



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on January 22, 2018

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The Seleucid War Against the Jews

From the print edition of The New American

Judas Maccabaeus, “The Hammer of the Jews,” gazed out at his camp. The last indigo of the night sky was giving way to the gathering orange glow that presaged the new day. It was not auspicious.

About him were 3,000 picked men, the flower of Jewish might, skilled warriors all, dedicated to protecting the Jews and defending faith and tradition against the pagan Greeks.



The gathering warmth of the sun couldn’t chase away the chill in Judas’ veins, for before him lay the greatest enemy army he had yet faced. The enemy camp was rousing from its restless slumber. Martial sounds began to reverberate through the dry air. Men, by their thousands, gathered shields, while the occasional glint of light darted from the swaying iron tips of ferocious spears, soon to be deployed by the enemy troops in fearsome phalanx formation.

The enemy general, Bacchides, began to position his troops, and the full scale of the terrifying threat became apparent to the gathered Jewish army. Judas’ troops, brave and skilled and resolute, were outnumbered at least five to one. A murmur of fear moved through the ranks. The most fearful, seeing the approach of certain death, melted away into the hills.

“We should withdraw and live to fight again,” came the cry of those who remained.

In righteous indignation, Judas, feeling the hot passion of righteousness chasing the chill from his veins, whirled on his men.

“Up! Let us face the enemy,” he growled at his flagging forces.

“We are too few,” they cried back in fear. “We have no strength for anything but to escape with our lives.”

Judas, a lion, a dragon among mere men, let loose his ferocity. “Let not the sun ever see such a thing, that I should show my back to the enemy!” he roared. “Although this be the time that will bring me to my end, and I must die in this battle, I will rather stand to it courageously, and bear whatsoever comes upon me, than by now running away, bring reproach upon my former great actions, or tarnish their glory.”

Rallied, the Jewish phalanx drew together while the fearsome general Bacchides arrayed his forces, with horsemen on the wings, phalanxes arrayed with archers and skirmishers to the front of the line.

The Jewish forces, small in number but immense of heart, drew likewise to their line of battle. With a pounding of shields and the blare of the trumpeter came a great shout, first from the Greek lines as they rushed to join battle. Then, the blood cry of the Jewish forces answered, and with Judas leading, the bravest of all men, the flower of Judea, fell upon the gathered horde of the enemy.



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Background to Rebellion

The final battle of Judas Maccabaeus against the Seleucid Greek general Bacchides was symbolic of the greater encounter, and indeed war, of the tiny Jewish population of Judea against the overwhelming cultural, social, economic, and military power of the Hellenistic empires left in the wake of Alexander the Great's conquest of the known world.

By 200 B.C., the most significant of these were the Ptolemaic Empire ruling in Egypt and the Seleucid Empire ruling most of the Near East from Antioch. These fought each other, both in diplomacy and war, in a "Great Game" to hold on to power, wealth, and territory against the rising colossus of Rome in the West.

The Seleucids, in particular, would be the first to feel the fire of Rome. Antiochus III, or "The Great" as he had legitimate reason to prefer, had extended the reach of his empire from the Aegean in the West as far East as the frontier of modern Afghanistan and into India. Ever the expansionist, he invaded Greece in 192 B.C. but was pushed out by the Romans. They pursued him into Asia Minor, where they fought again at the Battle of Magnesia. There Antiochus assembled an impressive array of military might, drawn from all the provinces of his vast empire. These largely were in support of his primary infantry force. This, according to the Roman historian Livy, was comprised of "16,000 infantry in the Macedonian fashion, known as the 'phalanx.' These formed the centre, and their front consisted of ten divisions; between each division stood two elephants. They were thirty-two ranks deep. This was the main strength of the king's army and it presented a most formidable appearance, especially with the elephants towering high above the men. The effect was heightened by the frontlets and crests on the animals, and the towers on their backs on which stood the drivers, each accompanied by four soldiers."

The Romans, for their part, were in their normal military array, all well disciplined and, in contrast to the motley army of the Seleucid Basileus, largely standardized in the Roman way as to weapons and tactics.

Surprising everyone, probably especially King Antiochus, the Romans proved the far better, more professional army, and the Seleucid army was completely destroyed, with Antiochus losing as many as 50,000 soldiers in the battle. As for terms, the victorious Romans required payment of 12,000 talents per year for 12 years in tribute, along with 20 hostages to Rome, to be selected by the Romans. And the Seleucid king would no longer be allowed to keep war elephants or have naval vessels beyond those Rome chose to allow.

He wouldn't live long enough to fulfill the terms demanded by Rome. The Treaty of Apamea that contained these terms dates to 188 B.C. By 187, Antiochus the Great, now campaigning against breakaway eastern provinces, died. He was replaced by his son Seleukos IV.

The Unraveling

Ironically, the terms of the treaty imposed by Rome would likely have stabilized the Seleucid Empire had Antiochus the Great lived. With his death, however, the terms of the treaty were void.

The new king, Seleukos IV was, like his father, a competent king. He was aware that his empire needed security on its northern and western frontiers, while also needing a strong military to counter the threat from a potentially strong and expansionist rival to the south in Ptolemaic Egypt.



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With the treaty with Rome broken, the annual tribute of 12,000 talents owed to Rome could be ignored and used to fund military and diplomatic affairs, including maintaining naval power and forming peaceful diplomatic relations with minor powers in Greece.

There was good reason to worry about Egypt. Ptolemy V had been busy fighting internal strife and rebellion, but by 180 B.C. he had achieved his internal aims and was beginning to consider making an attempt on lands to the north that the Seleucids had captured.

Many in his court feared the prospect of war and the taxes it would bring. “King Ptolemy, being asked by one of his courtiers why he neglected Coelê Syria though it was rightfully his, replied that he was giving good heed to the matter,” the historian Diodorus Siculus recounted. “When the friend continued and asked where he would find sufficient money for the campaign, the king pointed to his friends and said: ‘There, walking about, are my money-bags.’ ”

The “money-bags,” at least some of them, decided this was unacceptable. A conspiracy was hatched and Ptolemy V met his end by poison. There followed a few years under the regency of Queen Cleopatra (not to be confused with the later Cleopatra who famously consorted with Caesar), who did not favor a war in Syria. But soon enough she, too, perished, leaving her young children, still too young to govern, in the hands of otherwise obscure regents. These were Lenaios — a former slave — and the eunuch Eulaios, who had been Ptolemy VI’s nurse. Though weak in power, they took up the policy of initiating war to invade Seleucid lands.

This likely would have led to war, but it was Seleukos IV’s turn to perish at the hands of a conspiracy, murdered by his chief minister, one Heliodorus. This crime has remained a mystery for over 2,000 years. Heliodorus does not seem to ever have been mistreated by Seleukos. He was evidently well respected and wealthy. Nor did he make overly aggressive moves as a usurper of the throne.

The death, however, left a power vacuum within the Seleucid Empire. The proper heir to the throne was Demetrios, eldest son of Seleukos IV, who was a hostage in Rome. Demetrios had only recently ended up in that position, replacing Antiochus IV, Seleukos IV’s brother, who had been a hostage in Rome. Demetrios could not be retrieved from Rome, and this left an opening for Antiochus IV. Since leaving Rome, this new Antiochus had been living a life of luxury in Athens. But, assisted by Eumenes II of Pergamum, he now made his way to Syria, where he captured and executed Heliodorus.

There remained only family matters standing in the way of Antiochus IV, in the form of his sister, the widowed queen of Seleukos IV, and her four- or five-year-old son Antiochus, who was, in the wake of his father’s death, the legitimate heir. This was soon overcome, however. Antiochus IV married his sister and made himself co-king with his young nephew. Thus rose to power Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Hellenism Challenges the Jews

By all accounts Antiochus IV was an unusual character. The historian Diodorus Siculus gives us a portrait of the ruler who would soon attempt to destroy the religion of the Jews:

On first succeeding to the throne, [he] embarked upon a quixotic mode of life foreign to other monarchs. To begin with, he would often slip out of the palace without informing his courtiers, and wander at random about the city with one or two companions. Next, he took pride in stooping to the company of common people, no matter where, and in drinking with visiting foreigners of the meanest stamp. In general, if he learned that any young men were forgathering at an early hour, he would



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suddenly appear at the party with a fife and other music, so that in their astonishment some of the commoners who were guests would take to their heels and others be struck dumb with fear. Finally, he would at times put off his royal garb, and wrapping himself in a toga, as he had seen candidates for office do at Rome, would accost the citizens, saluting and embracing them one by one, and ask them to give him their vote, now for the office of aedile, and again for that of tribune. Upon being elected, he would sit on an ivory chair, and in the Roman fashion listen to the opposing arguments in ordinary cases of contract. He did this with such close attention and zeal that all men of refinement were perplexed about him, some ascribing his behaviour to artless simplicity, others to folly, and some to madness.

Two characteristics stand out from this: First, he was not always interested in dry matters of state if there was a party that could be attended and, second, he had a strong affinity for Roman, i.e., pagan, modes of living. In other words, it would not be surprising to find this ruler hostile to the traditions, beliefs, and laws of those of his Jewish subjects in Judea.

By this time, the Hellenizing influence of the Greeks that had so transformed the Near East in the wake of Alexander the Great was beginning to cause division even in Judea and the temple city of Jerusalem. At the outset of Antiochus IV's reign, the traditionalists were still ascendant in Jerusalem under the high priest Onias. But a Hellenizing faction was increasingly well organized and vocal.

One of them, Jason, purchased the position of high priest from Antiochus, replacing Onias. This unleashed the beginning of a Hellenistic purge of traditionalists. At first, this meant establishing some pagan institutions in Jerusalem. According to 1 Maccabees, the new high priest "imposed the Greek way of life on his fellow-countrymen. He suppressed the liberties which the kings had graciously granted to the Jews.... He went so far as to found a gymnasium at the very foot of the Citadel.... Godless wretch that he was and no true high priest, Jason set no bounds to his impiety; indeed the hellenising process reached such a pitch that the priests ceased to show any interest in serving the altar; but, scorning the Temple and neglecting the sacrifices, they would hurry, on the stroke of the gong, to take part in the distribution, forbidden by the Law, of the oil on the exercise ground; setting no store by the honours of their fatherland, they esteemed hellenic glories best of all."

Yet this was not fervent enough for the Hellenizing faction, who thought Jason not nearly aggressive enough in pushing Greek life and religion onto the Jews. They convinced Antiochus to replace him with Menelaos, whose ascension to the position, and activities in it, would set off a blood bath and reign of terror.

This created significant divisions among the Jews. "There were now three high priests, and their loyalties had become uncertain and divided," wrote historian John D. Grainger in his *Fall of the Seleukid Empire*. Further, he continued, "the man with the least support, Menelaos, was one of three who was in office. His party organized the murder of Onias, but this merely alarmed Jason, who may have assumed that he was next."

The deposed Jason, perhaps attempting to strike before he was himself struck down, raised a force to attack Menelaos, and moved against the city. "When the walls had been breached and the city was finally on the point of being taken, Menelaos took refuge in the Citadel," wrote the author of 2 Maccabees. "Jason, however, made a pitiless slaughter of his fellow-citizens, oblivious of the fact that success against his own countrymen was the greatest of disasters, but rather picturing himself as



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winning trophies from some enemy, and not from his fellow-countrymen.”

As this was happening in Judea, news had reached Antiochus that Egypt was preparing for war. And like Jason striking before he himself could be struck, Antiochus turned the might of his empire toward the south, launching the invasion of Egypt.

The result in Egypt was that the regents Eulaios and Lenaios were overthrown, replaced by the soldiers Komanos and Kineas, but it was the youthful king Ptolemy VI who appeared to rise in power as a result. He reached an agreement with Antiochus, who then moved against those in Alexandria who favored the young Ptolemy’s brother, Ptolemy VIII. The Seleucid siege of Alexandria was not long lived, and was unsuccessful in any case. Antiochus withdrew his army from most of Egypt, perhaps feeling that he had left the scene in sufficient disarray to prevent future Egyptian designs on his territories. Simultaneously, word reached him of the internecine fighting in Jerusalem.

From the point of view of the Seleucid king, Menelaos was the proper and lawful high priest, and Jason did not have a right to attack, much less depose Menelaos. Moreover, Jason had once been sheltered by a certain Hyrkanos, who was suspected of having links to the Ptolemaic regime. Jason’s actions, then, seemed to the king to have “had the air of a rising in favor of the active Ptolemaic enemy, and was certainly a defiance of Antiochus’ royal authority,” Grainger notes. “Antiochus decided he could not afford to ignore what had happened.... He sent his army into the Judean Hills, seized Jerusalem, looted the temple treasury, and defeated Menelaos’ opponents.”

2 Maccabees recounts the bloody decimation of Jerusalem at the hands of the enraged king. He “marched from Egypt, raging like a wild beast, and began by storming the city. He then ordered his soldiers to cut down without mercy everyone they encountered, and to butcher all who took refuge in their houses. It was a massacre of young and old, a slaughter of women and children, a butchery of young girls and infants. There were eighty thousand victims in the course of those three days, forty thousand dying by violence and as many again being sold into slavery. Not content with this, he had the audacity to enter the holiest Temple in the entire world, with Menelaus, that traitor to the laws and to his country, as his guide; with impure hands he seized the sacred vessels.”

This was only the beginning of the troubles for the Jews. While the king renewed his campaign in Egypt, he sent an army of more than 20,000 into Judea to complete the suppression of the Jews, putting to death many men of fighting age and selling women and children into slavery. With this force in place and Jerusalem firmly under the yoke, the process of completing the Hellenization of Judea could begin in earnest.

The Immense Power of Antiochus

Egypt proved no impediment to the power of Antiochus. He chased the Ptolemies to Alexandria and reduced the entire nation to his control. While a great victory, it brought with it problems. Antiochus only wanted the threat of invasion from Egypt to end. He didn’t want to annex the country and face the troubles of an occupation. And for their part, the Romans didn’t want to face the combined power of the Seleucids and Egypt as an eastern rival. Roman envoys then brokered a famous treaty that required Antiochus to leave Egypt, but forced the Ptolemies to renounce any further pretensions to invading Seleucid territories. Mission accomplished from the point of view of Antiochus.

Worthy, too, of a triumphal celebration in the Roman style, Antiochus thought. And, in fact, the triumph



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that Antiochus prepared at the sacred grove of Daphne just outside of Antioch was a spectacle that enthralled the entire Roman and Hellenistic world, while displaying the full power of the empire that the Jews would come to face.

Polybius gives us an extended account of the celebration:

The public ceremonies began with a procession composed as follows: first came some men armed in the Roman fashion, with their coats made of chain armour, five thousand in the prime of life. Next came five thousand Mysians, who were followed by three thousand Cilicians armed like light infantry, and wearing gold crowns. Next to them came three thousand Thracians and five thousand Gauls. They were followed by twenty-thousand Macedonians, and five thousand armed with brass shields, and others with silver shields, who were followed by two hundred and forty pairs of gladiators. Behind these were a thousand Nisaeon cavalry and three thousand native horsemen, most of whom had gold plumes and gold crowns, the rest having them of silver. Next to them came what are called 'companion cavalry,' to the number of a thousand, closely followed by the corps of king's 'friends' of about the same number, who were again followed by a thousand picked men; next to whom came the Agema or guard, which was considered the flower of the cavalry, and numbered about a thousand. Next came the 'cataphract' cavalry, both men and horses acquiring that name from the nature of their panoply; they numbered fifteen hundred. All the above men had purple surcoats, in many cases embroidered with gold and heraldic designs. And behind them came a hundred six-horsed, and forty four-horsed chariots; a chariot drawn by four elephants and another by two; and then thirty-six elephants in single file with all their furniture on.

Rather dryly, Polybius notes: "The rest of the procession was almost beyond description."

Blood, Tears, and Triumph

Beyond description, also, was the despair of the Jews in Judea. While the terrifying power of the empire was on display to the north, in Jerusalem the temple had been completely desecrated. Grainger recounts that the Hellenizers "now tackled the central element of the opposition, the temple. They applied to Antiochus to be allowed to convert the worship there from that of Yahweh to that of Zeus Olympios."

The Jewish faith was now effectively outlawed, and throughout the region, Seleucid forces were active in enforcing adherence to the new religion. The process ignited a firestorm when it came to the village of Modin. There lived a prominent local man, Mattathias, with his family. The Hellenizers were eager to convince Mattathias and his sons to commit to the Greek religion and set an example for others.

Mattathias refused, giving an impassioned speech. When he finished, another Jew, likely an *agent provocateur* for the Hellenizers, stepped forward to begin the sacrifice that Mattathias had refused. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, recounts what happened next: "There came one of the Jews into the midst of them, and sacrificed as Antiochus had commanded. At which Mattathias had great indignation, and ran upon him violently with his sons, who had swords with them, and slew both the man himself that sacrificed, and Apelles the king's general, who compelled them to sacrifice, with a few of his soldiers."

Mattathias raised then the cry of rebellion. "If anyone be zealous for the laws of his country, and for the worship of God, let him follow me!" With his sons and those of the region determined to resist



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Antiochene oppression, he led a growing guerrilla rebellion into the hill country north of Jerusalem.

Soon, Mattathias grew sick, and leadership after his death passed to his son, the great Judas Maccabaeus, whom Mattathias had recommended, in the words of Josephus, as having “courage and strength” enough to “bring vengeance on your enemies.”

The growing revolt had to be put down, and this fell at first to the Mysarch Apollonius. At the head of an army of militia and auxiliaries, he met Judas and his rag-tag army in battle. The fight was noteworthy, mainly because it was short. Judas was likely under no delusions that his force could fight in pitched battle against any army using anything remotely like normal Macedonian tactics and formations. Instead, he hit upon the strategy of striking at the heart of the enemy by immediately targeting their leadership. Thus, Judas flew at once to the position of Apollonius and put him to the sword. The result was as intended. Their general slain, the Antiochene force fell apart and fled. Judas claimed Apollonius’ sword from the field of battle, making it his own, and fighting with it for the duration of the struggle to follow.

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And struggle did follow. A new army was raised under the general Seron and brought to camp near the village of Bethoron, there to face the rising strength of Judas. This force was stronger in men and arms than that commanded by Apollonius, and it struck fear into the army of Judas, who worried that their small band couldn’t survive, much less defeat, such a force. Judas, though, reminded them that “victory in war does not depend on the size of the fighting force: Heaven accords the strength. They are coming against us in full-blown insolence and lawlessness to destroy us, our wives and our children, and to plunder us; but we are fighting for our lives and our laws, and He will crush them before our eyes; do not be afraid of them.”

At this Judas again led the attack on the enemy. From the hills the desperate and ferocious Jewish forces fell on the lead unit of the enemy army, overwhelming them and killing Seron. At this, again the enemy fled, Judas in pursuit.

“Judas pursued them down from Beth-Horon as far as the plain,” 1 Maccabees recounts. “About eight hundred of their men fell, and the rest took refuge in the country of the Philistines.”

This crushing defeat had to be answered. The task fell to the regent Lysias, left in charge and given the responsibility of subduing Judea while Antiochus campaigned in the east. “Lysias chose Ptolemy, the son of Dorymenes, and Nicanor, and Gorgias, very potent men among the king’s friends, and delivered to them forty thousand foot soldiers and seven thousand horsemen, and sent them against Judea,” Josephus tells us.

Under Gorgias, as many as perhaps 10,000 of these soldiers of the enemy made camp at the town of Emmaus, a well-armed horde designed to wipe out the rebellion once and for all. Facing this, there could be only two outcomes. The most likely, and the one any reasonable person would expect, would be that the Hammer of the Jews would break against the unyielding anvil of the Antiochene army. Or, covering himself and his army in glory, Judas would overcome insurmountable odds and win the day.

Gorgias, taking 5,000 infantry and 1,000 cavalry, thought to catch Judas unawares and wipe him out. But “the son of Mattathias perceived” the stratagem, Josephus noted, and taking his army outflanked Gorgias’ incursion and brought his forces up against the enemy camp. Taking it by surprise, he put



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them to rout, capturing the camp, and forcing Gorgias to withdraw.

Again, this caused an escalation, and the Antiochenes returned one more time with yet a larger army, this time under Lysias himself. This time, 60,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry made an orderly approach into Judea, eventually making camp at the village of Bethsur. With only 10,000 men to face this force, the apparently fearless Judas Maccabaeus led his army into battle again, skirmishing with the larger force. He “joined battle with the first of the enemy that appeared, and beat them, and slew about 5,000 of them, and thereby became terrible to the rest of them,” Josephus recounts.

Fate also intervened. Antiochus, on campaign in the East, died. Faced with potential turmoil as a result, Lysias returned with what remained of his army to Antioch. “Judah Maccabee had therefore gained a respite, and he used it to attack and capture Jerusalem,” writes Grainger.

There, the victorious Jewish army found the temple abandoned and in a terrible state. “They found the sanctuary deserted, the altar desecrated, the gates burnt down, and vegetation growing in the courts as it might in a wood or on some mountain, while the storerooms were in ruins,” 1 Maccabees recounts. They set about restoring the temple and reinvigorating the people in their ancient faith.

“So on the five and twentieth day of the month of Casleu ... they lighted the lamps that were on the candlestick, and offered incense upon the altar..., and laid the loaves upon the table..., and offered burnt offerings upon the new altar,” writes Josephus.

Continuing, Josephus writes:

Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days; and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them, by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.

Josephus wrote these words some 200 years after Judas Maccabaeus recovered the temple. Today, Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, remains justly famous and celebrated, a perpetual reminder of the courage of the Maccabees and the never-ending struggle for freedom and against oppression.

Elasa and the End

All this and more besides had come to pass before Judas Maccabaeus led his remaining troops into the lines against Bacchides at Elasa. With a strength and ferocity that no other warrior of his age could muster, Judas fought through the lines toward the main forces and Bacchides himself. To the resounding clang of sword on helm and the echo of dying screams of men, both sides fought until day began to fade.

The right flank of the Seleucids began to give way as Judas fell upon them. But the left flank of the Seleucid army responded, enveloping the remaining Jewish fighters. Judas fought, the sword of Apollonius in his hand striking here and there, the warriors of Bacchides falling at his feet, the blood-flecked bodies of his enemies making a wall around him, even as the weight of the full force of the enemy pressed in. At last, the merciless, cold iron of his foes found an end in his valorous breast, and



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with those few of his fighters at his back, he fell, mortally wounded.

“When Judas was dead,” recounted Josephus, “those that were with him had no one who they could regard [as their commander]; but when they saw themselves deprived of such a general, they fled.”

Though this was the end of Judas, it wasn’t the end of the Maccabean triumph. At Daphne, Antiochus the false god had celebrated his earthly wealth and power. At Jerusalem, with the great labors of the sons of Mattathias, a greater triumph was achieved. The temple was restored; the legacy of Judas Maccabaeus was a century of independence and the restoration, indeed salvation, of the Jewish faith.



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