

The Hasmonean Revival

Jewish Autonomy in the Shadow of the Seleucids

Introduction

After the death of Judas Maccabeus, the idea of Jewish independence seemed dead in the water, with no leader to take up the cause. Bacchides reinstated Seleucid sovereignty over Jerusalem and reinstalled Alcimus as high priest. All the Jewish sects were forced to adjust to this new reality. The Sadducees liked their connection to power and moved their leanings to a more centrist position. The conservative Essenes largely withdrew from Jewish society and turned toward prayer and ascetic monasticism. This left the ultra-conservative Pharisees with considerable influence among the common people, and they used this opportunity to grow and become more organized.

Individuals who remained unaffiliated with specific social groups continued to engage as educated scribes, officials, and entrepreneurs, maintaining moderate views and upholding traditions such as Davidic hopes and apocalyptic beliefs. While the presence of Hellenizing Jews within Jewish society was noted, it's unclear if they formed an organized sect. The tumultuous period possibly led some to distance themselves or further integrate with local gentiles. Still, the restoration of Seleucid rule and Alcimus's appointment as high priest provided a sense of relief. Alcimus, initially a moderate, shifted towards a progressive position by rejecting fundamentalist views, making him one of the most significant beneficiaries of the changes.

The Maccabean Cause After Judas

After Judas Maccabeus's death, his brothers—Lucky John, Clever Simon, and Jonathan the Trickster—continued the struggle against Bacchides, a Seleucid general. They took refuge in the Judean Desert, with Jonathan eventually leading their diminished group. Their attempt to relocate eastward led to the death of John by a Nabatean chieftain, weakening the Maccabean resistance further. This incident allowed Bacchides to locate and attack them, but Simon and Jonathan narrowly escaped by crossing the Jordan River. This marked a low point for the Hasmonean movement.

Bacchides then claimed to have suppressed the rebellion in Judea by implementing a fortification program and taking Jewish hostages to ensure loyalty to Seleucid rule. These hostages were held in hopes the Jews would adopt Greek culture, contributing to the Hellenization of the region despite the continued cultural autonomy of the Jewish people.

The Second Tenure of Alcimus

Alcimus faced opposition from conservative Jews due to his progressive inclinations, which likely influenced his decision to tear down the inner wall of the sanctuary—a measure seen by him and his Seleucid backers as removing a symbol of rebellion. This action threatened to blur the sacred boundaries of the temple by bringing it closer to secular and potentially unclean influences, sparking outrage among

conservative Jewish factions. However, before the demolition could progress, Alcimus suffered a severe illness, rendering him immobile and in pain, with symptoms pointing to a serious degenerative condition rather than a stroke. This unfortunate timing led to the halting of the wall's demolition, reflecting a possible divine disapproval in the eyes of some.

Alcimus's death, following his incapacitation, remains difficult to pinpoint precisely. Although some historical accounts mention he died in significant pain around the time he planned to demolish the temple wall, this does not necessarily imply an immediate death. Both First Maccabees and the Essenes' *Peshar of Habakkuk* indicate a prolonged suffering period, potentially extending over years.

This extended period of Alcimus's incapacitation is supported by the absence of any records of a new high priest in Jerusalem between 159–152 BC. Two theories have emerged to explain this gap. The first, believes that the Essene's Teacher of Righteousness served as high priest. But this lacks concrete evidence, as there are no claims of him holding such a position, nor any significant reforms associated with his alleged tenure. The second theory suggests a seven-year gap without any high priest, which Josephus mentions but contradicts other historical accounts. This gap seems unlikely since the religious practices in Jerusalem required a high priest's presence, and no crisis of this nature is recorded.

The narrative around Alcimus's condition and the implications of his prolonged life shed light on this period's complexities. Alcimus probably lived beyond 159 BC, with his plans to alter the temple wall abandoned and his physical state leading to a temporary easing of tensions in Jerusalem. A deputy likely performed his duties during his incapacity, maintaining the high priest's role in absentia due to the office's lifelong tenure. This situation left Judea in a state of limbo until at least 157 BC when Bacchides fortified the region, and the subsequent year's Sabbatical provided a pause in hostilities.

Return of the Hasmoneans

During the Sabbatical Year of 156-155 BC, Jonathan Apphus and Simon Thassi returned to Judea. Their return sparked fears among Hellenizing Jews, leading to requests for Bacchides to return. These fears materialized as Jonathan led a campaign of assassination against approximately fifty prominent figures in Judea, exploiting the incapacitated state of High Priest Alcimus to their advantage. Alcimus's inability to be replaced allowed Jonathan and Simon to conduct their operations without interference from the Seleucid authorities.

The Hasmoneans gradually regained political power through these assassinations, drawing attention from Antioch. However, Demetrius, the Seleucid king, was preoccupied with challenges to his rule, particularly from Alexander Balas, a claimant to the throne supported by powerful allies and recognized by the Roman Senate. This recognition emboldened Alexander to challenge Demetrius, who was struggling with alcoholism and made strategic errors, such as a failed attempt to control Cyprus, alienating Ptolemy VI and further bolstering Alexander's position.

In 154 BC, Bacchides was sent to Judea to secure the fortifications against a possible invasion by Alexander Balas. However, without additional troops, Bacchides could not counter the Hasmoneans' operations effectively. The failure in Cyprus likely convinced Bacchides of the futility in supporting

Demetrius, leading him to facilitate a defection to Alexander Balas, which included abandoning the pursuit of Jonathan and Simon.

Bacchides's shift in allegiance allowed the Hasmoneans to gain a more significant foothold in Jewish politics. They moved to Michmash, north of Jerusalem, where Jonathan took on a judicial role, signaling a move away from terror tactics. This turn of events also led Bacchides to oppose the Jewish Hellenizers who had initially sought the Hasmoneans' demise. The Hasmoneans' integration into mainstream Jewish politics marked a pivotal moment, facilitated by the broader political dynamics of the region and the Seleucid empire's internal strife.

The Rise of Jonathan Apphus

While waiting for Alexander Balas's arrival and the impending defection, Jonathan Apphus strengthened his political influence in Judea, reducing the impact of Jewish Hellenizers without resorting to violence. His diplomatic approach and anticipation of Bacchides's defection allowed him to gain support from various Jewish factions, including the centrist Sadducees and conservative groups. Jonathan's aim for the high priesthood became evident, especially as the ailing High Priest Alcimus lingered, maintaining a status quo that benefited Jonathan's strategic positioning.

As Alexander Balas prepared to challenge Demetrius for the Seleucid throne, Demetrius sought to win over the Hasmoneans with promises of peace and military authority, excluding the high priesthood due to Alcimus's continued survival. Jonathan capitalized on this, enhancing his stature, and preparing for the expected shift in power. Despite Alcimus's isolation and vulnerability, Jonathan refrained from harming him, focusing instead on reinforcing the temple's fortifications, signaling his impending leadership.

Alexander Balas's arrival in 152 BC marked a decisive turn, with defections to his side facilitating his control over Syria and reinforcing Jonathan's position. Alexander formally offered Jonathan the high priesthood, which became official after Alcimus's death that summer. This transition was broadly accepted across Jewish society, reflecting a shift in Jonathan's image from a militant to a legitimate political and religious leader, despite the Essenes' disdain for his pragmatic approach. Jonathan's actions thus navigated the complex political landscape of the time, leveraging both military and diplomatic strategies to consolidate his leadership and influence within Judea.

Jonathan Apphus (152-142 BC)

Jonathan Apphus's ascent to the high priesthood coincided with a tumultuous time in the Mediterranean, integrating Judea more deeply into the region's political dynamics. During his tenure, the Seleucid civil war unfolded, with Jonathan siding with Alexander Balas over Demetrius, despite Demetrius's attempts to win Jewish loyalty with generous offers. Ultimately, Alexander Balas emerged victorious in a power struggle marked by dramatic battles involving war elephants.

Jonathan's political and military strategies shifted the Hasmonean position from extremism towards a more moderate conservatism, facilitating alliances with Hellenistic monarchs and redefining the Maccabean cause. His acceptance and promotion by Alexander Balas into Hellenistic high priesthood



and governance roles further solidified his leadership, transforming Judea into a semi-autonomous province under Seleucid influence, yet maintaining a degree of Jewish autonomy.

The political landscape continued to evolve with Ptolemy VI's maneuvers affecting Seleucid authority and Jonathan's strategic positioning within these power shifts, showcasing his diplomatic acumen. Despite facing challenges, including from Demetrius II and external threats like the Parthians, Jonathan navigated these complexities to enhance Judea's autonomy and his personal authority.

Jonathan's leadership culminated in a significant but ultimately tragic confrontation with Tryphon, leading to his capture and death. Despite his demise, Jonathan's legacy was marked by his efforts

to secure Jewish independence and his role in moving the Maccabean resistance from the fringes to a central conservative force in Judean politics. His tenure as high priest not only symbolized the intertwining of Jewish and Hellenistic cultures but also set the stage for the Hasmoneans' continued engagement with the broader political currents of their time, illustrating the delicate struggle between conservative and liberal Jewish factions over Hellenism's influence on Judaism.

Jewish Independence

Following Jonathan's death, Simon became the high priest and leader of the Jewish state, reaching out to Demetrius II to secure Judea's independence. Demetrius II's response was favorable, granting Simon and Judea significant autonomy, effectively acknowledging Judea as a self-governing client state in May 142 BC. Judea also received formal recognition from Rome in 142 BC, marking its transition into a self-governing entity recognized by major regional powers. This was a significant diplomatic victory, as it meant Judea's status could only be reversed by military conquest.

This moment, marking the lifting of foreign yoke from Israel, was celebrated as the beginning of a new era under Simon's leadership, emphasizing his roles without conferring upon him the title of king, indicating a hierocratic rather than monarchical rule.

This arrangement sparked theological debate within Judea. Some saw the absence of a Davidic king as a temporary measure, awaiting the fulfillment of prophecies about a Davidic restoration. Others, satisfied with hierocracy, saw Simon's priesthood as a return to a Mosaic and Aaronic ideal, arguing that a kingdom of priests was a superior form of governance, aligning with Judea's agreement with Rome which required leadership under a high priest.

An edict in 140 BC formally justified Simon's leadership, emphasizing his comprehensive authority while also hinting at the ongoing debates regarding the legitimacy and permanence of his rule. The edict made concessions for those looking forward to the emergence of a "reliable prophet," indicating a belief in ongoing divine guidance and prophetic revelation that could potentially redefine Jewish governance and identity.

The theological division reflected broader sentiments within the Jewish community, with some holding onto the hope of a restored Davidic monarchy as essential for the nation's full restoration, and others, particularly the Sadducees, viewing the Hasmonean priestly rule as fulfilling the nation's needs. This division underscores the complexity of Jewish expectations regarding leadership and messianic hope, laying the groundwork for future theological developments and debates within the Jewish community.

Simon Thassi as High Priest

Simon's governance saw major developments, including the end of the Seleucid presence in Jerusalem with the capitulation of the Acra and its Seleucid and Greek inhabitants in 141 BC, symbolizing the final overthrow of foreign domination. The removal of the Acra's height and the repopulation of the city of David with Jews were symbolic acts that restored Jerusalem's Jewish identity and unity.

Meanwhile, significant shifts occurred in the broader region. The Parthians, under Mithridates I, captured Babylonia, further weakening the Seleucid empire. Demetrius II's attempt to reclaim the territory ended in his capture, sidelining him and leaving Tryphon and Antiochus VII as contenders for the Seleucid throne. Tryphon's brief rule was challenged by Antiochus VII, who established a new front in the ongoing Seleucid civil wars. Antiochus VII was raised in the Pamphylian port of Side, where he gained his nickname, "Sidetes."

Simon leveraged his relationship with Antiochus VII to ensure Jerusalem's freedom and expand the Jewish state's territory, capturing strategic locations such as Gazara and Joppa. These expansions not only secured a Mediterranean port for Judea but also stimulated economic growth and development.

In his later years, Simon ensured his legacy through his sons, positioning them in significant roles within the Jewish state's religious, military, and administrative spheres. This laid the groundwork for the continued Hasmonean rule and the further development of an autonomous Jewish state, navigating the complex political landscape of the time.

Simon's initially positive relationship with Sidetes deteriorated when Sidetes, after defeating Tryphon, demanded the return of cities including Joppa and Gazara to Seleucid control, along with substantial financial compensation. Simon resisted, particularly regarding Jerusalem, and offered a smaller sum for the sovereignty of Joppa and Gazara. Sidetes's refusal led to conflict, with Simon's son John successfully defending against Sidetes's general, Cendebeus, securing Judea's autonomy from Seleucid dominance.

This victory, however, did not eliminate the threat from Sidetes, especially after his victory over Tryphon in 136 BC, which left Judea exposed to potential Seleucid aggression. Simon worked to strengthen Judea's defenses and resources in anticipation of future conflicts.

Tragically, in 134 BC, Simon and members of his family were assassinated by his son-in-law, Ptolemy Abubus, during a visit to the fortress of Dok. Ptolemy's motivations remain unclear, but his actions aimed to seize power and possibly realign Judea under Seleucid influence. This act of treachery ended Simon's leadership, marking a turbulent period for Judea as it faced internal betrayal and the looming threat of Seleucid encroachment. Simon's era, characterized by significant strides towards independence and self-governance, ended with his murder, casting Judea into a period of political instability and uncertainty regarding its future direction.

Conclusion

The period following Judas Maccabeus's death was marked by significant upheaval and transformation for Jewish society. Despite initial setbacks and the reinstatement of Seleucid control, the Jewish people demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Various sects, from the Sadducees to the Pharisees and the Essenes, navigated the changing political landscape to preserve their identity and beliefs. Alcimus's tenure as high priest, though controversial and ultimately marred by illness and early death, reflected the ideological tensions between progressivism and conservatism within the Jewish religious hierarchy.

The Maccabean resistance continued under the leadership of Judas's brothers, who, despite early losses, managed to leverage the Seleucid civil strife to their advantage. Their strategic assassinations and subsequent political maneuvering, especially under Jonathan Apphus, set the stage for a gradual regaining of autonomy and influence. The Hasmoneans skillfully used diplomacy and military acumen to navigate the power vacuums and shifting allegiances within the Seleucid Empire, culminating in the significant political and religious role that Jonathan Apphus assumed.

Simon Thassi's ascension as high priest heralded a new era of Jewish independence, balancing the theological debates on governance with the practicalities of political autonomy. His diplomatic victories, including formal recognition from Rome, and the expansion of territory, underscored the Jewish state's growing self-determination.

However, the assassination of Simon and the subsequent upheavals revealed the persistent vulnerabilities and threats facing the nascent Jewish state, internally from betrayal and externally from Seleucid ambitions. Despite these challenges, the Hasmonean dynasty laid foundational changes that would impact the Jewish identity and its political and religious structures for generations to come. The period of Simon Thassi and his predecessors encapsulates a significant historical narrative of a people's struggle for autonomy, the negotiation of cultural and religious identities, and the quest for a balance between tradition and innovation in the face of external pressures and internal conflicts.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How did the Maccabean revolt reflect the tensions between Hellenistic influences and traditional Jewish practices?
2. In what ways did the political maneuvers of the Hasmoneans differ from the religious objectives of groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees?
3. What role did diplomacy play in the Hasmoneans' strategy to regain Jewish autonomy, and how effective was it compared to military action?
4. How did the assassination campaign led by Jonathan Apphus impact the structure and politics of Judean society?
5. What were the long-term effects of the Seleucid fortification program and hostage policy on the cultural and political landscape of Judea?
6. How did the shift from theocratic to hierocratic governance under Simon Thassi influence Jewish self-perception and their relationship with neighboring powers?
7. What are the implications of Simon Thassi's refusal to adopt the title of king, and how did this reflect the theological and political debates of the time?

8. How did the actions and policies of Alcimus as high priest represent the broader ideological struggles within Judea?

9. Can the approach of the Essenes towards withdrawal and asceticism be seen as a form of resistance, and how does this compare with the active resistance of the Maccabees?

10. In what ways did the struggle for Jewish independence under the Hasmoneans set the stage for the complex political and religious dynamics of later periods, including the rise of Christianity and the eventual Roman conquest?