

Josephus—the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD

Josephus was a Jewish historian who wrote near the end of the first century two books about the Jewish-Roman War fought from 66-73 AD. He identified himself as a Jewish priest, a member of the royal family, a Jewish general, and a Roman prisoner who became a guide for the Roman army. Therefore Josephus was an eyewitness to all the events that he wrote about. In the first person, as seen through his eyes, he described the Jewish revolt, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, and the Masada story. In fact, he gives us our only record of what went on at Masada. When the end came, Jerusalem was in ruins, over a million Jews were dead, and Israel had vanished.

Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem about 30 AD. Josephus was born in Jerusalem in 37 AD into the aristocratic Hasmonean family. Josephus was educated and groomed to be a priest in the Temple, and at the age of 19, he studied to be a Pharisee. They were elite well educated laymen who wielded great influence with the people. There was only about 4000-6000 of these respected men. In 64 AD, Josephus left Jerusalem for Rome to be an advocate for some priests that had been arrested. At that time, Rome's control of Israel was loose and corrupt. Rich Jews employed their own private armies. Faction fighting became common between Jewish sects, and class war had broken out. There were a large number of religious zealots who employed knifemen called "sicarri". Jerusalem was sliding into anarchy. The Roman Governor spent most of his time away from Jerusalem, and only about 1000 Roman troops were in Jerusalem, most of which were native Syrians or Idumeans.

While in Rome, Josephus received a crash course in Roman culture, power, and politics. He came to admire Roman soldiers as he observed their intense training and organization. He became close friends with the Empress of Nero until Nero went nuts and killed her. Josephus returned home in 66 AD to find a deteriorating political climate in Jerusalem. A new Governor, Gessius Florus, was openly anti-semitic, and very clear in his actions that he wished to harm the Jews. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that Florus pushed the Jew's patience to the breaking point. The wise men of Jerusalem knew that war with Rome was insanity, but they came to prefer it rather than the terrible abuse from Florus. Unemployed rebels burned the archives containing the records of debtors. Various factions of zealots and extremists ruled the day. A large group of them stormed the Antonia Fortress where the Roman soldiers were garrisoned and killed all the Romans there. Fighting broke out in the city between several

different Jewish factions fighting each other. Such was the anarchy that Josephus returned to in 66 AD.

The Beautiful City

In the first century, the historian Pliny wrote that Jerusalem was the most splendid city of the east, always full of pilgrims and tourists bringing prosperity. Herod had built an awesome palace on the summit of the hill in the northwest part of Jerusalem. It had three tall towers of white marble, mosaic floors, jeweled furniture, and silver and gold everywhere. The Antonia Fortress was built by Herod on the hill just north of the Temple so that it looked like part of the Temple Mount complex. It was named after Herod the Great's friend Mark Antony. It had massive square towers at each of its corners. Inside it was like its own city with courtyards, baths, and apartments. It was occupied by Roman soldiers. The masterpiece of Herod and the showplace of Jerusalem was Herod's Temple which became one of the great tourist attractions of the world. Herod began building it about 19 BC. It was a huge complex of buildings on top of Mt. Moriah on the east side of Jerusalem covering more area than the Acropolis in Athens. The Temple was built of white stone and white marble. The Royal Portico around the complex had three rows of columns that were long and high and plated in gold. The Temple itself had massive gateways with double gates plated in gold and silver. There were four courtyards each set higher than the previous one. In the inner Court of the Priests stood the giant altar of burnt offerings where hundreds of lambs and other animals were sacrificed each day. About 1000 priests were always at work in the Temple attending to the sacrifices, readings, chantings, music, blowing horns, and cleansings. Raised above the courtyards was the Temple Sanctuary itself with a great cedar door plated in gold. Josephus wrote that the entire staff for the Temple Mount complex was about 25,000 including priests, janitors, vendors, musicians, guides, etc. The Temple dominated the landscape of Israel. Josephus wrote, "When strangers first saw it from a distance it looked like a mountain covered in snow with gold glittering everywhere since it was so bright white wherever it was not clad in gold."

Israel's Initial Victory

After the Antonia Fortress was taken by the Jews and the small Roman garrison slaughtered, the nearest Roman legions were in Antioch, Syria. The Roman commander Cestius marched

his army to Jerusalem, but amazingly the Jewish insurgents defeated him. This was a disaster for Rome's military, and everyone knew that a much larger Roman force would eventually come. In Egypt, Syria, and Rome, pogroms broke out and thousands of Jews were killed all over the Roman Empire. Josephus wrote that it was at this time that the entire Christian community left Jerusalem. The church had begun in Jerusalem, but then in 66 AD thousands of Jewish Christians departed.

Anticipating the coming Roman invasion, the Jews had a public meeting at the Temple where ten generals were chosen with Eleazar being the head general. One of the generals chosen was Josephus who was made Governor of the area of Galilee.

Vespasian and Titus

A well known and successful Roman General Vespasian raised a large army that by Josephus' account numbered about 60,000 troops. His son Titus was also a Roman general and joined his forces as well. Their strategy was to bring their army through Syria, and attack from the north taking all the cities and strongholds in the Galilean area first, and then work their way south to Jerusalem. Therefore the General and Governor of Galilee, Josephus, was sitting right in the path of the great Roman army under Vespasian.

Hearing that the Romans were coming right at him, Josephus took refuge in what he hoped was an impregnable fortress at Jotapata. It stood on a steep hill with deep ravines on three sides, and it had a high strong wall. The Romans attacked and laid siege to Jotapata in the Spring of 67 AD. Vespasian set up artillery that was so effective that no defenders could stand on the wall. The Romans had "scorpions" and large catapults. The scorpions were large mounted crossbows that could shoot multiple armor piercing bolts at high velocity. The catapults hurled projectiles soaked in oil and lit on fire. When the projectiles landed, the oil splattered and spread the fire. The Romans then built assault platforms that topped the walls, and on the 47th day of the siege the Romans poured over the walls just before dawn and killed 40,000 Jews.

Josephus wrote that he took refuge in a deep cave with "forty notables". He wanted to negotiate a surrender, but the others threatened to kill him, and they made him join them in a suicide pact. As the leader, Josephus devised a plan to draw lots to see who was killed in what order. Josephus didn't tell how he did it, but through some sleight of hand, everyone

drew their name until only he and another guy were left. He then talked that guy into breaking the pact and surrendering. Josephus explained it all as God's providence, but even today mathematicians have what they call a "Josephus count" which is a formula to fix a circular count so that you always end up last. Josephus' experiences in Rome served him well because he knew how superstitious Romans were and what reverence they had for prophets and oracles. He was also well aware of Vespasian's ambition to be Caesar. Josephus convinced Vespasian that he was a prophet, and he had an important prophecy about the general's future. Josephus told him that Nero would die soon, and Vespasian would become the Emperor of Rome, and after him his son Titus would be the emperor. They spared Josephus, and made him a guide and interpreter.

In the Spring of 68 AD, the Romans continued their strategy of taking every town and stronghold before they went to Jerusalem. On June 9, 68 AD, Emperor Nero was outlawed by the Roman Senate, the army turned against him, and Nero cut his own throat. For the rest of that year and the next, Vespasian and Titus fixed their attention on politics in Rome, and they called a halt to the Judean campaign. After two crucial battles against his rival Vitellius, Vespasian's army marched into Rome on December 20, 69 AD, and the Roman Senate named Vespasian Emperor. Titus was sent back to finish the Jerusalem campaign in the Spring of 70 AD.

Jerusalem, 70 AD

A year earlier Simon bar Giora had raised an army to go to Jerusalem to support the priests and aristocracy in Jerusalem. They made him the ruler of the city, but the zealots held part of the city. By the Spring of 70 AD, the city was split three ways between the zealots led by John of Gischala who held the Temple Mount, Simon bar Giora in the Upper City, and Eleazar of the upper class in the actual Temple. The three competing factions would continue to fight each other as they all fought the Romans. Eventually John's men killed Eleazar, and reduced the factions to two. On Passover of 70 AD, Titus and his army appeared. Titus built camps around the city, and the siege of Jerusalem officially began on May 1, 70 AD. Roman General Titus quickly decided that the city was too protected on the south and west, so he focused on the northeast section to build his ramps and assault platforms. Titus ordered the construction of three ramps made of mounds of earth and timber, and his soldiers literally cut down every tree in Judea and demolished many buildings for the wood. The outer wall fell quickly, and

the Romans immediately began building ramps against the inner wall. Josephus went every day under orders to try and negotiate a surrender, but the Jews were not interested. His argument was based on comparing himself to the prophet Jeremiah who foretold that the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem back in 588 BC. Jeremiah begged them to surrender to spare the people and the city. Josephus then reminded them that the King of Babylon had demolished the city and the Temple in 586 BC. Josephus believed that he also was a prophet predicting the fall of Jerusalem, so they should surrender. Inside Jerusalem, the leaders of the factions, Simon and John, were both hoping to establish a new Jewish monarchy of their own, so they stubbornly refused.

Roman General Titus suffered a setback when his assault ramps were destroyed by “sappers”. The Jews had dug underneath the assault ramps until they collapsed. At the same time, thousands of Jews were running around outside the walls carrying on sorties and foraging for food. Titus decided to build a wooden wall around the city nearly 5 miles long with 13 towers, and amazingly the Roman army built it in 3 days. All chance of escaping Jerusalem or sneaking food in was over. New ramps were built against the Antonia fortress in the northeast corner of the city. They literally turned the landscape for 10 miles around into a barren desert. On July 1, the wall of the Antonia fortress fell, but the Jews had built a new wall behind it. On July 5, the fortress fell to the Romans, and all its defenders fled into the Temple Mount compound. .

Amazingly, the Jewish priests, in spite of the famine, had been sacrificing sheep and oxen every day until July 17. They had run out of animals and priests. The Jews were now held up inside the Temple itself with the Romans holding the fortress. Josephus begged them one last time to surrender in order to spare the Temple. He even implored them to come outside of the Temple and die in the open so as to not put the Temple at risk. To prevent the Romans from coming over the northern wall, the Jews set fire to the section they were assaulting. The next day the whole northern wall was ablaze, and the Romans came into the outer courtyard known as the Court of the Gentiles. Inside the courtyard, the Romans put ladders on the Temple’s walls and set fire to the gates. On August 10, a Roman soldier threw a burning torch into the “Holy of Holies” setting the giant tapestry on fire. In a frenzy now, the Romans began looting the Temple of all its treasures. Along with all the Zealot soldiers, 6000 civilians were slaughtered in the Temple. The Temple had treasure chambers, sort of safety deposit boxes for priests and rich Jews, and the Romans took great plunder from them. According to

Josephus, the gold taken from Jerusalem was so great that the price of gold was halved in the Empire. After the fires extinguished, all the stones were pried up looking for melted gold. Then they leveled the entire Temple Mount to foundation level.

Josephus wrote “the most marvelous building that was ever seen or heard of, with its amazing architecture and rich ornamentation, not to mention the glory of its holy places” was gone. Josephus wrote that there was no doubt that this was a judgment from God because the Romans had orders not to harm the Temple itself, but in the fog and violence of war, it was completely destroyed.

The Holocaust

We must ask why the Jews fought so hard and held out so long. The answer is amazingly like the answer to the same question in Jeremiah’s day of 586 BC. In Jer.5:31 we read, “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority”. In Jeremiah’s day, all the religious leaders were saying that the Lord was on their side, and would protect them, but at the same time Jeremiah was saying that the siege by Babylon was a judgment from God. In Josephus’ day all the religious leaders were saying that God would save them, but the opposite happened. A large number of false prophets had deluded the people. Josephus called them “these impostors and pretended messengers from heaven.” The Jewish leaders, Simon and John sought terms of surrender after the Temple Mount fell. They met Titus and Josephus on the bridge between the western wall and the upper city. Titus demanded absolute surrender, but they still declined. Titus gave orders to plunder and burn the rest of Jerusalem.

The legionnaires immediately overran the whole lower City of David and set fire to it. The zealots holed up in the upper city in the Royal Palace. On August 20, the Romans built ramps against it, and on September 8th they took the Palace. In the slaughter that followed throughout the city, Josephus claimed that 1.1 million Jews were killed. They found and killed 2000 zealots in the sewers. It was all over on Sept.8. John of Gischala and Simon both surrendered, and about 97,000 prisoners were taken. All walls and buildings were demolished except the foundation walls of the Temple Mount which still stand today. The southwest portion of that wall is exposed today, and is called the “Wailing Wall”.

On October 24, to celebrate his brother's birthday, Titus had 2500 Jews killed by beasts and gladiators. On November 17, Titus celebrated his father's birthday by killing another 2500. In the Spring of 71 AD, Titus held his great Victory Parade in Rome by parading 700 of the biggest and best looking Jews along with John and Simon before the Roman people. The golden Menora and the golden table from the Temple were also taken to Rome. Meanwhile back in what had been Israel, the mopping up operation continued by taking the last three Jewish strongholds—the Herodium, Machaerus which was east of the Dead Sea, and Masada which was west of the Dead Sea. All resistance ended on April 15, 73 AD when about 960 men, women, and children committed suicide at Masada rather than be taken and enslaved by the Romans.

Jesus Wept

In Luke 19:41, Jesus approached Jerusalem, and when He saw it, He wept over the city because He knew what was coming. Jesus loved the city and its people, and in Matt. 23:37-39, Jesus said “How often I wanted to gather you together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” Jesus foresaw the coming destruction, and He wept over it.

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