

# The Age Of The Maccabees (2)

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## CHAPTER II - THE PONTIFICATE

2. Rival Competitors for the High Priesthood—The office of high priest being thus, as we have seen, a powerful and lucrative position, became the occasion of much unseemly wrangling and conspiracy. There were two families in particular that made themselves notorious by their scramble for the coveted prize. These were the families of the Oniadae and of the Tobiadae. Each had its own party (principles and party cries. The Oniadae were of the old traditional stock that gloried in all that separated the Jews from their neighbors. The Tobiadae, again, belonged to the new Hellenising party, that were for a freer intermingling in the life of their neighbors. The one believed it best for Israel to be true to herself and tenacious of her cherished ways. The other held it injurious to the national interests to stand aloof from intercourse with the world. Both parties had, therefore, much to say for themselves. There was good on both sides so far as principles went. But neither of them had overmuch sense of honor or rectitude in their methods of work. One of the Tobiadae named Simon—himself a priest of some considerable rank — during the pontificate of Onias III, conspired against Onias to oust him from his office, and with that in view pursued certain scandalous tactics, part of which was to send secret information to King Seleucus touching a vast store of money existing in the Temple, that might be safely seized for the replenishment of the scanty royal coffers.

The king did not need to be told the news twice, but immediately dispatched a messenger, one Heliodorus, under the cover of visiting certain cities of Phoenicia, to fetch the store of treasure. Heliodorus came to Jerusalem, and was received courteously enough by the authorities of the Temple. Upon intimating the true purpose of his mission, he was at once informed that the money referred to did not belong to the priests, but to a fund for widows and orphans which had been entrusted to the custody of the Temple. Heliodorus, however, pressed his master's claims. When the citizens of Jerusalem heard of the king's demands, they rose in tumult against the audacious proposals. The priests too invoked Heaven to look down and defend the rights of the defenseless. The high priest behaved as a man distraught. Heliodorus, in spite of all, determined to force a passage into the sanctuary of God and rifle the money chests. On the day he was expected to perform this act of sacrilege and robbery, the people ran out of their houses in frantic excitement, women covered with sackcloth lined the streets, the gates and walls of the city and the windows of the houses were crowded with excited multitudes, who all cried out to heaven to avert the impending disaster. Heliodorus persisted in his resolve to lay hands on the sacred treasure.

But, according to the circumstantial and perhaps somewhat colored narrative of 2nd Maccabees, a fearful judgment descended upon him in the very act. At the moment of his wicked triumph, an apparition is said to have been seen, that caused all who beheld it to fall fainting to the ground. There appeared in the air a horse with a terrible rider, which ran fiercely at Heliodorus, and smote him with its forefeet. At the same moment, there stood by the guilty man two powerful youths, on each side one, who scourged him till he fell to the ground. Speechless he lay, and would have continued to lie, but he was restored to life and consciousness through the intercessions of Onias, who made atonement for him. The Temple treasures were thus miraculously saved at that time, and when Heliodorus returned to his master, and was asked who might be a fit man to be sent once again for the Temple treasures, Heliodorus replied to the king.

“If thou hast any enemy or traitor, send him thither, and thou shalt receive him back well scourged, if he even escape with his life: for in that place no doubt there is an especial power of God. For He that dwelleth in heaven hath His eye on that place and defendeth it, and He beateth and destroyeth them that come to hurt it” (2 Mac. iii. 37).

Let us now return to Simon, the author of this black conspiracy. When he saw that he had failed in his attempt to grasp the high priesthood for himself, he resorted to a more open course of tactics. He boldly accused Onias to the king, blaming him with working some underhand trickery, and so bringing the mission of Heliodorus to grief. Although there was not a word of truth in the charge, Onias felt bound to hasten to the court at Antioch to clear himself, feeling that he could not maintain his office as high priest under a charge of treason. It happened, however, that at this time (175 B.C.) King Seleucus died suddenly, having, as was said, had poison administered to him. The deceased king was succeeded by Antiochus IV., surnamed Epiphanes, under whom the affairs of Onias became involved in a deeper mesh of difficulties. It transpired that the new monarch refused to confirm Onias in his appointment as high priest, choosing to confer the office on Jason, an unworthy brother of Onias (Jason having, in fact, bought the appointment by a liberal bribe). Thus, the dignity of High priest, once the synonym of a holy and unworldly life, was bought and sold and plotted for by bands of scheming men. It carried with it too much wealth and power to be desired for its own sake: and the holder of it could hardly avoid falling into the snare that lies before all intriguing ambition, of fearing God too little and humoring royalty too much.

3. The Priesthood of Jason and Menetaus.— The price which Jason paid to King Antiochus Epiphanes in 'return for the appointment to the high priest's office amounted to several hundred talents of silver. By such corrupt means, he supplanted his own brother. As we shall see, he was paid back in his own coin by another supplanter later on. Apostate, as well as Simonist, Jason not only bought the high priest's office, but came to an understanding with the king to turn aside his countrymen from the strict habits of their own pure faith to the degrading pollutions of Heathenism. For this wicked conduct the chroniclers of the time can hardly find language severe enough to condemn him. They dismiss him from their narratives as a “profane and ungodly wretch and no High priest.” Dante (Inf. xix. 85) refers to the “ungodly wretch” in his Divine Comedy in scornful terms. Speaking of a certain Pope, who was a notorious Simonist, he calls him: “Another Jason he, such as we saw in Maccabees.”

To be continued.

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