

Josephus: Noble *Sicarii* Suicide or Mass Slaughter at Mount Masada?

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Abstract

An attempt is made to ratiocinate historical events at Mount Masada in circa 74 C.E. as related by Josephus Flavius. Cohen (1982, 393) clearly sees Josephus as a mostly dishonest historian, one who happily exaggerates and embellishes his accounts. As a consequence of this rhetorical straitjacket that he places Josephus in, Cohen (for one) cannot accept Josephus's Masada account as being an "unalloyed version of the truth." The author analyses Josephus's track record apropos his recording of other historical events and submits that, rhetorical strategies aside, the historian can largely trust Josephus's accounts.

Keywords: Josephus; Masada; *sicarii*; mass-suicide

Introduction

Josephus's writings are, for all intents and purposes, the only source historians have from which to piece together a valid reconstruction of certain past events. One important topic on which Josephus remains our sole source concerns the historical events at Mount Masada in circa 74 C.E. The story of Masada is, of course, well-known (cf. Yadin 1966; Ben-Yehuda 1995; Silberman 1999; Klassen 2000; Ngo 2014).

Josephus tells his readers (*Bellum judaicum* 7.8.2/275–7.9.2/406) that when Flavius Silva was procurator of Judea, he took his army and besieged a large group of *sicarii* who were ensconced within a stone-walled citadel situated on top of Mount Masada.¹ After an unspecified period of time, the Romans, exploiting a natural geological feature,

1 Mount Masada is part of a scarp, situated between the Dead Sea Rift Valley and the eastern side of the Judean Desert some 50 kilometres south-south east of Jerusalem.

managed to build a massive ascending ramp against the fortress's western wall. Then, using a 30-meter-high siege engine, they eventually managed to breach the wall. Simultaneously, these particular *sicarii*, fully aware of what was happening, built a secondary wall of wood and earth.

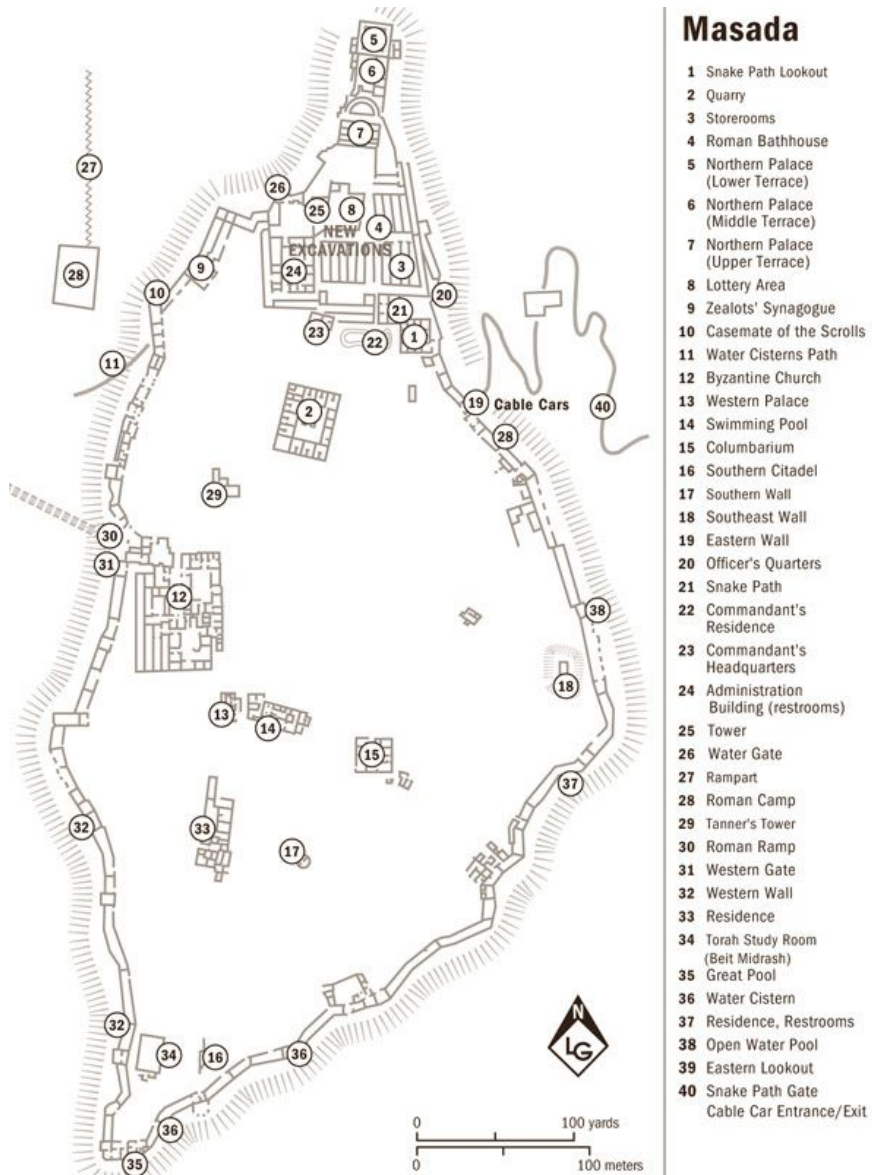


Figure 1. A modern map of Mount Masada²

² Map courtesy of <https://touristinisrael.wordpress.com/2016/09/01/maps-of-masada/>.

As a consequence, when the Romans finally broke through the stone wall, they were still faced with a formidable obstacle. Regardless, the Romans set fire to this ancillary wall and by the end of the day, whilst the wooden wall was still burning, they retired, intending to launch their final assault early the next morning. The leader of this group of *sicarii*, Eleazar ben Yair, convinced his men that the only recourse left to them was to slaughter their wives and children and then kill themselves rather than suffer reprisals from the Romans. Accordingly, when the Roman forces returned early the next day to finalise their operations, all they found were the corpses of 960 men, women, and children.

The person who was arguably most instrumental in popularising this saga was Israeli archaeologist and former military chief of staff, Professor Yigael Yadin. Between 1963 and 1965, he and his team of volunteers excavated the Masada site extensively. This major undertaking led to the publication of Yadin's book *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealot's Last Stand*, published in 1966. The problem is that this publication, and the many that followed, seemingly deliberately misled the reader into thinking that Masada was a glorious, heroic event. Indeed, articles and books by, inter alia, Silberman (1999), Klassen (2000), and Ngo (2014) blatantly present a tale involving heroic Jewish freedom fighters known as high-minded zealots, who bravely fought against and withstood the might of Rome. However, according to Josephus scholars such as Cohen (1982), Mason (2008) and Brighton (2009), the more accurate picture is that these Jewish militants were anything but noble zealots.³ Zerubavel (1994, 90) concurs and states that in Yadin's account he was "too eager to affirm the accepted commemorative narrative and hence overlooked historical evidence that would have tarnished the image of the *sicarii*, the group to which those who had found refuge at Masada belonged." Greco (2012, 1) confirms this view that "Bandits, terrorists, martyrs and heroes are all terms that have been used to describe the *sicarii*. With exceptions, Classics scholars identify them as bandits, Jewish scholars identify them as terrorists, and Israeli nationalists identify them as martyrs and heroes."

Josephus, too, presents the Masada *sicarii* as cowardly brigands who continually laid waste to the surrounding regions; in one infamous attack, they massacred 700 fellow Jews at Ein Gedi (*B.J.* 4.7.2/402–409). Josephus describes how these piratical bandits came to be known as *sicarii* as follows:

And then it was that the *sicarii*, as they were called, who were robbers, grew numerous. They made use of small swords, not much different in length from the Persian acinacae, but somewhat crooked, and like the Roman sicae, [or sickles,] as they were called; and from these weapons these robbers got their denomination; and with these weapons they slew a great many; for they mingled themselves among the multitude at their festivals,

3 Even the more honourable term "zealot" needs to be questioned in the light of Josephus's comments. To him both zealots and *sicarii* were nothing more than mindless terrorists who gladly brought death and destruction on their very own people by virtue of their brigandish and piratical behaviour.

when they were come up in crowds from all parts to the city to worship God, as we said before, and easily slew those that they had a mind to slay. They also came frequently upon the villages belonging to their enemies, with their weapons, and plundered them, and set them on fire. (*Antiquitates judaicae* 20.35/186–87)⁴

However, it is also commonplace for certain contemporary scholars to portray Josephus as having some hidden agenda and to be consciously employing rhetorical strategies for devious purposes (cf. Cohen 1982; Mason 2008; Brighton 2009). In this regard, he is mostly portrayed as being compromised by his relationship with the Flavian dynasty to whom he surely owed not only his life but freedom from certain slavery. Because of their distrust of Josephus's rhetorical strategies, many scholars feel that our knowledge of what happened at Masada in circa 74 C.E. is at best cursory. There is even doubt cast on whether or not *all* the *sicarii* committed suicide. On this issue, Huntsman (1996–1997, 374) states:

Josephus was not glamorizing the action of the Sicarii; rather he expanded the suicide of a few of the defenders of Masada to include almost all of them in order to illustrate that the entire effort of the Sicarii was vain, bound for failure, and led all of them equally to death.

In one extreme case, Weiss-Rosmarin (1969, 29–32) posits that the occupants of Masada were most likely massacred by the Romans and Josephus merely made up an entertaining tale.

The Masada saga has become perhaps *the* symbol of righteous resistance in Israeli consciousness. Mount Masada also remains one of the country's most popular tourist destinations and has been the topic of numerous scholarly articles and popular books. Most authors (e.g., Shargel 1979, 357–71; Zerubavel 1994 and 1995; and Ben-Yehuda 1995) refer to the “Masada Myth” when discussing this topic. In this context, some base their conjectures on Schorer's (1960, 355) definition which reads: “A myth is a large controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is a more or less articulated body of such images, a pantheon.” This author respects this view and accepts that the events of Masada have become mythologised in popular culture, especially in recent years. However, this article primarily seeks to deal with the saga more correctly as a historical legend. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a legend is “a story coming down from the past; *especially*: one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable.”⁵ In the context of this definition, this author is not concerned with Josephus's Masada account as a source for either propaganda or a national myth, but as a possible vestige or trace of an actual historical occurrence.

4 English translation according to Whiston (1895).

5 “Legend.” *Merriam-Webster.com* (2019).

Research Problem

Given that Josephus is our only source of literary information, are we really unable to accurately reconstruct what happened at Masada? Are we correct in our assessment of the recently revised actions and character of these particular *sicarii*? Did they in fact commit mass suicide or were they simply massacred by the Romans, as Weiss-Rosmarin claims? Considering Josephus's track record and given that we do at least have some archaeological evidence, what is the most probable reconstruction?

Methodology

Based on Josephus's other well-known accounts of historical events, this author attempts to determine whether there really is good reason to doubt his honesty when it comes to events at Mount Masada in circa 74 C.E. Josephus's track record as a reliable historian will be reviewed. In addition, the arguments made by, inter alia, Cohen (1982), Mason (2008) and Brighton (2009) will be carefully reviewed in the light of Josephus's record and known historical and archaeological facts.

The Interpretivist and/or Constructivist Episteme

This author acknowledges the usefulness of certain aspects of the so-called interpretivist or constructivist episteme. With reference to Kukla (2000, 95, 160) preference is given to an approach described as "reasonable constructivism." Here, it is acknowledged that all societies construct their own realities and in addition are quite proficient at projecting these perceptions onto other societies (rightly or wrongly). It is also accepted that although some "reality" exists, we can never really grasp it outside of a linguistic mediation. In the same way, this author concedes that he has no option but to employ a system of highly flawed linguistic signifiers to both interpret and communicate his findings. Finally, with reference to Pouliot (2007, 361), the author acknowledges a "metatheoretical commitment" to truth which is founded upon three assumptions:

1. all knowledge is socially constructed;
2. social reality is constructed; and
3. knowledge and reality are mutually constitutive.

According to Cohen and Manion (1994, 36) an interpretivist/constructivist approach to research has the intention of better understanding the world of human experience because it accepts that reality is, as Mertens (2005, 12) confirms, "socially constructed." Here, it is assumed that the constructed world views of all role-players will impact on the research findings. This approach also allows the researcher to make use of, where relevant and applicable, a wider range of methods which when triangulated may better assist in establishing greater validity of interpretation.

Josephus as a Reliable Historian

Taken at face value, Joseph repeatedly exhorts (albeit naïvely) his reader to consider the validity of what he is recording. In his prologue to *B.J.* (1. pr. 1/2–3) he stresses that he neither wants to flatter the Romans nor support those writers who unfairly misrepresent facts due to their innate hatred of the Jews. He clearly and openly informs his reader that he wants to primarily communicate to a Græco-Roman audience which would ordinarily not be privy to the truth as he sees it. Again, in his conclusion to *B.J.* (7.11.5/454–55), he repeats his commitment to ἀκρίβεια (accuracy), and promises that he has “boldly” recorded the truth in *B.J.* according to the highest of principles.

It is no doubt due to his commitment to clarify the Jewish situation to a largely Greek-speaking audience that Josephus makes use of both Greek rhetorical traditions as well as favouring Greek philosophical explanations over Jewish principles. It is also true that in *B.J.* he often resorts to explaining Jewish traditions and practices from a more Hellenistic perspective. However, instead of condemning him for doing so and, more importantly, automatically denying him any claim to a genuine attempt at historical validity, one needs to see how Josephus actually fulfils his carefully delineated and preferred rhetorical strategy. For example, he openly admits when he needs to employ rhetoric in an attempt to elicit a particular desired response from his reader. A good example is found in *B.J.* 3.7.2/138:

[Josephus] decided therefore to write to the authorities at Jerusalem an exact statement of the position of affairs, neither exaggerating the strength of the enemy, which might subsequently lead to his being taunted with cowardice, nor underrating it, for fear of encouraging them to hold out when possibly inclined to repent.⁶

Obviously, we need not be totally naïve. Consider for a moment the warning given by Mason (2005, 71–100) where he endeavoured to show that Josephus’s employment of flattery and criticism might not always be that forthright. Mason sees these motifs as carefully correlated rhetorical stratagems. In addition, Mason has claimed that Josephus may have shown “respect” toward the emperor Vespasian in an ironic manner in order that he might clandestinely reveal to the reader this man’s indiscretions.

In this context, Mason (2003, 87) explains:

In imperial Rome—and under tyrannical governments ever since—if writers wished to maintain their self-respect they had to resort to safe criticism, through coded or figured speech. If both the writer and the audience understood that the writer intended more than (or different from) what was actually said, such communication was called ‘ironic.’ I am suggesting that much of Josephus’ *War* should be read in this light. We know that

⁶ English translation according to Thackeray (1961a, 617–19).

he had a taste for doubletalk because he credits both himself and his adversaries in Galilee with such deception, more or less constantly ... ⁷

There may be an element of truth in this. However, surely when Josephus is referring to individuals who are long-dead and cannot possibly harm him, this view should be modified somewhat. Also, more importantly, one must not lose sight of Josephus's personal situation at the time he wrote, inter alia, *B.J.* and *A.J.* Josephus had both Jewish and Roman enemies whilst he lived under Flavian protection.⁷ Therefore, why would he have risked his only means of survival by generating cryptic messages which could easily affront the members of the Flavian household?

In addition, before examining what he has to say about the Masada incident in *B.J.*, how does Josephus seem to deal with other historical accounts? For example, are there any descriptions in, for example, *B.J.* that show obvious disingenuity or blatant deceit? Are there any proven examples of situations where we feel that we cannot in any way believe what Josephus has to say? We should not be too concerned with those occasions where he makes use of a certain amount of hyperbole to increase the drama of what he is reporting. In this regard, a suspected exaggerated statistic could also be excused on the grounds of unreliable sources. We should also largely ignore Josephus's tendency to generalise and round up figures.⁸ What is more important is the quality and validity of Josephus's broader descriptions of historical events and his stated reasons for *why* such events occurred.

A careful reading of Josephus's texts reveals many instances of what can only be construed as self-effacing honesty. Indeed, there were many occasions on which he could easily have skimmed over certain events that painted him in a poor light. The impression that Josephus gives his reader is that, apart from his claims to have had, inter alia, divine powers (which he no doubt genuinely believed), he also admits to such negative behaviour as anger, cowardice, over-confidence and personal greed. The fact that he admits to these human frailties should be seen as significant. If these admissions are not always in fact some rhetorical strategy to mislead his reader, they should be seen as clear evidence that he is at least on occasion *attempting* to live up to the promises he makes in his two prologues.

Consider his straightforward account of a situation (*Vita* 5/20–22a) wherein he was both fearful and unable to deal adequately with a particular situation:

I became anxious now that by saying these things constantly I might incur hatred and suspicion, as conspiring with the enemy, and I would risk being taken and done away

7 Cf. reference to enemies in Rome (*Vita* 76/425); Romans who wanted to kill Josephus (*B.J.* 3.8.8/393–94); and the citizenry of Jerusalem who considered Josephus to be both a deserter and a coward (*B.J.* 3.9.6/439).

8 Cf. Mason (2003, 58).

with by them. Since the Antonia, which was a fortress, was already in their possession, I retreated into the inner temple. After the removal of Manahem and the principal men of the bandit brigade, I came back out of the temple and held discussions with the chief priests and principal men of the Pharisees. Extreme fear took hold of us as we saw the populace with weapons: we were unsure what we should do ourselves and were unable to halt the revolutionaries. Given the clear and present danger to ourselves, we said that we concurred with their opinions.⁹

Indeed, Josephus seems to have little trouble, on many occasions, admitting to being fearful for his personal safety or planning rapid escapes from dangerous situations by virtue of his fear of death.¹⁰ Moreover, despite his (sincere?) claims of divine protection and higher purpose which he alleges underscored his more questionable actions, Josephus is staggeringly honest in recounting what would surely be embarrassing moments for other authors. Possible rhetorical agendas aside, he often supplies the kind of information that imparts a certain degree of confidence in his claims to be a truthful witness of historical events.

Surely we cannot doubt that, irrespective of any claimed “hidden agenda” on his part, Josephus was genuinely proud of his noble Jewish, priestly lineage and prided himself on his strict adherence to Mosaic law and halakah?¹¹ If so, why does he so easily display his obvious hypocrisy and on occasion give an account of how he clearly undermined his avowed halakic principles, if not to underscore his desire to be truthful? A very good example of just how “honest” Josephus can be is illustrated by his accepting Vespasian’s gift of a captive virgin in *Vita* 75/414b–415. It should be understood that the taking of a captive woman as a wife by a Jewish priest was strictly forbidden by Mosaic law. Indeed, Josephus clearly spells out a Jewish priest’s “correct” approach to marriage in two of his books:

From the priests [Moses] exacted a double degree of purity. For not only did he debar them, in common with all others, from the aforesaid practices, but he further forbade them to wed a harlot, he forbids them to wed a slave or a prisoner of war, aye or such women as gain their livelihood by hawking or innkeeping or who have for whatsoever reasons been separated from their former husbands. As for the high-priest, he would not suffer him to take even a woman whose husband was dead, though he concedes this to the other priests: none but a virgin may he wed and withal one of his own tribe. (*A.J.* 3.12.2/276–77a)¹²

Not only did our ancestors in the first instance set over this business men of the highest character, devoted to the service of God, but they took precautions to ensure that the

9 English translation according to Mason (2003, 29–33).

10 Cf. *Vita* 5/20–23, *Vita* 18/94–96, *Vita* 28/137–38, *Vita* 28/138, *Vita* 32/163–64, *Vita* 41/206, *Vita* 59/304, *B.J.* 3.6.3/131, *B.J.* 3.7.15/193, *B.J.* 3.7.16/197, *B.J.* 3.8.1/343, *B.J.* 3.8.2/346 and *B.J.* 3.8.5/361.

11 Cf. *Vita* 1/1–6.

12 English translation according to Thackeray (1961c, 451–53).

priests' lineage should be kept unadulterated and pure. A member of the priestly order must, to beget a family, marry a woman of his own race, without regard to her wealth or other distinctions; but he must investigate her pedigree, obtaining the genealogy from the archives and producing a number of witnesses. And this practice of ours is not confined to the home country of Judaea, but wherever there is a Jewish colony: there too a strict account is kept by the priests of their marriages; I allude to the Jews in Egypt and Babylon and other parts of the world in which any of the priestly order are living in dispersion. (*Contra Apionem* 1.7/30–33)¹³

Josephus also freely admits that after he married this captive woman and she had borne him three children, he ultimately divorced her—not because he wanted to restore his priestly status but merely because she dissatisfied him.¹⁴ Josephus (*Vita* 76/426) explains as follows: “At this time also I sent away the woman, being displeased with her habits. She was the mother of three children, of which two died and one, whom I called Hyrcanus, is still with us.”¹⁵ This should be viewed as a most candid confession.

Another good example is *B.J.* 3.4.1/61, in which Josephus openly admits his failure as a military strategist:

Josephus did, in fact, attempt an assault on the city in hopes of capturing it, although he had himself, before it abandoned the Galilean cause, so strongly fortified as to render it practically impregnable even to the attacks of the Romans; consequently his hopes were foiled and he found it beyond his power either to compel or to persuade Sepphoris to surrender.¹⁶

One should also consider his unguarded admission of guilt in *Vita* 15/81, where he confesses to keeping spoils of the enemy: “Yet do I confess, that I took part of the spoils of those Syrians which inhabited the cities that adjoined to us, when I had conquered them, and that I sent them to my kindred at Jerusalem.” He admits this openly despite informing his reader only a few sections earlier (*Vita* 14/79) that he made a point of keeping his “hands clear of all bribery” and later, in *Vita* 26/128, he reminds his reader that it is prohibited by Jewish law to keep the spoil of one’s enemy. Consider these two excerpts from the *Vita* which have Josephus happy to admit to being quite spineless when thwarted by his arch enemy John of Gischala:

From there I proceeded to Gischala with my fellow envoys, to see Ioannes, because I wanted to know what he was now thinking. I found him suddenly bent on revolutionary activities and harboring a powerful desire for rule. For he requested that I grant him authority to make off with the grain belonging to Caesar that was lying in the villages

13 English translation according to Thackeray (1926 175–77).

14 Whiston gives the false view that Josephus eventually divorced the captive virgin primarily because he wanted to comply with Mosaic law. He also seems to cite the Dutch orientalist Adriaan Reland (17 July 1676 to 5 February 1718) as supporting this opinion. Cf. Whiston (1895).

15 Translation according to Steve Mason (2003, 170ee).

16 English translation according to Thackeray (1961a, 595).

of upper Galilee—because, he said, he wanted to spend it on the repair of the walls of his native place. But since I had figured out his design and what he intended to do, I did not give him my consent. For I had in mind to reserve the grain either for the Romans or for my own use, by virtue of the fact that I myself had been entrusted with authority over activities there by the general assembly of the Jerusalemites. When he was unable to persuade me about these matters, he turned to my fellow envoys. In fact, they were careless about the consequences and quite prepared to take [gifts]. So he corrupted them with goods to vote that all the grain lying within his purview should be handed over to him. Alone and defeated by two, I kept quiet. (*Vita* 13/70–73)¹⁷

Knowing that among those in Caesarea [Philippi] one would sell two pitchers for one drachma, whereas in Gischala it was eighty pitchers for four drachmas, he [John of Gischala] sent for as much oil as was there! He had ostensibly received authority from me. It was not willingly that I agreed, but through fear of the mob—so as not to be stoned to death by them if I refused. So with my consent, Ioannes realized considerable wealth from this sordid business. (*Vita* 13/75b–76)¹⁸ [My insertion for clarity].

Again, in *Vita* 70/393, despite having repeatedly informed his reader of how he continually preaches tolerance towards one's enemies and often gives accounts illustrating his magnanimity when dealing with even the bitterest of his adversaries he is still happy to candidly admit to almost killing Justus, the son of Pistus, out of pure irritation.

One valid criticism that may be levelled at Josephus concerns his trust in his sources. This is an important issue because he does not always appear to be critical of the legitimacy of certain of his sources. He seems to accept them at face value and then attempts to “fairly” repeat their import in his own text. Of course, Josephus had no real methodology by which to assess the legitimacy of the accounts he chose to employ as a basis for a past event. All that can be affirmed is that, irrespective of the time that a historical event took place, from Josephus's perspective he doggedly criticised anyone whose actions harmed the Jewish community and praised those who acted in ways that either furthered the Jewish cause or were in accord with his own philosophical outlook.

As Allen (2016, 294–99) has pointed out, when Josephus did not have first-hand experience of a situation, he seems to have relied heavily on the opinion of those that he trusted. In addition, Josephus gives the impression that he at least believed in the validity of his own writing. Thus, even when he appears to be oblivious to his own hypocrisy, he does not appear to be attempting to delude his reader. If anything, at all times he writes in a manner such that his reader may better share and understand his own emotions on a particular matter. This is not quite the same as deliberately deceiving his reader since he employs his “art” for the express purpose of better communicating

17 English translation according to Mason (2003, 61–62).

18 English translation according to Mason (2003, 64).

his feelings rather than deliberately trying to distort the truth. The only overt agendas that Josephus has are the following:

- to communicate the truth as he sees/believes it;
- to primarily appeal to a Greek-speaking audience and culture;
- to explain to a possible Jewish audience why he believes Jewish history has unfolded the way it has;
- to make his accounts as entertaining as possible; and
- to make the reader understand his feelings on an issue.

As stated previously, Josephus's chief objective is to paint a positive and uplifting portrait of proud and superior traditional Jewish achievement to a Greek readership that is largely ignorant of Judaism's long and noble past. He also wants to be credited with being honest. Thus, on occasion, he has to face a dilemma when he needs to give a very negative account of a particular Jewish actor or action. A good example of how Josephus meets this challenge may be gleaned from his many accounts of events while he was military governor of Galilee (*B.J.* 2.20.4/566–3.8.7/391). In particular, he faced considerable antagonism from his arch-nemesis, John of Gischala. In this instance, he is “forced” to give negative accounts of a Jewish leader whose actions he truly considers to be despicable. However, he does not soften his portrayal for the sake of his Greek readership. In the same way, Josephus gives accounts of his own questionable actions in this tense Jewish political arena. Indeed, like John of Gischala, Josephus was capable of acting like a tyrant when circumstances demanded it. Mason (2003, 43) reminds us that Josephus committed acts that we today would find atrocious. However, what is most important for this investigation, he did not try to disguise these actions—including cutting off the hands of his opponents (*Vita* 34/169–73) and recruiting Galilean outlaws as mercenaries (*Vita* 14/77). Mason (2003, 43–44) sums up as follows:

Although it may now be impossible to recover Josephus' personal motives and mindset, or even the bare facts of his mission in Galilee, it is not necessarily the case that he has lied to cover up his past. First, when the war against Rome erupted, someone in his position might well have been faced with real ambivalence and difficult choices. We have only to consider the situation of Western-educated politicians in non-Western countries today to see similar kinds of tensions: loyalty to one's own people alongside a unique awareness of the costs of conflict and the benefits of cooperation, combined sometimes with a certain local coercion to lead as one's constituents desire. All of these tensions we can reasonably posit of the aristocrat Josephus, who was both scandalized by local Roman governance and keenly aware of the need to maintain peace.

Most researchers (cf. Decoster 1989, 72, 75–76; Sievers 2001, 241; Bergren 1997, 254 n.17; and Berthelot 2014, 547) accept that Josephus relied slavishly on 1 Maccabees and not vice versa. If true, this provides the historian with an excellent opportunity to check first-hand Josephus's levels of adherence to a known source text. Obviously, Josephus paraphrases the information taken from his sources and often embellishes. He also makes use of additional source material. Sievers (2001, 246) confirms: “Some additions in Josephus cannot be explained by his fanciful reworking of 1 Maccabees. It

is quite clear that occasionally he did use additional sources for Seleucid history and even for various elements of internal Judean history.”

In every instance, a specific number of troops mentioned in 1 Maccabees is repeated accurately and verbatim by Josephus. We are not limited to Josephus merely accurately citing numbers of troops from his source. Josephus also adheres to 1 Maccabees’ stated reasons for specific events. Africa (1982, 8) notes:

Both 1 Maccabees and Josephus state that Antiochus had tried to plunder a Persian temple but had been repulsed, and that grief over this failure troubled his last days—the Jewish writers then add to the king’s woes news of Seleucid reversals in Judea. Both 1 Maccabees and Josephus believe that Antiochus’ fiasco in Persia and his death were due to divine punishment because of his policies toward the Jews.

When Josephus does deviate from a suspected source, he does so for one of three reasons:

- he prefers the specific information found in an alternative source;
- he believes that the source contradicts what he believes to be true (cf. Schwartz 1989, 377–91); or
- he naively misreads what is contained in the source.

One good example of the third possibility is where, in his account of the circumstances of Jonathan’s appointment to the high priesthood, Josephus differs from 1 Maccabees in substantial ways. Schwartz (1989, 382–83) explains:

In Josephus’ version, Demetrius I promises to Jonathan to annex to Judaea Samaria, Galilee and (probably) Peraea, not merely three small districts in southern Samaria. Josephus’ alteration of his source in this case may conceivably have been the result of misreading, but if so, it was apparently a formative misreading—one which affected his presentation of other references to the three nomes derived from 1 Maccabees, and of Hasmonean history in general.

Schwartz (1989, 380) believes that some of the peculiarities found in the text are probably due to Josephus’ efforts to make sense of an obscurely worded source.¹⁹

Another reason for viewing Josephus’ Masada report as mostly reliable is the fact that this event occurred in his own time. As he was probably not totally dependent on another historian’s written account, we must also assume that he spoke to eyewitnesses or at the very least heard or read contemporary accounts whilst he was composing his own version. In addition, as he was probably supplied an official Roman account as part of

19 See also Marcus (1976) who, in his notes to the LCL *Antiquities*, lists Josephus’ divergences from his source. Most are trivial.

his source material he could hardly question or deviate from it given that a mostly Roman audience would be reviewing his own version of events.

It is also clear by the way he narrates that he faced a conundrum: he was moved by the pathos of the “mass suicide” incident and could see how this might be considered a noble (albeit desperate) act—one that greatly assisted him in his task of showcasing and extolling lofty, virtuous Jewish principles to a largely ignorant Hellenistic readership. Simultaneously, he had to deal directly with the fact that the “brave” defenders of Masada were none other than the common, hated and vilified *sicarii*—individuals whom Josephus had nothing but the utmost contempt for.

The *Sicarii*

Much has been said about Josephus’s seeming inconsistency when it comes to certain terminology. For example, on the topic of the *sicarii*, Vandenberghe (2016, 3–5) explains that although the bearing of Græco–Roman rhetoric on Josephus’s writings has been dealt with at some length by, inter alia, Attridge (1984), Villaba i Varneda (1986), Mason (1992) and Mader (2000), the actual rhetorical function of the *sicarii* has only been recently addressed by Mason (2008) and Brighton (2009). Their main findings coincide in that they have determined that the term *sicarii* is based on a Roman legal term. If so, then the claim is made that Josephus’s largely Roman audience would have understood *sicarii* to refer primarily to “assassins”. As a consequence, Vandenberghe (2016, 3–4) argues that *sicarii* in the context of *B.J.* should best be viewed as a “rhetorical label” indicating, inter alia, “bandits”, “revolutionaries”, or “partisans”. However, none of these findings in any way contradicts what Josephus has stated about the *sicarii*. Regardless of the possible Roman legal term, Josephus also clearly and unambiguously indicates that the *sicarii* are types of bandits or insurrectionists.²⁰

As Mason (2008, 1b, n.1604) states:

Certain *sicarii*, still carrying this name that Josephus connects with a technique for urban assassination (not with an ideology), will go to Masada under Eleazar’s leadership (4.400, 516; 7.253–311); yet after the reportedly complete self-destruction of the group there, a substantial number of *sicarii* (600–1,000?) escape to Alexandria from somewhere to cause further trouble (7.410–419). Yet again, after *they* have been removed to a man (7.416), ‘the madness of the *sicarii*’ reappears in Cyrene—in the odd form of a general trouble-maker (*not* apparently an urban dagger–assassin) named Jonathan (7.437–44). Even in the present passage, Josephus describes former *friends* using concealed knives to eliminate each other as part of the same social problem (2.254,

20 Cf. *B.J.* 2.13.3/254; 2.17.6/425; 2.17.7/431; 4.9.3/504; 5.1.5/30; 20.8.10/186; and 20.9.4/210 where *sicarii* are clearly equated with insurrectionists.

255–56): this does not sound like a political or militant organization, but only a means of killing; the label *sicarii* seems to lack content.

Both Brighton and Mason have also noted that Josephus’s employment of the term is not always consistent. Vandenberghe (2016, 4) states that the term “seems to refer to different groups, comprising a variety of actions between which there is no logical connection.”

I cannot totally support the implications of these findings. A critical review of *A.J.* and *Vita* clearly reveals that the term most employed by Josephus for what could loosely be termed an insurrectionist is *λεσπηζ ου* which Whiston (1895) repeatedly translates as “robber”. This term and its derivatives occur some 65 times in these three books not including the four mentions of *ἀρχιλησπτήν* (‘chief brigand’). It is quite clear by the context of this and related terms that Josephus applies it to unruly individuals who (irrespective of their claimed ideology) operate in quasi–military groups and survive by terrorising innocent people and stealing their possessions. On at least one occasion (cf. *Vita* 14/77), members of one of these militant piratical groups briefly served as mercenaries.

Only in the case of the *sicarii* and the zealots does Josephus refine this general view. In short, for Josephus, *sicarii* and zealots are simply two species of insurrectionist. There is no “slippage” of meaning here. The *sicarii* are mentioned some 18 times, either in their own right or with an explanation that they are a specific type of brigand or insurrectionist. Indeed, Josephus is very careful to distinguish between *sicarii* and insurrectionists in general. Once he has established the identity of the *sicarii* in his text he does, on occasion, defer to them in more general terms as *λεσπηζ ου*. This cannot be seen as Josephus confusing his terminology as the context is always clear. Possibly more problematic are Josephus’s references to zealots. It is clear that, like the *sicarii*, he has no time for them and considers them no better than piratical brigands. However, he leaves enough clues to indicate that of the three types of pirate or insurrectionist he refers to in his books, this group do seem to aspire to some higher ideal. This is despite the fact that according to Josephus they do not practice what they seemingly preach. They are mentioned some 48 times (solely in *B.J.*) and mostly in association with Josephus’s arch enemy, John of Gischala. The following excerpt from *B.J.* 7.8.1/267–74 is a typical example of how Josephus expresses his discontent with the zealots:

Yet even their infatuation was outdone by the madness of the Idumaeans. For those most abominable wretches, after butchering the chief priests, so that no particle of religious worship might continue, proceeded to extirpate whatever relics were left of our civil polity, introducing into every department perfect lawlessness. In this the so-called Zealots excelled, a class which justified their name by their actions; for they copied every deed of ill, nor was there any previous villainy recorded in history that they failed zealously to emulate. And yet they took their title from their professed zeal for virtue, either in mockery of those they wronged, so brutal was their nature, or reckoning the greatest of evils good. Accordingly these each found a fitting end, God awarding due

retribution to them all. For every punishment that human nature is capable of enduring descended upon them, even to those last dying moments of life, endured by them amid the agonies of manifold torture. And yet one may say that they suffered less than they inflicted; for no suffering could match their deserts. However, the present would not be the occasion to deplore, as they deserve, the victims of their barbarities; I will, therefore, resume the interrupted thread of the narrative.²¹

What we can say with certainty is that aspects of Josephus's so-called "fourth philosophy" are blamed for fuelling the revolts that started to take place during Gessius Florus' reign of terror (*A.J.* 18.1.6/23–25). The miseries caused by this philosophy are repeated in *A.J.* 18.1.1/9b–10:

for Judas and Sadduc, who excited a fourth philosophic sect among us, and had a great many followers therein, filled our civil government with tumults at present, and laid the foundations of our future miseries, by this system of philosophy, which we were before unacquainted withal, concerning which I will discourse a little, and this the rather because the infection which spread thence among the younger sort, who were zealous for it, brought the public to destruction.

Whether this "fourth philosophy" is what motivated zealots and *sicarii* specifically is not clear. According to *A.J.* 18.1.6/23–25 this doctrine was founded by one Judas the Galilean and was closely modelled on Pharisaism. Rappaport (2011, 330) suggests that this philosophy should be associated with the *sicarii*. Here, the only convincing link between what Judas the Galilean supposedly preached and what the *sicarii* purportedly believed is obtained by comparing what Josephus has to say about the fourth philosophy and aspects of Eleazar's long Hellenistic speech at Masada:

[T]hey have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kinds of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man lord. (*A.J.* 18.1.6/23–24)²²

...we determined neither to serve the Romans nor any other save God, for He alone is man's true and righteous Lord... (*B.J.* 7.8.6/323)²³

In *B.J.* 5.1.5/30 Josephus confirms that all three groups (i.e., "unlabelled" brigands, *sicarii* and zealots) are all insurrectionists. In short, all *sicarii* and zealots are insurrectionists but not all insurrectionists are *sicarii* or zealots.

21 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 581–83).

22 English translation according to Whiston (1895).

23 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 595).

What does need to be mentioned here is that despite Josephus's justifiable hatred for the *sicarii* he still acknowledges their extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity. In *B.J.* 7.10.1/418–19 we read:

For under every form of torture and laceration of body, devised for the sole object of making them acknowledge Caesar as lord, not one submitted nor was brought to the verge of utterance; but all kept their resolve, triumphant over constraint, meeting the tortures and the fire with bodies that seemed insensible of pain and souls that wellnigh exulted in it. But most of all were the spectators struck by the children of tender age, not one of whom could be prevailed upon to call Caesar lord. So far did the strength of courage rise superior to the weakness of their frames.²⁴

Mass Suicide or Slaughter?

Cohen (1982, 386) cites instances where in ancient times the inhabitants of a besieged city or fortress chose mass suicide over capture by a superior enemy. In this regard, Cohen even categorises the types of self-inflicted death reported in antiquity based on various classical authors' preferred methodologies. In this way, Cohen (1982, 390) emphasises the consistent inaccuracies of past histories. In this context, he refers to 16 accounts where the information is clearly either exaggerated or blatantly false. His examples include Herodotus's mistaken claim that Xanthus was totally devastated and depopulated by the Persian conquest, and Diodorus's exaggerated account that has the entire city of Sidon and its inhabitants destroyed by a fire set by the citizens. Cohen (1982, 391) also demonstrates that ancient historians generally approved of collective suicide. Furthermore, Cohen (1982, 390–91) reveals that some of these authors, especially Livy, tended to embroider their "versions of collective suicides with horror and gore."²⁵

Based on these *selected* examples, Cohen (1982, 390) then concludes that *all* ancient historians *automatically* exaggerated their accounts for art and effect. Accordingly, Cohen then determines that Josephus merely fell in line with these accepted practices and did much the same in his own account. This assumption needs to be carefully unpacked. Examples of various classical authors' rhetorical strategies cannot be automatically taken as evidence to either counter or support Josephus's favoured approach. For the latter we must surely look to Josephus's own extensive oeuvre for real evidence of his preferred strategies and *Tendenzen*.

The only concession that can be made to Cohen's argument is that an author like Josephus might well have known about the rhetorical strategies of any number of

24 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 621–23).

25 Cohen points to Livy's account concerning the "suicide" incident at Astapa where the reader is told that "the streams of blood were putting out the rising flames" (Titus Livius. *The History of Rome*, 28:23).

ancient authors. We already know, for example, that he employed typically Hellenistic approaches in his own writing. One obvious reason for doing so was because he wanted to communicate successfully to a largely Græco-Roman audience. We also know, based purely on his account of the two long Hellenistic speeches he attributes to the *sicarii* leader Eleazar ben Yair (*B.J.* 7.8.6/320–7.8.7/388), that he was greatly influenced by classical literature. In this regard, he seems to have been familiar with the works of Euripides, Posidonius, and Plato. In the last case, elements of Eleazar’s speech may be traced to *Laws*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, and *Phaedo*.²⁶ This fact is supported by many scholars, most notably Morel (1926, 106–15).

Eleazar’s “Speeches”

Much has been written about Josephus’s seemingly contradictory stance on Jewish attitudes towards suicide, viz. his apparent, self-serving behaviour at Jotapata when he successfully escaped having to take his own life, and his justification of Eleazar’s exhortation to his *sicarii* followers at Masada not only to commit suicide but also to massacre their wives and children.

In *B.J.* 3.8.1/340–343 Josephus gives an account of how he and 40 other Jewish survivors hid in a cave for two days after the fall of Jotapata. On the third day, the survivors were discovered by the Romans and Josephus was offered clemency (*B.J.* 3.8.1/344–3.8.2/349). Josephus then justified why he should save his life and go over to the Romans, citing his dream revelations and insights into God’s divine will (*B.J.* 3.8.3/350–354). The other survivors then insisted that Josephus not take a coward’s way out but submit to death (*B.J.* 3.8.4/355–60). As a consequence, in *B.J.* 3.8.5/362–82, Josephus, obviously keen to preserve his life, delivered his famous speech *against* suicide. Here Ladouceur (1980, 250) is correct that Josephus’s purely philosophical arguments are grounded in Greek philosophy and not Jewish teaching. Indeed, the *Torah* does not specifically command against suicide. However, what Ladouceur does not take into account is the fact that it is a generally accepted Jewish principal that the preservation of life is paramount. Indeed, from a Jewish perspective, any religious prescription may be temporarily ignored if a human life is at stake. So, despite employing distinctly Hellenistic reasons for preserving his life, Josephus’s sentiments *can* be supported by normal Jewish practice. As Josephus states in *B.J.* 3.8.5/365b: “It is equally cowardly not to wish to die when one ought to do so, and to wish to die when one ought not.”²⁷ Zeitlin (1967, 258) confirms this point. Josephus’s arguments against

26 The *loci classici* are *Phaedo* 61B–62D and *Laws* 873cD (cf. Ladouceur 1980, 250).

27 English translation according to Thackeray (1961a, 679).

suicide are in accord with the views of the sages, who maintained that one who committed suicide would not share a portion in the “Future World.”²⁸

Some scholars, such as Ladouceur (1980, 251) and Cohen (1982, 397), support the interpretation that Eleazar’s speech seems to serve as an ἀντιλογος to Josephus’s Jotapata speech. Certainly, Josephus again relied on Hellenistic wisdom when composing what he imagined would have been Eleazar’s arguments in support of mass suicide. I, for one, do not see Josephus’s Eleazar speech as a deliberate foil to his earlier Jotapata speech. In the latter, Josephus, mindful of his Greek-speaking readership, is merely supplying a suitable, philosophically convincing argument for Eleazar to make to his men. We will never know exactly how or why the *sicarii* ended their days on Mount Masada in circa 74 C.E. The important point is that according to Josephus, the *sicarii* massacred their families and then killed themselves. As his text would be inspected by individuals who were at the time better informed about events at Masada, we have to assume that Josephus stuck to the official Roman account. At best, Josephus’s Eleazar speech is merely an artistic means to have his readership better understand the situation from a hypothetical *sicarii* point of view. In addition, by including the two speeches to his account he manages to get two antithetical messages across simultaneously:

- Jews are heroic and noble; and
- *the sicarii* were wrong to act the way they did—by their own admission.

Ladouceur (1980, 251) correctly recognises that Eleazar’s speech is used as a justification for suicide with the support of the ἀνάγκη (necessity) clause. God brings on the ἀνάγκη in *B.J.* 7.8.6/330 and again in *B.J.* 7.8.7/387. In support of his argument that the Jotapata and Eleazar speeches are directly related to each other, Ladouceur (1980, 251) points out that both speeches make use of the ἐλευθερία/δουλεία *topos*. But even here, Ladouceur has to admit that the sense in which this *topos* is employed differs. Eleazar employs the *topos* of freedom/slavery in both a political as well as a religio-political sense, whereas Josephus, in his attempt to save his life, speaks to a freedom that relates to the choosing of the time and manner of one’s own death. Regardless, Ladouceur (1980, 251–52) points out that one cannot simply take these speeches at face value:

That some genuine Jewish stratum lies below to be detected rests upon two assumptions: that Josephus had a reliable source for the speech of Eleazar, and that he preserved that

28 It is important to note that in Judaism preservation of a human life takes priority over all other commandments. The Talmud stresses this principle with reference to Leviticus 18:5: “You shall therefore keep my statutes ... which if a man do, he shall live by them.” Also, “Take heed and guard your life very carefully” (Deuteronomy 4:9), and “Guard your lives very carefully” (Deuteronomy 4:15). Lastly, cf. *b. Yoma* 85b which adds: “That he shall live by them, and not that he shall die by them.”

information intact or at least in such a way that it can be recovered simply by removing the Greek trappings.

We also know that it was popular for Hellenistic writers, such as Thucydides, to have their characters recite long speeches which served as useful vehicles for their own thoughts. However, not *all* Hellenistic authors used long speeches for this singular purpose. One good example is Polybius, who was not especially interested in oratory. In this context, (cf. Wooten 1974, 235–36), he neither employs speeches as creative expressions of his own rhetorical ability nor as a means to put words into his characters' mouths. In the same vein, and as supported by Luz (1983, 26) Josephus's "transcription" of Eleazar's speeches represent neither what he wanted to say in Eleazar's place nor a Thucydidean reconstruction of what Eleazar was likely to have said. Josephus merely relies on Hellenistic stock themes to give his Eleazar something meaningful to say. The only exception to this is his carefully inserted passage that has Eleazar repeat Josephus's overt opinion that the actions of piratical bandits were the primary cause for the Jewish nation's downfall. He thus makes his Eleazar character conveniently amplify his own *leitmotif* of disdain for those Jews who by their anti-Roman actions brought the Jewish nation into disrepute and who were responsible for its ultimate destruction. This factor has no bearing on the accuracy (positive or negative) of his account of the engagement between Romans and *sicarii* on Mount Masada.

The Archaeological Evidence

What Josephus has to say about the structure of the fortress on Mount Masada compares favourably with modern scientific measurements of the site. Josephus claimed that the walls were seven stadia in length. A stadia was more or less equivalent to a modern furlong (220 yards) which means that Josephus was claiming a wall some 1 540 yards long. The actual measurement is 1 530 yards or 1 400 meters. Josephus also accurately accounted for the structure of the casemate wall with some 30 towers and 70 rooms.²⁹ His description of the so-called "snake path" that leads to a gate on the north-east side is also accurate as is his rough estimate of the 114 meter length of the Roman ramp, which was erected on a natural spur of bedrock (cf. Gill 1993, 569–70). In *B.J.* 7.8.5/306–07, Josephus also correctly mentions that Flavius Silva's ramp was built upon this pre-existing promontory:

Silva, having accordingly ascended and occupied this eminence, ordered his troops to throw up an embankment. Working with a will and a multitude of hands, they raised a solid bank to the height of two hundred cubits. This, however, being still considered of insufficient stability and extent as an emplacement for the engines, on top of it was

29 Yadin (1972, 1078–92).

constructed a platform of great stones fitted closely together, fifty cubits broad and as many high.³⁰

The current ramp has suffered centuries of erosion but the modern length of 114 meters compares favourably with Josephus's original estimate of 125 meters (250 cubits).

Yet Cohen (1982, 393) clearly sees Josephus as a mostly dishonest historian, one who habitually exaggerates and embellishes his accounts. As a consequence of this rhetorical straitjacket that he places Josephus within, Cohen (for one) cannot accept Josephus's Masada account as being an "unalloyed version of the truth." Having set the scene for a largely deceptive Josephus, Cohen expands upon where he sees Josephus's Masada account as being contrary to the archaeological evidence; listed below are pertinent examples of these cited discrepancies (Cohen 1982, 394):

1. The premeditated death of the 960 inhabitants of Masada and the destruction of the palace and the possessions of all the people acting in unison (*B.J.* 7.9.1/389–98).
2. The possessions of the *sicarii* were gathered together in one large pile and set on fire (*B.J.* 7.9.1/394).
3. Eleazar ordering his men to destroy everything except the foodstuffs (*B.J.* 7.8.6/336).
4. The last surviving Jew set fire to the palace (*B.J.* 7.9.1/397).
5. All the murders of the wives and children took place in the northern palace (*B.J.* 7.9.1/397).

Cohen argues that item 2 is contradicted by the archaeological evidence of multiple piles and fires. Again, item 3 is contradicted by the discovery that many storerooms which contained provisions were burnt. Josephus reports that the Romans found arms sufficient for ten thousand men, as well as iron, brass, and lead (*B.J.* 7.8.4/299—why weren't these valuable commodities destroyed?). Cohen points out that item 4 is contradicted by the fact that all the public buildings had been set ablaze. Lastly, Cohen points out correctly that the northern palace is too small to contain the bodies of 960 bodies and therefore contradicts item 5.

Cohen is mistaken about his identification of the northern palace. Josephus is clearly referring to the much larger western palace. In *B.J.* 7.8.3/289 we read: "There, too, he built a palace on the western slope, beneath the ramparts on the crest and inclining towards the north."³¹ Again, in *B.J.* 7.8.4/304b–305a, it is clearly recorded that "[Silva] had discovered only one spot capable of supporting earthworks. For in rear of the tower which barred the road leading from the west to the palace and the ridge, was a projection

30 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 591).

31 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 587).

of rock, of considerable breadth and jutting far out, but still three hundred cubits below the elevation of Masada; it was called Leuce.³²

Indeed, the northern palace is far smaller and situated below and *outside* the main Masada citadel walls. The western palace is situated *within* the walls and is certainly big enough to contain 960 corpses.

Despite his negativity, it is interesting that Cohen (1982, 395) admits to the veracity of the *sicarii* building a second wooden wall:

The fact that the combination of these two techniques (the construction of an inner wall out of pliable material) is not readily paralleled elsewhere is double testimony to its veracity. Josephus cannot be accused of enriching his narrative with a tactic cribbed from a poliorcetic manual, and the Sicarii are credited with a manoeuvre which befits their inexperience in siege warfare—who builds a wall out of wood? Further confirmation *may* come from archaeology. Some large wooden beams were stripped from the Herodian palace before its destruction by fire, perhaps to be used in the construction of this futile gesture. Confirmed or not, the story is at least credible.

This view is presented by Cohen, despite the fact that not a single scrap of archaeological evidence has survived to verify this possibility.

Cohen's comments apropos item 1 are relevant as far as *normal* expectations are concerned.³³ However, it is surely nit-picking to take Josephus to task based on the archaeological evidence of there being numerous fires. What seems to have been forgotten is that Masada was re-occupied after 74 C.E.—first by a Roman garrison (who obviously removed the bodies of the *sicarii* and their families) and later by Byzantine monks. Archaeologists are not investigating an untrammelled, virginal site. For example, the fact that there remains no evidence of the burnt secondary wooden wall can easily be explained by the time gap of 1,888 years between the incident in 74 C.E. and the excavation in 1962.

According to Josephus's text, the Roman commander Silva stopped his assault after finally breaching the western wall of the Masada citadel. Next morning, he resumed his attack and was surprised to find that all the Jews were dead. Josephus (*B.J.* 7.8.5/319) states on this issue: "The Romans, thus blessed by God's aid, returned rejoicing to their camp, with the determination of attacking the enemy on the morrow; and throughout that night they kept stricter watch lest any of them should secretly escape."³⁴

32 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 591). It should be noted that Thackeray explains that "Leuce" refers to "White (cliff)."

33 Cohen's views are shared to some extent by, inter alia, Huntsman (1996–1997, 373).

34 English translation according to Thackeray (1961b, 595).

Cohen understandably questions why the Romans would suddenly stop their attack at the very moment victory was in sight. Furthermore, based on Josephus's account the reader is supposed to accept that during the long night no one tried to escape, and the Romans remained oblivious to the *sicarii* slaying 960 individuals and setting at least two major fires. Cohen sees this hiatus in the story as merely a ploy to allow Josephus to insert the *sicarii* leader's two long Hellenistic speeches. I concur; but I am also mindful that there may be a logical explanation which justifies Josephus's claims. Certainly, we do not really know whether Eleazar really made two long speeches to his *sicarii* defenders. Here the reader is simply being fed what Josephus believes are reasonable arguments for the *sicarii* leader to make plus of course the obvious ploy of having Eleazar admit to the failings of the *sicarii* movement—something that Josephus clearly abhorred. However, assuming that the mass suicide event did occur, we really have no idea when the *sicarii* engaged in some mutual discussion as regards their final options. Moreover, when it comes to the Roman's actions, Josephus is hardly likely to have given an account that differed from what he was told by his military informants in Rome. This latter view is supported by Hoenig (1970, 12) and Huntsman (1996–1997, 372). How could he possibly claim to be truthful if he blatantly lied about Silva's official accounts of the siege? If the Romans had stormed the citadel immediately after breaching the western wall, the *sicarii* would not have had time to democratically discuss their collective fate and most would have been either massacred or captured. It should be seen as a fact that, given the stated circumstances, only a temporary Roman withdrawal would have given the *sicarii* the necessary time to commit mass suicide. Otherwise we must assume that the entire account is pure fiction.

Therefore, just as Cohen speculates (1982, 401–05) as to what might have happened on Masada some 1 933³⁵ years ago, we might well be rewarded by trying to find equally valid reasons why the Romans broke off their attack and waited until morning to resume hostilities.

One obvious possibility is that the Romans, who on that fateful day had suffered few or no casualties, were becoming physically exhausted after spending many hours assaulting the western wall of the Masada citadel. Given that they had come off lightly and night was settling fast, Silva did not want any of his troops to be unnecessarily massacred in the dark. He knew that the Jews were wholly defeated and could not effectively rebuild another secondary wall before the morning. In addition, he had already encircled the entire mountain with a wall to stop any of the *sicarii* from escaping. Accordingly, he decided that he would make a renewed attack in the morning and round up the beaten Masada defenders with well-rested and fresh troops.

Lastly, Cohen conveniently (it would seem) skips over all the other archaeological findings that support Josephus's account. He states (Cohen 1982, 395), “Perhaps

35 That is, at the time of writing (2019).

archaeology confirms other aspects of Josephus' narrative, especially his description of the site, but on these important points³⁶ it contradicts him." Cohen (1982, 395) goes on to state: "Even in archaeological matters Josephus' record is not perfect. He knows of only one palace on Masada although archaeology reveals two." This is not evidence that Josephus did not know about the northern palace complex. It was simply irrelevant to Josephus, considering the main points that he wanted to emphasize in his account.

Conclusions

It is clear, based on Josephus's track record, that he is not likely to misrepresent a historical fact. He may indeed embroider and employ rhetorical devices to heighten, say, the emotion of a particular event. However, the basic facts (i.e., as he finds them) will not be tampered with. Where he does make mistakes, it is safe to theorise that he has not been critical enough of a particular source which he has naively taken at face value. In this context, the historian should largely trust Josephus's historical accounts.

Lastly, given that Eleazar's two manufactured speeches serve merely to protect a sense of pride in Jewish actions (from the perspective of a Græco-Roman readership) they also allow Josephus to amplify his assertion that the *sicarii* generally were piratical in nature and, in addition, did much to damage the Jewish cause, especially from a balanced Jewish perspective. We can also assume that adherents of this fanatical movement were not really zealots as is so often asserted by authors like Yigael Yadin and Solomon Zeitlin. However, the *sicarii* of Masada, although severely tainted by their outrageous *modus operandi* of attacking and murdering members of the Jewish population, did at least have the courage to make the ultimate sacrifice. Even so, their actions, not only against their own people but also against their own family members, would be considered abhorrent and monstrous in modern times. In short, this is hardly a suitable *fabula* to employ as a myth exhorting national pride.

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