

THE JEWISH WAR AGAINST ROME WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT “THE END” OF THE JEWISH TEMPLE

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city; because these are days of vengeance, so that all things which are written will be fulfilled. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people; and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Luke 21:20-24 (NASB95)

66 [7*27 (TUE/WED 4/5 NOV)] In order to quell Jewish rioting, which had begun almost six months earlier, Legate Cestius of Syria and his reinforced Twelfth Legion established a Roman camp on Mt. Scopus, north of Jerusalem. According to Eusebius (the 4th Century church historian), when the Roman encampment went up, Jewish Christians still in the city, since they had been warned in a prophecy passed down to them that this signified Jerusalem was about to be destroyed, left the city and went to Pella (located about 50 miles NNE of Jerusalem, just east of the Jordan river), so that none of them were killed in what followed¹.

[8*8 (SAT/SUN 15/16 NOV)] In attempting to disengage from the Jewish rebels who were attacking them, Cestius’ forces were nearly wiped out.² Immediately after this event, many other Jews began to abandon Jerusalem just as the Jewish Christians had.

“After this calamity had befallen Cestius, many of the most eminent of the Jews swam away from the city, as from a ship when it was going to sink;”³

[8*?] 10,000 Jews of Damascus, already being detained within the grounds of the public gymnasium, were killed after news about the Twelfth Legion’s near annihilation arrived.⁴

[Later in the 8th Month] The Jewish rebels began mobilizing for war with the Gentile world. Josephus (29 yrs), a priest, a member of the famous Hasmonean line, and who belonged to the Pharisee sect, was designated as the commander of the Galilee region.⁵

¹ “But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come thither from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men.” Eusebius’ History of the Church 3.5.3.

² Wars 2.19.9.

³ Wars 2.20.1.

⁴ Wars 2.20.2.

⁵ Wars 2.20.4.

Summary of Josephus' Preparations

"...as to Josephus, when he came into Galilee, his first care was to gain the good will of the people of that country, as sensible that he should thereby have in general good success, although he should fail in other points. And being conscious to himself that if he communicated part of his power to the great men, he should make them his fast friends; and that he should gain the same favor from the multitude, if he executed his commands by persons of their own country, and with whom they were well acquainted; he chose out seventy of the most prudent men, and those elders in age, and appointed them to be rulers of all Galilee, as he chose seven judges in every city to hear the lesser quarrels; for as to the greater causes, and those wherein life and death were concerned, he enjoined they should be brought to him and the seventy elders.

"Josephus also, when he had settled these rules for determining causes by the law, with regard to the people's dealings one with another, betook himself to make provisions for their safety against external violence; and as he knew the Romans would fall upon Galilee, he built walls in proper places about Jotapata, and Bersabee, and Salamis; and besides these about Caphareccho, and Japha, and Sigo, and what they call Mount Tabor, and Taricheae, and Tiberias. Moreover, he built walls about the caves near the lake of Gennesar, which places lay in the Lower Galilee; the same as he did to the places of Upper Galilee, as well as to the rock called the Rock of the Achabari, and to Seph, and Jamnith, and Meroth; and in Gaulanitis he fortified Seleucia, and Sogane, and Gamale; but as to those of Sepphoris, they were the only people to whom he gave leave to build their own walls, and this, because he perceived they were rich and wealthy, and ready to go to war, without standing in need of any injunctions for that purpose.

"The case was the same with Gischala, which had a wall built about it by John the son of Levi himself, but with the consent of Josephus; but for the building of the rest of the fortresses, he labored together with all the other builders, and was present to give all the necessary orders for that purpose.

"He also got together an army out of Galilee, of more than a hundred thousand young men, all of whom he armed with the old weapons which he had collected together and prepared for them.

"And when he had considered that the Roman power became invincible, chiefly by their readiness in obeying orders, and the constant exercise of their arms, he despaired of teaching these his men the use of their arms, which was to be obtained by experience; but observing that their readiness in obeying orders was owing to the multitude of their officers, he made his partitions in his army more after the Roman manner, and appointed a great many subalterns. He also distributed the soldiers into various classes, whom he put under captains of tens, and captains of thousands; and besides these he had commanders of larger bodies of men.

"He also taught them to give the signals one to another, and to call and recall the soldiers by the trumpets, how to expand the wings of an army, and make them wheel about; and when one wing hath had success, to turn again and assist those that were hard set, and to join in the defense of what had most suffered.

"He also continually instructed them in what concerned the courage of the soul and the hardiness of the body; and, above all, he exercised them for war, by declaring to them distinctly the good order of the Romans, and that they were to fight with men who, both by the strength of their bodies and courage of their souls, had conquered in a manner the whole habitable earth. He told them that he should make trial of the good order they would observe in war, even before it came to any battle, in case they would abstain from the crimes they used to indulge themselves in, such as theft, and robbery, and rapine, and from defrauding their own countrymen, and never to esteem the harm done to those that were so near of kin to them to be any advantage to themselves; for that wars are then managed the best when the warriors preserve a good conscience; but that such as are ill men in private life, will not only have those for enemies which attack them, but God himself also for their antagonist.

"And thus did he continue to admonish them. Now he chose for the war such an army as was sufficient, i.e., sixty thousand footmen, and two hundred and fifty horsemen; and besides these, on which he put the greatest trust, there were about four thousand five hundred mercenaries: he had also six hundred men as guard of his body. Now the cities easily maintained the rest of his army, excepting the mercenaries; for every one of the cities enumerated before sent out half their men to their army, and retained the other half at home, in order to get provisions for them; insomuch that the one part went to the war, and the other part to their work: and so those that sent out their corn were paid for it by those that were in arms, by that security which they enjoyed from them."⁶

⁶ Wars 2.21.

66 [Fall] When Nero (28 yrs) learned of the Jewish uprising, he designated Vespasian (55 yrs), who had accomplished great military victories for Rome in Germany & Britain, to put it down.⁷

66/67 Josephus ran into a lot of trouble with John of Gischala. This Levite constantly plotted against him; first, trying to kill him; then, when that failed, trying to overthrow him with the aid of other Jewish rebels. Eventually Josephus regained control of the Galilee, with John busy preparing his own city for the imminent arrival of the Roman army.⁸

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, the rebels were also busy, rebuilding walls & forging a multitude of weapons. But, according to Josephus, there was already a sense of impending doom hanging over the city.

“Although the multitude of the young men were engaged in exercises, without any regularity, and all places were full of tumultuous doings; yet the moderate sort were exceedingly sad; and a great many there were who, out of the prospects they had of the calamities that were coming upon them, made great lamentations. There were also such omens observed as were understood to be forerunners of evils, by such as loved peace, but were by those that kindled the war interpreted so as to suit their own inclinations; and the very state of the city, even before the Romans came against it, was that of a place doomed to destruction.”⁹

He later detailed some of these “omens,” which probably all took place in AD 66, the year in which the war began.

“Thus were the miserable people persuaded by these deceivers, and such as belied God himself; while they did not attend, nor give credit, to the signs that were so evident and did so plainly foretell their future desolation; but, like men infatuated, without either eyes to see, or minds to consider, did not regard the denunciations that God made to them.

“Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet,¹⁰ that continued a whole year.

“Thus also, before the Jews’ rebellion, and before those commotions which preceded the war, when the people were come in great crowds to the feast of unleavened bread, on the eighth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan], and at the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day time; which light lasted for half an hour. This light seemed to be a good sign to the unskillful, but was so interpreted by the sacred scribes, as to portend those events that followed immediately upon it.

“At the same festival also, a heifer, as she was led by the high priest to be sacrificed, brought forth a lamb in the midst of the temple.

“Moreover, the eastern gate of the inner [court of the] temple, which was of brass, and vastly heavy, and had been with difficulty shut by twenty men, and rested upon a basis armed with iron, and had bolts fastened very deep into the firm floor, which was there made of one entire stone, was seen to be opened of its own accord about the sixth hour of the night. Now, those that kept watch in the temple came hereupon running to the captain of the temple, and told him of it: who then came up thither, and not without great difficulty, was able to shut the gate again. This also appeared to the vulgar to be a very happy prodigy, as if God did thereby open them the gate of happiness. But the men of learning understood it, that the security of their holy house was dissolved of its own accord, and that the gate was opened for the advantage of their enemies. So these publicly declared, that this signal foreshowed the desolation that was coming upon them.

“Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius [Jyar], a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sunsetting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities.

“Moreover at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence.””¹¹

⁷ Wars 3.1.1-2.

⁸ Wars 2.21.

⁹ Wars 2.22.1

¹⁰ Possibly a reference to Halley’s comet.

¹¹ Wars 6.5.3.

66/67 Even as Josephus was having trouble with John of Gischala in the north, the Jewish authorities at Jerusalem were having problems with Simon, son of Gorbas, in the south. This man was using the chaotic condition of Judea as an opportunity to plunder the wealthy inhabitants of the Judean countryside. When the High Priest finally sent an army out against him, he holed up at the Masada fortress.¹²

67 **[Late Winter/Early Spring]** Vespasian arrived in Antioch at the head of his Fifteenth Legion, where he was joined by three client kings - one of whom was Herod Agrippa II (40 yrs) - and their armies. From there he marched to Ptolemais, where he was joined by his son, Titus (27 yrs), who, at his father's command, had brought the Fifth & Tenth Legions with him out of Egypt. These three legions were further reinforced with all sorts of other military elements and auxiliaries. Altogether, Vespasian had command of over 60,000 well-trained military men, plus all the tens of thousands of support personnel needed to keep them a viable fighting force.

[Spring] The leaders of Sepphoris (located about 4 miles north of Nazareth) immediately met with Vespasian as he & his armies gathered at Ptolemais. They pledged their allegiance to Rome & in return, received Roman troops, which very quickly repelled an attempt by Josephus to seize control of this, the largest city in the Galilee.

Josephus, being friends with a Roman military tribune before the war began, was very well acquainted with & very much impressed with the Roman military. As noted earlier, he tried to organize & train his troops in the Roman way.

“Now here one cannot but admire at the precaution of the Romans, in providing themselves of such household servants, as might not only serve at other times for the common offices of life, but might also be of advantage to them in their wars; and indeed, if any one does but attend to the other parts of their military discipline, he will be forced to confess that their obtaining so large a dominion, hath been the acquisition of their valor, and not the bare gift of fortune; for they do not begin to use their weapons first in time of war, nor do they then put their hands first into motion, while they avoided so to do in times of peace; but, as if their weapons did always cling to them, they have never any truce from warlike exercises; nor do they stay till times of war admonish them to use them; for their military exercises differ not at all from the real use of their arms, but every soldier is every day exercised, and that with great diligence, as if it were in time of war which is the reason why they bear the fatigue of battles so easily; for neither can any disorder remove them from their usual regularity, nor can fear affright them out of it, nor can labor tire them; which firmness of conduct makes them always to overcome those that have not the same firmness; nor would he be mistaken that should call those their exercises unbloody battles, and their battles bloody exercises.

“Nor can their enemies easily surprise them with the suddenness of their incursions; for as soon as they have marched into an enemy's land, they do not begin to fight till they have walled their camp about; nor is the fence they raise rashly made, or uneven; nor do they all abide in it, nor do those that are in it take their places at random; but if it happens that the ground is uneven, it is first leveled: their camp is also foursquare by measure, and carpenters are ready, in great numbers, with their tools, to erect their buildings for them.

“As for what is within the camp, it is set apart for tents, but the outward circumference hath the resemblance of a wall, and is adorned with towers at equal distances, where between the towers stand the engines for throwing arrows and darts, and for slinging stones, and where they lay all other engines that can annoy the enemy, all ready for their several operations. They also erect four gates, one at every side of the circumference, and those large enough for the entrance of the beasts, and wide enough for making excursions, if occasion should require.

“They divide the camp within into streets, very conveniently, and place the tents of the commanders in the middle; but in the very midst of all is the general's own tent, in the nature of a temple, insomuch that it appears to be a city built on the sudden, with its marketplace, and place for handicraft trades, and with seats for the officers, superior and inferior; where, if any differences arise, their causes are heard and determined. The camp, and all that is in it, is encompassed with a wall round about, and that sooner than one would imagine, and this by the multitude and the skill of the laborers; and, if occasion require, a trench is drawn round the whole, whose depth is four cubits, and its breadth equal.

¹² Wars 2.22.2.

“When they have thus secured themselves, they live together by companies, with quietness and decency, as are all their other affairs managed with good order and security. Each company hath also their wood, and their corn, and their water brought them, when they stand in need of them; for they neither sup nor dine as they please themselves singly, but all together.

“Their times also for sleeping, and watching, and rising, are notified beforehand by the sound of trumpets, nor is anything done without such a signal; and in the morning the soldiery go every one to their centurions, and these centurions to their tribunes, to salute them; with whom all the superior officers go to the general of the whole army, who then gives them of course the watchword and other orders, to be by them carried to all that are under their command; which is also observed when they go to fight, and thereby they turn themselves about on the sudden, when there is occasion for making sallies, as they come back when they are recalled, in crowds also.

“When they are to go out of their camp, the trumpet gives a sound, at which time nobody lies still, but at the first intimation they take down their tents, and all is made ready for their going out; then do the trumpets sound again, to order them to get ready for the march; then do they lay their baggage suddenly upon their mules and other beasts of burden, and stand, at the place for starting, ready to march; when also they set fire to their camp, and this they do because it will be easy for them to erect another camp, and that it may not ever be of use to their enemies. Then do the trumpets give a sound the third time, that they are to go out in order to excite those that on any account are a little tardy, that so no one may be out of his rank when the army marches. Then does the crier stand at the general’s right hand, and asks them thrice, in their own tongue, whether they be now ready to go out to war or not. To which they reply as often, with a loud and cheerful voice, saying, “We are ready.” And this they do almost before the question is asked them; they do this as filled with a kind of martial fury, and at the time that they so cry out, they lift up their right hands also.

“When, after this, they are gone out of their camp, they all march without noise, and in a decent manner, and every one keeps his own rank, as if they were going to war. The footmen are armed with breastplates and headpieces, and have swords on each side; but the sword which is upon their left side is much longer than the other; for that on the right side is not longer than a span. Those footmen also that are chosen out from amongst the rest to be about the general himself, have a lance and a buckler; but the rest of the foot soldiers have a spear and a long buckler, besides a saw and a basket, a pickaxe and an ax, a thong of leather, and a hook, with provisions for three days; so that a footman hath no great need of a mule to carry his burdens. The horsemen have a long sword on their right sides, and a long pole in their hand: a shield also lies by them obliquely on one side of their horses, with three or more darts that are borne in their quiver, having broad points, and no smaller than spears. They have also headpieces and breastplates, in like manner as have all the footmen. And for those that are chosen to be about the general, their armor no way differs from that of the horsemen belonging to other troops; and he always leads the legions forth, to whom the lot assigns that employment.

“This is the manner of the marching and resting of the Romans, as also these are the several sorts of weapons they use. But when they are to fight, they leave nothing without forecast, nor to be done offhand, but counsel is ever first taken before any work is begun, and what hath been there resolved upon is put in execution presently; for which reason they seldom commit any errors; and if they have been mistaken at any time they easily correct those mistakes. They also esteem any errors they commit upon taking counsel beforehand, to be better than such rash success as is owing to fortune only; because such fortuitous advantage tempts them to be inconsiderate, while consultation, though it may sometimes fail of success, hath this good in it, that it makes men more careful hereafter; but for the advantages that arise from chance, they are not owing to him that gains them; and as to what melancholy accidents happen unexpectedly, there is this comfort in them that they have however taken the best consultations they could to prevent them.

“Now they so manage their preparatory exercises of their weapons, that not the bodies of the soldiers only but their souls, may also become stronger: they are moreover hardened for war by fear; for their laws inflict capital punishments, not only for soldiers running away from their ranks, but for slothfulness and inactivity, though it be but in a lesser degree; as are their generals more severe than their laws, for they prevent any imputation of cruelty toward those under condemnation, by the great rewards they bestow on the valiant soldiers; and the readiness of obeying their commanders is so great, that it is very ornamental in peace; but when they come to a battle, the whole army is but one body, so well coupled together are their ranks, so sudden are their turnings about, so sharp their hearing as to what orders are given them, so quick their sight of the ensigns, and so nimble are their hands when they set to work; whereby it comes to pass, that what they do is done quickly, and what they suffer they bear with the greatest patience.

“Nor can we find any examples where they have been conquered in battle, when they came to a close fight, either by the multitude of the enemies, or by their stratagems, or by the difficulties in the places they were in; no, nor by fortune neither, for their victories have been surer to them than fortune could have granted them. In a case, therefore, where counsel still goes before action, and where, after taking the best advice, that advice is followed by so active an army, what wonder is it that Euphrates on the east, the ocean on the west, the most fertile regions of Libya on the south, and the Danube and the Rhine on the north, are the limits of this empire. One might well say, that the Roman possessions are not inferior to the Romans themselves.¹³

¹³ Wars 3.5.

67 [Spring/Summer] Long story short...the Romans rapidly defeated Josephus' forces in the Galilee, although the Romans quickly developed a respect for this Jewish commander whose tactics consistently delayed their progress. After sending a message to Jerusalem in which he recommended they immediately negotiate with Vespasian on terms of peace or, if they insisted on him continuing the fight, to send him many more, he & the remnant of his army took a final stand in Jotapata (located about 6 miles north of Sepphoris).

[Summer] The siege lasted for 47 days, much longer than should have been the case, all because of the brave actions taken by the Jews under Josephus' leadership. Finally, based on intel gathered from a recent deserter, the Romans slipped over the wall during the middle of the night, killed the small night guard & took the city. In the fighting that followed, many Jews committed suicide rather than become Roman prisoners. 40,000+ Jews died at Jotapata & about 1,200 (women & children) were captured alive.

The Romans actively searched for Josephus' corpse among the dead, but he had taken refuge in a small cave just off to the side of the bottom of a cistern, which many prominent citizens had provisioned as a hidden shelter from the inevitable invasion of the city. On the third day after the city was taken a woman was captured who gave up the location of the hidden cave & the fact that Josephus was among those in it.

Vespasian eventually sent a tribune, Nicanor, a personal friend of Josephus, with the same offer, stressing that Vespasian actually admired his abilities as a military commander. Josephus now considered accepting the offer, but those with him threatened to kill him if he did. According to his own testimony, it was at this point that Josephus first took serious a series of dreams that he had had in which he had foreseen the destruction of the Jewish nation & the rise of certain Roman men as emperor. Trusting God, he went along with the plan of the other Jews in the cave to enter into a suicide pact. Using lots, they began to kill one another until only Josephus and one other man was left alive. He then convinced this man to surrender with him.

Vespasian ordered that Josephus be prepared for transport to Rome for trial before Emperor Nero, at which, Josephus asked to speak with him in private.

“When therefore they were all ordered to withdraw, excepting Titus and two of their friends, he said, “Thou, O Vespasian, thinkest no more than that thou hast taken Josephus himself captive; but I come to thee as a messenger of greater tidings; for had not I been sent by God to thee, I knew what was the laws of the Jews in this case, and how it becomes generals to die. Dost thou send me to Nero! For why? Are Nero's successors till they come to thee still alive? Thou, O Vespasian, art Caesar and emperor, thou, and this thy son. Bind me now still faster, and keep me for thyself, for thou, O Caesar, art not only lord over me, but over the land and the sea, and all mankind; and certainly I deserve to be kept in closer custody than I am now in, in order to be punished, if I rashly affirm anything of God.”

“When he had said this, Vespasian at present did not believe him, but supposed that Josephus said this as a cunning trick, in order to his own preservation; but in a little time he was convinced, and believed what he said to be true, God himself erecting his expectations, so as to think of obtaining the empire, and by other signs foreshowing his advancement. He also found Josephus to have spoken truth on other occasions; for one of those friends that were present at that secret conference, said to Josephus, “I cannot but wonder how thou couldest not foretell to the people of Jotapata that they should be taken, nor couldest foretell this captivity which hath happened to thyself, unless what thou now sayest be a vain thing, in order to avoid the rage that is risen against thyself.”

“To which Josephus replied, “I did foretell to the people of Jotapata that they would be taken on the forty-seventh day, and that I should be caught alive by the Romans.”

“Now when Vespasian had inquired of the captives privately about these predictions, he found them to be true, and then he began to believe those that concerned himself. Yet did he not set Josephus at liberty from his bands, but bestowed on him suits of clothes, and other precious gifts; he treated him also in a very obliging manner, and continued so to do, Titus still joining his interest in the honors that were done him.¹⁴

¹⁴ Wars 3.8.9.