

# The Maccabean Revolt I

## Introduction

Antiochus IV assumed control of the Seleucid empire in November 175 BC. He married his sister, Laodice IV, making him the focus of the royal religion and ruler as a divine king. As part of this, he took on the title “Epiphanes,” indicating his status as a god “made manifest.” Antiochus had spent 12 years as a prisoner in Rome and was familiar with Roman ideals. He was an extrovert, personally ambitious, and narcissistic. When he came to power, he pursued his own agenda, with little care for the Romans. While still having to pay reparations for war with Rome, he also wanted to invade Egypt as the Ptolemaic regime was floundering. He needed money for both.

In 175, Antiochus saw an opportunity present itself with the Jewish high priest’s brother, Jason. Onias III, the high priest, opposed Selucid involvement in Jewish affairs. But, Jason was much more favorable with Greek culture and wanted the Jews to have a more prominent place in Hellenistic affairs. In 175 BC, Jason negotiated with King Antiochus IV, offering 440 silver talents for the high priesthood in Jerusalem, potentially funded by resources like the estate of Hyrcanus in the temple treasury. Jason's strategy included possibly raising prices or imposing levies related to temple activities. Recognizing Jason's lineage and the financial benefits, Antiochus found him a fitting candidate for the position despite potential discontent among the populace.

Jason also proposed further Hellenization by promising an additional 150 silver talents to establish a gymnasium in Jerusalem and register its citizens as Antiochians, aiming to elevate Jerusalem to a Greek polis without diminishing its sacred Jewish identity. Jason saw this move towards multiculturalism as an enhancement of Jewish religion and an integration of Jerusalem into the Hellenistic world. However, this approach alarmed conservative segments within Jewish society, who viewed such cultural blending as a threat to Jewish monotheism and purity.

Ultimately, the agreement led to Jason replacing Onias III as the high priest in 175 BC, marking the official transformation of Jerusalem into a polis and further embedding it within the Hellenistic sphere. This decision, however, intensified divisions within Jewish society over the direction of its religious and cultural identity.

## A Cultural Divide

In 175 BC, Onias refused to accept his removal as high priest, arguing it went against Jewish law and that Jason's liberal policies threatened Jewish society. Despite potential legal and social ramifications, Onias stood firm, supported by many conservatives and intellectuals, putting pressure on Antiochus not to enforce the removal with extreme measures.

Jason paid Antiochus 440 silver talents, potentially using the estate of Hyrcanus and avoiding touching commoners' deposits, which might have led to unrest. This payment helped Antiochus settle debts with

Rome, securing a friendship alliance. Meanwhile, significant infrastructural changes occurred in Jerusalem, including constructing a military compound known as the Acra and a gymnasium promoting Greek culture. These constructions marked a significant shift towards Hellenization in Jerusalem, attracting more foreigners and altering the city's Jewish identity.

The establishment of the gymnasium led to increased Hellenization, drawing criticism for leading Jewish priests and men away from traditional practices in favor of Greek customs, such as participating in athletics naked, which exposed circumcised Jews to ridicule. Some even attempted to reverse their circumcision, stirring panic among conservative Jews worried about the erosion of Jewish cultural markers.

This period raised critical debates about the role of the Torah in Jewish life. Hellenizing Jews viewed it more as a historical document of sentimental value, akin to Greek epics, while conservatives saw it as a strict guide for living. Moderate views sought a balance, treating the Torah as a compass rather than a straightjacket. However, Jason's Hellenizing measures and the registration of Jerusalem's inhabitants as citizens of Antioch further divided the society, polarizing it between liberals and conservatives.

The introduction of the gymnasium and the elevation of Jerusalem to a polis catalyzed a rapid swing towards Hellenization, leaving the conservative segment feeling isolated but determined to defend traditional Jewish values. Jason's policies thus significantly polarized Jewish society, setting the stage for future conflicts between Hellenizing forces and conservative elements.

## **Menelaus Buys the High Priesthood**

The legality of Jason's appointment as high priest raised concerns that potentially led to reduced temple offerings, impacting his revenue and the Judean economy. In 172 BC, Jason made a controversial move by sending 300 drachmas for a sacrifice to Heracles at the Tyrian Games, which was redirected by the envoys to fund Antiochus IV's war efforts, anticipating his invasion of Egypt as Ptolemy VI sought to reclaim Palestine.

In 171 BC, Menelaus, a zealous Hellenizer and brother of Simon (who had previously clashed with Onias III), offered Antiochus IV 300 silver talents more than Jason for the position of high priest, despite not being from the priestly line. Antiochus accepted, prioritizing the invasion's financing over traditional lineage, marking a shift as someone outside the priestly line became high priest for the first time in eight centuries.

Menelaus's violent entry into Jerusalem and removal of Jason highlighted the increasing intertwining of politics and militarism within the priesthood. Now supported by the Tobiad family, distanced from both Onias and Jason, Menelaus needed to fulfill his financial pledge to Antiochus, further agitating the population and altering the sociopolitical landscape of Judea.

## **Murder of Onias III**

Menelaus's financial struggles to fulfill his promise upon becoming high priest led to hardships for the Judean population and disruptions in their worship due to his extreme measures, including melting

down temple gold. With half the Jewish society rejecting his leadership due to the existence of two legitimate priests of the priestly line still being alive, Menelaus found himself in a difficult position. Onias III, learning of Menelaus's actions, went to Antioch to expose him, taking refuge in Daphne to avoid direct confrontation with Antiochus IV, given the risk to his life.

Antiochus IV summoned Menelaus to explain his financial shortfall. Meanwhile, Menelaus left his brother, Lysimachus, in charge of Jerusalem to safeguard his position against Jason. This period also highlighted the looming issue of the young Antiochus, who was nearing the age to rule independently, potentially displacing Antiochus IV.

Antiochus IV arranged for a chain of events in 170 BC that consolidated his power in a move that seemed too opportune to be coincidental. While absent under the pretext of quelling a rebellion, he facilitated the murder of Onias III through a bribe from Menelaus to Andronicus, the king's representative in Antioch. Onias III was lured out of asylum and killed, removing a significant threat to Menelaus and Antiochus's plans.

Antiochus IV also covertly orchestrated the murder of his nephew, securing his position as sole ruler. Upon his return, he blamed Andronicus for both the murder of Onias III and the young prince, presenting Andronicus as a scapegoat for these political killings. This manipulation allowed Antiochus IV to eliminate two threats to his rule and assert his authority unchallenged, showcasing the lengths he would go to maintain power and control over the Seleucid kingdom and its priesthood.

These events are referenced in Daniel 11.21-22:

“In his place a despised person 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. A flood of forces will be swept away before him; they will be broken, as well as the covenant prince.

In his book, George Athlas also links this to the 70 weeks of Daniel:

Seventy “weeks” are decreed over your people and over your holy city, to complete rebellion and consolidate sin; to atone for iniquity and re-institute permanent righteousness; to authorize vision and prophet, and anoint the holy of holies. Know and understand from the issuing of the word to return and rebuild Jerusalem: until an anointed leader [Zerubbabel or the high priest Joshua] there will be seven “weeks” [587–538 BC]. In sixty-two “weeks,” [605–171 BC] you will have returned, and street and reservoir will be built, but with the anguish of the times. But after the sixty-two weeks [in 171/70 BC], an anointed one [Onias III] will be cut off and have nothing. Then the people of the coming leader [Antiochus IV] will ruin the holy city, its end overwhelming, with the ravages of war decreed to the very end. (Dan 9:24–26)<sup>17</sup>

The assassination of Onias marked a turning point, seen as the manifestation of great evils such as war, rebellion, and a deviation from Jewish laws towards Greek customs. Despite these daunting times, there remained hope for redemption. The question of who would succeed Onias as high priest became contentious, with his son Onias IV being too young and Jason, despite his priestly lineage, deemed unsuitable by many due to his Greek leanings. This left the conservative faction divided and unable to present a united front against the growing influence of Hellenizers.

Jerusalem became a hotbed of tension, escalating into violent rioting when Menelaus's theft of temple gold was exposed. Menelaus's brother, Lysimachus, was killed by an enraged crowd during such riots,

showcasing the deep-seated unrest and opposition to their leadership. Menelaus, now deeply unpopular and seen as a temple desecrator, still maintained support among Hellenists.

In an attempt to seek justice, three Jewish senators appealed to Antiochus for Menelaus's removal amidst the king's preparations for invading Egypt. However, their efforts were subverted by a bribe from Menelaus, leading to their execution and Antiochus' dismissal of the impeachment effort. This act alienated many, even those who had been more open to Hellenistic influences, underscoring the absolute power of the Seleucid king and revealing the harsh realities of aligning with Greek ideals under Seleucid rule. The existential crisis deepened within the Jewish nation, challenging its identity and cohesion amidst external and internal pressures.

## 170-167 BC: Sixth Syrian War

Antiochus IV launched a preemptive strike against young Ptolemy VI's plans to invade Palestine by moving on Egypt and securing a victory outside Pelusium. This win allowed Antiochus to establish a strategic foothold, from which he advanced to Memphis and proclaimed himself king of Egypt, even beginning to sell land in the Nile Delta for funds. His actions, however, needed careful diplomacy to avoid presenting himself as an aggressor to the international community, especially Rome, which would oppose a Seleucid expansion that included Egypt due to its potential to challenge Roman authority in the Mediterranean.

Against this backdrop, Ptolemy VI attempted negotiations with Antiochus, his maternal uncle, but his advisors, interpreting this as a sign of weakness, replaced him with his younger siblings, Cleopatra II and Ptolemy VIII (nicknamed "Fatso"), intending to resist Antiochus's aggression with these puppet rulers.

Antiochus reached an agreement with Ptolemy VI in Memphis, realizing the difficulty of conquering Alexandria militarily. He opted for a strategic approach, proposing to support Ptolemy VI's return to power as a means to peacefully regain control or, if resisted, to provide a justified cause for military action against Alexandria. This plan would portray Antiochus as a protector of Egypt's honor while still enabling him to assert authority over the region.

Antiochus returned to his realm in 168 BC to prepare the necessary military forces for his strategic endeavors in Alexandria, demonstrating a blend of military prowess and diplomatic maneuvering in his quest to expand the Seleucid Empire's influence.

Daniel's last vision portrays these events:

With confidence and with the best resources of the province, he [Antiochus IV] will come and achieve what his fathers and their fathers could not achieve. The plunder, spoil, and wealth they had taken he will spend in devising plans against fortresses, but for a time. He will rouse his strength and his heart against the King of the South [Ptolemy VI] with a large force, and the King of the South will provoke him to war with a very large and substantial force, but will be unable to withstand him, for they [Ptolemy VI's advisors] will plot against him; those who eat from his royal provision will break him, and his force will be overwhelmed, with many falling slain [at the Battle of Pelusium]. The two kings [Antiochus IV and Ptolemy VI], their hearts bent on evil, will speak lies to each other at a common table. This will not succeed, for the end will yet come in time. So he [Antiochus IV] will return to his country with great wealth. With his heart set against the holy covenant, he will act and return to his country. (Dan 11:24–28)

Upon returning from the first phase of his Egyptian campaign, Antiochus IV was welcomed by Menelaus in Jerusalem, who granted him unfettered access to the temple's treasures. Antiochus plundered the temple, taking significant artifacts and gold, including two symbolic crowns mentioned by the prophet Zechariah. This act deeply demoralized the conservative Jewish populace, sparking various Messianic hopes among them for divine intervention and the restoration of their heritage.

Simultaneously, Antiochus's rule extended to the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, appointing overseers to quell resistance, indicating a widespread imposition of Hellenism and Seleucid authority on religious communities.

Antiochus's efforts to secure additional forces for his Egyptian campaign were accelerated when Ptolemy VI, reneging on their agreement, returned to Alexandria to rule jointly with his siblings. This diplomatic maneuver forced Antiochus to hastily advance his military actions, leading to his occupation of Cyprus and a planned assault on Alexandria.

However, Ptolemy VI's attempt to negotiate peace was countered by harsh demands from Antiochus, which were ultimately refused. This series of events and Ptolemy VI's adept diplomacy caught Roman attention. Having recently concluded the Third Macedonian War, Rome was in a strong position to intervene. Roman emissary Gaius Popilius Laenas confronted Antiochus with a commanding ultimatum to withdraw from Egypt and Cyprus, dramatically issuing this demand by drawing a circle around Antiochus and insisting on an immediate decision. Under this pressure, Antiochus complied and retreated, marking a humiliating end to the Sixth Syrian War and demonstrating Rome's supremacy in the Mediterranean.

This episode not only highlighted Antiochus's ambitious yet ultimately overreaching strategies but also the pivotal role of Rome in maintaining balance and asserting its dominance in the region, striking a significant blow to Antiochus's prestige on the international stage.

## **167 BC: The Abomination of Desolation**

When a false rumor of Antiochus IV's death spread in Judea, Jason saw an opportunity to reclaim the high priesthood. He quickly took control of Jerusalem. The chaos put Menelaus, the reigning high priest, in danger, forcing him to seek refuge. The Jewish conservatives faced a tough choice between supporting Jason, despite his Greek leanings, or remaining neutral, risking their safety amidst the turmoil.

However, Antiochus returned, very much alive, and considered Jason's actions a rebellion. Antiochus's forces, led by Apollonius, brutally retook Jerusalem, massacring many and sending others into exile or slavery. This action significantly altered Jerusalem's demographic, favoring Hellenizing Jews and gentile colonists. Antiochus further solidified his control by demolishing parts of the city and expanding the Acra, turning it into a formidable symbol of Seleucid and Greek dominance.

In a broader move, Antiochus aimed to unify the diverse peoples of his realm, effectively revoking the Jews' status as a distinct nation. This had profound implications, including the mandatory worship of the Seleucid royal cult and the sanctioned worship of Greek gods in Jerusalem. It also meant the temple was rebranded as dedicated to Olympian Zeus, diluting Jewish religious practices with Greek ones.

These changes were seen by liberal Hellenizing Jews as positive, arguing that it brought Jews closer to the wider world and fulfilled prophecies of all nations recognizing Yahweh, albeit under the guise of Zeus. However, for conservative Jews, these developments were disastrous, stripping away their religious and cultural identity.

For conservative Jews, Antiochus's decree was seen as a profound theological disaster, undermining the very essence of their faith and identity. Far from being a step towards theological inclusivity, they viewed it as a grievous affront to the prophetic promises made by their God, effectively nullifying their covenant with Yahweh. This decree didn't unite nations under the God of Israel but rather assimilated Israel into the broader, idolatrous polytheistic culture of the Greeks, blurring the distinctiveness that was central to Jewish identity. In their eyes, it distorted the nature of their worship and made their practices indistinguishable from those of the surrounding nations. This was a stark deviation from their calling to be a holy nation, distinct and set apart for Yahweh, resulting in a loss of their unique cultural and moral standing as outlined in the Torah.

With the arrival of the Athenian senator appointed by Antiochus IV as the priest of the royal religion in Jerusalem, significant changes were implemented in the temple practices, aligning them with Greek religious customs. This included the cessation of the daily sacrifices to Yahweh, contradicting Torah mandates and essentially sidelining Jewish statutory laws. The temple, now dedicated to Olympian Zeus, saw traditional Jewish offerings redirected to honor Zeus, signifying a forced shift in the nature of worship.

On December 6, 167 BC, a new altar was constructed to facilitate worship directed towards Antiochus IV Epiphanes, symbolizing his deification in line with the royal cult. This alteration, coupled with the erection of a statue of Antiochus and the inaugural sacrifice offered to him on December 25th—potentially involving the sacrifice of pigs, a practice abhorrent to Jewish law—underscored the forced Hellenization of Jewish religious life.

This series of actions, culminating in these sacrificial practices alien to Jewish tradition, represented a profound desecration of the temple for conservative Jews. In their view, the temple was ritually defiled, rendering it unsuitable for Yahweh's worship and the requisite atonement rituals. This scenario echoed the prophetic visions of Ezekiel, where the infiltration of foreign worship and the corruption of the priesthood led to Yahweh's departure from the temple. Consequently, this moment marked a critical juncture in Judaism, exacerbating a crisis of faith and identity among the conservative Jewish populace.

These events were foretold by Daniel:

He [Antiochus IV] will overpower the public covenant for one “week.” Halfway through the “week,” he will stop sacrifice and offering, and along an edge [of the altar] will be abominations—a desolation, right until the end, when what is decreed will be poured out on the desolator. (Dan 9:27)

He [Antiochus IV] will sabotage the holy covenant, by reaching an understanding with those who abandon the holy covenant. Forces from him will oppose and desecrate the sacred stronghold, abolish the daily sacrifices, and set up the abomination of desolation. Those who contravene the covenant he will corrupt with ease, but the people who know their God will stand firm. (Dan 11:30b–32)

The assassination of Onias III in 170 BC was viewed as the onset of a disastrous seven-year period that would profoundly impact the Jewish community. This period reached a critical point with Antiochus's decree that stripped Jews of their ethnic recognition and introduced the Seleucid royal religion, an action regarded as the "abomination of desolation." This decree not only betrayed the national covenant but also threatened the very existence of the Jewish nation by dramatically altering its religious practices and identity.

Similarly, the Samaritans experienced a loss of their status and saw their temple rededicated to Zeus Xenios by the Athenian senator appointed by Antiochus. This move aimed to open up both Jewish and Samaritan religious practices to Gentiles, indicating an effort to counteract what was seen as xenophobia. The extent of Samaritan resistance to these changes remains unclear, reflecting Antiochus's reforms' widespread and profound impact across different communities.

## 167-164 BC: Three Years of Persecution

For the majority of Jews in Judea, Antiochus IV's decree was experienced as severe national persecution, forcefully applied by the Seleucid government with local authorities' avid cooperation. Jews were mandated to partake in sacrifices for Antiochus's birthday celebrations as a test of loyalty, with non-compliance equated to treason and punishable by death. This decree was rigorously enforced across various cities, including Ptolemais-Acco. Additionally, the festival of Dionysus, characterized by practices starkly at odds with Jewish customs, was imposed, symbolizing a direct affront to Jewish religious principles, particularly circumcision.

The oppressive environment pushed moderate and conservative Jews towards martyrdom or into hiding, creating a climate of fear and mistrust within communities. The author of 2 Maccabees highlights this through narratives of persecution, such as the execution of two mothers for circumcising their sons, the martyrdom of the elderly scribe Eleazar who refused to eat pork or feign compliance, and the story of a mother and her seven sons who chose torture and death over betraying their faith. These accounts, which resemble the persecution tales in the Book of Daniel, reflect the dire psychological state of Jews, perceiving themselves amid an apocalyptic crisis threatening their national identity and existence. In this challenging context, enduring faith and meeting death were seen as preferable to compromising their religious and cultural integrity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes marked a tumultuous period in Judean history, characterized by aggressive Hellenization efforts and severe religious persecution. Antiochus's imposition of the Seleucid royal religion, alongside the mandatory participation in Greek customs and festivals, was perceived by many Jews as a desecration of their faith and a direct challenge to their covenant with God. The erection of a new altar dedicated to Antiochus as a deity and the enforcement of idolatrous practices, including sacrifices abhorrent to Jewish law, signaled not only a cultural but a profound theological crisis. This period saw the Jewish community deeply divided, with Hellenizing forces pushing for integration into the broader Greek cultural sphere, while conservative and moderate Jews faced existential threats to their religious identity and practices.

The stories of martyrdom, as reported in the books of Maccabees, epitomize the resistance of devout Jews against Antiochus's decrees. These narratives of faith under duress serve as a testament to the indomitable spirit of those who chose death over renouncing their religion. Antiochus's plans, although momentarily successful in altering the religious landscape of Judea, ultimately ignited a fervent revival of Jewish nationalism and piety. The crisis precipitated by his reign underscored the unyielding dedication of the Jewish people to their covenant with God, setting the stage for the Maccabean Revolt and the rededication of the Temple.

The legacy of this era, marked by the struggle between Hellenizing reforms and the preservation of Jewish religious identity, illustrates the complex interplay of politics, religion, and culture in shaping community resilience and faith. Antiochus's policies, while aiming to unify his empire under a common religious and cultural framework, inadvertently strengthened the resolve of those committed to preserving their distinctive religious identity. The period of Antiochus IV's reign thus serves as a pivotal chapter in Jewish history, embodying the themes of resistance, faith, and the enduring quest for religious freedom.

## Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How did Antiochus IV Epiphanes' background and experiences in Rome influence his policies and actions as the ruler of the Seleucid Empire?
2. Discuss the implications of Jason's negotiation with Antiochus IV for the high priesthood. How did it contribute to the spread of Hellenistic culture in Jerusalem?
3. Analyze the impact of the establishment of a gymnasium and the elevation of Jerusalem to a Greek polis on Jewish religious and cultural identity.
4. In what ways did Antiochus IV's decree to revoke the ethnic status of the Jews and establish the Seleucid royal cult represent a collision of cultures and religions?



5. Compare and contrast the reactions of conservative and Hellenizing Jews to the changes implemented by Antiochus IV. What does this say about the diversity within the Jewish community at the time?
  
6. Discuss the significance of the martyrdom of Eleazar and the mother with seven sons as detailed in 2 Maccabees. What do these stories reveal about the values of conservative Jews during this period of persecution?
  
7. How did the festival to Dionysus and the enforced participation in Greek rituals challenge Jewish religious laws and customs? What does this tell us about Antiochus IV's understanding of and respect for Jewish faith?
  
8. Explore the role of martyrdom in shaping Jewish resistance and identity during the persecution under Antiochus IV. How did these acts of faith influence the future of the Jewish nation?
  
9. Evaluate the long-term consequences of Antiochus IV's policies on Jewish society. Did his actions have the intended effect, or did they lead to outcomes he did not anticipate?
  
10. Consider the role of external powers, such as Rome, in the conflicts between Antiochus IV and the Jewish nation. How did international politics play into the events described in the Maccabean Revolt and the years leading up to it?

1. ?