

THE FALL OF MASADA

Copyright 1994 - 2025 Bill's Bible Basics

Published On : March 5, 2011

Last Updated : April 5, 2025

First Jewish-Roman War And The 70 AD Destruction Of Jerusalem, John Of Giscala And Violent Zealots Known As Sicarii Or Dagger Men, Was Barabbas A Sicarii?, Jonathan the High Priest Builds Masada Fortress, Herod the Great Takes Over Masada, Cleopatra And Mark Antony Eye Judea, Herod Builds A Defensive Wall And Towers Around Masada, Roman Garrison At Masada Is Overtaken By Sicarii, Zealots Are Driven Out Of Jerusalem, Jesus Prophesied The Destruction Of Jerusalem, Eleazar Ben Ya'ir Leads Sicarii, Masada's Seemingly Impregnable Cliffs And Added Fortifications, Lucius Flavius Silva Leads The Assault Against Masada, Silva Builds A Siege Wall And Assault Ramp, The Outer Wall Is Broken Through And Inner Wall Burned, Flavius Josephus' Questionable Loyalties And Clear Hatred For The Zealots, Eleazar ben Ya'ir Realizes Futility Of Their Situation And Suggests Mass Suicide, King David Trusted In The Arm Of The Flesh And Conducts Census, God Smites Israelites, Eleazar ben Ya'ir's Speech Of Repentance To The Sicarii, The Sicarii Commit Mass Suicide, The Testimony Of Masada's Five Survivors, Romans Are Shocked To Discover The Dead, Sicarii In Alexandria, Masada TV Movie, BBB Reading List

In the twelfth chapter of Book 5 of his work entitled "The Histories", Roman historian, Tacitus, explains how during the seven-year First Jewish-Roman War, which endured from 66 AD to 73 AD -- and which saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD -- the forces in Jerusalem were divided into three factions. One faction consisted of the Zealots who were led by one John of Giscala. As you may know, the Zealots were the anti-Roman radicals who were initially concentrated in Galilee. However, they were eventually forced to relocate to Jerusalem, after the Romans legions, under the leadership of General Vespasian, who along with his son Titus and other allies, conquered the north and the coastal areas of Israel.

The most violent amongst the Zealots were called the Sicarii, or "dagger men". They acquired this gruesome name due to the practice of concealing small daggers -- referred to as sica -- underneath their cloaks, which they would then use to stab

their enemies in crowded areas. Their targets included Romans and Roman sympathizers, the Herodians, and other wealthy Jews who had compromised with Rome. Some scholars hold the opinion that Barabbas -- who, as you may know, was released by Roman governor Pontius Pilate in Jesus' stead -- may have been a member of the Sicarii, being as the Gospels describe him as being a robber, a murderer and a seditionist who was involved in insurrection against Rome. Consider the following verses:

"Now at that feast the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would. And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas."

Matthew 27:15-16, KJV

"Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection."

Mark 15:6-7, KJV

"(For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.) And they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas: (Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.)"

Luke 23:17-19, KJV

"But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews? Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber."

John 18:39-40, KJV

According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, a group of the Sicarii managed to escape to the isolated desert fortress of Masada, which overlooks the western edge of the Dead Sea. In his "The Wars of the Jews", Josephus explains that the Masada fortress was originally built by Jonathan the High Priest, who was one of the five Maccabees brothers. Later, during the 30s BC, it was reconstructed and heavily fortified, and served as both a fortress and a palace for King Herod the Great, who feared a revolt by his Jewish subjects.

Even more importantly, Josephus reveals that Herod the Great feared the machinations of Cleopatra -- the Queen of Egypt -- who oft times had told her lover and ally, Mark Antony, that

she wanted Judea for her possession. Herod the Great had in fact been installed by Mark Antony as the Jewish puppet king following Mark Antony's capture of Jerusalem in 37 BC from the Parthians -- or Persians -- today known as the Iranians.

Thus, as a result of his fears, Herod encompassed the entire mountaintop of Masada with a wall that stood eighteen feet tall, and was twelve feet thick. Within the wall there were thirty-eight towers, each of which stood seventy-five feet in height. Josephus also reports that King Herod the Great had stocked up enough weapons of war to supply ten thousand men. He likewise describes many water pits within the confines of the wall, and states that the plateau's soil was extremely fertile, which allowed the occupants of Masada to never lack for food. In addition, Herod also stocked Masada with a great variety of other food stuffs, which, according to Josephus, remained perfectly preserved for many years due to the arid, clean climate that existed on the summit of Masada.

With the outbreak of the First Jewish-Roman War in 66 AD, the Roman garrison that was now stationed at Masada was overcome by the Sicarii, which made it easier for additional Sicarii -- and their families -- to arrive there following the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In fact, some historical sources state that the Zealots were finally forced out of Jerusalem by the populace themselves, because the Zealots, and their even more violent sect, the Sicarii, were in large part responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem, due to their ungodly and wicked nature, and of course, their stubborn unwillingness to yield to Roman authority.

However, as Bible-believing Christians, we also know that God used the Romans as His rod of chastisement against the Jews, due to their stubborn rejection of Jesus Christ, who is God's one and only Messiah. As I point out in other articles, Jesus clearly prophesied of the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans about forty years earlier, as we can see by the following Bible verses that are found in three of the Gospels:

"And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."
Matthew 24:1-2, KJV

"And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith

unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Mark 13:1, 2, KJV

"And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation."

Luke 19:41-44, KJV

"And as some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, he said, As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down . . . And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."

Luke 21:5-6, 20-24, KJV

Returning to our discussion concerning the Masada fortress, under the leadership of one Eleazar ben Ya'ir, the Sicarii continued their resistance against the Romans until 73 AD, using Masada as their base of operations. The topography of Masada is such, that it was nearly impenetrable, with only three narrow, well-guarded paths leading to the summit of the steep plateau. The plateau is surrounded by sheer cliff walls which range from three hundred to one thousand three hundred feet in height, which would make any Roman assault extremely difficult. Add to that the fortifications which had been added by Herod, then by the Romans, and finally by

the Zealots themselves, and Masada seemed impregnable; or at least so the Sicarii thought.

However, Lucius Flavius Silva -- who was the Roman governor of Judea, or Iudaea, at that time -- wasn't about to accept defeat by Eleazar ben Ya'ir and his rebels atop Masada. So, over a period of several months, Silva built a wall around the entire perimeter of the plateau -- so that no one could escape -- and laid siege against Masada, while a 375-foot high assault ramp was constructed out of thousands of tons of rock and earth. This assault ramp extended from a rocky outcropping that was located on the west side of the plateau near Herod's old palace, to the fortress wall. Once the ramp had been completed, the Romans used a combination of engines -- that is, mechanical devices, an iron-encased tower and a great battering ram -- to try to break down the twelve-foot wall.

According to Josephus' account of these events in "The Wars of the Jews", upon breaking through the outer perimeter wall, the Romans discovered that the Sicarii had been forced to hastily build a second inner wall due to the outer wall being partially destroyed by the battering ram. This inner wall had been built in such a manner, that it absorbed the shock from the battering ram. Realizing this, Flavius Silva then ordered that the inner wall be set on fire using torches, being as it was primarily made out of wood. Josephus then informs us that a strong north wind began to blow which resulted in the fire threatening to destroy the Romans' war engines. However, the wind suddenly changed direction "as if it were done by Divine Providence, and blew strongly the contrary way, and carried the flame, and drove it against the wall, which was now on fire through its entire thickness."

Confident that Masada would fall into their hands the next day, the Romans retired for the night, while keeping a close watch on the burning wall to make sure that none of the Jews would try to escape. Josephus assures the reader that these events occurred by the will of God when he writes the following:

----- Begin Quote -----

"So the Romans, having now assistance from God, returned to their camp with joy, and resolved to attack their enemies the very next day; on which occasion they set their watch more carefully that night, lest any of the Jews should run

away from them without being discovered."

----- End Quote -----

It is because of statements like these, that some scholars question Josephus' loyalties. In fact, his account of his personal life has also come under the suspicion of certain historians who question how it is that he, being a Jew who according to his own account was a firsthand witness of the destruction of Jerusalem, not only escaped the wrath of the Romans during that time, but in fact likewise lived out the remainder of his life with ease in Rome. So it would seem that while Josephus may have been Jewish by birth, in his heart he may have been more a Roman than a Jew, similar to many other individuals of the Jewish aristocracy who took their orders from Rome. The Herodians and the high priests obviously come to mind.

If this is indeed the case, then the possibility exists that Josephus may have knowingly yielded to political correctness, in order to appease and flatter his Roman hosts. In other words, in his various works, he may have intentionally made the Zealots and the Sicarii look far worse than they really were, while at the same time making the Romans appear much better than they actually were.

Of course, there's another possible explanation for Josephus' description of the events surrounding the fall of Masada as being ordained by God; and that is that the Zealots -- and their counterparts the Sicarii -- were so violent, ungodly and evil, that in Josephus' eyes, they were simply receiving their just reward from God. In reading the various works of Josephus, it becomes readily apparent that he felt absolutely no sympathy for the Zealots, the Sicariis, or their leaders, such as John of Giscala, Simon bar Giora, Eleazar ben Ya'ir, or any of the other notable thugs who were involved in their heresies and vile and violent acts against their own people. Whether Josephus was reacting out of his own respect for the Laws of God, or simply his sense of Roman civility is hard to determine. Perhaps it was a combination of both.

At any rate, returning to the fall of Masada, if you are a Roman history buff, then you will already know that what Flavius Silva and his Roman army assumed would happen the next day, is by no means what actually occurred. Realizing that there was no longer any recourse for their survival, Josephus relates that Eleazar ben Ya'ir then proceeded to

give a short speech to his closest companions in Masada, in which he explained to them why he believed that the best course of action to pursue, was to take their own lives, to die still living in freedom, and to not allow the Romans to experience the taste of victory over their defeat. What is so remarkable about Eleazar's speech -- assuming that it is indeed accurate -- is that he recognized how misguided they had become by placing their faith in the impregnable nature of Masada to save them from the Romans, instead of in God.

As you may recall, and as I explain in other articles, King David made a similar mistake in 1 Chronicles 21 when he too placed his faith in the arm of the flesh, instead of in God. Against the sound advice of his general, Joab, David took a census in order to determine the size and strength of the armies of Israel, as we see by the following Bible verses:

"And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it. And Joab answered, The LORD make his people an hundred times so many more as they be: but, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? why then doth my lord require this thing? why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel? Nevertheless the king's word prevailed against Joab. Wherefore Joab departed, and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem. And Joab gave the sum of the number of the people unto David. And all they of Israel were a thousand thousand and an hundred thousand men that drew sword: and Judah was four hundred threescore and ten thousand men that drew sword."

1 Chronicles 21:1-5, KJV

It just so happens that this is the very first place in the Old Testament of the King James Version of the Bible where the name Satan is mentioned. At any rate, David's actions greatly displeased the Lord. As a result, God gave David a choice of punishment, where upon the Lord sent a pestilence into Israel, and seventy thousand men were smitten. What is interesting is that in the Psalms we discover the following verses which suggest that David did learn his lesson:

"Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God."

Psalms 20:7, KJV

"It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes."

Psalms 118:8-9, KJV

In the case of the Sicarii leader Eleazar ben Ya'ir, it was only after God had stripped away everything else, and all hope had been lost, that he finally recognized that it was because of their sins against God, that the Lord Himself had turned against them, allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed, and now -- by allowing the fire to destroy the wall -- was about to cause their destruction as well. While Eleazar's speech is somewhat lengthy, following is Josephus' version of the same for your consideration:

----- Begin Quote -----

"Since we, long ago, my generous friends, 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. And let us not at this time bring a reproach upon ourselves for self-contradiction, while we formerly would not undergo slavery, though it were then without danger, but must now, together with slavery, choose such punishments also, as are intolerable: I mean this upon the supposition that the Romans once reduce us under their power while we are alive. We were the very first that revolted from them, and we are the last that fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favour that God hath granted us that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom, which hath not been the case of others, who were conquered unexpectedly. It is very plain that we shall be taken within a day's time, but it is still an eligible thing to die after a glorious manner, together with our dearest friends. This is what our enemies themselves cannot by any means hinder, although they be very desirous to take us alive. Nor can we propose to ourselves any more to fight them, and beat them. It had been proper indeed for us to have conjectured at the purpose of God much sooner, at the very first, when we were so desirous of defending our liberties, and when we received such sore treatment from one another, and worse treatment from our enemies, and to have been sensible that the same God, who had of old taken the Jewish nation into his favour, had now condemned them to destruction; for had he either continued favourable, or been but in a lesser degree displeased with

us, he had not overlooked the destruction of so many men, or delivered his most holy city to be burnt and demolished by our enemies. To be sure we weakly hoped to have preserved ourselves, and ourselves alone, still in a state of freedom, as if we had been guilty of no sins ourselves against God, nor been partners with those of others: we also taught other men to preserve their liberty. Wherefore, consider how God hath convinced us that our hopes were in vain, by bringing such distress upon us in the desperate state we are now in, and which is beyond all our expectations; for the nature of this fortress, which was in itself unconquerable, hath not proved a means of our deliverance; and even while we have still great abundance of food, and a great quantity of arms, and other necessaries more than we want, we are openly deprived by God himself of all hope of deliverance; for that fire which was driven upon our enemies, did not of its own accord turn back upon the wall which we had built: this was the effect of God's anger against us for our manifold sins, which we have been guilty of in a most insolent and extravagant manner with regard to our own countrymen; the punishments of which let us not receive from the Romans, but from God himself, as executed by our own hands; for these will be more moderate than the other. Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery: and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually, and preserve ourselves in freedom, as an excellent funeral monument for us. But first let us destroy our money and the fortress by fire; for I am well assured that this would be a great grief to the Romans, that they shall not be able to seize upon our bodies, and shall fail of our wealth also: and let us spare nothing but our provisions; for they will be a testimonial when we are dead, that we were not subdued for want of necessaries, but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery."

----- End Quote -----

Not everyone immediately agreed with Eleazar's proposal of committing mass suicide. According to Josephus, there were those who were less manly -- or "effeminate" as Josephus called them -- who dissented with Eleazar's plan; not as it were vocally, but rather by the tears which filled their eyes. Concerned that the fear in their eyes might spread to others who were present, Eleazar began to speak forcefully, and at great length, and expounded upon the immortality of

the soul, death being God's apparent fate for all the Jews, and the weakness of cowardice. As Josephus explains, even before Eleazar had completed his speech, everyone present became so convinced of the wisdom of his words, that in order to demonstrate their courage, they began to carry out the evil work, as if they were moved by a demonic fury. As I read the following, taken from Book VII Chapter 9 of "The Wars of the Jews", it made me shudder, even though it was written over nineteen hundred years ago:

----- Begin Quote -----

"Now as Eleazar was proceeding on this exhortation, they all cut him off short, and made haste to do the work, as full of an unconquerable ardour of mind, and moved with a demoniacal fury. So they went their ways, as one still endeavouring 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 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. Nor was there at length any one of these men found that scrupled to act their part in this terrible execution, but every one of them despatched his dearest relations. Miserable men indeed were they! whose distress forced them to slay their own wives and children with their own hands, as the lightest of those evils that were before them. So they being not able to bear the grief they were under for what they had done any longer, and esteeming it an injury to those they had slain, to live even the shortest space of time after them, they presently laid all they had upon a heap, and set fire to it. They then chose ten men by lot out of them, to slay all

the rest: every one of whom laid himself down by his wife and children on the ground, and threw his arms about them, and they offered their necks to the stroke of those who by lot executed that melancholy office: and when these ten had, without fear, slain them all, they made the same rule for casting lots for themselves, that he whose lot it was should first kill the other nine, and after all should kill himself. Accordingly, all these had courage sufficient to be no way behind one another in doing or suffering; so, for a conclusion, the nine offered their necks to the executioner, and he who was the last of all took a view of all the other bodies, lest perchance some or other among so many that were slain should want his assistance to be quite despatched, and when he perceived that they were all slain, he set fire to the palace, and with the great force of his hand ran his sword entirely through himself, and fell down dead near to his own relations. So these people died with this intention, that they would leave not so much as one soul among them all alive to be subject to the Romans.

----- End Quote -----

At this point, you may possibly be wondering how it is that Flavius Josephus even became aware of the specifics of the horrific events that took place at Masada, when he was not an eyewitness to them himself. Well as it turns out, in the closing paragraphs of the ninth chapter of Book VII of his "The Wars of the Jews", there is found the following words:

----- Begin Quote -----

Yet was there an ancient woman, and another who was of kin to Eleazar, and superior to most women in prudence and learning, with five children who had concealed themselves in caverns under ground, and had carried water thither for their drink, and were hidden there when the rest were intent upon the slaughter of one another. Those others were nine hundred and sixty in number, the women and children being withal included in that computation. This calamitous slaughter was made on the fifteenth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan.]

----- End Quote -----

According to the writings of Josephus, upon breaking through the burned inner wall the following morning, the Romans were utterly shocked to discover that rather than surrender, the vast majority of the Sicarii, who numbered nine hundred and

sixty persons, had committed suicide. In the final paragraph of Book VII Chapter 9, Josephus writes as follows:

----- Begin Quote -----

"Now for the Romans, they expected that they should be fought in the morning, when accordingly they put on their armour and laid bridges of planks upon their ladders from their banks, to make an assault upon the fortress, which they did; but saw nobody as an enemy, but a terrible solitude on every side, with a fire within the palace, as well as a perfect silence. So they were at a loss to guess at what had happened. At length they made a shout, as if it had been at a blow given by the battering ram, to try whether they could bring any one out that was within; the women heard this noise, and came out of their underground cavern, and informed the Romans what had been done, as it was done, and the second of them clearly described all, both what was said and what was done, and the manner of it; yet did they not easily give their attention to such a desperate undertaking, and did not believe it could be as they said; they also attempted to put the fire out, and quickly cutting themselves a way through it, they came within the palace, and so met with the multitude of the slain, but could take no pleasure in the fact, though it were done to their enemies. Nor could they do other than wonder at the courage of their resolution, and the immovable contempt of death which so great a number of them had shown, when they went through with such an action as that was."

----- End Quote -----

And that, my dear friends, is the tragic story concerning the fortress of Masada. With the conquest of Masada, the last Jewish stronghold within Israel -- or Palestina -- was finally brought under Roman control. However, please note that it was not the complete end of the Sicarii just yet. As Josephus informs us at the beginning of chapter ten, rather than face death in Jerusalem, some of them had in fact fled to Alexandria, Egypt. However, their attempt to raise up new trouble for the Romans had very limited success before the Jewish leadership in Alexandria exposed their evil plot.

You may find it interesting to know that the actual assault ramp which Lucius Flavius Silva and his soldiers used to reach the top of the Masada plateau is still in existence today. Furthermore, Masada is a popular tourist attraction in Israel.

On a related note, I recall watching an excellent television mini-series concerning these historic events several decades ago. Entitled "Masada", it starred famed British actor Peter O'Toole as Lucius Flavius Silva, and Peter Strauss in the role of Eleazar ben Ya'ir. You may find it enjoyable, as I did.

With these thoughts, I will bring this article to a close. It is my hope that you've found it informative and enlightening, and I pray that it has been a blessing in your life as well. If you have an account with Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr or with any other social network, I would really appreciate if you'd take the time to click or tap on the corresponding link that is found on this page. Thanks so much, and may God bless you abundantly!

For additional information and further study, you may want to refer to the list of reading resources below which were either mentioned in this article, or which contain topics which are related to this article. All of these articles are likewise located on the Bill's Bible Basics web server. To read these articles, simply click or tap on any link you see below.

Abomination of Desolation: Explained!
Are You Flexible?
Fight Against Futurism!
He That Shall Endure Unto the End
Humility in Our Understanding of God's Word
In the Ages to Come
Jesus Christ's Return: Have We Been Deceived?
My Evolving Theology
Please Stop Misinterpreting the Scriptures
The Day of the Lord: What It Really Means
The Last Seven Years Chart
Understanding the Bible in Context
Who is Babylon the Great

Written by Bill Kochman

wordweaver777@gmail.com

<https://www.billkochman.com>