I. Introduction

The writings of Flavius Josephus are among the most important texts for students of the Hasmonean period. Although Flavius Josephus wrote his books nearly a century after the end of Hasmonean rule, he had access to many lost historical works that documented this time. Unfortunately, a comparison of events, battle narratives, and geographical locations in Josephus’ books and other works, such as 1–2 Maccabees, that also recount the Hasmonean period reveal many differences. It is difficult to determine which, if any, of these or other texts have preserved a reliable historical chronology for the major events of the Hasmonean era. This article addresses this issue by exploring Josephus’ alteration of history to reshape his presentations of the Hasmonean rulers from John Hyrcanus I to Aristobulus II. In the process, it will offer a new chronology for some events of this time that differs substantially from the sequence presented in Josephus’ works.

This study focuses on how Josephus has creatively shaped his depictions of the Hasmonean rulers from John Hyrcanus I to Aristobulus II. Because most of Josephus’ sources are no longer extant, I will not engage the large body of scholarship on the nature or identity of these lost works. Rather, I will highlight some neglected texts and archaeological evidence that help us to understand how Josephus has crafted his accounts of the Hasmonean period. For each Hasmonean ruler, I will begin with a section simply titled fiction, which merely summarizes Josephus’ accounts. This is followed by a fact section that will attempt to offer a historically accurate account of what actually occurred. The conclusion offers a few observations regarding the importance of Josephus’ social location in Rome for understanding why he chose to revise his portrayals of the Hasmonean rulers to produce books that are, to a great extent, works of historical fiction.
II. John Hyrcanus

1. Fiction

John Hyrcanus is clearly the hero of the Hasmonean period in Josephus’ books. According to the Antiquities, Hyrcanus was a pious “youth” (Ant. 13.228) when he became high priest after the assassination of his father Simon by Ptolemy. He delayed his attack upon Ptolemy’s stronghold in order to offer sacrifices in the temple as high priest. Hyrcanus was forced to abandon his siege due to the arrival of the Sabbatical year. According to Josephus, he had no choice in the matter since Jews were not permitted to fight at this time.

Upon returning to Jerusalem, Hyrcanus was immediately attacked by Antiochus VII Sidetes. In War’s brief account, Hyrcanus had no option but to plunder David’s tomb to pay off Antiochus. He then hired a mercenary force to protect Judea. However, in the Antiquities Hyrcanus mounted a spirited defense. During Antiochus’ siege of Jerusalem, Hyrcanus expelled the non-combatants from the city to conserve his diminishing supplies. Although Antiochus did not help these innocent civilians, it is Hyrcanus who comes across as the villain of Josephus’ narrative because he too allowed them to starve. Once again, the arrival of a religious holiday—the Feast of Tabernacles—ended Hyrcanus’ plight. Antiochus agreed to respect this festival and provide the necessary sacrifices as well as make peace with Hyrcanus. Because of his piety, Antiochus purportedly earned the sobriquet “Eusebes” (Ant. 13.244).

Josephus’ War and Antiquities disagree as to what happened next. In the War (1.62), Hyrcanus invaded Syria while Antiochus fought the Parthians. Hyrcanus managed to annex several cities and destroyed Samaria. However, in the Antiquities, Hyrcanus was obligated to render military assistance to the Seleucids and accompany Antiochus on his Parthian campaign (Ant. 13.249–53). According to Josephus, Hyrcanus was saved for the third time by the arrival of a religious holiday. After defeating the Parthians in battle, Antiochus had to leave Hyrcanus and his troops behind so that they could celebrate Pentecost.

---

1 1 Macc. 16:18–25; Ant. 13.230–300; War 1.54–69.
2 Josephus lists the following cities: Madaba, Samaga/Samoga, Shechem, Mt. Gerizim where the Cutheans lived, and the Idumean cities of Adora and Marisa (War 1.63; Ant. 13.255–257).