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Location: Masada

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Masada

A Position of Refuge, Self-Annihilation, and Insight

Masada was a natural rock formation, a plateau, or a tableland that sat on the top of a mountain in southern Judaea overlooking the Dead Sea and was surrounded by a dry, barren desert. One can therefore imagine that the top of the mountain was flat instead of jagged and pointed.

Flavius Josephus was a famous Jewish/Roman Historian who related the accounts of the History of the Jews. His version of the events involving Masada has been widely read and accepted as authentic. In his book "The Jewish War," he stated that the fortress was initially occupied by the Hasmoneans, and later captured and reconstructed by King Herod the Great (37-31 BCE).

Josephus related that Herod the Great, the King of Judea, built a complex and fortress in the late first century BCE, which included two palaces with three levels inserted on the side of the rock. This was the same Herod referred to in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus was born. Though Herod never met Jesus, he played a significant role in Jesus' young life.

Masada was considered an architectural marvel because it contained storehouses, bathhouses, a water cistern system, and an endless food supply. Josephus explained that Herod the Great built this fortress for himself as a refuge and a military stronghold in the event of an uprising. After Herod's death, Masada became a refuge for the Jewish Zealot rebels, the Sicarii, also known as "dagger men" because of the weapons they carried. Some of the Sicarii at Masada could have been related to the daggersmen referred to in Acts Chapter 21: 37-38. This group of Jewish zealots fled the Roman persecution during the first Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE). Later the Roman military surrounded Masada, which led to the famous "Siege of Masada" and the mass self-annihilation of the Jewish rebels. The Jewish rebels preferred to kill themselves rather than to be captured and enslaved by the Romans.

Why was the "Siege of Masada" such a significant event? Josephus addresses this question in his book "The Jewish War." The annihilation of the Sicarii Jews led me to examine the origin of the feud between the groups of extremist zealots and the Romans. According to Josephus, the Romans governed Judea during the 1st century CE, but the Jews objected to Roman occupation and felt it was a gross violation of the laws of their God. So, they kept fighting to regain their freedom. The Jews always thought that they were God's chosen people, and no one should rule over them. However, because of their frequent disobedience to God, many nations, like the Babylonians and the Persians, had ruled over them over the years. The Romans were powerful and ruthless people who believed in many gods. In addition, the Romans were ruled over by their Caesars, who were worshiped as gods like the Pharaohs in Egypt years before. To the Jews, who only worshipped only one God, the worship of any other gods was sacrilege. These factors were always a matter of contention for Jews for decades.

The Romans viewed the Sicarii as a hostile and defiant group who were always threatening their authority. This dispute between the rebel Jews and the Romans ultimately

spiraled into the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE) and led to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Generally, this divergence between the rebellious Jews and the Romans was imbedded in the resentment between the Jews' yearning for independence, Roman imperialism, and their religious differences between the two groups.

According to Josephus the Jews, out of defiance, fled to the mountain of Masada. Since Masada had been constructed as a military stronghold, they were prepared with weapons and food supplies for a prolonged fight with the Romans. The Sicarii were industrious as they were agriculturally driven, being able to cultivate crops such as grains and fruits which offered them the provisions to sustain themselves. They were skilled in making pottery, weapons, and textiles. When they arrived at Masada, they ousted the Roman garrison positioned in the fortress. They reinforced it by erecting walls, lookout towers, and houses to store their food and weapons.

The Romans breached the defenses the Jewish rebels erected, and according to Josephus, the Jews committed mass suicide before the Romans could capture them. It was further noted by Josephus that 960 Jews committed suicide and that Jewish rebels left records known as the Masada Scroll. Written on parchment and supposedly discovered around 1960 in a Temple in Masada, it contains one of the oldest surviving Hebrew Biblical texts and offers important information on the religious practices of the Jewish community at Masada. However, like the controversy surrounding Josephus' account of the "Siege at Masada," some scholars have queried the scroll's authenticity.

Scholars like Professor Yadin, an Israeli archeologist who discovered some skeletal remains on the lower terrace of the palace, strongly dispute all the details of Josephus' account of the destruction of Masada, whether it was the fire that burnt the storerooms with the food supplies or the number of human remains. The question has been asked whether it was a mass

suicide, or the rebels were discovered and killed by the Romans. At a minimum, archaeology suggest that Josephus' narrative was imperfect or incomplete.