

Lesson 10

Seleucid Rule II

190-175 BC

Introduction

Finally, under Seleucid rule, the Jews enjoyed a few positive years and the significant growth of Jerusalem as a cultural and economic hub for several years. This would last until around 188 BC when significant political and economic downturns would cripple the Seleucid empire. Off to the west, Rome was becoming increasingly a world power, having gained control of the Italian peninsula, most of Spain, northern Africa, and other areas across the western Mediterranean. Rome was advancing their interests east and viewed the Seleucids as a threat.

In the middle sat Greece and Macedonia. The Seleucids claimed the area because they had been there longer. Rome did not want them that close to them. The conflict became inevitable.

Antiochus III and Rome

Antiochus III arranged the marriage of his daughter, Cleopatra, to Ptolemy V, and also married his son and daughter, Antiochus and Laodice IV, to each other in 194 BC. After the crown prince Antiochus died a year later, Antiochus III named his next son, Seleucus, his heir. Meanwhile, Antiochus expanded his influence by conquering Thrace and aligning with many Greek states, unsettling Rome, which preferred a subdued Greece. Tensions escalated when Antiochus gave asylum to Hannibal, a foe of Rome, leading to conflict.

In 191 BC, after Antiochus entered Greece with a small force, Rome responded with a large military assault, defeating him at Thermopylae. While this loss was a setback, the real challenge came as Rome prepared to confront Antiochus in Asia. Concurrently, Ptolemy V attacked the Seleucid-controlled Phoenician coast, forcing Antiochus to divert military resources to Palestine.

Attempting to avoid further conflict, Antiochus sought a diplomatic resolution, but Rome demanded heavy concessions. The negotiations failed, leading to a decisive battle in 190 BC near Magnesia, where Lucius Cornelius Scipio defeated Antiochus, earning the title "Asiaticus."

Daniel writes:

Then he [Antiochus III] will turn his attention to the coasts and islands [The Aegean lands] and capture many. But a commander [Scipio Asiaticus] will put an end to his taunting; instead, he will turn his taunts against him. He will turn his attention back to the fortresses of his own land, but he will stumble, fall, and be no more.

The defeat at Magnesia was a significant blow to Antiochus III's ambitions. Despite his efforts to strengthen his realm through strategic marriages and alliances, he could not withstand the might of Rome, which was now a rising power in the Mediterranean. The victory at Magnesia curbed Antiochus's expansion. It marked a turning point, solidifying Rome's influence over the region and signaling a shift in power dynamics that would shape history in the years to come. Antiochus's defeat and the subsequent

peace terms imposed by Rome significantly diminished the Seleucid Empire's territory and power, illustrating the precarious nature of political and military fortunes in the ancient world.

After his defeat, Antiochus III faced harsh terms in the Treaty of Apamea (188 BC). He was forced to cede Thrace and Asia Minor to the Taurus Mountains, territories granted to Eumenes II of Pergamum, significantly expanding his domain. Additionally, Antiochus had to pay a hefty fine to Eumenes and substantial war reparations to Rome over twelve years, severely constraining his empire's resources.

Rome also dismantled Antiochus's military capabilities, limiting his navy and banning the use of elephants and the recruitment of mercenaries. The Romans demanded the handover of Hannibal and others who had found asylum with him. As a guarantee of compliance, Rome took twenty hostages from Antiochus, including his youngest son, Mithridates.

These events significantly elevated Rome's influence in the Mediterranean, shifting the political center westward. Though not entirely subdued, Antiochus's power was now confined, shifting his economic focus towards Mesopotamia. To meet the financial demands of the reparations, he attempted to seize wealth from a temple in Elymais, which was said to have had vast stores of gold and silver. This was an act that incited local outrage, leading to his death at the hands of an angry mob. The rise of Rome and this local uprising abruptly ended the reign of a ruler who had once significantly impacted Judea's fate.

The rise of Rome and this local uprising abruptly ended the reign of a ruler who had once significantly impacted Judea's fate. Antiochus's attempts to salvage his empire's economy through temple raiding backfired, leading to his violent death. His efforts to stabilize and secure his eastern frontiers while also trying to satisfy Rome's heavy reparations highlighted the shifting balance of power. Rome's dominance in the Mediterranean was now undeniable, and the Seleucid Empire, once a formidable Hellenistic state, found its glory and influence significantly diminished under the weight of Roman demands. The political landscape of the ancient world was forever altered as Rome emerged as the preeminent power, setting the stage for centuries of Roman influence and control.

Seleucus IV's Wrestling with the Roman Treaty

After Antiochus III died in 187 BC, his successor, Seleucus IV, inherited the Seleucid throne and the onerous Treaty of Apamea imposed by Rome. Unlike the person-centric treaties of Hellenistic kings, Rome's treaties were state-centric, surviving beyond any monarch's death. Seleucus IV began to rebuild his military to defend against Ptolemy V of Egypt, particularly after Ptolemy quashed a significant revolt. Seleucus tightened tax policies and seized control of temple treasuries across Palestine to fund this and meet Rome's reparations without overburdening his economy.

In a strategic move, Seleucus married his daughter to Perseus of Macedon to distract Rome while planning to seize Egypt, especially after Ptolemy V's death left Cleopatra I, Seleucus's sister, in charge as regent. He hoped to act before her son, Ptolemy VI, came of age. To finance these plans, Seleucus relied on funds from temples across Palestine and Syria.

To facilitate these efforts, Seleucus appointed Olympiodorus as overseer of temple affairs, centralizing control and ending the autonomy enjoyed by temples like Jerusalem's. This move was likely seen as

overreach by Judean citizens, disrupting the blessings and civic renewal associated with the temple's operation. The new high priest, Onias III, was in a difficult position. He was forced to adopt a more conservative stance due to this Gentile authority over the temple, marking a sour turn in Seleucid-Judean relations.

The strategic actions of Seleucus IV, aimed at regaining strength and territory while managing Rome's demands, ultimately led to significant unrest in Judea. The appointment of Olympiodorus as overseer of temple affairs across Palestine was a stark change from the previously semi-autonomous status of these institutions. It not only angered the local population but also put the high priest, Onias III, in a challenging position where he had to balance his loyalty to Seleucid governance with his people's religious and cultural expectations.

The Judeans deeply resented the imposition on the temple treasuries. It represented an infringement on their religious practices and an affront to their cultural identity. The once favorable relationship between the Seleucids and the Jews quickly deteriorated, and the period of relative peace and prosperity under Seleucid rule was abruptly ended.

While it may have temporarily diverted Roman attention, Seleucus's decision to marry his daughter to the Macedonian king did little to secure the long-term stability of his realm. The tension between the need to appease Rome and the desire to expand his territory created a delicate balancing act that would become increasingly difficult to maintain. This period set the stage for significant shifts in the Hellenistic world, with the Seleucid Empire's waning influence and the rising discontent among its subjects, particularly the Jews, who would later seek to assert their independence.

This period set the stage for significant shifts in the Hellenistic world, with the Seleucid Empire's waning influence and the rising discontent among its subjects, particularly the Jews, who would later seek to assert their independence. Despite a practical solution to his financial woes, Seleucus IV's efforts to secure funds through temple treasuries ultimately contributed to the erosion of his kingdom's stability. His delicate maneuvering in the geopolitical landscape of the time highlights the complex interplay of power, religion, and culture that characterized the era. As Seleucus IV's reign progressed, it became increasingly clear that the Seleucid dynasty's hold over its diverse territories was under threat, both from external powers like Rome and internal strife, setting in motion events that would significantly impact the ancient Near East.

As Seleucus IV's reign progressed, it became increasingly clear that the Seleucid dynasty's hold over its diverse territories was threatened by external powers like Rome and internal strife, setting events that would significantly impact the ancient Near East in motion. The measures imposed on the Jewish temple, in particular, sowed seeds of long-term resentment and unrest. This period of history foreshadowed the coming upheavals and the eventual rise of movements seeking autonomy and independence from Hellenistic rulers, which would reshape the region's political and cultural landscape. Therefore, Seleucus IV's reign stands as a testament to the challenges rulers face attempting to navigate the treacherous waters of international diplomacy and domestic stability in a rapidly changing world.

Jewish Discontent

Liberal Jews, who favored Hellenistic integration, were less troubled by the appointment of Olympiodorus, a Greek temple minister, as this aligned with their worldview. They favored greater integration with the Hellenistic world. However, this decision exacerbated the ideological rift between liberal and conservative Jews. Surprisingly, the liberal Tobiad family, whose wealth was essential to the temple treasury, sided with the conservative high priest Onias III, likely to protect their financial interests from potential seizure by the crown.

Seleucus IV increased taxes and claimed control of the temple treasury to fund military defenses and repay Rome. This policy further polarized Jewish society and jeopardized the treasury's wealth, including funds from the estate of Hyrcanus, 2 Maccabees 3.11. Onias III's conservative shift and the diverse conservative factions within Judaism made unified opposition to royal decrees challenging despite shared theological principles. At this time, there were many different conservative factions, each with a distinct ideology and vision for the future.

Simon, a liberal priest, clashed with Onias over the administration of Jerusalem's marketplace and sought intervention from the Seleucid governor. Simon came from a liberal family of priests who sought to integrate Judea into the wider Hellenistic world. Around 181 BC, Simon and Onias III disagreed over where the proceeds from the temple marketplace should go. It appears that Simon wanted these to go to the Seleucids. Onias did not. This dispute and the wealth of the Jerusalem temple caught the attention of Seleucus IV, who saw an opportunity to finance his ambitions, including an alliance with Macedon's Perseus and plans to invade Egypt.

In 179 BC, Seleucus IV sent Heliodorus to extract funds from the temple, putting Onias in a difficult position and risking the temple's financial health and divine favor. The Heliodorus Affair, as it came to be known, unfolded dramatically. Before Heliodorus arrived, the Tobiads promptly withdrew their deposits to the temple treasury, drastically reducing the available capital and leaving Seleucus without the funds for his strategies and war reparations. When Heliodorus arrives, he and his bodyguard are said to have been confronted by a divine cavalryman in golden armor. Heliodorus was kicked to the ground, and two other supernatural beings beat him. Onias interceded on Heliodorus' behalf, who was then miraculously restored. It is said that Heliodorus then offered sacrifices and left Jerusalem humbled, and not one penny from the treasury. Modern historians dismiss the supernatural accounts and speculate that Heliodorus may have been attacked violently by men hired by the Tobiads and later nursed back to health on the orders of Onias. Whatever happened, we know that Heliodorus returned to Seleucus without any money from the Jewish treasury.

No payments were made to Rome in 178-77 BC. In 176, The Roman Senate demanded the exchange of hostages, signaling their expectations for Seleucus's payments. They demanded trading Seleucus' brother, Mithridates (now around 40), for Seleucus' 9-year-old son, the crown prince Demetrius. Seleucus had no choice, and the hostage swapping was completed.

Seleucus' plans to further his power and interests were complicated by the unexpected death of his sister Cleopatra I in Egypt. Simultaneously, Heliodorus, once a close friend and confidant, became

disillusioned after his experience, assassinated Seleucus IV on September 3, 175 BC, and attempted to rule as regent, only to be ousted by Eumenes II of Pergamum, who installed Seleucus's brother Mithridates, now known as Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Daniel prophesied:

“In his [Antiochus III’s] place one [Seleucus IV] will arise who will send out a tax collector [Heliodorus] for the glory of the kingdom; but within a few days he [Seleucus IV] will be broken, though not in anger or in battle, Daniel 11.20.

Some speculate that Heliodorus was put up to the assassination by the Roman Senate. If he had told them of Seleucus’ plans to go to war with Egypt, they may have employed him to assassinate Seleucus rather than going to war. Heliodorus planned to serve as regent until the crown prince, Demetrius, could serve as king. Instead, Eumenes II intervened and installed Mithridates as regent. He immediately took the throne name Antiochus IV Epiphanes (“Antiochus, the divine manifestation”), making it clear he had no plans of handing the throne over when the time came. Daniel marks his coming to power with this foreboding prophecy:

“In his [Seleucus IV] place a despised person [Antiochus IV] will arise; royal honors will not be given to him, but he will come during a time of peace and seize the kingdom by intrigue, Daniel 11.21.

Seleucid legacy and Jewish history

The Heliodorus Affair and the subsequent political maneuvers did not just reflect the tumultuous reign of Seleucus IV but also forecasted the complex and often tense relationship between the Hellenistic rulers and their Jewish subjects. Antiochus IV Epiphanes' ascent to power was marked by an ominous tone in the biblical text, hinting at the challenges his reign would pose for the Jewish people. These events set the stage for the Maccabean Revolt and the struggle for Jewish independence, leaving an indelible mark on the region's history and resonating through the centuries.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes' reign, characterized by his self-deification and aggressive Hellenization policies, would ultimately lead to a significant cultural and religious conflict. As the Seleucid influence wavered, the stage was set for a period of upheaval to see the Jewish people assert their identity and faith against the backdrop of a changing world. The ensuing conflicts and the Maccabean Revolt would not only redefine the power dynamics in the region but also secure a place in history for the enduring struggle for religious freedom and national sovereignty.

The Seleucid attempts to consolidate power through economic and religious control ultimately catalyzed a significant response, highlighting the importance of respecting and understanding the complexities of cultural and spiritual identities within any empire. The legacy of Seleucus IV's rule thus serves as a historical lesson on the consequences of overreach by a ruling power and the potent force of a people's will to uphold their traditions and beliefs.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes' subsequent actions would only fuel the fire of Jewish resistance, ultimately leading to a celebrated period of revolt and the reestablishment of Jewish religious autonomy through the rededication of the Second Temple. This period, commemorated in the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, serves as a testament to the enduring human spirit and its capacity to overcome oppression.

Conclusion

Hellenistic rule significantly changed Judaism, with Greek influence intensifying after Persia's downfall. This led to cultural, political, and economic shifts, turning Judea's focus towards the Mediterranean. Ptolemy I's conquest of Jerusalem in 301 BC was a brutal blow, displacing many Jews to Alexandria, which became a new center for Judaism. With Greek becoming the dominant language, Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek, starting with the Torah. The Jerusalem temple, though still central for Jews, was far from the power and trade corridors of the time.

The political tumult following Alexander's death settled under Ptolemaic rule, but it came with heavy taxation, enriching some Jews like the Tobiads while impoverishing others. Antiochus III's reign brought relief and privileges to Jerusalem, transforming it into a prominent holy city and economic hub.

Under Seleucus IV, however, tensions within Judaism grew, with conservative and liberal factions pulling in different directions. This was exacerbated by the Treaty of Apamea's aftermath, leading to increased taxation and political unrest. Jerusalem's status as an international city raised the stakes for all involved.

The ascent of Antiochus IV saw Jews retaining cultural rights within the Seleucid kingdom, but internal cultural conflicts were brewing. Hellenism had seeped into even conservative Jewish thought, introducing Greek philosophical ideas that would persist into the first century, reshaping Jewish beliefs about the spiritual realm, the soul, and individual importance.

These shifts reflected the broader movement of the political and economic pole from the eastern to the western Mediterranean, ultimately settling in Rome. By 175 BC, Rome's dominance was established. During the Hasmonean era, its influence would continue to shape the region, with Jews looking westward across the Mediterranean toward Rome.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How did the fall of the Persian Empire intensify Greek cultural and linguistic influence over the Levant, and what impact did this have on Judea and Samaria?
2. What were the consequences of the Treaty of Apamea for Antiochus III and the Seleucid Empire, and how did this treaty compare to modern treaties like Versailles?
3. How did Antiochus III's strategic marriages and alliances reflect the geopolitical strategies of the time, and why were they ultimately unsuccessful against Rome?

4. What factors contributed to the defeat of Antiochus III at Magnesia, and what were the broader implications for the power dynamics in the Mediterranean region?
5. How did Seleucus IV navigate the challenges of the Treaty of Apamea in his efforts to rebuild the Seleucid military and manage Rome's demands?
6. What role did the appointment of Olympiodorus play in the tensions between the Seleucid rulers and their Jewish subjects, and how did this impact the religious and cultural identity of Judea?
7. How did the Heliodorus Affair illustrate the precarious balance of power within the Seleucid Empire and the potential for local resistance to imperial policies?
8. In what ways did the political and economic strategies of Seleucus IV set the stage for future conflicts and movements for independence within the Hellenistic world?
9. How did the spread of Hellenism influence Jewish thought and religious practices, and what tensions did this create within the Jewish community?
10. How did Rome's rise to power influence the political and cultural landscape of the region, and what lasting impacts did this have on the Jewish people and the Hellenistic kingdoms?