

PLOTTING ANTIOCHUS'S PERSECUTION

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The history of religious persecution could be said to have begun in 167 B.C.E. when the Seleucid king Antiochus IV issued a series of decrees outlawing Jewish religious practice. According to 1 Maccabees, anyone found with a copy of the Torah or adhering to its laws—observing the Sabbath, for instance, or practicing circumcision—was put to death. Jews were compelled to build altars and shrines to idols and to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals. The temple itself was desecrated by a “desolating abomination” built atop the altar of burnt offering. The alternative account in 2 Maccabees adds to the list of outrages: the temple was renamed for Olympian Zeus, and the Jews were made to walk in a procession honoring the god Dionysus. Without apparent precedent, the king decided to abolish an entire religion, suppressing its rites, flaunting its taboos, forcing the Jews to follow “customs strange to the land.”

Antiochus IV's persecution of Jewish religious tradition is a notorious puzzle, which the great scholar of the period Elias Bickerman once described as “the basic and sole enigma in the history of Seleucid Jerusalem.”¹ Earlier foreign rulers of the Jews in Jerusalem, including Antiochus's own Seleucid forebears, were not merely tolerant of the religious traditions of their subjects; they often invested their own resources to promote those traditions.² According to Josephus, Antiochus III, whose defeat of the Ptolemaic kingdom at the battle of Panium in 200 B.C.E. established Seleucid control over Palestine, allowed the Jews to live in accordance with their native laws and promised to protect and subsidize the Jerusalem temple (*Ant.* 12.129–53).³ 2 Maccabees suggests that

¹ Elias Bickerman, *The God of the Maccabees: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt* (trans H. Moehring; SJLA 32; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 61–62.

² See Erich Gruen, “Seleucid Royal Ideology,” *SBLSP* 38 (1999): 24–53.

³ The authenticity of the two royal documents recorded in this passage is an open question. See Elias Bickerman, “Le Charte Séleucid de Jérusalem,” in *Studies in Jewish and Christian His-*

such behavior was standard policy among the Seleucids, “even to the extent that King Seleucus of Asia defrayed from his own revenues all the expenses connected with the services of the sacrifices” (3:2–3). Such descriptions are consistent with Seleucid behavior as known from other sources. Thus, for example, a clay cylinder from the time of Antiochus I found in the Ezida temple complex at Borsippa presents the king as a patron of the Babylonian cult, the “caretaker of Esagila and Ezida,” who undertook to rebuild these important sanctuaries.⁴

Against this backdrop, according to Erich Gruen, Antiochus IV’s attempt to abolish Jewish tradition “stands out starkly and glaringly in contrast.”⁵ Sixty-five years after Bickerman tried to explain the persecution, it continues to defy explanation, becoming only more puzzling as more is learned about how Seleucid rulers normally related to the religions of their subjects. There has been no shortage of attempts to explain it.⁶ One theory imputes the persecution to mental illness.⁷ In another, the king is motivated by a love of Greek culture, forcing it on the Jews because of their stubborn adherence to their native traditions.⁸ In still others, the king’s behavior is reactively pragmatic, a response to a budgetary shortfall or a Jewish revolt.⁹ According to Bickerman, the impetus came not from Antiochus but from Jewish reformers who urged the king to persecute their traditionalist rivals.¹⁰ Not one of these reconstructions escapes being selective in what it stresses as salient facts, and they all must inevitably rely on speculation to fill in yawning gaps in the documentation.¹¹ This is true even of

tory (AGJU 9; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 2:44–85; idem, “Une Proclamation Séleucide Relative au temple de Jérusalem,” in *ibid.*, 86–104.

⁴ Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, “Aspects of Seleucid Royal Ideology: The Cylinder of Antiochus I from Borsippa,” *JHS* 111 (1991): 71–86.

⁵ Gruen, “Seleucid Royal Ideology,” 47.

⁶ For a recent review of these attempts, see Erich Gruen, “Hellenism and Persecution: Antiochus IV and the Jews,” in *Hellenistic History and Culture* (ed. P. Green; Hellenistic Culture and Society 9; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 238–64.

⁷ See, e.g., Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jews in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. and ed. G. Vermes and F. Millar; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), 146.

⁸ See Edwyn R. Bevan, *The House of Seleucus* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1902), 2:153.

⁹ See Klaus Bringmann, *Hellenistische Reform und Religionsverfolgung in Judäa: Eine Untersuchung zur jüdisch-hellenistischen Geschichte (175–163 v. Chr.)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 111–40; Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (trans. S. Applebaum; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 186–203.

¹⁰ Bickerman, *God of the Maccabees*, 76–92.

¹¹ For example, consider Bickerman’s theory that it was hellenized Jewish reformers who proposed the persecution, a view most directly supported by *Ant.* 12.384: “For this man [the hellenizing high priest] Menelaus was to blame for all the trouble, since he had persuaded the king’s father (Antiochus IV) to compel the Jews to abandon their father’s religion” (*God of the Maccabees*, 83). Bickerman’s use of this testimony does not factor in that Josephus’s account is a late and tendentious revision of the earlier accounts in 1 Maccabees—and possibly 2 Maccabees, as in this pas-

the most recent efforts to explain the persecution—that of Gruen, for example.¹²

What allows for, and indeed motivates, so many different explanations for the persecution is the slim and biased testimony of our sources—Daniel, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Josephus's narratives. What we know of these works shows that, with the exception of the brief and coded references to the persecution in the book of Daniel, all of the descriptions were written long after the events, and all, including the material in Daniel, were shaped by the rhetorical objectives of their respective authors.¹³ To choose between them, declaring this one trustworthy and that one irrelevant, is a necessarily arbitrary exercise, since each is suspect for one reason or another and there is practically no extratextual evidence against which to measure them.¹⁴ Not even a coherent chronology of events can be reconstructed with any certitude.¹⁵ This is not to deny that there are facts to be retrieved from these texts; but if scholarship demonstrates anything, it is that these facts support multiple, even conflicting theories. Some scholars have been tempted to give up on explanation altogether. One leading historian concludes: "It is best to confess, however, that there seems no way of reaching an understanding of how Antiochus came to take a step so profoundly at variance with the normal assumptions of government in his time."¹⁶

sage (cf. 2 Macc 13:4, the apparent source of Josephus's statement). For the objectives that may have shaped Josephus's revision, see Isaiah Gafni, "Josephus and *1 Maccabees*," in *Josephus, the Bible, and History* (ed. L. Feldman and G. Hata; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 116–31.

¹² As M. Gwyn Morgan makes clear in her response to Gruen's proposal (in *Hellenistic History and Culture*, ed. Green, 264–69).

¹³ On these goals, see Robert Doran, *Temple Propaganda: The Purpose and Character of 2 Maccabees* (CBQMS 12; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981); Seth Schwartz, "Israel and the Nations Roundabout: 1 Maccabees and the Hasmonean Expansion," *JJS* 42 (1991): 16–38; Gafni, "Josephus and *1 Maccabees*."

¹⁴ Archaeology has uncovered evidence consistent with some of the claims in a source such as 1 Maccabees. The excavation of Gezer seems to confirm elements of the description of Simon's conquest of that city and its resettlement with observant Jews (1 Macc 13:43–48). See Ronny Reich, "Archaeological Evidence of the Jewish Population of Hasmonean Gezer," *IEJ* 31 (1981): 48–52. This does not mean, however, that all of the claims in 1 Maccabees are accurate; and at present, there is no evidence to corroborate the Maccabean account of Antiochus's persecution.

¹⁵ Bickerman (*God of the Maccabees*, 101–11) tried to resolve the confusion about when things happened by arguing that the sources date events according to two different calendars, Macedonian and Babylonian (a view recently refined by Lester L. Grabbe, "Maccabean Chronology: 167–164 or 168–165 B.C.E.," *JBL* 110 [1991]: 59–74). This view has been challenged by others (Bringmann, *Hellenistische Reform*, 15–28), however, with the result that key events in this period can be dated very differently. Apart from this issue, there are inconsistencies in the sequence of events in 1 and 2 Maccabees: for example, in 1 Maccabees Antiochus's death occurs after the restoration of the temple, while in 2 Maccabees it happens before.

¹⁶ Fergus Millar, "The Background to the Maccabean Revolution: Reflections on Martin Hengel's *Judaism and Hellenism*," *JJS* 29 (1978): 1–21, esp. 16–17.

Even if one concludes that the persecution is inexplicable, there may yet be a way to reach another kind of understanding—by turning from the event itself to how it is represented, following the “linguistic turn” of historiography in the last three decades. The best known exponent of this approach, Hayden White, does not deny the existence of historical “facts”—that things can be known about the past—but he sees the integration of this information within a narrative form as a literary process, requiring the same kind of imagination that is involved in writing narrative fiction, and even sharing the same basic plot-lines.¹⁷ White’s efforts to blur the boundaries between historical and fictional discourse have become a justification for rejecting the very possibility of objective history, of narrating the past as it really happened.¹⁸ White himself does not place history, the past as it “really” happened, completely beyond reach, however, and neither must we.¹⁹ His own studies suggest, for example, that it is possible for a historian to explain and contextualize the act of “emplotment,” the translation of historical content into narrative form, and to consider how that process was shaped by antecedent literary paradigms. With this possibility in mind, I want to propose a new way to contextualize Antiochus’s persecution. Like other scholars, I will be inferring the motives of those long dead and drawing parallels with other ancient rulers, but what I will be attempting to illumine is not the event itself but its emplotment by early Jews, how it was framed within narrative, and why it was narrated in the first place.

To claim that early Jewish accounts of Antiochus’s persecution were shaped by literary convention is not in itself especially remarkable. Long before White, nearly a century ago in fact, classicists identified fictional elements within Greek historical writing by comparing it with Greek tragedy.²⁰ What I am proposing involves the same basic approach, only the parallel is not with Greek literature but with Babylonian literature. This kind of comparison is in line with recent scholarship that has emphasized the persistence of Babylonian cultural tradition in the Hellenistic period through the agency of the Seleucids who enlisted this tradition to indigenize their rule.²¹ Although exact lines of

¹⁷ See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); idem, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1–57.

¹⁸ See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 599–605.

¹⁹ See Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Discourse,” in *Tropics of Discourse*, 121–34.

²⁰ See Francis M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1907); Hans Fohl, *Tragische Kunst bei Herodot: Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der hohen philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Rostock* (Borna-Leipzig: Buchdruckerei Robert Noske, 1913).

²¹ See Joachim Oelsner, “Kontinuität und Wandel in Gesellschaft und Kultur Babyloniens in hellenistischer Zeit,” *Klio* 60 (1978): 101–16; Susan Sherwin-White, “Seleucid Babylonia: A Case

influence are impossible to trace, Babylonian narrative topoi were likely absorbed by Jewish writers in this period. An example relevant for our purposes surfaces repeatedly in royal inscriptions from the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Seleucid periods—the celebration of a new ruler as a restorer of old and disrupted traditions.²² It is this topos (and its equally conventional inversion) that will help us to reconstruct the emplotment of Antiochus's persecution.

I. A Babylonian Backdrop

A series of building inscriptions composed during the reign of the Neo-Assyrian ruler Esarhaddon to justify his rule of Babylon offers a paradigmatic example of the stereotyped image of the king as agent of cultic restoration.²³ The inscriptions accuse the Babylonians of all kinds of crimes, including many acts of sacrilege:

At that time, in the reign of the former king, there were evil signs in the land of Sumer and Akkad. . . . They spoke lies. They pushed away and neglected their gods. . . . On the possessions of (the temple) Esagila—a place where entry is forbidden—they laid their hands, and gold and silver and precious stones they gave to the land of Elam as a purchase price. (Babylon A and C, Episodes 2, 3 and 4)²⁴

Study for the Installation and Development of Greek Rule," in *Hellenism in the East: The Interaction of Greek and non-Greek Civilizations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander* (ed. Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White; London: Duckworth, 1987), 1–31 (other essays in this volume are also pertinent); eadem and Amélie Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 146–49; Susan Sherwin-White, "The Transition from Achaemenid to Seleucid Rule in Babylonia: Revolution or Evolution?" in *Achaemenid History VIII: Continuity and Change* (ed. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg et al.; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1994), 311–27.

²² See Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur is king! Aššur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 338–425; Philippe Talon, "Le Rituel comme Moyen de Légitimation Politique au 1er Millénaire en Mésopotamie," in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Quaegebeur; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 421–33. For the Seleucid period, see Kuhrt and Sherwin-White, "Aspects of Seleucid Royal Ideology." For a parallel in Egyptian/Ptolemaic propaganda, focusing on the king's role in returning cult statues captured by the enemy, see Jan Winnicki, "Carrying Off and Bringing Home the Statues of the Gods: On an Aspect of Religious Policy of the Ptolemies Towards the Egyptians," *JJP* 24 (1994): 149–90.

²³ See John A. Brinkman, "Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Retrospects on the Downfall of Babylon," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 35–42; Bustany Oded, *War, Peace, and Empire: Justifications for War in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1992), 132–35.

²⁴ For translations and discussion, see Barbara N. Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy* (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 208; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993), 100–104. For the inscriptions them-

The fragments of Babylon B add that they “infringed the taboo of the sacred meal” and discontinued the regular offering (Episode 3 c3).²⁵ The Babylonians’ offenses so angered the god Marduk that he resolved to destroy the city. The description sets the stage for Esarhaddon to step in as restorer of Babylon’s religious traditions, which he does by repatriating its cult statues and reinstating its offerings (Episodes 18–31, 32–36). It conveniently plays down the responsibility of Esarhaddon’s own father, Sennacherib, for the disruption of these traditions during his violent conquest of Babylon, transferring the blame to the Babylonians themselves.

In an ironic twist, the Assyrians’ condemnation of the Babylonians’ impiety may reflect a Babylonian tradition of its own, a *topos* applied to enemy kings. Another example survives in a copy from the Seleucid period, “The Crimes and Sacrileges of Nabû-šuma-iškun.” The text was given this title by a modern editor because it features a catalogue of the offenses committed by this king against the inhabitants and cult centers of Babylonia.²⁶ Although the original work was probably composed a few decades after the reign of Nabû-šuma-iškun (ca. 760 to 748 B.C.E.), the text as we have it is from a later time, perhaps from the Seleucid period, having been found in a dwelling from that time and showing scribal signs of being a late copy.²⁷ Here is the relevant portion of this narrative as translated by Steven Cole:

He detained Nabû in Babylon; and he turned Festival Vigil and Festival Day into one day. He covered the fine garment of Nabû with the fine garment of Bêl of the month Šabātu. Dressed as the latter, he proposed Bêl’s marriage to Tašmētu. Unshaven, he mutilated (the fingers) of his apprentice scribes; and wearing fine gold, he entered the cella of Bêl offering [. . .]. Leek—a thing forbidden in Ezida—he brought to the temple of Nabû and gave to the *ērib-bīti*-personnel to eat. Ea, god of wisdom, whose seat was founded with pure heaven and earth, he made get up from (this) seat befitting his great divinity and made him reside in the “Exalted Gate” of Bêl. He removed Madānu (and) Bêl of Babylon, his favorite god, and sent (them) down. (col. 2, lines 9–24)

This passage blames the king for a whole series of ritually disruptive acts. Other passages elsewhere in the text refer to the king’s seizure of a food offering (col. 1, lines 11–12); the removal of the statue of the goddess Ishtar from its shrine (col. 2, lines 31–38); and the plundering of the Esagila (col. 3, lines

selves, see Riekele Borger, *Die inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* (Afo 9; Graz: Im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1956).

²⁵ See Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics*, 102.

²⁶ Steven W. Cole “The Crimes and Sacrileges of Nabû-šuma-iškun,” *ZA* 84 (1994): 220–52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 220 and n. 3.

34–45). Although it is quite possible that it refers to actual incidents, it is not always clear that these desecrations occurred in the way this text purports. Ishtar's removal is mentioned by other sources, for example, an inscription from the reign of King Nabonidus (556–539 B.C.E.), but in the latter context the sacrilege is imputed to the people of Uruk in the reign of the preceding king.²⁸ Regardless of whether any historical reality lies behind it, the text's description of that reality is part of what Cole refers to as a "Mesopotamian historiographical tradition," describing the king in terms that invert the conventional role of the king as agent of cultic continuity.²⁹ Instead of acting the part of cultic restorer, the kings depicted in this way disrupt tradition, robbing temples, dislocating cult statues, transgressing taboos, and introducing illicit cultic innovations.

Another Babylonian king molded to this tradition was Nabonidus (556–530 B.C.E.). In his own propaganda, Nabonidus is predictably cast in the role of caretaker of Babylonian tradition (he too is described as the "provider for Esagil [*sic*] and Ezida . . . who shows concern for the sanctuaries of the great gods").³⁰ In works hostile to the king, however, that image is inverted. The so-called *Verse Account of Nabonidus* reports that he would "mix up the rites, confuse the omens . . . concerning the august rituals he would speak e[*vil*]" (col. 5, lines 13–14).³¹ The same section reports that he dared to rededicate the Esagila, the temple of Marduk, to the moon god. Elsewhere the account accuses him of halting the festival of the new year so that he could rebuild the temple of Eḫulḫul with a statue of a bull set up in front of it, described as "a work of falsehood . . . an abomination, a work of unholiness" (col. 2, lines 4–17). The *Cyrus Cylinder*, another text hostile to Nabonidus, accentuates the king's sacrileges in its damaged introduction: "He interrupted in a fiendish way the regular offerings . . . the worship of Marduk, the king of the gods, he [*chang*]ed into abomination. . . ." ³² Like the inscriptions of Neo-Assyrian rule, the *Cyrus Cylinder* transfers the role of restoring Babylonian tradition to an outside ruler—in this

²⁸ Cole believes that Nabû-šuma-iškun was the one responsible for moving the statue ("Crimes and Sacrileges," 242–44).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

³⁰ For a translation of the inscription from which this language comes, a clay cylinder found at Ur that describes the consecration of Nabonidus's daughter as high priestess of the moon god, see Erica Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut: Poetry from Babylonia and Assyria* (Michigan Studies in the Humanities 5; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 2 (1.4–5). For Nabonidus's efforts at cultic restoration in his early reign, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556–539 B.C.* (Yale Near Eastern Researches 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 104–43.

³¹ For the text and translation, see Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*, 215–16.

³² The translation is that of A. Leo Oppenheim in *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, *An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (ed. J. Pritchard; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 206–8.

case, the Persian Cyrus, who restores the rituals and statues disrupted by Nabonidus.³³

In all these texts, it is difficult to disentangle historical reality from polemical exaggeration. It is generally believed, for example, that the *Verse Account* and the *Cyrus Cylinder* refer to Nabonidus's effort to reform the Babylonian cult to elevate the moon god Sin to the head of its pantheon, but Amélie Kuhrt, noting the polemical character of these texts, has questioned their value for understanding the king's religious policies.³⁴ The challenge of determining what really happened is compounded by the possibility that the charges leveled in the *Verse Account* and the *Cyrus Cylinder* respond to Nabonidus's self-presentation, how his propagandists described his behavior, as much as to actual events.³⁵ Even if we were able to determine what really happened, however, there is nothing in the actions being described that mandated their narration as a *disruption* of cultic tradition, a point confirmed by Nabonidus's own inscriptions, where the rebuilding of Eḫulḫul is framed not as an abomination but as a restoration of tradition.³⁶ Even temple robbery could be narrated as a pious gesture, as it is in a letter from the Assyrian king Sargon II which reports that before his attack on the city of Muṣaṣir, the king received a divine sign bidding him to remove the statues and treasures of its temple and place them in the temple of his own god.³⁷ Whether an act restores or disrupts tradition depends on how it is retroactively emplotted.

II. A Literary Paradigm for the Persecution?

These topoi of cultic restoration and disruption offer a new perspective, a literary perspective, from which to approach Antiochus's marked deviation

³³ See Amélie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 83–97. On the cylinder's indebtedness to earlier Babylonian building inscriptions (especially those of Assyrian rulers and Nabonidus), see Janos Harmatta, "Les modèles littéraires de l'édit babylonien de Cyrus," *Acta Iranica* 1 (1974): 29–44.

³⁴ Amélie Kuhrt, "Nabonidus and the Babylonian Priesthood," in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. M. Beard and J. North; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 119–55.

³⁵ See Wolfram von Soden, "Kyros und Nabonid: Propaganda und Gegenpropaganda," in *Kunst, Kultur, und Geschichte der Achämenidenzeit und ihr Forleben* (ed. H. Koch and D. MacKenzie; Berlin: D. Reimer, 1983), 61–68. Peter Machinist and Hayim Tadmor argue that the *Verse Account*, which ridicules Nabonidus's pretensions to wisdom, is reacting to the king's depiction of himself in his own propaganda as an exceptional sage ("Heavenly Wisdom," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* [ed. M. Cohen et al.; Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993], 146–51).

³⁶ See Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*, 104–8.

³⁷ See A. Leo Oppenheim, "The City of Assur in 714 B.C.," *JNES* 19 (1960): 133–47, esp. 136–37.

from the norms of royal conduct. Our brief survey of Babylonian royal propaganda reveals striking similarities to the sacrileges imputed to enemy rulers:

1. Like Nabû-šuma-iškun, Antiochus is accused of plundering a temple. Compare the description in 2 Macc 5:16 (“He took the holy vessels with his polluted hands and swept away with profane hands the votive offerings that other kings had made . . .”) to the “The Crimes and Sacrileges of Nabû-šuma-iškun,” col. 3, lines 34–45: “the possessions of Esagil, all that the kings who preceded him brought into it, he took out, gathered in his palace, and made his own.”

2. Nabû-šuma-iškun tampers with the structure of sacred time: “he turned Festival Vigil and Festival Day into one day.” So too does Nabonidus, suspending the new year festival according to the *Verse Account*. In 1 Maccabees, Antiochus follows in this tradition, ordering the Jews “to profane Sabbaths and festivals” (1:45). In 2 Maccabees he compels them to participate in a pagan festival (6:7).

3. Both Nabû-šuma-iškun and Antiochus violate purity taboos. The first feeds leek, a food regarded as unclean, to temple personnel. In 1 Macc 1:47, Antiochus compels the sacrifice of unclean animals, while in 2 Macc 6, the king forces a scribe and other pious Jews to eat swine’s flesh. Another tradition preserved by the historian Diodorus has Antiochus sacrificing a sow on the temple’s altar and forcing the high priest and other Jews to eat its meat.³⁸

4. Nabû-šuma-iškun alters the appearance of some statues and moves others to where they do not belong. Nabonidus is accused of similar transgressions, offending the gods by removing their statues from their shrines. For his part, Antiochus orders offensive altars, shrines, and idols to be erected in the land, and his most egregious offense is the installation of a “desolating sacrilege” on the altar of burnt offering. This may refer to another altar, a statue of Zeus, or some other offensive object (Dan 11:31; 1 Macc 1:54).³⁹ The Hebrew for “desolating sacrilege”—מִשְׁכַּחֲסֵד—*mišḥaḥsēd*—is first used in Daniel, where it is associated with the cessation of the regular burnt offering. This is reminiscent of Nabonidus’s reconstruction of the Eḫulḫul as described in the *Verse Account*, which

³⁸ For text and translation of Diodorus’s account, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), 181–83.

³⁹ For attempts to explain what this phrase refers to, see Bickerman, *God of the Maccabees*, 69–71; Jonathan A. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 41; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 144–51; Johan Lust, “Cult and Sacrifice in Daniel: The Tamid and the Abomination of Desolation,” in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Quaegebeur, 283–99. Eberhard Nestle was the first to explain it as a pun on the name of the Phoenician deity *baʿal šāmên* (“Lord of the Heaven”), identified with Zeus to whom the temple was rededicated according to 2 Macc 6:2 (“Zu Daniel,” ZAW 4 [1884]: 247–50).

is denounced as an “abomination” and blamed for the cessation of the new year festival.

5. Another of Nabonidus’s outrages was the rededication of Marduk’s temple to his favorite deity, the moon god Sin. Antiochus does something similar when he renames the Jerusalem temple for Olympian Zeus (2 Macc 6:2).

6. Although the evidence is elliptical or indirect, both Nabû-šuma-iškun and Nabonidus may have attempted to interfere in scribal tradition, attacking scribes themselves or seeking to displace a sacred text. Nabû-šuma-iškun is said to have mutilated the fingers of his apprentice scribes, an admittedly puzzling reference (*Verse Accounts*, col. 2, lines 15–16). As Machinist and Tadmor note, the *Verse Account* has Nabonidus boast that he is wiser than the sacred texts composed by the legendary sage Adapa, and it suggests that he tampered with them to elevate the moon god over Marduk.⁴⁰ Antiochus too is accused of various offenses against sacred texts or scribes. In 1 Maccabees he has the books of the law torn up and thrown into the fire (1:56). In 2 Macc 6:18–31, he orders the mutilation and execution of the scribe named Eleazar.

The point here is not to explain these actions but to note that many of them fall into the categories of sacrilege cited in Babylonian texts to typify the impiety of bad rulers. Although not every outrage committed by Antiochus has an antecedent in these texts,⁴¹ the larger picture does—a wicked king who acts as an agent of ritual discontinuity, disrupting the connection between past and present.

How do we account for this similarity? Earlier studies have suggested

⁴⁰ Machinist and Tadmor, “Heavenly Wisdom.”

⁴¹ Even some of the unprecedented elements of Antiochus’s persecution can nonetheless be understood as reflecting the same basic rhetoric of inversion that is at work in a text like the *Verse Account*. Consider Antiochus’s publication of edicts forbidding Jewish religious practice (1 Macc 1:41–51; see also 2 Macc 6:8), an aspect of the persecution without precedent in the Babylonian texts we have considered. It is assumed that this reflects what the king actually did, but it is possible to understand the account as an attempt to invert the image of Seleucid rule created by the publication of royal edicts recognizing the sanctity of temples and/or a community’s right to observe its ancestral customs. For a collection of these edicts, see Kent J. Rigsby, *Asyria: Territorial Inviolability in the Hellenistic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Such decrees became quite common in Seleucid Syria-Palestine after the late 140s, and both 1 and 2 Maccabees reproduce such documents (or plausible forgeries)—letters and decrees from Seleucid rulers recognizing the “holiness” or “freedom” of Jerusalem and its temple or allowing the Jews to live in accordance with ancestral customs (1 Macc 10:25–45; 15:1–9; 2 Macc 11:22–33). The picture in 1 Maccabees of Antiochus IV issuing written edicts calling for the desecration of the temple and the abolition of Jewish custom is the reversal of this practice, yet another way in which this king turned the norms of proper royal conduct upside down. If there is nothing like this in earlier Babylonian portraits of sacrilegious kings, the reason may be that the image of the king it inverts did not emerge until the second century B.C.E. For the role of edicts in Seleucid rule and their manipula-

Babylonian literature as a model for texts such as 1 and 2 Maccabees. Doron Mendels proposed that the description of Antiochus IV's illness and death in 2 Macc 9:5–27 reflects a tradition about the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus known in Aramaic from the so-called *Prayer of Nabonidus* found at Qumran.⁴² It has also been argued that a scene in 2 Macc 3 involving the Seleucid official Heliodorus, who tries to rob the temple before being halted in his tracks by God's angels, continues a conventional theme reflected in a Babylonian story told of the Elamite king.⁴³ Such evidence suggests that Babylonian literary topoi penetrated Jewish literary imaginations, shaping their understanding of Seleucid rule, a scenario that might account for the parallels observed here.

How exactly this convention exerted an influence on Jewish texts is not possible to reconstruct from the sources we have available. What is clear is that this topos did cross cultural boundaries. Assyrian and Persian rulers (perhaps enlisting Babylonian scribes) adapted it for their purposes; the motif may even have made its way into the Greek world, surfacing in Herodotus, for instance, in a story that he tells in his history of the Persian War (1.183) about the plunder of a statue from the Esagila by the Persian king Xerxes (he apparently drew his information from a Babylonian source).⁴⁴ The same kind of story, told of Antiochus IV himself, shows up in 1 and 2 Maccabees, where the king is depicted robbing temples in Elam and Persepolis (1 Macc 6:1-3; 2 Macc 9:2). Evoking Nabû-šuma-iškun's proposal to the goddess Tašmētu (*Verse Account*, col. 2, lines 13–14), Antiochus even enters a temple of the goddess Nanea to marry her and take her dowry, the crime for which he was killed according to 2 Macc 1:11–17.⁴⁵ I would not insist at the expense of the rest of my argument

tion by the Maccabees, see J. Ma, "Seleukids and Speech-Acts: Performative Utterances, Legitimacy, and Negotiation in the World of the Maccabees," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 19 (2000): 71–112.

⁴² See Doron Mendels, "A Note on the Tradition of Antiochus IV's Death," *IEJ* 31 (1981): 53–56. Nabonidus may also have inspired the image of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel; see Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (JSJSup 61; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 51–99. On the *Prayer of Nabonidus* from Qumran, see John J. Collins, "Prayer of Nabonidus," in *Qumran Cave 4, XVII: Parabiblical Texts, Part 3* (ed. George Brooke et al.; DJD 22; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 83–94 and pl. VI.

⁴³ Nils Stokholm, "Zur Überlieferung von Heliodor, Kuturnahhunte und andere missglückten Tempelräubern," *ST* 22 (1968): 1–28.

⁴⁴ See Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, "Xerxes' Destruction of Babylonian Temples," in *Achaemenid History II: The Greek Sources: Proceedings of the Groningen 1984 Achaemenid History Workshop* (ed. Amélie Kuhrt and Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1987), 69–78. On Herodotus and his possible Babylonian sources, see Robert Rollinger, *Herodots Babylonischer Logos* (Innsbruck: Verlag des Instituts für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1993).

⁴⁵ Some suspect that this story originated in connection with another Antiochus—either

that this topos was absorbed by Jews directly from Babylonian tradition, since a similar motif can be identified in Ptolemaic royal propaganda, where Persia is repeatedly cast as the despoiler of Egyptian cult statues.⁴⁶ What recommends this origin, however, is the evidence that Jewish depictions of Seleucid rule did absorb elements of Babylonian literary tradition, even conceivably using a fictionalized Nabonidus as a model for Antiochus IV.

To make this proposal is not to draw any firm conclusion about how poorly or well surviving descriptions of Antiochus's persecution correspond to whatever actually happened. The Babylonian narratives we have discussed probably reflect some interaction between reality and literary convention. The *Verse Account*, for example, probably did not invent the crimes it imputes to Nabonidus out of the air but did shape its representation according to a pattern detectable in earlier Babylonian texts. I am arguing something similar for Antiochus's persecution—whatever this king really did to the Jews was subsequently emplotted according to a preexisting literary paradigm.

III. The Persecution and Maccabean Legitimacy

Pursuing the emplotment of Antiochus's persecution with the attention it deserves would take us beyond the confines of this article and would involve separate analyses of Daniel, 1–2 Maccabees, and Josephus with their overlapping but distinct depictions of this event.⁴⁷ What we can surmise of how the corresponding Babylonian topos was used does prompt a few tentative ideas, however, especially concerning one of the basic components of Antiochus's persecution as narrated by early Jews—the link between it and the rise of the Maccabees.

The motif of sacrilege as it appears in Babylonian literature works to discredit the rulers so characterized, but it also has an implicitly legitimizing role,

Antiochus III or Antiochus VII—and was later (mis)applied to Antiochus IV (see Diodorus Siculus 29.15, where Antiochus III plunders the temple of Bel at Elymais, suffering divine punishment later on). See Doran, *Temple Propaganda*, 6–7; Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 41A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 170. Others accept its historicity, for example, Otto Mørkholm, *Antiochus IV of Syria* (Classica et Mediaevalia, Dissertationes 8; Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1966), 170.

⁴⁶ See Winnicki, "Carrying Off and Bringing Home the Statues."

⁴⁷ Even the earliest extant account of the persecution, in Daniel, perhaps composed within a few years of the event, may have been influenced by antecedent mythology. See Jürgen C. H. Lebram, "König Antiochus im Buch Daniel," VT 25 (1975): 737–72; and Jan Willem van Henten, "Antiochus IV as a Typhonic Figure in Daniel 7," in *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings* (ed. A. van der Woude; BETL 106; Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 1993), 223–43, both of whom find Egyptian literary precedents for how Daniel describes Antiochus.

justifying those who would supplant them. Thus, for example, in Assyrian propaganda, followed by the *Cyrus Cylinder*, the disruption of cultic tradition was cited as a reason for going to war against Babylon and replacing its king with a foreigner ruler.⁴⁸ As framed by these narratives, any violence employed by the conqueror, far from disrupting the order of things, actually restores an order previously disrupted by the regime being replaced. Functioning in a similar way, this topos could also be used to justify usurpation, the displacement of an established ruler by a new ruler lacking the traditional authority conferred by lineage. As a political parvenu coming to power through some sort of court maneuvering or plot and without the prestigious pedigree of a dynastic king, a ruler like Nabonidus was able to secure a different kind of traditional authority by positioning himself as the restorer of neglected ritual traditions.⁴⁹ In this case, the narrative of sacrilege allows for a kind of role reversal: the previous regime is recast as an enemy of tradition, breaking the link between present and past, while the usurper moves into the breach as tradition's defender.

Another way to understand the role of the sacrilege topos is to see it as the middle of a larger narrative of political change. White defines the middle of a given narrative as a "progressive redescription of sets of events in such a way as to dismantle a structure encoded in one verbal mode in the beginning so as to justify a recoding of it in another mode at the end."⁵⁰ With some adaptation, this could describe the narratives in which a king like Nabonidus was framed by the ruler who would displace him; it dismantles the structure that exists as the narrative begins, a Babylon aligned with the cosmic order, precisely to justify its recoding at the end, things having been restored to what they were but now with a new political regime in place of the old. The sacrilege topos, moving its audience from the beginning to the end of this narrative, creates an opening for nontraditional leaders like Cyrus to integrate themselves into the structure of religious tradition.

As it happens, the story of Antiochus's persecution played just such a role for a nontraditional elite—the Maccabees, who in the years following the revolt evolved into the Hasmonean dynasty, who ruled Judea as high priests until the Romans installed the Herodian dynasty. As Jews, the Maccabees were not outsiders to Jewish culture in the way that Cyrus was in relation to the Babylonians, but they and their Hasmonean descendants always had to struggle to maintain their legitimacy. 1 Maccabees depicts the Maccabees as Jerusalem

⁴⁸ Oded, *War, Peace, and Empire*, 132–35. This may also help to explain why Ptolemaic propaganda so often credits the kings they celebrate with the return of captured gods. See Winnicki, "Carrying Off and Bringing Home the Statues," 169–86.

⁴⁹ Talon, "Ritual comme Moyen de Légitimation." For the evidence that Nabonidus was a usurper (he is described as a "rebel prince" in the *Dynastic Prophecy*), see Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*, 88–90.

⁵⁰ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 98.

priests from the order of Joarib (1 Macc 2:1), but that might obscure their true origins. Seth Schwartz argues that they really originated as “a group of ambitious ‘village strongmen’ who exploited the disorder in Jerusalem to establish their influence beyond their country district.”⁵¹ They would eventually have a legal claim to the office of high priest, a Seleucid edict (1 Macc 10:18–21), but that claim was questionable because of the Seleucid’s dubious authority and because the Maccabees lacked the sort of lineage expected of high priests. They seem to have faced competition from Zadokite priests, who did have such a lineage (see 7:12–14) and were quickly confronted with opposition from Jews who resisted their authority for this and other reasons.⁵² Like Nabonidus or Cyrus, then, the Maccabees were outsiders to the extent that they came from outside the established structure of traditional authority.

The Maccabees’ untraditional background might explain why they were so eager to stress their connections to tradition, a strategy that, as Tessa Rajak points out, they shared with the Seleucids.⁵³ The most pronounced of these connections was their claim to the high priesthood and their support of the temple cult, the latter tie to be reasserted repeatedly through the Maccabees’ institution of Hanukkah, modeled on the biblical festival of Tabernacles.⁵⁴ Other gestures included the gathering of Jewish books lost during the war (2 Macc 2:14), a motif that recalls the restoration of lost cult statues, and the use by later Hasmoneans of an archaizing paleo-Hebrew script in their coinage.⁵⁵ 1 Maccabees itself is probably the product of this traditionalizing urge, modeling its portrait of the Maccabees on the priest Phinehas and other biblical heroes (2:15–28, 51–60, etc.).⁵⁶ Phinehas was an especially shrewd model for the Maccabees, because, according to Num 25:1–13, he secured the high priesthood in perpetuity for himself and his heirs through zealous violence

⁵¹ Seth Schwartz, “A Note on the Social Type and Political Ideology of the Hasmonean Family,” *JBL* 112 (1993): 305–9.

⁵² On the opposition faced by the Maccabees/Hasmoneans, see Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 64–72; Joseph Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters: From Mattathias to the Death of John Hyrcanus I* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 86–92, 146–47.

⁵³ Tessa Rajak, “Hasmonean Kingship and the Invention of Tradition,” in *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship* (ed. P. Bilde; Studies in Hellenistic Civilization 7; Aarhus/Oakville, CT: Aarhus University Press, 1996), 99–115.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 111–12.

⁵⁵ “The Oracle of the Lamb,” an Egyptian text revised if not composed in the Hellenistic period, may refer to the recovery of a chest with sacred texts in it in a context where one might expect a reference to the recovery of cult statues. See Winnicki, “Carrying Off and Bringing Home the Statues,” 182–86. On the use of archaizing script in Hasmonean coinage, see Richard S. Hanson, “Paleo-Hebrew Scripts in the Hasmonean Age,” *BASOR* 175 (1964): 26–42.

⁵⁶ See Schwartz, “Israel and the Nations Roundabout,” 30–31; *idem*, “Note on the Social Type,” 305.

on God's behalf. The evocation of this story in 1 Maccabees implies that the Maccabees' high priesthood was similarly justified, their violence on behalf of the law trumping the dictates of lineage.

Against this backdrop, the story of Antiochus's persecution falls into place as another stratagem to legitimize the transition from charismatic warrior to traditional authority figure. This is not to suggest that the Maccabees invented this story. Our earliest reference to Antiochus's sacrileges, the book of Daniel, may actually precede the rise of the Maccabees as leaders of the revolt; its narrative probably originated in another circle opposed to Antiochus (the Hasideans⁵⁷).⁵⁷ What I am suggesting, rather, is that once they established their control, the Maccabees appropriated and reshaped the memory of Antiochus's sacrileges to insert themselves into tradition, just as other nontraditional elites elsewhere in the Near East used similar stories to discredit the established rulers they were displacing and to minimize the disruptiveness of conquest or usurpation by casting it as a restoration of disrupted tradition. As one such non-traditional elite, the Maccabees found in Antiochus's persecution exactly the sort of scenario that might justify their rise.

Of the various accounts of Antiochus's persecution available to us, the one most consistent with this interpretation is 1 Maccabees. Written in the period when the Hasmonians were seeking to routinize their power, during or shortly after the reign of John Hyrcanus (i.e., between roughly 130 and 100 B.C.E.), it seeks to legitimize their existence as a dynasty, explicitly asserting their right to serve as high priests in perpetuity (see 14:41).⁵⁸ It also makes a point of discrediting others with whom they might have to share credit for the revolt, revolutionary factions like the Hasideans and their ally, the priest Alcimus (7:12–18). As depicted in this narrative, the Maccabees gain a kind of monopoly over the battle against the Seleucids. When two other warriors arise to lead the battle, a Joseph and an Azariah, they are quickly struck down—a defeat 1 Maccabees attributes to the fact that “they did not belong to the family of those men

⁵⁷ The only supposed reference to the Maccabees in Daniel (11:34) is indirect: “When they fall victim, they shall receive a little help.” Some doubt this interpretation, however; and even if it does refer to the Maccabees, it does so in a belittling way and without clearly identifying the Maccabees as those responsible for restoring the temple. See John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 61, 66–69, 386. Daniel may now be preceded by another text discovered at Qumran, 4Q248, *Acts of a Greek King*, which seems to refer to Antiochus's theft of the temple treasures. This text has been dated earlier than Daniel and may have served as a source for some of its claims. See Magen Broshi and Esther Eshel, “The Greek King Is Antiochus IV (4Q historical Text=4Q248)” *JJS* 48 (1997): 120–29. It too makes no reference to the Maccabees, although its fragmentary state undercuts the value of its testimony one way or the other.

⁵⁸ On the date of 1 Maccabees, see Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 62; Schwartz, “Israel and the Nations Roundabout,” 36–38.

through whom deliverance was given to Israel" (5:55–62). One of the goals of 1 Maccabees, this evidence suggests, was to solidify the link between Antiochus's disruption of Jewish tradition and the Maccabees, to render them the sole agent of its restoration, and to draw a seamless connection between that event and their dynasty.

The forming of this narrative probably did not begin with 1 Maccabees. Cited in 14:27–45 is a document that may preserve a snapshot of an earlier stage of Maccabean propaganda: a public decree that pays tribute to Simon and his brothers for fighting the enemies of the nation "that their sanctuary and the law might be preserved."⁵⁹ If authentic, this document, said to have been inscribed on bronze tablets posted in the precincts of the temple, shows that some elements of the narrative in 1 Maccabees predate its composition, but it makes only general reference to the threat posed by Antiochus and does not mention any of the many sacrileges imputed to the king by 1 Maccabees itself. Also early, the book of Daniel refers to some of those sacrileges but not all and without giving the Maccabees a role in the story. The differences between this work and the other accounts of the persecution show that the memory of what happened continued to fluctuate for many decades. What we have seen may illumine why these elements were drawn together as they are in 1 Maccabees. It was not simply the actual course of events that determined how this book plots its story, but the structuring effect of literary convention and the need of an untraditional regime to render itself traditional.

What we have seen here does not solve the enigma of Antiochus's persecution if by that we mean an anomalous event in the real past. If we approach it as a literary enigma, however, even the impression of anomalousness falls into place. The sacrilegious king who robs temples and interferes in tradition—the opposite of what a good king was supposed to do—was a stereotypical role imposed literarily on kings by those who would supplant them. The real Antiochus almost certainly acted in ways that justified his reputation, and to the extent that he did so, he made it easier for his memory to be framed within this plot line. But that Antiochus remains inaccessible, his behavior impossible to understand within the political and cultural norms of the Hellenistic world. Far less inexplicable than the real king's sacrileges is the recounting of those sacrileges in texts such as 1 Maccabees, an act of emplotment with many precedents in earlier literary history and with clear political benefits for those framed in the story as the restorers of tradition.

⁵⁹ For analysis of this document, see Joseph Sievers, "The High Priesthood of Simon Maccabeus: An Analysis of 1 Macc 14:25–49," *SBLSP* (1981): 309–18.



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