

ELECTRUM * Vol. 24 (2017): 277–278
doi: 10.4467/20800909EL.17.035.7517
www.ejournals.eu/electrum

Kenneth Atkinson, *A History of the Hasmonean State. Josephus and Beyond (Jewish and Christian Texts, vol. 23)*, Bloomsbury T & T Clark, London – Oxford – New York – New Delhi – Sydney 2016, pp. 210, ISBN 978-0-56766-902-5

The last two decades have seen an increased interest in the history of Judaea in the period from its incorporation into the Seleucid state (200 BCE) to its subjugation to Rome (63 BCE). A number of monographs and edited volumes as well as dozens of articles have been published in this period, discussing this history from various perspectives. The subject of a large percentage of these publications is the period of Hasmonean rule. This is particularly important because many generations of scholars mostly focused on analysing the causes and the course of the armed rebellion to which the Hasmoneans traditionally lent their name. This event is known in historiography as the Maccabean Revolt, after the byname of one of its leader. Scholars have generally been much less interested in the history of the state that the Hasmoneans founded, mostly focusing on the history of their fighting against the Seleucids, their attitude to religion, to the Jerusalem temple, and the nature of the available sources. Until recently, the basic canon of these sources comprised 1 and 2 Maccabees and the works of Josephus. These were supplemented by references to the events of the second century BCE scattered throughout post-biblical Jewish literature and in the works of Greek and Roman historians. The available sources grew considerably only in the second half of the twentieth century. The first impetus came with the discovery of manuscripts at the Dead Sea, containing numerous allusions to the historical events in which the Hasmoneans participated. This was followed by the archaeological discoveries made at sites concealing the remains of ancient cities whose fates intertwined with the military activity of the rulers of Judaea. At the same time, the ever growing amount of archaeological, numismatic, and even epigraphic data has contributed to a systematic increase in the knowledge of the period of Hasmonean rule. The reason for this is that this data gives an indication of the aspects and effects of the rule that are reflected only barely, if at all, in written sources. This fact explains why the history of the state founded by the Hasmoneans is currently of interest to a growing number of scholars. Among them is Kenneth Atkinson, the author of many studies on the Hasmonean period and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In his latest book, he attempts to paint a picture of the current knowledge of the history of the Hasmonean state.

This is not a textbook presentation, however. The author's perspective is made clear by the second part of the book's title: *Josephus and Beyond*. He explains how this should be construed in the *Introduction*, which defines the objectives of his reasoning. These include 1) comparing the evidence given on the Hasmoneans by Josephus with other types of sources; 2) illustrating the Hasmonean state's relations with its neighbours;

3) determining to what extent non-literary sources can be used to change our understanding of literary evidence (p. 1). In addition, Atkinson underlines the difference between his depiction of the history of the Hasmoneans and earlier perspectives: “This study differs from all previous books on the Hasmonean period because it is the only work to integrate the full array of extant data to reconstruct the relationships between the Hasmonean state and the rulers of the Seleucid and the Ptolemaic Empires, the Itureans, the Nabateans, the Parthians, the Armenians, and the Roman Republic” (p. 1). Regardless of this, he also proposes new reconstructions and interpretations of a host of historical events that provide a better understanding of the political activity of the Hasmoneans in the process of construction of the state that they established (cf. pp. 1–2).

The book comprises nine chapters (Ch. 1: *Introduction*, pp. 1–22; Ch. 2: *The Creation of the Hasmonean State*, pp. 23–46; Ch. 3: *John Hyrcanus: His Role during Simon’s Reign and his Consolidation of Political and Secular Powers*, pp. 47–79; Ch. 4: *Judah Aristobulus: The Creation of the Hasmonean Monarchy*, pp. 80–99; Ch. 5: *Alexander Jannaeus: A Period of Conquest and Expansion*, pp. 100–133; Ch. 6: *Shelamzion Alexandra: A Hasmonean Golden Age*, pp. 134–145; Ch. 7: *Pompey and the Hasmoneans: Hyrcanus II, Aristobulus II, and the End of the Hasmonean State*, pp. 146–157; Ch. 8: *After the Roman Conquest*, pp. 158–165; Ch. 9: *Conclusion: Josephus, Rome, and the Hasmonean History*, pp. 166–179). Their structure is not only logical, but also self-evident. The contrasting lengths of the various chapters, especially those concentrating on the particular leaders, reflect both the available sources and our knowledge on them.

The research objectives that Atkinson sets himself mean that his main focus is the political history of the Hasmonean state. His emphasis on this aspect is entirely understandable, as without showing the broad political context in which the rulers of Judea acted, it is hard to make an accurate assessment of the size of their success in securing independence and defending it from numerous external and internal threats. Many of the interpretations the author proposes have a good chance of becoming widely acknowledged to be correct, while some are likely to face criticism. The main reason for this is that subsequent to this book’s publication, further books and articles have appeared – or are scheduled to shortly – whose authors propose a different verdict or view on Hasmonean political and diplomatic activity. Disputes and controversies in assessment of particular events are inevitable, resulting from the various interpretations that can be made of the sometimes ambiguous content of written sources.

Atkinson concludes his book with the following sentence, which is of major significance in the context of studies on the Hasmonean era: “When all the extant evidence is compared with his writings, Josephus emerges as a truly exemplary chronicler of one of history’s most remarkable dynasties, the Hasmoneans who, alone of all Jewish families, still has its own holiday to celebrate its struggle for religious and political freedom” (p. 179).

The value of Kenneth Atkinson’s book lies in its attempt to examine the place and role of the Hasmonean state in the context of the region’s history from the perspective of the complex political realities of the period. Only this perspective makes it clear how remarkable the path of this dynasty’s rulers to Judaea’s gaining independence was, as well as the extent of the effort and endeavours required from them to provide stability to the state that they founded.