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Gender, Politics and Religion in Antiquity: The Challenge of the Reign of Queen Alexandra

Abstract: The Hasmonean dynasty in Judaea (143/2–63 BC) was based upon theocratic rule – every Hasmonean king also served as the high priest. This interplay of politics and religion was challenged when for the first time a woman, queen Shelamzion Alexandra, inherited the throne upon the death of her husband, Alexander Jannaeus, in 76 BC. Such a transfer of power from a male to a female ruler ran counter tot he traditional (male) political and religious structure in Judaea since, according tot he Bible, the priesthood was limited to males (Numbers 8:19). Queen Alexandra's ascent to the throne therefore created a new political situation in Judaea – the separation of religious and political authority.

A variety of sources – including the writings of Josephus, Qumran documents, rabbinic literature, and Hellenistic historiographic texts – may provide an answer the intriguing question of how queen Alexandra managed to reign independently and successfully for nine years in a patriarchal society, despite the limitations imposed upon her by religious law.

Keywords: Hasmoneans, Alexandra, rabbinic literature, Judaea, Hellenistic queens

The interaction of religion and politics has characterized ancient Israel from its inception as a political entity in the 11th century BC until the end of its political structure in 70 AD.[1] Interaction between these two realms often involved hostility. In fact, a major clash involving religion and politics in Judaea occurred in 167 BC. In reaction to the prohibition of the Temple cult, the Hasmonean family led a revolt of the Jewish people against the Seleucid ruler of Judaea, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in order to achieve freedom of religion and the restoration of Mosaic law. In 164 BC the Hasmoneans succeeded in liberating Jerusalem and the Temple. This religious struggle evolved into a war for political independence. The revolt continued until 143/2 BC when Simon the

1 Starting with the biblical story of the anointment of the first king, Saul (usually dated c. 11th c. BC) by the prophet Samuel (I Sam 10:1), the political-religious interplay was between kings and prophets. On the historicity of the biblical story of the Saul dynasty and its time period, see Finkelstein 2006, 171–188. For a general classical study on this topic, see Frankfort 1948. For more contemporary studies, see Talmon 1986; Belnkinsopp 1996. This interplay changed in the middle of the fifth century BC with the end of the age of prophecy. Thereafter the high priest replaced the prophet and he then played a central religious and political role. For an overview of the postbiblical period, see Bickerman 1970.

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Hasmonean achieved independence from the Seleucids and became the first ruler/ethnarch and simultaneously the high priest of the Hasmonean dynasty.

The Hasmonean dynasty in Judaea (143/2–63 BC) was based upon theocratic rule – every Hasmonean king also served as the high priest. Following three more male rulers of the Hasmonean dynasty after Simon, who also functioned both as the ruler/king and high priest, queen Shelamzion Alexandra[2] inherited the throne upon the death of her husband, king Alexander Jannaeus in 76 BC. She ruled for nine years, ushering in a period of peace and prosperity, until her peaceful death at the age of 73.[3]

Queen Shelamzion Alexandra's reign represents a major turning point in Jewish history. It marks the final stage of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel in ancient times – following her death, the Hasmonean kingdom started to disintegrate in the wake of a war of succession between her sons, causing the conquest of Judaea by the Roman Republic in 63 BC. It is also the only successful case of a woman succeeding to the throne in Jewish society in antiquity. Most important for our topic, the ascent of queen Shelamzion Alexandra to the throne challenged the previous interplay of politics and religion. Such a transfer of power from a male to a female ruler ran counter to the traditional (male) political and religious structure in Judaea since the priesthood was given only to males through inheritance as it is written.

> And I have given the Levites–they are given to Aaron and to his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the service of the children of Israel [. . .].[4]

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2 She is also known as Salome Alexandra. Josephus only uses her Greek name, Alexandra, in Jos. b. Iud. 1 and Jos. ant. 13 but her Hebrew name remained a mystery until modern times. Over one hundred years ago, Clermont-Ganneau deduced (correctly) that the queen's original Hebrew name was, in fact, Shelamzion, (שְׁלַמְצִיּוֹן) see Clermont-Ganneau 1899, 385–392. Gustaf Dalman notes that Shelamzion is an Aramaic name meaning "the salvation of Zion," see Dalman 1929, 14. About fifty years after Clermont-Ganneau, Joseph Klausner claimed that Alexandra's Hebrew name was Shelomziyyon / שְׁלוֹמְצִיּוֹן – the name by which she is popularly known today, see Klausner 1972, 242. Yet in 1993, Tal Ilan challenged this assumption, positing that Alexandra's Hebrew name was Salamzion. In light of Qumran discoveries, Ilan later modified the spelling of the queen's name to Shelamzion (שְׁלַמְצִיּוֹן) and this has been accepted by scholars as her correct Hebrew/Aramaic name. See Ilan, 1993; Ilan 2000, 872–874.

3 The main sources for most of our knowledge of queen Alexandra are Flavius Jos. b. Iud.1.107–119 and Jos. ant. 13.403–432, along with Qumran Calendrical documents 4Q331 and 4Q322. For recent studies on queen Alexandra, see Liebowitz 2018a; Liebowitz 2018b, 41–65; Liebowitz 2015; Liebowitz 2013; Liebowitz 2012; Ilan 2006; Ilan 1999, 127–153; Ilan 1993, 181–190; Ilan 1996, 221–262; Knauf 2009; Lambers-Petry 2002, 65–77; Patterson 2002; Baltrusch 2001, 163–179; Stern 1999; Wise 1994, 186–221; Mason 1991, 82–115; Sievers 1989, 132–46. The fact that a popular book was recently published on queen Alexandra attests to her growing popularity, see Atkinson 2012.

4 Numbers 8:19. Interestingly, the opposition to a woman fulfilling sacral and monarchic positions continued throughout the centuries. An early modern example is the reign of Elizabeth I who "fulfilled the sacral role of monarchy and functioned as the Governor of the Church, despite Archbishop Heath's assertion in the 1559 Parliament that 'Her Highnes, being a woman by birthe and nature, is

Hence, since queen Alexandra was prohibited from serving as the high priest, her reign created a new political situation in Judaea – the separation of religious and political authority. This paper will address the conundrum: how was a woman able to achieve legitimacy as a political leader if she was not permitted to serve as the high priest? Moreover, how did queen Alexandra manage to reign independently and successfully for nine years in a patriarchal society, despite the limitations imposed upon her by religious law?

First of all, one explanation for queen Alexandra's success in ruling the country was her piety and consequent ability to gain support for her rule, as written in Flavius Josephus' *Judean War*:

> And he [Alexander] left the kingdom to his wife Alexandra, convinced the Judaeans would most of all listen to her, since her utmost lack of savagery and **her opposition to transgressions of the law** brought the people to bear good-will towards her.[5]

In other words, queen Alexandra's commitment to Mosaic law, expressed by her opposition to transgressions of that law, engendered popular support for her rule. In the next passage, Josephus emphasizes her piety and writes:

> And he was not wrong in these expectations, for this woman took over the kingdom on account of **her reputation for piety** (δόξαν εὐσεβείας). For she was indeed **very strict about her people's ancestral laws** (customs), and the offenders of the divine laws she used to throw out of office.[6]

Indeed, Josephus scholar Steve Mason concludes that queen Alexandra "came to power easily because of a (well-founded) reputation for piety."[7]

Now we come to another interrelated factor: the *Weltanschauung* of both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures towards women and authority and the interplay between the two. The interweaving of politics and religion in antiquity was not unique to the monarchy in Judaea, in fact, it was also a common feature of the surrounding cultures. For example, the Hellenistic monarchic tradition maintained that a king should be pious towards the gods even if he was also worshipped as a god.[8] Likewise, Macedonian royal women, who at times reigned as queens, were often viewed as goddesses.

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not qualified by God's words to feede the flocke of Christe.' Whereas the Roman Catholic Archbishop of York had no difficulty in recognizing a woman as a legitimate secular ruler, he used Elizabeth's gender as an argument against her assuming the Supreme Headship of the Church, since women could not act as priests." See Doran 2018, 42. Therefore Elizabeth was titled "Supreme Governor" and not "Head" of the Church (Doran 2018, 44).

5 Jos. b. Iud. 1.107.

6 My translation of Jos. b. Iud. 1.108. All subsequent translations of Josephus are my own unless otherwise stated.

7 Mason 1991, 109–110.

8 Roy 1988, 111.

One of the most well-known Macedonian queens, Arsinoë II (ca. 316-270/268 BC), received the title of θεοὶ ἀδελφοί (Divine Siblings) together with her co-ruler and husband-brother Ptolemy II.[9] A gold coin portrays Arsinoë II as a Greek goddess. This identification is based upon the style of her headdress – she wears a diadem and veil which symbolized divinity. On the obverse side there is a double cornucopia bound with a royal diadem symbolizing Ptolemaic and Egyptian concepts of kingship as the source of bounty, fertility and renewal.[10] An image of the royal couple Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II, engraved on the Mendes Stele, emphasizes the divinity of Arsinoë by identifying her with the goddess Isis.[11] Cleopatra I was given divine royal titles such as *Eucharistos* (beneficent god) and *Theos Epiphanes* (god made manifest).[12] Cleopatra III, who reigned from 116–101 BC, obtained the position of priest in the royal cult in 105 BC, which was usually only held by a king.[13] Postdating queen Alexandra, Cleopatra VII, the last (and independent) queen of the Ptolemaic dynasty, who succeeded her father in 51 BC, was identified with the goddess Isis.[14]

We can therefore establish that Ptolemaic rulers, both male and female, were almost always associated with divinity and with the religious cult. Sarah Pomeroy notes that "religion was the only state-supported activity that reserved an official place for women" (as priestesses) and that it "was an area of particular interest to women."[15] The latter was also true for many aristocratic Jewish women who felt an intense attachment to religion.[16]

Jewish law could not allow Alexandra to be a deity, as was the case with Hellenistic queens such as Arsinoë II, or a priestess, as was the case with aristocratic Hellenis-

9 They reigned together from 275–270 BC. See Carney 1995, 367–391.

10 Thus, this coin indicates both Arsinoë's religious and political authority. For a description of the coin and its provenance, see Lorber 2010, 45.

11 See Quaegebeur 1969, 206.

12 These titles were granted even before the death of her husband, Ptolemy V: Whitehorne 2001, 85.

13 See Macurdy 1932, 161–170; Pomeroy 1984, 24; Whitehorne 2001, 121–131; 132–148.

14 Though dated, Macurdy's analysis of Cleopatra VII still remains relevant in its insightful analysis of her reign and the double standard through which historians have judged her, see Macurdy 1932, 184–223. See also Pomeroy 1984, 24–28. The tradition of Ptolemaic widowed queens ruling until minor sons came of age goes back to Pharaonic times when Hatshepsut, the widowed queen of the pharaoh Thutmose II, was made regent after his death in c. 1479 BC. Although she was supposed to only rule for her stepson, Thutmose III until he came of age, Hatshepsut took on the role of king as the sixth pharaoh of the 18th dynasty even before she was crowned as the king, and did not step down after her co-regent came of age. See Roehrig et al. 2005, esp. 12–14. Other later examples of queens inheriting the throne include: the (unnamed) widow of Mithridates Eupator who received the throne together with her son following Mithridates V's assassination circa 120 BC (Jacoby 1950, no. 494, 351); Cleopatra III who inherited the throne from Ptolemy VIII in 116 BC (see Iust, 39.3.1).

15 Pomeroy 1984, 59.

16 See Ilan 1999, 11–42.

tic women.[17] Nevertheless, devoutness was certainly viewed as the proper virtue for a Jewish queen[18] and Alexandra did, in fact, display great piety. This enabled her to achieve the support of certain factions, in particular, the Pharisees, whom we will now discuss.

First of all, who were the Pharisees? The identity of the group termed 'Pharisees' has been a topic of fervent scholarly debate and the answers range from a small religious sect, to an influential political party and to a mass movement. Based upon the Josephan passages connected to queen Alexandra, Morton Smith maintains that the Pharisees were merely a small inconsequential sect up until 70 AD.[19] This study launched a discussion on this issue. Subsequently, other scholars either supported or contested this theory. Daniel Schwartz posits that Josephus' earlier work, *War*, reflects an attempt to show that the Pharisees were only an innocuous religious group and uninvolved in politics.[20] Steve Mason views them as a devious group.[21] Martin Goodman asserts that the Pharisees' "endorsement of ancestral tradition gave them great popularity."[22] Jacob Neusner views the Pharisees as only one of many political parties during the Hasmonean era (a party of "philosophical politicians").[23] Be that as it may, a comprehensive examination of the Pharisees is beyond the scope of this article and our discussion of the Pharisees in connection to queen Alexandra.

Why did queen Alexandra support the Pharisees and vice versa? Tal Ilan points out that, in particular, aristocratic women were attracted to Pharisaism.[24] This may provide one explanation.

17 Similarly, Jewish male kings were not deified in Judaism due to its monotheistic structure.

18 Josephus also describes queen Esther as pious, see Liebowitz 2012, 4–5.

19 See Smith 1956, 67–81. On Josephus' opinion of the Pharisees, see Ilan 1996, 221–262.

20 Schwartz 1983, 169.

21 Mason 1991.

22 Goodman 1999, 20.

23 Neusner 2003, 45–66.

24 See Ilan 1999,11–42. Based on a rabbinic story in *bBerakhot* 48a, several 19th century scholars believed that the Pharisaic sage Shimeon ben Shetah and queen Alexandra were siblings (see Derenbourg 1867, 96; Derenbourg 1891, 48). Nevertheless, modern historians cast doubts upon a family connection between Alexandra and ben Shetah. Joshua Ephron believes that this mistaken relationship was due to a scribal error, see Ephron 1970, 74 (in Hebrew). Shmuel Safrai points out that only the Babylonian Talmud makes Alexandra and ben Shetah sister and brother due to its tendency "of connecting prominent historical personalities by family ties, see Safrai 1971, 229. Likewise Isaiah Gafni notes that later Babylonian sources created a family connection between the two, see Gafni 1995, 261–276 (in Hebrew). Perhaps Alexandra's affinity for Pharisaism, as Tal Ilan has noted, is why rabbinic literature linked these two figures. In any case, although Shimeon ben Shetah is frequently mentioned in rabbinic sources Josephus does not mention him even once hence we have no historical source for any connection between the two, see Cohen 1986, 7. For one of the most recent studies on Josephus and rabbinic literature, see Ilan/Noam 2017 (in Hebrew).

The account of queen Alexandra's ascent to the throne in Josephus' *Judean Antiquities* may provide another explanation. Josephus relates that upon his deathbed, king Alexander Jannaeus provided his wife, Alexandra, with the following political guidance.

> Then, she should go as from a brilliant victory to Jerusalem, support the Pharisees, [and] grant them some power, for they, by giving her approval in exchange for these honours, would render the people well-disposed to her, and he said, these [Pharisees] have much power among the Judaeans – both hurting those that they hate while helping those with whom they are friendly. For they are highly trusted by the people, even when they speak harshly of someone due to envy, and he himself had come into conflict with the people due to these [Pharisees] [. . .].[25]

Alexandra accepted her husband's advice and delegated religious authority to the Pharisees:

> So, after Alexandra had taken the citadel, she talked with the Pharisees as her husband had counselled, and offered them all matters connected to his corpse and the kingdom, and their wrath against Alexander ceased, and she made them well-disposed and friendly.[26]

Subsequently, Alexandra placates the Pharisees even further by reinstating previous cultic laws promulgated by the Pharisees which had been rescinded:

> Thus, even any minor regulation which had been introduced by the Pharisees and revoked by her father-in-law Hyrcanus, even that she once again restored.[27]

The above description of king Alexander's deathbed bequest in Josephus' *Antiquities* shows that the Pharisees did indeed possess much political power and were a force to be reckoned with.

Why then was there a fierce enmity between king Alexander and the Pharisees, as expressed in Josephus' statement that "he himself had come into conflict with the people due to these [Pharisees] [. . .]?"[28]

Pharisaic opposition to the Hasmoneans in general, and to king Alexander Jannaeus in particular, was due to the fact that they "held it was not legitimate to join priesthood and monarchy."[29] In fact, the Pharisees rebelled against king Alexander and, at the end of the rebellion, circa 88 BC, king Alexander punished the Pharisees by cruelly crucifying eight hundred of them while they watched the execution of their wives and children.[30]

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25 Jos. ant. 13.401–402. For an up to date study on Jannaeus' deathbed bequest in Josephus and rabbinic literature, see Ilan/Noam 2017, 308–317.

26 Jos. ant. 13.405.

27 Jos. ant. 13.408.

28 Jos. ant. 13.402.

29 See Schwartz 1992, 53. For an analysis of the accounts in Josephus and rabbinic literature concerning Pharisaic opposition to a king who is also a high priest, see Ilan/Noam 2017, 255–285.

30 As related in Jos. ant. 13.380–383; Jos. b. Iud. 1.97. This killing is referred to later in Jos. b. Iud. 1.113: "Thus they themselves [the Pharisees] slew a certain Diogenes, a notable person, a friend of Alexan-

Nevertheless, upon his deathbed, king Alexander realized that the Pharisees were too powerful a group to fight against and advised his wife, queen Alexandra, to make peace with them, which she did. Moreover, as Josephus also reports, she also reintroduced Pharisaic laws, gaining even more support from the Pharisees and cultivating an excellent relationship with them. This liaison between the Pharisees and Alexandra can be attributed, among other factors, to her gender. As a woman, queen Alexandra could not serve as a high priest; hence she decided to focus upon the secular political arena, in particular foreign affairs, while delegating religious authority, the priesthood, to her eldest son Hyrcanus II. Nevertheless, it appears that, according to Josephus, Hyrcanus II was more of a figurehead and the real power behind the throne in religious matters was held by the Pharisees.

This division of religious and political power helped queen Alexandra gain the support of the Pharisees. In fact, the Pharisees' support gave an aura of religious legitimacy to her reign.[31] In other words, cordial relations between the Pharisees and Alexandra were in the interests of both parties – Alexandra required the Pharisees' backing in order to acquire legitimacy for her reign, and the Pharisees endorsed Alexandra in order to gain control of religious affairs.[32]

Still, if the Pharisees mainly opposed the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus, another group opposed all Hasmonean rulers, including queen Alexandra. Dead Sea Scroll documents reveal the opposition of the Qumran sect to the Hasmoneans as well as the Pharisees. We can observe this hostility, or even hatred, of both the Pharisees and Hasmoneans in the Qumran text of *Pesher Nahum* (4Q169), which connects verses in the biblical book of Nahum with historical events from the first century BC.[33] The *Pesher* first quotes a verse from Nahum and then gives the contemporary interpretation or *pesher* of the verse. This text has been dated from the end of the Hasmonean to the beginning of the Herodian period[34] and, it is presumed to describe the reigns of Alexander Jannaeus and Alexandra.[35]

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der, having charged him with being an advisor concerning the 800 (men) who had been crucified by the king. They urged Alexandra to destroy the others too who had incited Alexander against them; and she yielded, being superstitious, and they killed whomever they wished." Josephus' account is confirmed by Pesher Nahum (See Allegro/Anderson 1968). Based on these two accounts, Josephus and Pesher Nahum, we know that the Pharisees were said to have invited Demetrius III to attack Jerusalem and defeat their enemy. When this plan failed, king Alexander crucified 800 Pharisees for encouraging this attack, and to make their punishment even crueller, he made them watch the massacre of their wives and children while being crucified (See Vermes 2013; see also Vanderkam/Flint 2005, 279).

31 See Goodblatt 1994, 26.

32 For a discussion of the initial rift between the Pharisees and the Hasmoneans, see Schalit 1983, 182–186 (in Hebrew).

33 See Berrin 2004, 1–10.

34 Strugnell 1970, 205.

35 Strugnell 1970, 196.

Let us examine some lines of *Pesher Nahum* in Shani Berrin Tzoref's translation of the text:

> **4** 'and flash of spear! And a multitude of slain and a mass of corpses! And there is no end of (dead) bodi(es) and they will stumble over their bodies' (Nahum 3:3). Its pesher: concerning the **domain** [rule – E.L.] **of the Seekers-after-Smooth Things** [my emphasis].[36]

The pesher or interpretation of Nahum 3:3, referring to the "rule of the seekers after smooth things" coincides with Josephus' description of queen Alexandra delegating political authority to the Pharisees in Jos. b. Iud. 1.112 and Jos. ant. 13.408–410, which we have already mentioned.[37] This is based upon an identification of the Pharisees as דורשי החלקות -Seekers-after-Smooth-Things.[38] Scholars therefore believe that this line refers to the reign of queen Alexandra.[39]

The continuation of the *Pesher*, which describes "captivity, plunder, *and corpses*" apparently refers to the Pharisees' persecution of their opponents during queen Alexandra's reign.[40] This could parallel Josephus' description of the Pharisees killing Diogenes as well as the others who had incited Alexander against them in Jos. b. Iud. 1.113 and Jos. ant. 13.411.

Now let us move on to parts of the Pesher that yield a gender bias. The citation from Nahum 3:4 in line 7 of *Pesher Nahum* refers to Nineveh's might in terms of its seductive powers:

> Because of the many harlotries of the harlot, charmingly pleasing, and mistress of sorceries, who betrays nations through her harlotries and families through her sor[ce]ries.[41]

Who (or what) is the subject of this allegory? The harlot (זונה) is most probably someone (or a group) that the Qumranites despised since the enemies of the Qumran community are often accused of 'fornication'.[42] Due to the subsequent interpretation of this verse (line 8):

> Its pesher: concer[ning] the misleaders of Ephraim, who mislead many by their false teaching, and their lying tongue and their wily lip

36 Berrin 2004, 196.

37 See Amussine 1963, 392.

38 Berrin 2004, 91–99; Amusin 1977, 135, 143; Flusser 2007, 218–220. Anthony Salderini was one of the few who disputed this identification (see Salderini 2001, 277–297) but James Vanderkam refutes Salderini's argument, see Vanderkam 2004, 299–311.

39 Flusser 2007, 220; Amusin 1977, 143; Ilan 2001, 58–59.

40 Berrin 2004, 196. Flusser notes that "the dark description of the 'rule of those looking for smooth interpretations' is not substantially different from Josephus' description of that period." (Flusser 2007, 220).

41 Berrin 2004, 196.

42 Berrin 2004, 245.

most scholars have interpreted this phrase as referring to the Pharisees. In particular, Shanni Berrin Tzoref defines Ephraim as both the Pharisaic leadership and those Jews who supported the Pharisees.[43] In opposition to the scholarly consensus, Tal Ilan offers an innovative proposal. She argues that the negative female imagery of a 'harlot' alludes to a woman in power, queen Shelamzion Alexandra. This hypothesis is based upon the verse's position in the text, immediately after the passage describing the rule of the Pharisees. Ilan points out that "just as the sect disliked the Pharisees, it similarly disliked the new Hasmonean ruler" since "all Hasmoneans were bad."[44] Likewise, the term '*sorceries*' *(*כשפי*)* in line 7, which is often coupled with sexual offences (זנונים) in biblical and apocryphal literature,[45] can also be connected to queen Alexandra. Ilan notes that the text in the Jerusalem Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin[46] referring to the hanging of eighty witches by Shimon ben Shetah has some historical basis.[47] In fact, Ilan believes that due to her opposition to witchcraft, queen Alexandra was instrumental in executing the accused witches.[48] Yet the Qumranites held the opposite view – in this text they connect queen Alexandra's reign with witchcraft! Finally, line 9 refers to

> kings, princes, priests and populace together with the resident alien. Cities and clans will perish through their counsel [. . .].

The word 'kings' (מלכים) would also include queen Alexandra as well as other Hasmonean monarchs.[49]

Although *Pesher Nahum* does not add concrete historical data it does provide us with "tools for reconstructing the *Weltanschauung* of ancient Judaism."[50] The above analysis strongly indicates that *Pesher Nahum* alludes to queen Alexandra. The passages convey a hostile image of both queen Alexandra and the Pharisees whom she

43 Berrin 2004, 199.

44 Ilan 2001, 60. Schuller and Wassen note that "the type of abstract misogynous statements found in Josephus and Philo about the 'nature' of women [. . .] finds little parallel in the scrolls" (Schiffman/Vanderkam 2000, 2, s.v. "Women," 981).

45 Mal 3:5, II Kings 9:22, the Book of Watchers in Enoch 7. See Berrin 2004, 246.

46 YSan 6:8, based on MSan 6:4.

47 Ilan 2006, 241, 214–241. Ilan's claim of the historicity of this event is based upon the contradiction of the *halakhah* in the Mishnah (one does not hang two people in a single day), which the rabbis did not deny, the numerous rabbinic accusations against women of practicing magic, the biblical injunction to kill witches, and the story's similarity to other witch-hunts in history. Klausner, Schürer and many others do not accept this story as historically true, see Klausner 1972, 249; Schürer 1973, 310.

48 Ilan 2006, 223.

49 Berrin 2004, 253, however, believes that this line lists Pharisaic supporters. Still this would not exclude queen Alexandra, for she was indeed a Pharisaic supporter. Schiffman's interpretation is that the Pharisaic leadership had "led others astray with false interpretations" (Schiffman 2000, 282). In such a case, it would also include queen Alexandra as a Pharisaic supporter and one who followed their practices.

50 Schiffman 2000, 306.

supported, embodied in metaphors of sexual promiscuity. Thus, the Qumranites opposed both the secular political authority as well as the religious leaders of Judaea, which is not surprising since they viewed everyone outside of the sect as impure and corrupt.

Let us now return to queen Alexandra's son, Hyrcanus II. As mentioned above, queen Alexandra could not serve as a high priest yet the tradition of the Hasmonean dynasty was that the high priesthood and kingship were always united. Moreover, according to the custom of primogeniture in antiquity, the first-born son would usually inherit the throne. So here we have a clash of values – usually the first-born son, in this case Hyrcanus II, would inherit the throne and become high priest. Nevertheless, queen Alexandra's husband bequeathed her the throne. So, as a consolation prize, queen Alexandra appointed Hyrcanus as the high priest:

> [. . .] the elder, Hyrcanus she appointed high priest because of both his suitable age (ἡλικίαν) and moreover because of his being too lazy/stupid (νωθέστερν) to be troubled about all things (connected to the state), while the younger, Aristobulus, due to his passion she kept under [her] control as a private person.[51]

The fact that Josephus uses the term ἡλικίαν, defined as "to be of fit age for doing,"[52] demonstrates that Hyrcanus, as the first-born, was the correct son to appoint as high priest, and he would have been the king if not for Alexander Jannaeus' bequest. The description of Hyrcanus' personality indicates that he posed no danger to Alexandra since he was νωθέστερον – either lazy or stupid.[53] Aristobulus, on the other hand, was not entitled to be the king or high priest but he was viewed as a threat to Alexandra's reign, and his actions later on proved this. His depiction as a θερμότητα, a metaphor for heat or passion, which is rarely used by Josephus, immediately calls attention to the threat of this "hothead."[54] Consequently, Alexandra's actions – solidifying her rule as the sole monarch and eliminating any threat from her sons – ensured her country's stability. In Antiquity, challenges to royal power would often lead to chaos. That is exactly what happened later on – when the struggle for the throne between queen Alexandra's sons led to the collapse of the Hasmonean state in 63 BC.[55]

To conclude, one would suppose that the constraints of a patriarchal religion, such as that of ancient Judaism, would preclude a woman obtaining supreme political power. Yet in the case of queen Alexandra, by separating political and religious authority, she circumvented cultic restrictions owing to her gender. She placed a figure-

51 Jos. b. Iud. 1.109. See also Jos. ant. 13.408, 20.242.

52 Liddell, 1945, s.v. ἡλικία, def. 2, 350.

53 Liddell, 1945, s.v. νωθής def. 1 and 2, 537–538. D. Schwartz however believes that that this is not a historical description but a rhetorical one invented by Nicolaus of Damascus, so as to justify Herod's assent to the throne. See Schwartz 1994, 210–232.

54 θερμότητα only occurs two other times in Jos. b. Iud. 1.117 (where it also describes Aristobulus' temperament) and in Jos. ant. 2.316 (which details how the unleavened bread was heated).

55 Jos. ant. 14.77.

head as the high priest while obtaining cooperation and support from a powerful religious group, the Pharisees. She wisely used her devoutness in order to achieve popular support by the people. Despite the cultural milieu of female Hellenistic rulers, queen Alexandra's rule was unprecedented – she was the only woman in her era who ruled as an independent queen while she had two adult sons.[56] The one group that opposed her reign, the Qumran sect, did so because they opposed all Hasmonean rulers in general, whom they regarded as illegitimate and immoral, along with queen Alexandra's allies, the Pharisees. Nevertheless, the Qumran sect was a small and insignificant group living in the desert, far away from the capital city of Jerusalem, and hence we can assume that their opinion had little effect upon Alexandra's reign.[57]

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56 For an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, see Liebowitz 2018a.

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