CHAPTER NINE

THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF SIMON (142–140 B.C.E.)

Introduction

The previous chapter concluded the activity of Jonathan as high priest. His ambition of achieving independence from the Seleucid throne has been emphasized. Attention has also been given to the role played by Simon during this process. But Jonathan was captured in Ptolemais later in 143, by Tryphon, protector of the boy-King Antiochus VI. As the previous chapters have illustrated, it was the Seleucid king alone who would normally appoint or confirm the high priest in Jerusalem.

This chapter will concentrate on the situation around the Hasmonean high priestly office left vacant by Jonathan. Subsequently, it will analyze the way in which Simon subsequently became military leader and high priest. This is necessary in order to understand his contribution to the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood.

The study of the early high priesthood of Simon is important for at least four reasons. First, according to a decree issued by an assembly of priests and other Jews in 140, Simon was given consent to act as high priest. This happened apparently after he was first “appointed” high priest by “the people” (1 Macc 14:35) and “confirmed” by King Demetrius II (14:41). Who were these “people”? Second, why did Simon need such a public decree? Third, the process by which Simon became high priest helps clarify certain aspects in relation to the high priesthood of Jonathan. Four, how did the decisions of this assembly contribute to the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood?

1. The Decree in Favor of Simon in First Maccabees 14

The study of the document reported in 1 Macc 14:27–45 is extremely important for a deeper understanding of the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood. Not only does it reveal the various stages which led to the final stage of the institutionalization of the Hasmonean high priesthood, the study of this document will also unveil elements not found in the narrative texts. Literary as well as historical questions related to the decree itself must be addressed first.
The Delimitation of the Text of the Decree

First Maccabees 14:25–27a separates itself from 1 Macc 14:16–24, which treats the diplomatic relations of Simon with Rome and Sparta (see below). The rhetorical question of 1 Macc 14:25–26b serves as an interpretative introduction to the text of the decree. This is corroborated by the mention of the “sons” of Simon in 1 Macc 14:25. The favors listed in the decree, in fact, regard Simon alone (14:41).

The text of the decree itself begins at 1 Macc 14:27b. This is suggested by the introductory formula: καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἀντίγραφον τῆς γραφῆς. In 1 Macc 14:48–49 the reader is informed that apparently a copy of these “tablets” was given to Simon “and his sons.” First Maccabees 14:49 instead is followed by the letter of Antiochus VII Sidetes (138–129) to Simon (15:1–9).

Scholars are divided with regard to the exact end of the text of the decree: at 1 Macc 14:45,2 at 1 Macc 14:46,3 or at 1 Macc 14:49.4 First Maccabees 14:48–49 mentions the inscription of the decree and a copy of it. The inscription itself appears to have been made on “bronze tablets,” which were placed “on stele (στήλαις) on Mount Zion” (14:26).5 First Maccabees 14:48 specifies that these tablets were to be placed “in the precincts of the sanctuary in a conspicuous place” (14:48). Similar regulations are found at the end of many Hellenistic decrees.6 Thus, 1 Macc 14:48–49 appears to reflect the standard ending of a Hellenistic decree.

However, the main difficulty in getting a scholarly consensus lies in 1 Macc 14:46–47. James C. VanderKam considers the whole of 1 Macc 14:46–49 as describing the process of ratification.7 First Maccabees 14:46–47 alone states that:

a) “all the people” consented that Simon should act “according to these decisions,” i.e. those listed in 1 Macc 14:27b–45;

b) Simon consented to act as high priest (ἀρχιερατεύειν) and be strategos “of the Jews and priests.”

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1. The reported text is based on this “Hasmonean” copy.
2. So SVM, History, i, 194 n. 15; Schenker, “Einsetzung,” 166.
3. For example, Krentz, “Decree,” 147.
5. On bronze tablets, see also 1 Macc 8:22; 14:18.
6. See SEG 41:1574 l. 2; SEG 37:1010 ll. 46–50; OGIS 244 ll. 41–43; OGIS 737 ll. 20–23; SEG 57:1838 frag. E ll. 10–15; 1 Macc 11:37. See also Austin, HW, Nos. 110 ll. 45–49; 113 ll. 57–60; 115 ll. 25–30; 135 ll. 40–45.
7. From Joshua, 275.
8. The same verb εὐδοκέω is adopted both in 1 Macc 14:46 and 14:41. Besides, the phrasing εἶναι στρατηγός occurs both in 14:47 and at 14:42.