

Antiochus' Persecution in Josephus' *War*

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The persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes marks a watershed in Jewish history. The targeting of cult and culture by a Hellenistic ruler crystalized an ethos of resistance that manifested itself in martyrdom and rebellion. Foreshadowed by the Book of Daniel and commemorated in the Maccabean literature, the Antiochene persecution offered fertile ground for Jewish historiography.

Given its pivotal significance for Jewish history, it's unsurprising that Flavius Josephus showcased it in his *Jewish Antiquities*. What is surprising is that he chose to begin his *Jewish War* with the same event. To be sure, backstories are important for establishing context, but this fails to explain why Josephus felt compelled to reach back nearly two centuries to explain what happened in 66 CE. He might as easily have begun with Herod the Great, to whose reign he devotes most of Book 1 of the *War*. In his prologue, Josephus offers this justification:

To speak of ancient things in the case of the Jews, in fact – **who** some of these were, **how** they up and fled from the Egyptians, **what sort** of country they encountered while they were wandering, **how many** places they seized in sequence, and **how** they found themselves displaced – I consider to be untimely now and in any case redundant, seeing that many Jews before me have recounted the deeds of our ancestors with precision, and **certain Greeks** have recast those things into their native speech without veering much from the truth. So just where both the historical writers of this group and our **own prophets** finished, from there I shall establish the beginning of my account. (*War* 1:17-18).

On the face of it, this sounds reasonable, but a closer inspection of Josephus' Maccabean narrative reveals clear dependence on 1 Maccabees, thereby undercutting his pretense of filling an historiographical gap. Josephus' rhetorical claim to begin at the beginning, then, is insufficient to account for the presence of the Antiochene persecution in his narrative. A brief review of the narrative itself is in order.

Factional strife arose among the leaders of the Jews at the time when Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes had a quarrel with Ptolemy VI concerning all of Syria. Their ambition was control of the government because each person of rank could not bear being subject to his peers. Onias, one of the high priests, gained the upper hand and drove the descendants of Tobias out of the city. The latter fled to Antiochus and pleaded with him to invade Judea, using them as guides. The king, who had long had similar plans, was (easily) persuaded. Having marched out with a very sizable army, he himself took the city by storm and did away with a large number of Ptolemy's supporters.

In addition, he gave the soldiers license to collect spoils without restraint, whereas he himself not only plundered the Temple but also interrupted the continuity of the daily sacrifices for three years and six months. The high priest Onias, however, fled to Ptolemy and received from him a place in the district of Heliopolis where he founded a small town that resembled Jerusalem, with a similar temple. (*War* 1:31-33)

It is hardly coincidental that the first word of Josephus' narrative proper (stasis, factional strife) is the leitmotif of the whole work. The dynamic with which Josephus opens his history foreshadows the circumstances that will determine Jerusalem's fate.

Josephus continues:

For Antiochus, however, neither the unhoped-for conquest of the city nor the looting with so much slaughter was sufficient. So, lacking control over his passions and remembering what he had suffered during the siege, he tried to force the Jews both to keep their infants uncircumcised and to sacrifice swine on the altar, thus **abolishing ancestral customs**. All disobeyed these dispositions, and those who were most esteemed were slain. (*War* 1:34-35)

While Josephus' description of the persecution is unremarkable, the idiom he employs to sum up the event – abolishing ancestral customs – is a charged expression in *War*. In fact, most of Josephus' use of the verb καταλύω pertains only to political or military disruption. Only at the center (Book 4) and the ends (Books 1 and 7) of the work is the verb applied to the overthrow of the laws. It would seem then that (as many scholars have observed) Josephus deliberately chose to begin the *War* with the chronologically remote Antiochene persecution because it allowed him to highlight factional strife, constitutional overthrow, and Jerusalem besieged – all fundamental themes of his work – at the very outset.

To borrow an expression from Steve Mason, the Antiochene persecution serves as a “signpost of symmetry,” not only at the macro level of the whole *War*, but also within Book 1 where the event itself takes place. Book 1 is framed at the other end by the story of Jewish opposition to Herod the Great's ornamental eagle on the Temple facade. What is noteworthy is how the resistance expresses itself. Scholars of the ancestral laws incite some “daring” youths to tear down the eagle:

They mentioned to their acquaintances that now was perhaps the most appropriate time to avenge God and tear down the artifact put up in violation of their ancestral laws, for it was unlawful for the Temple to contain either images or busts or a work representing some living creature. Even so, the king had set up a golden eagle above the great gate. It was this creature which the learned men at that time exhorted [the youths] to knock down, arguing that **it was a noble deed to die for one's ancestral law**. (*War* 1:649-650)

In contrast to the *Antiquities*, which features multiple instances of the “Herod as violator of ancestral custom” trope, the golden eagle incident at the close of Book 1 is the only such instance in the *War*. Its placement, coupled with the Antiochene persecution, seems deliberate on Josephus' part.

Another important Antiochus appears in Book 7. Josephus introduces him early:

It happened about this time that the remnant of Jews at Antioch were incriminated and in danger of extermination, the Antiochene community having been greatly incited against them in consequence not only of the false accusations now laid to their charge, but also of certain incidents which had taken place not long before. (*War* 7:41-42)

The Jewish race, densely interspersed among the populations of every part of the world, is particularly numerous in Syria, where intermingling is due to the proximity of the two countries. But it was at Antioch that they especially congregated, partly owing to the greatness of the city, but mainly because the successors of King Antiochus had enabled them to live there in security. For although Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes sacked Jerusalem and plundered the Temple his successors on the throne restored to the Jews of Antioch all such votive offerings as were made of brass, to be laid up in their synagogue, and moreover granted them citizen rights on equality with the Greeks. Continuing to receive similar treatment from later monarchs, the Jewish colony grew in number, and their richly designed and costly offerings formed a splendid ornament to the Temple. Moreover, they were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks, and these they had in some measure incorporated with themselves. (*War* 7:43-45)

Josephus continues:

Now just at the time when war had been declared and Vespasian had recently landed in Syria, and when hatred of the Jews was everywhere at its height . . .

Note how Josephus chronologically displaces this backstory, which refers to the outbreak of the First Revolt narrated back in Book 2 of the *War*, to the beginning of this post-war survey in Book 7. This four-year time lag is transparently designed to set the events he is about to narrate parallel to the Antiochene persecution in Book 1:

. . . a certain Antiochus, one of their own number and highly respected for the sake of his father, who was chief magistrate of the Jews in Antioch, entered the theater during an assembly of the people and denounced his own father and the other Jews, accusing them of a design to burn the whole city to the ground in one night; he also delivered up some foreign Jews as accomplices to the plot. On hearing this the people, in uncontrollable fury, ordered the men who had been delivered up to be instantly consigned to the flames, and all were forthwith burnt to death in the theater. They then rushed for the Jewish masses, believing the salvation of their native place to be dependent on their prompt chastisement. Antiochus further inflamed their fury, for, thinking to furnish proof of his conversion and of his detestation of Jewish customs by sacrificing after the manner of the Greeks, he recommended that the rest should be compelled to do the same, as the conspirators would thus be exposed by their refusal. The test being applied to the Antiochenes, a few submitted, and the recalcitrants were massacred.

. . . Antiochus, having next procured the aid of troops from the Roman general, domineered with severity over his Jewish fellow-citizens, not permitting them to repose on the seventh day, but **compelling** them to do everything exactly as on other days, and so strictly did he enforce this, that not only at Antioch was the weekly day of rest **abolished**, but the example having been started there spread for a short time to the other cities as well. (*War* 7:46-53)

Conclusion

Josephus' decision to include the Antiochene persecution in his narrative serves at least three purposes:

(1) It introduces a cluster of motifs that figure prominently in his account of the First Revolt: civil strife as a precipitant of national calamity, threats to Jerusalem and its shrine, and the overthrow of the ancestral laws. All these themes reach their crescendo in Book 4, the center of his seven-volume history.

(2) The Antiochene persecution showcases the archetypal response to sacrilege: a daring drive to avenge God and country. The Maccabees, in this capacity, prepare Josephus' audience to comprehend the psychology of the vandals who dare to tear down Herod's golden eagle from the Temple facade at the end of Herod's reign, thus providing framing elements for Book 1

(3) The pre-war persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes parallels the post-war persecution of the Antiochene Jewish community by one of their own. The juxtaposition of these stories, I suggest, invites reflection on the part of the reader/hearer. When Titus visits Antioch following the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Judeophobic Antiochenes petition him to expel the Jews or at least strip them of their citizenship, the victorious general declines, leaving the community untouched. The Romans, suggests Josephus – or at any rate the Flavians – are not like Antiochus Epiphanes, in spite of their sharing with him the opprobrium of having ravaged Jerusalem.

Another moral the Antiochene persecutions deliver is that the Jews' deadliest enemies are not – or need not be – Greeks or Romans; the enemy may be within (a major theme of Josephus' retelling of the tragedy of the First Revolt).

Josephus' point is not naively propagandistic. As a Jewish aristocrat writing for his educated Roman counterparts, Josephus' goal is to build a bridge of empathy. Jews and Romans alike can appreciate the sort of political debacles that can lead to the madness of an Antiochus, whether that Antiochus be a Macedonian monarch or a Jewish magistrate.

Works Cited

Steve Mason. *A History of the Jewish War*. Cambridge 2016