

*What Motivated Antiochus to Issue his Decrees Against the Jews?*¹

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Introduction

One of the major questions that historians confront is understanding what motivated Antiochus (=Antiochus IV) to issue his decrees against the Jews in 167 BCE.² There are three main approaches that historians have taken. One approach views the decrees as motivated primarily by a desire of Antiochus to spread Hellenism or to culturally unify what was perhaps a crumbling empire. Another approach views the leading Hellenistic Jews as the main force behind the issuance of the decrees. A third approach views the decrees as primarily a response by Antiochus to a perceived revolt by the Jews. The purpose of this article is to evaluate these varying approaches.

Before we do this, we will provide some background to our main sources for the period, I and II Maccabees.³ We will also briefly summarize the events of the Hanukkah story.

¹ I would like to thank Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman and Sam Borodach for reviewing the draft and for their insights.

² Antiochus III, his father, had a good relationship with the Jews. See Josephus, *Antiquities*, XII, 133–153.

³ Of course, Josephus is an available source as well, but he is largely dependent on I Maccabees.

Some of Antiochus' actions in Egypt and Jerusalem in the years 170–168 BCE (just before his persecution of the Jews) seem to be alluded to in a Dead Sea text. See Magen Broshi and Ester Eshel, "The Greek King is Antiochus IV (4Q Historical Text=4Q248)," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 48 (1997), pp. 120–129. Antiochus is not mentioned by name in this text.

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Part 1: I Maccabees and II Maccabees

I Maccabees spans the period from the beginning of the reign of Antiochus IV until the death of Simon son of Mattathias. These are the years 175–134 BCE. The author of the work is unknown, but it is evident that he was a Jew who was an admirer of Mattathias and his sons.⁴ The work was originally composed in Hebrew, but what has survived is only a Greek translation (and ancient translations made from this Greek translation).⁵ Probably, the book was composed sometime after the death of John Hyrcanus in 104 BCE, or at least when his reign was well advanced.⁶

⁴ Close reading of the book points to its being a dynastic work, i.e., a work whose main purpose was the glorification of Mattathias and the legitimization of the rule of his descendants. See, e.g., Daniel R. Schwartz, “The other in 1 and 2 Maccabees,” in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30, Isaiah M. Gafni, “Josephus and I Maccabees,” in *Josephus, the Bible, and history*, eds. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 119 and 127, and 131 n. 49, and Jonathan A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 7 and 12. See particularly I Macc. 5:62. One way the author achieves his purpose is by setting up parallels between Mattathias and Pinchas, who was rewarded in the Bible for his zealotry. See, e.g., Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, pp. 5–7, and I Macc. 2:26 and 2:54.

⁵ That the Greek is only a translation from a Hebrew original is evident from the character of the Greek translation. See, e.g., *EJ* 11:657, and Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 14. The original Hebrew was seen by the church father Jerome (fourth cent.):

I have found the First Book of Maccabees in Hebrew; the Second is a Greek book as can also be proved from considerations of style alone.

The third-century church father Origen, quoted in Eusebius, refers to the First Book of Maccabees by the title *sarbêthsabanaiel*. See Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 15. Probably, this title is connected to the nickname for the priestly order of Yehoyariv, the order that Mattathias came from. The nickname for this order was מַסְרַבִּי. See Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, pp. 16–21, and J. Ta’anit 4:5, 68d. Probably, Eusebius or the manuscripts of his work have not accurately recorded the title, and the original title was something like *sefer beit sarbanei el* = the book of the dynasty of God’s resisters. See Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 16.

⁶ After describing the murder of Simon and the attempted murder of his son John, the book ends (16:23-24):

As for the remainder of the history of John, his wars and his valorous deeds and his wall building and his other accomplishments, all these are recorded in the chronicle of his high priesthood, from the time he succeeded his father as high priest.

(All my translations of verses from I and II Maccabees are taken from Jonathan Goldstein’s edition.)

II Maccabees is an entirely different work, also by an unknown author. The author tells us that his work is an abridgement of the work of Jason of Cyrene.⁷ Unfortunately, this Jason is also unknown.⁸

II Maccabees covers a shorter time period than I Maccabees. It begins in the years before the reign of Antiochus IV and ends with Judah's victory over the general Nicanor in 161 BCE.⁹ II Maccabees was composed in Greek.¹⁰ We do not know exactly when it was composed, but it certainly was composed before 63 BCE.¹¹

Both I and II Maccabees were preserved because they were incorporated into the canon of the early church.¹² Neither of these works is referred to in the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud.

The positive attitude towards the Roman Empire in I Maccabees strongly suggests that the book was composed before 63 BCE. See, e.g., I Macc. 8:1.

The Biblical canon may have been considered closed by Jewry even before I Maccabees was composed. See Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976), pp. 29-30 and 131-32. According to Leiman, the 2nd century C.E. Sages in M. *Yadayim* 3:5 and M. *Eduyyot* 5:3 were merely debating the inspired status of books in a canon that was already closed in the middle of the 2nd century BCE. Even if the canon was still open at the time I Maccabees was composed (see, e.g., Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994], pp. 162-169), I Maccabees was perhaps never a candidate for canonization since it did not claim to be a book composed before the period of prophecy ended. II Maccabees would never have been a candidate for canonization since it was composed in Greek.

⁷ Cyrene is on the northern coast of Libya.

⁸ The prevailing view is that Jason was a contemporary of Judah. See Daniel Schwartz, *Sefer Makabim ב* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzchak Ben Tzvi, 2004), p. 19, n. 23.

II Maccabees is not simply an abridgement of Jason's work. The author of II Maccabees seems to have incorporated material from other sources as well. See Schwartz, pp. 30-31.

⁹ The work is preceded by two epistles that may or may not have been part of the original epitome.

¹⁰ The work of Jason was probably composed in Greek as well.

¹¹ This is so because the last few lines of the work include the following remark (15:37):

Such was the outcome of the affair of Nicanor. From that time on, the city has been held by the Hebrews.

Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

¹² Probably, the books were canonized by the early church because they modeled steadfastness in the defense of God, and because the persecuted Jews were seen as forerunners of Christian martyrs. Centuries later, the Protestant church denied the sanctity of I and II Maccabees and all the other books known today as

Part 2: Brief Historical Overview and Background to Hanukkah

The Temple was rebuilt in the late 6th century BCE, but the Jews of Judea did not enjoy independence. They lived under the rule of the Persians for about 200 years, until the Persian Empire fell to Alexander in 332 BCE. Alexander died shortly thereafter, and for over a century Judea came under the rule of the Ptolemaic Greek dynasty centered in Egypt. Around 198 BCE, Antiochus III of the Syrian Seleucid dynasty wrested Judea away from Ptolemy V. Antiochus III was succeeded by his son Seleucus IV in 187 BCE. The latter ruled until his assassination and the accession of his younger brother Antiochus IV in 175 BCE.

In the beginning of the reign of Antiochus IV, a priest named Jason purchased the high priesthood with a bribe, usurping the position from his brother Onias. At Jason's initiative, a gymnasium was established near the Temple, new Hellenistic educational practices were instituted, and many Jews began to follow a Hellenistic way of life. According to II Maccabees 4:14, priests were no longer eager to perform their duties at the altar and preferred the activities in the gymnasium. A few years later, Menelaus usurped the high priesthood from Jason with his own bribe to Antiochus IV.

In 167 BCE, Antiochus IV issued his decrees against the Jews. I Macc. 1:44–50 describes the decrees as follows:

The king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah containing orders to follow customs foreign to the land, to put a stop to burnt offerings and meal offering and libation in the temple, to violate Sabbaths and festivals, to defile temple and holy things, to build illicit altars and illicit temples and idolatrous shrines, to sacrifice swine and ritually unfit animals, to leave their sons uncircumcised and to draw abomination upon themselves by means of all kinds of uncleanness and profanation, so as to forget the Torah and violate all the commandments. Whoever disobeyed the word of the king was to be put to death.¹³

the Apocrypha. But the books of the Apocrypha are still part of the canon of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches.

¹³ I Macc. 1:44–50. Nowhere in classical rabbinic literature are the decrees of Antiochus listed or a reason for their enactment given. (I am not considering *Megillat Antiochus* to be within classical rabbinic literature. On this work, see the additional note at the end of this article. Nor am I considering the late midrashim on Hanukkah first published by Adolf Jellinek in the 19th century and republished by Judah David Eisenstein in his *Otzar Midrashim*. It has been estimated that these midrashim date to the 10th century. See *EJ* 11:1511.)

Antiochus also ordered the burning of Torah scrolls and the death of anyone found with such scrolls in his possession. He also ordered the temple converted into one dedicated to Zeus Olympios.¹⁴

Some Jews chose death as martyrs, but many complied with the king's orders, willingly or out of fear of punishment.¹⁵

The persecution spread to Modein, where Mattathias, a priest from the order of Yehoyariv, had settled with his five sons after fleeing Jerusalem.¹⁶ In Modein, Mattathias slew a Jew who had publicly sacrificed upon

Admittedly, *Al ha-Nissim* includes a vague reference to the decrees of Antiochus (*ke-she-amedab malkhut yavan... le-hashkeham toratekba u-le-ha'aviram mei-hukei ritzonekba*). (The concept of an insertion for Hanukkah is found already at *Tosefta Ber. 3:14*. See also *Y. Ber. 4:1* and *7:4*, *Shab. 24a*, and perhaps *Shab. 21b*. But exactly what was being recited in the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods remains unknown. The version recited today largely parallels what is found in the sources from Geonic Babylonia. The version recited in Palestine in the parallel period was much shorter. See *Soferim 20:8* [20:6, ed. Higger]. The first two words of the Palestinian version, וּכְנִיִּי פְּלִאִיךָ, are also referred to in a Hanukkah *piyyut* by Kallir (early 7th cent.). The fact that the Babylonian and Palestinian versions differ so greatly suggests that the version recited today is not Tannaitic in origin. On the other hand, early authorship of *Al ha-Nissim* is suggested by the fact that some of its language resembles language in I and II Macc. See particularly I Macc. 1:49, 3:17–20, 4:24, 4:43, 4:55, and II Macc. 1:17 and 10:7. See also perhaps I Macc. 4:59. As mentioned earlier, the original Hebrew version of I Macc. was still in existence at the time of Jerome, 4th century.)

¹⁴ II Macc. 6:2.

¹⁵ See I Macc. 1:43, 1:52, and 2:16, and Josephus, *Antiquities*, XII, 255.

¹⁶ Modein was where the family of Mattathias originally hailed from. See I Macc. 2:70, 9:19, and 13:25. It is possible that Mattathias and his family had been in Jerusalem only temporarily. See I Macc. 2:17. Josephus (*Antiquities*, XII, 265) writes that Mattathias was a native of Jerusalem, but this was probably just a guess. Earlier, in his *Jewish War* (I, 36), Josephus had said that Mattathias was from Modein.

Despite the language in *Al ha-Nissim*, it is clear from I and II *Maccabees* that neither Mattathias nor his father Yoḥanan ever held the position of high priest in the Temple. Traditionally, the high priest came from the priestly watch of Yedayah, not from the watch of Yehoyariv. (It is possible that *Al ha-Nissim* initially referred to Mattathias only as a *kohen*, and that the title *gadol* erroneously made its way into the prayer later. There is at least one reference to Mattathias elsewhere in rabbinic literature as a *kohen*, without the title *gadol*. See *Shemot Rabbah* 15:6. But Mattathias is referred to as כַּהֵּן רַבָּא in the Targum to Song of Songs 6:7. See also *Pesikta Rabbati*, section 2, *piska de-Hanukkah*: הַשְּׂמוּנָאֵי הַכֹּהֵן הַגְּדוֹל.)

a pagan altar. He also slew the king's official who had ordered the sacrifice. Mattathias then fled with his sons to the mountains. Other Jews joined them, so that they too could avoid the persecution and observe the commandments.

Eventually, the Jewish fighters gained in numbers and the Jews began to strike back at the royal government and the apostate Jews. They demolished some of the pagan altars that had been erected. Mattathias died early in the revolt, but the revolt and the effort to liberate territories continued, led by his son Judah. Eventually, the Temple area was liberated, and on the 25th of Kislev in 164 BCE the Temple was rededicated, and the sacrificial service restored.¹⁷

The fight for independence continued after the liberation of the Temple, as parts of Jerusalem and most of the country were still under Syrian control. Judah died in battle in 160 BCE. But in 142 BCE Judea finally achieved independence. In 140 BCE, the Jews officially accepted Simon as their leader. He was the only son of Mattathias still surviving.

Part 3: Explanations for the Decrees of Antiochus

There are three main approaches that historians have taken to explain the decrees of Antiochus IV:¹⁸

One approach views the decrees as motivated primarily by the desire of Antiochus to spread Hellenism or to culturally unify what was perhaps

¹⁷ Antiochus IV died in 164 BCE around the time of the rededication of the Temple, on his way back from Persia. The exact date of his death is unknown. I Macc. tells of his death after describing the rededication. II Macc. tells of his death before describing it.

¹⁸ For an overview of the various approaches, see Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Phila.: Jewish Publication Society, 1959), pp. 175–203. More recently, see Fergus Millar, “The Background to the Maccabean Revolution: Reflections on Martin Hengel’s ‘Judaism and Hellenism,’” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (1978), pp. 1–21; Erich S. Gruen, “Hellenism and Persecution: Antiochus IV and the Jews,” in *Hellenistic History and Culture*, ed. Peter Green (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), pp. 238–274; Steven Weitzman, “Plotting Antiochus’s Persecution,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/2 (2004), pp. 219–234; Robert Doran, “The Persecution of Judeans by Antiochus IV,” in *The “Other” in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, eds. Daniel C. Harlow et al (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 423–433; and Louis Feldman, “The Maccabean Revolt: The State of the Question,” <www.yu.torah.org/togo/Chanuka_To-Go_-_5772_Dr_Feldman.pdf> (Dec. 2011).

a crumbling empire.¹⁹ In this approach, Antiochus presumably would have desired to interfere with other religions in his empire as well.

Another approach views Menelaus and his Hellenistic followers as the main force behind the enactment of the decrees.²⁰ In this approach, it is thought that Antiochus himself was indifferent about whether the Jews observed the Sabbath and holidays, the rite of circumcision, and the dietary laws. But in the minds of the Hellenistic Jews who found these rituals barbaric, it was important to reform Judaism to eliminate them.

A third approach views the decrees as primarily a response by Antiochus to a perceived revolt by the Jews.²¹

Language that supports the first approach is found at I Macc. 1: 41–43:

¹⁹ These are really two different approaches. In the first, Antiochus is an enthusiastic Hellenist. In the second, he is not.

²⁰ The scholar who first suggested this approach was Elias Bickerman. See his *Der Gott der Makkabäer* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937). This work was translated into English by Horst R. Moehring under the title: *The God of the Maccabees* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979). The fifth chapter of *Der Gott der Makkabäer*, the most important one for our purposes, was translated into English by Krishna Winston in Judah Goldin, ed., *The Jewish Expression* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 66–86. When I cite to Bickerman, I cite to Winston's translation.

Bickerman has also written (p. 80) that while posterity remembers the Maccabean movement as a war against the Seleucids, the movement "was primarily a civil war, a religious battle between the orthodox and the reformers." This statement has been oft-quoted, and is extremely misleading, since we do not know the percentage of Jews that stood with the reformers. As M. Gwyn Morgan has written:

As for the Jews themselves, there were, to be sure, priests in Jerusalem eager to ape Hellenistic custom, but that tells us little about the views of the priesthood as a whole, less about the feelings of the common people in the city, and nothing at all about the attitudes of the Jews out in the countryside.

See Gruen, p. 268. Admittedly, according to I Macc. 1:43, many Jews accepted the king's religion, sacrificed to idols, and violated the Sabbath. (See similarly I Macc. 1:52.) But this may still have been only a very small percentage of all Jews. Regarding the attitude of the common people in Jerusalem, it has been argued that there are no references to any demonstrations by the populace when Jason sought to make Jerusalem a Greek city with a gymnasium. But this is still only a weak argument from silence.

²¹ The scholar primarily associated with this approach is Tcherikover. See his *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, pp. 186–203.

- 41: The king wrote to all his kingdom, for all to become one people and for each to abandon his own customs.²²
42: All the gentiles agreed to the terms of the king's proclamation.
43: Many Israelites, too, accepted his religion and sacrificed to idols...

The first approach is also supported by language in a letter from Antiochus V revoking his father's decrees. In this letter, quoted at II Macc. 11:23–26, Antiochus V is recorded to have written:

We have heard that the Jews do not accept our father's decree for a changeover to Greek ways...²³

But a weakness with the first approach is that we have very little evidence of attempts by Antiochus to interfere with the religious practices of other peoples in his kingdom.²⁴ One scholar has observed:

²² See also I Macc. 3:29: "the tribute from his territories was small because of the dissension and disorder which he had caused in his land by abrogating the laws which had been in force from the earliest times."

²³ Another support for this approach is II Macc. 6:8-9:
A decree was published in the neighboring Greek cities, on the proposal of Ptolemy that they proceed against the Jews in the same manner and compel them to partake of the meat of pagan sacrifices and that they butcher those Jews who refused to go over to the Greek way of life.

(There is a major issue with regard to the text of this passage. See below, n. 40.) This approach is also supported by the following passage in Josephus: "And [Antiochus] compelled them to give up the worship of their own God, and to do reverence to the gods in whom he believed." *Antiquities*, XII, 253. See also the following statement of the first-century Roman historian Tacitus (*Historiae*, V,8): "King Antiochus endeavoured to abolish Jewish superstition and to introduce Greek civilization." Finally, see the letter of Antiochus to the Samaritans (discussed below).

²⁴ According to Bickerman (p. 61), four famous sanctuaries were secularized under Antiochus, aside from the sanctuary at Jerusalem. But Bickerman observes that in none of these other cases were measures involving force employed in order to bring about a change of faith or were the sacred writings of the native population burnt.

There is a cuneiform tablet from the year 169 BCE that perhaps evidences an interference at the instruction of Antiochus with Babylonian religious practice. See Samuel K. Eddy, *The King is Dead* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 135-36, and Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 128. But the text of this tablet is mutilated and its meaning obscure. See Otto Mørkholm, *Antiochus IV of Syria* (København: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1966), p. 132, n. 53, and Goldstein, *ibid.* Gruen writes (p. 251):

Eastern cities and territories under the suzerainty of the Seleucid kingdom continued to mint coinage with local symbols and types; the great temples

Nor have we any information that other oriental cults were forbidden or in any way restricted...Neither Antiochus' work as a founder of new settlements nor his religious policy entitle us to conclude that the king was an ardent protagonist of Hellenistic culture who concentrated all his efforts on the attempt to provide his kingdom with a common cultural basis...²⁵

Accordingly, many scholars believe that the scenario described in I Macc. 1:41-42 is just an invention by the author.²⁶

Regarding the second approach, there is explicit support for it in a statement by Josephus. At *Antiquities* XII, 384-85, Josephus writes:

For Lysias had advised the king [=Antiochus V] to slay Menelaus, if he wished the Jews to remain quiet and not give him any trouble;²⁷

at Uruk and Babylon betray no trace of Hellenization; and the priests and officialdom of the ancient sites retained native titles and responsibilities.

²⁵ Mørkholm, pp. 131–33. Tcherikover writes (p. 180):

[T]he Seleucids were never “bearers of culture” and never intended to Hellenize the populations of the Orient on profound spiritual matters, Hellenization expressing itself in a purely external political form, that of the transformation of oriental towns into Greek *poleis*. There are no grounds for supposing that the “philhellenism” of Antiochus was expressed in any other form...

(According to Millar, p. 14, two innovations by Antiochus IV are undeniable. He was the first Seleucid king to use the title ‘God manifest’ and he moved away from his dynasty’s traditional devotion to Apollo to a reverence for Olympian Zeus.)

Of course, we do not have complete information on Antiochus’ dealings with the peoples in his empire. Moreover, his interference with the religion of the Jews may have been the only time he embarked on a policy of forced religious interference only because the policy failed here and this convinced him not to pursue it elsewhere.

Earlier, Antiochus had lived in Rome for about 12 years. Goldstein conjectures that Antiochus was influenced by the fierce measures the Roman government took against a subversive sect there, and that, in the eyes of Antiochus, the Jews resembled this sect. See Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, pp. 104–60 and *II Maccabees* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 103–12. (These two volumes by Goldstein are filled with wild conjectures. This is one of them.)

²⁶ With regard to the language in the letter of Antiochus V, it can be consistent with the second and third approaches. The “decree for a changeover to Greek ways” may have come at the instigation of Menelaus (second approach) or may have been the decision of Antiochus IV and his Seleucid advisors as a means of punishing the Jew for the perceived revolt (third approach).

²⁷ Lysias was the chief minister to Antiochus V, who was 9 years old when he began to reign.

it was this man, he said, who had been the cause of the mischief by persuading the king's father to compel the Jews to abandon their fathers' religion. Accordingly, the king sent Menelaus to Beroea in Syria, and there had him put to death; he had served as high priest for ten years, and had been a wicked and impious man, who in order to have sole authority for himself had **compelled his nation to violate their own laws...**

But where Josephus obtained this information about Menelaus persuading Antiochus IV is unknown. It may be merely his own speculation.²⁸

²⁸ II Macc. 13:4 records:

When Lysias argued [to Antiochus V] to show that Menelaus was to blame for all the troubles, the king ordered that he be taken to Beroia and executed...

But there is nothing here about Menelaus persuading the king's father to enact decrees. Menelaus sufficiently earned the blame referred to by supplanting Jason, robbing the Temple, and committing other misdeeds. Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 159.

It has been argued that Josephus has simply expanded on II Macc. 13:4, based on his own speculation. See, e.g., Gruen, p. 254. But it is well accepted that Josephus did not have II Macc. or the work of Jason of Cyrene. See, e.g., Schwartz, *Sefer Makabim* 2, pp. 30 and 58-59, Gafni, p. 130, n. 39, and Menachem Stern, "*Moto Shel Chonyo Ha-Shelishi*," *Tzzyyon* 25 (1960), p. 11. For example, there is a difference in the time the killing of Menelaus is described to have occurred in II Macc. compared with the time it is described to have occurred in Josephus. At *Contra Apion* II, 84, Josephus cites various ancient historians (Polybius, Strabo, Nicolas, Timagenes, Castor, and Apollodorus) in connection with Antiochus' invasion of the Temple. It is possible that one of these was his source for his statement that Menelaus was the one who persuaded Antiochus to compel the Jews to abandon their religion. But most scholars believe that he did not have most of these sources and knew of them only secondhand. See Gafni, p. 153. It is also possible that his source stated only something similar to what was recorded at II Macc. 13:4 ("Menelaus was to blame for all the troubles") and Josephus merely expanded on what he found in his source.

It is significant that the author of II Maccabees never blames the anti-Jewish decrees on Menelaus. (Menelaus is not referred to at all in I Maccabees.) At II Macc. 13:8, upon the death of Menelaus, the following observation is made: "he who had perpetrated many sins against the altar (the fire and ashes of which are holy) met his death in ashes." But the sins referred to are vague. At II Macc. 4:50, Menelaus is called a "plotter against fellow Jews." But this is probably only a reference to his arranging for the murder of the former high priest Onias III. At II Macc. 5:15, Menelaus is called "the man who betrayed the laws and his country." But this is probably only a reference to his earlier looting of the Temple. See II Macc., chap. 4. (Menelaus is described this way at 5:15 **before** Antiochus' anti-Jewish decrees were enacted.)

None of the other narrative sources connect the decrees with Menelaus or his followers.²⁹ Even Josephus himself does not do so when he discusses the motivation for the decrees elsewhere.³⁰ Moreover, the decrees of Antiochus were not limited to particular rituals that Hellenistic Jews might have viewed as barbaric. The decrees essentially compelled the Jews to reject their entire religion. It seems unlikely that this was the vision of Menelaus and his followers, even assuming that Menelaus was an ardently Hellenistic Jew.³¹ Finally, it is clear from II Macc. 4:16 that the Jews who followed a Hellenistic way of life were punished just like everyone else.³²

²⁹ Bickerman claims support for his suggestion in the words *ויבן על עזבי ברית קדש*, at Dan. 11:30. Assuming the context is the reign of Antiochus IV (a common assumption), the words imply his looking favorably at the Hellenizers. Moreover, in the third century C.E., Porphyry interpreted this passage to indicate that the king was “impelled... by those who had deserted the sacred law and adopted the rites of the pagans.” See Bickerman, p. 73. But Porphyry was just giving his own interpretation of the passage, not reporting a tradition. Moreover, verse 11:30 implies only that the king looked favorably at the Hellenizers, and perhaps worked with them, but not that the idea for the persecution came from them. (Porphyry was the first to theorize that parts of the book of Daniel were composed in the time of Antiochus IV.)

³⁰ In his *Jewish War* (I, 34), his earlier work, Josephus had explained the decrees by stating that Antiochus “was carried away by his ungovernable passions” and had “the rankling memory of what he had suffered in the siege [of Jerusalem].” At *Antiquities*, XII, 253, Josephus explained the decrees with the following remark: “he compelled them to give up the worship of their own God, and to do reverence to the gods in whom he believed.”

Admittedly, Josephus did remark, at *Antiquities*, XII, 240, that Menelaus and the Tobiads had gone to Antiochus and “informed him that they wished to abandon their country’s laws...and to follow the king’s laws and adopt the Greek way of life.” But he states nothing here about Menelaus persuading Antiochus to impose the Greek way of life on the rest of the Jews.

³¹ Menelaus is never explicitly referred to as a Jew who advocated Hellenistic practices. Gruen (p. 259) theorizes that Menelaus may have had little sympathy with the Hellenistic practices sponsored by his rival Jason.

³² “[I]he Greeks, whose way of life they admired and whom they wished to ape in every way, became their enemies and the executors of their punishment.”

According to II Macc 11:27–33, Menelaus was used as an emissary by Antiochus V to put the minds of the Jews at ease when the decrees were cancelled. As Goldstein comments (*II Maccabees*, p. 422): “Could even the most obtuse regime have so used Menelaus if he had been one of the instigators of the imposed cult?”

For these and other reasons, Bickerman’s approach has been rejected by many scholars. See Albert I. Baumgarten, “Elias Bickerman on the Hellenizing Reformers: A Case Study of an Unconvincing Case,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol.

The third approach seems to be closest to the truth. It relies in large part on the fifth chapter of II Maccabees, which describes the events of 168 BCE. The chapter begins with mention of Antiochus' second incursion into Egypt. According to II Maccabees 5:5, the deposed high priest Jason heard a false report that Antiochus had passed away while in Egypt. Jason then took 1000 men and mounted a surprise attack on Jerusalem in an attempt to recapture his office. Much bloodshed ensued. The chapter does not record whom the masses of Jerusalem supported in this battle,³³ but it does record Antiochus' perception of the events. According to II Macc. 5:11, “[w]hen the king received news of the events, he concluded that Judaea was in revolt.”³⁴

II Maccabees continues:

[H]e broke camp and set out from Egypt. With the fury of a wild beast, he took the city, treating it as enemy territory captured in war. He ordered the soldiers to slay mercilessly whomever they met and to butcher those who withdrew into their houses...[F]orty thousand fell by the sword and an equal number were sold as slaves. Unsatisfied with these atrocities, Antiochus had the audacity to enter the holiest temple in the whole world...With polluted hands he seized the sacred vessels and swept up the gifts deposited by many other kings...

The leading scholar associated with the third approach, Victor Tcherikover, concludes, “it is clear that Antiochus now regarded Jerusalem as a hostile city and behaved toward it accordingly.”³⁵ Tcherikover further theorizes that Antiochus viewed the scribes and the interpreters of Jewish

97, No. 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 152-53. The other main criticism of Bickerman's approach is that, in the era of Antiochus IV, the Hellenism of the Hellenized Jews of Jerusalem was probably superficial. It is unlikely that they had the philosophic attitudes towards Jewish rituals that Bickerman attributes to them.

An argument in support of Bickerman's approach is that the decrees assume some knowledge of Jewish rituals. But the king and his Seleucid advisors could have employed Jews to help them craft their decrees.

³³ Josephus (*Antiquities*, XII, 239-240) writes that the majority of the people supported Jason, but this was probably just his own conjecture.

³⁴ The author of II Maccabees portrays this as a misunderstanding by Antiochus. But Daniel Schwartz has pointed out that perhaps Antiochus was correct in his perception of the events and there was an attempt by the Jews of Jerusalem to gain independence here. See his comments at <http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/symposiums/4th/papers/Schwartz99.html>

³⁵ Tcherikover, p. 188. See also Josephus, *Jewish War*, I, 34. Similarly, Goldstein writes (*II Maccabees*, p. 270):

Law as leaders in the revolt and its aftermath, and as the ones who had the support of the masses. Jewish Law had to be extirpated, Antiochus reasoned, if the city was to be controlled.³⁶

Interestingly, a story has come down to us in various sources about the humiliating manner in which Antiochus' attempt to invade Egypt was rebuffed in 168 BCE. It has been suggested that this humiliation also influenced him and led him to overcompensate in the manner in which he responded to the perceived rebellion in Judea.³⁷

By forcing the Jews to observe the imposed cult, Antiochus IV intended to punish and correct a turbulent subject-people... He was not imposing Greek patterns upon the Jews.

³⁶ Tcherikover, pp. 196–198.

³⁷ See Gruen, pp. 262–264. The story is brought down in Polybius (2nd century BCE) and in other ancient writers (see Gruen, p. 262, n. 82 for the references). When Antiochus was with his forces in Egypt in 168 BCE, Roman forces caught up with him in the suburb of Eleusis and ordered him to withdraw. When Antiochus said he needed time to consult with his advisers, the leader of the Roman forces took out a stick that he was carrying, drew a circle in the sand around Antiochus, and insisted that he make his decision before he took another step. Humiliated, Antiochus yielded and agreed to withdraw his army from Egypt. This event occurred about eighteen months before the persecution of Judea was launched late in 167 BCE.

Gruen writes:

The explanation has both psychological and political plausibility... The rage of Antiochus IV is readily intelligible. It could not, of course, be vented against Rome. But the upheaval in Judea came at a convenient time and offered a suitable target. The introduction of a garrison and the intimidation of the populace by state terrorism had a larger design than simply to punish the Jews. It would announce Antiochus Epiphanes' resumption of control to the diverse peoples and nations nominally under the Seleucid regime... Antiochus would answer any potential questions about his withdrawal from Egypt by taking the offensive in Palestine.

Of course, the eighteen-month gap between the humiliation in Egypt and the persecution of Judea militates against the psychological component of this explanation. As to the political component, actions taken against Judea could have been undertaken to send a message if other areas of the regime would have learned of these actions. But this seems a questionable assumption in ancient times.

Gruen observes that a connection between Antiochus' withdrawal from Egypt and his subsequent persecution of the Jews is perhaps implied at Dan. 11:30: *ובאו בו ציים כתיים ונכאה ושב וזעם על ברית קודש ועשה...*

The issue of precisely which Jewish communities were subjected to the decrees of Antiochus IV is also a matter that needs to be addressed to answer our question.³⁸ If we could determine precisely which Jewish communities were targeted, this would help shed light on the motivation behind the prosecution.

I will now collect and comment on the key passages:

- At I Macc. 1:51, we are told that copies of the decrees were sent to the entire kingdom. This could imply that the decrees were ordered for the entire kingdom. But alternatively, the implication could be only that officials outside Judea were invited to extend the persecution at their option,³⁹ or that the decrees were sent as a warning to the Jewish communities elsewhere.
- At II Macc. 6:8-9, we are told:

A decree was published in the neighboring Greek cities, on the proposal of Ptolemy that they proceed against the Jews in the same manner and compel them to partake of the meat of pagan sacrifices and that they butcher those Jews who refused to go over to the Greek way of life.

The implication of this passage is that the persecution referred to outside Judea (but still in the area of Palestine) was not at the order of Antiochus but a later order of Ptolemy, the governor of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia.⁴⁰

³⁸ Some possibilities:

- The decrees were limited to Jerusalem.
- The decrees were limited to Jerusalem and Judea (and perhaps the capital Antioch).
- The decrees were enforced on Jews in the entire province of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia. (This is suggested by Mørkholm, p. 147, n. 41.) This would include parts of Babylonia, but not Persia.
- The decrees were enforced on Jews throughout the empire of Antiochus.

³⁹ Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 223.

⁴⁰ There is a major issue regarding the text of this passage. In one reading, the text refers to a proposal by an individual named Ptolemy. If so, the reference is probably to the Ptolemy who was the governor of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia. He is mentioned elsewhere at II Macc. 4:45-46 and 8:8. In a different reading, the text refers to a proposal by the citizens of the city of Ptolemais (=Acre).

Schwartz (*Sefer Makabim* 2, pp. 153-54) discusses this passage extensively and suggests that this was an order **by Antiochus**, based on a proposal by Ptolemy. He points out that Ptolemy himself may not have had the authority to issue such an order. Schwartz suggests that this was a later expansion by Antiochus of his original order, which had covered only Jerusalem. In the view of Schwartz,

- At II Macc. 7:1–42, we are told of the king’s involvement in the torturing and murder of a Jewish mother and her seven sons. The location of this story is not specified, but the fact that the king is involved suggests that it took place in Antioch, Syria. But the story seems legendary, not historical.⁴¹
- At II Macc. 11:27–33, we are told that the letter from Antiochus V canceling his father’s decrees is addressed to “the Council of Elders of the Jews and to the rest of the Jews.” The reference to this Council implies that this notice was addressed to the Jews of Jerusalem. This seems to imply that the decrees themselves had been in effect only in Jerusalem and its province Judea.⁴²
- In his *Jewish War* (VII, 43-44), Josephus writes:

The Jewish race...is particularly numerous in Syria...But it was at Antioch that they specially congregated, partly owing to the greatness of that city, but mainly because the successors of King Antiochus had enabled them to live there in security. For, although Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes sacked Jerusalem and plundered the temple, his successors on the throne restored to the Jews of Antioch all such votive offerings as were made of brass, to be laid up in their synagogue, and, moreover, granted them citizen rights on an equality with the Greeks.

Josephus first implies that Antiochus IV did not let the Jews of Antioch live in security, but the only anti-Jewish actions that he points to are the sack of Jerusalem and the plundering of the Temple.

- Finally, we must mention the various sources documenting the persecution of the Samaritans by Antiochus. The Samaritans were centered at Mount Gerizim, outside Judea. According to II Macc. 5:22-23 and 6:1-2:

[Antiochus] went so far as to leave officials in charge of maltreating our race; at Jerusalem, Philip...and at Mount Gerizim, Andronikos...

[T]he king sent Geron the Athenian...to defile both the temple in Jerusalem and the temple on Mount Gerizim...”

“neighboring Greek cities” refers to cities outside of Jerusalem, and not to cities outside of Judea.

⁴¹ This story is discussed extensively by Goldstein. See his *II Maccabees*, pp. 296–98.

⁴² Bickerman, p. 69.

Moreover, Josephus (*Antiquities*, XII, 258–263) claims to present us with two documents regarding the persecution of the Samaritans by Antiochus. The first is a petition from the Samaritans asking that the persecution of their people be canceled, and the second is a reply of Antiochus consenting to their request. The following is the relevant language in the petition:

Now you have dealt with the Jews as their wickedness deserves, but the king's officers, in the belief that we follow the same practices as they through kinship with them, are involving us in similar charges, whereas we are Sidonians by origin, as is evident from our state documents. We therefore petition you... not to molest us in any way by attaching to us the charges of which the Jews are guilty, since we are distinct from them, both in race and in customs...

The following is Antiochus' reply:

The Sidonians in Shechem have submitted a memorial which has been filed. Now since the men sent by them have represented to us sitting in council with our friends that they are in no way concerned in the complaints brought against the Jews, but choose to live in accordance with Greek customs, we acquit them of these charges and permit their temple to be known as that of Zeus Hellenios, as they have petitioned.

But many scholars believe that these documents are fabrications by Josephus, who tells us of his distrust of the Samaritans.⁴³

In all the above material, there is no clear source documenting that Antiochus IV ordered his decrees on the Jews of the Diaspora. The source that would be the strongest support for this proposition, I Macc. 1:51 (“letters to the same effect he wrote to all his kingdom”), does not have to be interpreted this way. Even if it is, the passage is found in a section that does not sound credible.⁴⁴

⁴³ See *Antiquities* IX, 291:

[B]ut they alter their attitude according to circumstance and, when they see the Jews prospering, call them their kinsmen... but, when they see the Jews in trouble, they say that they have nothing whatever in common with them...and they declare themselves to be aliens of another race.

He repeats his allegation again at XII, 257, in our context.

⁴⁴ See I Macc. 41-42: “The king wrote to all his kingdom, for all to become one people and for each to abandon his own customs. All the gentiles agreed to the terms of the king’s proclamation.”

This idea of an empire-wide attempt at unification is repeated later at I Macc. 3:29: “the tribute from his territories was small because of the dissension and

Some form of persecution of the Samaritans is clearly documented, but the Samaritans may have been viewed as kin to the Jews of Judea and deserving of punishment even in the second and third approaches.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The most reasonable reading of all the material points to punishment of a rebellious city as being the primary motivation for the decrees. Although some of the documents (assuming their legitimacy) include language about an attempt by Antiochus IV to convert the Jews to Greek ways,⁴⁶ this may have been only the external form in which Antiochus IV formulated his actions. The underlying motivation may still have been punishment of a rebellious city. As pointed out by Tcherikover, II Macc. 5:11 sets forth clearly that “the king...concluded that Judaea was in revolt.”

The author of II Maccabees tells us that undertaking an abridgment “exact[s] a price of sweat and sleepless nights.”⁴⁷ At first glance, this seems like an exaggeration. But whatever material he chose to omit has indeed been relegated to oblivion. We are fortunate that he took his task so seriously and that verse 5:11 made it into his abridgement.⁴⁸

disorder which he had caused in his land by abrogating the laws which had been in force from the earliest times.” Here, the implication is that there was resistance to the supposed unification program. Since the author is inconsistent and describes two different reactions to the program, it can be argued that the whole notion of such a program was just a conjecture. It better served the author to blame the persecution on some grand plan by Antiochus than to blame it in some way on the Jews themselves, as the second and third approaches do.

Despite II Macc. 6:9, neither I or II Maccabees reports any specific persecution of Jews outside of Judea in the years 167–164 BCE. (This is consistent with Schwartz’s interpretation of “neighboring Greek cities.”)

⁴⁵ Bickerman (p. 71) theorizes that there was some kind of administrative linkage between Judea and the Gerizim area.

⁴⁶ See the response of Antiochus IV to the Samaritans (*Antiquities*, XII, 263) and the letter of Antiochus V (II Macc. 11:24).

⁴⁷ II Macc. 2:26.

⁴⁸ Of course, Bickerman could argue that the abridger fundamentally failed us. Perhaps Jason of Cyrene, like Josephus, had included a statement that Menelaus had persuaded the king to compel the Jews to abandon their religion, and the abridger left this out. But it seems unlikely that such a crucial detail would have been left out by the abridger.

Note on Megillat Antiochus

I have not considered passages from *Megillat Antiochus* anywhere in this study.⁴⁹ There are several important contradictions between this work and I and II Maccabees,⁵⁰ and the work is generally viewed as very unreliable.⁵¹ It is not referred to in either the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud, and most likely was composed in the Geonic period.⁵² In *Megillat Antiochus*,

⁴⁹ This work is familiar to many in modern times because a Hebrew text of this work was included in the *Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot* and in the Birnbaum Siddur. The work was originally composed in Aramaic.

⁵⁰ For example, *Megillat Antiochus* (= *MA*) reports that Antiochus decided to persecute the Jews in the 23rd year of his reign. But Antiochus reigned only 11 years. *MA* associates the name מַתִּיחַיָּהוּ with Yochanan, son of Matityahu. But according to I and II Maccabees, this name is associated only with Judah. (On the spelling and meaning of this name, see my Dec. 2011 article at seforim.blogspot.com.) *MA* describes Yochanan, son of Matityahu, as serving as high priest at the time of the persecution. But the high priest at the time of the persecution was Menelaus. *MA* describes Yochanan as killing the general Nicanor in a private encounter in the area of the Temple. But according to I and II Maccabees, Nicanor was killed by Judah and his forces in a battle that took place outside of Jerusalem. *MA* describes Judah as being killed before the Temple was retaken and describes Mattathias as stepping in to fight with the other brothers. But according to I Maccabees, Mattathias died before the Temple was retaken and Judah led the brothers in battle thereafter. (II Maccabees does not even mention Mattathias and describes Judah as leading the brothers in battle.) Finally, in its dating of the story of Chanukkah, *MA* assumes that the retaking of the Temple coincided with the beginning of Hasmonean rule in Palestine. But over two decades separated these events.

⁵¹ See, e.g., *EJ* 14:1046-47 (“Scroll of Antiochus”).

⁵² See Aryeh Kasher, “*Ha-Reka Ha-Historiy Le-Chiburah shel Megillat Antiochus*,” in Bezalel Bar-Kochva, ed., *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Selukit be-Eretz Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuchad ve-ha-Mador le-Yediyat ha-Aretz be-Tenuah ha-Kibbutzit, 1980), pp. 85–102, and Zeev Safrai, “The Scroll of Antiochus and the Scroll of Fasts,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 2, eds. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum and Fortress Press, 2006). According to Safrai, linguistic analysis of the Aramaic indicates that the scroll dates from sometime between the sixth and eighth centuries, and the Aramaic is Babylonian for the most part. See also Menachem Tzvi Kadari, *Zeman Chiburah Shel Megillat Antiochus*, in Daniel Sperber, *Minhagey Yisrael*, vol. 5, pp. 114–116.

The Palestinian *paytanim* of the 6th through 8th centuries do not seem to have had *MA*. See Shulamit Elitzur, *Piyyutei ha-Chanukkah: Semel Mul Realiyah*, in David Amit and Chanan Eshel, eds., *Yemei Beit Chashmonai* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzchak Ben-Tzvi, 1995), p. 309.

Antiochus announces to his ministers, without any particular provocation, that the Jews need to be eliminated, and that the rituals of *Shabbat*, *Rosh Chodesh* and *Milah* must be abolished. The king's complaint was that the Jews do not sacrifice to his gods or follow his laws, and someday hope to rule the world.

For references to the practice of reading *Megillat Antiochus* on Chanukkah, see Natan Fried, *Al Minbag Kriyat Megillat Antiochus be-Chanukkah*, in Daniel Sperber, *Minbagey Yisrael*, vol. 5, pp. 102–113, and Nosson David Rabinowich, *Binu Shenot Dor va-Dor*, pp. 138–146.⁵³ 

Mishnat R. Eliezer (p. 103, ed. Enelow) refers to four sons of *Chashmonai* after Judah, the eldest, was killed. These details match the scenario depicted in *MA*. But this does not prove that *MA* was known to the author or final editor of *Mishnat R. Eliezer*. (*Mishnat R. Eliezer* perhaps dates to 8th century Palestine. *EJ* 16:1515.) *Mishnat R. Eliezer* may merely have been recording a tradition similar to one that made its way into *MA*. (*Mishnat R. Eliezer* is also known as *Midrash Agur* and *Midrash Sheloshim u-Shetayim Middot*.)

Some editions of the *Halakhot Gedolot*, a work authored in the early or middle 9th century, include a statement that *Megillat Beit Hashmonai* was composed by the elders of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. Many have argued that the reference here is to *MA*. But most likely, the correct reading in the passage is not *Megillat Beit Hashmonai* but *Megillat Ta'anit*. See Vered Noam, *Megillat Ta'anit* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzchak Ben-Tzvi, 2003), pp. 383–85 and *Shabbat* 13b.

⁵³ An early reference to the practice of reading *MA* on Hanukkah is perhaps found in a statement by R. Saadiah Gaon (10th century). In his introduction to *MA*, R. Saadiah writes that “most of the nation read it.” See the translation of S. Atlas and M. Perlmann, “Saadia on the Scroll of the Hasmonaeans,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 14 (1944), p. 7. R. Saadiah does not state that it was read on Hanukkah as part of the ritual, but this is a reasonable interpretation of the passage.

R. Yosef Kafah translates R. Saadiah's Arabic differently: *rabim min ha-umab modim bah* (=many of the nation **admit to** it). See his *Daniyyel u-Megillat Antiochus Im Targum u-Peirush RSG* (Jerusalem: Ha-Vaad le-Hotzaat Sifrei R. Saadiah Gaon, 1981), p. 221. The translation of Atlas and Perlmann seems more consistent with the context.