The Fall of Jerusalem

What was the catalyst for the Jewish Revolt of AD 66? Believe it or not, money. The Roman procurator, Gessius Florus, was stationed in Caesarea. Funds were running low, so Gessius helped himself to a large amount of silver from the Temple Treasury.

This led to a backlash from the Jews, who began to mock and deride Gessius. In response, troops were sent into Jerusalem and 3,600 Jews were massacred – mainly civilians. In response, two men emerged as leaders of the Jewish people, Eleaser and Menahem. Eleaser was the son of Ananias the priest, and held the title of the captain of the Temple. Menahem was a more violent person, and he believed that God would raise up a Messiah to defeat the Roman army and preserve Jerusalem and the Temple.

Menahem took troops south of Jerusalem to the strongly guarder Roman garrison at Masada, and somehow was able to rout the Romans! He returned to Jerusalem as a conquering hero, and began to assume control of the city and the Temple, even claiming to be the Messiah. He was killed by Eleaser on the Temple grounds in a bitter power struggle.

This was only the start of problems for the Jews. Word soon reached the Roman governor Cestius Gallus, who ruled from Antioch, some 300 miles from Jerusalem. In an attempt to quell this latest Jewish uprising, he gathered together some 20,000 Roman troops and began the march to Jerusalem. It is recorded by Josephus that Cestuis made at least two crucial military blunders:

1) He positioned his siege machines at the rear of the column instead of the middle, as was the typical Roman practice

2) He did not properly secure the route to Jerusalem, thus allowing the Jews to take the high position on the road

As the column neared Jerusalem, it was attacked several times from the rear. The Jews were able to capture many of the Roman supplies, including the siege machines that would be necessary to break through the walls of Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Romans were ambushed at Beth-Horon, a place that held special meaning to the Jewish people. It was here that Joshua defeated the Amorites with assistance from God on the same narrow pass at Beth-Horon (Judges 10:10-11). Filled with a sense of divine protection, the Jews were prepared to stand against the Roman onslaught. The Romans finally reached Jerusalem, but without their weaponry were unable to break through the walls. 6,000 Roman soldiers met their death, and the column then retreated to Antioch. Passing through Beth-Horon, they again were ambushed. The city had been spared, and the Temple remained intact. Were these the armies surrounding Jerusalem that Jesus had warned about? If so, there was ample opportunity for the Christians to escape. The battle was not over, but rather had a momentary lapse.

In AD 67, the Roman emperor Nero had seen enough and ordered his General Vespasian to completely quell the revolt once and for all. Vespasian reached Antioch and began to assemble his troops, while his son Titus gathered an army in Egypt. Their forced combined at the city of Ptolemais and their troops numbered some 60,000. The Romans then began a systematic approach of subduing the Jewish rebels. Galilee was cleared out, as the walled city of Jotapata, north of Nazareth, was attacked. The leader of the Jewish resistance, Joseph ben Matityahu, survived the 47-day siege, but the rest of the city was not so fortunate. Such was the Roman M.O. – medium sized cities were savagely destroyed, with only a few survivors allowed to spread the news of terror to other cities that might encourage them to surrender to avoid the same fate. This worked well, as the Gadarenes tore down their own city walls to appease the Romans.

Joseph ben-Matityahu was captured, and was spared execution. His favorable prophecy concerning Vespasian probably did not hurt. He was given a Roman name, Flavius Josephus, and a front-row seat to record the events of the Jewish wars as a historian. The city of Gischala, far to the north, also fell to the Romans, but not before their leader escaped to Jerusalem. John of Gischala would become an important figure in the defense of the city.

Jerusalem was controlled by several warring factions among the people. The Zealots had gained control of the Temple, and were interested only in the political aspects of the war. They wanted freedom from Rome at any cost. John of Gischala and his private army were in a constant power struggle with the Zealots. Add to the mix a man named Simon the Proselyte, who had recently entered Jerusalem from Idumea to the south. In the spirit of Menahem, he led a contingent of Jews who focused on the Messianic theory – God would provide a Messiah to protect and guard Jerusalem and the Temple. The friction between the groups began to get out of hand, and skirmishes often took place in the city.

As Vespasian and the Roman army neared Jerusalem, word reached them from deserters concerning the internal strife of the city. Garrisons were set up as close as Jericho and Emmaus, a mere 20 miles from the city of Jerusalem. Armed with this new information, Vespasian became very patient, allowing the infighting of the Jews inside the city walls to weaken his enemy as much as possible. With the infrastructure in place, Vespasian returned to Caesarea to plan for the final assault.

It was the summer of 68, and Vespasian received troubling news while in Caesarea. Nero, the formidable emperor, had committed suicide and the entire empire was in distress. This would begin what the Romans would call “The Year of Four Emperors”, as civil unrest spread throughout the world. In a very short period of time, three men assumed the position of emperor only to have it torn away by civil war. With this uncertainty, Vespasian halted the final assault on Jerusalem and returned to Rome. By the end of 69, a fourth man would assume the position of emperor – Vespasian himself. His son Titus was promoted, and given the responsibility of finishing the job in Judea.

In the spring of AD 70, Titus marched his men to Jerusalem, and set up camp on Mt. Olives east of the city. On Passover (possibly April), he laid siege to the city. The battle was slow and methodical. As the siege wore on, the citizens faced starvation. Many tried to flee, but were caught and executed by the Romans. It was said that up to 500 Jews were crucified per day as they attempted to find safety outside the city walls. The Romans finally broke through the final wall in the late summer, and soon (possible September) held the city. Josephus estimated nearly 1.2 million Jews were killed in the relatively short siege and battle, while another 100,000 were enslaved and taken away to work across the Empire. The leaders of the rebellion were captured, with Simon the Proselyte executed and John of Gischala sentenced to life in prison. The Temple had been completely destroyed, and then burned. The fire was said to have melted the gold from off the stones of the Temple, and the soldiers utterly destroyed the compound in an attempt to secure the gold. This is what Jesus meant about one stone not left upon another. The treasures of the Temple, including the candlestick and table of the showbread, were carried out by Roman soldiers and returned to Rome, where they were paraded about as spoils of war.

The significance of the fall of Jerusalem cannot be overstated. Since that day, the Jewish system of religion has been effectively stopped. The sacrifices at the Temple have ceased, as have the proper celebration of the Jewish feasts. Do not forget this important fact: the destruction of Jerusalem was punishment of the Jewish nation by God for their failure to accept the true Messiah. As Luke recorded, these were “the days of vengeance” (Luke 21:22).