

Our First Trip to Israel (and Jordan)

By Larry Martin

Part 2 - Masada

[Note: Part 2 continues an account of the trip my wife and I took to Israel, October 14 -28, 2017. Pictures from the internet have a red border; all the others were taken with one of my cameras. A chronology of the trip is provided in Part 1.]

Logistics

Over the years we have taken a dozen Road Scholar trips, all in the U.S. or Central America; this was our first RS trip overseas. Considering it covered almost two weeks, five hotels and two countries, we were blown away by the superb logistics. Meals, rooms, motor coach drivers and guides were all in synch, and the only thing we had to do was show up on time. The bus usually left the hotel for the day's excursions between 7:30 and 8, and only rarely did our guide have to go look for some laggard before we took off.

Our guide in Israel is originally from Maryland. He moved to Tel Aviv after college, joined the Israeli Army and became a citizen; he has lived there ever since. Now 52, Jonathan is fluent in Hebrew, and probably knows as much about local history as anyone native born. To become an Israeli guide you have to do two years of course work and field trips, and then pass exams. He's been guiding tourists for about 10 years and knows all the angles, what's worth seeing and what's not. He was always engaging, ate all his meals with us, answered all questions and never hesitated to say if he didn't know something. It is no exaggeration to state he made the difference between a run of the mill If-It's-Tuesday-This-Must-Be-Belgium excursion and the trip of a lifetime.

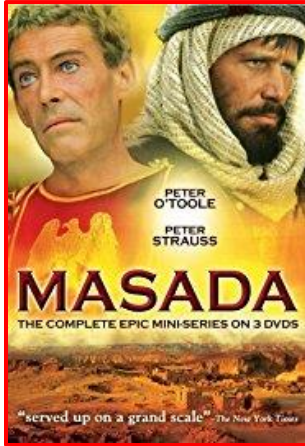
After two full days in Jerusalem, we boarded the motor coach, all baggage loaded, and at 8 am took off for Masada.



Leaving the Hotel Prima Kings, in Jerusalem

October 18, 2017

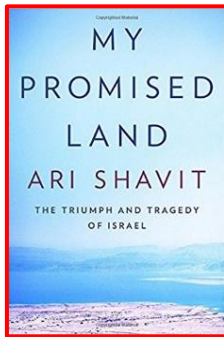
Most people have probably heard of Masada, the mountaintop where, in 73 A.D., close to a thousand Jews formed a suicide pact rather than succumb to a Roman assault and become enslaved. The story was made into a TV mini-series in 1981, starring Peter O'Toole as the conquering Roman general Flavius Silva, and Peter Strauss as leader of the Jewish Zealots, Eleazar Ben Yair.



Ben Yair's people were the last free Jewish holdouts in Judea, the rest having been conquered after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple (70 A.D.). Though isolated on the mountain top, their mere existence meant the Romans had to conquer them. The mountain or plateau, with its steep walls, was near impregnable, so the Roman army (estimated at 8-9 thousand) began a siege in 72 A.D. They finally reached the mountain top in April of 73 A.D.

When it became clear the Jews could not hold off the Roman army, history states they drew lots to see who would kill whom, until there was one last man standing, who then killed himself. When Romans got in they found almost everyone dead. As there was still plenty of food and water, they knew the Jews could have held out but chose death over slavery.

This history was all fairly obscure (to the general public) until the 1940s, when Israeli pioneers began to explore the site with more than an interest in archeology. In *My Promised Land*, Ari Shavit writes:



...until the end of the Arab revolt [1939] and the beginning of World War II in 1939, Masada did not fully capture the minds of mainstream Zionism. Only nationalistic fringe groups admired its suicidal zealots...

Shavit tells the story of a pioneer youth hike to Masada in 1942: 46 students led by 33-year-old Shmaryahu Gutman. Gutman knows what is happening in Europe, and when the group returns to Jerusalem he publicizes the hike and the story of the Jewish martyrdom on Masada. Another youth trek to the mountain top, 200-strong, takes place a few months later. About the situation in 1942, Shavit writes:

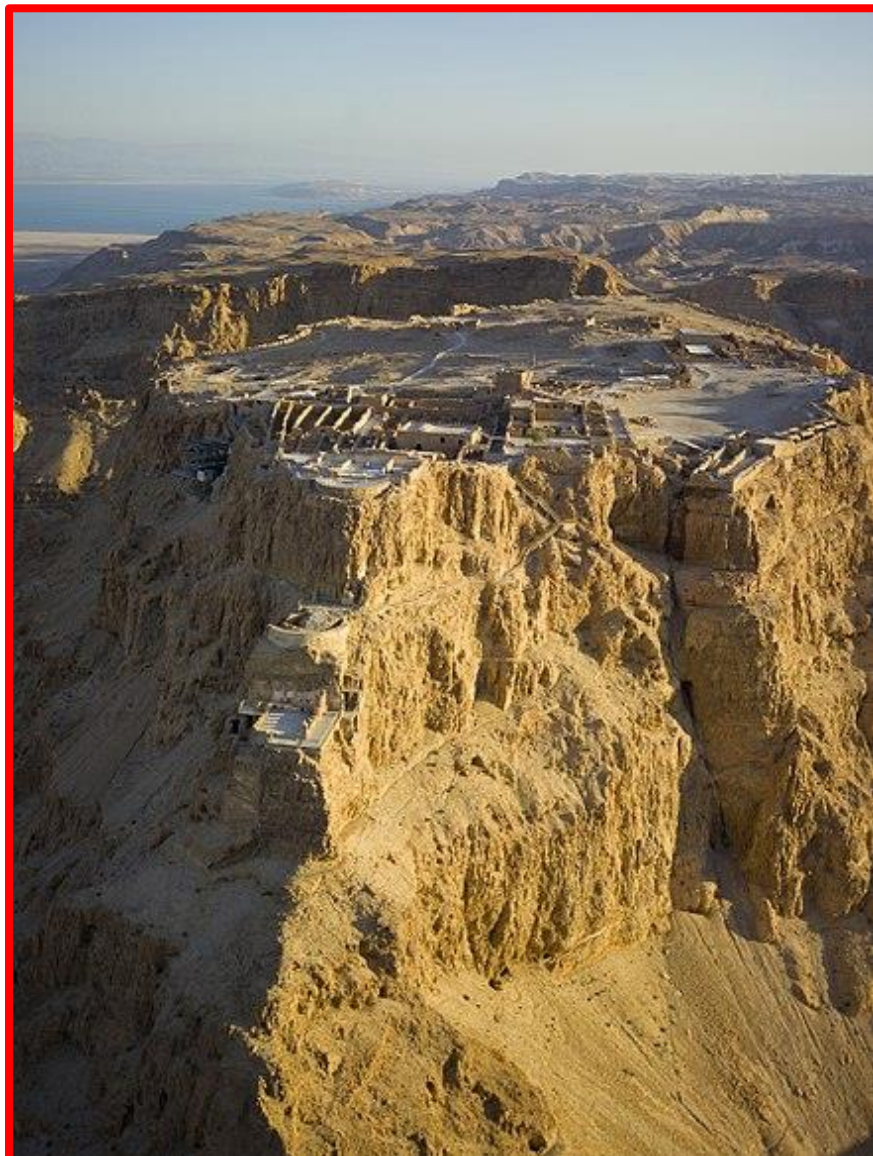
"...with Rommel at the gate, with Europe's Jewry in ghettos...Gutman's gospel of Masada spreads like fire in the woods. More and more youth movements ascend Masada...Masada overtakes the public discourse. Within a few months, the ethos of Masada becomes the formative ethos of the young nation. Masada is now at the heart of the Zionist narrative, defining its new Palestine-born generation."

And so it is today, at least from this tourist's perspective. Masada is now a National Park, and one of the top destinations in any Israel trip (along with Jerusalem's Old City, the Dead Sea and Tel Aviv's beaches). It is only a mile or so from the Dead Sea, and a two-hour bus ride from Jerusalem (see map).





Inside the Visitors' Center: a model of Masada and adjacent topography. Masada is the plateau on left.



Aerial view of Masada, looking east toward the Dead Sea

As with practically every ancient site we visited, the story of Masada is more complex and conjectural than you are likely to read in a travel book, or hear on your tour. Jonathan did his best to answer our incessant questions, which I'm sure he's heard a thousand times. Once there I wished I had studied up before visiting.

If nearly a thousand people lived on top of this mountain, how did they get food and water? They grew the food on the mountain, as the soil was fertile. Water came down via aqueducts to the base of the mountain after winter rains, and was brought up to cisterns by mule packs. When the Romans first began their siege the Jews had enough food and water to last several years.

How did the Romans reach the mountain top? They built a giant dirt ramp against the western face of the plateau, which took about a year to construct. Once at the wooden gate they used a giant battering ram to break through.



If everyone died before the Romans reached the top of the mountain, how do we know about it? From a history of the period written by one Flavius Josephus, a Jewish Roman scholar. In *The Jewish War* Josephus recounted the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation (A.D. 66-70), and then the siege of Masada in A.D. 73.

How did Josephus know what happened? Two women and five children hid from the others and survived. They told the Romans what had taken place. Josephus interviewed the Roman leaders of the assault.

After Masada I came to view every ancient site in two different ways: 1) as a place worth visiting for its vista or architecture or some historical context, and 2) as a place with its own legend, one often layered with assumptions and intense scholarly debate about the details.

1) **Masada as tourist site.** Even without the history it is impressive. There is path up the mountain from the visitors' center, but in the interest of time (the path takes a good hour) our group took the cable car. At the top are the ruins, dating from both the siege era (A.D. 73) and later Byzantine construction. The views from the mountain top are spectacular. Here are a few pictures from the visit.

Cable car to top of Masada



Above, picture taken from cable car; you can see hikers on the path up the mountain.

Below, left: Two tourists at the top, their backs to the Dead Sea. The mountain top is 63 meters above sea level, but the Dead Sea is 400 meters below sea level, so we are 463 meters (1528 ft.) above the Dead Sea.

Below, right. Looking down from the top, the Dead Sea in the distance. The area of the rectangle and wall in front is shown enlarged in the next photo.



The rectangle on right was one of 11 Roman camps built at the base of Masada. Below the rectangle is part of the wall the Romans built surrounding the mountain, to keep the Jewish holdouts from escaping.





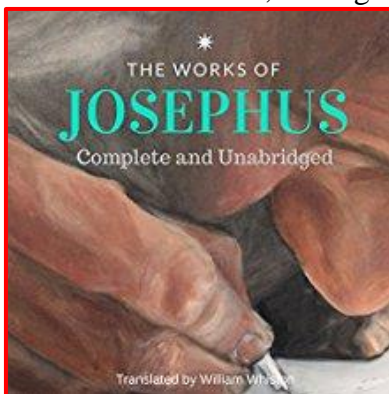
Model of Masada structures before the siege; the built up areas occupy one end of the plateau

Below, left. Looking away from display area of the model, toward actual ruins. Below right, another view of the ruins. To the untrained eye (i.e., most tourists) they are just a bunch of ancient walls.



Masada as legend. The only written history comes from Josephus' account. For \$0.99 you can download *The Works of Josephus* to your Kindle. It was translated from the original Greek by William Whiston, an English theologian (1667 – 1752). Included in *The Works* is Josephus' 7-volume account known as *The Jewish War*, published in A.D. 78.

The Jewish War starts with the period of the Maccabees and goes through the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and then the fall of Masada in A.D. 73. Below is the first page of one of the chapters dealing with Masada. *Sicarii* refers to the Jewish zealots who fought the Romans in the province of Judea. The Sicarii carried sicae, or small daggers, concealed in their cloaks, hence their name. Again, Silva is the general of the Roman army besieging Masada, and Eleazar is the leader of the Jews who gives a speech convincing everyone to participate in mass murder-suicide.



CHAPTER 8.***Concerning Masada And Those Sicarii Who Kept It; And How Silva Betook Himself To Form The Siege Of That Citadel. Eleazar's Speeches To The Besieged.***

1. When Bassus was dead in Judea, Flavius Silva succeeded him as procurator there; who, when he saw that all the rest of the country was subdued in this war, and that there was but one only strong hold that was still in rebellion, he got all his army together that lay in different places, and made an expedition against it. This fortress was called Masada. It was one Eleazar, a potent man, and the commander of these Sicarii, that had seized upon it. He was a descendant from that Judas who had persuaded abundance of the Jews, as we have formerly related, not to submit to the taxation when Cyrenius was sent into Judea to make one; for then it was that the Sicarii got together against those that were willing to submit to the Romans, and treated them in all respects as if they had been their enemies, both by plundering them of what they had, by driving away their cattle, and by setting fire to their houses; for they

Locatio

According to Josephus, when the Romans entered the fortress, they found it to be “a citadel of death.” The Jewish rebels had set all the buildings but the food storerooms ablaze and had committed mass suicide, declaring “a glorious death ... preferable to a life of infamy.”

When these “Jewish Zealots” were trapped on top of Masada with nowhere to run, Josephus tells us they believed “it [was] by the will of God, and by necessity, that [they] are to die.” Two women, who survived the suicide by hiding inside a cistern along with five children, repeated Eleazar Ben Yair’s exhortations to his followers (prior to the mass suicide) verbatim to the Romans:

"Since we long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God Himself, Who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice ... We were the very first that revolted, 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."

— *Eleazar ben Yair*

Is this a true and factual account? The women repeated the speech to the Romans, and they repeated it to Josephus, who then set it down word for word? My skepticism about this history first surfaced when reading about Masada in *My Promised Land*. Shavit, after telling us the whole story of how Masada came to symbolize the Jewish struggle, and not once mentioning possible historical inaccuracy, writes: (italics added):

As it turns out, 1942 is far worse than anyone could have imagined. In this year, 2.7 million Jews are murdered by the Nazis. Within twelve months, every sixth Jew in the world is exterminated and every fourth European Jew dies of disease, hunger, shooting, or gas. The Jewish people will never recover from the blow. Zionism will never overcome the loss.

But the ethos of Masada will live on. The ethos forged in Gutman's January 1942 seminar will grow stronger and stronger as the horrors of 1942 are revealed. *So those who ask whether the ethos was based merely on myth ask the wrong question.* It is not Ben Yair who defined Masada, it is Gutman. What matters is not the event that did or did not take place on the fringe of history in A.D. 73, but the event that does take place in the locus of history in A.D. 1942. For the Masada ethos put forth by Gutman would define the Zionism of the 1940s and would decide the fate of 1948 and would shape the future of Israel.

Myth? Shavit throws in the word as if winking at the reader, that the whole story is somehow not reliable. I decided to do some google searching for "the truth."

Shaye J. D. Cohen (born 1948) is a Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard, and an ordained rabbi. In 1982 he published "Masada: Literary Tradition, Archaeological Remains, and the Credibility of Josephus" (Journal of Jewish Studies: Essays in honour of Yigael Yadin Vol. XXXIII, pp. 385-405 Spring-Autumn 1982.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/masada.html>).

According to Cohen, archaeology shows that Josephus' account is "incomplete and inaccurate." Josephus only writes of one palace, archaeology reveals two, his description of the northern palace contains several inaccuracies, and he gives exaggerated figures for the height of the walls and towers. Josephus' account is contradicted by the "skeletons in the cave, and the numerous separate fires". After laying out all the inconsistencies of Josephus' account vs. the archeological record, Cohen writes:

Josephus needs no apology for these inventions and embellishments since practically all the historians of antiquity did such things. But if an apology were demanded, Josephus could respond that his narrative required inventiveness. If, upon storming the fortress, the Romans had discovered that the Sicarii had slain themselves, neither Josephus nor Flavius Silva nor anyone else could have known exactly what had transpired, since all the participants in the event were dead. Even the seven survivors, who are said to have reported to the Romans "everything that was said and done", could have known little. They were not present (though some might have been eavesdropping) when Eleazar exhibited his oratory--only the "manliest of his comrades" were invited. Before or during the actual killing they hid. Who could have told the Romans about the ten men drawn by lot and about the actions of the last man who set fire to the palace? Certainly not the women, safely ensconced in their cistern. If the Sicarii committed suicide according to Josephus' description, then that description must be a combination of fiction (inspired by literary and polemical motives) and conjecture.

As I write this I ponder how much we really "know" about what happened 2000 years ago in the land called Judea. Not just Masada, but Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Bethany, Mount Nebo and many other sites we visited. So much seems to be based on legend, or hearsay, or oral history many years removed from when the actual events took place. But I don't want to sound like a tourist curmudgeon. Historic skepticism should hold no one back from visiting these ancient sites. The fact that the Masada story is likely mythical does not diminish the site; if anything, it makes it even more interesting. I came away impressed. If you have not been to Israel, and plan a trip, do not pass up Masada.

After Masada our bus took us up north, along the western coast of the Dead Sea, to the caves of Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered in the late 1940s. Then it was on to the resort Ein Gat on the eastern shore of Sea of Galilee, an area controlled by Israel.

Galilee is not really a sea but a large lake, around which are historic ruins, churches and kibbutzim. On October 19, we toured the Roman Ruins of Capernaum, the Kibbutz Degania Bet, and Nazareth's Church of the Annunciation. All interesting and worth a visit, but what we learned at Degania Bet is worth recounting foremost, for it says much about the current situation in Israel.



Next: Part 3 – Sea of Galilee and Kibbutz Degania Bet