

JOSEPHUS AS JEREMIAH BEGS JERUSALEM

By David Lee Burris





‘Titus made good use of Josephus. Better than any, Josephus understood the mentality of those behind the walls, and well guessed that the high priests could clearly see nothing but ruin in the Jewish resistance. He must now therefore speak one last appeal to save his people. In Josephus account, he stationed himself before the walls, close enough to be heard, far enough back to be out of range for the archers, and *cried* out to his countrymen.

Had they really considered what they are doing? The outcome of this insanity could well be permanent and total destruction of the Temple and the Holy City. Did they see that they are fighting not merely Romans but God himself? Whenever their cause was right, did not God intervene and save them?

Then he hit harder, his voice ringing to the ramparts:

We can produce no example wherein our fathers got any success by war, or failure when without war they committed themselves to God. As for you, of the things commanded by our Lawgiver what have you done? And of the things he condemned, what have you left undone?

The response from the walls was a tirade of ridicule and of execration along with showers of stones. At this Josephus seems to have broken down, pleading as had so many Jewish prophets:

O, hard-hearted wretches that you are, cast away your weapons and take pity on your country which is already tottering to its fall. Turn and gaze at the beauty of what you are betraying: What a city! What a Temple! Who could be the first to set that Temple on fire? Who could wish that these things be no more?

You inhuman creatures, you stone-hearted men! At least have pity on your families, and set before your eyes your children, your wife, and your parents, who will gradually be consumed by either famine or war.

I know that this danger extends to my own mother, my wife, and my family. Perhaps you think it is for their sakes that I offer you this advice. Then kill them, and take my own blood as well, as the price of your salvation! I am ready to die, if that could lead you to learn wisdom!

The leaders remained unmoved, but some of the people stole out of the city, and Titus allowed them to cross over to freedom. The leaders promptly declared such evacuation was punishable by death, then they began executing people suspected of even planning escape.”

- The Veil is Torn, Volume One, The Christians Series

Josephus's first wife perished, together with his parents, in Jerusalem during the siege, and Vespasian arranged for him to marry a Jewish woman who had been captured.



HOW TITUS GAVE ORDERS TO DEMOLISH THE TOWER OF ANTONIA, AND THEN PERSUADED JOSEPHUS TO EXHORT THE JEWS AGAIN [TO A SURRENDER]

1. (93) And now Titus gave orders to his soldiers that were with him to dig up the foundations of the tower of Antonia, and make him a ready passage for his army to come up; (94) while he himself had Josephus brought to him (for he had been informed that on that very day, which was the seventeenth day of Panemus [Tamuz], the sacrifice called “the Daily Sacrifice” had failed, and had not been offered to God for want of men to offer it, and that the people were grievously troubled at it) (95) and commanded him to say the same things to John that he had said before, that if he had any malicious inclination for fighting, he might come out with as many of his men as he pleased, in order to fight, without the danger of destroying either his city or temple; but that he desired he would not defile the temple, nor thereby offend against God. That he might, if pleased, offer the sacrifices which were now discontinued, by any of the Jews whom he should pitch upon. (96) Upon this, Josephus stood in such a place where he might be heard, not by John only, but by many more, and then declared to them what Caesar had given him in charge, and this in the Hebrew language. (97) So he earnestly prayed them to spare their own city, and to prevent that fire that was just ready to seize upon the temple, and to offer their usual sacrifices to God therein. (98) At these words of his a great sadness and silence were observed among the people. But the tyrant himself cast many reproaches upon Josephus, with imprecations besides; and at last added this withal, that he did never fear the taking of the city, because it was God’s own city. (99) In answer to which, Josephus said thus, with a loud voice:—“To be sure, thou hast kept this city wonderfully pure for God’s sake! The temple also continues entirely unpolluted! Nor hast thou been guilty of any impiety against him, for whose assistance thou hopest! He still receives his accustomed sacrifices! (100) Vile wretch that thou art! If anyone should deprive thee of thy daily food, thou wouldst esteem him to be an enemy to thee; but thou hopest to have that God for thy supporter in this war whom thou hast deprived of his everlasting worship! (101)

And thou imputest those sins to the Romans, who to this very time take care to have our laws observed, and almost compel these sacrifices to be still offered to God, which have by thy means been intermitted! (102) Who is there that can avoid groans and lamentations at the amazing change that is made in this city? Since very foreigners and enemies do now correct that impiety which thou hast occasioned; while thou, who art a Jew, and was educated in our laws, art become a greater enemy to them than the others! (103) But still, John, it is never dishonorable to repent, and amend what hath been done amiss, even at the last extremity. Thou hast an instance before thee in Jechoniah, the king of the Jews, if thou hast a mind to save the city, (104) who, when the king of Babylon made war against him, did, of his own accord, go out of this city before it was taken, and did undergo a voluntary captivity with his family, that the sanctuary might not be delivered up to the enemy, and that he might not see the house of God set on fire; (105) on which account he is celebrated among all the Jews, in their sacred memorials, and his memory is become immortal, and will be conveyed fresh down to our posterity through all ages. (106) This, John, is an excellent example in such a time of danger; and I dare venture to promise that the Romans shall still forgive thee. (107) And take notice, that I, who make this exhortation to thee, am one of thine own nation; I who am a Jew do make this promise to thee. And it will become thee to consider who I am that give thee this counsel, and whence I am derived; for while I am alive I shall never be in such slavery as to forego my own kindred, or forget the laws of our forefathers. (108) Thou hast indignation at me again, and makest a clamor at me, and reproachest me; indeed, I cannot deny that I am worthy of worse treatment than all this amounts to, because, in opposition to fate, I make this kind invitation to thee, and endeavor to force deliverance upon those whom God hath condemned. (109) And who is there that does not know what the writings of the ancient prophets contain in them,—and particularly that oracle which is just now going to be fulfilled upon this miserable city—for they foretold that this city should be then taken when somebody shall begin the slaughter of his own countrymen! (110) And are not both the city and the entire temple now full of the dead bodies of your countrymen?

It is God therefore, it is God himself who is bringing on this fire, to purge that city and temple by means of the Romans, and is going to pluck up this city, which is full of your pollutions.”

2. (111) As Josephus spoke these words with groans, and tears in his eyes, his voice was intercepted by sobs. (112) However, the Romans could not but pity the affliction he was under, and wonder at his conduct. But for John, and those that were with him, they were but the more exasperated against the Romans on this account, and were now desirous to get Josephus also into their power; (113) yet did that discourse influence a great many of the better sort; and truly some of them were so afraid of the guards sent by the seditious, that they tarried where they were, but still were satisfied that both they and the city were doomed to destruction. Some also there were who, watching for a proper opportunity when they might quietly get away, fled to the Romans, (114) of whom were the high priests Joseph and Jesus, and of the sons of high priests three, whose father was Ishmael, who was beheaded in Cyrena, and four sons of Matthias, as also one son of the other Matthias, who ran away after his father's death, and whose father was slain by Simon, the son of Gioras, with three of his sons, as I have already related; many also of the other nobility went over to the Romans, together with the high priests. (115) Now Caesar not only received these men very kindly in other respects, but, knowing they wouldn't willingly live after the customs of other nations, he sent them to Gophna, and desired them to remain there for the present, and told them, that when he was gotten clear of this war, he would restore each of them to their possessions again; (116) so they cheerfully retired to that small city which was allotted them, without fear of any danger. But as they did not appear, the seditious gave out again that these deserters were slain by the Romans,—which was done, in order to deter the rest from running away by fear of the like treatment. (117) This trick of theirs succeeded now for a while, as did the like trick before; for the rest were hereby deterred from deserting, by fear of the like treatment. ¹

¹ Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1987). [*The works of Josephus: complete and unabridged*](#) (pp. 731–733). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Titus Flavius Josephus and the Prophet Jeremiah

Avishai Margalit contrasts the legacies of a historian and a prophet

Biblical Archaeology Society Staff December 27, 2022



In the first-century Jewish revolt against Rome, Josephus failed to honor the suicide pact he made with his soldiers. When he was later captured and taken to Rome, he predicted that the Roman commander Vespasian would become emperor. When the prediction proved accurate, Josephus was taken into the imperial family and became known as Flavius Josephus.

[Titus Flavius Josephus](#) is best remembered as an unparalleled chronicler of first-century A.D. Jewish history. His legacy also includes a military record marked by the betrayal of his peers and capitulation to the Romans. As a commander in [the Jewish revolt](#), Josephus attempted to persuade his companions to open the gates of Yodfat for the Romans, and when the city fell, he reneged on the group's suicide pact and personally surrendered. After the destruction of Jerusalem, [Titus Flavius Josephus](#) lived as a Roman citizen in the emperor's palace, enjoying the luxurious life of a dignitary and scholar.

Josephus's repeated calls for surrender to the Romans have been labeled as betrayal. Distinguished scholar Avishai Margalit contrasts the historian's tarnished reputation with that of [the prophet Jeremiah](#). The prophet Jeremiah also urged surrender to a militarily superior foe, [the Babylonians](#). He tried to escape Jerusalem, and, much like Titus Flavius Josephus, was accused of trying to defect.

Thus saith the LORD, He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live.

— Jeremiah 38:2 (KJV)

Benson Commentary

Jeremiah 38:2-5. Thus saith the Lord, He that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live — This had been the constant tenor of this prophet's prophecies. The crime of which he was now accused, seems to lie in this, that in such a time of danger he should repeat this prophecy, and also **advise the people to leave the city, and go out to the Chaldeans, telling them that if they did so, though the city would be lost, yet they should save their lives**, which might induce some to desert their posts. This they interpret to be not seeking the welfare of the people, but their hurt; though, indeed, their welfare was that alone which he sought, knowing that there was no other way for them to save their lives, but by submitting to the Chaldeans. The great men, however, would not believe it; for they would not form their judgments on the revelations which God had been pleased to make of his will, but were determined to judge of their safety from what they wished. Hence, for any one not to be of their opinion was to be an enemy to the state. *Therefore the princes said unto the king — We beseech thee, let this man be put to death* — His crime deserves no less a punishment; **for he weakeneth the hands of the men of war — By making them despair of success.**

Then the king said, Behold he is in your hand — At your disposal; I give him up into your power. Though Zedekiah was convinced that Jeremiah was a prophet sent of God, yet he had not courage to own this conviction, but yielded to the violence of his persecutors. *For the king is not he that can do anything against you* — He speaks as one who did not dare, in such difficult times, to contradict the great men about him. The king evidently speaks this in disgust with the princes for endeavouring to frustrate his clemency. He had once rescued Jeremiah out of their hands, and taken him under his royal protection. But his prerogative, he tells them, was likely to avail but little when opposed by their obstinate and repeated importunities. The power was in reality theirs and not his.

“THE SPEECH OF F. JOSEPHUS AT THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM”

- ❖ **His arguments fall into two parts: Failing to move them by his direct advice, he passed to reminiscences of their nation’s history. In the former part of his speech he makes appeal to sound reason in hopes to convince the defenders of the city but also support his arguments with theological reasoning. . . the ancestors had much greater opportunity to fight the Romans, ‘Who in soul and body, aye in resources to boot, were far their superior.’**
- ❖ **God supports Rome now, so ‘you are warring not against the Romans only, but also against God.’ From this point onwards the author teaches his audience almost exclusively on the basis of biblical narratives. He mentions biblical examples and shows that, if the will of the people does not coincide with the will of God, all efforts are in vain. No alliances can compete with the will of God. His hearers should learn from the examples of the ancestors.**

- ❖ **But hope is in vain because the audience lacks the most important element: repentance.**
- ❖ **The only prophet to be mentioned here is Jeremiah, who lived out the devastation of the city and the Temple and whose message was refused by the people and the king. This short illustration is important because there is a clear-cut parallel to his own task and that of the prophet. Just like his predecessor, he brings bad news, and just like Jeremiah, Josephus is refused and despised. ‘Yet, how much more moderate was that monarch than your leaders, and his subjects than you. . .’**
- ❖ **In Josephus’ time it is evident the Romans had to intervene in Jewish history because the quarrel between Aristobulus and Hyranus, as well as the deeds of the people, made the Jews unworthy of freedom. . .**
- ❖ **Josephus sees in Jeremiah his predecessor, a proto-type; and this is corroborated by the common descent: they were both of priestly background.**

- ❖ **Jeremiah could foresee future desolation he understood 'Babylon' as a code name for Rome. Both he and Jeremiah are accepted by a foreign ruler instead of their own people & its leaders.**
- ❖ **Last but not least both Jeremiah and Josephus are dissenters, Josephus like Jeremiah couldn't convince the defenders of the city, so its fall is inevitable.**
- ❖ **This is corroborated by the depictions of prophets in Josephus' speeches, since the prophets saw and explained historical events precisely. Prophecies coming true prove their prophetic insight.**
- ❖ **Josephus' speech contains two lines of argument: on the one hand, he addressed himself to pure reason(as politicians do); on the other, he appeals to emotions and insights coming from faith(as prophets do).**



