

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 12, The Coming of Rome

Abstract:

This lecture by **Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino** explores the turbulent transition of Judea from **Hasmonean rule** to **Roman occupation**. The narrative follows the power struggle between brothers **Hyrchanus II and Aristobulus II**, whose sibling rivalry eventually invited the intervention of the Roman general **Pompey**. Through the opportunistic maneuvering of **Antipater**, the Romans established a foothold that fundamentally altered the region's political and religious landscape. The text highlights how **Julius Caesar** later designated Judaism as a **protected religion**, even as the rising influence of **Herod the Great** signaled the end of Jewish autonomy. Ultimately, Tomasino reflects on the **Hasmonean dynasty**, concluding that the family gradually abandoned their original ideals to adopt the same **Hellenistic trappings** they once fought against.

Briefing Document:

The Coming of Rome: A Briefing on the Transition of Power in Judea

Executive Summary

The transition of Judea into the Roman sphere of influence was precipitated by a fractured Hasmonean leadership and the opportunistic maneuvers of regional power brokers. The internal rivalry between the brothers Hyrchanus II and Aristobulus II created a power vacuum that invited Roman intervention under General Pompey in 63 BC. This period marked the end of Jewish sovereign independence and the beginning of Judea as a Roman administrative interest.

Key takeaways from this historical period include:

- **The Rise of the Herodian Line:** Antipater, an Idumean convert and governor, leveraged the weakness of Hyrcanus II to position his family—specifically his son Herod—as indispensable allies to Rome.
- **Roman Pragmatism:** Roman involvement in the East was driven by trade interests, the instability of the Seleucid Empire, and the strategic need for a buffer against the Parthian Empire.
- **Legal Protections for Judaism:** Despite political subjugation, Julius Caesar established Judaism as a "protected religion," exempting Jews from the imperial cult.
- **The Hasmonean Decline:** The Hasmonean dynasty, originally founded on anti-Hellenistic zeal, ultimately collapsed due to internal civil war and its own adoption of the very Greek political trappings it once opposed.

The Hasmonean Succession Crisis

The death of Queen Salome triggered a struggle for supremacy between her two sons, representing a clash of personalities and ambitions:

- **Hyrcanus II:** The elder son and designated successor. Characterized as phlegmatic and unambitious, he initially agreed to abdicate the throne and high priesthood in exchange for a pension.
- **Aristobulus II:** The younger, aggressive brother who seized the temple and forced Hyrcanus into retirement.

The Role of Antipater the Idumean

The quiet retirement of Hyrcanus II was interrupted by Antipater, the governor of Idumea. A wealthy and "crafty" convert to Judaism, Antipater viewed Hyrcanus as a political tool.

- **Manipulation:** Antipater persuaded Hyrcanus that Aristobulus intended to assassinate him, convincing the former king to seek reinstatement.
- **Military Escalation:** Antipater bankrolled a mercenary army to besiege Aristobulus in the Jerusalem Temple, leading to a stalemate that only Rome could break.

Roman Intervention and the Siege of Jerusalem (63 BC)

The Roman General Pompey arrived in the East to settle affairs in Pontus and Syria. He viewed the remnants of the Seleucid Empire as a threat to trade and feared an invasion by the Parthian Empire.

Pompey's Decision

Both Hyrcanus and Aristobulus appealed to Pompey for support. When Aristobulus grew impatient and began fortifying Jerusalem, Pompey viewed the act as a provocation and laid siege to the city.

- **The Siege:** The siege lasted three months. In 63 BC, on the Day of Atonement, Roman troops breached the temple gates.
- **Sacrilege in the Holy of Holies:** Pompey insisted on entering the Holy of Holies to satisfy his curiosity about Jewish worship. He reported finding "nothing" inside, though he notably spared the temple from further looting and offered sacrifices to show respect for the religion.
- **Political Restructuring:** Pompey restored Hyrcanus II to the high priesthood but stripped him of civil authority. Aristobulus and his sons were taken to Rome as captives.

Roman Administrative Reforms

Following Pompey's departure, the administration of Judea was overseen by Roman officers, most notably **Gabinius**, and the strategist Antipater.

The Reforms of Gabinius

To minimize the threat of unified Jewish resistance, the Romans reorganized the territory:

- **Administrative Districts:** Judea was divided into five distinct administrative districts, each governed by a local council of nobles.

- **Loss of Territory:** Judea was forced to release Greek-inhabited territories previously conquered by the Hasmoneans. This led to a refugee crisis as Jews from those areas flooded into Jerusalem.
- **Increased Taxation:** Taxes were raised significantly to fund the Roman military presence and the protection of the province.

The Rise of Julius Caesar and the Herodian Family

The Roman Civil Wars between Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Crassus (the First Triumvirate) directly impacted Judean politics.

Antipater's Gambit in Egypt

When Julius Caesar was besieged in Alexandria during the Egyptian civil war between Cleopatra VII and Ptolemy, Antipater intervened. He led Jewish and mercenary troops to extricate Caesar from the palace.

Rewards of Loyalty

In gratitude for his military assistance, Caesar granted significant concessions:

- **Antipater:** Named **Procurator of Judea**, effectively the chief administrator.
- **Hyrcanus II:** Granted the title of **Ethnarch**, a civil leadership role.
- **Phasael and Herod:** Antipater's sons were appointed as governors. Phasael took Jerusalem, and Herod took Galilee.

The Character of Young Herod

Herod's tenure as Governor of Galilee revealed a ruthless nature. After he violently suppressed a riot, the Sanhedrin summoned him to answer for the deaths. Herod appeared before the council backed by his army, nearly executing the entire Sanhedrin before his father, Antipater, intervened to de-escalate the situation.

The Legal Status of Judaism

A pivotal development of the Caesarian era was the formal recognition of Judaism. Julius Caesar passed laws establishing Judaism as a **protected religion** within the Roman Empire.

Feature	Roman Requirement	Jewish Exemption/Adjustment
Imperial Cult	Worship of the Emperor as a god.	Exempted from worshipping the Emperor.
Religious Freedom	Limited for most provinces.	Could not be forced to convert to Hellenism.
Civic Loyalty	Sacrifices to Caesar.	Required to offer a daily sacrifice to the Lord <i>for</i> the benefit of the Emperor.

The Parthian Invasion and the End of Hasmonean Rule

In the wake of Julius Caesar's assassination (44 BC), Rome descended into further civil war between Mark Antony and Cassius.

- **Antipater's Death:** In 43 BC, Antipater was poisoned. Herod responded by assassinating the suspected killers, a move the Roman governor condoned.
- **The Parthian Coup (40 BC):** Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus II, allied with the Parthian Empire to reclaim the throne.
 - **Hyrcanus II Deposed:** The Parthians cut off Hyrcanus's ears, a physical blemish that biblically disqualified him from serving as High Priest.
 - **Death of Phasaël:** Captured during the invasion, Phasaël committed suicide to avoid torture.
 - **Herod's Flight:** Herod fled to Egypt and then to Rome to seek support from Mark Antony.

Historical Assessment: The Hasmonean Paradox

The Hasmonean dynasty, which began as a movement to preserve Jewish tradition against Greek influence, ended as a cautionary tale of political assimilation.

- **Sacrifice of Tradition:** In their pursuit of power, the Hasmoneans abandoned the Zadokite line of priests and the Davidic line of kingship, and they ignored Sabbath restrictions during warfare.
- **Cultural Assimilation:** Despite their origins, later Hasmonean rulers adopted Greek names and Hellenistic trappings of power.
- **The "Animal Farm" Analogy:** Historians note the irony of the Hasmoneans becoming indistinguishable from the Hellenistic tyrants they originally overthrew. As noted in the analysis, by the end of their era, it was "impossible to say which was which" between the Jewish rulers and the Greek-influenced world they had entered.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Coming of Rome and the Transition of Judean Power

This study guide examines the historical period during which Rome established control over Judea, the internal struggles of the Hasmonean dynasty, and the rise of the Idumean influence under Antipater and his son, Herod.

Part I: Short Answer Quiz

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

1. What was the primary cause of the initial struggle for supremacy between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II?
2. Who was Antipater, and how did he manipulate Hyrcanus II for his own gain?
3. What practical reasons drove the Roman General Pompey to annex Syria and intervene in Judean affairs?

4. Describe the events surrounding Pompey's breach of the Jerusalem Temple in 63 BC.
 5. How did the legal status of Sicily as Rome's first "province" differ from the status of cities on the Italian peninsula?
 6. What were the "reforms of Gabinius," and how did they affect Judean governance?
 7. Explain the circumstances under which Antipater and Jewish troops assisted Julius Caesar in Egypt.
 8. What specific legal protections did Julius Caesar grant to the Jewish religion within the Roman Empire?
 9. How did the Parthian invasion of 40 BC lead to the physical disqualification of Hyrcanus II from the high priesthood?
 10. In what ways did the later Hasmonean rulers mirror the "pigs" in the analogy of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. The struggle was a succession crisis following the deathbed of Queen Salome, who named the elder son Hyrcanus II as her successor. Though the phlegmatic Hyrcanus initially agreed to retire for a pension, the aggressive younger brother Aristobulus II seized power, leading to a military standoff bankrolled by outside interests.
2. Antipater was the wealthy and crafty governor of Idumea, a convert to Judaism whose family had been forced to convert generations prior. He persuaded Hyrcanus II that Aristobulus II intended to assassinate him, thereby convincing Hyrcanus to hire mercenaries and attempt to retake the throne, which allowed Antipater to become the "power behind the throne."
3. Rome viewed the internal chaos of the Seleucid Empire in Syria as a threat to their business interests and trade stability. Furthermore, they feared that a weakened Syria might be conquered by the powerful Parthian Empire, which Rome considered a significant eastern threat.

4. After a three-month siege, Pompey's troops breached the temple gates on the Day of Atonement, killing priests who refused to stop their sacrifices at the altars. Pompey entered the Holy of Holies to satisfy his curiosity about the Jewish God, though he later showed respect by offering sacrifices and restoring Hyrcanus II to the priesthood.
 5. While cities on the Italian peninsula were granted Roman citizenship and voting rights, Sicily was designated as a province governed by military leadership. Residents of provinces did not have the rights of citizens and were required to pay taxes to Rome in exchange for protection and order.
 6. Following revolts by the sons of Aristobulus II, the Roman general Gabinius stripped Hyrcanus II of his civil authority, leaving him only as high priest. He then divided the Judean lands into five administrative districts, each governed by a local council of nobles.
 7. Julius Caesar became trapped in a palace in Alexandria while intervening in a civil war between Cleopatra VII and her brother Ptolemy. Antipater saw a political opportunity and led an army of Jewish troops and mercenaries to Egypt to extricate Caesar from the siege.
 8. Caesar passed laws making Judaism a "protected religion," exempting Jews from the requirement to worship the Roman Emperor or participate in the royal cult. Instead, Jews were permitted to offer a daily sacrifice to their own God for the benefit of the emperor's well-being.
 9. The Parthians, allied with Aristobulus's son Antigonus, overran Palestine and captured Hyrcanus II. They cut off his ears, as Jewish law mandated that the high priest must be without physical blemish, thereby ensuring he could never legally hold the office again.
 10. Like the pigs in the novel who eventually became indistinguishable from the humans they once overthrew, the Hasmoneans transitioned from religious revolutionaries to Hellenized tyrants. They eventually adopted Greek names, took the title of "king" in defiance of Davidic tradition, and abandoned the Zadokite line of priesthood.
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Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Architecture of Influence:** Analyze the rise of Antipater and the Idumean line. How did Antipater use the civil war between the Hasmonean brothers to position his family as the indispensable agents of Roman power in Judea?
2. **Roman Pragmatism vs. Local Autonomy:** Discuss the evolution of Roman involvement in Judea from Pompey to Mark Antony. To what extent was Roman policy driven by internal Roman politics (such as the Triumvirates and Civil Wars) rather than the needs of the Judean people?
3. **The Erosion of Tradition:** Examine the ways in which the later Hasmonean rulers abandoned the biblical and ancestral traditions they originally fought to protect. Focus on their adoption of kingship, the high priesthood, and Hellenistic culture.
4. **Strategic Alliances and the Jewish Diaspora:** During the rescue of Julius Caesar in Egypt, the text notes the participation of Jewish troops and the eventual protection of Judaism across the empire. Evaluate the impact of these international political maneuvers on the status of Jews living outside of Jerusalem.
5. **The Role of Personal Ambition:** Compare and contrast the characters of Hyrcanus II, Aristobulus II, and Herod. How did their individual personalities and ambitions shape the political landscape of first-century BC Judea?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **4QMMT:** A specific text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that expresses a strict Jewish view against accepting sacrifices from Gentiles, equating them to sacrifices to demons.
- **Antigonus:** The son of Aristobulus II who allied with the Parthians to briefly reclaim the Judean throne and high priesthood from 40 to 37 BC.

- **Antipater:** The Idumean governor and father of Herod the Great; a crafty politician who leveraged Roman connections to become the procurator of Judea.
- **Aristobulus II:** The younger, aggressive son of Salome who usurped the throne from his brother Hyrcanus II, leading to Roman intervention.
- **Day of Atonement:** The Jewish holy day on which Pompey's forces breached the Temple of Jerusalem in 63 BC.
- **Ethnarch:** A civil title granted to Hyrcanus II by Julius Caesar; while its specific significance shifted, it generally denoted a leader of an ethnic group or region.
- **First Triumvirate:** A political alliance between three powerful Roman generals: Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Crassus.
- **Gabinus:** A Roman general and politician who instituted administrative reforms in Judea, dividing the territory into five districts.
- **Hasmoneans:** The ruling dynasty of Judea established by the Maccabees; the text details their eventual decline and Hellenization.
- **Herod:** The son of Antipater and governor of Galilee who demonstrated a ruthless and ambitious personality early in his career by suppressing riots and defying the Sanhedrin.
- **Holy of Holies:** The most sacred inner sanctum of the Jewish Temple, which Pompey famously entered to see what was inside.
- **Hyrcanus II:** The elder son of Salome and high priest; described as "phlegmatic" and easily manipulated by Antipater and the Romans.
- **Idumea:** A region south of Judea whose population had been forcibly converted to Judaism; the ancestral home of Antipater and Herod.
- **Parthia:** A powerful empire to the east of Rome that was a constant source of fear for the Romans and an occasional ally to Hasmonean rebels like Antigonus.
- **Phlegmatic:** A personality trait used to describe Hyrcanus II, meaning calm, unemotional, and lacking in ambition.

- **Pompey:** The Roman general who annexed Syria and brought Judea under Roman control in 63 BC.
- **Procurator:** A military and administrative title granted to Antipater by Julius Caesar, signifying a high level of Roman trust and authority.
- **Province:** A Roman administrative territory (like Sicily or Syria) governed by military leadership and subject to taxation, lacking the full rights of Roman citizenship.
- **Royal Cult of Rome:** The practice of worshipping the spirit of Rome or the Emperor at central altars; Jews were granted a unique exemption from this practice.
- **Sanhedrin:** The Jewish judicial and administrative body that attempted to try Herod for his ruthless actions in Galilee.
- **Zadokite:** The traditional line of high priests descending from Zadok; a tradition abandoned by the Hasmoneans when they took the high priesthood for themselves.