

An aerial photograph of the Masada fortress, a massive stone structure built on a high, rocky plateau. The surrounding landscape is arid and rugged, with deep canyons and sparse vegetation. The fortress itself is a complex of rectangular buildings and walls, situated on the edge of a steep cliff. The overall scene is dramatic and evocative of ancient history.

MASADA

Message for Today?

One of the most dramatic episodes in Jewish history is now a television miniseries. Few realize that television movie-makers are portraying a calamitous event 19 centuries ago which in many respects will be re-played in the years just ahead—but with a very different conclusion!

by Keith W. Stump



YEAR AFTER YEAR the Romans had tightened their grip on Judea. One restrictive decree after another had pushed the Jews of Judea closer and closer toward the brink of rebellion.

Events finally came to a head in the spring of A.D. 66. The Roman imperial procurator, Gessius Florus, seized the vestments of the Jewish High Priest during the annual Passover celebration and demanded payments from the temple fund!

That was the last straw. The Jews erupted into general revolt—defying the military might of the entire Roman Empire!

In response, the Roman general Titus, son of Emperor Vespasian, finally swept into Judea with his legions. In A.D. 70 he conquered Jerusalem, burning the Temple to the ground, laying waste to the city and slaughtering an estimated 600,000 Jews. Thousands of others were sold into slavery.

Some few Jews managed to

escape. Evading capture, they made their way across the barren Judean wilderness. Their objective: to join a group of Jewish Zealots that had earlier taken refuge in an ancient mountaintop fortress near the Dead Sea—the fortress of *Masada*.

The stage was now set for one of the most dramatic episodes in all of Jewish history!

Jews' Last Stand

The events which followed have often been retold. Now a major multimillion-dollar motion picture spectacle made for television brings the story into the homes of millions worldwide.

But few realize the amazing parallels with prophesied events soon to shake the world from the Holy Land! For the Jews are destined to *yet again* confront the power of the final revival of the Roman Empire!

But first, let us look briefly at the outcome of that earlier drama as it unfolded 19 centuries ago.

Following lengthy preparations, Flavius Silva, the Roman governor, marched on Masada

with his Tenth Legion. His objective was to capture this last fortress of Jewish resistance. The siege against Masada began early in A.D. 72.

The ancient mountaintop fortress stands in the eastern Judean Desert on the west coast of the Dead Sea. Originally a Hasmonean (Maccabean) stronghold, it had later been rebuilt and considerably enlarged by Herod the Great, King of Judea under the Romans.

Perched on a mountaintop more than 1,400 feet above the level of the Dead Sea, Masada—with its combination of natural and man-made fortifications—was considered virtually impregnable.

At the start of the Jewish Revolt in A.D. 66, an unsuspecting Roman garrison stationed at Masada was massacred by Jewish Zealots. The Zealots were a sect noted for their uncompromising opposition to Rome and its pagan polytheism. Their leader through the period of Jewish revolt was Eleazar ben Jair (Yair).

By the time of Silva's siege, the

Zealot defending force at Masada numbered 960, including women and children. The besieging Roman army, encamped at the foot of the mountain, stood at a strength of 15,000.

Month after month the siege wore on. Finally the Romans, using siege machines and fire, succeeded in making a breach in the wall. The end was at last in sight.

No hope of victory or escape remained for the Zealots. Only two alternatives stood before the defenders—surrender or death.

At the base of the giant rock fortress the Tenth Roman Legion prepared to overrun the stronghold and capture the Zealots at the first sight of dawn. But atop the mountain, plans were being made that were to result in a much different conclusion to the drama.

Eleazar ben Jair called the people together. "It is very plain that we shall be taken within a day's time," he observed. In a heart-felt, impassioned speech, he declared that "it is by the will of God, and by necessity, that we are to die: for it now appears that God hath made such a decree against the whole Jewish nation. . . ."

Eleazar's plan was then laid out: "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 and preserve ourselves in freedom as an excellent funeral monument for us."

So on that fateful night in the spring of A.D. 73 (15 Nisan 3833 on the Hebrew calendar) the defenders of Masada carried out their plan to "die bravely, and in a state of freedom." After killing their families, the men of Masada chose 10 from among themselves to execute the others. The 10 then cast lots to determine who would kill the other nine, and after that himself. This final man set fire to the palace and then drove a sword through his body.

The bloody story of the last day of Masada is known from the accounts of two surviving women and five children who had hid in a water conduit during the mass suicides. It was recorded at the time by the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his monumental work, *Wars of the Jews*.

"Now for the Romans," Josephus concluded, "they expected that they should be fought in the morning, when accordingly they put on their armor . . . to make an assault upon the fortress, which they did; but saw nobody as an enemy, but a terrible solitude on every side . . . as well as a perfect silence."

In the centuries since the mass-suicide at Masada, the fortress has become a symbol of Jewish national heroism. Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin, who excavated the site in 1963-65, noted:

"Masada represents for all of us in Israel . . . a symbol of courage, a monument to our great national figures, heroes who chose death over a life of physical and moral serfdom."

Many Israelis today see their nation as a *large-scale Masada*, a nation under siege, threatened by hostile neighbors and other foreign powers.

As we shall see, this analogy may prove to be more accurate than many today realize!

Modern-day "House of Judah"

Consider, first, the current Jewish state in Palestine.

In 1948, the present-day state of Israel was forged as a Jewish national homeland. This end-time physical restoration of the Jews as a nation was prophesied anciently—and came to pass just as foretold.

But understand this: the present Jewish state in Palestine is *not* the triumphant final return of the *entire* 12-tribed nation of Israel in peace and security, mentioned so often by the Old Testament prophets! Today's state of Israel is a *human* effort, born of strife and war. Moreover, the vast majority even of the House of

Judah *have not yet returned* to the Holy Land!

The Israelis in Palestine today are only a *part* of the "House of Judah"—modern descendants of the ancient tribe of Judah, along with elements of the tribes of Benjamin and Levi.

The 10 remaining tribes of Israel—the "House of Israel," often referred to as the "Ten Lost Tribes"—are still dispersed in various parts of the world! Herbert W. Armstrong's book *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* reveals that among the modern descendants of these "lost" tribes are the United States and the British peoples!

Only *after* the return of the Messiah will *all* Israel be regathered and brought back to the Promised Land.

But what is to become of the present-day state of Israel? Bible prophecy reveals the answer!

Revived Roman Empire

As we examine these prophecies, notice the amazing parallels between the episode at Masada and events that lie just ahead.

From the standpoint of the present time and the present world, the tangled Arab-Israeli situation appears increasingly to be an *unsolvable* problem. Though compromise has played and may continue to play a role in resolving certain aspects of the dilemma, the gulf between the two sides on *basic root issues* remains wide and deep.

There will continue to be outbreaks of strife between Israel and her Arab neighbors. However, the Bible reveals that the *major* military threat to the region will come from a different source altogether!

Bible prophecy reveals that the years just ahead will see a *rebirth* of the ancient Roman Empire in Europe! An end-time confederation of 10 nations or groups of nations will emerge in Europe, headed by a superdictator known in Bible language as the "Beast" (Revelation 17).

Many prophecies foretell that

this revived Roman Empire will become involved militarily *in the Middle East!* Israeli and Arab alike will feel the impact of this great military power.

Despite genuine and sincere efforts towards peace in the region, a great crisis is yet to occur throughout the Middle East!

In the prophecies of Daniel, the Beast is known as the "king of the north" (for details, request our free article, "The Middle East in Prophecy" by Herbert W. Armstrong). At the "time of the end," Daniel reveals, many nations and peoples of the Middle East are to be overthrown by the Beast's military intervention in the region (Daniel 11:40-41).

Among these occupied areas will be the Holy Land. The Beast, says Daniel, "shall enter also into the glorious land [the Holy Land]" (11:41). The present-day state of Israel will be occupied—*just as Judea had been occupied more than 19 centuries earlier by the ancient Roman Empire!*

Foreign troops will yet stand on Israeli soil!

The invasion of the state of Israel—and Arab countries as well—by the restored Roman Empire is foretold in both the Old and New Testaments. Now notice some of these prophecies.

Jerusalem to Be Trodden Down

Jesus Christ prophesied that at the end of this present age Jerusalem would be "compassed with armies" (Luke 21:20), and that "there shall be great distress in the land" (v. 23). The people would be "led away captive into all nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (v. 24).

Daniel calls this period "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time . . . (12:1). This corresponds to the "Great Tribulation," a time of unparalleled global chaos and turmoil, spoken of by Jesus (Matthew 24:21; Luke 21:22).

Numerous prophecies reveal the length of this occupation of Jerusalem. An angel disclosed to Daniel that "it shall be for a time, times, and an half" (Daniel 12:7), or 3½ years.

Revelation 11:2 corroborates this, stating that "the holy city shall they [the armies of the religious-political end-time revival of the Roman Empire] tread under foot forty and two months"—equivalent to 1,260 days or 3½ years.

Prophecy clearly indicates that the children of Judah—along with their "brother" nations, the United States, Britain and other modern descendants of the House of Israel—will have to learn the bitter lesson of their sins through utter humiliation and crushing national defeat at the hands of their enemies!

Jerusalem the Focal Point

Jerusalem will become the focal point of an all-out struggle for world supremacy.

"Behold, the day of the Lord cometh," declares the prophet Zechariah, ". . . For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken . . ." (14:1-2).

As the conflict escalates, mankind will stand on the very threshold of total annihilation! But God will suddenly intervene mightily in world affairs! Jesus Christ will return from heaven with a vast army. Unlike at Masada 19 centuries ago, the Messiah *will* intercede this time to save His people.

Instead of fighting each other, the world's armies will turn their attack against *Him*. The result will be the "battle of the great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:12-16; Joel 3:1-2, 9-17), often erroneously referred to as the "Battle of Armageddon." The returning Christ will destroy the Beast, the supportive kings of the earth and their armies gathered at Jerusalem (Revelation 19:19-20).

With the coming of the Messiah, the "times of the Gentiles"

will come to an end. Christ will deliver Jerusalem from the gentile forces. *All* 12 tribes of Israel will be gathered from captivity and be brought back to the Promised Land (Jeremiah 23:3-8; 50:4-5, 19-20; Ezekiel 20:34-43; 36:24-28; 39:25-29).

God's Government will then be established over the entire earth (Daniel 2:44; Revelation 11:15). Jerusalem will become His world headquarters (Jeremiah 3:17). The "Messianic Age" so long awaited by the Jews will at last be realized!

As the Jews were among the first to receive corrective punishment, they will be among the first to be delivered and resettled, along with the other tribes of Israel (Jeremiah 3:18). But Christ will not return as the Messiah of Israel only, but of the *entire world!* The prophet Zechariah reveals that ultimately "*many people* and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord" (8:22).

"In those days," Zechariah continues, "it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you" (8:23). How different this outcome than the tragic conclusion to the events of Masada 19 centuries ago.

Following the tumultuous crisis of the Great Tribulation, the Jews will *not* have to say, as they did on that calamitous last day at Masada: "The same God, who had of old taken the Jewish nation into his favor, has now condemned them to destruction."

But rather they will joyfully declare, along with all of Israel, to the gentiles: "The Lord liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land" (Jeremiah 23:8). □