



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“The Mighty Fortress of Masada”

by Sam Botwin

October 15, 2011

After meeting with Rabbi Peter about several different topics for my main project it became clear to me that the story of Masada would be something interesting for me to research. First, what made this topic so interesting is that I have a great love of history, especially the history of the Roman Empire and its battles. Secondly, the architecture and advanced building techniques used at Masada were especially interesting for me to research. I hope to be an architect or an engineer one day, like my grandfathers. Lastly, this topic also touches upon the relationship between the Romans and Jews. Since I am both Italian and Jewish I thought understanding the relationship between these two groups would give me insight into my history. Throughout history both Romans and Jews have shown great strength and determination. The major sources of information for this paper were the following websites: The Jewish Virtual Library, Bible Places and Bible Architecture.

Masada, the Hebrew word for “fortress”, was originally built during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus and expanded upon by Herod the Great between 37-31 B.C.E. Masada is situated on top of an isolated cliff rising 1,200 feet over the western end of the Judean Desert, overlooking the Dead Sea. The flat top of the fortress is a diamond shape, elongated from north to south. It is isolated from its surroundings by deep gorges on most of its sides. This position forms a natural fortification on which to have built a fortress.

Masada is one of the Jewish people’s most significant symbols in history. It is a symbol of the strength, courage and determination of the Jewish people. It also represents the Jews’ continuous fight for their freedom throughout history. When contemporary Israeli soldiers complete their basic training, they march up the mountain to the fortress and take an oath to defend the state of Israel. The oath states “Masada shall never fall again.” It’s a promise to the Jewish people that the State of Israel will always exist. Next to Jerusalem, it is the most popular destination of Jewish tourists visiting Israel. The history of Masada is an interesting and complex topic and stirs many emotions about Jewish survival throughout history.

Before I go into the history of Masada and its architecture I want to talk about the Roman rule of Judea and the Jews who lived there. At this time in history there were three well-established Jewish factions. These groups were called the Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. The Sadducees believed in a strict interpretation of the writings of the Bible and followed it to the letter of the law. They were also the upper social class of Jewish society whose responsibilities included maintaining the Temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees believed in a more liberal interpretation of the Bible as well as using other writings to help interpret the Torah in everyday Jewish life. They generally had the backing and goodwill of the common people. The Essenes were the smallest of the three groups. They lived a communal life dedicated to abstinence from worldly pleasures, which dictated no marriage and voluntary poverty.

During the time of the Roman occupation a “fourth faction” emerged. This was a political group called the Zealots that wanted to incite the people to rebel against the Romans. Within the Zealots there was an extremist splinter group called Sicarii, although the two names are often used interchangeably by historians. Sicarii was a Roman name given to this particularly extreme group because of the dagger its members carried called a sica that was used to kill their enemies. The founder of the Sicarii was a man named Judah of Gamala in Gaulantis. He and his followers broke from the Pharisee philosophy because they had an undying love of liberty. They and their families were prepared to die rather than submit to Roman rule and acknowledge the emperor as their God. This position differed from the original Pharisee philosophy in that they raised freedom to a religious belief and because they sated that recognizing the emperor as a God would be a mortal sin. They believed that God alone was their Lord and master. This philosophy put them at odds with the other Jewish groups at the time. The Zealots wanted an open revolt against Roman rule. They conducted raids against the Roman occupiers and they also intimidated and killed other Jews who wanted to live in peace with the Romans. This was the beginning of the “The Great Revolt” by the Jews against their Roman rulers.

“The Great Revolt” (66-70 C.E) began in 66 C.E when the Roman governor Gessius Florus stole large amounts of silver from the Temple in Jerusalem. The outraged Jewish masses rioted and wiped out the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. The Roman ruler Cestius Gallus brought troops from neighboring Syria to put down the Jewish uprising but he was defeated. The Romans came back later with 60,000 well trained troops and attacked Galilee in the north. This area had the most radical Jewish citizens. The Romans destroyed Galilee, and killed and enslaved over 100,000 Jews. The Jews who survived the Roman attack of Galilee fled to Jerusalem. While the Romans attacked Galilee the rulers of Jerusalem did nothing to help their fellow Jews. They realized that fighting the Romans was a mistake and did not want to be a part of the rebellion. When the refugees arrived in Jerusalem they were very upset with the leaders of Jerusalem who they thought had betrayed them. They killed all the leaders who were not as radical as they were. When the Romans arrived in Jerusalem for their final siege of the city, the Zealots were engaged in a civil war with less radical Jews for control of the city. The Zealots were so determined to make the rest of the Jewish population resist the Romans that they burned a stockpile of food that would have fed the city for years, in the hope that by destroying the food supply all the citizens would now have to join the revolt to survive.

The revolt ended when the Romans burned Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The surviving Zealots were led by Elazar bin Yair and fled to Masada. They climbed the famous “Snake Path” and overwhelmed a small Roman garrison that was defending the fortress. Elazar and the Zealots used Masada as a base for their resistance against Roman rule for the next 2 years.

Now before I talk about the siege of Masada by Roman Governor Flavius Silva, I want to pause for a moment to go over the history and the architecture of Masada to help you better understand what Silva was up against. The architecture of Masada is unique and very advanced for its time.

The original fortress of Masada was established sometime during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus who was King of Judea from 103 B.C.E - 76 B.C.E Its elaborate construction was carried out between 37 and 31 BCE by Herod, who was the first Governor of Galilee and then appointed by the Romans to be king of Judea, Jericho and Gaza by Augustus Caesar in 31 B.C.E. Herod fortified Masada for his own protection against foreign invaders such as the Egyptians and against a revolt from the local Jewish population. During his rule he constructed two ornate palaces there, one of which was built on three levels. Heavy outer walls surrounding the plateau were constructed along with extensive storehouses, a barracks and an armory.

One of the most unique features of Masada is its water system. Aqueducts brought water to immense cisterns that could hold nearly 200,000 gallons of water. A cistern is a waterproof receptacle that stores water. This water supply was guaranteed by a network of large aqueducts on the northwestern side of the mountain that fed a large cistern inside Masada. That cistern fed smaller cisterns inside the Masada complex. This water capture system provided an abundance of water to this mountain fortress in the middle of the desert.

The diamond shaped, flat plateau of Masada measures 180,000 square feet, which is a little more than the area of 3 football fields. It has a casemate wall, which is made of two parallel walls with a partition dividing the space in between into sections. The perimeter is 4,935 feet long and 13 feet thick. It was built along the edge of the plateau, above the steep cliffs, and had a number of towers. Three narrow paths led from the desert floor to fortified gates 1,200 feet above. Masada was an incredible architectural design for its time. It was a self-contained city in the middle of the desert. It was secure and safe from attack and was built to house thousands of people in comfort.

Now, I'm going to take you through the actual seizure of this amazing mountain fortress. In 72 C.E. the Roman general Flavius Silva, governor of the province of Judea, was determined to suppress the last outpost of Jewish resistance. His purpose was not for reasons of security, as there were only 960 men, women and children holed up in Masada. It was done to project Roman power in the region and to show the Roman Senate that Emperor Titus was firmly in charge. Flavius Silva marched against Masada at the head of the Tenth Legion with its auxiliary troops and with thousands of Jewish war prisoners, a total of ten to fifteen thousand people. The troops prepared for a long siege by establishing eight camps at the base of Masada.

The central challenge for Silva and his battlefield engineers was to overcome the mountain fortress and all its fortifications. Silva surrounded the fortress by constructing a 6-foot high, 7-mile long siege wall. This wall would prevent attacks and not allow the Zealots to escape. The wall also enclosed the eight base camps established for the army. After initial efforts to breach Masada's defenses failed, it took Silva's engineers and army nine months to build a siege ramp against the western face of the plateau. They used thousands of tons of stones and beaten earth.

The Roman army had many different siege weapons, one of which was a siege tower. This weapon was used to storm city walls. Normally men would push the tower up against the wall, climb the tower and use small bridges to get across. Another siege weapon that was used was the battering ram. This was a large cart with a cover and under the cover was a log with a stone head on the front and this would be used to break down wooden walls. During the siege of Masada Silva's men combined the two: a siege tower with a battering ram on top. The ramp

allowed the Romans to roll up the battering ram to breach Masada's walls. Finally they broke the stone wall, but the defenders managed to build a new wall of earth and wood that was flexible and hard to break. Both sides showed great determination and resolve. Eventually, the Romans managed to burn the wall to enter the city. However, as you may already know Silva's victory was incomplete because the Zealots, some 960 men, women and children had committed mass suicide shortly before the Romans took the mountain fortress. The Romans succeeded in making their point clear and re-asserted their rule in Judea.

Elazar Bin Yair, leader of the Zealots, was a descendent of the founder of the "Fourth Faction" Judah of Gamala in Gaulantis. Elazar was a very powerful man with strong beliefs about justice and freedom. During the final day of the siege, believing that the end was approaching, Elazar delivered a speech to his followers urging them not to give in to the Romans. Elazar proclaimed that they should die as free men, rather than live their lives out as slaves of the Romans.

In Elazar's final speech to the Zealots he stated "Since we long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice... We were the very first that revolted against Rome, and we are the last to fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom. Let our spouses die before they are abused, and our children before they taste slavery, and after we have slain them let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually."

He then directed the group to set Masada ablaze. The Zealots were to let all their possessions burn, except for their food. This was done to prove that the Zealots did not die because of wants and desires, but because they refused to give up their freedom. According to Josephus the Roman historian, Masada was set on fire, and ten men killed all the other men, women and children, with the last man standing killing himself. This last act by the Zealots has come to symbolize the ultimate sacrifice for freedom.

Josephus obtained this information about Masada by talking to 7 survivors, two women and five children, who hid in a storeroom. The Zealots' show of resistance has been symbolized by the term "Masada Complex". The idea of the "Masada Complex" is today sometimes applied critically to advocates of right-wing policies in the Israeli government. Political scientist Susan Hattis Rolef has defined this "complex" as "the conviction ... that it is preferable to fight to the end rather than to surrender and acquiesce to the loss of independent statehood."

What does Masada mean to me as a person and as a Humanistic Jew? Masada is not only an amazing architectural achievement; it symbolizes Jewish freedom, courage, strength and conviction. The fortress was built on the top of a small mountain in the middle of a desert. Its complex design and innovative use of aqueducts and cisterns is nothing short of genius. Masada's design inspires me and I hope that one day I will be able to create designs that will stand the test of time. Since I have not visited Masada yet, but I plan to someday, I decided to interview people who have been there. I asked them these two questions: What does Masada mean to you as a Jew? What was the most interesting thing you remember about the trip?

Some replied that Masada is a symbol of Jewish determination and courage. Others feel it's a Jewish monument to freedom and liberty. Lastly, a few said that Masada has come to represent Israel's inflexible negotiating position with the Palestinians. When talking about what they remember about the trip some said the climb up Masada was hot and difficult. Others remember the view of the Dead Sea and desert being amazing. Everyone I asked was amazed by the size and grandeur of the fortress and how well it is preserved.

Elazar and the Zealots fought the Romans who tried to break their resolve to win the freedom of their homeland. Humanistic Jews believe that freedom and social justice are a very important part of life. That is why I think Masada is an important symbol for me as a Humanistic Jew. These Jews committed suicide rather than becoming slaves of the Romans. They believed freedom was more important than their own lives. I think that is extremely brave. I don't know if I were there if I would have joined them since I also believe that life is sacred, but I hope I can live my life with that kind conviction and courage.