CHAPTER SIX
THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF JONATHAN:
PART ONE (152–150 B.C.E.)

Introduction

The previous chapter focused on two main issues. First, particular attention was dedicated to the history of the high priestly office between 159 and 152 B.C.E. It has been argued that there was no (at least official) high priest in Jerusalem during this period. Second, it analyzed the role played by Jonathan (and Simon) and concentrated on his appointment as royal military official. This event marked a real turning point in the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood.

The present chapter deals with historical issues related to the appointment of Jonathan as archiereus. The main question that is central to this study is the following: Was Jonathan appointed to act as a Jewish/biblical or as a Seleucid/Hellenistic high priest?

In order to study the nature of Jonathan’s appointment it is necessary to understand his relation to the temple priesthood and the royal Akra. It will then be important to investigate how the military power of Jonathan interacted with his new office of high priesthood.

The importance of this chapter lies in the fact that it will deal with one of the most eloquent periods in the Hasmonean high priesthood. More precisely, detailed analysis shall be made of the way the first Hasmonean became high priest. This chapter will also open the discussion of certain Dead Sea Scrolls that are believed to disclose information about the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood. The period under study here is from 152 to the summer of 150.

1. The Institution of Jonathan’s High Priesthood

According to 1 Macc 10:17, Alexander I Balas (152–145) wrote “letters,” in which the Seleucid rival king appointed Jonathan archiereus and a royal “Friend” (10:18–20). How and when did Jonathan become archiereus? What was the reaction of the temple priesthood to this event? Did the Akra officials collaborate with Jonathan? These are some of the most important questions which must be dealt with here.
As argued in the preceding chapter, Jonathan’s fortification of the temple area and more, reported in 1 Macc 10:10–11, was not part of the royal concessions of Demetrius I Soter (162–150; cf. 10:6). This was the first step of Jonathan’s defection from Demetrius after the peace treaty in 157. Jonathan opened negotiations with the rival king in Ptolemais, Alexander I. Thus, the Hasmonean leader could secure his new position against a possible military attack by Demetrius.¹

But the strategic position of Jonathan—which could have hardly remained unnoticed by Alexander I—and the latter’s need of allies offered the Hasmonean leader the possibility to negotiate new concessions from the rival king. Jonathan could ask for what he did not or could not obtain from Demetrius I, namely, the high priesthood.

First Maccabees 10:15 relates that Alexander I “heard” of the promises made by Demetrius I and the battles fought by Jonathan. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that it was Jonathan who first addressed the king.² At least, it can be said that Alexander found out Jonathan was willing to become an archiereus. The king also likely knew that the high priestly office in Jerusalem was vacant. This vacancy in fact made the appointment for Jonathan much easier.³

When was Jonathan appointed archiereus? According to 1 Macc 10:21 Jonathan put on “the sacred vestments” in the seventh month of the Sel. year 160. The year here follows the Babylonian system as confirmed by the mention of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (σκηνοπηγία/סכות). The date in question translates into October of 152.⁴

On the one hand, this date has been challenged by a number of scholars who suggested the year 153.⁵ But this can be dismissed because the arrival of Alexander I in Ptolemais can be placed at the end of 153 at the earliest, the same year he was recognized by the Roman Senate as king (Polyb. 33.15; 33.18).⁶ Even after this event Jonathan still remained loyal to Demetrius I for some time, as argued above.

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¹ Cf. 1 Macc 6:48, 51–54 and War 1.46 of Antiochus V–Lysias late in 163.
² In Ant. 13.43 Alexander is presented as if he were the first to have taken the initiative. Josephus’ inference seems to derive from the combination of both 1 Macc 10:15–17 and 10:46–47, for which he has no direct parallel.
³ So also Grabbe, Judaism, I, 294.
⁴ According to Goldstein, I Maccabees, 401, it fell on October 23 to 30.
⁶ Ehling, Untersuchungen, 149, points to the summer of 152. This may be too late a date. For a discussion, see Walbank, Polybius, III, 42, 557, 560–61.