



Introduction

Antiochus III's Decrees for Jerusalem and the Issue of Comparison

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The first decades of Seleucid rule in Judea are strikingly quiet in comparison to the tumultuous years of the 160s BCE. Two key pieces of evidence from these initial decades, however, are preserved in Josephus's *Antiquities*, book 12 (§§138–46). These are the two edicts issued by the Seleucid king Antiochus III regarding Jerusalem, which are said by Josephus to have originated in the aftermath of the fifth Syrian war, which saw the Seleucids take over Coele Syria and Phoenicia, including Judea.¹ In the edicts, the king provides benefactions and ordinances for the city of Jerusalem, its inhabitants, its temple, and its staff. These edicts therefore attest to the political, social, economic, and cultic factors that shaped the beginning of Seleucid rule in Judea. In this special issue, five scholars reassess these decrees and their significance for understanding Jewish history in the time of Seleucid hegemony using diverse interpretive methodologies that engage with different types of comparative materials. Across its five articles, the volume aims to map the main topics arising from the edicts that require attention, with a particular focus on the benefit, importance, and ongoing challenges of a comparative approach to this distinctive dossier of evidence. Such an approach, we argue, is essential for contextualizing Josephus's dossier within Seleucid administrative practices toward local communities,

¹ In *Ant.* 12.147–53, Josephus goes on to quote a third letter by Antiochus III, this time sent to the king's general Zeuxis. This letter does not concern the Jews in Judea and Jerusalem but rather the resettlement of Jews from Babylon in Phrygia. The focus of this volume on Judea and Jerusalem meant that this document received less detailed treatment than the first two letters in *Ant.* 12.138–46.

which in turn advances our understanding of the place of Jerusalem, the Jews, and Judaism in the broader Hellenistic world.

A comparative approach to the decrees was already firmly established by Elias J. Bickerman, whose seminal articles of 1935 and 1946 provided a plethora of documentary, literary, and epigraphic sources with which to compare Antiochus's edicts.² Since Bickerman's time, however, numerous discoveries have been made that expand the potential pool of comparison. As Benedikt Eckhardt highlights in his article, dozens of Seleucid letters have been published in the years since Bickerman's work on Antiochus's decrees. Moreover, discoveries from the Levant have opened new avenues for contextualizing Antiochus's edicts within an expanding body of evidence concerning the mechanics of Seleucid rule in Coele Syria. Most notably, the inscriptions on the so-called Hefzibah (CIIP V/2 7561) and Heliodorus (CIIP IV/2 3577) steles preserve examples of royal correspondence between the Seleucid kings Antiochus III and Seleucus IV and their officials concerning matters of local royal appointments and the supervision of local temples. They therefore provide important evidence concerning the characteristics of Hellenistic imperial administration in the region that can shed new light on the imperial dynamics of the decrees to Jerusalem. Further to this, the final publication of most of the manuscripts from the Qumran caves has radically expanded the range of Judean contemporary material with which the edicts might be compared. For instance, as explored by Julia Rhyder in her article, the stipulations regarding Jerusalem's purity in Antiochus's second decree find considerable resonance in the *Temple Scroll* and 4QMMT, which has significantly affected the study of the proclamation in *Ant.* 12.145–46.

Yet, many fundamental issues with the comparative approach remain. Particularly disputed is the degree of distinctiveness that we should expect of imperial decrees concerning Judea. This challenge comes to the fore in the first two articles by Eckhardt and Paul Kosmin, which offer diverging assessments of Antiochus's letter to Ptolemaios in *Ant.* 12.138–44. In his article, Eckhardt observes that the switch from first-person plural to first-person singular address in § 141, followed by the use of third-person imperatives, differs from syntactic constructions characteristic of the letters of Antiochus III known from the epigraphic record. Moreover, he notes that the use of the optative in § 141 is “without parallel in any Seleucid royal letter.” To Eckhardt, these anomalies suggest that §§ 141–43 constitute a redactional break in the letter quoted by Josephus, the point at which, he contends, Antiochus's original letter was spliced together

2 Bickerman, “The Seleucid Charter,” and Bickerman, “Proclamation.”

with another ancient source. Eckhardt wonders if this other source was perhaps a missing letter sent by Ptolemaios, the governor of Coele Syria and the addressee of the first letter. Perhaps such a letter was intended to enforce the general provisions stipulated by the king in Judea – an idea that finds support in other Seleucid administrative records, where such letters were often sent after a royal decree had been issued.

Kosmin, by contrast, argues that we should not use “the accumulation of parallels” with other Seleucid decrees to remove sections of Antiochus’s letter as secondary or inauthentic. Not all royal correspondence looked the same; important regional differences necessitated that the Seleucid kings engage in different discourses of persuasion depending on the context. In the case of the shift from first-person plural to first-person singular address in §141, for instance, Kosmin proposes that this was a rhetorical move by which Antiochus sought to present himself as personally motivated to protect the temple and thus appear as a “champion of piety.” Kosmin further suggests that Antiochus may even have relied on Jewish myths of origins when patterning his communication with the people of Jerusalem, specifically drawing on the motif of the exodus from Egypt to present the downfall of the Ptolemies as part of a long tradition of Jewish resistance against Egyptian interests.

These differences of interpretation illustrate how comparing the Antiochus dossier with other Seleucid letters can lead to conflicting results, thus raising major questions concerning the level of sameness and particularity we should expect from materials from Jerusalem and other Hellenistic locations. Such issues, in turn, push us to reevaluate the level of integration we sometimes assume for Jewish institutions within the Hellenistic sphere more generally. Such questions inevitably bring us back to the Jerusalem temple – the institution that unites the first and second documents in *Ant.* 12.138–46. We know frustratingly little about the temple and its leaders in the third century BCE, which again requires us to look to better-documented cultic contexts of the Hellenistic world when seeking to contextualize the rulings for the temple in Antiochus’s edicts. This is a key focus of Rhyder’s contribution to this special issue, which compares the proclamation of §§145–46 to diverse epigraphic sources from other eastern Mediterranean temples that preserve ritual norms used to regulate purity matters and to establish the conditions of entry to sacred precincts. Rhyder concludes that there are sufficient similarities between §§145–46 and Greek ritual norms to suppose that the Jerusalem proclamation served a similar purpose, insofar as it was probably put on public display and used to regulate the conditions of entry into the sacred area. Yet, Rhyder also observes important differences, most crucially the fact that the proclamation in §§145–46 is attributed not to the city’s civic or cultic authori-

ties, as was typically the case in Greek ritual norms, but rather to the Seleucid king. Might such a difference suggest that the attribution to Antiochus III is a later fabrication? Or might it rather reveal that the mediation of a royal agent was required in the case of Jerusalem because the matters in question concerning foreign access to the temple and the transportation of animal skins in the city were particularly disputed?

This question touches on a further issue: how should we situate the Antiochus dossier within the larger corpus of contemporary Jewish writings that concern the Jerusalem temple, the community's leaders, and their various disagreements on matters of cult and governance? Surprisingly, Hellenistic Jewish sources contain no direct reference to the arrival of Antiochus in Jerusalem outside *Ant.* 12. Yet, as Rotem Avneri Meir shows in his article, several sources from the second century BCE do appear to subtly allude to the outcomes of the Jewish negotiation with Antiochus III, and they go on to attribute the results to diverse local agents who seek to benefit from their association with this event. In Ben Sira 50 [Heb], it is the high priest Simon II who is said to have been in power when the temple and the city were reconstructed – a claim that is intensified in the Greek translation of the book, which states that Simon personally oversaw the temple works. First and Second Maccabees, by contrast, present the Hasmonean dynasts as the sole guardians of imperial benefaction and thus subtly obscure the role of any non-Hasmonean elites in negotiating with the imperial powers prior to the Maccabean revolt. Through a detailed comparison of various second century sources, Avneri Meir shows the complex ways in which Antiochus's conquest continued to serve as a site of local contestation well after the arrival of the Seleucids and remained a key mechanism by which competing Jewish elites buttressed their claims to authority and prestige.

Finally, comparative work also requires that we read the Antiochus III dossier not only with a view to other Hellenistic sources, but together with other imperial documents preserved by Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities*. In her article, Anthea Portier-Young explores how the edicts of Antiochus III contribute to a larger historiographical interest in Josephus's work to explore how imperial benevolence shaped Jewish life under Greco-Roman rule, and thus to encourage Jewish cooperation with Rome during the first century CE. Beyond this, Portier-Young expands the comparative horizon to explore how the specific reference to repairs to the Jerusalem temple and its porticoes, in *Ant.* 12.141, might be compared to more contemporary examples of urban landscapes in which wartime damage is not repaired but rather intentionally maintained in order to foster a particular collective memory of the conflicts of the past. In making this comparison, Portier-Young exposes the intentionally political

nature of Antiochus's decision to fund the temple repairs as a means of creating a "post-war Jerusalem" that would help integrate the Jerusalem elite into the urban network of the Seleucid kingdom.

The articles in this issue open various lines of enquiry into this important dossier of evidence, but several questions remain necessarily open. First, given this volume's focus on Seleucid rule over Judea and royal interaction with the Jews in Jerusalem, the third letter in §§147–53 is only occasionally addressed in the articles, notably in Kosmin's contribution. More could arguably be said about how the inclusion of this piece of correspondence shaped Josephus's presentation of the Seleucid arrival in Judea and his larger historiographical project. Second, future studies could explore how Antiochus's decrees reflect the economic history of Judea, such as the taxation of Judea during the early Seleucid period, the economic status of the Jerusalem priesthood, and trade and commerce connections in the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Levant. To this end, further comparisons could be made between Antiochus's decrees and relevant economic documents from the third and second centuries BCE, such as *philanthropa* decrees from Ptolemaic Egypt or the temple economies of Hellenistic Babylonia. Finally, future research could go further in exploring how the initial years of Seleucid hegemony that are partially reflected in the decrees of Antiochus III might be compared to the political events of later decades. While it is widely acknowledged that Jerusalem strengthened its position as the economic and political center of Judea in the later Hellenistic period under Hasmonean rule, the edicts provide earlier indications of the efforts of Jerusalemite elites to assure the elevated status of Jerusalem within the Seleucid empire by securing imperial benefactions for its temple and personnel, as well as by gaining imperial recognition of its legal statutes. The Hasmoneans thus appear as one group out of several who competed for prime position in Judean elite politics, using their relations with the empire to affirm their own centrality and enhance the prestige of their temple during the years of Seleucid hegemony. Such future inquiries, we believe, will benefit from the paths we charted in this volume, which place Antiochus III's letters concerning Jerusalem not only within their immediate literary context, but also within a larger historical frame concerning the Seleucid empire and Jewish ritual practice and historiography of the Second Temple period. This double contextualization, achieved through multiple comparative avenues, highlights both the imperial and the local in the interaction between the Seleucid empire, with Antiochus III at its head, and its subjects, and posits Judea and the Jews as a prism through which resistance and cooperation with foreign rule can be thought anew.

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