

Josephus Describes the Mass Suicide at Masada

- Why would there have been a mass suicide?
 - o Josephus states that "these people died with this intention, that they would leave not so much as one soul among them all alive to be subject to the Romans"
- Josephus would not have known what was going on inside the fortress walls
 - o Dramatizes the suicides by stating that all of the men kissed their wives and children lovingly
 - o This could reflect the mass suicide in which Josephus found himself while under attack by the Romans
- Also states that when the men did this, they "...had nothing else for their comfort but the necessity they were in of doing this execution to avoid that prospect they had of the miseries they were to suffer from their enemies. Nor was there at length any one of these men found that scrupled to act their part in this terrible execution, but every one of them dispatched his dearest relations. Miserable men indeed were they, whose distress forced them to slay their own wives and children with their own hands, as the lightest of those evils that were before them."
 - o Is Josephus making an indirect comment about the Roman forces?
 - o Josephus was a Jew, and originally against the Romans
- Josephus again appears to be favouring the Jews in this narrative, when he states: "Nor could [the Romans] do other than wonder at the courage of [the Jews'] resolution and the immovable contempt of death, which so great a number of them had shown, when they went through with such an action as that was."
- "...and he who was the last of all took a view of all the other bodies, lest perchance some or other among so many that were slain should want his assistance to be quite dispatched"
 - o This quotation shows that for Josephus, it was imperative that everyone should be killed
 - This has an air of the dramatic in it, but could also show a strong sense of devotion and community that no one should be left behind, even if that is what one chooses
 - o However, in the narrative there are survivors who tell the Roman forces what had happened. Josephus states that they were in underground caves
 - It is possible that Josephus added these characters to his narrative in order to add authority, since neither he or the Romans witnessed the mass suicide
 - However, these characters would not have witnessed the mass suicide either, since they were in hiding
 - The addition of these characters seems to contribute to the argument that this narrative is entirely fictional

The Credibility of Josephus

- The archaeological evidence does not affirm the mass suicide
- No skeletal remains have been found
 - o There is also no evidence of cremation of the remains
- As Shaye Cohen makes clear, there is evidence of numerous burned piles as opposed to the massive one that Josephus seems to suggest
 - o However, there are burned piles. What does this suggest?
- Cohen goes on to state that the palace, which still stands despite Josephus stating that it had burned down, would not have held the 960 bodies that Josephus had described
- Cohen also points out the discovery of 25 skeletons in a cave on the southern slope of the cliff
 - o He reasons that it would have been pointless to drag the bodies there, and that these must have been the people that hid from the Romans
- Cohen also mentions the speech given by Eleazar in Chapter 8 of Book 7 of Josephus' *The Jewish War*
 - o In this speech, Josephus has Eleazar state that the zealots are at fault
 - o Additionally, this is done in the style of a speech made at Jotapata
 - o Here it is clear that Josephus intends to make the Romans the 'good guys'
 - This is likely because he was captured by the Romans and was partially writing for them
 - o Cohen also states that Josephus was writing this as a warning to the Jews of his time
 - From this perspective, Josephus' writings serve as a warning to contemporary Jews to avoid the theology of the zealots
- Cohen goes on to state that almost all historians that were contemporary with Josephus embellished their texts, and so it is not unlikely that Josephus followed this trend
- In terms of the elements of the narrative that are plausible, Cohen states that suicide was common among both Jews during the years of the Jewish Revolt as well as non-Jews who escape their enemy
- Cohen concludes by stating that Josephus was attempting to be accurate, although there are many embellishments throughout the narrative

- What did the events at Masada mean for Jews then?
 - o To contemporary Jews, the death of the Zealots at Masada may not have been the worst outcome
 - o The Zealots had previously killed over 700 Jews in a nearby village because they did not follow the same theology
 - o Moreover, the Zealots refused to aid the Jews when the Romans besieged Jerusalem
 - This is because the Zealots thought of both the Jews and the Romans as enemies
- What do the events at Masada mean for Jews today?
 - o Other than Jerusalem, Masada is the most popular tourist destination in Israel
 - o The events at Masada were evidently important for Jews during the Second World War
 - Isaac Lamdan wrote a “poetic history” of the plight of the Jewish people entitled *Masada*
 - This poem was allegedly the inspiration for the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto
 - o As it was the last form of resistance against Roman occupation, Masada stands for the resolution of the Jewish people

Bibliography

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