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Masada

Rock fortress on the western shore of the Dead Sea about 19 miles south of En-gedi and 10½ miles north of Sodom, where the Jewish Zealots made their last stand against the Romans in AD73. The rock rises some 1400 feet above the Dead Sea, about 2000 feet from north to south, and about 980 feet from east to west, with sheer cliffs on all sides. The top, which slopes gently toward the south and west, is almost flat, about 20 acres in area, or the equivalent of about 2 large city blocks. It is situated about two miles west of the shore of the Dead Sea.

According to Josephus this almost impregnable rock was first fortified by Jonathan the high priest, who gave it the name Masada (“mountain stronghold”). The “Jonathan” mentioned by Josephus, long the subject of scholarly debate, is probably to be identified as Alexander Janneus (103–40BC) on the basis of scores of coins found at Masada. It was Herod the Great who expended a great amount of effort to build and fortify the place, partly out of fear that the Jews might overthrow him and restore the former kings, and partly because he was afraid that Cleopatra would convince Antony to cut him off and give the kingdom of Judea to her.

Present knowledge of Herodian Masada comes not only from Josephus but also from the excavations of Yigael Yadin in 1963–65. The archaeological discoveries confirm many of the statements found in Josephus.

Herod built palaces, a Roman bath, storerooms, an elaborate water-supply system, and a wall. The wall entirely surrounded the top of the rock, a length of 4250 feet, with 30 towers and 8 gates. The water supply consisted of drains from the wadis in the west, designed to collect water in the rainy season, and 12 cisterns in 2 rows on the northwest side of the fortress, having a capacity of 10½ million gallons. A three-tiered palace villa was built in a spectacular

location on the northern end of the rock. Other palaces, administrative buildings, and storerooms were located on the top of the rock, at the northern end, at the western side, and in the central region toward the southern end. It is possible that Josephus is correct in reporting that crops were raised, since there is a layer of soil toward the southern end of the rock. The royal buildings contained fine mosaic floors and frescoed walls, and the bath was a typical Roman bath with a caldarium (hot- or steam-room), tepidarium (warm-room), and frigidarium (cold-room). The entire bath-complex was 33 feet by 36 feet with walls 6 feet thick.

When the first Jewish revolt began in AD66, a number of Zealots led by Menahem took over Masada, which had been occupied by a small Roman garrison. Coins struck in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th years of the Jewish revolt (i.e., AD66, 67, 68, 69, and 70) were found, putting the date of the discoveries beyond question. Included in the discoveries were fragments of scrolls, including portions of Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), the Book of Jubilees, and a portion containing the words “the song of the sixth sabbath sacrifice on the ninth of the second month.”

These words, and the calendar system used, connected the scroll with one found in Cave 4 at Qumran. This led Yadin to conclude that some of the Qumran Essenes joined the Zealots in the revolt against Rome, bringing scrolls from Qumran with them to Masada.

After the destruction of Jerusalem (AD70), the Romans removed all pockets of Jewish resistance until only the fortress of Masada remained. When Flavius Silva became the Roman procurator, he determined to bring to an end the last of the revolt. The Zealots at Masada, 960 in number according to Josephus, were led by Eleazar. Silva surrounded the stronghold with 8 camps and a wall 6 feet thick and 11,400 feet long, with 12 towers at intervals of 240 to 300 feet. It seems obvious that his intent was to prevent a single Zealot from escaping to stir up a new revolt.

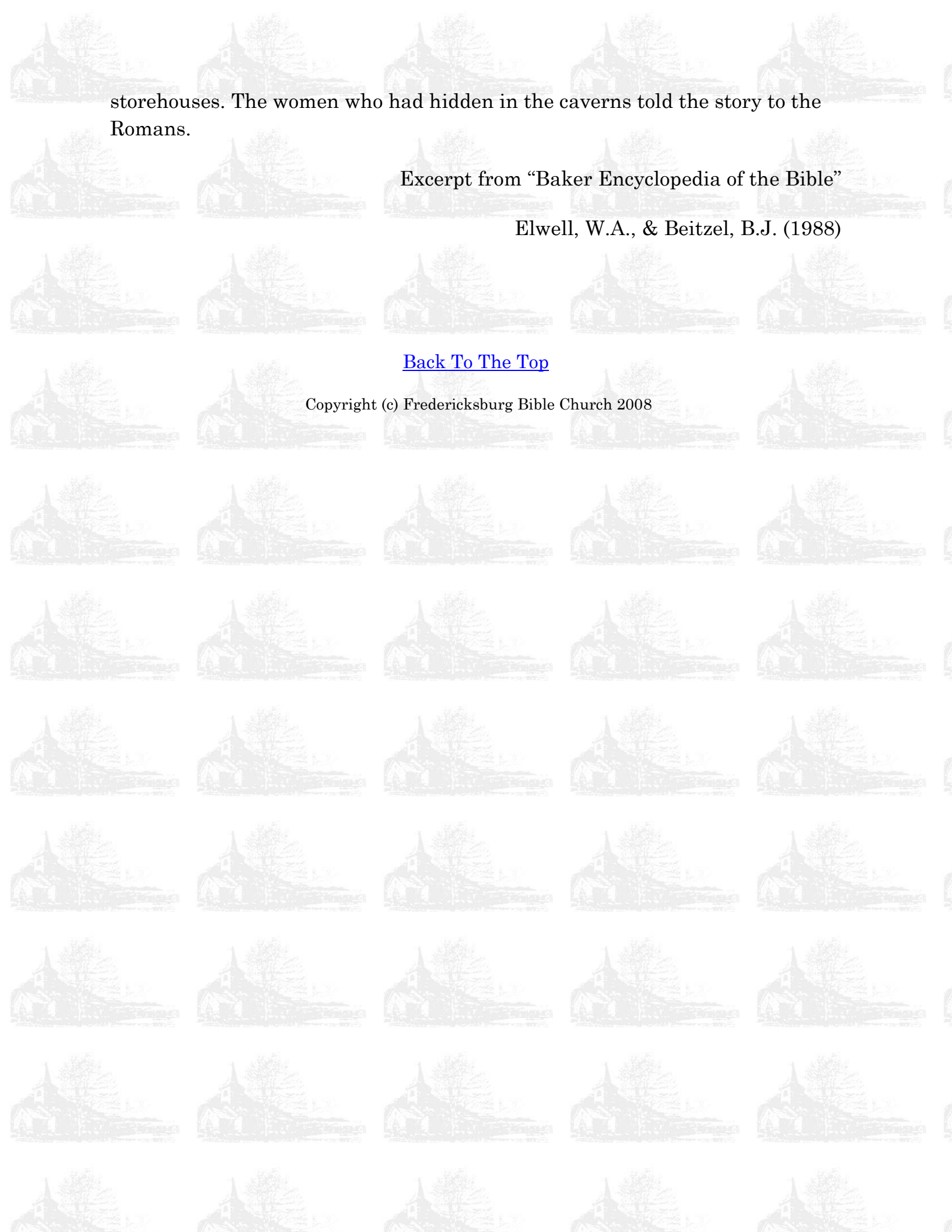
There were two routes to Masada, the “snake path” up the eastern side and a path on the western side. The snake path is tortuous and narrow, requiring about 50 minutes of dangerous climbing. The Zealots had amassed a supply of large boulders near the top, apparently expecting an attack at this point. Silva selected the western approach, ordering his soldiers to build an earthen

ramp, about 180 feet in height, about 645 feet in length, and about the same width at the base as the length. It did not quite reach to the top of the fortress, ending about 60 feet below the casemate wall.

By means of a battering ram and missile-catapult, Silva breached the wall, but the Zealots repaired it overnight with timbers and earth. Silva then burned the timbered repair. When *Eleazar Ben-Ya'ir* saw that the Romans were about to capture Masada, he delivered a stirring speech, given at length in Josephus. Some excerpts may be quoted: "It is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom.... Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery; and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually, and preserve ourselves in freedom, as an excellent funeral monument for us. But first let us destroy our money and the fortress by fire ... and let us spare nothing but our provisions, for they will be a testimonial when we are dead that we were not subdued for want of necessities; but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery."

There was reluctance to perform this mass suicide, and Eleazar had to follow the speech with a second, both shaming them and encouraging them. While he was still speaking, they cut him off and began the bloody work: "The husbands tenderly embraced their wives and took their children into their arms, and gave the longest parting kisses to them, with tears in their eyes." Then the men killed their wives and children, and laid all their possessions in a heap and set fire to them. After that, they chose 10 men by lot to slay the rest, "every one of whom laid himself down by, his wife and children on the ground, and threw his arms about them, and they offered their necks" to those chosen to slay them. Finally, the 10 remaining cast lots "that he whose lot it was should first kill the other nine, and after all, should kill himself." Yadin tells of finding 11 ostraca (pottery sherds) each with a single name inscribed on it, which he suggests may have been the means used to select the one to put the others to death. One of the sherds bore the name "*ben-Ya'ir*," quite likely that of Eleazar *ben-Ya'ir*.

The plan was carried out almost to the last detail. Two women, however, hid themselves and five children in one of the caverns. The Romans entered the fortress the next day, expecting to meet some kind of resistance, but all they found was silence and the ashes of a great fire—plus vast stores of food in the



storehouses. The women who had hidden in the caverns told the story to the Romans.

Excerpt from “Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible”

Elwell, W.A., & Beitzel, B.J. (1988)

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