Antiochus’ persecution of Judaism is a well known historical episode, for which various explanations have been proposed. It was so exceptional in the framework of the polytheistic, Hellenistic, world within which it happened, that it attracted the attention of many scholars. We will not discuss this theme at present, but we will try to follow and to scrutinize the career of one personality among the Seleucid politicians, who took part in the military and political efforts to put down the Judean revolt. His activity was also linked to the struggles which were taking place between various groups within Judean society regarding their cultural and political position, and their familial affiliations.

In our discussion we will accept two assumptions: First, that there were disagreements among Seleucid high officials about the policy that should be adopted by the Seleucid government towards the Jews (i.e., which of the various Jewish parties should they support). Second that the religious persecution in Judaea implicated both the king Antiochus Epiphanes and a part of the Judean aristocracy, which we will henceforth call the Hellenizers, who were lead by the Hellenized High Priest Menelaus.

Both these assumptions are accepted in some form or another by many scholars. The former is substantiated by the careers of Ptolemy Macron and Ptolemy the son of Dorymenes, as well as by the careers of some other Seleucid officials. The latter was convincingly presented by Bickerman and Tcherikover (although disagreeing on some points, they both saw the initiative for the religious persecution originating from within Jewish society), who were followed, with variations of course, by many others.2

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1 For Macron’s attitude toward the Jews see 2Macc., X, 12–13. About opposition to such a sympathetic attitude see implicitly in loc. cit. and and in 2Macc., XII, 2. Further discussion and bibliography see J. Kampen in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, s.v. (IV, 461–462).

2 M. Hengel follows basically Bickerman’s understanding of the religious persecution, which he developed further on, and which was considered by other scholars.
Among the Seleucid officials who were involved in Judean affairs, Lysias is singled out as the most important and tenacious opponent to the policy which was dictated by his king, Antiochus IV. This is not evident from a superficial reading of the sources. So we will first assemble them all, and then try to analyze them critically, following Lysias’ activity and policy, and then propose our conclusions on the basis of a general evaluation of his career (as much as we know of it).

The first time Lysias’ name is mentioned in 1&2 Maccabees is when he was appointed by Antiochus IV as ‘over the affairs of state’ (ο ἐπί τον πραγματόν, 1Macc. III, 32), and was also entrusted with the guardianship of the young son and successor of Antiochus IV (III, 33). An additional piece of information about Lysias’ position at court should also be looked at, though it is less accurate. 1Macc., III, 32, tells that Lysias was of royal lineage. This datum is not substantiated by any other source and is not at all reasonable, but it can be explained by what is told about Lysias in 2Macc., XI, 1. There we are informed that Lysias was guardian (ἐπιτρόπος) of the young son of Antiochus IV, and ‘relative’ (συγγενεσ) of the king. It is evident then that his being of the royal lineage in 1 Macc. is a misunderstanding of the meaning of syngenes, taking it to mean literally a relative, that is a member of the same family, when in the present context it is an hierarchical designation.3

It is clear then that, though we do not know Lysias’ ancestral or political background, he was an important member in Antiochus IV’s court and administration, and was entrusted by him with both the office of ‘Prime Minister’ (ο ἐπί τον πραγματόν) and the confidential task of guardian of the young crown prince.

Being in charge of the western part of the Seleucid kingdom, after Antiochus IV left for an expedition to the East, Lysias first conducted the war against the Judean rebels through the agency of

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