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In this book Regev explores the Hasmoneans’ political and cultural ideology that shaped their own sense of identity as well as an image they wanted to project to the outside world. The Hasmoneans were conscious about how to present themselves to their Jewish subjects in an effort to legitimize their power and rule. Examining the historical artifacts, including the literature both panegyric and hostile to the Hasmoneans, coins, and palace, Regev seeks to construct their self-representation, or “narrative” (13).

The book is divided into seven chapters with the introduction and conclusions. It includes helpful figures and pictures of numerous coins minted from the Hasmonean era.

In chapter 1 Regev discusses the importance of Hanukkah and the temple for the Hasmoneans’ ideology. He points out that, while Hanukkah is commonly known as the day of the temple purification, the eight-day celebration of the feast is symbolic and echoes the number of days celebrated during the inauguration of the temple (millu‘im). Further evidence for Hanukkah’s association with the cultic ceremony is found in 2 Macc 10:6–8, where Hanukkah is compared to the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot). The inauguration of the temple in the times of Solomon and Zerubbabel and the making of the covenant during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah are reported to have taken place around the Feast of Sukkot. Thus, Regev asserts that the Hasmoneans introduced and
presented the cultic practice as one in continuity with the tradition. Through the “invented tradition,” the Hasmoneans hoped to bolster their political legitimacy (54). The two legends reported in 2 Maccabees regarding the altar fire and the temple objects reveal that the Hasmoneans’ ideology is closely tied to the temple. The author of 2 Maccabees includes the legends regarding the ark and the holy fire, which symbolize the ideal ritual of the First Temple. Regev speculates that the author might have presented Judah Maccabee, who possessed the written tradition regarding the sacred objects, as the one who would rediscover the objects and thereby bring back the divine presence in the temple.

Regev expands on the ideological importance of the temple for the Hasmoneans in chapter 2. According to Regev, the temple provided the Hasmoneans a rationale for their military action and political and religious hegemony even after the threat to their religion was removed. Their newly found role as the protector of the temple and its cult led to the appointment of Jonathan as the first Maccabean high priest. Simon claimed the high priesthood with civic and military authority for his family’s meritorious work for the temple. Regev attributes the half-shekel tribute and pilgrimage to the Hasmoneans. Although the two practices have a long history and can be traced back to the biblical times, Regev claims that the origin and international propagation of the practices among Diaspora Jews are “Hasmonean enterprises” (77). Regev gives the examples of the Qumran community and the authors of Psalms of Solomon as those who resisted Hasmonean temple politics. The pesharim give evidence of an intense conflict between the Hasmonean temple establishment and the Qumran community. Regev does not think that the community’s judgments are “natural or reasonable consequences of Hasmonean policy” (95–96). He attributes the community’s reaction to its radical ideology and sectarian identity.

Chapter 3 follows the political career of Hasmoneans rulers in succession and traces how they accumulated their power and influence in religious and political realms. The thrust of the argument here is that the Hasmoneans acquired their power, political in particular, gradually over several generations. The early Hasmonean rulers were portrayed to be mainly religious leaders with great zeal for the law; however, 1 Maccabees also portrays the Hasmoneans exchanging gifts and tributes with foreign rulers, an unusual practice for Jewish high priests. Regev sees such depiction as the author’s attempt to present the Hasmoneans as equal in political stature to the Hellenistic rulers. According to Regev, “the Hasmoneans served the communal interest of the Jews and acted on behalf of the Jewish people” (128). They found the legitimacy of their rule in the popular support.

In chapter 4 Regev takes up two contrasting Jewish views of Hasmonean rule: some Jews opposed the Hasmoneans’ rule because of their non-Davidic and non-Zadokite origin;
others held no objection to the Hasmoneans because their regime had “no pretense of being a messianic one” (130). Regev seeks to examine these two claims’ accuracy by investigating the Hasmoneans’ own political ideology and the extent of people’s approval of the ideology. Having reviewed the Hellenistic and biblical royal ideologies, Regev does not see the same Davidic ideology operative in ancient Judaism. He argues that “the belief in a future Davidic king was therefore too weak or theoretical to limit the Hasmonean bid for the royal diadem” (150).

In chapter 5 Regev turns to Hasmonean coins to ascertain the Hasmonean royal ideology. Through the study of the coins he hopes to construct: (1) the political identity of the rulers, their public image, and their personality and achievements as well as (2) the religious or cultural identity of their subjects. He identifies roughly seventeen coin types, listing each by ruler, content of inscription, and symbols. With close attention to the political discourse on the Hasmonean kingship and priesthood, he notes that John Hyrcanus and Judah Aristobulus refrained from referring to themselves as king, preferring to be identified as high priest. Alexander Jannaeus, who minted coins with the royal title, did not use both titles concurrently on the same coin. In all cases, whenever the title of high priest is used, the paleo-Hebrew script is used. Regev interprets these features as evidence of the rulers’ way of emphasizing their Jewish identity and reinforcing the national consciousness among their Jewish subjects. The legend heber ha-yehudim also helps assert the religious independence of Jewish people and communicates the Hasmoneans’ desire for their subjects to “regard their rule as a political actualization of the Jewish religion” (199).

Chapter 6 entails a social-archaeological investigation of the Hasmonean palaces. Regev defines social archeology as an analysis for the reconstruction of the belief system and organization of past societies. In his study of public spaces, Regev avers that the Hasmoneans were careful and modest in their palace construction in order to avoid presenting themselves as distinguished rulers. Regev also employs access analysis, which measures the distance between spaces that represents social encounters as well as separation. The analysis suggests the Hasmoneans’ high religiosity. Numerous ritual baths in their palaces evidence their strict observance of ritual purity. The fact that many of the ritual baths are found in private sections of the palace points to their personal piety as opposed to propaganda.

In the final chapter Regev attributes the transformation of Jewish identity to the Hasmoneans. The Hasmoneans redefined Jewishness, transforming it from an ethnic concept (genos) into a political one (politeia). The conversion of Idumeans and Ituraeans to Judaism illustrates the Hasmoneans’ expansive understanding of Jewish identity and their confidence in the power of their religious and political ideology. The Hasmoneans’
legacy remains in their construction of a Jewish collective identity based on the national state. The amalgam of Jewish piety and Hellenistic politeia remains to be the unique characteristic of Hasmonean ideology.

Regev does a fine job of observing and articulating what he sets out to do in the beginning: reconstruct the Hasmonean narrative. This dominant narrative can be found in both literature and material culture and might well have found wide popular acceptance among their Jewish subjects. However, the absence of penitential tradition in Hasmonean ideology is quite striking. While the reading of Jeremiah prompts a prayer of penitence in the book of Daniel (Dan 9), the same prophet appears in Judas Maccabee’s dream and hands him over a golden sword, according to 2 Maccabees. The penitential tradition is one of the pronounced currents in ancient Judaism that continued into the Hellenistic era. Those who espoused such a tradition may not easily fall into the categories of pro- or anti-Hasmonean parties. However, the Hasmonean narrative was not born out of vacuum but was a result of intense negotiation for power and identity. The consideration of such a dialectic nature of political discourse in Regev’s project would have provided a richer context for the Hasmonean ideology.