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THE HASMONEANS AND THE RELIGIOUS HOMOGENEITY OF THEIR STATE*

The conquest of the Near East by Alexander of Macedon began a new era in the history of this region. This pregnant event was quite differently perceived and judged by contemporaries in conquered lands, Palestine among them. To those, the Macedonian's victory over the Persians meant little more than one hegemonist replacing another. It must have been with concern, or perhaps with hope, that they awaited possible changes under the new political arrangement. We know little about Alexander's direct rule over Palestine, but the historical evidence we have suggests that the behavior of local populations in the area did not always meet the expectations of Macedonian conquerors. One example may be seen in the attitude of the Jerusalem Temple's high priest, who, despite Alexander's superiority at arms, firmly declared his loyalty to the Persian king (Jos. *AJ* 11, 317–319), while some in Samaria's elites chose to follow their self-interest and did not hesitate to join the conqueror (Jos. *AJ* 11, 321–324; 340–345). Although local elites and communities declared their willingness to cooperate with the Macedonian monarch, there were no avoiding tensions and conflicts between locals and newcomers. One such instance was a mutiny in Samaria city against the Macedonians, during which the Syrian governor Andromachus was killed. In retaliation, the rebellion was quenched in blood and Macedonian settlers were brought into Samaria.¹

Stability in the new political arrangement was helped by the religious tolerance the Macedonian conquerors showed to the local population. Interested mainly in exploiting the conquered territory, they did not intend to interfere with the inhabitants' life or impose their own practices. Such a state of affairs was in effect during the life of Alexander of Macedon and throughout the rule of the Ptolemies, who overran southern Palestine in the late 4th century BCE. Great changes in Palestine, and especially in Judea, did not occur until the Seleucid rule, which came about following Antiochus III's victory over Egyptian forces in the battle of Panion (198 BCE).²

As he assumed rule over the conquered territories, Antiochus III (and later his successors) officially confirmed the right of Judeans to practice their religion and its related customs, and granted the Jerusalem temple and its priests a number of fiscal privileges

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¹ Curt. Rufus 4.8.9; cf. Cohen 2006: 274–276. Evidence for this bloody crackdown is believed to be 300 skeletons discovered in a cave near Wadi ed-Daliyeh, cf. Lapp 1993: 320–321; Cohen 2006: 276, note 3.

² For more on the situation in Palestine during the reign of Alexander of Macedon, the Ptolemies, and the Seleucids (prior to the Maccabean revolt), see Schürer 1985: 177–221; Hengel 1989: 35–78; Schäfer 1989: 15–81, and others.

(cf. Jos. *AJ* 13, 138–144). Yet some dozen years later, with Greek patterns being introduced by members of Judea’s secular and political elites into various areas of life, conflict aggravated between the country’s different social groups. The advocates of cultural assimilation called the Hellenists, on seeing a chance for careers in the Seleucid service, wished to hasten the process (cf. 1 Macc. 1: 11–15). To this end, they used Antiochus IV’s authority to attempt in 167 BCE to enforce the Hellenistic religious reform which would prohibit, on pain of the most severe penalties and repressions, the practice of their fathers’ religion and its related customs, while introducing polytheistic worship to the Temple.³ Yet the mainly agrarian people staunchly opposed such schemes. Effective armed resistance initiated by Mattathias, the head of the Hasmonean family, and then long continued by his sons, adherents to Judaism, succeeded in fully regaining their religious rights, and even in seeing Jewish statehood restored.

Religious issues made for the focus of the Hasmoneans’ attention, and not only early in the insurgency, when the rebellious Judeans were fighting to have their rights to practice their religion and customs restored, but also at the time when successive members of the family led the state they had created toward territorial expansion. Religion also served as an excuse for many of their political decisions. Some of those have already been addressed repeatedly, but they deserve another attempt at interpretation, if only because our knowledge about them is increasing with new types of sources becoming available which offer new insights from a slightly different perspective than has so far been possible.

One action by the Hasmoneans which radically departed from all previous Jewish tradition was to Judaize newly conquered territories. Literary evidence suggests that the action was carried out in two ways. One was to purge such areas completely of non-Jewish inhabitants and colonize them with believers in Judaism, or to marginalize the native population by bringing in a large number of Jewish settlers. This method was practiced to a limited extent, confined especially to small but strategically important areas. It was predicated chiefly on mistrust for the original population because of its political sympathies, which were hostile to the Hasmoneans (cf. 1 Macc. 13: 47–48). The other way in which Judaization was implemented was to force autochthons to follow the religious norms and observances of Judaism. That the Hasmoneans used enforced conversion as a tool in pursuing their own political agenda is mentioned by the anonymous author of the first book of Maccabees, Ptolemy the Historian, and Josephus in his *Antiquities*. At its most extreme, Judaization involved male circumcision (cf. Ptolemy the Historian, Stern 1976: 356, no. 146; Jos. *AJ* 13, 257–258, 318–319). However, it must be noted that biblical tradition contains no injunction that imposes, or so much as justifies, religious coercion on strangers.⁴

We know that the first Hasmonean to resort to religious violence was Mattathias. According to 1 Macc., the rebels he commanded attacked households belonging to opponents and performed forced circumcision on all boys who had not been so marked

³ 1 Macc. 1: 20–62; 2 Macc. 6: 1–11. Vast literature exists about events of the Hellenistic reform, its origin, and proposed interpretations; there is no need to cite it here. For highlights of this reform and references to literature, see Dąbrowa 2010: 16–17, notes 20–25.

⁴ Cf. Weinfeld 1993: 142–160, esp. 159; Cohen 1999: 119–125.

(1 Macc. 2: 46). But such actions cannot be thought of as forced conversion. Rather, they were part of a religious war fought between adherents to Judaism and proponents of Hellenization.⁵ Likewise repressive and religiously motivated was Simon's decision to expel Greek inhabitants from the city of Gezer and to make it Jewish by means of peopling it with Jewish settlers (1 Macc. 13: 47–48). Boundary stones found at Gezer are seen as a confirmation of that account.⁶ Simon's move was motivated by the city's strategic location and by the pro-Syrian sympathies of its Greek population (1 Macc. 9: 52). Probably the same fate befell Greek inhabitants of the port city of Joppe after it was occupied by Simon's troops.⁷ The Jewish colonization of Gezer was accompanied by certain religious events. Once the Greek inhabitants had been removed, their houses, having formerly belonged to believers in Greek deities, were ritually cleansed. Only after that solemn act could they be inhabited by followers of Judaism (1 Macc. 13: 48).

Sources confirm the great importance of a religious message in the context of other Hasmonean conquests. After overrunning Idumea, John Hyrcanus coerced its inhabitants to observe Judaic practices (Ptolemy the Historian, Stern 1976: 356, no 146; Jos. *AJ*, 13, 257–258; 15, 254). A similar action was implemented by Aristobulus I on conquered territories in Galilee and Iturea (Jos. *AJ* 13, 318–319). It is also probable that the same kind of steps were taken following Alexander Jannaeus' conquests. While sources are silent about it, this may be due to the practice of forceful conversions to Judaism having become the norm on territories gained by the Hasmoneans ever since John Hyrcanus, and Josephus not thinking them worth mentioning, or because Alexander Jannaeus' enforced Judaization did not meet with any spectacular resistance. The latter explanation seems to be confirmed by Josephus' mention of the capture of Pella by the Judean king. As he mentions a number of cities in Transjordan occupied by the king, only for Pella does he remark that the city was destroyed because its Greek inhabitants refused to submit themselves to Jewish religious norms (Jos. *AJ* 13, 397).⁸ Since the episode refers not to Semites, but to Greeks, scholars have reservations about accepting its credibility, since they think it hardly likely that Alexander Jannaeus should have forcefully converted Greeks. This is not the place to discuss whether the account is true or not. However, it should be noted that from the very beginning, the conquests of the Hasmoneans were followed not only with Judaization of the conquered populations, but also with systematic destruction of alien places of worship (cf. 1 Macc 13: 47).

Exactly what course the Hasmoneans took in Judaizing conquered peoples and territories, as well as some other aspects of their rule, arouses many disputes. Only some scholars are inclined to accept the credibility of Josephus' account about the Hasmoneans using religious enforcement.⁹ By contrast, many scholars believe that Judaization

⁵ Sisti 1992: 41–43; Weitzman 1999: 44–45, 51.

⁶ See Seger 1977: 389–395; Reich 1981: 48–52; Reich 1985: 71*; Reich 1990: 44–46; Weitzman 1999: 48–49; Reich & Greenhut 2002: 58–63. Some scholars date these stones to the reign of Herod: Rosenfeld 1988: 236–240; cf. Schwartz & 1990: 48–50.

⁷ See Dąbrowa 2010: 60 note 64.

⁸ Cf. Safrai 2000: 69–70.

⁹ Cf. Lemaire 1997: 97; Weitzman 1999: 37–59.

in conquered territories proceeded peacefully,¹⁰ especially in Idumea.¹¹ In support of their position, they quote Strabo, who makes not a single mention of any coercion in the process of Judaization of the Idumeans (Strabo 16, 2, 34 [760]). As another argument, they maintain that the men in the Hasmonean-conquered lands had already been circumcised as part of their own tradition, and repeating the procedure would have been impossible for them. Strabo's account is contradicted not only by Josephus, but also by a passage from *Herod's History* (*Historia Herodis*) by Ptolemy the Historian, who probably lived at the end of the 1st century BCE, where he firmly states that the Idumeans conquered by John Hyrcanus were forcibly subjected to circumcision and compelled to accept the Jewish way of life.¹²

As for Samaria, no available source speaks of direct religious coercion by John Hyrcanus. This silence is understandable since the Samaritans observed at least some rites prescribed by Judaism.¹³ Nevertheless, they too suffered religious repressions. The best known example of these was the destruction of the temple on Mt. Gerizim, which was the Samaritans' chief place of worship and could thus compete with the Jerusalem temple (Jos. BJ 1, 63; AJ 13, 256). Their own temple destroyed, the Samaritans were obliged to recognize the religious primacy of Jerusalem.¹⁴

Far greater problems arise out of Josephus' story of the Judaization of Iturean territories conquered by Aristobulus I, which speaks of forced circumcision of the inhabitants and their renunciation of their past religious customs and practices (Jos. AJ 13, 318–319). Like for Idumea, scholars cite some very relevant arguments against its credibility, because Josephus' ethnological and geographic description of the lands occupied by Aristobulus I raises many various objections.¹⁵ It is now accepted that in reality his description applies to northern Galilee. Nor does the study of archaeological evidence obtained in the said territory bear out Josephus' claim about it being inhabited by Itureans.¹⁶ At the same time, archaeology throws some more light on the ways in which the area was Judaized. The process was most probably implemented through organized colonization

¹⁰ One argument offered to support this view is the voluntary conversion of members of local elites, cf. Feldman 2003: 144–145. However, this argument is difficult to accept, since the interests of local elites seldom coincided with those of the general population, and such representative members sometimes only feigned conversion (cf. Jos. AJ 15, 253–255). The example of Judean elites' attitudes under Antiochus IV clearly shows that they did not always have much impact on the behavior of lower social groups, who were more conservative and attached to their traditions. In the case of the Idumeans, this attachment is seen in their worship of the god Qos (cf. Jos. AJ 15, 255). John Hyrcanus' religious policy is seen as one reason for the subsequent presence of believers in this deity in Egypt (Rappaport 1969: 73–82), although Idumeans found themselves there for other reasons also, cf. Thompson Crawford 1984: 1069–1075.

¹¹ Kasher 1988: 44–77; Schwartz 1989: 384 note 17; Cohen 1996: 211–216, esp. 215–216; Cohen 1999: 110–119, 136–137; Feldman 2003: 142–144. Cf. Weitzman 1999: 39–44.

¹² Ptolemy the Historian, Stern 1976: 356, no. 146. The credibility of this source is viewed with caution by believers in the voluntary conversion of Idumeans: Kasher 1988: 66, 69–70; Cohen 1999: 113–115; Feldman 2003: 143 and note 104.

¹³ Cf. 2 Kings 17: 4–40. This conclusion is a simplification necessary for the purposes of this paper. There is no room to discuss this matter in great detail. See Schwartz 1989: 378–385, 388–391; Kirkpatrick 2008: 156–160, 163–165.

¹⁴ Cf. Schwartz 1989: 385–386.

¹⁵ Cf. Cohen 1999: 115; Feldman 2003: 145.

¹⁶ Aliquot 1999–2003: 176–177. For a summary of archaeological findings so far, complete with historical conclusions, see Leibner 2009: 315–328, esp. 319–327.

with consequent decline in earlier settlement. Based on archaeological and numismatic evidence, the colonization began at the turn of the 1st century BCE.¹⁷ Quite clearly, this method of Judaization largely resembled that used by Simon in Gezer and Joppa.

Considering the above facts, there seem to be no grounds to question the Hasmonean drive to Judaize their new territorial acquisitions. A critical approach to sources and the archaeological and numismatic evidence show that the process varied in different areas. There can be no question that it was a deliberate and consistent policy whose aim was probably the religious homogeneity of their state. This is confirmed by reports of the Hasmoneans destroying local places of worship in occupied areas. Homogeneity could help speed up the religious and cultural assimilation of new groups of subjects.¹⁸ It could also prevent a recurrence of the situation which had led to the Hellenistic religious reform during the reign of Antiochus IV, although it did not stop conflicts from breaking out between various schools in Judaism itself. It clearly served to strengthen the role of the Jerusalem Temple as the focal point in the religious life of the Hasmonean state, while their fervor in matters of religion lent them legitimacy to serve as the temple's high priests. It was essential to them, particularly when their right to occupy the office, first obtained by Jonathan from Alexander Balas in 152 BCE, began to be contested by the Pharisees. The Hasmoneans placed emphasis on the religious content in their rule in order to persuade subjects that their leadership in politics and religion was inseparable.

We might add that the policy of the state's religious homogeneity brought the Hasmoneans political and economic benefits that are hard to overestimate. Including all subjects in the Jewish religious community greatly increased the demographic potential of their state, resulting in an improved military recruitment pool, and extended the colonizing resources for new conquests. Inevitably, it must have won them popular sympathy. Colonization helped solve problems caused by the shortage of arable land which provided subsistence to a large part of the Judean society. In the economic dimension, a greater number of subjects helped better exploit the resources of newly acquired lands. Territorial expansion, incidentally, contributed to the personal wealth of the Hasmoneans.

Hasmonean religious policy had to have some ideological underpinning. Regrettably, the sources contain nothing that could offer insight into their own point of view in this matter. However, 1 Macc., and some other works of Jewish literature written in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, contain hints which enable us to draw certain conclusions. We have reason to believe that 1 Maccabees is a book which not only shows the struggle of the Hasmoneans against the Seleucids and the making of Jewish statehood as seen by the earlier, but which was indeed inspired by one of the clan, most probably John Hyrcanus, so that his family's achievements might be generally known. We may therefore believe that its anonymous author deliberately emphasized those points which were close to Hasmonean political ideology. The language and style of the work clearly reflect those of biblical books. Nor is it short of allusions to biblical tradition. One example to

¹⁷ Leibner 2009: 322–327, 329, 331. Much contention among scholars is caused by the dating when Jews appeared in Galilee. Some claim that they were present there before Galilee was conquered by the Hasmoneans, cf. Freyne 2000: 35–41; Kashner 1988: 80–83; Syon 2006: 21–24. See also Schwartz 1989: 378–383 and note 16.

¹⁸ Conversion to Judaism by non-Jews (regardless of how the process was done) amounted to a complete change in their religious and cultural identity, cf. Aliquot 1999–2003: 177; Mason 2007: 489–510, esp. 506–510.

quote: the anonymous author presents Judas Maccabee's actions to defend ancestral laws as a God-supported mission, and as a hero much like biblical heroes.¹⁹ The first book of Maccabees also contains a number of references to Jewish relations with the outside world, a subject important for understanding Hasmonean attitudes toward their neighbors.²⁰ An analysis of Jewish literature from the Hasmonean period, including works containing their critics, shows that authors devoted much attention to lands which had once belonged to Israel. The need to restore Jewish dominion over them appears very often, especially from the time when the Hasmoneans began to achieve increasing success in building their own state.²¹

There can be no doubt that the ideological foundation for the expansionist policy of the Hasmoneans was biblical tradition. Although it hardly offers any justification for the use of force in religious matters toward conquered peoples, it still was a more effective means, over voluntary conversion, of securing social and religious integration relatively rapidly in building Jewish statehood in its traditional boundaries.²² All this means that the Hasmoneans, while readily citing biblical tradition, did not hesitate on occasion to follow a course inconsistent with its principles, if it suited them politically.²³

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¹⁹ See Dąbrowa 2010: 139–143.

²⁰ See Schwartz 1991; Schwartz 1998; Weitzman 1999: 46–58; Safrai 2000: 76–77; Shatzman 2006: 238–270.

²¹ See Mendels 1987; Safrai 2000: 77.

²² Weitzman 1999: 58–59. Some scholars think that proselytism was among the main reasons why Judea's population rose rapidly between 586 B.C. and 70 A.D., cf. Feldman 2003: 115–156, esp. 141–156.

²³ According to S.J.D. Cohen (1999: 110, 123–139), such behavior was the effect of Hellenistic cultural patterns affecting the Hasmoneans. This opinion is strongly rejected by S. Mason (2007: 494–495); cf. also Dąbrowa 2006: 118 and note 34.

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