Chapter 12

Temple or Taxes? What Sparked the Maccabean Revolt?

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For much of the last century, the main debate about the Maccabean revolt concerned the motivation of Antiochus Epiphanes in his suppression of the Jewish religion, which was widely seen as anomalous in the ancient world. Elias Bickerman (2011a) and Martin Hengel (1974) laid the blame on the Jewish Hellenizers, especially Menelaus, while others laid primary responsibility with the king, although his actions remained puzzling (Heinemann, 1938; Tcherikover, 1999:184; Goldstein, 1976:159; Millar, 1978). In recent years, however, the pendulum has shifted. There is now something of a consensus that the actions of the king were punishment for a rebellion (e.g. Doran, 2011). There is still disagreement, however, about the nature of the rebellion in question and the logic of the king’s repressive measures. Second Maccabees says that during Epiphanes’ second invasion of Egypt, Jason, the deposed High Priest, staged an unsuccessful coup against Menelaus, who had supplanted him. When the king heard that fighting had broken out in Jerusalem, he concluded that Judea was in revolt (2 Macc 5:11). In effect, he mistook factional fighting for a revolt, and proceeded to suppress it brutally. The brutality of the suppression, and especially the attack on central religious institutions, is what led to the Maccabean revolt. Robert Doran has argued cogently that this narrative “provides a coherent account of what happened in Judea under Antiochus IV. Thinking the city was in revolt, Antiochus IV took it by storm and abrogated the gift of allowing the city to live by its ancestral laws, as his father had done formerly to Apollonia at Rhyndacos” (Doran, 2011:432). Victor Tcherikover, however, argued that the popular rebellion came first: “it was not the revolt which came as a response to the persecution, but the persecution which came as a response to the revolt” (Tcherikover, 1999:191). Tcherikover’s view has found few followers, since it has practically no basis in the major sources. (Danny Schwartz, 2008:54–5, is a notable exception. He finds hints in 2 Maccabees 5 that support Tcherikover’s view.) Recently, however, it has been revived by Sylvie Honigman, who claims to find at least indirect support for it in the recently published Heliodorus/Olympiodorus inscription (Honigman, 2014:20. For the inscription, see Cotton and Wörrle, 2007, Gera, 2009, and Jones, 2009).
On Honigman’s reconstruction, the basic issues were economic. Elias Bickerman had argued that the Seleucid kings followed a policy of “surrender and grant” in the territories they conquered—a conquered city lost the right to live by its ancestral laws until that right was granted by the conqueror. “The first favor bestowed by a Hellenistic king on a conquered city—and the basis of all other favors,” wrote Bickerman, “was the re-establishment of the municipal statutes. In virtue of the conquest, the subjugated city was no longer entitled to its institutions and laws, and it regained these only by means of an act promulgated by its new master” (Bickerman 2011b; Ma, 2000:112–3; Doran, 2011:423–33, especially 426–8). Honigman (2014, 303–4) disputes this policy and argues that arrangements with conquered cities were a matter of negotiation: “The community’s status was established through negotiation, and not by the victor’s unilateral decree. . . . The precise details of the political and economic status of the community were worked out . . . once the military phase of the conquest was complete” (Honigman, 2014:306, relying on Chandezon, 2004). In her view, the “royal concessions” granted to Jerusalem by Antiochus III were primarily tax concessions. She takes the Heliodorus/Olympiodorus inscription, which speaks of the appointment of Olympiodorus “to take care” of the sanctuaries of Koile Syria and Phoenicia, as evidence that Seleucus IV was attempting to revise the treatment of temples, and to bring them under closer supervision (Honigman, 2014:321–2). This is the reason for Heliodorus’s visit to Jerusalem, which is the subject of a colorful, mythologized, narrative in 2 Maccabees 3. The High Priest Onias III evidently prevented Heliodorus from seizing funds that were on deposit in the temple,1 but this episode provides the backdrop for the replacement of Onias by Jason, which Honigman attributes to the initiative of the king. Jason secured the appointment as High Priest by agreeing to increase the size of the tribute. Honigman assumes that this would have required higher taxes. As part of the negotiation, he secured the right to convert Jerusalem into a polis, a development that would have been beneficial to the elite in Jerusalem. She dismisses the story of Menelaus’ accession as a doublet, on the grounds that two significant tax increases in quick succession were unlikely, leaving it unclear how Menelaus became High Priest. She then assumes that the tax increases led to a popular revolt, which is covered up in the Jewish accounts, in order to depict the king as an aggressor: “My thesis

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1 Honigman, ibid., 542–3 suggests that the funds in question were tax revenues that had been ceded to the Ptolemies. This interpretation relies on dating the story of Joseph the Tobiad in Josephus to the second century BCE, and bristles with problems that need not detain us here.