

# **Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 8, The Hasmonean Dynasty**

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This is Dr. Anthony Tomasino and his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 8, The Hasmonean Dynasty.

So, when last we left our heroes, Judas Maccabeus had recently died in battle and his brother Jonathan had taken command of the Hasmonean troops and became the leader of the rebellion.

An interesting little side note here is that Alcimus, the high priest who was kind of the leader of the Hellenizing party, died shortly after Jonathan took over. And we don't know who took his place at that time. Now, this becomes a bit of a mystery because some scholars say, well, maybe the office was just empty.

There was nobody serving as a high priest during that time, which I have a very hard time believing because, you know, high priests were responsible for doing things like the ritual of the Day of Atonement, which took away the collective guilt of the Jewish people. I don't think you want to leave that, you know, up to chance or something. Other people say maybe Jonathan was serving as high priest, which also makes no sense to me, because if Jonathan were the high priest at that time, I'm quite sure that the books of Maccabees would be celebrating it all over the place.

So, I'm just going to figure out that probably what's going on here is that whoever was installed in the office at this time was very inoffensive and very unmemorable. And that is why nobody even bothered remembering his name. But anyway, so we have Jonathan now taking power from 161 to 142 BC, he is going to lead this revolt.

Jonathan establishes a sort of government center at the city of Mishmash. And Mishmash is a city that's a little ways away from Jerusalem. We don't know who is running Jerusalem at this time.

What we do know is that many people were coming to Mishmash to receive justice. And it kind of reminds me of the story of when King David's son Absalom had sort of set up an in absentia government where he was passing judgment while his father David was sort of languishing in the palace. But that seems to be what's going on here.

The government at Mishmash and Jonathan's work was apparently very popular with the people. And there were more people going to Jonathan for help than people who were going to whoever was running Jerusalem at the time. Now, Maccabees, we've

already talked about him a little bit, Maccabees began to set up a number of fortresses throughout Judea and to try to secure this place for the Seleucid Empire.

Once again, we've got troubles in Syria, though, because we've got a rivalry between Demetrius I and a fellow by the name of Alexander Ballas, both of whom are part of the royal family, both of whom now are competing for the throne. Ballas, we really don't know what his connection is to the family. Some people think he had none.

But at any rate, he seemed to have a lot of popularity. To secure the support of the people he viewed as the more vigorous of the Jewish population, he appointed Jonathan to be the high priest in Jerusalem. This was to gain his favor.

This was to have him as an ally, keep him close, and so on. There's a major problem with this for the Jewish people, though, because it is a big break from tradition. Now, he's from a family of priests, true.

But the high priest, since days of, well, Solomon, basically had been taken from one major family, the family of a fellow by the name of Zadok. The Zadokite high priestly line had been well established. And pretty much God had made this covenant with the Zadokite family that they would be the high priests perpetually.

Now, we are breaking with that tradition by appointing this Hasmonean, who is not part of the Zadokite line, as the high priest. So, in 153 BC, the Feast of Tabernacles in 153 BC is the first official act of Jonathan. At this time, he presides as a high priest.

Balas continues to pour honors upon him. He makes him the Stratigos of Jerusalem. That Stratigos is a kind of military governor.

So not only is he the chief religious authority, but now he is the chief military authority of Jerusalem as well. It seems, initially, at least, that the Hasmoneans have won. So, Jonathan's downfall.

Here's a graph showing now where Judea is growing a little bit here. You know, it's not much of a nation, but Jonathan managed to conquer some regions here in the Transjordan and some areas out here as well and to expand the realm of the Judean territories. So, Demetrius II becomes king in 145 BC.

Now, this was Alexander Ballas's rival. Alexander Balas is dead, and Demetrius summons Jonathan to Syria in order to make him answer for having supported Alexander Balas. Well, in one of those weird, quirky twists of fate, what ends up happening is that Demetrius ends up ceding territory to the Judeans.

So, instead of being taken to the woodshed, Jonathan ends up coming back with even more power than he had had before he had gone into Syria. But it is not going to stand for long. Once again, Syrian politics are going to cause some conflicts here.

Another rival to the throne of the Syrian empire, the Seleucids, rises up. A fellow by the name of Tryphon. Tryphon was a general of Alexander Balas.

He is not a member of the royal family. He was a general. But he had a lot of power, and he had the armies behind him.

And so Tryphon was initially supported by Jonathan, which is kind of funky because, well, I guess they probably had a relationship before because he had supported Alexander Balas, and this guy had been associated with Alexander Ballas. Well, it seems like it might have been a good move, but Tryphon became suspicious of Jonathan. He thought Jonathan was working against him and thought he was trying to maybe expand his kingdom.

So, he lures him to the city of Ptolemaeus, which is a little bit further north of here. He has the pretense that he'll bestow upon him even greater honors.

Now, some of Jonathan's brothers were very suspicious of this. He was kind of warned not to go. But Jonathan went, hey, whatever.

You know, what could go wrong? Well, what could go wrong is that he was taken captive and then executed. So, his brother, Simon, then has to take over. Simon is appointed the high priest by the Jews, not by the Seleucids, when Jonathan is murdered by Tryphon.

Now, Tryphon tries to seize the kingdom again. Well, I should say the region. It's not a kingdom at this point.

At this point, Simon forms an alliance with Demetrius II, but he wants more concessions. He is willing to help Demetrius II against Tryphon if Jerusalem is exempted from taxation. Quite the concession here that he is demanding.

So, Demetrius II agrees. At this point, we're told that the Jews were freed from the yoke of the Gentiles, a day celebrated in the annals of the books of Maccabees and also remembered fondly in Jewish history. Because, face it, you're no longer paying taxes to foreign powers.

You're essentially independent. So, he gets to pretty much work with autonomy for a while. He expands the Jewish realm.

He conquers Gerasa and takes the Acre, a big fortress within the city of Jerusalem. He expels the Greek troops from the Acre and destroys several other fortresses in the region. Simon has a tragic end, even though he does manage to receive quite a few accolades along the way.

It's 140 BC, really, that they have what they call the Great Assembly, where he is recognized as the high priest and the leader of all the Jewish people. 140 or 139, Demetrius, his patron, is captured by the Parthians, them again. At this point, Simon throws his support to Antiochus VII for the throne.

Antiochus VII demanded that Simon release some of the territories that he conquered. Simon refused to do so when the Greeks sent their troops to try to take them by force. Simon and the Jewish troops defeated the Greek armies and managed to retain control of their territories.

What happens to Simon has nothing to do with honor or anything of the sort. Rather, he has a son-in-law by the name of Ptolemy. His son-in-law invites him to a banquet.

Simon shows up at the banquet, and he is murdered by his own son-in-law. His son-in-law is thinking he's going to take control of Jerusalem. This happens in 135 BC.

Well, immediately, we have a bit of a conflict, a struggle for the high priesthood and control of Jerusalem. John Hyrcanus, who is Simon's son, is now trying to take control of Jerusalem. It's kind of a really tragic, sad story here at the beginning of this because John Hyrcanus' reign does not get off to a good start.

Ptolemy escapes to Jerusalem and he takes Simon's wife, John Hyrcanus' mother, captive. Every time that it appeared that Hyrcanus and his forces were going to be able to breach the temple complex and get control of the temple again, Simon would parade Hyrcanus' mother out and threaten to kill her. Eventually, he actually did kill her and then still managed to escape and fled down to Egypt.

So, a first black eye on John Hyrcanus and his reign here. He was besieged by Antiochus VII in 135 BC. At this time, because of the forces of the Greeks surrounding Jerusalem and cutting them off from their allies, John Hyrcanus was forced to make huge concessions, giving up a lot of the property, the land that they had conquered in the previous expansions.

But, the thing is, Antiochus VII was not immortal. In 128 BC, Antiochus VII dies in battle. Demetrius II, who takes over after him, is distracted trying to secure his throne.

So, as he is not paying attention, John Hyrcanus begins to play his hand and begins to recoup his power and authority and to reconquer some of those lands that he had

had to cede to the Greeks. In the north, he takes Samaria, the city that Alexander the Great converted into a Greek city. In the south, he conquers the land of Idumea.

Idumea, we know of Edom from the Old Testament. The people of Edom were forced toward the west by the movements of the Arabic peoples. And as the Edomians moved into the west, they kind of formed their own little kingdom to the south of Judea.

That kingdom became known as Idumea. Well, John Hyrcanus conquered Idumea, and he forced the people of Idumea to convert to Judaism or die. And then, to the east, he conquered regions in the Transjordan.

But, Hyrcanus, in order to achieve his success, made a number of controversial moves. One of them was the plundering of the tomb of King David. Now, this is a traditional site of the tomb of King David today.

But, what we are told is that because they had been so crippled by the wars against the Greeks, they found themselves in desperate need of money, and the tomb of David was discovered, and it was discovered to be filled with riches. Those riches were taken and used by John Hyrcanus to rebuild his army. He hired foreign mercenaries, and this is a new step for the Hasmoneans.

Up to this point, the Hasmoneans had been fighting for the homeland, for the country, for honor, and all those good things. Now, he's got a bunch of people in his army who are fighting for money. And those aren't always, of course, the most reliable of troops.

Yet another move that he did was he destroyed a temple which was used by the Samaritans. Now, this is not in Samaria. This is a Samaritan temple that was located on Mount Gerizim.

And the Samaritans, of course, had worshipped there for many, many years. We have had bad blood between the Samaritans and the Jews for a long time for a number of reasons. Once again, this did not help matters in the least.

And you understand a little bit better, maybe, now why in the New Testament we are told that the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. It actually goes both directions. Finally, there is this whole issue with the Idumeans.

Now, the whole revolt began when the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes forced the Jews to give up their religion and become Greeks, essentially, to adopt the Greek religion. Now, John Hyrcanus, in his conquest, is forcing the Idumean people, on threat of death, to give up their religion and to become Jewish. You have to wonder at the irony of it all.

And there is a sense where this is going to come back to bite them later because of the fact that the Idumeans are, well, you know, the Jews have a long history with the Idumeans, going all the way back to the Old Testament. And one of the reasons why the Jews and Idumeans had bad blood was because the Edomites were some of the big slave traders that were told that they had; they were considered to be relatives of the Jews of the people of Judah. But when Judah was sacked by the Babylonians, the Edomites were there to buy the captives and sell them into slavery.

And so, several of the books of the prophets talk with a great deal of vehemence about how the land of Edom was going to be judged one day. Well, perhaps John Hyrcanus felt he was carrying out that judgment, but ironies will yet abound even there. In the later years of John Hyrcanus, he seemed to enjoy a great deal of success, actually, since the political intrigues going on in Syria prevented them from taking any kind of decisive action against Hyrcanus.

They're so busy fighting with each other, they couldn't fight against John Hyrcanus at this point. Hyrcanus conquered Samaria, and he raised it to the ground, as I had already mentioned, and this was a pretty impressive victory, considering that Alexander the Great had founded that city, and had populated it with Greeks. And now John Hyrcanus was undoing the work of Alexander the Great.

He was the first of the Hasmoneans to die of natural causes. He actually died of old age, amazingly enough, in 104 BC. Now, before his death, he had named his widow to be his successor.

But his son Aristobulus had other ideas. Now, Aristobulus does not reign for very long. He was the high priest from 104 to 103 BC, but in his first act, once he took over as high priest, obviously, John Hyrcanus's widow could not be a high priest.

His son, Aristobulus, takes over as high priest, but he wants the whole package. He wants it all. And so immediately, he puts his mother in prison, and he puts his brothers in prison to assure himself that there will be nobody that is going to be a rival for the throne.

He allows his mother to starve to death in prison. His brothers were spared. One of the remarkable things about him, as you can see from our little picture here, is that he is the first of the Hasmoneans to declare himself a king.

He did have one brother that he was close to, a fellow by the name of Antigonus. And Antigonus was allowed to remain free while all the other brothers were languishing in prison. Well, he was tricked by a member of the royal court into having Antigonus killed.

The way that this was done, according to Josephus and his accounts, is that he was told to pass a law and to tell his guards that if anybody came into the palace armed, they were to be immediately put to death. Because the idea was, of course, that they might be plotting against Aristobulus. And Aristobulus was just enough of a paranoid megalomaniac to believe that this was a possibility.

Well, the same courtier gifted Antigonus, the brother, with a wonderful suit of armor and a wonderful new sword. And said, you know who would really like to see this? Your brother would really like to see this. So, Antigonus marches into the palace with his armor and sword, and he is immediately cut down by the guards.

Now, Aristobulus was so overwhelmed with remorse and grief that he went into a huge drinking binge, which eventually took his life. But not before he managed to conquer Galilee and add that to the kingdom. The first king of the Hasmoneans thus begins with a very ignominious act of murder and ends with a death of drunken, well, ignominious shame.

So, the Hasmonean kingdom in 103 BC. This is the kingdom that is left behind by Aristobulus. You can see it has grown considerably from when it was about like that.

Just a little bitty spritz then, you know. Now it has gone up to this region. It has conquered the Transjordanian region.

We can now have some nice port here where we can go out and send some ships forth. We've got the Galilee region up here. All of this has been added to the kingdom of the Hasmoneans.

We are getting to a kingdom here now that is about as large as what David ruled. So after the death of Aristobulus, Alexander Jannaeus takes over, and he has a nice long reign. But, gee, what good things can be said about Alexander Jannaeus? Probably nothing, except for the fact that he did manage to expand the kingdom even more.

So, he is the brother of Aristobulus. He was one of the guys in prison. When he was released from prison, Aristobulus' widow, Alexandra Salome, married him, and he was elevated to the role of king.

The first thing he tried to do was conquer the city of Ptolemaeus, which is a little further north of Galilee on the coast. He wanted that nice, fine coastal city. He did not succeed in conquering Ptolemaeus.

In fact, the forces of Jerusalem were overrun by the Ptolemies at this point. Fortunately for Alexander Jannaeus, Alexandra Salome had already made some powerful friends, including Cleopatra III. Cleopatra III sent Egyptian forces, the Ptolemaic forces, up into Jerusalem and liberated Jerusalem from the Ptolemies.

She considered for a while whether or not she would add the kingdom of Judea to her realm, and Alexandra Salome managed to persuade her that it would be better to have a loyal ally on her northern borders rather than a recalcitrant subject. So she returned to Egypt, and Alexander Janius went back home to his realm and his palace in Jerusalem. He did manage to conquer Philistia and Iteria and several other regions, expanding the kingdom to really anything bigger than as large as it had been, maybe as far back as the days of Solomon.

Um, he, well, here we go, we're going to look at our map here, see? All the way up here, Ptolemaeus is up in this region here, all the way down here, a really fairly strong and fairly powerful kingdom by this point. And a lot of reasons you would think that the people of Judea would be proud of what they have accomplished. But there were a number of problems with this Alexander Janius fellow.

He had a lot of domestic issues. First of all, he was extremely unpopular with the Pharisees. And the Pharisees didn't like these Hasmoneans to begin with, for the most part.

There's a story told about John Hyrcanus that, for the most part, the rabbis kind of like John Hyrcanus when they look back in his reign. Uh, but, uh, when John Hyrcanus had been, uh, uh, sponsoring some of the Pharisees for, and giving a party to them, and he had asked them, so what is something I can do for you? And they had said, well, you can, um, step down from the high priesthood because you're not qualified to be the high priest. It's got to be somebody of the line of Zanuck.

And John Hyrcanus refused. From that point forward, there was tension between the Pharisees and the Hasmoneans, so he's having issues with them.

There's an episode recorded in the Feast of Tabernacles where, due to the unpopularity of Alexander Janius, he was known for carousing and for being a rather, uh, um, immoral fellow in a lot of ways. We're told that at the Feast of Tabernacles, the people would have a citron fruit that they would hold in their hand and a lulav bush. Well, as Alexander Janius was parading in his robes to preside over the Feast of Tabernacles, people started throwing their citrons at him.

And that did not make him happy. He ordered his troops to attack the crowds. And many of the Jews were killed by their own high priest at that point.

Well, you know, they kind of provoked it, I guess you could say, but still. In 88 BC, the Pharisees decided that they had had enough of this impious pretender to the high priesthood. And so, they made a deal.



They cut a deal with Demetrius III Eucharist, who was then the leader of the Solution Empire. They asked Demetrius to come and take control of Jerusalem so that they could put their own man in the office of the high priest and remove these guys from the office of king. Obviously, the idea of anybody but somebody of the line of David being king was very offensive to many of the Jews.

Well, what happened was, when the troops of Demetrius began to march on Jerusalem, it looked like Alexander Janius was going to be, well, toast, pretty much. But the citizens of Jerusalem, seeing these Greek troops about to invade their city, rose up actually to Janius' defense. And they managed to fight off the Greek army.

Well, Jannaeus responded to this event by crucifying all the leaders of the Pharisees. 800 Pharisees crucified in the middle of the city of Jerusalem by Alexander Janius. And we're told, in one of those little gruesome details, that Alexander was up on one of the porticos of his palace, where he had a wonderful view of the whole thing, cavorting with his concubines and with prostitutes, while the leaders of the Pharisees were dying down below.

Oh, and I should mention also that while the men were dying on the crosses, he had their families brought out and their families slaughtered as well. He died in 76 BC. And similar to his brother, he drank himself to death.

So, after his death, we find that Alexandra Salome now receives control of Jerusalem. And this was kind of by popular acclaim. Alexandra Salome was one of those people who was viewed as being a victim of her husband's infidelities.

It sort of sounds like modern politics in some ways. But so she became a very popular political figure because of the way that she had been treated by Alexander Jannaeus. And so she was elevated to the role of the, well, queen of Judea.

And kind of an ironic twist of fate here: the last time that the Jews had had a queen, it hadn't worked out so well. It was a lady by the name of Athaliah. So, this time, on the other hand, it worked pretty well, actually, you might say.

She was the widow of both Aristobulus and Janius. Athaliah had been queen in 841 BC, you know, and she had killed her children and had tried to seize the throne. She was not a popular lady.

Alexandra Salome, on the other hand, was a very popular lady. She reversed the policies of Jannaeus, and instead of favoring the Sadducees, she began to show conciliation toward the Pharisees. Pharisees began to take lots of public offices.

And it's really kind of interesting. I imagine if you had been a Sadducee, you would have been rather offended by all this because the Sadducees were kind of barred

from public office during her administration, while the Pharisees were getting all the perks. According to the later rabbis, who considered the Pharisees to be kind of their heroes and their progenitors and all that kind of thing, this is a great thing.

This is a golden age. Sadducees probably didn't see it that way. She didn't do any significant military conquest, but interestingly enough, she didn't lose any territory either.

So, for the most part, it seemed like her reign was a success. For the most part, they enjoyed peace and security, and a certain lack of scandal, which was a good thing for a while. But after Alexandra Salome passed, then the troubles really began.

See, at this point, she has two sons. One of them, Heraclius II, had been serving as high priest, and Alexandra appointed him as her successor. Her other son, a fellow by the name of Aristobulus II, he had been in charge of the armies.

He was kind of the military leader. Once Alexandra is on her deathbed, Aristobulus makes his move. He seizes the high priesthood.

He declares himself to be the king of Judea and sends his brother into exile. So, this begins a period of conflict that is going to result in really the collapse of the Hasmonean dynasty. We will talk about those events in a later lecture.

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