

The Judeans Prepare for War

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



The Destruction of Jerusalem by Roman Armies under command of Titus in AD 70, David Roberts, 1850

*From a translation of *Siege of Jerusalem*, the anonymous 14th c. Middle English epic.**

Assembled were thousands of Israelites, each
Upon an impetuous horse,
Both horsemen & horses prepared for the breach.

This number excluded the mobilized force
Attending the City's quartet
Of gates interrupting the battlements' course.

The twenty-five elephants (fortresses set
Upon their Precambrian backs)
Asserted that what wasn't, just wasn't...yet.

The elephant-fortresses glittered with plaques
Of metal as solid as Sin
When facing a terrible virtue's attacks.

Each bastion fastened to elephant skin
Was soldiered compactly abreast:
A hundred without, and a hundred within.

A hundred Arabian camels were dressed
In chainmail. Each loftily bore
A bullying tower, the Poets attest.

The towers on Bactrians hosted a score
Of soldiers; their contours, encased
In steel. How fantastic, these habits of war!

Designed when disinterested geniuses traced
The nightmare commanding the glen
Established in Slumber's malevolent waste.

And then there were chariots carrying men
Not given to feeling afraid,
Who, even before the Omnipotent Pen

Maintained by the Hand of the Heavens had stayed
The motions of war, would be dead
On sand that fresh blood had turned into a glade.

The heaviest elephant (covered in red
And amethyst fabrics) emerged
From numberless shadows exquisitely spread

Behind a Gibraltarform reverie purged
From oceans exploding in dreams.
The elephant's weight diabolically surged.

Attired in deathly-luxurious gleams,
The castle it carried upon
Its body aspired to Mammon's extremes:

A silver pavilion fine as a swan,
A plan's most extravagant part,
Pragmatic at midnight; by daybreak, forgone.

The silver pavilion had as its heart
A chest of white silver, and then
A chair of beguiling, torturous art.

What madman imagines such furniture? When
The candlelight flickered nearby,
The gold of the chair serenaded: "Amen."

Upholstered in cloth of imperial dye,
And studded with tumors of gold,
And heavy with sapphires smooth as an eye.

Upon it, the silent, majestically cold,
Monarchical Caiaphas sat,
Emotionless, focused, resplendently stole'd,

Invested with tunics, a ritual hat,
A breastplate encrusted with gems,
And trousers as soft as the ghost of a cat.

He absently whispered: "They'll fall before Shem's
Descendants. Vespasian, the beast,
Is ruined."—a confidence Prudence condemns.

A choir surrounded the decadent priest
With psalmody. Caiaphas took
A scroll from the chest, an ethereal feast—

A critical scroll whose profundities shook
The world with miraculous tales
Of Moses; of armies subdued by a book;

Of Jonah's descent to a furious whale's
Interior dusk; of the HE
Who renders the Chosen emergency trails

Permitting the shivering exiles free,
Miraculous license to pass
Directly athwart the devouring Sea.

Thus Caiaphas lorded his palace of glass
Relaxed on Complacency's beach,
Unshaken, expecting the Roman "ALAS!"

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