

THE END OF THE INDEPENDENT “HASMONEAN” KINGDOM & HOW ROMAN POLITICS CAME TO GOVERN JUDEAN POLITICS

76 BC Salome Alexandra, the widow of “King” & “High Priest” Alexander Jannaeus, took over the reins of government by promising the Pharisees great influence in her kingdom.

76-67 BC “Queen” Alexandra kept the peace between the Pharisees & Sadducees by permitting the former to consolidate their power in Jerusalem (within the Sanhedrin) and dispersing the latter into the various fortified cities of her kingdom.

69 BC “Queen” Alexandra (71 yrs) appointed her oldest son, Hyrcanus II (aligned with the Pharisees) as the High Priest.¹ Sensing that his mother’s death was near & desiring the throne for himself, Aristobulus II (aligned with the Sadducees) slipped out of Jerusalem and went about the kingdom, using his Sadducee connections to secure control of the various fortified cities for himself. His mother immediately imprisoned his wife & children at Jerusalem.

67 BC After Alexandra died, the armies of the two brothers fought at Jericho for control of the kingdom. Many of Hyrcanus’ troops deserted to Aristobulus, so he retreated to Jerusalem and barricaded himself in the citadel where his sister-in-law & her children were being held. Eventually a power sharing arrangement was reached, with Aristobulus ruling as “King” & Hyrcanus continuing as “High Priest.”

67-65 BC Hyrcanus had a very close friend named Antipater the Idumean.² Antipater was the son of Antipas, “King” Alexander’s governor of Idumea. Antipater was also the father of the Biblical Herod “The Great” who was a small child at this time (he was born c. 74 BC). Antipater constantly told Hyrcanus that it was unfair that his brother had taken the kingdom from him, the eldest son, & kept insisting that he do something about it. Eventually he talked him into going to King Aretas III of Arabia for assistance in regaining Jerusalem in exchange for the return of Arabian territory taken by Hyrcanus’ father.

¹ “Hyrcanus then began his high priesthood on the third year of the hundred and seventy-seventh Olympiad [July 70 BC-July 69 BC], when Quintus Hortensius and Quintus Metellus, who was called Metellus of Crete, were consuls at Rome [69 BC].” *Antiquities* 14.1.2

² Remember that the Idumeans (Edomites living in southern Judea) had been forcibly converted to Jewish customs by the High Priest Hyrcanus I, some sixty years earlier.

64 BC Hyrcanus, Antipater the Idumean & King Aretas III of Arabia invaded Judea. They defeated the army of “King” Aristobulus, inspiring many of his men to defect to Hyrcanus as the legitimate “King.”

PASSOVER (Mid April) Aristobulus barricaded himself in the Temple with what few supporters he had left, chiefly priests of the Sadducee party.

“While the priests and Aristobulus were besieged, it happened that the feast called the Passover was come, at which it is our custom to offer a great number of sacrifices to God; but those that were with Aristobulus wanted sacrifices, and desired that their countrymen without would furnish them with such sacrifices, and assured them they should have as much money for them as they should desire; and when they required them to pay a thousand drachmae³ for each head of cattle, Aristobulus and the priests willingly undertook to pay for them accordingly; and those within let down the money over the walls, and gave it them. But when the others had received it they did not deliver the sacrifices, but arrived at the height of wickedness as to break the assurances they had given, and to be guilty of impiety towards God, by not furnishing those that wanted them with sacrifices. And when the priests found they had been cheated, and that the agreements they had made were violated, they prayed to God that he would avenge them on their countrymen. Nor did he delay that their punishment, but sent a strong and vehement storm of wind, that destroyed the fruits of the whole country, till a modius⁴ of wheat was then bought for eleven drachmae.”⁵

Meanwhile, the Romans, under Pompey “The Great” (who was married to the daughter of Julius Caesar), were involved in a war to the north of the Hasmonean Kingdom. Scaurus, son-in-law of Pompey, to whom responsibility of the Damascus region had been given, came to Jerusalem to arbitrate the disputed succession of their Jewish ally. Both sides promised to pay 400 talents of silver into the Roman treasury for a decision in their favor. Scaurus decided in favor of Aristobulus – mostly (according to Josephus) because he was already barricaded in the well-fortified city of Jerusalem – and ordered Aretas III to withdraw his Arabian forces or face reprisals for attacking a Roman ally.

Aristobulus subsequently attacked (possibly with Roman reinforcements lent to him by Scaurus) & defeated his opponents, killing the brother of Antipater in the process. But this did not settle the matter of succession. Both sides sent representatives directly to Pompey, appealing for him to decide the matter himself. He agreed to do so when he came to Damascus the following spring.

³ A drachme was roughly one day’s wage for a common laborer, so each bull was being purchased for more than three years of wages for a common Jewish worker.

⁴ A modius was about ¼ of a bushel, so that a full bushel of wheat was being purchased for more than seven weeks of wages for a common Jewish worker.

⁵ Antiquities 14.2.2.

63 BC **SPRING** Pompey (42 yrs) heard the Jewish case at Damascus.⁶

- Hyrcanus claimed the right to rule based on his status as firstborn. He accused Aristobulus of not only declaring himself “King” by force, but of being an aggressor in neighboring regions also, including having had a connection to the Mediterranean grain ship pirates whom Pompey had recently defeated. Hyrcanus was supported by over a thousand Jewish nobles, gathered to him by his friend Antipater the Idumean.
- Aristobulus claimed the right to rule based on his brother’s weak leadership style, feeling that he had to declare himself “King” (a title which he defended as belonging to his father before him) lest someone else come in and seize control from his brother. Aristobulus was supported by the younger members of Jewish high society.
- Another group of petitioners wanted a return to legitimate priestly oversight since the two brothers seemed only to be interested in enslaving the Jewish people for their own purposes.

Pompey promised to decide the matter after settling issues between the Roman Republic & the Nabataean Kingdom of Aretas III. However, because Aristobulus continued to present himself as the rightful “King,” Pompey was forced to divert his army to Jerusalem, where he eventually took Aristobulus into custody. The supporters of Aristobulus barricaded themselves on the Temple mount, physically cutting off the access points. The remainder of the Jews welcomed Pompey’s army into the city. Pompey’s army then used the Jewish tradition of not engaging in offensive warfare on the Sabbath against the Jews within the Temple complex by spending several Sabbaths building siege ramps against the wall surrounding the complex.

63 BC **Third month on “The Fast”**⁷ When Pompey breached the wall, 12,000 pro-Aristobulus Jews died, many of them at the hands of anti-Aristobulus Jews who evidently followed the Roman soldiers through the breach.⁸

“...no small enormities were committed about the temple itself, which, in former ages, had been inaccessible, and seen by none; for Pompey went into it, and not a few of those that were with him also, and saw all that which it was unlawful for any other men to see, but only for the high priests. There were in that temple the golden table, the holy candlestick, and the pouring vessels, and a great quantity of spices; and besides these there were among the treasures two thousand talents of sacred money; yet did Pompey touch nothing of all this, on account of his regard to religion; and in this point also he acted in a manner that was worthy of his virtue.

“The next day he gave order to those that had the charge of the temple to cleanse it, and to bring what offerings the law required to God; and restored the high priesthood to Hyrcanus, both because he had been useful to him in other respects, and because he hindered the Jews in the country from giving Aristobulus any assistance in his war against him.

“...and he made Jerusalem tributary to the Romans, and took away those cities of Celesyria which the inhabitants of Judea had subdued, and put them under the government of the Roman president, and confined the whole nation, which had elevated itself so high before, within its own bounds.”⁹

⁶ Antiquities 14.3.2.

⁷ According to Wars 1.7.3. The Antiquities account mentions “The Fast,” which seems to be some extra-Biblical fast, possibly the one of the 23rd, related to the Jeroboam split from the kingdom.

⁸ According to the Wars account the majority of Jewish casualties were inflicted by Jews of the opposite party.

⁹ Antiquities 14.4.3.

Thus, thanks to political infighting among the Hasmoneans, their independent Jewish kingdom was reduced in size & Judea became just another Roman province. Josephus writes with clear irritation of this reality almost a century later.

“Now the occasions of this misery which came upon Jerusalem were Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, by raising a sedition one against the other; for now we lost our liberty, and became subject to the Romans, and were deprived of that country which we had gained by our arms from the Syrians, and were compelled to restore it to the Syrians. Moreover, the Romans exacted of us, in a little time, above ten thousand talents; and the royal authority, which was a dignity formerly bestowed on those that were high priests, by the right of their family, became the property of private men; but of these matters we shall treat in their proper places.

“Now Pompey committed Celesyria, as far as the river Euphrates and Egypt, to Scaurus, with two Roman legions, and then went away to Cilicia, and made haste to Rome. He also carried bound along with him Aristobulus and his children; for he had two daughters, and as many sons; the one of whom ran away [named Alexander]; but the younger, Antigonus, was carried to Rome, together with his sisters.”¹⁰

59-53 BC The “First Triumvirate” of Rome = This was a power sharing arrangement between Julius Caesar, Pompey and Crassus.

58 BC Alexander, the escaped son of Aristobulus, invaded Judea, deposed Hyrcanus and began rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem torn down by Pompey.

57 BC Pompey dispatched Gabinius to deal with this latest problem in Judea. (One of the Roman soldiers who distinguished himself in these battles against Alexander was a young man named Mark Antony.) Alexander’s mother was siding with the Romans (since they had the rest of her family in custody at Rome), so Alexander made a deal with Gabinius, giving up his hold on Jerusalem in exchange for maintaining his freedom.

“[Gabinius] brought Hyrcanus to Jerusalem, and committed the care of the temple to him; and when he had ordained five councils, he distributed the nation into the same number of parts: so these councils governed the people; the first was at Jerusalem, the second at Gadara [SE of the Sea of Galilee], the third at Amathus [E of Jordan, midway between the Sea of Galilee & the Dead Sea], the fourth at Jericho, and the fifth at Sepphoris [just north of Nazareth], in Galilee. So the Jews were now freed from monarchic authority, and were governed by an aristocracy.”¹¹

56 BC? Aristobulus & another of his sons, Antigonus, escaped from Rome and came to Judea in order to continue Alexander’s fight against Gabinius. Amidst heavy fighting, Aristobulus was badly wounded, captured and subsequently sent back to Rome.

55 BC While Gabinius was dealing with Roman business in Egypt, Alexander resumed his attempts to reestablish the “Hasmonean Kingdom.” When Gabinius returned from Egypt he discovered that Alexander had trapped what remained of the Roman forces of the Jewish areas on Mt. Gerizim. Gabinius defeated Alexander’s forces (with the help of Antipater the Idumean) and declared Hyrcanus to be the legitimate “High Priest” & “Ethnarch” of the Jews. Alexander was evidently captured & sent off to Rome to be imprisoned with his father.

¹⁰ Antiquities 14.4.5.

¹¹ Antiquities 14.5.3.

54-53 BC The First Triumvirate fell apart after the death of Pompey's wife (Julius Caesar's daughter) & the death of Crassus in battle with the Parthians.

49 BC Roman political tension reached its climax when Julius Caesar defied Pompey's instructions (who was then acting as Rome's political head) to relinquish control of his army before returning to Rome to involve himself in politics. This was when Caesar famously "crossed the Rubicon" with his army, effectively invading the Roman Republic & starting a civil war.

Julius Caesar freed Aristobulus, granting him and his son Alexander two Roman legions with which to subdue Syria (and Judea) for Caesar. Agents of Pompey poisoned Aristobulus & beheaded Alexander before they got anywhere near Judea.

48 BC **SEP** Pompey was assassinated in Egypt. Julius Caesar then went to Egypt where he supported Cleopatra VII in her own civil war against her brother/husband, Ptolemy XIII.

47 BC During Julius Caesar's battles in Egypt, Antipater the Idumean, at the insistence of Hyrcanus, sent Jewish troops to Egypt to assist him. Despite accusations by Antigonus, son of the lately-poisoned Aristobulus & brother to the beheaded Alexander, that Antipater & Hyrcanus were involved in those deaths & were illegitimately ruling Judea, Julius Caesar rewarded his newest allies.

- Hyrcanus was designated as "High Priest" & "Ethnarch" of the Jews & he was permitted to rebuild the Temple complex walls broken down by Pompey.
- Antipater's family were declared Roman citizens,¹² although personally exempt from Roman taxes. He also designated him as the "chief steward" of Judea – Hyrcanus' top official.

Antipater immediately informed the Jews that cooperation with Hyrcanus, himself & Caesar would bring peace & prosperity, such as was the case with the rebuilding of the walls around the Temple complex. But he also warned them that further disturbances like those incited by members of Aristobulus' family would bring serious reaction. He then appointed his own sons to positions of great authority.

- Phasaelus, the eldest, was made overseer of Jerusalem & the surrounding region. He administered his affairs with excellence.
- Herod (25 yrs) was made overseer of Galilee. He became a popular hero to the people in northern Galilee/southern Syria by wiping out Jewish gangs which had been terrorizing the region. Songs were composed in his honor & the governor of Syria, Sextus Caesar (Julius Caesar's cousin), commended him.

Josephus' later assessment of this early period of leadership within the Jewish kingdom by Herod's Idumean family is interesting.

"This conduct procured from the nation to Antipater such respect as is due to kings, and such honors as he might partake of if he were an absolute lord of the country. Yet did not this splendor of his, as frequently happens, in the least diminish in him that kindness and fidelity which he owed to Hyrcanus."¹³

¹² Hyrcanus' family probably already enjoyed Roman citizenship.

¹³ Antiquities 14.9.2.

TWO ROMAN DECREES FROM THIS PERIOD

“Caius Caesar, imperator the second time [47 BC], hath ordained, That all the country of the Jews, excepting Joppa, do pay a tribute yearly for the city Jerusalem, excepting the seventh, which they call the Sabbatical Year, because thereon they neither receive the fruits of their trees, nor do they sow their land; and that they pay their tribute in Sidon on the second year [of that Sabbatic period], the fourth part of what was sown: and besides this, they are to pay the same tithes to Hyrcanus and his sons, which they paid to their forefathers. And that no one, neither president, nor lieutenant, nor ambassador, raise auxiliaries within the bounds of Judea, nor may soldiers exact money of them for winter quarters, or under any other pretense, but that they be free from all sorts of injuries: and that whatsoever they shall hereafter have, and are in possession of, or have bought, they shall retain them all.

“It is also our pleasure that the city Joppa, which the Jews had originally, when they made a league of friendship with the Romans, shall belong to them, as it formerly did; and that Hyrcanus, the son of Alexander, and his sons, have as tribute of that city, from those that occupy the land, for the country, and for what they export every year to Sidon, twenty thousand six hundred and seventy-five modii¹⁴ every year, the seventh year, which they call the Sabbatic Year, excepted; whereon they neither plough, nor receive the product of their trees.

“It is also the pleasure of the senate, that as to the villages which are in the great plain, which Hyrcanus and his forefathers formerly possessed, Hyrcanus and the Jews have them, with the same privileges with which they formerly had them also; and that the same original ordinances remain still in force which concern the Jews with regard to their high priests; and that they enjoy the same benefits which they have had formerly by the concession of the people, and of the senate; and let them enjoy the like privileges in Lydda.

“It is the pleasure also of the senate, that Hyrcanus the ethnarch, and the Jews, retain those places, countries, and villages, which belonged to the kings of Syria and Phoenicia, the confederates of the Romans, and which they had bestowed on them as their free gifts.

“It is also granted to Hyrcanus, and to his sons, and to the ambassadors by them sent to us, that in the fights between single gladiators, and in those with beasts, they shall sit among the senators to see those shows; and that when they desire an audience, they shall be introduced into the senate by the dictator, or by the general of the horse; and when they have introduced them, their answers shall be returned them in ten days at the farthest, after the decree of the senate is made about their affairs.”¹⁵

“Julius Caius, praetor [consul] of Rome, to the magistrates, senate, and people of the Parians¹⁶, sendeth greeting.

“The Jews of Delos, and some other Jews that sojourn there in the presence of your ambassadors, signified to us, that, by a decree of yours, you forbid them to make use of the customs of their forefathers, and their way of sacred worship. Now it does not please me that such decrees should be made against our friends and confederates, whereby they are forbidden to live according to their own customs, or to bring in contributions for common suppers and holy festivals, while they are not forbidden so to do even at Rome itself; for even Caius Caesar, our imperator and consul, in that decree wherein he forbade the Bacchanal rioters to meet in the city, did yet permit these Jews and these only, both to bring in their contributions, and to make their common suppers.

“Accordingly, when I forbid other Bacchanal rioters, I permit these Jews to gather themselves together, according to the customs and laws of their forefathers, and to persist therein. It will be therefore good for you, that if you have made any decree against these our friends and confederates, to abrogate the same, by reason of their virtue, and kind disposition towards us.”¹⁷

¹⁴ About 5,169 bushels.

¹⁵ Antiquities 14.10.6.

¹⁶ Paros & Delos were islands in the Aegean Sea.

¹⁷ Antiquities 14.10.8.