


THE CONCEPT OF ANTIOCHUS IV EPIPHANES’ “UNIFYING EDICT” (1 MACC 1:41–53) AS AN PRODUCT OF JEWISH RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL THOUGHT¹

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Abstract

Studies to date on the events accompanying the outbreak of the Maccabean uprising have increasingly highlighted the difficulties in interpreting the sources. The main sources on the subject—i.e. 1–2 Maccabees—place emphasis on the attitude of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who was alleged to have acted against the followers of Judaism and the cult of Yahweh. It has been pointed out previously that the biblical tradition of an edict issued against the Jews is not supported by other sources, and, most importantly, is not consistent with the practice of Hellenistic rulers who supported the various cults of their subjects. Starting from this premise, the text reconstructs events with an emphasis on actions of a political nature related to the Sixth Syrian War and its aftermath. The second part of the text presents the biblical foundations on which the narratives of Antiochus’ alleged anti-Judaic edict and his actions against the Jews were built. The thesis is posited here that the authors of the books of Maccabees were pursuing the political plans of John Hyrcanus, constructing, among other things, an image of an external threat to the religious community, for which the only “salvation” was to be found in the activities of the Maccabees—*de facto* usurpers in the function of high priests.

Keywords: Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Hellenisation, Anti-Jewish edict, Maccabees, Hasmoneans, John Hyrcanus, Hasmonean propaganda.

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This article was written before I became aware of a publication by Reinhard Kratz („*Väterliche Gesetze und das Gesetz des Mose. Die Rolle der Tora im jüdischen Aufstand gegen Antiochos IV*,” Tübingen 2024) in which similar conclusions are expressed.

In the most commonly held view, the events leading up to the Maccabean uprising were both external—interference by the Seleucids in the life of the Jews—and internal—a struggle for power between political groups/parties, or as others want to call them religious/cultural groups. One element of this external interference in the life of the Jews, was supposed to be the decree of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes mentioned in 1 Macc 1:44–53. Scholars differ in their interpretation of it, and even in their reconstruction of its original purpose, and therefore its content.² The predominant view, however, is that such an act was indeed issued, and concerned Jewish cultic practices, which in some—indirect or direct—way influenced the outbreak of the uprising. In this article, I will try to present arguments against considering this decree as a historically reliable document. I will present a hypothesis about the possible ideological sources behind the author of this text and his likely motivations.

Christian Frevel has attempted to present a sort of scholarly consensus.³ According to him, Antiochus IV Epiphanes had intervened twice in Jerusalem, plundering the Temple (in 169 and 168 BCE), and as part of the second of these operations he established a fort, Akra, in the city. He believes that the tradition of martyrs arose from the relatively small number of people killed. He rules out, however, that Antiochus IV sought to unify local religions and impose a Greek model on them. Rather, it must be thought that Antiochus relied on political considerations, seeking a foothold in Jerusalem as a Hellenised city. Frevel does, however, think that some action was taken against the followers of Judaism:

According to biblical sources, circumcision was forbidden (2 Macc. 6:6, 10), the Sabbath and other feasts were suppressed (Dan 7:25; 2 Macc. 6:6, 11), and the distinction between clean and unclean animals was broken by eating pork. Whether the compulsion to worship deities other than YHWH was imposed (1 Macc. 1:47) remains controversial. The temple was indeed dedicated to Zeus Olympios (2 Macc. 6:2), yeti it is unlikely that this corresponds to a statue of Zeus being erected in the temple. Rather it seems, following Othmar Keel, to relate to the *interpretatio graeca* for YHWH.⁴

It seems Frevel is critical of the possibility that Yahweh's place of worship was forcibly transformed into a pagan place of worship, although he recognises that there was an introduction of pig sacrifices, which was the essence of the Temple's ritual pollution:

It is unlikely to refer [“abomination of desolation”] one or more standing stones, which were erected as an obvious expression of forced syncretism and for the worship of the gods Hada-Zeus, Anat-Athene, and Adonis-Dionysus, but rather to an altar construction in connection with the newly introduced pig sacrifices.⁵

For Frevel, it appears that the version from the books of Maccabees presents a certain vision mainly explaining the reason for the outbreak of the Maccabean uprising, and that the religious context of Antiochus' actions—while it certainly included the introduction of some non-Yahwist worship in Jerusalem involving the use of pig sacrifices—was rather incidental, and not at the centre of the king's intentions.

² Honigman 2014; Adler 2022, 226–228.

³ Frevel 2023, 520–524. Cf. Gera 1998, 223–230; Garbini 2008, 237–244; Ziółkowski 2010, 631–635.

⁴ Frevel 2023, 522.

⁵ Frevel 2023, 523.

There have also been some contributions to the literature showing the topical nature of the descriptions of the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 1 Maccabees and Daniel.⁶ The authors of these studies do not pose the thesis that the stereotypical description of an "evil" foreign king who oppresses the Jews implies the fictionality of the entire narrative about it. It does, however, provide a strong argument for critically assessing the historical value of these sources and demands that these narratives be treated accordingly.⁷

The traditional view, emphasising the role of Hellenisation and the followers of Greek culture on the course of events preceding the Maccabean uprising, was well embodied by Rainer Albertz:

And when in 167 BCE the radical reforms even used the power of the Seleucid state in a kind of shock therapy on the population to eliminate all the rites of the Jewish tradition which separated them from Hellenistic environment and incorporate the official Jerusalem Yahweh cult into the religious thought-world of Hellenism, open rebellion broke out.⁸

Daniel Schwartz, in his commentary on 1 Maccabees, presents rather traditional interpretation of events. What concerns the edict of Antiochus he put as follows:

All, or almost all, agree that the next two episodes are Antiochus's decrees against Judaism and the Judean revolt, but the order of the two is disputed. The decrees, detailed in 1 Macc 1:41–50 and 2 Macc 6:1–9, forbade, on penalty of death, the observance of Jewish law (prime examples cited include circumcision and dietary laws), required participation in a pagan cult, and were accompanied by a cessation of the Temple cult and introduction of a pagan altar (see the Note on 1:54, *abomination of desolation*) into the Temple of Jerusalem. As for the revolt: 1 Maccabees 2 and 2 Maccabees 8 report that it was led by the Hasmonean family, came after Antiochus's decrees, and was provoked by those decrees

However, there is some reason to believe that in fact a Judean revolt that was not led by the Hasmoneans preceded the decrees and provoked them. (p. 54) [...]

But if suggestions as to why Antiochus would, without provocation, impose decrees against Judaism are not satisfactory, it is warranted to consider the opposite reconstruction: that the Judeans first rebelled and Antiochus's decrees against Judaism were part of his attempt to put the rebellion down. Imagining the latter part of this is no problem: compare Hadrian's repression of Judaism in the 130s, after the outbreak of the Bar-Kochva rebellion, or recall Roman persecution of Christians on the grounds that Christian belief precluded loyalty to the emperor. But the former part entails two questions: (1) *Why* would Judeans rebel against Antiochus, and (2) what *evidence* is there that they did?

As for *why*: Two suggestions may easily be made on the basis of the survey offered above. First, the Roman humiliation of Antiochus, in the summer of 168, easily could have awakened nationalist hopes among the Judeans. The Hebrew Bible offers any number of prophecies of the restitution of Judean sovereignty, and it is not at all difficult to show, from such nearly contemporary works as Ben-Sira and Daniel, that such prophecies were not forgotten. Any Judean who read or remembered the end of Haggai, for example, which promises that God would "overthrow the thrones of kings" and instead enthrone a Davidic ruler, and had heard from his father of Antiochus III's humiliation at Magnesia and in his own day of Antiochus IV's humiliation in Alexandria, might easily think the end to be imminent and set out to help realize that dream. Probably

⁶ Weitzman 2004; Niskanen 2004.

⁷ Cf. Olson 2013, 239–241.

⁸ Albertz 1994, 542.

something of that atmosphere lies behind the heavily charged apocalyptic expectation in Daniel, a work of the 160s.

Moreover, as explained above, the institutionalized Hellenization in Jerusalem, which must have riled traditionally oriented Judeans, was undertaken and proceeded under the auspices of Antiochus, after whom the *polis* was named. It would have been quite difficult for ancient Judeans to prevent their hostility to Hellenizers, who had the king's ear and support, to flow over into hostility toward the king. So when, after the Roman intervention in Egypt, the king was thought to be on the ropes, they had all the more reason to rebel. (p. 56) [...]

I would summarize this discussion of the second and third parts of the story, namely Antiochus's decrees against Judaism and the Judean rebellion, by saying that there have been two main polar positions among scholars, with one in between. Heinemann, on the one hand, insisted that the first stage of the story, Hellenism in Jerusalem, is to be sharply distinguished from Antiochus's persecution of Judaism, so a separate reason is needed for the latter; he located it in Antiochus's desire to unify his kingdom. Bickerman, at the other pole, argued that Antiochus's decrees were basically a continuation and intensification, with royal support, of the Hellenizers' own actions. Here I have taken a third position: adopting Tcherikover's hypothesis of a Judean but non-Hasmonean Judean rebellion that preceded and provoked Antiochus's decrees, I have argued that while that rebellion broke out when Antiochus's troubles in Egypt made it seem that it had a chance, it was nurtured by hostility toward Antiochus's Judean clients, who had established, in his honor and with his permission and patronage, a Greek *polis*, "Antioch in Jerusalem," where once there had been only "the holy city" (1 Macc 2:7; 2 Macc 3:1). (pp. 57–58)⁹

Here is how Schwartz reconstructs the entire sequence of events and their causes:¹⁰

- The anti-Jewish edict of Antiochus IV and the revolt of the Jews are historically certain. However, the sequence of events is uncertain.
- Antiochus IV had no objective reasons for his anti-Jewish actions.
- The justification for the edict is the revolt of the Jews.
- In 168 BCE the Jews revolted but it was not a revolt of the Maccabees, which triggered anti-Jewish religious restrictions.
- The literary sources (esp. 1 Maccabees) are pro-Maccabean and are therefore silent about the protagonists of the "first" Jewish revolt.
- Antiochus IV issued an anti-Judaic edict in 167 BCE and abrogated it in the spring of 164 BCE.
- The autumn of 164 BCE saw the cleansing of the Temple of elements of foreign worship and the restoration of pure Yahweh worship.

Sylvie Honigman, referred to by Schwartz only in a footnote, who raises fiscal aspects as the main reason for the Maccabean uprising, states:

The literary analysis proposed below in Chapter 6 supports the conclusion that the notion of a decree 'prohibiting the Jewish customs' has no historical basis. That said, it is plausible that Antiochos promulgated a decree with a totally different purpose whose content was either severely distorted by the popular Judean memory or reinterpreted in a contentious way by the author of 1 Maccabees. I contend that the actual decree announced punishing measures following the crushing of the popular rebellion. Alternatively, in tune with John Ma's hypothesis that Geron

⁹ Schwartz 2022, 54, 56–58.

¹⁰ Schwartz 2022, 54–58.

was the lawgiver of the refounded polis, 1 Maccabees may contain a distorted echo of the foundation decree.¹¹

In her reconstruction, there is no place for a decree against Jewish worship issued "without reason." She acknowledges that an act concerning Jewish religious matters was indeed issued, and that our sources present it in a very distorted way. This does not change the fact that Honigman's hypothesis regarding the historicity of the edict can be reduced to the thesis that the king issued some regulation that in some way concerned Jews. It is difficult to disagree with such a conclusion. Arguably, there was a great deal of legislation issued by Seleucid rulers that applied to the population as a whole or to particular local communities. However, if one accepts that Honigman recognises that certain legislation concerning the establishment of a *polis* in Jerusalem may have struck at traditional Yahwistic worship, her position is not as far from the traditional interpretation as it might seem.

As it seems, the most far-reaching hypothesis has recently been put forward by Johannes Ch. Bernhardt.¹² He emphasises the key role of the "Day of Eleusis," i.e. the Roman intervention in Antiochus Epiphanes's war in Egypt in 168 BCE. He argues that there was no supposedly separate "party" of Judean Hellenizers, and that internal politics in Judah was organised along the axis of rivalry between priestly families and parties. Bernhardt does not believe in Antiochus' decree striking at the religion of the Jews and believes that the king's actions were only intended to secure his subjects' loyalty.

The author of the current article had offered a similar reconstruction of events in a text printed in 2016, and earlier delivered at a conference in Copenhagen in 2013.¹³

Several scholars have argued that the edict of Antiochus IV Epiphanes was a form of punishment for rebellion and/or was issued as part of the repression and promotion of Greek worship, and, as it were, struck at the religious freedom of the Jews.¹⁴ This was already claimed by John Ma:

There was no persecution of the Jews but a series of administrative measures in the aftermath of rebellion, real or perceived, at Jerusalem. [...] there was no edict of interdiction. Interdiction was the by-product of several factors: administrative measures; the loss of self-governance, laws, and shrines as punishment for revolt; and integration within a royal city as part of a synecism, and within the royal city's religious and civic culture of festivals and the ruler cult. The "abomination of the desolation," the interdiction of the Mosaic Law, and the obligation to participate in "pagan" cult were matters of administrative history. They were not religious.¹⁵

Edward Dąbrowa slightly modifies his earlier view and argues that the edict in its present form at 1 Maccabees is fictitious, but that some action against Jewish devotees is possible.¹⁶ He reconstructs the process in such a way that the foundation of a *polis* in Jerusalem coincided with acts directed against traditional forms of Yahweh worship. Menelaos

¹¹ Honigman 2014, 22; cf. 244–250.

¹² Bernhardt 2017.

¹³ Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016.

¹⁴ Dąbrowa 2024, 426–427.

¹⁵ Ma 2013.

¹⁶ Dąbrowa 2026.

in this reconstruction would have been the priest of the cult of the Greek polis, not Yahweh. Dąbrowa—following Bickerman—considers that the origins of the conflict against the traditional religion of the Jews should be sought in the radical attitudes of the Hellenists, who decided to implement Greek cultural practices, of which polytheistic worship was to be an element, at all costs. An additional argument in support of the thesis of the authenticity of the anti-Judaic law itself—according to Dąbrowa and many of his predecessors—is to be provided by 1 Macc 6:58–60; 2 Macc 13:23; Josephus, *AJ* 12.381–383, which refers to an alleged revocation of earlier anti-Judaic legislation:

Daily we grow weaker, our food supply is scant, the place against which we are fighting is strong, and the affairs of the kingdom press urgently on us. Now, then, let us come to terms with these people and make peace with them and with all their nation. Let us agree to let them live by their laws as they did before, for it was on account of their laws that we abolished that they became angry and did all these things. (1 Macc 6:57–60; biblical quotations come from NRSV)

There are two arguments against Dąbrowa's claims. First, equating the political structure of the Greek *polis* in Jerusalem and the polytheistic cults is merely a hypothesis for which there is no decisive basis. For we do not know what type of political entity Jerusalem was, and we know even less about its official cult(s). A second argument provides 2 Macc 4:18–20, for it speaks of the dispatch of the Hellenists—“being Antiochenes from Jerusalem.”

When the quadrennial games were being held at Tyre and the king was present, the vile Jason sent envoys, chosen as being Antiochenes from Jerusalem, to carry three hundred silver drachmas for the sacrifice to Hercules. Those who carried the money, however, thought best not to use it for sacrifice, because that was inappropriate, but to expend it for another purpose. So this money was intended by the sender for the sacrifice to Hercules, but by the decision of its carriers it was applied to the construction of triremes. (2 Macc 4:18–20)

Despite their clear connection to Greek culture, the envoys sent to offer sacrifices to Melkart (here referred to as Hercules) refrain from doing so, making a sacrifice to the political community of Tyre for the construction of the triremes. If a diplomatic delegation of Jewish Hellenists had qualms about making offerings to another god in Tyre, why should they not in Jerusalem? This tradition, if considered reliable, shows Jewish-Hellenists taking part in a politico-religious event such as the *agon* organised in honour of the king at Tyre. Despite the fact that the whole event is fully Hellenistic in content and form, the Jewish delegates, have religious doubts and avoid making sacrifices to a foreign god. This is a clear sign that the Jewish-Hellenists are not to be identified with opponents of Judaism, or even particular elements of Jewish customs. This passus is in clear opposition to the claim that being a Hellenist meant, by definition, taking action against traditional Judaism, which one would have to accept if one were to agree with the hypothesis that the legal strictures against the worship of Yahweh arose from the inspiration of Jewish Hellenists.

Moreover, another difficulty for the acceptance of Dąbrowa's hypothesis is his view that with the cleansing of the Temple in 164 BCE by the Jews, Menelaos continued to be the priest of a polytheistic cult. For we do not know whether such dualism would have meant the simultaneous existence of two places of worship in Jerusalem, or whether,

rather, a priest of a different cult from that restored by the Maccabees continued to administer in the cleansed temple.

The argument is based on taking the information in 1 Macc 6:58–60 and 2 Macc 13:23 as reliable and, indeed, on the same belief that has led many scholars to believe in the historicity of the anti-Jewish edict of Antiochus IV itself. I will try to show below that these references may be as fictitious as the edict of Antiochus itself.¹⁷

John Ma considers the four letters cited in 2 Macc 11:16–38 to be authentic and concludes from them that Menelaos and his entourage were involved in the correspondence with Lysias and Antiochus V, and that the decisions of the Seleucid authorities signified the revocation of the laws of Antiochus IV affecting the cult of the Jews.¹⁸ Among these four letters, three are uncontroversial and appear to be diplomatic letters of a rather general nature (2 Macc 11:16–21; 27–38). In one case, however, one can clearly see a very detailed knowledge of the situation of the Jews after the alleged anti-Judaic edict of Antiochus IV:

King Antiochus to his brother Lysias, greetings. Now that our father has gone on to the gods, we desire that the subjects of the kingdom be undisturbed in caring for their own affairs. We have heard that the Jews do not consent to our father's change to Greek customs but prefer their own way of living and ask that their own customs be allowed them. Accordingly, since we choose that this nation also should be free from disturbance, our decision is that their temple be restored to them and that they shall live according to the customs of their ancestors. You will do well, therefore, to send word to them and give them pledges of friendship, so that they may know our policy and be of good cheer and go on happily in the conduct of their own affairs. (2 Macc 11:22–26)

Goldstein interpreted the text of this letter as coming from a different collection from the rest of the letters,¹⁹ after which he changed his mind and considered vv. 22–26 as an integral part of the original collection of documents.²⁰ Detailed arguments related to the dating and sequence of the four letters and the possible distinctiveness of letter B (vv. 22–26) are also given by Daniel R. Schwartz.²¹

Later tradition clearly recognised the need to refer in 2 Macc 11 to the edict of Antiochus IV and made changes in 2 Macc 11:31, among others, where it specifies: *χρησθαί τοὺς Ἰουδαίους τοῖς ἑαυτῶν δαπανήμασι καὶ νόμοις, καθὰ καὶ τὸ πρότερον*. The commentators who accept the emendation of the text by changing *dapanēmata* to *diaitēmata* are right: “for the Jews to enjoy their own customs and laws, just as formerly” (so also NRSV).²² By adopting this change in the text, the letter of King Antiochus V acquires a rather vague content, indicating the extension of royal favour to subjects who, under an amnesty presumably linked to the new monarch's assumption of rule, will not be subject to the punishments imposed on them in the past because of the revolt of the year 168 BCE. Only the preceding letter thus explicitly indicates the repeal of the provisions restricting cultic rights and religious customs, i.e. it refers to the anti-Judaic edict of Antiochus IV. For this reason, its originality may be somewhat questionable.

¹⁷ Cf. Bernhardt 2017, 238–239, 255–261.

¹⁸ Ma 2013.

¹⁹ Goldstein 1976, 98.

²⁰ Goldstein 1983, 407.

²¹ Schwartz 2008, 396–397.

²² Goldstein 1983, 421–422; *contra* Schwartz 2008, 549–550.

The above brief review of the existing literature on the subject shows that scholars have obvious doubts about the historicity of the events described in Maccabees related to the alleged anti-Jewish edict of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his actions directed against Jewish worship and ritual. At the same time, the strength of the biblical tradition, in many cases, leads scholars to recognise that even if the details of these anti-Judaic actions appear to be fictitious, they are based on some historically plausible basis. This is despite the apparent bias of the sources and the lack of analogies from other parts of the Hellenistic world. This shows how deeply the biblical tradition of the bad king and the good Maccabees has imprinted on modern scholarship. In the following section of this text, I will present a reconstruction, based on an attempt to free ourselves from the ballast created by the authors of the Bible being Hasmonean propaganda.

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The events that preceded the Maccabees' rise to power, I argue, were as follows:²³

- 170–168 BCE—The Sixth Syrian War.
- Autumn 168 BCE—Antiochus IV meets the Roman legate Gaius Popillius Laenas and is humiliated by him; the Syrian army leaves Egypt (Polyb. 29.27; Livy 45.12).²⁴
- Winter 168/167 BCE—Rumours of Antiochus' death spread, inspiring Jason's revolt (2 Macc 5:5–27). Jason's revolt was political in nature and was a manifestation of the activity of a pro-Ptolemaic political group who hoped that the death of Antiochus would be followed by the breaking of the front and the return of the Ptolemies to rule Judea.²⁵ The calculation about the Egyptians returning to rule Judea after 32 years may seem naïve, but it would have been no exception in the world of the time. Pro-Ptolemaic party must have been supported by the Ptolemies, and had the natural local “fuel” based on the hard times of Seleucid fiscal pressure, as a result of the Peace of Apamea (188 BCE) with Rome and the need to pay enormous contributions for 10 years.²⁶
- Winter 168/167 BCE—Pacification of Jerusalem by Antioch; escape of Jason (= 1 Macc 1:20–24). “Bloodbath” = death of martyrs (2 Macc 6:18–7:42). Antiochus IV, withdrawing his army from Egypt, found a rebellion at the rear of the front in an attempt to remove his appointee Menelaus. The king had to take spectacular action in this situation to 1) punish the direct perpetrators of the revolt; 2) secure the loyalty of the local population.
- The former was accomplished through the public execution of the participants in the rebellion. “[T]hese punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people” (2 Macc 6:12).
- The second action—to ensure loyalty to the king—was done by ordering public and forced sacrifices for the king's prosperity by all the inhabitants of Judah

²³ Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016. Cf. Bernhardt 2017.

²⁴ Cf. Gera 1998, 140–143.

²⁵ Gera 1998, 153–157. In this context cf. esp. Lorber 2019.

²⁶ Gera 1998, 158–161.

- (1 Macc 1:51–55), or at least, like Matthias of Modin, the most important members of the community: “The king’s officers who were enforcing the apostasy came to the town of Modein to make them offer sacrifice. Many from Israel came to them, and Mattathias and his sons were assembled. Then the king’s officers spoke to Mattathias as follows: ‘You are a leader, honoured and great in this town, and supported by sons and brothers. Now be the first to come and do what the king commands, as all the nations and the people of Judah and those who are left in Jerusalem have done. Then you and your sons will be numbered among the Friends of the king, and you and your sons will be honored with silver and gold and many gifts.’” (1 Macc 2: 15–19).
- 168–159 BCE—period of control of worship in Jerusalem by Menelaos and Alkimos, loyal to the Seleucids, with the presence of Seleucid garrison in Akra.²⁷
 - 164 BCE—Judah enters to Jerusalem and “clean” the Temple.
 - Autumn 164 BCE—amnesty for Jews issued by Antiochus V after he took over from his father, marking the repeal of the laws punishing Jews for rebellion from 168 BCE.
 - 159–152 BCE—vacancy in the office of high priest.

Crucial to the interpretation of events is the evaluation of two facts: 1) the five years between 164 and 159 BCE when, after the Temple was cleansed by the Maccabees, it remained under the administration of legitimate high priests loyal to Seleucid authority,²⁸ and 2) the seven years when the office of the High Priest was left vacant, after the death of Alkimos and before the appointment of Jonathan to the office (cf. Josephus, *AJ* 20.237). These issues for sure deserve further studies and may be touch upon here only briefly.

I think both of these events indicate that the strong polarisation between the Hellenists including the priests, and the *hassidim*, led by the Hasmoneans, is a secondary creation of the authors of the books of Maccabees, and that the internal divisions ran along different lines than the polarising alignment suggests: reformers deviant—pious patriots. I believe that on both sides there were deeply Hellenized people at the head of political groups.

The first shows that it was the high priests—Menelaos and then Alkimos—who enjoyed not only the support of the Seleucids, but also of the people, who, even knowing the growing power and ambitions of the Maccabees, recognised the supremacy of the priests appointed by the king. There is therefore no question of resentment towards the Hellenists. More important here was the legitimacy of their holding the office of high priest, which involved the will of the king in the Seleucids. The same applies to the period after the death of Alkimos. Until the decision to appoint Jonathan as high priest by King Alexander Balas (152 BCE), the religious community accepted the vacancy. This was despite Jonathan’s actual authority over Jerusalem, but in the absence of a royal appointment (1 Macc 10:6–11). This shows that the high priest was more of an official responsible for administrative and fiscal activity (without whom the community could

²⁷ Josephus’ claim (*AJ* 12.414) that Judas Maccabaeus would have become high priest after the death of Alkimos is certainly incorrect.

²⁸ Garbini (2008, 242) accepts the version given by Josephus (*AJ* 12.414) that after the death of Alkimos, the high priestly function was assumed by Judah, which, however, seems to be incorrect both because of chronological difficulties (death of Alkimos 159 BCE and Judah 160 BCE) and the lack of support in other sources.

do without for seven years) and less of a chief priest. Indeed, if the absence of the high priest for seven years were to block the possibility of worship, then one would expect disturbances from the faithful, and we do not hear of such.

In my reconstruction, I start by reinterpreting the relationship between the Hellenists and the Maccabees. The political actions of the Hellenistic groups emanated from the ambitions of a larger group that sought to modernise the country and develop it. One should not—following the author of Maccabees—regard the Hellenists as radical innovators in conflict with the traditional majority of society. Hellenists were people at the top of society, including the most respected priests and aristocratic families such as the Tobiads. The antagonism between the Hellenists and the pious Maccabees is more a literary construction than an actual political polarisation. It is, after all, the Maccabean milieu that is behind the writing down (in Greek!) of both books of the Maccabees, it was their family members who, in next generation, used Greek names—Alexander, or the Greek title on coins—*basileus*. One could have been, apparently, a Hellenist and a devout Yahwist in the same time. So were the delegates to Tyre.

At the same time, let us remember that if we accept that the Jews were punished for Jason's rebellion of 168 BCE by the creation of a *polis* in Jerusalem, this would mean not so much that the Jewish administration of the city was curtailed as that the Jews were given a privileged status, linked, for example, to tax concessions. Is this being done to punish a city? In this hypothesis, the only rational explanation would be to interpret the *polis Antiocheia* in Jerusalem as a colony, and therefore that the citizens of this community were to be exclusively newcomers, non-Jews. This interpretation is supported by, among other things, the references to the construction of Akra (1 Macc 1:33–38). Such an interpretation, however, would be in complete contradiction with the biblical tradition about the role of the Jewish-Hellenists. Perhaps, however, it should be considered that the role of the Jews-Hellenists was deliberately altered by the authors of Maccabees? Then the foreign cults in Jerusalem could be explained by their being brought by their users. A military crew was settled in Akra, who—especially after the revolt of Jason in 168 BCE—enjoyed privileges, including religious freedom, which may have offended the Jews.²⁹

I am therefore inclined to conclude that the events of 168 BCE and the period immediately following it gave rise to three phenomena which took the form of literary fiction in the version of 1 Maccabees—the story of the religious persecution of the Jews by Antiochus and the issuing of a special anti-Judaic edict: 1) the appearance of non-Jews in Jerusalem and for their cause of foreign worship; 2) the public executions carried out on those involved in the revolt of Jason; 3) the coercion of Jews to offer sacrifices for the prosperity of the king to ensure his continued Jewish loyalty.³⁰

²⁹ Eckhardt 2021.

³⁰ Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016. On epigraphical data of honoring Seleucid and Ptolemaic kings, cf. Lorber 2022; Lorber 2023.

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In the following section I will present a hypothesis explaining the intellectual origins, within the Judean Biblical world, of the fictional narrative about Antiochus IV's supposed edict against the Jews in 1 Maccabees.

⁴¹ Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people ⁴² and that all should give up their particular customs. All the nations accepted the command of the king. ⁴³ Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the Sabbath. ⁴⁴ And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, ⁴⁵ to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane Sabbaths and festivals, ⁴⁶ to defile the sanctuary and the holy ones, ⁴⁷ to build altars and sAkrad precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals, ⁴⁸ and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane ⁴⁹ so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. ⁵⁰ He added, "And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die."

⁵¹ In such words he wrote to his whole kingdom. He appointed inspectors over all the people and commanded the towns of Judah to offer sacrifice, town by town. ⁵² Many of the people, everyone who forsook the law, joined them, and they did evil in the land; ⁵³ they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had.

⁵⁴ Now on the fifteenth day of Chislew, in the one hundred forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding towns of Judah ⁵⁵ and offered incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets. ⁵⁶ The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. ⁵⁷ Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant or anyone who adhered to the law was condemned to death by decree of the king.

⁵⁸ They kept using violence against Israel, against those who were found month after month in the towns. ⁵⁹ On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar that was on top of the altar of burnt offering. ⁶⁰ According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised ⁶¹ and their families and those who circumcised them, and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks. (1 Macc 1:41–61)

The following themes present in 1 Macc 1:41–61 deserve particular attention:

1. The extension of the law to the inhabitants of the whole country and a plan for the formation of a single nation (vv. 41–42).
2. Prohibition of specific cultic practices of Judaism (vv. 44–46).
3. The introduction of "pagan" worship (vv. 47, 54–55).
4. Prohibition of circumcision (vv. 48, 60–61).
5. The purpose of the action—to make the Judeans forget their laws, under threat of death (vv. 48–50).
6. Profanation of an altar in the Temple (v. 54).
7. Banning the possession of a copy of the Bible (vv. 56–57).³¹

³¹ The passage on "a desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt offerings" is one of the most frequently commented upon, and most obscure, terms in this text. Cf. Nodet 2005, 300–320.

1. The extension of the law to the inhabitants of the whole country and a plan for the formation of a single nation (vv. 41–42): *Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people and that all should give up their particular customs.* (εἶναι πάντας εἰς λαὸν ἓνα καὶ ἐγκαταλιπεῖν ἕκαστον τὰ νόμιμα αὐτοῦ).

The very idea that a law promulgated by Antiochus IV should cover all the subjects of his state is not in doubt. This was certainly the case at the time when the Seleucids had to raise taxes in search of new revenue after 188 BCE. What does raise doubts among scholars is the idea that such a state-wide provision would apply to matters of religion and worship. Hellenistic rulers did not pass laws restricting freedom of worship.³² There are occasional regulations by monarchs who supported individual temples and worship. In these cases, these measures were local in nature, due to the very structure of the various religions and cults within a internally diverse state.

Particularly striking is the purpose of this alleged right, described by two terms: *all should be one people and that all should give up their particular customs.* The notion of creating a “one people” (λαός εις) in the Seleucid kingdom is completely implausible, given the internal diversity of the subjects and the differences in their cultures, languages and religions. The addendum to this provision, the prohibition of “particular customs” (ὁ νόμιμος αὐτοῦ) also sounds implausible and smacks of totalitarianism.

Such a postulate could not have been born in the mind of the leaders of a Hellenistic kingdom whose foundations were internal diversities. However, it is possible to point to a legacy that could have fertilised the writer in this respect. It is the biblical patrimony expanded around the idea of a chosen people. The conflict postulated by the authors of the Hebrew Bible between the peoples and Israel resonates well in Deuteronomy:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you— and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sAkrad poles, and burn their idols with fire. **For you are a people holy** (λαὸς ἅγιος) **to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.** (Deut 7:1–6)

The idea of a single people, chosen from among the others, is not only present here, but also the tension between foreign peoples and especially their religion, or customs.

In the absence of an explicit Hellenistic basis for the idea of the creation of one people in the kingdom and an aversion to different local customs, we see this idea expressed *expressis verbis* in the Hebrew Bible. In the history of the Jews, however, this theme appears not only in their literary works but, it seems, was also implemented in practice. This is probably how the actions attributed to John Hyrcanus by Josephus should be understood:

³² Nodet 2005, 150–151.

Hyrcanus also captured the Idumaeen cities of Adora and Marisa, and after subduing all the Idumaeans, permitted them to remain in their country so long as they had themselves circumcised and were willing to observe the laws of the Jews. And so, out of attachment to the land of their fathers, they submitted to circumcision and to making their manner of life conform in all other respects to that of the Jews (καὶ τὴν περιτομὴν καὶ τὴν ἄλλην τοῦ βίου διάταξιν ὑπέμειναν τὴν αὐτὴν Ἰουδαίως ποιήσασθαι). And from that time on they have continued to be Jews. (Josephus, *AJ* 13.257–258)

Even if Josephus' story should be approached critically, there is no doubt that his sources contain information about forced conversions of Idumeans to Judaism. Thus, the Maccabees' implementation of the postulate: one state—one religion.

2. Prohibition of specific cultic practices of Judaism (vv. 44–46): *And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane Sabbaths and festivals, to defile the sanctuary and the holy ones.*

This passage has two elements. Firstly, it refers to letters (βιβλία) sent to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah with the command “to follow customs strange to the land” (νομίμων ἀλλοτρίων τῆς γῆς). Secondly, it indicates the element of Jewish worship that was to be banned. Would Antiochus have had reason to impose some religious practice alien to the Jews? It is conceivable to urge them to offer sacrifices for the king's prosperity, but this kind of activity would probably not be called “customs.” We have already seen foreign customs in Deut 7 as a source of religious deviation. The prohibition mentioned in this passages seems to summarise the most important—from the perspective of the Jewish religious elite of the time—elements of Judaism: 1) burnt offerings; 2) sacrifices; 3) drink offerings in the sanctuary; 4) Sabbaths; 5) festivals; 6) the sanctuary; 7) the holy ones (καὶ κωλύσαι ὀλοκαυτώματα καὶ θυσίαν καὶ σπονδὴν ἐκ τοῦ ἁγιάσματος καὶ βεβηλῶσαι σάββατα καὶ ἑορτὰς καὶ μιᾶναι ἁγίασμα καὶ ἅγιους).

Some scholars consider it historically possible that under some circumstances Antiochus IV punished the Jews by banning them from performing their religious practices in the Jerusalem temple. We have to keep in mind, however, that we do not find information about the supposed actions against the Jewish religious practice in Daniel.³³ It seems that such an action would have had a difficult to predict effect and may not have led to Antiochus securing the loyalty of this people. This therefore gives the impression of a Jewish list of cultic principals. The role of the Temple is evident in this list, which agrees with our knowledge of the Maccabees' legitimation of power by cultic arguments. It is thanks to them—as the author of 1 Maccabees argues—that the forbidden sacrifices were restored and worship takes place according to the precepts of tradition.

The presence here of “Sabbaths” and significantly the term “the holy ones” (ἅγιους) deserve separate attention. In the case of the latter term, Schwartz is probably right in thinking that it refers to objects of worship in the sanctuary.³⁴ But what can the term “to profane Sabbaths” (βεβηλῶσαι σάββατα) mean? The cultic activities mentioned in this

³³ Bernhardt 2017, 258–260.

³⁴ Schwartz 2022, 171.

sequence indicated a sanctuary. Were Sabbaths also rituals celebrated—like other festivals—in a temple?

And what would their profanation consist in. Let us remember, however, that the celebration of the Sabbath was only just gaining its form, and probably took shape no earlier than the first century BCE.³⁵ For the authors of Maccabees themselves and its protagonists, it was not clear as to what was necessary in order to celebrate the Sabbath, as evidenced by 1 Macc 2:32–40; 2 Macc 5:25; 6:11. In these texts, one can clearly see a postulated form concerning the observance of the Sabbath, a picture of a situation when the custom was not universally recognised, and the authors of Maccabees sought to popularise it.

The verse preceding the information about the introduction of these actions of Antiochus in the religious sphere speaks of the Jews who were to favour them (v. 43): “Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the Sabbath.”

3. The introduction of “pagan” worship (vv. 47, 54–55): *to build altars and sAkrad precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals* (καὶ οἰκοδομηῆσαι βωμοὺς καὶ τεμένη καὶ εἰδωλεῖα καὶ θύειν ἕια καὶ κτήνη κοινὰ) [...] *They also built altars in the surrounding towns of Judah and offered incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets.*

The theme of the construction of altars and the installation of places of worship for foreign gods clearly alludes to the prohibition of their creation in the Old Testament. The injunction to sacrifice pigs and unclean animals also alludes to biblical interpretations regarding ritual laws.³⁶ However, it is noteworthy here that the sentence about the construction of altars and the sacrifices of pigs and unclean animals does not necessarily refer to Jerusalem. The preceding sentence refers to letters sent to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, but it is not explicitly stated where these objects of worship were to be installed. There is therefore the possibility that this sentence did not refer to the sanctuary of YHWH in Jerusalem, but to other locations. This does not, of course, change the negative context that was intended by the authors. Wherever in Judah it was intended to install the worship of foreign gods and to offer unclean sacrifices to them there would be a violation of biblical laws. However, if this did not take place in the Jerusalem sanctuary, the gravity of this “deviation” would nevertheless be somewhat less than if we saw pig sacrifices here on the altar of YHWH in the central Temple in Jerusalem.

4. Prohibition of circumcision (vv. 48, 60–61): *and to leave their sons uncircumcised. [...] According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised and their families and those who circumcised them, and they hung the infants from their mothers’ necks.* (cf. 2 Macc 6:10).

The prohibition of circumcision of boys, in practice, would have been a regulation without clear meaning. The text of 1 Macc presents it among the religious measures that were intended to be directed against the Jews, and therefore either to be a punishment for them (e.g. for rebellion and insubordination) or to be an expression of resentment towards this group with unexplained reasons. However, it is not difficult to see in this

³⁵ Adler 2022, 136–145.

³⁶ Schwartz 2022, 171–172.

postulation echoes of the discussion of circumcision as a mark of Jewish identity, as expressed, for example, by the 1 Macc 1:14–15: “So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the customs of the nations, and **made foreskins for themselves, and abandoned the holy covenant**. They joined with the nations and sold themselves to do evil” (cf. Schwartz 2022, 157–158, 159–160). It is clear that 1 Macc 1:14–15 echoes the familiar tone of the definition of religious community from Deut 7 and alludes to the etiological stories establishing circumcision as a sign of inclusion in the community of the chosen people, the Covenant side with God:

God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Gen 17:9–14)

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.” So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the warriors, had died during the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt. Although all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people born on the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the Israelites traveled forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the warriors who came out of Egypt, perished, not having listened to the voice of the LORD. To them the LORD swore that he would not let them see the land that he had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised, for they were uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way. (Josh 5:2–7)

Giving circumcision the status of a covenant sign probably occurred already in the Babylonian captivity, since it was a practice not known there. Giving religious significance to a common hygienic practice among the people of the Levant and Egypt only made sense in an environment that did not practice it.³⁷ References in Maccabees show, however, that the sign was to become a subject of debate in the second century BCE.³⁸ The authors of 1 Macc 1:14–15 suggest a connection between the negative attitude of the Jews towards circumcision and gymnasium, i.e. nudity during athletic exercises. This is not stated explicitly, but it is often acknowledged by commentators that Hellenized Jews regarded circumcision as a sign of shame.³⁹ Bear in mind, however, that the text is speaking of the reluctance of some Jews to circumcise, not of a negative attitude towards the practice on the part of other peoples. In this light, the attribution to King Antiochus IV Epiphanes of an interest in the appearance of the *membra virilia* of the Jews seems implausible.

³⁷ Niesiolowski-Spanò – Stebnicka 2020, 196.

³⁸ Cf. Adler 2022, 132–136.

³⁹ Goldstein 1976, 200.

There is also the other side of the discussion about the role of circumcision. For not only could the discussion be about the importance of circumcision as a sign of the covenant contested by the Hellenists. It could also have been about the desirability and efficacy of using circumcision as a form of voluntary or forced conversion. The above-quoted passus from Josephus' *Antiquities* (13.257–258), showed an example of the coercion of circumcision imposed on the Idumeans.

However, the Bible also contains other literary themes in which circumcision is a pass to the community of Israel. The story of Dinah, here, is particularly interesting because the inhabitants of Shechem submit to circumcision, but this did not save them from bloody revenge at the hands of the sons of Jacob (Gen 34:24–26). A more optimistic scenario is presented in Judith: “When Achior saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly in God. So he was circumcised and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day.” (Jdt 14:10). It is worth recalling also at this point the quote from Ezekiel:

Say to the rebellious house, to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord GOD: O house of Israel, let there be an end to all your abominations in admitting foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple when you offer to me my food, the fat and the blood. You have broken my covenant with all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of my sAkrad offerings, but you have appointed foreigners to act for you in keeping my charge in my sanctuary. (Ezek. 44:6–8)

This passus could perfectly illustrate the situation in Jerusalem in 168 BCE and subsequent years, especially if the correct translation of the term *bene-nekar* (here as “foreigners”) is “apostates” or “inner-Israelite heretics.”⁴⁰

It can therefore be assumed that the appearance of the reference to the prohibition of circumcision, and the consequent punishment by death of mothers for breaking this prohibition, was an expression of the views of those Jews who regarded circumcision as an indispensable sign of Jewish identity. By constructing a strong narrative antagonism: the prohibition issued by an evil king—the heroic attitude of pious women giving their lives to keep the divine covenant (2 Macc 6:10), the authors emphasise the desirability of continuing circumcision and discourage the abandonment of the practice. Thus, this theme must have been part of a debate within the Jewish community about the boundaries that define identity and the ways in which they are defined.

5. The purpose of the action—to make the Judeans forget their laws, under threat of death (vv. 48–50): *They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. He added, “And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die”.*

On this point, the dimension of the punishment threatened for breaking the royal commandment is clear. The meaning of the command itself, however—it would seem—is not so clear.

What would be meant by *to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane* (βδελύξαι τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν ἐν παντὶ ἀκαθάρτῳ)? Schwartz has convincingly

⁴⁰ Cook 2018, 208: “The phrase *bēnē-nēkār* (outsiders) is universally misunderstood in modern English translations reference is not at all to ethnic foreigners, but to laity who encroach upon the raised inner courtyard of the temple.”

shown that ψυχή should be interpreted as equivalent to the Hebrew *nepeš*, and thus not necessarily "soul" but "self."⁴¹ However, it is still not entirely clear what these *everything unclean and profane*, by means of which people were to be defiled, were supposed to be. Schwartz has also rightly pointed out that this sentence seems to be based on Lev 11:43 (*You shall not make yourselves detestable with any creature that swarms; you shall not defile yourselves with them and so become unclean*) and Lev 20:25 (*You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean*). If it is so relevant, it is clear that it was not Antiochus IV who relied on the rules of Leviticus to determine the rules that Jews should break. Internal references to the Pentateuch text indicate the Jewish author of this text. But still, how is one to understand the intention of a law that would mandate Jews to eat amphibians and unclean animals? Could it be that one imagines that Antioch supports the lobby of sellers of frogs, or birds considered unclean?

This prescription is completely detached from reality. No Hellenistic ruler was interested in determining the ritual dietary habits of his subjects. It is clear here that the author of this regulation was someone from among the Jews. Thus, since the author relied on Leviticus then perhaps the very essence of this alleged prohibition concerns the intra-Jewish dispute over what is kosher, or more broadly: the principle of applying the principles of ritual kosher food? Yonatan Adler argues that the well attested observance of ritual dietary rules for Jewish communities can be clearly seen in the first century CE, but there is no strong evidence for them before the second century BCE. He therefore suspects that it was in the second century BCE that their introduction, or dissemination, took place.⁴² Was the author of the records in the alleged edict of Antiochus (1 Macc 1:48–50) involved in the then-current dispute over whether kosher should be rigorously observed? And if so, was the rhetorical device of constructing an image, the death penalty for adherence to biblical regulations, not too provocative?

The crucial element is perhaps v. 49, i.e. the expected effect of the application of the law forcing Jews to eat non-kosher food: *so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances* (καὶ βεβηλώσει, ὥστε ἐπιλαθῆσθαι τοῦ νόμου καὶ ἀλλάξαι πάντα τὰ δικαιώματα). Let us leave aside the possible validity of the claim that eating contrary to the rules of ritual purity, i.e. eating frogs' legs, for example, or any of the unclean birds, will cause a departure from the law (νόμος) and a change in all customs (πάντα τὰ δικαιώματα). The pair of these terms clearly refers to the pair in the Hebrew Bible: *Torah and mišwot*.⁴³ What the author of this text therefore particularly fears is the neglect of law and custom in the sense given to these terms by the Hebrew Bible. Since this is the case, the inevitable conclusion will be to recognise that, at the time of writing 1 Macc 1:48–50, the observance or rejection of biblical law may have been a matter subject to debate and required persuasion, including through emotional arguments. Such, after all, is the narrative construct in which a foreign ruler prohibits, on pain of death, the observance of law and custom. And here, again, we see a discourse within the Jews

⁴¹ Schwartz 2022, 172.

⁴² Adler 2022, 25–49.

⁴³ Schwartz 2022, 172.

of a religious nature, of which no Hellenistic ruler was probably aware. Nor was he probably curious about it.

6. Profanation of an altar in the Temple (vv. 54): *Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt offering* (καὶ τῆ πεντεκαιδεκάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ Χασελεῦ τῷ πέμπτῳ καὶ τεσσαρακοστῷ καὶ ἑκατοστῷ ἔτει ὤκοδόμησαν βδέλυγμα ἐρημώσεως ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον).

The commentators have particularly directed their interest to this passages from the alleged decree of Antiochus. In particular, the discussion focused on the attempt to identify the object that was to be set up in the temple.⁴⁴

Two aspects of the verse deserve particular attention here—the provision of a precise daily date for this event and the nature and location of the object in question.

The date—the fifteenth day of Kislev—points to November/December 167 BCE,⁴⁵ or as Goldstein, among others, wanted precisely on the 6th of December 167 BCE.⁴⁶ Commentators accept this date despite one Syriac manuscript where 25 Kislev is given, which would correspond to the version in 2 Macc 10:5: “It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Chislev.”

Also Josephus claims that the cleansing of the temple took place on the same day as its desecration, after a period of three years (*AJ* 12.320). A period close to three years is also indicated by the book of Daniel, where 2300 evenings and mornings, or 1150 days, are mentioned.⁴⁷ As can be seen from this, therefore, commentators do not so much build interpretations on the specific date of the desecration of the temple in 167 BCE, but on a pair of dates—the desecration and the cleansing of the temple—which would occur at some symbolically equal interval. Let us remember that for the event of 167 BCE, not only are there no extra-biblical sources confirming its date, there is not even the event itself. The same is true for the extra-biblical data on the cleansing of the temple in 164 BCE. The difference, however, is that the cleansing of the temple, which was to inspire a new festival, Hanukah, marked an event of importance to the community, whereas the desecration of the temple, whatever it actually was, must have been an embarrassing act, less readily commemorated. Thus, if we see a pair of dates: 167–164 BCE remaining in relation to each other in a symbolic relationship one must suppose that it is the latter that is more plausible, and that the date of desecration was added to it *ex post*. From this point of view, the mention of 15 Kislev 167 BCE has relatively little value as historical evidence, and should not be used as a binding argument for the reconstruction of Antiochus’ actions.

Sylvie Honigman argues that the profanation referred to in 1 Macc 1:45–46; 2 Macc 6:5–6 and Dan 11:31 was in fact the result of incidental acts, at the centre of which was the reconstruction of the altar by Menelaus. She therefore does not see these actions as deliberate acts directed against the cult, and attempts to rationalise the narrative of the sources by recognising that the provision of daily sacrifices, including for the prosperity

⁴⁴ Schwartz 2022, 173–174.

⁴⁵ Schwartz 2022, 173.

⁴⁶ Goldstein 1976, 163, 224.

⁴⁷ Boccaccini 2001, 325.

of the king, was considered unlawful by Menelaos' opponents.⁴⁸ As can be seen, this reasoning implies a certain amount of arbitrariness in the assessment of events and supposed intentions.

Somewhat similar is the case with the act of profanation itself, the erection of a *desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt offering*. Yes, the date of the purification seems to be a more certain data than the desecration of the temple, just as the description of the purification process may be more valuable than the description of its defilement.

Then Judas detailed men to fight against those in the citadel until he had cleansed the sanctuary. He chose blameless priests devoted to the law, and they cleansed the sanctuary and removed the defiled stones to an unclean place. They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. And they thought it best to tear it down, so that it would not be a lasting shame to them that the nations had defiled it. So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them. Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. (2 Macc 4:41–47)

Since the cleansing of the Temple required the destruction of the burnt altar itself and its re-building from scratch, this means that it was considered—and so the author of the text argues—that the defilement of the altar itself was more serious and permanent in relation to the altar material itself than the entire temple, which did not need to be destroyed, but only needed to be cleansed and consecrate. How, then, was the stone burnt altar defiled in such a way that it could not be cleaned and had to be replaced? Could the setting of anything on the altar lead, in even an extremely ritualised value system, to its irreversible defiling? This is a rhetorical question, because we will never know. Even if—as seems consistent with the context—pork sacrifices were offered *en masse* on this altar, it is not obvious that this would be such a profound blemish on the ritual purity of the altar as to have to destroy it. Moreover, the very term used there for the altar—*θυσιαστήριον*—refers exclusively to the cultic terminology of the LXX. So not only was it clearer to Greek Bible readers, and may have sounded unfamiliar (though understandable) to pagans, but it was also based on its Bible vocabulary.

I suppose the key point here is the symbolic significance of the construction of the new altar, and the very reason for its pollution is secondary. Well, Judah, decides to be like the new builder of the Temple and the altar. It does not matter, therefore, what was the cause of the defilement. What matters is that in 164 BCE, of which the new feast will remain a commemoration, Judah founded a new beginning for worship, in a manner analogous to the mythical times of Noah (Gen 8:20), Abram (Gen 12:7–8), as Moses was commanded (Exod 20:24–25), and as Joshua (Josh 8:30–31), David (1 Chr 21:26) and Solomon (1 Kgs 9:25) did. The information about the unhewn stones refers directly to Deuteronomy:

And you shall build an altar there to the LORD your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. You must build the altar of the LORD your God of unhewn stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God. (Deut 27:5–6)

⁴⁸ Honigman 2014, 401–402.

Therefore, I think that in the narrative of the defilement of the altar in Jerusalem, more important than the alleged act of Antiochus itself is the process of its restitution, making Judah the new founder of the cult. In this light, it does not matter what the enigmatic *a desolating sacrilege* (βδέλυγμα ἐρημώσεως) was. And even the ambiguity of this term must surely have been intentional. For something incomprehensible must have been the object that led to such a profound desecration of the altar, so often smeared with fire and drenched with the blood of sacrificial animals. There is therefore, I believe, no point in seeking rational identifying this object, for its essence is of total ritual impurity, and is therefore an abstract rather than a real thing. And this is why the cult in 164 BCE could/should have been founded anew. Beginning a new era of worship and therefore—in the Maccabees’ intention—a new era of the state.⁴⁹

Interestingly, in the very intellectual tradition of circles associated with the religious elite of the second century BCE, one can see a divergence of views on both actions and historical context. On one side—supporting the Maccabees—was the author of the “Animal Apocalypse” of 1 Enoch: 85–90, as convincingly demonstrated by Daniel Olson,⁵⁰ who makes no mention of pagan actions against faith and worship, while the author of the book of Daniel emphasises the role of an external factor defiling worship, which was thought to have led him to adopt a supportive stance for martyrdom.⁵¹ Going even further, no reference to Antiochus appears in “Animal Apocalypse” which can be interpreted as another argument in favour of the hypothesis of the fictitious nature of his alleged edict.⁵²

7. Banning the possession of a copy of the Bible (vv. 56–57): *The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant or anyone who adhered to the law was condemned to death by decree of the king.*

The conclusion of this sequence of alleged religious law directed against the Jews concerns the Bible, or indeed physical copies of it. Goldstein considers the prohibition of book possession to have earlier parallels in Greece and Rome, and does not even attempt to rationalize the message that Jews were forbidden to possess a copy of the Bible.⁵³ Similarly, Schwartz concentrates his commentary on pointing out the Hebrew equivalents of the terms used in the Greek.⁵⁴

The prohibition of the possession of the texts is among those elements of Antiochus’ alleged persecution which are most difficult to believe. The king would have had to know of their existence and content and show particular perfidy to prohibit their holders from reading the sAkrad texts. It is probably the clearest example of a tradition that was clear and important specifically to the Jews. They were the ones who recognised the religious

⁴⁹ Building of the new altar may be compared with the reconstruction of city-walls, by Judah, Jonathan and Simon (cf. Honigman 2014, 168–169).

⁵⁰ Olson 2013.

⁵¹ Albertz 1994, 588–591.

⁵² Olson 2013, 239–240.

⁵³ Goldstein 1976, 225–226.

⁵⁴ Schwartz 2022, 174–175.

role of their sAkraḏ texts and it was in their eyes that the alleged, and I believe the invented, prohibition of their possession must have been particularly egregious.

The placement of this thread at the end may suggest that the authors regarded it as narratively climactic, and thus, reading the edict *à rebours*, one could say that in the possession of the Bible lies the essence of the Jews' identity as a religious and political community.⁵⁵ At least, it was postulated as such by the Biblical authors...

Conclusions

The reconstruction proposed here is based on two premises. First, the typical activity of Hellenistic rulers does not provide analogies to make plausible the anti-Jewish actions of Antiochus IV directed against the religion of the Jews. Secondly, the literary tradition itself describing the supposed actions of the king against the cultic and ritual practices of the Jews is not supported by all the sources of the period ("Animal Apocalypse"), and the description in 1 Maccabees is built solely on earlier biblical tradition and was therefore only intelligible to Bible users.

The hypothesis posed here, has been formulated before, although generally, in a less explicit manner and with the recognition of at least part of the tradition transmitted in the books of Maccabees as credible. In my opinion, a historical reconstruction allows us to conclude that Antiochus IV Epiphanes did not take any action against the cult and religious traditions of the Jews. His actions were only in the nature of pacification and tax executions. The authors of the books of Maccabees, and the Hasmonean milieu behind them, sought to build up an image of an "evil" Antiochus attacking the foundations of the faith, so that the Maccabees usurpers could foreground themselves as defenders of the legitimate religion.

These considerations may also prove helpful in the discussion of the dating of 1 Maccabees. Commentators agree that it was written after John Hyrcanus took power, but there is disagreement as to whether it was still in his lifetime or after his death.⁵⁶ The above arguments about the presence of the idea of one nation and one state in 1 Maccabees and the attempts of John Hyrcanus himself to implement this idea (as Josephus writes about) provide additional reasons for accepting the thesis that 1 Maccabees came into being during John Hyrcanus' reign.⁵⁷ Undoubtedly, this idea may have accompanied the political thought of subsequent rulers of the Hasmonean dynasty. Nevertheless, the recognition that behind the dynastic idea and the political programme blaming Antiochus for actions against the religion of the Jews may have been the milieu of John Hyrcanus, who was advised to express this idea by deeds (Josephus, *AJ* 13.257–258) and by words (1 Macc 1:41–42).

Certainly, this is not the end of the research we should undertake to better understand both the events themselves taking place in the second century BCE and the intentions

⁵⁵ Cf. Adler 2022, 189–236.

⁵⁶ Goldstein 1976, 62–64.

⁵⁷ Schwartz 2022, 8.

of our sources. In doing so, the actual role of the religious and political leaders referred to by our sources deserves attention. Just as commentators pay considerable attention to the members of the victorious Maccabean family, less attention is paid to their antagonists. What was the political background of Menelaus and Alkimos during their tenure? Did the Seleucids rely on their knowledge of their base in the local community when appointing them to office? If so, where did they get their knowledge of this? Furthermore, how is the seven-year period of Jerusalem, i.e. from 159–152 BCE, without a formal high priest to be interpreted? Could Jonathan have exercised the *de facto* functions of high priest while waiting for an appointment from the Seleucid ruler? If not, and he had to wait until the year 152 BCE for formal recognition, how did the temple function without a high priest? Can it be assumed that some rituals were not performed for seven years? If this were the case, why do the sources not openly tell us about it? Or should the function of the high priest be associated more with political and less with ritual-cult competences?

The role of the so-called Hellenists also calls for deeper investigation. For, on the one hand, we have (especially in 2 Maccabees) the blaming of political disturbances on a group associated with the power elite described as Hellenizers, while on the other hand we see that the Hasmoneans themselves collaborated with the Hellenist leaders Menelaos and Alkimos. The Hasmoneans themselves also seem to have been deeply Hellenised. The question of why the narrator of 2 Maccabees blames the Hellenist reformers, and what political circumstances explain such a decision, therefore awaits better examination. What was the relationship between the Jews of Judea and the Diaspora in Egypt in this context, especially bearing in mind the persistence in Egypt of the descendants of the Oniad family, the legitimate dynasty of the high priests.⁵⁸ The issue, therefore, is not so much the events of 168–164 BCE, but the time of the writing of 1 Maccabees. What deserves closer attention is not only what is stated openly in the sources, but what remains in the realm of allusion and insinuation. So who were the main opponents challenging the Hasmoneans' mandate to rule? Did the Hasmoneans influence the redaction of Hebrew Bible texts? And if so, how were Bible texts included in Hasmonean propaganda?

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⁵⁸ Capponi 2007.

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