

Lesson 9

Seleucid Rule

Introduction

With a new century dawning, change was on the way. The Ptolemaic empire was in trouble, with domestic threats across Egypt and growing tensions with Antiochus and Seleucia. Sosibius and Agathocles, the regents who were in charge after Ptolemy IV's sudden death, were publicly lynched by the army in an attempted coup in 202 BC. Antiochus seized this moment and began to advance to the south toward Egypt. The fifth Syrian War had started.

The Fifth Syrian War

202-195 BC

Joseph Tobias died in 205 BC. His sons and the Jewish senate began pushing to secede from the Ptolemies and join the Seleucids. As the war was starting, the Jews influenced a Ptolemaic general stationed in Syria, Ptolemy Thraseas, to defect. This was no small event. Thraseas was also the high priest of the royal cult. His defection gave the Seleucids the upper hand in Judea and Samaria. As Antiochus marched his troops to the south, he found difficulties fighting against Gaza but eventually defeated them. But, his concentration on Gaza left an opening for the Ptolemaic general, Scopas, to counterattack. Scopas headed straight for Jerusalem, where he moved with vengeance on the population for their disloyalty. This is referenced in Daniel 11.13-14:

The king of the North [Antiochus III] will again raise a multitude larger than the first. After some years he will advance with a great army and many supplies. "In those times many will rise up against the king of the South. [Ptolemy IV/V]. Violent ones among your own people [the Tobiads] will assert themselves to fulfill a vision, but they will fail.

Scopas took the city, and the Jewish secessionists failed. The Jewish aristocracy was deported to Egypt. By the spring of 200 BC, Ptolemaic control was back over Syria, and Antiochus III had to withdraw. But this would only last for a while. In 199 BC, Ptolemy V took over as king at 11. He dispatched Scopas to suppress an ongoing rebellion in Egypt, and Antiochus invaded again. Antiochus and his superior number of troops won the day against the Ptolemies and once again had control of Palestine. The people of Jerusalem welcomed Antiochus III by giving his army provisions and assisting him in clearing out the Ptolemaic garrison outside the city. Antiochus defeated Sidon in 197 BC and allowed Scopas to return to Egypt. Daniel records:

Then the king of the North [Antiochus III] will come, build up a siege ramp, and capture a well-fortified city [Sidon]. The forces of the South [The Ptolemies] will not stand; even their select troops will not be able to resist.

After the defeat of Sidon, Antiochus decided not to invade Egypt. Instead, he turned his attention to Asia Minor and removed the remaining Ptolemaic-controlled areas, pushing to Pergamum. Antiochus also moved into Europe, absorbing much of Macedonia. Meanwhile, in Egypt, Ptolemy V shrewdly saw to the care and protection of the country from the annual Nile flooding by building a series of dams to store

water. This yielded a favorable political change, and the rebellion against the empire began to diminish. Ptolemy V ceased trying to regain Syria and Palestine and settled for peace with Antiochus III. Ptolemy V agreed to marry Antiochus' daughter, Cleopatra, in 194 BC. This brought the fifth Syrian war to a close.

The king of the North [Antiochus III] who comes against him [Ptolemy V] will do whatever he wants, and no one can oppose him. He will establish himself in the beautiful land [Judea] with destruction in his hand. He will resolve to come with the force of his whole kingdom and will reach an agreement with him [Ptolemy V]. He [Antiochus III] will give him a daughter in marriage [Cleopatra] to destroy it, but she will not stand with him or support him [Antiochus III].

Judea Under Antiochus III

Josephus, in his writing, included a letter from King Antiochus III to Ptolemy Thraseas dated to about 196 BC:

From the moment we entered the country of the Jews, they showed their devotion toward us. They warmly received us into their city, their senate met us, they provided our troops and elephants with abundant provisions, and they helped us eject the Egyptian garrison in the citadel. Therefore, we see fit to reward them by restoring their city, which has been ravaged by various wars, and repatriating those who have been deported from it.

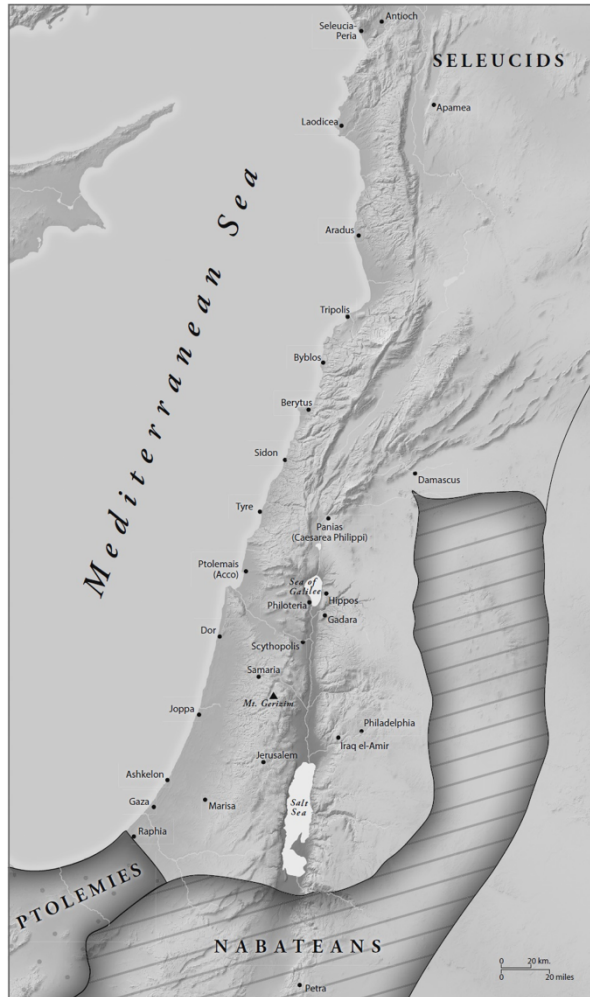
First of all, we judge that, by virtue of their piety, a subsidy be bestowed upon them for the sacrifice of sacrificially suitable animals, wine, oil, and incense, to the value of 20,000 pieces of silver; sacred artabae of fine flour in accordance with their native law; 1,460 medimni of wheat; and 375 medimni of salt. I would have these payments completed as I have stipulated.

Regarding their temple, the work on the stoas should be completed, along with anything else still in need of reconstruction. Wood materials should be procured from Judea itself, or from other nations, or the Lebanon without any toll charged. The same applies for other apparent materials that are needed for the repair of the temple.

Everyone who is part of their nation may live according to their ancestral laws. The senate, priests, temple scribes, and sacred cantors are exempted from the poll tax, the crown tax, and any other tax. So that the city might be speedily resettled, I grant the current residents and those who migrate to it before the month of Hyperberetaios [i.e., September] an exemption from taxes for three years. We also hereafter relieve them of a third of their taxes, so that they might recover their damages. Also, all from the city who were seized for slavery, along with those born to them, we set free, and command the return of their property.

Antiochus secured the return of the Jews Scopas deported from Jerusalem several years earlier (200 BC). These were prominent citizens who, years before, had been instrumental in turning the city over to him. Most likely, many of these were from the Tobiad family, now seen as victors in securing the regime change. This family played a massive role in the revitalization of Jerusalem that was to come. With the tax breaks and economic recovery, over the next few years, the population of Jerusalem expanded greatly to levels that had not been seen since the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Antiochus did not personally fund the renovation of the temple. Instead, he offered tax breaks that allowed the Jewish community to finance the construction themselves. This leveraged the momentum Simon II and the Tobiads initiated in their temple renovation and city fortification efforts. The funds now deposited in the temple treasury were no longer extended crown taxes but voluntary contributions from the Jewish people stemming from their untaxed income. Antiochus actively supported Jewish



worship, endorsed the financial role of the temple, and officially recognized the Jews as distinct ethnoses within his realm, granting them the right to practice their ethnic customs. This exemption extended to their non-participation in the Seleucid royal cult, dedicated to worshipping the Seleucid king as a deity.

Antiochus's policy achieved various objectives: it promoted the central role of the temple in Jewish life, established a bond between the Jewish people and himself as a benefactor, facilitated the integration of Judea into the Seleucid realm, enhanced security by fortifying the city, stimulated the local economy by injecting money and encouraging workforce growth, and outlined a sustainable revenue stream for the crown in the future (after the expiration of the three years of tax-free status). The outcome was a mutually beneficial arrangement for Antiochus and the Jewish community. However, it also highlighted that the prophetic promises of Davidic restoration were fading amid the prospects of prosperity.

Simon II and the Jerusalem Temple

In his role as high priest, Simon II supervised the transformation of the temple, giving it a Hellenistic makeover. The letter from Antiochus to Ptolemy Thraseas mentioned stoas, which are typical architectural features of Greek temples. Simon implemented significant changes, including constructing a retaining wall around the complex, doubling the height of its enclosing walls (Sir 50:2). The inspiration for these alterations may have been influenced by the impressive Mount Gerizim complex, which already exhibited distinct Hellenistic features. Consequently, the Jerusalem temple evolved into an imposing acropolis at the city's northern edge, positioning it more competitively against its Samaritan rival.

The temple's redesign also played a crucial role in Jerusalem's transition from a small Near Eastern town to a more classically Hellenistic city in the Mediterranean. The configuration and security structures of the precinct facilitated the transfer of certain civic functions from the city gates to the sacred precinct. Despite being around seventy years old, Simon successfully completed the temple construction shortly after the expiration of Jerusalem's three-year tax haven status (around 192 BC). He officiated at its dedication.

Jewish Moderates, Progressives, and Conservatives

Antiochus III's measures gave the Jewish people considerable autonomy. Spirits rose across the board, and the new latitude invigorated national life and the pursuit of holiness. With such latitude came diversity. The blending of politics, culture, religion, and economics under a beneficent Hellenistic regime generated a broad spectrum of worldviews among the Jews of Judea.

Moderates

Moderates like the high priest Simon II occupied the center of the spectrum. For Simon and many of his serving priests, national life and piety were about preserving Jewish identity in the here and now. A later Rabbinic tradition, which termed him "Simon the Just," attributed to him a statement reflecting his day's cultural and political reality.

On three things, the world stands: on the Torah, on the [temple], and on demonstration of piety. (m. 'Avot 1:2)

Simon promoted a moral culture that revolved around the Torah and the temple without mentioning political independence or Davidic hopes. He was politically progressive but religiously conservative and culturally moderate. Simon's eclectic approach to Hellenistic culture enabled him to gain broad appeal as a unifying figure in Jewish life. However, after he died in 185 BC, attention shifted to his Greek-educated sons, Onias III and Jesus.

Progressives

In Jewish society, some people embraced Greek education, including literature, art, philosophy, and ethics. While some still held onto traditional Jewish beliefs, they saw it as compatible with Greek religion and identified Yahweh with Zeus. These people were a minority but influential, especially in Jerusalem. On the other hand, some progressives became Greek in almost every way and had little connection to Jewish traditions. At first, they were a tiny minority, but as Jerusalem grew, they were increasingly exposed to Hellenism. Many Greek poleis also exerted a cultural pull around Judea. Some liberal Hellenizers didn't abandon circumcision but considered it embarrassing. Some Jews even reversed their circumcision due to the scorn it drew from Greeks. Despite being an island in a Hellenistic sea, the question was whether Judea could withstand the rising cultural tide around it.

Conservatives

During the intertestamental period, there were different types of Jewish conservatives. Some were culturally conservative and held onto Jewish tradition and Torah observance, while others were religiously conservative and concerned with orthodoxy or belief about the deity. The culturally conservative Jews were generally opposed to Greek cultural influence and hoped for independence to preserve Jewish culture.

As for the religiously conservative Jews, they were more concerned with belief than culture but still integrated Greek modes of thought into their theology. Over time, divisions arose among these conservative groups, some becoming more fundamentalist and separatist while others became involved in legal minutiae for observing the Torah. The Davidic loyalists believed in restoring a Davidic kingdom over a united Israel, but their beliefs were more moderate culturally and politically.

Overall, there was considerable growth among Jewish conservatives in the early years of Seleucid rule, which allowed them to flourish, even as the challenge to their beliefs grew with increasing internationalism and the rise of the Hellenistic tide.

The Big Picture

During the Seleucid rule over Judea, Judaism experienced a surge in growth and vitality. However, this also resulted in a lack of unity and direction, weakening the priesthood's central control. Simon II brought stability to the nation during his tenure, but after his passing, Judaism became vulnerable to various groups pulling it in different directions. This threatened to divide and weaken Judaism.

During the intertestamental period, the influence of Hellenism rose in Judea, which transformed how Jews thought about God and their identity. Judaism became porous, but the question was how much it would absorb and how it would manage its identity in a Hellenized world. Would it resist change and become insular, retain certain boundaries while engaging with change, or trade the old for the new and become international citizens? Antiochus III's concessions gave various schools of thought in Judea the opportunity to jockey for the right to define Jewish identity on a global stage, leading to a tug-of-war for the heart of Judaism that ultimately resulted in open conflict a generation later.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of Antiochus III and the subsequent conflicts with the Ptolemaic Empire set the stage for significant change and uncertainty. The detailed account of military campaigns, political maneuverings, and alliances underscores the intricate web of relationships that shaped the destiny of Judea. The role of key figures, such as Joseph Tobias, Ptolemy Thraseas, Scopas, and Antiochus III, becomes pivotal in understanding the power dynamics and the ebb and flow of control over Judea. The strategic choices made by these individuals, along with the shifting allegiances of the Jewish senate and populace, reflect the interplay of political and military strategies during this tumultuous period.

Antiochus III's concessions to the Jewish people, as outlined in the letter to Ptolemy Thraseas, reveal a moment of autonomy and cultural recognition. The temple's economic benefits, tax breaks, and restoration efforts contributed to growth and revitalization. However, the diverse responses within the Jewish community foreshadow the internal conflicts that would emerge in the subsequent generation.

Over the next few decades, defining Jewish identity in a rapidly changing world would be a struggle. The Hellenistic influences, political maneuverings, and the internal divisions within Judaism set the stage for future conflicts and challenges. The question of how Judaism would navigate its relationship with the surrounding Hellenized world and manage its identity becomes central to the unfolding story. During the Seleucid rule, this period was a pivotal chapter marked by growth, diversity, and the seeds of internal tension.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How did the geopolitical context, including the conflicts between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires, shape the events and decisions discussed in the lesson?

2. In what ways did the actions of key individuals, such as Joseph Tobias, Ptolemy Thraseas, and Antiochus III, influence the political and religious landscape of Judea during the Fifth Syrian War?

3. Explore the role of Simon II in overseeing the transformation of the Jerusalem Temple. How did his decisions contribute to the cultural and architectural changes in the temple complex?

4. Discuss the various responses within the Jewish community to Hellenistic influences, as exemplified by moderates, progressives, and conservatives. How did these differing perspectives impact the trajectory of Jewish identity?

5. Analyze the significance of Antiochus III's concessions to the Jewish people, as outlined in the letter to Ptolemy Thraseas. How did these concessions influence the economic, religious, and cultural aspects of Judean life?

6. Consider the internal conflicts within Judaism, particularly the tensions between preserving tradition and embracing Hellenistic influences. How did these internal divisions contribute to the challenges faced by the Jewish community?

7. Examine the impact of Simon II's leadership on the stability of Judea during his tenure. How did his approach to politics, religion, and culture contribute to or mitigate potential divisions within the community?

8. Reflect on the role of the Jerusalem Temple as both a religious and civic center. How did its redesign and fortification contribute to the evolving identity of Jerusalem and its residents?

9. Explore the consequences of the failed secession attempt by the Jewish senate and the subsequent deportation of the Jewish aristocracy to Egypt. How did these events shape the political and social landscape of Judea?

10. Consider the broader implications of Judea's interaction with Hellenistic influences during the Seleucid rule. How did this period set the stage for future conflicts and challenges in defining Jewish identity?