בס"ד

**Introduction: From Kingdom to Roman Province, or from Liberty to Bondage**

In the summer of 161 BCE, two Jews from Jerusalem made their way to Rome: Eupolemus, son of Yohanan, and Jason, son of Eleazar. Their journey came in the wake of several years of impressive successes. What began as the rebellion of a small, isolated religious group had become a series of triumphant battles against the Seleucid Empire. Winning round after round, Judah Maccabee, leader of the rebellion, forced Antiochus IV who was on the throne by 161 BCE, to allow the Jews in Judea to maintain their faith and way of life. He estimated that once the Seleucids returned and organized their army, they would take revenge, and he was right. Now it was time for diplomacy. Eupolemus and Jason set out to make a pact with the world's leading power, the Roman Republic. They fulfilled their mission perfectly, as the wording of the alliance, preserved in 1 Maccabees, shows:

Good success be to the Romans, and to the people of the Jews, by sea and by land for ever: the sword also and enemy be far from them, If there come first any war upon the Romans or any of their confederates throughout all their dominion, The people of the Jews shall help them, as the time shall be appointed, with all their heart: Neither shall they give anything unto them that make war upon them, or aid them with victuals, weapons, money, or ships, as it hath seemed good unto the Romans; but they shall keep their covenants without taking anything therefore. In the same manner also, if war come first upon the nation of the Jews, the Romans shall help them with all their heart, according as the time shall be appointed them: Neither shall victuals be given to them that take part against them, or weapons, or money, or ships, as it hath seemed good to the Romans; but they shall keep their covenants, and that without deceit. According to these articles did the Romans make a covenant with the people of the Jews (1 Macc. 8:23–29).

A century later, Pompey the Great conquered the Land of Israel and disbanded the Hasmonean kingdom (63 BCE). Then, after ruling it for more than 130 years, the Romans, led by Vespasian and his son Titus, destroyed the Jewish Temple (70 CE). This was the second time that the Jewish Temple was destroyed. According to the biblical tradition, the First Temple had been built by King Solomon in around 1000 BCE and destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians. Seventy years later, under the auspices of the Persian Empire, the Second Temple had been built (516 BCE). Unlike the first destruction, which had occurred because of rapid geopolitical processes, the second was the culmination of a 130-year-long conflict.

By the time the Second Temple was destroyed, Rome had become for many Jews the embodiment of the fourth beast in the vision of Daniel (Daniel 7)—a terrifying, nameless creature that would crush the whole world. As if to prove them right, Vespasian minted coins with the inscription “Judaea Capta”—Judea is captive. A generation later, Tacitus, one of the greatest Roman historians, would describe the Jews as a misanthropic nation: “Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity” (Tacitus, *History*, 5.5). The Jews, he added, despise Roman customs: “The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor” (ibid., 4). Seventy years after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews and the Romans clashed again in the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136). From now on, the Jews would call Rome “the kingdom of Evil, which destroyed our homes, and burned our halls, and exiled our land”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, the Romans even forbade Jews from entering Jerusalem. How did Jews transform from friends of the Romans to a race known, by the latter, to be “in the contempt of the gods” (Pliny, *Natural History*, 13, 46)?

Seventy years after the Jewish population in the region of Judea was almost destroyed in the Bar Kokhba revolt (as is evidenced by the archeological findings), a new chapter began. According to a famous Jewish legend, a secret tunnel connected the home of the Roman emperor with the house of the Jewish leader, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (flourished at the beginning the 3rd century). The Church father Origen (c. 184 – c. 253) also testifies to the good relations between the Jewish Patriarch and the Roman authorities. How did the enmity and hatred between Jews and Romans, which had acquired mythical dimensions during the first century CE, transform into completion and acceptance of Roman rule during the second century and into the third?

The purpose of this book is to unravel the complex relationship between Jews and the Roman empire. ‘Jews’ and not ‘*the* Jews’ or ‘*the* Jewish people’. There were many and different groups of Jews in the Land of Israel and in the Mediterranean basin, each had its unique attitude towards Rome, and the Romans reacted differently to each of the groups. In what follows, I review three interrelated factors that shaped the ups and downs of this bond:

**Jewish–Roman relations**: We need to formulate this concept with the utmost caution in light of changing historical circumstances. At the beginning of the period covered, from the second century BCE to the second century CE, two fairly well-defined political entities may indeed be discussed: the Roman Republic, headed by the Senate, and the Hasmonean state headed by the eponymous dynasty. Whereas Rome remained a recognized political entity with a fairly clear hierarchical system, the situation in the Land of Israel became quite complex. Pompey's conquests annihilated the Hasmonean state (63 BCE) and cost the Hasmoneans their crown. John Hyrcanus II descended to the rank of *ethnarch—*ruler of an *ethnos* (group of people who shared a belief in their common descent). Practically, he ruled over areas that had a large Jewish population in the former Hasmonean kingdom and his activity was limited to intra-Jewish relations. Later, Herod the Great did receive the title of King from the Romans (39 BCE) but remained essentially a vassal. Several years after his death, Judea became a Roman province (6 CE), called Judaea. While the Romans appointed no official to liaise with the Jews, they recognized the high priests and Herod's descendants as the Jews’ representatives. The undermining and disintegration of the Jewish leadership opened the door for lesser local personalities such as Judas of Galilee, John of Giscala, Rabban Yohannan be Zakkai and others, to attain prominence on religious, economic, or social grounds. No one could speak any more about a relationship between Judea and Rome, nor even between the Roman ruler and the Jewish people. Instead, the Roman government maintained diverse ties with various Jewish groups. Thus, as Rome engaged in military struggle against the Jews during the Great Revolt (66–70 CE), the Jews of Sepphoris, a city in Galilee, were granted protections and urban autonomy in exchange for their opposition to the revolt. The existence of Jewish communities in and outside the Roman Empire only complicated the situation: Are all the Jews the same? The complexity of Jewish identity and the Jews’ different social and political frameworks created a policy riddled with internal contradictions.

**Nationlism, religion and ideology**:

How did Romans and Jews interpret the confrontations between them? Did the Jews see their struggle with Rome as one aimed at national liberation? Did they think they were heeding a religious commandment? What ideology motivated them? Were there perhaps any changes in the way in which the Jews, who had rebelled against Rome for over two hundred years, defined themselves and the reasons for their revolt? On the other hand, did the Romans view the revolt of the Jews in the same way that they did the revolt of the Germanic tribes, or did they see the war against the Jews as a continuation of the campaign against the Hellenistic kingdoms?

Of course, we need to be cautious with the use of terms such as nationalism, religion, and ideology, as these concepts have strict definitions and uses in modern Western history. Although theoretical discussions of terms and definitions tend to be tedious (and to some extent useless as well, there seems to be no way to avoid them. If only to clarify the issue, I will open with “nationalism.” From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the division of the world into nation-states seems natural. Nonetheless, most sociologists and historians agree that nationalism, as we know it, is just another aspect of modernity, and did not exist as such in the ancient world. Indeed, prominent scholars of nationalism, including Eric Hobsbawm and Ernst Gellner, argue that it is impossible to attribute any form of national consciousness to the people of antiquity. Yet as we shall see immediately below, the cultural-political structure of Jewish society, and, even more so, some of the Jews’ arguments at the time, may sound to our ears as distinct expressions of national consciousness. Indeed, some scholars, including Anthony Smith, feel that this cannot be ignored. It seems to me that Smith's definitions can help us understand the group consciousness of the Jews in antiquity and the changes that took place in it. Smith's defines a nation as:

a named and self-defined human community whose members cultivate shared myths, memories, values, symbols and traditions, who reside in and are attached to an historic territory or “homeland,” create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe common laws and customs (Smith, *Diasporas and Homelands in History*, p. 3)

Accordingly, Smith argues that there are indeed periods of Jewish history in which Jews can be defined as a nation. He refers specifically to the first century CE (Smith, *The Antiquity of Nations*, p. 144), which is the focus of this book. However, Smith immediately goes on to state that the existence of a “nation” does not necessarily indicate “nationalism,” i.e. “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a human population some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’” (Smith, Diasporas, p. 3). In his view, the revolts of the Jews against world empires (the Seleucids and later the Romans) were intended to help the Jewish nation, but did not stem from nationalism, but had, at most, an element of “national sentiment” (Smith, *The Antiquity of Nations*, p. 144). As we shall see throughout this book, this assertion too must be qualified.

However, if nationalism is a modern phenomenon, what about religion? The term “religions of the ancient world ” is well known to all of us. In fact, religion is seen as one of the most basic human experiences. Nevertheless, “religion,” as we understand it today, did not exist back then; the prevailing perceptions of and attitudes toward all aspects of human existence were different. Jews have detailed laws that regulate almost every aspect of their lives. These laws are called“halakha,” a word derived from the verb *halakh* (to go), and halakha*,* (the way people should go). The halakha was developed intensively during the period covered by this book, but is not its focus. Instead, it examines the connection between “religion” and “politics.” Yet due to the nature of halakha, the theological and religious ideas that connected religion and politics became a binding way of life for some Jews. When dealing with the “religious ideology” that motivated Jews to revolt in Rome, this study looks at the way in which Jewish groups attempted to decipher the metaphysical meaning of political reality. In the Bible, there is already a clear recognition that history in general, and the history of the Jews in particular, is governed by God. Concerning the Second Temple period, we should ask whether and how various Jewish groups developed different metaphysical and political attitudes towards Rome. The disparities in the context presented here are reflected in both the variety of policies adopted by Jews toward Rome—confrontation, acquiescence, or cooperation—and the theological-religious question that the groups asked themselves at the time: How does God expect us to act in relation to Rome? Is a covenant with Rome desirable or forbidden?

For the Romans, the Jews were but one stone in a large mosaic of captive peoples. From a military point of view, they were a nuisance, sometimes a stubborn one, but certainly not an existential threat that could shake the Roman Empire. However, the way in which the Romans perceived the Jews did change over time. More importantly, it is quite possible that the way in which the Romans treated the Jews profoundly changed the self-consciousness of the latter. According to one Jewish historian, the punishment imposed by the Romans on all Jews after the Great Revolt is precisely what turned the Jews into a “nation.”

Another aspect worth examining is whether and how the Romans’ acquaintance and encounter with Jews contributed to the metamorphoses of the Roman Empire in the centuries to come. Is it possible that the very encounter with the Jews, even with its violence, created more fertile ground for the acceptance of Judaism’s daughter, Christianity? On the other hand, did the failures of the Jews in their war with the Romans cause the early Christians to adopt an approach of compliance with and acceptance of the Roman Empire? “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17).

**Socioeconomic conditions**: The violent clashes between Judea and Rome pitted a civilian population against a professional and skilled army. For a mass of civilians to be willing to risk their life and wealth in a military struggle, two elements must be present. One, of course, is an ideology that views the enemy as negative and dangerous to society’s continued existence. The second is a sense of such deep despair and frustration, that the feels spreads that there is nothing left to risk. The latter component mainly concerns the socioeconomic status of the population. The wealthier one is and the greater one’s physical comfort, the less likely one is to endanger them by embarking on a rebellion. In contrast, the worse a person's socioeconomic situation is, the more willing she would be to risk her paltry assets in the hope of bettering her state through rebellion. Karl Marx understood this well when he implored the workers of the world to unite and overthrow the existing order because “you have nothing to lose but your chains.” Indeed, just as the workers of the whole world did not unite, so did not all the Jews unite. Debates over the calculation of risks and prospects accompanied the confrontations with Rome throughout the period.

I will examine how socioeconomics contributed to the outbreak of the clashes and consider how aware the Romans were of the problem and how they tried to deal with it. On the Jewish side, ideological-religious fault lines in society often overlapped with class divisions. This phenomenon had implications for the leadership of the Jewish elites, the negotiations with the Roman government, and, ultimately, the extent of Jewish society’s mobilization in the struggle against Rome.

These three processes —political, ideological, and socioeconomic—are intertwined. To understand the Jewish–Roman conflict, one needs to develop a multidimensional picture based on these three factors and, even more so, of the people and groups who lived, dreamed, and fought. In this chapter, I discuss the beginnings of these three processes, from the first diplomatic meeting between Jews and Romans during the Maccabean rebellion (161 BCE), until the Roman warlord, Pompey, put an end to the Hasmonean kingdom. .

**The Hasmoneans: From Religious Revolt to an independent State**

The two diplomats sent by Judah Maccabee to Rome, Eupolemus, son of Yohanan, and Jason, son of Eleazar, embody in their names the changes that took place in Judea in the first half of the second century BCE. Both fathers bear distinct Jewish names. Yohanan is definitely known to have been a descendent of one of the prestigious priestly families. Eleazar, father of Jason, was probably also a priest. But the two priests chose epitomically Greek names for their sons: Eupolemus and Jason. That they did this attest to the rapid Hellenization of the Jerusalem priestly class and the elite of Jewish society in a process that likely began with the conquest of Judea by the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, in 200 BCE. The popularity and sympathy for Greek culture among the Jerusalemite elite and especially in the priestly circles collided with a counter-movement among Jews who fought to preserve Judaism’s ancient way of life.

The cultural confrontation and social tension soon escalated into violent conflict between the two groups. Hellenizing priests aspired to make Jerusalem, for all intents and purposes, a Hellenistic *polis*. Wrestling competitions and sporting parades, under the auspices of the Temple priests, began to be held throughout Jerusalem, now called *Antioch-in-Jerusalem*. Tensions between the two groups mounted as the Hellenizers enjoyed the support of King Antiochus IV. When the clash between the groups became violent, Antiochus intervened by banning the observance of the Jewish commandments.

It was at this stage that resistance to Hellenism and the Hellenizers became a direct confrontation with the Seleucid Empire. A priestly family from Modi’in, the Hasmoneans, spearheaded the uprising. Nothing is known about the family’s origins. The fact that the family hailed from the city of Modi’in indicates that they were not part of the priestly elite located in the economic and cultural center, Jerusalem. This was the first manifestation of a phenomenon that would recur in ensuing centuries: the will to rebel and the initial organization of the rebellion originated among the rural, remote, conservative population, far from the administrative and cultural center.

One gets a certain impression of the motives of the Hasmonean family from a careful reading of the words of Matityahu, the family patriarch. According to 1 Maccabees, a Seleucid military force arrived in Modi'in to oblige the Jews to offer a sacrifice, apparently for the sake of the king, an act that countered the laws of the Torah. Matityahu vehemently refused to comply. When one of the locals went to the sacrifice, Matityahu ran, killed the man with a sword, and struck the king’s representatives. Immediately afterwards, Matityahu called to the people of his village: “Let everyone who is zealous for the law (Torah) and who stands by the covenant come out with me!” (1 Macc. 2:27). Matityahu was not interested in the dignity of the nation, did not wish to break free from Hellenistic colonialism or enslavement, or have any other kind of national motive. The only thing that mattered to him was loyalty the Torah. He and his sons therefore set out for the mountains of Samaria, where they formed the first nucleus of rebels. Matityahu seems to have died shortly thereafter. In his will, he called on his sons to remain faithful to and ensure observance of the Torah. He sealed the document with the words: “And you shall gather about you all who observe the law, and you shall fully avenge your people. Pay back the nations the repayment they deserve, and observe the ordinances of the law” (1 Macc. 2: 67-68). Matityahu did not ask that the people be gathered or that all the Jews be called. His reference group was limited to “those who keep the Torah,” and his final words were: “observe the ordinances of the law.”

Judah Maccabee, the third son of Mattathias the Hasmonean, became the leader of the rebels and won a series of thrilling victories over the Seleucid forces. He conquered the Jerusalem Temple and resumed the sacred services formerly held there in accordance with Jewish law. Antiochus IV was in the midst of a campaign in the East when he learned of the military failures at home. Realizing that he could not afford to wage war on two remote fronts, he abolished the religious decrees and restored religious autonomy to the Jews. The rebellion should have ended at this point (164 BCE); the edicts had been rescinded, the Temple purified, and the sacred rite reinstated. Nevertheless, military clashes with the Seleucids continued, due most likely to the lasting tension provoked by the cultural and religious differences among various segments of Jewish society. This was when Judah Maccabee took two actions that would carry the Hasmonean uprising into a new era.

Thus far, Judah Maccabee’s actions had been restricted to Judea, a fairly small geographical area (about 2000 square kilometers) inhabited exclusively by Jews. However, Jewish populations existed elsewhere in the Land of Israel, even east of the Jordan River. The Hasmoneans’ successes prompted the Hellenistic majority in Galilee and Gilead to harass the Jewish minority there. Responding to the appeals of local Jews, Judah Maccabee fought on their behalf against the non-Jewish authorities. His responsiveness was the result of two ideological elements unrelated to the primary objectives of the Hasmonean uprising. First, the Jewish minorities predicated their request for aid on grounds other than religious restrictions or persecution. Second, Judah was willing to fight for other Jews even if they were not in his region. Thus, it seems that his motives were not solely religious. His activities clearly indicate his awareness of an affinity with Jews outside of Judea. How did he view this affinity? Did he believe that his responsibility to them was based on a common ethnic origin, or was he interested in their commitment to the Torah? At this stage of the discussion, it is unclear.

Let’s go back to our two diplomats in Rome. The covenant between Judea and Rome juxtaposes two sides identified by ethnic identity—“the Romans” and “the Jews.” They are seen as equal political entities that have common interests. Reading the covenant, one is hard put not to be impressed by the gap between the polite diplomatic formulations and Judah’s status as the leader of a group of bandits and rebels that achieved some local successes but lacks any formal status. It is precisely for this reason that the covenant hints at Judah’s aspirations. The rebellion that began in opposition to religious decrees and aimed to restore the order of the good old days became, within a few years, a struggle for the establishment of a political entity.

Judea’s outreach to Rome and the latter’s response can be well understood in view of the power relations in the eastern Mediterranean. Since 191 BCE, Rome had shown great interest in this part of the world. In 168 BCE, with violent clashes already under way in Judea, Rome demonstrated the seriousness of its intentions. That year, Antiochus IV succeeded in scoring a victory over the Ptolemaic army, and Seleucid forces seemed poised to capture Egypt. Now it was time for the Roman eagle to show its strength. Roman Senator Gaius Popillius Lineas met with Antiochus IV near Alexandria. Wasting no time even to sit down, he read to Antiochus the Senate resolution that required Antiochus to leave Egypt immediately. Antiochus asked for time to consult his people. In response, Lineas brandished a vine branch and used it to draw a circle around the king. “You can leave this circle only after you submit your answer to the Senate resolution,” Lineas advised him. Within moments, Antiochus announced that he was leaving Egypt. It was during his retreat to the north, defeated and humiliated, that Antiochus IV vented his wrath on the Jerusalem Temple and apparently looted it as well. The Jews’ harsh reaction to his petulant violence led him to impose the religious decrees. The connection between the two episodes did not go unnoticed by any party in the Middle East.

After Judah Maccabee had proved himself to be a reliable and significant agent in the Seleucid realm, it was only natural for him to approach Rome with a proposed alliance. The Romans, in turn, were interested in encouraging elements that could inhibit and counterbalance the Seleucid Empire. Thus, the pact between Judea and Rome served both sides’ military and political interests. Once the political circumstances changed, plainly one would expect the terms of the covenant to undergo revision as well; perhaps the alliance itself might founder. Still, one cannot help but wonder at the “cunning of history,” which made the Romans the first, since after the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE),to recognize a Jewish community as an independent political entity.

**The Hasmonean State, the Hasmonean Kingdom, and the Roman World:**

**Nationhood and Religion**

Several months into the alliance with Rome, Judah Maccabee’s death in battle with Seleucid forces (160 BCE) plunged the rebellion into its most severe crisis until that time. Bacchides, the Seleucid general who killed Judah, removed Hasmonean supporters from all key positions. A coalition of Hellenizers and religious pietists who did not share the Hasmonean motive confronted the Maccabees. The decline of the revolt and the abandonment of the Hasmoneans were probably related to a disagreement over the goals of the revolt. It is quite likely that the religious circles that supported the revolt were satisfied with the abolition of religious decrees and the cleansing of the Temple. They did not see the need to do anything more. The Hasmonean brothers, on the other hand, seem to have had far-reaching ambitions.

Leadership of the rebellion passed to Jonathan, Judah’s brother. A combination of mistakes by Seleucid loyalists, Jonathan’s military prowess, and rivalries among claimants to the Seleucid crown allowed Jonathan to take over large parts of Judea. More importantly, he secured the high priesthood for himself (152 BCE), thus becoming the Jews’ recognized religious leader. Jonathan now held the *duo gladii* (two swards, symbolize the spiritual and material power)*—*secular authority by virtue of his military leadership and religious authority as the High Priest. This combination would become a characteristic of Hasmonean leadership. Although its aroused fury against the Hasmoneans, it also left a deep imprint on factional and sectarian Jewish society.

Even though the Hasmonean leadership displayed various manifestations of sovereignty and recognition, Judea remained subject to the Seleucid authorities. Only in 140 BCE did Judea become an independent political entity with its own currency, recognized by the Jewish people and the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kings. An instructive expression of the Hasmonean self-concept came a few years later. The Seleucid king Antiochus VII, Sidetes (138-129 BCE) demanded that Simon, the brother of Judah and Jonathan who had risen to the Hasmonean leadership, return parts of Hasmonean-held territory to the Seleucid government. Simon’s answer is a significant landmark in the formulation of Jewish national ideology:

Then answered Simon and said unto him: We have neither taken other men’s land, nor holden that which appertaineth to others, but the inheritance of our fathers, which our enemies had wrongfully in possession a certain time. Wherefore we, having opportunity, hold the inheritance of our fathers (1 Macc. 15:33–34).

This wording is surprising in its modern conception of nation. The land belongs to the nation; therefore, the nation has the right to take “back” parts of its usurped historical homeland. Simon argues for continuity between the Biblical kingdom of Israel and his own time, and between ancient Israel and the Jewish people of his day. John Hyrcanus, son of Simon, continues this policy of expanding the Hasmonean state. The religious-national ideology is expressed in an inscription featured on his coins: “Yehohanan the High Priest and the Council of the Jews.” Jewish sovereignty rests on two legs: the reference to the high priesthood defines the religious status of the ruler, while the phrase “Council of the Jews” implies the Jewish people. Many scholars see the words of Simon and John Hyrcanus’ coins as the end point of an intense process in which a group that had been persecuted for its beliefs became a sovereign nation with territory. Is that the case?

If John Hyrcanus had quasi-national or proto-nationalist ideas, as some scholars believe, he does not seem to have been able to pass them on to his children. One of the modern foundations that helped shape national consciousness was the establishment of national armies through conscription. In the beginning, Hasmonean forces were, in fact, composed only of Jews. Of course, this was not necessarily due to a national consciousness, but rather to a common religious belief, but it would certainly have created a “national sentiment,” as Smith calls it. Judas Aristobulus, son of John, reigned only a year, but this gave him enough time to fundamentally change the nature of Hasmonean rule. Aristobulus gave up the “national army” and established his own army of mercenaries, as was customary in the neighboring Hellenistic kingdoms. He expanded the borders of the state and conquered the Golan Heights. This area was neither part of the area of ​​Jewish settlement nor an integral part of the biblical Kingdom of Israel. In doing so, Aristobulus violated the principle that a nation-state had to be closely associated with “national territory.” Not content with this, Aristobulus apparently assumed the title of king and became a famous “lover of Hellenism (philhellenos),” as Josephus writes. Aristobulus thus showed no sign that could be considered “national.” The Hasmonean state actually became a Hellenistic kingdom. This process continued during the reign of his brother, Alexander Jannaeus, and led to drastic changes in Jewish society.

**Sects and Parties in the Hasmonean Kingdom**

How did Jewish society react to the shifts in the nature of the Hasmonean government and its goals? Earlier we saw that a change in the revolt’s goals led to significant disengagement of fighters from the camp of Judah Maccabee. The successes of the Hasmonean family down the road must have provided them with many supporters, but also enemies.

The first to be harmed by the Hasmoneans’ ascent was, of course, the previous leadership. Before the Hasmonean revolt the high priests were descendants of an old dynasty of high priests, the Zadokites, who had held the position since the beginning of the Second Temple period. Indeed, according to popular tradition, Zadok, the patriarch of the family, had received the appointment from King David [1 Chron. 22:29]. Before Jonathan became a high priest, however, a member of the Zadok family does appear to have held the post. According to one scholarly reconstruction, after being ousted by Jonathan, he joined a radical religious group seated in Qumran in the Judean Desert. In due course, the members of this sect would call him the “teacher of righteousness.” His religious conceptions, eschatological hopes, and attitude toward contemporary events in Jerusalem are found in texts that belong to what are known today as the Dead Sea Scrolls—a collection of some 950 objects—scrolls and scroll fragments—that include biblical texts, commentaries, and detailed records of the sect’s special laws and eschatological expectations. Most scholars identify the Qumran group with the Essenes who are known from Josephus.

The Qumran sect, however, was but one rather isolated group. What about the rest of Jewish society? Jewish society at that stage of antiquity featured two powerful groups: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The origin and meaning of these epithets are unclear, but Josephus, rabbinic literature, New Testament literature, and other Second Temple texts yield a careful portrait. Josephus describes the theological and religious differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees, but also provides quite a bit of information about their socioeconomic background. Of the two groups, the Sadducees were part of the priestly aristocracy and, as brethren in tribe and class, supported the Hasmonean dynasty unreservedly. They also exhibited religious openness, at least in the sense of countenancing free interpretation of the Torah without subordination to any interpretive tradition. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were a religious elite. In this respect, they resembled the people of Qumran, the Essenes. Unlike the Essenes, however, who chose to seclude themselves from general Jewish society in the service of their religious rigor, the Pharisees engaged the public and sought to attract it to their religious positions. In contrast to the Sadducees, they adhered to an interpretive tradition regarding the Torah and its commandments, one that they considered binding.

Despite the Pharisees’ religious dimension, their powerful influence on the Jews of Judea and the great prestige that they enjoyed privileged them with growing political power. It is therefore no surprise that they frowned on the Hasmoneans’ unification of religious and secular functions, the *duo gladii*. Indeed, a fascinating story recounted by Josephus and in rabbinic literature tells of a feast in which Pharisees and Sadducees took part. The banquet was held in honor of the victory of a Hasmonean king, apparently Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE). During the fest, one of the Pharisees snapped at Jannaeus: “You have a royal crown; give the priesthood to Aharon’s seed.” That is, double-dipping in power is unacceptable; Jannaeus should settle for political leadership and leave the office of the high priest to someone else. Like the Essenes, the Pharisees were also reluctant to unite the two swords.

The confrontation between Jannaeus and the Pharisees also had a religious aspect. According to Pharisaic law, water must be poured on the altar during the festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot). The Sadducees rejected this custom because it is not described in the Torah. Jannaeus who served as high priest heeded their opinion, and within sight of the whole people, poured the water on his feet. This was the spark that ignited a civil war. Alexander Jannaeus enjoyed the support of the Sadducees, but the basis of his power lay in mercenaries from Asia Minor. At the same time, a fighting force was probably formed from among the Pharisees. At the height of the conflict, the Pharisees called on Demetrius III, king of Syria (97-87 BCE), and to some extent the heir of Antiochus Epiphanes, to help them against Jannaeus. We do not know the details of the agreement between the Pharisees and Demetrius. The Pharisees probably hoped that after Jannaeus was expelled, they would be able to gain religious control of the temple. It is quite reasonable to believe they agreed to accept the rule of Demetrius in return. The willingness of the Pharisees to relinquish political independence indicates not only the intensity of their hostility and hatred towards Jannaeus, but also the fact that Jewish nationalism—and with it political independence—was not at the forefront of their minds. On the other hand, Jannaeus’ military activity, and the ways in which his government was shaped, reveal that he, too, probably no longer saw himself as a representative of the “Jewish nation.” Jannaeus continued in the path of his brother and extended his conquests to distant lands, which by no means could be considered as “the inheritance of our fathers,” to use the phrase of his grandfather, Simon. At the same time, Jannaeus made intensive use of Hellenistic symbols. Some of his coins display the inscription “King Alexander” in Greek. On the verso of these appears a kind of sun with eight rays, a Hellenistic symbol often used to represent to power and might.

After the death of Alexander Jannaeus, his wife, Salome Alexandra, inherited power. Under her leadership new understandings were formed with the Pharisees, who gained much influence, especially in the religious sphere. This period was burned into the Pharisaic collective memory as a period of abundance and success. After nine years in power, Salome passed away. Her two sons, John Hyrcanus and Judas Aristobulus, competed for the crown. Each had his shortcomings, and their rivalry led to a bloody civil war. If, in the wake of Salome’s successful rule, there were Jews who often supported the idea of political independence, then the Hasmonean civil war seems to have caused many to reconsider their support of the dynasty, as we shall see in the next chapter.

In conclusion, the Hasmonean rulers took various steps to stabilize their rule. At the beginning of their journey, they wanted the Hasmonean dynasty to be perceived as a legitimate representation of a wider social group. For this reason, they relied on the support of the Jewish people. In view of this, it is not surprising that some of their actions and words may sound to us like expressions of nationalism in the modern sense. However, as the Hasmoneans consolidated their rule, they became more and more like the Hellenistic kingdoms surrounding them. They largely relinquished national expressions at the same time as their opponents renounced “national independence.” Like the Hellenistic kingdoms around them, the Hasmoneans also suffered internal intrigue, hatred, and civil war. Now all that remained was to wait for the final liquidation of the Hasmonean state. The Roman boot did not delay in taking this step.

1. Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)