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"None of the Weakness of Her Sex": Uncovering a Lost Chapter in Women's Studies

Kenneth Atkinson

University of Northern Iowa, kenneth.atkinson@uni.edu

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“None of the Weakness of Her Sex”: Uncovering a Lost Chapter in Women’s Studies

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Kenneth Atkinson, "None of the Weakness of Her Sex": Uncovering a Lost Chapter in Women's Studies¹

ABSTRACT

From 76-67 BCE a remarkable woman governed ancient Israel as its sole ruler - Queen Salome Alexandra. After the death of her husband, King Alexander Jannaeus, the country was on the verge of civil war. Jannaeus had ruthlessly persecuted his religious enemies. Salome Alexandra assumed power, competently reformed the government, and inaugurated fiscal and political policies that led to what was likely the most prosperous and peaceful period in ancient Israel's history. By examining the life and times of Salome Alexandra, this study will hopefully bring to light the achievements of this amazing woman that have been neglected by scholars of women's studies and history, and in the process uncover a unique period during which women attained unprecedented freedoms and reigned over men.

The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things rotten through and through, to avoid.

Livy, *History of Rome*, (Preface 10)

The Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375 CE) was inspired by his mentor Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* (*Lives of Famous Men*) to write a similar study devoted to biographies of important women. His book, *De mulieribus claris* (*Famous Women*), became the first work of Western Literature devoted exclusively to women. Although once widely popular, Boccaccio's composition has become almost unknown today and is seldom read by students of Gender Studies or the Humanities. In this inaugural issue of the University of Northern Iowa's new journal of research, scholarship, and creative activity, *Universitas*, I would like to introduce readers to the life of an important woman not only neglected by Boccaccio, but also by contemporary scholars of women's studies. The subject of this essay, Salome Alexandra, was married to the king of ancient Israel for twenty-seven years and amazingly took his place as her

country's sole ruler from 76-67 BCE. Despite this extraordinary achievement, no scholar has ever written a biography devoted to her life. Today, Salome Alexandra is a forgotten queen and a neglected pioneer who defied the social and religious conventions of her day and ruled over men.

Salome Alexandra lived in an era when women were prized for their beauty, yet we have no description of her appearance. As a female, her conduct was expected to enhance her husband's role, or serve as a distraction from his flaws. Salome Alexandra greatly surpassed her spouse, King Alexander Jannaeus, by succeeding him as monarch and becoming the most successful ruler in ancient Israel's history. Unfortunately, this unprecedented achievement is why we know so little about her life and times; she was vilified for succeeding where her husband and predecessors had failed. Later historians sought to erase her contributions from history and omitted most of her reign from their accounts. They were so successful that we not only have no idea as to when Salome Alexandra was born, but we are even uncertain of her true name. Recently, scraps of parchment from a long-forgotten library in the Judean Desert, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, have begun to reveal lost episodes of Salome Alexandra's life and, for the first time, what may have been her actual name. In this article I hope to disclose more than Salome Alexandra's name and uncover a lost chapter in women's studies by highlighting a few achievements of this remarkable woman who defied the odds to become the last sole ruler of an independent nation of Israel.

An Inauspicious Beginning

Salome Alexandra was born sometime in the first century BCE in ancient Israel, which was also known as Judea. The Romans later called this land Palestine. Women of Salome Alexandra's time were expected to bear sons. Later Jewish tradition even equated the failure to bear a male child with death.² This stigma began immediately since, according to Scripture, all mothers were ritually unclean following birth. If a woman delivered a daughter, her period of uncleanness was doubled.³ Although we do not know whether Salome Alexandra was the eldest child in her family, or if she had brothers or sisters, her birth undoubtedly brought sadness to all: "It is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son, and the birth of a daughter is a loss."⁴

Daughters in ancient Judean society were largely anonymous in life and death. A recent study of the names of Jewish men and women from ancient Israel preserved in texts and inscriptions dated to between 330 BCE-200 CE lists only 247 women and 2040 men. These figures are startling for what they reveal: if factual, they indicate that women made up only 10.8% of the entire population. This is highly unlikely since in both ancient and modern societies women have generally comprised 50% of the population. Ancient women were simply not deemed worthy of remembrance, which is why their names normally were not recorded in the historical record. In the majority of burial inscriptions that mention women, moreover, they are usually identified by the name of their father, their husband, and in some instances their son.⁵ The women of Salome Alexandra's day were not individuals, but merely wards of men.

Examining Salome Alexandra's life is difficult because the ancient sources spell her name many ways such as Shel-Zion, Shalmonin, Shalmzi, Shalmza, and Shlamto.⁶ This bewildering variety of names has led the distinguished scholar of ancient Judaism Jacob Neusner to comment that Salome Alexandra is "a queen whose name no one can get straight."⁷ Because there is no

consistent spelling of her name in the primary sources, and since she was often referred to by her first name, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a writer actually referred to Queen Salome Alexandra or to some other woman named Salome.

Salome Alexandra married into a royal family with a dubious past: the Hasmonean dynasty. The Hasmoneans came to power during one of the darkest periods in Judean history. In 167 BCE Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the King of the Seleucid Empire of Syria, defiled the Jerusalem Temple when he offered sacrifices to the pagan deity Zeus on its altar. He then sought to abolish the Jewish faith. A village priest from the little town of Modein named Mattathias rallied his five sons and the nation around his leadership and launched a guerrilla war to liberate the country from foreign rule. Following his death, Mattathias's son Judas, commonly called Maccabeus ("the hammer"), succeeded in defeating Antiochus's forces and rededicated the Jerusalem Temple. Jews around the world still commemorate this event with an eight day celebration known as the festival of Hanukkah or the "Feast of Lights."⁸ As a result of their victory, Mattathias's descendants became the high priests and rulers of the nation. Their successors eventually became known as the Hasmoneans in memory of Mattathias's great-grandfather "Hashmon."⁹

The Hasmonean dynasty into which Salome Alexandra married faced a problem, one that would prove especially precarious for a woman, since their positions as both monarch and high priest were without scriptural precedent. By biblical tradition, the king of ancient Judea was a descendant of the line of King David, while the high priest traced his lineage to the biblical priest Aaron or Zadok.¹⁰ God had promised David an eternal dynasty of kings, and a son who would fulfill his hope of providing God with a Temple in Jerusalem: "He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."¹¹ The Davidic dynasty was but a distant memory in Salome Alexandra's day. Judea had no king and had long been governed by the high priest. Most people were willing to accept the Hasmoneans as high priests since they were from a priestly family. The Hasmoneans, however, had no scriptural precedent upon which to base their claim to rule since they were not from King David's line. Consequently, the Hasmoneans had to convince people to acknowledge their family of warrior priests as sovereigns since they were not from the family that God had chosen to govern the nation.

The early Hasmoneans wisely avoided using the title 'King' since Scripture had restricted this office to David's descendants. This changed when Salome Alexandra's brother-in-law, Judah Aristobulus, became high priest and ruler. He decided to dispense with the fiction that the Hasmoneans were mere high priests and not rulers, and openly proclaimed himself king. His unexpected death after a one year reign was likely viewed by many as God's judgment upon the Hasmoneans for illicitly combining the powers of religion and state. Salome Alexandra's husband, King Alexander Jannaeus, succeeded his brother and also took the title of "king." He subsequently came to be one of the most ruthless monarchs in the nation's history, who never hesitated to kill anyone who refused to bow to his will.

Salome Alexandra first appears in the historical record as the spouse of the future king of Judea, Alexander Jannaeus. Josephus, the major historian of the period, failed to provide the date of her birth, the names of her parents, or any information about her background. We are uncertain whether Salome Alexandra was related to the Hasmoneans or simply married into the family.

Since she later ruled herself, it is very likely that Hasmonean royal blood flowed through her veins. However, this is mere speculation as her pedigree is a mystery that likely has been lost to us forever. The only chronological information Josephus provided about Salome Alexandra is a brief statement that she was seventy-three years old at the time of her death in 67 BCE, which would place her birth in 140 BCE.¹² Even this date is disputed by scholars, some of whom suggest that she must have been much younger at the time of her death.¹³ This brief chronological information may account for Josephus's reticence. If one compares this date with the ages of her children and husband as recorded by Josephus, it would indicate that Salome Alexandra was twenty-nine years old at the time of her marriage to Alexander Jannaeus, who was amazingly only seventeen or fifteen. This age discrepancy would have been quite remarkable in antiquity and demands an explanation. The fact that Josephus chose not to comment upon this unusual royal marriage may suggest that Alexander Jannaeus's parents thought it best, for reasons perhaps cautiously unstated, to marry their young and inexperienced son to a more mature woman. Josephus's reticence also leaves unanswered the question as to why Salome Alexandra, at a time when women married quite young, was still single. The events of her later reign hint that she may have been too powerful a personality for anyone other than a royal to wed. The irony was that the Hasmoneans, many of whom exercised their rule through force, eventually chose this powerful woman to save their dynasty. Salome Alexandra proved to be a remarkable woman who had the good fortune to have been born during an equally remarkable time.

Salome Alexandra was fortunate to have been born during the Hellenistic period, which was the era when virtually the entire Near East came under the sway of Greek culture. During the Hellenistic period many upper class women received an education. A few even became known for their scholarship such as Hestiaea, who wrote a book examining the Trojan War, and Diophila, an author of a poem about astronomy. In Hellenistic Egypt, which had a great influence upon Judean society, boys and girls from privileged families received the same curriculum of reading and writing. Girls also studied music, which required the ability to read words and understand musical notation. We have evidence that some women became painters, although it is uncertain if they acquired this talent from school or learned it from their artisan fathers. Many first century BCE philosophical treatises were written by women, some of whom adopted pseudonyms of earlier female disciples or relatives of the great philosopher Pythagoras. Women in Egypt frequently held positions of power.¹⁴ Salome Alexandra likely knew several articulate and highly literate women from the Egyptian royal family who, like her, also ruled over men.¹⁵

According to Josephus, Salome Alexandra became queen under unusual circumstances. Her brother-in-law, Judah Aristobulus, had imprisoned her husband Alexander Jannaeus along with all but one of his brothers when he became king. Judah Aristobulus only allowed his brother Antigonus to remain free. Both quickly came to distrust one another. Before Judah Aristobulus's unexpected death, his wife Salina conspired to have Antigonus murdered. When Judah Aristobulus died, Salina released her husband's three remaining brothers from prison and, according to Josephus, "appointed as king Jannaeus, also known as Alexander, who was best fitted for this office by reason of his age and his evenness of temper."¹⁶ Thanks to her sister-in-law, the thirty-seven year old Salome Alexandra was now the wife of the nation's new king and high priest.¹⁷

Although Josephus is remarkably reticent about the circumstances that led to Alexander Jannaeus becoming king, he clearly stated that Salina was in charge of appointing the new monarch. Presumably, Salome Alexandra was also somehow involved. She undoubtedly looked to Salina for protection during the turbulent year when her husband was in prison. Because Alexander Jannaeus had been incarcerated during Judah Aristobulus's entire reign, he must have relied upon both Salina and Salome Alexandra to determine whom he could trust to place in positions of power. Although we can only speculate how much political influence Salome Alexandra wielded during her husband's reign, Josephus's account suggests that it may have been considerable since even he was forced to acknowledge that with Salina's designation of Alexander Jannaeus as king the nation, for the first time in its history, had permitted a woman to determine the next monarch. Because Salome Alexandra's sister-in-law Salina could not have placed Alexander Jannaeus upon the throne without widespread support, Josephus's account once again concealed the obvious fact that a woman had managed to gain the backing of the nation's leading politicians and its military.

A Stable Force Behind An Unstable Monarch

Alexander Jannaeus spent his first seven years in almost constant warfare. His conquest of the Transjordan, to the east, and Gaza, to the south, changed his base of power. Economically, the country prospered due to the increased revenues brought into the general economy, as well as the royal coffers, from these newly acquired territories. However, many people were displeased at Alexander Jannaeus's military successes. He was a man with perhaps too much blood on his hands to continue as high priest. Alexander Jannaeus was also too fond of secular pagan culture. His coins now bore Greek and Hebrew inscriptions that proclaimed his status as king, but failed to mention his position as high priest. Because Alexander Jannaeus was the highest religious official in the land, any challenge to his right to supervise the temple could potentially undermine his position as king. It was a religious party known as the Pharisees who would come to pose the greatest threat to Alexander Jannaeus's reign.

Josephus wrote that the Pharisees and Sadducees were the two most important religious movements during the first century BCE. According to Josephus:

The Pharisees, who are considered the most accurate interpreters of the laws, and hold the position of the leading sect, attribute everything to Fate and to God; they hold that to act rightly or otherwise rests, indeed, for the most part with men, but that in each action fate cooperates.¹⁸

The Sadducees, on the other hand, rejected many of the Pharisees's most cherished beliefs, such as the immortality of the soul, and attributed all human activity to free will and none to fate.¹⁹ Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees held most positions of political influence and included the majority of priests who controlled the Temple. The Pharisees had once been powerful, but had been superseded by the Sadducees. Since Alexander Jannaeus favored the Sadducees, the Pharisees gradually became his most vocal opponents.²⁰

The Pharisees waited to act until Alexander Jannaeus presided over the Festival of Tabernacles in 95 BCE. During this holiday to celebrate the harvest it was a custom to wave a *etrog* (citron)

and *lulav*, a bundle made of palm branches, along with twigs of myrtle and willow to praise God. When Alexander Jannaeus in his role as high priest led the worship service in the Jerusalem Temple, the Pharisees pelted him with ethrogs. He retaliated by allowing his mercenary troops to attack the crowd.²¹ Six thousand people were killed. Alexander Jannaeus then had a wooden barrier constructed around the Temple's altar to protect him from flying objects.²² Only the priests were now allowed to pass through this palisade into the Temple's inner court. In the eyes of many, Alexander Jannaeus, the high priest, had impeded the people's connection with God when he illicitly blocked public access to the sacred altar.

Despite the calamity of the Festival of Tabernacles, Alexander Jannaeus failed to gauge the political situation and realize that the Pharisees were now strongly opposed to his reign. When he attacked Obodas I, king of the Nabataean Arabs across the Jordan River to the east, Alexander Jannaeus unwittingly fell into an ambush and barely escaped. He managed to retreat with the remnants of his army to Jerusalem. The Pharisees saw this as an opportunity to rid the nation of their hated king and high priest, whom an increasing number of people now opposed after the slaughter during the Festival of Tabernacles. This proved to be the beginning of a nearly six year struggle during which Alexander Jannaeus repeatedly used his troops to kill his own people. Over fifty thousand Jews perished during his reign.

The Pharisees in desperation turned to the Syrians, whom the Maccabees had once fought to regain their nation's freedom. At the Pharisees' urging, King Demetrius III (Eukairos) of Syria agreed to invade Judea and destroy Alexander Jannaeus. His forces met Alexander Jannaeus's army in Israel near Shechem. Alexander Jannaeus's army was soundly defeated and forced to flee to the mountains. When many of Demetrius's Jewish mercenaries unexpectedly defected to Alexander Jannaeus's side, the tide of battle quickly turned and Demetrius retreated home to Syria. Alexander Jannaeus then sought revenge. He ordered the crucifixion of 800 Pharisees in the center of Jerusalem while he slaughtered their children and wives before their eyes.²³ As this took place, Alexander Jannaeus openly feasted with his concubines while he watched his adversaries die. Josephus wrote that the people now began to refer to Alexander Jannaeus as "Thrakidas" (the "Cossack" i.e., the murderer) because he was more of a tyrant than a high priest.²⁴ Fearing further atrocities, 8,000 Jews fled the city at night and lived outside of Judea until his death.

Salome Alexandra supported the Pharisees during her husband's entire reign while he backed the Sadducees.²⁵ During Alexander Jannaeus' six year struggle with the Pharisees, he remained absent from Jerusalem for considerable periods of time as he fought to expand his kingdom. Although his period in office was filled with violence, for the most part Josephus did not record much trouble in Jerusalem or Judea when the king was away. Moreover, Josephus never revealed who was actually in charge during Alexander Jannaeus's frequent campaigns. It is likely that Salome Alexandra handled internal political affairs during Alexander Jannaeus's absences. Unlike her husband who was widely hated, Josephus commented, "as for the queen herself, she was loved by the masses because she was thought to disapprove of the crimes committed by her husband."²⁶

During his final three years (79-76 BCE) in power, Alexander Jannaeus suffered from the physical effects of a life time of heavy drinking and a recurrent fever.²⁷ Yet, he continued with

his policy of military conquest to enlarge the Hasmonean state. Alexander Jannaeus finally succumbed to his illness during his siege of the city of Rabaga across the Jordan. According to Josephus, Salome Alexandra was with her husband on the field of battle. Just before his death, Alexander Jannaeus claimed to feel remorse for his cruel acts. Nevertheless, he remained a shrewd politician to the end and struggled to determine how his family would retain power upon his death. Although he had two grown sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, Alexander Jannaeus realized that neither had the temperament necessary to rule. Therefore, he made two requests of Salome Alexandra. First, that she conceal his death from his soldiers until she had captured the fortress. Second, he urged her to make peace with the Pharisees since without their support she and their children could never keep the throne.²⁸ Alexander Jannaeus then designated Salome Alexandra as his heir and successor. As her first official act, he urged her to give the Pharisees his corpse to do with as they wished. With his final instructions to his wife, Alexander Jannaeus died at the age of forty-nine after a twenty-seven year reign (103-76 BCE).

Josephus's account of Alexander Jannaeus's death provides us with a rare glimpse into the political life of Salome Alexandra, one which hints that she had long played a major role in the operation of his kingdom. Salome Alexandra kept her husband's demise a secret until the fortress of Ragaba was captured. The Pharisees and the people accepted Salome Alexandra as their new monarch and her appointment of her eldest son, Hyrcanus, as the high priest. The fact that there was no revolt, and the military also recognized her as their sovereign, suggests that she already had their support long before the battle of Rabaga. Now the offices of monarch and high priest were once again separate as they had been during the biblical period, which may possibly account for Salome Alexandra's popularity. Salome Alexandra followed her husband's advice and delivered his body to the Pharisees, who gave him an exceedingly elaborate royal funeral and eulogized him as a just king. This unexpected memorial service was certainly not intended for Alexander Jannaeus, but was clearly undertaken to honor his wife. For the first and only time in Israel's history, the nation had willingly accepted a woman as their legitimate monarch and sole ruler.²⁹

"None of the Weakness of her sex"

Salome Alexandra was in almost every respect the opposite of her husband. He was universally reviled; she was widely loved. Unlike her spouse, Salome Alexandra never embarrassed the nation with any political or sexual scandals. She was deeply religious and a strong supporter of the Pharisees. Most important, in the dangerous world of the ancient Near East she was a realist. Salome Alexandra recognized that she had to adopt some of her husband's policies and keep a strong military, lest neighboring powers seek to annex Judea now that a woman held the reins of power. Nevertheless, she curtailed her husband's endless wars of expansion that had divided and almost destroyed the nation in favor of a strong defense. Josephus commented, "she not only strengthened her own nation, but became a formidable foe to foreign potentates."³⁰ Moreover, Josephus briefly mentioned in passing that Salome Alexandra received hostages from her neighbors, but nowhere wrote that she sent hostages to other countries.³¹ Only a single military expedition was undertaken during her reign to prevent a neighboring monarch, the Armenian King Tigranes, from seizing her kingdom. Tigranes apparently realized that Salome Alexandra was a tougher ruler than he had thought since he signed a peace treaty with her and then

permanently left her territory. Judea was now safe and Salome Alexandra never had to worry about any additional foreign invasions or military campaigns during her nine-year reign.

Salome Alexandra never remarried and retained her position as the nation's sole monarch until her death. Often reluctant to praise her, Josephus nevertheless wrote:

She was a woman who showed none of the weakness of her sex; for being one of those inordinately desirous of the power to rule, she showed by her deeds the ability to carry out her plans, and at the same time she exposed the folly of those men who continually fail to maintain sovereign power.³²

In a sexist society in which only men by biblical precedent could rule, Josephus's latter comment is particularly damning for what it suggests about how the public viewed Salome Alexandra's husband and contemporaries. Unlike Alexander Jannaeus, who had exhausted and divided the nation with continued wars of aggression, Salome Alexandra concentrated on bringing about peace and prosperity to her people. Centuries later the authors of the Talmud chose her reign as the time of the nation's greatest period of tranquility and commented that while she sat upon the throne:

the grains of wheat were like kidneys, the grains of barley like olives, and the lentils like golden denarii; the scribes gathered such grains and preserved samples in order to show future generations the effect of sin.³³

Although the fifth century CE writers of the *Talmud* were aware of Salome Alexandra's greatness, she is virtually unknown to contemporary scholars interested in the lives of important women and the effects of their deeds upon subsequent history. Yet, this enigmatic passage in the *Talmud* suggests that for centuries many recognized that Salome Alexandra was an exceptional woman and regarded her time upon the throne as the nation's golden age, the likes of which have never been repeated to the present day.

Like Father; Like Mother

Salome Alexandra's two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, shared the differing temperaments of their parents. The former took after his mother; the latter mirrored his father. Josephus described Hyrcanus as a young man who was incompetent to govern and too lethargic to be concerned with public affairs. He was more disposed to the quiet life. Aristobulus, on the other hand, was a young "hot-head" and a "man of action and high spirit." Realizing that his temperament was too much like his father's, Salome Alexandra confined him to private life.³⁴ She appointed her eldest son Hyrcanus as high priest, the position formerly occupied by his father, since the Bible mandated that this office be held by a male.

Like his mother, Hyrcanus was a Pharisee and began to restore abandoned Pharisaic customs to the Temple liturgy. The Talmudic authors not only viewed Salome Alexandra's reign as the time of Judea's greatest prosperity, but they also praised her alliance with Simeon ben Shetah, the leading Pharisee of the day. Simeon and Salome Alexandra were so close that later writers assumed that they were brother and sister. Simeon reformed the court system by placing more

Pharisees in it and altered the Jewish wedding ceremony by introducing the *ketubah*, the document that specified the obligations of the groom toward his bride.³⁵ According to tradition, Simeon required children to attend schools; a decree that presumably included young girls.³⁶ Life for women, as well as children, greatly improved under Queen Salome's reign as a result of the judicial reforms instituted by Simeon. The nation was so pleased with Salome Alexandra's policies and religiosity that they accepted her decision to appoint the high priest. Aristobulus was not willing to accept this situation and not only became his mother's most dangerous enemy, but led the country to its ruin.

Aristobulus must have been a constant source of grief for Salome Alexandra. Unlike Hyrcanus, who was clearly her favorite son, Aristobulus proved to be too much like his father to trust. He was, moreover, a Sadducee.³⁷ Nevertheless, Salome Alexandra must have loved both of her sons deeply, but realized that they hated one another. When archaeologists excavated the magnificent winter palace of the Hasmoneans in the warm desert oasis of Jericho, they uncovered two identical adjacent complexes that Salome Alexandra built for Hyrcanus and Aristobulus.³⁸ Salome Alexandra apparently realized that she had to keep her two sons apart from one another even in their leisure time. While she sought to provide both with the same comforts and amenities, Hyrcanus was clearly her favorite. As high priest, he was the most important male in the kingdom and the nation's primary connection with God since he supervised the Temple. According to Josephus, Aristobulus "let it be plainly seen that if only he should get the opportunity, he would not leave his mother any power at all."³⁹

Aristobulus's hatred for his mother blinded him to the potential consequences of his actions. The Sadducees used this to their advantage and sought Aristobulus's assistance to help them undermine her reign. Aristobulus was an eloquent spokesman for their cause. He had learned the game of politics from his father. He increasingly began to denounce his mother for allowing the Pharisees to execute those responsible for the mass crucifixion during Alexander Jannaeus's reign. In a speech against his mother, Aristobulus laid bare the real source of contention between the Sadducees and Pharisees; he admitted that the Sadducees were to a great extent responsible for their present misfortunes because they had allowed a woman to reign "when her sons were in the prime of their life."⁴⁰ For Aristobulus, his mother could not govern: for Hyrcanus, only his mother had the aptitude and trust to rule. In the eyes of the people, Salome Alexandra remained their choice to preside over the nation.

Salome Alexandra's Final Years

Josephus's account of Salome Alexandra's time in power is remarkable for its brevity. His report of her entire nine-year tenure upon the throne is slightly shorter than his narrative of the one-year reign of her brother-in-law Aristobulus. Josephus, for the most part, skipped virtually Salome Alexandra's entire life with the exception of her problematic relation with Aristobulus and then shifted the focus of his narrative to her final days. Yet, even his brief account is astonishing for what it revealed, namely that the nation preferred the leadership of a woman to a government led by a Hasmonean male.

Salome Alexandra became ill at seventy-three years of age in 69 BCE. Aristobulus decided that the time was right to seize power and prevent his brother from assuming the throne. He slipped

away from Jerusalem during the night and went to the desert fortresses where, Josephus tells us, his father's friends had been stationed. Salome Alexandra learned of Aristobulus's flight in the morning. For a time she did not realize that Aristobulus had left to start a revolt. Salome Alexandra and her people, however, quickly came to realize that civil war was at hand. The nation feared that Aristobulus and his Sadducean allies would take revenge upon the Pharisees for their domination of the country during his mother's reign.

Hyrchanus and the nation's leadership came to Salome Alexandra and begged her to take action. They told her that Aristobulus was now in control of several fortresses and their armament. Yet, they said that it was her decision to determine the necessary course of action they should undertake. Like her husband, Salome Alexandra summoned the necessary courage to remain a strong ruler while gravely ill and managed to handle affairs while on her deathbed. She ordered Hyrcanus and her officials to use any means necessary to quell the rebellion. In her last hours as she began to decline in strength, she continued to encourage Hyrcanus and the nation to resist Aristobulus's coup.

Upon Salome Alexandra's death, Hyrcanus immediately took her place as heir and successor to his mother's throne. He proclaimed himself both high priest and king, once again uniting the powers of religion and state. Aristobulus immediately declared war against his brother. Without the strength and wisdom of his mother to guide him, the weak-natured Hyrcanus simply chose not to fight. He asked his brother for peace and offered to relinquish to him the offices of king and high priest. Hyrcanus and Aristobulus publicly reconciled in the temple. This ceremony shocked the nation, for Josephus wrote that Aristobulus's triumph had been unexpected.⁴¹

The status quo would have undoubtedly continued if not for the actions of an unscrupulous friend of Hyrcanus, who knew how to use the former high priest's weak disposition to further his own political aims. This man, Antipater, was in many respects like Hyrcanus's brother Antipater. According to Josephus, while Hyrcanus was a "naturally a decent man" who did not listen to slander, Antipater was "by nature a man of action and a trouble-maker" who liked to spread malicious gossip.⁴² Antipater feigned friendship and convinced Hyrcanus to revolt from his brother to regain the throne. Hyrcanus followed Antipater's advice, which plunged the nation into the worst type of conflict as brother fought against brother, each oblivious to the consequences their hatred for one another would ultimately bring to their people.

The Decline and Fall of Salome Alexandra's Kingdom

While Judea was convulsed by civil war a new threat descended upon the nation: the might of Rome. The Romans used the opportunity occasioned by this conflict to intervene in Judea's affairs. In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey, assisted by Hyrcanus, besieged Jerusalem. Pompey captured the city and dragged Aristobulus, along with his sons and daughters and many of his supporters, in chains to Rome for his triumphal celebration.⁴³ Pompey also desecrated the Temple when he went into its innermost shrine where only the high priest was permitted to enter.⁴⁴ Although Pompey reappointed Hyrcanus as high priest, he was not allowed to assume his former position of king. From henceforth, the Romans would exercise direct control over Israel's political affairs.⁴⁵ The age of the Hasmonean rulers had ended.

Antipater quickly came to dominate the weak-willed Hyrcanus and convinced the Romans to grant him and his sons greater powers. Antipater's son Herod, known to history as Herod the Great, eventually triumphed where his father had only partially succeeded when he persuaded the Romans to install him, and later his children, as kings of Israel. The people hated Herod even more than the Hasmoneans because he was merely a pawn of Rome. His entire reign proved to be quite bloody as he killed many of his opponents, both real and imagined, including some of his own children and his favorite wife. Hearing rumors about the birth of a potential rival, Herod unsuccessfully attempted to prevent a new king, the infant Jesus, from growing up when he ordered the slaying of the children of Bethlehem. Herod's kingdom eventually ended in violence as the Romans later replaced his family of Jewish kings with a succession of Roman governors, one of whom presided over the crucifixion of Jesus.⁴⁶

If Salome Alexandra's children had followed their mother's policies, and put the welfare of their nation before their hatred of one another, Antipater and his son Herod would likely have never become rulers and perhaps modern history would have been different, for Christianity emerged against the backdrop of Roman occupation. Salome Alexandra was the last ruler of an independent nation of Israel free from foreign control. Her country would not regain its independence until the establishment of the modern nation of Israel in 1948. Unfortunately, none of its leaders has thus far managed to bring to this relatively new country the peace and prosperity that it once experienced under Salome Alexandra.

Emerging Chapters in the Story

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 has led to a reassessment of the roles that women held in ancient Judean society at the time of Salome Alexandra. These documents, believed to have been written by a celibate community of male monks belonging to a religious movement known as the Essenes, contain many texts that mention women. According to some of these works, women were permitted to testify against men in judicial proceedings and were members of the sect.⁴⁷ The reference to a female scribe in one Dead Sea Scroll, when read in conjunction with other texts that permit women to testify and possess property, suggests that some women associated with the Essenes were highly literate and financially independent.⁴⁸

The Dead Sea Scrolls, although comprising thousands of fragments of over 800 documents, contain only twelve proper names. A few people are mentioned more than once, which brings the total to eighteen individuals in the extant corpus.⁴⁹ Salome Alexandra is not only mentioned twice, but her name appears in calendars that document important events in the life of the Essene community in the desert settlement of Qumran adjacent to the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. These priceless Scrolls not only show that Salome Alexandra was important to the members of this religious sect, but also reveal that her actual name was "Shelamzion."⁵⁰ Many other Scrolls contain allusions to Salome Alexandra and record events that took place during her life.⁵¹ These texts, most of which were only made available to scholars in 1991, are now beginning to yield their secrets along with many new details about Salome Alexandra's life and times.

Conclusion

In the past few centuries, stories of great women such as Salome Alexandra have been neglected as both Catholic and Protestant political theorists assumed that male government was natural, and that gender disorder led to political chaos. Consequently, historians, especially in the Victorian era, sought examples from the past to support the confinement of women as natural and necessary for historical progress.⁵² This, however, was not always the case, as seen from the lost example of Salome Alexandra who represented one example of a competent woman ruler. Not everyone in antiquity ignored the achievements of such remarkable women. The Greek writer Herodotus in his *Histories*, for example, departed from the study of myth to record historical facts. In his book, like Boccaccio's, Herodotus made women a central theme and depicted them as full partners with men in establishing and maintaining the social order.⁵³ With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and additional ancient texts, it is now possible to uncover new information about Salome Alexandra that provide another example of an important woman who maintained the social order and was willingly accepted by men as their leader. As an institution committed to the philosophy that rigorous scholarship is the foundation of all excellent teaching, the University of Northern Iowa, as exemplified through the publication of this new journal, seeks to provide the people of Iowa and beyond with creative ways to stimulate research. I hope that this article will encourage readers of *Universitas* wherever they may reside to support the University of Northern Iowa's mission of teaching through scholarship and enhance their own learning and instruction by exploring the lives and contributions of the many other neglected women of the ancient world.

Kenneth Atkinson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Northern Iowa

¹ I would like to thank the Graduate Dean, administration, and staff of the Graduate College for their considerable financial support of my teaching and scholarship over the years and for awarding me a Professional Development Assignment to write the first biography of Salome Alexandra. Dean James Lubker and Associate Dean Reinhold Bubser of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts have also provided both financial assistance for my research on this project and have always encouraged me to pursue my scholarship. Betty DeBerg, Head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, has been a constant source of encouragement in my various academic endeavors. Kent Snowden, Linda Berneking, Rosemary Meany, and Herb Safford of the Rod Library staff were instrumental in tracking down elusive material for my research on this article. Richard Utz has undertaken the heroic task of editing this journal, and I am grateful for his invitation to be part of this inaugural issue.

² Genesis Rabbah 45.2. See further, Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody: MA, 1995), 44-56.

³ Leviticus 12:1-5.

⁴ Ben Sira 22:3.

⁵ Figures from Tal Ilan, "Notes on the Distribution of Jewish Women's Names in Palestine in the Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49 (1989): 186-200. For the exclusion of women in many studies of the period, see further Miriam Peskowitz, "The Gendering of Burial and the Burial of Gender: Notes from Roman-Period Archaeology," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 4 (1977): 105-24.

⁶ See further, see Tal Ilan, "Queen Salamzion Alexandra and Judas Aristobulus I's Widow," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 24 (1993): 181-90; *ibid*, "Shelamzion Alexandra," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford, 2000), 872-74; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC-AD 135)*, ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black (Edinburgh, 1979), 229-30.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees Before 70* (Leiden, 1971), 1:139. For additional spellings, see Tal Ilan, "New Ossuary Inscriptions from Jerusalem," *Scripta Classica Israelica*, 11 (1991/92): 155-57.

⁸ For the Hasmonean dynasty, see further 1 Maccabees 1:210-2; 2 Maccabees, 5:1-26; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.239-64; Josephus, *War*, 1.31-35; Daniel 11:21-39. See also, Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (Minneapolis, 1974), 1:283-309; Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York, 1974).

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.263.

¹⁰ See further, Kenneth Atkinson, *An Intertextual Study of the Psalms of Solomon* (Lewiston, NY, 2001), 43-44.

¹¹ 2 Samuel 7:13.

¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.430.

¹³ Some scholars have adjusted Salome Alexandra's age to make her sixty at the time of her death. See J. Müller, *Alexandra Judaeorum Regina: tanquam specimine sapientis ex hac gente foeminae ad illustrandam historiam factionum judaicarum* (Cologne, 1711), 12-13; Joseph Geiger, "The Hasmoneans and Hellenistic Succession," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 53 (2002): 1-17; Christiane Saulnier, "L'ainé et le porphyrogénè: Recherche chronologique sur Hyrkan II et Aristobule II," *Revue Biblique* 97 (1990): 54-62. This age discrepancy has led some to propose that Salome Alexandra was previously married to Judah Aristobulus and that she later married his brother Alexander Jannaeus in accordance with the ancient biblical laws that required widows to marry the brother of their deceased spouse. This, however, is unlikely since both men were high priests, who were forbidden from marrying a widow. See, Leviticus 21:13-14. See further, Immanuel Deutsch, *Die Regierungszeit der jüdischen Königin Salome Alexandra und die Wirksamkeit des Rabbi Simon ben Schetach* (Magdeburg, 1901), 11-16. There is no convincing evidence for changing Salome Alexandra's age or that she was married to Alexander

Jannaeus's brother. For more on biblical laws regarding marriage requirements for widows, see further R. Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York, 1984), 64-66; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel Volume 1: Social Institutions* (New York, 1965), 24-40.

¹⁴ See Michael Grant, *From Alexander to Cleopatra* (New York, 1982), 149-213; Ilan, "Queen Salamzion," 189-90; Ross Kraemer, "Jewish Women in the Diaspora World of Late Antiquity," in *Women Like This": New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta, 1991), 43-67; Joseph Sievers, "The Role of Women in the Hasmonean Dynasty," in *Josephus, the Bible, and History*, ed. L. H. Feldman and G. Hata (Leiden, 1989), 132-46.

¹⁵ For this subject, see further Sarah B. Pomeroy, "Women in Roman Egypt: A Preliminary Study Based on Papyri," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms in Spiegel der neueren Forschung: Part II, Principat, 10.1*, ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini (New York, 1988), 708-23; Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra* (New York, 1984), 41-82; Grace H. Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Women-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt* (Baltimore, 1932).

¹⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.320.

¹⁷ Alexander Jannaeus was either twenty-four or twenty-two in 103 BCE when he became king.

¹⁸ Josephus, *War*, 2.162-63.

¹⁹ Josephus, *War*, 2.164-66.

²⁰ See further, Kenneth Atkinson, *I Cried to the Lord: A Study of the Psalms of Solomon's Historical Background and Social Setting* (Leiden, 2004), 40-45.

²¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.374.

²² Th. A. Busink, *Der Tempel von Jerusalem, von Salomo bis Herodes: eine archäologisch-historische Studie unter Berücksichtigung des westsemitischen Tempelbaus* (Leiden, 1980), 888-90.

²³ Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Alexandre Jannée a-t-il crucifié ses opposants Pharisien?," in *Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium Paris 2001*, ed. Folker Siegert and U. Kalms (Münster, 2002), 59-71.

²⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.13.379-83.

²⁵ Joseph Derenbourg, *Essai sur l'histoire et la géographie de la Palestine: d'après les Thalmuds et les autres sources rabbiniques* (Paris, 1867), 101-13.

²⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.407.

²⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.398.

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.399.

²⁹ Queen Athaliah (845-840 BCE) is the only other woman to have ruled in the entire history of ancient Israel. Athaliah married into the royal family of Judea and seized the throne following her husband's death and then proceeded to exterminate the entire Davidic dynasty. She governed her nation as queen for seven years until a revolution returned a member of David's family, who unbeknownst to her had been hidden during her entire reign, to the throne. The biblical writers tell us little about Athaliah's time in power, but clearly denounce it as an illegitimate period since she was both a woman and not of King David's lineage. Athaliah was killed during the coup that brought King Joash to power. 2 Kings 11:1-21; Chronicles 22:10-23:21. Boccaccio included Athaliah in his *De mulieribus claris* to illustrate the consequence of using violence to unjustly usurp royal power. Because Salome Alexandra is the only other woman to have ever ruled ancient Israel, this makes her reign even more remarkable since Athaliah, her only predecessor, was denounced by Scripture primarily because she was a woman.

³⁰ Josephus, *War*, 1.112.

³¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*. 13.409.

³² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.430.

³³ Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit, 23a.

³⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.407; Josephus, *War*, 1.109.

³⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Ketubbot 82b.

³⁶ J. Klausner "Queen Salome Alexandra," in *The World History of the Jewish People VI: The Hellenistic Age*, ed. A. Schalit (New Brunswick: NJ, 1972), 252-53.

³⁷ See Atkinson, *I Cried to the Lord*, 40-46; E. Main, "Sadducees," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. H. Schiffman and J. C. VanderKam (Oxford, 2000), 2:812-16; H. E. Ryle and M. R. James, *Psalms of the Pharisees, Commonly Called the Psalms of Solomon* (Cambridge, 1891), xlv-xlviii; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE-66 CE*. (Philadelphia, 1992), 317-40, 380-51; P. Schäfer, "The Hellenistic and Maccabean Periods," in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller (Philadelphia, 1977), 602-4; J. Viteau, *Les Psaumes de Salomon: Introduction, texte grec et traduction, avec les principales variantes de la version syriaque par François Martin* (Paris, 1911), 294-95.

³⁸ Ehud Netzer, *The Palaces of the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great* (Jerusalem, 2001), 30-78.

³⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*., 13.411.

⁴⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.417.

⁴¹ Josephus, *War*, 1.123.

⁴² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.8-13.

⁴³ Pompey's triumphal celebration occurred in Rome in 61 BCE. See Josephus, *Antiquities*. 14.71, 70; Josephus, *War*, 1.154-57. See further, F. M. Abel, "Le siège de Jérusalem par Pompée." *Revue Biblique* 54 (1947): 243-55; Kenneth Atkinson, "Herod the Great, Sosius, and the Siege of Jerusalem (37 BCE) in Psalm of Solomon 17," *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996): 313-322; Atkinson, "Toward a Redating of the Psalms of Solomon: Implications for Understanding the *Sitz im Leben* of an Unknown Jewish Sect," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 17 (1998): 95-112.

⁴⁴ See further, Atkinson, *I Cried to the Lord*, 21-36.

⁴⁵ For the history of Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, and their dealings with the Romans, see further James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2004), 337-85.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the subsequent problems caused by Roman rule, see Kenneth Atkinson, "Herod the Great as Antiochus *Redivivus*: Reading the Testament of Moses as an Anti-Herodian Composition," in *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture*, ed. Craig A. Evans (Edinburgh, 2004), 134-49.

⁴⁷ See further, Kenneth Atkinson, "Women in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Evidence for a Qumran Renaissance During the Reign of Queen Salome Alexandra," *The Qumran Chronicle* 11 (2003): 37-56.

⁴⁸ See further, Kenneth Atkinson, "Dancing at Qumran?: Women and Worship at the Dead Sea," in *Proceedings of the Central States Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Schools of Oriental Research*, ed. Scott S. Elliott (Kansas City: MO, 2000), 3:39-54; L. Cansdale, Women Members of the Yahad According to the Qumran Scrolls, in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem*, ed. D. Assaf (Jerusalem, 1993), 215-22. The presence of a female scribe in the Dead Sea Scroll 4Q274 1:7 is similar to the many references in ancient literature to Christian women scribes. For this evidence, see K. Haines-Eitzen, "'Girls Trained in Beautiful Writing': Female Scribes in Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 629-46.

⁴⁹ Martin Abegg, "Concordance of Proper Nouns in the Non-biblical Texts from Qumran," in *The Texts from the Judaean Desert Indices and an Introduction to the Discoveries in the Judaean Desert Series*, ed. Emanuel Tov and Martin G. Abegg (Oxford, 2002), 234-5.

⁵⁰ J. Fitzmyer, "4QpapHistorical Text C" in *Qumran Cave 4 XXVI: Cryptic Texts and Miscellanea, Part I*, ed. S. J. Pfann, et al. (Oxford, 2000), 275-80; Fitzmyer, "4QHistorical Text D," in *Qumran Cave 4 XXVI*, 281-87.

⁵¹ See further, Hanan Eshel, *Megilot Kumran veba-medinah ha-Hashmona'it* [*The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State*] (Jerusalem, 2004), 122-35 [Hebrew].

⁵² For these observations, see further the evidence examined in Mary Spongberg, *Writing Women's History since the Renaissance* (New York, 2002), 15-33.

⁵³ Spongberg, *Writing*, 32-33.



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