

A WEEK IN THE FALL OF JERUSALEM



BEN WITHERINGTON III

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WHERE THERE'S SMOKE



JOANNA AWOKE SUDDENLY to the sound of a *shofar* blowing, its long, piercing call cleaving the cool morning air. It was barely cockcrow. The sun had not yet penetrated the cracks of the windowless house. Rousing herself, she sat up on her improvised couch. The acrid smell of smoke snapped her out of drowsiness. It was not the smell of wood or sacrifice—perhaps tar or pitch?

SHOFAR

A shofar is a trumpet-like instrument made by hollowing out a horn, usually a ram's horn. The horns vary in shape and size depending on the age and size of the animal from which they were taken. Typically used at Jewish festivals such as Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) or Passover, it can also be used in synagogue services. This horn is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with God's appearance at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16). A shofar could also be used to signal the beginning of a battle (Josh 6:4; Judg 3:27; 7:16; 1 Sam 8:3). The sound of the shofar was distinguishable from the trumpet, and this is significant in our story, as the Romans used trumpets, not shofars, to give military signals.

Fear rose in her chest in a familiar way, and brought back a time in her life when it had been her constant companion. Joanna had returned to Jerusalem from Roma after her husband, Andronicus, had been martyred during Nero's crackdown four years earlier. Andronicus had been swept up by the same Roman net that had caught the Jesus followers Peter and then Paul. None of them emerged alive from their time in the wretched prison called *Tullianum*. Andronicus had been crucified near the Appian Way. Joanna still shuddered whenever that memory came to mind. So the recent crisis in Jerusalem triggered memories of past traumas, mingled with tears.

Joanna had come to Jerusalem a couple of months ago to care for her ailing sister, Sarah. It had been a bold venture on her part, since the city was surrounded by Titus's army. But her plan of circling around the city and entering from the southwest, near the city of David, had succeeded. Under the cover of darkness, Joanna had managed to sneak into the city at a point where the Roman troops were less concentrated.

TULLIANUM

The Tullianum, known in the Middle Ages as the Mamertine Prison, was a cave carved out of solid rock on the northeast slope of the Capitoline Hill in Rome. It was reserved for criminals accused of heinous crimes before their trial or execution. While prisoners were traditionally held at the Campus Martius, the military headquarters on the edge of Rome, it seems that if a special prisoner was going to be publicly executed after a trial before the emperor, they might be held in a special holding cell like the Tullianum. For the Romans, imprisonment was not a punishment. It was a holding pattern until the prisoner was exonerated, penalized, or executed.

Her sister, who suffered in her breathing, had eventually been confined to her bed despite weeks of Joanna's best efforts. Only three days ago, on the day before the Sabbath, she had been gathered to her ancestors and interred in a makeshift grave in the southern part of the city, in the Hinnom Valley. In the midst of her grief, Joanna had wrestled with what she should do next. Now, awakened by the shofar, a new urgency possessed her.

Panic gripped her throat, but she mastered it and began to take mental stock. There had been a short-lived hope when Vespasian had withdrawn from Jerusalem and returned to Rome that the Romans might just leave. But recently Titus, Vespasian's son, had brought more troops, and now the siege of the city was well and truly under way. Food was scarce, and many had been feeling desperate, trapped within the holy city. The Zealots and their henchmen had taken control of most everything going on within, except for a few of the temple functions.

But why was the shofar blowing at this hour, and so insistently? Surely it was some kind of warning. Dread filled Joanna's mind. It was all of a piece with the dread she had experienced almost a generation ago, when her Master had been executed by Roman crucifixion outside this very city.

Suddenly there were cries in the street, a scrambling of sandaled feet, the grinding roll of cart wheels on cobbled pavement along with shouts of "Fire! Fire!" Joanna instinctively grabbed some essentials—unleavened bread, dates, figs, olives, a small flask of wine—and thrust them in her traveling satchel. Slipping on her best cloak, she stepped out into the darkness and was nearly overrun by a little ox cart rumbling toward the Sheep Gate.

"What's happening?" she shouted to a young man running alongside the cart.

“The Romans have breached the wall on the far side of the temple! They’ve set fires and poured pitch over the wall from their siege tower—right on the Zealots. You must flee!”

But where could she run? As she drew near the Sheep Gate, she could see the flickering lantern lights of Roman soldiers coming up the hill to the gate itself. Quickly she doubled back. Now she could see flames illuminating the far side of the city. She tightened in fear, breath shortened, hands clenched, flushed with perspiration. The shofar continued its piercing wail. She could hear the sounds of fighting, the screams of wounded men. This was no place for an old woman like herself. For a moment she thought of going to the house of John Mark’s mother. But no, they had packed up and left the city days ago. Her mouth was dry and she wished for a drink as she stumbled on.

THE JEWISH REVOLT

The Jewish Wars, as they were called by the Jewish historian Josephus, began long before the temple fell in AD 70. The wars involved a general revolt in Judea and Galilee, led by Zealots, a Jewish sect, and their henchmen (called *sicarii*, or “dagger men”). Emperor Vespasian had no idea at the outset that it would take his army years to put down the revolt in this tiny corner of his empire—Judea, Galilee, and Samaria and their environs were no more than about 120 miles north to south, and sixty miles at the widest point east to west.

Some major Zealot leaders, such as John of Gischala, were from the north. The revolt was not solely about the concentration of power in the temple system in Jerusalem. Jews were as angry with the client king Herod Antipas in the north as they were about Roman procurators in

Suddenly an idea came to her. She could use water—for a drink and an escape! She would go to the old water channel.

Hollowed out in the days of King Hezekiah, the channel led from the Gihon Spring toward the city wall. There, if anywhere, she might be able to escape.

It seemed Joanna was not the only one with this idea. As she approached the entranceway to the water channel, in the lower part of the city of David, she could make out shadowy figures entering the tunnel. Some were crying children being hurried into the tunnel by their parents. As she got to the entranceway she remembered—there was little water left in the tunnel or the Pool of Siloam. It had dried up during the siege. So the passage through the tunnel would be easier—but Joanna's thirst would not be slaked just yet.

Judea to the south. And despite Josephus's obvious sympathy toward the Jews, it is hard to believe him when he reports that the majority of the citizens of Jerusalem rejected John and the Zealots when they came to Jerusalem sometime in AD 67–68. The Zealots could hardly have taken over the whole city and the temple hierarchy if they had not had cooperation from many Jews in Jerusalem, including perhaps some Idumeans (Herod's family was largely Idumean). Josephus wrote for the benefit of his benefactors (the Roman emperor and his entourage) as well as for his own Jewish people, and he presents a view from above, that is, the view of the elite, including the landed elite, and not of the ordinary people. For Josephus, John of Gischala and his Zealots were simply brigands or thugs, and he does not really allow that they had any theological or religious motives for their actions, nor even that they were freedom fighters.

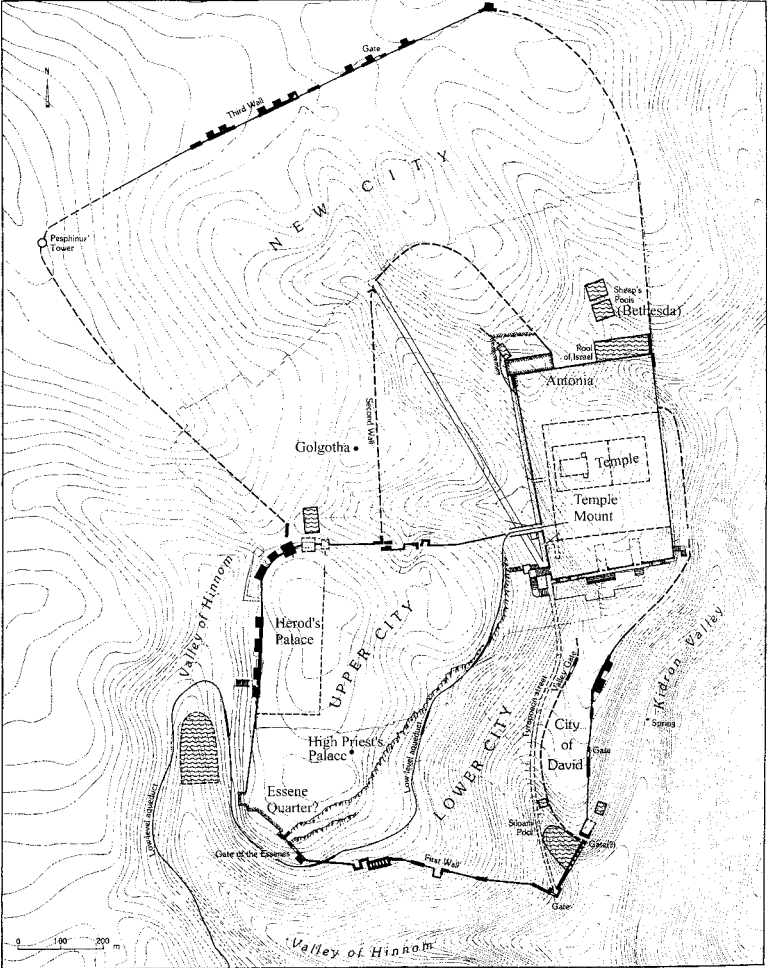


Figure 1.1. Map of Jerusalem in the early first century

Saying a prayer to the Lord for safety, she came to the dark tunnel entrance. There were eerie reflections cast on the ceiling of the narrow tunnel by those up ahead. The sound of damp feet echoed up as people walked carefully down, down, down to the Pool of Siloam. Someone was singing a psalm of ascent.

Joanna thought back to the day at Megiddo when she had gone down to the spring to get water for her Master and the other disciples. The spring was so far underground that it took over an hour to get down and back again to their camp on the edge of the city. But from Gihon to Siloam, even at a snail's pace, she would reach the pool before long.

Dawn was just lighting the eastern hilltops when she reached the pool. Looking up, she could see soldiers, some on horses, silhouetted on the rim of the Mount of Olives and above the Hinnom Valley. Shaking the water from her sandals, then sitting down briefly to wring out the bottom of her cloak, she concluded that the only way of escape was down the valley to Bethany and Bethpage. This was the path of least resistance, and she must hope that the Romans were too busy attacking the city to bother guarding every byway.

As she reached the far southern end of the Mount of Olives, she cast a brief look back. Flames were licking the temple precincts. Roman ladders leaned against the city walls. There was a breach in the great wall near Mount Zion, with Roman soldiers pouring into the city's wealthiest precinct and soon, it would seem, into the temple itself. Joanna's heart leapt into her throat as she glimpsed white-robed figures—Levites, no doubt—falling from the pinnacle of the temple. She could not bear to watch. She forged ahead.

Joanna's mind flashed back to when she had heard the prophecies of Jesus that within a generation not one stone would be left on another of Herod's temple. It seemed to be all coming true, and right when Jesus had suggested it would. But she could

not linger to see more. While she was living in Roma she had heard too many tales about how Romans sacked cities, raped women, and took all they wanted. Could this be God's judgment on his people for so much unfaithfulness over so many years?

Joanna had hardly walked a half mile from the Pool of Siloam when she arrived at Bethany. She was headed to Mary and Martha's house. Had they left yet? If not, she would urge them to come with her. But just before the final turn to their house, she was stopped by a lone Roman soldier.

"Where are you going, old woman?" he demanded in Greek.

Taking a chance, she replied in Latin, "I am leaving the city and heading to a place of refuge. Please, let me pass."

The soldier was clearly surprised that she could speak Latin. "So you know the *lingua Latina*. Are you from Roma like me?"

"I used to live in Roma," said Joanna, chafing at the man's harsh grip on her right arm. "You are hurting me! Surely you can see I am an old woman and no trouble for you. Please let a fellow resident of Roma pass."

The man smiled for a moment, seemingly amused to hear his native tongue from this unlikely source in this remote province of Judea. Then, with a shrug, he let loose her arm and warned, "Very well, but my legion will place a curfew on the region as soon as the city is taken. I suggest you get off the road as quickly as possible."

"I will!" she said with relief, and hurried away. Arriving moments later at the door of Mary and Martha's house, she knocked three times. It was the signal the disciples used. Nothing happened at first. She waited one minute, two minutes, three minutes . . . and then the door opened just a crack.

"Who is there?" whispered a tired old voice.

"It's me, Joanna."

Swinging the door wide open, Martha grabbed Joanna's wrist and pulled her into the darkness of the house.

HEZEKIAH'S TUNNEL

Hezekiah's Tunnel, a water channel carved out of solid limestone, was a remarkable feat of excavation. Some scholars have recently disputed whether this tunnel should be attributed to the reign and activity of Hezekiah, though it is still a reasonable hypothesis and is supported by 2 Kings 20:20. The famous Siloam inscription, discovered near the tunnel and now in the Istanbul Museum, tells of two teams working at opposite ends of the tunnel (the Gihon Spring on one end and the Pool of Siloam at the other) and meeting in the middle (see figure 1.2).

Whether or not the tunnel was originally carved in the eighth century BC at the instigation of Hezekiah, it certainly existed well before the first century AD and was a strategic feature of the city. The problem for Jerusalem was that its main source of water was outside the city walls; the tunnel gave protected access to the water in case of siege (for Hezekiah, Sennacherib's siege in the eighth century).



Figure 1.2. Hezekiah's tunnel

THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM BY TITUS: PART TWO

By the spring of AD 68, Vespasian had managed to subdue Galilee and move through Judea with a goal of besieging Jerusalem, where the Zealots were now safely ensconced. The Zealots were not a united group: besides John's faction, there was also Simon of Gerasa's faction, and a good deal of infighting.

By AD 69 Vespasian, who had been acclaimed emperor and was returned to Rome, had left his son Titus with the job of subduing Jerusalem. Titus marched with a significant force from Alexandria to Caesarea Maritima, the provincial headquarters. From there he marched with four legions on Jerusalem.

Three legions camped on Mount Scopus, and the fourth legion camped on the Mount of Olives. Thus they came at the city from the northeast and the east, assuming the best high ground overlooking the city. The Zealot factions had by then united—in fact, they sallied forth from the city and repelled the tenth legion, situated on the Mount of Olives, only to be beaten back by Titus's own troops. By Passover of AD 70, the city had not yet been taken, and Titus built a siege ramp, leveling the ground between Mount Scopus and the city proper.

How might someone like Joanna and many others escape from Jerusalem under siege? Josephus, who was in Titus's entourage and a useful tool in negotiating the surrender of the city, offers a topographical description of the situation:

The city was fortified by three walls, except where it was enclosed by impassable ravines, a single rampart there sufficing. It was built, in portions facing each other, on two hills separated

by a central valley in which the tiers of houses ended. . . . The valley of the Cheesemakers [i.e., the Tyropoeon Valley] as the ravine was called . . . divides the hill of the upper city from that of the lower, [and] extends down to Siloam; for so we called that fountain of sweet and abundant water. On the exterior of the two hills on which the city stood were encompassed by deep ravines, and the precipitous cliffs on either side of it rendered the town nowhere accessible.^a (*Jewish Wars* 5.136-139)

It was impossible to plug every exit hole from the city, especially on its south side. And there lay the road to Bethany and beyond, which was Joanna's escape route.^b

^aFlavius Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.136-39, in *Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (New York: Robinson, Pratt & Company, 1841).

^bFor much more on all this see Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

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