THE PUNISHMENT OF THE WICKED PRIEST AND THE DEATH OF JUDAS

RICK VAN DE WATER
Jerusalem

In a recent reassessment of Jonathan the Hasmonean as the Wicked Priest of the Qumran *pesharim*, the claim has been made that all other theories have been refuted “once and for all.”¹ There appears to have been little response to this claim, perhaps in part because that identification already enjoys something of a consensus. One of the main arguments for Jonathan has always been his death at the hands of gentiles (executed by Tryphon in 142 BCE), which is supposed to agree with what is said of the demise of the Wicked Priest in 1QpHab and 4Q171.² According to H. Stegemann, the Habakkuk *pesher* even agrees with Jonathan’s death outside Judea.³

On the other hand, there are a number of reasons why such confidence in identifying Jonathan as the Wicked Priest is misleading. To begin with, Stegemann’s assertion was based on a highly questionable interpretation of the above-mentioned *pesher*.⁴ J. Carmignac and W. Brownlee have criticized taking as past events what could actually refer to future punishment, according to the verb tenses.⁵ The

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perfect verbs that clearly indicate past punishment occur in passages that make no mention of gentiles, nor do they offer anything that would suggest a sudden execution, even if preceded by torture. Instead, there is a specific mention of diseases, which does not fit what is known of Jonathan.  

Brownlee also pointed out that there is no warrant for deriving “illegitimate priesthood” from the title “wicked.” On the contrary, there is clear evidence that at one time, the Wicked Priest was highly regarded, but that through greed, he transgressed the law. Brownlee put it bluntly: “in any translation it is the lust for wealth which has made a traitor of the Wicked Priest, and nothing is said of the usurpation of an office which did not belong to him.” To this can be added that there is no certainty that he was even a high priest at all.

From another angle, the presence of Essenes in the Temple as late as 103 BCE is hard to reconcile with the idea of an exodus of Zadokites from Jerusalem at the time of Jonathan. Some have even questioned whether Jonathan’s external concerns would have permitted him to persecute the Zadokites. Still another problem is posed by seeing him as the object of praise in 4Q448. The explanation that this song was written when Jonathan was only a military leader before becoming high priest leaves an important question unanswered: Why would it then be kept by the Qumran community for over two hundred years after Jonathan had become the Wicked Priest? These difficulties, and especially the question of the punishment of the

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12 Puech (“Jonathan le prêtre impie,” 259, 268) has attempted to defend that explanation with the suggestion that the song was introduced into the Qumran library by a member, without the notice of the others (1).