

# UFOs in Josephus

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WHILE writing about the Roman capture of Jerusalem, which was the climax of the Jewish War, beginning in A.D. 66, the Jewish historian Josephus, who defected to the Romans, records several interesting phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Josephus does not make it very clear whether these phenomena were seen before or during the War, but he certainly took them as divine portents of the subsequent catastrophe.

"There was a star resembling a sword which stood over the city and a comet that continued a whole year." It is considered that in this Josephus intended us to understand that these were two distinct phenomena, although Jeans thought them to be one.<sup>2</sup> If so, the sword might have appeared for only a short while, while the comet lasted for several months (a year seems rather unlikely).

Jeans also claims that it was "probably" Halley's Comet and that it appeared in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed. Apart from the fact that Josephus does not specifically claim that the comet appeared in that year—indeed he implies that it appeared before the War—it is a simple enough exercise to calculate that Halley's Comet should have been visible either in A.D. 10 or A.D. 86, and so cannot have been the comet referred to by Josephus. But there are many other comets whose period is not known, or which are of extremely long duration. There is no cause therefore to doubt Josephus' word.

A UFO in the shape of a sword was seen over Pittsburgh in July 1939.<sup>3</sup> The witnesses described it as hanging in the air at about 45° to the horizon, and resembling a modern airliner without its main wings. It was slightly tapered towards the top end where two fins were visible. This gave it the appearance of a short sword, the witnesses actually using the word "sword" to describe it. It seems coincidental that Josephus should likewise describe his UFO as being in the shape of a sword, even though swords are not all the same shape. Thus there exists a possibility that the object which hung over Jerusalem about the year A.D. 65 was the same one as, or a companion to, the one that appeared over the U.S.A. in 1939, one thousand eight hundred and seventy-four years later.

Again, we read in Josephus that before the Jewish War, on the 8th Nisan (March/April) at about 0300: "So great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day-time; which lasted for half an hour." This is a familiar feature of modern reports, where the UFO directs a powerful beam of light at the ground, and so illuminating it.

Shortly afterwards, on the 21st of the month Iyyar (April/May): "Before sunset, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armour, were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding cities." It is quite possible that the simple Judaeans witnessed the phenomenon we now call UFO, and, as a result of the deep concern they all shared for their fate at the hands of the Roman troops, interpreted the phenomenon as portraying the fate of cities already fallen to Roman power. It seems

unlikely that they could have seen any object in the sky resembling a chariot or a soldier, although the resemblance of a chariot wheel to the standard circular UFO is not without significance. But I suggest a host of glowing circular UFOs, perhaps *surrounding* a cigar-shaped craft, might have given rise to this interpretation of the phenomenon. Something mysterious in the sky must have caused such a rumour.

Josephus goes on to describe other unusual occurrences which may or may not have been connected with the aerial phenomena. At the feast of Pentecost in the following month (May/June), while the priests were entering the inner court of the Temple at night, they felt a quaking together with a great noise followed by what sounded like a large crowd saying "Let us get out of here". And at the previous feast (Passover) the heavy brass gates of the inner court had opened by themselves at midnight. These gates normally needed 20 men to shut them, and had been bolted at the time, the bolts going deep down into the solid stone threshold. At this earlier feast a heifer is reported to have given birth to a lamb (sic) in the Temple precincts.

Not too much reliance should be placed on these latter superstitious reports, which could be exaggerations of more mundane events, but it does leave one with the feeling that there was something odd in the air over Jerusalem in A.D. 65.

It should not be thought that these reports are typical of either the times in which Josephus wrote or his histories. Hardly anywhere else in his books does Josephus describe such abnormal events. His general approach is factual and pragmatic, and the collection of these reports in one paragraph, all relating to one year, is surprising and intriguing.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *Wars of the Jews* Book 6, chap. 5, para. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Stars in their courses*, Sir James Jeans, plate 23 (p. 64).
- <sup>3</sup> *Mysteries of the Skies*, Lore and Deneault, p. 138.

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