

The Doctrine of Masada

Topics		
Hebrew	Masada	Why mention the fortress Masada?
Biblical references to Metsûwdâh	Summary	Addendum: Archaeology in Israel: Masada by Jacqueline Schaalje
Charts, Maps and Doctrines		
King Herod's Residential Palace		Masada Photographs

Preface: In the Old Testament, there are many references to *Masada* or the *stronghold*. We do have the word used generally and we have places where it is probably a reference to a very specific stronghold. However, we also have a very famous Masada from Jewish history; therefore, we need to pursue all of these understandings.

1. Hebrew:
 - a. M^etsûwdâh (מְצוּדָה) [pronounced *m^etzoo-DAW*], which means *fortress, stronghold, top of a mountain; capture, prey, hunted; snare, net*. This word may be transliterated *Masada*. Strong's #4686
 - b. Related words: m^etsôwdâh (מְשׁוּדָה) [pronounced *m^etzoh-DAW*], which means *net, capture; fastness; castle, defense, stronghold*. We find this spelling only in Eccles. 9:12 Isa. 29:7 Ezek. 19:9. It differs from the spelling above by the placement of one dot. Strong's #4685 BDB #845.
 - c. There are also the masculine counterparts to these words: mâtsôwd (מְצוּד) [pronounced *maw-TZOHD*], means *siege works, hunting implement, net*. It is found in Prov. 12:12 Eccles. 7:26 9:14. In Job 19:6, it is mâtsûwd (מְצוּד) [pronounced *maw-TZOOD*]. It appears that the meaning as *stronghold* or *siege works* is dubious, due to the problems of the text in Eccles. 9:14. Therefore, we can probably go with *net* and feel comfortable. I have actually oversimplified the problem with this word. Strong's #4685 BDB #844.
 - d. The mention of these other forms lends credence to the other usages. The masculine and feminine forms of these nouns do not have to mean the same things.
2. Masada:¹
 - a. Before we explore Scripture, let us take a look at the famous stronghold, Masada.
 - b. First of all, Masada is located near the Dead Sea, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) southeast of Hebron. Its cliffs rise 1400 feet (427 meters) and the top of this rock is flat, measuring about 1900' X 650' (579X198 meters).
 - c. *On the east the rock falls in a sheer drop of about 450 meters to the Dead Sea (the lowest point on earth, some 400 m. below sea level) and in the west it stands about 100 meters above the surrounding terrain. The natural approaches to the cliff top are very difficult.*²
 - d. During the Hasmonean Revolt (167–142 B.C.), when the Jews sought independence from the Syrians, a famous Jewish leader, Jonathan, established a fortress there.
 - e. The Romans gained control of Judæa in 63 B.C., and Herod the Great became king of Judæa by Roman appointment in 40 B.C. He reenforced this existing fortress and built two more palaces on this rock. *According to Josephus Flavius, Herod the Great built the fortress of Masada between 37 and 31 BCE.*

¹ Many of these points are paraphrased from *The World Book Encyclopedia*; ©1983 by World Book, Inc.; Vol. M, p. 203.

² From <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Archaeology/Masada1.html>

Herod, an Idumean, had been made King of Judea by his Roman overlords and was hated by his Jewish subjects. Herod, the master builder, "furnished this fortress as a refuge for himself." It included a casemate wall around the plateau, storehouses, large cisterns ingeniously filled with rainwater, barracks, palaces and an armory.³

f. For those who are interested, the next few subpoints describe this fortress in detail:⁴

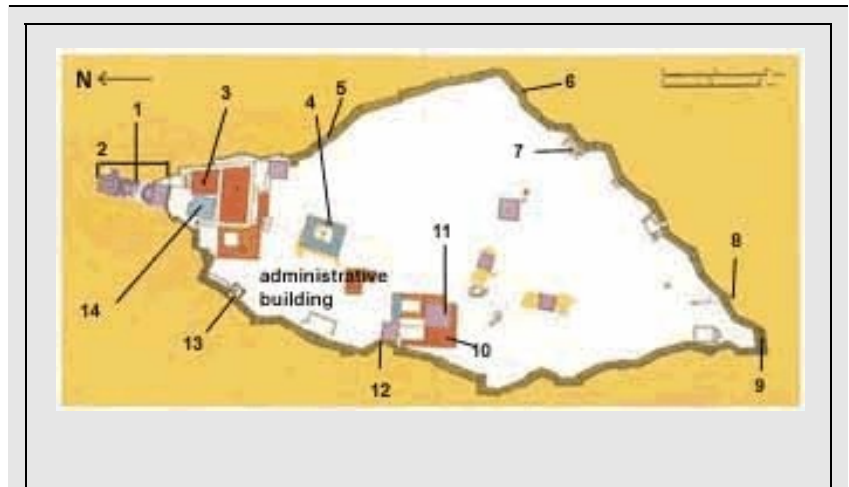
i. King Herod's residential palace. On the northern edge of the steep cliff, with a splendid view, stood the elegant, intimate, private palace-villa of the king. It was separated from the fortress by a wall, affording total privacy and security. This northern palace consists of three terraces, luxuriously built, with a narrow, rock-cut staircase connecting them. On the upper terrace, several rooms served as living quarters; in front of them is a semi-circular balcony with two concentric rows of columns. The rooms were paved with black and white mosaics in geometric patterns.

ii. The two lower terraces were intended for entertainment and relaxation. The middle terrace had two concentric walls with columns, covered by a roof; this created a portico around a central courtyard. The lowest, square terrace has an open central courtyard, surrounded by porticos. Its columns were covered with fluted plaster and supported Corinthian capitals. The lower parts of the walls were covered in frescos of multicolored geometrical patterns or painted in imitation of cut marble. On this terrace was also a small private bathhouse. Here, under a thick layer of debris, were found the remains of three skeletons, of a man, a woman and a child. The beautifully braided hair of the woman was preserved, and her sandals were found intact next to her; also hundreds of small, bronze scales of the man's armor, probably booty taken from the Romans.

iii. The storehouse complex. This consisted of two rows of long halls opening onto a central corridor. The floor of the storerooms was covered with thick plaster and the roofing consisted of wooden beams covered with hard plaster. Here, large numbers of broken storage jars which once contained large quantities of oil, wine, grains and other foodstuffs were found.

iv. The large bathhouse. Elaborately built, it probably served the guests and senior officials of Masada. It consisted of a large courtyard surrounded by porticos and several rooms, all with mosaic or tiled floors and some with frescoed walls. The largest of the rooms was the hot room (caldarium). Its suspended floor was supported by rows of low pillars, making it possible to blow hot air from the furnace outside, under the floor and through clay pipes along the walls, to heat the room to the desired temperature.

v. The western palace. This is the largest building on Masada, covering over 4,000 square meters (one acre). Located along the center of the western casemate wall, near the main gate towards Judea

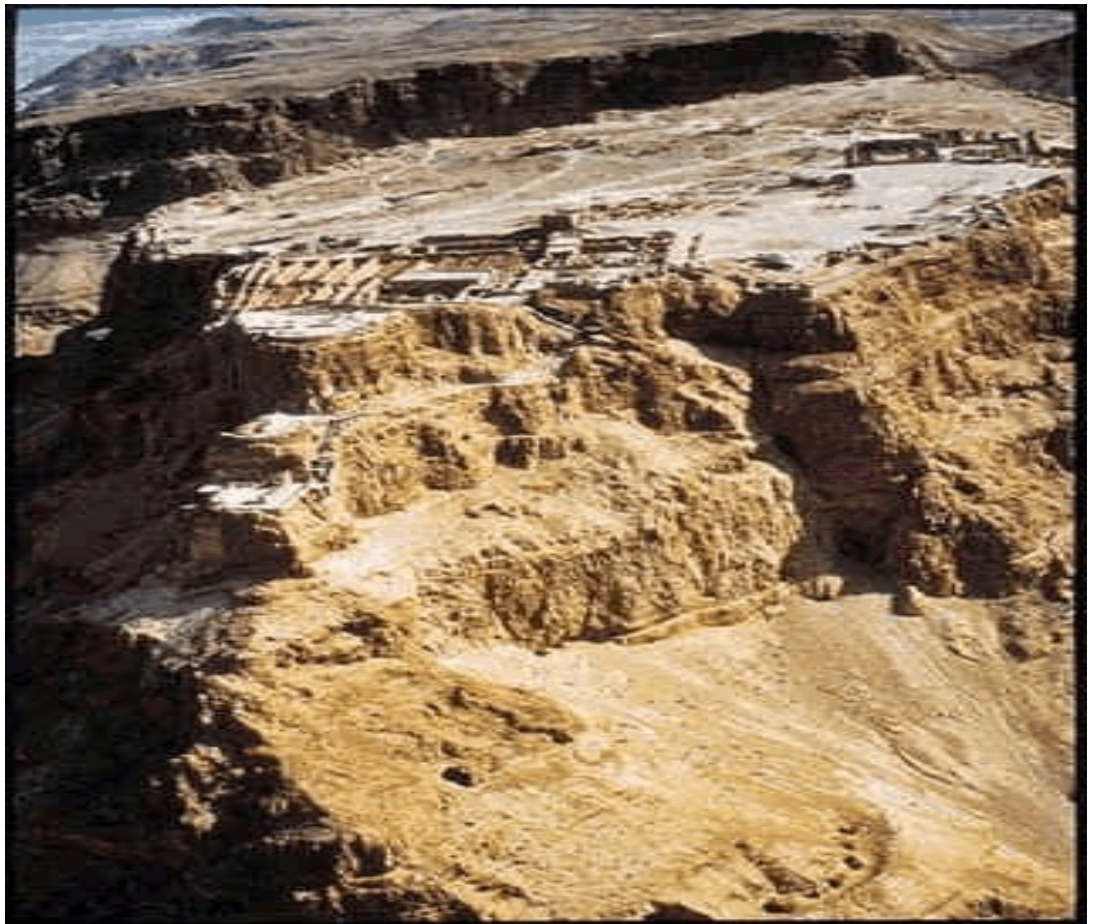


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|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Small bathhouse | 8. Underground cistern |
| 2. Herod's palace-villa | 9. Southern bastion |
| 3. Storerooms | 10. western palace |
| 4. Apartment building | 11. Throne room |
| 5. Snake-path gate | 12. West gate |
| 6. Casemate-wall | 13. Synagogue |
| 7. Zealots' living quarters | 14. Large bathhouse |

³ From <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Archaeology/Masada1.html>

⁴ All of these subpoints are quoted directly from: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Archaeology/Masada1.html>

and Jerusalem, it served as the main administration center of the fortress, as well as the king's ceremonial palace. It consists of four wings: an elaborate royal apartment, a service and workshop section, storerooms and an administrative unit. In the royal apartment, many rooms were built around a central courtyard. On its southern side was a large room with two Ionic columns supporting the roof over the wide opening into the courtyard. Its walls were decorated with molded panels of white stucco. On the eastern side were several rooms with splendid colored mosaic floors. One of these, the largest room, has a particularly decorative mosaic floor with floral and geometric patterns within several concentric square bands. This room may have been King Herod's throne room, the seat of authority when he was in residence at Masada.



- g. Herod receives quite a bad rap from history. However, he also built a synagogue on Masada, hoping to reach some sort of peace with the Jews.

- h. However, I have glossed over much of the history here of the conflicts and between the Romans and the Jews and the massacres which had previously taken place. An excellent source for further reading on this would be *The Story of*

Civilization; 3. Cæsar and Christ, by Will Durant; MJF Books, ©1963; pp. 542–545. Bear in mind as you read this, that the Jews were, for the most part, negative toward Jesus Christ, and therefore, their behavior may not have been exemplary. Also, Satan is the inspiration of all anti-Semitism, so the behavior of the Roman soldiers was likely cruel and heartless (witness the crucifixion of our Lord).

- i. Jewish patriots, also known as Zealots, captured Masada in 66 A.D. They are also known as *Sicarii*, or *dagger-men*.
 - j. These patriots did not just hold out here, but, for the next two years, Masada was a base for them from which they would raid the surrounding areas and harass the Romans in general. Those who support the Zealots tells us that their raids were only upon nearby areas and that they posed no real threat to the Romans.
 - k. Approximately 1000 zealots were in the stronghold when the Romans attacked. As the Romans recaptured Masada in 73 A.D., they entered into the fortress to find that it had been set fire to and that the Jews there all committed suicide, apparently at the urging of Eleazar Ben Jair, who led these Jews. The only ones who remained were two women and five children. Some say that the archeological evidence contradicts the historical writings of Josephus; however, I have not read exactly how (nor, is this really pertinent to our study). Josephus, by the way, is our only source of information of the siege of Masada.
 - l. This siege ended the existence of the nation Israel for nearly 1900 years.
 - m. It is from this incident that we get the famous Jewish saying, “Masada will not fall again!”
 - n. It was not until 1842 when this site was positively identified.
3. Why mention the fortress Masada?
- a. We know that David lived in this same general area for awhile when trying to hide out from Saul.
 - b. He delivered his parents to the other side of the sea to Moab for safekeeping (if, indeed, this is how David got them there).
 - c. A particular area, landmark, mountain, valley, etc. often retains its name for a considerably long time (the primary exception to this is when an opposing political entity conquers this area).
 - d. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that David himself lived on or around this very same rock while staying in the wilderness of Judæa. The Masada known to us from Jewish history fulfills all of the requirements for one of David’s hideouts.
4. Biblical references to *M^etsûwdâh*:
- a. The first time that we came across this word was as recently as 1Sam. 22:4–5, which is where David stayed after taking his parents to Moab. Some believe that David took his parents by boat across the Dead Sea into Moab, which would be reasonable for the location of Masada. In v. 5, David is told to leave this stronghold (which is at the edge of Judah, overlooking the Dead Sea). The prophet Gad told David to leave Masada and to go into the land of Judah, which, as you may recall, we took to understand as the more populated portion of Judah.
 - b. We find *M^etsûwdâh* again in our passage, 1Sam. 24:22. It is possible that this word refers either to a stronghold (secure hiding place) or to Masada (or to a place they called Masada). Other occurrences in Scripture make it clear that we should not assume that this is a proper noun.
 - c. After David became king, he captured the *stronghold* of Zion, which is a reference to the inner city of Jerusalem, as it is also called *the city of David* in this same verse (2Sam. 5:7 1Chron. 11:5). There is no confounding these two areas, as they are about 30 miles apart.
 - d. David lived in this stronghold that he conquered (2Sam. 5:9, 17).
 - e. *M^etsûwdâh* is also used figuratively, as Jehovah God is often called *our rock and our fortress* (2Sam. 22:2 Psalm 18:2 31:2–3 71:3 91:2 144:2). This means that God is Someone within Whom we can stay protected.
 - f. Given the previous 3 points, we cannot automatically assume that *m^etsûwdâh* always refers to *Masada*. However, it is common in the Hebrew for a word to refer both to a thing and to a city.
 - g. In 2Sam. 23:14, it sounds as though the *stronghold* refers to a very specific place. *And David was then in the stronghold, while the garrison of the Philistines was then in Bethlehem* (2Sam. 23:14 1Chron. 11:16). It would make most sense for this to refer to the king’s palace in Jerusalem.
 - h. When God speaks to Job, He speaks of an eagle staying in a rocky crag, up in a stronghold (Job 39:28).
 - i. The word *m^etsûwdâh* is also used to mean *snare, net*, as we find in Ezek. 12:13 17:20.
 - j. It means *to be hunted* in Ezek. 13:21.

5. Summary:

- a. Unfortunately, we cannot limit the meaning of *m^etsûwdâh*. It appears to have 3 or 4 sets of meanings.
- b. It could very well refer to the Masada known in Jewish history—at least in the first couple of references that we find in Scripture; however, it is clear that it does not refer to Masada in all of the other passages.
- c. *M^etsûwdâh* definitely refers to a stronghold, and means that actually and figuratively in Scripture.
- d. The final few references found in Ezekiel, which is written a few hundred years later, means something entirely different.
- e. Given the possible metamorphous of this word, this would further suggest that David's first *stronghold* was the Masada of Jewish history. This word would not have necessarily been used to name this rock after it changed its meaning.

Other references:

Layout of Herod's structures and aerial picture of Masada are both from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Archaeology/Masada1.html>

The second picture of Masada came from <http://www.jewishmag.com/26mag/masada/masada.htm>

Addendum: For those who are interested, these are the remarks of Jacqueline Schaalje concerning some of the questions that exist about the historical account of the mass suicide of Masada:⁵

Archaeology in Israel: Masada

By Jacqueline Schaalje

First of all: what is known as the biggest collective suicide in history was actually not a suicide at all, but a collective murder. If Josephus' story is true, only one man committed suicide. This could be historical, though, because suicide does not occur in Jewish history: it was taboo. Although many Jewish rebels were killed in conflicts, not only during the Jewish wars, they were always executed, and never killed themselves voluntarily.

Another strange thing is that of the hundreds of skeletons which must have remained on Masada only 25 were found. They could have been removed, but then it is unexplained why the last 25 were "forgotten." According to Josephus, the Romans found an awful silence when they returned to the mountain the next morning after the fire. They found 2 women and 5 children alive who had hidden in a cistern, and who told the Romans what happened.

The sceptics say that it was extremely unlikely that the Romans would have waited one whole night before they stormed the mountain. In all known sources about Roman sieges, they immediately finished the job after having achieved a breakthrough. The traces of more than one fire have been found on the walls, not only the one fire according to Josephus. On the other hand the fires could also have been lighted by the rebels, just before they chose to kill themselves. Josephus also errs in some other details, about the palace for example.

Unfortunately we cannot check the story against Roman sources, because the siege is not recorded by them. Many now believe that the story was partly true. Some rebels would have killed their families, while others probably fought to death or until they were arrested by the Romans. This was usual with the other rebellions against the Romans in the rest of the country. It makes the story not less heroic.

⁵ This is directly quoted from <http://www.jewishmag.com/26mag/masada/masada.htm>