

Chapter XVII

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

The Sabbath year which extended from the 1st day of Abib, i.e., Nisan (March/April), Israelite reckoning, in the year 134 B.C.E. to the beginning of the month of Abib in 133 B.C.E. can also be dated from 1 Maccabees and the works of Josephus by a Seleucid year: the Seleucid year 178. Once again the dating by 1 Maccabees and Josephus perfectly fits the Sabbath-year cycle already demonstrated by the 15th year of Hezekiah, the 8th year of Artaxerxes I, and the 150th Seleucid year. The evidence relating to the Sabbath year of 134/133 B.C.E. (Abib/Nisan reckoning) 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 attempted 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 at the hands of the Syrian-Greek Empire. Simon subsequently won freedom for the Judaeans in the 170th Seleucid year, Nisan reckoning.

Thus the yoke of the nations was taken away from Israel in the 170th year. Then the people of Israel began to write in their instruments and contracts, "In the 1st year of Simon the high priest, the governor and leader of the Jews."¹

Having, further, posted numerous ambushes in different parts of the hills, he (Simon) 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.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.³

At the end of Simon's government, Simon and his two sons, Mattathias and Judas, were visiting Simon's son-in-law, Ptolemy, who was residing in Dok, near Jericho. Ptolemy then treacherously murdered Simon. The book of 1 Maccabees dates Simon's murder "in the 177th year, in the 11th month called

¹ 1 Macc., 13:41f.

² Jos., *Wars*, 1:2:2.

³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:6:7.

Sebat (Shebat; i.e., Jan./Feb.).”⁴ Josephus adds that Simon died having “ruled over the Jews for 8 years in all.”⁵ The year 177, therefore equals the 8th 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 1st year of Simon.”
- Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13:6:7, reports that “in the 1st 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 18th day of Elul (Aug./Sept.), in the 172nd year, being the 3rd year of Simon the high priest,” etc. This comment equates the 172nd year with Simon’s 3rd year, thereby agreeing with the fact that the 177th year would have been Simon’s 8th year.

John and the Approaching Sabbath Year

After killing Simon, Ptolemy imprisoned Simon’s wife and two sons, Mattathias and Judas. He then sent men to kill his third son, John Hyrcanus. Fortunately for John, he escaped the assassins’ hands.⁶ Ptolemy next withdrew to the fortress of Dagon (Dok), 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.”⁷

Although the forces of John Hyrcanus were superior, 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.” Yet 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.”⁸

These events occurred in the 11th and 12th months, i.e., Shebat and Adar, of the 177th Seleucid year (Nisan reckoning), since they immediately followed Simon’s murder in the 11th month of that same year.⁹ Abruptly, Hyrcanus was forced to withdraw his troops because the Sabbath year was arriving (i.e., the 178th Seleucid year, Nisan reckoning):

⁴ 1 Macc., 16:14. That Shebat is the 11th month, see Zech., 1:7, and Chart B.

⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:7:4.

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

⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1, cf. *Wars*, 1:2:3.

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

⁹ 1 Macc., 16:14.

Yet 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 7th year, just as on the 7th day. And Ptolemy, being relieved from the war 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.¹⁰

The siege consequently dragged on until the year of ἀργὸν (*argon*; not working the ground)¹¹ came round, which is kept septennially by the Jews as a period of inaction, like the 7th 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.¹²

It is extremely unlikely that anyone could have endured torture in this horrible manner for 7 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 of Dagon within that amount of time, especially under these circumstances. The evidence, therefore, clearly indicates that the Sabbath year almost immediately followed the 11th and 12th months of the 177th Seleucid year (Nisan reckoning). That fact, in turn, demonstrates that the Sabbath year at that time began with the 1st day of Nisan of the 178th Seleucid year (Nisan reckoning), which was only about a month or so after the siege began.

War and the Sabbath

The practice of not waging war 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)."¹³ 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 7th year, JUST AS ON THE 7TH DAY."¹⁴

The book of Jubilees, composed about 100 B.C.E., argues that anyone "who makes war on the Sabbaths" is condemned.¹⁵ Josephus remarks that the Jews were not even permitted to "march out" either "on the Sabbath or on a

¹⁰ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1.

¹¹ The term ἀργὸν (*argon*) means, "not working the ground, living without labour," see GEL, p. 114.

¹² Jos., *Wars*, 1:2:4.

¹³ 1QM, 2:6–10.

¹⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:1.

¹⁵ Jub., 50:12.

festival.”¹⁶ 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 cannot bear arms or march on the days of the Sabbath; nor can they obtain the native foods to which they are accustomed.¹⁷

Up until the invasion of Judaea by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jews would neither go to war nor defend themselves on the Sabbath. Yet 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, as a result, were needlessly slaughtered, a decree was issued by the priest Mattathias (Mathathyahu ben Yukhanan) and his friends.¹⁸ It stated:

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.¹⁹

This decree clearly remained in effect well into the 1st 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:

Yet if it were not our national custom to rest on the 7th 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.²⁰

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 1st century C.E., at the time when Josephus wrote these words. 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

¹⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:4.

¹⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:10:12.

¹⁸ 1 Macc., 2:27–41.

¹⁹ 1 Macc., 2:41.

²⁰ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:4:2; cf. Jos., *Wars*, 1:7:3.

Titus have “deference to the Jewish law” and “allow them that day, being the 7th (i.e., Sabbath), on which they were forbidden alike to have resort to arms and to conclude a treaty of peace.”²¹

Josephus, who commanded a force of Jewish soldiers himself during this period, remarks that late on the 6th 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.”²²

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 have saved 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 4th year of his reign and the 1st 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.”²³ 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 (AY)—undoubtedly because the Jews of this period began to date contracts and public documents by the year of the high priest’s reign.²⁴ “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 Seleucid year (Nisan reckoning) became protracted, there arose a lack of water. This drought was relieved by “a great downpour of rain which came with the setting of the Pleiades,” being the rains of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.).²⁵ This detail once again confirms that the beginning of the Sabbath year could not have been Tishri 1. Only 1 month of siege would hardly have been long enough to affect the people of Jerusalem with a lack of water. Yet 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 Festival of Tabernacles (in the month of Tishri, i.e., Sept./Oct.) a treaty of peace was signed.²⁶

Next, as we have said above, Josephus dates the 4th year of Antiochus (VII) Sidetes, being the 1st year of Hyrcanus, as a Sabbath year. The book of

²¹ Jos., *Wars*, 4:2:3.

²² Jos., *Life*, 32.

²³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:2.

²⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:6:7.

²⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:2; cf. S.O., 4:12–15.

²⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:2.

1 Maccabees, 15:10–11, 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 system (AY) or the non-accession-year system (NY)?”

George Syncellus, Jerome, Eusebius and Porphyry provide our first clue. They give Antiochus VII 9 years of reign.²⁷ 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).²⁸ Diodorus of Sicily reports that Antiochus VII died during his eastern campaign just when spring began to melt the snow and the crops were appearing.²⁹ Justin adds that the army of Antiochus VII was still in winter quarters in Persia when the Parthians surprised him with the attack in which he lost his life.³⁰

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, using the Syrian-Seleucid system, was Seleucid 183, Macedonian (autumn) reckoning, a detail confirmed by his coins.³¹ It proves that the first of his 9 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 AY system.

Next, a comparison of Seleucid coins with the works of Josephus demonstrates that Josephus used the AY method for determining the reigns of the Seleucid kings Antiochus VI and Tryphon, both men ruling just prior to Antiochus VII.³² When we combine this data with the fact that ancient chronographers allowed only 9 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 possible 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 4 years of the 161st Olympiad, on the other hand, began in July, 136 B.C.E. (Attic reckoning)

²⁷ Syncellus, *Chron.*, 1, p. 552, 2, p. 271; Eusebius, *Chron.*, pp. 255, 263; Schoene, *Evsebi*, 1, app. 1, pp. 16, 56, 91f; Jerome, *Euseb. Chron.*, 227F–228F; HJP, 1, p. 127.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Chron.*, pp. 255, 263; HJP, 1, p. 132. See JQR, 10.1, pp. 58f, for the use of the Oct. or Macedonian-Olympiad system by Porphyry and Eusebius.

²⁹ Diodorus, 34/35:15–17.

³⁰ Justin, 38:10, 39:1, which reports that Antiochus VII and his army were cut off in Persia.

³¹ Macedonian Seleucid 183 = Oct., 130 to Oct., 129. For the coins of Antiochus VII, see below n. 32.

³² Josephus gives Antiochus VI 4 years of reign (Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:7:1). Coins bear the dates for 5 Seleucid years: 167–171 (HJP, 1, p. 131). Josephus gives Tryphon a reign of 3 years (Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:7:1). Tryphon’s coins bear the dates for 4 Seleucid years (HJP, 1, p. 131). Similarly, although the coins of Antiochus VII bear the Seleucid dates for 10 years, i.e., 174–183 of the Greek Era (HJP, 1, p. 132), Eusebius and Porphyry only allow him 9 years (see above ns. 27 & 28).

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.³³ He places the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus in the 3rd year of the 162nd Olympiad (Attic reckoning). As our other records reveal, the 3rd year is correct, but not of the 162nd Olympiad; rather, it was the 3rd year of the 161st Olympiad. The 3rd year of the 161st Olympiad extends from July, 134 until July of 133 B.C.E. (Attic reckoning). As such, it stands in full agreement with the events of the 178th Seleucid year (Nisan reckoning).

Conclusion

The records from Josephus and 1 Maccabees are clear. Simon was murdered in the 11th month of the 177th Seleucid year, Nisan reckoning. To avenge his father's death, John Hyrcanus tried to take Ptolemy at his fortress called Dagon before the arrival of the Sabbath year. He failed to do so, and due to the Jewish law forbidding military expeditions during the Sabbath year (as they were forbidden on a Sabbath day) John Hyrcanus had to retreat as the month of Nisan and the 178th year (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,³⁴ 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 the Maccabean books and Josephus began 1 year earlier (i.e., 312 rather than 311 B.C.E.). Yet, as demonstrated in the last section of Chapter XV, 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 7 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 had to 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 15th year of Hezekiah, the 8th year of Artaxerxes I, and the 150th Seleucid year.³⁵

³³ Eusebius, *Chron.*, p. 255.

³⁴ See above Chap. XV, pp. 227f.

³⁵ See Chart C.

This page intentionally left blank.