

# Judaism and masada assignment

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MASADA: The Story of Martyrdom Masada comes from the Hebrew mezuda meaning " fortress " or " stronghold. Today it is one of the Jewish people's greatest symbols. Israeli soldiers take an oath there: " Masada shall not fall again. " Next to Jerusalem, it is the most popular destination of tourists visiting Israel. It is strange that a place known only because 960 Jews committed suicide there in the first century C. E. should become a modern symbol of Jewish survival.

Let me examine the story of the fall of Masada and to do so I will begin to examine the events that led to the uprising and ultimately the fall of the fortress. Wars between the Jews and Romans: the War of 66-70 CE: There have been several military engagements between the Jews and the Romans around that period which led ultimately to the destruction of the Temple. Let me just give a short survey after which I will go into some detail. ??? In 63 BCE the Roman general Pompey conquered Judea In 6 CE, the emperor Augustus deposed king Archelaus, and established the province of Judea , which became a prefecture of Rome ??? in 66, a serious rebellion started, which led to the destruction of the Temple (September 70); this war was described by Flavius Josephus in his Jewish War a little later, the Romans took the fortress Masada (in 74). Causes of the War of 66-70 The obvious reason for this war was the religious tension between the Jewish people and the Roman government.

The Roman emperor Nero needed money, and ordered Gessius Florus, the governor of Jerusalem to confiscate it from the Temple treasure. Jews made fun of him and started a collection for " the poor governor ". Enraged by this event the Romans arrested innocent Jews and crucified them. Of course this

was tactless and brutal, but it would not have led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple if there had not been deeper causes. The real reason for the war was the poverty of the Jewish peasants. Sixty years of Roman taxes had meant only one thing: the Jews financed the Romans wars.

Also in Jerusalem many people had become unemployed when the renovation of the temple was finished in 63. The peasants and artisans had a reason to fight, and they were willing to do so. On top of it most people considered the high priesthood corrupt. The war of 66-70 was not only a war between the Romans and Jews; it was also a class struggle. The incident with the collection plate set fire to the powder. The high priest Ananias and the Jewish prince Marcus Julius Agrippa tried to calm matters but they were no longer in control of the situation.

While envoys were on their way to Nero, one of the Roman garrisons in Jerusalem was annihilated. War had become inevitable. Judaism of that period was divided into a number of denominations, each with differing perspectives. As we see later the nine hundred defenders of Masada against the Romans were members of a radical Jewish sect known by their enemies as the Sicarii, meaning literally "dagger-men," (Latin sica = dagger). The Sicarii were quite distinct from the three major Jewish denominations of that period??? the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.

Josephus, our main source of knowledge of the Jewish wars and religious sects around the time, places their origins in the failed rebellion of Judah of Galilee against the Romans in A. D. 6. Josephus describes Judah as a scholar and leader of a religious sect which maintained that paying tribute to Rome

was a violation of Jewish religious law. Israel, he said, should have no king but God. Judah was killed in his rebellion, after which his followers were scattered but not completely destroyed. Some fifty years later the Sicarii reappeared under the leadership of the religious teacher Menachem, grandson of Judah.

The Jewish high priests of the day were seen as collaborators with the Romans, and it was therefore permitted to use violence to remove such illegitimate rulers. The Sicarii began agitation in the late 50s, becoming prominent only in the 60s, when they began to use murder, kidnapping and terrorism to support their cause. Their efforts were not mainly directed against the Romans, but against Jewish “ collaborators” such as priests of the temple, Sadducees, Herodians, and other wealthy elites who had profited from working with the Romans.

According to Josephus, the Sicarii would hide short daggers under their cloaks, mingle with crowds at the great festivals, murder their victims, and then disappear into the crowd during the subsequent panic. Their most successful assassination was that of the high priest Jonathan. Although the Sicarii have sometimes been confused with the Jewish Zealots??? a political group which led the rebellion against Rome??? modern research has shown that the Sicarii were an entirely different religious sect, who were frequently at odds with the more numerous Zealots. The Sicarii did not begin the great rebellion against Rome in A. D. 66, which was initially lead by Eleazar , the captain of the Temple guard and the son of Ananias the high priest. When the revolt against Rome was underway, however, the Sicarii quickly joined the rebellion, capturing Herod’s old fortress of Masada from its small Roman

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garrison. Menachem and the Sicarii plundered the armory at Masada and marched on Jerusalem, where they allied with the Zealots against the Roman troops.

With the Romans temporarily expelled from Jerusalem, relations between the Sicarii, the Zealots, and other rebel groups quickly soured. Menachem attempted to seize authority over the entire rebellion by having himself crowned as the messiah-king in the Temple. Most of the other Jews were outraged by this act, refusing to accept Menachem's pretensions. The Sicarii were attacked and defeated by Eleazar, the captain of the temple guard; Menachem was captured, tortured, and put to death with many of his followers.

The surviving Sicarii, under the leadership of Menachem's relative Eleazar ben Ya'ir, fled to their stronghold of Masada, refusing further participation in the Jewish rebellion against Rome. Indeed, during the subsequent four years of the war between Jews and Romans, the only major military action of the Sicarii was to plunder Jewish villages near Masada, including the massacre of seven hundred Jewish men, women and children at Ein-Gedi. The fall of Masada It was Herod the Great who fortified Masada between 37 and 31 BCE as a refuge for himself in the event of a revolt.

In 66 CE, at the beginning of the First Jewish-Roman War against the Roman Empire, the Sicarii as mentioned earlier took Masada from the Roman's stationed there. In 72 CE, the Roman governor of Iudea, Flavius Silva marched against Masada with the Roman legion X and laid siege to the fortress. After failed attempts to breach the wall, they built a wall against the

western face of the plateau, using thousands of tons of stones and beaten earth. The rampart was complete in the spring of 73, after approximately three months of siege, allowing the Romans to finally breach the wall of the fortress on.

When they entered the fortress, however, the Romans discovered that its 936 inhabitants had set all the buildings but the food storerooms on fire and committed mass suicide rather than face certain capture, defeat, slavery or execution by their enemies. The little information we have about the final hours of Masada comes from a man mentioned already before and whom the Jews there considered a traitor and happily would have killed: Flavius Josephus a Jewish Roman historian. He wrote the history of the Jewish revolt against Rome and included an extensive section on Masada's fall.

According to Josephus, two women and five children managed to hide themselves during the mass suicide, and it was from one of these women that he heard an account of Elazar ben Yair's final speech. In his speech Elazar could not accept that the main reason the revolt had failed was because Rome's army was superior. Instead, he dwelt on his belief that the G'd had turned against the Jewish people. Finally, he came to following conclusion: " Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery, and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually. Elazar ordered that all the Jews' possessions except food be destroyed, for "[the food] will be a testimonial when we are dead that we were not subdued for want of necessities; but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery. " After this speech, the men killed their wives and

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children, and then each other. A few questions come to my mind after reading the passages Josephus wrote. He does not record any attempts by the Sicarii to counterattack during the building of the wall by the Romans.

In other parts of his momentous work he did record a raid on a nearby Jewish settlement called Ein-Gedi during the siege, where the Sicarii killed 700 of the inhabitants. Some historians believe that as the Romans did use Jewish slaves to build the rampart, the Rebels were reluctant to kill their fellow Jews. However as the Sicarii believed that Jews who did not belong to their sect could be robbed and killed with impunity this reason seems to be far-fetched.

Josephus also says that Eleazar ordered his men to destroy everything except the foodstuffs to show that the defenders retained the ability to live, and chose the time of their death over slavery but archaeological

excavations show that storerooms which contained provisions were burnt. Another problem with Josephus's version is that he reported that as Judaism strongly discourages suicide the defenders had drawn lots and killed each other in turn, down to the last man, who would be the only one to actually take his own life. This account, too, may be at issue, since Judaism also discourages murder and some historians believe the suicide account to be an invention by Josephus. Another view to support Josephus argues that this text does not deal really with suicide and murder, but martyrdom (and human sacrifice). Furthermore, in some instances Josephus claims that taking one's life and the life of others under certain circumstances was considered commendable not only at Masada, but in Gamala, a city in the Golan in which in 67, according to Josephus, was under siege from the Romans at <https://assignbuster.com/judaism-and-masada-assignment/>

least five thousand Jews hurled themselves to their deaths rather than be killed by the Romans (VI, I, 9).

In other places, however, such as at Yodefat Josephus speaks forcefully against suicide: ?? . . . It may also be said that it is a manly act for one to kill himself. No. Certainly, but a most unmanly one: as I should esteem that pilot to be an arrant coward who, out of fear of a storm, should sink his ship of his own accord. " (III, VIII, 5) adding that according to the law the bodies of those who kill themselves are not to be buried until sun set. He nevertheless participated in the lottery to determine the order of death.

He did speak out here against suicide as he himself didn't commit it and surrendered to the enemy. (See footnote 1). As " suicide " is the central theme of Masada, let me here just briefly elaborate on the Jewish view on suicide. Surprisingly enough, there is no clear law against suicide in the Bible or the Talmud. Perhaps suicide was so rare that there was no need for such a law. The Bible mentions six cases of suicide: (1) Abimelech son of Gideon (Judg. 9: 54); (2) Samson (Judg. 16: 25); (3) Saul (1 Sam 31: 3 and 1 Chron. 10: 3); (4) Saul's armor-bearer (1 Sam. 31: 5 and 1 Chron. 0: 5); (5) Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17: 23); (6) Zimri (1 Kings 16: 18). Let us examine two of the bible cases, a case mentioned in the Talmud and some cases from recent history, before going back to the case of Masada. In Judges, Samson declares, " Let my soul perish with the Philistines" as he pulls down the columns supporting the temple. We can view his death in the context of vanquishing the enemy and it should be similar to a soldier who gives his life fighting for his country, clearly not a suicide as that term is normally understood. The second instance appears in Samuel II.

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Ahithofel , who sided with Absalom against David, discovers that the rebellion has failed and kills himself. Ahitophel is clearly assigned a bad role in the Biblical narrative and his behavior can hardly be regarded as normative. Indeed, the Talmud Sanhedrin 90-b states that Ahithofel does not have a share in the world to come. As to Saul's taking his life it can be said that Saul, as leader of the besieged Jewish forces, felt that were he captured alive by the Philistines, the torture and public humiliation would have a devastating impact on combat morale.

He thus took his own life to protect the overall war effort. Another interpretation could be that Saul was afraid that, as a result of Philistine torture, he would be coerced into idolatrous worship. Since a Jew must be willing to give up his life before submitting to idolatry one can argue that one may even actively commit suicide to avoid the greater evil of apostasy or conversion. Nevertheless with either of these interpretations, pain and suffering alone, no matter how severe, do not give justification for suicide in the absence of " combat necessity" or " religious persecution. Some other instances of recorded suicide: The Babylonian Talmud in Gittin (57b) records that a number of young Jewish children captured by the Romans during the capture of Jerusalem jumped off a ship and drowned. The Talmud praises their act as saintly. The context of the passage indicates, however, that the children would be subject to sexual abuse (including homosexual activity). Since sexual offenses are recognized as among those for which a Jew must give his life, this incident falls under the " religious persecution" rubric.

Later in history during the crusades, a number of Jewish communities committed mass suicide rather than be captured by Christian troops. The <https://assignbuster.com/judaism-and-masada-assignment/>

most famous of these was the suicide of 500 Jews in York. Here too, the rationale was the prevention of forcible conversion to Christianity due to inability to withstand torture. Back to our story of Masada where the group of zealots led by Elazer Ben Yair, realizing that their situation was hopeless, took their own lives rather than surrender to the hands of the Romans. We can here have two interpretations.

To the extent that the suicide was “political”, i. e. , better to be dead than surrender, which is the way the story is commonly interpreted, it is generally regarded as halachically improper. To the extent the decision was taken to avoid torture and to avoid forcible religious conversion, the act would have halachic sanction based on the Saul precedent mentioned above. As we have to rely solely on Josephus account and we have no information to either the halachic authorities, if any, who advised the zealots or the actual deliberations within the fortress, we can never know for sure.

How much of the Masada story then is history and how much is myth? There are two major sources we can refer to in order to analyze this question. The first is the only contemporary account of the siege written by Josephus. The second is the archaeological evidence that was unearthed by the Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin during his major excavation of the site between 1963 and 1965. Both sources agree on the basic storyline: Jewish rebels seized the fortress and the fact that there was a siege is also beyond doubt. From this point, however, the “facts” are open to interpretation.

Were the defenders of Masada a group of religious zealots who fought a heroic but doomed guerrilla war against an overwhelmingly superior

adversary? Josephus's account does not reflect this view. In fact he shows nothing but contempt for the defenders of the fortress, Sicarii ??? an extremist group according to him that committed murder in order to obtain political objectives. Regarding the ways of the siege, Josephus tells us that the Roman general Silva set his army to work moving thousands of tons of earth and stone to construct a wall 375 high.

Excavations at the site by General Yadin, however, indicate that Josephus may be mistaken or deliberately misleading on this point. As any visitor today can see there is an existing rock that the Roman's used as a foundation for their construction. This meant they only had to add some 25 to 30 feet to this natural element in order to elevate the ramp to the level of the fortress' walls. The time required to accomplish this would have been significantly less than building it from the ground up. So this must have had an influence on the length of the siege itself.

Rather than being a long and brave resistance, the whole episode may have been over in as little a month. Josephus was also specific about the number of people besieged at Masada ??? 967 men, women and children. He also states that with the exception of two women and five children who hid themselves in the caverns beneath the citadel that they all died. He is just as specific about where they died; the royal palace. Yadin's excavations uncovered the remains of only 28 people, however, and of these only three were discovered under the debris of the palace.

The remainders were discovered in a cave at the base of the cliff. The whereabouts of the remaining bodies remains a mystery. Wherever the truth

lies, the Masada story still reminds us strongly today as a lasting symbol of the Jewish state's struggle for existence and of human courage in the face of insurmountable opposition. What bothers me personally is that the Masada episode is not mentioned in the Talmud. Why did the rabbis choose to ignore the courageous attitude and tragic fate of the last fighters in the Jewish rebellion against Rome?

I suspect there are two reasons the Talmud omits the story of Masada. First, many rabbis still felt a persistent anger toward the extremist Zealots who died at Masada. We know that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had to flee Jerusalem secretly to avoid being killed by the sort of people who died there. Moreover, at a time when the rabbis were desperately trying to rebuild Judaism that could survive without a Temple and without a state, they hardly were interested in glorifying the mass suicide of Jews who believed that life without sovereignty was not worth living.

The Masada Story in Sefer Yossippon is a tenth century Hebrew translation of a fourth century Christian, Latin version of Josephus. Although it was made in southern Italy, it was considered by Jews to have been the original Hebrew of Josephus and studied carefully by the leading rabbis of the middle ages such as Rashi and Meir of Rothenburg. Yossippon was translated into many other languages including Arabic, Ethiopian, as well as the languages of Europe. This popular version more accessible than Josephus's Greek contains some departures from its source.

In particular, the mass suicide is missing and in its place, the Jewish men kill their families, describing them as ritual sacrifices. As the memory of the

actual site faded, so too did the accounts of Josephus and Yossippon. It was only in the nineteenth century with the rediscovery of both the place and the account of Josephus that interest was renewed in the story. Popular interest reached a passion during the archeological digs there from 1963 to 1965 led by General Yigael Yadin. The Masada Complex

In about 1963 the expressions “ Masada Complex” and “ Masada Syndrome” began to be used to describe the attitude that Israel must face on its own insurmountable odds. Secretary of State Rogers used the expression, to which Golda Meir responded: “ You say that we have a Masada complex. . . It is true we do have a Masada complex. We have a pogrom complex. We have a Hitler complex. ” Books Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* ( 1995) Ben-Yehuda, Nachman. *Sacrificing Truth: Archaeology and the Myth of Masada*. Amherst, N. Y. Humanity Books. 2002. Wasserstein, Abraham, ed. 1974, *Flavius Josephus: Selections from his Works*. New York: The Viking Press. Yadin, Yigael and Gerald Gottlieb. 1969, *The Story of Masada*. New York: Random House, Inc. Yadin, Yigael. *Masada: Herod’s Fortress and the Zealots Last Stand*. NY: Welcome Rain. 1998 “ Zealots. ” Microsoft(R) Encarta 98 Encyclopedia, (c) 2005-2007 Microsoft Corporation. Berel Wein, 1995, *Echoes of Glory*, Shaar Press Articles Shaye Cohen, “ Masada: Literary Tradition, Archaeological Remains, and the Credibility of Josephus,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982).

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The Evolution of the Masada Myth," Judaism 28 (1979) Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz, Physician ??? Assisted Suicide: A halachic approach, Journal of Jewish Law Daniel C. Peterson, Who were the Sicarii? 2004, Meridian Magazine As the writings of Josephus Flavius are the basis of the story of Masada as well as of the general history of the Jews of that period, I include here a complete bibliography of his works.

Antiquities of the Jews Preface to the Antiquities of the Jews Book I — From Creation to the Death of Isaac Book II — From the Death of Isaac to the Exodus out of Egypt Book III — From the Exodus out of Egypt to the Rejection of the Generation Book IV — From the Rejection of that Generation to the Death of Moses Book V — From the Death of Moses to the Death of Eli Book VI — From the Death of Eli to the Death of Saul Book VII — From the Death of Saul to the Death of David Book VIII — From the Death of David to the Death of Ahab

Book IX — From the Death of Ahab to the Captivity of the Ten Tribes Book X — From the Captivity of the Ten Tribes to the First Year of Cyrus Book XI — From the First Year of Cyrus to the Death of Alexander the Great Book XII — From the Death of Alexander the Great to the Death of Judas Maccabeus Book XIII — From the Death of Judas Maccabeus to the Death of Queen Alexandra Book XIV — From the Death of Queen Alexandra to the Death of Antigonus Book XV — From the Death of Antigonus to the Finishing of the Temple by Herod Book XVI — From the Finishing of the Temple by Herod to the Death of Alexander and Aristobulus Book XVII — From the Death of Alexander and Aristobulus to the Banishment of Archelaus Book XVIII — From the Banishment of Archelaus to the Departure of the Jews from Babylon Book <https://assignbuster.com/judaism-and-masada-assignment/>

XIX — From the Departure of the Jews from Babylon to Fadus the Roman Procurator  
Book XX — From Fadus the Procurator to Florus War of the Jews  
Preface to the War of the Jews

Book I — From the Taking of Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes to the Death of Herod the Great  
Book II — From the Death of Herod till Vespasian was sent to subdue the Jews by Nero  
Book III — From Vespasian's coming to Subdue the Jews to the Taking of Gamala  
Book IV — From the Siege of Gamala to the Coming of Titus to besiege Jerusalem  
Book V — From the Coming of Titus to besiege Jerusalem to the Great Extremity to which the Jews were reduced  
Book VI — From the Great Extremity to which the Jews were reduced to the taking of Jerusalem by Titus  
Book VII — From the Taking of Jerusalem by Titus to the Sedition of the Jews at Cyrene  
The Life of Flavius Josephus - Autobiography