

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION OF THE JEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF HELLENIZATION. THEIR RESISTANCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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*Abstract:*The Greek culture and thinking spread across the Middle East thanks to the conquests of Alexander the Great. Greek was used in schools and in trading. The great leader's plan of Hellenisation included the setting up of Greek colonies such as Samaria, Ptolemais, Philoteria and Scytopolis in the conquered territories. After the fall of the great Macedonian empire, under the successive reign of Syria and Egypt, some Jews adopted the Greek culture while others, who followed the Jewish faith and tradition, strongly opposed this Hellenistic current. The Hellenisation of the Jews was carried out at a diplomatic level, see Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies and partially the Seleucids. The forced Hellenisation of the Jews ordered by Antiochus IV Epiphanes produced two effects. Firstly, many Jews that sympathised with Hellenism embraced the Greek culture and abandoned their Jewish faith. Secondly, the Jews that followed the faith joined the Hasideans to defend, through fight and confession, their faith and country at the cost of their lives. The Maccabees are an example in this regard. Hellenism had a strong impact upon different forms of Jewish expressions, such as literature or architecture, and, to a certain extent, on the entire social life. However, the Jews were firm in their religion and faith and rejected the Greek influence to a large extent.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, defence of Faith, Hellenisation, Jewish.

The period of time which ranges from Alexander the Great to the Roman conquest of the kingdoms divided from the great Macedonian Empire is known in history as the Hellenistic period.¹ After the death of Alexander the Great, his huge empire entered a civil war for two centuries, but the cultural and administrative footprint left over the eastern Mediterranean countries would give birth to a brilliant Hellenistic civilisation that survived even the Roman conquest.

The Greeks influenced many cultures, including the Jewish one. This influence was called Hellenism. The term *Hellenisation* denotes the Greek cultural, religious, social, political and economic influence on Europe and on the Near East beginning with the 4th century BC. As for the Hellenistic influence on the Jews, it is noteworthy that, until the second half of the 4th century BC, the life of the Jewish state followed its course quietly and with few events to be considered according to the scribes. The Judeans watched without interfering the battles between the Persians and the Egyptians which, temporarily, took place at the border of their country. This lasted until 332 BC when Alexander the Great united all Asia Minor, Phoenicia and Syria under his reign. Thus, that modern cultural trend - *Hellenism* - would penetrate even the rigidity of the Jewish community. From that moment on, social life would no longer be the same as under the Persian rule, and Palestine would be more and more involved in the general political events of the time.²

The main historical event that marked the political life of the Jews after the fall of the

¹ Alfred Hârlăoanu, *Istoria Universala a poporului evreu (The Universal History of the Jewish People)*, (București: Zarkony, 1992), 205

² Athanase Negoită, *Istoria religiei Vechiului Testament (The History of the Religion in the Old Testament)*, (București: Sophia, 2006), 159

Persian Empire was the Greek-Macedonian expansion and domination across the Ancient Orient. The Macedonian state developed, becoming very strong during King Philip II (359-336 BC) who introduced several reforms and strengthened its military position. Philip II reorganized the army by setting up a mass military formation called the phalanx. Philip conquered the Thracian and Illyrian tribes, then the Greek colonies, securing Macedonia access to the Aegean Sea.³

The Hellenisation of the Orient was considerably accelerated by the campaigns run by Alexander the Great.⁴ The young King of Macedonia led a pan-Hellenic expedition in 336 BC to free the Greeks from Asia Minor which unexpectedly caused the fall of the Persian Empire. Alexander of Macedon was a highly educated man. He was brought up with Homer's Iliad under Aristotle's tutelage and since childhood he had shown profound admiration for the Hellenistic traditions and ideals.⁵ In 334 BC, the brave Macedonian crossed the Hellespont into Asia Minor and defeated the Persians in the battle of the Granicus River and then in the battle of Issus, conquering Asia Minor.⁶ After having defeated Syria and Egypt, Alexander headed eastward and decisively defeated the Persian army in the battle of Arbela. In a rapid succession of victories, Alexander conquered Babylon and the capitals of Persia, Susa and Persepolis.⁷ Besides his intention of conquering and creating a huge empire, Alexander's goal was to spread the Greek language and civilisation across the occupied territories.⁸

Jewish historian Titus Flavius Josephus describes Alexander's visit to Jerusalem during his march to Egypt from 332 BC. The high priest, filled with fear and concern about how they should meet the Macedonians⁹, urged the people to offer sacrifice to God and pray for salvation. In a dream, God told the high priest to receive Alexander with the gates of the city open and adorned, the people to dress in white garments, and he in high-priestly robes. On the advice of God, the next day, when he learnt that the Macedonian was not far from the city, he came to meet him. Wearing garments completely unusual from other peoples, the high priest stood ahead of the procession dressed in white. The Phoenicians and the Chaldeans who accompanied the king were convinced that they would be allowed to plunder the city and kill the high priest. But their expectations were deceived. *"When he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest. The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about; whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind. However, Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews?"*¹⁰ Alexander's reply is famous: *"I did not adore him, but that God who hath honoured him with his high priesthood; for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios in Macedonia, who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain the dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make*

³ Hârlăoanu, 204

⁴ Merrill C. Tenney, *Privire de Ansamblu asupra Noului Testament (New Testament Survey)*, (Cluj-Napoca: BEE Internațional, 1998), 13

⁵ *Ibidem*, 13

⁶ *Ibidem*, 13

⁷ *Ibidem*, 13

⁸ Pat Alexander, *Enciclopedia Bibliei (Encyclopedia of the Bible)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Logos, 1996), 298

⁹ Not long before he had refused Alexander's request to surrender and join him against Darius, king of Persia, on the grounds that he had sworn to the latter not to take up arms against him. Flavius Josephus, *Antichități iudaice II (Antiquities of the Jews II)*, (Books XI-XX), (București: Hasefer, 2003), 51-53

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 54

*no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians; whence it is that, having seen no other in that habit, and now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision, and the exhortation which I had in my dream, I believe that I bring this army under the Divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians, and that all things will succeed according to what is in my own mind".*¹¹ After this reply, Alexander entered Jerusalem accompanied by the high priest and entered the temple to offer sacrifice to God according to the high priest's direction. It was thus that the legendary Macedonian considered to honour an old religion and a remarkable culture.¹² Alexander then granted the Jews the right to live according to their ancient laws and pay no tribute on the seventh year.¹³ The high priest showed Alexander the prophetic book of Daniel which said that a Greek would destroy the Persian power.¹⁴ It was the moment when Alexander identified himself with that Greek.

After having set up the city of Alexandria in the Nile Delta in 331 BC, Alexander crossed Syria, the Euphrates and the Tiger. The decisive battle for the destiny of the Persian empire took place at Gaugamela the same year. Victorious, Alexander was proclaimed king of Asia and conquered Babylon and Susa without a fight. Alexander's last great battle took place in 326 BC at Hidaspes where he defeated the Indian king Porus (Poros).¹⁵ Alexander had his soldiers marry Oriental women, and he himself began to teach Greek to thirty thousand Persians.¹⁶

In 323 BC, at the age of 32, ill with malaria, Alexander Macedon died in Babylon without having appointed a successor. He succeeded in partly Hellenising the Orient, but the Orient also succeeded in partly orientalising him.¹⁷

After Alexander's death, the vast empire he had created entered into civil war due to his diadochi or generals who each wanted to gain control. After having fought for about forty years (323-281 BC), the generals divided the empire. Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria are important for the biblical study. They fought for about 150 years, and these wars and rivalries turned Judea into a buffer zone. The Saron Plain, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, was a corridor that the two armies used in order to go to war. The tide of battle placed Judea either under the rule of the Ptolemies or under the rule of the Seleucids.¹⁸ The Book of the prophet Daniel makes reference to this. Prophetically, Daniel describes in detail the constant war between these two powers: "*And the king of the south*¹⁹ *shall be strong, but one of his princes*²⁰ *shall be stronger than he, and shall rule; and his authority shall be a great authority*" (Daniel 11: 5).

The Hellenisation of the Jews during the Ptolemies

The Judea conquered by Alexander the Great was incorporated into the Lower Syria or Coele

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 54

¹² As appreciation and gratitude for the tolerant spirit towards the Jews, it was decided to introduce the name Alexander into the Jewish onomastics. Alfred Hârlăoanu, 205

¹³ Flavius Josephus, 54; To conquer the Orient for the Greek civilisation, Alexander the Great showed respect for the traditions and the beliefs of the conquered nations, avoiding any means of oppression. Alfred Hârlăoanu, 205

¹⁴ Flavius Josephus refers here to Nebuchadnezzar's frightening dream interpreted by the prophet Daniel in his book (Daniel 18, 21), 55

¹⁵ Andrei Otetea, 29

¹⁶ Merrill C. Tenney, 14

¹⁷ Paul Lawrence, *Atlas de istorie biblică (The Atlas of Bible History)*, (Oradea: Cartea Cărții, 2007), 119

¹⁸ Merrill C. Tenney, 14; Paul Lawrence, 119; Alfred Hârlăoanu, 210

¹⁹ Ptolemy I Soter (Saviour) of Egypt, the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty

²⁰ Seleucus Nicator (Victor) of Syria, the founder of the Seleucid dynasty from Syria

Syria. In 333 BC, Ptolemy I defeated Antigonus²¹ and incorporated southern Syria, or Coele Syria, and therefore Judea as well, to Egypt. Ptolemy I had a favourable attitude towards the Jews. The fundamental nature of the Jewish community remained unchanged. During the Ptolemaic reign, the high priest represented the political and spiritual authority.²² He had to face not only the administrative and spiritual affairs but also the offensive of the Hellenistic culture that had penetrated the country. Positions were no longer occupied thanks to one's skills but rather to one's connections.²³

During the reign of Ptolemy I (305-283 BC), Alexandria became the greatest cultural and scientific metropolis of the Hellenistic world. The famous Library of Alexandria, the centre of the spiritual activity of the ancient world, was set up. Art, literature and science developed.²⁴ Jews were allowed to settle down in this metropolis and would establish strong ties with the colonized Greeks in the new capital. Thus, Greek became the language of the Jewish diaspora from Egypt.²⁵

Simeon the Just (300-270 BC) was one of the great personalities who marked this era. He was a high priest, a political and spiritual leader of the Jews who also rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. His chief maxim was "*The world exists through three things: the Law, Service, and acts of loving kindness*".²⁶

Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-246 BC) showed a benevolent attitude towards the Jews. When asked by Aristeus, who was close to him, the pharaoh issued a decree freeing all the Jews in Egypt who had been enslaved by his father, Ptolemy I Soter, when he had overtaken Jerusalem by fraud and betrayal. He paid for their redemption from the king's treasury.²⁷ Ptolemy Philadelphus was a science and art lover who collected books for the Library of Alexandria. As the library lacked the sacred Hebrew books, the pharaoh asked Eleazar, the high priest in Jerusalem, to send him Jewish scholars to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek.²⁸ So, during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the sacred Hebrew writings were translated into Greek. The translation, known as the *Septuagint*, became the Bible of the Jewish diaspora and was later used by the hagiographers of the books of the New Testament.

Judea lost its peace under Ptolemy III Euergetes - *the Benefactor* (246-221 BC) and Ptolemy IV Philopator - *the Lover of his Father* (221-204 BC). The Seleucids, with powerful armies, fought at the gates of Jerusalem to take Judea from Egypt. A party was formed in Jerusalem that wanted the country to become subject to the Syrian king. The high priest joined the party and refused to send the annual tribute to Alexandria. Judea was threatened by Ptolemy III and remained under the Egyptian rule. Following an event in Jerusalem²⁹, Ptolemy IV set off fiercely against the Jews and their religion. The people began to hope that they would be better off under the Syrians.

²¹ One of Alexander the Great's generals who would rule Asia after the empire was divided. Flavius Josephus, 61

²² Raymond E. Brown et al., *Introducere și comentariu la Sfânta Scriptură (Introduction and Commentary on the Holy Scripture)*, vol. I, Translation and adaptation for Romanian: Dumitru Groșan, (Tîrgu-Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2005), 427

²³ Moșe Maur, *Istoria Israelului (The History of Israel)*, (Oradea: Aion, 2000), 82

²⁴ Simona Gabriela Bungău, Viorel Cristian Popa, "Between Religion and Science: Some Aspects: Concerning Illness and Healing in Antiquity", *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 3, (2015): 3-19

²⁵ Alfred Hârlăoanu, 210

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 211

²⁷ Flavius Josephus, 61-64

²⁸ Alfred Hârlăoanu, 211; Flavius Josephus, 63-75

²⁹ It is said that Ptolemy IV asked to see the Temple when he was in Jerusalem. The priests showed him all the rooms, except the Holy of Holies. Ignoring the priests' advice of not entering this sacred room, where the high priest entered only once a year, Ptolemy entered by force. He fell unconscious and hardly regained his senses. Alfred Hârlăoanu, 211

Beginning with the 3rd century BC, the phenomenon called the *diaspora* would be present, i.e. the dispersion of the Jews throughout the Hellenistic world. *The Sibylline Oracles* contains a text about Israel that says: "And every land and sea is filled with thee".³⁰ As many as one million Jews lived in Egypt. Two of the five neighbourhoods of Alexandria were inhabited by Jews. The Jews spread across Lidia, Phrygia, Sardis, Pergamon, the Greek islands and even built a synagogue in Delos, the religious capital of the Hellenistic cult. They would set up communities everywhere, become subjects to the state they were living in, ask for certain rights, such as the right to be judged according to their own law system.³¹

The Jewish diaspora seemed to prefer Egypt. The papyri found on Elephantine Island³² show the presence of the Jews in Egypt even in the 6th century BC. In 525 BC, when Cambyses conquered the pharaonic empire, Elephantine had a Jewish colony that had already built a temple for their God.

The number of Judeans was higher in Lower Egypt where they had a very strong community that was not inferior to those in Palestine or Babylon.³³ For this community, Onias IV, the high priest who had fled from Jerusalem because of the sons of Tobias³⁴, built in Leontopolis, in the Heliopolis district, a temple dedicated to Yahweh. The construction rivalled the one in Jerusalem.³⁵

The Jewish diaspora had the opportunity to come into contact with the Greek life. Impressed by the great Greek art, they were naturally attracted by the new concept of life they were being offered. Still ignoring the Greek philosophy, the Jews were great admirers of the Greek social life, imitated it, and, like all Oriental people, came to love it until self-forgetting. Hymns in honour of Bacchus could be heard from the gardens and the vineyards of the Jews. This led to a serious rift in Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of Judaism.³⁶ This Hellenistic infiltration was slow and gradual, but uninterrupted, and gained numerous partisans among the Jews even in the first half of the 2nd century BC. This Hellenistic infiltration gave the Judaism from Alexandria a very different aspect from the traditional Judaism in the Holy Land.

The forced Hellenisation of the Jews by the Seleucids

Unlike the diplomatic efforts of Alexander the Great and the moderate efforts of the Ptolemies of Hellenising the Jews, the Seleucids, especially during Antiochus IV Epiphanes, resorted to an aggressive form of forced hellenisation when conquering Judea from the Egyptians. In 203 BC Antiochus III the Great defeated the Egyptians and the pro-Antiochus party made it so that Judea surrendered voluntarily. The party was made up of the rich upper class who would succumb to debauchery, deny their Jewish faith and tradition and adopt the Greek life and customs to gain the trust of the Syrian government. A gymnasium just like the Greek ones was built south of the Akra fortress. The priests left the altars for athletic competitions. A high priest named Jason sent three hundred didrachmas for the celebrations

³⁰ Rops Daniel, *Histoire Sainte, le peuple de la Bible (Sacred History, The People of the Bible)*, (Paris, 1943), 344

³¹ Athanase Negoitã, 159

³² These papyri were found at Elephantine in Upper Egypt, near Aswan today (Syene of the Greeks)

³³ Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Storia delle religioni (History of the Religions)*, vol.II, (Torino: Tocchi-Venturi, 1937), 257

³⁴ The sons of Tobias wanted Judea to belong to the Seleucids while Onias was pro-Egyptian. Since Tobias won, Onias fled to Egypt.

³⁵ In order to build the temple of Yahweh on foreign land, that was unclean, Onias invoked the text of Isaiah: "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt..." (19, 19). Anyway, the temple was considered illegal by the Judeans from Jerusalem.

³⁶ Athanase Negoitã, 160

given in honour of Hercules in Tīre. The nobles thought it was time for everyone to become Greek. The Hellenisation of the personal name was interesting: Joshua became Jason, Eliakim Alchinus, and Menachem Menelaus.³⁷ The Hasidic party was formed in opposition to the Hellenists. It might seem hard to believe, but even priests were members of both parties. Onias, the high priest, belonged to the Hasideans, while his brother Joshua, who took the Greek name of Jason, was the leader of the Hellenists.

Antiochus III the Great was the first Seleucid governor in the kingdom of Judah. He showed a benevolent attitude towards the Jews. He offered a significant sum of money, which he entrusted to the high priest Simeon the Just, for the needs of the Temple as well as for the strengthening and the embellishment of Jerusalem. He also helped to improve the welfare of the Jewish communities in Babylon and Syria. He died early, following a defeat in the war with the Romans. After his death, his son Seleucus IV came to power. The persecution of the Jews began under his rule. In order to pay the heavy tributes to the Romans, Seleucus IV imposed heavy tributes on the Judeans.³⁸

When Seleucus IV died, he was succeeded by Antiochus IV. The Greeks called him Epiphanes (God Manifest), others Epimanes (the mad one) and the Jews Haraṣa (the tyrant) because of the sufferings he brought upon them. This extravagant tyrant, who turned from Stoicism to Epicureanism, from a dignifying conduct to a vulgar cynicism, is worthy of his pun-based nickname. Under the pretext of unifying the states of his kingdom, he dashed against the Palestinian wasps' nest. For the pious Jews, Antiochus IV was a cunning, cruel man in purple who tore apart.³⁹ He initiated and issued laws aimed at abolishing the Jewish religion and culture. Antiochus IV Epiphanes wanted to Hellenise the Jews from Judea by force, which caused great tension. The masses opposed the new measures proposed and introduced by the nobles. The assimilated ones, who wanted to impose their point of view, asked Antiochus to resolve the tensions in the country. He complied with their request and banished Onias III, the high priest. Onias was replaced by his brother, Joshua, who immediately took the Greek name Jason the Antiochian. In an excessive Hellenistic zeal, Jason even gave Jerusalem the name of Antiochia which led to a violent social crisis. Since the Romans prevented him from attacking Egypt, Antiochus headed angrily for Jerusalem, more exactly for the Temple, the very heart of Yahwism. In 168 BC, he broke in the temples, in the Holy of Holies, and took the treasure, the candlesticks and the golden altar. Thousands of pious Jews were slaughtered. The walls of Jerusalem were destroyed.

Flavius Josephus described in detail the atrocities committed in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his men, mentioning that the Seleucid king violated even the agreement with his supporters when he looted the money and the other ornaments that adorned the sanctuary. *“So he left the temple bare, and took away the golden candlesticks, and the golden altar [of incense], and table [of shew-bread], and the altar [of burnt-offering]; and did not abstain from even the veils, which were made of fine linen and scarlet. He also emptied it of its secret treasures, and left nothing at all remaining; and by this means cast the Jews into great lamentation, for he forbade them to offer those daily sacrifices which they used to offer to God, according to the law. And when he had pillaged the whole city, some of the inhabitants he slew, and some he carried captive, together with their wives and children... He also burnt down the finest buildings; and when he had overthrown the city walls... And when the king had built an idol altar upon God's altar, he slew swine upon it, and so offered a sacrifice neither according to the law, nor the Jewish religious worship in that country. He also compelled them to forsake the worship which they paid their own God, and to adore those whom he took to be gods; and made them build temples, and raise idol*

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 161

³⁸ Alfred Hârlăoanu, 212

³⁹ Rops Daniel, 323

altars in every city and village, and offer swine upon them every day. He also commanded them not to circumcise their sons... He also appointed overseers, who should compel them to do what he commanded".⁴⁰ Those who did not obey died a terrible death. They were tortured almost to death, and then they were crucified. The children who were circumcised despite king's interdiction were strangled, and so were their mothers, and hung about their necks to their fathers' crosses. Those who possessed sacred books or scrolls of the law were executed as the evildoers, and the writings were burnt.⁴¹ These acts of cruelty made many Jews give in, either willingly or due to fear. The evil tyrant wanted to eradicate the Jewish faith and culture, to wipe out any difference between Jews and Greeks. Akra, an imposing fortress guarded by a garrison of Macedonians, was built near the temple. Many impious and wicked Jews settled down here, causing terrible sufferings to their fellow countrymen.⁴²

An inconceivable event for the Jews happened on 15 December, 167 BC when the statue of Zeus of Olympus, bearing the features of Antiochus himself, was built in the sacred temple of Yahweh. "*The abomination of desolation*" as predicted by Daniel the prophet. The cruel king then prohibited the reading of the Torah, the celebration of the Sabbath, the circumcision of the firstborn. This was the most typical religious persecution, the first known in history.⁴³ The Jewish people boiled with rage. It was not long until the opposition appeared, initially weak, manifested mainly by individual resistance. Not to break the Law, some people discovered the old patriarchal ideal deep down in their hearts and found shelter in remote places together with their flocks. They were called the Hasideans, i.e. the pious ones.⁴⁴ Others proved to be more heroic such as the venerable 90 years old Eleazar, a highly respected teacher of the Law, who refused to eat pork as the mosaic law forbade it (2 Maccabees 6, 24). He did not accept the compromise suggested by friends who, in order to save him, wanted to replace the pork with meat that was lawful for him to eat. Eleazar replied that he did not want to dishonour his old age and leave a negative example to the young (2 Maccabees 6: 18-31). He was killed, and his death is an example of virtue not only for the young people, but for the whole nation.

Another touching example of faith is the martyrdom of a family of seven brothers⁴⁵ and their remarkable mother who were forced to bring sacrifices to idols and eat pork. But, because they refused, they were tortured to death (2 Maccabees 7, 1-42).⁴⁶

The reign of the Seleucids had a significant effect in terms of Jewish Hellenisation. Antiochia, the capital of their country, became the third largest city in the Roman Empire and the place where the East met the West. The Greek language and literature were widely spread in the Near East and provided a common cultural background for the Eastern and Western peoples. Many Palestinian fortresses, especially in Galilee, were bilingual and their inhabitants worshiped both Oriental and Western deities.⁴⁷

The terrible persecution ordered by Antiochus had two effects. On the one hand, many Jews who sympathized with Hellenism renounced of their faith and Hellenised, and on the

⁴⁰ Flavius Josephus, 92

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 93

⁴² Athanase Negoită, 161; Flavius Josephus, 93

⁴³ Athanase Negoită, 162

⁴⁴ Rops Daniel, 324

⁴⁵ The Eastern Church celebrates these martyrs on 1 August under the name of the Seven Holy Maccabee Martyrs. Do not mistake these 7 martyr brothers for the real Maccabees, the sons of Mattathias the priest, who chased the Syrians and obtained the freedom of their faith and then the independence of Judea.

⁴⁶ The seven brothers' strength in faith and martyrdom strikingly resembles the martyrdom of the Holy Brancoveanu martyrs

⁴⁷ Merrill C. Tenney, 14

other hand, many undecided Jews, not too pious in their faith, shook up and joined the followers of Yahweh in war in the name of their religion and their country.⁴⁸

The Jewish resistance under the Maccabees and its consequences

Not strong enough to face the Syrians, the Hasideans abandoned Jerusalem and retreated to localities that were less accessible to the Syrian authorities. This way not only would their foreign persecutors lose track of them, but they would also lose contact with those Jews that had been Hellenised, especially the priests. However, the persecution reached them even in the most remote places. The Hasideans could not stand by any longer and began to fight. Priest Mattathias and his five sons set the example. He was joined by groups of Judeans and Hasideans.⁴⁹ A guerilla fight started which proved to be to their advantage. Judah, the priest's third son, led the attack in the field. He was nicknamed Maccabee (the Hammer), hence the name of the future dynasty: the Maccabean Dynasty.

Judah Maccabee was victorious and, taking advantage of Syria's domestic difficulties⁵⁰, tried to re-establish the normal course of the Jewish religious life. In December 164 BC, he purified the temple of the idolatrous profanation ordered by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and started to officiate the traditional Jewish cult.⁵¹ Thus, the Jewish cult obtained its independence.

Politically speaking, the situation was far from being solved. The Syrians and their Hellenised supporters from Judea wished the reign of Antiochus were restored while the pious Jews wished it vanished forever. The fighting was resumed and Judah Maccabee died on the battle field. He was succeeded by Jonathan, his brother, and later by Simon would obtain a complete victory thanks to the fights for the succession to the Syrian throne. The plebiscite from September 140 BC granted Simon the highest civil and religious authority in the state. Thus, Simon was proclaimed leader and high priest forever until a trustworthy prophet should arise (1 Maccabee 14,41).⁵²

After Simon's death, the last of the Maccabees, the state was run by his son John Hyrcanus (134-108), the founder of the Hasmonean Dynasty. Because of the fights for the succession to the Judean throne, the claimants asked for the Romans' help. Pompeius, the famous Roman general located then in Syria, was sent to install the order. Thus, Judea would fall under Roman rule. In 37 BC, Herod the Idumaeen was crowned king of Judea by the Romans. Herod, called "the Great" by the history, had been appointed king since 40 BC. He

⁴⁸ Giuseppe Ricciotti, 256

⁴⁹ They were aware that, from the perspective of the Bible, of the faith and of the Law, idolatry and apostasy, as capital sins, and as any sin in general, would generate personal and collective sufferings. Viorel-Cristian Popa, "Suffering caused by injustice references of the biblical prophets and their actuality", *European Journal of Science and Theology* 8 (Suppl.2), (2012): 239-248; Doru Fer, "De la suferințele cauzate de căderea în păcat, la suferințele omului modern" (From the sufferings of falling into sin to the sufferings of the modern man), in vol. *Suferință și terapie – perspective teologice- (Suffering and Therapy – Theological Perspectives)*, (Alba Iulia-Deva: Editura Reîntregirea a Arhiepiscopiei Alba Iuliei; Editura Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, 2013), 175-184

⁵⁰ In 167 BC, on the road to Persia, Antiochus IV Epiphanes died, leaving his younger son, Antiochus V Eupator on the throne and Philip as regent. Antiochus, however, had previously appointed Lysias as regent. Thus, there were two candidates for running the state affairs. The rivalry between these two dignitaries caused numerous conflicts that were used by the Jews to strengthen their military position in Judea. Alfred Hârlăoanu, 214

⁵¹ Alfred Hârlăoanu, 213

⁵² Simon was given those dignities for the merits his family had earned in raising the nation. However, he was not proclaimed king of Israel for this title could only belong to a descendant of the house of David, and the family of the Maccabees did not have this descendancy. From now on the succession of the high priest that, from the hereditary point of view, had to follow the line of Aaron and his sons would no longer be respected.

proved to be great indeed in crime.⁵³

Idumaeen by family, Judaizer by interest, Herod was a Hellenistic king. Cunning, to please the Jews as well, he rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem that would stand out for its beauty and splendour. The high roof of the temple with its golden top could be seen from the distance. From the Mount of Olives, in the light of the sun, the temple appeared in all its glory, just like a mountain peak covered in snow. The sanctuary was surrounded by arcades and gardens similar to the ones in Solomon's time. Foreigners were prohibited from entering the inner court of the temple. The temple, sanctified with special ceremony in 18 BC, was placed under the protection of emperor Augustus. A golden eagle above the entrance gate symbolised the Roman power.

Hellenistic in spirit, Herod built theatres, hippodromes and arenas. To spite the Jews, he reconstructed the city of Samaria in 25 BC, building palaces, gardens and a heathen temple. He even renamed it Sebaste. On the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, he erected the luxurious and elegant city of Caesarea. He also built a Roman temple in the city. His deeds were beneficial for the Jewish people. However, he did not act out of his religious faith in Yahweh, but out of political interests.

It has become obvious that, during the second temple period, the Hellenisation of the Jews followed three directions: culture, language and philosophy.

The Greek *culture* influenced several fields of the Jewish life: arts, architecture, clothing, ceramics. This influence was obvious not only at the Greek-Roman diaspora, but also in Judea where buildings followed the Greek pattern.⁵⁴ Part of the upper class from Israel accepted Hellenism and, when Jerusalem was reconstructed, many gymnasiums were built in the Greek style. The temple in Jerusalem, the pride of the Jews extended and decorated by Herod, was undoubtedly a masterpiece of Greek-Roman architecture.⁵⁵

As far as *language* was concerned, the essence of Hellenisation consisted in introducing the Greek language in the Jews' vocabulary. The Greek language was triumphant in the diaspora. Philo, the most educated Jew from Alexandria, only spoke a few words and phrases from the Torah. All the inscriptions of the Jews from the diaspora were engraved in Greek.

The situation was much more complicated in Israel. There was a real competition among Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. But even in Israel there were many Jews who spoke Greek and wrote in Greek.⁵⁶ The Greek language had a huge impact in Judea in that period. As far as it is known, Hebrew was the main language used in the literary expression. The Qumran Caves Scrolls show that Hebrew was the original language in most of the writings from Judea during the reign of the Maccabees till the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Aristeus's intervention⁵⁷ and 4 Maccabees are representative for the apologetic character of the Jewish writings from that period. 4 Maccabees presents the confrontation between the

⁵³ He ruthlessly murdered Hyrcanus, the high priest, and massacred Babas, a relative from the Hasmonean family. For fear of having claimants to the throne, he murdered his own wife, the beautiful Mariamne, Alexandra, her mother, his uncle Joseph and his brother-in-law Costabar. Among the Judean nobles who formed the Sanhedrin, he killed 45 persons. He confiscated the possessions of the rich and highborn ones. Fearing his own children, Alexander and Aristobulus, he ordered they were strangled. Five days before his death, he ordered the killing of one of his most faithful sons, Antipater. And, to die in "peace", he made his intriguing sister, Salome, swear that, on the day of his death, she would execute all the nobles of the country whom he had imprisoned in Jericho. Living among a hostile population, Herod had the country filled with spies who reported to him all that was said about him, and so few escaped his thirst for blood. He licked the palm he could not bite. That is why, with a diabolical ability, he managed to be a friend of Rome for 45 year as the stability of his throne depended on it. Athanase Negoită, 164-165

⁵⁴ Sbye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, (London: Westminster Jhon Knox Press, 2006), 27

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 30

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 30

⁵⁷ Flavius Josephus, 63

cruel Seleucid king and a Jewish mother. The talmudic literature proves the subtle, but profound infiltration of Greek lexical borrowings into Aramaic and Hebrew texts.

As far as *philosophy* is concerned, one must notice the fact that certain Jews from Israel and from the diaspora sought to wipe out the difference between them and those of a different nationality. These Jews would be often called apostates or rebels. Some believed that their Jewish origin would prevent them from having a career in the civil service or would represent an obstacle in their professional success. Intellectuals had difficulties in accepting the truths of Judaism, but they accepted more easily the Greek philosophies.⁵⁸ The fact that the Jews were influenced by the Greek culture or that they borrowed Hellenistic ideas does not mean that they unconsciously embraced their ideology. Much of the Jewish literature from the Hellenistic period followed the Greek literary forms.⁵⁹ As far as the idea of God is concerned, the Yahweh of the Jews presented in their sacred writings differed from the supreme God in Platon or Aristotle's philosophy. The philosophers' God was more of an abstract figure that lacked any feeling and that did not interfere in people's daily activities. His divine intervention was completely absent. Many people tried to present the God of the Bible in the light of these philosophies. Philo of Alexandria tried in his many essays, based on the Torah, to demonstrate that the God of the Jews was similar to Platon's God.

In conclusion, one can say that the conquests of Alexander the Great introduced the Greek culture and thinking to the Near East. Alexander sought to establish Greek settlements across his kingdom. Greek was used in schools and trading. Several Greek colonies such as Samaria, Ptolemais, Scytopolis and Philoteria were set up. Under the successive reign of the Ptolomies and of the Seleucids some Jews adopted the Greek culture while others firmly opposed it. As shown by the following events, this was a problem that would polarize the Jewish society and that would be introduced in the Early Christian Church. The Jews who spoke Greek, the Hellenists, complained against the Jews because "their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food" (Acts 6,1). The Jews in their homeland as well as the Jews in the diaspora could not avoid these important transformations. Despite the huge influence of the Hellenists, the Jews showed a continuous rejection. From a Jewish point of view, the Hellenistic heathen conception about the world represented a threat for the very essence of Judaism. The apologetic literature of the time clearly illustrates this aspect. Hellenism had a great impact on several forms of Jewish exterior expressions such as literature or architecture and, to a certain extent, on life itself. However, the Jews were very firm in their religion and faith and largely rejected the Greek influence.

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