

The Maccabean Revolt: What Really Happened

Dr. Lawrence H. Schiffman

Vice-Provost of Undergraduate Education, Yeshiva University

Political Background

The political background of the struggle over Hellenization must be sought in the years following the final Seleucid conquest of the Land of Israel under Antiochus III in 198 B.C.E. Throughout the years of warfare between the Seleucids (Alexander the Great's successors ruling in Syria) and the Ptolemies (the successors ruling in Egypt), each empire had its partisans among the aristocracy of Jerusalem. When the Seleucids firmly established their dominion over Judea, the pro-Ptolemaic party was left disenfranchised. The high priest Onias III had supported the Ptolemies during the reign of King Seleucus IV Philopator (187–175 B.C.E.). The pro-Seleucid party, therefore, denounced him to the Seleucid rulers. In an effort to exonerate himself, Onias set out for Antioch to meet with the king.

Meanwhile Seleucus IV died, and the infamous Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.E.) succeeded to the throne. Onias, unable to convince him of his loyalty, was forced to remain in Antioch. His brother Jason then bought the high priesthood from Antiochus. This disruption of the hereditary succession of the high priests set a precedent that would hasten the decline of this office in the years to come.

Hellenistic Reform

In addition to purchasing the office of high priest, Jason also bought the right to establish a gymnasium and ephedion in Jerusalem, and, on the basis of these institutions, to turn the city into a Hellenistic polis to be named Antioch in honor of Antiochus IV. The right to live according to the Torah, granted to the Judeans by Antiochus III, was now rescinded. In its place, the Jews were to live under the laws of a Greek city. Among other things, this meant that the majority of those who previously had enjoyed full rights under the laws of the Torah now found themselves second-class citizens in an oligarchy. In addition, Greek-style athletic activities began and the Gerousia was probably purged of members who did not support the reform.

It is not surprising that the already Hellenized aristocracy of Judea so willingly undertook these changes. Throughout the Hellenistic world, rulers were encouraging ancient cities to become up-to-date Greek poleis (plural of polis, a Hellenistic city). The poleis were allied closely with the kings and could be depended upon to control the less Hellenized rural areas. Citizenship in Greek cities held out many pluses: the commercial benefits of trade with other such cities, the

minting of coins, and other advantages that would have been particularly attractive to the aristocracy. Further, the polis afforded its citizens the opportunity to see themselves as part of a wider and more open world.

Jason and his followers were not extremists. Although they introduced the political and commercial changes mentioned above, they did not seek to change the Jewish faith. They maintained the Temple and its rituals according to the tradition, even if they compromised with the Hellenistic way of life in other spheres. They were seeking a way to live as Jews within the wider Hellenistic world without abandoning the age-old traditions of Israel.

Jason's brand of Hellenization was apparently not enough for some. As a member of a family which had been pro-Ptolemaic, he soon found himself opposed by the pro-Seleucid Tobiad family, and by the three brothers Simeon, Menelaus and Lysimachus. The Tobiads plotted to have Menelaus replace Jason as high priest. Menelaus succeeded in buying the office from Antiochus in 171 B.C.E., as Jason himself had done only a few years earlier. After an armed battle, Jason was forced to flee Jerusalem. Now in control, Menelaus appropriated funds from the Temple treasury to present gifts to Antiochus.

Civil Strife

Menelaus's misappropriation of Temple funds and his lack of Oniad family ties turned the people bitterly against him. Violence broke out in Jerusalem, and Lysimachus, who had taken over in his brother's absence, himself fell in the fighting. Despite an appeal from representatives of the Gerousia that Menelaus be replaced, Antiochus allowed him to continue in office, and the representatives were executed. It was not long before, under new leaders, popular discontent became full-scale revolt.

Antiochus had for some time been trying to conquer Egypt. His first attempt against the Ptolemies failed, but his second, in 168 B.C.E., almost succeeded. The Romans, however, already looking toward the East, forced him to abandon Egypt. The false rumors of Antiochus's death which spread in the aftermath of this humiliation led Jason, the deposed former high priest, to leave his hiding place in Transjordan and mount an assault on Jerusalem. He managed to drive Menelaus and his supporters into the citadel, but was not able to reassert his rule. Apparently, popular forces arose against him, remembering that he had begun the Hellenistic reform, and forced him to again flee the holy city. Despite a slaughter led by Antiochus himself, the insurrection in Jerusalem continued. An attempt by the Seleucid general Apollonius to bring the situation under control by establishing a fortress, known as the Akra, at the center of the polis, and by stationing a Hellenistic garrison there, led only to further popular opposition and to a massive flight of Jews from the city, some of whom had been dispossessed to make room for the garrison.

It was probably at this time that foreign deities were introduced into the Temple, creating further friction. The Jewish Hellenizers, Menelaus and his party, saw these gods as equivalent to the God of Israel, and thus in their view this was not really foreign worship. They regarded the ancestral God of Israel as simply another manifestation of the supreme deity known in Syria as Baal Shamin (Master of Heaven) and in the Greek world as Zeus Olympius. In this way they rationalized their behavior.

Revolt and Persecution

The earliest attempts at an organized uprising were probably led by the Hasidim (“pious”), a group of priests who found the religious compromises in Hellenistic Jerusalem totally unacceptable. Rebellion was mounting; determined to stem it, Antiochus conceived of the infamous persecutions, which, far from being the beginning of our story, came after years of struggle and insurrection fueled by the attempt of Hellenistic Jews to foist their way of life on the entire nation of Israel. There is no evidence whatsoever that Antiochus pursued a similar policy anywhere else in his kingdom. He took up the Hellenizing banner in Judea in response to the nature of the rebellion confronting him there. As he saw the situation, the way to defeat the rebels was by an onslaught against the forces that propelled them, the Torah, the commandments, and the culture of the Jewish people.

The persecutions were enacted in the winter of 167/66 B.C.E. To begin with, the decree of Antiochus III which had granted the Jews extensive rights of religious freedom was formally rescinded. Moreover, in December of 167 foreign idolatrous worship and cultic prostitution were introduced into the Temple. In addition, throughout Palestine, the Sabbath and festivals were to be violated, high places (outdoor shrines) were built where unclean animals were to be offered, circumcision was outlawed, and the dietary laws could not be observed. The penalty for violating these ordinances was death. In every part of the land, Jews found themselves facing royal officials who sought to enforce the regulations with a vengeance, burning Torah scrolls and executing those who hid them. Antiochus had instituted this brutal program in order to deprive the Jewish uprising of a purpose by forcing the Jews to become normal citizens of the Seleucid Empire. Thanks to his short-sighted scheme, the stage was now set for the confrontation of two opposing forces, the Jewish people and the Seleucids. The appearance of the Hasmonean (Maccabean) family would ignite the flames of full-scale revolt.

We cannot be sure whether the accounts of the beginning of the revolt in I and II Maccabees are historical. Nonetheless, Mattathias, the priest of Modiin, and men and women like him bravely refused to submit to the persecution and repaired to the forests. Several thousand soon coalesced around the Hasmonean family, led by Judah the Maccabee (“hammer”), and his brothers John, Simon, Eleazar, and Jonathan. Together with elements of the Hasidim they began to take control of villages throughout the countryside. By Mattathias’ death in 166/65 B.C.E. they had taken control of Judea.

Under Judah the Maccabee, the Jewish army defeated a series of Seleucid generals who attempted to put down the uprising. Having defeated the best of Antiochus’s generals, Judah soon was master of the entire country. Menelaus and the Hellenizers sought a peaceful settlement, asking that the Jews be allowed to return to their homes and that the persecution be officially suspended. The Seleucid government recognized the need for a political compromise. On October 15, 164 B.C.E. it restored the rights of the Jews as granted by Antiochus III, providing amnesty as well. While some may in fact have taken advantage of the amnesty, the soldiers of Judah did not. In December of that year Judah and his men captured Jerusalem, although a Seleucid garrison continued to hold the Akra, the Hellenistic fortress. On the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev Judah purified the Temple, relit the Menorah, and reorganized the

sacrificial worship to conform to the Jewish tradition. The main objective of the revolt, ending the persecutions and restoring Judaism, had been achieved.

Aftermath of the Revolt

Throughout the period of persecution and revolt, the Hellenistic pagans in the Land of Israel had sided with the Seleucids and had participated in the persecutions. It was therefore natural that Judah now turned on these enemies as well as on the Hellenizing Jews who had brought on the horrible persecutions. The Hellenizers, many of them of aristocratic origins, had fought on the side of the Seleucids against Judah. Their center was the Akra, and it was here that they finally took refuge when Judah conquered Jerusalem.

Judah undertook wars throughout the Land of Israel to defend the Jews from their pagan neighbors and at the same time to extirpate paganism from the country. After Antiochus IV died in 164 B.C.E., his son Antiochus V Eupator advanced on Judea, came to terms with Judah, and again restored the rights of the Jews. He executed Menelaus, the Hellenizing high priest, blaming him for embroiling the Seleucid Empire in the persecutions and the war with the Jews, and appointed Alcimus, a moderate Hellenizer, as high priest. By 162 B.C.E. Judah and his party had barred Alcimus from taking office. Alcimus sought the help of the Seleucids, and they confirmed him in office. The Hasidim hastened to compromise with Alcimus, but the Hasmoneans continued to resist his rule. After a brief honeymoon, the Hasidim were back in Judah's camp. The Syrians had again succeeded in putting the Hellenizers in power over Judea.

Alcimus sought Seleucid help to maintain his regime against Judah. The force dispatched to aid him was defeated, and Alcimus fled to Syria. He returned with the Seleucid general Bacchides, and Judah fell in battle against him in 160 B.C.E. The Hasmoneans now rallied around Jonathan, Judah's brother. Again the Hellenized Jews sought to rule and again the Hasmoneans plagued them on all sides. For several years, as the war raged, the post of high priest remained vacant. Finally, Bacchides entered negotiations with Jonathan. The two signed a treaty that gave Jonathan, based in his stronghold at Michmash, control over most of Judea.

In 152 B.C.E., when internal affairs in Syria led to a civil war over the succession to the throne, both sides began wooing Jonathan. He gave his backing to Alexander Balas and on Tabernacles of 152 B.C.E. appeared in the Temple in the robes of the high priest, having been appointed to the office by Balas as a *quid pro quo*. Judea was now united under the rule of a Hasmonean high priest. The Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty had dawned which would rule the Jewish people until the coming of the Romans in 63 B.C.E.

Bibliography

- E. J. Bickerman, *The God of the Maccabees*. Leiden: Brill, 1979.
- L. I. Levine, "The Age of Hellenism: Alexander the Great and the Rise and Fall of the Hasmonean Kingdom." *Ancient Israel from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*. Ed. Hershal Shanks. Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999, 177-204, 254-7.
- L. H. Schiffman, *Texts and Traditions: A Source Reader for the Study of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1998, 151-69
- V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959.