

Old Testament History
by
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Part Eight
Between the Testaments:
The Hellenistic Period

CHAPTER 87

The Jews Under the Seleucids

1. Antiochus III and the Conquest of Palestine

Antiochus III was only eighteen years of age when he came to the throne of Syria in 223 B.C. He had had experience in government, however, having served as ruler of Babylonia under his brother Seleucus III.

After crushing a revolt in the eastern part of his empire, Antiochus attempted to invade Coele-Syria in the summer of 221 B.C. He got as far as the fortresses of the Marsyas valley in Lebanon, but was forced to withdraw by Theodotus, the commander-in-chief of the Egyptian forces in Syria.

A second invasion was attempted in 219 B.C. with greater success. Seleucia in Pieria fell before Antiochus, and Theodotus transferred his loyalty from Ptolemy Philopater to Antiochus and delivered the cities of Ptolemais (Acre) and Tyre to the Syrians. Nicolaus, an Egyptian general, delayed Antiochus at the fortress of Dora, south of Mt. Carmel. When a rumor reached him that a strong Egyptian army was awaiting him at Pelusium, Antiochus accepted a truce and withdrew to Seleucia, leaving Theodotus in charge of the conquered territory. Sosibius, the Egyptian commander-in-chief, reorganized his army for a showdown.

Early in 218 B.C. Nicolaus marched with an Egyptian army to the Lebanon to meet the Syrians. Polybius describes the encounter:

When Theodotus had forced back the enemy at the foot of the mountain, and then charged from the higher ground, all those who were with Nicolaus turned and fled precipitately. About two thousand of them fell during the flight, and a not less number were captured; all the rest retreated on Zidon.¹

1 Polybius, *Histories*, v, 69.

Antiochus pursued the retreating army of Nicolaus down the Phoenician coast. Leaving Nicolaus in Zidon, Antiochus took Tyre and Ptolemais, then turned inland and came to Philoteria (Tiberias) on the Sea of Galilee. He crossed the Jordan taking the strong Trans-Jordanian cities, including Gadara, and Philadelphia (Rabbath-Ammon). He returned to winter at Ptolemais.

In the spring of 217 B.C. Antiochus continued his conquests, conquering Philistia, including Gaza, before reaching the frontier town of Raphia. An Egyptian army under the personal command of Ptolemy Philopater met the Syrians south of Raphia. Here the armies of Antiochus met a disastrous defeat. Polybius says that Ptolemy "remained three months in Syria and Phoenicia setting things in order in the cities."²

The third book of Maccabees tells how Ptolemy visited the cities of Syria after his victory at Raphia. The Jews are alleged to have sent a group of elders to congratulate him on his victory. Ptolemy is reputed to have insisted on entering the Holy of Holies, only to flee in confusion and terror when he had gotten as far as the Holy Place (III Maccabees 1:9-11, 24). The story cannot be regarded as historical. It is significant that nothing is said of the incident in Daniel II, which describes the incident at Raphia in considerable detail.

For a number of years Antiochus was busy in the East, but he never gave up his plans for annexing Coele-Syria to his domains. At the death of Ptolemy IV, Philopater, in 203 B.C., Egypt was rent with turmoil and rebellion. In the spring of 202 B.C. Antiochus launched an attack which accomplished little or nothing. The following spring another attack was launched, with bitter fighting in the Palestinian cities, including Gaza. Scopas, the Egyptian general, pushed the Syrians back to the sources of the Jordan during the winter of 201-200 B.C.

The decisive Syrian victory came at the Battle of Panion, near the sources of the Jordan. Scopas fled to Zidon where he was besieged by land and sea. In the spring of 198 B.C. Scopas was forced to surrender, leaving the whole of Syria in the hands of Antiochus. In passing through his newly acquired territories, Antiochus came to Jerusalem where, according to Josephus, the inhabitants gave him a cordial welcome.

When the Carthaginian, Hannibal, was defeated by the Romans at Zama (202 B.C.), bringing to an end the Second Punic War, he fled eastward and took refuge in the court of Antiochus. Still interested in stirring up trouble for Rome, he encouraged Antiochus to invade Greece. Rome thereupon declared war on Antiochus.

The Roman forces moved into Greece, defeated Antiochus, and forced him to retreat to Asia Minor. There at Magnesia, between Sardis and Smyrna, the Romans under Cornelius

² Polybius, *Histories*, v, 86, 87.

Scipio defeated Antiochus (190 B.C.). He had to pay an enormous indemnity, surrender his war elephants and his navy. The younger son of Antiochus the Great, later to rule as Antiochus Epiphanes, was taken to Rome as a hostage for the payment of the indemnity. His twelve years in Rome gave him a healthy respect for Roman power and Roman ways of doing things.

2. Antiochus Epiphanes and the Persecution of the Jews

The fall of Palestine into Syrian hands, following the victory of Antiochus the Great as Panion (198 B.C.), ushered in a new era of Jewish history. The rule of the Ptolemies had been tolerant. The Seleucids determined to force the Jews to accept Hellenism.

Antiochus IV bore the surname Epiphanes ("the illustrious," almost a title of deity). The Jews, masters of innuendo, gave him the nickname, Epimanes ("the madman"). He was born in Athens, and had served as chief magistrate of the city whose culture was the epitome of everything Greek. Antiochus spent twelve years as a hostage in Rome, where he learned to respect the new power which was about to conquer the world. With a sense of mission coupled with political astuteness, Antiochus determined "to civilize," which meant "to Hellenize," the domain over which he ruled.

It is possible to misrepresent Antiochus. He was not a foreigner intent on enslaving a persecuted minority group. On the contrary, a sizable number of Jews were impressed with the possibilities of greater conformity to the Hellenistic manners and customs. Antiochus used this inner dissension among the Jews, coupled with his own need of funds, to interfere in the internal affairs of Judea.

In the early days of the reign of Antiochus IV, Jerusalem was ruled by the High Priest, Onias III, a descendant of Simon the Just, and a strictly orthodox Jew. The Jews who looked favorably on Greek culture opposed Onias and espoused the cause of his brother, Jason. By promising larger tribute to Antiochus, Jason succeeded in having himself appointed High Priest.

To Antiochus, the high priesthood was a political office. As Syrian king, he would have the right to appoint whomever he chose. To the pious Jews, however, the priesthood was of divine origin, and its sale to the highest bidder was looked upon as a sin against God. Since the priesthood involved both civil and religious functions, both viewpoints would appear valid to their respective adherents.

Jason encouraged the Hellenists who had sought his election. A gymnasium was built in Jerusalem. There Jewish lads exercised in the nude in accord with Greek custom. Greek names were adopted in place of the more pious-sounding Jewish names. Hebrew orthodoxy was looked upon as obscurantist and obsolete. Antiochus visited Jerusalem in 179 B.C. He showed his approval of the new order of things by authorizing the citizens to

call themselves "Antiochites" after their sovereign.

With the developing tide of Hellenism, however, there developed a resistance movement. The Hasidim (the "pious") followed the paths of their fathers and attempted a defense of orthodox Jewish institutions.

Antiochus, who was having trouble elsewhere in his empire, looked upon Jewish orthodoxy as a divisive force. Aiming at a united Hellenistic empire, he awaited an opportunity to implement his program.

Such an opportunity came when a dispute arose between Jason and one of his closest associates. Menelaus was of the tribe of Benjamin. As such, he had no right to the priestly office. Nevertheless, by offering higher tribute to Antiochus than that paid by Jason, he was nominated to the office of High Priest. A Syrian garrison was stationed in the citadel in Jerusalem to insure order and respect for the new High Priest.

If the Hasidim were scandalized when Jason replaced his brother Onias, they were infuriated when a Benjamite, who was a thoroughgoing Hellenist, was installed by force of Syrian arms.

The deposed Jason did not quietly acquiesce in the change. Unable, for the time being, to resist the forces of Antiochus, he awaited an opportunity to reassert himself.

Several years after Menelaus became High Priest, while Antiochus was busy fighting in Egypt, Jason raised an army in Transjordan and raided Jerusalem. Menelaus beat off the attack, but it became obvious to Antiochus that large segments of Judaism were still opposed to Hellenism and Syrian control in Palestine.

On the return of Antiochus from Egypt, Menelaus welcomed him to Jerusalem. What was left of the Temple treasure was placed at his disposal. Since Menelaus was unpopular with many of the Jews, he found it all the more necessary to court the favor of Antiochus.

During a second campaign in Egypt, Antiochus came as close as he ever came to subduing the empire of the Ptolemies. He was deterred by the rise of a new power which was soon to transform the Mediterranean into a Roman lake.

At the Battle of Pydna (168 B.C.) the Romans defeated the Macedonians in one of history's decisive battles. On the ruins of the Macedonian Empire, Rome was to make a name for herself. In his younger days Antiochus had come to know and respect the Romans. Rome was not ready to annex Syria and Egypt, but Rome was determined that Antiochus should not strengthen himself by annexing Egypt. In a famous scene outside the city of Alexandria, the Roman envoy demanded that Antiochus, before he stirred from a circle drawn around him in the ground, promise to evacuate Egypt. With dreams of grandeur

suddenly dissipated, Antiochus turned back in bitterness.

If Egypt was to remain a rival power, Antiochus found it more necessary than ever to retain his hold on Palestine. He sent Appolonius, his general, to occupy the city of Jerusalem. In a Sabbath attack, when he knew that the orthodox Jews would not fight, he slaughtered large numbers of the opponents of Menelaus. The city walls were destroyed, and a new fortress, the Akra, was built on the site of the citadel. The Akra was garrisoned by a large force which was expected to keep the Jews in submission to the policies of Antiochus.

One of Israel's darkest periods began. A systematic attempt was made to Hellenize the country by force. An edict demanded the fusion of all the nationalities of the Seleucid Empire into one people. Greek deities were to be worshiped by all.

An elderly Athenian philosopher was sent to Jerusalem to supervise the enforcement of the order. He identified the God of Israel with Jupiter, and ordered a bearded image of the pagan deity, perhaps in the likeness of Antiochus, set up upon the Temple altar. The Jews popularly spoke of this as "the Abomination of Desolation."

Greek soldiers and their paramours performed licentious heathen rites in the very Temple courts. Swine were sacrificed on the altar. The drunken orgy associated with the worship of Baccus was made compulsory. Conversely, Jews were forbidden, under penalty of death, to practice circumcision, Sabbath observance, or the observance of the feasts of the Jewish year. Copies of the Hebrew Scriptures were ordered destroyed.

These laws promulgating Hellenism and prescribing Judaism were enforced with the utmost cruelty. An aged Scribe, Eleazar, was flogged to death because he refused to eat swine's flesh. A mother and her seven children were successively butchered, in the presence of the governor, for refusing to pay homage to an image. Two mothers who had circumcised their newborn sons were driven through the city and cast headlong from the wall. Later ages may have exaggerated the atrocities of Antiochus, but there is no possibility of seeing him as anything but an oppressor who merited the name Epimanes -- the Madman.

By force of arms the Hellenizing party had gained a victory. Menelaus continued as High Priest. Where once his worship was directed to Yahweh, the God of Israel, now he served Jupiter. Yet the Hellenizers had gone too far. Their very zeal for a quick defeat of the "old order" evoked a reaction which drove the Hellenizers out of power and brought into being an independent Jewish state.