

Chapter XIV

The Sabbath Year of 134/133 B.C.E.

The sabbath year which extended from Abib, i.e. Nisan (March/April), of 134 to the beginning of the Jewish year in 133 B.C.E. can also be dated from 1 Maccabees and the works of Josephus by a Seleucid year: the year 178. Once again the dating by 1 Maccabees and Josephus perfectly fits the sabbath year cycle already demonstrated by the fifteenth year of Hezekiah, the eighth year of Artaxerxes, and the 150th Seleucid year. The evidence relating to the sabbath year of 134/133 B.C.E. is built around the story of the murder of the high priest Simon and the subsequent rise to power of his son John Hyrcanus, who attempts to avenge his father's death.

The Chronology of Simon

The high priest Simon came to power after the capture and death of his brother Jonathan by the Syrian Greek empire. Simon then won freedom for the Judeans in the 170th Seleucid year.

Thus the yoke of the heathen was taken away from Israel in the 170th year. Then the people of Israel began to write in their instruments and contracts, "In the first year of Simon the high priest, the governor and leader of the Jews." (1 Macc., 13:41-42)

Having, further, posted numerous ambuscades in different parts of the hills, he was successful in all the engagements, and after a brilliant victory was appointed high priest and liberated the Jews from the Macedonian supremacy which lasted for 170 years. (Jos., Wars, 1:2:2)

This liberation and exemption from tribute came to the Jews in the 170th year of the Syrian kingdom, reckoned from the time when Seleucus, surnamed Nicator, occupied Syria. (Jos., Antiq., 13:6:7)

At the end of Simon's government, Simon and his two sons, Mattathias and Judas, were visiting Simon's son-in-law, Ptolemy, in Dok, near Jericho. Ptolemy then treacherously murdered Simon. 1 Maccabees dates Simon's murder "in the 177th year, in the eleventh month called Shebat (Shebat; i.e. Jan./Feb.)."¹ Josephus adds that Simon died having "ruled over the Jews for

¹ 1 Macc., 16:14. That Shebat is the eleventh month see Zech., 1:7, and Chart G.

eight years in all.”² The year 177, therefore equals the eighth year of Simon. This fact is confirmed by other statements in these texts dating the regnal years of Simon.

- 1 Maccabees, 13:41–42, states that the 170th year was dated in contracts as “the first year of Simon.”

- Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13:6:7, reports that “in the first year of his high-priesthood,” Simon “liberated the people from servitude to the Macedonians,” which Josephus then dates as “the 170th year of the Syrian kingdom.”

- 1 Maccabees, 14:27, makes the following statement: “The eighteenth day of Elul (Aug./Sept.), in the 172nd year, being the third year of Simon the high priest,” etc. This comment equates the 172nd year with Simon’s third year, thereby agreeing with the fact that the 177th year would have been Simon’s eighth year.

John and the Approaching Sabbath Year

After killing Simon, Ptolemy imprisoned Simon’s wife and two sons, Mattathias and Judas, and then sent men to kill his third son, John Hyrcanus. John, fortunately, escaped the assassins’ hands.³ Ptolemy then withdrew to the fortress of Dagon, located above Jericho, while John, assuming “the high-priestly office of his father, first propitiated the deity (Yahweh) with sacrifices, and then marched out against Ptolemy and attacked his stronghold.”⁴

Though John Hyrcanus was superior to Ptolemy in his forces, he was at an emotional disadvantage, for Ptolemy had brought John’s mother and brothers up to the city walls and tortured them in the sight of all. John, seeing his family treated in this way, “slackened his efforts to capture the place.” But John’s mother helped change his mind when she yelled to him that it would be pleasant for her to die in torment if the enemy paid the penalty. After hearing these words, “Hyrcanus was seized with a powerful desire to capture the fortress, but when he saw her being beaten and torn apart, he became unnerved and was overcome with compassion at the way in which his mother was being treated.”⁵

These events occurred in the eleventh and twelfth months, i.e. Shebat and Adar, of the 177th year, since they immediately followed Simon’s murder in the eleventh month of that year.⁶ Abruptly, Hyrcanus was forced to withdraw his troops because the sabbath year was arriving (i.e. the 178th year):

But while the siege was being protracted in this manner, there came around the year in which the Jews are wont to remain inactive, for they observe this custom every seventh year, just as on the seventh day. And Ptolemy, being relieved from the war

² Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:7:4.

³ 1 Macc., 16:18–23; Jos., *Wars*, 1:2:3, *Antiq.*, 13:7:4.

⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1, cf. *Wars*, 1:2:3.

⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1, cf. *Wars*, 1:2:4.

⁶ 1 Macc., 16:14.

for this reason, killed the brothers and mother of Hyrcanus, and after doing so, fled to Zenon, surnamed Cotylas, who was tyrant of the city of Philadelphia. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1)

The siege consequently dragged on until the year of ἀργὸν (not working the ground)⁷ came round, which is kept septennially by the Jews as a period of inaction, like the seventh day of the week. Ptolemy, now relieved of the siege, put John's brethren and their mother to death and fled to Zenon, surnamed Cotylas, the tyrant of Philadelphia. (Jos., *Wars*, 1:2:4)

It is extremely unlikely that anyone could have endured torture in this horrible manner for seven months, which would have been required if the sabbath year had begun with Tishri (Sept./Oct.) instead of Nisan. Neither does it seem plausible that Hyrcanus would have been unable to take the small fortress at Dagon within that amount of time, especially under these circumstances. The evidence, therefore, clearly indicates that the sabbath year was near. That fact, in turn, demonstrates that the sabbath year at that time began with Nisan, which was only about a month or so away from the time that the siege began.

War and the Sabbath

The practice of not warring on the sabbath (whether the sabbath day or sabbath year) was the law of the Jews during the days of John Hyrcanus. For example, the *War Scroll* states, "But in the year of release they shall mobilize no man to go into the army, for it is a sabbath of rest for the sovereign (Yahweh)."⁸ The words of Josephus, in this regard, are very important, for he points out that the army of Hyrcanus remained "inactive" during the sabbath year, "the year of not working the ground," because "they observe this custom every seventh year, JUST AS ON THE SEVENTH DAY."⁹

The book of Jubilees, composed about 100 B.C.E., argues that anyone "who makes war on the sabbaths" is condemned.¹⁰ Josephus remarks that the Jews were not even permitted to "march out" either "on the sabbath or on a festival."¹¹ In a letter sent by the Emperor Dolabella on January 24, 43 B.C.E. to the people of Ephesus, we read:

Alexander, son of Theodoros, the envoy of Hyrcanus, son of Alexander, the high priest and ethnarch of the Jews, has explained to me that his co-religionists cannot undertake military service because they may

⁷ The term ἀργὸν (*argon*) means, "not working the ground, living without labour," see GEL, p. 114.

⁸ 1QM, 2:6–10.

⁹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1.

¹⁰ Jub., 50:12.

¹¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:4.

not bear arms or march on the days of the sabbath;
nor can they obtain the native foods to which they
are accustomed. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:10:12)

Up until the invasion of Judaea by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jews would neither go to war or defend themselves on the sabbath. But after the outrage committed by Antiochus Epiphanes against the Jews at Jerusalem in 167 B.C.E., after the Jews refused to defend themselves on the sabbath day and were needlessly slaughtered because of it, a decree was issued by the priest Mattathias and his friends,¹² stating:

Whosoever shall come to make battle with us on the sabbath day, we will fight against him: neither will we all die, as our brethren that were murdered in the secret places. (1 Macc., 2:41)

This decree clearly remained in effect well into the first century C.E. To demonstrate, Josephus refers back to the time when the Roman general Pompey took advantage of this custom in late 64 B.C.E. by building earthworks against the city of Jerusalem on the sabbath day while the Jews rested. He then goes on to state:

But if it were not our national custom to rest on the seventh day, the earthworks would not have been finished, because the Jews would have prevented this; for the Law permits us TO DEFEND OURSELVES AGAINST THOSE WHO BEGIN A BATTLE AND STRIKE US, BUT IT DOES NOT ALLOW US TO FIGHT AGAINST AN ENEMY THAT DOES ANYTHING ELSE. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:4:2; cf. Jos., *Wars*, 1:7:3)

The words of Josephus are spoken in the present tense, thereby confirming that this same Law was still practiced by the Jews during the latter part of the first century C.E., at the time when Josephus wrote. Indeed, at the time of the First Revolt (66–70 C.E.) it was still the Jewish practice. Josephus writes that a Jewish citizen named John requested that the Roman general Titus have “deference to the Jewish law” and “allow them that day, being the seventh (i.e. sabbath), on which they were forbidden alike to have resort to arms and to conclude a treaty of peace.”¹³

Josephus, who commanded a force of Jewish soldiers himself during this period, remarks that late on the sixth day of the week he was reluctant to recall his disbanded force, “because the day was already far spent; and even had they come, it would have been impossible for them to bear arms on the morrow (sabbath), such action being forbidden by our laws, however urgent the apparent necessity.”¹⁴

¹² 1 Macc., 2:27–41.

¹³ Jos., *Wars*, 4:2:3.

¹⁴ Jos., *Life*, 32.

The fact that the Jews of this period avoided military aggression during the sabbath year as they did on the sabbath day explains why Hyrcanus was unable to pursue his war against Ptolemy even though by doing so he might save the lives of his mother and brothers.

“Year 1” of Hyrcanus, a Sabbath Year

After Hyrcanus’ retreat from Dagon, “Antiochus Sidetes,” the Greek Syrian king, “being resentful of the injuries he had received from Simon, invaded Judaea in the fourth year of his reign and the first year of Hyrcanus’ rule, in the 16[1] Olympiad. And after ravaging the country, he shut Hyrcanus up in the city (Jerusalem) itself, which he surrounded with seven camps.”¹⁵ Since Hyrcanus did not return to Jerusalem until the very beginning of the sabbath year (the 178th Seleucid), this is our first indication that “Year 1” of Hyrcanus was calculated by the accession-year method—undoubtedly because the Jews of this period began to date contracts and public documents by the year of the high priest’s reign.¹⁶ “Year 8” of Simon on these Jewish contracts represented the 177th Seleucid (Simon having died near the end of that year); “Year 1,” of Hyrcanus, therefore, would belong to the 178th Seleucid.

As the siege of Jerusalem in the 178th year became protracted, there arose a lack of water. This drought was relieved by “the great downpour of rains which came with the setting of the Pleiades,” being the rains of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.).¹⁷ This detail once again confirms that the beginning of the sabbath year could not have been Tishri 1. One month of siege would hardly have been long enough to affect the people of Jerusalem with a lack of water. But a siege lasting through the summer months until Marheshuan would. After the rains, the siege continued even further, until the next year (the 179th Seleucid), when at the Feast of Tabernacles (in the month of Tishri, i.e. Sept./Oct.) a treaty of peace was signed.¹⁸

Next, as we have said above, Josephus dates the fourth year of Antiochus (VII) Sidetes, being the first year of Hyrcanus, as a sabbath year. The book of 1 Maccabees, 15:10f, reports that Antiochus VII came to Syria in the 174th year, at which time he went to war against King Tryphon in an effort to seize the Syrian kingdom. After besieging Tryphon at Dora, Tryphon fled. The question is, “Did Josephus determine the reign of Antiochus VII by the accession-year or the nonaccession-year system?”

Syncellus, Jerome, Eusebius and Porphyry provide our first clue. They give Antiochus VII nine years of reign.¹⁹ Eusebius and Porphyry date it from Olympiad 160, year 4 (i.e. 138/137 B.C.E., Oct. reckoning), until Olympiad 162, year 4 (i.e. 130/129 B.C.E., Oct. reckoning).²⁰ Diodorus reports that Antiochus VII died during his eastern campaign just when spring began to melt the snow and the crops were appearing.²¹ Justin adds that the army of Antiochus VII

¹⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*,13:8:2.

¹⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*,13:6:7.

¹⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*,13:8:2; cf. S.O., 4:12–15.

¹⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*,13:8:2.

¹⁹ Syncellus, 1, p. 552, 2, p. 271; Eusebius, *Chron.*, 1, pp. 255, 263, app. 1, pp. 16, 56, 91f; Jerome, *Euseb. Chron.*, 226F–228F; HJP, 1, p. 127.

²⁰ Eusebius, *Chron.*, 1, pp. 255, 263; HJP, 1, p. 132. See JQR, 10, pp. 58f, for the use of the Oct. or Macedonian Olympiad system by Porphyry and Eusebius.

²¹ Diodorus, 34/35:15–17.

was still in winter quarters in Persia when the Parthians surprised him with the attack in which he lost his life.²²

This evidence places the death of Antiochus VII in Persia during the early spring, not long after the beginning of the new year, 129/128 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. His last year, therefore, is Seleucid 183, Macedonian reckoning, which is confirmed by his coins.²³ It proves that the first of his nine years was the 175th Seleucid year (137/136 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning). “Year 4” of Antiochus VII, therefore, was the 178th Seleucid (134/133 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning) and his reign was determined by the accession-year system.

Next, a comparison of Seleucid coins with the works of Josephus demonstrates that Josephus used the accession-year method for determining the reigns of the Seleucid kings Antiochus VI and Tryphon, both men ruling just prior to Antiochus VII.²⁴ When we combine this data with the fact that ancient chronographers allowed only nine years for Antiochus VII, it indicates that “Year 4” in Josephus for Antiochus VII, being “Year 1” of Hyrcanus, was the Seleucid year 178 (134/133 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning) and that this year was a sabbath.

The mentioning of the 162nd Olympiad in the texts of Josephus, meanwhile, is clearly a scribal error. The original has to be the 161st. The 162nd Olympiad does not work with any sabbath cycle system. It did not begin until July, 132 B.C.E. (Attic reckoning) or November, 132 B.C.E. (Macedonian reckoning), far too removed to be considered. The four years of the 161st Olympiad, on the other hand, began in July, 136 B.C.E. (Attic reckoning) or November, 136 B.C.E. (Macedonian reckoning). The 178th Seleucid year extended from Nisan, 134 until Nisan, 133 B.C.E. Therefore, the 178th Seleucid year was in the 161st Olympiad, not the 162nd.

This error is also picked up in the works of Porphyry, who is cited by Eusebius.²⁵ He places the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus in the third year of the 162nd Olympiad (Attic reckoning). As our other records reveal, the third year is correct, but not of the 162nd Olympiad; rather, it was the third year of the 161st Olympiad. The third year of the 161st Olympiad extends from July, 134 until July of 133 B.C.E. (Attic). As such, it stands in full agreement with the events of the 178th Seleucid year.

Conclusion

The records from Josephus and 1 Maccabees are clear. Simon was murdered in the eleventh month of the 177th year. To avenge his father’s death, John Hyrcanus tried to take Ptolemy at his fortress at Dagon before the arrival of the sabbath year. He failed to do so, and due to the Jewish law forbidding military expeditions in the sabbath year (as they were forbidden on a sabbath day) John Hyrcanus had to retreat at the month of Nisan and the 178th year

²² Justin, 38:10, 39:1, which reports that Antiochus and his army were cut off in Persia.

²³ Macedonian Seleucid 183 = Oct., 130 to Oct., 129. For the coins of Antiochus VII see below n. 24.

²⁴ Josephus gives Antiochus VI four years of reign (*Antiq.*, 13:7:1). Coins bear the dates for five Seleucid years: 167–171 (HJP, 1, p. 131). Josephus gives Tryphon a reign of three years (*Antiq.*, 13:7:1). Tryphon’s coins bear the dates for four Seleucid years (HJP, 1, p. 131). Similarly, though the coins of Antiochus VII bear the Seleucid dates for ten years, i.e. 174–183 of the era (HJP, 1, p. 132), Eusebius and Porphyry only allow him nine years (see above pp. 209f, and ns. 19, 20).

²⁵ Eusebius, *Chron.*, 1, p. 255.

(the sabbath year) arrived. Therefore, the 178th year (134/133 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning) was a sabbath year.

The fact that Josephus dates the beginning of the Hasmonaean dynasty to 162/161 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, making that year the 150th Seleucid year,²⁶ clearly demonstrates that system "B," which would have the sabbath year in question equal the 177th Seleucid (Tishri of 136 until Tishri of 135 B.C.E.) is not workable. System "C" (Tishri, 135 until Tishri, 134 B.C.E.) is also untenable, since the sabbath year clearly began with Nisan (March/April).

System "D" (Nisan, 135 until Nisan, 134 B.C.E.) alone has possible merit if it can be proven that the Seleucid system utilized by Josephus and the Maccabean books began one year earlier (i.e. 312 rather than 311 B.C.E.). Yet, as demonstrated in the last section of Chapter XII, the evidence from Josephus and even the later Talmudic writers prove that such was definitely not the case.

This much is also clear. There is no indication that the siege against Ptolemy by John Hyrcanus could have lasted seven months, a figure required if the sabbath year that was arriving at the time of the siege began in October. With that much time Hyrcanus could have easily taken Dagon. Indeed, if that arriving sabbath year did wait until Tishri of 133 B.C.E. it would be beyond any possible sabbath cycle system.

All things considered, system "A" is the only viable solution to the problem. Not only does it agree with the evidence that the 178th Seleucid year (Nisan reckoning) was a sabbath but it is in complete harmony with the sabbath years that fell in the fifteenth year of Hezekiah, the eighth year of Artaxerxes, and the 150th Seleucid year.²⁷

²⁶ See above Chap. XII, pp. 177f.

²⁷ See Chart B.

