

**VASILE BABOTA, *THE INSTITUTION OF THE HASMONEAN HIGH PRIESTHOOD*  
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The Hasmonean era is a subject of unceasing interest to scholars. The reason for this is the continued efforts to interpret all kinds of texts from this era or referring to it. Until recently, these interpretations usually accompanied analyses of selected texts or passages from them, particularly the First or Second Book of Maccabees. Even recently, the Hasmonean era was rarely analysed systematically, something that has changed only in the last few years. Over a short space of time, a whole host of monographs on the entire Hasmonean era or selected aspects thereof have been published in various countries. The observations, interpretations and conclusions made in them have not only added a significant amount to our knowledge on the subject, but also contributed to a profound change in its image. One of the most recent of these works is Vasile Babota's monograph devoted to the office of the high priest of the Jerusalem temple, held by the first Hasmoneans, Jonathan and Simon. This book came about on the basis of the author's PhD dissertation, written under the supervision of Joseph Sievers. This is the latest in a series of theses supervised by this excellent scholar that study the history and significance of the function of high priest of the Jerusalem temple at various points in its history. The first was Maria Brutti's book published in the same publishing series, on the role of the high priests in the period between the foundation of the Second Temple and the outbreak of the Maccabean Revolt.<sup>1</sup>

Many opinions have been aired on the function of the high priest exercised by the Hasmoneans, but these have mostly been in the context of the discussion on the nature of their authority and its constituent parts. No extensive analysis has yet been made on the nature of this function itself. This was what led Babota to focus on the subject in more depth, as well as examining the function from a different point of view than had previously been attempted: "(...) the central question that this study raises is what kind of institution was the Hasmonean high priesthood" (p. 5). The timeframe chosen by the author encompasses the period from the Seleucids' conquest of Judea until Simon's death. The reasons for this selection are not only the historical significance of this period, in which the Jews struggled to maintain the religious and cultural identity that was threatened by the process of Hellenisation and the Hasmoneans bid to free Judea from Syrian suzerainty, but also the fact that it was at this time that the change in the nature and role of the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple took place. The beginning of the process of its change began with Antiochus IV's nomination of Jason for the position of high priest. Thereafter, each nomination for the office made by the Syrian monarchs deepened the process and made it irreversible. As a result, the function of high priest, the terms of which were strictly defined by biblical tradition, came to resemble the of-

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<sup>1</sup> M. Brutti, *The Development of the High Priesthood during the pre-Hasmonean Period. History, Ideology, Theology* (*Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism* – 108), Brill, Leiden – Boston 2006.

fice of the priests of the Seleucids' official state cult in its competencies. Despite being called priests, to all intents and purposes they were state officials furnished with a broad scope of executive authority allowing them to effectively serve the political interests of the Syrian rulers.

Babota traces the process of the transformation of the high priest's function by analysing the activity of all those whom the Seleucids nominated for this position. He does this over ten chapters. The first ("Sources and their Character", pp. 9-34) describes the sources on which he bases this analysis. Each of the subsequent chapters looks at a precisely defined segment of the period. In the second chapter ("The Pre-Hasmonean High Priests of the Seleucid Period", pp. 35-66), the author presents the situation in Judea during the rule of Antiochus II, Seleucus IV and Antiochus IV until the outbreak of the Maccabean Revolt. He uses this situation as a background for examination of the significance of the office of high priest until the times of Antiochus IV as well as the circumstances in which this position was accorded to Jason and Menelaus. In the third chapter ("The Hasmonean Revolt and the High Priesthood of Menelaus", pp. 67-88), Babota's main focus is the question of the character of the mutual relations between Menelaus and the Syrian ruler and Judah Maccabee's relationship with Menelaus and the Syrian monarch. Analysing Judah's position, the author reaches the conclusion that his position on the function of priest was clear even at this point in the revolt: it should be independent from the Syrian king, and the high priest himself ought to have the powers (including military) to effectively defend the Temple and the Jewish people under its rule (p. 88). In the fourth chapter ("Judas Maccabaeus and the High Priesthood of Alcimus", pp. 89-118), the author endeavours to answer three important questions: why did the Hasmoneans question the legality of Alcimus' rule; did Judah Maccabee hold the position of high priest (cf. *Jos. AJ* 12,414; 419; 434); and what was the nature of the leadership of Judah inherited by Jonathan (p. 89)? According to Babota, Judah's position towards Alcimus evolved: from readiness to work together to rejection of the idea when Alcimus tried to remove him from the political scene. However, there is no reason to believe that Judah wanted to take Alcimus' place, either before or after his death. This was impossible without a royal nomination and owing to the hostility which the priesthood showed to Judah (pp. 105-106, 109-113, 117). The fact that in spite of defeat and Judah's death the insurrectionary movement did not dissipate, and in Jonathan found a new leader, was due to his previous position and the authority he had gained (pp. 113-115).

In the fifth chapter (pp. 113-115), Babota discusses the situation in Judea in the period from Alcimus' death until Jonathan's nomination for the position of high priest. He also portrays at length Jonathan's activity and relations with the rulers of Syria, which granted him their formal recognition as local leader. According to the author, the reason for which for seven years after Alcimus' death the position of high priest remained vacant was the existence of an agreement between Jonathan and Demetrius I. In return for not nominating a successor, the king secured peace in Judea and Jonathan's cooperation (pp. 131-133). It is likely that the high priest's religious duties at the time were carried out by one of the authorised priests (pp. 136-138). The three subsequent chapters look at Jonathan's activity after being appointed as high priest and until his death. The reason why they are given so much space is the author's chosen periodisation of Jonathan's rule. The first period is the years 152-150 BCE (Chap. VI: "The High Priesthood of Jonathan:

Part One (152-150 B.C.E.)”, which encompasses the time from Jonathan’s nomination by Alexander Balas and the death of Demetrius I. The circumstances in which the nomination took place, and the other honours accorded to him, leave no doubt that the position entrusted to him was essentially different not only from the traditional function of the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple, but also the office held by his immediate predecessors. This was what soon made Jonathan’s position the target of criticism from religious communities. The second period of his rule, from 150-145 BCE (Chap. VII: “The High Priesthood of Jonathan: Part Two (150-145 B.C.E.)”, pp. 171-194), corresponds to the years of Alexander Balas’ rule in Syria. At this time, thanks to close relations with the king of Syria and the strong support of adherents of the Hasmoneans, Jonathan’s position as high priest continued to be strengthened, and the secular character of the function became increasingly evident. Babota puts the third and final period of Jonathan’s rule in the years 145-143 BCE (Chap. VIII: “The High Priesthood of Jonathan: Part Three (145-143 B.C.E.)”, pp. 195-223). This corresponds with Demetrius II’s years of rivalry with Antiochus VI and his protector Diodotus Tryphon for rule over Syria. Since the pretenders to the Syrian throne each needed the support of the Judean ruler, in exchange for collaboration they all extended the scope of his authority. The result was increasing dissatisfaction among those religious groups which opposed Jonathan. At the same time, many social groups, including some priests, offered their support to Jonathan, in the hope that he would free Judea from Syrian suzerainty. Jonathan’s strong position allowed Simon to inherit power from him and maintain its scope without significant limitations.

A description and analysis of Simon’s activity as high priest is made in the ninth chapter (“The High Priesthood of Simon (143-140 B.C.E.)”, pp. 225-267). Here, Babota points out that Simon, like his predecessors, received a confirmation of his position from Demetrius II, but also based it on the foundation of social support, which gave him an entirely new form of legitimation for his and his successors’ rule.

In the final chapter (“The High Priesthood of Simon (143-140 B.C.E.)”, pp. 225-267), the author presents important observations concerning the issue of the Hasmoneans’ priestly lineage, which has been a very contentious subject among scholars. He leans towards the conclusion that the Jehoiarib family to which the Hasmoneans belonged did not have biblical descent, and was probably only added to the list of such families in the late fourth century BCE (p. 273). The author argues that the question of whether the Hasmoneans were Zadokites or Aaronides is not particularly significant for assessing the legality of their holding of the office of high priest, since after returning from Babylonia all priestly families considered themselves “sons of Aaron”. For the Hasmoneans themselves, incidentally, this lineage was of secondary importance (p. 279). It was clearly more significant for them to invoke the biblical figure of Phinehas, from the family of Aaron. They often cited him as an ideal model, as his activity offered excellent justification of both the religious and the military nature of the positions of high priest that they occupied (pp. 279-284, 291).

A summary of the analyses and proposed interpretations is offered in the succinct “Final Conclusions” (pp. 285-291). One of the author’s most important conclusions is that the position of high priest held by Jonathan and Simon should be perceived not as a traditional religious function, but more as a royal office, and this is why it should be treated as an institution. Its nature was shaped both by the constantly changing political situa-

tion in Syria and by the personal ambitions of each of the Hasmoneans. According to Babota, "(...) this study has shown that the institution of the Hasmonean high priesthood was neither a substitution for nor a continuation of the pre-Hasmonean high priesthood" (p. 287). Particularly decisive in the new character of the institution of high priest were the Hellenistic elements that were added to previous traditions (p. 289). This claim fully confirms the correctness of similar opinions expressed previously by other scholars.

There is no doubt that the author deserves recognition for his achievement in making a detailed examination of the question of the nature of the position of high priest at the time of the Hasmoneans, especially as this study was accompanied by questions that had never before been asked in this particular context. Babota's research makes the position of the Hasmoneans as high priests clearer than hitherto.

However, this recognition does not mean that the book is free of errors and deficiencies, at least some of which we should note. In the bibliography, a whole host of publications are lacking that are relevant for better understanding of some of the issues analysed by the author. Some of these are worth mentioning as examples. During the discussion of the question of Jerusalem's status of *polis* (cf. pp. 51-52, 65), it is noticeable that there is no reference to W. Ameling's article which makes conclusions different from Babota's.<sup>2</sup> Although Babota makes frequent references to the royal titles of *philo*i received by Jonathan and Simon, it is surprising that he fails to cite I. Savalli-Lestrade's fundamental work on this subject.<sup>3</sup> In the discussion on the Wicked Priest, whom Babota identifies as Jonathan, he fails to refer to M.O. Wise's important article on the historical figures mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>4</sup> I treat the claim that Judea became independent in 129 BCE (!) as a mere slip (p. 149). The same applies to the suggestion that Babylon was captured by the Parthians in 145 (p. 208, note 39). Well-dated cuneiform sources tell us that Mesopotamia did not come under their rule until July 141 BCE.<sup>5</sup> It is also hard to agree fully with the author's conclusion that the resolutions of "the great assembly" (1 Macc 14: 41-45), which took place in 140 BCE, "(...) was the expression of a compromise reached by the Hasmonean high priest with certain opposition parties against the weakening Seleucid kingship" (p. 267). Analysing them, one might gain the impression that they were more an expression of a decree of the adherents of the Hasmoneans.

To conclude, Babota's book fills a gap in the previous research on the Hasmonean era. His interpretations frequently permit us to look at well-known events from a perspective which reveals new possibilities for understanding them, which means that scholars dealing with the history of the Hasmonean era have one more reading to add to their list.

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<sup>2</sup> Jerusalem als hellenistische Polis: 2 Makk 4, 9-12 und eine neue Inschrift, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 47, 2003, 105-111.

<sup>3</sup> *Les philoi royaux dans l'Asie hellénistique*, Genève 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Dating the Teacher of Righteousness and the *floruit* of his Movement, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, 2003, pp. 53-87. This issue was also subjected to critical assessment by K. Atkinson (Representations of History in 4Q331 (4QpapHistorical Text C), 4Q332 (4QHistorical Text D), 4Q333 (4QHistorical Text E), and 4Q468e (4QHistorical Text F): An Annalistic Calendar Documenting Portentous Events?, *Dead Sea Discoveries* 14, 2007, pp. 125-151; Historical References and Allusions to Foreigners in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Seleucids, Ptolemies, Nabateans, Itureans, and Romans in the Qumran Corpus, *The Qumran Chronicle* 21, 2013, pp. 1-32).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. del Monte, *Testi dalla Babilonia Ellenistica*, vol. I, Pisa – Roma 1997, pp. 102-104.