

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 7, The Hasmonean Revolt

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This is Dr. Anthony Tomasino in his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 7, The Hasmonean Revolt.

So, we're coming up to the time of the Hasmonean Revolt.

So, let's go and look at a little background here and what brought this into existence. The political setting, we've already talked about to some extent. The Seleucids managed to take Palestine from Egypt around 200, between 204-200 BC, sometime in that period.

The Palestinian Jews were very likely initially pleased by this development. They had tried to revolt against the Ptolemies earlier because they thought they were going to get cheaper taxes. Well, they're about to find that the grass is not always greener on the other side of the hill.

See, what had happened was that, yes, the Seleucids had, for the most part, been fairly easy on the people that they were ruling as far as taxation goes. But then they found themselves in need of a lot of cash real fast. The reason was that the Seleucids had decided to aid the Greeks in their battle against the Romans.

Well, the Romans won. And one of the Seleucids was taken captive. And the son of Antiochus III, in fact, was held as captive in Rome.

And the Seleucids had to then ransom him back. Well, the Romans were not people who were gracious in victory. And the amount of money that the Seleucids had to pay to the Romans was actually crippling their economy.

Of course, to pay their bills, they had to tax the people. Under the Seleucids, well, the Jews thought they had it bad under the Ptolemies. Under the Seleucids, the taxes went through the roof.

And so, they were not particularly pleased with this development. Now, prior to the persecution, the fact that the Jews were being taxed in this way led to increased cries from the Hellenizing party to convert Jerusalem into a polis. Because as a polis, they would be exempted from taxation.

So, we have the beginning of what is called the Hellenistic reform. The book of Maccabees says something to the effect that in those days, certain wicked, worthless people of the Jews said, let us join ourselves back unto the nations for since we have

separated from them, nothing but evil has befallen us. They decided that they were going to try to become Greek.

We're told they were going so far as many of the leading people were trying to undo their circumcision. And if you think that's symbolic, it wasn't. It was literal.

They really did actually have procedures that they could use to try to remove the signs of their circumcision. There is nothing that I want to go into detail about or experience personally. So anyway, Jason, who is the brother of the high priest, Onias II, bribes Antiochus to appoint him as the high priest.

This happens in 170 BC. Well, you know, Antiochus needs money. So, Antiochus is more than happy to accept a bribe.

To him, one high priest is as good as another. After all, they're both from the same family, descendants of Aaron, etc.

So why not? Well, Jason wants to push through this process of converting Jerusalem into a polis, and you can almost hear his pleas. They just sound so much like a politician or a college president or something. You know, we need money.

It's a very small sacrifice for us to make in order to achieve the kind of freedom that this will bring to us as a city. So, the beginnings of the reform occur at this time under Jason. But what happens is Jason is then outbid by even a more radical Jew, a fellow named Menelaus.

Menelaus is not a member of the tribe of Aaron. Menelaus is not even, in fact, a priest. He is in any way. And yet, he has now been displaced, and he has now displaced the legitimate priestly line in order to turn the priesthood into sort of his political pawn.

So, with Menelaus now leading the Jews as their high priest and Menelaus being thoroughly indebted to Antiochus, Antiochus thinks that this means that Jerusalem is going to be secure and that he now has little to worry about as far as any kind of rebellion from Judea. Menelaus begins his reign as high priest by deciding to plunder all the temple treasures. We'll be talking a little more about the temple in the next lecture.

But one of the things that is going on here is that the temple had long served as a repository of wealth, and many of the wealthiest Jewish citizens in Jerusalem had deposited their funds in the temple. Well, Menelaus was proceeding to help himself with those funds, and this was not making the Jews happy.

But as long as Antiochus was getting his cut, he wasn't going to interfere. So, what instigates the actual revolt here? Well, Antiochus, thinking that Jerusalem is secure, decides to invade Egypt. Now, an eight-year-old has now taken the throne.

And so, this seems to be the ideal time to take over the land of Egypt. Antiochus travels down to Egypt with his armies, crosses into the border, and lo and behold, who should he find there but a Roman general and a bunch of Roman troops. Now, Antiochus, this is Antiochus IV, he knew something about the Roman troops.

He had been a captive in Rome before he had been ransomed by his father. So, he understood what it meant to go against Rome. He had seen what they had done to the Greeks.

And he did not want to come into conflict with Rome. But he decided that it would be, he needed to save face in all this. So, he says to the Roman general, well, we shall take your requests to withdraw from Egypt under advisement.

And the Roman general, I just have this wonderful image in my head of this almost cartoonish kind of thing. You know, this Antiochus Epiphanes, from what we understand, is a really big guy, very imposing. And I can just imagine this little Roman general pulling out his sword and going up to Antiochus Epiphanes.

And he draws a circle in the sand around Antiochus Epiphanes. And he says, Oh, sure, take all the time you want. But Rome requires an answer from you before you step out of that circle.

Okay, so Antiochus now has been humiliated by the Romans, and is forced to agree to withdraw from Egypt. Now, you might wonder what the Romans were doing there. Well, simply put, the Romans didn't want any one kingdom becoming too strong, too powerful.

They viewed Egypt as a very important resource for Rome because it provided them with a lot of the grain that they needed. So, the Romans did not want the Seleucids to take control of Egypt. So anyway, how is Antiochus Epiphanes going to respond to this? Well, he's kind of got his tail stuck between his legs, and he begins a slow march back home.

Well, as often happens, in these kinds of situations, a rumor rather rapidly spread throughout the East, that Antiochus Epiphanes had been killed in Egypt. And so Jason, the former high priest, brother of Onias the Second, hearing this rumor that Antiochus Epiphanes is dead, decides that it is now his opportunity to retake the temple. So, he gathers for himself an army of Ammonites, hires them.

He was also being bankrolled by that same Tobias family that we've been hearing about over and over again. He gathers an army, bankrolled by the Tobias, and he invades Jerusalem. So how does Antiochus respond? He hears that Menelaus, the priest that he installed as high priest in Jerusalem, is being assaulted in the temple.

He believes that this is a personal attack upon himself and his authority. And so, Antiochus diverts his troops. No, he wasn't going to challenge the Romans, but doggone it, he is not going to let the Jews push him around.

So, on he marches to Jerusalem with his army. Well, as his armies approached Jerusalem, Jason fled like a rat from a sinking ship kind of thing.

And he will pop up again. But Antiochus immediately imposes martial law in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Antiochus believes that part of the problem here lies in the Jews' peculiar religion.

Antiochus Epiphanes believed himself to be a god. In fact, his title, Epiphanes, means the manifestation. He is the manifestation of the God.

In fact, he took this so seriously that in some of his coinage, where typically the face of Zeus would appear in the coinage, he had his own face placed there instead of Zeus's face because, you know, he was Zeus on earth. And he felt that the Jews' refusal to worship him meant that they weren't playing ball with the Seleucid Empire. They've got this crazy religion of theirs, which keeps them from working with the other nations.

So, he decides that he must now eliminate the Jewish religion in Judea. One of the things he does is he builds in the city of Jerusalem, a fortress called the Acre. This is going to become like a major sticking point for this entire period here because this Acre was like this huge fortress in the middle of Jerusalem, garrisoned with Greek soldiers.

So, you've got the presence of it. Let's see if I can find a picture of it. I believe it's over here in this section. But you've got this major tower with all these Greek soldiers now watching over the Jews all the time, making sure that they don't step out a line.

There's a model of the Acre. As you can see, it was a pretty imposing place. The religious persecution, the book of Second Maccabees gives a very lurid description of what happened here.

But essentially, the idea is that the Jews need to learn to accept the Greek gods and Antiochus as the representative of the Greek gods upon earth. The book of Daniel says that the abomination that causes a desolation was set up in the temple in

Jerusalem. The abomination is an idol of some sort representing Antiochus as the Greek god, probably Zeus.

So, the Greek state cult is forced upon Jerusalem. Outlawed Jewish laws and customs. We are told that Jews were forbidden to practice circumcision and that any mother who had her child circumcised was put to death along with her baby.

We are told that anybody found possessing a copy of the Torah, the laws of the Jews, was put to death. We were told that anybody observing the Sabbath was put to death. There seemed to be practically one punishment for everything that happened here.

Greek ambassadors were sent out from town to town throughout Judea, requiring those towns to set up an altar for the Greek cult and to offer sacrifices to the Greek gods in the person of, of course, Antiochus. Now, not everybody was going to go along with this, obviously. And there are a couple of major sources of resistance.

One is a group that we come to know as the Hasideans, which means pious ones. The Hasideans were extremely devoted to the laws of the Lord and refused to participate in any of the activities that were being required of the people. And so, many of them had to leave the towns and flee out into the wilderness, where they formed these little bands of resistance.

The other major wing of the resistance was the Hasmonean family, which we've come to know as the Maccabees. That's a bit of a misnomer, and I'll tell you why in a moment.

The story goes that when the ambassadors from the Seleucids came to the town of Modin, where a fellow by the name of Mattathias lived with his sons, the officer required that the people perform a sacrifice. And Mattathias, who was a priest, and seeing that this fellow was highly respected among the people of the citizens, he ordered that Mattathias should be the first one to perform the sacrifices and show his loyalty to Antiochus. Well, Mattathias took the sword in hand, which was supposed to be used for performing sacrifice, and instead, he killed the Greek officer.

And then he called out to his sons and said, My sons, gather around, and all you people who are zealous for the laws of the Lord, let us go and rally into the hills. And so Mattathias led his family out of Modene, and they too took to the hills where they would become the second wing of the resistance. So, how did all this turn out? Well, Mattathias died very shortly after this revolt began, and his son Judas took over.

Now, Judas has a nickname. His nickname is Maccabeus, which apparently refers to a hammer. There have been all kinds of speculations about what exactly the hammer part of him was.

Some people there were some legends about him fighting with a hammer. That doesn't seem to be the case, because we know he used swords. It says he used swords.

Some people said maybe his head looked like a hammer. Others said maybe it was his foot. But we don't know, but for some reason he was called the hammerer.

Maybe it was because, or hammer man, I guess. Maybe it was just because of the way he pounded his enemies. Who knows? But at any rate, that's where we get the name Maccabeus, is from Judas.

Judas was the main leader of the revolt after his father's death. So let's talk about the early revolt. It was characterized by guerrilla warfare.

So, the Hasidim, the Hasideans, and the Hasmoneans both took to the hills, camped out in caves in the area around Judea and around Jerusalem. And then they would raid any towns which were collaborating with the Greeks. They would fall upon any Greek troops that they found moving through Judea.

In this way, they won some minor skirmishes at the beginning and began to develop a name for themselves as a force to be reckoned with. Now, there was a bit of a breach between the Hasidim, the Hasideans, and the Hasmoneans over the question of fighting on the Sabbath day. A group of Hasideans were encamped in a cave on the Sabbath, and they were discovered by a Greek army.

The Greek army ordered them to come out and either surrender or fight. They said, well, they can't surrender because they have to be true to the laws of their God, but they can't fight either because it's the Sabbath day. And so what the Greeks did is they burned them all alive in the cave.

Well, the Hasmoneans, seeing this, said, we've got a decision to make here. Are we going to let people attack us on our Sabbath day and be sitting ducks, or are we going to fight back? And they made an agreement that they would be willing to fight anyone who attacked them, even on their Sabbath day. We can see them beginning to compromise principles a little bit here, maybe, but this is only the first of many compromises to come.

At any rate, there were some initial victories that were quite significant. For instance, a small force led by a fellow by the name of Apollonius was defeated by Judas Maccabeus, and Judas took the sword of Apollonius and said, ah, good sword, and fought with that sword for the rest of his life. So much for his hammer, right? But another victory occurred.

There was a victory over troops at a place called Beth-horon, or Saron, that was the leader of the Greek forces there. A fellow by the name of Gorgias and Nicanor in the Battle of Emmaus. All these various victories over these Greek armies and these Greek soldiers were building the reputations of the Hasmoneans as being tenacious fighters and a real threat to the stability of the Seleucid Empire.

So, after several of these victories, the Greeks decided it was time to take these Jews seriously, and they appointed a fellow by the name of Lysias to become the regent of the Seleucids. Lysias decided that he would make this revolt in Judea a top priority. So, in 162 BC, after the Hasmoneans had managed to retake Jerusalem, 164 they began to suffer some of their setbacks.

You know, you read these accounts, and you kind of wonder if it really couldn't have been this easy. We know what these Greek troops are capable of. Could it really have been this easy? I think part of the question is that the Greeks were divided on multiple fronts, and they really couldn't devote the resources to the Jewish revolt that they should have devoted to them, in part because they didn't take it very seriously at first.

As they began to take it more seriously, the victories started going in both directions a little bit more. But not before 164 BC. In 164 BC, the Hasmoneans captured the temple, and at this point, we have this wonderful story about the rededication of the temple that's recorded later.

According to the story, in order to rededicate the temple, they needed to first, of course, purify all the stuff that had been polluted by the Greeks, who had been sacrificing pigs or whatever else they were sacrificing in there. So, they had to clean everything out, they had to disassemble the altar that was in there, and it said that the bricks were stored away because they had to wait for a prophet to tell them what to do with the bricks. This is an interesting kind of thing because you wonder, does this mean that prophecy was continuing at this time? Apparently, it was.

Anyway, so they stored away the bricks, they built a new altar, and then came the time when they were supposed to dedicate the temple. And this would require an eight-day ceremony for the dedication of the temple. Well, when they checked out their oil, the special oil that was made according to the Levitical laws, they found that they only had enough oil for a single day.

The oil had to burn for all eight days, or it wasn't dedicated. Well, they used what oil they had, and miraculously, the oil burned for the entire eight days. And so, this is the miracle which is still celebrated to this day at the Feast of Hanukkah, when the Jews remember the rededication of the temple.

So, let's see here. This story comes from the Talmud. So, the consecrated oil, it was mixed with a lot of different things.

Why didn't they just make more oil? Well, there were special procedures involved in the making of the oil as well, so they couldn't just make more. They had to have it blessed in certain ways, and they were in a bit of a hurry here. So, it burned the entire time needed for the manufacture of the oil.

It's interesting, this Feast of Hanukkah is mentioned by Josephus. He calls it the Festival of Lights in his book. Hanukkah really means dedication.

The Feast of Hanukkah, however, is never mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It doesn't appear in any of the list of Jewish holidays, and there are several in the Dead Sea Scrolls. And it's never mentioned in the New Testament either.

There is a possibility that there's an allusion to it when in one case, we are told that Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem to observe a festival, and some people think that that might have been Hanukkah, that he was going to Jerusalem to observe. The problem with that is Hanukkah was not considered a pilgrim feast. You didn't have to go to Jerusalem to observe Hanukkah.

Maybe you'd want to go to Jerusalem to observe Hanukkah, like you might want to go to Washington, D.C., to experience the Fourth of July or something, but it was not required. So, who knows? So, this revolt, of course, continues on. Antiochus Epiphanes is fighting in the north against, guess who? The Parthians.

I told you they weren't going away. The Parthian Empire remains a thorn in the side of not only the Greeks but later the Romans as well. So, in 164 B.C., Antiochus V, the son of Antiochus IV, is named king.

But at this point, Lysias, the guy who was appointed regent, is still ruling the country, pretty much. Now, in 162 B.C., there is a major battle, which is really the first major kind of defeat suffered by the Hasmonean forces. Battle of Beit Zechariah.

Judas is defeated, and he returns to Jerusalem. Lysias pursued him and laid siege to Jerusalem, but a revolt broke out in the capital city of Antioch because you've got this new king in place, and anytime you get a new king in place, you automatically have revolted. Plus, we have this issue of multiple claimants to the throne.

And so, Lysias had to return to Antioch and deal with the revolt. So, this becomes an issue for Lysias. He says, is it really worth pursuing this rebellion in Jerusalem for me? Is it really worth committing my resources to this when we've got war going on in the north against Parthia, when we've got revolts happening here in Antioch? Why don't I just let the Jews do their own thing? And so, that's precisely what he decides to do.

Lysias offers to lift the persecution of the Jews, and they accept the offer, of course. But at this point, the nature of this conflict changes because the Hasmoneans, even though they are now free from persecution, believe that they will not be truly free from the threat of such events in the future until they become a free nation. And this is kind of dividing the Jewish community at this time because not everybody agrees with this.

There were many people in Jerusalem, many people in Judea, who were willing to say, okay, well, let's just take the peace offer and be good with it. But not the Hasmoneans. They wanted to continue this battle and press on for Jewish independence.

There are some political entanglements at this point. The fate of the Jews now is becoming intertwined with politics in Syria. That is where the Seleucid Empire now has its capital.

And believe me, there are lots of political intertwinements here, and I'm not going to give you all these names because you'll get lost. Because so many people have the same name, you know? So many people that play into this whole thing. So we're going to try to keep this to the bare minimum, as necessary to understand what's going on here.

So, first of all, we have Demetrius I. Demetrius is the nephew of Antiochus Epiphanes, Antiochus IV. And he invades Syria. He kills Antiochus V, son of Antiochus IV, and Lysias both.

Now, of course, he's king, right? Well, we've got a new high priest in Jerusalem, a fellow by the name of Alcimus. Alcimus is part of the Hellenizing party. And he requests that Demetrius will help him to fight against the Hasmoneans, who are still pushing for the independence of Judea.

Well, Demetrius responds to this. This is Demetrius, by the way, down here. He sends an army to Jerusalem under the leadership of a fellow by the name of Bacchides, a very fearsome general among the Greeks.

Judas is forced to withdraw from Jerusalem. And he resumes his guerrilla warfare. At this point, the Seleucid forces withdraw from Jerusalem and return to Antioch in order to put down the revolts and all the quelling troubles there.

Well, Demetrius has to dispatch yet another army led by a fellow by the name of Nicanor. And this becomes a kind of a major, well, a major victory for the Hasmonean forces. Because at the Battle of Adassa, Judas' forces, in the biggest battle they fought yet, defeat Nicanor and his troops.

And in fact, it says in the Books of Maccabees that they still celebrated that as Nicanor's Day. It never really seemed to make it into the calendar in later times. And you'll find no Jews today celebrating Nicanor's Day.

But at the time when this battle was won, it was considered a very major accomplishment by the Hasmoneans. Well, Judas Maccabeus has to go against an army of 20,000, which seems, you know, small in those days. You know, when you think that Alexander the Great had a force of 40,000 that he brought over to kind of conquer the East.

But it was considered a rather sort of minor army. But 20,000 to deal with a people like the Hasmoneans, that seems kind of, well, seems like overkill, I guess. Judas managed to stand his ground for some time, even though, of course, his troops were heavily outnumbered here.

But it was at the Battle of Eleazar in 161 BC that Judas finally fell against the Greek forces. And when he was killed, his brother Jonathan, the next man up, immediately came and took over the leadership of the Hasmonean revolt. So, when we move on from this point, we're going to be talking about how the nature of the revolt changes.

And particularly the leadership of the Hasmoneans to come. Because from this point, the Hasmoneans start to become not just rebels, but they start to become kind of the leaders of Judea in general. So that will wait till our next time.

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