

*Masada: Literary Tradition, Archaeological Remains, and the Credibility of Josephus**

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Of all the numerous and distinguished accomplishments of Professor Yigael Yadin, none is so well known as his excavation of Masada. His popular book, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* (1966), found an appreciative audience in five languages and stirred up intense discussion among Jewish intellectuals. Unfortunately, perhaps because Professor Yadin has not yet published a complete report of his excavations, the scholarly world has not paid sufficient attention to his discoveries and their relationship to the narrative of Josephus. His book spawned numerous articles which sought to identify the occupants of Masada (the Sicarii) and to analyze the magnificent speeches placed by Josephus in the mouth of Eleazar ben Yair, the commander of the Sicarii, but these essays treat neither the archaeological remains nor the central historical problem, the credibility of Josephus.¹ The precise identification of the Sicarii — were they a distinct revolutionary group, or were they, as Professor Yadin assumes, identical with the Zealots? — cannot help us to assess the reliability of Josephus' report that the Sicarii committed collective suicide. In his second speech to his followers Eleazar alludes to Plato, invokes the example of Indian philosophers, and declaims a philosophic essay on the immortality of the soul, but this wonderfully incongruous speech does not detract from the historicity of the narrative as

* Upon discovering that he and I were simultaneously writing studies of the Masada story, Professor Morton Smith generously put his manuscript and notes at my disposal. Professor Smith's work enabled me to enrich my documentation in part I and to sharpen my arguments in part II. I am very grateful to him for his courtesy and selflessness, and I hope that he will agree with my conclusions. I am grateful also to the Abbell Publication Fund of the Jewish Theological Seminary for its support. BJ = Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum*.

¹ L. H. Feldman, 'Masada: A Critique of Recent Scholarship', *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith*, III (1975), pp. 218-248. Recent works include: V. Nikiprowetzky, 'La mort d'Eléazar fils de Jaire', *Hommages à A. Dupont-Sommer* (1971), pp. 461-490; H. Lindner, *Die Geschichtsauffassung des Flavius Josephus im Bellum Judaicum* (1972), pp. 33-40; P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Flavius Josèphe et Masada', *Revue historique* 260 (1978), pp. 3-21; S. Zeitlin, *The Rise and Fall of the Judaean State*, III (1978), pp. 144-151; D. J. Ladouceur, 'Masada: A Consideration of the Literary Evidence', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 21 (1980), pp. 245-260.

a whole any more than an appropriate speech would have confirmed it.² Professor Yadin's claim that his archaeological discoveries vindicate the Josephan account still awaits detailed discussion.³ Part I of this essay is a study of several other instances of collective suicide in antiquity; part II is an analysis of the Masada narrative of Josephus and its relationship to the archaeological remains; part III is an attempt to reconstruct the history of the fall of Masada.

I

Masada was not unique. Ancient history provides many examples of a besieged city or fortress whose inhabitants (men, women, and children) preferred death to surrender or capture. I have assembled here sixteen such cases, arranged chronologically. A diligent search of Greco-Roman literature would no doubt enrich this catalogue, but we may assume that these sixteen fairly represent all the available material.⁴ I exclude from this catalogue suicides and murder-suicides which approximate only parts of the Masada story: an individual dignitary or a group of dignitaries commits suicide rather than be captured or executed (the suicide might be preceded

² This point is not appreciated by Ladouceur (n. 1) and Weiss-Rosmarin (see next note). Ladouceur interprets the speech within the context of Roman politics of the Flavian era (Josephus makes Eleazar into a member of the philosophic opposition who would rather commit suicide than accept the principate) but this interpretation is much too subtle. It is also inappropriate. Vespasian's opponents came from the senatorial aristocracy who wrote in Latin and looked back to the glorious days of the Roman Republic. A parvenu from the provinces writing in Greek was not the one to respond to them. Under Domitian the opposition came to include "Cynic" philosophers, but it is unlikely that the speeches of Eleazar, written around 81 CE (see below), refer to them, since they were not yet prominent.

³ The most outspoken critic of Yadin's views is Trude Weiss-Rosmarin. See most recently *Jewish Spectator* 46,1 (Spring 1981), pp. 3-9, extracted from *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies 1973* (1977) I, pp. 417-427. For a summary and critique of Weiss-Rosmarin's views, see Feldman, pp. 232-239. Her arguments are a mixture of pious romanticism (Jewish heroes do not commit suicide but fight to the end), factual errors (the Romans would have regarded the suicide as an act of cowardice), and logical inconsistencies (Josephus fabricated the Masada suicide to compensate for his own failure to commit suicide at Jotapata, but if the Masada suicide is unbelievable, so is the one at Jotapata — Jewish heroes do not commit suicide).

⁴ Are there any instances in classical antiquity after 74 CE? A perfect opportunity for a collective murder-suicide would have been the fall of Byzantium to Severus but Dio Cassius (75.12-14) reports no such thing. Several scholars have noted that the suicide at Masada was not unique; see A. Schulten, 'Masada: die Burg des Herodes', *ZDPV* 56 (1933), p. 24, and Vidal-Naquet, p. 9. On suicide in antiquity see Y. Grise, *Latomus* 39 (1980), pp. 17-46 (with bibliography).

by the murder of the family);⁵ defeated soldiers commit suicide rather than be captured;⁶ anticipating a defeat (or after a defeat) the fighting men kill their families and then await capture or attempt to escape.⁷ In contrast to all these, the following sixteen cases closely parallel the Masada incident as a whole.⁸

1. In the 540's BCE, Harpagus, the general of Cyrus the Great, attacked Xanthus (in Lycia). Following an initial defeat, the citizens gathered their wives, children, property, and slaves in the acropolis and set it on fire. Taking a fearsome oath (not to return from battle alive), they then marched out of the city and died in battle against the Persians (Herodotus 1.176; cf. Plutarch, *Brutus* 31.5; Appian, *Civil War* 4.80).

2. Sometime between 491 and 481 BCE, the Thessalians invaded Phocia. The Phocians piled their wives, children, property, clothing, gold, silver, and images on a large pyre guarded by thirty men. "These were under orders that, should the Phocians chance to be worsted in battle, they were then to slay the women and children, to place them and the property like sacrifices on the pyre, and, after setting it on fire, to perish themselves, either by each other's hands or by charging the cavalry of the Thessalonians." Fighting with desperation, the Phocians were victorious and the thirty men did not have to perform their assigned task (Pausanias 10.1.6-9; cf. Polybius 16.32.1-5; Plutarch, *Moralia* 244a-d; Polyaeus 8.65).

3. During their peregrinations in Asia in 401-400 BCE, the Ten Thousand attacked a mountain fortress of the Taochians. As soon as they penetrated the fortress, the Taochian "women threw their little children

⁵ Individual dignity: innumerable examples. Individual kills family and then commits suicide: Diodorus of Sicily 2.27.2 (king of Nineveh in 612 BCE); Herodotus 7.107 (Persian governor of Eion, 475 BCE; cf. too Plutarch, *Cimon* 7.2, and Polyaeus 7.24); Livy 26.15.11-15 (a Campanian in 211 BCE); Appian, *Punic War* 131 (Hasdrubal's wife in 146 BCE); Strabo 14.5.7 (in Lycia in 46-44 BCE). Cf. the Pergamene statue (c. 228 BCE) of a Gaul committing suicide after having killed his wife; see M. Bieber, *The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age* (1955), pp. 80-88 and plates 281-283. Group of dignitaries: Diodorus of Sicily 20.21 (the family of the king of Paphos in 310 BCE); Plutarch, *Agis and Cleomenes* 37.6-7 (fourteen conspirators in Alexandria in 220 BCE); Livy 26.13-14 (twenty-eight Capuan senators in 211 BCE). Professor Ramsay MacMullen brings to my attention the remarkable incident at Arduba (Dalmatia, 9 CE) in which the men surrender to the Romans but the women commit suicide with their children (Dio Cassius 56.15.3).

⁶ Appian, *Samnite History* 6.2 = *Gallic History* 11 (283 BCE); *Punic Wars* 131 (900 Roman deserters at Carthage, 146 BCE); Appian, *Spanish War* 77 ("robbers," 141 BCE); Dio Cassius 40.25.2 (soldiers of Crassus after Carrhae, 53 BCE); Dio Cassius 56.21.5 (Varus and company, 9 CE). See J. Bayet, 'Le suicide mutuel dans la mentalité des romains', *L'année sociologique* (1951), pp. 35-89 = *Croyances et rites dans la Rome antique* (1971), pp. 130-176.

⁷ Diodorus of Sicily 17.28 (Lycians in 334 BCE); Livy 41.11.4-6 (the Istri in 177 BCE); Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.363 (Gazaeans, c. 100 BCE); Tacitus, *Agricola* 38.1 (the Britons in 84 CE).

⁸ My summary of each instance is derived from the first source listed. The sources indicated by "cf." may or may not agree with the first source. See below.

from the rocks and threw themselves down after them, and the men did likewise." Very few captives were taken (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.7.13-14).

4. When Sidon was recaptured by Artaxerxes III Ochus (late 350's or early 340's BCE), the Sidonians locked themselves, their children and their wives in their houses which they then set on fire. More than forty thousand perished (Diodorus of Sicily 16.45.4-5).

5. According to Appian, the Xanthians slew themselves rather than submit to Alexander the Great, presumably in 334-333 BCE. See no. 15 below (Appian, *Civil War* 4.80; cf. Arrian, *Anabasis* 1.24.4).

6. After Perdiccas defeated Ariarathes king of Cappadocia in 322 BCE, the Cappadocians slew their wives and children, set their houses and property on fire, and committed suicide by leaping into the flames (Justin, *Philippic Histories* 13.6.1-3).

7. After defeating Ariarathes, Perdiccas attacked the Isaurians in Pisidia (322 BCE). For two days the city resisted, but during the night of the third day of the siege, the citizens locked their children, wives and parents in their houses which they then set on fire. Adding their property to the blaze, they then threw themselves into it also (Diodorus of Sicily 18.22.2-6).

8. According to Livy, when Saguntum was about to be captured by Hannibal (219-218 BCE), many chieftains of the city gathered the gold and the silver, set it ablaze (how?) and leaped into the flames. Shortly afterwards, when Hannibal's troops entered the city, many citizens burned down their houses upon themselves, their wives and children, while others fought to the death (Livy 21.14; cf. Polybius 3.17; Diodorus of Sicily 25.15; Appian, *Spanish War* 12; Zonaras 8.21 = Dio Cassius 13).

9. When L. Marcus Septimius attacked Astapa (Spain) in 206 BCE, the inhabitants, realizing that they had little hope for victory, gathered all their valuables in the forum, placed their wives and children on top of the pile and surrounded it with wood. Fifty armed men — stationed around the pyre — were instructed that if they should see that the city was about to be captured they should know that all of the Astapaeans would perish in battle and should "leave nothing against which the enraged enemy might vent its cruelty." Unlike the Phocians (no. 2 above), the Astapaeans had to implement their resolve. All the men were killed in battle. The fifty guards slew the women and children, set the pyre ablaze and threw themselves upon it (Livy 28.22-23; cf. Appian, *Spanish War* 33).

10. A similar story is told of the fall of Abydus to Philip of Macedon in 200 BCE. The citizens assembled the women in the temple of Artemis, the children in the gymnasium, the silver and gold in the forum, and the valuable clothing in two ships. Fifty men were ordered to slay the women and children and to set everything on fire if they should see that the city was

about to fall into Philip's hands. The Abydenes themselves swore to fight to the death. Events did not transpire as planned. After a day of intense fighting, the city was betrayed to Philip. When the citizens realized what had happened, they employed various means to slay themselves, their wives and children. The slaughter lasted three days (Polybius 16.31-34; cf. Livy 31.17-18).

11. In 134 BCE, Scipio Africanus besieged the Vaccaeii (Spain). The tribesmen slew their wives and children and committed suicide (Livy, summary of book 57).

12. After a long siege, the citizens of Numantia (Spain, 133 BCE), racked by hunger, set fire to their city and slew themselves and their families rather than surrender to Scipio Africanus. (Annaeus Florus 1.34=2.18.15-17; cf. Livy, summary of book 59; Appian, *Spanish War* 96-97).

13. In 118 BCE, the Gauls (Ligurians), surrounded by the Romans under the command of Q. Marcius, slew their wives and children and hurled themselves into fire. Even the Gauls who had been captured by the Romans managed to commit suicide. Not a single Ligurian survived (Orosius 5.14.5-6).

14. In 82-81 BCE, the city of Norba was betrayed to Aemilius Lepidus. The inhabitants set fire to the city and slew themselves (Appian, *Civil War* 1.94).

15. When Xanthus was captured by Brutus in 42 BCE, the citizens slew their families, placed the bodies on funeral pyres in their houses, set them on fire and then killed themselves. Only a few women, 150 men, and some slaves survived (Appian, *Civil War* 4.80; cf. Plutarch, *Brutus* 31; Dio Cassius 47.34.3). According to Appian, this was the third time the Xanthians destroyed themselves rather than surrender; see nos. 1 and 5.

16. In 35 BCE, Metulum (Illyricum) was garrisoned by Octavian. The natives locked their wives and children in the senate chamber and stationed guards there with orders to set fire to the building if the Romans were victorious. They marched out, attacked the Romans, and were killed. The guards set fire to the building. Many of the women killed themselves and their children; others picked up their children and leaped into the flames (Appian, *Illyrian War* 21; cf. Dio Cassius 49.35.4).

Before we turn to Josephus, let us examine four aspects of this material. First, eleven of our sixteen cases fall into two distinct patterns. In the first, the women and children (and property) are gathered together and placed under guard as the men go out to fight. If the men meet death in battle, the guards kill the women and children, set the corpses and the city ablaze, and then kill themselves (nos. 2, 9, 10, 16; cf. 1). In the second pattern, the men

lock their families in their houses which they then set on fire, or kill the women and children before setting the houses on fire. Either way, the men commit suicide by jumping into the flames (nos. 4, 6, 7, 8; cf. 13 and 15). Two important distinctions separate the first pattern from the second. In the first pattern, the murder of the women and children is the premeditated action of all the citizens acting in concert; while in the second pattern, it is the spontaneous action of individual citizens. In the first pattern, the men die on the field of battle; in the second they commit suicide. The remaining five cases do not fit either of these patterns exactly. In one case, the women commit suicide alongside the men (3); in two cases they are murdered by the men (11, 12); and in two cases the details are obscure (5, 14). In all five, the men die by their own hand, not by fighting the enemy on the battlefield.⁹

Second, our corpus shows that collective suicide was the action of last resort not only for “barbarians” (Taochians, 3; Sidonians, 4; Spaniards, 8, 9, 11, 12; Gauls, 13; Illyrians, 16), but also for Greeks (2), Romans (14), and the townspeople of Asia Minor (1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 15), whose object was to avoid capture not only by Romans (9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16) but also by Persians (1, 4), Greeks (including Macedonians and Thessalonians, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10), and Carthaginians (8). Collective suicide did not characterize any particular people or any particular part of the ancient world.¹⁰

Third, our corpus demonstrates that ancient historians often exaggerated and embellished the truth when narrating collective suicides. This is not particularly surprising since ancient historians regularly sacrificed “historical truth” for the sake of art and effect. Archaeology shows that sixth century Xanthus was not destroyed and depopulated by the Persian conquest, no matter what the father of history says (no. 1).¹¹ Diodorus relates that the “entire city of Sidon and its inhabitants” was destroyed by the fire set by the citizens (no. 4), but this too is grossly exaggerated. Not all the inhabitants were killed; many were brought to Babylon and Susa as captives. The entire city was not destroyed; less than thirty years later Sidon was again powerful.¹² The second collective suicide of the Xanthians (no. 5) is either false or exaggerated since Arrian implicitly denies it.¹³ Livy embellished his versions of collective suicides with horror and gore. (At

⁹ According to Florus, the Numantines (no. 12) first sought death on the battlefield.

¹⁰ “The idea of anticipatory suicide is completely absent [among the Greeks],” Ladouceur, p. 258. Ladouceur suggests that anticipatory suicide characterized barbarians and philosophers, an unlikely combination.

¹¹ P. Demargne and H. Metzger, in Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie* 9A,2 (1967), p. 1381.

¹² See the note in the Loeb edition of Diodorus. On the Sidonian captives, see the text edited by A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (1975; Texts from Cuneiform Sources V), p. 114.

¹³ Demargne and Metzger, pp. 1397-1398.

Astapa “the rivers of blood extinguished the rising flames”.)

Our corpus also shows that collective suicide was for Livy (or the annalistic tradition upon which he relied) almost a stock motif, like the other stock motifs employed by historians when describing the capture of a city.¹⁴ Appian reports, probably on the basis of Polybius, that the Numantines committed suicide only *after* surrendering to Scipio (no. 12). Furthermore, he mentions nothing about the slaughter of women and children, saying instead that many Numantines were taken prisoner by the Romans. Florus, however (probably following Livy), has the Numantines “kill themselves and their families” *rather than* surrender; Scipio took no prisoners. Similarly, Polybius, our earliest source, says that when Hannibal besieged and captured Saguntum, he found in the city a large quantity of booty and took many captives (no. 8). According to Diodorus, Appian and Dio, the Saguntines, after burning all their valuables on a pyre, went out to die fighting Hannibal while the women slew the children and themselves. Livy combines these two traditions (the Saguntines burn their gold and silver and kill themselves, but Hannibal still manages to find much booty and to take many captives) and invents a collective murder-suicide of the second pattern: the men kill their wives and children and then burn the houses upon themselves or seek death in battle. Here then are five authors and three stages of tradition. Only Livy has the men murder the women and children and then commit suicide. For him collective suicide has become a stock motif. Other historians represented by our corpus also did not refrain from developing the tradition which they received.¹⁵

Fourth, our corpus shows that ancient historians generally approved of collective suicide. In narratives of the first pattern (women and children are placed on a pyre while the men go out to fight), Polybius and his followers clearly admire the desperate resolution of the Phocians (no. 2) while Appian

¹⁴ Quintilian 8.3.67-70; P. G. Walsh, *Livy: His Historical Aims and Methods* (1961), pp. 193-195.

¹⁵ In *The Glorious Deeds of Women*, Plutarch transfers the heroism of the Phocians (no. 2) from the men to the women by having the latter assent to the desperate plan of the former. Polyaeus goes even further. In his account the men do not figure at all. The women themselves build the funeral pyre and pledge to set themselves on fire if the Phocians are defeated. In his life of *Brutus*, Plutarch excuses his subject of any responsibility for the suicide of the Xanthians (no. 15). The citizens were motivated by a “love of death” while Brutus, like Titus before Jerusalem, pleaded with them to save themselves and their city. These details do not appear in Appian and Dio. Polybius compares the resolve of the Abydenes (no. 10) to that of the Phocians (no. 2) and the Acarnanians, but overlooks the fact that the Acarnanians, unlike the Abydenes and Phocians, did not plan to kill their wives and children (Polybius 9.40.4-6 and Livy 26.25.10-14). Perhaps Polybius was somewhat confused (other aspects of the comparison in 16.32 are not entirely clear) or perhaps he was aware of two traditions concerning the resolution of the Acarnanians. Walbank’s commentary does not discuss these problems. In our corpus, nos. 6 and 7 appear to be doublets.

has the Roman consul admire the “virtue” or “prowess” (*aretē*) of the Astapaeans (no. 9). For Polybius the resolve of the Abydenes (no. 10) was splendid (*semnon*), remarkable (*thaumasion*),¹⁶ and worthy of memory, an act of nobility (*gennaiotēs*) and courage (*eupsychia*). In narratives of the second pattern (the men kill their families and then kill themselves), Diodorus lauds the heroic and memorable deed (*hēroikēn kai mnēmēs axian*) of the Isaurians (no. 7), while Appian admires the triple self-destruction of the Xanthians (no. 15) who, as lovers of liberty, could not tolerate slavery (*doulosynē*). Florus closes his account of the fall of Numantia (no. 12) with an apostrophe to that “most brave and most blessed city” which even in its defeat did not allow its enemy to rejoice. For all these authors, collective suicide is noble and memorable for two reasons: it demonstrates love of liberty and intolerance of slavery, and it prevents the enemy from enjoying the fruits of his victory.¹⁷ The sole exception is Livy. Like the Greek historians, Livy admires collective suicide, calling it *mors honesta*,¹⁸ but he unreservedly condemns the murder of women and children, terming it a “sordid crime” (*facinus foedum*), an act of butchery (*trucidatio*) and murder (*caedes*). For Livy the murder of one’s relations is a symptom of madness and rage (*ira, furor, rabies*). Appian admires the virtue of the Astapaeans, Polybius admires the nobility of the Abydenes, but Livy sees no virtue and no nobility. He condemns the citizens of both towns.¹⁹

II

Let us now turn to our seventeenth example of collective murder-suicide. The incident at Masada shares many features with the other incidents just described. After a siege, the attackers breach the wall. Like the citizens of Abydus (no. 10) the men of Masada build an inner wall. When it is clear

¹⁶ “Remarkable,” not “admirable” as translated in the Loeb edition. Polybius’ admiration is evident from the tenor of the narrative as a whole.

¹⁷ In addition to *eleutheria* and *douleia*, other terms which frequently recur in these texts are: *hormē*, “impulse” (to describe the motivating force of the suicides: Diodorus, no. 7; Polybius, no. 10; Plutarch, no. 15); the suicide is an act of *tolmē*, “daring” (Polybius, no. 10; Plutarch, no. 15) or *aponoia* and *apognōsis*, “desperation” (Pausanias, Polybius, and Plutarch, no. 2; Appian, nos. 8 and 9; Polybius no. 10; Plutarch no. 15; Appian no. 16). When contemplating the suicides, the enemy is struck by amazement, *kataplēxis* (Diodorus, no. 7; Appian, no. 9; Polybius, no. 10; cf. Livy, nos. 9 and 10).

¹⁸ See his account of Astapa (no. 9) and 26.13.14 and 26.13.19.

¹⁹ Contrast his account of Taurea Vibellius (26.15.11-15). Florus speaks of the *rabies* and *furor* of the Numantines but admires their conduct anyway. David Daube, ‘The Linguistics of Suicide’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), pp. 387-437, does not discuss these terms in any detail.

that this wall too will fall, they assemble, again like the Abydenes, to deliberate their course of action. Eleazar advocates collective suicide because it guarantees the Jews their freedom and saves them from slavery (*douleia*, BJ 7.334 and 336). It also prevents the enemy from enjoying his victory (388). Eleazar tells his men that suicide will be a deed of "prowess and courage" (*aretē* and *eutolmia*, 342). They are convinced. They view the deed they are about to commit as an act of "manliness and good counsel" (*andreia* and *euboulia*, 389). After each man has killed his wife and children (in accordance with narratives of the second pattern), they gather all their possessions²⁰ in one pile and set it ablaze (in accordance with the first pattern). Finally they kill themselves (in a fashion which accords with neither pattern), the last man alive also setting ablaze the building which contained the corpses (first pattern). Most of these motifs and terms have their parallels in the sixteen cases summarized above. Similarly Josephus accepts the prevailing attitude towards collective suicide. He does not explicitly praise the Sicarii, but the general tone of the narrative is favourable to them. Eleazar assures his followers that the Romans will be astonished and amazed²¹ at the manner of their death, and according to Josephus the Romans really were amazed, scarcely believing what they saw (405-406). The murder-suicide is an act of daring (*tolma*, *tolmēma*, 388, 393, 405; cf. *eutolmia*, 342), an act of nobility (*gennaiotēs*, 406). Even the references to "possession by a *daimon*" (389) and "murder" (*phonos*, 396, 397, 406),²² which sound Livian, cannot change the impression that the historian, like the Romans, was amazed at the steadfastness of those who met a wilful death.²³

Some of the sixteen cases which parallel the episode at Masada are exaggerated or embellished products of the literary imagination. If any ancient historian loved exaggerations and embellishments, it was Josephus; we may therefore suppose that his Masada narrative is not an unalloyed version of the truth. This supposition is corroborated by Professor Yadin's archaeological discoveries and by analysis of the narrative itself.

²⁰ *ktesin* 324, translated "stores" by Thackeray.

²¹ *Eκπλήξις* and *thauma*, the latter mistranslated "admiration" by Thackeray. See notes 16 and 17.

²² Josephus' *phonos* corresponds to Livy's *caedes*. Elsewhere in the Masada narrative Josephus uses *sphagē* ("slaughter," 389, 395, 397, 399), a term used also by Pausanias (no. 2), Appian (nos. 9 and 15), and Polybius (no. 10) who laud the action they describe. BJ 7.389 uses *hormē* which is neutral; see n. 17.

²³ Cf. BJ 2.152-153 and 7.417-419. Unaware of all this material, Ladouceur imagines that Josephus' favourable terms are used ironically (Ladouceur, p. 259) and denies that Josephus showed any admiration for the people of Masada.

According to Josephus, the death of the 960²⁴ inhabitants of Masada and the destruction of the palace and the possessions were the premeditated acts of all the people acting in unison. But the archaeological remains cannot be reconciled with this view. Josephus says that all the possessions were gathered together in one large pile and set on fire but archaeology shows many piles and many fires (in various rooms of the casemate wall, in some of the storerooms, in the western palace, etc.).²⁵ Josephus says that Eleazar ordered his men to destroy everything except the foodstuffs (336) but archaeology shows that many storerooms which contained provisions were burnt.²⁶ (In addition, Josephus reports that the Romans found arms sufficient for ten thousand men, as well as iron, brass, and lead (299) — why weren't these valuable commodities destroyed?) Josephus says that the last surviving Jew set fire to the palace (397) but archaeology shows that all the public buildings had been set ablaze. Josephus implies (405) that all the murders took place in the palace (unless the women and children, after being killed, obliged their menfolk and the narrator by marching to the palace) but the northern palace is too small for an assembly of almost a thousand people.²⁷

Professor Yadin discovered three skeletons in the lower terrace of the northern palace and twenty-five in a cave on the southern slope of the cliff. He suggests that the twenty-five skeletons were tossed there "irreverently" by the Romans, but this suggestion will not do.²⁸ If, as Josephus says, the Romans found 960 corpses in the palace, they would not have dragged twenty-five of them across the plateau in order to lower them carefully into a cave located on a slope where one false step meant death. This is not irreverence, this is foolishness. The obvious and simple procedure for the Romans was to take the corpses out of the palace and toss them over the nearest cliff. No, the twenty-five skeletons in the cave must be the remains of Jews who attempted to hide from the Romans but were discovered and killed.²⁹ (Or did they commit suicide?) At the very least, then, archaeology

²⁴ Most manuscripts of the *War* as well as the Latin version have this figure. One manuscript, however, has 560; Zonaras 6.29 has 260. See Niese's apparatus on BJ 7.400.

²⁵ Yadin, *Masada*, pp. 97, 146, 154, and 207; 'The Excavation of Masada — 1963/64', *IEJ* 15 (1965), pp. 43, 66, 72-73, 78, and 118.

²⁶ None of the empty storerooms was burnt. Yadin, always eager to verify Josephus, suggests that the Sicarii intentionally left one or two full storerooms intact, in order to prove that they were not subdued by famine (BJ 7.336), but destroyed all the remainder (*Masada*, p. 97; *IEJ* 15, p. 43). According to Yadin, then, the storerooms were emptied by the Romans. Even simpler is the explanation that the Sicarii destroyed all their foodstuffs and did not bother to fire empty storerooms, but this explanation contradicts Josephus. See below.

²⁷ M. Avi-Yonah et. al., "The Archaeological Survey of Masada," *IEJ* 7 (1957), p. 54.

²⁸ *Masada*, p. 197.

²⁹ I assume that the skeletal remains were disturbed by the earthquake which rearranged much of Masada's landscape.

reveals that Josephus' narrative is incomplete and inaccurate. The skeletons in the cave and the numerous separate fires cast doubt on Josephus' theory of unanimity of purpose and unity of action among the Sicarii in their final hours. Perhaps archaeology confirms other aspects of Josephus' narrative, especially his description of the site, but on these important points it contradicts him.³⁰

But even without the benefit of the archaeological discoveries we would know that something is wrong with Josephus' story. According to the historian, when the Jews saw that the Roman ram was about to breach the wall, they hurriedly built an inner wall out of wood and earth which could absorb the force of the ram. When they broke through the outer wall, the Romans tried the ram on the inner wall but without success. Therefore they set it on fire. So far, the narrative is plausible and probably true. The use of soft pliable material to blunt the effects of a ram, and the construction of an inner wall to replace an outer one which is about to be destroyed, were standard techniques in ancient siege warfare.³¹ The fact that the combination of these two techniques (the construction of an inner wall out of pliable material) is not readily paralleled elsewhere³² is double testimony to its veracity. Josephus cannot be accused of enriching his narrative with a tactic cribbed from a poliorketic manual,³³ and the Sicarii are credited with a manoeuvre which befits their inexperience in siege warfare — who builds a wall out of wood? Further confirmation *may* come from archaeology. Some large wooden beams were stripped from the Herodian palace before its destruction by fire,³⁴ perhaps to be used in the construction of this futile gesture. Confirmed or not, the story is at least credible.

But the story soon loses its plausibility. After being blown about by the wind, the fire takes hold of the inner wall.³⁵ At this point the Roman assault

³⁰ Even in archaeological matters Josephus' record is not perfect. He knows of only one palace on Masada although archaeology reveals two. His description of the northern palace contains several inaccuracies (Avi-Yonah, *IEJ* 7, pp. 51-54; Yadin, *Masada*, p. 46). He gives exaggerated figures for the height of the walls and the towers (Avi-Yonah, p. 53; Yadin, p. 141).

³¹ S. J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome* (1979), p. 96.

³² As far as I have been able to determine, it is not found in the poliorketic tradition. Vegetius 4.2 probably depends on BJ 7 (Cohen, p. 95 n. 34).

³³ Contrast his account of Jotapata (Cohen, pp. 95-96).

³⁴ Yadin, *IEJ* 15, p. 28.

³⁵ Is this a *topos*? Professor David Marcus brings to my attention the following text of Esarhaddon, edited by R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Esarhaddons (Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 9)*, p. 104: "Während ich in jenem Distrikte siegreich umherzog, bespritzten sie den Belagerungswall, den ich gegen seine Residenz Uppume hatte stampfen lassen . . . im Schweigen der Nacht mit Naphtha und legten Feuer an ihn. Auf Geheiss Marduks, des Königs der Götter, wehte aber der Nordwind, der angenehme Hauch des Herrn der Götter, und wendete die Zungen des angefachten (?) Feuers gegen Uppume; den Belagerungswall ergriff es also nicht [. . .], doch verbrannte seine eigene Mauer und liess sie zu Asche werden." In any event, Josephus exaggerates the Roman fear of the fire (317) since the Roman machines were plated with iron (309) to protect them against fire (3.287).

should have begun. The wall was breached, the inner wall was rapidly being consumed, the army was ready. Instead, the Romans withdraw, postponing the assault until the following morning. Their only activity that night was to maintain a careful watch lest any of the Jews escape (316-319). This is incredible. Why withdraw when victory was so close? Even if it was late afternoon or evening when the fire finally took to the wall, a point which Josephus does not make clear, Silva could have stormed the fortress by night, just as Vespasian did at Jotapata (3.235 and 323). Why wait? Furthermore, since the wall was breached, the Romans will have had to maintain a careful guard not only in their camps but especially on the ramp, in order to prevent the Jews from attacking the tower and the other siege machines. And yet, according to Josephus, the Roman soldiers positioned both on the ramp and on the tower, the former only a few feet from the inside of the fortress, the latter able to survey all of Masada, were oblivious to the activities of that eventful night. They did not notice that 960 men, women, and children were slain, and that at least two large fires were set, one destroying the accumulated possessions of the Sicarii, the other destroying the palace and cremating the corpses. They did not hear the shrieks of the women and children³⁶ or see that the plateau was ablaze or sense that anything unusual was afoot. When the Romans stormed the fortress the next morning, they suspected nothing. They expected a battle but found silence. Very dramatic but utterly incredible.

Drama was not the only reason for Josephus' invention of a premature Roman withdrawal and a careful Roman watch which saw and heard nothing. Josephus wanted Eleazar, the leader of the Sicarii, to make a speech in which he would publicly confess that he and his followers, those who had fomented the war, had erred and were now receiving condign punishment from God for their sins.³⁷ Josephus even has Eleazar declare that God has condemned the "tribe of the Jews" to destruction (327, cf. 359) because he wants the Jewish readers of the *Jewish War* to realize that the way of the Sicarii is the way of death and that the theology of the Sicarii leads to a renunciation of one of the core doctrines of Judaism, the eternal election of Israel. In order to allow Eleazar to confess his guilt and to display his rhetorical skills, and in order to allow the Sicarii to follow Eleazar's instructions and to destroy themselves in an orderly fashion, Josephus inserted a crucial but inexplicable pause in the Roman assault.

³⁶ Were the women and children of Masada more self-restrained than those of the Istri? Cf. Livy 41.11.5, *inter complorationem feminarum puerorumque*.

³⁷ Well noted by Thackeray in the Leob edition ad BJ 7.341. None of the sixteen parallel cases discussed above has such a set speech, but cf. Livy 26.13-14 and Lucan, *Pharsalia* 4.474-520.

Eleazar made a second speech too. Entitled "On the Immortality of the Soul" (340), it had for its major themes not Israel, God, and sin, but soul, death, and suicide. Its purpose was purely literary, to correspond to the speech which Josephus himself allegedly delivered at Jotapata under similar circumstances. Josephus gives us a *logos* and an *antilogos*, a speech in book III condemning suicide and a speech in book VII lauding it. The parallel between the incidents at Jotapata and Masada was developed further by the transference of the lottery motif from the former to the latter.³⁸ If, as I have attempted to show, the occasion, content, and impact of Eleazar's speeches are fictitious, then the use of lots as described by Josephus must be fictitious too. Perhaps some of the Sicarii slew themselves in accordance with a lottery (see below), but it is most unlikely that all of them did so. They had neither the opportunity nor the unanimity required for such an action. The idea that all of them did so was derived by the historian from his (very suspect) account of the episode at Jotapata.³⁹

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

³⁸ Certain phrases were transferred too, cf. 3.261 with 7.321. Like Eleazar at Masada, Josephus at Jotapata speaks of slavery vs. freedom (3.365-368, cf. 357), but this is a *topos*. For "Live free or die!" speeches in the mouths of commanders of "barbarian" tribes fighting Rome, see, for example, J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (1979), pp. 163-164.

³⁹ It was not derived from the Greco-Roman tradition, which does not mention lots in these situations. Lots were widely used in first-century Judaism; see *Acts* 1:17 and 26; *BJ* 4.153-155; *mYom.* 2:2-4; Qumran (use of *goral*). At Jotapata, the lottery is said to have worked in the following fashion: B killed A, C killed B, D killed C, etc., the last man finishing the process by committing suicide after committing his assigned murder. This system mitigates the guilt of those involved since each victim except the first was also a murderer and therefore deserving of death. Only the final man was responsible for two deaths. At Masada, there were not forty men but several hundred, so the procedure allegedly employed at Jotapata would have been too slow and cumbersome. Josephus had to imagine something different. First, each man killed his family (women and children were *not* in the cave at Jotapata). Then ten men were chosen by lot to kill the rest. Finally, one was chosen to kill the remaining nine and then himself. Although the details differ, the suicides at Jotapata and Masada are fundamentally similar: at both the Jews employ a lottery, and at both the Jews commit suicide by allowing themselves to be murdered (only one person in each case actually commits, or was supposed to commit, suicide). Either of these procedures might be described in such phrases as *se ipsi interficiunt* (Caesar, *Gaulic War* 5.37.6), *allēlous apekteinan* (Dio Cassius 40.6.3), and *allēlous anechrēsanto* (Dio Cassius 47.34.3 = case no. 15 above), but I have not found any Greco-Roman account which precisely parallels the procedures allegedly employed at Jotapata and Masada. Cf. too *allelotoktonia*, *allelophonía*, and related forms. (On the use of *alleloi* for a repeated, non-reciprocal action, see e.g. the description of a torch race at the beginning of Plato's *Republic*.) Bayet (n. 6) does not discuss any of this. On the transference of the lottery motif see n. 42 below.

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” (404), 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 (322).⁴⁰ Before or during the actual killing they hid (399). 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. Surveying the corpses on the plateau, the Romans deduced that the Sicarii had killed themselves. Josephus, or his Roman informant,⁴¹ advanced more adventurous conjectures too. These conjectures may be true or false — ancient conjectures have no greater likelihood of being true than their modern counterparts — and we have seen already that some of them, at least, are false. The food supplies laid up by Herod the Great were discovered intact. Somebody, perhaps Josephus, believing that the food was still edible (297), conjectured that the Sicarii had intentionally spared their food from the destruction (336). Noticing a large pile of destroyed possessions and remembering some of the cases discussed above, someone conjectured that the Sicarii had gathered all their belongings in one place, oblivious to the fact that the fires and the smoke hid the remains of many such piles. The other conjectures can be neither verified nor refuted. Perhaps the Romans, like Professor Yadin, saw lots scattered about and deduced that a sortition played a role in the process of death.⁴² In addition

⁴⁰ Even Plutarch, who imagines that the Phocian women assented to the resolution of their husbands (see note 15), does not have the women present at the assembly of the men.

⁴¹ Although Josephus was in Rome in 74 CE, his detailed description of the topography of the fortress and the Roman siegeworks suggests that this account is based on a (or the) report sent to Rome by one of the Roman participants, probably Silva himself (Schulten [n. 4], p. 25). Since Josephus had access to the *Commentarii* of Vespasian and Titus we may assume that he would have been able to inspect Silva’s report as well. Perhaps he even spoke with Silva in Rome (see below).

⁴² The lots discovered by Professor Yadin verify, at best, a Roman conjecture. At worst they verify nothing. Eleven “lots” were discovered (*Masada*, p. 201), but if these were the lots of that final evening, they should have numbered either several hundred (for the first sortition) or only ten (for the second). Why eleven? See Vidal-Naquet, pp. 12-13. It is not impossible that Josephus was inspired by the discovery of lots at Masada to re-write his Jotapata story in order to include a lottery there too. This is unlikely because the passage, like the *Jewish War* generally, shows no sign of revision; see Cohen (n. 31), pp. 89-90. Furthermore, the Jotapata story demands a miraculous escape which would demonstrate that Josephus stood under the protective care of God. Without the lottery, the story is incomplete.

to these motivated fictions and historical conjectures, Josephus' account also contains simple mistakes.⁴³

Is there any truth at all in this Josephan farrago of fiction, conjecture, and error? Did the Sicarii commit suicide? Did the Romans discover corpses when they arrived at the summit? The twenty-five skeletons in the cave show that Josephus' account is incomplete at best, but our question is whether *any* of the Sicarii preferred a self-inflicted death to flight, battle, or surrender. We might suggest that the Sicarii were captured by the Romans and massacred, or that they fought the Romans and were killed, and that Josephus, whose fondness for literary commonplaces and types is well known, substituted a collective suicide story for the truth. Perhaps. These conjectures, like those of Josephus himself, can be neither verified nor refuted, but we may readily believe that the Josephan story has a basis in fact. First, it is plausible. Many Jews committed suicide during the crucial moments of the war of 66-70,⁴⁴ and, as we have seen above, many non-Jews also committed suicide rather than face their enemies. Second, the Masada story is too complex to be dismissed as a literary *topos*. It combines motifs from the two major patterns of collective suicide stories with motifs from the Jotapata episode. The whole is enriched with Josephus' own inventions. Finally, why should Josephus have invented such a story? He wished to show that the way of the Sicarii is the way of death, but death comes in many forms, and the Sicarii did not have to commit suicide to make this point clear. Death in battle would have served just as well.⁴⁵ Had the Romans massacred the Sicarii, Josephus would have had no reason to disguise this fact. From the Roman point of view, the Sicarii deserved death, since they had participated in the siege of the royal palace in Jerusalem in 66 CE, killing some Roman soldiers (BJ 2.433-440). And if Silva refused to take any prisoners, no one could have argued with his wisdom, for who would want a slave who could not be trusted with the kitchen cutlery? From the Jewish point of view, the Sicarii deserved death since they had raided the towns near Masada and had killed 700 women and

⁴³ Why does Josephus ignore the fire in all the buildings except the royal palace? His concern to have the Sicarii act in unison and concord, which explains his impossible statement that all 960 corpses were found in the palace, should not have prevented him from having them set fire to all the buildings — which, after all, they probably did. (The alternative is that the Romans looted and fired them, either when entering or later.) I assume that Josephus has made an error. For errors in archaeological matters, see n. 30.

⁴⁴ For these suicides see Feldman, p. 241, and M. Hengel, *Die Zeloten* (1961, ²1976), pp. 268-271. For the murder of a family in anticipation of suicide, see BJ 2.469-476 and cf. AJ 14.429-430.

⁴⁵ E.g., Eleazar could have delivered a speech in which he confessed the collective guilt of the Sicarii, acknowledged God's abandonment of the Jews, and exhorted his followers to death, and then could have led them to death in battle with the Romans. For the views of Ladouceur and Weiss-Rosmarin, see above notes 2 and 3.

children in the Jewish town of En Geddi (BJ 4.399-405). From Josephus' point of view, the Sicarii were guilty of all sorts of nefarious crimes, not the least of which was the launching of the war against Rome (BJ 7.253-262). If the Romans had massacred the Sicarii, Josephus would have been pleased.

The essential historicity of the narrative is confirmed not only by its plausibility but also by its setting. Contrary to the accepted view, it is likely that BJ 1-6 was completed in the reign of Titus (79-81 CE), not Vespasian, and that BJ 7 was completed early in the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE).⁴⁶ One of the two first consuls (*consules ordinarii*) in 81 CE was none other than Flavius Silva, thus putting him in Rome at the very time Josephus was there writing the final books of the *Jewish War*. Silva, no doubt, could appreciate rhetorical historiography as much as any educated Roman, but his presence in Rome must have been an incentive for Josephus to restrain his imagination and tell the truth. Of course, it was also an incentive to tilt the narrative in the Romans' favour, but Josephus did not have to tilt it very far to make the Romans look good since, as archaeology demonstrates, Silva did his work efficiently and expertly. In fact, Silva's consulship was his reward for a job well done in Judaea.⁴⁷ Since the Temple had already been destroyed and the Roman triumph had already been celebrated, Silva did not have to become another Titus pleading with the Jews to surrender and commiserating with them on their misfortunes.

Josephus did, however, restrain his imagination when writing the Masada narrative. In stark contrast to his descriptions of the falls of Jotapata (3.141-339), Jerusalem (books 5 and 6), Machaerus (7.164-209), and Jarden forest (7.210-215), and in stark contrast to the historiographical tradition concerning collective suicides, Josephus' description of the fall of Masada does not refer to the bravery or military prowess of the defenders. Not a single Roman or Jewish casualty is mentioned. In only one passage (309) does Josephus imply that the Sicarii actually fought against the Romans,⁴⁸ and he does not have them employ any of the standard tricks for prolonging a siege, tricks recounted with inflated detail at the siege of Jotapata.⁴⁹ The one tactic they adopt was rather ineffective (see above). Josephus certainly did not want the Sicarii to seem as heroic as he himself claimed to have been at Jotapata, but his silence is remarkable nonetheless. The Romans had no reason to suppress references to the military actions of the Jews — a

⁴⁶ Cohen (n. 31), pp. 87-89.

⁴⁷ Silva held no post between his governorship of Judaea and his consulship. See W. Eck, *Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian* (1970), pp. 101-102.

⁴⁸ *machēn eti prosdokōntes* (402), translated by Thackeray "expecting further opposition," probably should be translated "still expecting battle." Cf. Michel-Bauernfeind, "Die Römer hingegen erwarteten immer noch einen Kampf."

⁴⁹ See n. 33 above.

desperate defence by the Sicarii would have made the Roman victory all the more impressive (cf. BJ 1.7-8). The most likely explanation is that the Sicarii did not put up a great resistance to the Romans. They had no catapults or other torsion weaponry. They had little experience in siege warfare, most of them not having participated in the defence of Jerusalem,⁵⁰ or in fighting the Romans — they had concentrated their murderous attacks on their fellow-Jews. The only defences available to them were stones and arrows, but the Romans knew how to protect themselves from such projectiles. The failure of the Sicarii to mount an effective defence is not as amazing as Josephus' failure to invent one for them.⁵¹

I conclude, then, that Josephus attempted to be reasonably accurate in matters which were verifiable by Silva and the Romans. He refrained from inventing glorious military actions for the Sicarii, and, we may assume, had some basis in fact for the ascription of murder-suicide to them. At least some of the Sicarii killed themselves rather than face the Romans. This fact was exaggerated and embellished. Silva could not object — Livy had done worse.

III

We do not know what happened on the summit of Masada on the fifteenth of Xanthicus in 74 CE.⁵² The archaeological discoveries of Professor Yadin show that Masada was besieged by the Romans in the fashion described by Josephus, but they do not tell us how the defenders of Masada were killed. For this and for all the other details of Masada's history, we are dependent upon Josephus alone.

Masada was captured by the Sicarii at the outbreak of the war in 66 CE.⁵³

⁵⁰ Although the coins found at Masada indicate that some of the defenders came from Jerusalem in 70 CE.

⁵¹ See Zeitlin (n. 1). Professor Yadin also noticed Josephus' silence (*Masada*, pp. 230-231).

⁵² Eck, pp. 98-100, has shown that 74 CE is the earliest possible date for the fall of Masada. (See E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus I*, ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar [1973], pp. 512 and 515). It is also the latest possible date. When Masada fell the governor of Egypt was Ti. Iulius Lupus (BJ 7.420; Thackeray's note ad loc. is wrong). He was succeeded by (Valerius) Paulinus (BJ 7.434) who, in turn, was out of office by 75/6 CE. Hence Masada could not have fallen in 75 CE. Eck, pp. 100-101, accepts an identification of Paulinus which has proven to be incorrect, and we may therefore discard his suggestion to reverse the order of Josephus' narrative. On the Egyptian prefects see G. Bastianini, 'Lista dei Prefetti d'Egitto', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 17 (1975), pp. 275-276, and P. J. Sijpesteijn, 'Flavius Josephus and the Prefect of Egypt in 73 A.D.', *Historia* 28 (1979), pp. 117-125.

⁵³ How did they capture it? For a conjecture see Cohen, p. 193.

Taking arms from Herod's storehouse, Menahem, the leader of the Sicarii, marched on Jerusalem. There he attempted to gain control of the revolt by directing the siege of the royal palace. After his followers had assassinated the high priest Ananias and his brother Ezechias, Menahem himself was killed by Eleazar and the priestly revolutionary party. Some of the Sicarii, including Eleazar ben Yair, fled to Masada (BJ 2.433-448). Between the events of 66 CE and 74 CE, Josephus has little to narrate about Masada and its inhabitants. It served as a refuge for Simon bar Giora, fleeing from the priestly party in control of Jerusalem (BJ 2.653 and 4.504). From their haven at Masada the Sicarii raided the surrounding countryside, once venturing as far north as En Geddi (4.399-405, 506, 516). The objective of these raids was to obtain supplies (4.400, 404, 506) — who wanted to eat the one-hundred-year-old Herodian food which filled Masada's storerooms? — and the victims were the Judeans of En Geddi and the Idumeans of the countryside, all of them Jews. The Sicarii could attack these people (over seven hundred women and children were killed at En Geddi, their greatest success)⁵⁴ because in their eyes they were wicked and doomed to perdition. Not being members of the sectarian elect, they could be robbed and killed with impunity. This attitude explains the silence of the Sicarii during the siege of Jerusalem. No raids on the Romans from the rear, no feints to distract the Romans and to alleviate the pressure of the siege, no attempt to aid the city in its time of crisis. For the Sicarii, the Jews of Jerusalem (who had killed Menahem) and the Romans besieging it were different categories of wicked people who would be destroyed when God would inaugurate the End and bring glory to his chosen. True, the Sicarii did accept converts,⁵⁵ but their overall attitude is clear.

Finally, in late 73 CE Flavius Silva approached Masada. The Sicarii were still awaiting the End, which they thought would be presaged by heavenly chariots, not Roman legions. It is likely that some Sicarii fled from Masada and the countryside to Egypt when Silva approached, for it is remarkable that immediately after the fall of Masada Josephus tells of Sicarii in Egypt and Cyrene, although he had given no hint of any such agitation there previously. In any case, Flavius Silva arrived and set to work. His siege works, the circumvallation, the camps, and the ramp, remain in a remarkable state of preservation. His troops, mainly the tenth legion, were experienced in this sort of activity, having had plenty of practice during the protracted siege of Jerusalem, and the work seems to have progressed

⁵⁴ Josephus, of course, may be exaggerating.

⁵⁵ They gradually came to accept Simon b. Giora (BJ 4.505-506); during their raids many people joined them (BJ 4.405); the coins and scrolls found at Masada indicate that refugees were accepted.

quickly. The Sicarii were unable to mount any serious resistance, having neither the equipment nor the experience required for a defence against seasoned veterans. Finally, all was ready. A tower and a ram were hauled up the ramp. Some of the stones hurled by the *ballistae* from the tower and the ground below were discovered by Professor Yadin in the western casemate wall.⁵⁶ The ram brought down a portion of the wall. The Roman assault was hindered briefly by a second inner wall which had been hastily constructed by the Sicarii, but its wooden framework was easily destroyed by fire.

At this point we know what did *not* happen. We know that Josephus' account is false. Silva did not order a premature withdrawal, Eleazar did not have an opportunity for two magnificent orations, the Jews did not have a long evening for the leisurely slaughter of their wives and children, the deliberate collection of all their possessions in one pile and the methodical murder of all the remaining men. This scenario is implausible, contradicted by the archaeological discoveries, and motivated in part by Josephus' polemical and literary concerns. What did happen, then? Rather than simply admit ignorance, I offer the following conjectures.⁵⁷

As the Romans were storming through the wall, some of the Jews slew their families, burnt their possessions, and set the public buildings on fire. All(?) the granaries were burnt, except those containing the stale food stored by Herod. In the confusion, the Sicarii either forgot, or were unable, to destroy Herod's armoury, thus granting the Romans a modest reward for their labours. Having destroyed what they could, some Jews killed themselves, some fought to the death, and some attempted to hide and escape. The Romans were in no mood to take prisoners and massacred all whom they found.⁵⁸ After the smoke had cleared, the Romans inspected the fortress and discovered the corpses of those who had committed suicide. They also found two women and five children in one of the cisterns and twenty-five people in a cave on the southern slope. The former were spared (?), the latter killed (or did they commit suicide when discovered?). The corpses on the plateau were probably tossed over the cliff and the site was garrisoned. The battle and the war were over.

The evidence for this reconstruction is uneven. We have no reason to doubt that at least some of the Sicarii killed themselves and their families, even if they did not perform the deed with the deliberation and concord alleged by Josephus. Archaeology shows that portions of all the public

⁵⁶ *Masada*, p. 156.

⁵⁷ Those who believe that ancient historians may study historiography but must not attempt to reconstruct historical events (like the reviewer in *JJS* 31 [1980], pp. 240-242), will prefer to admit ignorance.

⁵⁸ Compare the Roman assault on Jotapata (BJ 3.329-337).

buildings on Masada were set ablaze, and since it is unlikely that the Romans would destroy their own loot, we may assume that this was the spontaneous act of the Jews.⁵⁹ That some of the Sicarii sought death through battle with the Romans is a suggestion based merely on plausibility.⁶⁰ That some of the Sicarii tried to escape is confirmed by the twenty-five skeletons in the cave.

Sitting in his study in Rome, Josephus improved on this story. He wanted Eleazar, the leader of the Sicarii, to take full responsibility for the war, to admit that his policies were wrong, to confess that he and his followers had sinned, and to utter the blasphemous notion that God had not only punished but also had rejected his people. Condemned by his own words, Eleazar and all his followers killed themselves, symbolizing the fate of all those who would follow in their footsteps and resist Rome. This was the work of Josephus the apologist for the Jewish people and the polemicist against Jewish revolutionaries. Josephus the rhetorical historian realized that the murder-suicide of some of the Sicarii at Masada would be far more dramatic and compelling if it became the murder-suicide of all the Sicarii. (Many historians before Josephus had similarly exaggerated collective suicides.) Josephus modelled the Masada narrative in part on his own description of the Jotapata episode, in part on the Greco-Roman historiographical tradition. Inspired by the former, he gave Eleazar a second speech, an *antilogos* to the speech which he claimed to have himself delivered at Jotapata, and invented (or exaggerated) the use of lots in the suicide process. Inspired by the latter, he had each Jew kill his wife and children (a motif derived from Greco-Roman stories of one pattern) and contribute his possessions to one large pile which was then set ablaze (a motif derived from stories of another pattern). Most important, Josephus learned from the Greco-Roman tradition that collective suicide was to be an object of amazement, almost admiration, an attitude he failed to reconcile with his condemnation of the Sicarii. Out of these strands — historical truth, a fertile imagination, a flair for drama and exaggeration, polemic against the Sicarii, and literary borrowings from other instances of collective suicide — Josephus created his Masada story.

We do not know whether Flavius Silva, who was in Rome while Josephus was writing the final books of the *Jewish War*, read or heard this narrative, but we may be sure that he enjoyed it if he did. After all, some of the Sicarii had committed suicide, and Silva must have known that an historian was entitled to exaggeration and simplification. Josephus shows clearly that

⁵⁹ See note 43.

⁶⁰ In Yosippon, the Jews kill their wives and children and fight the Romans to the death.

Silva himself and the Roman soldiers performed their task with professionalism and dispatch. Furthermore, the story is wonderfully told. As we read it, we almost forget that these Sicarii had failed to aid their brethren in Jerusalem during the long siege. We almost forget that they had massacred seven hundred Jewish women and children at En Geddi. Even Josephus forgot that he wished to heap opprobrium, not approbation, on them. One does not have to be a Jew, a Zionist, or a citizen of the state of Israel to be swept away by the rhetoric which Josephus derived from the classical tradition: "Live free or die!"⁶¹ The Masada myth does not begin in the twentieth century.

⁶¹ In his survey of the archaeological remains of Masada, Schulten spoke frequently of "der Heldenkampf für das Vaterland" and "Heldenmut." As Yadin would later do in *Masada*, Schulten closed his report with a reverential paraphrase of Josephus' account, including Eleazar's speech. See Schulten (n. 4), pp. 2, 24, and 172-179. Schulten himself was aware that Spanish historians allowed their patriotic fervour to interfere with their interpretation of the history and archaeological remains of Numantia (Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie* 17,1 [1936], p. 1264).