ALEXANDER JANNAEUS—PRIEST AND KING

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The prolific bronze prutahs of Alexander Jannaeus bear on the obverse an eight-rayed star within a circular diadem with a tie. The diadem is formed by a broad band. Between the eight rays is the Paleo-Hebrew legend, יהונתן המלך (king Jonathan). On the reverse is represented an anchor and the Greek legend ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ (of king Alexander). The identification of the star was put forward by Kindler and that of the diadem by Kanael. Both assumed that Hasmonean coinage was influenced by Seleucid coinage prototypes from the second century B.C.E. In the collection of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem there is a specimen from this category which reads: [ב]יהונתן mal [ך] (Fig. 1).

Ya’akov Meshorer published in 2001 a superb example with the legend כהן המלך (priest the king) and reports to have seen numerous further specimens of this coin type struck by the same pair of dies (Fig. 2). This type belongs to a different category of the diadem/anchor series which has rays with bulbous ends at the center of the star. He suggests that the double titles should be regarded as a ‘curiosity.’ However, between the two Hebrew words appears a symbol similar to a Greek Π and Meshorer adds that if this “sign has some symbolic significance, it can be suggested that the inscription too is not incidental.” The Π-like symbol divides the legend, preceding כהן המלך and shows that the legend reads המלך כהן.

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1 D. Barag (z”l) passed away in November 2009, prior to the final editing of this manuscript (the editors). The text has been left as written by Barag (save for minor corrections).
4 HU, No. 6631, 1.22 gr.
5 Y. Meshorer, A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kokhba, (Jerusalem and Nyack: Amphora, 2001), 38–9, Pl. 25: K 17. Meshorer refers, erroneously, to “Yehohanan the king.”
6 Ibid., 39.
7 Ibid.
J. Chaim Kaufman published three coins bearing the priest-king legend. Two specimens are examples of the coin published and discussed by Meshorer, struck by the same pair of dies; one of them extremely well-preserved (Fig. 3). A third coin was struck by a different pair of dies and bears the legend הַמֶּלֶךְ [יל], i.e. with an additional vowel (Fig. 4). It should be noted that many of the Paleo-Hebrew letters are angular.

Two coins of the same category (diadem/anchor series with rays with bulbous ends) are preserved in the coin collection of the Hebrew University, and one in a private collection, each struck by a different pair of dies (Figs. 5–7). The Hebrew legends on these three coins show clearly the title המלך but the preceding המ is botched, however certainly not the king’s name יְהוֹנָטָן.

Thus, there are five (or possibly eight) coins bearing the priest-king legend. One belongs to the category of the fine standard style diadem/anchor category (Fig. 1) and four belong to the category of diadem/anchor type with a star with rays with bulbous ends, struck by two or rather five (?) different pairs of dies (Figs. 2–7). This survey shows that the legend המֶלֶךְ (priest-king) is not a mere incidental curiosity but bears a clear message—that King Alexander is the high priest as well as the king. His title, High Priest, is vindicated by the common bronze prutahs bearing the legend “Jehonatan the high priest and the hever of the Jews.”

The reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.E.) was turbulent and marked by serious inner dissent as well as warfare, mainly to extend the territory of the Hasmonean kingdom. The chronology of his coin issues is on the agenda of Jewish numismatics since 1862.