The Ancient Roman Sieges of Jerusalem and Masada: The History of the First Jewish-Roman War’s Most Famous Battles

By Charles River Editors

Edward Poynter’s painting depicting a Roman catapult
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Introduction

The Siege of Jerusalem

David Roberts’ Painting Depicting the Siege

“[T]hey ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many of the houses was quenched with these men's blood. And truly so it happened, that though the slayers left off at the evening, yet did the fire greatly prevail in the night, and as all was burning, came that eighth day of the month Gorpieux [Elul] upon Jerusalem; a city that had been liable to so many miseries during the siege, that, had it always enjoyed as much happiness from its first foundation, it would certainly have been the envy of the world. Nor did it on any other account so much deserve these sore misfortunes, as by producing such a generation of men as were the occasions of this its overthrow.” - Josephus

The Siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE is arguably the most important event in Jewish history. First, it was the central battle in the First Jewish-Roman war. Second, the failure of the siege on the Jewish side resulted in the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, a
disaster that would eventually prove both permanent and catastrophic, since it was never rebuilt. Third, it permanently altered the diaspora of Judaism in the Ancient World. Fourth, because it was indecisive in breaking the power of the Jewish revolt permanently, it was also inconclusive and led to further, inevitable revolts that broke Judean identity completely.

The siege of Jerusalem was a classic case of two opposing and incompatible worldviews. It was not the first time the Romans had conquered the capital of the kingdom, nor was it the first time Jerusalem had been sacked by a foreign power. It was unusual for the Romans, however, because it was not the final act that such a conquest generally was. With few exceptions, such as the Carthaginians and the Celts, the Romans had not encountered an opponent who refused to remain defeated. Roman generals and governors found this stubborn resistance unnerving and that may have contributed to an increased cruelty toward the local Jewish population, not that the Romans generally required an excuse to be brutal. However, the Romans were inclined to be tolerant of local religious customs as long as the local population paid lip service to Roman religious domination, such as in the very politically motivated Cult of the Emperor.

To the Romans' bewilderment, the Jews were absolutely, adamantly opposed to worshiping any deity above God (in the universal form of Yahweh), or even alongside or beneath God. At this point in their theological history, the Jews had become strict monotheists. Worshiping the Emperor as a deity would imperil their immortal souls. Therefore, they absolutely refused to do this and were willing to die for their faith. The Jewish refusal to tolerate the Cult of the Emperor in their main place of worship was a direct challenge to Roman political power. The Roman refusal to recognize Jewish monotheism was a direct challenge to Jewish theology. The clash of ideologies would result in many casualties. Josephus, a primary source for the revolt, would calculate the death toll at over 1,000,000.

The Siege of Masada
"Since we long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God Himself, Who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice ... We were the very first that revolted, and we are the last to fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom." - Eleazar ben Ya'ir

Many Westerners have never heard of the Siege of Masada, and those who have may simply know it as an obscure reference to a minor battle fought in a remote location of the Roman world. By contrast, virtually all Israeli school children know the story of Masada as a premier example of nationalistic pride. The heroic story of a small band of fighters facing incalculable odds has many elements that are reminiscent of both the Battle of Thermopylae and the Battle of the Alamo. The refrain “Masada shall not fall again,” coined in a poem on the subject by Yitzak Lamdan, became a cry of resolve in battle for Israeli soldiers in the 20th century, just as the cry of “Remember the Alamo” had galvanized Americans. For decades the Israelite military
used the site of Masada as the location for swearing in their new recruits; the choice of the site was designed to evoke within the new soldiers a deep sense of connection with their national history.

The Siege of Masada was the final battle in a long series of fights that constituted the First Jewish-Roman War. The Roman Empire had established control over the region in the 1st century BCE, when the Roman proconsul Pompey the Great took control of Jerusalem and ceremonially defiled their temple by entering it. This mix of political control and religious desecration was a contentious issue for the Judeans throughout the Roman period, and militant activists opposed to Roman rule, often espousing strongly held religious beliefs, frequently developed large followings to challenge the Roman authorities. This led to multiple violent clashes between the Judeans and the Romans, and the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE) was one such clash (albeit on a larger scale than most). The Roman troops marched through and made their military might felt, first in the northern region of Galilee, then down the coast where they finally laid siege to the capital city of Jerusalem. This left three Roman fortress outposts, including Masada, that had been built by Herod the Great but had been taken over by various Judean factions. Masada was the last of these fortresses that the Romans attacked and proved the most difficult for them to seize, but seize it they did.

However, what made this battle qualitatively different from most was not just the difficulty Rome had in retaking control of it with incredibly disproportional military equipment and numbers, but also the actions of the Judean defenders. In the final hours of the battle, just as the Romans were about to breach the walls of the city, the defenders gathered together and committed mass suicide, rather than being killed or taken captive by the Romans. Josephus, a contemporary historian of the era, vividly described the mass suicide in his works, writing, “Now as Eleazar was proceeding on in his exhortations, they all cut him off short, and made haste to do the work, as full of an unconquerable ardor of mind, and moved with a demoniacal fury. So they went their ways, as one still endeavoring to be before another, and as thinking that this eagerness would be a demonstration of their courage and good conduct, if they could avoid appearing in the last class; so great
was the zeal they were in to slay their wives and children, and
themselves also! Nor, indeed, when they came to the work itself, did
d their courage fail them, as one might imagine it would have done, but
they then held fast the same resolution, without wavering, which they
had upon the hearing of Eleazar's speech, while yet every one of them
still retained the natural passion of love to themselves and their
families, because the reasoning they went upon appeared to them to
be very just, even with regard to those that were dearest to them; for
the husbands tenderly embraced their wives, and took their children
into their arms, and gave the longest parting kisses to them, with tears
in their eyes. Yet at the same time did they complete what they had
resolved on, as if they had been executed by the hands of strangers,
and they had nothing else for their comfort but the necessity they were
in of doing this execution to avoid that prospect they had of the
miseries they were to suffer from their enemies."

*The Ancient Roman Sieges of Jerusalem and Masada: The History of
the First Jewish-Roman War’s Most Famous Battles* chronicles two of
antiquity’s most famous battles. Along with pictures of important
people, places, and events, you will learn about the sieges of
Jerusalem and Masada like never before.
Chapter 1: The Sources for the Siege

The main sources for the siege are Flavius Josephus (37-100 CE), through his books, *The Jewish War* (c.75) (aka *The Judean War* or *Flavius Josephus's Books of the History of the Jewish War against the Romans*) and *Antiquities of the Jews* (c.94) (aka *Judean Antiquities*), though the Talmud, Midrash Eicha, and the Hebrew inscriptions on minted Jewish coins, and Book V of Tacitus' *Histories* also survive. Josephus wrote originally in Aramaic (though these versions are now lost), but his books were translated into Greek, likely during his lifetime. Josephus' works survive mainly through glossed Christian sources (since he was a near-contemporary of Jesus and is a very rare outside source for his life, albeit a hostile one). In *Judean Antiquities*, he gives his own spin on the Old Testament, in a way intended to portray Jewish religion in a positive light to a skeptical Pagan audience.
Bust of Josephus

Josephus is an extremely valuable source in that he was both a witness and a participant to the Siege, and wrote his book on the War only a few years afterward. He acted as the Emperor's slave and translator during the Siege. However, it is precisely this reason why he is such a problematical source. On the surface, Josephus appears to be the perfect primary source. He was a Hellenized Jew of the priestly class, who began the war fighting against the Romans and ended it working for them. He therefore had a great deal of knowledge about the leadership structure of the Siege and the various factions in it. Unfortunately, Josephus was so close to the action that he inevitably invested considerable bias into his writings about it. In addition, while he appears to be an accessible source for the Jewish side of the revolt, he ultimately writes his books to justify the Roman side of the equation (albeit *Judean Antiquities* is intended to defend his fellow Jews against Pagan anti-Semitic beliefs), even writing as a hostile source about his former compatriots. This is despite the fact that both his first wife and his parents were killed during the Siege.

Josephus was born in 37 CE. He was a descendant of the Maccabean brothers through the High Priest Jonathan Maccabeus on his mother's side. Revolt was therefore in his blood. His father Matthias was a member of one of the highest of the 24 priestly classes in Jerusalem, one known as the Jehoiarib. His mother claimed royal descent. His older brother was also named Matthias. This brother survived the Siege, though he was enslaved, and was freed through the intervention of his younger brother. After that, he disappears from history.

Josephus introduces himself as, “I, Joseph, the son of Matthias, by birth a Hebrew, and a priest also, and who at first fought against the Romans myself, and was forced to be present at what was done afterwards, am the author of this book” (*The Jewish War*, Preface, Section 1, Lines 6-7.).

His first official contact with the Romans was to negotiate the release of some Jewish priests with Nero. At the beginning of the Jewish revolt in 66, he became the commander of the revolutionary forces in Galilee.
His career as a revolutionary ended after the fall of Yodfat in 67. In July, he and a group of 40 others were trapped in a cave, but the others refused to surrender. After he suggested a mass suicide by pairing off and killing each other – a technique later used at Masada – the others killed each other off until he and the one other survivor surrendered to the Romans. The Romans who were besieging them were led by Vespasian and Titus.

Due to his education and experience with diplomacy, Josephus became a valuable slave to Vespasian. After he was released in 69, thanks to a revelation he had claimed to have that Vespasian would become Emperor at the end of the Year of the Four Emperors, he was sent to negotiate with the defenders at the siege of Jerusalem. Therefore, he was a direct eyewitness to the fall and sack of Jerusalem.
As part of his revelation, Josephus also became convinced that God was angry with the Jews and was using the Romans as his instrument, a belief later attributed to Titus and Vespasian, as well.

After the fall of Jerusalem, Josephus continued to serve Titus as a freedman, becoming a client of his patrons, the Flavians. This is where he earned his later name Flavius Josephus. In the process, he also received Roman citizenship, a pension, and property in Judea.

Josephus' wife having died in the Siege, he was offered a new wife by Vespasian from among the Jewish captives, but she left him. Shortly after, he married a third time to an Alexandrian. Though they had three children, he later divorced her and married a fourth time, this time to a Greek. His fourth wife gave him two sons. He died around 100, though the circumstances are not known.

Josephus has an extremely troubled posterity. He is, of course, obviously a valuable source, a true survivor of the Siege and Revolt, and an accomplished historian who lived to tell his tales. However, the very things that make him so knowledgeable an eyewitness are the things that make him problematical in terms of bias (in addition to the fact that, like most writers of chronicles from a first-hand perspective, he waited until his old age, decades later, to write some of his work).

Regardless of his motivations, there is reason to describe him as a traitor to his own people. Josephus' lack of apparent guilt over switching allegiances to the Romans and his harshness towards his perceived enemies do not make him more sympathetic. He was shunned in Jewish culture prior to the nineteenth century as someone not to be studied and his works were not translated into Hebrew. Even non-Jewish historians speak of him very harshly. The most troubling act is not his attempts to act as a bridge between Judaism and Hellenism. There were others like him in this regard, not least early Church Fathers like St. Paul. It is his betrayal of his own troops, including the mass suicide that he induced and then failed to participate in, that historians find difficult to reconcile.

The fact that he was dismissive about Jesus, despite being one of the few non-biblical sources near contemporary to Jesus, has not
endeared him to Christians either, although his works became extremely popular in Europe after they were translated into English in 1732. Josephus made several references to Jesus and his family or associates, as well as recording the ministry and death of John the Baptist, though scholarship generally believes now that the more positive references were probably added by later Christian writers. That said, Josephus himself was not hostile toward his own people in his writings. In fact, what he wrote was intended to defend Judaism from pagan critics and he blamed the revolt on harsh Roman governors who were too corrupt to be trusted, as well as extreme fanaticism on the part of Jewish religious leaders who ignored the traditional aristocracy, of which he was a part, in leading the people to destruction.

Even so, Josephus did not entirely turn his back on his Jewish heritage and spent much of his writing defending the Jews from antisemitic Pagan charges. The hostile sources to which Josephus is referring can be embodied in the other main source for the Revolt, Roman writer Tacitus. Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. CE 56 – after 117) was from an Equestrian family and wrote in Latin. He was not from Rome, being born in either northern Italy or perhaps southeastern France, since his wife was the daughter of a senator from that region. Most of his personal life has been gleaned from his writings and the letters of his friend Pliny the Younger.

He studied in Rome, going through the traditional *cursus honorem* of a Roman nobleman. He gained fame as an orator. His experiences under Vespasian’s son, Domitian, left him with a dislike for tyranny, which appears in his writings. It may also have left him with a bias against the Flavians, though he began his career and experienced early success under both Vespasian and Titus.

He eventually became a governor in Anatolia, where he wrote his *Annals* around the year 116, shortly before his death. Tacitus wrote the *Histories*, the *Annals*, and three monographs. His account of the Jewish Revolt, which includes a brief discussion of the history and culture of the Jews, appears in the *Histories* (which are incomplete), shortly before the version that survives cuts off.
While what he actually wrote about the Revolt is lost, we get a good example of how educated Romans generally felt about the Jews. It was quite negative. His views of the early Flavians, Vespasian and Titus, do not survive. It could be that he is an anti-Flavian source, which would contrast him with Josephus, who was generally quite pro-Flavian, despite some criticism of Vespasian and Titus in tactics.

Tacitus has retained a generally positive reputation with modern historians, thanks to his compact and straightforward style, which appears on the surface to be objective and modern in approach. It is also known that Tacitus had access to official records of the Roman government when writing his books. These included the minutes of the Roman Senate, the acts of government, and any news from the Imperial court. He also had collections of Imperial speeches and various other historians.

The weaknesses of Tacitus as a source include his obvious bias as a non-Jewish, Roman citizen and the fact that he could not have been an
eyewitness to the Jewish revolt. He was only ten when it began. The strengths of his *Histories* are his scrupulousness in collecting his sources and his ability to collate now-lost official documents, including them in the *Histories*.

He seemed to have difficulty understanding the Jewish religion, describing it (erroneously) as a combination of Egyptian religion and a corruption of the worship of Saturn. He believed the Jews worshiped idols (a common Pagan form of worship) rather than being monotheistic worshipers of a universal God. He found them mystifying and thus treated them with the contempt he generally reserved for perceived barbarians:

“[5.4] Moyses, wishing to secure for the future his authority over the nation, gave them a novel form of worship, opposed to all that is practiced by other men. Things sacred with us, with them have no sanctity, while they allow what with us is forbidden. In their holy place they have consecrated an image of the animal by whose guidance they found deliverance from their long and thirsty wanderings. They slay the ram, seemingly in derision of Hammon, and they sacrifice the ox, because the Egyptians worship it as Apis. They abstain from swine's flesh, in consideration of what they suffered when they were infected by the leprosy to which this animal is liable. By their frequent fasts, they still bear witness to the long hunger of former days, and the Jewish bread, made without leaven, is retained as a memorial of their hurried seizure of corn. We are told that the rest of the seventh day was adopted, because this day brought with it a termination of their toils; after a while, the charm of indolence beguiled them into giving up the seventh year also to inaction. But others say that it is an observance in honor of Saturn, either from the primitive elements of their faith having been transmitted from the Idaei, who are said to have shared the flight of that God, and to have founded the race, or from the circumstance that of the seven stars which rule the destinies of men, Saturn moves in the highest orbit and with the
mightiest power, and that many of the heavenly bodies complete their revolutions and courses in multiples of seven.

“[5.5] This worship, however introduced, is upheld by its antiquity; all their other customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness. The most degraded out of other races, scorning their national beliefs, brought to them their contributions and presents. This augmented the wealth of the Jews, as also did the fact that among themselves, they are inflexibly honest and ever ready to shew compassion, though they regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. They sit apart at meals, they sleep apart, and though, as a nation, they are singularly prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; among themselves, nothing is unlawful. Circumcision was adopted by them as a mark of difference from other men. Those who come over to their religion adopt the practice, and have this lesson first instilled into them, to despise all gods, to disown their country, and set at nought parents, children, and brethren. Still, they provide for the increase of their numbers. It is a crime among them to kill any newly-born infant. They hold that the souls of all who perish in battle or by the hands of the executioner are immortal. Hence, a passion for propagating their race and a contempt for death. They are wont to bury rather than to burn their dead, following in this the Egyptian custom; they bestow the same care on the dead, and they hold the same belief about the lower world. Quite different is their faith about things divine. The Egyptians worship many animals and images of monstrous form; the Jews have purely mental conceptions of Deity, as one in essence. They call those profane who make representations of God in human shape out of perishable materials. They believe that Being to be supreme and eternal, neither capable of representation, nor of decay. They therefore do not allow any images to stand in their cities, much less in their temples. This flattery is not paid to their kings, nor this honor to our Emperors. From the fact, however, that their priests used to
chant to the music of flutes and cymbals, and to wear garlands of ivy, and that a golden vine was found in the temple, some have thought that they worshiped Father Liber, the conqueror of the East, though their institutions do not by any means harmonize with the theory; for Liber established a festive and cheerful worship, while the Jewish religion is tasteless and mean.” (Tacitus, Histories, 5.4-5)

Tacitus' writings, biased as they are, give a good picture of how the average Roman might have perceived the Jews. It is largely quite negative and dismissive, to the point of dehumanizing them and justifying destroying their religion. Even though Tacitus is not a primary historian for the Revolt, he is a valuable source on the Roman side (contrasting with Josephus' strenuously positive view of the relationship between Roman and Jewish cultures) that explains how the Revolt ended so badly for the Jews.

The Talmud (in this case, the section known as the *Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli)*) recounts several stories in its account of events leading up to and during the siege. These stories are generally told to demonstrate the punishment of wealthy Jewish women during the siege, perhaps echoing the tendency among post-Babylonian Exile, Jewish religious writers to use the metaphor of Jerusalem as a sinful woman. One account, 56B, also attributed a charge of blasphemy to Titus as well as a painful death, though Titus did not die until 81. As with the fall of the First Temple to the Babylonians, this second fall was attributed to Jewish disobedience of God, not to the superiority of the Romans.
Initially, the Talmud was a collection of sayings preserved as oral tradition, attributed to different schools of thought that could conflict. These were commentaries on the law of Moses from the Torah in the Tanakh (original Jewish version of the Old Testament) that regulated Jewish religious life, eventually written down. The first section, from 200 CE, is called the *Mishna*, while the *Gemara* dates to 500 CE. The Talmud is used for the interpretation and prosecution of Jewish law to this day. The Babylonian Talmud comes from the later collection, the Gemara, though this is not its final form.

The Babylonian Talmud included opinions from rabbis from both Babylonia and Palestine. It was one of the most influential of the sections of the Talmud. Aside from some quotations in Hebrew, most of the Gemara is written in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, which was the extant language of the Jewish populace by that time.

The utility of the Babylonian Talmud passages about the Siege are invaluable in giving a source from the viewpoint of the hardline Jews who refused reconciliation with the Romans. It also includes stories that do not appear in other sources. However, it suffers from some
drawbacks. Though it does include stories about neglected groups like women during the Siege, it is not kind to them, as most of the post-Exile books of the Bible are quite patriarchal. Also, though it is in Aramaic, it reflects largely the opinion of the Jewish population in Babylon (the Jerusalem population having faded in influence following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132-5 CE). The late date of its being written down and finalized also calls into question how distorted the stories became over centuries of oral retelling. Despite the apparent immediacy and uniqueness of such stories, they are not eyewitness accounts in the way that Josephus is, however many flaws may be in his own retelling.
Chapter 2: The Importance of Jerusalem

Originally in the Bronze Age, Jerusalem was not a large city until, according to the story in the book of Judges in the Bible, King David conquered it and made it his capital city. Thereafter, Jerusalem became increasingly the most sacred site in Judaism.

There is some dispute as to how early Jerusalem became the theological capital as well as the political capital of Israel. Much centers around discrepancies between events described in the Bible and events described in other written sources for that period, as well as archaeology. For example, monotheism appears to have come to Judaism quite late. There may never have been an actual invasion of Canaan by the Israelites but rather, a slow evolution from a polytheistic to a henotheistic (where one god is supreme over many other minor gods) to the monotheistic system that we have today.

In the Bible, generations after David's death, the Kingdom of Israel was divided into Israel in the north (with its capital in Samaria) and Judah, centered around Jerusalem, in the south. The Kingdom of Israel fell into apostasy and was conquered. The smaller kingdom of Judah survived for longer and was eventually conquered in 587 BCE by King Nebuchadnezzar II of the Babylonian Empire. While historians still debate over how much of the Davidic storyline is legend and how much is fact (for example, the two kingdoms may always have been separate, with the northern kingdom being more nomadic tribes than settled peoples), it is known to be true, and that it coincides with other sources from other cultures, that the kingdom centered around Jerusalem, including Jerusalem itself, fell to Nebuchadnezzar and that many Israelites (most of them apparently from the priestly and noble elite) were exiled to Babylon. It also appears true that there had been a temple in Jerusalem at that point already, with a major cult center that was destroyed by the Babylonians during the sack of the city. This would not be the first time that Jerusalem in known history underwent a major siege. In fact, the city had survived for centuries by giving tribute to more powerful empires such as the Assyrians and its traditional enemy and neighbor, Egypt to the south.
Chapter 3: The Babylonian Exile and Jewish Diaspora

To this point in the Hebrew story, both in history and in the legend, there had been no Jewish diaspora since the legendary migration of Jacob and his family to Egypt. Judaism as a religion was very much a state and regional religion, or collection of religions, centered on the coastline of the Levant. However, when the Jewish elite was exiled en masse to Babylon, the monarchy was effectively destroyed, but the priestly class continued to practice the same cult as they had practiced in the First Temple in Jerusalem, even under what was initially extreme persecution by the Babylonians.

Eventually, the Babylonians were conquered and became the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The new king, Cyrus the Great, was more lenient than the Babylonians had been. Decades after they had been initially exiled from Israel, some of the exiles returned home and began to build, or rebuild, a new temple to replace the old one, completing it in 516 BCE under Darius the Great. Though the Bible states that the religion of Judaism had failed in Israel during the Babylonian Exile, it seems more likely that the returnees forcibly replaced what was still being practiced by the lower classes with their new version. To cement this, and their political and theological power, they outlawed the hill shrines of Palestine, and insisted on making Jerusalem and its Temple the central cult place of Judaism. This does not appear to have been the case in the period of the First Temple, assuming there was a First Temple, as there was still worship going on in the hills. It is unclear how much of this was worship of Yahweh, let alone monotheism, and how much of it was of the Canaanite religion that is much demonized in the Bible but from which the Yahweh cult likely evolved.

The Babylonian Exile and its return of the Jews to Israel introduced two major and fateful changes to Judaism. First, many of the Jews in Babylon did not wish to return. Instead, many Jews left Israel or Babylon, and created new communities that followed the Jewish religion and also maintained their racial and cultural integrity, throughout the Mediterranean and what is now Anatolia.
But the Mediterranean was a highly mobile area with much competition and migration among populations, and empires coming and going. The Neo-Babylonian Empire under Cyrus the Great, for example, was not an especially long-lived one and had fallen apart within a century, leaving the Jews without a powerful protector for Israel. The Jews were not the only people migrating. One group that spread throughout the Mediterranean as well around this time were the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians also settled along the coast of Palestine and became known in the Bible as the Philistines. Ironically, the Phoenicians were not the uncultured barbarians that they have come to be seen as in popular culture. In fact, they appear to have had a higher level of material culture than the Israelites. They and the Israelites engaged in fierce and prolonged competition over Palestine for several centuries.

The Phoenicians were closely related to their neighbors and successors, the Greeks and the Romans (the latter becoming major competitors to the Phoenician colony of Carthage on the North African coast). The Greeks first arrived in Palestine in force during the conquest of the Middle East by Alexander the Great. Alexander's successors were not kind to the Jews.

The differences between the Greeks (also known as Hellenes) and the Jews were strong and many. Though both were stratified patriarchal cultures, the similarities largely stopped there. There were surprising superficial similarities in their cult behavior (which might explain some of Tacitus' confusion about Judaism), in that both the Jews and the Greeks and Romans engaged in a great deal of external ritual behavior, which focused much on ritual cleanliness and animal sacrifice, centered on temples and similar holy spaces, and was practiced by a hierarchical and hereditary priesthood. It would be a mistake to believe uncritically biblical and post-biblical Judeo-Christian propaganda that was hostile toward the old Pagan religions, and portrayed the Greco-Roman religious beliefs as hypocritical and entirely external. Jewish and Christian religion can just as easily be practiced externally alone, but we know for a fact that they include far deeper internal beliefs. The Greeks and Romans also had their own range of faith and practice from fairly shallow popular religion and cult
behavior, such as superstitions and white and black magic, to deep philosophical disciplines that still influence us today. Modern Western culture continues to be a tug-of-war between Hellenistic ideals and Judaic ideals.

The Jews by the second century BCE practiced a strictly monotheistic religion, with a powerful and influential hereditary priesthood centered in Jerusalem. The points of conflict truly occurred, in part, because the Greeks wanted to impose their own religious practices on the Jews, and also because many other Greek values were not ones that the Jews shared. One of the greatest differences was that of personal modesty, wherein the Jewish priesthood was greatly offended by Greek and Roman art, and the nudity of the gymnasium. It is possible that the conflict was exacerbated by the fact that at this point in its history, Judaism was still simply one of many religions with relatively similar cult practices, and that Judaism did not stand out sufficiently at this time to survive on its own regardless of its surroundings. In a further historical irony, as Judaism and early Christianity (which started out as an early Jewish sect) deviated further and further from Greco-Roman religious practice, they came into more and more conflict on a fundamental level with the Roman Empire.

Part of the problem was that previous conquerors had been willing to allow Jerusalem to pay tribute and continue along as it had before, but with the Alexandrian Empire onward (now known as the Seleucid Empire in the Levant), rulers increasingly began to impose their own cult religion upon the people of Palestine, as well as their own cultural values.

One of the greatest ironies about the conflict between the Jews and the post-Alexandrian Greeks was that initially, the Jews were willing to seek alliances with other polytheistic, but more distant, states to fight against the Seleucids. During the Maccabean Revolt (167-60 BCE), the revolt's first general Judah Maccabee was willing to seek an alliance with the Roman Republic, as recorded in the Book of Maccabees in the Bible and in Josephus (who claimed descent from Judah's brother and successor, Jonathan). The reasoning was that the Romans loved freedom like the Jews, but this is somewhat contradicted by the fact
that the revolt was largely a conflict between the Maccabees (and their hardline allies) and the Hellenized Jews of the region, and that the Maccabees then established a theocratic autocracy under a High Priest in Jerusalem. Perhaps the distance of the Romans from Palestine at the time made them seem like less of a threat. At any rate, Judah signed a treaty with them in 161 BCE. Two centuries later, their descendants would use them as an inspiration for fighting the Romans themselves.

The Romans came to control the area through a succession of Jewish puppet kings after Pompey sacked Jerusalem in 63 BCE in the wake of the Third Mithridatic War. By 4 BCE, the kingdom was divided into thirds and the facade of self-rule began to crumble. Over the next three decades, each of these puppets was deposed and Rome took direct control of the province that resulted.

The inhabitants of Judea greatly resented the often-corrupt Roman prefects (like the infamous Pontius Pilate of the Bible) and this eventually resulted in the Crisis of Caligula from 37 to 41 CE, and open revolt. After Caligula's death, his successor Claudius relented and allowed a return of the Jewish puppet kings, but the situation continued to deteriorate until the Great Revolt from 66 to 70 AD. Direct Roman rule continued from then until 135, but that did not stop two more revolts, which eventually resulted in the abolition and renaming of the province in a final attempt to punish the rebellious Jews and sever their connection to the territory for good.

The Siege of Jerusalem occurred in the last year of the Great Revolt. The Great Revolt, like the Maccabean Revolt, was as much of a civil war as a revolt. It was punctuated by bloody infighting between different factions among the Jews and exacerbated by the instability in the Roman Empire itself, precipitated by the Year of the Four Emperors in 69 following Nero's suicide.

The Second Temple as we know it in the New Testament, and in the form that was destroyed by the Romans, was not the Temple built (or, according to tradition, rebuilt) after the Babylonian Exile and rededicated during the Maccabean Revolt of 167-60. It was the work of the Hasmonean king, Herod the Great. Herod was the infamous tyrant
who ordered the massacre of the Innocents in the New Testament, but he was also a patron of great architecture. After their initial conquest, the Romans had not molested the Temple the way the Greeks had (which had precipitated the Maccabean Revolt), but it still had been neglected and required renovation. The old Temple was completely replaced and even the old mountain was reinforced and shaped into a square to suit the tyrant's exacting standards, using enormous stone blocks. Work was still going on until shortly before the Temple's final destruction.

Herod’s Temple, a Renovation of the Second Temple
Chapter 4: The Cult of the Emperor

The Cult of the Emperor was the greatest single trigger for the Revolt. Traditionally, Romans of the Republican period were suspicious of the influence of Eastern religions, especially so-called “Mystery” religions (which they believed included Christianity). They were also suspicious of the corruption of their generals and officials by non-Roman foreign cultures. Titus, for example, drew criticism after the fall of Jerusalem for beginning a romance with the Jewish queen Berenice. However, in the Late Republic, Julius Caesar discovered the utility of encouraging an imperial cult toward him among his new conquests in the Eastern provinces as a way to keep the peace. In the Near East, such as in Egypt, worshiping the ruler as a mortal god – and an immortal god after death – was very common. Once the Republic failed and Caesar's grand-nephew Octavian made himself the first Roman emperor, Augustus, Octavian imported this Imperial cult. Though he himself was not interested in being perceived as a god, he also saw the utility of taking a feature of Roman ancestor worship of particularly important dead men known as divi, a kind of minor god, and applying it to worthy emperors in his line, to be awarded them after their deaths. This was continued by his successors, particularly the Flavian emperors, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian.

While the Emperor's Cult was strongly tied into the traditional Roman religion and rituals intended to protect the city-state and empire of Rome, it also had a very clear political element. For the Romans, sacrilege and political treason were intertwined. The cult was especially important to the newly crowned Vespasian as a critical part of consolidating his power and legitimacy as Emperor and founder of a new imperial dynasty.

It is unsurprising that the Jews and early Christians, being monotheists, were greatly offended by the Cult of the Emperor. It was not just a way for the Romans to impose their power in the most ostentatious way (though the Jews also perceived it as a convenient focal point in their rallying cry to liberation), but it also endangered the souls of Jews and Christians in their own belief systems. They were
strictly enjoined by the First Commandment, not only to worship a universal and living God, but “to worship no other gods before me.” This had become interpreted following the Babylonian Exile as to mean worshiping no other god at all. The Jews and Christians were therefore fiercely opposed to the Cult of the Emperor, and when the mad Emperor Caligula ordered that the cult, and the image of the Emperor, be installed in the Temple itself, the fragile accommodation established by Herod's Hasmonean dynasty began to crumble.
Chapter 5: The Cult of the Temple

The Romans found themselves directly at odds with an equally strong and powerful (at least, in Judea) cult of the Temple. For a long time, the priests and kings of Jerusalem had sought to take control from more regional forms of Yahweh worship (such as the oft-vilified mountain shrines frequently mentioned in the Old Testament) and concentrate it on the Temple in Jerusalem. With each successive destruction and rebuilding of the Temple, the priestly classes became more powerful within the ancient Israelite religion, to the point where the priestly caste of the early first century CE brooked no rivals. This made the conflict over the imposition of the Emperor's image on Temple grounds intensely political for the Jews, as well. The Romans were used to making accommodations to local cults in that they were happy to allow worship of local deities as long as the populace also made sacrifice to the Imperial cult. As Tacitus' passage about the Jews shows, however, the Romans had very little understanding of how much Jewish religion differed from others they had encountered, so their usual efforts backfired spectacularly and a power struggle of deadly proportions ensued.
Chapter 6: Christian Involvement and Response to the Revolt

One might think that the Christians should have been front and center in the Revolt, as S.G.F. Brandon hypothesized in his work *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (1951), arguing that the Christians would have felt loyalty to sometime-allies the Zealots. Simon the Zealot was identified as one of the Apostles in the “Acts of the Apostles” from the Bible and it is possible that St. Paul had once been one, too. The Christians were already being actively persecuted, both by the Romans and by the Jewish religious hierarchy, for what were perceived as dangerous and heretical beliefs. These groups had, after all, collaborated in the execution of Jesus in the first place. The Christians' firm refusal to sacrifice to the Cult of the Emperor, and secret mystery rites, had already made them victims in the arena and Nero's scapegoats for the fire that devastated Rome. The ordinary Roman misunderstood the act of Communion as a form of ritual cannibalism, making Christians internal enemies of the Empire. As traced by Norman Cohn in *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975), these charges would mutate over the centuries, long after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, to be used against Medieval Jews and Reformation Era witches.

However, their very unpopularity appears to have protected the Christians in this case. According to later fourth century Christian Church Fathers Eusebius and Epiphanius of Salamis, most of the Christians had already been expelled from the cult center of Jerusalem and its environs. According to these late sources, the few remaining Christians fled across the River Jordan to Pella at the beginning of the Revolt, having been warned by a vision. They were therefore able to keep a low profile during the Revolt and were largely unaffected by the carnage of the aftermath. Feeling was high, though, and Christians were permanently barred from Jewish synagogues after the fall of Jerusalem. This motivated the Christians to expand their ministry (which had been encouraged by early Church leader St. Paul) by focusing on proselytizing among Gentile communities. As the Jewish communities went into a long recovery, Christians began a sudden expansion, despite still being under extreme oppression. The
destruction of the conservative Jewish priestly elite took away a major opponent that prevented early Christians from increasing in influence.
Chapter 7: The Three Revolts

The Siege of Jerusalem should have been the end of the Jewish revolt against Rome. However, it was really more the beginning. The First Jewish-Roman war lasted from 66 to 73 CE. It was also known as the Great Revolt. This first revolt was the greatest chance the Jews had of breaking free of Rome and becoming independent. It began with protests and the plundering of the Temple by the Romans, and ended with the fall and mass suicide at Masada in 74.

The Second Jewish-Roman war was the more minor Kitos War, named after the Roman general, Lucius Quietus, who prosecuted it. It lasted from 115 to 117 CE. This was a more provincial war than the other two, but proved almost as bloody. This revolt was marked by large-scale massacres of Roman and Greek populations in the Levant.

The Third Jewish-Roman war is in some ways the most famous and may sometimes be confused with the first rebellion. It lasted from 132 to 136. It is known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt, after the main leader of the Jewish forces. This final revolt turned out to be the nail in the coffin for the Roman province of Judea and for Ancient Judaism as it had been up to that point. Not only was the destruction of Jerusalem and its main religious center completed and made final, but the Jewish diaspora was accelerated when the Romans decided to make a final example of the Jews and scattered most of the population that was not slaughtered to various parts of the Roman Empire.

The failure of the Herodians to maintain control over their restless subjects resulted in Rome's complete takeover of Judea in 6 CE. The situation remained quiet under Augustus and his successors until Caligula's reign. Due to the increasing clashes between the traditional hierarchy and Hellenistic influences after 37, Caligula decided to install a statue of his image in the Temple in 40. Local Roman authorities, knowing how disastrous would be the response, stalled until they were able to persuade him to rescind the order.

Sporadic uprisings continued, and were successfully put down, until 66. Josephus states that a conflict between the Jews and the Pagans
ignited over a Pagan sacrifice of birds in front of a synagogue and the failure of the local Roman authorities to intervene. Jews responded by refusing to do sacrifices to the Emperor, attacking Pagans, and protesting high taxes. Puppet co-rulers Herod Agrippa II and his sister Berenice (who later had a relationship with Titus) fled the country, leaving it to the revolutionaries.

Four major groups took control under the Great Sanhedrin (the ruling religious council): the Sadducees, whom Josephus identifies as the higher priesthood and nobility, and who centered their authority on the Temple; their chief religious rivals the Pharisees (with whom Josephus identified), who took their authority and direction from the Torah and Mosaic law; the Essenes, a group of peaceful ascetics who may have influenced later Christian monasticism; and the Zealots, a radical and violent anti-Roman group who sought to expel and kill Romans and pro-Roman Jews.

Upon hearing the news, Cestius Gallus (d. 67), the Roman legate in Syria, assembled a legion with auxiliaries of about 30,000 men and went to quell the insurrection. He enjoyed some initial successes, indicating the revolt would end like the previous ones, in defeat for the rebels, but he failed in besieging Jerusalem and was ambushed in the Battle of Beth Heron. Though he escaped (after losing 6,000 men), he died the following spring in Syria. The rebels now controlled all of Judea.

Soon after, the Emperor Nero appointed his general Titus Flāvius Caesar Vespasiānus Augustus to replace Gallus. Vespasian soon after arrived in Judea with his son Titus. Joined by local allies, such as the army of Herod Agrippa, he promptly set about subduing Galilee (it was during this campaign that Josephus was captured in the 47-day Siege of Yodfat). Josephus claims that 100,000 Jews died during the campaign, though the number is likely exaggerated. Vespasian also took Gamla (on the Sea of Galilee) and sacked Jericho. In 68, he headquartered in Caesaria Maritima, a coastal Roman colony in northern Judea built by Herod the Great.

Josephus was greatly taken with Vespasian (or perhaps sought to curry Flavian favor in his writing), but not everything he reported was
positive. Though he claimed that Vespasian was a far superior and more just ruler than Herod Agrippa, Josephus also reported that Vespasian once decided to test the buoyancy of the waters of the Dead Sea by throwing chained prisoners in to see if they floated (they did). Josephus would also claim that the Messiah did not exist and that the only ruler of the world was Vespasian.

In the wake of the conquest of Galilee, Jewish refugees from Galilee fled to Joppa, which they used as a pirate base. Meanwhile, two of the surviving leaders, John of Giscala and Eleazar ben Simon (a leader of the Zealots), fled to Jerusalem. Another leader of the peasants, Simon bar Giora, used Masada as his base of operations, making successful attacks on the Romans in the north.
Chapter 8: The Year of the Four Emperors

The Jewish defenders of the Revolt experienced a respite in 68-9 CE, as Vespasian had to return to Rome. This was thanks to the Year of the Four Emperors, precipitated by the assassination of the Emperor who had sent Vespasian and Titus to destroy the city – Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. Nero was a petulant tyrant and the last of the Julians, also often believed to be the worst of them. Born the same year as Josephus, he had come to the throne in 54 after the propitious (some said too propitious) death of his grand-uncle and stepfather Claudius. Claudius had been a good, careful, cautious, and competent emperor. Nero was none of those things. After many excesses and atrocities (including a great fire in Rome in 64 that he utterly failed to deal with, may have started himself to clear land for his own palaces, and subsequently blamed on the Christians in the city, as well as the murder of his own mother in 59), Nero was deposed and induced a slave to kill him as a form of suicide (fearing public execution) on June 9, 68. This sparked the period of unrest known as the Year of the Four Emperors.

Nero was first succeeded by Servius Sulpicius Galba (24-69). Initially, Galba appeared to be the strong and experienced emperor Rome needed, but he proved too old and physically infirm for the job. He was also unable to control the Praetorian Guard, in addition to repealing even the more popular reforms of Nero and imposing harsh sanctions on the towns he passed on his way to Rome. He was assassinated on January 15, 68, by troops serving his rival and successor, Otho, who had been cuckolded by Nero.
Galba

Otho treated his predecessor's remains with mockery, but his own reign was short. He killed himself on April 16, two days after his defeat at the hands of his successor, Vitellius, in the Battle of Bedriacum, and three months after Galba's death.

It was believed that Vitellius would end the anarchy, but instead, he bankrupted the treasury and oppressed the populace. Vespasian hurried back from Jerusalem, leaving his son Titus in charge, and Vitellius was killed on December 20. Vespasian was declared Emperor the next day and founded the Flavian dynasty.

Josephus writes about the unrest in Judea while this went on: “Now, the affairs of the Romans were in great disorder after the death of Nero. At the decease of Herod, Agrippa, his son, who bore the same name, was 17 years old. He was considered too young to bear the burden of royalty and Judea relapsed into a Roman province. Cuspius
Fadus was sent as governor and administered his office with firmness, but found civil war disturbing the district beyond Jordan. He cleared the country of the robber bands; and his successor, Tiberius Alexander, during a brief rule, put down disturbances which broke out in Judea. The province was at peace till he was superseded by Cumanus, during whose government the people and the Roman soldiery began to show mutual animosity. In a terrible riot, 20,000 people perished, and Jerusalem was given up to wailing and lamentation.” (Josephus, The Fall of the Temple in Jerusalem, par. 3)

Vespasian and Titus were important to this chain of events for two reasons. One is that they were instrumental in the successful siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple. The other is that they owned the primary source for the siege, Josephus, after he became a war captive.

_Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem_ by Francesco Hayez

Vespasian (17-79 CE) was born near Rome. Like Tacitus, he came from an Equestrian family. Like his grandfather, he used the army for advancement. He became a praetor at the age of 30, quite an
accomplishment for a young man with no political connections. He participated in the invasion of Britannia in 43 and began a political career in 51. He was sent to Rome by Nero in 66, after the death of the previous Roman governor. Following the Year of the Four Emperors, he and his son Titus took Jerusalem in 70. Vespasian ruled until 79, leaving the throne to Titus.

Titus (39-81 CE) was the first biological son of a Roman emperor to succeed his father. While Vespasian is also credited with the siege and sack of Jerusalem, Titus was the one who actually prosecuted it under his father's name, after Vespasian was forced to return to Rome during the Year of the Four Emperors. Titus received a triumph, the Arch of Titus, which survives to this day. He completed the Colosseum, and dealt with the eruption that destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79, as well as another fire that struck Rome in 80. However, his reign itself was very short, lasting only two years before he, too, died of illness in 81. His younger brother Domitian succeeded him and proved to be an extremely harsh persecutor of Jews and the early Christians.

Vespasian came to believe that he destroyed Jerusalem, not under his own power, but as an instrument of God, at least according to Josephus. Though this emperor was known for mildly accepting criticism, he was also known to pay sympathetic chroniclers and to severely punish those who publicly criticized him. This may account for his generally favorable reputation among writers like Josephus (who, being Vespasian's slave at the time he was writing about the revolt, may not have dared speak harshly of the Emperor) and Tacitus (whose father-in-law Agricola, Vespasian had served in Britain), despite the terrible damage he and his son did in Israel and the little we know about his actual reign following the Year of the Four Emperors.
Chapter 9: The Jewish Civil War

A map of Judea in the 1st century CE
Unfortunately for the Jews, their leaders did not take advantage of the respite created by Vespasian’s departure, instead engaging in a vicious civil war. In 68, the Zealots began a reign of terror against anyone they deemed a traitor and took over the Temple. Ananus ben Ananus, who had ordered the stoning of James, the first Christian martyr, incited a revolt against his rivals, but was killed when the Zealots invited the Edomites into the city to help them. John of Giscala (who had previously tricked Titus by persuading him not to invade Giscala on the Sabbath, to give himself time to escape) had offered to broker a peace with the Zealots, but as soon as he entered the Temple, he warned them, instead. In what became known as the Zealot Temple Siege, John frightened the Zealots by claiming that Ananus had sent messengers to Vespasian to take the city. Such an event would have ended in the destruction of the Zealots. At this point, they sent messengers to the Edomites, who came in and destroyed Ananus’ army. Once the Edomites realized they had been tricked, and that Vespasian was not coming, they left. The Zealots retained control of the city.

Shortly before the sack of the city, John, who had the lower part of the city and the outer court of the Temple, tricked the Zealot leader Eleazar ben Simon into allowing his troops inside the Temple and
murdered him. Previously in the spring of 69, leaders seeking to expel John's despotic rule had invited Simon bar Giora into the city to depose him. He brought 15,000 troops. Though Simon was a popular leader, he was not entirely successful in his coup, so he was only able to control the upper city. The Zealots, who feared him, had tried to gain control over him by kidnapping his wife, but he had broken their hold by killing anyone exiting Jerusalem until the Zealots released her.

All along, the various factions sought to weaken each other by destroying each other's grain supplies. This made their situations increasingly desperate as the Siege went on. It did not help that it was a sabbatical year (per Mosaic law), which meant grain was more scarce than in other years. Also, the Siege began in the spring, precluding a harvest later in the year.
Before his departure for Rome, Vespasian had not wanted to besiege Jerusalem just yet. Despite their chronic internecine warfare, the factions holding the city were well-armed and still had many troops. Vespasian feared that the casualty rate would be too high.

However, after Vespasian left, his more impetuous son, Titus, decided to besiege Jerusalem, anyway. He began the siege just before Passover in 69 with four legions. He had great initial success and was
able to take down the first and second walls near the Jaffa Gate (one of the eight ancient gates of Old Jerusalem, which is unique in that it is at right angles to its adjoining wall), but then the desperate Jews were able to unite and put up stiff resistance. Titus then settled in for a long siege.

He built a wall around the city to prevent food from coming in. Then he launched a sneak attack that took the Antonia Fort (a Herod-built fort on the eastern wall) near the end of July. He leveled it so that he could bring in siege materials against the Temple.

Both John and Simon responded to the desperateness of the situation by executing anyone they deemed a traitor. This caused many people to flee the city during the siege, weakening the defenders even further. It is unlikely that Judea would have been able to maintain its independence forever against Rome at that empire's height of power, but the infighting sped up the process of reconquest, and made the bloodletting and societal damage much worse. Though information about the personalities involved comes from Josephus, who was hostile to his former compatriots, the same pattern of ruthless rule and infighting was recorded in the Bar Kokhba Revolt, decades after Josephus' death.

Titus then sent Josephus to negotiate with the defenders, but this resulted in a sneak attack from them in which Titus himself was nearly captured. In late August, the final assault began. It was at this time that the Temple was destroyed. Josephus claims that Titus did not want to destroy it, but wanted to convert it to a Pagan temple. He blamed its burning on angry Roman soldiers instead. This could, however, have been simply a way to cover Titus' ruthlessness, particularly in light of the fact that Roman soldiers were well aware that breaking discipline in battle and disobeying a general's orders could result in the severest discipline if one survived.

The sack itself was violent and prolonged, lasting for weeks. Many innocent civilians were killed, though some escaped into the tunnels. Simon bar Giora tried this route, but ran out of food and was forced out and captured. The city was finally completely taken by September 7.
Josephus blamed the revolt largely upon dissension between factions of Syrian Greeks and wealthier Jews, as well as the favoritism and tyranny of the previous Roman procurator: “It was in Caesarea that the events took place which led to the final war. This magnificent city was inhabited by two races – the Syrian Greeks, who were heathens, and the Jews. The two parties violently contended for the preeminence. The Jews were the more wealthy; but the Roman soldiery, levied chiefly in Syria, took part with their countrymen. Tumults and bloodshed disturbed the streets. At this time, a procurator named Gessius Florus was appointed, and he, by his barbarities, forced the Jews to begin the war in the twelfth year of the reign of Nero and the seventeenth of the reign of Agrippa.” (Josephus, *The Fall of the Temple of Jerusalem*, par. 4).

According to Josephus, a case of ritual pollution and interreligious conflict sparked off a pre-existing feud in Caesarea, an ancient city built by Herod the Great the previous century on the coast, near what is now Tel Aviv. It was the administrative center of the Roman province of Judea and survived the revolt, albeit as a mostly-non-Jewish city:

“But the occasion of the war was by no means proportioned to those heavy calamities that it brought upon us. The fatal flame finally broke out from the old feud at Caesarea. The decree of Nero had assigned the magistracy of that city to the Greeks. It happened that the Jews had a synagogue, the ground around which belonged to a Greek. For this spot, the Jews offered a much higher price than it was worth. It was refused, and, to annoy them as much as possible, the owner set up some mean buildings and shops upon it, and so made the approach to the synagogue as narrow and difficult as possible. The more impetuous of the Jewish youth interrupted the workmen. Then the men of greater wealth and influence, and among them John, a publican, collected the large sum of eight talents and sent it as a bribe to Florus, that he might stop the building. He received the money, made great promises, and at once departed for Sebaste from Caesarea. His object was to leave full scope for the riot.
“On the following day, while the Jews were crowding to the synagogue, a citizen of Caesarea outraged them by oversetting an earthen vessel in the way, over which he sacrificed birds, as done by the law in cleansing lepers, and thus he implied that the Jews were a leprous people. The more violent Jews, furious at the insult, attacked the Greeks, who were already in arms. The Jews were worsted, took up the books of the law, and fled to Narbata, about seven miles distant.” (Ibid, par. 5-6).

Josephus was highly critical of what he perceived as the fanaticism of the Jewish revolutionaries, of whom he had until recently been part. He was especially harsh toward John of Giscala, Eleazar ben Simon and Simon bar Giora. He may have been influenced by Jewish hostility toward his brother Mathias (who had been under suspicion that he was a collaborator with the Romans) when Mathias was in Jerusalem prior to the siege. Josephus ascribed many atrocities to the revolutionaries and blamed them at least in part for escalating events beyond the point of reconciliation. He cast the Revolt as a situation where outrage was met with reprisal and then further reprisal, with bloody massacres on both sides over what had originally been relatively minor incidents, such as the sacrifice of the birds in Caesarea:

“And now great calamities and slaughters came on the Jews. On the very same day, two dreadful massacres happened. In Jerusalem, the Jews fell on Netilius and the band of Roman soldiers whom he commanded after they had made terms and had surrendered, and all were killed except the commander himself, who supplicated for mercy and even agreed to submit to circumcision. On that very day and hour, as though Providence had ordained it, the Greeks in Caesarea rose and slew over 20,000 Jews, and so the city was emptied of its Jewish inhabitants. For Florus caught those who escaped, and sent them to the galleys.

“By this tragedy, the whole nation was driven to madness. The Jews rose and laid waste the villages all around many cites in Syria, and they descended on Gadara, Hippo and
Gaulonitus and burnt and destroyed many places. Sebaste and Ashkelon they seized without resistance, and they razed Anthedon and Gaza to the ground.

“When thus the disorder in all Syria had become terrible, Cestius Gallus, the Roman commander at Antioch, marched with an army to Ptolemais and overran all Galilee and invested Jerusalem, expecting that it would be surrendered by means of a powerful party within the walls.

“But the plot was discovered, and the conspirators were flung headlong from the walls, and an attack by Cestius on the north side of the Temple was repulsed with great loss. Seeing the whole country around in arms, and the Jews swarming on all the heights, Cestius withdrew his army by night, leaving 400 of his bravest men to mount guard in the camp and to display their ensigns, that the Jews might be deceived.

“But at break of day it was discovered that the camp was deserted by the army, and the Jews rushed to the assault and slew all the Roman band.” (Ibid, par. 10-14).

Josephus was especially critical of extremist bands like the famous Zealots, who attacked any of their own countrymen whom they perceived to be traitors even more vigorously than they did the Romans, and failed to respect previous Jewish religious and political hierarchies: “Large numbers of these evil men stole into the city and grew into a daring faction, who robbed houses openly, and many of the most eminent citizens were murdered by these Zealots, as they were called, from their pretence that they had discovered a conspiracy to betray the city to the Romans. They dismissed many of the Sanhedrin from office, and appointed men of the lowest degree, who would support them in their violence, till the leaders of the people became slaves to their will.” (Ibid, par. 23).

Josephus was of the opinion that more Jews were killing each other in what was as much a civil war as a revolt, than they were the Romans or the Romans were killing them: “At length, resistance was provoked,
led by Ananus, oldest of the chief priests, a man of great wisdom, and the robber Zealots took refuge in the Temple and fortified it more strongly than before. They appointed as high priest one Phanias, a coarse and clownish rustic, utterly ignorant of the sacerdotal duties, who, when decked in the robes of office, caused great derision. This sport and pastime for the Zealots caused the more religious people to shed tears of grief and shame, and the citizens, unable to endure such insolence, rose in great numbers to avenge the outrage on the sacred rites. Thus, a fierce civil war broke out in which very many were slain.” (Ibid, par. 24).

Despite his pro-Flavian stance, Josephus went to great lengths describing the atrocities inflicted during the final assault:

“Thus, the fight continued for three days, till Titus a second time entered the wall. He threw down all the northern part and strongly garrisoned the towers of the south. The strong heights of Sion, the citadel of the Antonia, and the fortified Temple still held out. Titus, eager to save so magnificent a place, resolved to refrain for a few days from the attack, in order that the minds of the besieged might be affected by their woes, and that the slow results of famine might operate. He reviewed his army in full armor and they received their pay in view of the city, the battlements being thronged by spectators during this splendid defiling, who looked on in terror and dismay.

“The famine increased and the misery of the weaker was aggravated by seeing the stronger obtaining food. All natural affection was extinguished, husbands and wives, parents and children snatching the last morsel from each other. Many wretched men were caught by the Romans prowling in the ravines by night to pick up food and these were scourged, tortured and crucified. This was done to terrify the rest, and it went on till there was not wood enough for crosses.

“Terrible crimes were committed in the city. The aged high-priest, Matthias, was accused of holding communication with the enemy. Three of his sons were killed in his presence, and he was executed in sight of the Romans, together with 16 other members of the Sanhedrin. The famine grew so woeful that a woman devoured the body of her
own child. At length, after fierce fighting, the Antonia was scaled, and Titus ordered its demolition.

“Titus now promised that the Temple should be spared if the defenders would come forth and fight in any other place, but John and the Zealots refused to surrender it. For several days, the outer cloisters and outer court were attacked with rams, but the immense and compact stones resisted the blows. As many soldiers were slain in seeking to storm the cloisters, Titus ordered the gates to be set on fire. Through that night and the next day, the flames raged through the cloisters. Then, in order to save the Temple itself, he ordered the fire to be quenched. On the tenth of August, the same day of the year on which Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple built by Solomon, the cry was heard that the Temple was on fire. The Jews, with cries of grief and rage, grasped their swords and rushed to take revenge on their enemies or perish in the ruins.

“The slaughter was continued while the fire raged. Soon, no part was left but a small portion of the outer cloisters, where 6,000 people had taken refuge, led by a false prophet who had there promised that God would deliver His people in His Temple. The soldiers set the building on fire and all perished. Titus next spent 18 days in preparations for the attack on the upper city, which was then speedily captured. And now the Romans were not disposed to display any mercy, night alone putting an end to the carnage. During the whole of this siege of Jerusalem, 1,100,000 were slain, and the prisoners numbered 97,000.” (Ibid, par. 34-8).

Tacitus wrote about the prelude to the fall of Jerusalem toward the end of his Histories, where they break off. In keeping with his belief that the Jews were barbarians with strange customs, he attributed their destruction to their failure to expiate their cultural sins via ritual:

“[5.10] Yet the endurance of the Jews lasted till Gessius Florus was procurator. In his time, the war broke out. Cestius Gallus, legate of Syria, who attempted to crush it, had to fight several battles, generally with ill-success. Cestius dying, either in the course of nature, or from vexation, Vespasian was sent by Nero, and by help of his good fortune, his high reputation, and his excellent subordinates, succeeded within
the space of two summers in occupying with his victorious army the whole of the level country and all the cities, except Jerusalem. The following year had been wholly taken up with civil strife, and had passed, as far as the Jews were concerned, in inaction. Peace having been established in Italy, foreign affairs were once more remembered. Our indignation was heightened by the circumstance that the Jews alone had not submitted. At the same time, it was held to be more expedient, in reference to the possible results and contingencies of the new reign that Titus should remain with the army. Accordingly he pitched his camp, as I have related, before the walls of Jerusalem, and displayed his legions in order of battle.

“[5.11] The Jews formed their line close under their walls, whence, if successful, they might venture to advance, and where, if repulsed, they had a refuge at hand. The cavalry with some light infantry was sent to attack them, and fought without any decisive result. Shortly afterwards, the enemy retreated. During the following days, they fought a series of engagements in front of the gates, till they were driven within the walls by continual defeats. The Romans then began to prepare for an assault. It seemed beneath them to await the result of famine. The army demanded the more perilous alternative, some prompted by courage, many by sheer ferocity and greed of gain. Titus himself had Rome with all its wealth and pleasures before his eyes. Jerusalem must fall at once, or it would delay his enjoyment of them. But the commanding situation of the city had been strengthened by enormous works which would have been a thorough defence even for level ground. Two hills of great height were fenced in by walls which had been skilfully obliqued or bent inwards, in such a manner that the flank of an assailant was exposed to missiles. The rock terminated in a precipice; the towers were raised to a height of 60 feet, where the hill lent its aid to the fortifications, where the ground fell, to a height of 120. They had a marvellous appearance, and to a distant spectator, seemed to be of uniform elevation. Within were other walls surrounding the palace, and, rising to a conspicuous height, the tower Antonia, so called by Herod, in honor of Marcus Antonius.

“[5.12] The temple resembled a citadel, and had its own walls, which were more laboriously constructed than the others. Even the
colonnades with which it was surrounded formed an admirable outwork. It contained an inexhaustible spring; there were subterranean excavations in the hill, and tanks and cisterns for holding rainwater. The founders of the state had foreseen that frequent wars would result from the singularity of its customs, and so had made every provision against the most protracted siege. After the capture of their city by Pompey, experience and apprehension taught them much. Availing themselves of the sordid policy of the Claudian era to purchase the right of fortification, they raised in time of peace such walls as were suited for war. Their numbers were increased by a vast rabble collected from the overthrow of the other cities. All the most obstinate rebels had escaped into the place, and perpetual seditions were the consequence. There were three generals, and as many armies. Simon held the outer and larger circuit of walls. John, also called Bargioras, occupied the middle city. Eleazar had fortified the temple. John and Simon were strong in numbers and equipment, Eleazar in position. There were continual skirmishes, surprises, and incendiary fires, and a vast quantity of corn was burnt. Before long, John sent some emissaries, who, under pretence of sacrificing, slaughtered Eleazar and his partisans, and gained possession of the temple. The city was thus divided between two factions, till, as the Romans approached, war with the foreigner brought about a reconciliation.

“[5.13] Prodigies had occurred, which this nation, prone to superstition, but hating all religious rites, did not deem it lawful to expiate by offering and sacrifice. There had been seen hosts joining battle in the skies, the fiery gleam of arms, the temple illuminated by a sudden radiance from the clouds. The doors of the inner shrine were suddenly thrown open, and a voice of more than mortal tone was heard to cry that the Gods were departing. At the same instant, there was a mighty stir as of departure. Some few put a fearful meaning on these events, but in most there was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time, the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire. These mysterious prophecies had pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, with the usual blindness of ambition, had interpreted these mighty destinies of
themselves, and could not be brought even by disasters to believe the truth. I have heard that the total number of the besieged, of every age and both sexes, amounted to 600,000. All who were able bore arms, and a number, more than proportionate to the population, had the courage to do so. Men and women showed equal resolution, and life seemed more terrible than death, if they were to be forced to leave their country. Such was this city and nation; and Titus Caesar, seeing that the position forbade an assault or any of the more rapid operations of war, determined to proceed by earthworks and covered approaches. The legions had their respective duties assigned to them, and there was a cessation from fighting, till all the inventions, used in ancient warfare, or devised by modern ingenuity for the reduction of cities, were constructed. " (Tacitus, Histories, 5.10-13.)

Despite the decisive sack of Jerusalem, the thorough destruction of the Temple (though the Romans were unable, or unwilling, to destroy the massive walls of the Temple Mount, which partly survive to this day), and great loss of life (Josephus claimed a million Jews were killed in the sack of the city, though this seems quite unlikely), the Jewish resistance was far from over. Instead, it moved out to the countryside. Its final spasm would instead come at Masada.
Chapter 11: Josephus’s Account of Masada and Its Credibility

When historians reconstruct any ancient event, the first question always relates to the sources available surrounding the event and the question of their reliability. In some cases, our sources were only written down hundreds of years after the event recorded took place. In other cases, pranksters have buried fake artifacts in order to deceive or mislead archaeologists. Historians continually examine and test their sources against other data points to determine their validity and reliability. In the case of the siege of Masada, the sources are just about as impeccable as they come in the ancient world.

Literary sources are the primary tools for the historian. Writing itself differentiates history from prehistory. But historians differentiate between third person narratives of an event and first person accounts. In third person accounts, the writer intends to tell a story. They portray the characters and the events taking place, highlighting for the reader what they see as important information for the story. A good story has certain standard elements and a storyteller often has a point to make. Self-conscious history writers are a little better than storytellers in that they are intentionally trying to avoid the more egregious fabrications characteristic of traditional storytellers. Nevertheless, the philosophical underpinnings of the post-modern era remind us that every writer has their own perspective and values that they bring to their writing that colors the story even if only subconsciously. At the time of the siege of Masada, in 73 CE, the Roman philosophers had already developed historical writing as a genre centuries prior along with the concept of historians who wrote in this genre. The primary reason that modern society is aware of the siege of Masada is because one such historian included this battle in his wider history.

Yosef ben-Matityahu was an aristocratic priest born in Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Emperor Caligula. The general outline of his life runs as follows. He was born and raised with the education and training of an upper-class Jew in Jerusalem. The Jewish aspect of his education honed his innate memory skills, whereas the upper-class aspect ensured that he spoke Greek fluently and could read and write it
(Josephus, *Vita*, 10). He most likely used his given name, Yosef ben-Matityahu in Jewish settings, but used the Greek/Latin form of his name, Josephus, in more formal or public settings. He spent two years in Rome on a diplomatic mission where he interacted a great deal with the empress Poppaea, Nero’s wife. When he returned to Judea war was imminent, but he had seen the might of the Roman army up close and personal, which had not yet come to Palestine, and tried desperately to convince his fellow citizens that was with Rome was a bad idea.
He was unsuccessful, but was given a commission as the governor of Galilee, nonetheless. After the Romans attacked Galilee, they captured Josephus and planned to send him to Nero. Before doing so, Josephus prophesied before the military commander Vespasian that he would soon become emperor. This prophecy forestalled his trip to Rome, upgrading him to cushy accommodations at Vespasian’s headquarters where he was even provided with a Jewish wife from among the prisoners from his region. When his prophecy proved true two years later, Vespasian remembered Josephus’ favorable prophecy and freed him. But Josephus continued to travel with the head of the Roman army through the conclusion of the war. Because he spoke both Greek and Aramaic fluently, the Roman commanders frequently used him as an intermediary in negotiations.

Josephus initially wrote something like a small pamphlet in Aramaic describing the war he had experienced for the Jews in various parts of the Roman world who had not experienced or witnessed it. He was not fluent enough in writing literary Greek, which differed from the more colloquial Koine Greek that he spoke, to write such a document in Greek. But at some point a Greek translation of his Aramaic was produced. When this translation made its way to Vespasian, he commissioned Josephus to write a much more comprehensive treatment of the war, highlighting, of course, his prophecy about Vespasian with his divine appointment as well as the exploits of Titus, the military commander. Back in Rome, in the comfort of Vespasian’s former private residence and the privileges of a new Roman citizen, Josephus wrote this book in Greek with various assistants the emperor provided to help him with his literary Greek (Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, 1.50). He states that he used his own notebooks as well as the war diaries of Vespasian and Titus that were made available to him (Seward, 2009, 245).

In his position on both sides of the war at different times, Josephus was often an eyewitness to the events that he narrates, which is almost unheard of in most ancient history writing. Moreover, the unique circumstances that allowed him to empathize with both sides of the conflict on a deep emotional level also helped lessen the bias that is typically unavoidable for writers, especially those who wrote in
antiquity. This, combined with his training in the Roman tradition of history writing that emphasizes both the accurate recording of historical information and taking an unbiased perspective, served to enhance his credibility.

Although several scholars question whether Josephus was an eyewitness to the event at Masada, the evidence is certainly inconclusive. On the one hand, Josephus’ narrative follows Titus back to Rome after the capture of Jerusalem and the following description of the events at the three desert fortresses seem more removed and also lack any of the personal anecdotes that appear in other episodes related in The Jewish War. On the other hand, the information about the festivities in Rome could easily have been gleaned from the war diaries of Titus or Vespasian and this section is equally lacking in personal anecdotes. Since neither Vespasian nor Titus were personally involved in the siege of Masada, their war diaries would not have contained any information on the event, so either Josephus had access to additional military records that he did not report, or he was indeed an eyewitness to this event as well. His detailed knowledge of the event confirmed by archaeology requires one of these possibilities. When Titus left the 10th legion, it is certainly possible that Josephus accompanied him back to Rome. An equally likely possibility, however, is that Josephus remained with the 10th legion in his capacity as intermediary and translator between the Jews and the Romans until the rebellion was officially squashed.
One incident from Josephus that seems important to recount in more detail in this context is the siege of Jotapata. In this instance, Josephus was on the other side of a siege similar to that of Masada. There were two cities that Josephus focused on fortifying during his time as governor of Galilee—Tiberias and Jotapata. When the first wave of the Roman army attacked, they set their sights on Gadara, while Josephus was with his troops at Garis. As soon as his ramshackle troops heard rumors of the massive Roman legion approaching, they turned tail and ran. Josephus, who had always been reluctant about the war and never had high hopes for their success, fled for safety to Tiberius when his troops deserted him. This did nothing for the spirits of the inhabitants of Tiberius, who figured all was
lost when even their governor was running away. But the Tiberians, who had opposed him politically from the start of his commission, posed just as great a threat to his life as did the Romans. Therefore, he decided it best to flee Tiberius and to hole up in Jotapata, which was the most secure site in the region. He chose this city knowing that the Roman army was already in the process of setting up camp in order to attack Jotapata.

Titus wasted no time in attacking the city, but Josephus organized the inhabitants of the city to defend it as best they could. He advised them on multiple different defensive measures to take in an effort to slow down if not to deter the Roman army entirely. Eventually Jotapata fell after a long and honorable hold-out similar to what would happen at Masada. The Roman troops were ordered to track down this governor who had caused so many difficulties for them in the region. Josephus managed to escaped by jumping into a pit inside of which was a large cave. Once there, he found 40 prominent individuals from the city already there. He was in the cave three days before the Romans captured one of the women when she came to the surface for reconnaissance. It did not take them long to break her into revealing where Josephus was hiding. Titus first sent two of his tribunes down to ask Josephus politely to come out and surrender himself with assurances that they would spare his life, since they were under orders to take him alive. Josephus politely declined their invitation.

Next they found one of Josephus’ old friends among the tribunes, Nicanor, and sent him in to talk with Josephus. Since Nicanor had more of a rapport with Josephus, he proved more convincing. Nicanor even stopped the other legionaries from burning the whole lot in the cave. Josephus relented and accepted the invitation from Nicanor. But now it was those in the cave with him who refused to let him leave. When they saw that he had a close friend so high in the ranks of the Roman army they inferred he must have planned this betrayal from the very start. They asked him how many men he had convinced to die fighting for him, while he cowardly tried to spare his own life. Then and there he knew that he needed to talk his way out of this jam, and decided that he must convince them to form a suicide pact. He gave them a rousing speech bringing all of his rhetorical training to bear.
He began by rehearsing all of the fears and horrible images that might be flooding their minds at this moment. He then went on about how “self-murder”, suicide, was clearly a sin according to Jewish tradition and the eternal consequences of taking such action. The reverse psychology that he used here was nothing short of brilliant. Josephus then explains his own view of his planned actions as his very destruction, rather than as some desperate grasp to save his own life. This speech did not seem to help matters and resulted in the leaders of Jotapata swing swords and clubs at his head. Josephus managed to dodge them and regain some semblance of control of the group with his charismatic personality enough to calm things down.

He then explained that since suicide was not an option for them, they needed to make a pact to each be killed by another in the group. They would draw lots in order to decide in what order everyone would be killed. The first to draw the lot would await the killing stroke by the second to draw the lot and on and on the process would go. Josephus was undoubtedly the one drawing the names from the jar and credits the grace of God for not being cast until the bitter end.

Historians question how much Josephus actually left this decision up to fate, so much so that mathematicians have even labeled a formula that would have prevented his name being called in a circular count the “Josephus count.” Whatever the cause, at the end, Josephus was left with only one other individual in the cave. Realizing that the next draw would either mean his own death or that he would be forced to murder one of his compatriots and remembering the multiple assurances from the Romans regarding his well-being, Josephus talked the other man into abandoning this pact at the last minute.

The parallels between this event in Josephus’ own life and the account of the behavior of the Sicarii inside Masada are numerous. It would be hard to imagine that the details of one event did not in some way color or shape the details of the other. On the one hand, the incident in the cave was an event to which he was an eyewitness, whereas the event inside Masada that dreadful night was only related second-hand or third-hand. The event in the cave put his own reputation on the line, but the event at Masada involved individuals for
whom he showed a good deal of disdain. Josephus was the only witness to the events in the cave (since the Romans likely killed the other individual who survived in the cave), while the two women were the only witnesses to the events inside Masada. Since women in both cultures were considered among the least reliable witnesses to an event, it seems unlikely that he would fabricate such an unreliable source whole cloth.

Conversely, both the Greeks and Romans believed that suicide in the face of imminent defeat or capture was an honorable end for a soldier. Victory over an honorable and formidable opponent was considered that much more impressive. The Siege at Masada is the culmination of the First Jewish War that Josephus is narrating for the reader. By elaborating on the suicide pact of the inhabitants of Masada and highlighting its noble character in the extensive speeches of Eleazar ben Ya’ir, Josephus elevates the Roman victory in the minds of his Roman audience. Throughout the rest of The Jewish War, Josephus describes the Sicarii in almost a disdainful tone, but in the story of the siege, they are touted as acting heroically against incalculable odds. While one might initially think that Josephus was trying to paint a positive picture of his fellow Jews, this group was not one with which Josephus identified in his writings, but one from which he continually distanced himself. The goal in the extended speeches (which, if nothing else, was the part most invented by Josephus), was to highlight the honorable nature of the enemy to elevate the final conquest of the Romans. This was, after all, what Vespasian was paying him for.

In addition to Josephus, the practice of generals keeping military diaries (commentarii) in the Roman world was widespread. Already in Hellenistic times the Greek general Pyrrhus kept military diaries of his exploits, while Julius Caesar and Trajan are among those who kept military diaries in the Roman world. This allowed them to both protect themselves from their superiors if their tactics or military decisions were ever questioned and could also be used later to publish their prowess in battle to a much wider audience. Therefore, there is no reason to question that Vespasian and Titus would have kept similar military diaries.
There is then the question of whether Josephus would have actually had access to these diaries. Here again, the fact that Josephus was so close to Vespasian that he lived in the latter’s private house, which was no longer needed now that he was emperor, indicates a continued close relationship with the former military commander. Moreover, the purpose of these diaries in the first place was to widely publish their exploits, so by commissioning Josephus to write this work, one would even expect that both Vespasian and Titus would have lent him their military diaries.

Having said that, neither Vespasian nor Titus were present at the siege of Masada, so while the majority of the war as Josephus presented it could have incorporated information from such military diaries, they would not have been any help for this last portion of the book.

For what it is worth, there does appear to be a pattern in the nature of the survivors recounted in Josephus’s *The Jewish War* (4.79-81). When he describes the mass suicide committed by the inhabitants of Gamla when the Romans overtook their city, he notes that the two survivors were prominent women. They were nieces of a commander of King Agrippa’s army known by name. In the siege of Masada, the reason Josephus gives for why he can retell what happened within Masada in those final hours is because two women survived by hiding in a cistern, one of whom was related to Eleazar ben Ya’ir. It also may not be coincidence that the Passion Narrative within the Gospels (the reconstructed source behind Mark 11:1-16:8; John 11-19; and the Gospel of Peter), thought by many scholars to be a source document on which the Gospel writers relied, also has two prominent women as witnesses to the empty tomb—Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. This passion narrative was also written in Greek, in the style of Jewish stories of persecution and vindication very close to the time when Josephus wrote *The Jewish War*.

At first, it may not seem odd that women are the ones that survive the massacres that Josephus describes, but it is curious that the number is always two and they are always prominent women in the community of which they were a part. If it is just a literary motif, it is shocking since
women in both the Roman and Jewish societies at the time were not allowed to be witnesses in court (Peck, 1965, 1011; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 4.8.15). Their testimony was considered unreliable. It is difficult to imagine why these authors would have chosen women as witnesses to these events if most of the society considered their testimony unreliable.
Chapter 12: Other Sources

Most of the Hebrew sources simply provide a glimpse into daily life at Masada, rather than anything directly related to the siege itself. Nevertheless this information fills out scholars’ understanding of the groups involved in this conflict.

The Hebrew sherds unearthed on the site include 305 tags with different groups of letters. The phrase “groups of letters” is intentional here because they do not seem to have been words. Most of these contained only one or two letters on a tag and some of these also had a horizontal line above the letters. Some of these tags were written in normal Hebrew letters and others were written using an old form of Hebrew letters (Paleo-Hebrew). Only six of these tags had more than two letters and some of these are the equivalent of “ZZZZ,” clearly not indicating a word. These tags were used for administrative purposes.

Another group of 78 Hebrew sherds from the site contained one of three names—Yehohanan, Simeon and Yehuda—paired with one Greek letter and one Paleo-Hebrew letter written below the name. Yadin and other archaeologists associated with the excavation of Masada have interpreted these as related to the military organization of the camp (Yadin and Naveh, 1989, 17-23).

One Hebrew ostracon was not actually found at Masada, but rather in some nearby caves in a ravine called Wadi Murabba’at. There were actually 120 different Hebrew texts found in these caves with most of them dating to the third Jewish Revolt between 132 and 136 BCE. Most of these documents were various legal contracts related to daily life and the one that relates to life at Masada falls into that category. It reads as follows, “Yehoseph son of Naqsan from […] residing in Masada divorces his wife, Miriam, daughter of Yehonathan from the Nablata, residing in Masada. On the first of Marheshvan in the year 6 at Masada.” (Yadin and Naveh, 1989, 9-10).

Since silver coins found at Masada bear date of “year one” all the way through year five, beginning with the first year of the Jewish Revolt in 66 CE, there is no reason to think they stopped using this dating
system, so year 6 would refer to 71 CE. The absence of similar coins at Masada dated from year 6 through year 8 could simply be explained by the fact that the mint where such coins were struck was destroyed during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. One of these individuals carried the certificate of divorce with them when they left Masada before the siege in 73. They then joined up with the group of rebels who would eventually follow Simon bar Kochba in his revolt against the Romans some 60 years later. The document was kept with the other legal documents of the group.

In addition to these short inscriptions on potsherds, the archaeologists uncovered 15 Hebrew literary texts. It should come as no surprise that several of the scrolls found at this Jewish encampment contained individual books of the Hebrew Bible, including portions of the books of Genesis, Leviticus (2 copies), Deuteronomy, Ezekiel and the book of Psalms (2 copies). There were also copies of other Jewish texts that we know some Jewish groups considered sacred along with the Biblical texts. These were the Wisdom of Sirach (a wisdom book like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes) and a retelling of the book of Genesis (the book of Jubilees). These texts are helpful for Biblical scholars, but they provide very little information in relation to understanding the inhabitants or the siege of Masada any better. These texts are even closer to the medieval Masoretic texts, on which modern Hebrew Bibles and English translations are based, than the similar scrolls found a few miles north along the Dead Sea at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls). This suggests that the Sicarii brought these texts with them to Masada from Jerusalem (Tov, 2000, 61).

The non-Biblical texts, on the other hand, provide two key pieces of information about the inhabitants of Masada during the siege that come from no other source. At least four of the non-Biblical texts seem to have been transported to Masada from Qumran: an unknown text with spellings and handwriting that matches those from Qumran; Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (a document developed specifically for the worship calendar used at Qumran); and the apocryphon of Genesis and the apocryphon of Joshua (both resembling similar texts found at Qumran). The logical conclusion from this data is that when the
Romans overran Qumran in 68 CE, some of the inhabitants managed to flee to Masada for safety.

Another fragmentary text is clearly of Samaritan origin, mentioning Mount Gerizim in several instances all written as one word, which is standard Samaritan practice, as opposed to the standard Jewish practice of writing it as two separate words. This indicates the presence of a third religious sect at the site—Samaritans. Based on the relative number of Jerusalem, Qumran and Samaritan texts found at the site, it seems likely that the Samaritan population was the smallest minority. Whether it consisted of only one or dozens of members is unclear, but the presence of at least some members of this Jewish sect at Masada is fairly clear.

These observations suggest a level of religious tolerance at this location that might strike some as unexpected, but this situation gives all the more reason to distinguish the Zealots, adherents of the fourth philosophy according to Josephus, from the Sicarii. Issues of class distinctions and income disparity appear to have been the overriding concerns of the Sicarii. While they certainly seem to have had their own brand of Jewish belief, they do not seem to have shared the religious concerns of the Zealots.

The fact these documents survived suggests the Romans obviously had no use for these scrolls that had been of highest importance to the previous occupants; in fact, the Romans also tossed their own documents into the same room. There have been 30 different papyri and ostraca found at the site written in Latin or Greek, including various letters and notes written on papyri that they no longer needed found their way into this room.

One poorly preserved document [Inv. no. 1039-122/1] was an economic document of some type. It mentions xylobalsamum, which was the cheapest product of the balsam-tree, or the persimmon plant as it is also called. It is not too odd to find this plant mentioned at Masada since it grew in arid, inhospitable climates, but there were actually only really two areas in the region where these balsam trees grew—Jericho and Ein Gedi. Nevertheless, after Vespasian and Titus conquered Judea in response to the revolts, they carried branches of
this tree aloft in triumphal procession to proclaim their victory over the region (Pliny, *Natural History*, 12.111). The reason for their use of this symbol, therefore, was obviously not that it was ubiquitous in the region. In fact, they were far from it.

Instead, the Romans used the symbol because of its inherent value as a rare and prized commodity. When the Romans took over these cities during the Jewish Revolt, they took over the cultivation of these groves themselves in an effort to increase their revenue stream. It was not this cheap xylbalsamum, however, which caused them to put in the effort to cultivate these groves; it was the expensive perfume that could be extracted from these trees that provided the payoff. Ancient economic documents reveal that the Romans made the equivalent of millions of dollars (Sestertius) selling this perfume.

Another document is a pay stub from a legionnaire dated to 72 CE. Another is a letter addressed to Tiberius Iulius Lupus. This figure was likely one of the high-ranking officers involved in the siege since he became prefect of Egypt in March 73 CE. Cotton uses both of these documents to argue for dating the siege to 73 CE rather than 74 CE.

The archaeological evidence for the siege of Masada is extensive, since its remote location and lack of current occupation allowed it to become one of the most studied archaeological sites in Israel. In 1838, an American seminary professor and his missionary friend identified the site as ancient Masada while they viewed it through a telescope from Ein Gedi about 90 miles away. The first official archaeological survey did not take place until 1959, with a detailed excavation by Yigael Yadin and his team conducted between 1963 and 1965.
Archaeologists have been able to study the siege as it appears both from within the walls of Masada and from within the Roman camps facing it. This evidence allows historians to compare the claims made in the literary accounts of the siege (mainly from Josephus) with the facts on the ground. Comments regarding the size of the Roman forces, and the details Josephus provided about how the Sicarii inside Masada tried to reinforce their defenses, can be paired side by side with the archaeological evidence indicating the same. Given how old Josephus’s account is, the corroboration between archaeological evidence and Josephus’s account is surprisingly quite high.
Chapter 13: The Different Groups at Masada

A view of the plateau from the east
An aerial view of the plateau with the outline of the Roman camp bottom right

Understanding those involved in the siege of Masada requires looking at the larger groups involved in the events, along with the prominent individuals who belonged to these groups. Understanding the group dynamics, as well as their histories and values, helps explain the siege itself.

Although it’s easy and convenient to think of the Jews of this period as a homogenous group, there were many different factions within the Jewish community present during the time, each with their own agendas. Even within Masada itself, there were different groups living there at the time of the siege. The Sicarii were the most prominent group, led by Eleazar ben Ya’ir, but a group from a neighboring compound, Qumran, had joined these Sicarii when the Romans ran them out of their own settlement 5 years earlier. The archaeological data points to a clear separation between these two communities during that 5-year period.
The Sicarii as a group come onto the scene in the 50’s (50-60 CE). When Josephus introduces the Sicarii, he contrasts them with the bandits, whom he has been describing in his narrative. Like bandits in many cultures, they acted primarily in rural areas, stealing from the wealthy and protected by the peasants, both of whom knew their identity. They rarely killed, except when necessary to successfully complete their crime, and rarely robbed from the peasants surrounding them. However, this new breed of bandits, the Sicarii, was a different animal altogether. They did not operate in rural areas, but in the heart of the cities. They did not perform their disruptive deeds openly, with their identities on display, but instead worked silently in the shadows and their identity was a mystery. They would blend into the crowd, assassinate a high profile official with the dagger (sicae) they kept hidden in their robes, and disappear into the crowd once more. In other cases, they would kidnap high ranking officials and ransom them for the release of one of their own.

Some scholars have described their methods as one of “guerrilla tactics” (Hengel, 1975) or as those of ancient “terrorists” (Horsley, 1979). To be fair, the attributes associated with “terrorists” in the 21st century that have accumulated in the last decade or so are somewhat different from those envisioned in the late 1970’s when this connection was made. That said, there is something to be said for a broad comparison between the behavior of covert government spies as depicted in modern cinema and this ancient group.

The balsam groves at Ein Gedi have already been mentioned in relation to the Roman papyri found at Masada. One of the episodes Josephus chose to narrate in more detail when he speaks of the raids on which the Sicarii would engage was the raid on Ein Gedi. Archaeological excavations at Ein Gedi have uncovered ancient workshops complete with the tools, vessels and furnaces required to extract the costly perfume from the balsam tree (Zohary, 1982, 198). This enterprise likely made the inhabitants of the town quite wealthy, and it was this economic disparity to which the Sicarii were so adamantly opposed. At the beginning of the harvest season marked by the Jewish Feast of Unleavened Bread, when the persimmons would be ripe for the picking, the Sicarii set out at night and attacked Ein
Gedi, a little more than ten miles north of their fortress along the Dead Sea.

This attack highlights the stealth of these trained assassins. The inhabitants didn’t have a chance. The Sicarii surprised them quickly without warning so that even the armed men who might have fought back did not even have time to grab their weapons or form into any type of defensive formation. Those who were not killed immediately ran from the town for their lives leaving behind 700 of their women and children who could not run. Thus, the Sicarii did not hesitate to slaughter them, considering them no less a part of this elite upper class. Once there was no one left in their way they plundered these wealthy houses and harvested the best of the persimmons themselves, bringing everything back to Masada (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.390-400). The excavation at Masada actually uncovered a jar inscribed with ‘balsam’ in Hebrew (Zohary, 1982, 198).

One group that is often confused with the Sicarii is the Zealots. This confusion is not restricted to popular discussions of the siege, but appears in the writings and language of several scholars closely related to the study of the siege, including the main excavator of Masada, Yigael Yadin. Despite the confusion over terminology, it is clear that these were two distinct groups in first century Palestine.

The Zealots were a political movement centered in Galilee begun around 6 CE with Judas of Galilee. In the 30’s one of Jesus’ disciples was identified as Simon, the Zealot. Around the time that the Sicarii were retreating to Masada, many of these Zealots made their way south to Jerusalem from Galilee. This fanatical group had become so incensed by the various massacres of unarmed Jews by the Romans at Caesarea (20,000), Scythopolis (13,000), Joppa (8,500), Ascalon (2,500) and Ptolemais (2,000) that they were willing to fight the Romans at any cost. They would take whatever means necessary to prevent peace talks with the Romans. At this point, Josephus calls them Zealots, but they did not yet form any cohesive group. As tensions escalated, the Romans were focused on trying to quell the rebellion in and around Jerusalem.
It was this group of Zealots who fought Cestius Gallus, the Roman governor of Syria, at the Beth-Horon Pass. The Syrian Roman army had just finished their attack on the Tower of Aphek and had made camp at Gabaon (Gibeon). The Zealots got word of an imminent attack on their position and wasted no time by striking first. On Shabbat during the Festival of Sukkoth, some of the Zealots snuck out of the city of Jerusalem and took the Roman camp completely by surprise. These Zealots managed to kill 400 Roman cavalry and 115 Roman infantry while losing only 22 of their own in the process. Cestius and his army then had to retreat from Gabaon to Beth-Horon (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.19.1). Meanwhile, as the army focused its attention on the zealot threat from the south, the leader of the Zealots, Simon bar Giora, led his forces around and attacked the Roman contingent from the north. Taken by surprise a second time, Cestius' lost an abundance of weapons, cavalry horses, and mules, along with the supplies they were carrying (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.19.2).

When he heard of the defeat, King Agrippa II, who had come along for the ride in the hopes of reclaiming the throne he had recently lost, sent ambassadors to the Zealots in a futile attempt to negotiate a peace treaty. The Zealots responded by killing the ambassadors (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.19.3). Seeing that the negotiations had failed, Cestius chased the Zealots back to Jerusalem, where they retreated behind the walls of the Upper City while Cestius established his army a few miles to the northeast of Jerusalem at Mount Scopus. There he appropriated the food from the local villages for his troops (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.19.4). Cestius then set fire to the homes and villages of the Jews in the surrounding suburbs and countryside. With this offensive he brought his army into the Lower City setting up his new base camp in the royal palace, much to the delight of King Agrippa II.

At that point, the elite Jews within the city, who had been close with King Agrippa II, invited Cestius into the walls of the city. The Sicarii, who remained with the people in the Lower City, quietly killed these Jews for conspiring with the enemy. Then, for some unknown reason, Cestius and his army abandoned their assault and retreated.
The site of Qumran, which housed the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls, was located just 8 miles north of Masada. Like the Sicarii, this group was another Jewish sect fed up with the status quo in Jerusalem that had retreated to live a more “holy” life in the solitude of the desert. The group belonged to a larger religious party, known as the Essenes.

The Essenes are described by Josephus in book II of *The Jewish War* as an ascetic Jewish sect who lived communally and spent their days praying and doing chores, much like medieval European Christian monks. Despite being set apart somewhat from the rest of society, the Essenes were active in the community helping the sick and poor. Unlike many monks of other religions, the Essenes were not pacifists and always carried weapons to protect themselves from the many bandits that lurked on the roads of ancient Judea.

The process by which a young man became an Essene was long and grueling, as it was intended to separate the true believers from those who only joined for physical comfort and protection. Any man who wished to join the Essenes was first placed on a one year probationary period whereby he would be given the white garments of the order and a hatchet, but was only allowed to observe the full members. If the candidate showed his worthiness after the probationary period was over, he was then allowed to take part in communal activities such as washing in the sanctified waters. The candidate was then tested by the brothers for another two years and if he was deemed to be of good character, he was then given full membership in the Essene order.

Joseph detailed the theological beliefs of the Essenes as complex and influenced by a combination of Jewish religion and Hellenic philosophy. Like other Jews, the Essenes observed the Sabbath and eschewed various foods considered unclean in the Old Testament, but they also articulated a philosophy of the after-life. According to Josephus, the Essenes believed that the soul was immortal and that everlasting paradise awaited those who led good lives, or eternal punishment for the wicked.
The main body of the Essene sect practiced celibacy, although the sect was not cloistered and lived among the greater population so contact with women and non-Essene men was unavoidable. Despite abstaining from marriage and sexual intercourse, Josephus related that the Essenes would choose boys from non-Essene families and “fashion them after their own pattern” in order to keep their sect from diminishing.

Josephus notes that there was another sect, or sub-sect, of Essenes who married because they believed reproduction was important in order to continue the existence of their people. The non-celibate Essenes followed the others of their sect every other aspect and even placed their fiancés on a three year probationary period so that they could determine if the women were capable of bearing children. Once it was determined that the bride-to-be was capable of bearing children, the Essene was allowed to marry her, but sexual intercourse was only allowed to produce issue. The men were not allowed to have intercourse with their pregnant wives.

The Essenes followed Jewish law but like any religious order of monks, they also established a number of their own rules that members were expected to follow. Decisions on important matters were often deferred to the oldest members and the sect as a whole practiced democracy and majority rule. Members found guilty of the most serious offences were often banished and left to starve, but it was common for the other members to forgive their wayward brother if they deemed he suffered enough.

Josephus states that it was the 10th Roman legion and their auxiliary forces that attacked Masada. The standard size for a Roman legion during this period was about 5,000 soldiers divided into 10 infantry cohorts with approximately 480 men each. These were accompanied by a 300 horse cavalry legion. This legion had only a year prior successfully captured two similar desert fortresses built by Herod the Great (Herodium and Machaerus) under the command of Lucilius Bassus. The year before that, Emperor Vespasian’s son Titus had led them in their siege of Jerusalem, throughout which they camped on the Mount of Olives.
In terms of their accompanying auxiliary forces, the size of an auxiliary garrison in this provincial region of the Roman world is well understood thanks to Roman military records (diplomas) dated within 15 years of the siege (Nesselhauf, 1936-1955, 33). Such a garrison contained two cavalry units (totaling 1,152 men) and four infantry units (totaling 2,240 men). Moreover, since these siege operations involved a great deal of construction and other type of manual labor, the legion travelled with another 2,000 slaves and 3,000 conscripted laborers. These are the groups who would have done the majority of the work required in preparation for the siege.

Greg Schecter’s picture of the remains of the Roman camp at Masada
The site of Roman Camp A
Chapter 14: The Different Leaders at Masada

Eleazar ben Ya’ir (son of Ya’ir), sometimes referred to in the Greek Eleazar ben Jairus, was the leader of the Sicarii and the commander of the Jewish rebels at Masada. In modern times, Eleazar ben Ya’ir has sometimes been confused with Eleazar ben Simon, the leader of the Zealots, but Josephus was clear that they were two different men. Josephus first mentions Eleazar ben Ya’ir in book II of *The Jewish War* during the outbreak of hostilities between the Jews and Romans. According to Josephus, the Sicarii leader, Menahem, had grown as despotic as any Roman emperor and so Eleazar ben Ya’ir led some of his men against him, but in the ensuing confusion was forced to flee to Masada. Menahem was later captured and tortured to death by Jews who wished to end the war.

Josephus relates little about Eleazar ben Ya’ir’s genealogy other than in book VII where he states that he was, “a descendant of Judas who had persuaded many Jews, as recorded earlier, not to register when Quirinius was sent to Judea to take a census.” In book II, Josephus describes Judas as a Galilean and a rabbi who led a sect “quite unlike the others.” Eleazar ben Ya’ir was also related to Menahem, who he overthrew as leader of Sicarii as noted above, as Josephus relates later in book II that Menahem was the “son of Galilean.” The familial connection between the two men then would probably be that of uncle (Menahem) and nephew (Eleazar), although not enough detail is given as to the degree of their connection.

Unfortunately, Josephus relates few of Eleazar ben Ya’ir’s military tactics other than some defensive preparations he took at Masada. The ancient historian states in book VII that Eleazar and the Sicarii were actually lucky to have found the food-stores of the fortress fully stocked. The true essence of Eleazar ben Ya’ir’s military capabilities was not in any tactical or strategic decisions he made, but was instead his ability to persuade others to follow him. The Sicarii, like the Zealots, were essentially a rogue band army comprised of bandits and other societal rejects, so any commander who could keep them unified for the duration of the war as Eleazar did no doubt had to have a high level
of charisma. The Sicarii also continually had inferior weapons compared to the Romans and were usually better disciplined than their Jewish counterparts.

Along with his apparent charisma, Eleazar ben Ya’ir was also an articulate, eloquent, and persuasive speaker. As will be discussed more thoroughly below, when all hope was lost for the Jewish defenders of Masada, Eleazar rallied his troops to do the unthinkable for a pious Jew – commit suicide. According to book VII of *The Jewish War*, Eleazar’s first appeal to his comrades went unheeded, but he reached deep inside for the words that could convince his people to follow him.

“When he saw them playing the coward and their spirits qualing before the bold sweep of his plan, Eleazar was afraid that even those who had not flinched when they heard his proposal might be unmanned by other men’s tears and laments. So instead of abandoning his appeal he roused himself, and bursting with ardour began a more dazzling display of oratory on the immortality of the soul.”

Lucius Bassus was appointed by the emperor Vespasian as legate of Judea in AD 71. When the emperor decided that an entire legion (approximately 5,000 men) would be garrisoned in Judea instead of half a dozen auxiliary units, the province could no longer be governed by an equestrian procurator. According to Roman imperial protocol, Judea required a legate of senatorial rank, which is how Bassus was elevated to the position. Bassus took control of the 5th Legion and Cerealis Vetilianus was given the 10th Legion (Smallwood, 1981, 457).

Bassus wasted no time in his duties as he quickly the cities of Herodium and Machaerus to succumb to Roman power. Machaerus, like Masada, was a mountain fortress, but unlike the latter, which required an extensive siege to take, Bassus took Machaerus through guile. The siege of Machaerus began like any other with both sides sending sorties at the others, but Bassus got his break when a Jewish defender named Eleazar (not the same man as the more important Eleazar ben Simon or Eleazar ben Ya’ir) was captured by a Roman auxiliary soldier. Josephus recounts the situation: “The commander ordered him to be stripped, taken where he would be most clearly seen
by the watchers in the town, and flogged with whips. The Jews were
terribly distressed by the young man’s agony, and the whole town burst
into tears, showing most unusual concern for one unfortunate
individual. Seeing this, Bassus proceeded to play a trick on the enemy,
wishing to aggravate their grief, and so to induce them to surrender the
fortress in return for the man’s life; and in this he succeeded.”

With the major urban centers of Judea pacified, Bassus then turned
his attention to remaining Jewish rebels who were concentrated in the
countryside. According to Josephus, thousands of the surviving Jewish
rebels made their way to a wooded area known as the Forest of
Jardes. Josephus offers no details about why the rebels chose the
forest as a refuge, leaving historians to speculate whether they were
planning a counterattack or just hiding and hoping the Roman threat
would pass, but whatever the reason, Bassus quickly learned where
the rebels were ensconced and surrounded the woods with his cavalry.
The result was the wholesale slaughter of all 3,000 Jewish rebels.

Bassus’ next target was the last Jewish stronghold of Masada, but
fate would not give Bassus the victory over the Jews at Masada
because he died on the road to the siege. The victory at Masada would
fall to his successor, Lucius Falvius Silva.

Sextus Vettulenus Cerialis, incorrectly referred to by Josephus as
“Cerealius”, was the commander of the 5th Legion stationed in Judea
during the outbreak of the First Jewish War. The correct spelling of the
name is known from Latin inscriptions (Smallwood, 1981, 439). Despite
the misspelling of the Roman commander’s name, Josephus’ account
of his career in Judea and role in the First Jewish War appears
accurate.

In book III of *The Jewish War*, an account is given of how Sextus and
the 5th Legion, short of the standard 5,000 man force at 3,600 men,
successfully assaulted Mount Gerizim and laid waste to the Samaritans
holding it. In order to be successful, Sextus proved that sometimes
discretion is the better part of valor. “Vespasian thought it wisest to
forestall the rising and nip their attempt in the bud; for though every
corner of Samaritis was garrisoned, the size and organization of the
assembled host was alarming. So Cerealis, commanding the 5th Legion, was sent at the head of 600 horse and 3,000 foot. In this officer’s opinion it was unsafe to ascend the mountain and join battle, as so many of the enemy occupied still higher ground; so encircling the whole base of the mountain with his troops he kept the enemy under observation all day long. . . When his proposals were rejected he fell upon them and slew them all to the number of 11,600. It was on the 27th of Daisios that the Samaritans suffered this terrible calamity.” (Josephus, *The Jewish War, Book III*).

When the emperor Vespasian personally came to Judea to suppress the rebellion, Sextus fought at his side. The war had taken an extremely brutal path at this point as all were fair game, including women and children. Sextus focused his attention on the biblical city of Hebron by burning it to the ground and killing all of its inhabitants – men, women, and children.

Sextus then took part in the siege of Jerusalem and the burning of the Second Temple in 70. Although Josephus dedicates less space to Sextus than Silva and Bassus, the Roman commander impressed Vespasian enough that the emperor elevated him to the position of legate/governor of Judea in 70. The rotation of Roman legates was common, so the replacement of Sextus for Bassus should not be seen as a demotion; Sextus had requited himself well on the battlefield against the Jewish rebels, and for that he was allowed to return to his beloved Rome.

Lucius Flavius Silva, usually abbreviated as Silva by Josephus, took over military operations in Judea after Lucilius Bassus died. Silva was a wealthy individual who spent most of his life in service to the Roman Empire in a number of capacities, advancing rapidly during the reign of the Emperor Vespasian (McDermott, 1973, 335). Before he became legate/governor of Judea, some of the titles Silva held were “tribune of the people,” “legate of the twenty first Rapax legion,” “quaestor,” and “tribune of the soldiers of the fourth Scythian legion” (McDermott, 1973, 335). Silva distinguished himself among his troops in Germania, which is ultimately what gained him the position in Judea.
According to book VII of Josephus’ *The Jewish War*, when Silva became governor of Judea, the war was all but won and the fortress of Masada was the last Jewish strongpoint to yet be pacified. Silva took his time in his operations against Masada and favored a siege over a frontal attack. The first thing Silva did was to establish a series of eight camps encircling Masada, then the Roman governor ordered his troops to build a wall around the exterior of the citadel. The temporary Roman wall ended up being about two miles long and was clearly visible to besieged inside Masada. Silva set up his own camp just outside the temporary Roman wall, northwest of Masada. Joseph notes that the location proved to be a prime location for directing the siege, but was extremely difficult to supply.

Once the Romans complete the temporary wall that encircled Masada, Silva ordered his troops to build an assault ramp on a cliff outside of the fortress. Atop the ramp, the Romans then built a wooden tower, covered with iron plates, that was capable of shooting arrows and missiles. The specifics of these siege tactics and their success at Masada will be discussed more thoroughly below, but the account serves to demonstrate some details about Silva’s character and abilities as a commander. Just like any successful Roman commander, Silva used the resources at his disposal and never underestimated his enemy. He maintained a calm, stoic demeanor during the entirety of the siege, and when the victory was at hand, he refrained from any outward signs of glee. Josephus perhaps best summarized the stoic ideal that Silva instilled in his troops when they came upon the dead defenders of Masada: “When they came upon the rows of dead bodies, they did not exult over them as enemies but admired the nobility of their resolve, and the way in which so many had shown an utter contempt of death in carrying it out without a tremor.” (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, VII, 416).

After Silva successfully completed his operations in Judea, he returned to Rome to find it a different place. Vespasian had brought a certain level of stability to Rome after it suffered through the reign of Nero and the “Year of the Four Emperors,” which tremendously helped Silva’s career in his later life. He obtained the title of *consul ordinarius* in 81 and became a member of the pontifical college around the same
time, which put a capstone on an impressive career that spanned decades and included positions in the secular government, military, and the religious institutions of Rome (McDermott, 1973, 338).
Chapter 15: The Date of the Siege

The general dating of the siege of Masada to the end of the war is clear. There has been some debate, however, concerning the actual year the siege took place (see Campbell, 1988 for more history and details on the debate). The problem is that Josephus only records the month and day (16 Xanthikos) of the suicide at Masada and seems to assume that his reader knows the year.

The month of Xanthikos in the Macedonian calendar typically corresponds to the month of Nisan (March/April) in the Jewish calendar (Shürer, et.al., 1973, 590-599), but several scholars have argued that Josephus simply translated the Julian month names (in this case, the month of April) to Macedonian month names (Nicols, 1978, 44-47).

Other scholars see an even more complex situation, with Josephus using the Jewish calendar himself but the Julian calendar when working with his Roman sources. This would mean that in some cases, when he uses Xanthikos, he would have been translating Nisan, and in other cases he would be translating April (Burgess, 1999, 104-106). This means that even with the precise date from Josephus, there is still a 15-20-day margin of error.

Since Josephus does not give the year explicitly, scholars have tried to identify it based on the surrounding events in Josephus’ narrative and the prominent Roman figures involved in the conflict. Josephus describes the fall of Machaerus and the transition in military leadership that occurs before the siege of Masada, but the amount of time the transition takes is not immediately apparent.

The traditional position has maintained that since “the fourth year of Vespasian” (July 72 – June 73) is the last year date that Josephus gives before the attack on Masada, his omission of a year date in this context assumes the year has not changed. As such, Lucilius Bassus led the attack against Machaerus in 72 CE and died in the winter between 72 and 73. Lucius Flavius Silva would have then conducted the siege on Masada in the spring of 73 CE.
On the other hand, much of the epigraphic Roman evidence suggests that Lucius Flavius Silva could not have held the command in Judea as early as April 73 (Cotton, 1989). The alternative view is that Lucius Flavius Silva attained his command and marched east in the fall/winter of 73. They made preparations for the siege in the winter of 73/74, when the summer sun would not be an issue in the desert location. The siege would then have ended in April 74 CE.
Ricardo Tulio Gandelman’s picture of some of the ruins at Masada

One of the more fascinating aspects of the siege of Masada is the composition of the fort itself. The fort was built by Herod not to withstand a siege by the Roman army, but as a show of opulence and to demonstrate Judea’s place within the Hellenistic world. Because of that, modern excavations have revealed the remains of two palaces, several Roman style baths, and a number of warehouses that once stored wine and food.

In book VII of Josephus’ The Jewish War, the ancient historian described, in detail, the dimensions of the fort and the composition of some its buildings. Although some of Josephus’ observations have been proved false by modern archaeologists, as will be discussed below, his account is fairly accurate and the only one that exists from the ancient world:
“On this the high priest Jonathan first built a fortress and named it Masada: later King Herod devoted great care to the improvement of the place. The entire summit, measuring three quarters of a mile round, he enclosed within a limestone wall 18 feet high and 12 wide, in which he erected thirty-seven towers 75 feet high: from those one could pass through a ring of chambers right round the inside of the wall. For the plateau was of rich soil more workable than any plain, and the king reserved it for cultivation, so that, if ever there was a shortage of food from without, this should not injure those who had entrusted their safety to these ramparts. He built a palace, too, on the western slope, below the fortifications on the crest and sloping down northwards. The palace wall was of great height and strongly built, with 90 foot towers at the four corners. The design of the interior apartments, the colonnades, and the bathrooms was varied and magnificent, with supporting pillars cut from a single block in every case, and the walls and floors of the room tiled with stones of many hues. At every spot where people lived, whether on the plateau, round the palace, or before the wall, he had cut out in the rock numbers of great tanks to hold water, ensuring a supply as great as where spring water can be used. A sunken road led from the palace to the hill-top, invisible from outside. Even the visible roads were not easy for an enemy to use: the eastern one, as already explained, was by nature unusable; the western was guarded by a large fort at its narrowest point, at least five hundred yards from the crest. To pass this was impossible, to capture it by no means easy, while it had been made difficult even for innocent travelers to get away. So strong had the fortress’s defences against enemy attack been made both by nature and by human effort. (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, VII, 288)

Yadin later determined through excavations that in fact Josephus had wrote about the palace on the northern slope, not the west (Yadin, 1966, 42). For the most part Josephus’ description was accurate, although the ancient author’s account did not do the structure justice. The palace, cisterns, and walls will be discussed more thoroughly
below; what follows is a treatment of some of the lesser structures discovered within the fortress.

South of the north palace storehouses, archaeologists discovered an apartment type building that was used continually from just after the complex was built until the Byzantine period (Yadin, 1966, 107). A number of individual dwellings, which were each comprised of three rooms, surrounded a courtyard. The apartments probably housed administrative officials during the time of Herod and some of the most important Jewish leaders during the time of the First Jewish War (Yadin, 1966, 108).

A picture of the ruins of storehouses at Masada
Ricardo Tulio Gandelman’s picture of ruins of a storehouse at Masada
Between the apartment building and the western palace was a church from the Byzantine period and just south of the western palace were three small palaces and a swimming pool (Yadin, 1966, 132). The Byzantine church testifies to both continued habitation of Masada into the medieval period and the existence of a Christian community at the
site, although it is not known what the Christians thought of the site or the siege during the First Jewish War.

The church
Except for the northern tip of Masada, the entire summit was encircled by a wall (Yadin, 1966, 141). Specifically, the wall was what is known as a casemate wall, which means that it was actually a double wall with a space in between divided into chambers by partitions. Casemate walls were popular during the 1st century BCE because they could serve a variety of functions (Yadin, 1966, 141). The rooms between the walls were often used for storage, and, in the case of the siege of Masada, they were also used as dwellings. The wall measures about 1,400 yards and about four and a half yards in width (Yadin, 1966, 141), which means that things could be cramped in the walls’ rooms. 38 towers, which also had storerooms and dwellings, were spaced at various points along the wall. Between the wall and the towers there were about 110 rooms available to the defenders of Masada to live in and store their weapons and food. The wall, like the other buildings at Masada, was constructed from locally quarried dolomite stone (Yadin, 1966, 141).

The rooms within the walls ranged in length from 6-38 yards. The defenders of Masada made a number of additions to the inside chambers of the walls by adding partitions to divide the rooms into yet smaller units. Excavations at Masada also revealed that the defenders added cupboards to some of these rooms and even built mud ovens (Yadin, 1966, 145). Fortunately for modern scholars, the defenders of Masada did not set fire to the inner rooms of the walls, so a number of domestic utensils were discovered in the floors during excavations (Yadin, 1966, 146). Some of these utensils include bronze pans, oil lamps, and cosmetic equipment (Yadin, 1966, 148-9). Moreover, when Yadin and his excavators uncovered one of these apartments [casements], they found a large and disparate cache of items. Archaeologists posit that shortly after the Roman army took the fortress, they set about collecting the spoils from the fortress, and this room acted as their “junk room,” where they put the less valuable items they were less concerned about (Cotton, 1989,160-161). Among these items were several Hebrew scrolls, which led to the excavators giving this room the popular name “Locus of the Scrolls” [Locus 1039 was the technical term assigned for the excavation report]. Put together,
everything suggests the rooms within the casemate walls at Masada were vibrant and lively while the defenders held the mountain.

A number of 100 pound round stones were found at a number of points on the floors of the casemate walls. At first, excavators were at a loss to explain the purpose of these stones, but Yadin believes that they may have been kept on the roofs of the walls for the purpose of rolling them down on the Roman besiegers. Since the Romans only attacked one section on the western approach, historians speculate the stones were never used and eventually landed where they were found when the roofs decayed (Yadin, 1966, 156).

In addition to the main fortress wall, during the course of the siege the inhabitants built a secondary wall behind it as a further defensive measure against the battering ram. To do so, they went throughout the fortress dismantling all the wooden beams from the ceilings in all the rooms not immediately in use during the siege. When the archaeologists dug the site, they found that about 85% of the ceilings (which would have been constructed with such wooden beams) throughout the many rooms and halls of the summit had been dismantled and were missing, but not those of the three rooms they think served operational purposes during the siege (Netzer, 1991, 26).

The Sicarii took these large beams and abutted them against the siege wall perpendicular to it. The other side of these timbers they secured with vertical beams. Next to this they left a large gap and added another set of vertical beams abutted with perpendicular beams. Others then brought earth and stones to fill the gap. (Netzer, 1991, 23; Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.311-314)

One of the primary concerns of life in the desert climate was reliable access to fresh water. When the engineers working for Herod the Great built these desert fortresses they addressed this problem head-on. They found that near the site where Herod the Great wanted to build his fortress, there were two river beds [wadis] that remained bone dry most of the year, but a few times each year, massive rainstorms would quickly fill these river beds. Thus, Herod’s engineers first built dams in these river beds to help in diverting the water to channels that they dug leading to 12 different large stone cisterns. They then
plastered the interior of these cisterns to ensure that the water did not absorb into the rock. The massive amount of water diverted to these cisterns, which had a total capacity of 38,500 cubic meters, was more than adequate to supply the inhabitants with water for the year (Garbrecht and Peleg, 1994, 169). On a regular basis, the inhabitants of the fortress would have sent down individuals with pack animals along the narrow snake path and then diverting to small man-made paths down the eastern slope to these cisterns to draw water. They would then make the arduous hike back up the mountain, transferring the water to a smaller 8,000 cubic meter cistern within the fortress itself (Garbrecht and Peleg, 1994, 164).

The synagogue that the Sicarii used was partially built into the wall, like the housing units, but it was a larger structure and extended out from the wall into the interior of the summit. Its eastern wall, opposite the fortress wall contained the entrance to the building, so that the synagogue faced Jerusalem as was customary for ancient synagogues just as it is for modern ones. Within the synagogue was a great hall, the walls of which were lined with tiered seating benches four deep. This hall had five large columns supporting the structure. On the floor of the synagogue, the excavators found oil lamps and a sherd with the label “priestly tithe.” At some point the Sicarii had dug holes into the floor where they buried a scroll with the last two chapters of the book of Deuteronomy and another with sections from the book of Ezekiel.

Besides the evidence of the daily life that modern excavators unearthed at Masada, the most interesting discovery may be the two large palaces of Herod and three smaller palaces. Excavations of the palaces do little to demonstrate how the rebels lived in Masada, but they testify to the wealth of Herod and the lifestyle that he enjoyed during the Hellenistic Period. The architecture also reveals the influence that the Greeks and Romans had on Judea in the late first century BCE and early first century CE.

As noted above, Josephus’ detailed description of the fortress included a survey of the northern palace, not the western one. Jutting from the northern slope were three terraces that comprised Herod’s three-tiered palace villa. The lowest terrace is only a few yards wide but
once contained magnificent wall frescoes that would have been popular in the early Roman Imperial period (Yadin, 1966, 45). The middle terrace contained a circular structure with the remains of a colonnade, which was believed to have been used as a relaxation area (Yadin, 1966, 59). The upper terrace functioned as Herod’s primary living quarters and was divided into two sections: a circular porch that had a view of the north, east, and west, and to the south of the porch were the living chambers (Yadin, 1966, 62). The dwelling area was ornately decorated, possibly more so than the lower terraces, but only floor mosaics have been recovered (Yadin 1966, 63). Behind the villa was a large Roman style bath house that was “among the most ancient ever discovered in the country and region” (Yadin, 1966, 78). Finally, adjacent to and behind the bath house were two large storerooms. The storerooms and all of the other major buildings at Masada were constructed of dolomite stone, not limestone as Josephus reported, that was quarried at the site (Yadin, 1966, 88).

Carole Raddato’s picture of Herod’s bath house

Although Josephus was incorrect in his attribution of Herod’s northern palace complex to the western approach, there was another palace on
the west side of Masada. The palace complex just behind the western gate was the largest structure at Masada, measuring around 36,000 square feet and served as Herod’s primary palace (Yadin, 1966, 117-19), which makes his omission that much more interesting. The western palace, like the northern palace, was divided into distinct sections. A south-eastern wing held the dwelling quarters of the king and his family, while a section to its north was comprised of a “service wing”, which may have housed rooms for administrative officials. The third section was on the west end of the structure and was comprised of storerooms and an administrative building (Yadin, 1966, 117-18).

Along with the larger northern and western palaces were three smaller palaces located in the south-central section of the fortress (Yadin, 1966, 39). The defenders of Masada made additions to two of the smaller palaces, which then served as living quarters. Although not as ostentatious as the two larger palaces, the smaller palaces were complete with beautiful wall frescoes (Yadin, 1966, 136-7). Interestingly, although most the palaces were built with a definite Hellenistic influence, the lack of human images in the frescoes shows a Jewish religious influence at the site.

Although Herod’s palaces at Masada give modern scholars a glimpse into the opulent life of the Judean ruler, they do little to help illustrate how the Jewish rebels spent their time during the siege. The Jewish fighters had no time to relax in Herod’s baths because they were too busy trying to defend against the Roman rampart and siege weapons. For that reason, most of the defenders in Masada lived within the walls that encircled the mountain complex, not in Herod’s palaces or any of the other structures, with one surprising exception.

The number of individuals who made their way from Qumran to Masada when the Romans attacked their settlement was quite substantial. By mapping out the location of common everyday items that were most closely associated with men (coins) contrasted with those most closely associated with women (spindle whorls [the flywheel mechanism used in manufacturing yarn]), one of Yadin’s students, Ronny Reich (2001), has argued that when the Qumran refugees arrived at Masada, the Sicarii gave them three different buildings for
their living quarters. These buildings consisted of the Western Palace and buildings 11 and 12.

On the other side of the line, the Roman camps surrounding Masada were massive and imposing. There were two main camps, one on the northwest side and a second on the eastern side, and each of these camps would have housed an estimated 2,400 soldiers. The northwestern camp functioned as the headquarters for daily operations, while Silva used the eastern camp for retiring in the evening.

In addition to these main camps, there were six other smaller camps, with one on the north (housing 600), one in the southwest (housing 500), another directly south (housing 300), two more at the base of the snake path (housing 1100 between the two) and one near the northwest command camp (housing 300). Each camp consisted of scores of small housing units with small four-foot-high walls the size of one eight-man tent (8x10 feet). Since this region has no timber to speak of, they used the rocks and rubble to build these structures. They would have erected tents atop these semi-permanent structures.

One of the most interesting aspects of Masada for historians is the preservation of material remains of canabae. This is the technical Latin term used to describe the civilian contractors and merchants who traveled in the wake of Rome’s legionary expeditionary forces. Like the notorious lawyers chasing ambulances, for those working class Roman citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit, the Roman military soldiers and officers were well-paid and represented a captive market. At Masada, there are remains of 30 different tabernae in the vicinity of the main northwestern camp. Each of these buildings consisted of one two three rooms which suggests somewhere around 40 different civilian merchants operating in a symbiotic relationship with the camp (Richmond, 1962, 151). In terms of what exactly these merchants and entrepreneurs offered that the military did not already provide, speculation on this matter is left to one’s imagination.

Historians suggest that there were taverns where the soldiers could enjoy food and drink that would have been a cut above the standard military fare. There were likely merchants and artisans among this group. Brothels and cabarets are also a common suggestion for the
nature of some of these attendant facilities (Le Bohec, 1994, 225-226). These civilian camps stayed far enough away from the “action” to remain safe, but close enough to the camps to allow for a convenient retreat for the type of leisure activities that were so valued in Roman culture.
Chapter 17: Reconstructing What Happened

Given all the information available, it’s now believed that in the winter/spring of 73 or 74, the Romans attempted to eliminate the last corner of the Jewish rebellion. Lucius Flavius Silva marched with the 10th Legion against Masada and the Jewish rebels who were occupying and defending it. They marched into the desert ravine and built their camps, and Silva planned to use a siege to put these last holdouts into check.

The siege offensive basically had three components: confine; breach; and destroy. Once their camps were in place, the Roman soldiers implemented the confine element of their plan. They built a circular wall 10 feet high and 5 feet wide surrounding the entire encampment. Within this wall they built defensive watchtowers every 100 yards or so along the wall, and one of their camps was embedded in this wall itself. This managed to seal off Masada from the outside world, so nothing could get in and no one could get out.

Implementing the second aspect of their plan required much more patience. When Herod had built Masada, he clearly had a defensible position in mind, so Silva had to figure out how to bring his ground troops against Masada in sufficient numbers. The two or three at a time that the small foot paths up the mountain would allow for just wouldn’t cut it, as they would leave his troops ripe for attack.
Meg Stewart’s picture of some of the snake paths at Masada
Eventually, Silva’s engineers put their minds together and realized that the “White Cliff” on the northwestern side of the fortress, where Silva had established his main camp, provided the perfect foundation for building an earthen ramp up to the fortress. The engineers identified two separate ideal quarries where certain sections of the army could unearth massive amounts of rock, stone and earth to lay at the base of the cliff. The first quarry was at a turn in one of the river beds [Wadi Sebbe] and acted as a standard deep quarry. The second was behind their circular wall, where they continued to level the earth to form a large [100 x 120 ft.] yard.

As they dug, they separated the stone into piles, while the earth and rocks they would then transport with various carts to the base of the cliff for others to pack in. Their experience taught them that carrying this material to the base of the mountain would be dangerous work as the defenders would likely try to injure or kill the workers with projectiles of various kinds. To discourage any would-be heroes from attempting
to halt or slow the construction of the siege-mound, the Romans set up their catapults, which they brought with them, on a nearby hill. Any movement along the wall of the fortress would be met by the quick action of one of these catapults.

Although the earthen rampart the Romans eventually constructed measured 300 feet high and 700 feet wide, this only got them a third of the way up the face of the mountain. It was at this point that the Roman engineers brought the quarried stone into play. Carrying this stone to the base of the mountain, they added another 75 feet to the height of their rampart and maintained this height 75 feet across. This stone addition to the rampart seemed almost tailor-made for the siege weapons that the Romans did not bring with them. Using the yard next to the patch of circular wall they had formed during their quarrying efforts as a manufacturing site, the Romans built their main offensive breaching weapon, the battering ram. They housed this battering ram within an enormous iron-plated assault tower over 8 stories high [90 ft.] and 20 feet wide.

An aerial view of the ramp
A picture of the ramp looking upward towards the fortress
While the Romans were preparing their offensive, the Jews inside Masada were taking their own defensive measures. Since they knew where the Romans planned to breach their defenses, they could install some reinforcements, which is exactly what they did. They designed a second wall behind the main fortress wall that would serve as further protection against the advancing force. It consisted of wooden crossbeams laid parallel to each other with a sizeable gap in the middle that they filled with earth. The design of this second wall would allow it to absorb the blows of the battering ram, hopefully making it almost ineffective.

According to book VII of Josephus’ *The Jewish War*, the second wall proved to be initially effective against the Roman onslaught: “Huge baulks were laid lengthwise and fastened together at the ends: these were in two parallel rows separated by the width of a wall and with the space between filled with earth. So that the soil should not fall out as
the height increased, they laid beams across the long baulks to secure them. To the enemy the rampart looked like a normal construction, but the blows of the engines falling on yielding earth were absorbed: the concussion shook together and made it more solid.”

However, Silva, ever the Roman commander who paid attention to detail, recognized an inherent weakness in the hastily built wall: it was made of wood. Wood has its place in battlefield construction, but it also is susceptible to fire, which can be a fatal situation in the arid region around Masada where water was at a premium. Silva thus ordered his men to launch burning torches in order to take down the wall and instill fear in the hearts of the defenders. The tactic was effective, but since fire is often difficult to control under any circumstances and the winds at the summit of Masada are especially capricious, for a time it looked as though the winds would blow the flames back on the Romans. After a brief scare, the winds cooperated with the Romans and Silva’s tactic worked.

Once the wall caught fire, Eleazar knew that the end was near for the Jewish defenders of Masada. According to Josephus, Eleazar then appealed to his cohorts that the fight was lost, but that they could still control how they died. As noted above, while the Romans viewed suicide as an honorable death, it was a sin in the Jewish tradition, but for the Jews at Masada, the alternative of capture by the Romans understandably seemed most odious and no true alternative. Josephus noted that Eleazar “had a clear picture of what the Romans would do to men, women, and children if they won the day; and death seemed to him the right choice for them all.” In particular, the children of the defenders would have had a lifetime of slavery to look forward to, and the women would have been raped by the soldiers before also being sold into slavery. The adult males survivors would have been killed, and most likely painfully so.

With all of that in his mind, Eleazar then proceeded to deliver a lengthy speech to his comrades that combined elements of Jewish theology, Jewish nationalism, and anti-Roman sentiment. Perhaps more importantly, Eleazar made emotional appeals that painted a vivid image of what they could expect the Romans to do if they were
captured alive. “Is anyone too blind to see how furious they will be if they take us alive? Pity the young whose bodies are strong enough to survive prolonged torture; pity the not-so-young whose old frames would break under such ill-usage. A man will see his wife violently carried off; he will hear the voice of his child crying ‘Father!’ when his own hands are fettered. Come! While our hands are free and can hold a sword, let them do a noble service! Let us die unenslaved by our enemies, and leave this world as free men in company with our wives and children. That is what the Law ordains, that is what our wives and children demand of us, the necessity God has laid on us, the opposite of what the Romans wish.” (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, book VII, 390).

The speech had the desired effect, as the male defenders said their goodbyes to their families and proceeded to kill their wives and children. The defenders then made a pyre of their possessions and set flame to it. The defenders of Masada left little behind intact save for the food, which Josephus claimed was to demonstrate that the defenders killed themselves not due to starvation but because of the strength of their beliefs.

After killing the women and children, the defenders had to kill themselves so similar to the situation Josephus had described in the cave. To do this, 10 were chosen by lot to kill the remaining men. According to book VII of *The Jewish War*, the defenders were quite efficient in their death pact: “So finally the nine presented their throats, and the one man left till last first surveyed the serried ranks of the dead, in case amidst all the slaughter anyone was still left in need of his hand; then finding that all had been dispatched, he set the palace blazing fiercely, and summoned all his strength drove his sword right through his body and fell dead by the side of his family.” Thus ended the lives of Masada’s defenders.

When the Romans finally entered the fortress, they found the structures on fire and the dead defenders in piles. Although all of the Jews of Masada were supposed to die in the mass suicide, Josephus wrote that an old woman, five children, and an educated female relative of Eleazar’s escaped death by hiding in the conduits that brought water
from the cisterns. It was the survivors who related Eleazar’s speech to the Romans, which was then put into writing by Josephus.

At first, the Romans did not believe the survivors account of the mass suicide, but when they discovered the bodies, they were amazed at the situation. According to Josephus, the Romans did not gloat over the victory but instead “admired the nobility of their resolve, and the way in which so many had shown an utter contempt of death in carrying it out without a tremor.”

After Masada was cleared out, Silva left a garrison at the fortress and returned with the bulk of his troops to Caesarea. After Masada had fallen, hostilities between Jewish rebels and the Roman army came to an end in Judea. Communal violence persisted in Egypt between the Jews and Romans, but the siege of Masada proved to be the final major battle in the First Jewish War.

A picture of the point where the Romans breached the wall to enter the fortress
Chapter 18: The Aftermath

Despite the massive destruction of the cult centers of Judaism, including the permanent destruction of the Temple and its priestly caste, Judaism continued as a religion. The revolt's surviving leaders were captured and carted off to Rome; Simon bar Giora was thrown from the Tarpeian Rock, and John of Giscala died in prison. Many Jewish survivors were scattered abroad as they fled or were sold into slavery. Meanwhile, Titus was granted his triumphal arch in Rome that survives to this day.
The most significant difference between the Roman sack of Jerusalem and the Babylonian sack of the city was that after 70, the priestly caste was destroyed and its conservative power was broken. The Levites had been able to reform during the Babylonian Exile and return to Jerusalem, where they had been able to continue daily Temple activities during its reconstruction, including the major rebuilding under Herod. But this time, the loss of life and the destruction of the Second Temple were too great. The cultic life of ritual and sacrifice was not able to return after the siege in 70.
The Pharisees, who had claimed authority from Mosaic Law, were able to continue after the fall of the Second Temple. Since their worship already extended to the synagogues, beyond the Temple life, they were able to retreat to those smaller centers of worship and refashion Jewish cultic life, using the Torah as their religious center. They eventually evolved into the rabbinical authorities of today and even were able to reconstitute the Sanhedrin for a few more centuries.

Other groups fared less well. The Zealots were extinguished at Masada, while the Essenes, never a prominent group, faded away. The Pharisees' main rivals, the Sadducees, were unable to continue after the destruction of their cultic center, the Temple, and almost completely disappeared after 70.

Thus, Jewish religious life was both narrowed and almost completely reconstructed as the survivors struggled with the conundrum of how to recover with no more centralized religious base and such a terrible defeat. Judaism continued, but it would never be the same again.

**Online Resources**

*Other books about Ancient Rome* by Charles River Editors

*Other books about the siege of Jerusalem* on Amazon

*Other books about Masada on Amazon*

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