



## A WEEK IN THE FALL OF JERUSALEM



BEN WITHERINGTON III

*A Week in the Fall of Jerusalem*

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## The Fall of Jerusalem Begins

*New Testament scholar Ben Witherington leads us behind the veil of centuries to see and experience the historical and social realities of the epochal event of the fall of Jerusalem. It's A.D. 70. Amid smoke, clamor, and terror, Jerusalem is falling to the Romans, its temple being destroyed. As Jews and Christians try to escape the city, we travel with some of them through an imagined week of flight and faith.*

*As a part of a broader series of books including A Week in the Life of Corinth and A Week in the Life of a Roman Centurion, this narrative retelling of events in the ancient church gives vibrancy and light to what often appears clouded and heavy.*

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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?

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. 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

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Witherington is an elected member of the prestigious

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.

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

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# BOOK EXCERPT

Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, a society dedicated to New Testament studies. He is a John Wesley Fellow for Life, a research fellow at Cambridge University, and a member of numerous professional organizations, including the Society of Biblical Literature, Society for the Study of the New Testament, and the Institute for Biblical Research. He previously taught at institutions like Ashland Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt University, Duke Divinity School, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

An ordained pastor in the United Methodist Church and a popular lecturer, Witherington has presented seminars for churches, colleges, and biblical meetings around the world. He has led numerous study tours through the lands of the Bible and is known for bringing the text to life through incisive historical and cultural analysis.

Along with many interviews on radio and television networks across the country, Witherington has been seen in programs such as *60 Minutes*,

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.

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.”

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20/20, Dateline, and the Peter Jennings ABC special *Jesus and Paul – The Word and the Witness*.

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.

– Taken from chapter one, “Where There’s Smoke”