

# Last Years Before the Romans

134-63 BC

## Introduction

John Hyrcanus I's tenure, thus, was marked by a complex interplay of ambition, necessity, and ethical dilemmas. His actions and decisions reflected the turbulent times of his reign, characterized by constant threats from without and within and the challenging balance between political pragmatism and adherence to Jewish laws and traditions. While effectively navigating Judea through immediate crises, his leadership invited scrutiny and criticism for its departure from traditional norms and the moral compromises it entailed. John's reign, therefore, remains a significant chapter in Jewish history, symbolic of the struggle for survival and autonomy in a period of intense conflict and change.

## 134-133 BC: John Hyrcanus I and the Siege of Jerusalem

John Hyrcanus I's leadership period was characterized by a blend of strategic brilliance and controversial decisions that had a lasting impact on Judea. Navigating through misinformation about the fate of his family, he took decisive actions that would secure his position as high priest and leader of Judea despite the traditional age and succession norms. This move demonstrated the urgency and desperation of the times. It marked a significant departure from established religious and political protocols, setting new precedents for the role and appointment of the high priesthood.

John's conflict with Ptolemy Abubus reveals the complexities of Judea's internal and external threats. Ptolemy's attempt to take control of the Jewish state and align it with Antiochus VII Sidetes was a significant challenge, highlighting the delicate balance of power and the ever-present danger from the Seleucid empire. John's initial belief in the murder of his close family members by Ptolemy propelled him into actions that were both bold and risky, including securing the high priesthood under pretenses and engaging in a power struggle that risked the very independence of Judea.

The siege of Jerusalem and the torture of his family before his eyes showcased not only the brutal reality of the conflict but also John's capacity for mercy, even when it conflicted with military objectives. His decision to lift the siege, while tactical, also reflected a human dimension in his leadership, showing a reluctance to cause further suffering despite the personal cost.

John's strategies to defend Judea against Sidetes' invasion involved harsh measures, including the expulsion of non-combatants from Jerusalem to conserve resources. Though practical from a military standpoint, this decision had profound social and moral implications, highlighting Judea's grave circumstances and the burdens of leadership during a crisis. The starvation and death of those expelled manifested the tragic consequences of the siege and the harsh realities of ancient warfare.

The negotiations with Sidetes and the subsequent reincorporation of Judea into the Seleucid realm were pivotal moments in John's reign. While these actions preserved the high priesthood within the

Hasmonean dynasty and maintained a semblance of Jewish autonomy, they also represented a capitulation to foreign powers and a deviation from the goal of complete independence. The controversial decision to fund the tribute to Sidetes by desecrating King David's tomb further compounded John's legacy, intertwining acts of pragmatic leadership with moral and cultural transgressions.

## Back Under Seleucid Control

John Hyrcanus I's tenure as high priest and leader of Judea was marked by significant challenges, including a dip in popularity following controversial decisions and actions during his reign. Antiochus VII Sidetes's confirmation of his role as high priest and his lifetime tenure in the office was crucial for his survival, especially after his father's assassination and growing public discontent.

The Seleucid invasion and subsequent famine severely affected the Jewish army's size and morale. Discontent grew among the Jewish soldiers, mainly due to John's financing of the military with funds obtained from the looting of King David's tomb. This led to a reliance on gentile mercenaries, which introduced Greek influences into the Jewish army, reflecting a broader Hellenization process within Judea.

John acquired the epithet "Hyrcanus," a name subject to various theories regarding its origin. It is speculated that it could be associated with mercenaries from Hyrcania, a name imposed by Sidetes, or a Greek name John adopted for international diplomacy. This period also saw John participating in Sidetes's campaign against the Parthians, demonstrating respect for Jewish customs by observing Pentecost.

While meeting with initial success, Sidetes' war against the Parthians ultimately failed. Sidetes fell into despair and committed suicide, leaving a power vacuum that ultimately benefited John, leading to Judea's regained independence. This shift marked a turning point for John's leadership, allowing him to consolidate power, recover from the strains of Seleucid rule, and reduce external threats, notably from Ptolemy Abubus.

John's subsequent military campaigns focused on expanding and securing Judea's borders, notably regaining control over strategic locations like Gazara, Joppa, and Medeba. These victories secured vital trade routes and facilitated economic growth and expansion into new territories like Perea. John's ability to navigate through these tumultuous times and emerge with an independent Judea highlights his complex legacy as a leader who managed to preserve and even enhance Jewish sovereignty amidst a backdrop of internal dissent and external pressures.

## 133-123 BC: The International Scene

Between 133 and 129 BC, Judea was once again under Seleucid control. This period coincided with significant upheavals across the Mediterranean, profoundly affecting regional dynamics and Judea's future.

In 133 BC, Attalus III of Pergamum passed away, leaving his kingdom to Rome, foreseeing the Republic's expansion. This bequest significantly impacted Rome, especially during its economic and military crisis exacerbated by a slave revolt in Sicily. Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus's attempt to address these issues through land redistribution led to his murder, exposing deep societal divisions and setting a precedent for individual interests overruling state authority.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the ascension of Ptolemy VIII, known for his brutal reign, resulted in civil strife and significant Jewish involvement in political affairs. His tumultuous rule saw the throne's temporary loss and eventual recovery, further destabilizing the region.

In Syria, the death of Antiochus VII Sidetes led to Demetrius II's return to power. His failed campaign against Egypt and subsequent loss of support highlighted the fragility of Seleucid authority. The introduction of Alexander II Zabinas as a rival claimant, supported by Ptolemy VIII, further compounded these challenges, leading to widespread civil unrest and changing allegiances.

John Hyrcanus exploited these tumultuous times, securing Judea's borders and leveraging Roman support to reaffirm Jewish control over strategic territories. The decline of Seleucid power, marked by internal conflict and failed leadership, allowed John Hyrcanus to strengthen Judea's position and expand its influence.

The continuous power struggles within the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms, characterized by betrayals, assassinations, and shifting alliances, eventually led to the diminishment of these Hellenistic empires. This decline, coupled with external pressures from Rome and Parthia, allowed Judea, under John Hyrcanus's leadership, to enjoy relative peace and prosperity, setting the stage for further Hasmonean expansion.

## **123-104 BC: Judean Expansion**

John Hyrcanus's reign saw significant territorial expansions and religious reforms, most notably in Idumea around 114 BC and later in Samaria. His conquest of Idumea involved a policy of forced conversions, requiring the Idumeans to undergo circumcision and adhere to Jewish laws, effectively Judaizing the population. This approach was rooted in a broader conceptual shift towards defining religious identity through cultural and religious practice rather than ancestry alone. This period highlighted the evolving relationship between ethnic identity and faith, a theme that would later be echoed in early Christian debates about the necessity of circumcision for Gentile converts.

In conquering Idumea, John did not entirely alienate the Idumeans despite their forced conversions. He recognized them as close relatives and historically part of the Israelite community. This policy facilitated the integration of Idumeans into the Jewish nation, marking a significant step in the cultural and religious unification under the Hasmonean dynasty.



John's campaign against Samaria in 111 BC, targeting the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, was a pivotal moment in his reign. The destruction of the Samaritan temple eliminated a major religious rival and was intended to consolidate worship exclusively in Jerusalem. However, this act exacerbated tensions between Jews and Samaritans, deepening the rift and leaving a lasting impact on their relations.

John's military successes extended to the siege of the Greek polis in Samaria, demonstrating his military prowess and political strategy. These victories expanded Judean territory and solidified John's leadership and the Hasmonean dynasty's authority.

John navigated the complexities of Hellenistic politics throughout his reign, balancing Jewish traditions with the broader Greek cultural sphere. His policies and military campaigns significantly shaped the religious and political landscape of the region, striving toward a unified Jewish state under Hasmonean rule. Despite the challenges and controversies, John's efforts in territorial expansion, religious reform, and political diplomacy marked a transformative period in Jewish history, setting the stage for the further development of Judea

and its integration into the Hellenistic world.

## 104 BC: Judas Aristobulus I

John Hyrcanus: I left his wife in charge of Judea, a significant act of trust highlighting her competence in a male-dominated society. His sons, particularly Aristobulus, were born into privilege, which may have fostered a sense of entitlement. Although young and a skilled military leader, Aristobulus lacked the finesse required for governance. His relationship with his brother Antigonus was strong, unlike with his other siblings, particularly Alexander Jannaeus, with whom John had become estranged for reasons lost to history.

Although underage, Aristobulus's ascent to the high priest and eventual self-declaration as king marked a critical shift in Judean politics. This move alienated Davidic loyalists and heightened messianic expectations among those yearning for divine intervention in history. His rule, however, was short-lived. A palace coup led by Aristobulus resulted in the imprisonment of his mother and three youngest brothers and the starvation of his mother. Only Antigonus was spared, given their close bond.

Aristobulus's actions, including forced conversions and territorial expansions, continued his father's legacy but also introduced new tensions. His forced Judaization of the Itureans expanded Jewish control

over Galilee, indicating a strategic consolidation of power. However, his insecurities led to paranoia, particularly towards Antigonus, whom he feared might usurp his throne.

This paranoia culminated in a tragic mistake. Under the impression that Antigonus was plotting against him, Aristobulus ordered his brother's execution when he appeared in battle armor, a decision influenced by a misinterpretation of his wife Salome Alexandra's advice. This was seen as divine retribution, leading to Aristobulus's death from a severe illness shortly after, ending his reign after only ten months.

## Alexander Jannaeus



Upon the death of her husband Aristobulus, Salome Alexandra quickly demonstrated her conservative, Pharisaic roots by releasing his imprisoned brothers and marrying Alexander Jannaeus, the eldest among them. Despite potential controversies over her previous marriage, the union was accepted mainly due to the Pharisaic influence and the necessity of continuing the Hasmonean lineage. Alexander, known to the Greeks as King Alexander and Judeans as King Jonathan, faced immediate political challenges, including opposition from his youngest brother, whom he eventually executed to consolidate his power.

Alexander's reign began ambitiously with attempts to expand Judean control, notably targeting the Seleucid capital at Ptolemais-Acco. However, his plans were thwarted by Ptolemy IX Chickpea's invasion, leading to a disastrous defeat for Alexander and significant losses for Judea. In response, Alexander skillfully navigated the complex political landscape by allying with Ptolemy IX's mother, Cleopatra III, drawing her into a conflict that ultimately resulted in Alexander's tactical retreat but strategic survival.

Political duplicity, military setbacks, and a desperate fight for survival against internal and external threats marked the early years of Alexander Jannaeus's rule. His actions invited criticism and possibly calls for his abdication, especially those who favored a more traditional Zadokite leadership. However, Alexander managed to retain power, partly due to strategic alliances and the intervention of Ananias, who advised Cleopatra III against invading Judea to avoid alienating the Jewish community in Egypt.

Alexander Jannaeus's reign stabilized after these tumultuous beginnings. He secured control over the northern coastal plain and symbolically represented his achievements and aspirations for stability and expansion with the image of an anchor on his coins. This period underscored the Hasmonean dynasty's

resilience and adaptability amidst the Hellenistic world's political complexities, balancing traditional Jewish values and the realities of governing a state in a Greek-dominated landscape.

Alexander Jannaeus strategically enhanced his kingdom's defenses by constructing fortresses throughout the Jordan Valley, including Alexandrium, Hyrcania, and Machaerus, and strengthening Masada. His expansion served military purposes and included luxurious amenities, highlighting his ambition to solidify control and showcase his reign's prosperity.

His territorial gains, particularly in Transjordan, shifted economic advantages from the Nabatean Arabs to Judea, disrupting established trade routes and diminishing Nabatean economic influence. This led to heightened tensions, especially after Alexander's successful siege of Gaza, which further bolstered Judea's economic status at the Nabateans' expense. Alexander's conquests effectively extended Jewish sovereignty over the land promised in biblical covenants, drawing comparisons to the legendary reigns of David and Solomon.

Despite these accomplishments, Alexander's legacy was contentious among his contemporaries. His rulership was marked by a Hellenistic flair that clashed with traditional Jewish expectations. The Sadducees might have viewed his conquests and the establishment of a kingdom of priests as a fulfillment of biblical promises, valuing the present sovereignty over ancient prophecies. However, the Pharisees were critical of Alexander's liberal policies and his deviation from strict adherence to the Law and Oral traditions, concerned that his actions diluted the Jewish nation's distinctiveness. This division reflected broader debates within Jewish society about the nature of leadership, religious observance, and the fulfillment of divine promises.

### ***The Jewish Civil War***

Alexander's reign was marked by conflicts with the Pharisees, culminating in a violent incident at the Festival of Sukkot around 94 BC. His refusal to perform a Pharisaic ritual led to public outrage and a crackdown on his opponents.

Alexander's antagonism towards the Pharisees and his subsequent fortification of the temple alienated many, inadvertently bolstering the Pharisees' popularity. His reign of terror, targeting opponents including the Essenes, led to widespread dissent, with many fleeing to Qumran or Egypt. Alexander's domestic policies, particularly his embrace of Hellenistic customs and neglect of the Law, deepened divisions within Judea.

The tension with the Pharisees escalated into a civil war that lasted six years, devastating Judea.

Alexander's reliance on mercenaries and subsequent battles against internal and external foes highlighted his political and military struggles. His brutal crucifixion of 800 rebels, observed in a macabre display of power, marked a low point in his reign, casting him as a tyrant in the eyes of many.

Despite these challenges, Alexander stabilized his rule through strategic alliances and reconciliations, notably with the Pharisees, facilitated by Salome Alexandra. Her influence helped reintegrate Pharisaic leaders into Judean politics, gradually restoring some peace and political balance. However, Alexander's

actions had lasting effects on his popularity and the perception of the Hasmonean dynasty, sowing seeds of dissent and discontent that would impact Judean society for years to come.

### ***Alexander Jannaeus: The Latter Years***

The chaotic struggle for the Seleucid throne greatly impacted the Jewish state, leading to shifting allegiances and territories in Syria. After a series of power shifts, Damascus fell under the influence of Cleopatra Selene, who declared her young son Antiochus XIII king, ruling in his stead. Meanwhile, the Iturean leader Ptolemy Menneus seized the opportunity to establish control over significant parts of what had been Seleucid Syria, including Damascus.

Alexander Jannaeus responded by launching a campaign to reclaim territories lost to the Itureans and the Nabateans. His successful military efforts led to the Judaization of these areas, notably Galilee, shifting its cultural orientation towards Jerusalem and making it predominantly Jewish. However, Alexander's ambition to control Damascus was interrupted by an invasion from Nabatean king Aretas III, which forced Alexander into a peace deal that redistributed control over several key regions.

This peace agreement, likely facilitated by Alexander's Idumean commander Antipater, ended hostilities with the Nabateans and marked Alexander as a significant figure in the region, capable of negotiating substantial territorial changes. Despite these achievements, Alexander's reign was marred by his alcoholism and his brutal suppression of opposition, including the mass crucifixion of rebels.

As Alexander's health declined, he designated his wife, Salome Alexandra, as his successor, advising her to ally with the Pharisees to ensure stability. Alexander's death ended a tumultuous but impactful reign, with his efforts at territorial expansion and Judaization significantly reshaping the Jewish state and setting the stage for Salome Alexandra's rule.

### **76-67 BC: Queen Salome Alexandra**

Queen Salome Alexandra assumed control of the Jewish kingdom at sixty-four in 76 BC. Her initial acts included appointing her son, John Hyrcanus II, as high priest and innovatively separating the priesthood from civic governance. This move was complemented by placing the Pharisees, led by Joshua ben-Perachiah and later her brother Simeon, at the helm of the Jewish Senate, effectively transferring significant political and religious authority to them. This shift transformed the Senate into what would be recognized as the Sanhedrin, marking a pivotal moment in the Pharisees' empowerment and the Sadducees' marginalization.

Salome Alexandra's reign was marked by Pharisaic dominance, with her brother Simeon emphasizing the enforcement of Oral Law, showcasing his influence through notable acts like the mass crucifixion of women accused of sorcery in Ashkelon. However, this era of Pharisaic ascendancy was viewed critically by the Essenes, who saw it as a period of puritanical terror.

Despite her success in balancing the complex political landscape, Salome Alexandra faced challenges as a woman in a male-dominated society. Her son John Hyrcanus II's lack of political acumen initially served her strategy to empower the Pharisees. Still, it also led to tensions, particularly with the Sadducees and her more ambitious younger son, Judas Aristobulus II. The Sadducees' dissatisfaction with Pharisaic

control and rallying behind Aristobulus prompted Salome Alexandra to make concessions, including military leadership roles for the Sadducees and specifically for Aristobulus.

Salome Alexandra navigated the delicate balance of power, sects, and family dynamics by maintaining control over critical fortresses and encouraging her sons to work together by constructing twin residences. Her reign thus significantly shaped the Jewish kingdom's political and religious landscape, reinforcing the Pharisees' prominence while managing the aspirations and tensions within her own family and the broader society.

## **70 BC: The End of the Seleucid Empire**

Resentment towards Roman rule escalated in Asia due to exploitative financial practices by Roman lenders, leading to significant land transfers to Romans and an influx of Roman settlers. Mithridates VI of Pontus capitalized on this discontent, orchestrating a widespread massacre of Romans in Asia in 88 BC, known as the "Asiatic Vespers." His actions, coupled with anti-Roman sentiments across the Aegean, positioned him as a liberator in the eyes of many Greeks.

Rome's response, led by Lucius Cornelius Sulla, marked a turning point in Roman politics. Sulla's march on Rome itself represented a significant breach of the Republic's norms. Sulla's subsequent campaigns in Greece and Asia Minor against Mithridates temporarily subdued the threat. Still, Mithridates's continued military buildup led to further conflicts, though these did not decisively shift the balance of power.

Tigranes II of Armenia, allied with Mithridates through marriage, expanded his territory significantly, filling the power vacuum left by a weakening Parthian Empire. His conquests eventually led to the absorption of the remnants of the Seleucid kingdom, marking its end as a political entity. Attempts by Cleopatra Selene to assert her sons' claims to the Seleucid and Ptolemaic thrones were largely symbolic, as Roman recognition could not revive the Seleucid dynasty nor challenge the established rule in Egypt.

The downfall of the Seleucid kingdom was primarily due to internal dynastic strife, exacerbated by external pressures from Rome, Parthia, and the Ptolemaic kingdom. This internal disunity, rooted in a century-long rivalry within the Seleucid royal family, left the kingdom vulnerable to conquest, ultimately leading to its absorption by Tigranes II's Armenian empire. This marked the end of the Seleucid dynasty, highlighting the destructive consequences of internal conflict and the shifting powers within the Hellenistic world.

## **67-63 BC: Jewish Civil War**

After Queen Salome Alexandra's death, her son John Hyrcanus II inherited the title of "king." His brother Aristobulus quickly challenged him, a conflict underpinned by the deeper battle for control between the Pharisees and Sadducees. This long-standing tension, dating back to the Jewish independence in 142 BC, had led to a unique political dynamic in Judea, with the socially conservative yet politically progressive Sadducees pitted against the culturally and politically conservative Pharisees. Aristobulus's attempt to dethrone Hyrcanus was not just a personal power grab but an effort by the Sadducees to reclaim their perceived divine right to leadership.



The civil war saw Aristobulus, backed by the Sadducees, quickly gaining the upper hand, forcing Hyrcanus to capitulate and surrender his titles without a fight. This peaceful transition, sealed with oaths and family marriages, temporarily settled the leadership but did not resolve the more profound factional disputes or the legality of Aristobulus's priesthood.

Hyrcanus's retreat from power, influenced by the persuasive Idumean governor Antipater, was short-lived. With Antipater's encouragement, Hyrcanus sought an alliance with Nabatean King Aretas III, promising territorial concessions in exchange for military support to reclaim leadership. However, a severe drought delayed their plans, which some interpreted as divine judgment against Aristobulus and the Sadducees.

During this period, the revered prophet Onias, known for his miraculous prayer for rain, became embroiled in the conflict. Refusing to curse Aristobulus, Onias's neutral yet powerful prayer criticized all factions. This led to his mysterious and controversial disappearance, further fueling public outcry and eschatological fervor.

As Passover approached, Hyrcanus's forces' blockade of the temple threatened religious observances, casting Hyrcanus in a negative light when he attempted to exploit the situation for financial gain. This and a devastating windstorm that destroyed crops heightened perceptions of divine wrath against Hyrcanus's leadership.

The external intervention by Aretas, influenced by the region's ecological and political turmoil, momentarily shifted the conflict's dynamics. Yet, the arrival of outside forces soon placed the Jewish state in a completely new predicament, altering the trajectory of the civil war and the future of Judean leadership.

## For Discussion

1. How did John Hyrcanus I's actions to secure his position as high priest and leader reflect the complexities and challenges of Judean leadership during his reign?
2. In what ways did John Hyrcanus I's mercy during the siege of Dok challenge traditional military strategies and demonstrate his humanistic approach to leadership?
3. Considering the strategic expulsions and harsh measures taken during Sidetes' invasion, how did John Hyrcanus I balance the immediate survival needs of Judea against the longer-term social and moral implications of his decisions?

4. How did John Hyrcanus I's negotiations with Antiochus VII Sidetes and the desecration of King David's tomb highlight the tension between political pragmatism and adherence to cultural and religious values?
  
5. What were the consequences of John Hyrcanus I's reliance on gentile mercenaries for the cultural and military identity of the Jewish army, and how did this reflect broader trends of Hellenization within Judea?
  
6. How did Aristobulus's self-declaration as king and his subsequent actions reflect the evolving political and religious dynamics within the Hasmonean dynasty and Judea more broadly?
  
7. In what ways did Alexander Jannaeus's military campaigns and territorial expansions influence the cultural and religious landscape of the region, particularly regarding the Judaization of conquered areas?
  
8. How did the complex interplay of factions within Judea, particularly between the Pharisees and Sadducees, shape the course of the civil war following Salome Alexandra's death, and what does this reveal about the political landscape of the time?
  
9. Reflecting on the decline of the Seleucid kingdom, how did internal dynastic strife and external pressures contribute to its downfall, and what lessons can be drawn about the fragility of political entities facing similar challenges?
  
10. Considering the role of religious figures like Onias in political conflicts, how do their actions and the public's response to them illuminate the intersections of faith, politics, and societal expectations in ancient Judean society?