

Combining the Offices of King and High Priest During the Hasmonean Period

Despite the fact that Aristobulus was the first to be “*King*” and High Priest,¹ it is pertinent to consider also the reins of his Hasmonean predecessors, because they too controlled the political establishment while holding the title of High Priest. Jonathan was the first to combine political and religious power,² with Syrian approval for the high priesthood.³ Jonathan’s successor, Simon, became High Priest while holding political leadership, with the high priesthood confirmed by an assembly of priests and people.⁴ Simon’s successor, Hyrcanus I, also was High Priest while political leader.⁵

One of the concerns for the Jews during this period must have been that their leaders would sacrifice religious ethics to attend to the needs of the state. Jonathan was appointed by the Syrian kingdom and was not militarily strong enough to be wholly independent.⁶ Also, because these kings were interacting with Hellenistic influences both politically and socially, they were somewhat corrupted [from the religious standpoint] by these philosophies.⁷ Furthermore, the combination of the two offices left a lack of leadership in the religious establishment to combat the effects of Hellenism in the greater population, effects which were intensified by the growing Hellenistic influence of the King/High Priest. This problem would come to its climax with Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II seeking to buy an appointment from the Roman Governor of Syria,⁸ thus selling out not only the political state but also the leadership of the religion. Hyrcanus II would end up as High Priest, appointed by Roman General Pompey, but at the cost of all political control.⁹

To have one man in the dual roles of political ruler and High Priest was seen by some of the Jewish religious leaders as being against the Law of Moses,¹⁰ which would mean the state [and religious] would be continuously in sin. Such a concentration of power also could lead to corruption, though there were some religious checks in the existence of the Sanhedrin and the rise of the Hasidaeans movements.¹¹ However, when there was ungodly behavior by the leader of the state, there consequently was a lack of leadership to stand firm in the religious establishment. The pious would seek to not follow such a person,¹² but now they were not only in rebellion against the political leadership but also of the official religious leadership. This was true when the Pharisees opposed Alexander Jannaeus [who had little regard for spiritual concerns and was oppressive¹³], and when he was victorious he continued his questionable behavior by crucifying 800 rebel leaders, most of them Pharisees.¹⁴ The last of the Hasmonians to hold both offices, Antigonus [who seized power briefly after the Romans initially took political control], gave a final example of such behavior when he cut off the ears of the existing High Priest, Hyrcanus II, so that he could not be a threat to return to the high priesthood.¹⁵

The dual roles also might have presented some perspective conflicts for the leaders holding them: when Hyrcanus I asked a group of Pharisees to point out any sins of his they might witness, one Pharisee asked

¹ Grassmick, Class Notes, 28.

² Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 55.

³ Grassmick, 26.

⁴ Grassmick, 27.

⁵ Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 93.

⁶ Barnett, 54.

⁷ Barnett, 74.

⁸ Bock, 95.

⁹ Bock, 95-96.

¹⁰ Bock, 92.

¹¹ Barnett, 49, 54.

¹² Barnett, 55.

¹³ Grassmick, 29.

¹⁴ Bock, 94.

¹⁵ Bock, 97.

about giving up the High Priest title, since they believed this combination of power to be against the Law; under influence of a Sadducee, Hyrcanus I took this as an insult to the *political* ruler of the land and – angry that in this case the Pharisees would only recommend a punishment of whipping – “renounced his association with the Pharisees and decreed that their practices should not be followed, with penalties for those who did.”¹⁶ Thus, another effect of this combination of titles was the politicization of religious affairs and the pitting of one sect against another.

However, it is worth noting that some of these problems existed before this time. For example, during the time of Persian conquest, the Jews had a great deal of local autonomy, which resulted in the High Priest becoming powerful as the only authority figure in a developing “temple state.”¹⁷ During the Seleucid rule [just prior to Hasmonean Rule], the Oniads and Tobiads entered into a bidding war for the position of High Priest, with the result that the Seleucids began appointing the High Priest,¹⁸ thus stripping the position of its autonomy. The High Priest was later appointed by Herod during his rule,¹⁹ and then still later by Rome directly.²⁰

During the Seleucid period, there was no lack of corruption in the High Priest position. The first appointed High Priest, Jason, promoted Hellenism²¹ and let the Seleucid leader into the temple.²² Antiochus IV appointed Jason and removed Onias III because Jason was willing to pay a larger bribe and was willing to use the temple treasury to pay for Hellenistic enterprises.²³ Antiochus later replaced Jason with Menelaus, who was not a descendent of Zadok [thus not fit to be High Priest], because he was even more willing to bribe and even more willing to cooperate with Antiochus IV in his efforts against the Jewish faith, discontinuing services in the temple, destroying copies of the scriptures, forbidding circumcision, and abolishing the food laws; eventually, they erected an alter to Zeus in the temple and sacrificed pigs on it.²⁴ This eventually led to the Maccabean revolt.²⁵

So while there are several reasons why it was disadvantageous to combine the kingship with the high priesthood, not all of the results were new effects attributable to the Hasmonean period.

¹⁶ Bock, 93.

¹⁷ Bock, 83.

¹⁸ Bock, 88.

¹⁹ Barnett, 75.

²⁰ Bock, 120.

²¹ Bock, 88.

²² Bock, 89.

²³ Barnett, 51.

²⁴ Barnett, 52.

²⁵ Bock, 90.