

CRITICAL NOTES

A NOTE ON THE SOCIAL TYPE AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF THE HASMONEAN FAMILY

The First Book of Maccabees has seduced almost every scholar who has worked on the book or the history of the Hasmonean revolt. And this is not entirely inappropriate: the bristling and fearsome defenders of the “laws and holy things” of Israel may never have existed precisely as described, but this resonant and perversely attractive image of the Hasmonean family *can* be safely assumed to correspond to one aspect, at any rate, of the family’s self-presentation. Still, it is important to recognize that 1 Maccabees has reasons apart from devotion to historical accuracy for portraying the Hasmoneans as it does and furthermore that it does not even provide a full repertoire of Hasmonean propaganda.¹ One way to demonstrate this is to pose the question, Who were the Hasmoneans?

1 Maccabees’ answer to this question is straightforward:² they were Jerusalem priests of the order of Joarib who went to Modein in 168 or 167 (1 Macc 2:1); they were heirs to the zeal of Phinehas b. Eleazar when he rose up from the congregation (2:15–28; 2:54); they were latter-day Joshuas, judges, and King Davids, who mercilessly chastised Israel’s enemies (especially 2:55–57);³ and they were the family to whom God entrusted the salvation of Israel (5:62), and who had given their lives for the laws and the holy things.⁴

Now, Deuteronomic judgship or kingship—the image that 1 Maccabees labors to evoke—is a literary fiction; it is very unlikely to correspond to any social reality even in Israel’s remote past, and certainly the model cannot be properly applied to anyone in Hellenistic Palestine—as appealing as the assimilation of the Hasmoneans to this type certainly was in some circles. Nor is it possible to imagine the Hasmoneans as a band of armed pietists, as 2 Maccabees more or less does—a social type that actually did exist in Hellenistic Palestine and could be found, briefly, among the early partisans of the Hasmoneans.

I wish to argue that the Hasmoneans should be understood as representatives of a very different class, moderately well attested in the immediate environment of the family. V. Tcherikover, in his survey of papyri concerning Palestine from the Zenon archive, observed that Zenon and his friends, traveling through Palestine as private

¹ For detailed discussion, see S. Schwartz, “Israel and the Nations Roundabout,” *JJS* 52 (1991) 16–38.

² Of the other sources, only Josephus is interested; his account in *Antiquities* is dependent on 1 Maccabees and his account in *Jewish War* (source unknown) is hopelessly garbled. It is of some interest though that in *J.W.* 1 §36 Mattathias is called τῶν ἱερέων ἀπὸ κώμης Μοδεείν.

³ This is of course an important theme of the work.

⁴ See Simon’s programmatic speech in 13:3–7.

agents of the *dioikētēs* Apollonios in 259 and 258 BCE,⁵ occasionally encountered what one might call “village strongmen”—that is, well-to-do landowners, living in areas relatively remote from centers of government authority, who were influential enough locally and zealous enough of their own prerogatives to resist successfully official interference in their villages or farms.⁶

CPJ 1.6, dated April 258, reports how Zenon’s agent and the agent of a local official (probably in southern Judea or Idumea) attempted to collect money which a certain Ieddous owed Zenon;⁷ when they appeared with a letter authorizing collection, Ieddous . . . αὐτοῖς δὲ [χεῖρας] προσενεγκεῖν καὶ ἐγβαλεῖν ἐκ τῆς κώμης (“ . . . laid hands on them and threw them out of the city”). Tcherikover’s interpretation of this incident (mentioned above) is convincing: an average private citizen of no standing is (1) unlikely to have borrowed money from Zenon; (2) would not have been willing or able to “throw the officials out of the village.” Ieddous was probably Jewish—his name has priestly associations⁸—though we should not be as certain of his Jewishness as Tcherikover was. He could have been Idumean.⁹ In any case, a similar situation is likely to be behind the letters Zenon sent (from Alexandria²) to his representatives in the vicinity of Marisa, drafts of which are published as *P.Cair.Zen.* 1.59015.¹⁰

Though the existence of such people presumably upset the Ptolemies’ aspirations to control fully the political and economic life of Palestine and Phoenicia,¹¹ Tcherikover was probably right to suppose that they were fairly numerous. The geography of (and probable absence of roads in) the interior of Palestine certainly favored them, because it meant that landowners in areas remote from Jerusalem, Marisa, and other administrative centers could generally expect to be left alone. But we know too little about the economic and social history of late Persian and early Hellenistic Palestine to understand why the phenomenon developed.

Tcherikover considered the Ammanite Toubias mentioned in the Zenon papyrus the most successful of the “village strongmen”—wealthy and influential enough to have his position, and his private army, recognized by the Ptolemies and incorporated into the administration of the province of *Syria-kai-Phoinike*. The history of Toubias’s family is well known, so it need not be repeated here. It must be emphasized, though, that government recognition of their position in Ammanitis was not the only mark of their success. They also had an interest in Jerusalem; the factual basis of the so-called Tobiad Romance in Josephus, *Ant.* 12 §§160–236 may be that Toubias’s son Joseph exploited a political blunder of the high priest Onias II to acquire some sort of authority over

⁵ On Zenon et al. as private agents of Apollonios, see R. Bagnall, *The Administration of the Ptolemaic Possessions Outside Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1976) 18.

⁶ See V. Tcherikover, “Palestine under the Ptolemies,” *Mizraim* 4/5 (1937) 48–51.

⁷ See V. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁸ Neh 10:22 (priest or levite); 12:11 (high priest); Josephus, *Ant.* 11 §302ff.

⁹ Ieddous (ידיע) is a hypocoristic of the same type as זכור, שלים, ברך; but it could just as easily abbreviate a name like the Idumean קיסרדע or the ethnically neutral אלדדע as the Judean ירוידע or ירוידע.

¹⁰ See C. C. Edgar, *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Zenon Papyri*, vol. 1 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1971).

¹¹ See Bagnall, *Administration*, 9–24.

tax collection at least in Judea and perhaps elsewhere in Palestine.¹² These later Tobiads are portrayed by Josephus as ardent Jewish “nationalists” whose activities—mostly the plundering of Greek cities along the coast (12 §§180–185)—had somehow “brought the *laos* of the *Ioudaioi* from beggary and weak government to more resplendent opportunities of life” (12 §224). Their religious observance is another matter: everyone knows about Toubias’s casual and utterly gratuitous mention of “the gods” in his letter to Apollonios;¹³ Joseph and Hyrcanus are both described as dining with Ptolemy: no kosher caterer is mentioned (12 §§173, 187, 210–214). Some Jews, at least, like the author of Daniel 1 (perhaps their contemporary), would have disapproved.

The Hasmoneans fit best in this company. Despite the statement in 1 Macc 2:1 that Mattathias came from Jerusalem and settled in Modein only at the time of the persecution, it is obvious that Modein was in fact their home. This village was in the foothills on the far northwestern fringe of Judea, or perhaps more likely on the far southwestern fringe of Samaritis.¹⁴ At any rate, it was certainly remote from any administrative center or military outpost (Gezer, which was nearby, was fortified only around 160 [1 Macc 9:52]). It is generally agreed that the Hasmoneans were well-to-do landowners and influential in their village. Such a sentiment is put into the mouth of the Seleucid official in 2:17 (Mattathias is ἀρχων και ἐνδοξος και μέγας . . . ἐν πόλει ταύτῃ) and is confirmed by the course of events early in the uprising.

The family’s activities conform closely to the patterns typical of their class. They were zealous of their local prerogatives: their failure to react to the reform of the Jerusalem cult was a source of embarrassment to some of their later supporters; this explains the moving lamentation for Jerusalem which 1 Maccabees puts into Mattathias’s mouth, and also Josephus’s statement in *J.W.* 1 §§35–36—perhaps derived from folk recollection—that the Hasmoneans’ first act of resistance occurred in Jerusalem. It is therefore likely to be a fact, as 1 Maccabees says, that Mattathias and his group first rose when the royal officials appeared in his village¹⁵—an event reminiscent of Ieddous’s reaction to the arrival of Zenon’s agents.

Subsequently, the family displayed a measure of political ambition and flexibility inconsistent with the common images of them as zealous biblical heroes or religious extremists. Down to 164 they apparently remained especially active in the far north of Judea,¹⁶ yet even there their supporters belonged to very diverse groups, of which

¹² The thoroughgoing skepticism expressed by D. Gera is perhaps excessive (“On the Credibility of the History of the Tobiads,” in *Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel* [ed. A. Kasher, U. Rappaport, and G. Fuks; Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1990] 21–38).

¹³ See *CPJ* 1.4; C. Orrieux points out that it was *not* customary to mention the gods in the greeting of a private letter, yet he paradoxically minimizes the importance of the mention in Toubias’s letter (“Les papyrus de Zénon et la préhistoire du mouvement maccabéen,” in *Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky ZL* [ed. A. Caquot, M. Hadas-Lebel, J. Riaud; Louvain/Paris: Peeters, 1986] 329–33).

¹⁴ See J. Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters From Mattathias to the Death of John Hyrcanus I* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 27 n. 1. However, J. Schwartz argues that Modein was in Judea (*Lod (Lydda), Israel From its Origins through the Byzantine Period* [BAR International Series 571; Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1991] 49).

¹⁵ See Sievers, *Hasmoneans*, 29–36. The details of the account are intended to evoke the zeal of Phinehas and thereby legitimate the Hasmoneans’ high priesthood; they should be disregarded (so Sievers); but that some such event occurred is quite likely.

¹⁶ See J. Schwartz and J. Spanier, “On Mattathias and the Desert of Samaria,” *RB* 98 (1991) 252–71.

1 Maccabees mentions only two, both of them some type of pietists (the Asidaioi and the “Sabbath Observers,” 2:29–38, 42). But there must have been others, too:¹⁷ (1) landowners like the Hasmoneans, some of them possibly moderately hellenized. Such people may have feared that the transformation of Judea into a normal oriental Greek state would result in the subjection of the countryside to the city; this would have involved the loss of the political and civil status which these landowners had had as prominent members of the *ethnos* of the *Ioudaioi*—in which the Jerusalemites had enjoyed no special advantages over the country people;¹⁸ (2) bands of the socially and economically marginal—brigands, impoverished peasants, and so on—always present in the fragile economy of central Palestine; (3) common pious priests from Jerusalem and points north; (4) Samaritans angry at the reform of the Gerizim cult;¹⁹ (5) apathetic peasants pressured into rebellion by the Hasmonians’ rampages in the north Judean countryside (1 Macc 2.45–48);²⁰ (6) either at this point or sometime in 164/3, the Hasmonians created an alliance with some group of Tobiads;²¹ (7) most likely in 164, they won the support of some of the more hellenized, probably priestly, members of the Jerusalem aristocracy—for example, Eupolemus b. John and Jason b. Eleazar (1 Macc 8:17) That Judas retained these partisans after the appointment of Alcimus is unlikely, but later some of these groups do show up in the party of Jonathan and Simon

Now, in all likelihood, the Hasmonians’ control over the revolt in its early stages was looser than 1 and 2 Maccabees admit. Nevertheless, they *are* overwhelmingly likely to have been the revolt’s leaders (at least in the north): no source provides even a hint that there was serious competition for this position. If so, then the fact that they held their supporters together demonstrates an ability to mediate, compromise, and appeal to diverse interests, which nothing in 1 Maccabees’ account of the family’s early history would lead us to expect

The Hasmonians notoriously continued fighting after the restoration of the *status quo ante* had cost them the support of much of their faction. Why? Probably not for

¹⁷ The following list extends that provided by Sievers (*Hasmonians*, 37)

¹⁸ Except a few short-term privileges granted by Antiochus III, see Josephus, *Ant* 12 §§143–144

¹⁹ I will discuss this issue in “John Hyrcanus I’s Destruction of the Gerizim Temple and Judaeo-Samaritan Relations,” *Jewish History* 7 (1993) 9–25

²⁰ Sievers argues that the destruction of altars and forcible circumcision of children in the Judean countryside are here attributed to Mattathias to provide a legal precedent for John Hyrcanus’s treatment of the Idumeans (*Hasmonians*, 35) That John actually treated the Idumeans in this way, however, is unlikely—see S. Cohen, “Religion, Ethnicity and Hellenism in the Emergence of Jewish Identity,” in *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom* (ed. P. Bilde, T. Engberg-Pedersen, L. Hannestad, and J. Zahle, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1990) 215–16. More likely, 1 Maccabees’ statement reflects actual early Hasmonian practice, undertaken either to “purify the land” or to force peasants who had complied with government demands into outlawry and revolt—a common technique among revolutionary and terrorist groups

²¹ Judas and Jonathan depended on Tobiad troops in their Galaadite “campaign”—a fact suppressed by 1 Maccabees (2 Macc 12:17ff), such an alliance also explains the peculiar by-name Hyrcanus, of the ethnarch John b. Simon, born sometime in the 160s. Though such an explanation seems obvious, it is rarely given. Obviously wrong is the explanation common in the Christian chronographic tradition that Hyrcanus received his name after a victory over the Hyrcanians—presumably during Sidetes’ Parthian campaign, see E. Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (ed. G. Vermes and F. Millar, Edinburgh: Clark, 1973) 1:201 n. 2. This explanation reflects its authors’ knowledge of Roman, not Hellenistic or Jewish, practice

Judean independence. Judas himself, in befriending Nicanor (2 Macc 14:23–27),²² behaved more like an ambitious courtier than a zealous freedom-fighter. So he was probably seeking not to overthrow the existing system but to advance within it: Judas's strategy of winning concessions from the Seleucids by pestering them militarily had proved successful in the past, and he probably hoped it would continue to work (one is reminded here of the private army of the Tobiads). With the Hasmonians' military failure in 161/0, the survivors apparently began to pursue their own political advancement more vigorously, or at least more successfully. The details are unknown, since 1 Maccabees suppressed them, but when its account starts up again, the Hasmonians have been transformed into the Seleucid counterparts of the late third-century Tobiads: powerful local politicians who have been integrated into the administration of the empire. And they behaved predictably in seizing control in Jerusalem and exploiting their official positions in the Seleucid administration to plunder the coastal cities.

1 and 2 Maccabees and Josephus all make much of the early Hasmonians' devotion to the Law, and it must be true that in some general sense their inclinations were traditionalist. Yet even here they showed a remarkable willingness to ignore or adapt the law when it suited their purposes to do so. Either Mattathias himself or Jonathan selectively ignored the Sabbath laws—a development apparently opposed later on by some supporters of the Hasmonians, like the author of 2 Maccabees. Jonathan's assumption of the high priesthood while a presumably legitimate member of the traditional family (Onias IV or his son) was still available was at the very least problematic. But it was probably easier to defend than the family's military activities, which inevitably resulted in the contraction of corpse impurity—ambiguously forbidden to common priests by Lev 21:1, but unambiguously forbidden to high priests by v. 11;²³ indeed, there is no record that any previous high priest except Jason and Menelaus had gone to war. Perhaps I should mention also their failure to observe the laws of war as prescribed in Deuteronomy 20, a failure that 1 Maccabees cannot conceal though not for lack of trying. We have no further solid information about the legal practice of Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, though it would be very interesting to know the facts behind the vituperative rhetoric of, for example, *Pesher Habakkuk* or the *Psalms of Solomon*. These and other documents, especially those from Qumran, raise the possibility that even the early Hasmonians neglected or altered traditional laws in profound ways not mentioned by the books of Maccabees.

To sum up: many details of the behavior of Mattathias, Judas, Jonathan, and Simon are most closely paralleled in the Zenon papyri and the stories about the Tobiad family. Therefore, the family, like the Tobiads before them (and, for that matter, the family of Antipater the Idumean later, and various Jewish rebel leaders later still), may be profitably viewed as a group of ambitious “village strongmen,” who exploited the disorder in Jerusalem to establish their influence beyond their country district. Their main concern at all periods was their own advancement. To secure this, they displayed political and religious flexibility for which the rhetorical tone of the most important source for their rise, 1 Maccabees, leaves us unprepared.

²² 1 Macc 7:26–32 hurries past the incident.

²³ See also v. 12: ומן המקדש לא יצא ולא יחלל את מקדש אלהיו.



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