The collection as a whole provides more questions than answers. But nothing exceeds the importance of asking the right questions. Sarah Pearce deserves commendation for bringing together a set of highly intelligent essays that prompt thinking and probing even when they do not provide definitive solutions.

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Sylvie Honigman’s ambitious study of the books of Maccabees and the Maccabean revolt is divided into three parts, preceded by a general introduction that anticipates her main conclusions.

The general introduction declares the paradigm of scholarship inherited from Bickerman and Tcherikover to be flawed and outdated, because of its positivistic reading of the source, its legalistic view of the institutions, an essentialist view of culture, an instrumentalist view of religion and overemphasis on comparative material from Greek cities. She also rejects any view of the books of Maccabees as ‘theological’ or ‘temple propaganda’. The interpretative key to both books is the centrality of the rededication, in her terms ‘refoundation’, of the Temple, which she interprets in light of the tradition of temple foundations in the ancient Near East as a means to legitimate kings or rulers. Both books are dynastic histories. 2 Maccabees, no less than 1 Maccabees, was written in Jerusalem. Both use the cultural and narrative codes that were commonly accepted in Judaean literate circles. Piety is a condition of a ruler’s legitimacy. Illegitimate rulers are by definition impious. Events are only worth narrating in so far as they are related to the Temple. Consequently, much of their narratives should not be taken literally. The charge that Menelaus stole temple vessels is mere slander. There is no reason to think that he and Jason were not dutiful High Priests. Ioudaismos is simply the political order championed by Judas Maccabee and Hellenismos is the order championed by his opponents.

Part 1 begins with a polemic against the ‘modernist’ view of religion, as an optional belief system. Belief in and worship of the gods were simply a given in the ancient world. Accordingly, there was no need to
demonstrate divine control of events or the principle of retribution. There was no place for ‘liberalism’ or scepticism: ‘All recent studies on Greek religion insist on continuity with archaic and classical times, and there is no ground to assume that “Hellenized Jews” were more liberal in religious matters than the Greeks themselves.’ Consequently, ‘the depictions of Jason and Memelaos as Hellenizers must be discarded’ (p. 64). Honigman continues with a discussion of 2 Maccabees as ‘Dynastic History’. She especially opposes any attempt to read 2 Maccabees as ‘theological’. The details of the story ‘do not stem from a fondness for epiphanies and martyrs’; ‘when divine powers are implicated as a pervading source of causality in worldly affairs, these are intended as clues of something else and not an issue per se’ (p. 70).

Honigman proceeds to lay out the pattern of temple building described by Victor Hurowitz and to argue that this pattern was adapted in the accounts of the post-exilic restoration. She admits that Judas’s role is toned down in the account of Hannukah in 2 Macc. 10, but she claims that there is another ‘refoundation’ in 2 Macc. 15 after the death of Nicanor. This section also includes a lengthy discussion of Ioudaismos and Hellenismos as ‘contentious ethnicization of partisan political ideology’ (143).

Part 2 of the book discusses the causes of the rebellion. It begins with a discussion of ‘cultural codes’. Honigman endorses the argument of Steve Weitzman that the accounts of the ‘persecution’ in the books of Maccabees are ‘informed by the same literary conventions as the portraits of the wicked kings found in the Mesopotamian royal inscriptions’, especially in so far as they portray the king as the disrupter of the cult. Weitzman did not question the basic underlying historicity, but Honigman feels free to discount much of it. She claims that ‘most of the narrative items in the persecution accounts may be explained as violent acts typically associated with military repression. In the case of certain deeds that cannot be accounted for in this way, comparative material will be used to show that such passages are formal elaborations that agree with a series of traditional literary patterns and typified catalogues used by ancient authors to narrate such events’ (233). So she rejects the historicity of the prohibition of circumcision, and the compulsion to eat forbidden foods or to participate in festivals. She concludes: ‘the literary topoi and narrative patterns… are basically what prompted the myth of religious persecution.’

Honigman follows Tcherikover in arguing that the revolt preceded the repressive measures of Antiochus. On her interpretation, 2 Maccabees points to three decisive causes of this rebellion: the destabilization of the High Priesthood; increased tribute; and the establishment of the gymnasium, which is construed as anti-temple. 1 Maccabees focuses on the Akra rather than the gymnasium, but the two accounts are complementary. Both are ascribed to Hasmonaean court scribes.

In the final part of the book Honigman offers her own historical reconstruction. She rejects Bickerman’s
‘surrender and grant’ model of Seleucid rule (by which a conquered city lost its right to live by its ancestral laws, until the conqueror restored it by his grant) and denies that the Torah was a charter for Judaea. The royal concessions granted by Antiochus III were primarily tax concessions. The recently published Heliodorus/Olympiodorus inscription shows that Seleucus IV tried to revise the tax arrangements. This is the context for the Heliodorus story in 2 Maccabees. Heliodorus may have been attempting to collect taxes related to the market place that was under the control of the High Priest, or to retain taxes that had been ceded to the Ptolemies. Onias III resisted him successfully, but shortly afterwards he was replaced by Jason as High Priest, a move that Honigman credits to the initiative of Antiochus IV. Jason won the right to convert Jerusalem into a polis as part of the negotiation for higher taxes. The phenomenon of polis creation is paralleled in the Tyriaion inscription. Some light is shed on Jason’s polis by the polis at Babylon, but the composition of the citizen body is not clear in either case. Honigman regards the stories of the accession of Jason and Menelaus as doublets, since she regards it as unlikely that there would have been two substantial tax increases in quick succession. In her view, the increased tribute and the instability of the High Priestly office provoked a popular revolt, although this is not reported in any of the sources. (The closest reference concerns the murder of Lysimachos, brother of Menelaos, in a riot, in 2 Macc. 4:39–42). ‘The hypothesis of wide-scale rebellion’, she claims, ‘makes it possible to interpret events in the literary sources as a military suppression of a popular insurgency’ (387). Nothing Antiochus Epiphanes did was extraordinary. She grants that the temple was renamed for Zeus Olympios, the altar desecrated, the daily sacrifices discontinued, illicit altars built across the city and countryside, and that people were killed. But there was no ‘religious persecution’. No one was compelled to violate their traditional observances. There were no ‘renegade’ ‘Hellenizing’ or ‘liberal’ Jews. Menelaus did the best he could to accommodate the demands of the king and the occupying army and maintain his own religious tradition.

Honigman’s study is certainly original, and it represents the most comprehensive study of the Maccabean revolt for a long time. While the length of the volume is due in some part to repetitiveness, the range of scholarship is impressive. Honigman tends to present this scholarship, however, in a simplistic binary opposition of ‘outdated paradigms’ and new enlightened positions. In the process, she sometimes resorts to caricature, as in the claim that scholars who argue that some Judaeans were receptive to Hellenistic ideas represent them as liberal religious sceptics in the modern mould. While she objects to ‘instrumentalist’ views of religion, her own views of it are highly reductionistic. She does not allow that anyone may have been motivated by religious considerations (that would be a ‘theological’ approach), and she
assumes that stories about epiphanies and martyrs are code for some ‘pragmatic’, ‘rational’ concerns.

So far as the literary analysis of the books of Maccabees are concerned, two arguments are crucial: first that ‘temple foundation’, or ‘refoundation’, is central to both books and establishes them as dynastic history; and second the claim that many episodes are traditional, and therefore fictitious, representations of one’s opponents as wicked. The analogy with Near Eastern temple dedications is enlightening; his role in the rededication greatly enhances the status of Judas. But Honigman’s argument that this is the central concern in the books of Maccabees is surely exaggerated. She herself admits that the role of Judas is downplayed in 2 Maccabees 10, but she claims that the defeat of Nicanor in 2 Maccabees 15 is another ‘refoundation’. Her attempt to find Hurowitz’s pattern of temple dedication in the Nicanor episode is strained. The display of Nicanor’s head, in 2 Maccabees, is a ‘dedication rite’. Her argument about cultural codes, however, is much more problematic. She claims that events were only worth remembering if they were related to the Temple. (Why, then, did people keep rewriting Genesis?). Steve Weitzman was certainly right that the authors of the Maccabean books drew on traditional patterns. Whether this entails that the stories are fictitious is another question. Many of the details of the Maccabean stories — undoing circumcision, prohibition of the law, compulsion to eat pork, and so on — have no precedent in Near Eastern inscriptions. They are at most analogous outrages. Honigman uses her very dogmatic views about ‘cultural codes’ too easily to dispense with those aspects of the stories that do not fit her presuppositions about ‘rational’ or ‘pragmatic’ behaviour.

On the historical questions, Honigman makes a valuable contribution by emphasizing the importance of economic issues in the dealings of the Seleucids with Judaea in the first quarter of the second century BCE. In this reviewer’s opinion, this is the most important contribution of her book. Her rejection of Bickerman’s ‘surrender and grant’ model is overstated. While negotiations surely took place, no Hellenistic king ever issued an edict saying that his decrees were the result of negotiation. Honigman is strangely blind to the importance of ‘ancestral laws’ and the passions that were associated with them, and also to the nature of Seleucid repression, which threatened the persistence of a rebel people as a distinct entity.

Honigman’s treatment of the actual Maccabaean revolt is distorted by two factors. The first is her insistence that the revolt must have been caused by ‘rational’ or ‘pragmatic’ causes, such as excessive taxation, not by ‘theological’ considerations such as the profanation of the temple. This is why she has to posit a popular revolt that has no support in the sources, as even she admits. She dismisses out of hand the claim of 2 Maccabees that the original fighting was between partisans of Jason and Menelaos, which the king construed as a revolt, since Menelaos was his appointee. But the account in
2 Maccabees provides just as plausible an explanation of the sack of Jerusalem as does Honigman’s hypothetical popular revolt. The second factor is her rigid idea of ancient religion. People in the Hellenistic age were traditional in their observance. Therefore there can have been no exceptions. Jason cannot have been a Hellenizer, there could have been no Jewish renegades, no one could conceivably try to undo circumcision, Antiochus could not have compelled Judaeans to abandon their traditional customs, and so on. But in fact there are well-known cases of Judaeans who abandoned their traditional religion (Dositheos, son of Drimylus, and Philo’s nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander). If this was possible in the Diaspora, why was it not possible in Jerusalem? The parallel with the polis in Babylon, while inconclusive on the make-up of the citizen body, shows clearly that people liked to ‘play Greek’. Why could the Greek customs associated with the gymnasion not have been attractive to Judaeans? Honigman attempts to reduce Ioudaismos and Hellenismos to political code words, but both clearly refer to a way of life. The way of life dubbed Ioudaismos was championed by Judas Maccabee, but he did not invent it. It was the way of life associated with the ancestral laws of the Judaeans, or at least one interpretation thereof. To argue that Jason and Menelaos were equally committed to the ancestral laws is to dismiss what evidence we have in favour of doctrinaire, a priori assumptions about the traditional character of ancient religion. If everyone was so respectful towards traditional cult, how could Antiochus Epiphanes have changed the name of the deity in Jerusalem to Zeus Olympios and allowed his soldiers to build altars that were contrary to Jewish law? Was such a change not tantamount to the suppression of the traditional cult?

The books of Maccabees are quite explicit about the causes of the Maccabean revolt, and the reasons they give are not those that Honigman attributes to them. In 1 Maccabees, the revolt begins because of Mattathias’s zeal for the law. The whole story of Mattathias may well be fictitious, but at least it shows what the author thought was the issue. It is remarkable that Honigman does not acknowledge the ancestral law as an issue in the revolt at all. In 2 Maccabees 5, Judas and his companions withdraw to the wilderness after the sack of Jerusalem. Honigman claims that he was already fighting, but this is gratuitous. The only reason to insist that the popular revolt must have preceded the suppression is an assumption about the kind of factors capable of igniting a revolt.

Honigman’s book is a remarkably comprehensive discussion of the revolt and the evidence pertaining to it. As such, it deserves to be at the centre of discussion in the coming years. But, for all its learning, it is deeply flawed by the author’s prejudices as to what constitutes rational or pragmatic action, and her rigid conceptions about the nature of religion in the Hellenistic age.

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