

Desperate Measures

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (September 2023)



Rest, Herwig Zens

From a translation of The Siege of Jerusalem, the anonymous fourteenth century Middle English epic. While it bears some connection with legitimate primary source material (including Josephus's chronicle of the Revolt), The Siege of Jerusalem is a macabre fever-dream version of the story of Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70. Of course, neither Vespasian nor Titus was a Christian; the circumstances surrounding the siege differed both in detail and character from what's depicted here. The manner in which the characters are presented has more to do with the fourteenth century writer's rhetorical priorities (he's clearly a pro-Crusade propagandist) than with historical accuracy. Therefore, these characters should be regarded, for all intents and purposes, as fictional.

Jerusalem's sorrows were awful to tell.

Its citizens helplessly drowned
In thirstiness, lost in the baffling maze
Of Hunger, occasioning frantic malaise.
Indeed, it had been over forty dark days
Of anguish since food had been found.

Alas, in the absence of fish or of flesh,
Of olives or barley ... in lieu
Of what had before been the émeraüd fields'
Divinely voluminous, regular yields,
The Jews ate unusable sandals and shields—
Not easy for ladies to chew.

A donkey's old, half-rotten head could be had
For fifty denarii; its lung,
For twice that. Where Hunger positions her fort,
Contriving decrees that admit no retort,
Five pieces of silver can buy you a quart
Of dove or Leviathan dung.

Severe dehydration was worse than the work
Of swords or a legion of spears.
New water was tainted. The cisterns were dry.
Since all of Jerusalem knew how to cry,
The only enduringly ample supply
Of water was Israelite tears.

And hundreds cöllapsed from Starvation's resolve.
The living soon suffered a plight
Exceeding the sting of Mortality's aim.
The living were snared in a turbulent game
Revolting to Conscience. The Hebrews became
Hyenas patrolling the night.

A woman named Mary, a wonderful wife,
Starvation impairing her soul's
Transcendent, intuitive exercise of
A woman's inheritance, Motherly Love,
Implored the forgiveness of Heaven above,
And roasted her son on the coals.

"My Father, alas!" she cried, flipping the ribs.
"The battle surrounding the town
Devours the best of us! Hungers consume
Whoever remains in a city that Doom
Has made her encampment. The womb is a tomb,
And martyrdom isn't a crown.

"This beautiful baby that came from inside
My body reënters: his hips,
His beautiful arms...—That Starvation outruns
My basic humanity no longer stuns."
She shuddered, dispatching a piece of her son's
Left shoulder inside of her lips.

Aromas of roasting descended upon
The squalid, crepuscular street
Where Jews in their thousands dementedly wore

Their hunger. A pack of them sniffed. With a roar,
They quickly located and busted the door
In search of the scandalous meat.

And Mary declared: "I have roasted my son,
And greedily gnawed on the bone!"
And then, in a broadly approximate sketch
Of sweet hospitality: "Pardon. I'll fetch
A kitchen knife" –so each delusional wretch
Could cleave off a piece of his own.

As Mary hysterically searched for the knife,
The visitors' stupor withdrew.
"It would have been better to fall in the fray,"
They bellowed, "than witness the Devil at play!–
The Good and the Beautiful: so far away
From being the same as the True.

"O consummate Master, behold who You've done
This misery to! Shall the board
Of Hebrews be laden with babies released
From living? Shall Man be reduced to a Beast?
O Master of Mercy! Shall Prophet and Priest
Be slain in the House of the Lord?"

The seething extent of the Jewish distress
And shame had so thoroughly bruised
Their will to continue their war against Good,
Against a perfection they now understood,
They brokenly asked if the Christians would
Have mercy. But Titus refused.

(He's bursting with Absolute Wisdom who knows,
Before the Fiasco can feed
Upon him—before the Catastrophe that
Devours insanelly; before all the fat
Is rendered—to deal with Duplicity at
A generous distance indeed.)

The Hebrews continued to tunnel beneath
The walls that were built to protect
Jerusalem from the incursions of foes,
But now were obscenely enlisted to close
Within its mephitic perimeter those
United in Vanity's sect.

[Table of Contents](#)

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