

## THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

From The Graphic Bible by Lewis Browne  
Pages 98-101

... The fierce struggle between Roman and Jew began once more in Judea and Galilee. Seven Roman governors followed each other in rapid succession, each more cruel than the last. They drove the people to despair and madness by their wanton violations of religious feeling.

Perhaps the governors were not altogether to blame. They were at their wits' end. They had been able to handle all sorts of people in every part of the world -- but these Jews were altogether beyond them. They would rather die than offer sacrifices to the image of an emperor. They were willing to give up everything: their wealth, their homes, their land, their very lives -- but they would not give up their God. To the Roman officials they seemed a spoiled, obstinate, half-demented people; and, failing to win them over with kind words, they tried their swords. Thousands of Jews were put to death in those ghastly years. They were burned and crucified and massacred in droves.

Finally, in the year 66, matters reached a climax: The Jews could stand the tyranny no longer, and openly rebelled. Roman legions were sent down from Syria to quell the uprising, but to no avail. The Jews fought like maddened lions, and could not be subdued. Nero, the Roman emperor, realizing this was no ordinary little outbreak, quickly sent two of his ablest generals, Vespasian and Titus, to the scene. Down through Galilee they marched, fighting wildly a whole year before finally reducing that region to subjection. Then west of Jerusalem they plowed a bloody furrow; then south; and then at last up to the walls of the city itself.

It is chiefly from the writings of a Jewish general named Josephus, a man who deserted his forces and then tried to do penance by recounting the heroism of those who stayed true, that we know what happened during the siege. Jerusalem became the scene of one of the most devastating contests in all history. The besieged within the city were divided into three camps, each wrangling with the other over who should be leader and how the war should be carried on. One held the lower city, another the upper, and a third the Temple area in between. Two of the factions began to quarrel over the possession of the town granaries, and, after repeated raids and massacres, someone set fire to the whole vast store so that it was completely destroyed. There they were, a million or more Jews butchering each other in an ancient, dirty high-walled city hardly a mile square in size -- the food supplies gone, and the dread Roman already at the gates! And yet they would not surrender!

Vespasian had been called back to Rome to be crowned emperor, and Titus, his son, began the siege. His artillery hurled great boulders a quarter of a mile into the heart of the city. Great mounds were built close against the north wall and huge battering rams were placed on them. Every tree within ten miles of the city had been cut down to make those rams. And then day and night the thunder of the rams was to be heard. Fifteen days the incessant pounding went on, and at last a breach was made in the outer wall. Nine days more, and the second wall fell. At last the Romans were masters of the lower city.

But still the Jews would not surrender. In the upper city they huddled, starving and dying. There was murder among them over scraps of meat or bread. At night those who stole out to pick herbs and roots in the fields were crucified by the Romans who captured them -- five hundred were crucified in one day -- or were robbed and slain when they returned home. Yet they would not surrender. No, rather they became even more maddened and stubborn as their terrors increased. They undermined the Roman mounds and the huge battering rams suddenly came crashing to the ground. - Then out they stormed like ravenous demons, flinging themselves full tilt at the enemy, and clawing, slashing, biting their way through.

The great legions wavered -- tottered -- broke ! And Titus retreated. But then came even greater horrors for the besieged. Titus had a high wall of earth five miles in length thrown all around the city -- and sat down to wait. The suffering of the Jews seemed beyond bearing. Even Titus, a hard Roman not unused to war, could not stand the sight of it. He begged the mad zealots to surrender and have done with it all. But no. No surrender. Never!

A month passed. Two. The Romans returned to the attack. One wall fell, but a second had been raised by the Jews in the meantime. The second fell. But still the heroes fought on. They were taking their stand in the inner fortress now. The narrow streets ran with blood. Sickening was the stench of the dead bodies rotting in the hot summer sun. Jews fought each other in the streets over handfuls of the most loathsome food -- filthy straw, bits of leather, even offal. The wife of the High Priest, who had been wont to have thick carpets laid from her house to the Temple so that her sandals might not be soiled, now staggered about in the alleyways in search of crusts. The daily offerings on the altars were no longer made because of the lack of animals. But still there was no surrender.

Titus again offered to make terms, but again the zealots refused to parley. They knew what terms with the enemy would mean -- giving over the city. And they believed the city was God's, not theirs, to give. And so wondrous was their faith that at the sight of it some of the Roman soldiers even deserted their own legions and ran to throw in their lot with the besieged.

The fortress walls were scaled, and the zealots were forced to retreat to the Temple courts. For six days the battering rams savagely pounded the sacred walls, and then at last the inevitable end drew near. Titus ordered that the sanctuary be spared, but his infuriated soldiers refused to listen. A burning torch was hurled through the Golden Window, and immediately the wooden beams caught fire. Into the Temple courts the soldiers dashed, massacring the thousands who had taken refuge there.

And then there was quiet for a moment.

But again the resistance blazed forth. The zealots retreated to the upper city, to their last inch of ground, and once more defied the enemy. Almost a whole month they held out there before they crumpled for good. They were starved out and exhausted; their strength was utterly spent. The Romans came raging in, slaying until their arms were tired. Every alley and room and corner was choked with bleeding corpses. Then fire was set to everything - houses, buildings, walls -- and the conquerors stood back to watch the flames.

And thus-was old Jerusalem destroyed.

It is said that more than a million Jews died in that siege. Of those who survived, 97, 000 were made slaves. They were deported to labor in the mines of Egypt, or were forced to fight wild beasts in the Roman arenas . Titus himself carried away the noblest of the zealots to march in his triumphal procession through the broad streets of Rome. A great arch was built there to commemorate his ghastly triumph, an arch on which were carved figures of his young captives carrying the sacred vessels of the Temple. That beautiful arch is still standing in old Rome; and the ruins of the blood-soaked wall still stand in old Jerusalem.