

“Masada Will Never Fall”: Ancient and Modern Accounts of the End of the Rebellion Against Rome

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Josephus, *War* 1.9–11

I have permitted my own feelings to mourn over the calamities of my native place. That *domestic civil strife* brought it down, and that *the Judean tyrants* drew both the Romans’ unwilling hands and the fire upon the shrine, Titus Caesar—the very one who destroyed it—is witness ... He gave opportunity even during the siege for a change of mind on the part of *those responsible*. Now, in case anyone might recklessly impugn what we say accusingly against *the tyrants and their bandit bloc* or our groaning over the misfortunes of our native place, let him grant indulgence for this feeling, beyond the law of history. For indeed it happened that our city, of all those under the Romans, reached the most complete happiness, then in turn fell in the worst of calamities ... and since no foreigner was the cause of these things, it was not possible to keep control over one’s lamentations.

Josephus, *War* 4.318

I should not be wrong in saying that the capture of the city began with the death of Ananus; and that the overthrow of the walls and the downfall of the Jewish state dated from the day on which the Jews beheld their high priest, the captain of their salvation, butchered in the heart of Jerusalem. A man on every ground revered and of the highest integrity, Ananus, with all the distinction of his birth, his rank and the honors to which he had attained, yet delighted to treat the very humblest as his equals. Unique in his love of liberty and an enthusiast for democracy, he on all occasions put the public welfare above his private interests. To maintain peace was his supreme object. He knew that the Roman power was irresistible, but, when driven to provide for a state of war, he endeavored to secure that, if the Jews would not come to terms, the struggle should at least be skillfully conducted. In a word, had Ananus lived, they would undoubtedly either have arranged terms—for he was an effective speaker, whose words carried weight with the people, and was already gaining control even over those who thwarted him—or else, had hostilities continued, they would have greatly retarded the victory of the Romans under such a general.

Josephus, *War* 6.42–44

For shameful were it that Romans, soldiers of mine, men who in peace are trained for war, and in war are accustomed to conquer, should be outdone, either in strength or courage, by Jews, and that when final victory is in sight ... It would indeed be disgraceful that Jews, to whom defeat brings no serious discredit since they have learnt to be slaves, should, in order to end their servitude, scorn death and constantly charge into our midst, not from any hope of victory, but for the sheer display of bravery; and yet that you, masters of well nigh every land and sea, to whom not to conquer is disgrace, should never once venture into the enemy’s ranks, but should wait for famine and fortune to bring them down, sitting idle with weapons such as these...



Yigael Yadin, *מצדה : בימים ההם בזמן הזה* (translated by Jodi Magness, *Masada*, 198)

The sight of the adjoining camps, Silva's and our own, was not without its symbolism, and it expressed far more poignantly than scores of statements something of the miracle of Israel's renewed sovereignty. Here, cheek by jowl with the ruins of the camp belonging to the destroyers of Masada, a new camp had been established by the revivers of Masada.

Shmaryahu Gutman's introduction to Ilan, *למצדה בעקבות הקנאים* (1973; translated by Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 68)

Masada is not just a historical site that researchers study; Masada is not simply an ancient fortress that one digs to find archaeological remains through which one can learn about the past in order to support or refute theories. Masada is a symbol. Masada is a guideline. Masada is longing. Masada is a loud cry. Masada is a tower of light ... Masada is a symbol of Jewish and human heroism in all its greatness. A generation of youth was raised by Masada. This is the generation that created the state, the generation of defense in its various manifestations. Masada has been the source of power and courage to liberate the country, to strike roots in it, and defend its whole territory.

Uriel Ofek (1976; translated by Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 72)

Under the swords they fell, the Masada heroes,
For they had rejected eternal slavery.
Their heroic act our hearts has filled
Since the far days of our childhood.

We stood still, the thunder roared,
And we all knew so well:
It is good to die and be ever free,
Than become our enemy's slaves.

Jewish War 7.252–272

This fortress was called Masada; and the Sicarii who had occupied it had held by at their head a man of influence named Eleazar. He was a descendant of the Judas who, as we have previously stated, induced multitudes of Jews to refuse to enroll themselves, when Quirinius was sent as censor to Judaea. For in those days the Sicarii clubbed together against those who consented to submit to Rome and in every way treated them as enemies, plundering their property, rounding up their cattle, and setting fire to their habitations; protesting that such persons were no other than aliens, who so ignobly sacrificed the hard-won liberty of the Jews and admitted their preference for the Roman yoke. ... the people did join with them in the revolt and take their part in the war, only, however, to suffer at their hands still worse atrocities; and when they were again convicted of falsehood in this pretext, they only oppressed the more those who in righteous self-defense reproached them with their villainy. Indeed, that period had, somehow, become so other prolific of crime of every description amongst the criminals that no deed of iniquity was left unperpetrated ... So universal was the contagion, both in private and in public life, such the emulation, moreover, to outdo each other in acts of impiety towards God and of injustice towards their neighbors; those in power oppressing the masses, and the masses eager to destroy the powerful. **These were bent on tyranny, those on violence and plundering the property of the wealthy. The Sicarii were the first to set the example of this lawlessness and cruelty to their kinsmen,** leaving no word unspoken to insult, no deed untried to ruin, the victims of their conspiracy...

What ties of friendship or of kindred but rendered these men more audacious in their daily murders? For to do injury to a foreigner they considered an act of petty malice, but thought they cut a splendid figure by maltreating their nearest relations...

Accordingly these each found a fitting end, God awarding due retribution to them all.

Jewish War 7.315–319

Observing this, Silva, thinking it is easier to destroy this wall by fire, ordered his soldiers to hurl at it showers of burning torches. Being mainly made of wood, it quickly caught fire, and, from its hollow nature becoming ignited right through blazed up in a volume of flame. At the first outbreak of the fire, a north wind which blew in the faces of the Romans caused them an alarm; for, diverting the flame from above, it drove it against them, and the fear that all their engines would be burnt up had almost reduced them to despair. **Then suddenly the wind veering, as if by divine providence, to the south and blowing with full force in the opposite direction, wafted and flung the flames against the wall, which now through and through was all ablaze. The Romans, thus blessed by God's aid, returned rejoicing to their camp...**

Jewish War 7.323–393 (speech of Eleazar b. Yair)

At this crisis let us not disgrace ourselves; we who in the past refused to submit even to a slavery involving no peril, let us not now, along with slavery, deliberately accept the irreparable penalties awaiting us if we are to fall alive into Roman hands. ... Maybe, indeed, we ought from the very first—when, having chosen to assert our liberty, we invariably experienced such hard treatment from one another, and still harder from our foes—we ought, I say, to have read God’s purpose and to have recognized that the Jewish race, once beloved of Him, had been doomed to perdition. ... But did we hope that we alone of all the Jewish nation would survive and preserve our freedom, as persons guiltless towards God and without a hand in crime—we who had even been the instructors of the rest? Mark, now, how He exposes the vanity of our expectations, by visiting us with such dire distress as exceeds all that we could anticipate. ... For it was not of their own accord that those flames which were driving against the enemy turned back upon the wall constructed by us; no, all this betokens wrath at the many wrongs which we madly dared to inflict upon our countrymen. The penalty for those crimes let us pay not to our bitterest foes, the Romans, but to God through the act of our own hands. ... let us render a generous service to each other, preserving our liberty as a noble winding-sheet. ...

Thus spoke Eleazar; but his words did not touch the hearts of all hearers alike. Some, indeed, were eager to respond and all but filled with delight at the thought of a death so noble; but others, softer-hearted, were moved with pity for their wives and families, and doubtless also by the vivid prospect of their own end, and their tears as they looked upon one another revealed their unwillingness of heart. Eleazar, seeing them flinching and their courage breaking down in face of so vast a scheme, feared that their whimpers and tears might unman even those who had listened to his speech with fortitude. Far, therefore, from slackening in his exhortation, he roused himself and, fired with mighty fervor, essayed a higher flight of oratory on the immortality of the soul. ... Yet, even had we from the first been schooled in the opposite doctrine and taught that man's highest blessing is life and that death is a calamity, still the crisis is one that calls upon us to bear it with a stout heart, since it is by God's will and of necessity that we are to die. ... Do not attach the blame to yourselves, nor the credit to the Romans, that this war with them has been the ruin of us all; for it was not their might that brought these things to pass, but the intervention of some more powerful cause has afforded them the semblance of victory. ...

Plato, Phaedo 61d–62c

“Why in the world do they say that it is not permitted to kill oneself, Socrates?”...

“Then perhaps from this point of view it is not unreasonable to say that **a man must not kill himself until god sends some necessity upon him**, such as has now come upon me.”

now that hope has vanished and left us alone in our distress, let us hasten to die honorably; let us have pity on ourselves, our children and our wives, while it is still in our power to find pity from ourselves. ... But outrage and servitude and the sight of our wives being led to shame with their children—these are no necessary evils imposed by nature on mankind, but befall, through their own cowardice, those who, having the chance of forestalling them by death, refuse to take it. But we, priding ourselves on our courage, revolted from the Romans, and now at the last, when they offered us our lives, we refused the offer. ... while those hands are free and grasp the sword, let them render an honorable service. Unenslaved by the foe let us die, as free men with our children and wives let us quit this life together! This our laws enjoin, this our wives and children implore of us. The need for this is of God’s sending, ...

He would have pursued his exhortation but was cut short by his hearers, who, overpowered by some uncontrollable impulse, were all in haste to do the deed. Like men possessed they went their way, each eager to outstrip his neighbor and deeming it a signal proof of courage and sound judgement not to be seen among the last: so ardent the passion that had seized them to slaughter their wives, their little ones and themselves. ... For, while they caressed and embraced their wives and took their children in their arms, clinging in tears to those parting kisses, at that same instant, as though served by hands other than their own, they accomplished their purpose ... Wretched victims of necessity, to whom to slay with their own hands their own wives and children seemed the lightest of evils!

Jewish War 2.355–400 (Speech of Agrippa II)

Passing to your present passion for liberty, I say that it comes too late. ... For servitude is a painful experience and a struggle to avoid it once for all is just; but the man who having once accepted the yoke then tries to cast it off is a contumacious slave, not a lover of liberty...

The only refuge, then, left to you is divine assistance. But even this is ranged on the side of the Romans, for, without God's aid, so vast an empire could never have been built up...

All who embark on war do so in reliance on the support either of God or man; but when, in all probability, no assistance from either quarter is forthcoming, then the aggressor goes with his eyes open to certain ruin. What is there, then, to prevent you from dispatching with your own hands your children and wives and from consigning this surpassingly beautiful home of yours to the flames? By such an act of madness you would at least spare yourselves the ignominy of defeat... For to the victims of unforeseen disaster there is left at least the meed of pity; but he who rushes to manifest destruction incurs opprobrium to boot... Take pity, then, if not on your children and your wives, at least on your mother city and its sacred precincts.

Jewish War 4.163–193 (speech of Ananus b. Ananus)

Truly well had it been for me to have died ere I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers! ... When plundered you submit, when beaten you are silent, nay over the murdered none dares audibly to groan. **What bitter tyranny!** ... When houses were pillaged, not a word was said ... The natural sequel was to watch these same men massacred: that spectacle also we have witnessed, when as from a herd of dumb cattle one prize victim after another was dragged to the slaughter; yet not a voice, much less a hand, was raised...

Have you then lost that most honorable, that most instinctive of passions—the desire for liberty? Have we fallen in love with slavery, in love with our masters, as though submission were a heritage from our forefathers? ... We are now at war with Rome ... but what is its pretext? Is it not liberty? If, then, we refuse to bow to the lords of the inhabited world, are we to tolerate domestic tyrants?... we can suffer no greater cruelty than what these men have already inflicted upon us... Maybe the Deity, whom they have outraged, will turn their missiles back upon them, and their own weapons will bring destruction upon the impious wretches. Only let us face them and their doom is sealed. And if the venture has its attendant risks, it were a noble end to die at the sacred portals and to sacrifice our lives if not for wives and children, yet for God and for the sanctuary.