

A Brief Synopsis of the Fall of Jerusalem, 70 C.E.

Based on the works of Josephus

Note: Josephus, a younger contemporary of the Apostle Paul, wrote his first great work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, to impress his Roman captors with the nobility of the Jewish race. His later work, *Wars of the Jews*, also political propaganda, aimed at impressing the Jews with the nobility of the Romans. One might consider these shrewd pieces of self-preservation.

I. Factions inside the city (*War* 7:260)

1. Four factions (*War* 7:269-74):

- a. Sicarii, named after their assassination dagger, murdering people in the broad daylight (*War* 2.255). They arose in the summer of A.D. 66 and probably were responsible for the arson of Ananias' Palace, the High Priest's house and the palaces of Agrippa II and Bernice as well as other public buildings which held debt records. In the process they annihilated two Roman cohorts that were keeping peace in the city. This fanned into flame Jewish nationalism all over Palestine and caused the outbreak of civil/racial riots in several cities.
- b. Zealots, under Eleazar ben Simon, were primarily brigands and bandits of infiltrated the city. They captured the temple and used the Holy Place as a headquarters for their tyranny (4.151-52). Ananus, the high priest, was outraged by their impiety and sacrilege and called the people to rise against them.
- c. John of Gischala played several factions against each other trying to win power for himself.
 - i. John and Josephus vied for power in Galilee. Particularly over Tiberias where Josephus was stationed.
 - ii. In Jerusalem he invited the Idumeans to come fight with them. 20,000 came and were let into the city undetected during a storm by the Zealots. 8,500 men lay dead in the temple after their massacre. The Idumeans tired of the carnage and left. John tired of his alliance with the Zealots and so broke off the alliance. This left two despots vying for power, John and Eleazar ben Simon.
- d. Simon ben Giora, a powerful general, had his wife kidnapped by the Zealots. In a rage he marched against the city and demanded her release. The Zealots, afraid of Simon, gave in. This gave the High Priest, Matthias hopes that Simon could rid the city of the Zealots and John of Gischala. He came at their invitation but proved to be a tyrant like the other two.

2. Life of the city:

- a. Simon ben Giora controlled the upper and lower city; John had the temple mount, and the Eleazar was confined to the inner forecourt of the temple.
- b. Because of the violence people were inadvertently killed and blood formed pools even in the temple (5.18)

II. Entrance of the Romans

1. **Vespasian** was the Roman general in charge of the campaign (after Gallus died prematurely in 66). His advisors told him to ransack the city but he chose to wait since the Jews were destroying themselves faster than he could and he didn't want to unite them against a common enemy.

2. **Nero** committed suicide (under duress) on June 9, A.D. 68, leaving a vacuum of leadership in Rome. Galba took over the throne but only lasted 7 months and 7 days. Otho, who took over lasted less, only 3 months and 2 days. He was defeated by Vitellus and took his own life on April 17, A.D. 69.
3. When **Vitellus** declared himself emperor, this infuriated Vespasian's troops who demanded that he return to Rome and take his rightful place as emperor. Under their insistence, he did, leaving his son **Titus** in charge of the campaign.
4. More than a year had passed with little or no activity from the Romans. It was during this time that Christians, following Jesus' command (Mt 24:15-21), fled to Pella and were saved the terrible destruction to come.

III. The Siege of the City

1. The first victory was won by the Jews when Titus himself marched with 600 troops to test the resolve of the Jews and scout out the city. The Jews raced from the city, divided the troops and very nearly captured Titus. This, however, drew in the 5th, 10th, 12th, and 15th legions (5:60-70).
2. For a brief time this united the internal factions. But once things settled down they began to fight amongst themselves again. On April 14, A.D. 69, the Zealots, who controlled the temple, allowed the citizens to make their sacrifices in the temple during the Passover. John of Gischala slipped in with concealed weapons and he, with his men, slew Zealots and commoners alike, throwing the temple into chaos (5.99-105).
3. As Titus began building earthen works against the city, the Jews pummeled them with stones and arrows. The Romans answered back by throwing stones (45-50 kilograms) of brilliant white. "They made a dreadful whizzing noise as they flew through the air" (5.270-72). This attack again united the forces inside the city.
4. The battering ram, named "victor," constantly smashed against the wall, finally breaking through the first wall on May 25, A.D. 70, on the 15th day of the siege (5.298-302). The second was broken through five days later. Titus had given orders not to burn the houses or destroy the city for he wanted to save it as a monument to Rome, particularly the temple (5.334). The Jews mistook this as a sign of weakness and ruthlessly attacked the Romans who were at a disadvantage in the narrow and convoluted city streets. They fought their way back to the safety of the first wall.
5. It was at this point that Josephus pleaded with his countrymen to surrender (5.413-420). Many were inclined to do so. Others, however, tried to escape, swallowing coins to keep them from being found. The Romans, however, discovered what they were doing and began "discharging" the coins with their swords (5.421).

IV. Suffering in the City

1. The famine had grown so bad that elders and children were beaten for their bread (5.424-38), some were reduced to eating the leather from shoes and belts (6.197-98), and some even succumbed cannibalism of their own infants (6.205-12). According to Josephus, this was the worst suffering since the beginning of the world (5.442; cf. Mt 24:21).
2. Five hundred or more were caught daily venturing outside the city to forage for food. These were crucified until there was no more room for crosses, nor anymore wood to build them (5.451). When the Arabians observed a man picking gold coins from his

excrement, they started butchering all who tried to escape in search of loot. One evening 2,000 Jews died this way.

3. The Jews dug a tunnel under the battering ram of the Romans and filled it with wood and pitch. Lighting this on fire caused the whole thing to collapse. This angered the Romans who then built a wall all around the city and patrolled it to make sure no one escaped. This ensured the city would fall into deep starvation which effectively decimated the city (5:512-18).

V. Sack of the city

1. After a stirring address, outlining the dangers of the invasion but the glory of Rome, urging them to beat the resolve of these untrained Jews, a Syrian was the first to rise and offer to scale the wall. He gave a “prayer” to Caesar promising to fight valiantly, knowing that he would probably die. He said he preferred death in Caesar’s honor (6:56-57). He and eleven others did successfully scale the wall but were eventually killed on July 22, A.D. 70.
2. Two days later, at 2:00 a.m., a group of Roman soldiers moved toward the tower (fortress) of Antonia, killed the sleeping guard and took the stronghold. They attempted to take the Temple but the fury of the Jews drove them back (6:68-80).
3. The Romans decided to raze the fortress to make the entrance into the city easier. On that very August day the Jews stopped making daily sacrifices in the temple either due to lack of lambs or manpower. This made them very despondent (6:93-94). Josephus gave a strong appeal to surrender that cause many to defect. The leaders, however, remained adamant (6:111-29).
4. Titus proceeded to attack the temple, first with a foray that lasted from 2:00 a.m. to 10 a.m., finally retreating. Both sides proceeded to set fire to the temple and neither tried to extinguish it. On August 15th, a group of Jews set an ambush in the temple filling the rafters of the Western portico with dry tender, pitch, and bitumen, then pretending to retreat. The Romans rushed in and found themselves caught in the inferno. With no way to escape, some jumped to their death, others died in the blaze (6:177-92).
5. The Romans were unsuccessful at battering the temple walls, scaling them or digging under. So they set fire to the gates. The silver melted and the wood underneath caught fire in a massive blaze. The Jews inside withdrew to the Holy Place. Unsuccessful in entering there, the Romans finally set fire to that as well. When Titus found out he rushed to the scene but it was too late. The soldiers were in a frenzy with hatred for the Jews and hopes of finding treasures. They killed everyone who ran out and the fire could not be extinguished. Thus, against Caesar’s desires, the temple was destroyed. Josephus describes the scene: “You would indeed have thought that the temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame, but yet that the stream of blood was more copious than the flames and the slain more numerous than the slayers. For the ground was nowhere visible through the corpses” (6:275-76).
6. Josephus recounts a number of phenomenal portents that supposedly accompanied the destruction of the city including a star in the shape of a sword that stood over the city for a year, a cow that gave birth to a lamb, the spontaneous opening of the Nicanor gate, and the sighting of chariots and armed soldiers in the sky (6:289-300). There was one prophet who, in spite of being brutally flogged, continued to prophesy nothing but “Woe to Jerusalem” for seven and a half years. He was a peasant named Jesus.

7. Titus granted an audience to Simon and John, who asked for pardon. He granted them opportunity to escape but the following day gave orders to his soldiers to raze the city, killing everyone who had refused to leave (6.349-71). On September 26 the entire city was engulfed in flames. He destroyed everything in the city except the three towers used by the Romans as encampments. The healthiest were taken as slaves, workers in the mines, or to be killed in the gladiatorial arenas (6.417-18). Simon was captured and sentenced to perpetual imprisonment; John was captured and killed.
8. Titus' arch in the Roman forum depicts the victory march in Jerusalem.