

TITUS AND THE BURNING OF THE TEMPLE

70 [1*22 (SUN/MON 22/23 APR) = 1st Day of Siege] Titus began his siege of Jerusalem.

[During the 3rd Month] Titus had Josephus constantly circling the city, offering amnesty for Jews (in particular civilians) who surrendered.

One group of rebel soldiers, unhappy with Simon of Gadara, tried to surrender their section of the wall to nearby Roman soldiers, who hesitated in believing their offer. Before Titus could arrive to accept their surrender, Simon found out, came with loyal soldiers & killed those who were attempting to surrender.

After being hit in the head with a sling stone, Josephus fell to the ground & was assumed dead. The rebels rejoiced; his mother (who, along with his father, were prisoners of the rebels), as well as those who were hoping to surrender to the Romans under his protection grieved. When Josephus recovered his senses from the stunning blow, he vowed vengeance upon those who wounded him & resumed his offer of amnesty.

“Hereupon some of the deserters, having no other way, leaped down from the wall immediately, while others of them went out of the city with stones, as if they would fight them; but thereupon, they fled away to the Romans:—but here a worse fate accompanied these than what they had found within the city; and they met with a quicker dispatch from the too great abundance they had among the Romans, than they could have done from the famine among the Jews; for when they came first to the Romans, they were puffed up by the famine, and swelled like men in a dropsy; after which they all on the sudden over-filled those bodies that were before empty, and so burst asunder, excepting such only as were skillful enough to restrain their appetites, and, by degrees, took in their food into bodies unaccustomed thereto.¹

Josephus was absolutely appalled by the behavior of John of Gischala.

“But as for John, when he could no longer plunder the people, he betook himself to sacrilege, and melted down many of the sacred utensils, which had been given to the temple; as also many of those vessels which were necessary for such as ministered about holy things, the caldrons, the dishes, and the tables; nay, he did not abstain from those pouring-vessels that were sent them by Augustus and his wife; for the Roman emperors did ever both honor and adorn this temple; whereas this man, who was a Jew, seized upon what were the donations of foreigners; and said to those that were with him, that it was proper for them to use divine things while they were fighting for the Divinity, without fear, and that such whose warfare is for the temple, should live of the temple, on which account he emptied the vessels of that sacred wine and oil, which the priests kept to be poured on the burnt offerings, and which lay in the inner court of the temple, and distributed it among the multitude, who, in their anointing themselves and drinking, used [each of them] above and in of them: and here I cannot but speak my mind, and what the concern I am under dictates to me, and it is this: I suppose, that had the Romans made any longer delay in coming against these villains, the city would either have been swallowed up by the ground opening upon them, or been overflowed by water, or else been destroyed by such thunder as the country of Sodom perished by, for it had brought forth a generation of men much more atheistical than were those that suffered such punishments; for by their madness it was that all the people came to be destroyed.²

¹ Wars 5.13.4.

² Wars 5.13.6.

70 [4*1 (WED/THU 27/28 JUN) = 67th Day of Siege] The Romans finished constructing a security fence around the city. Titus was informed that well over 600,000 bodies had been thrown out of the various gates of Jerusalem.³ The Romans also finished their siege ramp against the Antonia Tower, having stripped the region bare of material.

“And now the Romans, although they were greatly distressed in getting together their materials, raised their banks in one-and-twenty days, after they had cut down all the trees that were in the country that adjoined to the city, and that for ninety furlongs⁴ round about, as I have already related. And, truly, the very view itself of the country was a melancholy thing; for those places which were before adorned with trees and pleasant gardens were now become a desolate country every way, and its trees were all cut down: nor could any foreigner that had formerly seen Judea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, but lament and mourn sadly at so great a change; for the war had laid all signs of beauty quite waste; nor, if anyone that had known the place before, had come on a sudden to it now, would he have known it again; but though he were at the city itself, yet would he have inquired for it notwithstanding.”⁵

[4*17 (FRI/SAT 13/14 JUL) = 83rd Day of Siege] The Romans had seized control of the Antonia Tower & Titus was bringing his army into it in preparation for a push on the Temple.

“And now Titus gave orders to his soldiers that were with him to dig up the foundations of the tower of Antonia, and make him a ready passage for his army to come up; while he himself had Josephus brought to him (for he had been informed that on that very day, which was the seventeenth day of Panemus [Tamuz], the sacrifice called “the Daily Sacrifice” had failed, and had not been offered to God for want of men to offer it, and that the people were grievously troubled at it) and commanded him to say the same things to John that he had said before, that if he had any malicious inclination for fighting, he might come out with as many of his men as he pleased, in order to fight, without the danger of destroying either his city or temple; but that he desired he would not defile the temple, nor thereby offend against God. That he might, if pleased, offer the sacrifices which were now discontinued, by any of the Jews whom he should pitch upon.

“Upon this, Josephus stood in such a place where he might be heard, not by John only, but by many more, and then declared to them what Caesar had given him in charge, and this in the Hebrew language. So he earnestly prayed them to spare their own city, and to prevent that fire that was just ready to seize upon the temple, and to offer their usual sacrifices to God therein.

“At these words of his a great sadness and silence were observed among the people. But the tyrant himself cast many reproaches upon Josephus, with imprecations besides; and at last added this withal, that he did never fear the taking of the city, because it was God’s own city.”

“In answer to which, Josephus said thus, with a loud voice:—“To be sure, thou hast kept this city wonderfully pure for God’s sake! The temple also continues entirely unpolluted! Nor hast thou been guilty of any impiety against him, for whose assistance thou hopest! He still receives his accustomed sacrifices!

³ Wars 5.13.7.

⁴ Roughly a radius of 10 miles.

⁵ Wars 6.1.1.

“Vile wretch that thou art! If any one should deprive thee of thy daily food, thou wouldst esteem him to be an enemy to thee; but thou hopest to have that God for thy supporter in this war whom thou hast deprived of his everlasting worship! And thou imputest those sins to the Romans, who to this very time take care to have our laws observed, and almost compel these sacrifices to be still offered to God, which have by thy means been intermitted! Who is there that can avoid groans and lamentations at the amazing change that is made in this city? Since very foreigners and enemies do now correct that impiety which thou hast occasioned; while thou, who art a Jew, and was educated in our laws, art become a greater enemy to them than the others!

“But still, John, it is never dishonorable to repent, and amend what hath been done amiss, even at the last extremity. Thou hast an instance before thee in Jechoniah,⁶ the king of the Jews, if thou hast a mind to save the city, who, when the king of Babylon made war against him, did, of his own accord, go out of this city before it was taken, and did undergo a voluntary captivity with his family, that the sanctuary might not be delivered up to the enemy, and that he might not see the house of God set on fire; on which account he is celebrated among all the Jews, in their sacred memorials, and his memory is become immortal, and will be conveyed fresh down to our posterity through all ages.

“This, John, is an excellent example in such a time of danger; and I dare venture to promise that the Romans shall still forgive thee. And take notice, that I, who make this exhortation to thee, am one of thine own nation; I who am a Jew do make this promise to thee. And it will become thee to consider who I am that give thee this counsel, and whence I am derived; for while I am alive I shall never be in such slavery as to forego my own kindred, or forget the laws of our forefathers.

“Thou hast indignation at me again, and makest a clamor at me, and reproachest me; indeed, I cannot deny that I am worthy of worse treatment than all this amounts to, because, in opposition to fate, I make this kind invitation to thee, and endeavor to force deliverance upon those whom God hath condemned.

“And who is there that does not know what the writings of the ancient prophets contain in them,—and particularly that oracle which is just now going to be fulfilled upon this miserable city—for they foretold that this city should be then taken when somebody shall begin the slaughter of his own countrymen!⁷ And are not both the city and the entire temple now full of the dead bodies of your countrymen? It is God therefore, it is God himself who is bringing on this fire, to purge that city and temple by means of the Romans, and is going to pluck up this city, which is full of your pollutions.”

“As Josephus spoke these words with groans, and tears in his eyes, his voice was intercepted by sobs. However, the Romans could not but pity the affliction he was under, and wonder at his conduct. But for John, and those that were with him, they were but the more exasperated against the Romans on this account, and were desirous to get Josephus also into their power; yet did that discourse influence a great many of the better sort; and truly some of them were so afraid of the guards sent by the seditious, that they tarried where they were, but still were satisfied that both they and the city were doomed to destruction. Some also there were who, watching for a proper opportunity when they might quietly get away, fled to the Romans, of whom were the high priests Joseph and Jesus, and of the sons of high priests three, whose father was Ishmael, who was beheaded in Cyrena, and four sons of Matthias, as also one son of the other Matthias, who ran away after his father’s death, and whose father was slain by Simon, the son of Gioras, with three of his sons, as I have already related; many also of the other nobility went over to the Romans, together with the high priests.

“Now Caesar not only received these men very kindly in other respects, but, knowing they would not willingly live after the customs of other nations, he sent them to Gophna, and desired them to remain

⁶ This young king’s surrender is described in 2 Kings 24:10-17.

⁷ It is possible that Josephus has in mind a particular understanding Daniel 9:26 in which the city and Temple will be destroyed along with the coming prince.

there for the present, and told them, that when he was gotten clear of this war, he would restore each of them to their possessions again; so they cheerfully retired to that small city which was allotted them, without fear of any danger. But as they did not appear, the seditious gave out again that these deserters were slain by the Romans,—which was done, in order to deter the rest from running away by fear of the like treatment. This trick of theirs succeeded now for a while, as did the like trick before; for the rest were hereby deterred from deserting, by fear of the like treatment.

“However, when Titus had recalled those men from Gophna, he gave orders that they should go round the wall, together with Josephus, and show themselves to the people; upon which a great many fled to the Romans. These men also got in a great number together and stood before the Romans, and besought the seditious, with groans, and tears in their eyes, in the first place to receive the Romans entirely into the city, and save that their own place of residence again; but that, if they would not agree to such a proposal, that they would at least depart out of the temple, and save the holy house for their own use; for that the Romans would not venture to set the sanctuary on fire, but under the most pressing necessity.

“Yet did the seditious still more and more contradict them; and while they cast loud and bitter reproaches upon these deserters, they also set their engines for throwing of darts, and javelins, and stones, upon the sacred gates of the temple, at due distances from one another, insomuch that all the space round about within the temple might be compared to a burying ground, so great was the number of the dead bodies therein; as might the holy house itself be compared to a citadel. Accordingly, these men rushed upon these upon holy places in their armor, that were otherwise unapproachable, and that while their hands were yet warm with the blood of their own people which they had shed; nay, they proceeded to such great transgressions, that the very same indignation which the Jews would naturally have against Romans, had they been guilty of such abuses against them, the Romans now had against Jews, for their impiety in regard to their own religious customs. Nay, indeed, there were none of the Roman soldiers who did not look with a sacred horror upon the holy house, and adored it, and wished that the robbers would repent before their miseries became incurable.

“Now Titus was deeply affected with this state of things, and reproached John and his party, and said to them, “Have not you, vile wretches that you are, by our permission, put up this partition-wall before your sanctuary? Have not you been allowed to put up the pillars thereto belonging at due distances, and on it to engrave in Greek, and in your own letters, this prohibition, that no foreigner should go beyond that wall? Have not we given you leave to kill such as go beyond it, though he were a Roman? And what do you do now, you pernicious villains? Why do you trample upon dead bodies in this temple? And why do you pollute this holy house with the blood both of foreigners and Jews themselves? I appeal to the gods of my own country, and to every god that ever had any regard to this place (for I do not suppose it to be now regarded by any of them); I also appeal to my own army, and to those Jews that are now with me, and even to you yourselves, that I do not force you to defile this your sanctuary; and if you will but change the place whereon you will fight, no Roman shall either come near your sanctuary, or offer any affront to it; nay, I will endeavor to preserve you your holy house, whether you will or not.”⁸

[4*22-24 (WED/THU 18/19 - FRI/SAT 20/21 JUL) = 88th-90th Days of Siege] As the Jewish rebels within the Temple resisted the Roman advance, the NW porticoes which connected the Antonia Tower to the Temple were burned & demolished. Josephus counts this as the beginning of the burning of the Temple.⁹

70 [4*27 (MON/TUE 23/24 JUL) = 93rd Day of Siege] The Jewish rebels booby-trapped the entire western portico by filling its rafters with oil-soaked material. As they retreated from their fortified

⁸ Wars 6.2.1-5.

⁹ Wars 6.2.9.

positions on top of the portico, some Roman units flooded into the area without waiting for orders to advance. The rebels immediately ignited the combustible materials, trapping many of the Romans on top of the rapidly burning structure. Some tried to jump to the Roman territory, breaking bones or being killed by the height of the drop. Others jumped down a shorter distance into the Temple courts, where they were overwhelmed by the rebels and killed. The following day, the Romans burned down what remained of the northern portico.¹⁰

[LATE JUL] The famine had reached its climax. Even the hint of food brought on fights. The people were ripping apart & chewing on anything made of leather – belts, sandals, shields. A small scrap of old hay sold for four days wages. A wealthy woman, now impoverished by the rebels, killed, cooked & proceeded to eat half her own infant. When the rebels stormed into her house to demand that she surrender the food they smelled, she mockingly offered them the other half. In horror, they refused. This story went like wildfire through the city & the Roman encampments.¹¹

[5*8 (FRI/SAT 3/4 AUG) = 104th Day of Siege] Titus lost a lot of men & equipment (and nearly their legionary emblems) by carefully trying to break through the northern gate of the inner temple with a minimum of damage; so he gave them permission to set fire to the gate instead. The fire soon spread to the porticoes of the inner court.¹²

[5*9 (SAT/SUN 4/5 AUG) = 105th Day of Siege] Titus met with his commanders to determine what to do about the Temple shrine building, where the remaining rebels were now holed up.

“Now, some of these thought it would be the best way to act according to the rules of war [and demolish it]; because the Jews would never leave off rebelling while that house was standing; at which house it was that they used to get all together.

“Others of them were of opinion, that in case the Jews would leave it, and none of them would lay their arms up in it, he might save it; but that in case they got upon it, and fought any more, he might burn it; because it must then be looked upon not as a holy house, but as a citadel; and that the impiety of burning it would then belong to those that forced this to be done, and not to them.

“But Titus said, that “although the Jews should get upon that holy house, and fight us thence, yet ought we not to revenge ourselves on things that are inanimate, instead of the men themselves;” and that he was not in any case for burning down so vast a work as that was, because this would be a mischief to the Romans themselves, as it would be an ornament to their government while it continued.¹³

Having come to this conclusion, he ordered his troops to put out the fires & to prepare to storm the Temple shrine building on the following day.¹⁴

¹⁰ Wars 6.3.1-2.

¹¹ Wars 6.3.3-5.

¹² Wars 6.3.1-2.

¹³ Wars 6.3.3.

¹⁴ Wars 6.3.4-5.

70 [5*10 (SUN/MON 5/6 AUG) = 106th Day of Siege] As Josephus points out, this particular date is quite significant in Jewish history.

“...but, as for that house, God had for certain long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of ages; it was the tenth day of the month Lous [Ab],¹⁵ upon which it was formerly burnt by the king of Babylon;”¹⁶

When the rebels launched a quick attack of the Romans who were fighting the portico fires, they were chased back into the Temple shrine building by the Roman soldiers. One of these soldiers, without any orders to do so, tossed a burning piece of debris through a storage room window on the north side of the Temple shrine building. This fire spread quickly through the storage rooms. The rebels tried to fight it, but also attacked the Romans, who fought back.

When informed about the developing situation, Titus ran to the Temple Mount & tried to organize fire-fighters. His soldiers couldn't hear him over the sound of their fighting with the rebels & the roar of the fire (or possibly pretended they couldn't).

“And now, since Caesar was no way able to restrain the enthusiastic fury of the soldiers, and the fire proceeded on more and more, he went into the holy place of the temple; with his commanders, and saw it, with what was in it, which he found to be far superior to what the relations of foreigners contained, and not inferior to what we ourselves boasted of and believed about it; but as the flame had not as yet reached to its inward parts, but was still consuming the rooms that were about the holy house, and Titus supposing what the fact was, that the house itself might yet be saved, he came in haste and endeavored to persuade the soldiers to quench the fire, and gave order to Liberalius the centurion, and one of those spearmen that were about him, to beat the soldiers that were refractory with their staves, and to restrain them, yet were their passions too hard for the regards they had for Caesar, and the dread they had of him who forbade them, as was their hatred of the Jews, and a certain vehement inclination to fight them, too hard for them also.

“Moreover, the hope of plunder induced many to go on, as having this opinion, that all the places within were full of money, and as seeing that all round about it was made of gold; and besides, one of those that went into the place prevented Caesar, when he ran so hastily out to restrain the soldiers, and threw the fire upon the hinges of the gate, in the dark; whereby the flame burst out from within the holy house itself immediately, when the commanders retired, and Caesar with them, and when nobody any longer forbade those that were without to set fire to it; and thus the holy house burnt down, without Caesar's approbation.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Jeremiah 52:12-13. The first Temple was burned in late July of 587 BC.

¹⁶ Wars 6.3.5.

¹⁷ Wars 6.3.7.