

## THE CHANGE TO HELLENISM

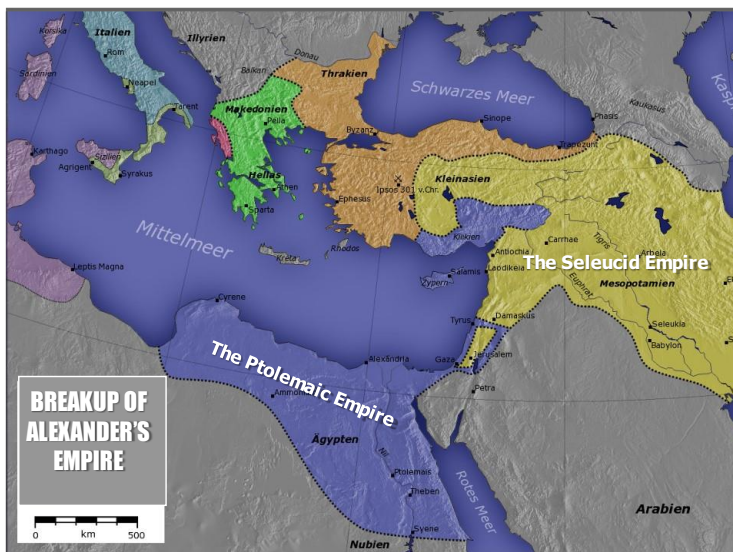
The center of power in the ancient Near East was about to change. For centuries, the empire builders came from southwest Mesopotamia and even farther east, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, however, a shift would come quickly and unexpectedly, with the center of power now moving from Mesopotamia in the east to the Mediterranean west. The Persians had exhausted themselves trying to conquer Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Although Persia was at the peak of its strength, the defense mounted by the Greeks defending their homeland against Persian invasion was successful. The Persians had failed in their bid to overwhelm Greece, and the Peace of Callias in 449 BC ended the hostilities for the time being. Within a century it would be Greece invading Persia, this time under the leadership of Alexander of Macedon. In a series of conquests from 336-323 BC, Alexander accomplished a chain of victories climaxing in the defeat of Darius III in the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC. Subsequently, Anatolia, Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan, and India were all subsumed into Alexander's territories before his death in Babylon in 323 BC at the young age of 32.



*Alexander the Great*

### The Vision of Daniel (Da. 8)

The Book of Daniel recounts a vision of a ram and a goat. It is typical of the apocalyptic genre for kingdoms to be symbolized by animals and horns to represent political powers. In this vision,



Daniel saw the goat attack the ram and destroy it. The vision, as is explained later (Da. 8:20-21), concerned the fall of Persia to Alexander the Great. Alexander died prematurely at age 32, and he left no clear provisions for succession. This, in turn, led to a struggle between his generals who, in the end, pieced up his kingdom into four large blocks, again described in Daniel's vision (Da. 8:8b). While each section had its

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own political identity, all of them were dedicated to the belief that Greek ideals were superior and all the world should adopt Hellenistic humanism as the prevailing culture, including reason, the pursuit of knowledge, the arts, civic responsibility, and bodily development.

Of the four great sections of the empire, two, in particular, would emerge with huge consequences for the land of Israel, since geographically Israel lay between them both. Seleucus and his successors in Babylon, and Ptolemy and his successors in Egypt, both coveted Israel, the land bridge between three continents with control of the major trade routes between them.

Intrigue and war would characterize the relationship between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies for the next century and more. This conflict is captured in the vision of Daniel 11:2-35. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that one can line up the vision in Daniel with *Cambridge Ancient History* and follow it virtually blow by blow.<sup>1</sup> In the end, the Seleucids gained control of Israel and Jerusalem, which in turn prepared the way for the most intense persecution of Jews until that time.



*Stela publicly announcing the right of the Seleucid king to the treasuries of local sanctuaries, like the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple (Israel Museum)*

### The Maccabean Revolt

While there is a complicated back story to the Maccabean Revolt, surely one early incident demonstrates the intent of the Seleucid kings. In 178 BC, Seleucus IV sent out what the Book of Daniel calls a “tax collector” (Da. 11:20a), a man named Heliodorus who attempted to seize the temple treasury (2 Macc. 3). A stela records official correspondences between Seleucus, Heliodoros and two lower royal officials. An inscription—what amounts to a manifesto—gave to Seleucus a free hand to interfere in the affairs and religious treasuries of the area, including the Jerusalem temple. This proclamation would be the beginning of a policy of religious exploitation, and within a decade it would lead to open Jewish rebellion.

As it turned out, Heliodorus was unable to confiscate the temple treasury. According to 2 Maccabees 3, when the Jews prayed for relief, God sent a heavenly horseman along with two angels, and they flogged Heliodorus, badly

<sup>1</sup> The general history of the Ptolemies and Seleucids can be followed in W. Tarn, “The Struggle of Egypt Against Syria and Macedonia,” and M. Rostovtzeff, “Syria and the East,” *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Hellenistic Monarchies and the Rise of Rome*, eds. S. Cook, et al. (rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975), VII.155-196, 699-731. (See especially the genealogical Table IV at the end of the volume for the Seleucid dynasty.)

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*Archaeologists have uncovered a Greek fortress in Jerusalem built by Antiochus IV to control access to the Temple Mount. Called the Acra, this fortress lay between the Temple Mount to the north and the Palestinian village of Silwan to the south. The ruins are the first solid evidence of Hellenistic culture in Jerusalem. While the fortress was known to scholars from texts (Josephus, *Antiquities* 12:252-253), it was only unearthed in 2014.*

forced Hellenization, while others continued to resist (Da. 11:32).

In 169/8 BC Antiochus' army invaded Jerusalem, massacred many of its residents, and desecrated the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple. He set up an altar to Zeus in the holy place (what Daniel would call the "abomination of desolation," Da. 11:31), offered a pig on the great altar, and imposed harsh bans on the traditional observances of Judaism, forbidding circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the daily sacrifice (1 Macc. 1:41-51). He seized Torah scrolls and burned them (1 Macc. 1:56). 2 Maccabees, in particular, describes a horrific persecution. Two women, who had circumcised their sons, were publicly paraded through the streets with their babies' corpses hung about their necks and then hurled over the city wall. Others, trying to keep the Sabbath, were burned to death. One of the teachers of the Torah, an elderly man of 90, had his mouth forced open and pork

wounding him so that he was carried away on a stretcher and later begged forgiveness, even offering sacrifices to God.

The successor to Seleucus IV was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and he would extend the policy of religious exploitation to its full extent. He built a gymnasium just outside the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, where all the performances were conducted naked (something strictly forbidden in Jewish culture), requiring Jews to enter it in violation of their own moral code. Altars to Greek gods were set up in many villages, and all Jews were required to pray to them or face a death sentence. Some Jews submitted to this

### **HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF 1 AND 2 MACCABEES AND JOSEPHUS**

*Since our primary sources of information about the Maccabean Revolt are to be found in 1 and 2 Maccabees and Flavius Josephus, the question naturally arises as to their historical reliability. There is general agreement that 1 Maccabees is highly trustworthy historically. 2 Maccabees doesn't get quite so high marks, but since it seems to be an independent account of the same events, differences may be more cosmetic than substantial. In any case, having two independent detailed accounts of the same history is quite rare. Josephus, whose account of the Maccabean Period is dependent upon pre-existing traditions, can never be better than his sources, but given that, he is considered to be fairly reliable as well.*



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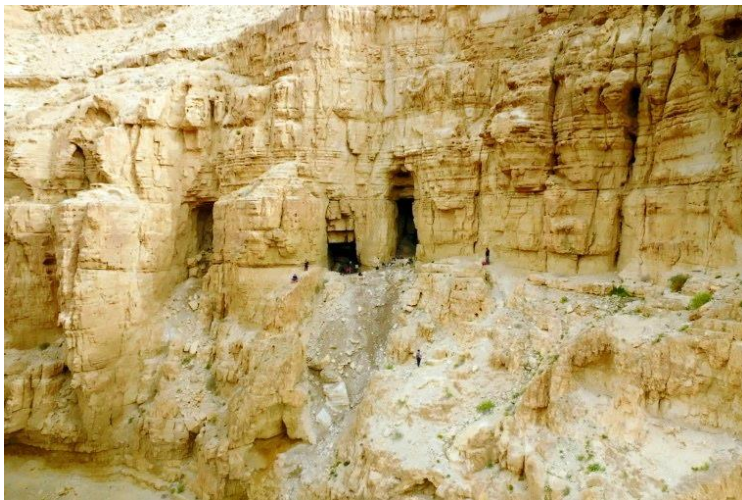
forced down his gullet (2 Macc. 6). Seven brothers were tortured with whips and scourges, they had their tongues cut out, their heads scalped, were emasculated, and finally fried in a metal pan while their mother was forced to watch (2 Macc. 7).

By 168/7 BC, the Jews had had enough. Under the leadership of Mattathias, a priest in Modi'in (a village about 20 miles north of Jerusalem), he and his five sons rallied about 6000 guerilla fighters to begin attacking the Seleucid Greeks in the northern villages of Judea. They tore down pagan altars as they went. When Mattathias died in 166 BC, he left the guerilla army in charge of his son Judas, who promptly defeated the Seleucid soldiers sent out to apprehend him. Though severely outnumbered, Judas was the better tactician, and with a prayer to God for victory, he devastated Antiochus' army, driving the Seleucids from Jerusalem (1 Macc. 3-4).

### The Cleansing of the Temple

When Judas and his brothers entered Jerusalem and saw the defilement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, they were overwhelmed with grief (1 Macc. 4:36-40). After much work of reconstruction, including the rebuilding of the great altar, on December 25, 165 BC (some scholars say 164 BC), they rededicated the temple to God, continuing their celebration for eight days during which the oil in the menorah burned without being replenished for the whole period. In memory of this miracle of the oil, Jews ever since have celebrated the Festival of Lights, called Hanukkah (= dedication). They light a candle in a menorah with nine cups, one for each of the eight evenings and the ninth symbolizing Judaism as light to the world.

It is of interest to Christians that Christ attended the celebration of Hanukkah in Jerusalem during his public ministry (Jn. 10:22-24).



*The Muraba'at cave where the coins were discovered.*



*The coin cache (IAA)*

In 2022, a trove of silver coins was discovered in a cave during an archaeological excavation in the Judean desert. Scholars from the Israel Antiquities Authority believe that this treasure was hidden by a refugee fleeing the tumult of the Maccabean War, the “first evidence in the Judean Desert for the Maccabean revolt against the Greek Seleucid kingdom” (IAA).