

## THE HASMONEANS AND THE ROMANS

The Jewish history in Palestine after the Maccabean Revolt falls into two blocks, the period of independence and the Roman Period.

### The Hasmoneans

After the death of Judas Maccabeus, his brothers Jonathan and Simon carried on the conflict with the Seleucids, eventually emerging victorious and achieving a state of semi-independence that would last about a century. Simon assumed leadership in 142 BC, receiving the titles of High Priest and Ethnarch, and he and his descendants were confirmed by the Jewish community as dynastic leaders “until there should arise a faithful prophet” (1 Macc. 14:41). After capturing the citadel of Acra in 141 BC, Simon’s dynasty was eventually recognized by the Roman Senate in 139



*Coin of John Hyrcanus I with the Hebrew inscription “Yohohanan the High Priest and the Council of the Jews”*

BC. The Hasmoneans (“Hasmon” is an ancestral family name) under the leadership of John Hyrcanus I, one of Simon’s sons, expanded political control to include Samaria and Idumea (Edom). Aristobulus, son of John Hyrcanus, conquered the area of Galilee. Alexander Jannaeus, another son, conquered Iturea (the area northeast of Galilee). By 100 BC, Judea included the entire Palestinian area from Galilee in the north to the Negev in the south. The Hasmoneans continued to push their conquests along the coastlands and in the



*In the excavations of the Samaritan temple destroyed by John Hyrcanus I, archaeologists uncovered this monumental stairway leading to the platform where the temple was located.*

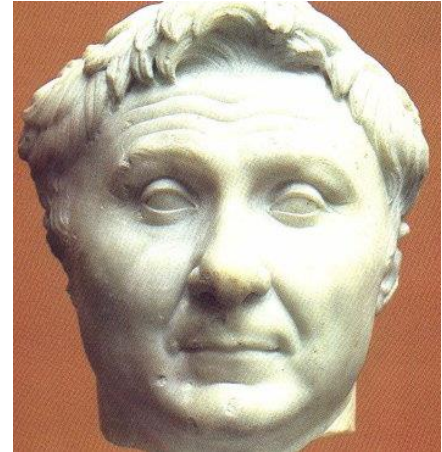
Transjordan, which in turn left them very wealthy from the accumulated plunder.

One event in particular would leave a deep and lasting bitterness between Samaritans and Jews. In 111-110 BC, John Hyrcanus I took an army northward and put Samaria to a year-long siege. After the city collapsed, he destroyed it, consigning its inhabitants to slavery and destroying the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim.

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After John Hyrcanus' death in 104 BC, one of his sons, Aristobulus I, seized the throne, jailing both his mother and his brothers to secure his authority. He took to himself the title of "king," but died only a year later. Alexander Jannaeus, one of his brothers now released from prison, assumed rulership for the next quarter century, and when he died, his wife, Salome Alexandra, assumed power for the next decade, the first ruling queen in Jerusalem since Athalia, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Kg. 11). She appointed her son, John Hyrcanus II, to be the High Priest and her successor. At her death, a civil war over throne succession erupted between yet another brother, Aristobulus II, and Antipater, an Idumean with designs on controlling Judea.

The in-fighting over succession among the Hasmoneans provided the Romans the opportunity to make the Jewish kingdom a client of Rome. Pompey, the Roman general, sacked Jerusalem in 63 BC, installing John Hyrcanus II as a client administrator (but denying him the title of "king"). Most of the outlying territories that had been annexed by the Hasmoneans were now awarded to other local kingdoms.



*Pompey the Great (106-48 BC)*  
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek,

### Rome and the Herods

The political intrigue that attended the Hasmoneans was duplicated in Rome itself, with Pompey and Julius contending for control of the empire in the Roman civil war. Julius, who was supported by Hyrcanus II and Antipater, emerged triumphant, and he restored Hyrcanus II to the priesthood and appointed Antipater as the procurator of Judea. Antipater, in turn, appointed his sons to office, Phasael as the Governor of Jerusalem and Herod as the Governor of Galilee. To complicate things further, Julius was assassinated in 44 BC (an event made doubly famous in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*), leaving considerable turbulence and uncertainty. In the power vacuum, the Parthians awarded Antigonus, a son of Aristobulus II, control of Jerusalem, while Herod fled to Rome. In 40 BC Herod was unexpectedly nominated by the Senate as the King of Judea (with the proviso that he would expel Antigonus). Herod promptly returned to Jerusalem, putting the city to siege, and with the help of the Roman army captured it. Marc Antony had Antigonus executed, and Herod emerged as the "King of the Jews," a client king of Rome.

Herod's kingship was not warmly received by his constituents, no doubt partly due to the fact that while his mother was Jewish, his father was an Edomite (though, to be fair, Herod was reared as a Jew). Still, though he publicly identified himself as Jewish, Herod's decadent lifestyle was repudiated by the Jews generally, especially those who were Torah-observant. As a vassal of Rome constantly currying Roman favor, Herod was able to maintain his position until his death in 4 BC.

Herod is justly famous for his building projects, the most ambitious being the expansion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in Jerusalem, a project that began in 19 BC (and may not have been entirely completed until several years after his death). The quarried stones with which he enlarged the temple mount



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*Southern wall of the expanded temple, the lower courses laid by Herod (and upper courses from the later Islamic era)*



*Distinctive Herodian masonry at the western wall in Jerusalem.*

are the largest in antiquity, some measuring as long as 39' and weighing over 100 tons. The great outer court was enlarged to approximately 35 acres. In addition, he built a number of fortresses, various temples in honor of Caesar Augustus, and an artificial harbor at Caesarea Maritima. In his old age, he became increasingly vicious, mentally unstable, and incessantly suspicious of his own family members. He ended up

murdering Mariamne, one of his wives, along with her mother, as well as three of his own sons. He altered his will repeatedly. It should come as no surprise that when eastern magi showed up in Jerusalem wanting to know who was born king of the Jews, Herod slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem to eliminate any claimants to his throne (Mt. 2:16-18). In his final testament, subject to Augustus' approval, he left his realm to three remaining sons, Herod Archelaus over Judea, Samaria and Idumea; Herod Philip over Trachonitus; and Herod Antipas over Galilee and Perea.

### Roman Occupation

Life for the Jews under Roman occupied Palestine meant ever-present soldiers and implements of pagan culture. Soldiers were needed to minimize the threat of banditry, Arab desert raiders, Parthian invasion, and Jewish patriotism. This meant the building of small Roman fortifications along the various roads of Judea as well as a prominent presence in Jerusalem at the annual festivals, where crowds of pilgrims were in attendance. The Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem just to

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the north of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple precincts, a citadel built by Herod the Great and named for his patron, Marc Antony, housed a garrison of soldiers, which served as a sort of local police force. Soldiers in occupied Palestine came in three types, legionaries (Roman citizens whose allegiance was to the emperor and whatever general they served), auxiliaries (non-citizens making up the infantry and cavalry), and local royal forces under the authority of client kings, such as, the Herods. The organization of the units, if at full strength, consisted of the *legio* (ten *cohors* of six *centuries* of 100 soldiers each), i.e., about 6000. During the reign of Augustus, at the time when Jesus was born, three legions were assigned to Syria-Palestina, and later, at the time of Jesus' ministry, four were assigned under Tiberius. No doubt there were abuses of power from time-to-time, and preachers like John the Baptist would admonish soldiers to stop their false accusations and extortions (Lk. 3:14).

The administration of Judea was carried out by a series of Roman Legates, Prefects, and Procurators, along with client kings. While the Roman governors lived in Caesarea Maritima on the coast, they stayed at Herod's Palace when in Jerusalem.

### Taxation

Taxation was inevitably a part of being a vassal to Rome. One of the primary responsibilities of client kings was to make sure revenues were incoming for the empire, and to that end, censuses were periodically conducted in order to ensure that everyone was on the tax roll. While we don't know many details about taxation during Herod the Great's rule, his lavish building projects must have consumed huge amounts of revenue. The tax burden was significant enough that when he died and Archelaus came to power in Jerusalem, Josephus records that the people asked for relief (*Antiquities* 17.200-5; *Wars* 2.4). When Archelaus was deposed in AD 6, which in turn meant a more direct rule by Rome, one of the first events was a census, which was the tipping point for the rebellion of Judas the Galilean. Consequently, there was a head tax, a land tax, a transportation tax, and an inheritance tax, and this doesn't count religious taxes for the temple.

### The Rise of Zealotry

The memory of Judas Maccabeus and his striking military successes a century earlier did not fade. Indeed, it underlay a movement of patriotic zealotry, this time directed not at the Greeks but at the occupying Romans. Believing God to be the only legitimate ruler, Judas the Galilean began an armed resistance movement against the Romans in AD 6, and though he was captured and executed, the movement would continue for several decades, culminating in the 1<sup>st</sup> Jewish revolt in AD 66. The decades between the time of Judas and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jewish Revolt were characterized by a variety of disturbances and uprisings, at least some of which were regarded as messianic and all of which were put down by violence, one way or another.

Some leaders of zealotry are mentioned briefly in the New Testament, such as Judas and Theudas (Ac. 5:36-37). Barabbas, who was released instead of Jesus, was likely a zealot, and at least one of Jesus' disciples, Simon, was a zealot as well (Mk. 3:18).