

## Lesson 8

# A Century of War

## Introduction

After the death of Seleucus I in 281 BC, his son Antiochus I took over. Early on, he focused on securing peace in the heart of the Seleucid empire, which left Asia Minor open for exploitation. Over a few decades, the Gauls, who had invaded Greece, began an eastward push and took over much of western Asia Minor. Thus, that region became known as Galatia. Unfortunately, the rivalry between the Seleucids and Ptolemies did not lessen. In fact, over the next century, there would be six wars between them.

The first Syrian War lasted four years, from 275 BC to 271 BC. In this war, the Ptolemies won Asia Minor. The area of Judea and Samaria remained with them as well. Ptolemy II flaunted the victory in Alexandria with an exuberant parade. Also, after the war, he divorced his wife, Arsinoe, and married his sister, Arsinoe II. They ruled as “sibling gods”. This was an effort to combine the religion of the Egyptian and Greek gods – and it also established a dynasty that would last until Cleopatra VII. His marriage to his sister caused him to be known as *Philadelphus* or sister-lover.

## The Septuagint

After the high priest Hezekiah’s death in 301 BC, Onias I succeeded him, ruling until 279 BC. Simon I was following, but he died in 275, and his son Onias II was too young to assume the priesthood. So the office passed to Simon’s brother, Eleazar. The books of Law (Torah) were translated into Greek at Alexandria sometime during the 260s BC. The Septuagint was translated into everyday Greek (koine).

The Roman numerals LXX ( $50 + 10 + 10 = 70$ ) often represent the Septuagint. This is because Ptolemy II commissioned 70 or 72 translators to render the Law of Moses into Greek. By this time, Jews had been living in this area for well over a century and had – for the most part – lost their homeland’s native language. The need for an Old Testament in Greek led to the production of this translation. According to the Jewish *Letter of Aristeas*, Ptolemy II commissioned the Jewish high priest, Eleazar, to send six translators from the 12 Jewish tribes (72) for the work. It is said that they completed the translation in 72 days.

Today, as a set of books, the Septuagint contains:

- A Greek translator of the Jewish bible (24 books of the Hebrew canon).
- Additional books for the Jews: Tobit; Judith; Additions to Esther; 1 & 2 Maccabees; Wisdom of Solomon; Sirach; Baruch; Letter of Jeremiah; Additions to Daniel.

Translating these key texts into Greek was pivotal to developing what would become known as Hellenistic Judaism. These texts were carried across the Mediterranean to the other Greek cities where Jews had settled.

## The Beginning of the Synagogue

Around the same time as the translation of the Septuagint, prayer houses began to spring up throughout Jewish communities, especially in Egypt. The Jews constructed buildings dedicated to communal prayer, the reading of Scripture, and the safe storage of scrolls. These buildings were called *prayer houses*. These houses were met with the approval of the Ptolemaic monarchs. Some were located on as many as 2 + acres, allowing Jews to grow flowers and vegetables. One was located next to a canal, which would have provided access to water and maybe a means for ritual bathing. These houses were considered sacred.

Prayer houses in Egypt played a significant role in fostering Jewish cultural life. They provided a place for Jewish travelers to stay and also served as schools for Jewish boys, especially in Alexandria. Wealthy Jewish families in the city felt the need to educate their children in a city where the Museum and the gymnasium dominated. Literacy became a valuable skill that enabled social betterment in a rapidly developing world due to the monetization of the economy.

## The Second Syrian War

### 261-253 BC

As the 260s passed, Asia Minor fractured. Pergamum and Pontus both seceded and became independent states. Antiochus I, leader of the Seleucid empire, had appointed his son, Seleucus, to rule as co-regent, but their relationship soon soured to the point where Antiochus had him executed in 267 BC. He then replaced him with his younger son, Antiochus II. Antiochus I died in 261 BC.

As soon as he died, Ptolemy II went after the parts of Asia Minor he had not captured ten years before. After two years, Ptolemy II pushed into the central part of Syria. To round up a defense, Antiochus II was forced to cede independence to several up-and-coming states in eastern Asia Minor in exchange for their resistance to Ptolemy II. The strategy worked, and Ptolemy II was repelled from Asia Minor and defeated at sea. The loss was significant. However, Antiochus II's victory was short-lived as he soon dealt with rebellion in Babylon. Finally, a truce between the two nations was negotiated, with Ptolemy agreeing to give his daughter, Bernice, to Antiochus II. There was just one problem. Antiochus II was already married to his cousin, Laodice, who had given him two sons. Antiochus reluctantly agreed to divorce Laodice and sent her into exile at Ephesus with her two sons, removing them from succession. Ptolemy sent Bernice to Syria, and the wedding occurred in 252 BC. Five years later, she gave birth to a son named Antiochus, after his father. The baby became the new heir to the Seleucid kingdom.

## The Third Syrian War

### 246-241 BC

Just a year after the birth of Bernice's son, Ptolemy II died at the age of 62. The treaty between the Ptolemies and Seleucids was now over. As soon as he learned of Ptolemy's death, Antiochus II went to Ephesus in an attempt to reconcile with his wife, Laodice—this upset Bernice and also her brother, Ptolemy III. Ptolemy III tried to pressure Antiochus to reject Laodice again, but this time, Laodice had

Antiochus II poisoned in July 246 BC and proclaimed her son, Seleucus II, king. Ptolemy III came to the defense of his sister. Thus, the third Syrian war was launched.

By the time Ptolemy III arrived in the Seleucid capital, he had discovered Laodicea's agents had murdered his sister and infant son. He then headed for Ephesus to find Laodice and her son, but they had fled to a different part of the empire, trying to raise support for Seleucus. Ptolemy decided to chase after them and inflicted great terror on the communities as he collected large amounts of treasure. His effort to find Laodice and Seleucus II ended abruptly in 245 when he had to hurriedly return to Egypt to deal with a crisis created by famine. While Ptolemy III was in Egypt dealing with internal matters, Seleucus II established his own rule in Syria. In 241, the two kings agreed to a peace treaty. Ptolemy took Seleucia in this treaty, forcing Seleucus II to move the capital to Antioch.

These events were spoken of in Daniel 11.6-9:

After some years, they will form an alliance, and the daughter [Bernice] of the king of the South [Ptolemy II] will go to the king of the North [Antiochus II] to seal the agreement. She [Bernice] will not retain power, and his [Ptolemy II] strength will not endure. She will be given up, together with her entourage, her father, and the one who supported her during those times. In the place of the king of the South, one from her family [Ptolemy III] will rise up, come against the army, and enter the fortress [Seleucia-Pieria] of the king of the North [Antiochus II]. He will take action against them and triumph. He will take even their gods captive to Egypt, with their metal images and their precious articles of silver and gold. For some years he [Ptolemy III] will stay away from the king of the North [Seleucus II], who will enter the kingdom of the king of the South and then return to his own land.

## The Jews During This Period

Onias II succeeded Eleazar as the High Priest in 255 BC. The Jews, because of monotheistic beliefs, could not participate in the royal religion that worshipped the king. So, to gain and retain power, he was required to pay an annual fee and swear allegiance to the king in the name of God. During the years of family, Ptolemy III relaxed the tax demanded of Onias II. But when the famine ended, Ptolemy reinstated the tax, and Onias refused to pay because he had supplied Egypt with grain from Palestine to feed Egypt during the famine. Onias also appealed to the Seleucids for support. Because he was occupied elsewhere (the Demetrian War of 238-234 BC), Ptolemy III let Onias get away with refusing to pay. This lasted until 229 BC, when Ptolemy finally demanded Onias' pay. An ambassador, Athenion, was dispatched in 228. Onias refused to pay, and for this, Ptolemy threatened to send in the military and confiscate the land, turning Jerusalem into a Greek city. This caused quite a panic in Jerusalem, and many denounced his leadership.

After the threat of retaliation, some leaders in Jerusalem initiated diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis. One of these leaders was Joseph Tobias. It is believed that Joseph, like his father, was a strong advocate of Hellenization. Joseph's mother was the sister of Onias II, giving him an influential position in Jerusalem. Joseph traveled to Jerusalem, where he urged his uncle to change his stance and go to Egypt to appease the king and avoid a potential Jewish disaster.

In 227 BC, Joseph Tobias was sent to Egypt to resolve a tense situation. He won the support of Athenion and brought an ample bribe for Ptolemy, which he had procured from supporters in Samaria. Ptolemy was alleviated by the payment and backed down from his threat of drastic action. Joseph's plan was

successful, and he was praised for his efforts. The *Tobiad Romance*, used as a source by Josephus, implies that Joseph's charm and negotiation skills were critical factors in defusing the situation and saving the day.

But Ptolemy couldn't depose Onias as he was the high priest. Joseph Tobias saw an opportunity and pledged to double the tax revenue for Ptolemy, which won him the right to oversee the farming of taxes throughout Palestine. Ptolemy saved face by promoting Onias' nephew and filling the royal coffers with the money he had never paid. However, the tax burden on Judea and its neighbors doubled overnight, causing misery for thousands. Joseph embarked on a lucrative tax farming career, using violence and murder to force compliance with the new tax regime. The exploitation of local landowners and workers and the redistribution of wealth to the powerful few became prevalent, making Joseph Tobias an influential criminal leader.

Two years after the peak of the crisis, Seleucus II had a fatal accident, falling from his horse and succumbing to his injuries in 225 BC. As a result, Onias II lost any support from the Seleucid rulers and became even more isolated. Although he was not removed from his high priesthood position, he was politically overshadowed by Joseph Tobias. He spent the rest of his tenure in his nephew's shadow while being despised by his people.

## The Fourth Syrian War

### 219-217 BC

After his death, his teenage son, Alexander, succeeded Seleucus II, who took the name Seleucus III. His other nickname was *Thunderbolt* because of his fiery temper. After taking power, he sailed into Asia Minor to attempt to bring back territories that had seceded. He was defeated and eventually assassinated by two of his commanders in 222 BC. He had no son to succeed him. The throne passed to his younger brother, Antiochus III. By now, the Seleucid kingdom was in danger of being completely dissolved, with rebellion all over the empire.

Meanwhile, Ptolemy III died and was succeeded by his oldest son, Ptolemy IV Philopator, who was 23. Upon assuming power, Ptolemy IV murdered his mother and all his younger brothers. He then surrounded himself with a staff that pandered to his every desire, and he found himself "absorbed in unworthy intrigues and senseless and continuous drunkenness.

By 220 BC, Antiochus III had successfully dealt with the rebellion in his empire, except for that in Asia Minor. Around this time, a Ptolemy IV general, Theodotus, approached Antiochus III. Theodotus, who commanded Ptolemy IV's army in and around Palestine, offered to turn over all the lands to him. Antiochus jumped on the opportunity and, in 219 BC, started the fourth Syrian war. Ptolemy IV had little interest in the war, so his ministers had to take matters into their own hands to negotiate. Peace talks soon failed, and in 218, captured most of Palestine. Jerusalem came under siege. Severe damage was inflicted on the temple. It is unclear as to whether Jerusalem succumbed to the siege.

However, the successor to the high priest Onias II, Simon II, played a pivotal role in negotiating the safety of the Jewish people during this time.

Finally, in 217 BC, the war reached its decisive point in Gaza. Ptolemy IV and his sister-wife, Arsinoe III, crossed the desert out of Egypt and joined the battle. His forces, composed of native Egyptian recruits, won the fight against the Seleucids and pushed them back to the north.

## The Remaining Years of Ptolemy IV

After gaining victory, Ptolemy IV promised to renovate the temple in Jerusalem and upgrade its prestige. This was a reward to Simon II, the high priest, who had remained loyal during the war. The work was begun but never completed. Ptolemy instead continued the increased taxes from the Judeans but used the funds to continue his lavish lifestyle. Polybius said that Ptolemy “abandoned entirely the path of virtue and took to a life of dissipation.” Meanwhile, Joseph Tobias continued to collect taxes for the empire in Syria. Resentment for Ptolemy grew.

Simon II was known for his loyalty to the Ptolemies. However, as resentment against them grew, he changed his allegiance and used the widespread resentment against the Ptolemy dynasty to strengthen his leadership. Simon initiated the repair of the temple and the city, but he could not complete the work while Ptolemy was in power. Even Joseph Tobias, who had grown rich through his association with the Ptolemaic crown, became wary of Ptolemy's indifferent approach to governance. With Egypt on the brink of a crisis and Antiochus III growing in strength, Joseph realized that Ptolemy was not a reliable leader for the future.

Consequently, he and most of the Jewish elite in Judea distanced themselves from the prodigal prince. During the remainder of Ptolemy's reign, there was a significant political shift in Palestine as Ptolemy's relationships with the key figures who upheld his power locally deteriorated, making his control unstable. The region was rapidly turning against him.

In 208 BC, Ptolemy IV had a grand celebration for his son and heir, Ptolemy V, who had been born in 210 BC. Now an older man, Joseph Tobias turned down the invitation, as did his seven powerful sons. Instead, they sent his youngest son, Hyrcanus, born by Joseph's niece, to represent them in Alexandria. While there, Hyrcanus seized an opportunity when he befriended Ptolemy IV and came away with a commission to be the new tax collector, replacing his father. The family turned to violence. As Hyrcanus returned to Jerusalem, he was ambushed by his seven brothers, two of whom were killed in the fight. The remaining five escaped. Hyrcanus continued to Jerusalem, where he set up his operation. He was a marked man. He soon moved his residence out of Jerusalem and built a mansion for himself in the Jordan River region.

During this time, 208-204 BC, Simon II rebuilt the temple. After moving out of Jerusalem, Hyrcanus concentrated on collecting taxes from the Nabateans –collecting more from them than what came out of Judea. Meanwhile, the five remaining brothers of Joseph Tobias collected taxes in Judea and directed most of those funds to Simon II, who had commissioned the temple project. This changed the way most of the Judeans looked at the Tobiad family. Instead of collecting taxes for a wealthy, spoiled, distant king, they were seen as investors in Judaism's most vital institution. By the time Joseph Tobias died in 205 BC, Josephus writes that he was a “good and magnanimous man, who brought the Jewish people out of poverty and weak circumstances into a brighter standard of living.”<sup>15</sup>

## Death of Ptolemy IV

In what came to be his final years, Egypt was embroiled in civil war. The rebels in the region of the upper Nile (southern Egypt) gained the upper hand. Then, suddenly, Ptolemy IV died in the summer of 204 BC. He was not yet 40 years old. His son, Ptolemy V Epiphanes, was six. Ptolemy IV's two advisors, Agathocies and Sosibius, killed his mother, Arsinoe III, and took control of the boy. They announced the death of Ptolemy and Arsinoe and pledged to act as regents from the new boy king in September 204.

This was met with immediate suspicion by those in Alexandria. The rebels in Egypt gained more power, and the new regents had difficulty dealing with that. The glory of the Ptolemaic kingdom was fading fast.

After Ptolemy IV's death, the peace treaty with Syria ended. Antiochus III had solidified his power and was primed to invade Palestine. Details of how this played out will be given in the next lesson.

## Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How did the political instability in Asia Minor during the reign of Antiochus I open the door for the Gauls to establish the region of Galatia?
2. What were the long-term effects of the rivalry between the Seleucids and Ptolemies on the surrounding regions, particularly on Judea and Samaria?
3. How did cultural and religious syncretism impact the relationship between the Egyptian and Greek gods during Ptolemy II's rule?
4. In what ways did the translation of the Septuagint into Greek (koine) influence the spread of Hellenistic Judaism?
5. What role did the synagogue, or "prayer house," play in the cultural and educational life of the Jewish communities, especially in Egypt?

6. How did the actions and policies of Antiochus II during the Second Syrian War shape the future political landscape of Asia Minor and its neighboring states?
  
7. Discuss the significance of the marriage between Ptolemy II and Bernice in the context of the alliances and wars described in Daniel 11:6-9.
  
8. How did the Jews maintain their religious identity and monotheistic beliefs during times of political upheaval and forced allegiance to ruling monarchs?
  
9. What strategies did Joseph Tobias employ to navigate the political tensions between the Ptolemies and Seleucids, and what were the consequences for the people of Judea?
  
10. Explore the shifting political allegiances and the role of the Jewish elite in Judea during the late reign of Ptolemy IV, leading up to the death of Joseph Tobias. How did this affect the local perception of the Tobiad family?

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<sup>15</sup> Antiquities, 12.224.