

# **Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand**

## **A BYU Forum Address**

Yigael Yadin

Introduced and edited by S. Kent Brown

*From 1963 to 1977, before Professor Yigael Yadin entered politics and became Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, he held the most distinguished chair of archaeology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a chair which was established in the name of his father, Professor E. L. Sukenik, who was in his own right a noted archaeologist and linguist and who performed the initial work on three of the seven Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Cave 1 at Qumran. An indication of the remarkable abilities of Professor Yadin can be seen in his notable military career. Without receiving any formal military training, he rose through the ranks of the Israel Defense Forces to become the Chief of Staff when Israel became a state. All that he learned about military affairs he learned on his own through reading and by practical experience, a remarkable record considering the fact that he retired from the army as a Lieutenant General.*

*Professor Yadin became Israel's foremost field archaeologist, having conducted extensive excavations at Hazor, Megiddo, and Masada. The last site forms the focus of the following forum address delivered in 1976. In addition, during his life he distinguished himself as one of the foremost scholars of the Dead Sea scrolls. He edited and published a number of these texts, including his three-volume work on the Temple Scroll, published in both Hebrew and English.*



Yigael Yadin (1917-1984)

*Dr. Yadin was the recipient of numerous awards; among them, he delivered the Schweich lectures of the British Academy and, just before coming to BYU, he delivered the prestigious Haskell lectures at Oberlin College. In addition, he received four honorary doctorate degrees.*

*The following piece I have edited with a light touch. Professor Yadin delivered this illustrated lecture at BYU on May 4, 1976.*

I feel highly honored to speak in this forum on this day, which is also the memorial day for the fallen in Israel, on the eve of the Independence Day, tomorrow. I am happy to speak about a fortress situated on the other salt lake, on the Dead Sea, thousands of miles from here and thousands of feet below where we are standing, the lowest spot on earth. And the subject, as was said, is the rock fortress Masada and its story on the Dead Sea.

One of the strangest phenomena in human history is the struggle of the Jewish people for their spiritual independence, always the few against the many. And one of the most amazing, heroic, alas tragic episodes in this struggle is no doubt the story of Masada.

In A.D. 73, three years after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem by Titus, when arches of triumph were erected in Rome to commemorate the great victory of Rome over Judea, when coins with the inscription the "Judaea Capta" were in currency throughout the Roman Empire, on one spot—and one spot only—960 Jewish zealots, patriots—men, women, and children—held that isolated rock fort near the Dead Sea in the Judean desert against the whole might of Rome headed by its crack Tenth Legion commanded by their famous General Silva. And when the inevitable and bitter end was near—they could not hold out any more—they decided (and it is not for us to criticize them now) to take their lives with their own hands rather than to submit their spiritual and physical independence.

This amazing story, until recently, was in a way semilegendary because our sole source of information was the writings of Josephus Flavius, an unfortunate Jew, I would say, and a brilliant historian. He himself was a very important commander in this great war against the Romans in A.D. 66. But then for his own reasons, he defected to the Romans. When he sat in the court in Rome—maybe

he had a guilty conscience—he repented perhaps and wrote his two major works, *The War of the Jews* and *The Antiquities of the Jews*. And it is only therein that we have a description of what happened in Masada on the eve of Passover, A.D. 73.

I cannot repeat what he says. This book is available today in paperback. I think that, because of his guilty conscience, this chapter of his, describing Masada, is the best. But what I would like to say is, that from my childhood—at that time I didn't ever dream that I would have the privilege to excavate Masada—I used to read like anyone in Israel the chapter on Masada.<sup>1</sup> And I used to visit Masada. Of the whole big speech which Josephus puts into the mouth of Eleazar ben Yair, the commander of these zealots,<sup>2</sup> I was particularly impressed by a few passages that always looked to me to be real and human. Ben Yair says to his fellows, as he's trying to persuade them to take their lives, "Do it quickly, before you hear your children crying, 'Daddy, Daddy,' and you won't be able to help them, before you see your wives being violated and you will be helpless." That, I imagined, could have happened then, could have happened anytime, anywhere. He says at the very end, when they decided to do that, they embraced each other and kissed—his wife, his children, everyone. They collected everything and set it on fire, lest it fall into the hands of the Romans. He says they drew lots as to who would be the last ten people to see that everybody complied with this order. These last ten or eleven people drew lots to see who was to be the last, and the last went to the palace and set the whole fortress on fire. These were the salient points of the description which were always in my mind from childhood. You can well imagine, therefore, that when in 1963 I was asked by the archaeological institutions of Israel to lead an excavation of that site, I considered myself rather privileged because Masada is not really just another archaeological site. For many of us it is a sort of mausoleum of the nation's martyrs.

Now, how to dig such a site, to hire labor? We had an idea. We thought that Masada and its story would appeal to people, and we asked for volunteers. The amazing response was that thousands of people from all religions, from all the continents, from all walks of life, from twenty-eight countries, flocked to help us. I said from all walks of life—from professors to hippies—although in those days it

was impossible to distinguish who was who just by the look of it. The amazing thing was that, when we appealed for volunteers, we promised them three things. We promised them bad food, and we promised that they would sleep ten in a tent. We also promised them, or rather told them, that they had to pay their own fare. Needless to say, we kept all our promises. Nevertheless, all of them came and really helped us. It was because of these volunteers that we managed to excavate that site in eleven months of very hard work, which I reckon otherwise would have taken us twenty-five years in the normal procedures of excavating. They were volunteers, and you know very well that there is no one better than a volunteer to do any job. (I remember one industrialist was asked how many people worked in his plant. He thought for awhile and he said about 60 percent.) If I were asked, I would say 100 percent of our volunteers worked. Not all of them came, of course, for the same motives. Some said they came to slim down, to lose weight, and they were very successful, I must say. Nevertheless, when they left Masada, they all felt emotionally the way we did.

Now, I would like to take you to the top of Masada, not only to show you what we found there, but how we found it. This was part of an experience which for me was the greatest in my life. Before doing that, I must discuss two points. Otherwise I think it would be, perhaps, incomprehensible for some of you to understand what we found there. Josephus tells us that the first to fortify that rock was King Herod the Great, and he says that there were two motives. One, he was not really Jewish, but he became, with the help of Rome, the King of the Jews. Therefore he could not really rely on his citizens, so he built this rock fort in the desert as a potential asylum. Well, that made sense. The other reason, according to Josephus, was that Herod the Great was afraid of Cleopatra, who reigned in Egypt. As we know, she had some, shall we say, intimate relations with the great men of Rome at the time and coveted Judea. Herod, so said Josephus, was afraid that one day she would get what she wanted, so he built the fortress. (Now that was a bit difficult to grasp. I remember when I used to talk to each new batch of volunteers telling them that Herod the Great was afraid of Cleopatra. The youngsters, particularly, couldn't really understand that Herod the Great was afraid of Elizabeth Taylor.)

The more serious scholars thought that the first reason really was more correct. Whatever the reason, our excavations proved quite clearly that the Masada of Herod was not just a fort; it was really a royal fort built by a great king. Otherwise, we cannot understand why we found there on this isolated rock one palace after another, adorned with frescos and mosaics. He built it for himself, just in case, and, of course, also fortified it.

The second point is that we knew what happened on the Passover of A.D. 73, this great tragic deed of the zealots which turns Masada into Masada. Yet we asked ourselves what we were going to find archaeologically of these last events, which occurred within just a few days. Although we did not find mosaics or frescos of this period, the poor remains that we found of the zealots—their clothes, the women's sandals, the coins, and the stoves—for us these were really the greatest finds. These then are the two facets of Masada: the Herodian one and, if I might say, the heroic one.

First of all, I would like to acquaint you with Masada and how it looks. Looking at Masada from the south, the Dead Sea is on the right (to the east), the Judean Desert is on the left (to the west). Masada is a natural rock standing twelve hundred feet above the level of the Dead Sea. But since the Dead Sea is twelve hundred feet below the ocean level, the top of Masada is really at zero, so to say, from the ocean point of view.

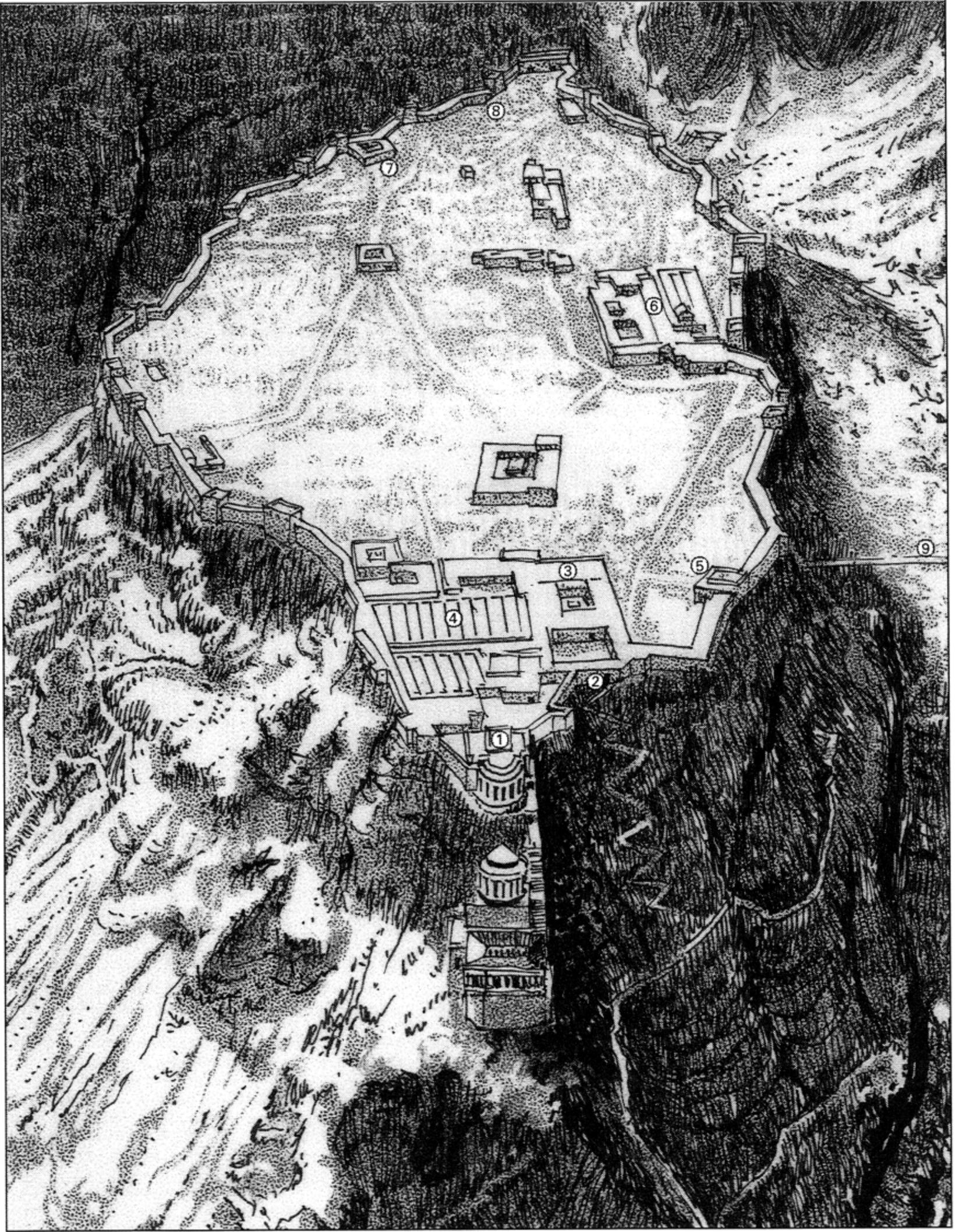
Strange as it may sound, our first problem was to determine where to base our operation. The most natural spot would have been on the east, because there was a hostel, electricity, and a road. But that would have meant daily climbing what Josephus rightly calls the "snake path," a rise of twelve hundred feet. Although I was younger twelve years ago, it was too difficult for me to think of climbing twice daily from this side. More than that, we needed to use heavy equipment, and therefore we reluctantly decided to locate our operation on the western side. On the west was the huge ramp, the assault ramp which the Romans built and by means of which, in the end, they managed to reach Masada. The difference in altitude between the hill on the west and the top is only one hundred yards, or three hundred feet, in comparison to twelve hundred. I said "reluctantly" because on the west we were completely handicapped. There was no road, no water, no electricity.

However, the Israeli army helped us very much, and we were able to do everything that we needed.

There was another problem: where to put our camp. The whole desert was ours; nevertheless, the only good spot to pitch a camp had already been taken by Silva, the commander of the Tenth Legion. He was first to come, first to choose, and he chose well. He chose his place on the west, and one can still see how his camp looks even today, without excavating. It is remarkably well preserved, far from the maddening crowd. Silva was the destroyer of Masada. His camp today is a fine archaeological object, and we did not want to destroy it. So we pitched our camp nearby. We also had something which Silva didn't have. We had the bulldozers of the engineers of the Israeli army. They flattened the area, and we pitched our camp just to the south of Silva's. For many of us, it was symbolic. On the north was the camp of those who destroyed Masada two thousand years ago; on the south was the camp of newly born Israel, who was coming to reconstruct the ruins of Masada.

While working, we used to climb up to Masada along the top of the ramp. At the crack of dawn, we and all the volunteers used to climb this earthen ramp to the top. We installed a simple cable car for our equipment. But while we walked to the top of Masada and looked to the south, Masada took on a slightly different appearance for us. Although you can't see them easily, to the south of the ramp are two rows in the cliff of what look like little holes. Actually each of them is a huge water reservoir. A royal fort or no royal fort without water means nothing. Like today, in those days there was no spring of water at the site. Herod's engineer had an ingenious idea. In the desert, it doesn't rain—it pours. The idea was to build two little dams, collect the winter runoff water, and divert it by gravitation into big reservoirs. When you stand there today, in the heat, you dare not believe that such a thing could happen. There are about twelve of these reservoirs cut out of the rock, and as you stand there, as I said, in the scorching sun you won't believe that they can be filled.

When we were excavating, though, there were two terrible winters. Our tents were torn to pieces and blown about. But we were fortunate to see how the whole system would have worked were it not that the channels are now destroyed. A half an



The Masada Fortress. (1) Northern Palace, (2) Water Gate, (3) bathhouse, (4) storehouses, (5) synagogue, (6) Western Palace, (7) southern miqveh, or ritual immersion pool, (8) large underground cistern, and (9) aqueduct.

hour after the rain started, the deep, dry gullies were filled with gushing water. I managed to photograph a rare picture because the water currently falls off the cliffs of Masada in breathtaking waterfalls into the Dead Sea rather than into the reservoirs. We were also compensated by these rains: for two weeks afterward the whole desert blossomed, as the Bible said. Even the top of Masada looked briefly like a park. For a short time, everything was blossoming, but then returned to desert again.

Talking so much about the weather you would think I came straight from London. Maybe I'm giving you the wrong idea as if the main problem in Masada is the rain. Just the contrary. Eleven months of the year, it's the scorching sun. The volunteers, particularly the women who came from Scandinavia and the northern countries, found it extremely difficult to cope with the heat. Nevertheless, I want to tell you it was these men and women who did the work, the results of which I'm going to show you now.

Before the excavation, the stumps of the walls could be seen. One could also see the double wall of Masada, the casemate wall, as we call it. We shall have a word to say about that wall because it was here that we found the most interesting discoveries connected with the zealots.

Now our first problem was to locate Herod's fantastic palace. Josephus goes out of his way in his description to say that Herod built a hidden palace, with a hidden staircase, decorated with frescoes. Until our excavation, all scholars identified that building with the biggest structure on the site. However, there was one big fly in the ointment. The location of that large building did not tally with Josephus's description. He said it was in the north, but the large building was in the west. He said the palace was under the wall, but this structure was within the wall. He said there was a hidden staircase, but this building was flat. Unfortunately, as it happens with us scholars, when the theory does not tally with the facts, we come to the conclusion that the facts in the texts are wrong. This was how it was left for many years, until it was suggested by youngsters, in the early fifties, that the palace was not on the west but rather in an incredible spot. Two youngsters climbed Masada, not along the ramp or snake path, but up the narrow bluff on the north. When they climbed there, they saw three terraces: a lower, a middle, and

an upper. Having read Josephus, one of them ventured to publish an article in a semiscientific journal suggesting that this was the palace that Josephus had described. And they were right. Therefore, the first real objective in our dig, you can well imagine, was to excavate this palace. We proved that this was the palace. However, I do not call it the palace; I call it the villa. Only the megalomaniac Herod—I mean he was a great king with great lust for building—could have built a villa on this narrow bluff, on these three terraces. It was a place only for himself or one of his nine known wives. All the rest was just for pleasure and luxury.

We started at the lower terrace and had removed only the top debris when a very crucial moment arrived: pillars began to appear. If Josephus was correct, then the wall paintings would appear from this point downwards. What we found in that spot, two weeks later, was the lower part of the wall covered with well-preserved wall paintings. They are not beautiful, perhaps, according to our modern taste, but that was the fashion in Rome in those days, including Pompeii and elsewhere. The idea was to imitate by painting the lower part of the wall as if it were built of marble panels. In fact, the desperate efforts of these artists can be seen in the inner peristyles, where the artist tried to imitate the veins of the marble. All was remarkably well preserved after two thousand years, and it showed that Josephus was right in his description of the luxury of the buildings which Herod built.

However, this was merely one facet. Before I was able to photograph that wall, we had to remove three meters of debris consisting of complete fire damage. In the fire level, we found coins with the inscription “The Freedom of Zion”<sup>3</sup> struck by these same zealots fighting Rome. We found many pieces of clothing, sandals, and jewelry belonging to the zealots. So we knew who built the latest structure, and we also knew who were the last to die here. And just to the left of this spot of wall, Herod built for himself a little bath—hot room, cold room, and a tepid room. Since this area was lower, it was covered by much more debris. When we removed the debris, even the most cynical members of our expedition could not go on working because, on the floor, there were three skeletons: a man who looked to be an officer and warrior, a young woman, and a child.

The man, as I said, was an officer, for we found near him hundreds of scales of armor and arrows with their wooden shafts. Because of the lack of humidity, everything was well preserved. The man must have been a very important commander. His young wife's scalp was found still intact, with the beautiful plats of hair and her kerchief stained with blood. These are things you don't normally find in excavations. But even if you do, you do not know the story behind them. We asked ourselves if it were possible that we had found the very last person, as Josephus tells us, who went down to the palace, killed his family, and set the whole palace on fire. Probably yes. Of course, we shall never be able to prove it, but I think the circumstances and the analogy to what Josephus said are really striking.

This was our first encounter with the two facets of Masada: the beautiful buildings of Herod and the poor remains of the zealots, as such, but with an amazing story behind them.

The other two parts of this villa are not very important for us. The lower villa includes the bath where we found the skeletons. There is a middle terrace with the circular kiosk or overlook, for pleasure. On the upper one, there were four rooms with a beautiful semicircular balcony. This was the bedroom. There were also some guest rooms. How many people were killed to build it, I don't know. But it is a fantastic villa.

To the south of that villa was a large complex. All the visitors who had come to Masada in the last one hundred years had identified these with the storerooms, because Josephus also talks about the storerooms which Herod built. Certainly they looked like storerooms. And we decided to excavate them—easier said than done. What one could see were the lower stumps of the wall. All the fallen stones—some of them weighing three or four hundred pounds—were lying on the ground. If it were not Masada, we would just take the stones and throw them away. But it was Masada, and we had to think about future visitors. So we decided to use a different technique: to restore first and excavate later.

In a typical area before excavation, one can see the lower walls and fallen stones. We recruited good masons and told them to take these stones and build them back into the walls. I cannot pretend that we put each stone in its exact spot. But amazingly, when

they finished their work, all the walls were of the same height. This shows that we were not too far wrong in our reconstruction. Having removed the stones, we started to dig again. A few inches under the surface, we again encountered the terrible fire layer, which the zealots left behind them, sometimes with charred beams and thousands of broken jars. These were the signs of the last moments, as Josephus says, when ben Yair told them to set the whole fortress on fire lest it fall into the hands of the Romans. We didn't excavate all of the storerooms. I left a few for future archaeologists, as great as the temptation was to check everything.

If we move further to the west, we come to the building which was thought to be the palace described by Josephus. It was really the palace par excellence, not the villa which Josephus described, but the ceremonial building—four thousand square meters. We started our excavations in order to find the main court of the palace. It took a group of volunteers eleven months to clear the whole area, including the layers of ash. It turned out to be the central court of the palace, revealing two pillars upon a beautiful plaster floor of the court.

It was a big palace indeed, with its own court and its own storerooms. In fact, the longest storeroom is seventy meters in length. There were also workshops and administrative rooms. To prove that this was the great palace of a great king, we found the throne room of Herod, and nearby there was a room filled with stones about four or five yards deep. When we removed those, we were rewarded. It turned out to be the waiting room for the VIPs who came to see Herod. This was the only place which Herod bothered to pave with a beautiful mosaic floor—multicolored—the earliest mosaic floor ever found in the Holy Land. It's beautiful. The interesting thing is that, although it is the earliest, it's simple. Another interesting thing is that, although Herod was not a Jew, he married the last of the Maccabean queens. Even here on top of Masada, although the whole style is Hellenistic and pagan, instead of adopting pagan images as was normal throughout the Near East, he used the patterns that were popular in Jewish art, like the pomegranate and the vine leaf. So this really was a great palace. Nearby he had a bathroom (he had bathrooms everywhere, like a good Roman), and in the corridor leading to the bathroom,

we also found a mosaic floor. Now it's not as nice as the floor of the waiting room, but I don't think too many of us can boast of having mosaic floors in corridors leading to our bathrooms.

When one looks at the mosaic floor, typically one does not notice the other rough stones. I left these in place. Every visitor can see them because they give the true picture of Masada. One sees the mosaics of Herod the Great and on top of them the few stones that are part of a bin or a stove which the zealots built. When they came, they had priorities other than just to admire the beautiful mosaics of Herod. They came as squatters. And this stone really tells a great story as in the Bible when Joshua placed the stones. He asked God why he should put the twelve stones near the Jordan River. God said, "When your children come they will ask what these stones mean, and then you will tell them" (Josh. 4:3-7). Today when people come to Masada, they ask what these stones mean, and the whole story is really there.

Now before we went to Masada, we asked ourselves if we were going to find the skeletons of the 960 Jews. We knew we had very little chance because we knew that the Romans had stationed a garrison there who must have disposed of the bodies for hygienic reasons. Nevertheless, we looked for them from the very beginning. One promising site was on the southeast sheer cliff of Masada. We could see a number of little caves from there. This was a sheer cliff of twelve hundred feet. We decided to explore some of them with the help of ladders and ropes. In the little cave on the south, when we removed the top fifteen or twenty inches, we were confronted by an ugly sight, a heap of skeletons. Were these the skeletons of the zealots? Were these skeletons of the Romans? Were these the skeletons of some Christian monks who lived at Masada in the sixth century? At that time I didn't know. But now all these skeletons have been examined. They are skeletons of men, women, children, and even an embryo that was found near its mother's skeleton. I believe this dismisses the possibility these were monks or that these were Roman soldiers. Whether these were of the zealots, I don't know.

In a different vein, I mentioned that there was this double wall surrounding Masada. From the air, we could see that it was a double wall. But on site it was one huge heap of stone, one thousand

three hundred yards long. I decided to excavate one spot just to know how it was built. Once I started I couldn't stop. The excavation revealed two walls, the outer wall and the inner wall. And then occurred to me what I should have thought of before. Where did the zealots live with their families? Masada had been built with palaces, with storerooms. The one hundred and ten rooms within this double wall really were a blessing—I wouldn't say even in disguise—for the zealots. It was there that they lived. It was there that we uncovered the most moving discoveries related to the zealots because, unlike the public buildings which they set on fire, they did not burn the walls. Sometimes we had the feeling that we were entering rooms that had been lived in only yesterday. For example, we would enter a room, finding a clay stove with the soot still on the wall. In another case, we found the stove with unused faggots of wood, along with a jar for flour or oil. These scenes freeze the last moments before life came to a standstill.

Yet the most moving thing for us was that in the rooms themselves, which were not burned, there was a heap of ashes, but only in the corner. Then we remembered what Josephus said, how these people embraced each other and then took their belongings, their private belongings, and set them on fire. It was in these fire heaps that we found the jewelry and other things. A heap of ashes like that means nothing anywhere else, but the story at Masada, of course, was great. Further, on the floor we found a lot of objects. And because of the lack of humidity even objects made of organic matter were found in abundance. For example, we found clothing, the earliest pieces of clothing ever found in the Holy Land—tunics and other garments. We found, of course, many objects of daily life, like spindle whorls and spoons made of ivory. We even found a die. I'm ashamed to say that this die is loaded. I give the zealots the benefit of the doubt—I say they took it from the Roman soldiers—but who knows. We found, of course, a lot of metal objects on the floor: cosmetic objects of women, perfume bottles, a comb, a mirror, sticks to paint the eyes and the cheeks. (Human nature hasn't changed in the last two thousand years, I must say.) And of course we found metal buckles and other metal objects; the more precious ones we found buried under the floor. On the floor, we

found huge quantities of food. We assumed that they did not die of hunger. There were nuts, dates, olives, cereal, pomegranates, and salt—huge, huge quantities.

When we went to Masada, we asked ourselves—we didn't ask, we just dreamt—whether we were going to find scrolls of the Bible or not. We knew it would be difficult, for there are no caves there. We also knew that the zealots wouldn't burn the holy scriptures, but where to look for them was hope against hope. Weeks passed, and we found nothing. And then one day a volunteer came and on his trembling palm was a black piece of leather. We couldn't see anything except for a few letters, but with the infrared photograph, this fragment turned out to be part of the book of Psalms, Psalms 82 and 85, beautifully written. These texts come from the oldest part of the biblical psalms. There can be no doubt about this manuscript's date, A.D. 73 at the latest, and it was obviously written before the destruction of Masada, perhaps sixty or seventy years before that date. The strength of tradition, the division into chapters, the spelling of the words are exactly like the Hebrew Bible which we all still use to this day. In all, we found fourteen scrolls.

One of the buildings looked suspicious to us. This was built into the casemate wall that was divided into rooms. From the very beginning we saw that one part of the wall protruded inward. When we excavated it, we found that this building had benches all around the inside of it. I immediately suspected that this was a synagogue. But I didn't dare utter that because, if I were right, this was not only the oldest synagogue known, but the only one ever discovered from the time of Second Temple or the time of Jesus. It was oriented toward Jerusalem, and on the day that we finished clearing it, we had a group of rabbis who came to inspect the ritual bath. The time for praying came, and I said to one, "You know, Rabbi, I found a building. Perhaps it is a synagogue, but I can't guarantee it. It's your responsibility if you want to pray there." And the rabbi said, "I don't care what you say, I'm going to pray. From now on it will be a synagogue." It was really quite an emotional sight for me because I knew that it was a synagogue. These Jews were praying again in this synagogue after two thousand years, looking towards Jerusalem.

The plan of the synagogue is very simple, with benches and an orientation toward Jerusalem. But the room at the back was suspicious. So we cut a section to see where the missing pillars were. When we cut into that section, a scroll fell into our hands. We looked carefully and we saw that there was originally a pit cut into the floor; the scroll had been buried and the pit filled in. Then we knew that this was a genizah, the hiding place in a synagogue where Jews used to hide their books. We decided to remove the whole floor, and I gave this task to a volunteer from our marines. When he removed the floor, another pit appeared. At that moment, he received an order to go back to his army camp for three days. He cried like a baby, this sturdy soldier, and said, "This is my pit." This was one of the most difficult decisions I had to make, but because he had worked very hard, I said, "I'll wait; it waited two thousand years, it'll wait another three days." When he came back, he cleaned the pit, and at the bottom there was a scroll. It was not well preserved, eaten by moths. It turned out to be the book of Ezekiel. The miracle—if you like, a coincidence—is that of all the pages that were preserved, only the page with the famous prophecy of Ezekiel about the resurrection of the dry bones of Israel was extremely well preserved (Ezek. 37:1-10).

Near this synagogue stood another building that was rather strange. We called it the apartment house because it was built with one big room and two small rooms. Maybe these were the apartments or flats of the officers of the administration. Of course, we decided to excavate it. While I was in the synagogue, taking out the remnants of Ezekiel, I saw that there was a commotion among the volunteers in the other buildings. I saw that all of them were looking at a girl with a bikini, and I thought this was the attraction. However, when I came nearer, I saw that she had been cleaning the floor of the two smaller rooms. (I wish her mother would have seen how thoroughly a cleaning job she did.) She overdid it, rather, and scratched a bit of the mud floor. Under the floor she found a cache of coins. This is what they were all watching. These coins were unusual because the patina indicated that these were silver coins. With a touch of cleaning in the laboratory, they turned out to be, so to say, brand new. They turned out to be sixty silver shekels, struck in this very war against the Romans, for the

first time found in their pure archaeological context. Because they were not used, the zealots had buried them under the floor lest they fall into the hands of the Romans. They looked beautiful after cleaning. And they are the typical ones, with the holy chalice, saying year two, year three, year four, year five of the revolt, with the inscription "The shekel of Israel," and on the other side, "Jerusalem the holy." Unlike the silver coins, on top of the floor we found hundreds of thousands of pennies. The zealots simply threw them on the floor. They didn't care whether they fell into the hands of the Romans. These too were covered with holy symbols and with the Hebrew inscription "For the Freedom of Zion." The inscriptions said, "Year two" and on the other side they said, "For the Freedom of Zion." These were the coins that were struck by the Jews in the great war against Rome, so there was no doubt whatsoever who the last defenders of Masada were, as in fact Josephus tells us.

In conclusion, I want to tell you something that I was always asked when I had visitors at Masada and I showed them the palaces. There is always someone who will ask a very annoying question, "What is the most important thing that you discovered?" I'm not going to tell you what the most important thing is that I discovered because I don't know. I don't know whether one scroll is more important than the other, whether these coins are more important, or the frescos more than the mosaics. The whole thing is important.

But I would like to end with a find which perhaps, if not the most important, was definitely the one which electrified all of us there, archaeologists and lay workers. Between the storerooms and the villa, there were typical groups of volunteers working. When one group came to a layer of ashes, suddenly they found eleven small pieces of pottery, or sherds, each of them with an inscription of one name in ink, one name only. It was interesting to see the volunteers and us, without talking to each other, say, "Is it possible that we have found the actual lots of the last ten or eleven people, which Josephus described?" This possibility was strengthened when the names which we read there were nicknames, rather than proper names, names of commanders. For example, one was called "the hunter." Another was called Joab, like the commander-in-chief of David. One was called "the one from the valley" and so on. The possibility became a probability when, on one of these, we found

the magic name of ben Yair, the very commander of the zealots—ben Yair, the one who, according to Josephus, was the head.

Now whether this is really the same ben Yair, as I believe, or not, it is because of ben Yair, it is because of the fire that the zealots left behind them everywhere on top of Masada, that Masada today, for many of us, for all of us in Israel, and for many of us in the world, is not just an archaeological site. It is a symbol, it is a challenge, and it is also a reminder. This is why to this very day,<sup>4</sup> three or four times a year, the recruits of the armored corps of the Israeli army take the oath of allegiance to the state of Israel on top of Masada, saying three times, “Masada shall not fall again.” Thank you very much.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.252-406.

<sup>2</sup>For one use of the word *zealots* in reference to general sorts of rebels (*to tōn zēlōtōn klēthentōn genos*), which could include the Sicarii, see Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.268, 272. For a more specific analysis of the group that formally called themselves Zealots according to Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.161, see Kent P. Jackson, “Revolutionaries in the First Century,” in this volume.

<sup>3</sup>The coins from the first through the third years of the revolt preserve this phrase, “the freedom of Zion.” Coins from year four and year five read “for the redemption of Zion.” See Yaakov Meshorer, “The Coins of Masada,” in *Masada I: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963-1965, Final Reports*, ed. Joseph Aviram, Gideon Foerster, and Ehud Netzer (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989), 101-19; and Yaacov Meshorer, “The Coins of Masada,” in *The Story of Masada: Discoveries from the Excavations*, ed. Gila Hurvitz (Provo: BYU Studies, 1997), 141.

<sup>4</sup>On the cessation of the swearing-in ceremonies on Masada in 1987, see Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 159-60.