

Hanukah, Hasmoneans, & War

What we think they think happened... and how the meaning shifts...

Rabbi Jonathan Lee Jackson, 19 December 2024

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Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5.

How, upon the quarrels of the Jews one against another about the High Priesthood, Antiochus made an expedition against Jerusalem; took the city, and pillaged the temple, and distressed the Jews. As also, how many of the Jews forsook the laws of their countrey: and how the Samaritans followed the customs of the Greeks; and named their temple at mount Gerizim, the temple of Jupiter Hellenius.

1. [About An. 171.] About this time, upon the death of Onias the High Priest, they gave the High Priesthood to Jesus his brother: for that son which Onias left [or Onias IV.] was yet but an infant. (20) And in its proper place we will inform the reader of all the circumstances that befel this child. But this Jesus, who was the brother of Onias, was deprived of the High Priesthood by the King, who was angry with him, and gave it to his younger brother; whose name also was Onias. For Simon had these three sons; to each of which the High Priesthood came: as we have already13 informed the reader. (21) This Jesus changed his name to Jason; but Onias was called Menelaus. Now as the former High Priest, Jesus, raised a sedition against Menelaus, who was ordained after him, the multitude were divided between them both. And the sons of Tobias14 took the part of Menelaus: but the greater part of the people assisted Jason; and by that means Menelaus, and the sons of Tobias were distressed, and retired to Antiochus, and informed him, that they were desirous to leave the laws of their countrey, and the Jewish way of living according to them; and to follow the King's laws, and the Grecian way of living. Wherefore they desired his permission to build them a Gymnasium at Jerusalem. (22) And when he had given them leave, they also hid the circumcision of their genitals; that even when they were naked they might appear to be Greeks. Accordingly they left off all the customs that belonged to their own country, and imitated the practices of the other nations.

2. [About An. 170.] Now Antiochus, upon the agreeable situation of the affairs of his Kingdom, resolved to make an expedition against Egypt: both because he had a desire to gain it; and because he contemned the son of Ptolemy, as now weak, and not yet of abilities to manage affairs of such consequence. So he came with great forces to Pelusium, and circumvented Ptolemy Philometor by treachery; and seized upon Egypt. He then came to the places about Memphis; and when he had taken them, he made haste to Alexandria; in hopes of taking it by siege, and of subduing Ptolemy, who reigned there. But he was driven not only from Alexandria, but out of all Egypt, by the declaration of the Romans; who charged him to let that countrey alone: according as I have elsewhere formerly declared.15 I will now give a particular account of what concerns this King, how he subdued Judea and the temple. For in my former work I mentioned those things very briefly; and have therefore now thought it necessary to go over that history again, and that with great accuracy.

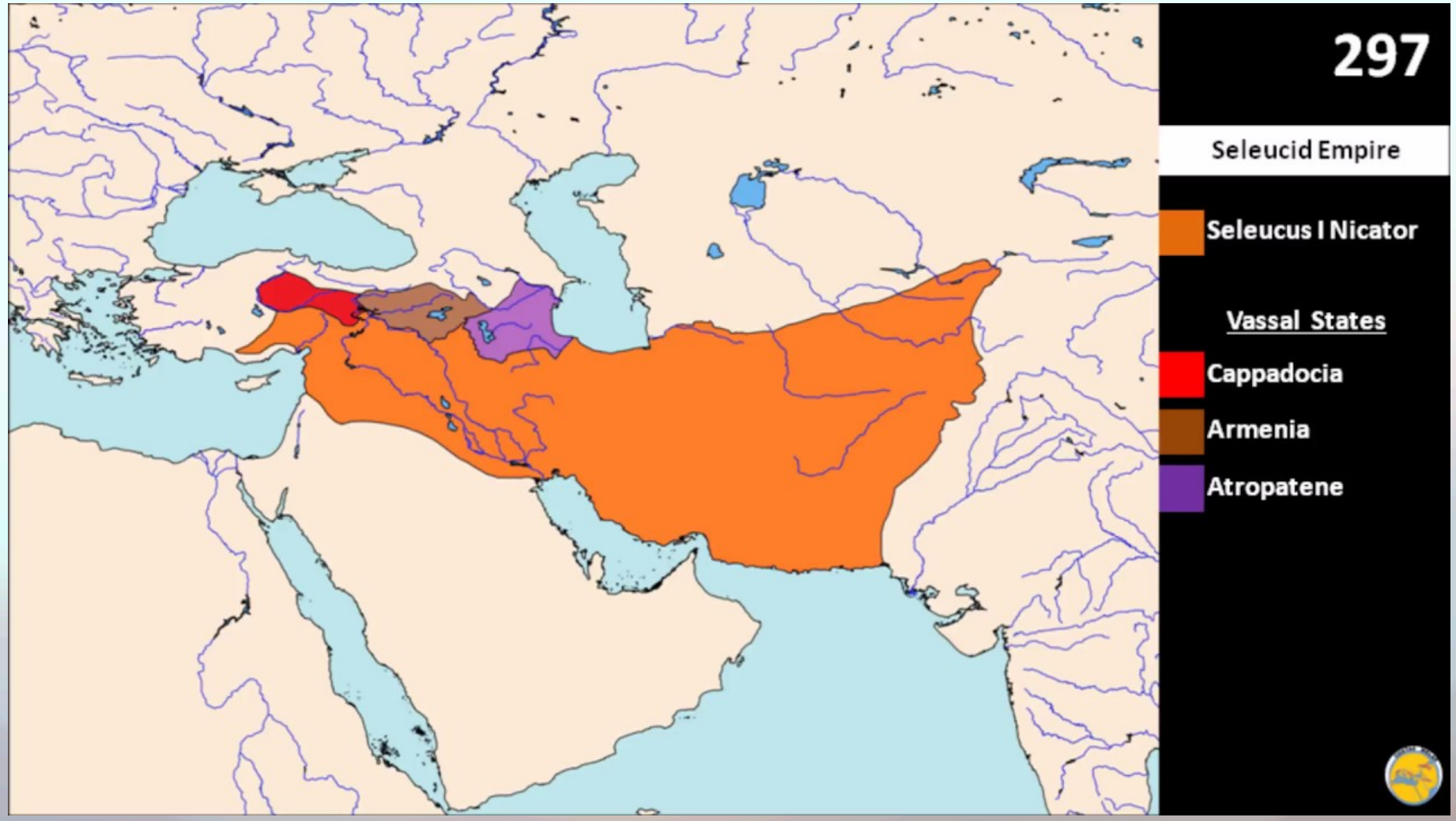
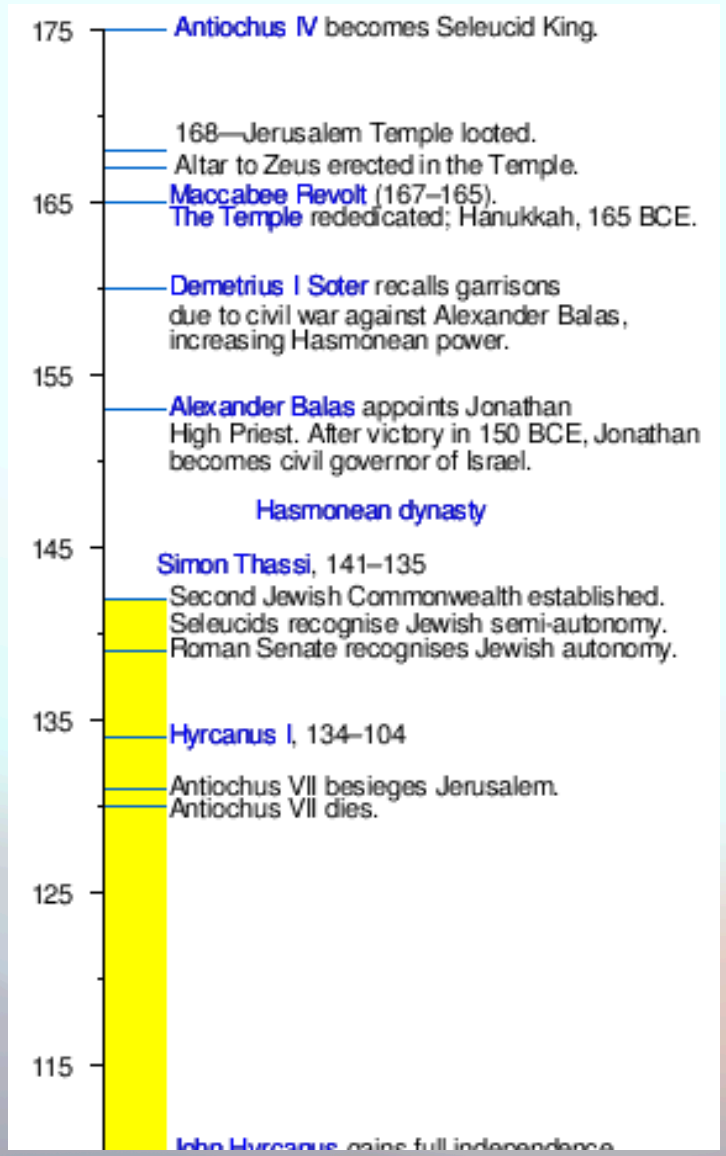


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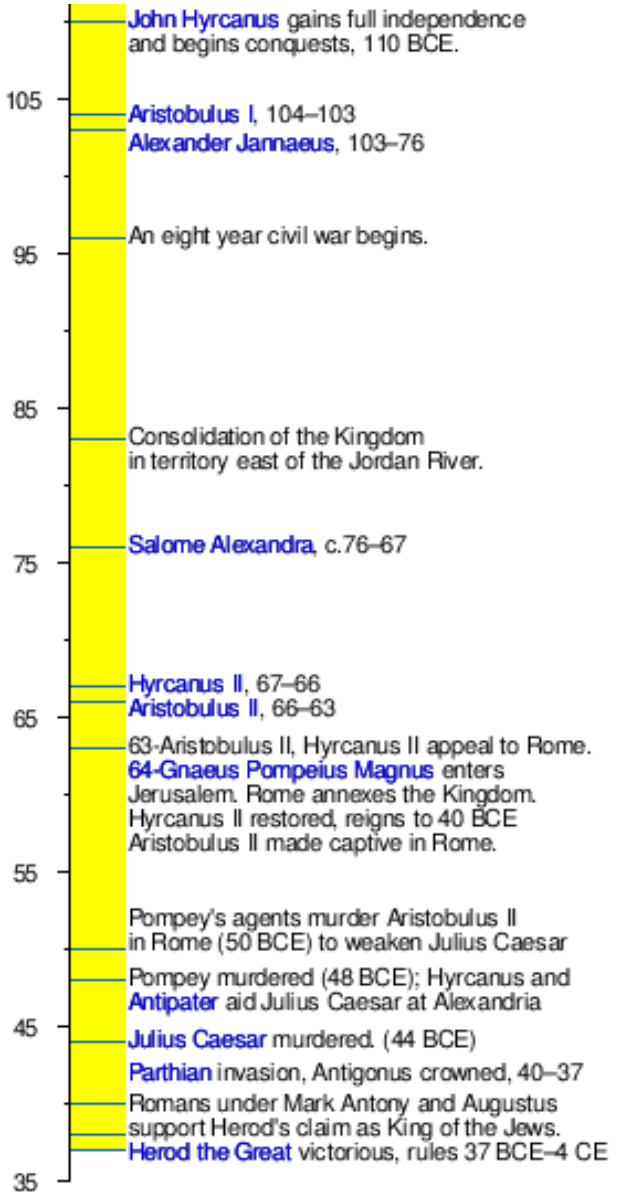


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"After the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids, the Hasmonean dynasty gained enough independence to mint their own coins. In 138 BC[E], Antiochus VII issued a decree allowing the Jews to mint their own coins, an event that is recorded in I Maccabees 15:"

from "Bronze Hasmonean Coins," 13 July 2019, available at https://zaksjerusalemgifts.com/articles/bronze-hasmonean-coins):

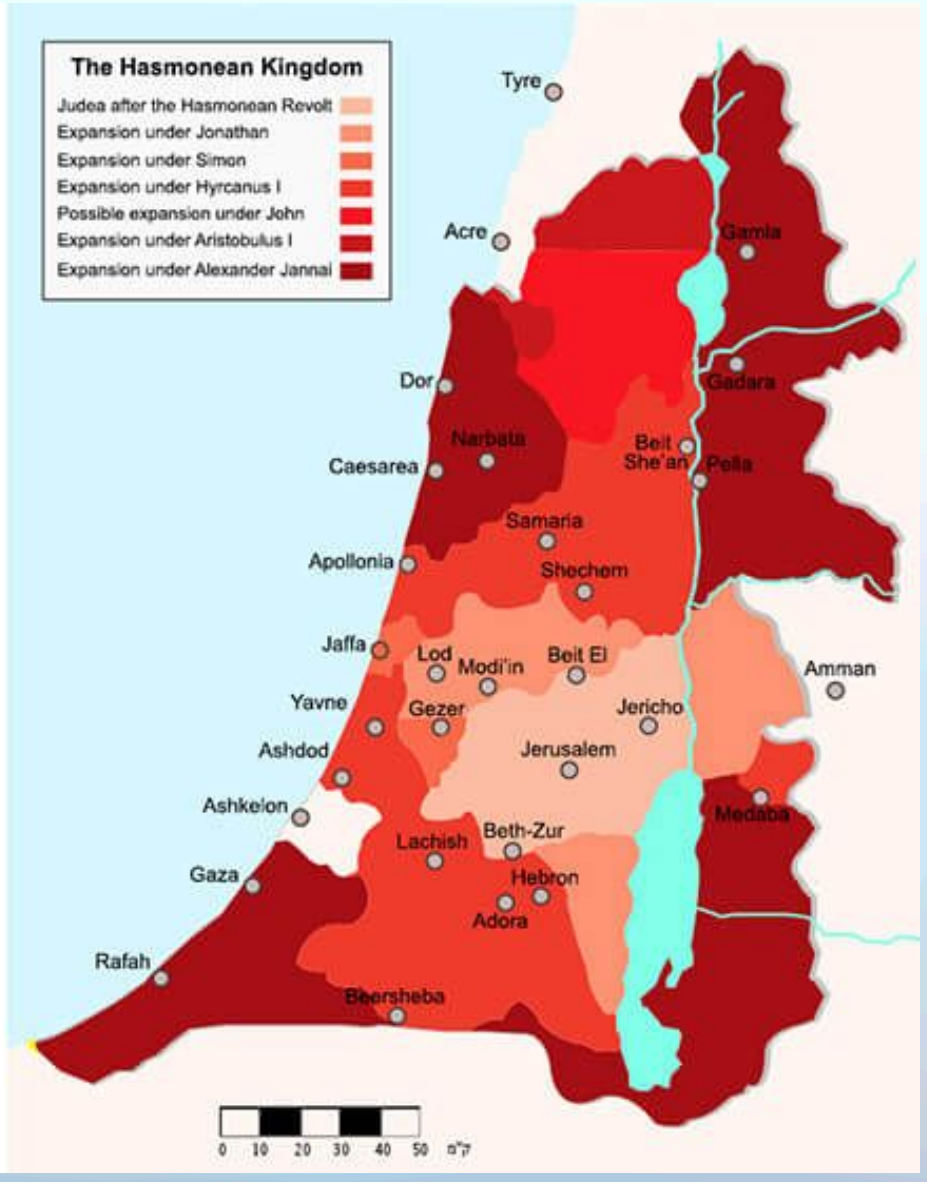
1Mac. 15:1 ¶ Καὶ ἀπέστειλεν Ἀντίοχος υἱὸς Δημητρίου τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπιστολὰς ἀπὸ τῶν νήσων τῆς θαλάσσης Σίμωνι ἱερεῖ καὶ ἐθνάρχῃ τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ παντὶ τῷ ἔθνει. καὶ ἦσαν περιέχουσαι τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον Βασιλεὺς Ἀντίοχος Σίμωνι ἱερεῖ μεγάλῳ καὶ ἐθνάρχῃ καὶ ἔθνει Ἰουδαίων χαίρειν. ἐπειδή τινες λοιμοὶ κατεκράτησαν τῆς βασιλείας τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν, βουλεύομαι δὲ ἀντιποιήσασθαι τῆς βασιλείας, ὅπως ἀποκαταστήσω αὐτὴν ὡς ἦν τὸ πρότερον· ἐξενολόγησα δὲ πλῆθος δυνάμεων καὶ κατεσκεύασα πλοῖα πολεμικά· βούλομαι δὲ ἐκβῆναι κατὰ τὴν χώραν, ὅπως μετέλθω τοὺς κατεφθαρκότας τὴν χώραν ἡμῶν καὶ τοὺς ἠρημωκότας πόλεις πολλὰς ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ· νῦν οὖν ἵστημί σοι πάντα τὰ ἀφαιρέματα ἃ ἀφῆκάν σοι οἱ πρὸ ἐμοῦ βασιλεῖς, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα ἀφαιρέματα ἀφῆκάν σοι· ποιῆσαι κόμμα ἴδιον νόμισμα τῆς χώρας σου· Ἰερουσαλὴμ δὲ καὶ τὰ ἅγια εἶναι ἐλεύθερα· καὶ πάντα τὰ ὅπλα ὅσα κατεσκεύασας, καὶ τὰ ὀχυρώματα ἃ ᾠκοδόμησας, ὧν κρατεῖς, μενέτω σοι. καὶ πᾶν ὀφείλημα βασιλικὸν καὶ τὰ ἐσόμενα βασιλικά, ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν καὶ εἰς τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον, ἀφιέσθω σοι. ὡς δ᾽ ἂν καταστήσωμεν τὴν βασιλείαν ἡμῶν, δοξάσωμέν σε καὶ τὸ ἔθνος σου καὶ τὸ ἱερὸν δόξῃ μεγάλῃ, ὥστε φανερὰν γενέσθαι τὴν δόξαν ὑμῶν ἐν πάσῃ τῇ γῇ.

1 From the Greek islands Antiochus son of King Demetrius wrote the following letter to Simon the High Priest and governor of the Jews and to the whole nation:

2 King Antiochus to Simon, the High Priest and governor, and to the Jewish nation, greetings. 3 As you know, the kingdom of my ancestors has been seized by traitors. I have decided to reclaim it and restore its former greatness. I have raised a large army of mercenary troops and have fitted out warships. 4 I plan to invade the land and to attack those who have destroyed many of the towns and ruined the country.

5 Now therefore, I confirm all exemptions from taxes and payments granted you by former kings. 6 I authorize you to mint your own coins as legal currency in your own country. 7 Jerusalem and the Temple shall be free of taxation. All the weapons that you have manufactured and the defenses you have built and now occupy shall remain yours. 8 In addition, all debts now owed to the royal treasury, or which may in the future fall due, are permanently canceled. 9 As soon as I have regained control of my kingdom, I will confer upon you, your nation, and the Temple such great honors that the glory of your country will be evident to the whole world. (I Macc. 15:1-9)


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A Moment in Time
The Maccabees' Coins


The Hasmonean Kingdom
Judea after the Hasmonean Revolt
Expansion under Jonathan
Expansion under Simon
Expansion under Hyrcanus I
Possible expansion under John
Expansion under Aristobulus I
Expansion under Alexander Jannai
Tyre
Acre
Gamla
Dor
Gadara
Narbata
Beit She'an
Pella
Caesarea
Samaria
Apollonia
Shechem
Jaffa
Lod
Modi'in
Beit El
Amman
Yavne
Gezer
Jericho
Ashdod
Jerusalem
Ashkelon
Medaba
Beth-Zur
Lachish
Gaza
Hebron
Adora
Rafah
Beersheba
0 10 20 30 40 50

"Jerusalem was a sacred city like many others in the Seleucid kingdom. The changes of its fortune: the granting of the suspension of charters of freedom, the dissolution and reestablishment were all shared with many other **temple states**... we were able to demonstrate that the history of Seleucid Jerusalem can be divided into four successive phases. For three... we can adduce numerous parallels. Only one phase appears to be unique: the persecution...

In fact, **under Epiphanes, no fewer than four famous sanctuaries were secularized**. Mopsuestia became Seleucia on the Pyramus; the temple city of Castabala, also in Cilicia, band Bambyce, the cult center of Atargatis in Syria, were here forth called "Hieropolis"...

In **no case were measures involving force employed in order to bring about a change in faith**.. the coins of Mopsuestia, under Epiphanes, always exhibit the hfs of the sanctuary, whom the Greeks called "Apollo" and "Artemis." Hieropolis-Bambyce displays a standing "Zeus." The symbol of the lion reminds us that this god, even in Greek dress, was still the ancient Semitic [Ba'al] Hadad... In Hellenized Babylon, the astrologers remained unmolested, and in the year 163 BC[E], the venerable cultic prayers were transcribed... from ancient to new tablets.

(from: Bickerman and Hengel, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*: ch. 4, "The Apostasy")

II Macc. 6:1, ff (Bickerman, et al.):
2Mac. 6:1-2 Μετ᾽ οὐ πολὺν δὲ χρόνον ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ βασιλεὺς γέροντα Ἀθηναῖον, ἀναγκάζειν τοὺς Ἰουδαίους μεταβαίνειν ἀπὸ τῶν πατρίων νόμων, καὶ τοῖς τοῦ θεοῦ νόμοις μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι·
μολῦναι δὲ καὶ τὸν ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις νεὼ καὶ προσονομάσαι Διὸς Ὀλυμπίου, καὶ τὸν ἐν Γαριζεί[ν], καθὼς ἐτύγχανον οἱ τὸν τόπον οἰκοῦντες, Διὸς ξενίου.

"The Nameless God"

"... Antiochus ordered 'to pollute the temple at Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, and to dedicate the sanctuary on Mt. Geranium to Zeus, God of Hospitality" ... The petition of the Samaritans is actually preserved in Josephus, and it in fact contains the request to proclaim as the sanctuary of Zeus "**the nameless sanctuary on the mountain, which is called Gerizim."** This request was granted by a decree dating from the year 167/6 BC[E}."
...
"To the Greeks and Romans, the God of the Jews appeared to be nameless. The emperor Caligula accuses the Jews that they do not want to consider him a divinity, but only their own "unnameable" God. "In Jerusalem," we read in an ancient historian, "There exists a sanctuary the God of which the Jews do not name (Livy in Scholion Lucan. 2.531). After all, the Lord on Zion and Gerizim had for centuries been addressed by his believers only through appellatives "God of our fathers," "King of Israel," etc) (1095, 1097)

(from: Bickerman and Hengel, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*: ch. 4, "The Apostasy")



By Attar-Aram syria - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=81212128

"The holiday of Chanukah now commemorates two very different elements: the celebration of the stunning military victory by the Hasmoneans over the Syrian Greeks [the Seleucid Empire] in 164 BCE, and the miracle of the menorah that was lit upon the Jewish restoration of their Temple, whose light lasted for eight days..."

(Simkovitch 2024: "Uncovering the Truth about Chanukah," citation "a.")

מאי חנוכה דתנו רבנן בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון **שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי** ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה

What is [the reason of] Chanukah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Chanukah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. [**only historical reference!**] **For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them**, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving. (cited in a.)

1Mac. 4:52-9 Καὶ ὤρθρισαν τὸ πρωὶ τῇ πέμπτῃ καὶ εἰκάδι τοῦ μηνὸς τοῦ ἐνάτου· οὗτος ὁ μὴν Χασελεὺ τοῦ ὀγδόου καὶ τεσσαρακοστοῦ καὶ ἑκατοστοῦ ἔτους. καὶ ἀνήνεγκαν θυσίαν κατὰ τὸν νόμον ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον τῶν ὁλοκαυτωμάτων τὸ καινὸν ὃ ἐποίησαν· κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐν ᾗ ἐβεβήλωσαν αὐτὸ τὰ ἔθνη, ἐν ἐκείνῃ ἐνεκαινίσθη ἐν ᾠδαῖς καὶ κιθάραις καὶ κινύραις καὶ κυμβάλοις. καὶ ἔπεσον πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ἐπὶ πρόσωπον, καὶ προσεκύνησαν καὶ ηὐλόγησαν εἰς οὐρανὸν τὸν εὐοδώσαντα αὐτούς. καὶ ἐποίησαν τὸν ἐγκαινισμὸν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἡμέρας ὀκτώ, καὶ προσήνεγκαν ὁλοκαυτώματα μετ᾽ εὐφροσύνης, καὶ ἔθυσαν θυσίαν σωτηρίου καὶ αἰνέσεως. καὶ κατεκόσμησαν τὸ κατὰ πρόσωπον τοῦ ναοῦ στεφάνοις χρυσοῖς καὶ ἀσπιδίσκαις, καὶ ἐνεκαίνισαν τὰς πύλας καὶ τὰ παστοφόρια, καὶ ἐθύρωσαν αὐτά. καὶ ἐγενήθη εὐφροσύνη μεγάλη ἐν τῷ λαῷ σφόδρα, καὶ ἀπεστράφη ὄνειδος ἐθνῶν. καὶ ἔστησεν Ἰούδας καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία Ἰσραήλ, ἵνα ἄγωνται ἡμέραι τοῦ ἐγκαινισμοῦ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἐν τοῖς καιροῖς αὐτῶν ἐνιαυτὸν κατ᾽ ἐνιαυτὸν ἡμέρας ὀκτώ, ἀπὸ τῆς πέμπτης καὶ εἰκάδος τοῦ μηνὸς Χασελεύ, μετ᾽ εὐφροσύνης καὶ χαρᾶς.

[Only the Military Victory!]

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Kislev, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of the burn offering that they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals... So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and joyfully offered burnt offerings... Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev (a.)

2 Macc. 10:5-9

2Mac. 10:5 ἐν ᾗ δὲ ἡμέρᾳ ὁ νεὼς ὑπὸ ἀλλοφύλων ἐβεβηλώθη, συνέβη κατὰ τὴν αὐτὴν ἡμέραν τὸν καθαρισμὸν γενέσθαι τοῦ ναοῦ, τῇ πέμπτῃ καὶ εἰκάδι τοῦ αὐτοῦ μηνός, τοῦ Χασελεύ.
2Mac. 10:6 καὶ μετ᾽ εὐφροσύνης ἦγον ἡμέρας ὀκτὼ σκηνωμάτων τρόπον, μνημονεύοντες ὡς πρὸ μικροῦ χρόνου τὴν τῶν σκηνῶν ἑορτὴν ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν καὶ ἐν τοῖς σπηλαίοις θηρίων τρόπον ἦσαν νεμόμενοι.
2Mac. 10:7 διὸ θύρσους καὶ κλάδους ὡραίους, ἔτι δὲ καὶ φοίνικας ἔχοντες, ηὐχαρίστουν τῷ εὐοδώσαντι καθαρίσαι τὸν ἑαυτοῦ τόπον.
2Mac. 10:8 ἐδογμάτισάν τε μετὰ κοινοῦ προστάγματος καὶ ψηφίσματος παντὶ τῷ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνει κατ᾽ ἐνιαυτὸν ἄγειν τὰς δεκάτας ἡμέρας.
2Mac. 10:9 ¶ Καὶ τὰ μὲν τῆς Ἀντιόχου τοῦ προσαγορευθέντος Ἐπιφανοῦς τελευτῆς οὕτως εἶχεν.

[Only the Miracle!]

“It happened on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Kislev. They celebrated it for eight dats with rejoicing... therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year” (a.)

Antiquities 12.7.323-6

Antiq. 12:323 ¶ (12.7.7) Ἑώρταζε δὲ ὁ Ἰούδας μετὰ τῶν πολιτῶν τὴν ἀνάκτησιν τῆς περὶ τὸν ναὸν θυσίας ἐφ᾽ ἡμέρας ὀκτὼ μηδὲν ἀπολιπὼν ἡδονῆς εἶδος, ἀλλὰ πολυτελέσι μὲν καὶ λαμπραῖς ταῖς θυσίαις κατευωχῶν αὐτούς, ὕμνοις δὲ καὶ ψαλμοῖς τὸν μὲν θεὸν τιμῶν αὐτοὺς δὲ τέρπων.

Antiq. 12:324 τοσαύτῃ δ᾽ ἐχρήσαντο τῇ περὶ τὴν ἀνανέωσιν τῶν ἐθῶν ἡδονῇ μετὰ χρόνον πολὺν ἀπροσδοκήτως ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ γενόμενοι τῆς θρησκείας, ὡς νόμον θεῖναι τοῖς μετ᾽ αὐτοὺς ἑορτάζειν τὴν ἀνάκτησιν τῶν περὶ τὸν ναὸν ἐφ᾽ ἡμέρας ὀκτώ.

Antiq. 12:325 καὶ ἐξ ἐκείνου μέχρι τοῦ δεῦρο τὴν ἑορτὴν ἄγομεν καλοῦντες αὐτὴν φῶτα ἐκ τοῦ παρ᾽ ἐλπίδας οἶμαι ταύτην ἡμῖν φανῆναι τὴν ἐξουσίαν τὴν προσηγορίαν θέμενοι τῇ ἑορτῇ.

Antiq. 12:326 τειχίσας δ᾽ ἐν κύκλῳ τὴν πόλιν καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἐπιδρομὰς τῶν πολεμίων πύργους οἰκοδομησάμενος ὑψηλοὺς φύλακας ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐγκατέστησεν καὶ τὴν Βεθσούραν δὲ πόλιν ὠχύρωσεν, ὅπως ἀντὶ φρουρίου αὐτῇ πρὸς τὰς ἀπὸ τῶν πολεμίων ἀνάγκας ἔχῃ χρῆσθαι.

[Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 12.7.323-326]

"Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifice of the temple for eight days; and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon: but he feasted them upon the very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them, by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, wen after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly ha regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that the should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to the festival" (a.)

"...I believe the rabbis may have been trying to distance themselves from the Hasmonean association, which has strong resonances with insurrectionist and militaristic periods in Judean history, especially the final great rebellion against Rome: The Bar Kochba revolt. In this final attempt at forcing the Romans our of Judea, Bar Kochba and thousands of his loyalists lead a massive revolt th[at!] devastated the Roman economy for years. Between 132-135 CE, Shimon Bar Kochba (whose real name was Shimon Bar Kosiba; he likely changed his name to 'Son of a Star' to give himself messianic mystique) borough major disaster upon the Jews living in Roman Palestine when his rebellion against Rome turned sour and scores of Jews were killed... In addition to the human carnage wreaked by Bar Kochba, the Romans razed the city of Jerusalem to the grounds and banned the Jew from entering it. They gave Jerusalem a Latin name, Aelia Capitolina, and built within it a temple dedicated to the god Jupiter, among others..." (a.)

"unrestrained anti-Jewish rhetoric on the part of the 5th century Church fathers burgeoned during this [that is, the Rabbinic period..."



The seven holy Maccabee martyrs Abim, Antonius, Gurias, Eleazar, Eusebonus, Alimus and Marcellus, their mother Solomonia and their teacher Eleazar suffered in the year 166 before Christ under the impious Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This foolish ruler loved pagan and Hellenistic customs, and held Jewish customs in contempt. He did everything possible to turn people from the Law of Moses and from their covenant with God. He desecrated the Temple of the Lord, placed a statue of the pagan god Zeus there, and forced the Jews to worship it. Many people abandoned the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but there were also those who continued to believe that the Savior would come.

A ninety-year-old elder, the scribe and teacher Eleazar, was brought to trial for his faithfulness to the Mosaic Law. He suffered tortures and died at Jerusalem.

The disciples of Saint Eleazar, the seven Maccabee brothers and their mother Solomonia, also displayed great courage. They were brought to trial in Antioch by King Antiochus Epiphanes. They fearlessly acknowledged themselves as followers of the True God, and refused to eat pig's flesh, which was forbidden by the Law.

The eldest brother acted as spokesman for the rest, saying that they preferred to die rather than break the Law. He was subjected to fierce tortures in sight of his brothers and their mother. His tongue was cut out, he was scalped, and his hands and feet were cut off. Then a cauldron and a large frying pan were heated, and the first brother was thrown into the frying pan, and he died.

The next five brothers were tortured one after the other. The seventh and youngest brother was the last one left alive. Antiochus suggested to Saint Solomonia to persuade the boy to obey him, so that her last son at least would be spared. Instead, the brave mother told him to imitate the courage of his brothers.

The child upbraided the king and was tortured even more cruelly than his brothers had been. After all her seven children had died, Saint Solomonia, stood over their bodies, raised up her hands in prayer to God and died.

The martyric death of the Maccabee brothers inspired Judas Maccabeus, and he led a revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes. With God's help, he gained the victory, and then purified the Temple at Jerusalem. He also threw down the altars which the pagans had set up in the streets. All these events are related in the Second Book of Maccabees (Ch. 8-10).

Various Fathers of the Church preached sermons on the seven Maccabees, including Saint Cyprian of Carthage, Saint Ambrose of Milan, Saint Gregory Nazianzus and Saint John Chrysostom.

https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2024/08/01/102162-7-holy-maccabee-martyrs