



## *A History of the Jewish War, AD 66–74* by Steve Mason.

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No other conflict in antiquity has so profoundly affected the adherents of the Abrahamic religions as the war of Jews against Romans in 66–74 CE.<sup>1</sup> Jews, Christians, and Muslims have debated its causes, course, and meaning ever since. The destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem in 70 is a defining episode in their intertwined, often competing histories and eschatologies.

Did regional tensions or some long-standing enmity between Jews and Romans cause the war? How exactly did the Romans plan to win the war and how much resistance did their legions encounter? Did the future Roman emperor Titus destroy the Temple as a matter of policy or was it burned down by accident? Did Eleazar ben Yair and the *sicarii* (dagger-men) atop Masada really commit mass suicide/murder in spring 74?

The answers to such questions must be based on a firm grasp of the ancient sources for the war. By far the most important of these is the monograph of the Jewish-Roman priest and military leader Titus Flavius Josephus (born Joseph ben Matityahu).

Born in 37 or 38 (*Life* 5) Josephus was descended on his father's side from the first of the twenty-four courses or clans of Jewish priests; on his mother's, from Asamonaeus, ancestor of many high priests and kings of the Jewish ethnos or nation (*Life* 1–2). Josephus himself claimed to be a priest and an interpreter of dreams and words spoken ambiguously by God (*War* 3.352).

When hostilities broke out in Jerusalem in summer 66, Jewish fighters ambushed and mauled a re-treating Roman auxiliary army led by the governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, at Beit-Horon. In anticipation of the inevitable Roman response, rebel leaders put Josephus in charge of the defense of the two Galilees and Gamala (*War* 2.568). He scraped together an army, fortified some of Galilee's most important towns, and personally led the resistance to the Roman siege of Iotapata (Yodfat). When the Romans, commanded by the future emperor Vespasian, breached the town's walls, Josephus hid in a cavern and entered into a suicide pact with some of his fellow Jews, only to go back on it after all but one other man had died. After surrendering to Vespasian, Josephus saved his own life by prophesying that the Roman commander would become emperor (*War* 3.400–402). He then spent the rest of the war trying to convince other Jews to give up, witnessing the burning of the Temple and the sack of Jerusalem.

Josephus went to Rome and by ca. 79 had composed books in Greek (*biblia*) to explain to a Greek-reading audience that the Jews had lost “the greatest war ever heard of” because God himself had chosen the Romans to punish them for their impiety (*War* 1.10–12, 4.323, 5.19, 5.412; *Antiquities* 20.165–66).

In *The History of the Jewish War, AD 66–74*, noted Josephus scholar Steve Mason<sup>2</sup> (Univ. of Groningen) provides an in-depth analysis of the sources for the war and advances provocative hypotheses

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1. All dates herein are Common Era, unless otherwise indicated. Note, too, the following abbreviations of the works of Josephus: *War* (*The Jewish War*), *Antiquities* (*Antiquities of the Jews*), *Life* (*Life of Josephus*).

2. His earlier work includes *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees: A Composition-Critical Study* (NY: Brill, 1991) and *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 1b: *Judean War 2* (NY: Brill, 2008).

about its causes, course, and significance. The book is divided into Parts I, “Contexts” (chaps. 1–3), and II, “Investigations” (chaps. 4–9). In what follows, I will address Mason’s most important arguments about the war itself and his “reimagining” of what might have happened once we disentangle the events from Josephus’s interpretation of them. I will also suggest counterarguments and alternative interpretations where possible.

In chapter 1, “A Famous and Unknown War,” Mason argues that the fall of Jerusalem affected, besides the Jews, who lost their mother-city, many others who had reason to advertise it. The Flavian regime (69–96 CE) and, later, Christians celebrated and publicized Jerusalem’s fall: the Flavians wanted to deflect attention from their real war, that is, against their rivals to the throne (especially Vitellius) after the death of the Nero in 68. Vespasian and Titus’s joint triumphal procession through Rome in summer 71 was a sham, revealed as such by Josephus in his description of it (*War* 7.116–57). All the “fuss” that the Flavian dynasty and the Christians created leaves us no wiser about the nature of the war, its causes, and its course. We are left, Mason writes, with Flavian spin-doctors’ depiction of Jews as a foreign enemy with a great army or a nation in revolt. Christians portrayed the Judeans as the killers of Jesus, destined for eternal punishment. In short, events do not declare their true significance. As students of history, we must construct the meanings of events by bringing our own experience and insight to bear on the surviving evidence. Three polarities must be borne in mind: first, between an event and its exploitation; second, between force and power; and third, between the chaos of events as they occur and any attempt to represent them in a meaningful way (58–59).

In chapter 2, “Understanding Historical Evidence, Josephus’ Judean War in Context,” the author argues that Josephus’s account of the war is unreliable for modern readers. For he was writing for his contemporaries, whose values and interests we cannot share. Further, “Like his contemporaries, Josephus wrote every word and phrase (as long as he was on the ball) according to the prescriptions of rhetoric” (80). The best we can do is to strive to understand his work as a product of its time.

In chapter 3, “Parthian Saviours, Sieges, and Morale: Ancient Warfare in Human Perspective,” Mason discusses considerations that may have affected morale on both sides during the war: specifically, the distant prospect of Parthian support for the Jews; starvation and disease; internal conflict; inducements to surrender; and the prevention of desertion. The background context and details provided in chapters 1–3 are meant to provide frameworks to “help to refine the problems underlying the following investigations, to understand the relevant evidence, and to imagine the scenarios that might have produced the survivals” (196).

Both the Flavian dynasty and some Christians exploited the Jewish War for their own purposes. Josephus’s own account of the Flavian Triumph (celebratory procession) in Rome betrays his ambivalence about the Roman victory. But the claim that the festivities were a kind of Potemkin celebration raises questions: for instance, who exactly saw it in that light? And what real evidence can be adduced for such a view, since, Mason cautions, we cannot accept Josephus’s narrative of the war at face value? His work reflects his values and assumptions about life and the writing of history, as well as his rhetorical training.

On the other hand, without Josephus’s work, we would know very little about the war at all, other than its results. Archaeological finds tell us there was fighting, that the Temple was destroyed, and that Masada fell, but give little idea how any of this happened. Consequently, we have no choice but to engage with the texts of Josephus. Hence Mason’s meticulous presentation of background material in chapters 1–3 to support his reconstruction of the motives for and the causes and results of the war.

Chapter 4, “Why Did They Do It, Antecedents, Circumstances, and ‘Causes’ of the Revolt,” concerns the motivations behind the bitter conflict between Judaea and Rome. Mason rejects the nearly universal assumption that either innate hostility or mounting grievances between Judeans and Ro-

mans caused the war, stressing that the Rome-Judaea bond was exceptionally strong. Looking back to Rome's first substantial intervention into Judaea and surrounding territories—in 64 BCE, by Pompey, who briefly canceled Hasmonean gains—Mason notes that Jerusalem's subsequent renewed expansion provoked residents of the old coastal cities, Samaria, and the Decapolis in what is now Jordan. The auxiliary army recruited and based in Samaria after 6 CE sought opportunities to flex its muscles against Jerusalem, particularly after the seat of the Roman procurator/prefect was moved from Jerusalem to Caesarea. Thereafter, everything depended on the character and intentions of the emperor, his prefect in Caesarea, and his legate in Syria, as well as the vigilance of the Herodian royals who ruled small kingdoms outside Jerusalem.

Mason argues that Judaea was not a Roman province at the time of the revolt, but an ethnic zone centered on Jerusalem. He ignores neither occasional literary expressions of anti-Roman sentiment nor long-standing social, economic, and religious grievances of some Judaeans, Samaritans, and Gadarans that other scholars have identified. But, he observes, evidence of militant anti-Roman sentiment as a cause of the Judaeen War is exceedingly scarce, whereas indications of Judaeen prosperity under Rome's tutelage are abundant, at least for elites and probably, by extension, for traders, craftsmen, and producers.

Mason reckons that the war between Jews and Romans that erupted in summer or autumn 66 had its origins in regional conflict, not theological or philosophical differences. “The Judaeen-Roman conflict broke out ... not from anti-Roman ideas or dreams among the uniquely favored Judaeen population, but from the sort of thing that more commonly drives nations to take up arms: injury, threats of more injury, perceived helplessness, the closure of avenues of redress, and ultimately the concern for survival” (584).

In chapter 5—“Nero's War I: The Blunder of Cestius Gallus?”—Mason argues that the punitive intervention of the Syrian legate Gaius Cestius Gallus in 66 to restore order in Jerusalem after the slaughter of the auxiliary garrison by Jews provoked by the prefect Gessius Florus was not undertaken against a province in revolt. But his action “must have created new enemies of Rome among the Judaeans,” just as “Untold thousands of people in Afghanistan and Iraq who never had reason to hate the United States or Americans have been radicalized, as anyone can see in many documentaries and interviews, because of the presence of U.S. forces in their neighborhoods” (333). Before Cestius's intercession, the Judaeans' chief problem had been the Roman administration's inability to protect them from their local enemies and the emperor Nero's equestrian agent (prefect). The subsequent arrival of the Roman army “manufactured” enemies where few had existed before.

Relevant here is the early history of conflict in the region, at least from the time when Alexander the Great swept through the Levant in 332/331 BCE. We know from sources other than Josephus that, after the Samaritans burned alive the governor Alexander had left among them, the Macedonian conqueror ordered a brief punitive expedition against them (Curtius 4.8.9–11). This likely pleased Jews in Jerusalem. The subsequent permanent settlement of many Greeks and Macedonians in the region during the Hellenistic era set the stage for contacts and conflicts among Jews, Samaritans, and Greeks. According to Josephus, the conflict began in 66 with, tellingly, a clash between Jews and Syrians (i.e., Greeks) in Caesarea over a sacrifice provocatively made by a Greek outside the entrance to a synagogue (*War* 2.285–90).

But why, in 66, were tens of thousands of Jews willing to take up arms and fight to the death against the ancient world's most powerful state? Sadly none of the Jews or Idumaeans who fought the Romans in the streets of Jerusalem left memoirs explaining their motivations. But we do know that it was not primarily against Samaritans that Jews fought in Iotapata, Gamala, or Jerusalem. Moreover, the Roman prefect Gessius Florus, as the representative of the emperor, commanded the garrison in

Jerusalem. These auxiliaries committed atrocities against Jews *before* Cestius's intervention. Cestius may have "manufactured" new enemies for Rome but there were already many existing anti-Romanists, just as there were thousands of sworn enemies of the United States in Afghanistan before American Special Forces A-teams first set foot in the country after 9/11. As Josephus wrote in the very first sentence of his work, this was a war of Jews against Romans. The right question to ask is: precisely when and why did a temporary spasm of violence become an organized attempt to break free from Roman imperium?

In chapter 6, "Nero's War II: Flavians in Galilee," the author critiques the scholarly view that when Vespasian invaded Galilee in March/April 67 with a combined Roman, allied, and royal army of some sixty thousand, he intended to suppress all areas of opposition before attacking Jerusalem. Mason argues that Vespasian decided against a scorched-earth policy in favor of a risk-averse strategy to pacify the north through intimidation and a show of force. In the event, there was little fighting before Galilee's speedy submission. No one sees Vespasian's approach to the war as a precursor of General Sherman's march through Georgia, but there was substantial fighting nevertheless. Although Josephus had personal reasons for exaggerating the intensity of Jewish resistance at Iotapata in central Galilee, he also describes sharp, bloody encounters at Iapha and Mt. Gerizim, as well as stiff resistance in the territory of King Agrippa II at Tiberias and Taricheae. Gamala in the Golan was not taken until September 67.

Chapter 7, "Jerusalem I: Josephus and the Education of Titus," concerns events from autumn 67 to December 70. These include the ascendancy of John of Gischala and the Zealot faction of Eleazar ben Simon in Jerusalem, the entry of the Idumaeans into Jerusalem, the civil war in the city, Vespasian's campaign in the Peraea in spring 68, his suspension of military operations against the Jews after Nero's death in June 68, the entry of Simon bar Giora into Jerusalem in March 68 and intensified civil war in the city, and Titus's siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple and the city by late August 70. These events are at the heart of Josephus's history and the subjects of ongoing scholarly arguments. Mason warns that we should translate Greek *zelotes* not as "zealot" (i.e., fanatic), but as "disciple." This correction will change our impression of the followers of Menahem, Eleazar ben Simon, and John of Gischala in Jerusalem.

Mason contends that Josephus uses *zelotes* ironically and sarcastically. Breaking ranks with other historians, he portrays Josephus's rival, John of Gischala, as a wealthy local preoccupied with his town, who became a dead-ender rebel only after he fled to Jerusalem. So, too, Simon bar Giora, in Mason's telling, becomes not a messianic figure, but a tough, enforcer son of a Jewish convert from Gerasa (Jerash). The Idumaeans become Jerusalem's Ghurkas, a special force called in at a time of crisis. Mason sees Titus's approach to the siege of Jerusalem as consistent with Vespasian's risk avoidance during the war. Titus escalated the attack on Jerusalem only when it became apparent that the rebels would not come to terms. Mason rightly rejects Josephus's figure of 1.1 million Jews killed during the siege of Jerusalem, and another 97,000 taken prisoner, given the ca. 1 square-mile area of the city (438).

In chapter 8, "Jerusalem II: Coins, Councils, Constructions," Mason treats the material remains of the war in Peraea and Judaea, which confirm massive destruction in Jerusalem in 70. He surveys finds of coins minted in Jerusalem during the war, which, *pace* J.S. McLaren,<sup>3</sup> were produced in contexts of political turmoil and motivated by political needs, not a desire to advertise a holy war.

Using the destruction of Monte Cassino in 1944 as a suggestive parallel, Mason hypothesizes<sup>4</sup> that

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3. "The Coinage of the First Year as a Point of Reference for the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE)," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003) 135–52.

4. Against the evidence of the account by the Christian chronicler Sulpicius Severus (fl. 400).

the Temple was demolished not as a matter of policy but as consistent with Titus's overall improvisational approach to capturing the city and defeating the rebels. That said, Titus shed no tears over the destruction of the Temple. Indeed, he gladly exploited it as emblematic of Roman victory in Judaea.

Although Mason's case for Titus's adherence to his father's cautious strategy during the siege of Jerusalem is well argued and convincing, his reconstruction of how the Temple was destroyed will generate further debate, as will his interpretation of the evidence of rebel coins. As commander of the Roman army, Titus was ultimately responsible for his soldiers' actions, including their devastation of the Temple. As for the coins, the obverse of the silver shekels minted in year one of the revolt bear the legend "Shekel of Israel" written in Paleo-Hebrew; the reverse of bronze coins from years two and three read "Freedom of Zion" (*herut Tziyon*). In both cases, the coins hark back to the ancient past of their people. But evoking that past in writing was a declaration of freedom from the jurisdiction of a Roman prefect and the legate of Syria. The minting of coins within the Roman imperium was normally a privilege granted by emperors. To mint without such permission was a manifest assertion of historical and political independence.

In the book's ninth and last chapter, "A Tale of Two Eleazars: Machaerus and Masada," the author recounts the Roman capture of the fortresses of Herodium (site of Herod's burial), Machaerus (looking out over the Dead Sea from the east), and, as a kind of afterthought, Masada, strategically disconnected from the Flavian war, which ended with the sack of Jerusalem. The Roman governor of Judaea, Sextus Lucilius Bassus, took Herodium in 72 virtually without a fight. He then captured Machaerus that same year, after encircling it with a wall and starting to build an embankment on the northwestern approach to the upper citadel, to which the Jews had fled, leaving non-Jews in the lower town. After the Romans captured the young Jewish leader Eleazar and threatened to crucify him, the Jews agreed to surrender and received free passage out of Machaerus. Bassus, however, followed them (and other refugees from Jerusalem) to a grove of trees along the Jordan River, where the Romans killed them all.

Mason debunks Josephus's account of the heroic defense and mass murder/suicide of Masada's *sicarii* and their families. He casts Eleazar ben Yair and his men as bandits, not freedom fighters, who for years had tried to avoid a confrontation with Rome. By 74, Masada was a kind of displaced persons camp. Citing topographical studies indicating that the Roman commander Flavius Silva never completed the ramp up to the mesa's summit,<sup>5</sup> Mason suggests that there was no prolonged defense by Eleazar and his few fighters; Flavius Silva did not finish the ramp because surrender terms were offered and accepted, but something went awry and some people on Masada committed suicide, probably in March 74. Finally, he argues that the two famous speeches that Josephus attributes to Eleazar, in which the *sicarius* leader defended the actions of the Jews and urged his comrades to commit suicide rather than surrender to the Romans, were rhetorical inventions, meant to dazzle Josephus's Greek-reading Roman friends. Whatever the truth, his noble myth of heroic resistance by the *sicarii* endures to this day.

The capture of Herodium and Machaerus two years after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem cannot be separated entirely from the Flavian war. Roman governors could not have conducted military operations without the blessing of the emperor, and neither Vespasian nor Titus would have seen Bassus's actions in 72 as unrelated to the events of 66–70. The same goes for Silva's operation at Masada. As for the hypothesis that Masada's defenders accepted surrender terms and only murdered each other or committed suicide after negotiations went wrong, it is probable that they knew the survivors of

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5. B. Arubas and H. Goldfus, "Masada, the Roman Siege Works," *New Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Soc., 2008) 1937–39; "Masada from the Roman Point of View: The Excavations of the Siege Works," in S. Yona, ed., *Or Le-mayer: Studies in Bible, Semitic Languages, Rabbinic Literature, and Ancient Civilizations ...* (Beersheba: Ben-Gurion U of the Negev Pr, 2010) 19–32.

Machaerus had been perfidiously slaughtered at Jordan's Grove. Again, for all our misgivings about Josephus's veracity, we would know precious little about Masada's fall and the war in general without his history.

*A History of The Jewish War* is a major contribution to the literature of its subject, one that will stimulate much salutary scholarly discussion and debate. The most economical explanation for past events, however, is not always the most convincing: collective human behavior, especially under the strain of violence in combat, is complicated and controversial. The study of both ancient and modern wars underscores the power of belief to inspire resistance and violence. Moreover, the recollections even of those who fought side by side often sharply differ. Steve Mason's many perceptive arguments may or may not lead us to a new understanding of the reasons why so many Jews took up arms against Rome in 66. But his book provides a new starting point in the search for better answers to questions about a war that is not—and may never be—over.