

Masada: Ancient Fortress of Defiance — Herod’s Engineering, Rome’s Siege, and Israel’s National Identity

Lecture: 03-01 Masada: Ancient Fortress of Defiance — Herod’s Engineering, Rome’s Siege, and Israel’s National Identity | Israel 2026

SITE OVERVIEW

Location: Masada (Hebrew: Matsada) — meaning “desert stronghold”; located approximately 20 miles southeast of Jerusalem in the Judean Desert, near the Dead Sea Rift Valley

Date of Visit: Not explicitly stated

Biblical References:

- 1 Samuel 23:14 — “David stayed in Masada and in the hills of the desert of Ziph” (noted as potentially referencing this site if “Masada” is a proper noun rather than a generic term)
- Psalm 18:2 — “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer” (cited thematically, not as a direct Masada reference)

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Key Events:

- Planned as a fortress during the Hasmonean period
- Fortified and extensively developed by Herod the Great as part of his large-scale building program; included storehouses, cisterns, a swimming pool, an aqueduct system, and two palaces
- Herod built Masada as a refuge in case of popular uprising, intending a route from Jerusalem → Herodium (Bethlehem, ~6 miles) → Masada for his entourage; he never actually used it
- 70 CE: Roman forces attacked and destroyed Jerusalem; approximately 960 Zealots escaped through the city’s rain gutter and made their way to Masada, ascending via the snake/goat path
- 70–73 CE: Romans besieged Masada for approximately three years in extreme desert heat (~124°F in summer), constructing a circumvallation siege wall around the entire mountain and building a ramp on the western side

- 73 CE: Roman forces breached the wall using a battering ram and set fire to the wooden sections; facing imminent defeat, the Zealots chose mass suicide over surrender or enslavement

The Lot (Masada Lot): Ten men were selected by lot (ten pottery shards with names inscribed); each man killed his own family; the ten then reduced to one by lot; the final man fell on his sword; when Romans entered the next morning, there was no one to claim victory

Time Periods Covered:

- Hasmonean period (pre-63 BCE)
- Herodian period (post-63 BCE through late 1st century BCE/early 1st century CE)
- Roman-Jewish War period (66–73 CE)
- Possible earlier reference: Davidic period (~1000 BCE), contingent on interpretation of 1 Samuel 23:14

Historical Figures Associated:

- David (possible, per 1 Samuel 23:14 — speculative)
- Josephus (Jewish historian; quoted: “fortified by heaven and man alike against any enemy who might wage war against it”)
- The Hasmoneans — Jewish rulers who expelled the Seleucids
- Herod the Great — Idumean-born king; family converted to Judaism under coercion; widely disliked by Jewish population; commissioned Masada’s fortification
- The Zealots — approximately 960 Jewish fighters who held Masada from 70–73 CE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Physical Features & Excavations:

Goat/Snake Path: The sole natural access route up the mountain; visible from below, running beneath the cable car

Rain gutters: Herod engineered a channel cut entirely around the mountain perimeter to capture all rainfall and direct it into cisterns

Cisterns: Multiple cisterns located across the site; Herod also diverted water via aqueduct from surrounding hillsides into these cisterns — critical given the region’s approximately two inches of annual rainfall

Swimming pool / Mikvahs

Storehouses: Multiple food and wine storage facilities, sufficient to sustain nearly 1,000 people for approximately three years

Two Palaces:

- The Middle (Central) Palace: Features beautiful mosaic floors; accessible to visitors

- The Hanging (Northern) Palace: Three-tiered structure on the north face; top and bottom levels accessible; middle level not yet excavated sufficiently for group access; descent between levels requires traversing an exterior staircase on the mountainside

Synagogue: The Zealots converted one existing building into a synagogue during the siege period

Siege Wall: Remains of the Roman circumvallation wall are visible from the summit

Roman Garrison Posts: Positioned at intervals along the siege wall

Ten Pottery Shards (Ostraca): Inscribed with names; interpreted as the lots drawn to select the ten men responsible for carrying out the mass suicide; considered one of the most significant finds at the site

Herod's Tomb: Discovered at the Herodium (near Bethlehem) "a few years ago" (relative to recording date); currently on display in a museum (not visited on this trip)

How Archaeology Illuminates the Historical Account:

- The cistern system, storehouses, and aqueduct infrastructure corroborate Josephus's account of Masada's near-impregnable self-sufficiency
- The ten inscribed ostraca provide direct physical evidence for the lot-casting episode recorded by Josephus
- Survivor testimony (a woman and children who hid in a cistern) is the ancient textual source for knowledge of the Zealots' final act

DR. SCHILLING'S KEY POINTS

On Herod's Identity and Jewish Hostility: Herod was Idumean, not Jewish by birth. His family converted to Judaism under coercion (convert, leave, or die) after the Jewish conquest of Idumea. Dr. Schilling argues this conversion was not genuine, and the Jewish population recognized and resented it — making Herod's reign politically and socially fraught.

On the Siege Mentality of the Zealots: Dr. Schilling emphasizes the psychological warfare conducted by the Zealots — splashing in the swimming pool, audibly wasting water in front of a parched Roman army — as a deliberate morale tactic.

On Masada's National Symbolism: The phrase "Masada will never fall again" functions as an Israeli national motto, particularly invoked in the context of modern security threats (Dr. Schilling cites Iran). Historically, Israeli military recruits conducted graduation ceremonies atop Masada after ascending the goat path.

On Herod's Building Program: Masada is placed within Herod's broader construction legacy: the Temple in Jerusalem, Caesarea Maritima, the Herodium (burial site near Bethlehem), the Winter Palace at Jericho, and the aqueduct through Wadi Kelt.

On the Two Jerichos: Dr. Schilling distinguishes between:

- Old Testament Jericho: The original tell; God declared it would never be rebuilt; mud-brick remains visible
- New Testament Jericho: Located west of the tell at the base of the wadi; site of Herod's Winter Palace; currently in poor condition due to neglect and Bedouin use

On the Five Empires: Dr. Schilling provides a sequence for contextualizing the periods: Babylonian → Persian → Greek → Hasmonean → Roman, all preceding the ministry of Jesus.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Relationship to Other Biblical Sites:

- ~20 miles southeast of Jerusalem (direct/hypotenuse distance across desert)
- ~6 miles from Bethlehem/Herodium (Herod's planned escape corridor)
- Adjacent to the Dead Sea Rift Valley
- Qumran is the group's next destination (~30–40 minutes by bus from Masada); described as the Essene village where the Dead Sea Scrolls were copied; Romans destroyed it after the fall of Jerusalem, en route to Masada

Strategic Significance:

- Near-impregnable natural fortification: single-access mountain in open desert
- Romans required three years and massive engineering effort (siege ramp, siege wall) to breach

Terrain and Natural Features:

- Desert plateau/mesa rising from the Judean Desert floor
- Approximately 2 inches of annual rainfall — extreme water scarcity necessitated the elaborate cistern and gutter engineering
- Summer temperatures approximately 124°F (Fahrenheit)
- The snake path / goat path is the only natural ascent; the Roman siege ramp on the western face was an artificial engineering solution

QUOTABLE MOMENTS

Josephus on Masada: "Fortified by heaven and man alike against any enemy who might wage war against it."

Psalm 18:2 (cited by Dr. Schilling): "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer."

On Herod's conversion: "They became Jews out of fear; it's not really by choice. So Herod was never a Jew, and the Jews hated him because he was acting like one, and they knew he wasn't."

On Israeli national identity: “Remember the Alamo. Well, they say Masada will never fall again. That’s their national statement.”

On the Jericho Palace today: “I don’t need to see a mess. I’ve already seen a mess.”

On the Roman siege: “For two, almost three years the Roman army is here, in the desert. It’s about a hundred and twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. Full uniform, building a ramp.”

PERSONAL NOTES

Follow-up questions to consider:

- Source Josephus’s full account of Masada (The Jewish War, Book VII) for comparison with Dr. Schilling’s summary
- Clarify which museum currently displays Herod’s tomb artifacts from the Herodium
- The “Assyrians” reference in context of Hasmonean revolt likely refers to the Seleucids — worth noting as a possible slip or pedagogical simplification
- Verify Herod’s early fortification date; standard scholarship typically places Hasmonean fortification in the 2nd–1st century BCE and Herod’s major construction ~37–31 BCE
- Whether 1 Samuel 23:14 refers specifically to this site or uses “masada” as a common noun for “desert stronghold” remains an open interpretive question