DEMETRIUS III IN JUDEA

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TEXT FRAGMENT

Absence of sources is why we know little about the last kings of the Seleucid dynasty and their reigns. One exception is Demetrius III (97/96–88/87 BC), a son of Antiochus VIII Grypus. What knowledge we have of him we owe to his role in the history of Judea at the end of Alexander Jannaeus' reign (103–86 BC). Josephus' historical works suggest that the king of Syria became involved in a conflict which broke out in Judea between Alexander Jannaeus and a group of his opponents led by the Pharisees. In doing so, he lent the latter his powerful military assistance. It proved so substantial that in a battle near Shechem Alexander Jannaeus' army was defeated. Only a lucky coincidence enabled him still to stay in power and soon to suppress his opposition (cf. Jos. BJ 1, 92–95; AJ 13, 376–379). This historical episode is exceptional in that Demetrius III was the first king of Syria since Antiochus VII Sidetes to stand on Judean soil and, at that, as an ally of one of local religious groups. It is this fact that makes the event worth looking at through the lens of not only the conflict between Alexander Jannaeus and the Pharisees, but also of Demetrius III's objectives in interfering in Judea's internal affairs.

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A close study of Josephus’ account of Demetrius III’s involvement in Judea produces the impression that, despite its fairly comprehensive description of events, it contains some important gaps. First of all, it fails to present the circumstances and conditions of the Syrian king’s alliance with the Pharisees. Both of these questions are of major importance for an understanding of this development, for the Syrian can hardly be supposed to have been disinterested in lending help to the Pharisees. His support must have come at the price of certain political commitments on their part, commitments weighty

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† Cf. Willrich 1901: 2801–2802, no. 42; Grainger 1997: 44; Hoover 2007b: 290–295; Ehling 2008: 232–234; Levenson/Martin 2009: 310–313. To this king scholars are usually attributing epithet Eukarios, even if Josephus is also calling him Akairos. Recently D.B. Levenson and Th.R. Martin (2009: 309, 313–322, esp. 336–337) after very detailed analysis of all available evidence related to this epithet of Demetrius III have concluded that it never had an official character, and it is best to abandon its use.
enough to persuade Demetrius III to gather a large force, no doubt a serious effort on his part.2

Scholars studying the history of the Seleucids are well familiar with events in Judea in the 2nd–1st centuries BC. Even so, it is worth outlining the situation in Judea and in Syria during the period in question. At the root of Alexander Jannaeus’ conflict with the opposition lay a contention going back to late in John Hyrcanus’ reign (133–104 BC). It was then that a religious group known as the Pharisees entered the political scene. Its leaders questioned John’s right to hold political and religious power simultaneously, claiming that it was against Biblical tradition. The conflict stemmed from doubts about the purity of John Hyrcanus’ descent, such “purity of descent” being required of persons holding the office of high priest of the Jerusalem temple (cf. Jos. AJ 13, 291–292).3 Members of the Hasmonean family who led the armed struggle of Judeans first against the Hellenistic religious reform under Antiochus IV (184–164 BC) and later for freedom from Syrian rule obtained such a right in 152 BC from the then king of Syria, Alexander Balas. The first Hasmonean to combine both offices in his hands was Jonathan (1 Macc 10: 20; Jos. AJ 13, 45).4 During the reign of Simon, his brother and successor, this privilege was confirmed by a vote of Hasmonean supporters representing various social groups, assembled in Jerusalem, and became law.5

Although John Hyrcanus succeeded in limiting the negative effects of Pharisee action, it still stirred doubts among some subjects, leading to increasing resentment toward the Hasmoneans. Skillfully played upon by the Pharisees, under Alexander Jannaeus this resentment led to years-long bloody civil war in which the king, commanding a disciplined army and mercenary units, inflicted heavy losses on his opponents (cf. Jos. BJ 1, 88–89; AJ 13, 372–374, 376). The conflict broke out at a time when he was especially active abroad as he was bent on conquering maritime cities and Transjordan, and involved in fighting the Nabateans, whose rising power posed a threat to Judea.6 The situation on foreign fronts had much impact on affairs back home. As long as the king was winning victories, he enjoyed sufficient popularity among subjects to maintain a clear advantage over the opposition. But when at the turn of the second decade of the 1st century BC he began to suffer bitter defeats from the Nabateans, his position was much weakened, while the opposition gained ground in society (cf. Jos. BJ 1, 89–92; AJ 13, 375–376). Opposition leaders, unable to achieve a decisive upper hand against the king, decided to seek help abroad and found an ally in Demetrius III (Jos. BJ 1, 92; AJ 13, 376).

2 The data cited by Josephus on Demetrius III’s numerical strength vary widely. In his Antiquitates (13, 377), he says that at Shechem, the Syrian king commanded 3,000 cavalry and 40,000 infantry, while in Bellum (1, 93) he makes mention of 3,000 horse and 14,000 foot in the same encounter. The latter figure seems more likely. Not impossibility, his Antiquitates contains a slip by the author on an error by a copyist.

3 For more on the roots and background of this conflict (with earlier bibliography), see: Dąbrowa 2010: 78–80, 142–143.


We could not say if the Pharisee leaders also considered other alliances. We can only surmise that in choosing an ally they were looking for its military capacities and its status on the political scene. What may give us a pause is that they did not decide to call on the Nabatean king Obodas I, who already had a record of defeating Alexander Jannaeus and who might have been willing to use an opportunity finally to eliminate his opponent once and for all. Perhaps the Nabateans’ rapidly rising strength at the time caused the Pharisees to fear possible effects of their king’s interference in Judean matters. Besides, the Nabateans were culturally alien to the Judeans. For this reason, Demetrius III might have appeared to them as the more predictable ally. He ascended to power in 97 with the help of king Ptolemy IX Lathyros of Egypt (Jos. AJ 13, 370). For the first few years of his reign, he controlled only a part of Syria, Damascus being his capital. The remaining part of the Seleucid state was then in the hands of his brother Philip I (Jos. AJ 13, 369, 371). Both brothers, amicable at first, at some point turned bitterly against each other.

There are indications that in fighting his brother, Demetrius III was successful since he ended up controlling a large part of Syria, including Antioch. Demetrius III’s position was therefore strengthened at the time when, in Judea, the conflict between Alexander Jannaeus and the Pharisees erupted into civil war.

We may speculate that the Pharisees were expecting Demetrius to help them regain their hold on the Jerusalem temple and thus control Judea’s religious life. Josephus does not mention the price they were willing to pay for such assistance. Some light on this matter is thrown by a mention in an anonymous commentary (pesher) to the biblical book of the prophet Nahum which was found among Qumran papyri. The moment the commentary was published, it caused debate among scholars regarding the identity of the king Demetrius mentioned there. At present, he is generally identified with Demetrius III. Disputes also surrounded the meaning of the oft-used term „Seekers-