

HOW VESPASIAN BECAME EMPEROR AMIDST A GREAT JEWISH CIVIL WAR

“And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.”

Matthew 24:12 (NASB95)

67 [4th Jewish Month JUL] Having successfully defeated Josephus’ Galilean army at Jotapata, Vespasian returned to Ptolemais & went from there to Caesarea, the Roman administrative capital of Judea. The people welcomed him warmly as a hero, but called for the execution of the rebel commander, Josephus; Vespasian basically ignored their demand.¹ He then stationed his Fifth & Tenth Legions at Scythopolis (located just south of the Sea of Galilee), while keeping his own Fifteenth Legion & (presumably) the newly reconstituted Twelfth Legion at Cesarea. This permitted Vespasian to run military operations through the remainder of the year – effectively “mopping up” what remained of the Jewish rebels in the Galilee – while letting the bulk of his men prepare more fully for his ultimate push on Jerusalem.² He also retook control of Joppa in order to stop Mediterranean piracy by the Jewish rebels.³

[4th Jewish Month (JUL)] When news of the fall of Jotapata finally reached the Jewish rebels at Jerusalem, they were greatly distressed. They were especially grieved by the rumored death of their Galilean commander, Josephus. Professional mourners were paid to play sad music & sing sad songs on his behalf (as well as the others who had died) right up through the end of the month.⁴

[5th Jewish Month (AUG)] When it was discovered that Josephus was alive & that he had voluntarily surrendered to the Romans & that he was being treated with deference by them and not as a regular prisoner of war, there were public demonstrations calling him a coward & a traitor.⁵

[Summer/Fall] The Romans carried on military operations throughout the north, particularly in the territory of Herod Agrippa II, to the north & east of the Sea of Galilee.⁶ Casualties to date:

15,000 killed in battle at Japha
11,600 Samaritans killed in battle at Mt. Gerizim
40,000 killed in battle at Jotapata
4,200 killed in battle at Joppa
6,500 killed in battle at Taricheae (a.k.a., Magdala)
1,200 old men executed at Tiberius⁷
4,000 killed in battle at Gamala [an unknown number of people had already died of starvation]
5,000 jumped to their deaths at Gamala

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87,500+ dead in less than six months of Roman military operations in the Galilee

¹ Wars 3.9.1.

² Ibid.

³ Wars 3.9.2-4.

⁴ Wars 3.9.5.

⁵ Wars 3.9.6.

⁶ Wars 3.9-4.1.

⁷ Vespasian was sorting out the rebel captives he had gathered by this time. He sent 6,000 young men to Greece in order to work on Nero’s Corinthian canal project. He sold another 30,600 into slavery. The unnamed balance he gave to Herod Agrippa II.

67 [7th Jewish Month (OCT)] The final Jewish rebel city in the north to be captured was Gischala. The rebel leader, John, who had caused Josephus so much trouble earlier, tricked Titus into permitting him & his people a final Sabbath rest in their city, after which they would surrender. That night, with few Romans on guard due to the Sabbath rest agreement, John was able to sneak his men & many of his supporters out of the city. Titus was very angry to learn on Sunday morning, that John & his people had escaped on Friday night. Most of the civilians, who couldn't keep up with John's rapidly moving forces, didn't make it all the way to Jerusalem; Titus' pursuit force killed 6,000 of them & captured another 3,000.

Since those who remained in the city did surrender after the Sabbath, as promised, Titus did nothing more than tear down a section of the wall (standard military procedure), warn the population to remain loyal to Rome & leave behind an occupying military unit.⁸

News of the losses in the Galilee split the Jews in and around Jerusalem into competing factions. Chaos descended upon the nation. Jewish gangs thrived.

“There were besides disorders and civil wars in every city; and all those that were at quiet from the Romans turned their hands one against another. There was also a bitter contest between those that were fond of war, and those that were desirous of peace. At the first this quarrelsome temper caught hold of private families, who could not agree among themselves; after which those people that were the dearest to one another, brake through all restraints with regard to each other, and everyone associated with those of his own opinion, and began already to stand in opposition one to another; so that seditions arose everywhere, while those that were for innovations, and were desirous of war, by their youth and boldness, were too hard for the aged and the prudent man; and, in the first place, all the people of every place betook themselves to rapine; after which they got together in bodies, in order to rob the people of the country, insomuch that for the barbarity and iniquity those of the same nation did no way differ from the Romans; nay, it seemed to be a much lighter thing to be ruined by the Romans than by themselves.”⁹

“There were, besides these, other robbers that came out of the country, and came into the city, and joining to them those that were worse than themselves, omitted no kind of barbarity; for they did not measure their courage by their rapines and plunderings only, but proceeded as far as murdering men, and this not in the nighttime or privately, or with regard to ordinary men, but did it openly in the daytime, and began with the most eminent persons in the city;”¹⁰

These Jewish gangs eventually took over the Temple complex.

“Now, the people were come to that degree of meanness and fear, and these robbers to that degree of madness, that these last took upon them to appoint high priests. So when they had disannulled the succession, according to those families out of whom the high priests used to be made, they ordained certain unknown and ignoble persons for that office, that they might have their assistance in their wicked undertakings; for such as obtained this highest of all honors, without any desert, were forced to comply with those that bestowed it on them. They also set the principal men at variance one with another, by several sorts of contrivances and tricks, and gained the opportunity of doing what they pleased, by the mutual quarrels of those who might have obstructed their measures; till at length, when they were satiated with the unjust actions they had done towards men, they transferred their contumelious behavior to God himself, and came into the sanctuary with polluted feet.

“And now the multitude were going to rise against them already; for Ananus, the ancientest of the high priests, persuaded them to it. He was a very prudent man, and had perhaps saved the city if he could but have escaped the hands of those that plotted against him. Those men made the temple of God a stronghold for them, and a place whither they might resort, in order to avoid the troubles they feared from the people; the sanctuary was now become a refuge, and a shop of tyranny.”¹¹

⁸ Wars 4.2.

⁹ Wars 4.3.2.

¹⁰ Wars 4.3.4.

¹¹ Wars 4.3.6-7.

67 [Fall] When the Jewish gangs forcibly appointed a man as High Priest who didn't have a clue what the office was about, Ananus couldn't stand it any longer. He and other prominent Jewish leaders roused the people against these "zealots."¹² Civil war broke out within the Temple complex.

"Now while Ananus was choosing out his men, and putting those that were proper for his purpose in array for fighting, the zealots got information of his undertaking (for there were some who went to them, and told them all that the people were doing) and were irritated at it; and leaping out of the temple in crowds, and by parties, spared none whom they met with.

"Upon this, Ananus got the populace together on the sudden, who were more numerous indeed than the zealots, but inferior to them in arms, because they had not been regularly put into array for fighting: but the alacrity that everybody showed, supplied all their defects on both sides, the citizens taking up so great a passion as was stronger than arms, and deriving a degree of courage from the temple more forcible than any multitude whatsoever; and indeed these citizens thought it was not possible for them to dwell in the city, unless they could cut off the robbers that were in it.

"The zealots also thought that unless they prevailed, there would be no punishment so bad, but it would be inflicted on them. So their conflicts were conducted by their passions; and at the first they only cast stones at each other in the city, and before the temple, and threw their javelins at a distance; but when either of them were too hard for the other, they made use of their swords; and great slaughter was made on both sides, and a greater number were wounded.

"As for the dead bodies of the people, their relations carried them out to their own houses; but when any of the zealots were wounded, he went up into the temple, and defiled that sacred floor with his blood, insomuch that one may say it was their blood alone that polluted our sanctuary. Now in these conflicts the robbers always sallied out of the temple, and were too hard for their enemies; but the populace grew very angry, and became more and more numerous, and reproached those that gave back, and those behind would not afford room to those that were going off, but forced them on again, till at length they made their whole body to turn against their adversaries, and the robbers could no longer oppose them, but were forced gradually to retire into the temple; when Ananus and his party fell into it at the same time together with them. This horribly affrighted the robbers, because it deprived them of the first court; so they fled into the inner court immediately, and shut the gates.

"Now Ananus did not think fit to make any attack against the holy gates, although the other threw their stones and darts at them from above. He also deemed it unlawful to introduce the multitude into that court before they were purified; he therefore chose out of them all by lot, six thousand armed men, and placed them as guards in the cloisters; so there was a succession of such guards one after another, and every one was forced to attend in his course; although many of the chief of the city were dismissed by those that then took on them the government, upon their hiring some of the poorer sort, and sending them to keep the guard in their stead."¹³

John of Gischala began maneuvering for singular leadership of Jerusalem by ingratiating himself to both sides of the civil war. During the day, he shadowed Ananus, pretending support for the people's cause. At night, he would sneak in to the Zealots and tell them all that was being prepared against them. Eventually, Ananus, suspecting that he was a traitor, extracted from him a divine oath of support. John then went to the Zealots and told them the lie that Ananus was intending to turn the city over to the Romans. This caused the Zealots to send for support from the Idumeans.

When a 20,000 man Idumean army approached Jerusalem, Ananus locked the city gates against them. They were told they could enter only if they laid down their arms. The Idumeans refused to do so & accused Ananus of duplicity for refusing them lawful entry into their Holy City for worship while planning to welcome the Romans. That night a tremendous thunderstorm scared both sides into believing that horrible things were about to happen.

The Zealots used the storm to sneak into the city & saw open the locked city gates (Ananus had let the guard go to sleep since he supposed the enemy would not be doing anything due to the severity of the storm). The Idumean army entered the city & started killing the sleeping guard. An alarm was raised & full scale fighting broke out. When morning dawned, there were 8,500 dead bodies in the Temple courtyard.¹⁴

¹² The use of this term for the violent members of Jewish gangs engaged in anti-Gentile purges of Judea should be distinguished from the earlier use of the term for non-violent members of Jewish society who advocated a Jewish kingdom independent of Rome.

¹³ Wars 4.3.12.

¹⁴ Wars 4.3.13-4.5.1.

67 [Fall] A “reign of terror” (not unlike that of the bloody French revolution in 1793/94) followed. Ananus was but the first of many prominent Jews to die. Josephus felt very strongly that the murder of Jewish leaders such as Ananus guaranteed Roman victory.¹⁵

“Now after these were slain, the zealots and the multitude of the Idumeans fell upon the people as upon a flock of profane animals, and cut their throats; and, for the ordinary sort, they were destroyed in what place soever they caught them and bound them, and shut them up in prison, and put off their slaughter, in hopes that some of them would turn over to their party; but not one of them would comply with their desires, but all of them preferred death before being enrolled among such wicked wretches as acted against their own country. But this refusal of theirs brought upon them terrible torments; for they were so scourged and tortured, that their bodies were not able to sustain their torments, till at length, and with difficulty, they had the favor to be slain. Those whom they caught in the daytime, were slain in the night, and then their bodies were carried out and thrown away, that there might be room for other prisoners; and the terror that was upon the people was so great, that no one had courage enough either to weep openly for the dead man that was related to him, or bury him; but those that were shut up in their own houses, could only shed tears in secret, and durst not even groan without great caution, lest any of their enemies should hear them; for it they did, those that mourned for others soon underwent the same death with those whom they mourned for. Only in the nighttime they would take up a little dust and throw it upon their bodies; and even some that were the most ready to expose themselves to danger, would do it in the daytime: and there were twelve thousand of the better sort who perished in this manner.

“And now these zealots and Idumeans were quite weary of barely killing men, so they had the impudence of setting up fictitious tribunals and judicatures for that purpose; and as they intended to have Zacharias, the son of Baruch, one of the most eminent of the citizens, slain,—so what provoked them against him was, that hatred of wickedness and love of liberty which were so eminent in him: he was also a rich man, so that by taking him off, they did not only hope to seize his effects, but also to get rid of a man that had great power to destroy them. So they called together, by a public proclamation, seventy of the principal men of the populace, for a show, as if they were real judges, while they had no proper authority. Before these was Zacharias accused of a design to betray their polity to the Romans, and having traitorously sent to Vespasian for that purpose. Now there appeared no proof or sign of what he was accused; but they affirmed themselves that they were well persuaded that so it was, and desired that such their affirmation might be taken for sufficient evidence.

“Now when Zacharias clearly saw that there was no way remaining for his escape from them, as having been treacherously called before them, and then put in prison, but not with any intention of a legal trial, he took great liberty of speech in that despair of life he was under. Accordingly he stood up, and laughed at their pretended accusation, and in a few words confuted the crimes laid to his charge; after which he turned his speech to his accusers, and went over distinctly all their transgressions of the law, and made heavy lamentations upon the confusion they had brought public affairs to: in the meantime the zealots grew tumultuous, and had much ado to abstain from drawing their swords, although they designed to preserve the appearance and show of judicature to the end. They were also desirous, on other accounts, to try the judges, whether they would be mindful of what was just at their own peril.

“Now the seventy judges brought in their verdict, that the person accused was not guilty,—as choosing rather to die themselves with him, than to have his death laid at their doors; hereupon there rose a great clamor of the zealots upon his acquittal, and they all had indignation at the judges, for not understanding that the authority that was given them was but in jest.

“So two of the boldest of them fell upon Zacharias in the middle of the temple, and slew him; and as he fell down dead they bantered him, and said, “Thou hast also our verdict, and this will prove a more sure acquittal to thee than the other.” They also threw him down out of the temple immediately into the valley beneath it. Moreover, they struck the judges with the backs of their swords, by way of abuse, and thrust them out of the court of the temple, and spared their lives with no other design than that, when they were dispersed among the people in the city, they might become their messengers, to let them know they were no better than slaves.”¹⁶

Shortly thereafter, the Idumeans came to the conclusion that Ananus had never intended to voluntarily surrender the Holy City to the Romans & that they had been used by the Zealots to accomplish their own purposes. They freed 2,000 Jewish prisoners which they still held & pulled out. Once they were gone, the Zealots actually increased the number of their executions, targeting especially the rich & influential.

Keeping tabs on all this turmoil from a distance, Vespasian was advised by his military leaders to move against Jerusalem while the Jews were fighting amongst themselves, but he responded that doing so would only unite the warring parties against the Romans. Instead, he intended to let the civil war continue, intervening later, after the various factions of Jewish rebels had done great harm to one another.¹⁷

¹⁵ Wars 4.5.2.

¹⁶ Wars 4.5.2-4.

¹⁷ Wars 4.6.1-3.

67/68 [Winter] John of Gischala's faction gained a large amount of control within the city.¹⁸

68 [12th Jewish Month (FEB/MAR)] Jewish gangs operating in the region around this time began attacking undefended cities in order to take their stored up provisions & wealth for their own use, and killing any civilians who resisted. Hearing about these latest atrocities, Vespasian decided to intervene¹⁹ on behalf of the city of Gadara (located about 6 miles SE of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee), which was in the process of being plundered & had asked for assistance.

When the rebels tried to escape, the Roman forces engaged them in a running battle which eventually resulted in 15,000 Jews dead in battle & with a large number of their compatriots also drowning in the flood-stage Jordan, trying to escape, and about 2,200 prisoners taken, along with a great deal of supplies. This operation pretty much secured Perea (the land east of the Jordan).²⁰

[Passover (APR)] The *Sicarii* at Masada overran the nearby city of En-Geddi, killing about 700 women & children in the process, just so that they could confiscate supplies for their fortress.²¹

[Spring] Discontent with Nero was growing. This emboldened Vindex of Gaul (N France) to support Legate Galba of Hispania (NE Spain) as the new emperor.

[Spring/Summer] Vespasian carried out a military campaign in Judea, efficiently pacifying the region surrounding the rebel-controlled city of Jerusalem.²²

[Spring/Summer] Simon of Gerasa, a Jewish gang leader whom Ananus had defeated two years earlier, was now a very powerful king-like leader in Idumea. Even the Jewish Zealots in Jerusalem were afraid of him & had been in conflicts with his army.

[MAY] The Legion which defeated Vindex wanted to declare their commander as the new emperor. When he declined, support for Galba within the Roman military deployed in western Europe increased.

[JUN] Nero fled from Rome after the top military official there declared support for Galba.

[9 JUN] Nero (30 yrs) committed suicide (or possibly asked a servant to kill him).

[Summer] Galba (71 yrs), accompanied by his Seventh Legion, arrived in Rome, where he declared himself "Caesar."

[Fall] Learning of Nero's death & Galba's ascension to the throne, Vespasian – who had been on the verge of besieging Jerusalem – suspended military operations, sending Titus (accompanied by King Herod Agrippa II) to Rome in order to discern Galba's intention for dealing with the Jewish rebellion.²³

¹⁸ Wars 4.7.1.

¹⁹ He was also concerned about the Vindex rebellion in Gaul (France), which was further threatening the stability of the empire, being a second major military operation demanding Nero's attention. Wars 4.8.1.

²⁰ Wars 4.7.3-6.

²¹ Wars 4.7.2.

²² Wars 4.8.1-4.

²³ Wars 4.9.2.

69 [JAN] The First & Fourth Legions in Germany swore their allegiance to Vitellius as emperor.

[15 JAN] Otho (36 yrs), a disappointed supporter of Galba, conspired with the Praetorian guard to assassinate Galba and to declare him emperor instead.

[Winter] Having only made it as far as Greece (due to winter sailing hazards) before hearing of the latest coup in Rome, Titus immediately headed back to confer with his father. King Herod Agrippa II continued on to Rome.

[16 APR] Otho committed suicide after his troops failed to stop Vitellius' entry into Italy.

[APR] The First & Fourth Legions from Germany occupy Rome. Vitellius (54 yrs) was accepted as the new emperor by the Roman Senate.

[Spring] When Vespasian got word of events in Rome it grieved him. His top military leaders & his soldiers insisted that he had to take charge as emperor to restore order. Eventually, he agreed.²⁴

[1 JUL] Vespasian was officially declared emperor at Alexandria, Egypt, by the Roman officials & the legions there. He had gone there to take control of the wheat exports to Italy as part of his plan to dislodge Vitellius & his legions from power in Rome.²⁵

[Summer] While he was at Beirut, having received promises of allegiance from Roman officials & legions throughout the eastern empire, Vespasian felt it necessary to acknowledge Josephus' earlier prediction that he would be emperor.

“So Vespasian's good fortune succeeded to his wishes everywhere, and the public affairs were, for the greatest part, already in his hands: upon which he considered that he had not arrived at the government without Divine Providence, but that a righteous kind of fate had brought the empire under his power; for as he called to mind the other signals, which had been a great many everywhere, that foretold he should obtain the government, so did he remember what Josephus had said to him when he ventured to foretell his coming to the empire while Nero was alive; so he was much concerned that this man was still in bonds with him.

“He then called for Mucianus, together with his other commanders and friends, and, in the first place, he informed them what a valiant man Josephus had been, and what great hardships he had made him undergo in the siege of Jotapata. After that he related those predictions of his which he had then suspected as fictions, suggested out of the fear he was in, but which had by time been demonstrated to be divine.

“It is a shameful thing (said he) that this man who hath foretold my coming to the empire beforehand, and been the minister of a divine message to me, should still be retained in the condition of a captive or prisoner.”

“So he called for Josephus, and commanded that he should be set at liberty; whereupon the commanders promised themselves glorious things from this requital Vespasian made to a stranger.

“Titus was then present with his father, and said, “O father, it is but just that the scandal [of a prisoner] should be taken off Josephus, together with his iron chain; for if we do not barely loose his bonds, but cut them to pieces, he will be like a man that hath never been bound at all.” For that is the usual method as to such as have been bound without a cause. This advice was agreed to by Vespasian also; so there came a man in, and cut the chain to pieces; while Josephus received this testimony of his integrity for a reward, and was moreover esteemed a person of credit as to futurities also.”²⁶

²⁴ Wars 4.10.1-4.

²⁵ Wars 4.10.5-6.

²⁶ Wars 4.10.7.