

Dartmouth Bible Notes

Notes From the Pulpit Ministry of Dartmouth Bible Church

Series: Masada (2 of 2)

Scripture: various

Speaker: Rev. Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.

Date: March 2nd, 2003 [evening]



Spiritual Lessons from Masada

Introduction The ancient fortress of Masada is located near the western shore of the Dead Sea about ten miles south of the town of En-gedi. Situated on top of a cliff rising over 1,200 feet above the surrounding desert, the fortress was originally constructed during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE) and later extensively expanded under Herod the Great (37–4 BCE), who added two luxurious palaces (one over 13,000 ft²), a Roman bathhouse, twelve huge cisterns, and a

number of other structures. (Elaborately built, the large bathhouse probably served the guests and senior officials of Masada. It consisted of a large courtyard surrounded by porticos and several rooms, all with mosaic or tiled floors and some with frescoed walls. The largest of the rooms was the hot room (*caldarium*). Its suspended floor was supported by rows of low pillars, making it possible to blow hot air from the furnace outside, under the floor and through clay pipes along the walls, to heat the room to the desired temperature.)

Fortress of Masada



Overall, Masada is a fascinating study in first century archeology and the finds which have been discovered there are truly amazing. In the time of the Jewish revolt (66-73 A.D.) the billeted Roman garrison was destroyed and the fortress was re-occupied by the Zealots. In fact, the Zealots had been in revolt against the Romans since the year 6.

The only written source about Masada is Josephus Flavius' *The Jewish War*. Born Joseph ben Matityahu of a priestly family, he was a young leader at the outbreak of the Great Jewish Rebellion against Rome (66 CE) when he was appointed governor of Galilee. He managed to survive the suicide pact of the last defenders of Jodfat and surrendered to Vespasian (who shortly thereafter was proclaimed emperor) – events he described in detail. Calling himself Josephus Flavius, he became a Roman citizen and a successful historian. Moral judgment aside, his accounts have been proved largely accurate.

In 72 and 73 A.D. their number had grown to over 900, including some Essenes from Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls)—recently overrun by the Romans. A ruthless conqueror, Rome would not tolerate even the smallest insurrection to continue. General Flavius Silva and his 10th Legion (perhaps as many as 10,000 troops and at least 6,000) were told to destroy the fortress. When they arrived they discovered there was no way up to the fortress save by traversing a narrow “snakepath,” exposing themselves to archery enfilades, catapult bombardment (ammunition has been unearthed, intact, neatly piled on Masada’s summit), and other forms of defense, any climber becoming an easy target. Their several siege encampments still exist. Ever vigilant in their determination to dominate, the Romans set about plotting how to defeat the Zealots in their seemingly impregnable mountaintop fortress. Herod had brilliantly fortified it. In their favor, the Romans had time, a plentitude of supplies (save water), battlefield momentum, overwhelming numbers of soldiers and unlimited slave labor. In the Zealots’ favor was a plentitude of water (the Romans had to resort to severe rationing), defensive advantage, religious purpose and *esprit de corps* and the will to protect their own families who were with them on the mountain. They were also led well and courageously by Elazar ben Yair. But alas, Silva’s engineer devised a plan to construct a massive earthen ramp up the west side of the mountain using slave labor at their disposal. The ramp remains to this day! When this was completed they planned to place in position a giant siege tower and shower the wooden gates with fire. The whole plan took seven months, according to the historian Josephus (himself a former Zealot commander from Galilee). Once it became apparent that the Tenth Legion’s battering rams and catapults would soon succeed in breaching Masada’s walls, Elazar ben Yair, the Zealots’ leader, decided that all the Jewish defenders should commit suicide. Because Jewish law strictly forbids suicide, this decision sounds more shocking today than it probably did to his compatriots. There was nothing of Jonestown in the suicide pact carried out at Masada. The alternative facing the fortress’s defenders were hardly more attractive than death. Once the Romans defeated them, the men could expect to be sold off as slaves, the women as slaves and prostitutes.

Ironically, the little information we have about the final hours of Masada comes from a man whom the Jews there considered a traitor and happily would have killed: Flavius Josephus. When he wrote the history of the Jewish revolt against Rome, he included an extensive, largely sympathetic section on Masada’s fall. According to Josephus, *two women and five children* managed to hide themselves during the mass suicide, and it was from one of these women that he heard an account of Elazar ben Yair’s final speech (their subsequent fate is unknown.) Josephus probably added some rhetorical flourishes of his own, but Elazar’s speech clearly was a masterful oration:

"Since we long ago resolved," Elazar began, "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.... We were the very first that revolted [against Rome], and we are the last that fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom."

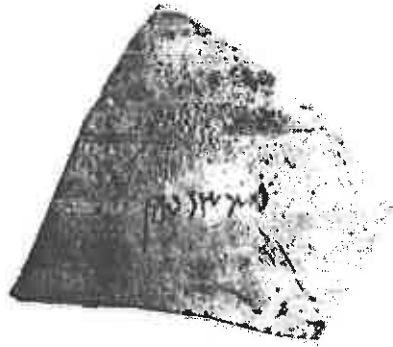
Even at this late juncture, Elazar could not accept that the main reason the revolt had failed was because Rome's army was vastly superior. Instead, he dwelt on his belief that the Lord had turned against the Jewish people. Finally, he came to an inescapable conclusion: "Let our wives die before they 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." Elazar ordered that all the Jews' possessions except food be destroyed, for "[the food] will be a testimonial when we are dead that we were not subdued for want of necessities; but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery." After this oration, the men killed their wives and children, and then each other.

Masada was first systematically excavated between 1963 and 1965 by a team under the direction of Yigael Yadin. The excavations uncovered evidence of occupation from the time of Jannaeus through the Byzantine era, including a period of habitation by the Jewish rebels. During the first season of excavation, a structure that Yadin subsequently identified as a synagogue was uncovered in the northwestern section of the upper plateau of the fortress. Built into the casemate wall that circles the plateau, the rectangular building measures 15 x 12 meters and was constructed in two distinct phases.

The first phase, dated to the period of Herod, was possibly used as a stable. Upon occupying the fortress, the rebels transformed the building into a synagogue, adding benches along the walls, with columns intervening between the seating and the center of the hall--a configuration characteristic of the Galilean-type synagogue. Fragments of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel scrolls were discovered in a back room, which appears to have been the temporary residence of an attendant, quite possibly a priest. During the Jewish War of 66-73 CE, however, the Jewish rebels transformed it, adding tiers of benches for the congregation and a backroom for the synagogue attendant. Ehud Netzer, one of the excavators, estimates that structure could accommodate 250 persons.

An ostrakon (pottery sherd) found in the synagogue near the attendant's room. Written in Hebrew, it bears the words "priest's tithe" (*m'shr chn*). Yadin

thought this may have been part of a jar bearing a tithe for the synagogue attendant, a priest.¹



When you visit Masada today, there is an unmistakable solemnity to the place, possessing a legendary status in Israeli mentality. Every Israeli soldier must climb Masada on foot at the conclusion of their basic training and take an oath there: "Masada shall not fall again."

SPIRITUAL LESSONS:

1. There is one "true and just God of mankind" (according to Elazar ben Yair.) The 960 who died did not doubt this, even though faced with death. They did not doubt His justice as is sometimes questioned by people in far less costly environs.
2. Even in tragedy, the goodness of God can be seen. As Elazar said, "I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely." God remains gracious and caring even when hard circumstances dictate a forfeiture of freedom or life. Though Israel was sadly dying, the body of Christ, the church –universal was taking up the torch and growing strong.
3. While not specifically a fruit of the Spirit, valor is a high and valuable virtue. Too infrequently today do men commit to a noble cause at risk of deprivation, life and family. Courage should be honored among us and taught to our children. When it comes to standing up for our faith, we should always practice courage and fearless heroism.
4. With real faith, fear is overcome. We know very little about the Zealots themselves other than what Josephus wrote. But clearly their fear did not

¹ Donald D. Binder, "Masada." <<http://faculty.smu.edu/dbinder/masada.html>> [accessed: 3/1/2003]

overcome these 960 Jews. Testimonies abound of this same quality of bravery among Holocaust-surviving Jews and Christians (i.e. Corrie Ten Boom).

5. Even architectural magnificence and a “fortress mentality” do not guarantee safety. Ultimately the person of faith takes refuge in the ancient promises of God and in His providence. It remains true today—we must not think that because our country is the strongest superpower on earth, that our ultimate security lies in our own strength—in our “fortresses”—“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord!”

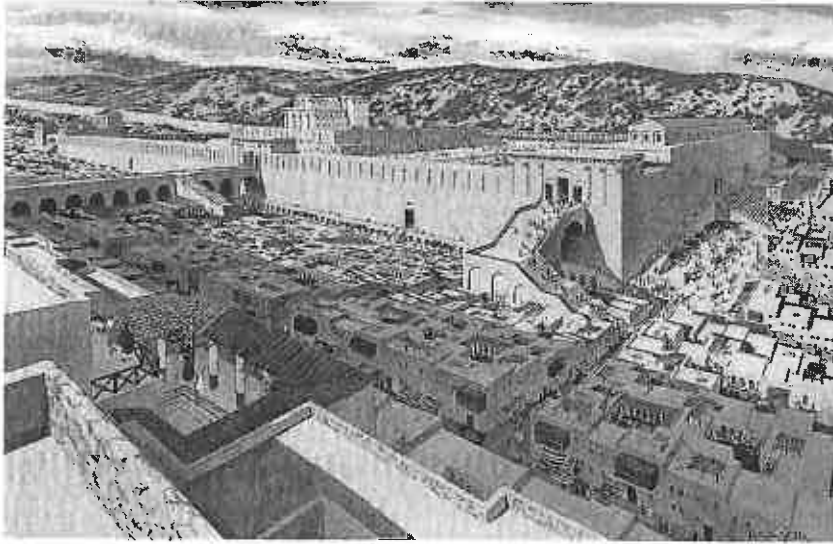
Micah 7:16 Nations will see and be ashamed of all their might. They will put *their* hand on *their* mouth, their ears will be deaf. 17 They will lick the dust like a serpent, like reptiles of the earth. They will come trembling out of their **fortresses**; To the LORD our God they will come in dread, and they will be afraid before Thee. 18 Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. 19 He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea.

6. Despite the destruction of Israel their survival testifies to God’s faithfulness to them. Two millennia later, their remains a world-wide presence of the Jews. Even though many kings and dictators have tried to exterminate them they survive. Christians interpret, from Romans 9-11, the demise of Judaism as a dispensational feature in God’s grand plan of redemption. Many scholars believe a time of re-awakening for the nation of Israel is yet to come and that there is still a place in eschatology for the Jews. Sometimes the “safety” of our movement too may suffer severe setbacks but that does not mean that God has abandoned His people.

7. Sometimes Christians are not the biggest news item nor do they have to be. We say this in reaction to today’s superstar mentality about Christians and Christian leaders, and our propensity to “canonize” certain Christian media-giants. In the time of Masada’s fall, Paul and Peter were only recently martyred and Christianity was spreading like wildfire. New churches and Christian communities were popping up all over the empire. And yet, the biggest news was the Jewish Revolt. Judaism was receiving a dispensation of “parenthesis,” even as Christianity was just getting started. The Zealots’ persecution would be mirrored by Christians soon enough—indeed, Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome only nine years before and many Christians there died—simply considered a cultic variation of Judaism. Christians endured waves of persecution for three centuries, replacing the Jews as a target of hatred.

8. Despite the destruction of the capital city and the Temple, the kingdom continues... Herod’s palace and the little synagogue on Masada were no rival to

his places elsewhere and the Jerusalem Temple. But when Masada fell, the last localized symbols of “the people of God” were no more. However, as bad as it was their defeat was physical and political only. It must have been unimaginably



grievous to know the Temple was gone. But their *faith* was not gone. How many times did the Lord say, “I do not dwell in a house made by human hands”? Even a human king among them was not the Lord’s perfect plan for His people. In the end, it is God who is the king. And His kingdom cannot be breeched! It is interesting that in Jesus’ last conversation with a Roman authority (Pilate) He said...

John 18:36 Jesus answered, “**My kingdom is not of this world.** If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”³⁷ Pilate therefore said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

9. If you were “under siege,” would you be willing to kill your enemy? This is a difficult question because for us, here, tonight, we are safe and have been in living memory. But if we were in real danger, and cornered, with our families, how would we respond? Would we be passive, submissive and surrendering to certain abuse and enslavement? With all our American talk of liberty and the rights of self-government, would we fight and kill to defend it?

10. If you were “under siege,” would you be willing to die rather than become enslaved? This is even harder to imagine but Christians today in other countries live with this fear. Would you rather be dead, and is it OK to select death, rather than to become enslaved. What about children? Is life itself sacred, even enslaved life, and should it not be forfeited?

11. A forced simple lifestyle gives opportunity for spiritual focus. In their final months the Zealots’ lives were simplified completely—food preparation, hygiene, battle preparations, worship. That was pretty much it. There was

nowhere to go and nothing to do except to work hard at staying alive. Surely they turned often to the REASON for their resistance—their faith. If there were Essenes among them they would surely have become mentors, spiritually.

12. The synagogue and mikvah: Worshipping together, in times of attack, can increase one's appreciation for worship. Although there are many interesting questions we might have about how the Zealots used their synagogue and mikvah (ritual bath—in 1966, the oldest yet to be uncovered from the Second Temple period), their existence and the evidence that the Zealots used them, demonstrate that they had not lost their enthusiasm for worship. They had no Temple any more and probably only a priest or two, but they had the Scriptures and they had each other. Ultimately, that is all that is needed for corporate worship.



13. Commitment is not necessarily proportional to comfort and beauty (surroundings). As the 960 closed their eyes in death, they saw only the faces of their loved ones. There was no Temple, no Jerusalem, no anesthesia and no pain-abatement medication. But their commitment to each other and to their identity as Jews was at its peak.

14. Even God's people must administrate well—we are stewards of what God gives us. The "storehouses" were an important part of the economy and Nehemiah, at least, insisted that resources should be stockpiled for later use.

Masada Storehouses



Nehemiah 13:11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts.¹² All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the **storehouses**.¹³ And in charge of the **storehouses** I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen.¹⁴ Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

Addendum:

The Wars of the Jews, Book 7 from The Works of Josephus, translated by William Whiston
Hendrickson Publishers, 1987

CHAPTER 9

1. (389) Now as Eleazar was proceeding on in his exhortations, they all cut him off short, and made haste to do the work, as full of an unconquerable ardor of mind, and moved with a demoniacal fury. So they went their ways, as one still endeavoring 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! (390) 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; (391) 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. (392) 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. (393) 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 dispatched 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. (394) 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 in a heap, and set fire to it. (395) 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; (396) 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; (397) 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 dispatched; and when he perceived that they were all slain, he set fire to the palace, and with the great force of his hands ran his sword entirely through himself, and fell down dead near to his own relations. (398) 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. (399) **Yet there was 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.** (400) Those others were nine hundred and sixty in number, the women and children being withal included in that computation. (401) This calamitous slaughter was made on the fifteenth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan].

2. (402) Now for the Romans, they expected that they should be fought in the morning,

when accordingly they put on their armor, and laid bridges of planks upon their ladders from their banks, to make an assault upon the fortress, which they did, (403) but saw nobody as an enemy, but a terrible solitude on every side, with a fire within the place 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 anyone out that was within; (404) 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: (405) yet they did 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, (406) 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.