

THE BEGINNING OF THE JEWISH WAR WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT “THE END” OF THE JEWISH TEMPLE

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him.

And He answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for *those things* must take place, but *that* is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are *merely* the beginning of birth pangs.

“Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.

“And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.”

Matthew 24:1-14 (NASB 77)

64 Gessius Florus began his tenure as Procurator of Judea, replacing Albinus. While Albinus had quietly used the office to his own advantage, Florus openly abused his position of authority.

The Levitical Singers of the Temple requested from King Herod Agrippa II the right to wear the exact same clothing as the Priests. Josephus saw this as the sort of violation of the Law which would soon bring about the wrath of God upon the Jewish nation.¹

Many years of construction on the Temple courtyards ended, suddenly leaving tens of thousands of construction workers without steady jobs. When they demanded more work, in order to continue being paid out of Temple funds, King Herod Agrippa II permitted them to repave the entire city with white stones.²

[Summer] Most of Rome burned to the ground.

[Later in the year] Nero, whom rumor was making responsible for the burning of Rome, began to deflect blame for it upon the “Christians.” The first Roman government persecution began.

64-66 Peter & Paul were executed at Rome. John was probably the only remaining Apostle.

66 **[1*14-21, Passover³ (APR/MAY)]** When Legate Cestius Gallus of Syria visited Jerusalem, the Jewish leadership approached him to complain that Florus was an atrocious ruler. Florus, who was present, actually laughed contemptuously at this accusation. Cestius promised the Jews that Florus would do better & publically instructed him to do so. Cestius then returned to Antioch. According to Josephus, Florus thereafter dedicated himself to provoking the Jews into rebelling against Rome, in large part to keep them from eventually bringing him up on charges before Nero.⁴

¹ Antiquities 22.9.6.

² Antiquities 22.9.7.

³ Josephus estimated this Passover attendance (men, women & children) at upwards of 3 million (Wars 2.14.3). Josephus reported elsewhere (Wars 6.9.3) that the Passover attendance several years earlier (2,700,500) had been estimated by counting the number of Passover lambs sacrificed (256,500), since each lamb accounted for no less than 10 participants.

⁴ Wars 2.14.3.

66 [2*8?, a Friday (THU/FRI 22/23 MAY)] Jews belonging to a particular synagogue in Caesarea were involved in a property dispute – they wanted to buy some property that would broaden access to their place of worship, which the owner not only refused to sell, but who had begun erecting even more buildings on it, further narrowing their access. Florus accepted a bribe (of 8 talents)⁵ from a Jewish tax collector in order to halt this work, but then left Caesarea for Sebaste (Samaria), leaving the matter unattended.⁶

[2*9?, the next day, a Sabbath (FRI/SAT 23/24 MAY)] A Gentile man, with the backing of many other Gentiles spoiling for a fight with the Jews, blocked the narrow path to the synagogue with a dead bird on the top of an overturned waterpot (a mockery of the Jewish leprosy cleansing ceremony⁷, intimating that the Jews were lepers). Even though a high ranking Roman official came & removed the offending object, a street fight still broke out between the Jews & the Gentiles. The Jewish leaders removed their Scripture scrolls out of the synagogue and took them to a safe place several miles outside the city. When a delegation of the Jews, led by the tax collector who'd bribed Florus, went to Sebaste to complain, the Procurator accused them of stealing the Scripture scrolls and arrested them.⁸

[2*?] Next, Florus took 17 talents⁹ from the Temple treasury, claiming that Nero wanted it. While the people of Jerusalem did not openly riot, some mocked him by going around the city with a basket, begging donations for the Procurator. Florus responded by coming to Jerusalem with a large military force, demanding that the Jewish leadership hand over to him those who had mocked him. When they begged him to take into consideration that these offenders were young & foolish, he gave his soldiers permission to plunder a certain part of the city (perhaps where the mockery had taken place), killing anyone who resisted. By the end of the day, 3,600 men women & children had been killed. Many Jews who were Roman citizens of high social rank had also been whipped & crucified in direct violation of Roman law.¹⁰

[2*16 (FRI/SAT 30/31 MAY)] “Queen” Bernice (38 yrs), who was undergoing completion of a Nazirite vow, appeared barefoot before Florus, begging him to leave off his atrocities. She barely escaped being killed herself, when Florus permitted his men to attack her entourage. Protected by her security forces, she fled back to her palace and barricaded herself inside.¹¹

[2*17 (SAT/SUN 31 MAY/1 JUN)] The Jewish leadership convinced the mourners of those already killed not to riot & give Florus the excuse to do even more harm.¹²

⁵ 48,000 days wages. Just over \$ 3.8 million in modern buying power.

⁶ Wars 2.14.4.

⁷ Leviticus 14.

⁸ Wars 2.14.5.

⁹ 102,000 days wages. Just over \$ 8.1 million in modern buying power.

¹⁰ Wars 2.14.6-9.

¹¹ Wars 2.15.1.

¹² Wars 2.15.2.

66 [2*?] Florus next summoned the Jewish leadership and ordered that they and the people prove their good will toward Rome by publically welcoming the next group of soldiers that would soon arrive in Jerusalem. They agreed, begging the people to be on their best behavior, even bringing out some of the most precious objects within the Temple, warning them that these could be lost if they refused to comply with Florus' orders. Florus, however, had ordered his soldiers to completely ignore the people & that if even one negative word was spoken toward them, to respond with extreme force.¹³

As expected, when the Roman soldiers ignored the Jewish greetings, some of the younger Jews shouted derogatory things. The soldiers began beating the people with clubs. In the stampede that followed many people were trampled to death.

Florus' men then tried to make their way to the Antonia Tower (where Herodian & Roman soldiers were already stationed) but were stopped from doing so when the Jewish people took up positions on the housetops and fired upon any soldiers (probably with arrows & slingstones) passing through the streets below. The Jewish people then destroyed that part of the Temple porticoes which included several entrance points from the Antonia Tower, insuring that even if Florus did gain control of it, he still wouldn't have easy access into the Temple. Florus decided to withdraw from the city, but informed the Sanhedrin that he was leaving behind a military force (not the one that had recently fought with the people) to help them deal with those Jewish people who had damaged the Temple.¹⁴

[Not long after] Florus sent an accusation to Legate Cestius of Syria that the Jews were rebelling against Rome. The Jewish leadership, including Bernice, sent a counter claim. Cestius sent Tribune Neopolitanus to meet with King Agrippa II (39 yrs), who had just arrived back from Egypt, in order to investigate the situation. After touring the city, they seemed satisfied that Florus was the major instigator in the recent turmoil. However, Agrippa was concerned that some of the younger, more passionate Jews wanted vengeance against the Roman soldiers, while other Jews were expressing a desire that Judea withdraw from the Empire; both of which he knew would trigger a strong reaction from Nero (28 yrs). He gathered together representatives from the Jewish community & spoke to them at length at what would be involved in taking on Rome. Here is the conclusion to his speech:

“...but it were best, O my friends, it were best, while the vessel is still in the haven, to foresee the impending storm, and not to set sail out of the port into the middle of the hurricanes; for we justly pity those who fall into great misfortunes without foreseeing them; but for him who rushes into manifest ruin, he gains reproaches [instead of commiseration].

“But certainly no one can imagine that you can enter into a war as by an agreement, or that when the Romans have got you under their power they will use you with moderation, or will not rather, for an example to other nations, burn your holy city, and utterly destroy your whole nation; for those of you who shall survive the war will not be able to find a place whither to flee, since all men have the Romans for the lords already, or are afraid they shall have hereafter. Nay, indeed the danger concerns not those Jews that dwell here only, but those of them who dwell in other cities also; for there is no people upon the habitable earth which have not some portion of you among them, whom your enemies will slay, in case you go to war, and on that account also; and so every city which hath Jews in it will be filled with slaughter for the sake only of a few men, and they who slay them will be pardoned; but if that slaughter be not made by them, consider how wicked a thing it is to take arms against those that are so kind to you.

“Have pity, therefore, if not on your children and wives, yet upon this your metropolis, and its sacred walls; spare the temple, and preserve the holy house, with its holy furniture, for yourselves; for if the Romans get you under their power, they will no longer abstain from them, when their former abstinences shall have been so ungratefully required.

“I call to witness your sanctuary, and the holy angels of God, and this country common to us all, that I have not kept back anything that is for your preservation; and if you will follow that advice which you ought to do, you will have that peace which will be common to you and to me; but if you indulge your passions, you will run those hazards which I shall be free from.”¹⁵

¹³ “What benefit will it bring to the soldiers to have a salutation from the Jews? or what amendment of your affairs will it bring you, if you do not now go out to meet them? and that if they saluted them civilly, all handle would be cut off from Florus to begin a war; that they should thereby gain their country, and freedom from all further sufferings; and that, besides, it would be a sign of great want of command of themselves, if they should yield to a few seditious persons, while it was fitter for them who were so great a people, to force the others to act soberly.” Wars 2.15.3-4.

¹⁴ Wars 2.15.5-6.

¹⁵ Wars 2.16.4.

66 [After Agrippa's speech] Agrippa & Bernice both continued to tearfully beg the people not to go to war with Rome. When the Jews claimed their problem was with Florus, the king reminded them that in destroying the Temple-Antonia Tower access points they had destroyed Caesar's property, not Florus' & that by not sending their annual tribute to Florus, they had actually withheld it from Nero. Most of the people acquiesced, joining Agrippa in repairing the access points & helping to resume the collection of the full amount of tribute that would be due for the year. However, when he continued to urge them to put up with Florus until Nero got around to replacing him, he was actually run out of the city by stone throwing opponents.¹⁶

[SUMMER] Shortly thereafter, a group of Jews seized the Masada fortress, killing all the Roman & Herodian soldiers stationed there.¹⁷

[5th Month (AUG/SEP)] A group of priests, under the leadership of a young man named Eleazar (head of Temple security), seized control of the Temple courts, refusing to offer sacrifices on behalf of any non-Jew, including Nero, for whom sacrifices had been customarily offered.¹⁸ The Jewish leadership, including many Pharisees, tried to reason with the rebels, presenting historical evidence that sacrifices had long been offered on behalf of non-Jews. When they refused, the leadership thought it best to officially request that Florus & Agrippa intervene by force to dislodge the rebels, rather than let the matter get further out of hand. The residents of the city began taking up sides – those who supported the rebels were within the lower city (poorer area of town) & those who supported King Agrippa in his opposition to the rebels were within the upper city (the wealthier part of town). Street fighting between the two groups went on for about a week.¹⁹

[5*14 (SUN/MON 24/25 AUG)] There was a traditional Jewish festival on this day, with people bringing donations of wood to help keep the great altar fire burning. The rebels banned their opponents from entering the Temple complex. They also engaged in a major push to take over the upper city.

“And when they had joined to themselves many of the Sicarii, who crowded in among the weaker people (that was the name for such robbers as had under their bosoms swords called Sicae), they grew bolder, and carried their undertakings further; insomuch that the king's soldiers were overpowered by their multitude and boldness; and so they gave way, and were driven out of the upper city by force. The others then set fire to the house of Ananias the [former] high priest, and to the palaces of Agrippa and Bernice; after which they carried the fire to the place where the archives were repositied, and made haste to burn the contracts belonging to their creditors, and thereby dissolve their obligations for paying their debts; and this was done, in order to gain the multitude of those who had been debtors, and that they might persuade the poorer sort to join in their insurrection with safety against the more wealthy; so the keepers of the records fled away, and the rest set fire to them.

“And when they had thus burnt down the nerves of the city, they fell upon their enemies; at which time some of the men of power, and of the high priests, went into the vaults under ground, and concealed themselves, while other fled with the king's soldiers to the upper palace, and shut the gates immediately; among whom were Ananias the high priest, and the ambassadors that had been sent to Agrippa. And now the seditious were contented with the victory they had gotten, and the buildings they had burnt down, and proceeded no further.²⁰

[5*15 (MON/TUE 25/26 AUG)] The rebels assaulted the Antonia Tower, killing the soldiers stationed there (both Roman & Herodian), setting it on fire. Afterward they marched against the Roman Praefect's palace, to which the survivors had retreated, placing them under siege.²¹

¹⁶ Wars 2.16.5-2.17.1.

¹⁷ Wars 2.17.2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Josephus counts this event as the technical beginning of the Jewish War.

¹⁹ Wars 2.17.3-5.

²⁰ Wars 2.17.6.

²¹ Wars 2.17.7.

66 [Early 6th Month (SEP)] Menahem, the son of the infamous Judas the Galilean, went to Masada & confiscated all the weaponry there, distributing it to his own followers and any of the rebel supporters that might want to assist him in expelling the Romans & their supporters from Jerusalem. He took charge of the siege, tunneling under a main tower, hoping to collapse it and provide access into the palace.²²

[6*6 (SUN/MON 14/15 SEP)] When the tower collapsed, but before Menahem's men could get past a secondary wall built by the defenders, the Herodian (Jewish) defenders begged to surrender in exchange for their lives. Menahem agreed. The Romans, not included in the surrender deal, made a break from the palace to some nearby towers, losing many of their number along the way.²³ The Jews besieged the towers, but were held at bay by the Romans' advantageous position high above the attackers.

[6*7 (MON/TUE 15/16 SEP)] A former High Priest & his brother were caught hiding in an aqueduct and, known to be pro-Roman, were summarily executed by the rebels.²⁴

[Early 7th Month? (OCT)] Menahem went to the Temple to worship, dressed as if he were king & attended by his armed supporters. Eleazar rebuked him, letting him know that he and his group weren't going to exchange a Roman tyrant for a Jewish tyrant. Eleazar's rebels attacked Menahem, routed his followers,²⁵ and eventually tracked him down and killed him.²⁶

[Early 7th Month?, a Sabbath] The surviving Roman soldiers holding out in the towers requested the opportunity to lay down their arms and come out in exchange for their lives. Despite agreeing to these conditions, when they did so, Eleazar slaughtered them all, except for one who pleaded for mercy & vowed to become a Jewish proselyte.²⁷

In Caesarea, at the exact same time the Roman soldiers in Jerusalem were being killed, the Gentiles killed over 20,000 Jewish residents. Rather than protect the Jewish survivors, Florus tracked them down, captured them & sold them into slavery as rowers aboard Roman ships.²⁸

Upon learning about the massacre at Caesarea, Jews who had been living peacefully alongside Gentiles for decades, took up arms & attacked their neighbors. The Gentiles, of course, reciprocated.

"every city was divided into two armies encamped one against another, and the preservation of the one party was in the destruction of the other; so the daytime was spent in shedding of blood, and the night in fear,—which was of the two the more terrible; for when the Syrians thought they had ruined the Jews, they had the Judaizers in suspicion also; and as each side did not care to slay those whom they only suspected on the other, so did they greatly fear them when they were mingled with the other, as if they were certainly foreigners. Moreover, greediness of gain was a provocation to kill the opposite party, even to such as had of old appeared very mild and gentle towards them; for they without fear plundered the effects of the slain and carried off the spoils of those whom they slew to their own houses, as if they had been gained in a set battle; and he was esteemed a man of honor who got the greatest share, as having prevailed over the greatest number of his enemies. It was then common to see cities filled with dead bodies, still lying unburied, and those of old men, mixed with infants, all dead, and scattered about together; women also lay amongst them, without any covering for their nakedness: you might then see the whole province full of inexpressible calamities, while the dread of still more barbarous practices which were threatened, was everywhere greater than what had been already perpetrated."²⁹

²² Wars 2.17.8.

²³ Wars 2.17.7.

²⁴ Wars 2.17.9.

²⁵ One of them, Eleazar, son of Jairus, escaped back to Masada, where he played a role in that final hold-out against the Romans.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Wars 2.17.10.

²⁸ Wars 2.18.1.

²⁹ Wars 2.18.2.

66 [Early 7th Month (OCT)] After the race riots had spread to Egypt (requiring Roman intervention there), Legate Cestius of Syria took action. He took his 12th Legion, reinforced by many auxiliaries & backed up by King Agrippa II's own army, and swept through Galilee & then along the Mediterranean coast & finally up toward Jerusalem.³⁰

[7*16, The Sabbath during the Feast of Tabernacles (FRI/SAT 24/25 OCT)] The Jews attacked the Romans, killing 515 of them but losing only 22 of their own.³¹

[7*27 (TUE/WED 4/5 NOV)] Cestius established a Roman camp on Mt. Scopus and waited, hoping that Jewish tempers would soon cool.

[7*30 (FRI/SAT 7/8 NOV)] Cestius entered the upper ("new") part of the city, but on the advice of one particular officer (who had been bribed by Florus to delay Cestius' advance into the city), did not attempt to enter the lower ("old") city where the Temple was located. The Romans were attacked by the Jews throughout a five day period, losing many men.

[8*5 (WED/THU 12/13 NOV)] Cestius inexplicitly withdrew his forces from Jerusalem to his encampment on Mt. Scopus, losing many more of his men in the process.

[8*6 (THU/FRI 13/14 NOV)] Cestius then retreated toward the coast, losing even more of his men as the Jewish rebels assailed them from the high ground along the way. They took shelter for two days in a fort located along the road from Jerusalem to Caesarea.

[8*8 (SAT/SUN 15/16 NOV)] The remnant of the Roman forces withdrew to the coast under cover of darkness, leaving a few hundred men behind as a diversion. When the Jews discovered the ruse, they attacked the fort & slaughtered the men left behind. When it was all over, Cestius' original army had nearly been annihilated, suffering the loss of 5,300 soldiers, 380 horsemen & all their equipment.³²

THE PROPHETIC RESULT OF THIS EVENT

"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;"³³

Compare this reality with the prophetic warning of Jesus about 33 years earlier.

"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)

³⁰ Wars 2.18.3-19.1.

³¹ Wars 2.19.2.

³² Wars 2.19.9.

³³ Wars 2.20.1.