

INTRODUCTION TO "967 - MASSADAH" .

by Israel Eliraz.

On the 15th day of the month of Nissan in the year 73 A.D., after a twelve-month siege, Massadah fell to the tenth Roman legion under the imperial legate Flavius Silva. Massadah was taken three years after the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, and after the storming of the last Judean fortresses, Herodion and Machaerus, by Bassus.

The story of the stand of the 967 Zealots of Massadah is told in Josephus' "War of the Jews", which also gives in high rhetorical style the last speeches of Eleazar Ben Yair. According to Josephus Flavius, there were only seven survivors, who hid in the water supply system - two women and five children.

Some Basic Assumptions.

It is impossible to approach the Massadah story today unless it has something to say to us, unless the spiritual implications go beyond the specific historical background of its age. Hence, this work, though making no claim to historicity, will nevertheless contain almost no details or facts running counter to what is known to us from the historical and archeological sources at our disposal. (see the bibliographical note at the end of this introduction). It was not the playwright's intention to write a drama reconstructing a heroic historical event with national-religious echoes, but rather to reveal within the events of the past their living significance for the present. At the same time, it must be stressed that the playwright has no wish to topicalize or to present anachronisms: while fully aware of the difficulties involved, it is his intention to transform the historical event into a feasible present experience.

It should therefore be clear that the purpose of this work is not to tell the story of Massadah's stand and fall. ~~Who-~~ ever wishes to acquaint himself with the tale of the Zealots' stand and their death will do well to refer to the historians. The playwright believed his task to lie in wrestling with the subject of the universally familiar historical event. Hence, it is not the plot that impelled the writer, since it is known to every member of the audience, but the feelings of admiration and exaltation it aroused in him.

WHAT IS MASSADAH?

First Aspect.

Massadah is a small people's defiant challenge to a vast empire. Massadah proved in its time and for ~~the~~ generations to come that a community of people, however small, if fanatically true to its ideals can *say* "No!" to a mighty empire such as Rome was in those days. We have before us a human community whose style of life and whose national-religious values are attacked by a great power. These Jews, alone in their age, are not prepared to admit that the Romans are the masters of their country. They refuse to accept the dominion of a flesh-and-blood king, and reject foreign rule. The death of these people is a terrible and tragic protest against the impossibility of living in a world that affords them no chance to exist according to their principles. It is an absolute refusal to accept a new life style they can not believe in.

Never did a community of people wish to live as much as the men of Massadah did. They fled Jerusalem at the time of its destruction, and continued to live for three years after their holiest of holies had been laid waste. They wished to live in freedom according to their beliefs. They hoped to hold out atop a precipitous mountain, while at the same time looking forward to that miraculous redemption

(the last judgement!) foretold in their Scrolls. It was only their absolute will to live that sustained them during the siege. Only those who cling so tightly to a full and real life, a life of national and religious freedom, know that life is devoid of meaning if it cannot be lived in this way - for then death is the only way. They choose to die and, fully aware of what they are doing, they decide to renounce this world - for otherwise they could have yielded to Flavius Silva and so saved their skins. But these people know that death is nothing but a new kind of life for them. What Massadah had to say in its time and to the generations to come is that life represents no value in itself; only a life worth living is desirable.

Hence, Massadah does not represent merely a mountain in Judea, but a supreme peak crowned with people - people anywhere and at any time - facing the terrible choice between a life devoid of any belief in values and the rejection of such a life, followed by the drawing of the inevitable conclusion. At the same time, Massadah casts its terrible bright light on some of the historical processes that have confronted the Jewish people ever since.

Second Aspect.

The suicide of 960 people - warriors, women and children - strikes the Romans mute. They cannot come to terms with the notion that anything can be of greater value than life. Death as such and under any circumstances is devoid of meaning. Death is the final end and not a setting out on a new road. This community gave them terrible proof that even a small people can refuse to accept the offer of such a life held out by a great power - since life at any price is of no value.

The physical victory of Rome is also, and at the same time, a great spiritual defeat. Rome proved incapable of overcoming Massadah the moment it could not persuade its defenders that it was worth their while to remain alive. Rome was defeated the moment it failed to enslave the people of Massadah. This great power was afraid that this small mountain might become a symbol to other rebels throughout its empire.

Otherwise, how else can one explain the trouble taken by the great empire to liquidate the solitary mountain? How else can one view the empire's taking such pains to polish off the last remnant of the Jewish Revolt? After all, the year is 73 A.D., three years after the fall of the Temple, after Titus erected his Arch of Triumph in Rome -- and suddenly there is this new thorn in the imperial flesh, in the East. It is then that Flavius Silva is sent, at the head of the Tenth Legion, 10,000 men in all, to lay siege to this mountain for 12 months under the most difficult of desert conditions, in order either to enslave or totally to destroy the Zealots of Massadah.

From her own standpoint, Rome is right: so long as Massadah still stands, be it as distant a mountain lost in the desert as it actually is, the victory of the empire is incomplete. Moreover, the very idea of the Roman conquest is placed in doubt. Is it not thus that one must view the Roman desire to efface the Massadah affair from history? For there is almost no Roman record of this event except in Josephus' book. The moment Massadah's stand and the suicide of its defenders are forgotten, Rome has won. Massadah then represents the hideous dilemma of an empire unable to accept the existence of small nations prepared to die rather than agree to live under its rule and according to its beliefs.

The mountain fastness falls to the Romans on the fifteenth day of Nissan -- the feast of Passover. Is there not an element of divine irony in this date? It would seem that the men of Massadah view themselves as Passover self-offerings. Another way of considering the event is that their suicide is an avatar of the sacrifice of Isaac, in which the fathers offer up their sons at the behest of their fath and then, unlike the patriarch Abraham, lay down their own lives upon that self-same altar. It is the most total, the most terrible, the most exalted sacrificial offering in the history of mankind. It is not only martyrdom in the exclusively religious sense of the word, but a testifying to the true worth of man created free in the image of God.

REMARKS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLOT-LINE.

There are three plot-lines in this work:

First Plot-line.

The Roman commander, imperial legate Flavius Silva, storming the flame-covered mountain with his troops, cannot understand what is happening in front of his very eyes. The sight of the slaughtered corpses shakes him profoundly. To his mind, it is inexplicable, inexcusable madness -- and the sight causes him to become increasingly hysterical, since the suicide of the Jews points to his own failure. Despite the tremendous military and logistical effort invested over the period of a whole year, he cannot claim to have defeated the handful of defenders. "Who has won?" - that is the question that will trouble his conscience throughout the play. He decides to wipe out the memory of the Zealot mountain-top by systematic destruction and the burning of all the bodies. He also issues an impracticable order to his historians and poets - that they refrain from even mentioning the existence of Massadah, since passing over it in silence might yet save his reputation and the honour of Rome.

In this state of irrational hysteria he has a nightmare vision in which he encounters the Jewish commander Eleazar Ben Yair. There follows a bitter and savage, yet frank and revealing dialogue between the living and the dead man. Silva is the loser in this contest, even though he has remained alive. As he leaves the site, the stink of burning flesh fills the air.

Second Plot-line.

Josephus Flavius relates that, of all the Zealots, only two women and five children remained alive, hidden in the water-supply system. After the Roman soldiers break through the defence walls, the survivors are discovered. In the course of this encounter, various events are made known through what the women and children tell the historian. The purpose of these tales stemming from the historical events is to cast a free and poetic light upon the unfolding of the siege before the fall of the stronghold. The rationalistic historian is in a quandary: how shall he record historical events which he finds contrary to reason? He is apprehensive lest his readers refuse to believe the tale of Massadah, since history must be reasonable in order to be acceptable.

Third Plot-line.

The complex relationship between the two women and the historian on the one hand, and the commander on the other expose the still more complex inter-connection between life and death. These women have to face not only the significant fact that all their loved ones have died by their own hands, but also the no less significant fact that, for a variety of reasons, they themselves have refused to share in this act. In this way, the complex of

human relationships within the Massadah community is brought to light -- for it is reasonable to assume that not all its members accepted the suicide proposal with stoic calm (and it should be remembered here that Eleazar was obliged to address his people twice in order to persuade them to die).

The three plot-lines are inter-woven into a single unit in which the military Roman world and the world of the Jewish dead confront each other, the latter in the shape of a chorus of death-masks. It is this polar ideological confrontation of two worlds, of two nations, of two sets of beliefs that must be given literal physical reality.

Theatrical Aspects.

This is both a musical and dramatic work. As such, considerable attention should be paid to theatrical aspects, in order to give visual and auditory dimensions to the philosophical ideas outlined above. The playwright was fully aware that this cannot be a work presenting merely ideological clashes, for these must be given suitable dramatic forms.

I see this play as a sort of gladiatorial contest between the Roman and the Jewish worlds. For this reason, I consider it most suitable that the theatrical setting should be arena-like, and should be as gladiatorial as possible. The stage is one half of a Roman amphitheatre, together with a proscenium -- the whole reminiscent of that playing-field of death, the Roman stadium. The various happenings unfold upon a series of stepped areas affording a sort of infinite multiplication of stage settings for the events. These steps, which also represent the conquered mountain-top and its various geographical areas, are to be utilized to the fullest possible extent.

This mountain encompasses the world of the dead, embodied by the dead Jews, the faces of whose naked corpses are covered with death-masks. At various stage in this play, these dead are in choreographic perpetual motion, thus giving the unfolding of events a macabre movement. At suitable moments, the dead come alive and re-experience various events in their encounter with the Roman world. The physical and metaphysical presence of these dead is vital to the play: the Roman soldiers and their officers and commanders move amongst them, without being aware of their existence at all times.

Two powerful theatrical presences co-exist on this mountain - the dead and the Roman soldiers among them. The polarity of their opposition must be stressed by differences in dress, movement, etc. Special attention should be paid to the interplay between the chamber scenes of which the play is built and their reconstruction within the framework of the perpetual mass presence of the choruses (the dead, the soldiers). The dramatic encounters are between the choruses on the one hand and the dramatis personae of the plot on the other.

Scenic and decorative elements are to be held down to as few as possible, with the exception of those marked in the notes as having symbolic significance - such as the sun, the eagle, the pots, etc.

The work should be staged as a whole, without any intermission.

How to define the dramatic and musical genre to which this work belongs? Who needs definitions? It partakes of the nature of a Mass for the Dead - or rather a dramatic Requiem blending together elements of prayer and religious song (~~Mass~~^{such as} cantor and choir) dramatic activity, violent events, etc. It is vital that these elements be balanced against one another.

The play is in metrically irregular blank verse - and the vitality of its poetry is, to my mind, the sine qua non for the delicate balance between the truly pathetic subject and its expression, which aims at avoiding the stressing of pathos and the piling of up symbols as far as possible.

Final Note.

It seems to me that what happened at Massadah partakes of the nature of Greek tragedy. Here, as in Greek tragedy, the heroes are faced with the inevitable and are aware of it. Over a period of twelve months, the besieged saw the ~~A~~^Aing of encirclement inexorably closing around them hour by hour, day by day. These 960 Jews, like any tragic hero, knew that their fate was sealed. Similarly, they, too, failed to understand the significance of their death, just as they failed to understand the rationale for the destruction of their country and their Temple - unless it be the outcome of a divine eschatological reckoning beyond ^{human} any comprehension.

However, as against the tragic hero who goes to his inevitable death without any alternative choice (life), these Jews have chosen death by renouncing the life offered to them. It is by this choice that they have become masters

of their fate rather than its slaves. It is this choosing of death, however problematic (and it is this particular aspect that is central to the work), that gives the historical event its terrible human significance - a significance worth coming to grips with in every generation, and, perhaps, especially in our generation.

Bibliographical Note.

I shall not enumerate and classify the bibliographical materials I studied before writing this work - materials connected with the events at Massadah, the age of the Second Temple, and the complex relationships among the various sects - Essenes, Sicarii, Saducees, etc. I could not ignore Josephus Flavius' "The Jewish War" or Yadin's books - "Massadah", "The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness", ~~the~~ "The Ben Sira Scroll" - on the findings of the Massadah digs. I also found ancillary materials in Joseph Klausner's books "When a Nation Fights for its Freedom" and "The Messianic Idea in Israel", as well as in the books of Yohanan Aharoni, Beno Rottenberg, Zvi Ayalon, Yhanan ^L Levi and others, and ⁱⁿ such ~~collec~~ collections of articles as the Sukenik Festschrift, and the researches into the history of Israel by Gedalyahu Alon and others.

Although the historical sources and the research works (as listed above, as well as others) served to guide me to no small extent in laying the plot foundations of the work, I have opted for freedom in building up the characters of its personages, its ideology and its theatrical aspects.