

# Masada



## Description

Situated with a commanding view of the Dead Sea, this rocky fortress was virtually impenetrable, and standing on top of it gives an indescribable sense of awe and security. The courage, sacrifice, and blood that was shed here nearly 2,000 years ago during the Jewish Revolt of A.D. 70, will always have a place of respect in your heart for Israel's second most holy site. For almost seven years, Jewish patriots held off the Roman army, which had completely surrounded them, and they would have lasted much longer except for their unwillingness to kill their brethren who had been enslaved by the Romans to build a gigantic rampart up to the walls. In the end, they chose death over enslavement, and their heroic act immortalized them in the minds of both Jews and Romans alike. Today, every Israeli child visits Masada at least once while he is in school, and Israeli soldiers are sworn in on top of this historic monument with this oath:

"I swear – I swear – I swear – Masada will never fall again."

One thing, however, that is often overlooked amongst the breathtaking views and impressive ruins of Herod's palace (built along the side of this fortress), is the fact that Masada is mentioned in the Bible. David took refuge here at least three different times (twice when running from Saul and once when the Philistines sought for him), and he also wrote of Masada in the Psalms (18:1, 2; 31:1-3; 71:1, 3). While Masada was a temporary place of refuge for David, David understood

that his real fortress and security was in God. In Psalm 31:3, David says to God, "Thou art my 'Masada.'"

## Geography of Masada

The summit of Masada sits 190 feet (59 m) above sea level and about 1500 feet (470 m) above the level of the Dead Sea. The mountain itself is 1950 feet (610 m) long, 650 feet (200 m) wide, 4250 feet (1330 m) in circumference, and encompasses 23 acres. The "Snake Path" climbs 900 feet (280 m) in elevation. From the west, the difference in height is 225 feet (70 m).

## David's Masada

When David defeated Goliath and gained popularity, King Saul became extremely jealous and tried to kill him. Fleeing Saul's attacks, David went to the Judea Wilderness for refuge.

The Text does not tell us whether David ever stayed at Masada, but we know that he hid in strongholds like it. The writer of 1 Samuel recorded, "David stayed in the desert strongholds. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands" (23:14).

During his wilderness hiding, David wrote beautiful psalms about his trust in God. He used the picture of a desert fortress to describe God's protection: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock in whom I take refuge" (Ps. 18:2).

**In this psalm, David used the Hebrew word that literally means "masada."**

**Even if he never stayed at Masada, David had surely seen or heard of its huge size and steep cliffs.** And in the midst of his troubles, David's Masada was God—an unshakable source of protection and strength.

## Herod's Masada

During his reign over Israel, Herod became paranoid about potential invaders. He especially feared Cleopatra of Egypt, and believed his life would be endangered if she ever gained control of the area.

In the event that he would have to flee Jerusalem, he built a line of palace fortresses along his escape route to Moab. Herod built the Masada fortress as one of these retreats.

On the northern end of Masada, Herod built a three-level palace, complete with hot and cold baths. The rest of the fortress was filled with living quarters, swimming pools, and storehouses for the soldiers stationed there. According to the historian Josephus, Herod had enough resources to supply thousands of men for up to ten years.

Herod's engineers also built a water storage system so that Herod and his troops could survive in the dry wilderness. They dammed up a nearby wadi and diverted water to cisterns at Masada. Servants then bucketed, carried, and poured this water into cisterns located near the top of Masada.

Though Herod's Masada was the largest fortress in the world at the time, there is no record that he ever stayed there. The Romans maintained power over Israel, and Herod was never forced to flee Jerusalem.

## The Zealot's Masada

After Herod's death, Jewish nationalism began to rise. During Jesus' ministry, the Jewish people continued to hope for a nationalistic Messiah, someone to defeat and remove the Romans. Although many Jews put their faith in Jesus, some could not accept that he would only bring spiritual freedom.

One group in particular, the Zealots, was very devoted to removing Roman influence, even when it required violence. The Zealots were completely devoted to God and did not want to give their allegiance to any other power, including Rome.

Shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Zealots revolted. Rome responded by sending her army to crush Israel. They successfully defeated the revolt, destroying Jerusalem and the temple in the process. One small group of Zealots fled to Masada to take refuge from the Roman army.

When the Zealots' occupation of Masada became known, Rome's army marched there and built eight camps around it. Determined to defeat the Zealots, they used Jewish slaves to build a two-mile wall around the massive mountain and then built an enormous siege ramp against its western side.

Once the ramp was completed, the Romans used a battering ram to break through Masada's wall. They discovered that the Zealots had built an inner wall of timbers and dirt to absorb the battering ram's force. So the Romans set the timber on fire and waited while it burned.

## Empty Masada

As their wall burned, the Zealots faced a terrible choice. They could either end their lives or face a life of slavery under Rome.

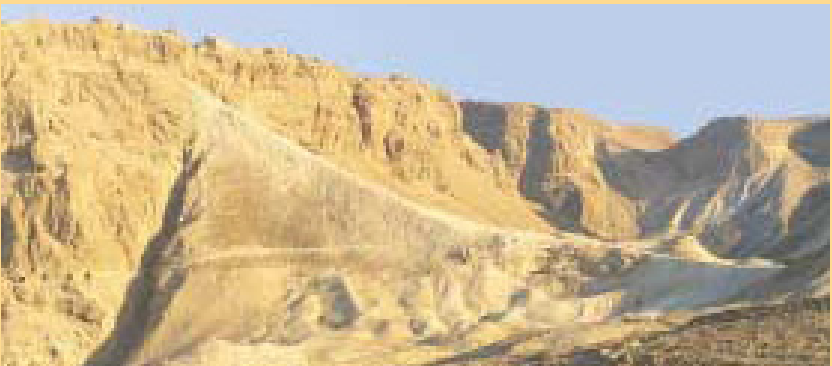
The historian Josephus recorded the tragic events that took place next. The Zealots' commander, Eleazer, made a speech reaffirming their belief that God created people to be free. He said, in effect, "It would be better for us to die at our own hands than to hand our own flesh over to the pagans."

Having spent years fighting the Romans and seeing their culture and temple destroyed, the freedom fighters agreed with Eleazer. They burned everything of value from the fortress, leaving only their food and weapons; they wanted the Romans to know they had not died of starvation or lack of weapons.

The men killed their wives and children and chose ten men to kill those who remained. One last man killed the nine others and then himself. Only two women and five children lived to tell the gruesome story.

The Zealots proved that their beliefs were not idle words. Wanting to be totally devoted to God, they put themselves to death rather than turn themselves over to the Romans.

## Points of Interest



### Roman Rampart

On the southern side of Masada is the rampart that the Romans built to capture the mountain from the Jewish revolutionaries who were holding out on the top. It is amazing to think of the labor and difficulty that would have been involved as they poured dirt bucket by bucket, yet it was all accomplished in less than a year.

Masada was a strategic location to build a fortress. Its slopes would have been very difficult to climb and anyone attempting to climb it, would be very vulnerable to attack. Rocks, arrows, hot oil, etc., could easily be hurled from above onto the attackers.

It is spectacular to see how large of an area the summit covers. Herod the Great prepared for everything on top--supply rooms, a synagogue, bathhouse, living quarters, and a water system.



## Points of Interest



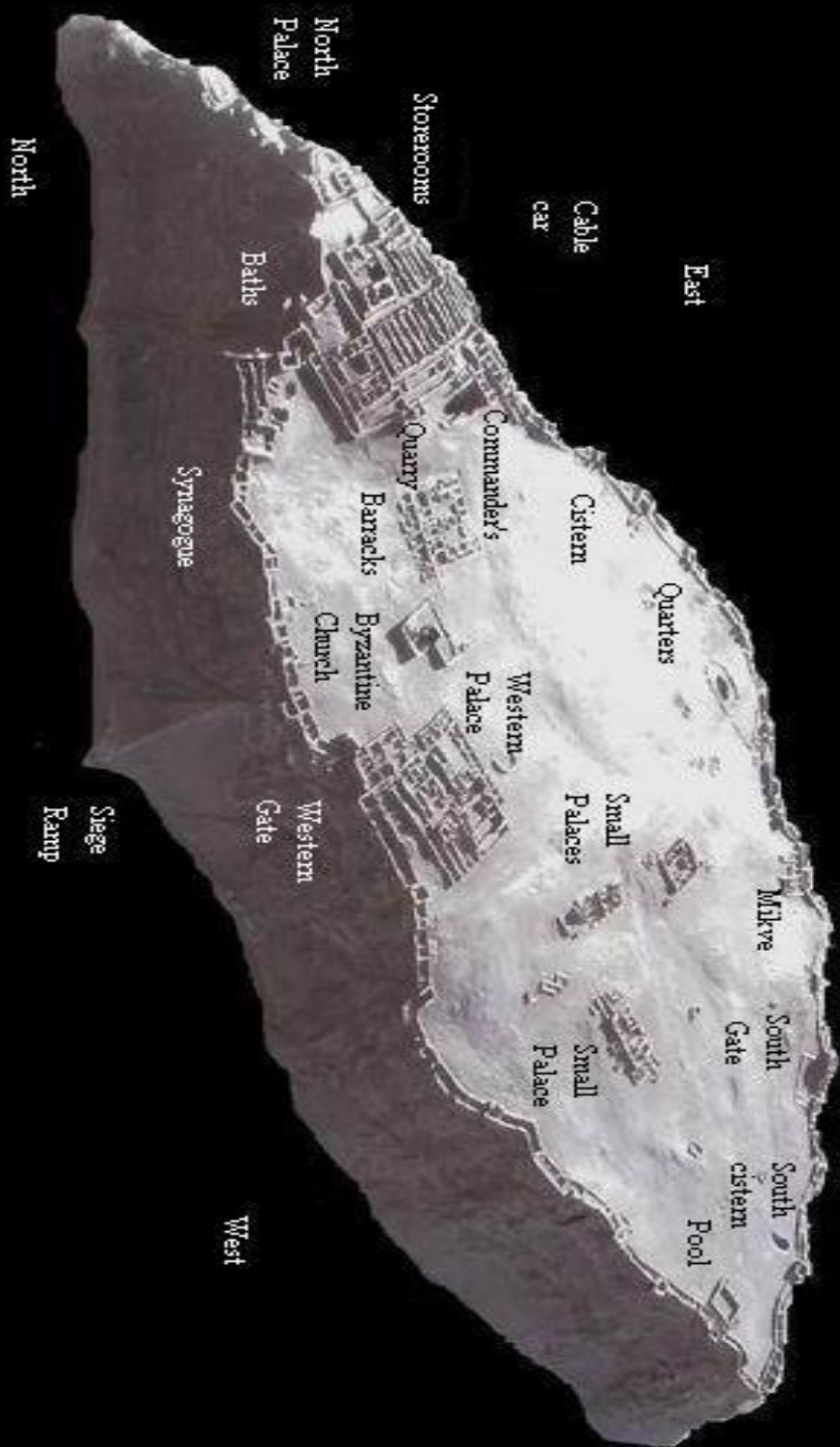
### Storerooms

Fifteen long storerooms kept provisions for time of siege. Herod filled with them with food and weapons. Each storeroom held a different commodity. This was attested by different storage jars and inscriptions on jars in rooms.



### Synagogue

This synagogue was found in the first season of Yadin's excavations. No Second Temple period synagogues were known at the time. Many coins from the Jewish Revolt were found here. Inside the synagogue, an ostrakon (a piece of pottery) bearing the inscription me'aser cohen (tithe for the priest) was found, as were fragments of two scrolls; parts of Deuteronomy 33-34 and parts of Ezekiel 35-38 (including the vision of the "dry bones"), found hidden in pits dug under the floor of a small room built inside the synagogue. Fragments were found of the books of Genesis, Leviticus, Psalms, and Sirach, as well as of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice.



## Points of Interest



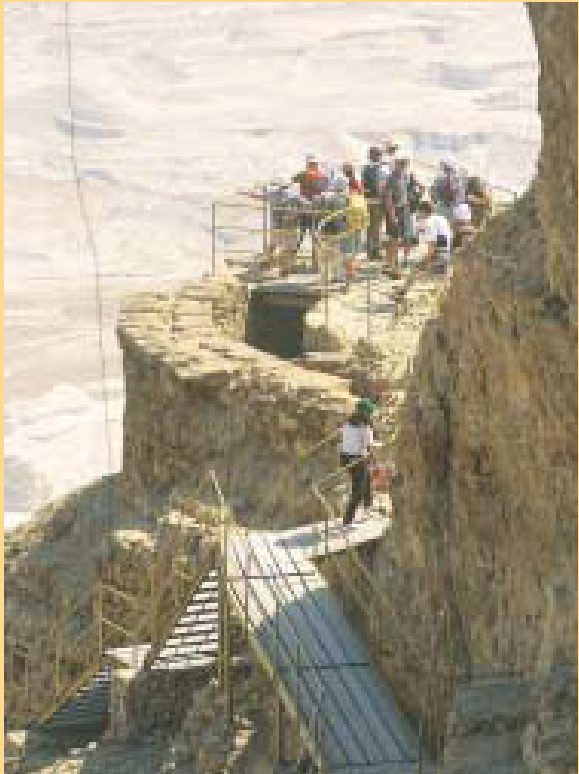
### The Water System

During the Parthian siege of Masada, Herod's family had been cut off from their water supply. Herod determined that this would not happen again. He cut two rows of cisterns in the rock face on the northwestern face of Masada. He then dammed the Ben Yair ravine and the Masada valley on the southwestern end of the fortress. He built simple aqueducts from them to the

cisterns. The cisterns could hold about 40,000 cubic meters of water. The water would have been carried up from the cisterns through the Water Gate and poured into cisterns located on the summit.

### The Hanging Palace

This is one of the most remarkable of the buildings on Masada. Herod built a palace on the northern side of the summit that reached down the cliffs. There were three levels. On the lowest level there is a colonnaded court and the art work on the plastered wall has been redone.





## Points of Interest



### Herod's Bathhouse

Herod had several private bathhouses built at Masada. The caldarium depicted here had a heavy floor suspended on 200 pillars. Outside the room a furnace would send hot air under the floor. When water was placed on the floor, steam was created. Pipes were built into the walls to help heat the room. Also included in the bathhouse were a gym, changing rooms, a cold room, warm room, and the hot room.

