

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

Abstract:

This lecture by **Dr. Anthony Tomasino** examines the turbulent history of the **Hasmonean Dynasty**, focusing on the internal power struggles and territorial expansion following the death of Judas Maccabeus. The narrative highlights the reigns of leaders like **Jonathan and Simon**, who navigated Syrian politics to secure Jewish autonomy and eventually gained exemption from foreign taxation. As the dynasty progressed, figures such as **John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus** significantly grew the kingdom's borders, though their rules were often marked by religious controversy, the hiring of mercenaries, and brutal crackdowns on the **Pharisees**. The sources also emphasize the transition from a traditional priestly line to a **Hasmonean monarchy**, noting the rare period of stability under **Queen Alexandra Salome**. Ultimately, the text illustrates how the dynasty's success was undermined by **filial rivalries** and moral decay, setting the stage for the eventual collapse of Hasmonean rule.

Briefing Document:

The Hasmonean Dynasty: Rise, Expansion, and Internal Collapse

Executive Summary

The Hasmonean Dynasty represents a pivotal era in Jewish history characterized by a transition from a guerrilla rebellion to a sovereign, albeit highly controversial, monarchy. Emerging from the Maccabean revolt, the dynasty progressively expanded Judean borders to their greatest extent since the era of Solomon. However, this period was also defined by significant internal strife, religious shifts, and moral decay. Key takeaways include:

- **Legitimacy and Priesthood:** A fundamental break with tradition occurred when the Hasmoneans, who were not of the Zadokite line, assumed the High Priesthood.
- **Territorial Expansion:** Under leaders like John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus, the kingdom grew to include Idumea, Samaria, Galilee, and regions in the Transjordan.
- **Political Irony:** The dynasty, which began as a revolt against forced Hellenization, eventually employed similar tactics, such as the forced conversion of the Idumeans.
- **Internal Rupture:** Constant tension between the Hasmonean rulers and the Pharisaic party, coupled with fratricidal succession disputes, ultimately led to the dynasty's vulnerability and eventual collapse.

The Early Hasmonean Leaders (161–135 BC)

Jonathan (161–142 BC)

Following the death of Judas Maccabeus, his brother Jonathan assumed leadership. His reign was marked by political maneuvering and the formalization of Hasmonean religious authority.

- **The Mishmash Government:** Jonathan established a popular administrative center in Mishmash. While an unknown, "unmemorable" figure likely held the High Priesthood in Jerusalem, the populace increasingly sought justice from Jonathan.
- **The High Priesthood:** In 153 BC, the Seleucid contender Alexander Balas appointed Jonathan as High Priest to secure an alliance. This was a radical departure from the established Zadokite line, which had held the office since the time of Solomon.
- **Military Authority:** Jonathan was named *Stratigos* (military governor) of Jerusalem. He expanded the realm into the Transjordan before being captured and executed by the Syrian general Tryphon.

Simon (142–135 BC)

Simon, Jonathan's brother, transitioned the movement toward true independence.

- **Tax Exemption:** Simon negotiated an alliance with Demetrius II, securing an exemption from taxation for Jerusalem. This act is remembered as the moment the Jews were "freed from the yoke of the Gentiles."
- **The Great Assembly:** Around 140 BC, a Great Assembly officially recognized Simon as the High Priest and leader of the Jewish people.
- **The Fall of the Acre:** Simon captured the "Acre," a major Seleucid fortress in Jerusalem, and expelled Greek troops.
- **Death:** His reign ended abruptly in 135 BC when he was murdered at a banquet by his son-in-law, Ptolemy.

Consolidation Under John Hyrcanus (135–104 BC)

John Hyrcanus, Simon's son, faced an initially precarious reign but eventually presided over a period of significant military success and controversial policy shifts.

Military and Territorial Gains

After surviving a siege by Antiochus VII and the murder of his mother by Ptolemy, Hyrcanus took advantage of Syrian instability (following the death of Antiochus VII in 128 BC) to reconquer and expand territory:

- **Samaria:** He razed the city of Samaria, effectively undoing the work of Alexander the Great.
- **Idumea:** He conquered the southern region of Idumea.
- **Transjordan:** He secured territories to the east.

Controversial Innovations

- **Foreign Mercenaries:** In a departure from previous Hasmonean practice, Hyrcanus used riches plundered from the tomb of King David to hire foreign mercenaries rather than relying solely on native Jewish troops.
- **Religious Conflict:** He destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, deepening the historical animosity between Jews and Samaritans.

- **Forced Conversions:** Hyrcanus forced the Idumeans to convert to Judaism on threat of death. This is noted for its historical irony, as the Hasmonean revolt originally began as a protest against forced religious adoption.
- **Tension with Pharisees:** Late in his reign, a rift formed between Hyrcanus and the Pharisees when they challenged his legitimacy as High Priest, demanding he step down because he was not of the Zadokite line.

The Hasmonean Monarchy and Civil Strife (104–67 BC)

The later Hasmonean period saw the formal adoption of the title "King" and a descent into extreme internal violence and moral decline.

Aristobulus I (104–103 BC)

Though his reign lasted only a year, Aristobulus I was the first Hasmonean to declare himself King.

- **Domestic Brutality:** He imprisoned his mother (allowing her to starve to death) and his brothers to secure his throne.
- **Expansion:** He successfully conquered Galilee.
- **Death:** After being tricked into ordering the execution of his brother Antigonus, he died following a period of heavy drinking and remorse.

Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC)

The brother of Aristobulus, Jannaeus presided over the kingdom's greatest territorial expansion but was loathed by many of his subjects.

- **Territorial Reach:** He expanded the kingdom to include Philistia and Iteria, creating a realm nearly as large as the Davidic/Solomonic empires.
- **Conflict with the Pharisees:** Jannaeus was famously unpopular. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the populace pelted him with citrons. In 88 BC, the Pharisees even invited the Seleucid King Demetrius III to intervene against Jannaeus.
- **The Great Crucifixion:** After defeating the Greek-backed rebels, Jannaeus crucified 800 Pharisees in Jerusalem. While they died, he reportedly watched

from a portico while cavorting with concubines, having first slaughtered the victims' families before their eyes.

Alexandra Salome (76–67 BC)

The widow of both Aristobulus and Jannaeus, she took control by popular acclaim upon Jannaeus's death.

- **Reversal of Policies:** Unlike her husband, she favored the Pharisees, granting them public offices and creating what later rabbis considered a "golden age."
- **Stability:** Her reign was characterized by peace, a lack of scandal, and the maintenance of established territories.

Summary of Hasmonean Rulers

Ruler	Dates of Reign	Key Characteristics
Jonathan	161–142 BC	Established the Hasmonean High Priesthood; military governor.
Simon	142–135 BC	Achieved independence and tax exemption; murdered by son-in-law.
John Hyrcanus	135–104 BC	Expanded borders to Idumea/Samaria; used mercenaries; plundered David's tomb.
Aristobulus I	104–103 BC	First Hasmonean King; conquered Galilee; imprisoned his family.
Alexander Jannaeus	103–76 BC	Maximum territorial expansion; brutal repression of Pharisees.
Alexandra Salome	76–67 BC	Queen regnant; period of peace and Pharisaic influence.

The Collapse of the Dynasty

Following the death of Alexandra Salome, the dynasty fell into a terminal struggle between her two sons: **Hyrcanus II** (the High Priest and appointed successor)

and **Aristobulus II** (the military leader). Aristobulus II seized power and forced his brother into exile, initiating a period of conflict that led to the eventual collapse of the Hasmonean line.

Study Guide:

The Hasmonean Dynasty: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides an in-depth review of the Hasmonean Dynasty as outlined in the historical lectures of Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino. It covers the transition from rebellion leaders to Hellenistic-style monarchs, the expansion of Judean territories, and the internal religious and political conflicts that defined this era of Jewish independence.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the historical context provided.

1. How did Jonathan establish his authority in Judea before officially taking control of Jerusalem?
2. What was the religious significance of Alexander Ballas appointing Jonathan as High Priest in 153 BC?
3. How did Simon achieve functional independence for the Jewish people from the Seleucid Empire?
4. Describe the circumstances surrounding the death of Simon in 135 BC.
5. What controversial methods did John Hyrcanus use to fund and build his military?
6. Why was the destruction of the temple on Mount Gerizim a pivotal moment in Jewish-Samaritan relations?

7. What distinguished the reign of Aristobulus I from his Hasmonean predecessors regarding his title and family relations?
 8. Describe the "Citron Incident" involving Alexander Jannaeus and its immediate consequences.
 9. How did the Pharisees attempt to remove Alexander Jannaeus from power in 88 BC?
 10. In what way did the administration of Alexandra Salome differ from that of her husband, Alexander Jannaeus, regarding internal Jewish sects?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. Jonathan established a government center at the city of Mishmash, located outside Jerusalem. While the leadership in Jerusalem at the time remained obscure, the populace favored Jonathan, traveling to Mishmash to receive justice and effectively creating an *in absentia* government.
2. The appointment was a major break from centuries of tradition because the High Priest had historically been drawn from the family of Zadok since the time of Solomon. By accepting the office from a Seleucid ruler, Jonathan ended the Zadokite monopoly, despite the Hasmoneans being a priestly family themselves.
3. Simon formed an alliance with the Seleucid ruler Demetrius II during a period of Syrian civil unrest. In exchange for military support against the general Tryphon, Simon secured an exemption from taxation for Jerusalem, effectively freeing the Jews from the "yoke of the Gentiles."
4. Simon was murdered at a banquet in 135 BC by his own son-in-law, Ptolemy. Ptolemy's motive was to seize control of Jerusalem, which led to a subsequent power struggle eventually won by Simon's son, John Hyrcanus.
5. John Hyrcanus plundered the tomb of King David to obtain riches to rebuild his army after suffering losses to the Greeks. He used this wealth to hire foreign mercenaries, marking a shift from a citizen army fighting for the homeland to a professional force fighting for pay.

6. Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim to assert Judean religious dominance, exacerbating a long-standing "bad blood" between the two groups. This act solidified the deep-seated mutual animosity that persisted into the New Testament era, where Jews and Samaritans refused to have dealings with one another.
7. Aristobulus I was the first of the Hasmoneans to formally declare himself a King. His reign was marked by extreme paranoia; he imprisoned his brothers and allowed his mother to starve to death in prison to prevent any challenges to his throne.
8. During the Feast of Tabernacles, a crowd unhappy with Alexander Jannaeus's perceived immorality pelted him with citrons (fruit) and lulav bushes as he prepared to officiate. Enraged by the insult, Jannaeus ordered his troops to attack the crowd, resulting in the massacre of many Jewish worshippers.
9. The Pharisees cut a deal with the Seleucid king Demetrius III Eucharist, asking him to invade Jerusalem and remove Jannaeus. However, when the Greek troops arrived, the citizens of Jerusalem paradoxically rose to defend Jannaeus to prevent a foreign occupation, successfully repelling the Greek army.
10. Alexandra Salome reversed her husband's hostile policies toward the Pharisees, instead favoring them with public offices and patronage. While this created a "golden age" for the Pharisees, it marginalized the Sadducees, who had been the primary beneficiaries of Jannaeus's administration.

Part III: Suggested Essay Questions

The following questions are designed to encourage deeper analysis of the Hasmonean era. Answers are not provided.

1. **The Shift to Monarchy:** Analyze the transition of the Hasmonean leaders from "leaders of a rebellion" to "Hellenistic Kings." How did this shift affect their legitimacy among the Jewish population?
2. **Religious vs. Political Authority:** Discuss the implications of the Hasmoneans holding both the office of High Priest and the office of

King/Governor. How did this dual role contribute to the internal conflicts with groups like the Pharisees?

3. **Ironies of Sovereignty:** Explore the irony of John Hyrcanus forcing the Idumeans to convert to Judaism on threat of death. How did this mirror the very Hellenizing pressures that sparked the original Maccabean revolt?
4. **The Role of Foreign Diplomacy:** Evaluate how the internal instability of the Seleucid Empire (Syria) facilitated the expansion and survival of the Hasmonean Dynasty.
5. **The Legacy of Women in Power:** Examine the reign of Alexandra Salome. How did her approach to governance and sectarian relations differ from the male Hasmonean rulers, and what was the lasting impact of her "Golden Age"?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Acre	A major Seleucid fortress within the city of Jerusalem that was eventually captured and cleared of Greek troops by Simon.
Alexander Ballas	A contender for the Seleucid throne who appointed Jonathan as High Priest to secure Hasmonean support.
Antigonus	The brother of Aristobulus I; he was the only brother initially left free but was later murdered due to a courtier's trick.
Citron	A fruit used during the Feast of Tabernacles; famously used as a projectile by disgruntled Jews against Alexander Jannaeus.
Great Assembly	A gathering in 140/139 BC where Simon was officially recognized by the Jewish people as their High Priest and leader.
Idumea	A region south of Judea (ancient Edom) conquered by John Hyrcanus, where the inhabitants were forced to convert to Judaism.

Mishmash	The city where Jonathan established a temporary government center and judicial seat while Jerusalem was under uncertain leadership.
Mount Gerizim	The site of the Samaritan temple which was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, deepening the rift between Jews and Samaritans.
Pharisees	A Jewish sect that grew increasingly hostile toward the Hasmonean rulers (particularly Jannaeus) but enjoyed a "golden age" under Alexandra Salome.
Sadducees	A Jewish group often allied with the Hasmonean aristocracy; they lost their public influence during the reign of Alexandra Salome.
Stratigos	A Greek term for a military governor; a title bestowed upon Jonathan by Alexander Ballas.
Tryphon	A Seleucid general who rose to power and eventually captured and executed Jonathan.
Zadokite	The high-priestly lineage descending from the time of Solomon; the Hasmoneans were viewed as usurpers for breaking this line.
