CHAPTER II

The Historians’ Hanukkah: Recalling the Worst Jewish Civil War

by Elias Bickerman and Victor Tcherikover

A medieval engraving of the battle of Judah the Maccabee in full medieval armor and plumed helmet.
(Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America)
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Introduction

The Jewish Civil War at the Heart of Hanukkah

For Lovers of Historical Tales

In this chapter we will present the history of the Maccabean period from a new and disturbing angle — from the perspective of an internal Jewish civil, economic and religious war. In the companion volume, A Different Light: The Hanukkah Book of Celebration, we presented readings from the Maccabees’ Megillah (page 15). The dramatic moments in the Maccabean Revolt were retold using an abbreviated version of the original Books of the Maccabees. But now we will hear from the great historians of the twentieth century as they place these events into the broad context of the confrontation of Hellenism and Judaism. This should appeal to readers interested in history and politics.

The Historians’ Hanukkah weaves together selections from the most creative historians of the Greek-Jewish encounter — Elias Bickerman and his chief scholarly adversary, Victor Tcherikover. Both are Russian-born academics who studied in Germany during the rise of antisemitism and emigrated — Bickerman to the United States and Tcherikover to Israel. While both of them are concerned with ancient internal Jewish conflicts, they offer opposed readings of the events. Just as we have presented a pluralism of religious views of Hanukkah, so too with varied historical perspectives. These historical selections are organized to follow the chronology of events from Alexander the Great to Antiochus and beyond Judah’s initial victory and the rededication of the Temple (164 BCE) to encompass the founding of the Hasmonean Dynasty on the model of the Hellenist kingdoms (134–63 BCE).

Most of the historical narrative in this chapter is taken from Elias Bickerman because his style is so clear and engaging. On a personal note, I recall the “aha experience” as a college student when I first read Bickerman’s book, From Ezra to the Maccabees. Suddenly childish legends were enlightened by broad historical patterns. Bickerman’s strongly argued case revolutionized my understanding of the Maccabees.

The Worst Civil War in Jewish History

Most of us grew up on the prayerbook version of Hanukkah — the battle of the few against the many, the righteous believers against the wicked idol worshippers, the Jewish freedom fighters against the Greek conquerors. Historians, however, make the story more ambiguous and more interesting, and therefore more relevant to our world. According to them, the Jewish admirers of Alexander the Great’s enormously successful empire, of the prosperous court of Antiochus, and of the excitement of the Greek Olympics, took the initiative in importing Hellenism into Jerusalem. These Hellenist Jews were the wealthiest, best educated, urbanized elites of the priesthood. Elias Bickerman argues that Antiochus never would have persecuted any Jew for his religious beliefs, if the High Priests in Jerusalem hadn’t invited him to do so in support of their own Hellenist reforms.

Jews are persecuted first and foremost by other Jews, priests by other priests.

In our contemporary era of increased Jewish ideological conflict between Orthodox and liberal Jews — Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform and secular — we need to re-read the Hanukkah story as a civil war and learn its lessons. Its old heroes may no longer

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arouse such easy identification, but they may be appreciated even more when understood in a more sophisticated way.

In the following sections we will try to raise controversial issues in the historical tale, which have resonance for our contemporary situation, even though we will not directly address the present. For example, in reading what Bickerman has to say about Mattathias the priestly rebel, we may, on one hand, be reminded of contemporary religious fanatics and terrorists. Or, on the other, we may come to see him as a moderate religious reformer who helped lead the Rabbis to accommodate Jewish law to the historical need for survival. In reviewing the career of Judah and his brothers, we will see the military tactics of a freedom fighter but also the power of religious inspiration in a battle against a world empire. In studying Judah’s brothers, we will discover the relative value of diplomacy that may have been even more important than actual military prowess in gaining independence from the Greek Syrians.

Victor Tcherikover offers a particularly penetrating analysis of the Maccabean revolt as a complex civil war with its ethnic, legal and class aspects, all of which are reminiscent of the way we see political struggles today. Both Bickerman and Tcherikover conclude their histories by relating to the ancient and yet contemporary question — Did this Jewish state that arose after the Maccabean victory constitute just a new form of assimilation to Western forms, in effect, a capitulation to Antiochus; or did a Judaism with its own independent state create a truly Jewish state? That is a matter of intense debate between Bickerman and Tcherikover because even today we are arguing to what extent Judaism and Western values are compatible. When our past is read in dramatic detail, it offers us analogies to our world, which will hopefully lead us to moderate internal Jewish conflict and develop a more pluralistic understanding of our people.

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**Timeline of the Maccabees**

**Early History**

**1700 BCE**

- circa 1700 — Abraham arrives from Babylonia.
- circa 1200 — Exodus from Egypt
- circa 1000 — King David and King Solomon make Jerusalem capital of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judea, and erect the Temple.
- 722 — Northern Kingdom of Israel is conquered by Assyria and ten tribes are exiled.
- 586 — David’s Dynasty falls when Jerusalem is destroyed with its Temple and the Jews of Judea are exiled to Babylonia.
- 539 — Persian Emperor Cyrus allows Jews to return to Judea (539) to rebuild the Temple (516) and to establish Torah as the Constitution of Judea (Ezra, 450).

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1. The chronology is based roughly on Elias Bickerman’s timeline with variations in the light of other scholars’ opinions. Sometimes articles in this book will use different dates than those in this timeline depending on the author being quoted.
ALEXANDER THE GREAT (334-323 BCE)
AND HIS JEWISH ADMIRERS (174-167 BCE)

In the days before the Maccabean Revolt there arose a great cultural alliance between Hellenist universalism and Jewish religious reform which foreshadowed some of the attempts of modern Jews to accommodate Judaism to Western civilization. Alexander the Great created the idea of a universal civilization based on Greek ideas, which came to be known as Hellenism. Every nation he conquered had to decide what its stand would be toward assimilation into his cosmopolitan religious culture. Many “progressive” Jews chose to abandon Judaism altogether. Others sought to reform Judaism in the Hellenist spirit. Below is the story of their motives and their issues in creating this reform version of Judaism, and why it engendered such resistance that it backfired and caused the Maccabees to revolt and defeat it.

ALEXANDER’S GREATNESS:
HELENIST INTERNATIONAL CULTURE
by Victor Tcherikover

In spring 334 BCE Alexander of Macedonia crossed the narrow sea that divides Europe from Asia, and went to war with the King of Persia. In a few years he had successfully dealt the Persian army its deathblow and had put an end to the rule of the royal house of Persia. On the ruins of the mighty kingdom, which he had destroyed, Alexander established his own realm. Those eleven years (334-323 BCE) began a new chapter in the history of the ancient world, the so-called Hellenistic Period, chronologically set 332 BCE.

HELENIST PERIOD

332 BCE

332 — Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquers the Persian Empire including Egypt and Syria.

3rd Century — Greek Dynasty of Egypt — Ptolemy — rules Judea.

174-172 or 171 — High Priest Jason obtains the right to transform Jerusalem into a Greek polis (with a gymnasium) which is renamed “Antioch.” Thereby he replaces the Torah as the constitution of Judea.

200 — Antiochus III, the Greek Seleucid Dynasty of Greater Syria captures Judea.

172 or 171-163 — High Priest Menelaus bribes Antiochus IV to replace Jason and to completely Hellenize Judea.

169 — Jason recaptures Jerusalem from Menelaus apparently after hearing a false rumor that Antiochus IV was killed in war. In response, Antiochus IV puts down the revolt, robs the Temple of its golden Menorah, and builds a garrison fortress (Acra) in Jerusalem for Greek-Syrian soldier-settlers.

167 December — The Temple is rededicated to Zeus Olympus, the walls of Jerusalem are razed and the religious persecution of Jews begins. (Book of Daniel written).

2. Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews, p. 1,7
between Alexander the Great and the coming of the Romans to the countries of the East.

In order to bring the Macedonians nearer to the Persians, Alexander held a great wedding at Susa [Shushan in Persia where the story of Esther is set], in which at his command eighty eminent Macedonians married noble women of Persia. It is worth noting that the ceremony was according to Persian custom. Ten thousand Macedonian troops who wedded foreign wives received gifts from the king. His desire to merge the peoples affected even the Macedonian holy of holies — the organization of the army. Before the very eyes of the Macedonians, and despite them, he appointed generals from among the Persians, made Persians his bodyguards and even bestowed upon some of them the honorary title of “kinsmen of the king.” The Macedonians tried to oppose him, but at last saw that they were incapable of breaking the king’s will and gave in. Alexander, to celebrate peace and concord, held a splendid banquet in which Persians and Macedonians alike took part, while priests of Greece and Persian Magi poured libations and prayed for the welfare of those gathered. Thus did Alexander display at various opportunities his determination to efface the difference between victors and vanquished and to fuse westerners and easterners into a single nation.

Alexander died suddenly at Babylon, in the summer of 323 BCE, before he had lived to be thirty-three. What he would have done in the world had he continued to live is an idle question; but the work which he had succeeded in carrying out was sufficient to give the course of history a new direction. By destroying the Persian kingdom, Alexander had abolished the frontier between the East and the West and opened the countries of the Orient to the Greeks from the Mediterranean Sea to the frontiers of India. He had also shown to future generations the direction in which he desired the historical process to develop — the merging of the East and

167 BCE

164 or 163 — 
**Death of Antiochus in battle**

160 or 166 — 
Mattathias the Priest refuses to sacrifice pigs to Zeus and declares a revolt which his son Judah the Maccabee leads.

160 — 
**Death of Judah:** The defeat of Maccabees by Greek Syrians reinstates High Priest Alcimus, but does not renew forced Hellenization.

163-161 — 
After the death of Antiochus IV and a series of unsuccessful Greek Syrian campaigns against the Maccabees, the Greek Syrians cancel the persecution, reinstate the Torah as the constitution, kill the Hellenized High Priest Menelaus and appoint a traditional High Priest Alcimus. But Judah fights on defeating General Nicanor and then he signs a treaty with the rising Roman Republic for the political independence of Judea.

142 BCE

142-140 — 
After Jonathan is assassinated, his brother Simon is appointed High Priest by the Greek Syrians, confirmed by the Judean assembly as Prince (nas) and recognized as head of an independent state by the Greek Syrians and the Romans. The Greek Syrian garrison-citadel in Jerusalem, the Acra, is captured and dismantled, and the Jews begin to mint their own coins.
THE SELEUCID EMPIRE AND ITS RIVALS

37 BCE - 5 CE —
King Herod replaces the Hasmonean Dynasty in Judea but marries Hasmonean Marianne. Then he expands and renovates the Temple Mount. This is the era of Hillel and Shamai as rabbinic leaders.

5-66 CE —
Roman procurators rule Judea directly: Pontius Pilate orders the execution of Jesus.

63 BCE

134-63 —
Hasmonean Dynasty: King/High Priest John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE)
(The First Book of the Maccabees is written).

Alexander Yannai (103-76 BCE)
Salome Alexandra (76-67 BCE)
Aristobulus II (67-63 BCE)

63 —
Roman Conquest: General Pompey invades Judea and appoints as governor, the Hasmonean subject-king Hyrcanus II (63-43 BCE) and later Rome appoints Antigonus Mattathias (40-37 BCE) who mints coins with the menorah imprinted on them.

66-70 CE —
The Jewish Revolt against Rome and then the destruction of the Second Temple and of all Jerusalem concludes with the fall of the Zealots on Masada (73 CE).
the West into one cultural body. History, indeed, confirmed the great king’s dream. The fusion of peoples and cultures became a fact, although it was not realized at the pace that Alexander had hoped for, nor exactly in the form he had dreamed. The penetration of Greek culture to the Orient and the Orient’s influence on the Greeks are the basic themes of the history of the centuries between Alexander’s death and the conquest of the eastern lands by Rome.

Later the great geographer Eratosthenes declared that men are not to be distinguished as Greek or barbarian, but rather according to their virtues or their vices [“for in the one the sense of right and community, of education and eloquence prevails, and in the other the contrary”]. Thus the Hellenistic epoch produced a new picture of man and the key concept in it was paideia (education). As the Greek Isocrates put it:

The designation “Hellene” seems no longer to be a matter of descent but of disposition and those who share in our education have more right to be called Hellenes than those who have a common descent with us.

Alexander’s victorious expedition gave new possibilities to the idea of “Greeks by paideia.” The Graeco-Macedonian soldiers, officials and merchants planted their customary institutions of education, the Greek school — the gymnasium. School and gymnasium together gave the Greek minority support against the threat of assimilation to the “barbarian” environment; they were “the basis on which Greek culture was built up.” Here generation upon generation of the foreign ruling class received its traditional Greek education and life-style, which bound together all Greeks far beyond the boundaries of the world-empires.

During the three centuries which we call Hellenistic — that is, the period between Alexander the Great and Emperor Augustus (330 to 30 BCE) — the notion of the “Hellene,” like the modern notion of the “European,” grew into a concept independent of descent. In Hellenistic Egypt the whole population was officially divided into two classes: the natives, called the “Egyptians,” and the immigrants, called the “Hellenes,” regardless of their origin. In point of fact, the immigrants were Hellenized with singular rapidity. (As early as the third century BCE synagogues in Egypt were dedicated in honor of Greek kings and the Scriptures were translated into Greek. What could be more Hellenic and more alien to the Orientals than
Whether or not to accept this culture was a question of life and death for every people.

In its tendency and in its claim, therefore, Hellenistic culture was universal. To it belonged the mighty of the world and the world’s dominion. It was vested with the superiority that the judgement of war constantly reaffirmed. It was open to all. Whether or not to accept this culture was therefore a question of life and death for every people. The nations of the ancient world were confronted by the same problem that confronts the Oriental peoples in the modern world from Tokyo to Cairo, whether to adopt the supranational and therefore superior European culture or else accept an inferior status.

In antiquity the problem was actually solved by only two peoples, the Romans and the Jews. Other peoples shut themselves off from Hellenism and its effects upon them were therefore only negative. The native cultures were disintegrated and enfeebled. They lost their upper class, whose connection with the people had been ruptured by the process of Hellenization. (The Egyptians, for example, deprived of their upper class, their intellectual elite, for centuries lagged behind the inexorable march of history and so suffered the fate of enslavement to foreign conquerors).

Strategies of Jewish Survival: Separatism or Accommodation?

For Judaism, then, the question of its historical existence or disappearance depended upon its ability to accommodate itself to Western culture. But in the days of the Maccabees, the law interposed a wall between Jews and non-Jews. Nothing brings people closer together than a common table. But dietary laws forbade the Jew to taste the food of the non-Jewish neighbor. There is no closer tie than the bond of matrimony. But the Jews told with approval the story of a father who abandoned his own daughter in order to free his brother from a passing attachment to a pagan dancing girl. [To a man of the Hellenistic age this “separation from the nations” could be regarded as nothing else than the expression of a Jewish “hatred of mankind.”] No one outside Jewry itself has ever recognized positive merit in the separation. When the Jew declined to associate with pagan slave women, such an attitude seemed an invidious distinction even to a friend of the Jews, who posed the question: “Are they not human beings like yourself?” [The ritual separation of the Jews became one of the chief causes of ancient antisemitism. According to Eratosthenes (275-194 BCE), ‘xenophobia’ was a typical characteristic of the barbarians: The ideal of the educated was not segregation in a national religion with separatist customs, but world citizenship].

To “advanced” Jews, therefore, it seemed imperative to let these bars fall. “In those days,” we read in First Maccabees, “there emerged in Israel lawless men who persuaded many, saying, ‘Let us go and make a covenant with the nations that are around us; for since we separated ourselves from them, many evils have come upon us.’” [As in the traditional Jewish view, these “lawless men,” these Hellenist Jewish reformers, present disaster in history as a punishment for the wrong conduct of the people. But its content is turned upside down: the catastrophe of past history has been caused, they claim, not by imitation of the Gentiles and their idolatry, but by separation.] “In those days” denotes the reign of the Syrian King Antiochus IV, surnamed Epiphanes (176-163 BCE). The new King entrusted the position of High Priest at the Temple in Jerusalem — and hence the rule over Judea — to men of that same “advanced” party, first to a man who called himself by the Greek name of Jason (about
inviolate and as long as the Law enjoining misanthropic [humanity-hating] separation continued in force. Like the Emancipation of the nineteenth century, that of the second century BCE must have necessarily led to religious “reform.”

Jerusalem becomes Antioch

In 169 BCE, then, a regular Greek city surrounded by walls and fortified by towers, was founded upon one of the hills of Jerusalem, opposite the Temple Mount. The name of this city is unknown; in our tradition it is referred to simply as Acra, that is to say, the Citadel. Henceforward the Sanctuary was dependent upon this Greek city. This was only natural. The Hellenistic culture, understandably enough, had first affected the upper classes, the Jerusalemites and the priesthood. When the signal went up for the exercises upon the athletic field to begin, it was the priests who hastened to the contests and surrendered their priestly linens for the nakedness of Greek sports. Greek marks of distinction were prized above old-fashioned, native honors. People strove to appear wholly Greek — externally, by removing the marks of circumcision through a painful operation; inwardly, by participating in the games in honor of the foreign gods and even by contributing money for sacrifices to these gods.

But the leaders of the party understood perfectly well that all this must remain merely a diversion of the upper classes as long as the Sanctuary remained

The First “Reform Jews” in History

Jason and Menelaus, in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, wished to follow the other course; they desired to accommodate traditional Judaism to the times. Their intention was to preserve those characteristics of the Jewish religion which suited Greek taste — the imageless God, for example — but to remove everything which smacked of separation of the “ghetto”: Sabbath observance, beards, circumcision and that namelessness of God which was otherwise to be met with only among the most primitive peoples.

Henceforth the Lord on Zion must bear a name, which could be communicated to Greek friends who might inquire what manner of God it was that the people of Jerusalem worshipped. In Greek that name was Zeus Olympius. For some time the Jews had been
Henceforth the Lord on Zion must bear a name, which could be communicated to Greek friends who might inquire what manner of God it was that the people of Jerusalem worshipped. In Greek that name was Zeus Olympius.

in the habit of calling their God “Lord of Heaven,” or even simply “Heaven,” as is the regular practice in the First Book of Maccabees. But for the Greeks the Lord of Heaven was Zeus Olympius. In Aramaic the expression was probably *Baal Shemin*, under which title all the peoples of Syria worshipped the ruler of heaven. In this manner the “God of the Jews” was now accepted into the general pantheon. Now He was no longer worshipped in the dim light of the Holy of Holies, but under the open sky, in an enclosure, as was the practice in the most highly revered sanctuaries of Syria and in keeping with the Greek ideal. Even after its transformation, the cult naturally remained aniconic — educated Greeks had long ridiculed the notion that the gods had a human form. But the presence of the Almighty was now symbolized by a “sacred stone” upon the sacrificial altar in the middle of the forecourt of the Temple. All the requirements of the law concerning the sacrificial ritual were rescinded. The pig was now approved as a sacrificial animal: prohibition of its use for sacrifice or food had seemed the most striking mark of Jewish separatism.

[The ancient Greek historian Diodorus justifies Antiochus Epiphanes’ persecutions in 167 BCE based on the Jews’ presumed hatred of humankind (misanthropy). He reports that when Antiochus had entered the Holy of Holies, he had discovered an image, which he supposed to be that of Moses who had created the misanthropic customs of the Jews:

And since Epiphanes was shocked by such hatred directed against all humankind, he set himself to break down their traditional practices. Accordingly, he sacrificed before the image of their founder (Moses) and the open-air altar of their god a great sow and poured its blood over them. Then having prepared its flesh, he ordered that their holy books, containing the xenophobic (anti-foreigner) laws, should be sprinkled with the broth of the meat. The lamp, which they called undying [the *ner tamid*] and which burnt continually in the Temple, should be extinguished, and the high priest and the rest of the Jews should be compelled to partake of the meat.]

After December of 167 BCE sacrifices on Mount Zion were carried out according to the new ritual. Offerings were made to the same God and on the same spot as formerly, but the manner was new and in direct opposition to the old. Moreover, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was no longer sole ruler in Jerusalem. Adaptation to the religious customs of the Greeks was impossible without the surrender of monotheism. And so the festivals of Dionysus were celebrated in Jerusalem, and perhaps Athene, too, figured among the new divinities; certainly the deified kings of the ruling dynasty were included.

At the same time the High Priest Menelaus procured a decree from the King prohibiting the Mosaic law and ordering the introduction of pagan customs. Such a measure was in complete accord with the thought of the Greek social reformers, who, since Plato, had always regarded the lawgiver as the creator of social life. According to the historical principles basic to Greek thought, Jewish law was the invention of Moses, enjoined by him upon his followers. If Menelaus now wished to impose his own law upon the people, his conduct could not be regarded as improper. It was these measures that passed into the consciousness of contemporaries and posterity as the “persecutions of Epiphanes.” With them the history of the Maccabees begins.
The Independence of the Greek City

The most prominent feature of the Greek cities of the classical period was their independence. The Greeks took it for granted that no city (polis) could exist except under conditions of liberty. Two terms were the constant watchword of the cities in all their struggles against one another: “autonomy” — the right to conduct the city’s affairs according to its own laws, and “liberty” — non-subjection to any power whatever outside the city. The original Greek polis was not a city in our sense of the term, but a petty state. Questions of war and peace, the making of alliances with other cities, monetary arrangements, the drafting of laws and statutes, the internal authority — all these were conducted by the members of the city with complete freedom and without coercion from outside.

In those cities which were conducted according to the rules of democracy (such as Athens), the whole people (the demos) participated in the exercise of power and everyone had the right to express his opinion in the general assembly of the city. The citizens elected a city council, which decided all questions on the agenda. This right to self-government constituted the outstanding superiority of the town over the village. Yet from the economic point of view the city itself was a sort of large village; not only merchants and craftsmen but also landowners and working farmers dwelt there as citizens and most of the lands about it were the private property of its members. Thus, in the economic sense, the town did not cease outside its own gates, but extended over a wide area round about, so that its borders touched the borders of the next city.

Every Greek city was surrounded by a wall and this fortification symbolized its independence. The greatest catastrophe and disgrace that could befall it was to be deprived of its rights, as a sequel to an unsuccessful war or an internal revolution. In such case the town was humiliated and deposed from its political eminence, its walls were dismantled, and it became a village. Such occurrences the Greeks called “the destruction of the city.”

The Hellenistic Empire and its Cities in the East

Alexander was the first of the Hellenistic kings to build Greek cities in the eastern countries. He founded Alexandria of Egypt with the intention of creating an important commercial city which would serve as a bridge between Greece and the land of the Pharaohs. In the countries of central Asia and in western India, he built a large number of “Alexandrias” in order to fortify the frontier of his empire.

[The Macedonian generals who succeeded Alexander] introduced new political principles into the life of the ancient world making the main motivating factor the unrestricted strength of a forceful personality aspiring to power. The Macedonian people produced within a brief space a large number of aggressive characters, who used the confusion of the period to make themselves absolute rulers. Two men — Ptolemy and Seleucus — at length emerged victors from the hurly-burly of the period of the Diadochi.
Seleucus obtained the largest portion of Alexander’s empire; all the countries of Asia from the frontiers of India to the Mediterranean were under his rule. Seleucus I and his son Antiochus I founded a large number of Greek cities in Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Media and Afghanistan. Every new city needed a name, and its endowment with such was in the Hellenistic period an act of importance to which political value also might attach. The vast majority of the names belonging to Greek cities were dynastic in origin and proclaimed their founders, who named them either after themselves or after their forebearers. Side by side with the “Alexandrias” there arose flourishing “Antiochs” and “Seleuceias,” extensive and important cities.

[Theoretically the Greek cities were regarded as “allies” of the king; their relation to him was not that of subjects to their lord, but of two political powers possessing equal rights. The defense of city rights, of their “freedom” and “autonomy,” was a matter of honor in the eyes of the kings and an attribute of civilized political behavior. Hence the kings accorded license to the ancient cities “to live according to their ancestral laws,” that is, they confirmed the traditional constitutions of the cities. They also permitted new ones to conduct their internal affairs freely, to elect a council and officials, to strike coins, to hold athletic contests, and so on. Each city possessed laws of its own, according to which its officials conducted its public life].

Democracy for the Elite

Let us now turn to the inner life of the Greek town in the East. The urban population was divided juridically into two parts: citizens and mere inhabitants. [In Athens it is estimated that 80% were slaves and foreigners. All the natives living around the city in the agricultural hinterland as well as low-born persons born and bred within the city were subject to the rule of the minority of Greek citizens of the polis]. Only the [male] citizens enjoyed all civic rights, while the residents were regarded as foreign-born natives, although they might have been born in the city and have grown up there.

The citizen educated his sons in the municipal educational institutions — the gymnasion (for ages 17-20) and the ephebeion (for ages 14-16), which were the very embodiment of the spirit of Hellenism. Here
the young citizens received their Hellenic education, developed their strength and agility by physical exercise, and learned poetry and music. [Literary instruction concentrated on one language — Greek, and on one book — Homer’s epic tale of war, The Iliad. There was no test or report card because the public contests in all fields generated their own intrinsic motivation. The very idea of constant competition, the agonistic ideal of life, basically goes back to Homer. Its overall object was to fashion the ideal of Greek gentlemen. Because of its slant towards sport and its spiritual foundation in the chivalrous ideals of the Homeric world, Hellenism acquired an expressly aristocratic character. After hesitation at some unusual manifestations like the competition of naked youths in the palaestra had been overcome, it could also exercise a stronger attraction over the youths of subject peoples than the educational ideal of the oriental scribe, which was predominantly directed towards religious attitudes and traditional “wisdom”.

The oriental peoples were ignorant of this gymnastic education, and physical culture was generally alien to their outlook; hence the gymnasium became the symbol of Hellenism. An inner connection existed, moreover, between the gymnasia and the athletic contests, which were held in the large cities every four years. The large crowds, which attended the contests, imparted to them the character of immense demonstrations in honor of Hellenism. These athletic assemblies were for the Greeks not simply amusements, but affairs of the greatest gravity and moment, not only culturally but also politically. During the festivals the Greeks were sensible of the living bond between themselves and all their fellow Greeks scattered over the world, a bond that bound them to ancient Greek tradition and to their mother-country.

Religion occupied an important place in the life of the Greek city; it is possible to state without exaggeration that its entire public life revolved within the framework of Greek religion. Every polis had its particular god who was its guardian and whose cult was the focus of the religious life of the citizen body. [Moreover, the gymnasium possessed its own guardian deities: Hermes, Heracles and the muses. Young people at school played an important role in the feasts that honored the gods of the city. In the Hellenist monarchies the ruler cult gained overwhelming significance in the gymnasia in particular; this tendency to revere human heroes and benefactors as gods began at an early stage in the gymnasium].

To obtain the privileges of a polis was very beneficial to the economic development of a city. It received the right to strike bronze coins for the local market and to take part in international Hellenist undertakings (such as the athletic contests) which constituted a convenient means of creating political and economic connections with other countries. The city could further anticipate that the favor of the sovereign founder whose name, or alternatively whose father’s or mother’s name, it had received, would not be withheld in an hour of need.

The wealthy bourgeoisie of the Orient and the upper strata of the landed aristocracy and of the priesthood were interested in the conversion of their towns to a polis. They were prepared to purchase the valued privileges even at the price of some concessions in their traditional regimes, since every conversion of an oriental town into a Greek polis was bound up with the Hellenization of its social life. The king, for his part, was interested in the Hellenization of the eastern cities, since in this way he gained loyal friends among the local population. Thus an alliance was formed between the wealthy bourgeoisie of the ancient oriental towns and

These athletic assemblies were for the Greeks not simply amusements, but affairs of the greatest gravity and moment, not only culturally but also politically.
the Hellenistic kings, an alliance whose external mark was the exchange of the city’s traditional constitution for the new constitution of a Greek polis. A “Greek city” means a city organized in the form of a Greek polis, not a city whose inhabitants were racial Greeks.

[When Jerusalem became a polis named Antioch, it ceased to be a Temple-centered *ethnos* (an ethnic province with its own recognized cultural traditions). It became a *democracy* for the elite only, wealthy Hellenized urbanites who could afford the education of their children. *Thus democracy and Westernization became tools for the oppression of the vast majority of Jews in the imperial state inspired by Alexander the Great.*]
were offered even upon the altar of the
Sanctuary at Jerusalem, upon which each day,
in early morning and at the approach of
evening, offerings had been made to the God
of Israel. The “abomination of desolation”
(probably an idol of Zeus) hovered over the
Sanctuary and the wrath of God over the
people. Never before and never thereafter
was the spiritual existence of Israel so
imperiled. Was this not the last trial, that
“Day of the Lord” so often proclaimed and
threatened by the prophets?

The Book of Daniel (167 BCE)

A book has come down to us from this
period of persecution, the biblical Book of
Daniel. In the midst of these afflictions a
seer perceived the significance of the ancient
prophecies concerning the world empires,
their wars, and the tribulations of the holy
people. To Daniel, these prophecies seemed
to speak of his own time, and thus he
interpreted them for his contemporaries,

Daniel felt that the end of time was approaching,
and he could see no salvation for the people other
than through the direct intervention of God.

suiting them to the events during the
persecutions of Epiphanes. He felt that the
day of the end was approaching, and he could
see no salvation for the people other than
through the direct intervention of God. He
knew well enough that the Romans had just
driven Antiochus Epiphanes from Egypt, and
that the King was then waging a campaign in
the East. Yet he refused to think of the
possibility, frequently suggested by the
prophets, that another earthly power might,
in fulfillment of the divine plan, crush the
persecutor to earth. Rather would Epiphanes
yet conquer Egypt, he foretold: “There shall be
a time of trouble as never before” — until “there
will arrive with the clouds of heaven one like a son of
man” to rule over the world forever. The
reader of this book knew that supplication

and fast — but never a human act — might alter the course of events and shorten the
period of tribulation.

Assimilation or Martyrdom
in Jerusalem

Daniel’s resignation was no accident.
Judaism’s cause seemed desperate precisely
because the Jews showed no zeal in its
defense. (Two centuries later, when the
Roman governor Pontius Pilate had his
standards bearing the image of the emperor
set up in the Temple area, the people went to
his headquarters at Caesarea and for five days
and five nights besought him to remove the
human likenesses from the Holy City. And
when Pilate’s soldiers surrounded the crowd
with swords drawn, the Jews bared their
necks. They preferred death to acquiescence
— and Pilate yielded). But in 166 BCE
Jerusalem was filled with monuments of the
pagan cult, and the princes of Jerusalem
together with the men of Judea obediently
heeded the will of the earthly ruler. Altars
were built before the doors of the houses and
sacrifices were offered upon them, to make a
public display of zeal for the new paganism.

Only a few proved unyielding and openly
transgressed the commandment of the King
for the sake of the commandment of the
living God. They were seized, scourged,
martyred, and slain. More numerous were
those who sought to evade the order of the
King. Without standing forth openly as Jews,
they still avoided any participation in the
idolatrous rites. In order to lay hold of these,
officers of the King journeyed from city to
city, coercing the people into open apostasy.
They would cause an altar to be erected in the
market place, summon the populace, and
require them to worship the gods and taste
the flesh of the offerings. Many refused, and
suffered martyrdom. “They shall stumble by
sword and by flame,” says Daniel of them, “by
captivity and by spoil, many days.”
FIRST, LET US DWELL UPON THE METHOD WHICH LINKS THE ANTIOCHAN DECREES WITH THE CHARACTER OF THE KING. The classical historian Polybius has strange things to tell of him. He lacked political tact and did not understand how to behave as befitted a king. Sometimes he would leave his palace and wander through the streets of his capital with two or three of his courtiers, enter shops and the craftsmen’s places of work and converse at length with these insignificant people. Once, during one of his habitual visits to the public baths he poured a jar full of perfumed ointment over the heads of the bathers and enjoyed the sight of the people rolling on the slippery floor, unable to rise or to keep their balance, himself among them. Particularly fond of taking part in the carousings of common folk, he was more than once seen in the shady company of aliens of unknown origin and identity. If he heard of some drinking party that was being held by young people, he would appear suddenly among the guests accompanied by an orchestra, making so strange an impression on the participants that fear fell upon them and many would make their escape. Sometimes he walked the streets of Antioch splendidly garbed and crowned with roses, showering upon those he met now rings of gold, now simple stones.

Like Nero two hundred years after him, he liked to participate personally in theater performances. Once during a magnificent festival, which he was holding at Antioch, he appeared on the stage before the audience as an actor, and began to dance with the other players. The Greeks had never seen their king in such a role, and many left the banqueting hall in shame. His behavior toward other people was full of contradictions and sudden surprises, for he was silent in the company of his best friends and talkative with strangers. To some he gave precious gifts such as silver and gold, and to others, without clear reason, worthless objects such as dates and dice. Irritable and nervous, full of profound inner contradictions, ever striving to do something extraordinary and to astound the world — this was the figure cut by King Antiochus in the eyes of his Greek contemporaries. Hence it is not to be wondered at that humorists mocked him and called him in jest Epimanes (“mad” — instead of Epiphanes, ”the god manifest”).

THE VIEW WHICH PREVAILED IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, AND STILL FINDS ITS DISCIPLES TODAY, HOLDS THAT THE MAIN MOTIVE FOR ANTIOCHUS’ POLICY WAS HIS GREAT DEVOTION TO THE HELLENISTIC SPIRIT AND CULTURE. Many scholars see in Antiochus, the Hellenizer par excellence, who was determined to spread Hellenic culture among all his subjects in order to make it an instrument for uniting all the inhabitants of his huge empire into a single body. In contrast to all the rest of the population, who accepted Hellenization, however, the Jews alone resisted it. In Palestine Antiochus’ Hellenistic tradition encountered another tradition, deeply rooted in the soil, and scholars offer differing evaluations of the fierce clash between Greek culture and Jewish monotheism — each scholar according to his general views on Hellenism and Judaism respectively.

If we turn to the sources, we shall find in them many facts, which appear to support this manner of thinking. Antiochus was

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6. Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews (p. 175-181)
renowned in the ancient world as an enthusiastic Hellenist. The leaders of the Greek people explicitly emphasized that he was the first and only Seleucid king to bestow benefactions upon the Greek people and to concern himself with their many needs.7 His generosity to the Greeks knew no bounds. The novel character of Antiochus’ activity was already existed. He turned the ancient oriental towns, which had not yet been Hellenized into Greek poleis, by granting them special political privileges. Some eighteen cities were linked by name to that of the philhellenic king, [a king who loves and promotes Hellenism].

The great political importance of the Hellenization of these oriental towns is not to be denied. This policy created friends for Antiochus among the wealthy bourgeoisie of those communities and so considerably strengthened the entire state. It has already been observed that Antioch-at-Jerusalem also was intended as a link in the long chain of strongholds of the new Hellenism in the Seleucid Empire. Second Maccabees relates that at the beginning of the persecutions an order was published by the king to extend the persecution to the Jewish population of the Greek cities of Syria. In it the king ordered the execution of those Jews “who do not wish to go over to Greek ways of life.”

This [previous] view which is to all appearances supported by such convincing proofs cannot in fact stand up to criticism, for the following reasons. The Seleucids were never “bearers of culture” and never intended to Hellenize the populations of the Orient on profound spiritual matters. Hellenization expressed itself in a purely external political form, that of the transformation of oriental towns into Greek poleis. There are no grounds for supposing that the “philhellenism” of Antiochus was expressed in any other form. Antiochus saw in Hellenism a political means of strengthening his state; but it never occurred to him to abolish local culture and to substitute for it the Greek. [Rather Antiochus sought political unification by adding a level of worship of himself as “epiphanes” — god-manifest.]

The doctrine of “unification” holds that Antiochus sought to strengthen his crumbling kingdom by political centralization and

The king’s ultimate aim was to introduce into his realm the worship of himself in the form of Zeus Olympius.

Maccabees IV: Elazar the Martyr’s Death as a Prototype for Jesus

Philosophical Reflections on Rational Martyrs and Vicarious Sacrifice

The Book of Maccabees IV (written by an author different than Maccabees I,II or III) is a reflection on the virtues of the Maccabean martyrs like the elderly Elazar who refused to eat ritually impure food and like Hannah and her seven sons who refused to bow down to Zeus and Antiochus. Their courage is attributed to the supremacy of reason — the highest Greek ideal — not to enthusiastic zealotry and blind faith. Early Christianity, which produced its own martyrs under Roman Imperial persecution, was deeply influenced by this notion of vicarious sacrifice and the saving efficacy of the death of the martyred righteous. Perhaps this notion of the death of the pure as a “ransom for the sinful” directly influenced the idea of Jesus’ death as atonement for the sins of humankind. [See the “Cult of the Maccabees in Christianity” on page 42 and the article by Eugene Wiener on “The Sociological Analysis of the Martyr” on page 176]. Maccabees IV quotes Elazar’s prayer:

“Be merciful to your people and let our punishment [as martyrs by the Greek Syrians] be a satisfaction on their behalf. Make my blood their purification and take my life as a ransom for theirs.” That prayer was answered. “The tyrant was punished and our land purified, since they became a ransom for the sin of our nation. Through the blood of these righteous ones and through the atonement of their death, the Divine Providence rescued Israel.”

8. IV Maccabees 17:21-23, written in the first century BCE in Greek

7. Polybius XXIX, 9,13
cultural unification. The establishment of one religion for all the people of the state was part of his plan of reform [but it did not necessarily require prohibiting other forms of local worship]. This explanation too finds authority in the sources. *First Maccabees* 4:1 relates: “And the king wrote to all his kingdom that all should be one people and that each people should abandon its customs; and all the peoples did as the king commanded.”

This interpretation has found unexpected support in numismatics. Coins afford evidence that under Antiochus Epiphanes the cult of Zeus Olympius took root in his dominions, being especially fostered by the king and replacing the traditional cult of Apollo, the divine guardian of the Seleucid dynasty. Specialists further point to coins of Antiochus on which the image of Zeus resembles the king’s features. From this they conclude that the king’s ultimate aim was to introduce into his realm the worship of himself in the form of Zeus Olympius, and that this also was the cult which was to prevail on the Temple hill at Jerusalem. This doctrine looks much better founded than the preceding. [Antiochus created a syncretic cult, mixing Greek and Oriental elements.] Zeus Olympius was actually an original Greek deity, but could easily be identified with any “chief” god of the oriental pantheon, and particularly with the Syrian “Baal Shamin.” The God of Israel could also (in Antiochus’ view, at least) be readily identified with Zeus, [so Antiochus did not expect that suppressing the Jewish religion would need to be part of his program].

Persecution under Antiochus IV: Elazar the Scribe, compelled to eat pork, prefers to die.
Hellenist sources present the tortures used regularly by the Graeco Roman authorities. They seek both to titillate their readers who loved melodrama and bodily gore (like the gladiators) and to impress Jew and Greek alike with the physical and spiritual heroism of the “martyrs” who bear witness by bearing their suffering stoically. Interestingly enough, a woman — the mother Hannah — is portrayed in Second Maccabees 7 as the most ideologically steadfast. [Compare this version to the medieval midrash about Hannah in the companion volume, A Different Light: The Hanukkah Celebration, page 42]:

It happened that seven brothers were also arrested with their mother, and were tortured with whips and thongs by the King, to force them to taste of the unlawful swine’s meat. One of them made himself their advocate and said, “What do you expect to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die, rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.”

The King was infuriated and gave orders that pans and cauldrons should be heated. And when they were immediately heated, he commanded that the tongue of the one who had been their advocate should be cut out, and that they should scalp him and cut off his extremities, while his brothers and mother looked on. And when he was utterly crippled, the King ordered them to bring him to the fire and fry him. And as the vapor from the pan spread quickly, they and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, “The Lord God is looking on . . . .”

But when he was at his last gasp, he said, “You wretch, you release us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up, because we have died for His laws, to an everlasting renewal of life.”

But their mother was surpassingly wonderful, and deserves a blessed memory, for though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage, because of her hope in the Lord. And she encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors, for she was filled with a noble spirit and stirred her woman’s heart with manly courage.

When the youngest son paid no attention to him, the King called the mother to him and urged her to advise the boy to save himself. After he had labored with her a long time, she undertook to persuade her son. She bent over him, and mocking the cruel tyrant, she spoke thus, in the language of her ancestors:

“My son, have pity on me, who carried you nine months in the womb, and nursed you for three years, and brought you up and brought you to your present age, and supported you. I beseech you, my child, to look up at the heaven and the earth, and see all that is in them, and perceive that God did not make them out of the things that existed, and in that way the human race came into existence. Do not be afraid of this butcher, but show yourself worthy of your brothers, and accept death, so that by God’s mercy I may get you back again with your brothers.”

Before she could finish, the young man said, “What are you waiting for? I will not obey the command of the King, but I obey the command of the Law that was given to our ancestors through Moses . . . . I, like my brothers, give up body and soul for the laws of my ancestors, calling upon God speedily to show mercy to our nation, and to lead you to confess, in trials and plagues, that he alone is God, and to stay through me and my brothers the wrath of the Almighty, which has justly fallen on our whole nation.”

But the King was infuriated and treated him worse than the others, being embittered at his mockery. So the boy passed away unpolluted, trusting firmly in the Lord. Last of all, the mother met her end, after her sons.

So much then for the eating of sacrifices and excessive barbarities.9

Hannah and her seven sons defy King Antiochus: “Indeed, who would not be astonished at the courage of this woman, who was worthy to be a proverb for many nations.” (II Maccabees 7:22)
(Julius Schnorr, 19th century Germany)

9. II Maccabees 7:1-6, 9, 20-21, 25-42
3.

**Mattathias — the Rebel Priest**

**Religious Zealot or Moderate Reformer?**

*by Elias Bickerman*

In the course of the winter of 166 BCE the agents of apostasy [abandonment of one’s religion] made their appearance in the town of Modiin, situated upon a hill near Lydda, on the road from Jerusalem to Jaffa. When the first Jew of Modiin stepped up to the pagan altar to sacrifice according to the King’s will, Mattathias, a priest whose family resided in Modiin, sprang out from the circle of bystanders. He struck the man down so that his body was stretched out upon the altar, slew the agent of the government, and then pulled down the altar.

In the age of the European religious wars, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the legitimacy of Mattathias’ conduct was vigorously debated. His hallowed precedent was held to justify subjects who oppose the authorities in questions of faith. This conception of his deed, which is not without significance even today, would have seemed strange and perhaps dangerous to Mattathias himself. In the speech, which First Maccabees\(^\text{11}\) puts into his mouth, Mattathias does not dispute the right of the ruler to alter the laws of peoples subject to him. He does oppose an order of the King, which is at variance with the revealed commandment of God. The struggle is not one of an individual conscience for freedom of belief, it is rather a conflict between earthly power and the law of the state of God. Mattathias championed the Torah as once the Biblical Pinchas had done, when he slew Zimri, who dared worship the Baal of the Midianites.\(^\text{12}\) But looked at through the eyes of worldly power, Mattathias’ deed was an act of political terrorism. Mattathias and his five sons, John (Yohanan), Simon, Judah, Elazar and Jonathan, fled from its punishment into the mountains of Judea.

In those days many in Israel sought out the wilderness. In order not to desecrate the holy covenant they went into the desert with “their sons, and their wives, and their cattle.” Such passive resistance by flight was common in antiquity. If an Egyptian peasant was oppressed by taxes, a debtor harried by his creditor, or later, a Christian persecuted for his faith, they took this means of eluding the reach of the state, whose organization was not yet so perfected as to lay hold of them. They forsook house and land and lived as wretched vagabonds, as is said of the Maccabees, “after the manner of wild beasts in the mountains.” But the state suffered a falling off in revenues as a result, and yielded more and more in the course of time, until finally an amnesty was proclaimed.

In the meanwhile, however, agents of the government sought to lay hands upon the fugitives. In 166 BCE a search was instituted in Judea for those who had disregarded the King’s command and had hidden themselves away in the wilderness. In this case the task of the police was rendered easy by a Jewish practice which seemed to the pagans the height of superstitious unreason. The Jews, lest they desecrate the day of rest, offered an attacker no resistance on the Sabbath. Thus in 312 BCE Ptolemy of Egypt had been able to take possession of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, without a blow. Now, too, the fugitives made no attempt to defend themselves on the day of rest. They neither threw stones at the enemy nor walled up the caves in which they had sought safety, but preferred to die in order conscientiously to fulfill the law of God for which they had forsaken their homes.

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\(^{10}\) Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Maccabees*, p. 96-101.

\(^{11}\) *I Maccabees*, 125 BCE

\(^{12}\) Numbers 25
Mattathias realized the situation: “If we all do as our brothers have done, and do not fight against the pagans for our lives and our laws, they will soon destroy us from off the earth.” Mattathias and his people therefore resolved, not indeed to attack, but at least to defend themselves on the Sabbath day. This rule continued in force even in the great uprising against the Romans (66-70 CE).

Mattathias and his people therefore resolved, not indeed to attack, but at least to defend themselves on the Sabbath day.

Even more significant is the fact that Mattathias ventured to interpret the law upon his own authority. In his day this privilege was vested in the High Priest and his council, who governed Jerusalem and Judea. It was the High Priest to whom God had given “authority over statute and judgment, that he might teach His people statutes, and judgments unto the children of Israel.” Mattathias, a man previously unknown, one priest among ten thousand, resolved to interpret the traditional law and to impose his interpretation upon the people and thus to infringe upon the prerogatives of the High Priest. He raised himself, perhaps without intending to do so, to the position of an opposition government. Hence his resolve constituted a turning point in Jewish history. His measure immediately gave him the authority of a leader. The “community of the pious” [the early Hasidim], a fraternity zealous for the law of God, joined him and his following was filled with those who fled the evil. Those who had abandoned their homes in order not to depart from the law “either to the right hand or to the left” were united by that very measure [suspending the observance of Shabbat for purposes of self defense] which infringed the Torah for the Torah’s sake.

Strengthened by these additions, Mattathias determined upon another deed, which was pregnant with consequences. Hitherto, like the other fugitives, he had evaded the royal decrees in order to seek a refuge in the desert where he might fulfill the commandments. But now the Maccabees determined to replace passive resistance by active struggle. They made a stealthy and roundabout entrance into the villages and summoned together those eager to fight. The force moved from place to place destroying the idolatrous altars where they found them, compelling the observance of the Torah by force. For example, they circumcised newborn infants, and killed apostate violators of the law. Thus, as their historian relates, they liberated the Torah from the hand of the heathen.

As is clear from this account, the wrath of the Maccabees was poured over the Jews and not the heathen. The company of the Maccabees was an active minority that sought to restore its law to the people. This law was in no sense an innovation, but the revelation of Moses.
Greek General Bacchides’ Calvary attacking Jerusalem.
(An illuminated manuscript made by the Crusaders in Acre, circa 12th Century)

4.

JUDAH THE MACCABEE
A GUERRILLA WARRIOR FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (166-162 BCE)
by Elias Bickerman

The brilliant military strategist of the Maccabean Revolt was Judah, nicknamed in Greek, the “hammer.” His guerrilla tactics and his power to inspire religious enthusiasm enabled him to do the impossible — to defeat army after army of the mighty Greek Syrian empire with a group of ragtag Jewish irregulars. Step by step he forced the Greek Syrians to retract their policy of persecution of Jewish practice, the paganization of the Temple and the repeal of the Torah as Judea’s constitution. However in his own lifetime during which he liberated the Temple (164 BCE) just three years after the revolt began, he never achieved political independence. Only a long 25 years later, after more warfare and much more diplomacy, did Judah’s brothers finally achieve that goal. Then they were recognized as the legitimate high priests and political leaders of an independent Judea (140 BCE). The political miracle took much more effort and perseverance than the eight-day burning of a vessel of oil.

STAGE 1:
Guerrilla Warfare against the Jewish Hellenist Reformers

When, during 166 BCE (or at the beginning of 165), Mattathias died, leadership devolved, we do not know why, upon the third of his living sons, Judah, surnamed the Maccabee. For two years Judah waged guerrilla war like his father, making surprise descents upon the Jewish apostates without venturing to attack any walled cities or the tyrant’s stronghold in Jerusalem.

At first, the central government paid no attention whatsoever to the Maccabean uprising. It must be remembered that the Seleucid empire extended from Egypt to the Persian Gulf, and that disturbances of this nature flared up constantly at one point or another. The handful of Maccabees could only be regarded as another robber band on the highways. But in the meanwhile Judah was steeling his company in guerrilla warfare. He also gave it a regular organization by appointing “captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, and captains of fifties, and captains of tens.” It would appear that his force amounted to something more than three thousand men.

It was important for the future course of events that the Hellenist reform party made no attempt at mustering its strength to put an end, once and for all, to the activity of the marauders. Their failure is easy to understand if we reflect that they belonged to the upper strata of the people, being city dwellers and Jerusalemites, and did not particularly relish chasing after the Maccabees through gorges and over stony hills. The mass of the peasantry, on the other hand, remained secretly devoted to the old faith.

13. From Ezra to the Maccabees, p. 112-126.
Judah ruthlessly extirpated the few in the countryside who followed the reform party, but at the same time he restored freedom of faith to the majority.

Before a battle Judah’s company fasted, clothed themselves in sackcloth, rent their garments, and prayed devoutly to the Lord of Hosts: “Behold, the pagans are gathered together against us to destroy us. How shall we be able to stand before them unless You help us?”

STAGE 2:
The Guerrillas fight the Empire

The new pagans of Jerusalem, the “sons of Acra” [the Greek citadel recently built in Jerusalem], sought protection against Judah from the King’s officers, whom they assisted moreover with auxiliaries, guides acquainted with the terrain, and the like. Judah defeated the troops that were sent against him, one after the other. When the Syrians were making a slow and laborious ascent to the pass of Bet Horon along the mountain path that led from the coastal plain to Jerusalem, they were suddenly attacked by swarms of Maccabees, routed, and pursued the length of the slope into the lowland. Schooled by this defeat in the hills, another Syrian army took up a position in the plain near Emmaus. This afforded a convenient post for controlling the roads to Jerusalem. During the night, under cover of the rough terrain, Judah led his company to a point south of Emmaus. The Syrian general planned to overwhelm the Maccabees by a surprise night attack. But, while the King’s troops were looking for Judah’s forces in the hills, Judah made an attack at dawn upon the Syrian encampment. Later in the day, when the Syrian troops approached Emmaus, they saw their camp in flames and fled to the Philistine country.

The success of Judah can be more readily understood, if we reflect upon the difficulties that guerrilla warfare in a hill country presents even to modern regular troops. The Seleucid armies were composed largely of contingents of [poorly paid] auxiliaries from various cities and peoples. The professional soldiery [of the Seleucid army] was employed only for more important enterprises.

It was now, in the fall of 165 BCE, that Judah’s successes began to disturb the central government. He appears to have controlled the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem, and thus to have cut off the royal party in Acra from direct communication with the sea and thus with the government. It is significant that this time the Syrian troops, under the leadership of the governor-general Lysias, took the southerly route, by way of Idumea. They encamped at Bet Zur, a fortress about thirty kilometers south of Jerusalem that was the key to Judea from the south. Judah was forced to quit his hiding place in the hills and hurry southward. Still he defeated Lysias.

STAGE 3:
Antiochus Rescinds Religious Persecution

And so Antiochus Epiphanes resolved to call a halt to the persecutions. In a proclamation to the Sanhedrin and the Jewish nation, he declared that he had been informed by the High Priest Menelaus that the Jews who had fled from their homes, those loyal to the ancient faith, amongst whom were the Maccabees, desired to return to their legal abodes. Exemption from punishment was guaranteed all who returned by March 29, 164 BCE and in addition, the assurance was given that the Jews would be permitted “to use their own food and to observe their own laws as of yore.” The persecution was thus ended.

The edict makes no mention of the Maccabees, by as much as a syllable. It is represented as an act of royal grace instigated by Menelaus. But such an interpretation
could not conceal the true state of affairs.  The cessation of the persecutions signified the defeat of Menelaus, who had been their instigator, and the victory of the Maccabees, something that must have seemed unbelievable to contemporaries.  David had again overcome Goliath.  Only a year before, the prophet Daniel [whose Biblical book was written in part in this period] could see no help except through a miraculous intervention of God.  And yet Judah had won his victory with casual irregulars who were often lacking in such essential arms as sword and shield.  How could the issue be interpreted as other than explicit confirmation of the leadership which the Maccabees had assumed?

From the beginning Judah comported himself as the lawful leader of his people.  He put into force the law according to which a man who had just built a house or betrothed a wife or planted a vineyard or was fainthearted, was released from service.  His people conscientiously separated first fruits and tithes, but these could only be offered in the Sanctuary, and the Sanctuary was still in the hands of the reform party.

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14. Deuteronomy 20:5-8
STAGE 4:
The Guerrillas Capture Jerusalem

Antiochus Epiphanes' restoration of freedom of conscience had only brought an end to the persecutions, but not an end to the rule of Menelaus the High Priest and his friends. It was not to be expected that they would voluntarily surrender their position. Judah therefore determined to wrest their rule from them by force.

At the end of 164 BCE, about the beginning of December, Judah made a sudden descent upon Jerusalem. To understand that such a surprise attack could promise success, it must be remembered that in 168 BCE the central government had pulled down Jerusalem’s city walls. The intention was to make the city completely dependent upon the citadel of Acra. It was this that made it possible for Judah, only four years later, to take possession of Jerusalem so easily.

The first act of the conqueror was the purification of the Holy City of all traces of idolatry and the restoration of the service of God in the Temple. According to the Jewish calendar, it was Kislev 25, precisely three years after the reform party had offered the first pagan sacrifice upon the altar, that Judah again carried out, in early morning, the prescribed sacrifice in the ancient usage. “And all the people fell upon their faces, and worshipped, and gave praise unto heaven, to the God who had given them success.” For eight days the rededication of the purified altar was celebrated. Then “Judah and his brethren and the whole congregation of Israel ordained, that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their seasons year by year for eight days, from the twenty-fifth day of the month Kislev, with gladness and joy.” This celebration, which is the model for the annual festivals of dedication in all churches, is Hanukkah, a word that literally signifies “dedication.” But this name can be documented only from the first century CE. Originally the festival was called “Tabernacles (Sukkot) of the month of Kislev,” as in an official communication from the Palestinian to the Egyptian Jews, dated 124 BCE.

By instituting this festival, Judah and his people declared themselves the true Israel. Their act was one of far-reaching significance, for all previous festivals were prescribed in Scripture. Never had a festival been instituted in Israel by human hand. Even the restoration of the Temple after the Babylonian Exile had not been solemnized by the establishment of a day of commemoration. Judah’s measure was therefore an innovation without precedent. On the other hand, it was in complete accord with the usage of the Gentiles. Among the Greeks it was usual for a generation, when it regarded an event in its own history as important, to believe it should be commemorated for all time. Thus Judah imitated the practice of his enemies, but at the same time incorporated it into Judaism. This was the first step along the path, which was to constitute the historic mission of the Hasmoneans — the introduction of Hellenic usages into Judaism without making a sacrifice of Judaism.

Thus, at the beginning of 163 BCE, Judah was master of Judea; only the Acra in Jerusalem remained as refuge and citadel for those loyal to the King. Apparently the garrison in Acra was too weak to act independently and the central government was, as usual, little concerned with the affairs of Judea. Moreover, at this time Antiochus Epiphanes suffered a serious reverse in Persia when he attempted to plunder an Oriental sanctuary in the hill country, and was lying sick in Persia.

STAGE 5:
Judah Saved by a Miracle

At the end of the winter of 163 BCE Antiochus Epiphanes died in Persia. About the same time Judah began the siege of Acra,
already employing in this operation the best equipment of the great armies of that period, siege towers and battering rams of various types. An unknown fugitive four years before, Judah was now, though without office or title, ruler over the Jewish nation. From Acra urgent dispatches went out to the central government. The reform party complained, with perfect justice, that the government was again leaving them, the group loyal to the King, in the lurch. “We were willing to serve your father,” the messengers said to the new king, Antiochus V Eupator, “and to walk after his words, and to follow his commandments. For this cause the children of our people besieged the citadel, and were alienated from us, and many of us were killed, and our property pillaged.”

At the head of the new government there stood as regent the same Lysias with whom Judah had negotiated a year previously and who had promised the Jews his good will if they would continue to be loyal. But, in the meanwhile, Judah had broken the peace and had taken advantage of the amnesty granted him to make himself master of Judea. The court at Antioch in Syria determined to dispose of the Maccabees once and for all.

In the summer of 163 BCE Lysias himself marched at the head of an army of professional soldiers through Idumea to Jerusalem in order to raise the siege of Acra. His way was barred by the citadel of Bet Zur, which Judah had in the meanwhile occupied. Lysias directed the siege of this fortress, and Judah, obliged to hasten to the assistance of his outposts, was forced to interrupt the siege of Acra. This was Lysias’ first success. Near Bet Zechariah, halfway between Jerusalem and Bet Zur, where the hills merge into a plateau that permits the deployment of larger battle formations, Judah one morning came upon Lysias’ superior army, which included cavalry, and even thirty-two elephants, arms that were wholly wanting to the Maccabees. The rising sun was reflected in the gilt and brazen shields of the Syrian heavy infantry, so that “the mountains shone and blazed like torches of fire.” Judah’s brother, Elazar, vainly immolating himself in an effort to save his people, rushed into the ranks of the enemy and attacked the largest of the elephants, upon which he naively supposed the young king to be riding. The beast, transfixed, fell, crushing the hero. Judah’s army was defeated and Bet Zur capitulated.
The royal army now reached Jerusalem unhindered and laid siege to the fortified Mount Zion, where Judah and his people had taken refuge. In ancient times, before the use of explosives, every wall and every tower was an obstacle to the attacker. The besiegers therefore preferred to starve out rather than storm a besieged fortress. It was the summer of a Sabbatical year, in which, according to biblical law, nothing had been planted. Hence there were no considerable supplies in Zion. Judah’s troops dispersed, each man to his own home. Only a small company of the most faithful remained shut up in Zion under Judah’s leadership. Judah’s life was in any case forfeit. Moreover, we may surmise, he was firmly convinced that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would not forsake him. In his desperate situation, therefore, Judah awaited a miracle, and the miracle came about. Expressed in untheological language, Judah’s tenacity made it possible to expect a favorable turn in the situation, which, in the unforeseeable complications of life, might at any time take place.

The deliverance of the besieged Maccabees on Mount Zion came about as result of Antiochus Epiphanes’ last act on his deathbed in Persia. When the King marched to the east he had left the guardianship of his son and successor, a minor, to Lysias, who after the death of the King assumed the regency. But on his deathbed Epiphanes had appointed another general, named Philip, as regent of his realm. And so it came about, approximately in February of 162 BCE, that while Lysias was occupied with the siege of Zion, he received word that Philip was approaching Antioch at the head of the army of the east to secure the overlordship for himself. Lysias found it necessary to withdraw in great haste, and so quickly made a peace with the beleaguered Judah.

**Stage 6:**

**The Empire Acknowledges Judean Religious Autonomy**

Formally considered, the “peace” amounts on the one hand to a capitulation on the part of Judah, and on the other, to a remission on the part of the King. In actuality, its basis was an understanding between Lysias and Judah, which was tantamount to a restoration of the conditions that had obtained in Judea prior to Antiochus Epiphanes. The King’s remission was addressed to Lysias, and solemnly proclaimed renunciation of the policy of forced Hellenization. “As for our Jewish subjects,” the new King wrote, “we understand that they object to our father’s project of bringing them over to Hellenism, preferring their own ways of life and asking permission to follow their own customs.” The king resolved “that the subjects of the realm should live undisturbed and attend to their own concerns.” He agreed “to give them back their Temple and to permit them to live according to the laws of their ancestors.”

A year earlier the government had consented to tolerate the Jewish religion; now the dominion of the Torah was fully restored. According to the decree of 163 BCE, those Jews who wished to do so might give obedience to the Jewish law. The new decree of 162 BCE again obliged the entire people to observe this law. This marked the consummation of the victory of “Orthodox” Judaism. For centuries thereafter the Jews celebrated the recurrence of this day (Shevat 28) “upon which King Antiochus withdrew from Jerusalem.”
On the other hand, the task of the Maccabees also seemed to have been completed. The government had deserted the reform party, traditional Judaism had been recognized as alone valid, and the conditions which had obtained before the promulgation of Epiphanes’ measures were thus restored. The rebellion of the Jews now seemed pointless and at an end. “Now therefore let us give the right hand to these men, and make peace with them, and with all their nation; and let us settle with them that they be permitted to walk after their own laws, as aforetime; for because of their laws which we abolished were they angered, and did all these things.” This opinion of the young King’s counselors proved correct; Judah was deserted by his partisans. The government appointed a new High Priest, a member of the previous high-priestly family called Jakim, who then Hellenized his name into Alcimus. The government even caused an assembly of legal scholars to be convoked so that it might confirm, after exhaustive investigation, that Alcimus was in fact the legitimate prince. The Hasidim, the “Pious,” a group known for the strictness of its faith and who had been the first to join Mattathias, these very Hasidim were now the first to recognize Alcimus. From this time forward, supported by a royal guard, Alcimus ruled over Judea, and his power was so secure that he could without misgivings cause the execution of sixty of the “Pious” who had shown themselves rebellious. Once again the burnt offering for the reigning king was daily offered upon Mount Zion.

At first Judah again retired into the mountains. But when a new palace revolution took place in Antioch — Antiochus V was overthrown by his cousin, Demetrius I — Judah took advantage of the occasion to reappear in Jerusalem. He took possession of the Sanctuary and even prevented Alcimus from approaching the altar. Judah’s supporters maintained that Alcimus had “voluntarily polluted himself” in the time of Epiphanes; that is, without being compelled to do so, he had participated in pagan festivals and sacrifices. Was such a man now eligible to perform the service of God? The question was one of conscience, fought out by zealots and moderates, similar to the question, which later arose among the early Christians during the time of persecutions: Can there be forgiveness for apostasy? We know that the various answers to this question led to numerous schisms within the Church and to reciprocal excommunications. It is therefore not surprising that Judah and his followers refused to recognize Alcimus, even after an assembly of legal scholars convoked by the government had pronounced in favor of Alcimus’ legitimacy.

THE MACCABEAN BROTHERS — JUDAH, ELAZAR, JOHN, JONATHAN, AND SIMON (163-140 BCE)
BEYOND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TOWARD NATIONAL LIBERATION
by Elias Bickerman

The consequences of the peace of 162 BCE were twofold. For one thing, it marked the end of the reform party. Its chief, the former High Priest Menelaus, was executed upon the King’s orders, “for he was the cause of all the evil in that he persuaded Epiphanes to abolish the ancestral constitution of the Jews.” This was the ground on which the verdict was based. The remaining partisans of reform, who continued to find refuge in the Acra, had in the meanwhile lost all touch with Judaism. The reformers had now become apostates.

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Jewish Civil War Renewed and the Invasion by General Nicanor

This time the cleavage in the Jewish people was quite different from that in the days of Epiphanes. The struggle no longer concerned the validity of the Torah but whether or not Alcimus was justified in functioning as High Priest. Civil strife began anew. Judah again marched forth. He swept through all the territory of Judea, taking vengeance upon his enemies and punishing the “apostates” who were worse than pagans in his eyes.

Twice Alcimus went to the royal court to request the government’s help against the Maccabees, “who are keeping up the feud and stirring sedition; they will not let the kingdom settle down in peace.” But King Demetrius was entirely taken up with other difficulties, especially with the uprising, which with Roman support, had wrested Mesopotamia from the King. Finally the King sent out one of his generals, Nicanor, with orders to take the Maccabees captive. Nicanor first sought to lay hands on Judah by cunning; but when the attempt miscarried, he marched his troops out of Jerusalem into the neighborhood of Beth Horon, where he was joined by troops from Syria. He himself led a levy of Jews loyal to the King out of Jerusalem. Because his troops were Jewish, he was constrained, much against his will, to abandon his intention of attacking Judah on the Sabbath. This was approximately in the month of March, 161 BCE.

The political situation had rapidly changed. It was only four years before that the government had punished the observance of the day of rest with death, and those wishing to hallow the Sabbath had sought help and refuge with Judah. Now they marched side by side with pagan soldiers in the attempt to capture Judah and send him to his death. An hour and a half north of Jerusalem, where the road narrows as it passes through the hills, the opposing forces encountered one another. Judah’s troops again proved far superior to the city levies. Nicanor fell on the field of battle and his army fled. Judah besieged Jerusalem and the Sanctuary a second time, and again had the day of his victory (Adar 13) entered in the calendar of festivals. This amounted to a demonstration that Judah and his followers represented the true Israel. For the first time in the history of Jacob a day in a war between brothers was declared a joyous festival. The victory over Nicanor in March 161 BCE made Judah master of the country once again.

Afterword: The Forgotten Judah

Israel quickly forgot Judah. In the Talmud he is nowhere mentioned. In Megillat Antiochus, a post-Talmudic (and quite spiritless) account that was read at the Hanukkah festival in the Middle Ages, Mattathias and his grandson, John Hircanus — but not Judah — are the principal figures. It was only during the Middle Ages, thanks to the Hebrew compilation called Josippon, composed on the basis of the writings of Josephus, that Judah again became a hero for the Jews. The Christian world, which had taken the Books of Maccabees into their Holy Scripture, meanwhile honored Judah as a paragon of knighthood. Even today the statue of Judah may be seen in the principal market place of Nuremberg, Germany. His figure, along with those of eight other heroes (three pagans, three Jews, three Christians), decorates the Schone Brunnen (1385), a masterpiece of the age of chivalry.

Putting Down Judah: A Passing Victory

The Christian historian Emil Schurer dismisses Judah’s importance:

The downfall of Judah offered final proof of the futility of any opposition by the nationalists to Syrian power. However brilliant the earlier achievements of Judah had been, he owed them primarily to the rashness and conceit of his opponents. Lasting military success was unthinkable so long as Syrian power remained to some degree united. In the following years there was not even a passing victory of the kind won by Judah. What the Maccabees finally achieved, they won through the voluntary concessions of the rival pretenders to the Syrian throne, and as a result of the internal disorganization of the Syrian Empire.

The “Alliance” with Rome

What did Judah know of Rome?

The First Book of Maccabees represents him as having heard of the great reputation of the Roman people, “that they were valiant men, and that they were friendly, disposed towards all who attached themselves to them, and that they offered friendship to as many as came unto them.” That was enough for him. An exact knowledge of the details of a situation is often unnecessary, frequently even a hindrance, to resolute action. Judah knew that a Roman embassy had once before helped him (164 BCE); he knew too that “whomever they will to make kings, become kings; and that whomever they will, do they depose.” He therefore sent emissaries to Rome. They were well received and the Senate, anxious to cause Demetrius I all possible difficulty, approved the treaty that was concluded, not, to be sure, with Judah and his brothers, but with the “nation of the Jews.” “When the Jews rebelled against Demetrius I,” an ancient historian writes, “and sought the friendship of Rome, they were the first of all Oriental peoples to receive a grant of freedom. The Romans were generous in disbursing what was not theirs.”

In any case, for the first time since the Exile the Jews were recognized as an independent power, and by the very people that ruled the world.

Christian theologians have often wondered at the fact that Judah, who was so zealous in the service of the Lord, made a treaty with and sought security through a pagan power, despite all the admonitions of the prophets. It must be said that there is ground for such wonder. The Maccabees had again taken a step that brought them nearer to the pagan world; they had again accommodated devout Judaism to the ways of the nations.

Judah’s Death in Battle

It may be argued that the Roman alliance, which was Judah’s greatest success, became the immediate cause of his downfall. The Seleucid government could look on calmly at the occasional successes of a guerrilla chief, in expectation of a favorable moment for delivering a blow. But when Judah became a protege of Rome, it seemed essential to act at once. Judah’s emissaries returned to Jerusalem towards the end of the summer of 161 BCE. In the first month of the following spring, as soon as the rainy season was ended, the King’s general Bacchides, accompanied by Alcimus and at the head of a regular army, moved through Galilee towards Jerusalem. As always, the professional soldiers were qualitatively far superior to the Maccabean irregulars. When the Syrians approached, the greater part of the Maccabean levy, which amounted to three thousand men, fled. Only eight hundred remained with Judah, and “he

The Mallet-Headed Hero

“Maccabeus” may refer to Judah’s mallet shaped head. In the Mishnah there is a list of defects that disqualify priests from serving in the Temple. “These blemishes, whether permanent or temporary, disqualify priests from Temple service. Among them are a wedge-shaped head, a turnip-shaped head, or a mallet-shaped head (Maccaban).”

16. Bechorot 7:1
Jonathan, Judah's brother and successor, again became the simple chief of a band, and sought refuge in Trans-Jordan. Eight years elapsed after the death of Judah before the Maccabees again entered history. It was the Syrians who aroused Jonathan from his slumbers. In 152 BCE, a pretender called Alexander Balas arose against the reigning king, Demetrius I, the conqueror of Judah. There was only one man who commanded sufficient authority among the Jews to muster an army for Demetrius I, — Jonathan, Judah's brother and heir. Demetrius gave Jonathan full power to collect troops. Jonathan naturally used the opportunity first to secure his own position. He occupied Jerusalem. Naturally, too, Alexander Balas now sought to draw the Jewish leader over to his side. Jonathan demanded his price, and it was given him. At the Feast of Tabernacles in 152 BCE Jonathan clothed himself, by the authority of Alexander Balas, in the sacred vestments of the High Priest.

Jonathan's fantastic rise in the few months of the autumn of 152 BCE from petty chieftain to High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem and Prince in Israel ushers in a chapter in the history of the Maccabees which, except for the identity of the family, has little in common with the previous course of their destiny. Judah's lifework had been to prevent the threatening Hellenization of Judaism and the surrender of the Torah. He succeeded, and gave his life to his success. Jonathan and his successors, his brother Simon and Simon's descendants, now seek to accommodate Hellenism to Judaism. Under them Judea becomes a Hellenistic principality.

Jonathan's first task was to maintain himself. This required that he watch the political currents and keep in touch with the pagan princes, but it also meant that he had to sacrifice the blood of Jews for the cause of one or the other of the pretenders. He became a Seleucid official, a strategos and governor of a province; he received a court title and wore the purple reserved for the "friends of the king."

Their political success consisted in the emancipation of the Jews from the rule of the Seleucids. In May 142 BCE Simon obtained Israel's complete freedom from tribute. "Therefore the yoke of the pagan was taken away from Israel." Public documents began to be dated according to the years of Simon. A year later the Hellenistic city and the citadel in Jerusalem, Acra, was taken. In the year 139 BCE Simon received the royal privilege of striking (copper) coins in his own name. On Elul 18 (about September) of the preceding year (140 BCE) "in a great congregation of priests and people and princes of the nation, and of the elders of the country," it was determined that Simon should be "their leader and High Priest forever." Heretofore the legal basis for the power of the Maccabean princes had been royal appointment. Now the rule of Simon and of his successors rested upon the decision of the people itself; hence Simon assumed the new title, "Prince of the People" (Ethnarch).

These various successes the Jews owed not so much to their own strength as to the adroitness of their leaders, Jonathan the "Sly" (so is his nickname Aphphus probably to be interpreted) and his brother, the Ethnarch Simon.
THE HOUSE OF THE MACCABEES (HASMONEANS) (167-29 BCE)

Black boxes indicate high priest or monarch; double lines indicate marriage.

Mattathias
d. 166

John
(Yohanan)
d. 159

Simon
142-134

Judah
d. 160

Elazar
d. 163

Jonathan
152-142

Mattathias
d. 135

Judah
d. 135

John
Hyrcanus I
134-104

Judah
Aristobulus
104-103

Alexander
Janneus
103-76

Salome
Alexander
76-67

Aristobulus
67-63 d. 49

Hyrcanus II
63-40 d. 30

Alexandra
d. 28

Aristobulus III
37-5 BCE

Mariamne
d. 29
READING THE REVOLT FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE
BY PROFESSOR VICTOR TCHERIKOVER,
WHO CHALLENGES PROFESSOR ELIAS BICKERMAN

INTRODUCTION

Professor Victor Tcherikover set out to challenge the views of Elias Bickerman regarding the underlying causes of the Maccabean Revolt. Tcherikover presents the Maccabean Revolt in a new light. It was not a religious war, but a political civil war between social climbing opportunists, between competing economic classes and ultimately between ethnic nations. Bickerman, a Diaspora Jew, saw the main conflict as a religious-cultural one between Hellenist and Jewish values instigated by Jewish religious reformers who tried to change Temple practice. Tcherikover, a secular Zionist, saw things in class and national terms.

To present Tcherikover’s views we will quote from his book, Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews (originally published in Hebrew in 1931). There will be some retelling of the Maccabean Revolt from the beginning though it was just described above by Bickerman. However the emphasis will be quite different. We will present three stages and three levels of the civil war as Tcherikover sees it:

A. Social Climbing Opportunists — Jason and Menelaus, High Priests and Hellenist Jews
B. Class War: Landowners and Financiers against Farmers and Urban Workers
C. Ethnic Nations: The Jews of Palestine against the Greek Syrians of Palestine

ELIAS BICKERMAN BLAMES THE RELIGIOUS REFORMERS
by Victor Tcherikover

Elias Bickerman seeks to account for the persecution of Antiochus in a new way. His book Der Gott der Makkabaer is an important study. But [it is] precisely the central idea of the book that evokes numerous doubts. Bickerman’s basic assumption is that Antiochus, a king of Greek education and a pupil of the Epicureans, could not have been the initiator of the persecution, since it meant not simply an abolition of the existing law, but the imposition of a new religious law in a way which implies religious fanaticism. However in the entire ancient world there is no example of religious fanaticism of this sort. It would never have occurred to the king to order the burning of the Torah, to prohibit circumcision, compel people to eat pork, and the like.

But all this is comprehensible, according to Bickerman, if we assume that not Antiochus but the Hellenistic reformers of Jerusalem, the High Priest Menelaus and his group, were the real initiators of the decrees. Antiochus’ function was merely the abolition of the rule of the Torah in Judea, and it was the Jewish Hellenizers who filled the formal abolition with real content. What was their aim? They sought to abolish Jewish particularism and to come to terms with the peoples around them. In this they were influenced by Greek views, since in Greek eyes all exclusiveness was barbarism. The Jews therefore faced the alternative of being thought barbarians or of joining the Hellenistic way of life and worship.

Bickerman wrote, “It is sufficient to follow the trend of thought of these Jewish Hellenists (Philo and the other Alexandrian commentators), in order to understand an ideology of the sort held by Jason and Menelaus in Palestine. They desired to reform Judaism by abolishing the barbaric exclusiveness which had infected it with time, and to return to an original worship of God free of all distortion.”

Bickerman, then, shifts the onus from Antiochus to the Hellenizing Jews. For this he finds authority in the sources which all ascribe the attempt to Hellenize the Jews not to Antiochus but to the Hellenizers
among the Jews themselves. Bickerman’s innovation is in seeing the Hellenizers, not only as the initiators of the reform, but also as the initiators of the persecution. [However, Bickerman underestimates the political motives of the period.]

The Social Climbing Opportunists — Jason versus Menelaus, High Priests for a Price

The civil war in Judea that ultimately led to the Maccabean Revolt five year later, began as an internal conflict among the upper class priestly land owners and financiers who were struggling for recognition by the Seleucid empire. These Hellenizing Jews wanted to be the official political, financial and (only secondarily) religious leaders of the province of Judea. They sought to turn Judea into the Greek polis of Antioch-in-Jerusalem. The traditionalist High Priest, Onias, was replaced by social climbing, aggressive individuals — first Jason (174-171 BCE) and then Menelaus (171-162 BCE). The transfer of power had everything to do with bribes to Antiochus IV, promises of political support to the Seleucids (or the Ptolemies) and opportunities for control over the treasury of Judea, that is, the Temple. The Hellenist upper classes sought the rights to levy taxes on the Judeans and only secondarily to impose policies of Hellenization on the city, the Temple and later on all of Judea itself.

Hellenism was not introduced into Israel by the forces outside. Part of the Jewish public itself developed an attachment to alien customs and became eager for Hellenistic modes of life to obtain a foothold in Jerusalem. What was the motive of those who inclined in this direction? The obvious and simple answer is that their aim was the spread of Greek culture and that for them Hellenization was based on their consciousness of the advantages of Hellenism over Judaism.

Hellenism, from its first appearance in Judea, was internally bound up with one particular social class — with the wealthy families of the Jerusalem aristocracy. The crafty and resourceful tax-collector, the powerful and unscrupulous businessman, were the spiritual fathers of the Jewish Hellenizing movement, and throughout the entire brief period of the flourishing of Hellenism in Jerusalem, lust for profit and pursuit of power were among the most pronounced marks of the new movement.

The Social Climbers:
Jason the High Priest (174-171 BCE) versus Menelaus the High Priest

The Hellenistic period was a period of revolution, which all over the world broke up the fixed frameworks of tribe, polis, and family, and put in their place the will of the strong individual. A man’s success in life frequently depended, not on the support he obtained from his relatives, but on his own personal talents and characteristics. In Jerusalem the priestly class was divided into families, among them rich and highly

Greeks sacrifice a pig to their gods. (Greek bowls, circa 500 BCE)
connected families that controlled the Temple, the city and the whole country, while others had to be content with little. Among all these, that of the Oniads, who held the hereditary post of High Priest, was the noblest and the wealthiest. Hence in Judea we find a fratricidal struggle blazed up in the Oniad clan to replace the traditionalist High Priest Onias.

To seize the post, Jason had to depose Onias, and this was impossible without the king’s permission; so Jason journeyed to see Antiochus. We do not know how he managed to discredit Onias — the latter’s pro-Egyptian tendencies probably played a primary role — we only hear of the results. Jason promised the king, in addition to the 300 talents which were evidently the usual tribute, another 60, and a further 80 “of another revenue”; by this payment he purchased the High Priesthood from Antiochus. Antiochus was constantly in need of money, for from the day that his father had been defeated by the Romans (190 BCE), the Seleucid kingdom had become involved in a recurring financial crisis. The wealthy temples fulfilled the function of banks in ancient times, and Antiochus III, Epiphanes’ father, had already coveted their treasures. This act of Jason introduced an important innovation in the character of the High Priest’s function. Whereas till now the post had been hereditary and the king had been in the habit of only granting or withholding his ratification in respect of the new candidate, henceforth the candidate paid the king the price of the position. So the High Priesthood became a normal official post and the High Priest a Seleucid royal official utterly dependent on the king’s favor.

[Once Jason had established this new mode of political advancement, the way was open for Menelaus (171 BCE) to offer a bigger bribe to the King and form a stronger military band of supporters in Jerusalem to replace Jason. The civil war begins between 171 BCE and 169 BCE as upper class factional bloodshed in the streets of Jerusalem between pro-Jason and pro-Menelaus forces, each one allied opportunistically either with the Seleucid Syrians or Ptolemaic Egyptians during the perennial Seleucid-Ptolemy wars. It is under Menelaus that Antiochus IV transforms the Temple into an out-and-out pagan temple and decrees the outlawing of traditional Jewish observance throughout Judea (167 BCE). The Seleucids execute Menelaus in 162 BCE when they abandon their policy of forced Hellenization and seek the compromise with the Maccabees by appointing a new traditionalist High Priest Alcimus.]

Most of the people supported Jason, while

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17. Josephus, Antiquities XIV, 110  
18. ibid.,113  
19. II Maccabees 4:8
Menelaus had attained power against the will of the Jerusalem population and could only maintain himself by brute force. In the words of The Second Book of Maccabees he was an unparalleled tyrant, “like a beast of prey in his wrath,” which means that he was forced to conduct his rule by means of terror in order to protect himself and his party. His position was difficult, the people hated him, and he did not receive sufficient support from the king of Syria.

A People’s Revolt in the Name of the Temple

While Menelaus was in Syria, his deputy, his brother Lysimachus, carried out the spoliation [plundering] from the Temple treasury of the vessels which Menelaus needed [in order to pay off the bribes he had promised to Antiochus]. This lawless deed aroused the ire of the population of Jerusalem; the Temple treasure, accumulated over generations, was the property of all Israel, and it was hard to tolerate the fact of a small group of people disposing of it as if it were their own.

The Temple, this national and religious center, was now in the hands of men who had cast off the restraints of religion and followed strange customs belonging to other peoples. The plundering of the Temple plate [vessels] made good material for religious propaganda among the masses, and the people came out openly against the Hellenizers. Lysimachus armed some 3000 men and a battle took place in the streets of Jerusalem. The people were victorious: Lysimachus’ men gave way and he himself was killed near the Temple. Antiochus, seeing in the happenings at Jerusalem a rebellion against his royal authority, came to put it down with a strong hand. [In 169 BCE Antiochus Epiphanes himself robbed the Temple, taking its golden menorah as well as other holy vessels].


B. THE MACCABEAN CIVIL WAR AS A CLASS WAR

Cherikover argues that the civil war within the opportunistic, capitalist priestly class gave way to a much deeper inter-class war between the priest-led urban ruling class and the scribe-led urban plebes. Each group rallied their allies, the large landowners on one hand and the village dwellers on the other. One group identified with and relied on the military and political support of the Seleucid Greek Syrians, while the others defended traditional Judaism and, more significantly, the traditional constitution of Judea since the days of Ezra (the priest-cum-scribe) — the Torah.

[Long before the revolt broke out in Judea] social antagonisms existed among the people and could not be ignored, in particular, the contrast between zealots of the traditional faith and the freethinking Hellenizers. The Jerusalem theocracy had gradually transformed the priests into an exclusive caste, superior to the people, sometimes oppressing it with a high hand. They constituted the Jewish aristocracy, the wealthy landed group, and quite naturally drew away from the poor and their troubles.

The urban population sought other intellectual leaders who lived and thought in a manner more akin to themselves. Hence rose the class of scribes, the flesh and bone of the broad city populace, which took upon itself the task of interpreting the Torah neglected by the priests. Thus was created the Oral Law as a continuation, interpretation and supplementation of the Written Law.

Possibly the new scribal interpretations were delivered in the synagogues which had now for the first time risen and spread in Judea, and thus was created the important opposition between the Temple and the Synagogue. A special sect among the scribes, the sect of the Hasidim, constituted its external expression.
A Constitutional Revolution

Once Jason became the High Priest appointed directly by Antiochus IV in 174 BCE the class antagonisms led to radical political — not religious reforms.

Jason built a gymnasium and ephebeion [a school for 15-17 year olds] in Jerusalem and registered the wealthy people of Jerusalem as Antiochenes. The establishment of the gymnasium and ephebeion was also in harmony with the city’s aristocratic character, for religious reform, or at any rate a change in the traditional way of life. However, the Greek politeia (“way of government”) was not a religious concept, but a political one. The conversion of Jerusalem into Antioch meant first of all the transfer of the Jewish state from one political category to another (from ethnos to polis). The changes in the spheres of religion and culture were not the reason for the reform, but its consequences.

By granting rights to these towns Antiochus deepened the gulf between the wealthy urban population and the backward oriental countryside; he anticipated that in the decisive struggle that was to break out between the Seleucid kingdom and the awakening Orient, the wealthy bourgeoisie would stand by him. The Hellenization of a city like Jerusalem, lying in the vicinity of the southern frontier of the realm, on the road to Egypt, was likely to be extremely advantageous to him, especially in the event of war with his Ptolemaic rival. Thus the interests of both sides met — the striving of the Jerusalem aristocracy for economic and political growth and the king’s endeavor to acquire a friendly power in this part of his kingdom — and the outcome of the meeting of interests was Jason’s Hellenistic reform.

The Hasidim were the chief scribes and authoritative interpreters of the regulations and commandments of the Torah. The attitude of the scribes in general and of the Hasidim in particular to the Hellenizers is quite plain. The abolition of the “ancestral laws” by Jason made their entire class superfluous; if the Law of Moses was no longer to be the prevailing law in Israel, what point would there be in interpreting it? Naturally, isolated individuals might go on resorting to the scribes with their queries, but the polis of Antioch took no account of them and had no need of them. Hence the struggle of the Hasidim against the Hellenizers was not merely an ideological struggle for the maintenance of the commandments of the Law, but also the struggle of an entire class for its existence. This class did not live in a social

The Law of Moses became the war cry of the masses, just as Greek culture was the watchword of the aristocracy.
vacuum, but was supported by the broad sections of the urban population of Jerusalem, that is, by the mass of the people consisting of craftsmen, laborers, petty traders and kindred elements. The Law of Moses, therefore, became the war cry of the masses, just as Greek culture was the watchword of the aristocracy. When the urban plebes took up arms to oppose the Hellenizing government with force, it was natural that the Hasidim, meaning the scribes and their leaders, should be the popular directors and leaders of the insurrection.

The control of the city passed to the opponents of the king — the enemies of the Hellenizers. This means that a very significant thing had occurred in Jerusalem, namely, a people’s revolt against Jason and the overthrow of the rule of the Hellenizers in the city. Antioch-at-Jerusalem was liquidated and the people was preparing to return to its traditional form of government. Simultaneously, the rising was a demonstration of hostility toward Syria and of sympathy for Egypt, for only from Egypt could the rebels hope to receive support for the liberation movement. As a dissident movement arose also in other parts of Syria at this time, Antiochus perceived that his kingdom was in considerable danger and that he must put down the Jewish rising with a strong hand. According to Second Maccabees the king, gripped by the fury of a wild animal, took the city by storm and gave his troops the order to put its inhabitants to the sword; some 40,000 people were slain and an equal number was sold into slavery. These figures are of course exaggerated, but it is clear that Antiochus now regarded Jerusalem as a hostile city and behaved toward it accordingly.

C.

ETHNIC CIVIL WAR: THE JEWS VERSUS THE GREEK SYRIANS OF PALESTINE

Tcherikover argues that only after (not before) the urban masses revolted against the Seleucid-appointed high priests, does Antiochus begin widespread intervention in the religious life of Judea. Only in reaction to rebellion does he transform the Temple into a pagan cultic center, forcibly convert the Jewish population and settle Jerusalem’s main fortress, the Acra, with Greek Syrians. Now the war becomes a struggle of colonialist and colonializer where economics, politics and religion play a role as well as the ethnic struggle for control of Palestine between Hellenized Syrians and traditionalist Jews.

Tcherikover’s point is that Antiochus’ intervention is a move within a larger ethnic struggle over control of all Palestine. Since the great expulsion of 722 BCE by Assyria and 586 BCE by Babylonia, Judea, the area of Jewish autonomy, had been reduced to Jerusalem and its environs (not including any of the coastline, Hebron or Samaria). However, the Jews had increased and significant minorities of Jews filled the countryside and the Greek cities of Samaria, Idumea, the Trans-Jordan and the coast.

Parallel with the conflicts between Antiochus and the Judean traditionalists, there is bloodshed between Greek Syrians throughout Palestine and the Jewish minorities in their midst.

When the people threw out Jason and Menelaus, Antiochus declared Judea hostile and sent in Apollonius in 168 BCE to suppress the opponents of his royally appointed high priest and to introduce Greek Syrian soldier-settlers into Jerusalem itself.

According to First Maccabees, the king’s commissioner Apollonius having captured the city and punished the rebels, fortified the “City of David” with a wall and towers. He converted it into a strong fortress, the Acra, which was occupied by the Jewish Hellenizers and so became the new center of the Greek polis. But not only Hellenizers settled in the Acra. First Maccabees says that Antiochus settled there “people of pollution, sons of Belial, who brought there spoils from...
the whole of Jerusalem and shed innocent blood about the Temple."23 As a result, the inhabitants of Jerusalem abandoned the city, and it became an “abode of aliens.”

It is quite clear what means were adopted by Apollonius to punish the rebellious city. He settled in it “a nation of a foreign god,” that is, new settlers drawn from among the Gentiles, who were, of course, soldiers and local Syrians. It meant **confiscation of the agricultural property of the citizens**, the introduction of new settlers into their homes, deeds of violence and rape upon the former inhabitants, the imposition of taxes upon them and sometimes even their expulsion from the town.

These Syrian troops, who by the royal will had become settlers of the city of Antioch-at-Jerusalem, brought with them the cults of their native country. The importance of Bickerman’s discovery of the oriental Syrian character of the divine cults on the Temple hill during the persecutions of Antiochus, may be understood and estimated in the light of these facts. It is his opinion that these were not the Greek gods, Olympian Zeus, Dionysus, or Athene, as they are called in the sources, but Syrian deities in Hellenistic garb. The “wanton women,” moreover, whose presence in the Temple is referred to by the sources, were simply the **sacred prostitutes** so characteristic of the cults of Syria, and so utterly foreign to any Greek cult.

The result could have been foreseen. A temple in which Syrians ruled and made their sacrifices to the God of Israel under the form of the Syrian Baal and to other Syrian gods as well — a temple in which Syrian prostitutes sported with Syrian soldiers — could not serve the needs of the Jewish religion. It was abandoned by the Jews, doubtless after conflict and bloodshed, both grave and prolonged. Only the Hellenizers, who were now a mere worthless appendage to the Syrian troops, continued to serve in the shrine, and it is to be assumed that Menelaus still performed his function as official High Priest of the Jewish God. The Jewish masses neither acknowledged nor could possibly acknowledge what was being done in the Temple. The Temple of the Lord had been polluted by Gentiles and by a pagan rite. The people led by the Hasidim revolted against the desecration of the Temple and the imposition of a Greek Syrian fortress.

Our account has reached events at the end of the year 168 BCE; yet we have still heard absolutely nothing of a religious persecution. The order of Antiochus prohibiting the Jewish faith was promulgated about a year after Apollonius’ political measures.

We are now in a position to understand the reasons for the decrees of Antiochus. If the revolt was led by the Hasidim, for whom the commandments of the Torah were of the utmost sanctity, and if devotion to the Mosaic Law was the watchword of the uprising, then that Law had to be extirpated if the rebellion was to be put down. This was the conclusion drawn by Antiochus from what was occurring in Judea.

The king sent an order to his emissaries at Jerusalem and in the towns of Judea prohibiting Sabbath observance, the festivals and the rite of circumcision. He further ordered the erection of high places and altars on which swine and other animals were to be sacrificed. Upon the altar of the Temple was set up the “abomination of desolation”; books of the Law were burnt and inspectors were appointed by the king to make sure that his order was being carried out in all the towns of Judaea.24

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23. *I Maccabees* 1:35-36  
The War of Liberation against Local Greek Syrians

Of the beginning of the Hasmonean rebellion in 167 BCE we read in First Maccabees, that stirring account known to every Jew. It is the story of a company of Syrian troops that came to the village of Modin to compel the inhabitants to bow down to the pagan gods. Then up rose old Mattathias, priest of the order of Joarib, and slew the Hellenizing Jew as he was about to obey the Syrian command. Then he slew the king’s commissioner who had been appointed to carry out the royal decree, and fled with his sons to the hills, and so the uprising began.

What is not true is that this was the commencement of the rising. The movement of rebellion had been in progress for a year and was led by the Hasidim; but they had not been able to produce among themselves a leader of note who could give to the guerrilla struggle the character of a regular planned war.

Eventually Judah in 166 BCE took over the revolt and routed the Greeks. Judah the Maccabee, now master of the entire country of Judea, captured Jerusalem, with the exception of the fortress of the Acra, purified the Temple and restored the cult of the God of Israel.

However, the successes against the imperial armies of Antiochus IV just expanded the ethnic civil war throughout Palestine. The entire Greek population of Palestine was taking part in its suppression and aiding the forces of the government to fight the Jews. Greek Syrians attacked Jewish minorities throughout Palestine. [Editor]

The Greek army against which Judah the Maccabee was fighting was not therefore racially Graeco-Macedonian, but Syrian, and the troops recruited to suppress the rising were mostly volunteers native to the country. The Graeco-Syrian population of the Hellenized cities was quick to welcome the Greek commanders and joyfully anticipated a Jewish defeat. [Nicanor intended to sell cheaply the Jewish prisoners of war]. When Nicanor invited the citizens of the maritime towns (that is, the Hellenized cities) to meet him, with money in hand, for acquiring slaves, the wealthy were quick to throng to him from every place, bringing not only money but also fetters for the slaves. The Greek cities also took part in the persecution of the Jewish religion, in accordance with the invitation of the government to Hellenize the Jews residing in the Palestinian towns. There is no doubt that these persecutions swiftly created general hatred against the Jews and ruined them economically. The second period of the rising, opening with Judah the Maccabee’s attack on the Graeco-Syrian population in Palestine, was a natural outcome.

The Jews were expanding over the entire land of Palestine and were bringing the Syrian population under their control. This too was no sudden phenomenon, but a continuation and conclusion of a prolonged process which had begun long before the Hasmoneans.

If the idea of national and political revival was formulated clearly only under the Hasmoneans, there can be no doubt that the national idea was secretly at work among the Jewish population of Palestine in an earlier period. The Jewish communities were sensible of a strong inner bond with the people’s national center at Jerusalem and had no desire to assimilate among the Syrians or to give up an independent position. This independent stand no doubt irritated the Syrians, especially as the Jewish communities grew continually with the constant arrival of new immigrants from Judea. Thus hatred of the Jews increased among the Palestinian population and, the moment the government declared a persecution of Judaism, the Syrians willingly joined the army and helped it to fight against the Jews in order to exterminate them.

The gravest danger, which threatened the Jews, was the confiscation of lands in favor of new immigrants whom the Syrian government was proposing to send to Judea. This threat — the dispatch of Greek inhabitants to Judaea and Jerusalem and the reallocation of the land — is twice mentioned in the sources.
The Class War
Against the Hellenistic Jews

Besides the Graeco-Syrians, Judah the Maccabee had other enemies, namely, the Hellenizing Jews. Our sources term them “criminals” and “transgressors,” and praise Judah the Maccabee fulsomely for his ruthless fight against them. The sources relate Judah’s frequent attacks on towns and villages and the extermination of their Hellenizing inhabitants,25 and from these brief reports it emerges clearly that the civil war which had begun in Jerusalem had now spread and embraced the whole of Judea. We know that these people whom Judah persecuted with such hatred were the high-born and wealthy, the rulers of the nation, people who saw in the Hellenization of the Jews an easy way of attaining prominence. They now stood defenseless before multitudes of insurgents filled with a spirit of religious fanaticism and detestation of their oppressors. Small wonder that the Hellenizers sought protection and shelter from the Syrians and became their loyal confederates. When Seron marched against Judah he was accompanied by a large company of Hellenizers,26 and when Gorgias invaded the country of Judea to attack Judah the Maccabee, these (“the people of the Acrâ”) acted as guides to the Seleucid army.27

A custom in the ancient world gave the victors the right to enrich themselves at the expense of the conquered. This was so in every political war, and much more in a social conflict. The Maccabees shared the spoil among themselves after their victory over the enemy, looting the estates of the Hellenizers.

The Constitutional Counter-Revolution: Reinstating the Law of the Torah

About six months later Judah the Maccabee appeared before the walls of Jerusalem and took the city. With this capture began a new chapter in the process of the war of liberation. The capture of Jerusalem fundamentally altered the position of the rival parties. The Hellenizers, who had till now held the power, were compelled to yield their place to their opponents, to evacuate the town and to fortify themselves in the Acrâ. Part of them took refuge with the peoples in the vicinity of Judah, such as the Idumaëans.28 Judah the Maccabee and his faction now controlled Jerusalem and the country. We do not know what his official title was — he was not at any rate High Priest — perhaps because Menelaus was still officially regarded as such. His first objective was to abolish Antiochus’ decrees and to restore the cult of the God of Israel to its rightful place. On the 25th Kislev of the year 164 BCE, the Jews of Jerusalem celebrated the festival of the dedication of the Temple, after the shrine and the entire city had been purified from the remnants of the worship of the Greek deities.

Then came the internal reform. The Hellenizers had abolished the “ancestral laws” as the legal foundation of Jewish political and social life. It is clear that Judah’s chief task was to procure the restoration of the Torah to its former place of primacy. According to Megillat Ta’anit, on the 24th of the month of Av the Jewish courts were set up afresh and “once again judged according to the laws of Israel.” This reform is probably related to the information in Second Maccabees on the gathering of the scrolls of the Torah by Judah the Maccabee. If we recall that the decree of Antiochus had condemned the Torah-scrolls to be burnt,30 it will be easy to understand the Maccabees’ decision to collect the surviving copies of the books of the Law.

The restoration of the Torah to its former position doubtless also restored its interpreters to their previous duties. Although there is no allusion to this in the sources, [it seems that] the Hasidim, Judah

25. I Maccabees 3:8; II Maccabees 8:6
26. I Maccabees 3:15
27. I Maccabees 4:2
28. II Maccabees 10:15
29. II Maccabees 2:14
30. I Maccabees 1:56
For the first time after an interval of hundreds of years there had appeared among the Jews an organized military force, a fact which had its repercussions both on the Jewish world and on other peoples. Till now Judah the Maccabee had been only a leader of the rebels. With the capture of Jerusalem, he became a national leader, and the peasant force which had accompanied him at the beginning of the rising now assumed the form of a real army, which could be used not only for attacks on villages but also for organized warfare against strong enemies. Judah's army was never, of course, a professional force; in periods of peace the soldiers returned to their villages and resumed the working of their land.

There is no doubt that the simple soldiers loved and worshiped their leader, seeing in him a hero and trusting him implicitly. The admiration communicated itself from Judah's camp to the broad sections of the people, and to this day we feel, as we read the books of the Maccabees, the tremendous impression made by Judah the Maccabee on his contemporaries.

Judah the Maccabee's victory over the Hellenizers was the victory of the small peasants and the "urban plebes" over a small group of high-born and wealthy people. This victory caused an important democratization of the public life of Jerusalem and perhaps also deprived the wealthy of part of the economic basis on which their lives had been built.

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Continued Ethnic Strife all across Palestine

Judah the Maccabee became leader of the nation, and the nation immediately had reason to know it. From every corner of Palestine — from Idumaea, Ammon, Gilead and Galilee, as well as from the maritime cities — messengers sped to Jerusalem bringing the evil tidings, that the Syrians and the Greeks were attacking the Jews and plundering their property. This was a sudden outburst of the forces of hatred, which had been accumulating for generations among the Syrian population. The Jews sought the protection of Judah the Maccabee, who naturally did not reject their appeal, but countered the Syrians.

Judah and his brothers regarded the Syro-Greeks not simply as enemies, but as "the worshippers of heathen gods." During the persecution of Antiochus, the Syrians had sought to convert the Jews by force, and now Judah took vengeance not only on the Syrians but also on their deities. He burnt the temple of the Syrian goddess Atargatis (Ashtoreth) over the heads of those who had taken refuge in it and destroyed the high places and statues of the gods at Ashdod.

Thus did Judah's campaigns against the Syrians assume the character of religious wars. They were not merely campaigns in defense of Judaism, they were offensives against the local cults.

It is not surprising to hear that in some localities, Judah's assaults on the Syrian population were accompanied by the total extermination of all the male inhabitants. This ruthlessness was no doubt justified in the eyes of the fighters for freedom, for they were fighting for their religion and for the...
sanctities of Judaism against pagans; hence, the conduct of the war was accompanied by religious ceremonies and religious slogans. This was the role of the Hasidim — to foster the religious zeal of Judah’s warriors.

Conclusion

Let us now examine the rebellion itself. Scholars like Elias Bickerman have pointed to one phenomenon in the progress of the movement which has struck them as very important. The rising, which at its beginning was entirely religious, aiming to defend freedom of worship, became in course of time a political movement, in other words, a struggle for power on the part of Judah and his brothers. Scholars emphasize this new direction especially from the year 162 BCE onwards. In 162 BCE, Antiochus V Eupator rescinded the decrees of his father Antiochus Epiphanes and restored to the Jews the right to live “according to their own laws.” The movement now had no further religious or cultural raison d’etre; yet despite this it did not come to an end, but made great progress. Why?

Antiochus’ decrees were only the trigger, which set off the explosion of forces, the push needed to release the avalanche, but not the sole nor even the basic reason for the Hasmonean movement. If this is the case, there are no grounds for describing the movement as purely religious in its inception, or as purely political at a later stage. In all the doings of Judah the Maccabee and his brothers, the political and religious aspects were equally involved, and any distinction between them can only be artificial.

The Maccabean revolt was from a broader point of view only one link in a long series of uprisings on the part of the Oriental countries against their western rulers. These uprisings manifested the deep social antagonism between the towns, which supported the central power and compromised with Hellenism, and the countryside, which upheld ancestral tradition and fought the foreign power and the local aristocracy simultaneously. The Hasmonean movement, insofar as it was both religious and political, was also social [and economic].

Another Hanukkah Miracle: The Ferocious Angel

Lysias, the guardian and relative of the king, who was in charge of the government, was greatly annoyed [at the success of the Maccabean Revolt in rededicating the Temple]. He mustered about eighty thousand men and all his cavalry, and came to attack the Jews, with the intention of making a place for Greeks to dwell in, of imposing tribute on the Temple and of offering the high priesthood for sale every year. Taking no account at all of the power of God, he was made overconfident by his tens of thousands of infantry, his thousands of cavalry, and his eighty elephants. He invaded Judea, approached Jerusalem and besieged it.

When Judah Maccabeus and his men got news that Lysias was besieging the strongholds, they and the people prayed to the Lord to send some good angel to help save Israel. Judah Maccabeus himself was the first to take up arms and called on the others to risk their lives with him and go to the aid of their brothers. As they eagerly hurried off together, a [mysterious] rider, clothed in white, appeared at the head [of their column] brandishing golden weapons. They all blessed the merciful God together, their hearts were strengthened, and they felt equal to overcoming not only men but the fiercest animals and iron walls. So they advanced in good order with their heavenly ally, for the Lord had had mercy on them. Flying at the enemy like lions, they killed eleven thousand of them and sixteen hundred horsemen, and forced all the rest to flee. Lysias himself escaped only by a disgraceful flight.34

34. II Maccabees 11: 1-12
When we celebrate Hanukkah we usually concentrate on Judah’s achievement of religious freedom and perhaps the later recognition of Judean independence. However, political statehood in a Hellenist world meant accommodations of Jewish society to Greek institutions. The descendants of the Maccabees became kings with the “appropriate” bloody internal feud. They too used foreign mercenaries, pursued expansionist conquest and even forcible conversion to Judaism of the conquered. The result was the alienation of the people and the early Rabbis from the splendor and tyranny of the new monarchy.

Yet Judaism in this period — by merging modern and traditional elements — survived, flourished and ultimately gave birth to Christianity, even though the Hasmonean state lost its independence early on (63 BCE). It is no surprise that the two leading historians of this period, Bickerman and Tcherikover, come to diametrically opposed assessments of the question — did the Maccabean dynasty betray Judaism or ensure its success and growth? Perhaps their historical views, first written in the 1930’s, are somehow congruent with the values of the lands they chose to live in. Both were Russian Jewish scholars who later studied in Germany in the 1920’s. However they chose different paths of emigration from Germany. Bickerman fled to France and then to the U.S.A. where he was involved in the Jewish Theological Seminary of the Conservative Movement. Tcherikover chose to make aliyah to Israel already in 1925. Perhaps Bickerman’s decision to live in America goes with his more optimistic views about the nature of Judaism and its compatibility with the West. Perhaps Tcherikover’s more nationalist reading of the Maccabean Revolt and his more pessimistic view of Judaism’s compatibility with Hellenism fits his secular Zionist commitments.

The treatment by thinkers and historians of the Maccabean revolt has always been colored by their attitudes to coexistence of Western and Jewish culture. Elias Bickerman and Victor Tcherikover disagree radically about the possibility of a Jewish-Western synthesis as they disagree in their evaluation of the ultimate success of the Maccabean Revolt. For Bickerman, for example, the greatness and the survival of Judaism has always been its ability to borrow successfully and critically from its environment. The Greek-Jewish dialogue fertilized Judaism and helped promote Rabbinic culture as much as political survival. [See Bickerman’s essay on “The Philosopher and the Rabbi” on page 133].

However Tcherikover is much more pessimistic. Judaism as a religion has always been at odds with Greek political forms. The Hasmonean Dynasty is a betrayal and a corruption of the Maccabean Revolt, but unfortunately that was inevitable. Jewish religion and the Western notion of state could never be reconciled. This debate over optimism/pessimism on cultural synthesis is still relevant to understanding the tensions between religion and democracy today.
Hellenism was a supranational culture based upon reason and faith in reason. Hence its immediate effect upon all peoples whom it embraced was everywhere to disrupt tradition. Contact with the "enlightened" and universal culture of Hellenism could only be salutary for one who, wrestling as Jacob did with the angel, did not allow himself to be overcome but extorted its blessing, not losing himself in Hellenism, but coming safely away with enhanced strength. Only two peoples of antiquity succeeded in doing so, the Romans and the Jews. The Romans succeeded because they became the rulers even of the Hellenic world. To be sure, they lost much in the process, a good part of their national religion, whose gods Greek gods supplanted. The Jews succeeded because their knowledge of the oneness of God and of His world rule — in a word, the singular character of their faith — set up an inner barrier against surrender and separated them from the rest of the world.

But separation alone could by its nature only preserve past gains, it could not enrich the spirit and the inner life. Many other Oriental peoples, as for example the Egyptians, shut themselves off from Hellenism; but this led only to their becoming backward. Their leading classes, seduced by Hellenism, were lost to the nation.

Jerusalem had been threatened with a similar fate. The leading men of Jewry went over to a foreign culture. These were priestly reformers. The Maccabees protested. They defended the God of their fathers against the deity fabricated by the reformers. By their uprising they preserved the uniqueness and permanence of Judaism, and they preserved monotheism for the world.

But the question of a final settlement with Hellenism had not been resolved. Hellenism continued to be a universal spiritual power, like Western civilization in the modern world, and no people could isolate itself from it if it wished to live and assert itself. Above all, isolation would have involved a break with the already numerous communities of the Diaspora, which were scattered throughout the Greek world and hence were constrained to accept Hellenism.

With the Maccabees, the internal Jewish reconciliation with Hellenism begins. Ideas and concepts of the new age and the new culture were taken over without thereby surrendering native spiritual values. This was managed in two ways. First, the inner strengthening of the people achieved by the Maccabees made it possible to adopt unaltered ideas and institutions which had previously seemed to offer, or in fact did offer, a serious threat.

At the time of Antiochus Epiphanes the gymnasium in Jerusalem was enormously dangerous to Judaism. In the time of Philo the Jews of Alexandria thronged the games without sacrificing any part of Judaism; and the theater, amphitheater and hippodrome erected in Jerusalem by Herod were later visited even by Orthodox Jews.

There are several examples of the Maccabean process of Hellenization:

A first indication of “assimilation” is the accommodation of proper names to the taste of the surrounding world. The leaders of the reform party called themselves Jason instead of Jeshu, Menelaus instead of Onias and the real name of the High Priest Alcimus was Jakim. The Maccabees, on the other hand, bore purely Hebrew names. Mattathias, son of Yohanan, son of Simon, called his children Yohanan (John), Simon, Judah, Elazar, Jonathan.

But already Simon’s son-in-law was called Ptolemaeus, and the sons of John Hyrcanus,
Simon’s grandson, had double names, Aristo-bulus-Judah, Alexander Jannaeus (Yannay, a short form of Jonathan). John Hycanus and Aristobulus struck their coins only in Hebrew; Jannaeus’ coins are bilingual, bearing “King Jonathan” in Hebrew and “King Alexander” in Greek. The character and significance of Maccabean Hellenism is plainly revealed. The reform party wished to assimilate the Torah to Hellenism, the Maccabees wished to incorporate Hellenic culture in the Torah.

Let us consider, for example, the decree of 140 BCE, by which the people invested Simon with the rulership. The document is thoroughly Hellenistic in character. It must have been drafted in Greek. The very notion of drawing up a document to establish a constitution is purely Greek; the Bible provides no pattern for this.

Secondly, Hellenistic notions were appropriated only after their poison had been drawn. The recipe was very simple. The new was fitted into the system of the Torah and was employed the better to serve the God of the fathers, not to elude Him the more adroitly.

In this way Maccabean Hellenism succeeded in parrying spiritual movements which might otherwise have destroyed traditional Judaism. For example, the Hellenistic world surrounding Judaism was caught up by a new revelation that solved the problem of evil on earth. Retribution would come after death, when the wicked would be punished and the righteous rewarded and awakened to new life. Such notions are alien to the Bible, indeed in contradiction to it, for the Torah promises reward and punishment in this life.

Thus Judaism was able to enrich itself with new and foreign ideas and to be saved from the mummification that overtook the religion of the Egyptians, for example, which shut itself off from Hellenism completely. If today the West and Islam believe in resurrection, the idea is one which Maccabean Judaism took over from Hellenism and then passed on to Christianity and Islam. The Maccabees preserved the Judaism of the Greek period from both dissolution and ossification. It is through their deeds that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could and did remain our God.
times, from the time of Judah the Maccabee on. Moreover, the Assembly granted the entire scope of this power to Simon in perpetuity, a conception involving the right of the new ruler to bequeath his authority hereditarily to his son. Thus Simon gathered into his hands, powers of a genuinely monarchical character, and the new dynasty was established on a strong legal basis. As long as the Jews had not issued from the confines of the Judaean hills, they were of no importance in the world of politics. Now, after the Hasmonean state had been founded, it was inevitable that the new power should come into political and cultural contact with the wide world — with Rome, Egypt, Syria and the rest. That world was a Hellenistic world, hence the Hasmonean kingdom was destined to become a Hellenistic state.

The reign of Simon already reveals the lines of a new epoch. The coronation decree of Simon, although it was a decision of “the Great Assembly,” bears the stamp of a pronouncedly Hellenistic influence. [Note the external splendor bestowed upon the High Priest (“he shall put on purple cloth and the clasp of gold”), and the reckoning of the era by the year of his priesthood (“and let all the bills of the country be registered in his name”).] Simon earned the praise of the Knesset because he “had spent much money of his own and had armed the warriors of his nation and given them fee” — the typical praise accorded to a Hellenistic king, who stands above the state and extends aid to his subjects out of his generosity and humanitarian feelings.

In the eyes of the outer world, too, Simon was an independent prince of Hellenistic type; Antiochus VII of Syria granted him permission to mint coins of his own, a right given only to free Greek cities and to vassal princes of independent standing. Simon’s great wealth, the gold and silver utensils which were appointed for use at his court, and the entire brilliance of his new state, amazed the envoy of Antiochus not a little and angered the king himself. It is clear then that the sons of the Hasmoneans had no sooner ceased to be leaders of the nation in rebellion, or officials of the Seleucids, than they appeared before their subjects crowned with Hellenistic splendor. They behaved just as did most of the petty monarchs who set up their kingdoms on the ruins of the disintegrating Seleucid Empire.

The Hasmoneans Become a Hellenist Dynasty

Simon’s successor John Hyrcanus was the first to import mercenaries from abroad for his army. This was characteristic of the epoch, and with the exception of Rome, all the states of those days utilized mercenary troops. The practice did not arise from lack of local forces. The Jewish population of Palestine, although it was small, could furnish Hyrcanus with some thousands of troops, and the wars of Judah the Maccabee showed conclusively that the peasants of Judea were not inferior in military prowess to the Syrians. The need of bringing mercenaries from abroad arose from the desire of the rulers to bind the army with strong and direct bonds to their own persons. This was the practice everywhere. In the Hellenistic world the ruler stood above the state, which he ruled, as a personal power independent of the population. This power was based mainly on formations of mercenaries who received permanent pay from the ruler and were alien to the local people and to the affairs of the state.

Josephus reports that Hyrcanus obtained the money to pay his army in a strange way: by opening the tomb of King David and taking from it 3000 talents of silver. This manner of finding money was also typical of the period, for Hellenistic rulers took money whenever they could, not always in lawful fashion.

By these two acts — the hiring of foreign

troops and the plundering of David’s tomb — Hyrcanus marked the beginning of the rift between himself and the people. The rule of Judah the Maccabee and his brothers had sprung directly from the national awakening which had swept the nation during the persecution of Antiochus and the government of the Hellenizers. The first Hasmoneans were national leaders and part of the people itself. Now the dynasty faced the people as an independent power, and the question was whether the two could find a common language.

The systematic and planned conquest of the country began only under John Hyrcanus. His war in the south was especially productive of results, for he overran the entire country of Idumaea with its Hellenistic towns and compelled the Idumaeans to convert to Judaism.43

The life of the Maccabean court was also fashioned on the model of the Hellenistic monarchies. In their private lives the Hasmoneans were very far from the austerity and stateliness befitting a Jewish High Priest. The Hasmoneans did the same as all the other monarchs of their time, having drinking parties, taking mistresses in addition to their lawful wives, and persecuting those of their relatives whom they suspected for personal or political reasons. Simon was killed by a member of his family during a banquet when he and his sons were drunk.44 The Hasmonean rule was a secular rule, hence the life of the court was secular also, possessing no higher a level than that of the courts of Antioch or of the kings of Asia Minor.

Thus the Hasmoneans went the way of Hellenization and began to resemble the normal type of Hellenistic monarch; King Herod (37 BCE) later trod the same road and trod it to the end. It may be assumed that the Hasmoneans too might have played down the nationalist side of their policy in favor of international Hellenism, had they been free to act as they chose, but they were not. From the time of John Hyrcanus they encountered strong opposition from the Pharisees (the early Rabbis), whose party fought obdurately against the secular monarchy of Alexander Jannaeus and finally under Queen Salome Alexandra, victoriously put an end to the Hellenistic aspirations of the Hasmoneans.

A Sad Conclusion

The Hasmonean aim was to build a Hellenistic state on a Jewish national foundation. This, however, was to prove impossible. Judaism and Hellenism were, as forces, each too peculiar to itself to be able to compromise within one country. A Hellenistic state could not be founded on the Jerusalem theocracy. A Jewish High Priest could not be a Hellenistic king, and the two conceptions had to be separated. This operation was carved out by Herod, who separated the monarchy from the priesthood and established a Hellenistic state. Yet this state did not rest on a national foundation. The Pharisees also wished to make a distinction between the secular power and religious life; from Herod’s time began the great work of the scholars which aimed to set the people’s religious life on a solid basis of Hebrew tradition.

In conclusion, the state created by the Maccabees was not a really a Jewish state according to Tcherikover and it could not survive half-priestly and half-Hellenist. However, for Bickerman, the synthesis of Judaism as a Western religion and the Greek modes of political thought was a great achievement of the Maccabees which has left us a useful legacy.

43. Josephus, Antiquities XIII, 257
44. I Maccabees 16:15
Many scholars and rabbis have argued, sometimes approvingly and sometimes angrily, that the Rabbis or the Pharisees (as they were known before the Second Temple destruction in 70 CE) did everything to repress the memory of the Maccabees. They have marshaled the following evidence:

(1) The historical book written in Hebrew by Maccabean scribes, *First Maccabees*, was never included in the Tanach or preserved in Hebrew in Eretz Yisrael.
(2) There is no Mishnaic tract on Hanukkah as there is for Purim and the other holidays.
(3) Neither Mattathias nor Judah are mentioned in Rabbinic literature.
(4) No megillah is read on Hanukkah.
(5) Only the miracle of the oil, not the amazing military victory, is commemorated in the Talmud.

Secular nationalists of the 19th and 20th century condemned the Rabbis for denigrating military heroism and political activism and sought to reclaim the proto-Zionist image of the Maccabees. Non-Zionist rabbis on the left and on the right praised the original Rabbis for separating religion from politics and criticizing the secularist Hellenist dynasty of the Hasmoneans. Both groups referred to the sources (Josephus and Rabbinic literature) that describe the conflict between the Pharisees and the Hasmonean monarch, King Alexander Yannai (103-76 BCE).

It is told: When King Yannai took sick, he had seventy elders of Israel seized, confined them in prison, and told the warden, “If I die, put these (Rabbinic) elders to death. Thus while the Jews rejoice at my death, they will at the same time be forced to grieve for their teachers.” It is further told that King Yannai had a good wife whose name was Shalmonin. The instant her husband died, she removed a ring from his hand and sent it to the warden with the message: “As a result of a dream, your master has ordered the elders released.” He released them, and they went back to their homes. It was only then that she announced, “King Yannai is dead.” The day King Yannai died was declared a feast day by the Rabbis.

This view argued that the Rabbis rejected the Hasmoneans because as a priestly family they had usurped the messianic claims of David’s descendants from the tribe of Judah. The Hasmoneans were too “modern,” too Hellenized for the traditionalist Rabbis.

However the Israeli historian Gedalyahu Alon has argued that the so-called repression of the Maccabees is severely overstated:

(1) That *First Maccabees* was not canonized could be because of its late subject since the Tanach’s last historical book is about Ezra (450 BCE).
(2) Although there is no Mishna on Hanukkah, the holiday is sanctioned in the earliest written document of the Rabbis — *Megillat Taanit* (1st-2nd CE) which recalls several Maccabean military victories and their annual commemorations (13th of Adar, the Victory over Nicanor by Judah the Maccabee).
(3) Generally Rabbinic literature does not describe any political or military history, since its genre is legal and sermonic in character. While Judah the Maccabee is not praised, neither are the Maccabees ever criticized. In the Talmud God is praised for “raising up the Hasmonean (Mattathias) and his sons” to redeem Israel. Only the Hasmonean monarchs appearing sixty to eighty years later are criticized in Rabbinic tradition.

(4) While there is no official reading of the Maccabean history on Hanukkah, there was an Aramaic version of *First Maccabees* written in Eretz Yisrael between 2nd and 8th centuries CE which was read aloud with traditional cantillation on Shabbat Hanukkah. It is called the *Megillah of Antiochus*.
(5) While the halachic literature focused on the miracle of the cruse of oil, the official synagogue prayer on Hanukkah (8th century CE), *Al Hanissim* — “On the Miracles” describes the battle of the few righteous and pure ones against the many wicked ones. The miracle is military; the heroes are Mattathias’ family.

Whatever the historians may conclude, the lack of an official narrative for the commemoration of Hanukkah, invites each generation of Jews to fill that gap creatively and integrate their own new readings of the past along with new ideologies for the future.

45. Berl Katznelson, Avraham Yaari, Eliezer ben Yehuda, Simon Dubnov
APPENDIX

THE BIASES OF THE ANCIENT HISTORIANS

CONTRASTING THE BOOKS OF FIRST AND SECOND MACCABEES
   THE COURT HISTORIAN AND THE DIASPORA HISTORIAN

When in 140 BCE the Jews gained political independence under a self-consciously national state with Simon the High Priest at its head, they turned self-reflective and began to generate and promote the writing of the new state’s political and religious “autobiography” so to speak. This involved a return to the long neglected genre of Biblical history as well as its integration with Hellenist historiography. Following a bloody civil war, the revolutionary victory of a new high priesthood and the rise of a newly independent state after four hundred years of subjugation, the Jews needed to identify the villains and the heroes, to redefine their values and to clarify their theology. They needed to understand the new state that had arisen in terms of its place in Jewish tradition as well as to evaluate the Hellenism, which in some ways they rejected and yet in others had absorbed completely. Finally, they needed to praise God for their victory and define the nature of Divine intervention in the events that occurred.

The Hasmoneans, as the Maccabees were called, first collected all the old books and the documents into a national archive, which might be compared to the American Library of Congress, just as the Jews had done after the destruction of the First Temple:

“Nehemia (450 BCE) founded a library and collected the books about kings and prophets, the works of David and the royal letters about sacred gifts. In like manner Judah also collected for us all the books that had been scattered because of the outbreak of war [and the explicit edicts of persecution that condemned the Torah scrolls to the flames] and they are in our hands.”

Then the Maccabees began to write new books. Four Books of the Maccabees survive into the twenty-first century, each written originally by different authors from different perspectives and sometimes in different countries and languages. In addition, a five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene is mentioned but now lost. We will focus chiefly on the First and Second Book of Maccabees which, unlike the First and Second volume of Samuel or Kings in the Bible, are not two volumes written by the same author in succession but two totally independent works covering partially overlapping periods of the Maccabean revolt. Let us summarize the perspective of each author.

First Maccabees: The Court Historian

First Maccabees (written circa 134-104 BCE and describing the period of 166-135 BCE) is devoted to presenting the Maccabean dynasty, from Mattathias through his son, Judah, to Jonathan and Simon who became high priests and gained political independence. First Maccabees was written in Hebrew (though it is only preserved today in Greek) for a Judean audience in a Biblical style that emphasizes how God chose the Hasmonean family to save Israel. First Maccabees is in a way reminiscent of the book of Judges (The Maccabees are “those men into whose hand the salvation of Israel was given”). Many original prayers, speeches and poems embedded in First Maccabees reflect the strong religious feelings of the new rulers.

The book may have been designed to legitimate the Hasmonean dynasty in the face of two internal objections rooted in the worldview reported a generation before the revolt by Ben Sira:

“Praise the God who planted the seed of the House of David!”

49. II Maccabees 2:13-14
51. I Maccabees 5:62
Praise the God who chose the children of Zadok the priest.  

(1) Mattathias is not a direct descendant of the Zadok family of high priests chosen in the days of David, with whose descendants Jason and Alcimus were implicated in the Hellenist reforms in the Temple.

(2) The Hasmonean dynasty of priests cannot be the descendants of King David who came from the tribe of Judah.

However, the narrative of First Maccabees implicitly answers these objections:

(1) The author describes Mattathias’ action and his rallying call, “Let everyone who is zealous for the Law and who remains faithful to the Covenant, follow me.” He uses terms directly analogous to Moses and the Levi tribe at the Golden Calf and Pinchas the zealous priest. They both attacked public desecraters of Jewish worship. In the Bible both the tribe of Levi and Pinchas himself are rewarded for their zealous action by being granted a special status in the Temple worship. Pinchas is even promised what most commentators understand as the high priesthood. Similarly, in Mattathias’s case, zealous action in face of desecration earns the volunteer the dynastic right to the priesthood for their children after them.

(2) Second Maccabees legitimates the political claims of the Hasmonean dynasty by describing at length the people’s assembly that ratified Simon’s claim to the high priesthood and the governorship. The Greek Syrians acknowledge Simon’s claim by granting him the “purple cloth and the gold clasp,” while the Jewish people immortalize their agreement to Simon’s rule by engraving the agreement on brass tablets set in pillars on Mount Zion. Yet Simon never claimed to displace David’s house, therefore he never took the title “king” and left the agreement as a temporary one “until the true prophet will come.” First Maccabees also emphasizes the international recognition accorded the Hasmonean declaration of independence by quoting no less than nine royal documents from Greek Syria, Rome and Sparta. (This concern for legitimacy recalls the Zionist concern to obtain the Balfour Declaration, November 2, 1917, and the United Nations recognition on November 29, 1947.)

Interestingly enough, First Maccabees plays down the religious and political civil war that the Maccabees fought with the Zadokite priests and the Hellenizers. Rather it emphasizes the unity of the people around the inspiring religious figure of Judah the Maccabee who is described as a hero (military warrior) and soter (savior of his political community). The true villain is Antiochus IV, the Emperor who seeks to homogenize his empire’s many ethnic and religious groups into one loyal Hellenistic kingdom. (“The king ordered all his kingdom to become one people.”)

Probably the author of First Maccabees was supported by the Hasmonean court and believed his book continued the Biblical tradition of Chronicles.

Second Maccabees: The Diaspora Historian

In contrast to First Maccabees, the book of Second Maccabees is a summary of a history written originally in Greek for Diaspora Hellenistic Jews living in the Greek speaking area in Egypt. The Jews to whom the book was addressed were both loyal to their nation and its new Hasmonean state and yet faithful subjects of the kingdoms of the Greek dynasty of Ptolemies in Egypt. Jason of Cyrene wrote the original five-volume history of the Maccabees which was later summarized by an anonymous “epitomizer” in Second Maccabees. The original has not been preserved.

As we explained, the author of First

52. Ben Sira 51:28-29  53. I Maccabees 2:27
54. I Maccabees 14:41  55. I Maccabees 1:44
**Third Maccabees:**

**Ptolemy and the Elephants**

Third Maccabees is really a Greek historical novel which has nothing to do with the Maccabees. It describes the Egyptian Hellenist king, Ptolemy IV, who lived two generations before the Maccabean revolt, when Judea was still ruled by the Ptolemies.

According to the story, Ptolemy IV resolves to visit Jerusalem. The scene moves swiftly to the Temple. Impressed by its magnificence, he insists, against the Torah and despite all the Jewish protests, on his right to enter the Temple. A mighty Jewish throng converges at once upon the Temple: “The combined shouts of the crowd, ceaseless and vehement, caused an indescribable uproar. It seemed as if not only the people but the very walls and the whole pavement cried out. They all preferred death to the profanation of the Temple.”

Simon the high priest then offers a long prayer, rehearsing the mighty acts of God on behalf of his people Israel. God responds by imposing physical punishment upon Ptolemy who suffers a seizure. The description is a good example of the bombastic language of Third Maccabees: “God scourged the one who was greatly exalted by his own insolence and effrontery tossing him to and fro like a leaf on the wind, until he fell impotent with his limbs paralyzed and unable to speak, completely overpowered by a righteous judgement.”

We next find Ptolemy back in Egypt breathing vengeance against the Jews. He commands a census of all Jews in Alexandria in order that they might be reduced to slavery. Exemption is offered to those who agree to participate in the pagan mystery cult of Gnosis. Some Jews do accept the Greek religion, but the great majority gallantly hold on to their ancestral faith. The angry Ptolemy then decrees that all Jews in his kingdom be transported in chains and put to death. The account of their deportation is a classic piece of “pathetic history,” written in the most florid style. Once arrived on the outskirts of the city, the vast multitude is herded into the race track. Ptolemy plans their destruction with Hermon, the captain of his five hundred strong elephant brigade. Three times Hermon, and finally Ptolemy himself, set out on this nefarious exploit and three times this scheme is thwarted by God’s miraculous interference on behalf of the Jews.

On the last occasion, by reason of the venerable Elazar’s prayer, by an amazing reversal, the elephants, previously intoxicated by doses of frankincense and wine, turn back on the king’s own troops and trample them to death. In a fit of remorse Ptolemy undergoes a complete change of heart towards the Jews, orders their release and he praises their God. The point of the narrative is to illustrate both the power of prayer and the absolute sovereignty of the Jewish God.

56. III Maccabees 1:28-29 was written in the 1st century BCE.
57. III Maccabees 2:21-22
58. III Maccabees 4:1-13

Maccabees, who wrote for Judeans, sought to promote the legitimacy of the Hasmonean priesthood and its political rule. However, Second Maccabees seeks to explain to Diaspora Jews and Greeks alike, that the Maccabean revolt was not the result of an inevitable clash of two cultures — Hellenism and Judaism — or of two peoples — Hellenes and Jews. The bloodshed was really unnecessarily caused by an unholy alliance between money-hungry so-called priests and irrational Greek leaders who caused the desecration of an ancient Temple and the persecution of a legally protected religion. The Jewish villains, Jason and Menelaus, threatened the peace of the city by undermining traditional Greek respect for native religious and legal practice. Greek readers, who always respected ancient traditions, were sure to condemn these Jewish innovators who wrought havoc.

In Second Maccabees there is a unique emphasis on religious martyrdom — Hannah and her seven sons and Elazar the elderly scribe — are presented as philosophers rationally defending the decision to die rather than to abandon their ancestral faith. Their deaths are seen not only as a way to sanctify God’s name, but as a way to vicariously remove the sins of Israel and to evoke a supernatural intervention by God. This new
A phenomenon of religious martyrdom reflects the kind of religious loyalty valued in particular in the Diaspora. Their voluntary, tortured deaths assuage God’s wrath over the desecration of the Temple by false high priests and explain Judah’s victories as God’s salvation in response to the death of the Jewish martyrs as well as God’s appropriate punishment for Antiochus IV’s insufferable arrogance.

Supernatural intervention abounds in Second Maccabees, while religiously motivated military initiatives are emphasized in First Maccabees. (The miracle of the vessel of oil that burned for eight days is never mentioned in any of the Books of the Maccabees and appears only in later Rabbinic sources.)

The literary style chosen by Jason of Cyrene highlights the martyrdom. It is a melodramatic Greek style that describes graphically the death of innocent children, women and old men. It seeks to shock the audience with tear-jerking violence and to inspire the reader with heroic resolve to suffer horrendous torture rather than commit idolatry.

The summary of Jason of Cyrene was created by someone seeking to legitimize the celebration of Hanukkah in Ptolemaic Hellenistic Egypt. Therefore the anonymous “epitomizer” (summarizer) provides an abbreviated history with two letters written in 142 BCE by newly independent Judea to the Diaspora Jews in Egypt. The letters call upon their brothers to observe Hanukkah as the holiday of the rededication of the Temple.

60. II Maccabees 9

The Apocrypha

How were the Books of Maccabees preserved? In the Christian Bible. As we noted before, First Maccabees was written in Hebrew in Judea as a chronicle of the newly established Hasmonean Dynasty, probably 30-50 years after the Maccabean revolt. But it was never accepted by the Rabbis in Judea as a part of the canon. In fact, the Hebrew Bible contains no historical works after Ezra and Nehemia (450 BCE), which were written in the Persian period.

However, the Jews of Hellenist Egypt preserved two of the four Books of the Maccabees. First Maccabees was translated into Greek and the other three were written originally in Greek. First and Second Maccabees were incorporated into the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible by Egyptian Jews which sometimes contains different versions of what we have in the Hebrew version as preserved. This Greek Jewish Bible, the Septuagint, was absorbed into the Christian Bible even before the New Testament was canonized. However, when the Christians did begin to canonize or to categorize holy books, some church fathers like St. Jerome (4th century CE) distinguished the canonical “Old Testament” made up of the books found in the Hebrew Bible from the ecclesiastical works of a lesser status, like the Maccabees which is only in the Septuagint.

Still the official bodies of Eastern and Western Christendom did regard all of the Septuagint, including all the books of the Maccabees, as sacred in some sense.

In 1534 the founder of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, translated the Hebrew Bible into German leaving the Books of the Maccabees in his appendix under the title: “Apocrypha, that is, books which are not equated with Holy Scripture and yet which are useful and good to read.” In response, the Catholic Church (Council of Trent in 1546) reaffirmed its status as a holy book just below the sanctity of the official Bible.