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THE HASMONEAN MONARCHY IN THE HELLENISTIC CONTEXT. SOME OBSERVATIONS*

Just how Hellenized was the system of rule created by the Maccabees and Hasmoneans has been the subject of analyses and debates. Many scholars bundle it together with Hellenistic monarchies, quoting example after new example of „Hellenistic” acts and practices by Judea’s rulers. While such arguments are not to be taken lightly, they are not, however, unambiguous enough to be taken at face value. A lot of scholars make an *a priori* assumption that the Hasmonean dynasty was a Hellenistic-type monarchy and focus their research efforts on trying to prove the correctness of this assumption. Yet the Hellenization of Judea must be considered in the broad historical context of the period in which the Hasmoneans flourished.

In this paper limited in size, we can only attempt to show Hasmonean Hellenization from a slightly different angle. In doing this, we should try to reflect whether the presence in the Hasmonean monarchy of elements characteristic of Hellenistic kingdoms was caused by their conscious introduction into the practice of government, or whether it reflected social awareness. It is therefore of fundamental importance to ask also what the Hasmoneans needed Hellenism for.

We must make our starting point the presence of Greeks in Palestine and their influence on cultural transformations in Judea. The problem has often been the subject of interest of scholars who view it mainly through the material artifacts and written records.¹ Paramount

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¹ Scholars studying Greek cultural interaction with inhabitants of Palestine and their Hellenization often neglect to use archaeological evidence. Yet it is through such evidence that we know that Greeks influences in the area were present long before the Persian expedition of Alexander the Great, cf.: Auscher 1967; Weinberg 1971: 87 ff.; Rajak 1990: 263 ff.; Hengel 2001. It was not until Alexander had seized Syria and Palestine did the Greeks and Macedonians start pouring into the area. Their cultural influence on the local population did not immediately become apparent with equal impact in every country, cf. Feldman 1977: 376 ff.; Rey-Coquais 1991; Harrison 1994; Rappaport-Pastor-Rimon 1994; Schwartz 1994: 161 ff.; McGing 1995: 59 ff.; Berlin 1997: 3–22.

among the latter are the letters dated 261–252 BC originating from the archive of Zenon of Kaunos, a clerk in the service of a high Egyptian official, *dioiketes* Apollonios.² Despite the dearth of such sources, we can state with much confidence that the influences of first Greek and then Hellenistic culture on Judea's inhabitants was a complex process that took on many forms and, importantly, was not the result of any planned or organized action. This means that the presence in the Hasmonean monarchy of elements considered by scholars as Hellenistic need not have been the effect of conscious borrowings. Behavioral patterns typical for the Greek and Hellenistic world found their way to Judea along two main channels. One was through contacts of the inhabitants of Palestine and Judea with a broadly understood Greek world by way of trade and migration. The same category includes influence felt by Jewish communities existing in the Greek world. The resulting behavior of their members could have unconsciously spread in the Judean environment in contacts with the Jewish diaspora, its intensity growing as the contacts became more frequent. The other channel in which Hellenistic models of social and cultural behavior spread in Judea was through actions of officials representing first Ptolemaic, then Seleucid authority there.

In both cases, it was a slow, gradual process. However, it seems that the first was far more effective as the importation and adoption of new behavioral patterns and traditions progressed almost imperceptibly, expanding to embrace different social strata simultaneously and producing lasting effects. The process could not be stopped by isolationist attitudes or even by conscious efforts to limit contacts with the Greek world. A well-known example of such attitudes is seen in Judean opinions of the Galileans, whom they accused of cosmopolitanism.³ By contrast, Hellenizing measures introduced by foreign administrations met with much greater resistance. Any such attempts could lead to the growth of strong patriotic sentiments, even to more or less active forms of resistance. Importantly, such actions were differently perceived by respective social groups. Some representatives of higher strata, mindful of their careers, expected privileges, and advantages, accepted them more readily than the lower orders which enjoyed no share in such spoils (cf. 1 *Macc.* 1: 11–15, 43; 2 *Macc.* 4: 7–17).⁴ Nonetheless, even if government-enforced, Greek patterns of behavior and system of values were in time accepted by the society and became commonplace in the population at large. Differences notwithstanding, both paths of Hellenistic influence in Judea led to assimilation by its inhabitants of many elements of a broadly understood Greek culture. Failure to consider the importance of this process makes judgments of the Maccabees and Hasmoneans rely more on opinions based on *a priori* assumptions than those considering the peculiar and dynamic nature of cultural phenomena occurring in Palestine at the time in question. Identifying the Hellenistic origin of some political happenings and practices under the Hasmoneans is not in itself a plausible argument to call them Hellenistic rulers.

The appellation is certainly not justified by a comparison between the Hasmonean monarchy and its Hellenistic counterparts. The starting point for any such comparison is to define the nature of Hellenistic kingship.⁵ The Hellenistic kings exercised absolute heredi-

² Individual documents from the Zeno archive concerning Palestine have been repeatedly published and interpreted. A collection of those texts is now available in a new edition with translation, commentary, and full bibliography: Durand 1997.

³ See Freyne 2000: 138 ff., 261–297.

⁴ Cf. Kurtz 1999: 60 ff.

⁵ Many aspects of the Hellenistic kingship had been studied. Some of these publications deserve a special attention: Goodenough 1928; Schubart 1937; Bikerman 1938: 3–30; Mott 1975; Will 1975; Mooren

tary power. They held in common their Macedonian descent traced to their ancestors, the successors of Alexander the Great. Their power did not have a clear religious foundation, even though they made efforts to be seen by their subjects as living gods caring for the security and welfare of their people.⁶ Not in all Hellenistic monarchies was the cult of the ruler equally forcefully propagated. The Seleucids supported it and emphasized their family's divine origin, but it never became an obligatory worship for their subjects.⁷

Relations of the Hellenistic kings with their people emphasized the importance of self-presentation and propaganda, one part of which was the ideology of a ruler who was victorious, generous, attentive to the needs of the gods – to whom he built new or restored old sanctuaries and endowed them with privileges – and his subjects. Building such an image was advanced by the ruler extending sponsorship to distinguished artists and scholars whose presence graced the court.⁸ A similar purpose was served by coinage. Not only did coins reveal the current king's visage to his people, but they also, in images borne on the reverse, conveyed propaganda messages concerning the traditions and symbols of the ruling house and policies of respective kings.

Hellenistic kings used the army as a foundation of their power. In the Seleucid Empire, it was a complex structure made up of units of varied ethnic background. Next to regular units composed of Greek soldiers and inhabitants of respective lands, an important place was occupied by mercenary detachments which assured rulers a strong and stable power base and served to subdue rebellious subjects. This last function made mercenaries a symbol of the Hellenistic period.

Although Hellenistic rulers showed tolerance to the social, religious, and cultural traditions in the lands they conquered⁹, they did not hesitate to advance Greek cultural patterns whenever possible. Acceptance of such patterns by native inhabitants was stimulated by a policy to reward and promote members of local elites in their service. The same end was served by elaborate court hierarchies which embraced a systematically growing number of positions. Significantly, such positions involved nomenclature deliberately suggestive of family ties existing between the ruler and his immediate environment. In making important decisions, the king sought counsel on various matters from his advisors and „relatives“, which demonstrated to the outside world how close those ties were, while helping to convince those in question of their immediate impact on government. As we may infer from known examples, the practice was not merely an empty gesture on the ruler's part. It indeed enabled the circle of officials and diplomats to familiarize themselves with matters of state and to have a real part in implementation of royal policies. The court offices were also accorded to vassal rulers.¹⁰ Although their role, e.g. at the side of Syrian kings, was largely

1983; Walbank 1984; Bringmann 1993(a); 1993(b); Weber 1997; Gruen 1999; cf. also Bilde/Engberg-Pedersen/Hannestad/Zahle 1996.

⁶ Cf. Kurtz 1999: 71–73.

⁷ See Bikerman 1938: 236–257; Martinez-Sève 2004: 24; Van Nuffelen 2004.

⁸ Cf. Balty 2004: 11 ff.

⁹ Antiochus III was the first Seleucid king who officially recognized the right of Judea's inhabitants to practice their religion and related customs and granted privileges to Jerusalem temple priests (Josephus, *AJ* 12, 138–144). After Antiochus IV, such privileges were confirmed also by all successive rulers of Syria: *I Macc.* 10: 34–35, 41–45; 15: 7.

¹⁰ The Seleucid court honours with their associated attributes were also bestowed on Jonathan and Simon (*I Macc.* 10: 20, 88–89; 11: 26–27; 11: 57–58; 14: 38–39; Josephus, *AJ* 13, 45). Both accepted them without hesitation: McGing 1995: 70 f.

symbolic, the status symbols appropriate to their awarded titles made them indistinguishable from real members of the court elite, giving them a sense of belonging to the world of Hellenistic civilization. Characteristic of relations between Hellenistic ruling families were dynastic marriages. They were an important part in political and military coalition-building and in creating intricate ties between ruling houses, largely strengthening respective monarchs' influence outside their states (cf. 1 *Macc.* 10: 57–58; 11: 9–12).

The Hellenistic concept of kingship was inextricably connected with the phenomenon of benefaction. The rulers not only extended their benevolent protection to Greek subjects but also generously supported the Greek element outside their state. An important instrument in advancing Greek culture and lifestyle was urbanization. It was an ambition of almost every Hellenistic king to found new settlements bearing the names of Macedonian cities or of members of the ruling family. As a rule, one of such cities became the capital.¹¹

In discussing the Hellenization of the Hasmonean monarchy, one is bound to refer to the two major sources: the *First Book of Maccabees* and Josephus Flavius. Openly favorable to the Maccabees, the Biblical book contains arguments with which the Hasmoneans fully identified themselves and which were part of their official propaganda. The works of Josephus Flavius offer a comprehensive picture of the Hasmonean period. In spite of his connections to Judea's rulers by family ties (Josephus, *Vita* 1–2; *AJ* 16, 187), his personal sympathies did not significantly distort his assessment of their achievements.¹²

The Maccabees and Hasmoneans drew legitimacy for their rule in Judea from the appointment by Alexander Balas of Jonathan as high priest in 152 BC (1 *Macc.* 10: 20–21; Josephus, *AJ* 13, 45–46).¹³ The right to hold this office was formally confirmed by successive Seleucids, also for Jonathan's brother, Simon (1 *Macc.* 13: 36, 38; 15: 2). It was only from the reign of John Hyrcanus, from the moment Judea obtained full independence, that the high priest was each successive representative of the dynasty on his accession to power (cf. Josephus, *AJ* 13, 230). Since the Maccabees were of non-Zadokite descent¹⁴, whose members enjoyed the privilege of holding this office¹⁵, their right to perform this prestigious function was formally sanctioned by a decision of a representative assembly of all of Judea's social groups in Jerusalem in 140 BC (1 *Macc.* 14: 27–47; Josephus, *AJ* 13, 213; *BJ* 1, 53).¹⁶ Independent of this resolution, the Maccabees took pains to manipulate genealogies to show their connection with the house of Zadok.¹⁷

Despite such efforts, the Pharisees publicly questioned the Hasmonean claim to religious power. A conflict they provoked, a brutal and bloody affair, filled the final years of

¹¹ Cf. Rey-Coquais 1991: 18 ff.; Martinez-Sève 2004: 21–32.

¹² Cf. Fuks 1990; Feldman 1994; Thoma 1994.

¹³ The appointment was also confirmed by Antiochus VI: 1 *Macc.* 11: 57.

¹⁴ Smith 1996; Rooke 1998: 207 f. According to 1 *Macc.* 2:1, the Maccabees belonged to the priestly line of Joarib.

¹⁵ The problem of the high priest's position in the policies of the Maccabees and Hasmoneans has been recently the subject of a detailed study: Rooke 2000: 266–327.

¹⁶ Scholars often underscore the „Greek” character of the resolution then passed, cf. Bickerman 1962: 157 f.; van Henten 2001: 118–133; Krentz 2001: 146 ff.; cf. Sievers 1981: 309 ff. However, this cannot in any event be held as proof for Hellenization of the Maccabees: McGing 1995: 64 f.; see also below. Important factors involved with that event are the circumstances in which Simon rose to the high priesthood, the social composition of the assembly that first agreed to it, and the real authority granted him in 140 B.C., see Sievers 1981: 311 ff.; VanderKam 1990: 211–219.

¹⁷ Cf. Dequerker 1986: 94 ff.; Kurtz 1999: 75 f.

John Hyrcanus' reign and the entire reign of Alexander Jannaeus (Josephus, *AJ* 13, 288–297, 372–373, 376, 379–383; *BJ* 1, 20–21, 92–98). The roots of the conflict lay in earlier Jewish history. From the moment religious life was revived at the Jerusalem temple at the time of Cyrus the Great, all the way to Antiochus IV, the superior office in the Judean society was that of the high priest of that temple. The high priest was the real leader of the Judean society and the only representative of the Jewish people in relations with monarchs exercising supreme power over Judea. The high priest's position was so powerful that it is often compared to that of a monarch, the social and religious system built around that office being described as a priestly monarchy.¹⁸ The high priest's power was essentially religious. He did not possess the all-important attributes of a lay monarch such as effective executive powers or army, for those were controlled by Judea's real sovereigns. This state of affairs did not change until Jonathan combined military power he held as insurrectionist commander with the religious authority he obtained from Alexander Balas (Josephus, *AJ* 13, 46). This fusion of both powers became a foundation on which rested the position of his successors and it assured first the Maccabees and then the Hasmoneans remarkable political effectiveness through wide use of religious references. In their struggle to shed Seleucid dominance, it offered the Maccabees an inspiration for a religious fuel to their claims to lands that had once made up the monarchy of David and Solomon (1 *Macc.* 15: 33–34).¹⁹ To the Hasmoneans, it was a powerful tool to bring about religious unity in their state.

The conflict between the Pharisees and Hasmoneans for the right to exercise religious authority did not leave the Hasmonean army unaffected. From the time of John Hyrcanus, the place of units composed of Jewish inhabitants, which supported Maccabean efforts in defense of native customs and ancestors' religion²⁰, was gradually taken by foreign mercenaries whose numbers and importance grew as the Pharisee conflict escalated (cf. Josephus, *AJ* 13, 374, 377–378; *BJ* 1, 93–95). Use of mercenaries gave Judean kings a greater sense of their own security in a situation when the Pharisees' strong religious influence in the society aggravated the relations between the subjects and the ruling house.²¹ It was probably a desire to build solid political backing that made the Hasmoneans establish their own court fashioned after Hellenistic patterns known to them.²² Nor was the office of the high priest used by the Hasmoneans only to bolster their political importance. As has been said before, they used it to emphasize their attachment to the national religion and tradition. Unquestionably, those were the values they held in the highest esteem (1 *Macc.* 1: 19–22, 50; 13: 3–6). One indication of Hasmonean regard for the Jewish system of values was in their marital unions. Although our knowledge of Hasmonean royal consorts, with the exception of Queen Salome Alexandra, the wife of Alexander Jannaeus, is very modest, we can say with much confidence that they did not go looking for wives outside Judea, nor did they renege on the time-honored tradition of not giving their daughters in marriage to for-

¹⁸ There is not generally accepted opinion about the political role of the Jerusalem high priest in the Hellenistic period. The majority of scholars nevertheless recognize without much reservation that, like in the Persian period, he was still Judea's religious and social leader. Cf. Bickerman 1938: 165; Goodblatt 1994: 6–29; Rajak 1996: 102 f.; Rooke 1998: 198–206; Kurtz 1999: 56 ff.; Rooke 2000: 125–265.

¹⁹ Rajak 1996: 114; Mendels 1997: 81–99.

²⁰ See Kasher 1991: 325 ff.; Shatzman 1991: 25 ff.; Mendels 1997: 164 ff.

²¹ Kasher 1991: 346 ff.; Shatzman 1991: 31–35; Mendels 1997: 180 f.

²² Cf. McGing 1995: 65 ff.

eigners.²³ Their attitude toward non-Jewish subjects, openly hostile as it was, precluded any publicly declared tolerance for customs and religious practices other than Jewish ones (cf. 1 *Macc.* 13: 47–48). The populations of all Greek cities in lands sized by the Hasmoneans lost their self-government privileges they had received from the Seleucids.²⁴ Some of those cities, like Gezer (1 *Macc.* 13: 43–48) or Samaria (cf. Josephus, *AJ* 13, 275–283; *BJ* 1, 65), suffered almost complete extinction.²⁵ As city after captured city, and region after seized region were made dependent, its inhabitants underwent compulsory Judaization as a matter of policy.²⁶ Those among them who refused to make obeisance to the new order imposed by the Hasmoneans were forced to emigrate (1 *Macc.* 13: 47; Strabon 16, 2, 34 (760); Josephus, *AJ* 13, 257–258, 318–319, 397; 15, 254).²⁷ As another characteristic trait of their policies, the Judean rulers never founded a new city that would resemble a Greek city in its shape or constitution.²⁸ Given such attitudes, it is easy to understand the lack of even the least indications of their benevolence.

Little can be said about Hasmonean pursuit of self-presentation. Apart from building royal palaces in Jerusalem and in the vicinity of Jericho and a series of fortresses²⁹, no known evidence suggests that the Judean rulers took steps to win social popularity in a manner proper for the Greek world. Even the coins they struck bore no self-promoting messages other than the ruler's titlature. Conforming to Jewish traditions, they bore images that were free of any portraits or likenesses of animals. With two exceptions³⁰ they were religion-related symbols only.³¹ The national character of that coinage is emphasized by its use of Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic writing in legends.³² Although Greek does also appear on Hasmonean coins, it is only featured on reverses³³, except for some issues of Alexander Jannaeus³⁴; in numismatic terms, the reverse is the lesser of the coin's two sides.

²³ McGing 1995: 72.

²⁴ For reasons for such Hasmonean stance see Rajak 1990: 271 ff.; Cohen 1996.

²⁵ As Gezer became subordinated to the Hasmoneans, its previous residents were expelled and the Jewish settlers brought in. Such change had highlighted the city's development for a long time. Cf. Seger 1977; Reich 1981; Rosenfeld 1988; Reich 1990; Berlin 1997: 29; Reich/Greenhut 2002. In the case of Samaria, Josephus Flavius's account suggests its complete annihilation by John Hyrcanus. Yet archeological excavations do not support that claim. Without a doubt, Samaria did not regain its position until after more than a decade, during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus: Shachar 2004: 13–20.

²⁶ See Josephus, *AJ* 13, 257–258, 318–319, 397; 15, 254; Cohen 1996; 1999: 112 f.; Berlin 1997: 28 f., 30 f.; Schwartz 2001: 38; Dąbrowa (a).

²⁷ See Rappaport 1969: 77 ff., 81 f.; Finkelsztein 1998: 42–43, 47, 50–51; Cohen 1999: 112 f., 115.

²⁸ For more details on the Hasmonean attitudes toward the Greek cities: Kashner 1990. Cf. also Rajak 1990: 271 ff.

²⁹ See Netzer 2001. The Hasmonean palace complex in the vicinity of Jericho was their private residence and as such did not serve self-presentation.

³⁰ See Meshorer 2001: 24 ff. Those exceptions are: an image of a helmet on coins of John Hyrcanus (Meshorer 2001: 36) and a reversed anchor, called the Seleucid anchor (Meshorer 2001: 37). The meaning of the latter symbol is the subject of long debate: Bikerman 1938: 219, 223, 228; Wirgin 1973: 143 ff.; Jacobson 2000: 73–81; Kindler 2000: 320; Meshorer 2001: 31, 36 ff., 209 ff.; Hoover 2003: 58; Dąbrowa 2004: 76–77, note 26.

³¹ McGing 1995: 72–73; Meshorer 2001: 33 ff.

³² Meshorer 2001: 39 ff., 201 ff. Strong Hellenistic influences in Hasmonean coinage is detected by A. Kindler (2000: 323), although his arguments do not seem convincing.

³³ Meshorer 2001: 218 ff.

³⁴ Meshorer 2001: 209 ff.

No source mentions the least signs of scholarly or artistic patronage by the Hasmoneans, or so much as an interest in those pursuits.

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The above discussion leads to the conclusion that the Hasmonean system of rule included elements with an obvious Hellenistic origin. It is important, however, to note what their real meaning in the system was. The period's context suggests in no uncertain terms that the presence of some such Hellenistic patterns in the Hasmonean state was the effect of long-term mutual interaction between the two civilizations – Hellenistic and Jewish. Others were subsequently adapted to the needs of an authority that sought effective ways to deal with challenges posed by the social and political realities with which the Hasmoneans were faced. This practice is observed especially in those areas where, given the lack of an available national model or sufficient historical experience, it was impossible to hark back to monarchic patterns from Biblical times. First, because historical memory of that distant past had effectively been deformed by the Deuteronomic tradition which had altered or obliterated events and figures its creators found inconvenient³⁵; secondly, because that tradition, although it could be emotionally dear to the Hasmoneans, would, if fully embraced by them, have meant giving up the religious power they exercised and thus abandoning their political ambitions; thirdly, because the historical situation the Hasmoneans faced called for them to look for institutional patterns and political solutions that would effectively safeguard and strengthen their position against any scheming competitors, political and religious alike (this explains the establishment of a lay court and employment of foreign mercenaries); fourthly, adoption of Hellenistic solutions was suggested by the Maccabees' and Hasmoneans' own experience gained at the time they encountered them directly at various points in their struggle for Judean independence. Creatively adapted to their own needs, such schemes guaranteed the rulers the exercise of fully sovereign power on their territory. Thus all actions in which the Hasmoneans followed Hellenistic solutions were fully justified.³⁶

The presence in the Hasmonean monarchy of many Greek elements by no means deformed its national character, for this is not determined solely by a stubborn adherence to the country's own historical tradition, custom, and religion in all aspects of social life. Although the Hasmoneans did follow or adapt Hellenistic patterns, in the principal religious, political, and social spheres of life they remained faithful to traditions and values dear to their Jewish subjects.³⁷ Employment and imitation of Hellenistic patterns was a mere tool to help them achieve a stable dynastic position. There is no evidence to suggest that they intended to use that tool to alter thoroughly their society's structure. While they appreciated the benefits to be drawn from such imports, the Hasmoneans cannot be ranked among Hel-

³⁵ This is not to say that the Hasmoneans made no references to biblical patterns at all. They chose those elements that they found useful in furnishing religious legitimacy for their rule, cf. Goodblatt 1994: 30–56. It will be useful to note that in the second century B.C., no concept of kingship was commonly accepted among the Jews. How such a form of government was perceived largely depended on the ideology of different religious groups that spoke out on the issue, see Beek 1959; Rajak 1996: 99 ff.

³⁶ Cf. Rajak 1996: 104 ff.

³⁷ See Goodblatt 1994: 22–26; McGing 1995: 73 f.; Baumgarten 1996: 197–210, esp. 208 f.

lenistic rulers and their state among the Hellenistic kingdoms.³⁸ Their monarchy was much more firmly rooted in the Jewish, rather than the Hellenistic, tradition.

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³⁸ Mendels 1997: 59–73. A different position is taken by T. Rajak (1990: 267 ff.).

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