

## THE RELIGIOUS PERSECUTIONS OF ANTIOCHUS EPIPHANES AS A HISTORICAL REALITY

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Some scholars have recently claimed that the religious persecutions by Antiochus Epiphanes have no historical grounds. This thesis joins a challenging call to refresh the research of Ancient Jewish history by utilizing modern disciplines and innovative methods

This denial of the historicity of one of the most celebrated and decisive events in the History of the Jewish people was presented mainly in the voluminous book by Sylvie Honigman in *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV*, Oakland (University of California Press) 2014. The book tries to prove that the religious persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes were invented by court historians of the Hasmonean dynasty in order to glorify the Hasmoneans as the saviors of the Jewish religion and its Temple and thus justify their usurpation of the secular and religious authority. According to Honigman, Antiochus' violent treatment of the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants in 168 B.C. was only typical of the regular policy of Hellenistic and Seleucid rulers. However, shortly afterwards Antiochus Epiphanes demonstrated respect toward the Jewish God and granted precious gifts to his Temple. The real cause of the unrest in Judea was the heavy tax imposed on the Temple already by the time of Seleucus IV, Epiphanes' predecessor, and not religious persecutions.

Honigman argues that: (a) II Maccabees (and not only I Maccabees) was written by a court historian, living in Jerusalem at the time of John Hyrcanus, who was committed to promote Hasmonean dynastic propaganda; (b) the activities of the gymnasium established in Jerusalem by Jason were not unacceptable to the Jews, and none of the accusations imputed to Jason by II Maccabees can be regarded as an offense against Jewish law and traditional practices; (c) I & II Maccabees adopted a topos current in Mesopotamian literature for justifying the rise to power of 'righteous' rulers and deposition of 'villain' kings, and used it for legitimizing the Hasmonean dynasty; (d) the basic structure of both books accords with the Mesopotamian 'topos'; (e) it is generally accepted that a Seleucid military settlement was founded in the Jerusalem Akra after the Seleucid invasion in 168 B.C.; hence Honigman concludes that the report of the Books of the Maccabees that pagan sacrifices were forced on the Jews in Jerusalem and the rural areas, reflect only the existence of pagan altars serving the foreign military settlers in Jerusalem and in their agricultural allotments in the countryside; (f) the real motivation of the Jewish revolt was the great increase of taxes, especially the tax imposed on the Temple. In Honigman's view, this can be proved by the Olympiodoros inscription discovered in Marisa, dated to the last years of Seleucus IV; (g) there was no parallel to the religious persecutions imputed to Antiochus IV in Greek and Hellenistic history, and such a policy would have been inconsistent with Greek religious conceptions and practices and those of other polytheistic religions.

The present article refutes these arguments one by one. It expands on (a) the hostility of II Maccabees to Simeon, the founder of the Hasmonean dynasty, and the lack of any acquaintance of the author and the abbreviator with Jerusalem and the Land of Israel; (b) the role of the gymnasium as a place of public nudity and especially of the *palaestra* as a center of intensive homosexual activity in the Holy City, not far from the Jewish Temple

(indicated quite clearly in II Maccabees); (c) the meaning for the Jews of the period of these practices and of the provocative parades of the Ephebes in the streets of Jerusalem; (d) the Mesopotamian topos, which is entirely different from the content and structure of I & II Maccabees (notably Honigman's misleading assertion, referring to I Macc. 13:48, that Simeon built his palace in the Akra of Jerusalem, presented by her as the decisive evidence for a similarity between the Babylonian topos and the structure of I Maccabees is baseless: according to that verse Simeon built his palace in Gazara, the fortress situated at the edge of the coastal plain. There has never been a palace in the Akra); (e) the lack of a real proof for the foundation of a military settlement in the Jerusalem Akra, while there is ample evidence in the sources that no military settlements were established in Judea, such a step being useless and impractical in the given circumstances; (f) the taxation system of the Seleucids in Judea in the days of Antiochus IV was moderate in comparison with other regions of the Seleucid empire and considerably lower than the Ptolemaic one. The discussion expands especially on the token tax imposed on the Jerusalem Temple and on its timing, as well as on the implications of the Olympiodoros inscription. The token tax on the Temple could not have been the cause that generated the long Jewish Revolt, nor the taxation system by and large; (g) the internal, international and personal background of Antiochus IV led him to persecute the Jewish religion: he deviated dramatically from the religious policies and practices of his predecessors; the orthodox Jews of Jerusalem launched a revolt before the invasion of the city by Epiphanes in 168 B.C.; the king apparently suffered from cycles of depression and mania, which correspond to the development of his drastic reactions against the rebelling Jews. The article also points out that the assertion that the religious persecutions were unparalleled in Antiquity, is far from being accurate.

The article presents the sources on the religious persecutions which cannot be suspected of a pro-Hasmonean bias: (a) the book of Daniel (esp. 7:25), written at the beginning of the Revolt, many years before the Hasmonean dynasty was established, by a man who awaited divine intervention and did not expect much of the resistance movement; (b) authentic Seleucid official documents, written under the rule of Antiochus IV and his son, Antiochus V, that explicitly refer to the religious persecutions (II Macc. 11:24-26, 31); (c) the accounts on the religious persecution in Judaea preserved by early Hellenistic authors who were personally well acquainted with Seleucid history, and drew directly on contemporary Seleucid court historians. Honigman ignores the evidence of these sources altogether (while accepting the authenticity of the Seleucid documents in chapter 11 of II Maccabees).

Honigman's additional thesis, that the battles of Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers are imaginary, is also refuted. The article closes with some comments on the irrelevance to the issue under discussion of the disciplines and methods inadequately applied by Honigman.