

The Masada Myth

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Scholar presents evidence that the heroes of the Jewish Great Revolt were not heroes at all.

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The expression "the Masada Myth 1" has become quite common among Israelis, and yet, the exact meaning of that expression is not entirely clear. In this short paper I shall try to describe the nature of the Masada myth, when it was created and why.

The logical structure I shall pursue here is the following. First, I would like us to get acquainted with that historical narrative of Masada that is not considered a "myth" - that is, with Josephus Flavius's account. Second, where and how do we learn about the myth? Third, what is the myth? Fourth, why and when was the Masada mythical narrative created?

The Masada Narrative As Described By Josephus Flavius

While **the issue of the credibility of Josephus** has never been fully and satisfactorily resolved, more researchers seem to accept his credibility. There also seems to be **two different schools of thought** regarding the reading and interpretation of Josephus. One school tends to infuse much interpretation into Josephus Flavius and reads him very liberally. The other school emphasizes that one should read and interpret Josephus "as is," that is as close as possible to the text itself, without allowing for much free interpretation.

What Does Josephus Say? 2

The Masada narrative must be contextualized within the relevant historical period otherwise it is meaningless. Masada was part of a **much larger Jewish revolt** against the Roman Empire between

the years 66-73. That revolt ended in disaster and in bitter defeat for the Jews. Masada was only the final defeat in the much larger suppression of that revolt.

Different ideological groups of Jews existed during the time of the revolt. Of those, four are singled out as important. It appears that the two most relevant groups are the Sicarii, and much more so, the Zealots who apparently carried the main burden of the revolt. Josephus makes a clear distinction between these two groups. Throughout Josephus' books, the connection between the Zealots and the Sicarii is not always entirely clear, but when Josephus discusses Masada his use of the word "Sicarii" to describe the Jewish rebels there is quite consistent.

Prior to the beginning of the revolt, Masada was taken over by force—probably by the Sicarii (headed by Manachem) in 66 A.D., (e.g., see Cotton and Preiss 1990). In fact, this very act may have symbolized and marked the beginning of the Jewish Great Revolt.

The Sicarii in Jerusalem were involved in so much terrorist activity against Jews and others that they were forced to leave the city some time before the Roman siege there began. They fled to Masada. There, under the leadership/command of Eleazar Ben-Yair (a "tyrant" in Josephus' terminology) they remained (perhaps with some non-Sicarii who may have joined them) until the bitter end when most of them agreed to kill one another.

While the Sicarii were in Masada, it is clear that they raided nearby villages. One of the "peaks" of these raids was the attack on Ein-gedi. According to Josephus, the Sicarii on Masada attacked Ein-gedi in the following ferocious manner:

"...they came down by night, without being discovered... and overran a small city called Engaddi: - in which expedition they prevented those citizens that could have stopped them, before they could arm themselves and fight them. They also dispersed them, and cast them out of the city. As for such that could not run away, being women and children, they slew of them above seven hundred" (p. 537).

Afterward, the Sicarii raiders carried all the food supplies from Ein-gedi to Masada.

There are different versions about how long the siege of Masada lasted. Josephus does not discuss this issue. However, it is very obvious that the siege did not begin immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem. First, the fortresses of Herodium and Machaerus were conquered, and then

Lucilius Bassus (who was sent to Judea as legate) died and was replaced in command by **Flavius Silva** (who succeeded him as procurator of Judea). Silva had to gather his forces and only then launched the final attack on Masada. All these processes took time.

Most researchers seem to accept that the siege and fall of Masada only took **a few months**—Probably **from the winter of 72/73 A.D. until the following spring**—A matter of 4-6 (maybe 8) months. In fact, Roth's impressively meticulous study (1995) states:

All in all, a nine-week siege is the likely maximum, a four-week siege the likely minimum, and a siege of seven weeks the most probable length for the siege of Masada. **Postulating a siege of some seven weeks fits in well with the date given by Josephus** for the fall of the fortress, whatever calendar is being used (p. 109).

Moreover, this conclusion is supported by the recent geological attention paid to the fact that the massive siege ramp on the west side of Masada is based on a natural huge spur. If so, then the Roman army did not have to build the big siege ramp from the bottom of the mountain, but only to add the actual ramp on top of that natural spur. This means that constructing the ramp took a significantly less effort than previously assumed by some (see Gill's 1993 work).

While in Josephus's description of the siege of Jerusalem he describes rather courageous raids made by the Jewish defenders of Jerusalem against the Romans, no such descriptions are available for the siege on Masada. This is a significant omission because after Jerusalem fell, the Roman army went on to conquer three other fortresses. One was Herodium, which fell rather quickly. The other was Machaerus where the Jews put a courageous fight including raids against the Roman army. Moreover, Josephus had a clear "interest" to present the heroic fight put by the Jews so as to demonstrate just how much more heroic was the Roman army that conquered them. His failure to mention any active fights or resistance (or raids) by Masada's defenders against the Romans is not insignificant. Thus, while the impression one typically gets through the historian's description of fights, battles and struggles, is that **there was a war around Jerusalem, no such impression is projected about the Roman siege of Masada.** In other words, **there really was no "battle" around Masada.**

We must remind ourselves at this point that there are plenty of historical examples of real, remarkable and heroic "fighting to the last." For example: Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans at the pass of Thermopylae; the last stand at the Alamo; the readiness of the American commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Bastogne to "fight to end" during the German counter-attack in the Ardennes in 1944; the heroic stand of the U.S. Marines on Wake Island in 1941; the Jewish revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto, against all odds and the death of Biblical Samson together with his enemies. Thus, **using a strictly Jewish analogy, when the Sicarii were faced with the choice, they selected suicide rather than the destiny of Samson.**

What Josephus has to say about the suicide is that after the Romans entered Masada and discovered the dead bodies: "Nor could they [the Romans] do other than wonder at the courage of

their [the Sicarii] resolution, and at the immovable contempt of death which so great a number of them had shown, when they went through with such an action as that was" (p. 603). The absolute resolution and courage of the Sicarii and their act of collective suicide in Masada raised, apparently, much respect and wonder among the Romans and in Josephus Flavius. Indeed, it should. But, **the analytic jump from "respect" to "heroism" is not made by Josephus.** It was socially constructed. Indeed, elsewhere Josephus describes the Sicarii killing one another as: "Miserable men indeed they were!" (p. 603).

The unpleasant impression is that **the Sicarii on Masada, so adept at raiding nearby villages, were not really good fighters** and, in fact, avoided opportunities to fight. Josephus points out, in particular, that Eleazar Ben-Yair had to make two speeches in order to persuade his people to commit that suicide. He even "quotes" those speeches at length. The implication, obviously, is that the Jewish rebels on Masada were originally quite reluctant to commit themselves to collective suicide.

Josephus states that **there were close to a thousand Sicarii** on top of Masada. These people were not all warriors. There were women and children there, and perhaps other non-combatants. **How many actual fighters were there is unknown.** Although Josephus does not state the specific size of the 10th Roman legion, which carried out the siege on Masada, it seems safe to assume that it was probably composed of a minimum of 6,000 soldiers (the estimate found in the literature). However, the size could have reached 10,000 too.

It is imperative to emphasize that there **were seven survivors** from the collective suicide. This is an important point because the details about that last night of the Sicarii on Masada were provided by one of the women survivors.

Thus, when we carefully examine the main ingredients of Josephus's narrative about both the Great Revolt and Masada, a portrait of heroism in Masada is simply not provided. On the contrary. **The narrative conveys the story of a doomed (and questionable) revolt,** of a majestic failure and destruction of the Second Temple and of Jerusalem, of large-scale massacres of the Jews, of different factions of **Jews fighting and killing each other,** of **collective suicide (an act not viewed favorably by the Jewish faith) by a group of terrorists and assassins whose "fighting spirit" may have been questionable.** Moreover, and specifically for Masada, Josephus's implication is that it was not only the nature of the rebels there that was problematic, but their lack of a fighting spirit too. Josephus implies that the 10th Roman legion came in and put a siege around Masada. That siege was not too long and was not accompanied by any major fighting. When the Romans managed to enter the fortress they found seven survivors and the remains of the Jewish Sicarii (and perhaps some non-Sicarii, too) who had committed collective suicide. This act itself clearly instilled in both the Roman soldiers and Josephus a respect for those rebels.

From the Roman military perspective, the Masada campaign must have been an insignificant action following a very major war in Judea—a sort of a mop-up operation. It was something the Roman army had to do, but that did not involve anything too special in terms of military strategy or effort. In fact, Shatzman (1993) notes that **the Roman siege of Masada was quite standard**. Reading Josephus's narrative raises the immediate question of how could such a horrible and questionable story become such a positive symbol? After all, the heroism in the Masada narrative and in the context is not at all self evident or understood.

How Do We Know What The Masada Mythical Narrative Is?

Now that we are acquainted a bit with the historical account about Masada, the next question is to what extent are Israelis familiar with this account? How close is their knowledge of Masada to the actual historical account? More important, how do we know what these Israelis (and others) know? To discover the answers to these questions, I examined the different cultural manifestations of the account. That is, the methodological question became focused on **how cultures manufacture and transmit knowledge to their members**. In the case of Masada, that question was not difficult to answer. I made an in-depth inquiry into almost every possible cultural facet that could have references to Masada, and examined how the Masada account was described there. This examination was both historical and cross-sectional, and consisted of examining written sources (newsletters, books, pamphlets, newspapers) as well as interviews. The cultural elements that I checked were:

1. **Youth movements**. The major seven youth movements in Israel (secular and religious) were examined.
2. The use of Masada by **the pre-state Jewish underground** movements in Palestine.
3. The ways that Masada was used in the **Israeli army**.
4. The way Masada is presented in **textbooks for schools** (elementary and high), as well as in reference texts and Encyclopedias.
5. The way Masada was presented in the printed daily **media during the 1963-1965 excavations of the site** (religious and secular).

6. The way Masada is presented **to tourists** who visit the site; in printed manual tour guides; the numbers of visitors to Masada; the development of Masada as a site for tourists.

7. The way Masada is presented **in various art forms**: children's literature; adult fiction; poetry; theater; movies; pictures; sculpturing; science fiction. Examining all these areas gives us a very powerful cultural analysis as to the amount of consistency between the account given by Josephus Flavius and the nature of the presentation of Masada in the Jewish Israeli culture. Moreover, this cultural analysis also exposes the ways in which Masada was presented.

The Masada Mythical Narrative

It should come as no surprise to find out that the most obvious conclusion from the cultural analysis is that **the way Masada is presented in the various cultural manifestations that I examined is not at all consistent with the account provided by Josephus Flavius**. As compared to Josephus, the Masada mythical narrative constitutes a significant deviation from the historical account.

Three main elements from Josephus' historical account are, more or less, kept in the mythical narrative. These are:

- The Jewish rebels who took part in the Great Revolt against the Roman Empire found themselves at the end of the rebellion on Masada
- The Roman imperial army launched a siege on the mountain in order to conquer the place and capture the rebels
- When the rebels realized that there was no more hope of either winning or holding out against the Roman army, they chose to kill themselves rather than surrender and become wretched slaves.

These details can be found in nearly all forms of the mythical narrative, both written and oral. Viewed in this manner, it is indeed easy to be impressed with the heroism of the rebels on top of Masada.

Many other no less important elements from the historical account are typically omitted altogether from the mythical account. Moreover, these omissions are frequently accompanied by factually unsubstantiated, imaginary (and sometimes quite creative, one must admit) "information."

Omissions and Factually Unsubstantiated "Information" Added to the Masada Account

In the first place, the fact that the events at Masada were the **final act in a failed and disastrous revolt against the Roman Empire is not proven**. The wisdom of that revolt, and the questionable way in which it was organized and fought, are typically not spelled out explicitly. Generally added to this omission is **the fabrication that the rebels on Masada arrived there after the destruction of Jerusalem**. This is significant since it implies that these "poor heroes," who fought so hard in Jerusalem, were barely able to escape the Roman army. However, having succeeded in doing so, they chose to continue the fight elsewhere. Almost completely ignored is the fact that **the Sicarii on Masada were forced to leave the city by the other Jews in Jerusalem who had had enough of them and their leader Menachem**. The Sicarii were, in fact, forced to flee Jerusalem before the Roman army put a siege on the city. It was at this time that they found refuge on top of Masada.

Second, the true identity and nature of the "rebels" on Masada is not usually revealed. As we have seen, they were **Sicarii**, and what Josephus has to say about them is not exactly flattering. **They were a group of thieves and assassins** who killed and robbed other Jews. Very few accounts of the events mention them, or their nature. The terms generally used to describe them, such as "defenders of Masada," "fighters of Masada," and, most frequently, "**Zealots**," are deliberately deceptive. The last term - following Josephus - is simply **inaccurate**.

Third, the raids carried out by the Sicarii at Masada on nearby Jewish (?) villages, and their massacre of the settlers at Ein-ge-di, which testifies to their nature as brutal assassins, robbers, or terrorists, is almost universally ignored.

Fourth, the length of the Roman siege of Masada, most probably between a few weeks to perhaps four months, at least in accordance with Josephus, tends to be ignored. **The siege is usually described vaguely as "long" or as having "taken years,"** or else as having lasted between one to three (more typical) years.

Fifth, the fact that no battles around Masada are described by Josephus Flavius is ignored. Also ignored is the implied possibility that the Sicarii may have been less than enthusiastic about fighting the Roman army. In fact, many versions of the mythical narrative either imply or state explicitly that **those on Masada during the siege fought the Roman tenth legion**, carrying out raids on its troops, its war machines, etc. Thus, a real battle is hinted at; some creative writers have even suggested that Masada was the center of operations against the Romans. This **is pure invention**. However, given the fact that archaeological excavations have failed to provide any confirmation of a real battle, this scenario is more than likely pure fabrication. Nevertheless, while it is probable that there may have been a fight in the last stage of the siege when the Romans were actually in the process of breaching the wall, prior to that time there was no significant opposition from the besieged "heroes" of Masada.

Sixth, **attempts are made to "undo" the suicide** either by using expressions that ignore the exact nature of the act, such as "died heroically," "chose death over slavery," etc., or by emphasizing that Ben-Yair's followers killed each other and not themselves; that is, of course, except for the last person.

Seventh, the hesitation of the rebels to commit suicide and the fact that it took Eleazar Ben-Yair two speeches in order to persuade them to do so is typically disregarded. Only one speech, if any, is usually mentioned. This, of course, is much more consistent with a tale of heroism; after all, heroes do not hesitate.

Eighth, Josephus's report of seven survivors is rarely mentioned and it is often emphasized that all of those present on Masada committed suicide. Usually the whole matter of survivorship is ignored although at times mention is made of "one survivor" (an "old lady"), or of "no survivors." Once again, this approach suits the heroic theme much better: heroes do not hide underground "cowering" in fear for their own survival.

Finally, the choices left open to the rebels on Masada are usually presented as having been limited to two: surrender or death (meaning suicide). **Other possible (and glorious) alternatives, such as actually fighting to the end** (as suggested by Josippon) or concentrating forces in one spot in an attempt to create a diversion that **could have allowed for the escape of many**, including the women and children as suggested by Weiss-Rosmarin, are completely ignored. Also ignored is the possibility (albeit less desirable one) of the rebels trying to negotiate with the Romans (in fact, such a negotiation did take place at Machaerus).

Other Methods Used in Construction of Mythical Narrative

Omission and addition are not the only methods used in the social construction of the mythical narrative. Emphasis has also played an important role. For example, most sources that propagate the Masada myth present a picture of a small group of rebels against a huge Roman army. Sometimes, even figures are provided: 967 rebels against thousands (10,000-15,000) of Roman soldiers. While these figures are probably accurate, their very emphasis **tends to reinforce an element that is one of the hallmarks of modern Israeli Jewish identity—the struggle of "the few against the many"**.

If I wanted to synthesize and re-construct the Masada mythical narrative, with its preservation of true facts, its omissions and its additions, into an **ideal type** it might look something like this:

"After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, the remaining Zealots escaped to Masada. The Romans put a siege on Masada. The Zealots fought valiantly and raided the Roman positions over a period of three years (and thus Masada served as a center of a rebellion against the Romans for three years). However, when they realized that there was no longer any hope to win and that the choice was either death or wretched slavery, they all chose to kill themselves."

Thus, by preserving some elements, by ignoring, in a systematic fashion, the more problematic aspects, and by adding liberal interpretations and fabrications, the heroic Masada mythical narrative was formed.

The combined effect of the above-mentioned omissions, additions and selective emphasizing is **the creation of a heroic tale**. Moreover, this heroic tale is typically told on the site itself, in the presence of the ancient ruins. Typically, **it is told as part of a swearing-in ceremony (in the army)**; a long and arduous trek in the Judean desert or some other educational activity. This method of combining the experiential part of an actual visit to Masada with a logically constructed heroic tale, helped into being the suspension of disbelief and the transmission of the Masada mythical narrative.

When And Why Was The Masada Mythical Narrative Created?

It is not too difficult to establish the fact that **the Masada mythical narrative was created by secular Zionism**. (Religious Jews, Zionists and non-Zionists were, to a very large extent, not part in the creation of the myth. Many even objected fiercely to the myth). It is clear that the Masada mythical narrative began **to be created at the turn of the century**. It received a big boost in the 1920s. Before the 1920s Masada, as an heroic tale, was used in a debate between two famous secular Zionist ideological leaders (Achad Ha'am and Berdyczewski). In 1923 the excellent Hebrew translation of Josephus by Dr. Simchoni was published. In 1927 Y. Lamdan published his most popular Masada poem. Moreover, two key and powerful secular Zionists who were promoting Masada as a heroic tale, Shmaria Guttman and Prof. Yoseph Klosner, were operating in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Clearly, the crystallizing Zionist movement was desperately looking for heroic Jewish tales. It needed these tales for a few reasons:

- To counteract the poisonous European anti-Semitic image of the Jew as non-heroic
- To create a new secular Jewish consciousness and identity
- To establish a strong and unquestionable bonding of the Jews to Palestine (then) and Israel (later).

The need for this bond became very acute in the early 1940s when the threat of a Nazi invasion of Palestine was imminent (from Rommel's Korpus Afrika). These years saw the crystallization of the Masada mythical narrative in its most powerful form. The creation of the myth then, no doubt, was justified from a functional point of view as it helped many members of the Yishuv to face some truly formidable historical challenges. Thus, the Masada mythical narrative has become a major and important ingredient in shaping the national and personal identity of the new secular and Zionist Jew—proud, rooted in his/her land and willing, indeed able, to fight for this land to the end if necessary. Clearly, the Masada mythical narrative has a strong generational effect for some generations who were influenced by it the most (including that of the author). This identity connection is exactly the element that explains the negative emotional reaction stirred by connecting the word "Masada" with "Myth" and thus implying something that is untrue.

The archaeological excavations of the early 1960s headed by Prof. Yigael Yadin helped to solidify the myth. However, following the Six Days War (1967) the opening up of new sites as well as some profound changes in Israeli society, created a process where, starting in the late 1960s, Masada lost its sacred place in the secular Zionists pantheon of heroism. Basically, Masada was transformed from a shrine of heroism and a sacred place for pilgrimage into a tourist attraction. The overwhelming majority of people visiting Masada these days are non-Israelis.

Notes

(1) This paper is based on my 1995 book: *The Masada Myth. Collective Memory And Mythmaking In Israel*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

(2) When a reference to Josephus Flavius is made, the text used is *The Complete Works Of Josephus*, by Josephus Flavius, Translated into English by Wm. Whiston. I used the 1981 edition published by Kregel Publications (Grand Rapids, Michigan). I deliberately used this edition for several reasons. The small group of professional scholars who specialize in Josephus use a reference system of book and paragraph numbers, which I decided not to employ for two main reasons.

First, most naive readers are unaware of this system (which is confined to the above scholars) and its use in a publication intended for a more general audience will surely confuse the reader. I thus preferred to use a text that is easily available and a citation mode that is accessible to all.

Second, uncovering the myth of Masada requires that we attempt to know what the myth makers at the time knew. Hence which version of Josephus was used is a crucial issue. The edition used above was clearly used by myth makers, as well as Simchoni's translation. The fact is that without Josephus we know very little. **Virtually all our knowledge of the period and the relevant events is based on Josephus's writings.** He is--fortunately or unfortunately--the main, and in most respects the only, historical source. If Josephus had not written a history, there would "be" no Masada, Sicarii,

revolt, and so forth. I thus take Josephus's version as a fundamental baseline, regardless of its "truth" value (unless, of course, one can come up with persuasive arguments as to why what he says, or which parts of what he says, are wrong.

Unquestionably, as an historical source, Josephus provides a problematic account. But, it is the only historical account we have. Historically speaking, it is the only detailed "truth" we have about the Jewish Great Revolt and Masada.

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