CHAPTER FIVE

JONATHAN AND THE HIGH PRIESTLY OFFICE: 159–152 B.C.E.

Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with the attitude of the Hasmoneans towards the high priest Alcimus in particular and the Seleucid rule in Judea in general. During the high priesthood of Alcimus there was an increase of Seleucid military/colonist presence in Judea. Attention was paid to the development of the high priesthood of Alcimus, especially his militarized representation. Judas, the leader of the Hasmonean revolt, died in 160. After his death, the Hasmonean led forces under the command of Jonathan were reduced to a minor threat beyond the Jordan valley.

According to the royal letter alluded to in 1 Macc 10:3, 6–7, King Demetrius I Soter (162–150) permitted Jonathan to recruit troops, manufacture arms, and settle in Jerusalem. Several scholars have argued that, after the death of Alcimus in 159, there was a high priest in Jerusalem, whom Jonathan expelled and then he himself assumed the high priestly office. His name would have been purposely omitted from First Maccabees, just as had been done to the high priests Jason and Menelaus.

Such a scholarly claim makes at least three significant implications on the understanding of the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood. First, seeing that there are no reported revolts between 157 and 152, it would seem that the Hasmoneans implicitly accepted the legitimacy of this alleged high priest. Second, Jonathan would have been unable to assume the high priestly office before 152 due to the existence of a high priest. Third, in 152 Jonathan would have usurped the high priestly office by finally removing the alleged high priest.

In this chapter it is necessary to focus on three important aspects: 1) The policy and role of Jonathan (and Simon) as warrior priests after the death of Alcimus; 2) The history of the high priestly office between 159 and 152; 3) The circumstances surrounding Jonathan’s military appointment in 152 and its significance for the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood.
1. Jonathan, the Expedition of Bacchides, and the Peace Treaty

First Maccabees 9:57 relates that the royal friend Bacchides, at seeing that Alcimus was dead, returned to the king and then there was peace for “two years.” In Ant. 13.22 Josephus is, again, in agreement with First Maccabees. Alcimus died very probably in May of 159. The described events in 1 Macc 9:58–73 are supposed to have begun in 157.1 From 1 Macc 9:58 it is implied that, sometime after the departure of Bacchides, Jonathan and his men returned to Judea. The enemies of the Hasmoneans designated as “the lawless” (οἱ ἄνομοι) appealed to Bacchides (the king is not mentioned). They urged him to return to Judea and capture their enemies “in one night.”

Jonathan and Simon with their followers took refuge in Beth-Basi some 2 km south-east of Beth-Lehem and fortified it (1 Macc 9:62).2 Although the Hasmoneans based themselves well inside the fortified area of Bacchides, they apparently encountered no serious opposition from the royal garrisons. Moreover, the subsequent siege of Bacchides concluded with a peace treaty (9:70–73).3 Before his return to the king, Bacchides reportedly executed “many” of those who urged him to march on the Jewish rebels (9:69).

Who were these “lawless” people and why did they appeal to Bacchides again? The return of Jonathan to Judea was probably interpreted as a threat, which surfaces later in 1 Macc 10:7–8. The accusers of Jonathan likely included the Hellenized Jews—former militants of the high priest Alcimus. Since there was no longer a high priest, only the Hellenized ruling party had authority to require the intervention of Bacchides. The latter reacted positively to their request.

What were the terms of the peace treaty? Reportedly it was Jonathan, who had promoted the negotiation, probably indirectly, with Bacchides (1 Macc 9:70). After the siege, Jonathan received some of the prisoners

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1 1 Macc 9:57–73//Ant. 13.22–34 purports to cover the period between Alcimus’ death in 159 (1 Macc 9:54–56) and 152 (cf. 10:1). Seven years is roughly the time span covered in some details in 1 Macc 2:1–9:53 (cf. 2:70 and 9:57).

2 First Maccabees 9:61 reports the execution of fifty leaders of the plot. The subject of the verbs συνέλαβον and ἀπέκτειναν is not clear. Josephus understood it to be Bacchides (Ant. 13.25; cf. 1 Macc 9:69//Ant. 13.31). However, see Sievers, Hasmoneans, 77–78 n 18. On Beth-Basi, see Abel, Géographie, II, 269.

3 First Maccabees 9:66 has ἐπέταξεν in the Greek Mss V and 340, instead of ἐπέταξεν as suggested in Kappler’s edition. Thus, Jonathan probably added to his forces the tribes of Odomera and Phasiron. Cf. Goldstein, I Maccabees, 395.