

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

Abstract:

This lecture by **Dr. Anthony Tomasino** outlines the historical catalysts and progression of the **Hasmonean Revolt** against the **Seleucid Empire**. The conflict was ignited by **excessive taxation**, the forced **Hellenization** of Jewish culture, and the desecration of the **Temple** by Antiochus IV. Led initially by **Mattathias** and later by his son **Judas Maccabeus**, the Jewish resistance utilized **guerrilla warfare** to challenge Greek dominance and reclaim religious freedom. A pivotal moment in the narrative is the **rededication of the Temple** in 164 BC, an event preserved today through the celebration of **Hanukkah**. Following the death of Judas in battle, the movement shifted from a localized rebellion toward a broader pursuit of **political independence** for Judea.

Briefing Document:

The Hasmonean Revolt: Historical Analysis and Key Insights

Executive Summary

The Hasmonean Revolt (c. 167–160 BC) represents a pivotal transition in Jewish history, moving from a struggle for religious freedom to a campaign for political independence. The conflict was precipitated by a combination of crippling Seleucid taxation, internal Jewish divisions regarding Hellenization, and the aggressive religious persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Key takeaways from the historical record include:

- **Economic Catalysts:** Seleucid debt to Rome following military defeats led to exorbitant taxation on Judea, fueling early resentment.

- **Corruption of the Priesthood:** The High Priesthood became a political commodity, with figures like Jason and later Menelaus—a non-priest—bribing the Seleucid king for the office.
- **Religious Persecution:** Antiochus IV attempted to forcibly Hellenize the Jews, outlawing the Torah, circumcision, and Sabbath observance while installing a pagan idol in the Temple.
- **The Rise of the Hasmoneans:** Initiated by Mattathias and led by Judas "Maccabeus," the Hasmoneans utilized guerrilla warfare to secure significant military victories against superior Seleucid forces.
- **Strategic Fractures:** A rift developed between the Hasideans (focused on religious purity) and the Hasmoneans (focused on political sovereignty) after the Seleucids offered to lift religious bans.

Political and Economic Context

The transition of Palestine from Ptolemaic (Egyptian) to Seleucid (Syrian) control around 204–200 BC was initially welcomed by the Jewish population. However, this sentiment quickly shifted due to the financial pressures facing the Seleucid Empire.

The Roman Influence

Following a military defeat against Rome, the Seleucids were forced to pay a crippling financial indemnity to ransom captives, including the son of Antiochus III. To meet these obligations, the Seleucids imposed extreme taxation on their subjects. In Judea, this economic burden led the "Hellenizing party" to advocate for converting Jerusalem into a *polis*, which would provide tax exemptions but required the adoption of Greek cultural and religious norms.

The Corruption of the High Priesthood

The internal leadership of Jerusalem was destabilized by competitive bribery:

- **Jason (170 BC):** The brother of the legitimate High Priest Onias II, Jason bribed Antiochus IV to secure the priesthood and began the process of Hellenistic reform.

- **Menelaus:** A radical Hellenizer who was not of the priestly line (the tribe of Aaron), Menelaus outbid Jason for the office. To pay his debts to the king, Menelaus plundered the Temple treasures, which served as a repository for the wealth of Jewish citizens.

The Escalation to Revolt

The catalyst for the actual revolt was a series of humiliations suffered by Antiochus IV.

The "Circle in the Sand"

While attempting to invade Egypt, Antiochus IV was confronted by a Roman general. To prevent the Seleucids from becoming too powerful, the Roman general drew a circle around Antiochus in the sand, demanding an answer regarding his withdrawal before he stepped out of it. Humiliated and forced to retreat, Antiochus's return to Judea coincided with rumors of his death, which prompted Jason to attempt a violent retaking of the Temple.

Religious Suppression and the "Acre"

Antiochus interpreted the internal Jewish power struggle as a personal rebellion against his authority. He responded by:

- **Imposing Martial Law:** Establishing the "Acre," a massive fortress garrisoned with Greek soldiers in the heart of Jerusalem to monitor the population.
- **Outlawing Judaism:** The Torah, Sabbath observance, and circumcision were banned on pain of death.
- **The Abomination of Desolation:** A Greek state cult was forced upon the Temple, involving the installation of an idol (likely Zeus with Antiochus's likeness).

The Resistance Movements

The opposition to Seleucid rule was divided into two primary factions:

Group	Primary Motivation	Methodology
Hasideans (Pious Ones)	Absolute devotion to the Laws of the Lord and religious purity.	Non-participation and flight into the wilderness.
Hasmoneans (Maccabees)	Zealous defense of the Law combined with political liberation.	Armed resistance and guerrilla warfare.

The Modin Incident

The armed revolt began in the town of Modin when a priest named Mattathias refused to perform a Greek sacrifice. Instead, he killed the Greek officer and a collaborating Jew, calling for those zealous for the Law to follow him into the hills.

Military History of the Revolt

Guerrilla Warfare and Strategic Shifts

Following Mattathias's death, his son Judas (nicknamed "Maccabeus" or "The Hammer") took command. The early revolt was characterized by raids on collaborating towns and skirmishes with Greek troops.

A major tactical evolution occurred regarding the Sabbath. After a group of Hasideans were burned alive in a cave because they refused to fight on the Sabbath, the Hasmoneans decreed they would fight in self-defense on the holy day, prioritizing survival over strict legalism.

Major Battles and Victories

Judas Maccabeus secured several high-profile victories against Seleucid generals:

- **Apollonius:** Defeated by Judas, who took the general's sword for his own use.
 - **Battle of Emmaus:** A significant victory over the forces of Gorgias and Nicanor.
 - **Battle of Adassa:** A major accomplishment where Hasmonean forces defeated Nicanor; the victory was briefly celebrated as "Nicanor's Day."
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The Rededication of the Temple (164 BC)

In 164 BC, the Hasmoneans successfully retook the Temple in Jerusalem. This event led to the establishment of the Feast of Hanukkah (the Festival of Lights).

- **Purification:** The Hasmoneans removed the "polluted" elements of the Greek cult, including the pagan altar.
- **The Miracle of the Oil:** Traditional accounts from the Talmud state that while there was only enough consecrated oil to burn for one day, it miraculously lasted for the eight days required to manufacture new oil and complete the dedication.
- **Historical Note:** While the dedication is mentioned by Josephus and possibly alluded to in the New Testament, it is notably absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Transition to Political Sovereignty

In 162 BC, the Seleucid regent Lysias offered to lift the religious persecutions due to internal Syrian political instability and wars with the Parthians.

Internal Jewish Division

This offer created a rift within the Jewish resistance:

1. **Religious Satisfaction:** Many Jews, including the Hasideans, were willing to accept the peace offer once religious freedom was restored.
2. **Political Independence:** The Hasmoneans insisted that religious freedom would never be secure without total national independence.

The Death of Judas Maccabeus

The conflict became increasingly entangled with Syrian dynastic politics. Demetrius I eventually dispatched a massive force of 20,000 troops under the general Bacchides. In 161 BC, at the Battle of Eleazar, Judas Maccabeus was killed. Leadership of the movement then passed to his brother, Jonathan, marking a new phase where the Hasmoneans transitioned from rebels to the established leaders of Judea.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Hasmonean Revolt

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the Hasmonean Revolt as detailed in the historical analysis by Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino. It explores the political, economic, and religious catalysts that led to the Jewish uprising against the Seleucid Empire and the subsequent establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty.

Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided source material.

1. Why did the Seleucids impose crippling taxes on the Jewish population after taking Palestine from the Ptolemies?
2. What was the primary motivation for the "Hellenizing party" to convert Jerusalem into a Greek *polis*?
3. How did the appointment of Menelaus as High Priest represent a radical departure from Jewish tradition?
4. Describe the "circle in the sand" incident involving Antiochus IV and the Roman general.
5. What rumor triggered Jason's attempt to retake the Temple, and how did Antiochus IV interpret this action?
6. What was the "Acre," and what purpose did it serve in Jerusalem?
7. Identify three specific Jewish religious practices that were outlawed under the persecution of Antiochus IV.
8. What was the "abomination of desolation" mentioned in the book of Daniel?
9. How did the Hasmoneans justify their decision to fight on the Sabbath?

10. According to the Talmudic tradition, what miracle occurred during the rededication of the Temple in 164 BC?

Answer Key

1. The Seleucids required vast amounts of cash to pay a crippling ransom to the Romans after losing a battle alongside the Greeks. To settle these debts and maintain their economy, they were forced to significantly increase taxation across their territories, including Judea.
2. The Hellenizing party sought to convert Jerusalem into a *polis* primarily to gain exemption from the heavy Seleucid taxation. They believed that by adopting Greek identity and structures, they could avoid the economic "evil" that had befallen them since separating from the other nations.
3. Unlike previous High Priests, Menelaus was not a member of the tribe of Aaron and was not a priest at all. He secured the position by outbidding Jason with a larger bribe to Antiochus, effectively turning the sacred office into a political tool.
4. In Egypt, a Roman general confronted Antiochus IV and drew a circle in the sand around him, demanding an answer regarding withdrawal before he stepped out of it. Humiliated and wary of Rome's military might, Antiochus was forced to comply and retreat from Egypt.
5. A rumor spread that Antiochus IV had been killed in Egypt, prompting the former High Priest Jason to hire an army and invade Jerusalem to retake the Temple. Antiochus viewed this as a personal assault on his authority and responded by marching his troops into the city to impose martial law.
6. The Acre was a massive fortress built by Antiochus IV in the middle of Jerusalem and garrisoned with Greek soldiers. It served as a permanent military presence to watch over the Jews and ensure they did not rebel against Seleucid rule.
7. Antiochus IV outlawed the practice of circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath, and the possession of the Torah. Violations of these decrees, such

as a mother circumcising her child, were punishable by death for both the parent and the infant.

8. The "abomination of desolation" was an idol or Greek state cult object set up within the Temple in Jerusalem. It likely represented Antiochus IV in the form of the Greek god Zeus, as Antiochus believed himself to be the earthly manifestation of the deity.
9. After a group of Hasideans were burned alive in a cave because they refused to fight on the Sabbath, the Hasmoneans decided they could not remain "sitting ducks." They made a strategic agreement to fight back against anyone who attacked them, even on the holy day, to ensure their survival.
10. upon retaking the Temple, the Jews found only enough consecrated oil to last one day, yet the dedication ceremony required eight days. Miraculously, the small supply of oil burned for the full eight days, a feat now celebrated during the Feast of Hanukkah.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following prompts to develop in-depth historical arguments. No answers are provided for this section.

1. **The Economics of Rebellion:** Analyze how the Seleucid Empire's conflict with Rome and subsequent financial desperation served as the underlying catalyst for the Hasmonean Revolt.
2. **Hellenism vs. Traditionalism:** Discuss the internal Jewish conflict between the Hellenizing party (led by figures like Jason and Menelaus) and the traditionalists (such as the Hasideans). How did this internal strife facilitate Seleucid intervention?
3. **The Martyrdom of the Hasideans:** Evaluate the role of the "Pious Ones" (Hasideans) in the resistance. How did their strict adherence to the Law influence the Hasmoneans' military strategies and religious compromises?
4. **Antiochus IV as "Epiphanes":** Examine the motivations of Antiochus IV in his attempt to eliminate the Jewish religion. To what extent was his persecution driven by his own self-deification versus a political need for imperial unity?

5. **From Revolt to Independence:** Trace the evolution of the Hasmonean movement from the initial act of defiance by Mattathias at Modin to the quest for full national independence under Judas and Jonathan.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Acre	A major, imposing fortress in Jerusalem garrisoned by Greek soldiers to maintain control over the Jewish population.
Alcimus	A member of the Hellenizing party who was appointed High Priest and sought Seleucid aid to fight against the Hasmoneans.
Antiochus IV (Epiphanes)	The Seleucid king whose title means "the manifestation [of God]"; he initiated the brutal religious persecution of the Jews.
Apollonius	A Greek leader whose force was defeated by Judas Maccabeus; Judas famously took and used Apollonius's sword for the rest of his life.
Bacchides	A fearsome Greek general dispatched by Demetrius I to Jerusalem to suppress the Hasmonean rebellion.
Hanukkah	A Jewish festival, also known as the "Festival of Lights" or "Dedication," commemorating the 164 BC rededication of the Temple.
Hasideans (Hasidim)	Meaning "pious ones," this group of Jews was extremely devoted to the Torah and formed one of the two main wings of the resistance.
Hasmoneans	The priestly family, also known as the Maccabees, who led the armed revolt against the Seleucid Empire.
Jason	The brother of Onias II who bribed Antiochus IV to be appointed High Priest and began the Hellenistic reform in Jerusalem.

Judas Maccabeus The son of Mattathias and lead commander of the revolt; his nickname "Maccabeus" is thought to mean "The Hammer."

Lysias The regent of the Seleucids who initially made the Jewish revolt a top priority but later offered peace to deal with internal Syrian coups.

Mattathias A priest from the town of Modin who sparked the revolt by killing a Greek officer and an apostate Jew during a forced sacrifice.

Menelaus A radical Hellenizing Jew who outbid Jason for the High Priesthood despite not being from a priestly line; he plundered Temple treasures.

Polis A Greek city-state; the Hellenizing party sought this status for Jerusalem to gain political autonomy and tax exemptions.

Seleucids The Hellenistic dynasty that ruled a large portion of the former Persian Empire, including Palestine, after the death of Alexander the Great.
