

The Hasmonean Dynasty (167 to 37 BC)**Part I: 167 to 103 BC**

After Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, his world empire was divided into four among his generals. Two, Ptolemy (Egypt) and Seleucus (Syria), wound up leading the two largest kingdoms of the world. The Seleucids (northern) and the Ptolemies (southern) constantly fought over the land bridge of Judea. For the first 125 years after the death of Alexander, the Ptolemies controlled Judea. But in 198 BC, Judea becomes part of the Seleucid kingdom in the Fifth Syrian War. The Seleucids placed the position of High Priest up for the highest bidder. The wealthy among the Jews sought peace with the Greek kings of Syria (the Seleucids). In 176 BC, Antiochus IV Epiphanes ascends to the throne of the Seleucid Empire. This new king begins to outlaw Jewish traditions, including circumcision, the Sabbath, and Old Testament dietary laws.

In 167 BC the Jewish Maccabean Revolt began against the Seleucid Empire of Syria. In December 167, Antiochus Epiphanes sets up an idol of Zeus in the Temple of Jerusalem and demands the Jews offer sacrifices of pigs to it. This is **“the abomination of desolation”** foreseen in Daniel 11:31. A Jewish priest named Mattathias living in Modiin revolted, killing a fellow Jew offering a pig and the Greek official standing watch. He then challenged the Jews to follow him. Mattathias had 5 sons (I Maccabees 2:1-5): John, **Simon**, **Judas**, Eleazar, and **Jonathan**. Maccabee is the Hebrew word for “hammer” (*makabah*) used in I Kings 6:7, and the family of Mattathias the Hebrew priest who boldly resisted attempts by Antiochus Epiphanes IV to Hellenize the Jews. The Maccabees would enter battle shouting their cry: **“Mi chamocha ba'elim YHWH,”** “Who is like You among the heavenly gods!” (Exodus 15:11)

This 130-year period of Hasmonean influence in the land of Judea (167-37 BC) is the most significant but least understood Jewish time period for Christians. The 130 years can be broken into FIVE major periods. In this first part of a two-part study, we’ll cover the first three of five major time periods (167-103 BC).

167 to 160 BC – From *the abomination of desolation* by Antiochus Epiphanes (December 167 BC) to the death of Judas Maccabeus in the Battle of Elasa in 160 BC (I Maccabees 9:18).

Key Dates: **167 BC** - Abomination of Desolation (Daniel 11:31). The revolt begins.

166 BC - Mithridates of Parthia takes advantage of the Seleucid confusion to seize the strategic city of Herat; Antiochus leaves the handling of the Maccabees to Lysias and goes to war against an emerging Parthian Empire.

166 BC - Mattathias dies (I Maccabees 2:49-51). Judah Maccabee leads the revolt.

164 BC - Antiochus dies of an illness while on a campaign against Parthia.

164 BC - Rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem under Judah Maccabee.

161 BC - Judas Maccabeus makes an alliance with Rome (I Maccabees 8); first contact.

160 BC - Judas Maccabeus dies at the Battle of Elasa (I Maccabees 9:18).

160 to 142 BC – From the ascension of Jonathan (Judah’s brother) as leader of the Maccabees to the removal of Greek soldiers and the Seleucid tax in the land of Judea at Jonathan’s death.

Key Dates: **157 BC** - Jonathan sets up camp at Michmash to “judge over Israel,” (like Jonathan, the son of King Saul had done 900 years earlier).

152 BC - Jonathan is appointed “High Priest” by the Greeks, *though not a descendant of Zadok*. Only the family of Aaron could serve as High Priest, and Zadok served as High Priest (descendant of Aaron) during the days of King David. Thus, the “the house of David” is for a king and “the house of Zadok” is for a High Priest. The appointment of Jonathan as High Priest troubles the orthodox Jews.

143 BC – Jonathan is captured by General Tryphon (Syria) and Tryphon marches against Jerusalem to lay siege to the city. A snowstorm intervenes, forcing the Seleucids to retreat to Syria, and on the way, they execute Jonathan. Tryphon had a rival to the Seleucid throne (Demetrius II), so Simon – who is now the only remaining living son of Mattathias, takes Maccabean leadership (as High Priest) and enters into an alliance with Demetrius II. Demetrius II defeats Tryphon and rewards Simon by withdrawing troops and removes the tax burden on the Jews in Judea.

142 to 103 BC – From the declaration of Jewish independence under Jewish Maccabean leader Simon, son of Matthias to the crowning of Simon’s grandson, Judah Aristobulus as not only High Priest but also **King of the Jews** in 103 BC. Aristobulus’ coronation was not only the first “King of the Jews” since Zedekiah (see II Kings 25:6-7), he was the first King of Judah “not of the House of David.” Both King and High Priest merge into one disqualified man.

Key Dates: **142 BC** - Civil war breaks out in the Seleucid kingdom again; both sides again attempt to get the help of the Jews. Simon Maccabee negotiates the independence of the Jews and in 142 BC ***the Hasmonean era of Judea begins*** (see 1 Macc. 14:41).

135 BC - Simon Maccabee is murdered through the machinations of his son-in-law; his son John Hyrcanus becomes High Priest and ruler of the Hasmonean realm, but only by cutting deals with the Seleucid kingdom that effectively make the Hasmonean realm a puppet state (again), and Hyrcanus Hellenized the Jews.

128 BC - Antiochus VII dies, and the Hasmonean realm again achieves independence. As it consolidates and expands, there’s the rise of the Pharisees (see Appendix 7).

104 BC - Aristobulus, son of John Hyrcanus, becomes the new leader of the Hasmonian Dynasty at the death of his father.

103 BC - Aristobulus, son of John Hyrcanus, assumes the title of “King of Israel.”

Tensions between the Hasmonean Dynasty and the Pharisees begin to mount. Aristobulus dies shortly after assuming the title of King and his son, Alexander Jannaeus, becomes “King of Israel” (103 BC).

In our next lesson, Part II (Lesson 8), we will see the last two periods of the Hasmonean Dynasty:

103 to 67 BC – From the ascension of King Jannaeus, son of Aristobulus, to the death of Queen Salome Alexandra (67 BC). King Jannaeus, in contempt of the Pharisees, pours a water offering to himself rather than to God; observers begin to riot, leading to their massacre. The Hasmonean Kingdom undergoes civil war between supporters of the Pharisees and supporters of the Sadducees. The Pharisees win and, believing they have made their point. They allow Alexander to take the throne again. He throws a banquet in honor of the Pharisees; 800 Pharisees come. When they are drunk, he seizes them and crucifies them, killing their families as well. In **76 BC**, King Alexander Jannaeus dies. His pro-Pharisee wife, Salome Alexandra, becomes queen (we’ll see her story next week).

67 to 37 BC – From the death of Queen Salome Alexandra dies. Her sons, Hyrcanus II (with the support of the Pharisees) and Aristobulus II (with the support of the Sadducees) both claim the throne of Israel. Hostilities between the two soon break out again. In **63 BC**, Rome gets involved. Pompey rules in favor of Hyrcanus II. When Aristobulus II refuses to concede, the combined forces of Hyrcanus II and Rome overwhelm him. Despite intensive fighting, Rome wins; **Judea becomes a province of Rome**, Hyrcanus II is made High Priest, and his ally Antipater (father of Herod the Great) is put in charge of the province. In **57 BC**, Antigonus son of Aristobulus escapes from Rome and returns to Judea. In **40 BC**, Antigonus is declared king by Parthia. Herod appeals to Rome and is recognized as king of Judea by the Roman Senate. In **37 BC**, with the help of Rome, Herod recaptures Jerusalem and executes Antigonus.

The Hasmonean Dynasty ends, the Herodian Dynasty begins.