



Masada

A Position of Refuge, Self-Annihilation, and Insight



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History of Israel
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Masada is a natural rock formation, a plateau, or a tableland that sits on the top of a mountain in southern Judaea overlooking the Dead Sea. It stands along the famous Afro-Syrian geological break surrounded by dry, barren desert land. Masada stems from the Hebrew word "Metzada," defined as "fortress or stronghold."

The events that occurred at Masada were disclosed through the interpretation of Flavius Josephus, who was a famous Jewish/Roman Historian who lived in the first century C. E. Josephus was "A commander of Jewish forces during the war against Rome in 66-70, He gained favor with the Romans following his surrender"¹. He related the accounts of the History of the Jews through his works, "The Antiquities of the Jews" and "The Jewish Wars." Josephus was controversial in his literature, and some of his works today are still debatable. However, his version of the events involving Masada has been widely read and accepted as reasonably authentic.

In "The Jewish War," he stated that the Masada fortress was initially occupied by the Hasmoneans (who were said to be descendants of the Maccabean family). The Hasmoneans were the first to build roads along with houses to the top of the mountains. "Josephus attributes the construction of Masada to Jonathan the High Priest, but practically all scholars agree that it was Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C) who first built on the site."² Archaeologists like Yigael Yadin also initially believed that Alexander Jannaeus was the first to build the site. During his

¹ Russell Pregeant, *Engaging the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 567.

² David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 4, K-N (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 586.

excavation in the 1960s, some buildings uncovered on the mountain were determined to have been built by Herod the Great. However, according to Josephus, Herod reconstructed Masada after the Hasmoneans left. It also became a refuge not only for the Jewish Zealots known as the Sicarii but for Simon, the son of Gioras who, "When a force was sent against him by Ananus and his magistrates, he fled with his followers to the bandies at Masada, and there till the death of Ananus and his other enemies he remained."³ Yigael Yadin further noted, "At the beginning of the 66 AD rebellion, a group of Jewish zealots had destroyed the Roman garrison at Masada and held it throughout the war".⁴ Therefore, Masada was more than a place of leisure and pleasure for Herod, but it was an important dwelling for various groups.

Herod was powerful and wealthy, but he was also ruthless. "He was a native of Idumea and was appointed "king of the Jews" by the Roman emperor and came to be called "Herod the Great." He reigned as a vassal of Romans from 37 to 4 BCE and appeared in the Gospel of Matthew as a jealous king seeking the life of the child Jesus."⁵ In spite of his complicated relationship with the Jews, Herod was known as a great builder and architect.

In the late First century BCE, Herod built this magnificent complex, a fortress on the top of Masada. I can only imagine that Masada was an architectural marvel because it included three palaces, storehouses, and bathhouses. These bathhouses served multiple purposes besides the obvious, hygiene, and personal care. Josephus also shared that the bathhouses were an essential aspect of the Jews culture, and the Jewish rebels used them for ritual purification before prayer and other religious rites. It also served as a place of relaxation and socialization among the

³ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*: Translated by G. A. Williams (New York: Penguin Classics, 1981), 188.

⁴ Yigael Yadin, *Masada Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966), 11

⁵ Pregeant, *Engaging the New Testament*, 566.

residents. There was also a water cistern system (today, we would call it a reservoir) and an endless food supply.

Josephus explained that Herod the Great built this fortress for himself as a refuge, a place of protection, and a military stronghold in the event of an uprising. After Herod's death, Masada became a refuge for a radical Jewish group called the Sicarii. They emerged around 54 CE in the first century when the Romans occupied Judea. The name "Sicarii" is derived from the Latin word "sica," which means "dagger" or "knife." Hence another name for them was "dagger men," because their preferred weapon of choice was the knife. Josephus described this small group of Jews as a dangerous, defiant, fanatical, violent faction who objected to the Romans' occupation of Judea. They believed that the Romans were violating their God's laws and were a serious threat to their independence/sovereignty. They always thought they were God's chosen people, and no foreigner should rule over them. They also felt that any Jew who collaborated with the Romans was disloyal to the Jewish people. It is also believed that the two thieves crucified with Jesus were suspected of belonging to this group. Also, in Acts: 21:37-38, Paul was mistaken as the leader of four thousand Sicarii.

The Romans viewed the Sicarii as a hostile and rebellious group that opposed their rule and threatened their authority. These Jewish rebels were vicious and were seen as assassins to the Romans because they killed some Roman officers and Jewish collaborators like the High Priest Jonathan Apphus. So how did they get up at Masada and what was this refuge and self-annihilation all about?

To simplify, this divergence between the rebellious Jews and the Romans was rooted in the resentment between the Jews' yearning for their independence, Roman imperialism, and the religious differences between the two groups. Therefore, the Jewish rebels fled the Roman persecution during the first Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE) because of all this bitter contention.

They occupied Masada, which was already constructed as a military stronghold. The Sicarii were industrious and agriculturally driven. While on Masada, they were able to cultivate crops such as grains like barley and wheat and also dates on top of the mountain, and they were skilled in making pottery, weapons, and textiles. They also reinforced Masada by erecting walls, lookout towers, and houses where they stored food and weapons.

The Sicarii remained at Masada for about three years, around 73 CE, before the Roman Military surrounded Masada, and they eventually penetrated the rebels' defenses. Recognizing that the fortress would be overrun, Josephus stated that, rather than being captured and enslaved by the Romans in 960, the Jewish rebels, women, and children killed themselves. This event is known as the "***Siege at Masada.***" Josephus cited in the "War of the Jews" that those 960 men, women, and children committed mass suicide leaving only two women and five children alive. These were found hiding in a cave. It was also noted that they left records of this event written on parchment, supposedly discovered around 1960.

Josephus' has always ignited some form of debate in the minds of his audience. Hence, the question has been asked whether "The Siege at Masada" was a mass suicide or whether the Romans found the rebels and killed them. Archeologists like Yigael Yadin initially disputed the details of Josephus' account of the self-annihilation that took place on Masada. However, in his excavation in 1960, "Yadin discovered three skeletons in the lower terrace of the northern palace and twenty-five in a cave on the southern slope of the cliffs".⁶ In addition, upon visiting the area, two American Scholars, Edward Robinson and Eli Smith, noted as follows; "The truncated summit of the lofty isolated rock forms a small plain inaccessible, and the ruin occupies this. Its appearance had greatly struck us, and upon examining it closely with a telescope, I could

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/masada.html>

perceive what appeared to be a building on its N.W. part and traces of other buildings further east. Subsequent research leaves little room to doubt that this was the site of the ancient and renowned fortress of Masada”.⁷ As proof that a historical event occurred at Masada, remains such as Sicarii sandals, pottery, silver shekels, and coins have been excavated from the Masada complex.

Yadin's excavations uncovered areas such as The Western Palace, the most prominent building at Masada, which was said to be the residence of King Herod. One of the most significant discoveries was the intricate hot and cold-water system that provided Masada's occupants with fresh water. This system was a marvel of engineering for its time. It comprised a network of channels, cisterns, and pipes that collected, filtered, and distributed water from the nearby Ein Gedi springs. The hot water was heated by a furnace that was located nearby, and then it was transported to the bathhouse through a series of pipes. The bathhouse featured a series of heated rooms, a sauna, and a large plunge pool. Yadin's excavation of the hot and cold-water system provided a unique insight into the daily life of the fortress inhabitants. In addition, it showed the ancient builders' advanced engineering and architectural skills and their understanding of the importance of clean water and hygiene.

Dan Barag, another archaeologist, made a fascinating discovery of the synagogue that was built by the Jewish rebels. The synagogue was built in the late first century CE, during the time of the Second Temple, and it was destroyed in the 4th century CE. The synagogue was a small building made of stone, and four columns supported the roof. The synagogue was adorned with elaborate frescoes that depicted scenes from the Jewish scripture and carried floral motifs. The frescoes demonstrated the importance of the arts in Jewish worship and highlighted the connection between Jewish and Roman artistic traditions. Yadin further described the findings of

⁷ Yadin, *Masada Herod's Fortress*, 231.

the remains of a scroll that was written on parchment, "which they could identify the writing as chapters from the Book of Ezekiel; and the parts that were better preserved than others, and which we could easily read, contained extracts from Chapter 37 – the vision of the dry bones." ⁸

Archeologist Yadin's background plays an important role in affecting his interpretation of the findings on Masada. He is an Israeli archaeologist and a military leader who played a role in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. His military background and strong attachment to Israel's national identity and security may have influenced how he viewed the archaeological finds at Masada. For archaeologists like Yadin and non-experts, Masada stands as a symbol of bravery and a tribute to their prominent national leaders, who courageously chose death rather than a life of servitude. Yadin's noted zeal for the work he invested in this excavation can be seen when he expressed, "This was the site at which I was privileged to head an eleven months' archaeological expedition in two seasons of exhaustive excavations." ⁹ He added, "I say 'privileged' because it had been the dream of every Israeli archaeologist to fathom the secrets of Masada."¹⁰

Even now, hordes of tourists visit Masada to witness this historic site firsthand. Masada's fame has increased considerably over the years, and it is now more renowned than it was in the Herodian era. With convenient and secure access, it is likely that Masada will continue to captivate an endless stream of visitors in the future.

⁸ Yadin Masada Herod's Fortress, 187-188.

⁹ Yadin Masada Herod's Fortress, 12

¹⁰ Ibid

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