

Historical Fraud and Deception: The Zionist Myth of *Masada*



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Note: Modern Jewish identity is layered with rings of myth and self-delusion. Among Jewry's greatest illusions today is its convention about Masada, the desert fortress near the Dead Sea that has become an important pilgrimage stop for the world's Jews, in homage to alleged noble resistance against Roman invaders (hundreds of Jews are declared to have committed mass suicide rather than surrender). Masada has evolved in Jewish consciousness as a point of collective pride in dying for Jewish identity against oppressive non-Jews, a hallowed form of resistance against an "anti-Semitism" of antiquity. Like so much of modern Jewish self-delusional identity, however, an accurate examination of Jewish history and tradition too often proves to be embarrassing

Most of the material below is excerpted from WHEN VICTIMS RULE. A CRITIQUE OF JEWISH PRE-EMINENCE IN AMERICA.

"We must be committed to support Israel in the exacting, essential search for that dream. I will never forget a moment on top of **Masada**, when I stood on that great plateau where the oath of new soldiers used to be sworn against the desert backdrop and **the test of history**. I had spent several hours with Yadin Roman debating whether or not **Josephus Flavius** was correct in his account of the siege--whether these really were the last Jews fighting for survival--whether they had escaped since no remains were ever found." -- Another President for the Occupation? "The Cause of Israel is the Cause of America", By **SEN. JOHN KERRY**, **CounterPunch, February 17, 2004**

Among the most important nationalist legends in the modern state of Israel (and for many in the international Jewish community) has been the story of Masada. In Israeli/Jewish lore, 900 Jewish zealots nobly defended themselves for months against attack and then committed mass suicide at a remote desert fortress near the Dead Sea in 73 AD rather than

surrender to besieging Roman legions. The Masada tale of desperate Jewish warriors has popularly been regarded as historical fact and has served as heroic symbol -- a "last stand" in Jewish collective consciousness, a story where Jews who were revolting against Roman domination chose to die for their Jewish heritage rather than suffer oppression at the hands of Gentiles. Masada has embodied a range of traditional Jewish beliefs: Jewry as a "nation apart" against all others, the few against the many, Jewish heroism against Gentile hordes, and dedication to each other to the point of death as itself a noble endeavour.

The Masada story has long been a source of Jewish and Israeli pride, especially since the founding of modern Israel in 1948. "Masada is not just a story," notes Israeli historian Nachum Ben-Yehuda, "Masada provides, certainly for my generation of Israelis, an important ingredient in the very definition of our Jewishness and Israeli 'identity.'" [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 5] "Masada," writes Yitzhak Landau in his famous patriotic poem to Israel and Jewish solidarity, "shall not fall again." [BENVEN-ISTI, p. 35]

Astoundingly, however, the Masada legend of courageous Jewish defenders is false. Its historical basis was distorted and embellished to serve the propagandistic needs of early Israeli nation-building. Nachum Ben-Yehuda wrote an entire volume in 1995 that catalogues, not only that the heroic version of the Masada story is untrue, but that it was consciously fabricated to serve Israeli propaganda about Jewish identity, especially in the early post-Holocaust period when the Jews of Europe were perceived to have so passively met their fate at the hands of Hitler.

Virtually everything modern scholarship knows about Masada comes from the writings of Flavius Josephus, a man -- who born a Jew -- joined the Romans and is generally considered in Jewish circles to be a traitor to his people (an odd source for heroizing ancient Jewry). A close reading of him, notes Ben-Yehuda, reveals that the "zealots" of Masada were actually Sicarii -- "assassins," of both Romans and Jews. The reason they fled to Masada was not because they were fighting Roman domination, but that they were driven out of Jerusalem by fellow Jews. The Sicarii then "raided nearby Jewish villages, killed the inhabitants, and took their

food." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 9] They killed about 700 Jews in Ein Gedi alone, "mostly women and children." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 36]

From this core of information about Masada's dubious "defenders" provided by Josephus, Israeli propagandists "socially constructed a shrine for Jewish martyrdom and heroism" [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 190] whereby the entire nation of modern Israel was itself conceived as a Masada, isolated defenders against gentile hostility towards Jews everywhere, "a symbol of the heroism of Israel for all generations ... [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 87] ... Masada was not destroyed. It became a symbol of the Jewish will to live as a nation, of refusal to surrender to the forces threatening its extinction." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 123] "In the late fifties and early sixties," says Meron Benvenisti, "Masada became a national shrine." [BENVENISIT, p. 38]

Yet, "the Masada mythical narratives," adds Ben-Yehuda, "was consciously invented, fabricated, and supported by key moral entrepreneurs and organizations in the Yishuv [Israeli community] ... [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 307] ... [while Masada's defenders were really] "thieves and assassins who robbed and killed other Jews." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 300] For years, Israeli army recruits were taken to the ruins of the Masada fortress to swear allegiance to the Jewish state, ritually stating "endless devotion" to Israel at this "place of splendour, glory and majesty." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 147] And Israeli newspaper in 1964 called Masada Israel's "most cherished national asset" and the "mausoleum of the saints of the nation." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 185] A popular patriotic slogan became "Masada shall not fall again." The Mossad's assassination division was even called "Masada."

Home of a band of fleeing Jewish murderers or not, the Masada story has not been without its Jewish critics on other terms. The idea of Israel itself as a veritable Masada country, a garrison state with a desperate back-to-the-wall "we against them" world view (sometimes described as the "Masada complex") has worried some Israeli commentators. Is collective suicide an appropriate role model for any people? How would this affect Israeli self-conception and behaviour in the nuclear bomb world? Is an alienated "last stand" psychology a healthy premise to interact with the

rest of the world? Seymour Hersh quotes the comments of an 'expert who has been involved in government studies on the nuclear issue in the Middle East for two decades: "Israel has a well thought-out nuclear strategy and, if sufficiently threatened, they will use it." [HERSH, S., p. 92] "Many senior nonproliferation officials in the American government," adds Hersh, "were convinced by the early 1990's that the Middle East remained the one place where nuclear weapons might be used [i.e., no other Middle Eastern country *has* nuclear weapons except Israel]." [HERSH, p. 92]

"Our nationalists are leading us to Masada," once complained famed tank commander Yitzhak Ben-Ari, "in the sense that 'all the world is against us. We shall fight, and if we have a nuclear bomb, we shall use it.' And what will remain for us? Nothing." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 157] "It is unavoidable," worried Israeli historian Benyamin Kedar, "that [nationalist] behaviour influenced by identification with Masada will indeed resuscitate it. If the entire world is against us, then one begins to behave as if we are against the entire world and such behavior is bound to lead to ever-increasing isolation." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 246]

It is clear that this Masada model is, of course, merely a secular, militant expression of the traditional religious "nation apart" syndrome itself, Jewish enclaves throughout history self-ghettoised against the non-Jewish Other. And as for the Masada myth itself, "time after time," notes Ben-Yehuda, Jews who are told that the Masada story of heroism is fake "elicit expressions ranging from mild discomfort to (much more frequently) anger and open hostility. My worse encounters have typically been with [Israeli] history teachers ... Obviously, the realization that a major element of one's personal and national identity was based on a biased and falsified myth is not an easy thing to deal with." [BEN-YEHUDA, p. 311]

Among the many forms of Masada mythologising, in this case for American popular consumption, was a 1970 "historical novel," Masada, subtitled A Novel of Love, Courage, and the Triumph of the Human Spirit, by Ernest Ganz, described by a Kirkus Reviews reviewer as "a return to the days of heroes larger than life." It was also the subject of an "8-hour TV epic from ABC-TV and Universal." [GANN, back cover and opening

page] The Masada myth also saw American expression in 1987 when Jewish American Marvin David Levy, recently released after a two year prison term for his role in a drug smuggling ring, watched the Chicago Symphony Orchestra perform his "dramatic oratorio, Masada, in its newly expanded version." The work, noted the Chicago Tribune, "emphasizes the triumph and tragedy of a heroic band that chose individual liberty at great personal cost." [VON RHEIM, J., p. 26]

In 1971 Michael Rosenberg summarized American Jewry's irrational views of Israel succinctly: "Israel is the ultimate reality in the life of every living Jew today. I believe that Israel surpasses in importance Jewish ritual. It is more than the Jewish tradition; and, in fact, it is more than the Mosaic law itself. The anti-religious Jew who supports Israel is welcomed as a Jew and as an integral part of the community. The observant Jew who does not accept the centrality of Israel is not accepted and is rarely even tolerated. In dealing with those who oppose Israel, we are not reasonable and we are not rational. Nor should we be." [ROSENBERG, M., p. 82]

From: Israel and Zionism (a chapter in WHEN VICTIMS RULE. A CRITIQUE OF JEWISH PRE-EMINENCE IN AMERICA)

* Required reading: Ben-Yehuda, Nachum. *The Masada Myth. Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1995

FROM: *The Jewish War*, by Josephus [Flavius Josephus]. Translated by G. A. Williamson. Revised with a new introduction, notes and appendixes, by E. Mary Smallwood. Dorset Press, New York, First published 1959, Revised edition 1970, This edition: 1985

And now a fourth calamity was coming on the doomed nation. Not far from Jerusalem was a well-nigh impregnable fortress built by the kings of long ago for the safe keeping of their treasures and their personal security in the hazards of war. It was called **Masada**, and was in the hands of the so-called Sicarii. Hitherto they had merely raided the districts nearby to procure supplies: fear prevented any further ravages; but

when they heard that the Roman army was making no move, while the Jews in Jerusalem were torn by party-strife and domestic tyranny, they launched out on more ambitious schemes . During the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (kept by the Jews in memory of their escape, ever since they were freed from slavery in Egypt and returned to their ancestral home) they eluded those who lay in their path and made **a night raid on a little town called Engedi.** [*Note: today Ein Gedi*] Those who might have put up a resistance were scattered before they could seize their weapons and form up, and thrown out of the town; **those who could not fly, women and children and more than 700 in number, were butchered.** Then they stripped the houses bare, seized the ripest of the crops, and brought the loot to **Masada. They proceeded to plunder all the villages around the fortress and ravage the whole area, their numbers being daily swelled by a flow of ruffians like themselves from every side.**" [p. 266-267]

But there was to be no peace in Jerusalem. There was a young hothead called Simon, son of Gioras, a Gerasene by birth. He was less crafty than John who was the master of the City, but superior in physique and daring - -the quality which had caused Ananus the high priest to turn him out of his toparchy of Acrabata, so driving him into the arms of **the bandits who had seized Masada.** At first they eyed him warily, and only allowed him into the lower part of the fortress with the women he brought with him, occupying the upper part themselves. Later, as a kindred spirit and to all appearance trustworthy, they took him on **their plundering expeditions and raids round about Masada.** [p. 274-275]

The fortress was Masada, occupied by the Sicarii under the influential man called Eleazar, a descendant of the Judas who had persuaded many Jews, as recorded earlier, not to register when Quirinius was sent to Judea to take a census. At that time the Sicarii combined against those prepared to submit to Rome, rounding up their cattle, and setting their dwellings on fire: they were no better than foreigners, they declared, throwing away in this cowardly fashion the freedom won by the Jews at such cost, and avowedly choosing slavery under the Romans. In reality this was a mere excuse, **intended to cloak their barbarity and avarice.** The proof lay in their own actions; **for people who joined the Sicarii in their revolt and**

fought by their side against Rome then suffered worse atrocities at their hands, when the Sicarii, convicted of hollow pretence, maltreated those who tried to clear themselves by condemning the wickedness of the Sicarii. [p. 393]

Somehow those days had become so productive of every kind of wickedness among the Jews as to leave no deed of shame uncommitted; and even if someone had used all his powers of invention, he could not have thought of any vice that remained untried: so corrupt was the public and private life of the whole nation, so determined were they to outdo each other in impiety towards God and injustice to their neighbours, those in power ill-using the masses, and the masses striving to overthrow those in power. One group was bent on domination, the other in violence and on robbing the rich. **First to begin this lawlessness and this barbarity to kinsmen were the Sicarii, who left no word unspoken, no deed untried, to insult and destroy the objects of their foul plots. [p. 393-394]** The Roman assault upon the *Sicarii* (and their mass suicide) at Masada is described on pages 395-405.

Israel Masada Now U.N. Heritage Site, Newsday, October 31, 2002

"Hundreds of Israelis climbed this ancient hilltop fortress Thursday, where Jewish rebels chose suicide over capture by Roman troops, to celebrate its addition to a U.N. list of cultural treasures. The Judean mountain promontory overlooking the Dead Sea is where where a last group of Jewish holdouts sought refuge from Roman legions who had already destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Israeli soldiers now come here at the start of their military training to swear an oath to protect the country. Boys celebrate coming-of-age rituals here. Many come to pray. Masada and the ancient Mediterranean port city of Acre in northern Israel were included in the World Heritage list of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization last year -- the first two Israeli sites to make it onto the UNESCO list. A plaque commemorating the Masada site was unveiled Thursday as dancers and musicians performed for diplomats, Cabinet ministers and nearby residents. The listing puts it

on a par with the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids of Egypt ... Israelis have vowed not to let Masada fall again. If challenged, Israel will not commit suicide but will fight to the death, said **Avia Oann**, 55, standing among the pillars. 'We must learn from it, not to make the same mistake,' she said."



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