

# **The Jewish War (AD 66-70 AD) And Israel's Future**

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For over a century the Jewish People had suffered the humiliation of subjugation to Rome. Entering Jerusalem in 63 BC, the triumphant Roman General Pompey had even dared to enter the Holy Temple, initiating a period of defilement for the sacred structure under Roman rule, which intensified the loss of independence by the Jewish Nation. Nevertheless, while the Temple stood and a Jewish King ruled as symbols of the former independence, future independence remained a hope. Therefore, as the century came to a close, rising messianic expectation combined with nationalistic aspiration and conflicting political ambition among the Jewish religious sects. From Rome's perspective, its continued toleration of Jewish religion was an insufferable autonomy, yet a justifiable compromise needed to keep Jewish nationalism in check. However, once religious ideals tempted Jews to express themselves in nationalistic terms, Roman intervention was assured.

In AD 44, the death of the Jewish King Agrippa placed the whole of the country under direct Roman rule, removing one of the illusions of independence. Mounting Roman oppression, the siding of Roman authorities with the non-Jewish element in the Land, and repeated violations of the Temple's sanctity, created the atmosphere for revolt. In April of AD 66, when the Roman governor confiscated seventeen talents from the Temple treasury, Jewish nationalists staged a revolt, seizing the Temple, stopping the daily sacrifices in tribute of the Roman emperor, and capturing the stronghold of Masada.

The Great War, or First Jewish Revolt, was unique in the history of the region, since the Jews were the only people in the ancient Near East to launch a revolution on such a scale against the Roman Empire. Unique also is the fact that no other ancient conflict has been preserved in so complete detail by an eyewitness. This historian and eyewitness was the first-century Jew Yosef ben Mattityahu, better known as Josephus Flavius. Josephus was a former Pharisee and commander of Jewish nationalist forces in the Galilee. Another important account is that of the Roman historian Dio Cassius, who based his chronicle of events on official military records.

In response to the Jewish insurrection, which was staged primarily in Jerusalem, Rome's leading commander Vespasian was dispatched to quell the uprising with four legions comprising some 50,000 soldiers. Vespasian's plan of attack began in northern Israel, which unlike Jerusalem, offered little resistance to his legions. One example was the Galilean fortress of Jotapata defended by the forces under Josephus. The Jewish families at the fortress committed suicide rather than surrender and Josephus turned to the Roman side. One exception was the city of Gamla in the Golan Heights which in the fall of AD 67 attempted to prevent the Roman advance toward the Holy City. However, the Roman legions decimated the city, slaughtering some 4,000 Jews. Rather than allow their families to fall to Roman savagery, some 5,000 Jews took their own lives, plunging

off the nearby cliffs to their deaths. This heroic stand, in comparison with the final Jewish resistance at the southern stronghold of Masada (AD 73), later earned the site the title: "The Masada of the North."

By the summer of AD 70, Vespasian's Tenth Legion had made its way to Jerusalem and placed the city under siege. Because of the influx of refugees from other Jewish cities destroyed by the Romans, as well as the Judean population fleeing in advance of the legions, the city's population had increased to at least three times its normal size. Jerusalem's reputation as one of the largest cities of the ancient world and as impregnable, made it a significant challenge to the already wearied Roman soldiers. However, its role as the center of political and spiritual authority and as the center of the Jewish Revolt, required it to be the foremost example of Roman punishment.

At the time of the Roman siege, two of the most militant factions among the Jewish nationalists, the Zealots and the Sicarii, had gained control of the Temple Mount. This had been accomplished with the aid of Idumean mercenaries (descendants of the Edomites) who had ruthlessly killed the more moderate Sadducaic and Pharisaic elements in charge. The aim of the militant factions from the beginning had been to crush the Roman occupation of Israel and drive the Romans from the Land. Now that the war had come to the Holy City, they were determined to fulfill their purpose or perish. To assure that the Jewish populations of the city would not flee but fight to the death, the Zealots destroyed the storehouses of food, while proclaiming the divine inviolability of Jerusalem. Since the only way out of the city was in a coffin, a leader of the Pharisaic sect, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, escaped by hiding in one and surrendering himself to Vespasian. Upon being delivered to the general, he addressed him as emperor, stating that God would only allow a great ruler to capture His city. According to tradition, a messenger from Rome arrived at this very minute announcing to Vespasian that the emperor had died and he had been crowned as his successor. Impressed by the rabbi's prophecy, the new emperor permitted him to safeguard the Torah scroll and its Sages in the city of Yavneh. Thus, while the Temple was destroyed, the Torah was not, and though Jerusalem was spoiled, Judaism was spared.

Vespasian returned to Rome to assume his duties as emperor, giving his son Titus in command of the Tenth Legion the charge of completing Jerusalem's submission. Despite the famine inside the walls of the city, Jews celebrated a last Passover with their Temple and prepared for the Roman attack. It came days later with a catapult barrage that continued for two months until the Romans finally breached the walls. Proceeding house by house, the Romans set fire to the city, slaughtering every Jew in their wake. One archaeological testimony to the fierceness of the fighting is the "Burnt House" within the present Jewish Quarter. Here can be seen the debris of one of the houses destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, with the remains of a woman holding a spear, lying on the doorstep where she was felled in the attack.

Though weakened by hunger, the Jewish defenders held back the Roman assault from the Temple Mount for some three weeks. Then, on the Ninth of the Jewish month of Av (our August), the Roman invaders reached the Second Temple compound. This was, providentially, the very day the First Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians 656 years earlier. Dio Cassius describes the final opposition of the Jews

nestled around the sacred precinct: "The populace was stationed below in the court and the elders on the steps and the priests in the Sanctuary itself. And though they were but a handful fighting against a far superior force, they were not conquered until part of the Temple was set on fire. Then they met their death willingly, some throwing themselves on the swords of the Romans, some slaying one another, others taking their own lives and still others leaping into the flames. And it seemed to everybody and especially to them that so far from being destruction, it was victory and salvation and happiness to them that they perished along with the Temple."

The Romans next plundered the Temple, taking out every item of value. After the destruction, these Temple treasures were displayed in Rome during a victory procession and carried by thousands of Jewish slaves. The image of this event remains to this day in the Roman Forum etched in one of the reliefs on the monument known as the Arch of Titus' Triumph. Once the Temple was ignited, the Romans chopped down the trees in the area to form a huge bonfire around the structure. This caused the moisture in the limestone blocks that comprised the Temple to expand and blow the stones apart, collapsing the Temple in a single day.

Why was the Temple destroyed? Josephus notes that it was against the specific orders of Titus who wished to preserve the Sanctuary. Indeed, Roman policy was to keep a conquered people's temples under Roman control and grant a resumption of its services as an act of clemency when proper submission was restored. Some scholars believe that the Roman soldiers, half-crazed because of the length of Jewish resistance and the desire to plunder the wealth of the Temple, deliberately set it ablaze. Some Jewish sources claim that it was accidental when a soldier's torch caught the curtains of the Sanctuary on fire. I remember, however, when my class on the Second Temple at Hebrew University argued these options they found no theory satisfactory. Turning to our Orthodox professor, Isaiah Gafni, to solve our quandary the class asked what he thought. With a pause, and then a smile, he said, "Maybe Jesus was right!" I never knew if this was a rabbinic debate tactic or an unconscious flash of inspiration, but it effectively ended any further questions!

The rabbis had declared that the reason for the Temple's destruction was *sinat chinam*, "senseless hatred" among Jews. According to this idea, the fierce rivalry between the Jewish sects erupted in a "civil war," dividing Jews, angering God, and making the Nation liable to both divine judgment and susceptible to the Roman onslaught. Yet, if Professor Gafni's supposition is considered, the "senseless hatred" of *one* Jew, namely Jesus of Nazareth, divided Jews, angered God, and brought about the prescribed covenantal curse: "I will also bring upon you a sword which will execute vengeance for the covenant; and when you gather into your cities, I will send pestilence among you, so that you shall be delivered into enemy hands ... I will lay waste to your cities as well; and make your sanctuaries desolate ... and scatter you among the nations ..." (Lev. 26:25, 31, 33). This is, in fact, what Jesus stated as the principal cause of Jerusalem's destruction in Luke 19:43-44: "For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you,

and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation (cf. Matt. 23:37-38; Acts 3:13-15).

The national rejection of Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah served, along with many other internal factors, as the climatic act that brought divine judgment. While this judgment ended the institution of the Temple and forced a reformulation of Judaism, it did not end the Jewish People nor the unconditional covenantal promises of national restoration and blessing through Messiah in the future. Jesus had included this hope even in His prophetic pronouncement against Jerusalem and the Temple in Matthew 23:38-39: "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord!'" The Apostle Paul, basing his teaching on the prophecies of Isaiah, taught that this day of Jewish national repentance will one day arrive with the return of Jesus to Jerusalem: "And thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob, And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.'" (Rom. 11:26-27).

The call for this repentance toward Jesus as Messiah has come from pious Jews even before the Temple's destruction and continues still today. The Apostle Peter, who issued this call in Second Temple times, reminds us that the hope of Israel's restoration rests on Israel's repentance: "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Messiah appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things ..." (Acts 3:19-21). When any Jew, and ultimately the Jewish Nation, answers this call, the disaster of the Great War will be turned to the deliverance of the Great Redemption.