dining room. As the officers in this triclinium dined, they gazed out at the mountain of Masada.

Just inside the wall of Camp F2 and partly covered by it is the *principia*—the camp headquarters. Although the principia yielded almost no finds, it was the only unit we excavated with plastered walls and floors. Nearby and also within the walls of F2, we excavated a row of identical one-room units called *contubernia*. A contubernium was the smallest subdivision of a legion, consisting of eight enlisted men who marched and camped together on campaign. Each of these one-roomed units housed a group of eight men—a contubernium (fig. 12). The interior of the room was lined with a rough stone-and-dirt bench used for sleeping and dining. The contubernia are small because the men ate and slept in shifts, similar to living quarters in a modern submarine. In front of each room is a small open porch or courtyard enclosed by a wall, with a small hearth in the corner where the men prepared their food. Roman soldiers were equipped with mess kits which they used on campaign, as depicted on Trajan’s Column in Rome, where soldiers are setting out with their mess kits dangling from a pole slung over one shoulder.

The floors of the units we excavated in Camp F were covered with layers of broken pottery, mostly from storage jars. The rarity of cooking pots and dining dishes such as bowls and cups apparently is due to the use of mess kits by the enlisted men, whereas Silva and his officers were provided with fine ceramic and glass tableware. The storage jars, which have a bulky, bag-shaped body, are characteristic of Judea in the first century CE and presumably were produced for the Roman army by Jewish potters. The siege of Masada was a logistical challenge for the Romans due to the scarcity of food and water in the immediate vicinity. They had to import enough supplies every day to provision approximately eight thousand soldiers as well as pack animals, servants, and slaves. Food and water were hauled from great distances over land on pack animals or shipped on boats from points around the Dead Sea.¹² Josephus describes the provisioning of the Roman troops at Masada: “For not only were

supplies conveyed from a distance, entailing hard labor for the Jews told off for this duty, but even water had to be brought into the camp, there being no spring in the neighborhood” (*War* 7.278).

As Josephus indicates, Jewish slaves hauled the food and water. The supplies were transported in baskets and animal skins, which are lighter, easier to carry, and less susceptible to breakage than ceramic jars. Upon arrival at Masada, the contents of these containers were emptied into ceramic jars for storage. After the siege ended, the storage jars were emptied and left behind.

Roman Military Equipment

Not surprisingly, we found few remains of military equipment in our excavations in Camp F, as the soldiers took their weapons with them when the siege ended. However, in and around the tent units were piles of large, egg-shaped pebbles, which had been collected from *wadis* (river beds/washes) in the vicinity. They were used as slingshot stones and were left behind because they had no inherent value. In contrast to Camp F, Yadin’s excavations atop Masada yielded a large and diverse quantity of military equipment, which I co-published with Guy Stiebel.¹³ Yadin’s finds included hundreds of iron arrowheads, nearly all of which represent the standard Roman Imperial type: a head with three barbed wing-tips to stick into the flesh, and a long tang that was inserted into a wooden or reed shaft (fig. 13). The arrows were fired in volleys by archers. Three bone ear laths from Yadin’s excavations come from the reinforced ends of composite bows.¹⁴ Yadin also discovered hundreds of small bronze scales, most of which are narrow and elongated, and have four holes at the top and a raised rib down the center (fig. 14). Originally the scales were sewn onto a cloth or leather backing so that they overlapped. In the first century CE, scale armor was typically worn by auxiliaries. One large group of scales was colored red, gold, and perhaps silver, and apparently belonged to a suit of parade armor.

Legionary soldiers wore segmented armor (*lorica segmentata*), which consisted of overlapping iron strips, a few fragments of which were found in Yadin’s excavations. The armor covered only the upper part of the body and was worn over a short tunic that stopped just above the knees. On their heads, legionaries wore a bronze helmet with large cheek-pieces

attached to the sides; we discovered one such cheek-piece in Camp F. The typical footgear worn by Roman soldiers consisted of heavy hobnailed leather sandals called *caligae*, examples of which were preserved at Masada thanks to the arid desert atmosphere. The emperor Gaius was nicknamed Caligula—“little boots”—after the hobnailed sandals worn by the soldiers who he befriended as a child. The lower part of a legionary’s body was left unprotected by armor to allow for mobility.

Around their waists, legionaries wore a leather belt to which several items were attached. An apron consisting of narrow strips of leather with bronze studs dangled from the front of the belt, which protected the soldier’s genitals (as nothing was worn under a tunic) and made a clanking noise intended to frighten the enemy in battle. A leather sheath holding a dagger was attached to the right side of the belt, and on the left side was a leather sheath with a gladius—the double-edged sword used by legionaries. The tip of the sword sheath was reinforced with a bronze casing called a scabbard chape. Yadin found a complete scabbard chape with delicate cut-out designs, through which the dark leather sheath would have been visible (fig. 15). This scabbard chape, which must have belonged to a legionary officer, has parallels in Italy dating to the mid-first century CE. In the left hand, legionaries held a large rectangular shield to protect the unarmored lower part of the body. In the right hand, they carried a tall, skinny javelin called a *pilum*, which was the characteristic offensive weapon of legionaries. In battle, the pilum was thrust or thrown to pin the opponent, who was then killed with the sword in hand-to-hand combat.

The Assault Ramp

The Romans undertook the siege of Masada by constructing their camps and the circumvallation wall, thereby sealing off and isolating the mountain. In some sieges, no additional measures were required to starve an enemy into surrender. This was not the case at Masada, where the besieged were provisioned with large quantities of food and water stored in Herod’s palaces, whereas the Roman forces had to import supplies from long distances. Therefore, at Masada the Romans sought to bring the siege to a swift resolution. To accomplish this, they had to move their troops and siege machinery up the steep, rocky slopes of the mountain

and break through Herod's fortification wall at the top. There were two paths to the top of Masada: the Snake Path on the east and another path on the west (today buried under the Roman ramp) (see chapter 4). Using these paths would have required the soldiers to climb up in single file while carrying their personal equipment as well as the battering ram, which had to be erected at the top to break through the Herodian casemate wall—all the while leaving the soldiers vulnerable to stones, boulders, and other projectiles thrown or fired by the defenders above. To solve this problem, Silva ordered his men to construct an assault ramp of dirt and stones, which ascended to the summit from a low white hill (called the *Leuke* by Josephus) at the foot of the western side of the mountain:

The Roman general, having now completed his wall surrounding the whole exterior of the place, as we have already related, and taken the strictest precautions that none should escape, applied himself to the siege. He had discovered only one spot capable of supporting earthworks. For in rear of the tower which barred the road leading from the west to the palace and the ridge, was a projection of rock, of considerable breadth and jutting far out, but still three hundred cubits [1 cubit = ca. 1.5 feet or 0.5 meters] below the elevation of Masada; it was called Leuce. Silva, having accordingly ascended and occupied this eminence, ordered his troops to throw up an embankment. (Josephus, *War* 7.304–5)

Once completed, the ramp provided a gentle slope that the soldiers could ascend easily with several men across. At the top of the ramp, they erected a stone platform for the battering ram:¹⁵

Working with a will and a multitude of hands, they raised a solid bank to the height of two hundred cubits. This, however, being still considered of insufficient stability and extent as an emplacement for the engines, on top of it was constructed a platform of great stones fitted closely together, fifty cubits broad and as many high. (Josephus, *War* 7.306–7)

During the siege operation, auxiliary troops provided cover fire with a barrage of arrows and ballista stones—large, round stones shot from torsion machines:

The engines in general were similarly constructed to those first devised by Vespasian and afterwards by Titus for their siege operations; in addition a sixty-cubit tower was constructed entirely cased in iron, from which the Romans by volleys of missiles from numerous quick-firers and ballistae quickly beat off the defenders on the ramparts and prevented them from showing themselves. (Josephus, *War* 7.308–9)

Yadin found iron arrowheads and ballista stones surrounding the area at the top of the ramp, confirming Josephus's description of a concentrated barrage of cover fire.¹⁶ Andrew Holley, who published the ballista stones, notes that their relatively light weights (nearly all weighing less than 4 kg and most of these less than 1 kg) indicate they were fired from small-caliber engines and were aimed at human targets rather than being intended to make a breach in the casemate wall.¹⁷ Most of the ballista stones were discovered along the northwest edge of the mountain, facing the assault ramp, with large deposits in two casemate rooms (L1039 and L1045). Holley has argued persuasively against Ehud Netzer's suggestion that these stones were associated with engines used by the Jewish rebels, as the Romans would not have established Camps E and F within range of artillery fire. Instead, the ballista stones in L1039 ("the Casemate of the Scrolls"—see chapter 8) and L1045 were fired into the fortress by Roman artillery mounted in the tower on the assault ramp, and were collected and dumped in these rooms after the siege ended.¹⁸ The Casemate of the Scrolls also yielded rare fragments of Roman shields made of three layers of wood faced with glue-soaked fabric, which were covered with leather that still bears traces of red paint.¹⁹

In the above passage, Josephus describes the Romans firing volleys of ballista stones and "missiles" to provide cover during the siege operation. And indeed, numerous ballista stones and iron arrowheads of the characteristic Roman barbed, trilobite type with a tang (which originally was set into a wooden or reed shaft) were discovered in Yadin's excavations at Masada. Puzzlingly, however, there is not a single definite example of an iron projectile point (catapult bolt). Catapult bolts are heavier than arrowheads (which were shot from manual bows) and differ in having a solid head and a socket instead of a tang. In contrast, numerous iron projectile points were found at Gamla in contexts associated with

the Roman siege of 67, where, according to Josephus, the Romans employed catapults (see chapter 7).

In light of the absence of iron projectile points at Masada, Guy Stiebel and I originally proposed that catapults were not employed during the siege, perhaps due to the steep angle of projection from the ramp to the fortification wall.²⁰ This would contradict Josephus's account and suggest that his description of the artillery barrage was formulaic. However, I now believe that the archaeological evidence can be reconciled with Josephus's testimony. As Gwyn Davies has observed, "It is inconceivable that the Romans didn't have bolt-firers at the siege [of Masada]. In fact, the bolt-firers would almost certainly have been mounted in the siege tower for the purposes of sweeping the parapets, even if they were not advanced up the ramp when the tower was being winched up or emplaced at the foot of the ramp."²¹ Davies suggests that the bolts were collected and recycled by the Romans in cleanup operations after the siege, just as the ballista stones were gathered and dumped.

Although it may be difficult to believe that the Romans were so thorough that they retrieved every iron bolt head in their cleanup operations, an examination of the distribution of iron arrowheads at Masada supports this possibility. The overwhelming majority of arrowheads come from the lower terrace of the northern palace and the workshop in the western palace (for the latter, see chapter 8). These spots were buried in collapse from conflagrations, and for this reason presumably were not retrieved by the Romans. Other locations with small groups of arrowheads are on the western side of the mountain, around the area that would have been swept by cover fire from the direction of the ramp. However, aside from the arrowheads in the northern palace and the western palace, which were buried in collapse, the Romans seem to have retrieved most of the arrowheads as well as all the iron bolt heads. The small groups of remaining arrowheads seem to have been left where they were gathered, perhaps because their poor condition rendered them unusable. And unlike Masada, the Romans did not occupy Gamla after the siege. Presumably they retrieved some of the iron bolt heads at Gamla, but without a garrison left to occupy and clear the site, the rest of the bolts remained among the destruction debris.²²

In addition to biblical and extra-biblical scrolls, the only examples of Latin papyri at Masada were discovered in the Casemate of the Scrolls.

The Latin papyri either date to around the time of the siege or are associated with a detachment of legionaries that was stationed atop the mountain for up to several decades after the siege ended.²³ One of the Latin papyri is inscribed with a line in hexametric verse from Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid* (4.9). Another Latin papyrus—the longest one discovered at Masada—is a military “pay record.” This document records payments made by a legionary named C. Messius of Beirut, which were deducted from his salary for items such as barley and clothing. A third, poorly preserved Latin papyrus lists medical supplies for injured or ill Roman soldiers, specifically mentioning bandages and “eating oil.”²⁴ In addition to the papyri, twenty-two *ostraca* (inscribed potsherds) inscribed in Latin with the names of Roman soldiers were found in the vicinity of the large bathhouse in the northern palace complex (see chapter 4). The names—including Aemilius, Fabius, and Terentius—belong to legionaries and are unusual in that they are written on the inside rather than the outside of the potsherd.²⁵

During the 1995 excavations in the siege works, we cut a section through the ramp a little over halfway up, to determine how it was constructed. Today the ramp, which can still be climbed, appears to consist of fine, white chalky dust that poofs up in clouds underfoot, mixed with small to medium-sized stones. Our excavations revealed that the Romans constructed the ramp by taking pieces of wood—mostly tamarisk and date palm—and laying some of them flat and using others as vertical stakes to create a timber bracing filled with packed stones, rubble, and earth.²⁶ Today the tips of timbers are visible protruding near the bottom of the ramp. Geological analyses suggest that the ramp was built on a natural spur that ascended the western side of the mountain from the Leuke, although we did not reach the spur in our excavations.²⁷ Once the ramp was completed, the Romans erected a stone platform for the battering ram and began to break through Herod's fortification wall. A large breach in the casemate wall at the top of the ramp is still visible today.

The Last Stand

Josephus reports that once the Romans breached the wall, they found the rebels had constructed a second wall of wooden beams filled with

earth, which not only withstood the battering ram but was compacted by its blows:

The Sicarii, however, had already hastily built up another wall inside, which was not likely to meet with a similar fate from the engines; for it was pliable and calculated to break the force of the impact, having been constructed as follows. Great beams were laid lengthwise and contiguous and joined at the extremities; of these there were two parallel rows a wall's breadth apart, and the intermediate space was filled with earth. Further, to prevent the soil from dispersing as the mound rose, they clamped, by other transverse beams, those laid longitudinally. The work thus presented to the enemy the appearance of masonry, but the blows of the engine were weakened, battering upon a yielding material which, as it settled down under the concussion, they merely served to solidify. (*War* 7.311–14)

While preparing the final publication describing the architecture of Masada, Ehud Netzer noticed that only about 10 percent of the buildings on the mountain showed evidence of destruction by fire, and they were not contiguous. Netzer reasoned that had the buildings been set on fire, they all should have burned down. He proposed that the absence of burning in most of the buildings means their wooden ceiling beams were dismantled, presumably for the construction of the second wall as described by Josephus.²⁸ If Netzer's interpretation is correct, it would corroborate this part of Josephus's testimony about the fall of Masada.

Once the Romans noticed that the rebels had constructed a second wall of wood and earth, Silva ordered his soldiers to set it on fire. At first, a strong wind blew the flames toward the Romans, threatening to burn down their battering ram. However, the wind suddenly changed course and blew back toward the wall, causing it to go up in flames. At this point, Josephus says, Eleazar ben Yair convened the men and convinced them to take their own lives to escape capture, thereby depriving the Romans of their victory:

Let our wives thus die undishonored, our children unacquainted with slavery; and when they are gone, let us render a generous service to each other, preserving our liberty as a noble winding-sheet. But first let us destroy our chattels and the fortress by fire . . . Our provisions

only let us spare; for they will testify, when we are dead, that it was not want which subdued us, but that, in keeping with our initial resolve, we preferred death to slavery. (*War* 7.334–36)

FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS (37–CA. 100 CE)

Josephus concluded his account of *The Jewish War* not with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the second temple in 70, but with the siege of Masada and mass suicide three years later—a story not reported by any other ancient author. In fact, much of our information about the history of Judea in the late Second Temple period and especially the First Revolt comes from Josephus’s writings.²⁹ Josephus was an eyewitness to some of the events he describes—such as the siege of Jerusalem—and in other cases he drew on literary sources that have since been lost.³⁰ One of the great ironies of history is that whereas in Jewish tradition Josephus is remembered as a traitor, for Christians his testimony has great significance. Was Josephus a villain who betrayed the Jews or a hero whose works preserve a treasure trove of information about Judea in the late Second Temple period?

Josephus’s Biography

Josephus was born Joseph son of Mattathias in Jerusalem in 37 CE, the same year Gaius Caligula became emperor. He was from a priestly family and claimed to be related to the Hasmoneans (see chapter 5) on his mother’s side. All our biographical information about Josephus comes from his works, including his autobiography (called the *Life [Vita] of Flavius Josephus*, written as an appendix to *Antiquities*).³¹

Josephus presents himself as a precocious young man.³² At the age of sixteen, he set out to learn firsthand about the three major sects of Judaism—Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes—and spent three years in the wilderness as the disciple of an ascetic named Bannus. At the age of nineteen he became a Pharisee (*Life* 9–12).³³ Josephus is the only ancient writer about the Essenes who claims firsthand knowledge of them (see chapter 5). He is also only one of two ancient Jews who self-identifies as a Pharisee; the other is Paul of Tarsus.³⁴ In 64 CE, at the age of twenty-six, Josephus traveled to Rome on an embassy to negotiate for the release

of priests who had been sent there by the procurator Felix to be tried by Nero (*Life* 13).³⁵ Coincidentally, this was the year of the Great Fire in Rome, when “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.”

After the First Revolt erupted in 66 CE and the Jews organized a provisional government, Josephus was put in charge of the district of Galilee. This was the region subdued first by the Roman army as the general Vespasian made his way south to Judea from Antioch. Galilee fell quickly, as the Jews were no match for the Roman forces, and some settlements including the city of Sepphoris capitulated without a fight. The last fortress, Jotapata (Yodfat), fell following a siege that lasted forty-seven days (see chapter 7). After the siege ended, Josephus and forty other survivors took refuge in a cistern. When they were discovered by the Romans, Josephus’s comrades made a suicide pact. Josephus did not want to commit suicide but had to go along with the others. He convinced them to draw lots, and then, as he says, “by fortune or by the providence of God,” he drew the last lot (*War* 3.391).³⁶ Instead of committing suicide Josephus surrendered to the Romans, which is why later Jewish tradition considers him a traitor.

When brought before Vespasian, Josephus predicted that one day the general would become emperor: “You will be Caesar, Vespasian, you will be emperor, you and your son [Titus] here” (*War* 3.401). This prediction illustrates Josephus’s awareness of events in Rome in 67 CE, where, following the great fire Nero was very unpopular, having appropriated a huge piece of urban property for his “Golden House” (*Domus Aurea*) instead of rebuilding residents’ homes. Josephus must have suspected that Nero would not last much longer, and that a powerful general like Vespasian would have ambitions to become emperor. Upon hearing Josephus’s prediction, Vespasian took him alive into captivity instead of sending him to Nero for a trial in Rome. Events in Rome soon proved Josephus right. In 68 CE, Nero committed suicide, and after a year of civil war, Vespasian was proclaimed emperor. He then set Josephus free.

Josephus was present during Titus’s siege of Jerusalem and witnessed the city’s destruction. He was hated by the Jews because he walked around the walls on behalf of the Romans and encouraged the besieged to surrender. After the fall of Jerusalem, Josephus settled in Rome. He received Roman citizenship and became a client of the Flavians, whose family name he adopted—becoming known as Titus Flavius Josephus

instead of Joseph son of Mattathias. Josephus was commissioned by his imperial patrons to write histories of the Jewish people and the First Revolt.³⁷ He lived in Rome until his death around 100 CE.

The Jewish War

Josephus's first work is his seven-volume account of *The Jewish War*, which was completed in the late 70s–early 80s—that is, about a decade after the First Revolt ended.³⁸ *War* is written in Greek, although in the preface Josephus refers to an earlier version in Aramaic.³⁹ The work follows a pattern of history-telling that originated with the Greeks, most famously with Thucydides's eight-book account of *The Peloponnesian War*.⁴⁰ As Tessa Rajak remarks, “For what is striking and even bold in Josephus is the very fact that he had introduced a distinctive Jewish interpretation into a political history which is fully Greek in form, juxtaposing the two approaches.”⁴¹

Whereas Thucydides began by describing the war between Athens and Sparta as “the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-Hellenic world” (1.1), Josephus claims that, “the war of the Jews against the Romans [was] the greatest not only of the wars of our own time, but so far as accounts have reached us, well nigh of all that ever broke out between cities or nations” (1.1).⁴² Josephus followed Thucydides's example and introduces himself as an eyewitness to many of the events he describes, thereby presenting himself as an accurate and trustworthy source: “In these circumstances, I—Josephus, son of Mattathias, a Hebrew by race, a native of Jerusalem and a priest, who at the opening of the war myself fought against the Romans and in the sequel was perforce an onlooker—propose to provide the subjects of the Roman Empire with narrative of the facts” (1.1). Thucydides commenced his narrative by identifying the causes of the Peloponnesian War: “this is in order that there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about what led to this great war falling upon the Hellenes” (1.23). Similarly, Josephus begins his account with the Maccabean Revolt, which he credits with setting in motion the chain of events that led to the outbreak of the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans.⁴³ Kenneth Atkinson notes that Polybius's *Histories* and Julius Caesar's *Gallie*

War also influenced Josephus's *War*, as all these works aimed to defend Rome and the authors' homelands and personal reputations.⁴⁴

War has multiple messages.⁴⁵ On the one hand, it is intended as a cautionary tale for subject peoples living under Roman rule not to consider the possibility of revolt. For example, Honora Chapman argues that Josephus's account of the mass suicide at Masada illustrates the futility of resisting Rome's imperial might.⁴⁶ On the other hand, for the benefit of a Roman audience, Josephus pins the blame for the First Revolt on extremists and criminals who do not represent Judaism or the Jews. In this regard, *War* is an apologetic intended to exonerate most of the Jews who participated in the revolt, especially the upper classes—including Josephus himself. As Atkinson observes, “Studying the *War* is complicated because Josephus was both its author and one of its major characters.”⁴⁷

Jewish Antiquities

Around 93–94 CE, Josephus completed a twenty-volume work called *Jewish Antiquities* (or *Antiquities of the Jews*; Greek *Archaeologia* [Archaeology]).⁴⁸ This is a much longer and more ambitious project than *War*. Written in Greek, *Antiquities* was intended to present to a Roman audience the entire scope of Jewish history beginning with creation and ending on the eve of the First Revolt. The first ten volumes are based on the books of the Hebrew Bible, while the second ten volumes cover the rest of Jewish history up to the revolt. There is much overlap in the material covered by *War* and *Antiquities* (including *Life*), but with significant differences and even some contradictory information.⁴⁹

Written at a time when the First Revolt was less immediate and political fortunes had shifted dramatically in Rome and Judea, *Antiquities* has a different tone than *War*.⁵⁰ Instead of warning subject peoples against rebellion, *Antiquities* seeks to elevate the Jews and Judaism in the eyes of the Greco-Roman world—a goal reflecting Josephus's own changed circumstances and perspective.⁵¹ By the time he wrote *Antiquities*, Josephus had been a Diaspora Jew for more than a decade. Many Jews in Rome lived in squalor with other eastern immigrant communities in Trastevere, on the west bank of the Tiber River. After 70 CE, these impoverished Jews, whose patron deity had been vanquished and temple

cult obliterated, became the butt of ridicule among the Roman population, as expressed in Juvenal's satires:

No sooner has that fellow departed than a palsied Jewess, leaving her basket and her truss of hay, comes begging to her secret ear; she is an interpreter of the laws of Jerusalem, a high priestess of the tree, a trusty go-between of highest heaven. She, too, fills her palm, but more sparingly, for a Jew will tell you dreams of any kind you please for the minutest of coins. (*Satires* VI, 542–47)⁵²

The Romans respected ancient peoples and their gods. By recounting the history of Jews based on sacred scripture, Josephus sought to demonstrate the antiquity of the Jewish people, and by extension, the continued power of the God of Israel and the need to observe biblical law.⁵³ Josephus's last work, *Against Apion*, was written in response to vicious attacks on Judaism by a well-known Jew-hater from Egypt.⁵⁴ This same Apion led the gentile delegation to Gaius Caligula in 40 CE as a counter to the Jewish delegation headed by Philo (see chapter 6).

Josephus's Biases and Apologetic Tendencies

Josephus's works are complex for various reasons, including (1) much of the information is drawn from lost or unknown sources; (2) the works were aimed at different audiences and therefore were intended to convey different messages; (3) Josephus wrote with biases and apologetic tendencies aimed at exonerating his Roman patrons from responsibility for the outcome of the revolt, and to justify and glorify his own behavior.⁵⁵ In other words, much of Josephus's writings constitute an apology in the classical sense, meaning a defense. For example, Josephus shifts the blame for the revolt and its consequences away from the Jewish aristocracy, including himself, by pinning it on extremists and fanatics. Josephus's apologetic for the Romans is equally clear. Vespasian and Titus are portrayed as having given the Jews every opportunity to surrender. According to Josephus, Titus did his best to save the temple and even wept when he saw its destruction, whereas the Roman historian Tacitus apparently reported that Titus ordered the temple's destruction (see chapter 7).

Recently scholars have employed postcolonial theory (which analyzes the negotiation of relationships between imperial powers and

conquered peoples) to understand how Josephus manipulated and subverted Greco-Roman cultural values and norms.⁵⁶ Scholars have also become increasingly skeptical of Josephus's credibility and therefore less confident of our ability to reconstruct history based on his accounts. Already in 1979 Shaye Cohen stated, "By now it should be clear how little we know of the events of 66–90. Because Josephus is our only extensive source and because he is so unreliable our knowledge is very defective."⁵⁷

The Afterlife of Josephus's Works

Why have Josephus's works survived when so many other ancient writings have not? The reason is simple: because Christians preserved them. For Christians, Josephus was an important witness to events during and after Jesus's lifetime. Christian authors such as Eusebius, who was bishop of Caesarea in the early fourth century, used Josephus's writings to blame the Jews for Jesus's death, a crime for which (in their view) God had punished the Jews by allowing the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.⁵⁸ One passage in *Antiquities* (18.63–64) even refers to Jesus, although scholars disagree on whether it was written by Josephus or inserted by Christian copyists. If the passage is original, parts show signs of later reworking and alteration:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah (*Christos*). When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.⁵⁹

Other passages that are believed to have been written by Josephus but later reworked refer to John the Baptist (*Ant.* 18.116–19) and James, the brother of Jesus (*Ant.* 20.200).

Josephus is the last ancient Jewish author to write about the history of the Jews whose writings have survived.⁶⁰ A vast corpus of Jewish literature was produced after 70 by the rabbis (sages), which contains their rulings on biblical law and other matters related to religious life. However, they were not interested in the writings of Jewish authors such as Josephus and Philo, as these have no relevance to the rabbinic approach to Torah interpretation through oral law. Moreover, the rabbis viewed the Jewish rebels as crazed fanatics who brought disaster on Israel. Whereas for Christians Josephus's writings provide important testimony about events that occurred during Jesus's lifetime and after his death, for Jews they memorialize the trauma of the First Revolt. Jews reacted to the Christian appropriation of Josephus's works to express an anti-Jewish message by turning their backs on Josephus.⁶¹

Because of *War*, we are better informed about the First Revolt than any other native rebellion against Rome. The revolt has retained an importance far beyond the Jewish tradition because the Gospels report that Jesus foretold the destruction of the second temple: "As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down'" (Mt 24:1–2; also see Mk 13:1–2; Lk 21:5–6).

Christian interest in preserving Josephus's writings was based on supercessionism and triumphalism: Christianity's victory over Judaism is confirmed by Josephus's eyewitness account of the temple's destruction as predicted by Jesus and is God's punishment of the Jewish people for their culpability in Jesus's death.

Postscript: Josephus at Masada

The name "Josephus" was stamped onto the wall of a casemate room on the southeastern side of Masada. Since Flavius Josephus was not present at the siege of Masada and probably never visited the mountain, the graffito must refer to another individual with this name. The casemate room is a tower that was remodeled during the rebel occupation and contained numerous installations, including a cooking stove with two "burners," two silos, a small baking oven (*tabun*), and a niche in the wall

for an oil lamp. The wall inside one of the silos was stamped with seal impressions with the name Josephus in Latin (*Iosepu[s]*). The seal impressions belong to bread stamps, suggesting that Josephus was a baker. Because the impressions were made when the plaster on the wall was still wet, they must date to the time of the rebel occupation of Masada. Hannah Cotton and Joseph Geiger note that this is the only Jewish inscription in Latin from ancient Palestine and describe it as a “highly puzzling” find.⁶²

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