Levin on Magness, 'Masada: From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth'

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One of the books that made a significant impression on me in my childhood years was *The Story of Masada* (1968) by Yigael Yadin, retold for young readers by Gerald Gottlieb (1969). Later in life, I, like the author of the book under review, led groups up the steep “Snake Path” that climbs up the eastern face of the mountain, most recently taking my thirteen-year-old son and his classmates for a bar-mitzvah hike in between COVID-19 lockdowns just last year. So, when asked to review Jodi Magness’s *Masada: From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth*, I jumped at the opportunity. I was not disappointed, finding this book to be an excellent summary of the history and archaeology of the site, written by one of the most prominent Masada scholars of our generation.

Magness, Kenan Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence in Early Judaism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is uniquely qualified to write a book such as this. After studying under Yadin at the Hebrew University in the 1970s and serving as a guide in the Ein Gedi Field School, just a few kilometers north of Masada, she was involved in the posthumous publication of Yadin’s excavations, as well as in the further excavation of Roman siege works at Masada. Since then, she has directed and co-directed numerous excavations in Israel and Greece and has published widely on the archaeology of the Land of Israel during the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods.

This present volume is intended for a nonprofessional readership, particularly an American one, as can be seen by both the units of measurement and the many references to the New Testament, even where they do not add to the reader’s understanding of the Masada story.[1] Despite the subtitle, “From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth,” it is not an in-depth study of the Masada myth, nor is it a detailed description of the archaeological finds. It is also not a guidebook, despite the short epilogue in which Magness shares her insights as a former tour guide. The title for chapter 3, “Masada in Context,” may serve as a more accurate title for the book as a whole, which geographically, archaeologically, and historically contextualizes the Masada site, story, and myth.

The book begins with a four-page prologue, “The Fall of Masada,” which grabs the reader’s attention by segueing directly from Eleazar Ben-Yair’s famous speech and Josephus’s account of the defenders’ mass suicide directly to Masada’s present status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most-visited sites in modern Israel. Chapter 1, “The Siege of Masada,” provides a short summary of
the events leading up to the siege, as well as a detailed description of the Roman army and its siege works, reflecting Magness’s own involvement in the 1995 excavation. The final pages of this chapter describe Josephus’s life and writings and put his description of the siege—our only source for these events—in perspective.

In chapter 2, Magness recounts how Masada, known to Christians from Josephus’s accounts, which were not widely known to Jews, was rediscovered by nineteenth-century American and European explorers of the Holy Land. She then discusses the site’s increased importance as a symbol of the growing Zionist revival of Jewish settlement in the land both before and after Israel’s independence—although this analysis reads as perfunctory following the chapter’s fascinating first section.

Chapter 3 reflects Magness’s experience as a guide in the region. The chapter first focuses on the natural setting of Masada—the Jordan Rift Valley, the Dead Sea, and the region’s geology, climate, and sources of water and roads—and allows the readers to imagine that they are actually driving down Route 90 toward the site. Ever a skilled tour guide, Magness includes contextual references to such elements as the modern Dead Sea Works and the problematic state of the Dead Sea region in an age of receding water levels and the appearance of sinkholes, topics that do not necessarily improve the reader’s understanding of the Masada story but that certainly make the region come to life in the reader’s mind. The rest of the chapter surveys the area’s most important archaeological finds chronologically, from the Chalcolithic period to the Byzantine period. Once again, while the fantastic finds from the Cave of the Treasure are not directly relevant to the Masada story, Magness’s descriptions make for excellent reading. Her descriptions of Second Temple period Qumran, Ein Gedi, and other sites are more relevant.

Chapter 4, “Masada and Herod’s Other Building Projects,” is rich in detail but may have been better positioned later in the volume. Magness begins with a fairly short description of Herod’s buildings at Masada, based mostly on Josephus as interpreted by Yadin, followed by a discussion of Jerusalem’s topography and early history. Here, the brevity of the description obscures some clarity. Somehow, the Babylonian destruction, the city’s rebuilding under the Persians, and Jerusalem’s expansion under the Hasmoneans and the Herodians go entirely unmentioned. Magness describes the settlement and fortification of the western hill “by the latter part of the eighth century” and then states that “the area we have just described—the City of David, Temple Mount, and western hill—constituted the city of Jerusalem until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE (although by then settlement had expanded to the north)” (pp. 70-71). Magness does not discuss either the “second wall,” supposedly built by Herod himself, or the “third wall,” begun by Agrippa I and completed by the rebels in 66. Her mentioning of “three successive walls” and references to an included figure—a standard plan of late Second Temple period Jerusalem showing the three walls—will not make the uninformed reader any better informed (although she does go on to describe Titus’s breaching of the walls on page 150) (p. 71). The chapter’s further description of Herod’s palace and the three towers, the western hill, the Temple Mount, and the Antonia Fortress is fairly standard. Understandably, it includes a description neither of the more recent discoveries of Herod’s palace within the “Kishe” building adjacent to the citadel nor of the “Pilgrims’ way” that ascends from the City of David toward the Temple Mount, both of which were made public after the book went to press. The page and a half dedicated to the present “Via Dolorosa” that passes by the site of the Antonia, which Magness admits is probably not the original route taken by Jesus to the site of his crucifixion, seems superfluous. From Jerusalem,
Magness takes the reader on a tour of Caesarea Maritima, Samaria-Sebaste, Herodian Jericho, and Herodium, which serves to further place Masada within the context of Herod’s many building projects.

Chapter 5 focuses on Herod’s Masada, with Magness moving quickly through the pre-exilic history of Israel and then explaining to the modern Western reader the concept of a national deity and the importance of a temple to the inhabitants of the ancient world as the dwelling place of that deity. From here, Magness continues to the conflicts that ensued from the interaction between the Judeans and their Greek rulers, leading to the Maccabean revolt and eventually to the Hasmonean kingdom, also outlining for readers the three Jewish “sects”: the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. This summary is extremely useful, although not all scholars will agree on every point Magness makes. For example, Magness considers the Qumran group to be a branch of the Sadducees but does not mention the possibility of the word “Pharisees” being derived from the Hebrew word perush, meaning “to interpret.” Once again, she consistently refers to how these groups are described in the New Testament.

Chapter 6 summarizes the history of Judea from Herod’s appointment as king by the Roman Senate, through the careers of his descendants and the tenures of the Roman “procurators” (more properly prefects), up to the outbreak of the Great Revolt. Chapter 7 describes the revolt itself, focusing on the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Both chapters are fairly straightforward, using Josephus’s descriptions judiciously (for example, when mentioning his claim that Titus did not intend to destroy the Temple, Magness reminds the readers of Josephus’s biases and dependence on the Flavians) and providing occasional references to additional sources as well as archaeological evidence.

In chapter 8, Magness brings the Masada rebels back to life by combining Josephus, additional ancient sources, archaeological evidence, and varied scholarly interpretations. Some assertions, such as the idea that some defenders were “Qumran Essenes,” are speculative (p. 164). Her discussion of Yadin’s use of the term “Zealots” rather than sicarii is instructive, as is her comment that laboratory analysis of food remains shows that much of the food that the defenders had stored was infested.

Chapter 9, the book's final chapter deals with three topics: Yadin, the mass suicide, and the Masada myth. Magness’s short biography of Yadin (b. 1917)—a second-generation archaeologist, military commander, and (ultimately unsuccessful) politician—includes mention of her own encounters with him as a student and is instructive in understanding his interpretation of the findings at Masada and elsewhere. Her discussion of the reliability of Josephus’s account of the “mass suicide” revolves around the archaeological evidence, which she admits is inconclusive, stating: “The archaeological remains can be interpreted differently as supporting or disproving Josephus’s account. Whether or not the mass suicide story is true depends on how one evaluates Josephus’s reliability as an historian—a matter that I prefer to leave to Josephus specialists to resolve” (p. 196). Finally, Magness attempts to explain how Masada became such a powerful symbol in modern Israel, building on Nachman Ben-Yehuda’s *The Masada Myth, Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (1995), in a way that makes the story more relevant to American readers.

The book includes two maps (one of the Hasmonean kingdom and one of Herod’s kingdom), as well as forty-six figures (mostly photos but also plans of archaeological sites). Unfortunately, these figures...
are not placed in or near the places in which they are referred to in the text but rather collected in two un-numbered collections of “plates,” a surprising production decision in today's age of digital publication. The figures are all in black and white, which presumably makes publication less costly, but surprisingly, even in the book's digital format (https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780691186016/html), the vast majority are black and white.

All in all, despite my reservations about some minor details, this is a book that anyone interested in Masada specifically, and in the late Second Temple period in general, should read. Magness brings all of her knowledge and experience to the table, in a readable, well-informed volume.

Note

[1]. For example, chapter 4, which describes Herod’s building projects, begins with a reference to “the slaughter of the innocents” (Matthew 2:16-18) (p. 59). This is repeated at the beginning of chapter 6. The description of the three “sects” in chapter 5 constantly refers to their mention or non-mention in the New Testament. Most of the section on Aristobulus I is about Jesus’s Galilean origins, even though Jesus was born a century after Aristobulus’s reign.


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