

The Origins and Objectives of Onias' Temple

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Some time in the mid-2nd century B.C.E., Jewish leaders in exile from Palestine installed a new temple in Egypt. The decision derived from high authority. Onias, heir to the venerable Zadokite clan of High Priests in Jerusalem, founded the shrine himself, with the sanction of the Ptolemaic king of Egypt. The structure rose in the Heliopolite nome, not far from Memphis, at a site referred to as Leontopolis. As a center for Jewish worship, the temple stood for well over two centuries until its destruction at Roman hands after the Great Revolt. Abolition of the site, however, did not eradicate its memory. Rabbinic sources still preserve echoes of the temple of Onias.

A question arises immediately. The strong Biblical pronouncement about worship of the Lord at a single site and the prohibition of ritual ceremonies elsewhere would seem to deny legitimacy to religious centers outside the Temple in Jerusalem.¹ On the face of it, Onias' house of worship was schismatic, a breakaway cult, and a challenge to the authorities in Palestine.² The mid-2nd century certainly constituted a turbulent time for Judaism in the homeland. The persecutions unleashed by Antiochus IV had sullied the Temple, terrorized the populace, and created or exacerbated divisions among Jewish factions and sects. The office of High Priest had been compromised more than once, some of its occupants of dubious lineage and loyalty. The Maccabean rebellion, while successful in restoring the Temple, opened additional rifts within Judaeen politics and society. And the Hasmonaean regime that followed in its wake generated challenges to its own authority by conducting a complex policy that veered between the autonomy of the Temple and collaboration with Hellenistic princes and pretenders. How then does one interpret the meaning of Leontopolis? Did Onias' religious center represent an alternative to Jerusalem, a refuge for Palestinian Jews disenchanted with or in flight from the turmoil at home, the creation of a new temple uncontaminated by political compromise and the questionable credentials of the Jerusalem leadership?

Such is the interpretation applied by Josephus, the principal and almost sole substantive source on the events underlying the genesis of the new shrine. But

¹ Deut. 12.4-18.

² So, e.g., U. Kahrstedt, *Syrische Territorien in hellenistischer Zeit* (Berlin, 1926), 132-145; E. Cavaignac, *RHR*, 130 (1945), 49; A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom* (Cambridge, 1975), 118.

the evidence conveyed by Josephus, unfortunately, is confused and inconsistent, a major muddle even for that historian. Any conclusions, however tentative, must rest on careful and critical evaluation of his text.

The subject of Leontopolis surfaces in Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum*. Indeed it neatly frames the entire work. The historian brings it up right at the outset of his narrative. He sets Antiochus IV Epiphanes' assault on Judaea in the context of quarrels amidst the Jewish leadership. Onias, a High Priest, gained the upper hand over his rivals, who then took refuge with the Seleucid king. They in turn encouraged Antiochus in his attack on Jerusalem and on the Jewish sympathizers with his enemy Ptolemy VI Philometor of Egypt. Onias consequently fled to Egypt under the protection of Ptolemy, and from him gained permission to construct a temple in the Heliopolite nome similar to that in Jerusalem.³ Josephus then drops the subject, promising to return to it later. He keeps that promise only at the very end of his work. After narrating the fall of Masada, Josephus turns to a final uprising by Jewish survivors of the Great Revolt who had managed to escape to Egypt. The result was an imperial order to destroy the sanctuary of Onias. This gave Josephus the occasion to revert to the origins of that house of worship. Onias son of Simon, he asserts, a High Priest in Jerusalem, fled his native land as consequence of Antiochus' invasion, gained refuge in Alexandria, and, upon promise to Ptolemy that he would swing all Jewish support to him, received permission to build a temple in the nome of Heliopolis. He went on to erect an impressive edifice, more like a tower than its counterpart in Jerusalem, and received from the king an extensive area of land whose income could support the temple and its priesthood. Josephus proceeds to append his own explanation of Onias' motives. They were not altogether respectable: Onias sought to win an advantage over the Jews in Jerusalem whom he blamed for his exile and hoped to draw a substantial number away to his own temple; moreover, he claimed to be fulfilling a prophecy made by Isaiah that a sanctuary would be raised in Egypt by a Jew.⁴

A fundamental difficulty stands in the way of Josephus' account. By identifying Onias as son of Simon, he apparently refers to Onias III, High Priest and successor to Simon the Just who held office in the first part of the 2nd century.⁵ But Onias III had a very different fate in the narrative of our earliest source, II Maccabees. The author of that work has Onias deposed from office by his

³ Jos. *BJ* 1.31-33.

⁴ Jos. *BJ* 7.421-432. F. Parente, in F. Parente and J. Sievers, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Honor of Morton Smith* (Leiden, 1994), 75-76, oddly contrasts this negative portrayal of Onias with the allegedly positive one in Jos. *Ant.* 1.31-33. But there is nothing particularly positive in the latter; see 1.31: ἡ φιλοτιμία δ' ἦν αὐτοῖς περὶ δυναστείας. ἐκάστου τῶν ἐν ἀξιώματι μὴ φέροντος τοῖς ὁμοίοις ὑποτετάχθαι.

⁵ Cf. Jos. *Ant.* 12.224.

brother Jason ca. 175 B.C.E., and, three years or more later, when Menelaus had usurped the High Priesthood, Onias was slain in Daphne by Andronicus, an official of the Seleucid king, on the initiative of Menelaus.⁶ What reason then is there to value Josephus' version over that of II Maccabees?

Some scholars have found reasons. The tale in II Maccabees contains questionable elements. Onias, according to the narrative, sought asylum at Daphne, presumably in a pagan temple — not the most likely sanctuary for a Jewish High Priest. He was then treacherously lured out of the shrine and murdered by Andronicus.⁷ But Andronicus, so independent testimony informs us, was the assassin of Antiochus IV's nephew and potential rival.⁸ Hence, it has been argued, the story is sheer fabrication, a romantic tale designed to provide a dramatic demise for Onias. The wicked Andronicus could serve as suitable villain for this invention, although his real victim was an altogether different person. Other texts have also been brought into the reckoning. The 5th-century scholar Theodore of Mopsuestia follows the account in II Maccabees through Jason's accession to power and his Hellenic reforms, but then has Onias III, disgusted with these developments, depart for Egypt and erect his temple.⁹ Rabbinic evidence too would seem to lend support. The "House of Onias" appears in both Talmuds, on each occasion with Onias labelled as son of "Simon the Just."¹⁰ This assemblage of texts and arguments has led a number of scholars to prefer Josephus' account in *Bellum Judaicum* to II Maccabees: Onias III did not perish at the hands of an assassin, but survived to found the temple at Leontopolis.¹¹

The case, however, is weak and unconvincing as most investigators have long since realized. The author of II Maccabees stood much closer to the events, his text composed probably within two generations of Onias III's death — or indeed rather less if Onias actually survived to establish the Heliopolitan temple

⁶ II Macc. 4.4-7, 4.31-34. A slightly different dating in J.G. Bunge, *JSJ*, 6 (1975), 4-5.

⁷ II Macc. 4.33-34.

⁸ Diod. 30.7.2-3; John of Antioch, fr. 58.

⁹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in Ps. 54*, edited by R. Devreesse in *Studi e testi*, 93 (1939), 351-3.

¹⁰ Menahot, 109b; y. Yoma, 6.3.

¹¹ S.A. Hirsch, *Jews' College Jubilee Volume* (London, 1906), 52-77, makes a case for Talmudic confirmation of the *BJ* account, but he ignores the evidence of II Maccabees altogether. Efforts to discredit II Maccabees occur periodically: A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire des Séleucides, 323-64 av. Chr.* (Paris, 1913), I, 250-1; A. Momigliano, *Prime linee di storia della tradizione maccabaica* (Rome, 1930), 38-9; I.L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah* (Leiden, 1948), 91-4. O. Murray, *JTS*, 18 (1967), 364-6; V. Keil, *ZAW*, 97 (1985), 222-6. The most recent and fullest treatment can be found in Parente, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 69-98.

several years later.¹² Dubious elements do indeed occur in the narrative, most notably Antiochus IV's public weeping at the death of a Jewish High Priest and the fervor with which he carried out the execution of Andronicus.¹³ But embellishments do not discredit the kernel of the tale. Much more striking is the fact that II Maccabees describes the death of Onias quite briefly, in sober and restrained fashion.¹⁴ The author does not provide the drama of a martyr tale that we might expect — and that exists elsewhere in his text.¹⁵ If he simply invented a fable here, he missed a good bet. Andronicus, to be sure, had another dastardly deed to his discredit. Yet he could well have been the agent in both assassinations. The slaying of Onias provided the king with a convenient pretext to eliminate the man who had done his dirty work.¹⁶ Theodore of Mopsuestia adds little weight to the argument. He appears simply to have conflated the version found in Josephus with the narrative of II Maccabees. That hardly counts as independent confirmation of Josephus.¹⁷ As for the rabbis, they had no access to historical records and no interest in historical research. That they adopted a modified

¹² A massive bibliography exists on the date of II Maccabees. Important titles collected in E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, III.1 (rev. ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman, Edinburgh, 1986), 536-7. See further the sensible and sober remarks of B. Bar-Kochva, *Judas Maccabaeus* (Cambridge, 1989), 182-5; J. Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and their Supporters* (Atlanta, 1990), 4-7.

¹³ II Macc. 4.37-38.

¹⁴ II Macc. 4.34.

¹⁵ Cf. II Macc. 6.18-7.41. That the High Priest might seek refuge in a pagan temple at a time of emergency should hardly be surprising. The situation can be paralleled in rabbinic sources; see now R. Wilk, *Sinai*, 108 (1991), 185-7 (Hebrew). It is noteworthy that II Maccabees makes no issue of the fact: II Macc. 4.3. Some scholars even postulated that Onias' sanctuary in Daphne was a synagogue; cf. V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York, 1959), 469; J. Bunge, *Untersuchungen zum zweiten Makkabäerbuch* (Bonn, 1971), 560.

¹⁶ See the cogent remarks of M. Stern, *Zion*, 25 (1960), 4-5 (Hebrew). A similar conclusion reached by F.M. Abel, *Les Livres des Maccabées* (Paris, 1949), 343-4; Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 469-70; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 559-60; J. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (Garden City, 1983), 238-9.

¹⁷ Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version*, 91-94, noted an ostensible gap between II Macc. 4.6 and 4.7, and argued that the story of Onias III's flight to Egypt and establishment of the temple was deliberately omitted by the epitomator. The thesis has now gained further elaboration at the hands of Parente, *REJ*, 154 (1995), 434-5, who maintains that Theodore's version derived from a lost ms. of II Maccabees which included the story. On his view, the interpolator who excised the flight also substituted the fiction of the murder. The case rests on sheer speculation. No glaring gap between 4.6 and 4.7 strikes the reader of II Maccabees. And, if the alleged tamperer removed Onias' flight and inserted his invented murder, why leave the purported gap?

form of the story conveyed in Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* does not lend any further authority to it.¹⁸ The account in II Maccabees can stand. Onias III perished in Daphne and could not have led a Jewish exile community to Heliopolis.¹⁹

Josephus himself supplies a rather different rendition in the *Antiquitates*. Here he acknowledges the death of Onias III early in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes and the successive occupation of the High Priesthood by Jason and Menelaus.²⁰ It was the son of Onias, a mere infant upon his father's death, who remained to witness the slaying of Menelaus and the installation of a non-Zadokite Alcimus as High Priest, an act which prompted his flight to Egypt. Young Onias IV came under the protection of Ptolemy and his wife Cleopatra, receiving from them a place in the nome of Heliopolis where he built a temple similar to that in Jerusalem.²¹ Josephus takes up the story again later in the *Antiquitates*, this time providing a more detailed treatment. Onias IV, having fled to Ptolemy Philometor, dwelled for some time in Alexandria, and then requested permission from the king and queen to build a temple like that in Jerusalem and to appoint Levites and priests of his own nation. He gave as justification the prophecy of Isaiah that a Jew will build a temple to God in Egypt.²² Josephus proceeds to quote a letter of Onias to Ptolemy and Cleopatra recounting his services to the royal couple during a war in Coele-Syria and Phoenicia

¹⁸ The tortuous efforts of J. Brand, *Yavneh*, 1 (1939), 76-84 (Hebrew), to wring authentic data out of the rabbinic traditions amount to little more than imaginative conjecture. The Talmudic tales, by contrast with Josephus, have Onias install his sanctuary in Alexandria. The error, however, may arise from the fact that "Alexandria" was an alternative designation for Leontopolis in the early Byzantine period — a point persuasively argued, with characteristic erudition, by A. Wasserstein, *Illinois Classical Studies*, 18 (1993), 124-8. That great scholar's passing has left many persons intellectually and personally bereft.

¹⁹ The *Bellum Judaicum* version, in fact, is not even internally self-consistent. The beginning of the work has Onias build a temple similar to that in Jerusalem, whereas the description at the end explicitly denies that the ναός resembles its Jerusalemite counterpart; Jos. *BJ* 1.33: πολίχνην τε τοῖς Ἱεροσολύμοις ἀπεικασμένην καὶ ναὸν ἔκτισεν ὅμοιον; Jos. *BJ*, 7.427: τὸν μὲν ναὸν οὐχ ὅμοιον . . . τῷ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις. See the discussion by G. Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (Atlanta, 1996), 27-30. The matter would be definitively settled if Daniel's allusion, 9.26, to "an anointed one cut down" refers to Onias III, as most commentators conclude; e.g., L.F. Hartman and A.A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (Garden City, 1978), 251-2; J.J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis, 1993), 356-7. But that conclusion is plausible rather than decisive. For Keil, *ZAW*, 97 (1985), 226-8, Daniel's statement does not refer to assassination. Similarly inconclusive is another passage often cited in this connection: I Enoch, 90.8.

²⁰ Jos. *Ant.* 12.237-239.

²¹ Jos. *Ant.* 12.237, 12.387-388, 20.236.

²² Jos. *Ant.* 13.62-64.

and seeking authorization for a new temple in Leontopolis. Onias explains the choice of site as one containing a shrine in ruins, filled with trees and sacred animals, and needing restoration. He proposed to construct a temple to the Lord of the same dimensions as that in Jerusalem, a shrine that would be a religious center for the Jews of Egypt and a place where they could serve the interests of the king. Onias then concluded by citing the forecast of Isaiah.²³ A return letter followed from Ptolemy and Cleopatra. They rebuked Onias for his transgression and violation of the law and questioned whether a site so wild and crowded with sacred animals would be pleasing to God. Nonetheless, in view of Isaiah's prophecy, they granted the petition, fearing lest they appear to have offended the Lord.²⁴ Having received authorization, Onias constructed the temple, erected an altar comparable to but smaller than that in Jerusalem, and assigned Levites and priests to administer it.²⁵

The ascription of the temple's establishment to Onias IV rather than to Onias III carries greater plausibility. And it has drawn the endorsement of most scholars.²⁶ Yet the story in *Antiquitates* too is riddled with problems. A blunder occurs right at the outset, with regard to the relationship of the High Priests. Josephus has Menelaus as brother of Onias III and Jason, all sons of Simon.²⁷ Menelaus, however, was not a Zadokite, as II Maccabees informs us, but of a different priestly clan.²⁸ The fact is significant, for it means that Menelaus, not Alcimus, broke the Oniad hold on the High Priesthood, thus undermining Josephus' explanation for the flight of Onias IV to Egypt. The muddle gets worse. Onias IV was a mere child, even an infant, upon the death of his father, so Josephus reports more than once.²⁹ Yet, after arrival in Egypt, he obtained high hon-

²³ Jos. *Ant.* 13.65-68.

²⁴ Jos. *Ant.* 13.69-71.

²⁵ Jos. *Ant.* 13.72-73, 20.236.

²⁶ E.g., Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 275-7; Stern, *Zion*, 25 (1960), 1-16 (Hebrew); M. Delcor, *RevBibl*, 75 (1968), 188-93; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 555-61; H. Hegermann, in W.D. Davies and L. Finkelstein, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, II (Cambridge, 1989), 141-2.

²⁷ Jos. *Ant.* 12.237-238; cf. 20.235-236.

²⁸ II Macc. 3.4, 4.23-25. The tribe of Menelaus' brother Simon is given as Benjamin in the Greek text, but is almost certainly to be emended to Balgea on the basis of the Latin and Armenian manuscripts. See Abel, *Les Livres des Maccabées*, 316-7; Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 403-4; Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 201. This would give Menelaus priestly status, but evidently not Zadokite lineage. On Josephus' confusion here, see Bunge, *JSJ*, 6 (1975), 6-9.

²⁹ Jos. *Ant.* 12.237: *νήπιος ἦν ἔτι*; 12.387: *ἔτι παῖδα*. Parente's interpretation of these texts in *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 79, is without foundation. On the same page he has Onias III die both in 175 and in 170. And his claim that Onias IV was about twenty three when he fled to Egypt lacks any textual authority. An anonymous referee suggests that Onias IV's youth was invented by

ors from Ptolemy VI Philometor, and, according to his letter, as quoted by Josephus, he gave substantial military aid to the king for his war in Coele-Syria and Phoenicia.³⁰ On that version, Onias would have had to reach a swift maturity, establish credentials as a military leader, and round up a significant force to make a difference in Ptolemy's war. Not very likely. And what war was it anyway? Surely not that between Ptolemy and Antiochus IV which took place between 170 and 168 when Onias was a boy -- and well before he went to Egypt on Josephus' own account. Ptolemy VI did, to be sure, engage in subsequent contests with his brother and rival Ptolemy VIII Euergetes over the next two decades. But none of these struggles occurred in Coele-Syria or Phoenicia.³¹ The reliability of Josephus becomes increasingly suspect.

Only the most determined or committed will find anything of historical value in the exchange of letters between Onias and Ptolemy, supplied by Josephus. As we have seen, Onias claimed to have provided sizable military assistance for what was, in fact, a non-existent war.³² His justification for asking leave to build

Josephus to account for the High Priesthood going to Onias III's brother; *Jos. Ant.* 12.237. But this would not explain *Jos. Ant.* 12.387, set in a different context. No good reason exists for questioning Josephus on this point.

³⁰ *Jos. Ant.* 12.388, 13.65.

³¹ For the battles between the Ptolemies in this period, see W. Otto, *AbhMünch*, 11 (1934), 88-133. A. Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Tübingen, 1985), 133-4, implausibly proposes that Onias' services came in the war between the Seleucid rivals Demetrius I and Alexander Balas ca. 150, on the grounds that Balas was an ally of the Ptolemies. Even less likely is Bunge's speculation that this refers to an otherwise unattested backing by Onias and Ptolemy of Jason's "Putsch" in 169; *JSJ*, 6 (1975), 10. Philometor did interfere in Syrian politics and moved forces into Palestine in the mid 140s; I Macc. 11.1-19; *Jos. Ant.* 13.103-119; *Diod.* 32.9c-10.1; *Livy, Per.* 52. But that came at the end of Philometor's life, not a war for which Onias could later gain the king's blessing for construction of a temple.

³² The evidence of Josephus, *C. Apionem*, 2.49-50, is regularly brought up in this connection: Philometor and Cleopatra appointed Jewish commanders, Onias and Dositheus, to head the entire royal army. The statement is, on any reckoning, a gross exaggeration. But one can go further. The common scholarly presumption that Onias the general and Onias the temple-founder are one and the same is far from certain. Josephus makes no such identification or suggestion. The Onias of *C. Apionem* is simply a στρατηγός, not heir to the line of High Priests. And Onias IV, who was only a child at the time of his father's death ca. 172, would be little more than thirty by the death of Philometor in 145 — hence hardly an experienced commander of armies. Yet the identification of general and priest has gone almost entirely unquestioned; see, e.g., Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 276-9; Delcor, *RevBibl*, 75 (1968), 192; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 578-579; J.A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (Garden City, 1976), 35; Hegermann, *Cambridge History of Judaism*, II, 142; Parente, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 80; Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 24.

a temple strikes a further discordant note. Onias alleged that he found numerous Jewish communities in Egypt with improper shrines and engaged in mutual hostilities, comparable to the religious diversities and disagreements among Egyptians. He then sought a royal mandate to refurbish the ruined temple at Leontopolis, a neglected site still filled with animals sacred to the Egyptians. This revived sanctuary would unify the Jews of Egypt and provide a center of support for the Ptolemaic regime — in addition to fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah.³³ Why Onias selected a location with such pagan reverberations goes unexplained. Nor are we told why Ptolemy should be expected to welcome the establishment of a strong and united Jewish seat of authority in the vicinity of Memphis. The reply of Ptolemy and Cleopatra appears more extraordinary still. The royal couple rebuked Onias for selecting a spot sacred to Egyptians and thus displeasing to the Lord, a violation of the law, but acceded to his request anyway on the authority of Isaiah.³⁴ Ptolemy and his sister-wife, in short, are represented as more pious than Onias, protectors and promoters of Jewish law and traditions. The portrayal mirrors other texts that present Hellenistic rulers as respecters of the faith and champions of Jewish interests, most notably the *Letter of Aristeas*. In this instance, however, praise of the Ptolemies comes at the expense of Onias, a gratuitous slap at the founder of Leontopolis. Josephus' narrative is shot through with tendentiousness.³⁵

The character and inconsistencies of the evidence render efforts to establish a firm chronology largely fruitless and pointless. The dates of Onias' departure from Judaea for Egypt and his construction of the temple in the Heliopolite nome remain elusive. Josephus' version in the *Bellum Judaicum* has Onias escape from his homeland in the wake of Antiochus Epiphanes' invasion, plundering, and desecration of the Temple, hence ca. 168.³⁶ How long an interval passed between that event and the erection of a new sanctuary receives no indication in this narrative. Josephus' brief account, in fact, suggests that Onias' request to Ptolemy Philometor occurred not long after the Jewish leader had taken refuge in Alexandria, and construction proceeded with no apparent delay.³⁷ Acceptance of this tale would place the founding of the temple in the

³³ Jos. *Ant.* 13.65-68.

³⁴ Jos. *Ant.* 13.69-71: τὴν γὰρ ἀμαρτίαν καὶ τὴν τοῦ νόμου παράβασιν εἰς τὴν Ὀνίου κεφαλὴν ἀνέθεσαν ... διὸ καὶ θαυμάζομεν εἰ ἔσται τῷ θεῷ κεχαρισμένον.

³⁵ In the view of L. Robert, *Études épigraphiques et philologiques* (Paris, 1938), 235, Josephus' use of the term θρησκεία (*Ant.* 13.66) suffices to discredit the correspondence, for its usage is unattested prior to the Roman period. Thanks are due to G. Bohak for this reference.

³⁶ Jos. *BJ* 1.32, 7.421.

³⁷ Jos. *BJ* 7.421-422.

mid 160s, a date adopted by many.³⁸ But the text also identifies the founder as Onias III, a conclusion already shown to be most dubious and implausible. Once that identification falls, a date for the temple in the 160s falls with it.³⁹

The *Antiquitates* name a more likely founder in Onias IV. But the rest of the text leaves much to be desired. Josephus here dates Onias' self-exile to the time of Alcimus' appointment as High Priest, i.e. 162.⁴⁰ There followed a stay in Alexandria of unspecified length, until Onias, distressed by evils wrought upon Judaea by Hellenistic kings, asked for authorization to build a temple in Egypt.⁴¹ This version provides little secure ground for chronology. Struggles between Seleucid commanders and Jewish forces, and then between princes and pretenders, plagued the land of Israel repeatedly from the late 160s through the 140s. And the year 162 as the supposed time of Onias' withdrawal depends upon the motive ascribed by Josephus: that elevation of Alcimus brought a non-Oniad to the post. Since Menelaus' appointment, however, had already broken the Oniad monopoly a decade earlier, this motive loses meaning, and, with it, the date. So we are no closer to chronological confidence.

A more tangible pointer has been found in an intriguing letter on papyrus, dating to 164. The *dioiketes* Herodes in Memphis addressed the missive ostensibly to a certain Onias. Given the very polite formula at the outset, which includes reference to the health of the entire royal family, one may infer that the addressee was a man of considerable prestige and standing. The temptation is strong to identify the recipient of the letter with the scion of Judaea's high priestly clan, recently arrived in Egypt.⁴² The identification, however, creates more problems than it solves. If Onias were already ensconced in Egypt by 164, this wrecks Josephus' chronology in the *Antiquitates* which brings him to that land only after 162. An appeal to the *Bellum Judaicum* does not help much. That account has Onias depart for Egypt ca. 168, but he spent some time in Alexandria before gaining permission to build his sanctuary in Heliopolis. Its construction, however swiftly undertaken, would not likely be complete by 164 when the

³⁸ So, e.g., Cavaignac, *RHR*, 130 (1945), 48-49; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 567-72; Parente, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 95-7.

³⁹ A common view has it that Onias' temple could only have been built between 168 and 165, i.e. between Antiochus' sacrilege and the cleansing of the Temple by Judas; see previous note. But this presumes that a shrine in Leontopolis would otherwise violate a prescription that no second temple was legitimate — which begs the question.

⁴⁰ *Jos. Ant.* 12.387.

⁴¹ *Jos. Ant.* 13.62-63.

⁴² So, e.g., V. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, I (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 244-6, no. 132; Murray, *JTS*, 18 (1967), 366; Delcor, *RevBibl*, 75 (1968), 192-3; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 562-3; Parente, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 84; a more guarded view by Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 21.

addressee of the papyrus was evidently well established and well respected somewhere in the *chora*. Moreover, the recipient's stature is not readily compatible with that of young Onias IV -- who was still a pre-teen in 164. The document itself may well be a red herring in this context. The reading of "Onias" as addressee is far from certain; only a single letter of the name is clearly legible.⁴³ And even if one accepts the conjecture, it falls well short of proving the identification: the name Onias occurs with some frequency in the Egyptian diaspora. Hence, the papyrus letter fails to advance the quest for a time-table.

One other chronological item has generated some discussion. At the end of the *Bellum Judaicum*, Josephus records the closing down of Onias' temple by the Romans in 73 C.E., and adds the peculiar datum that the structure had lasted 343 years.⁴⁴ What can one make of this? The reckoning, if accurate, would take the founding of the sanctuary back to 270 B.C.E., a date far earlier than any suggested by the available testimony, and altogether at odds with the contexts supplied by Josephus himself.⁴⁵ A more promising approach led to emendation. By altering the numeral from 343 to 243, scholars reached a foundation date of 170 B.C.E., which does indeed approximate the time elsewhere supplied in the *Bellum Judaicum*, namely the period of Antiochus Epiphanes' persecutions.⁴⁶ The idea is attractive, but, in fact, gets us nowhere. Even if correct, the emendation shows only that Josephus was internally consistent in the *Bellum Judaicum*. It does not make the date, ca. 170 B.C.E., any more plausible than it had been before — a date vitiated by the fact that Onias III was dead and Onias IV still a small child. A third theory has had appeal as well: the number 343 possesses symbolic significance, seven jubilees, i.e. seven times seven sabbatical years ($7 \times 7 \times 7 = 343$). Hence a mystical connotation rather than temporal chronology explains the figure.⁴⁷ Perhaps so. But this leaves the actual foundation date as elusive as ever.

⁴³ The reading was first proposed by U. Wilcken, *UPZ*, 110, who claimed to see 'Ov[ι]αι; accepted, e.g., by J. Mélèze-Modrzejewski, *RevHistDroit*, 72 (1994), 7-8. An earlier conjecture by Letronne, *P. Per.* 63, I-VII, offered [θέο]vi. Mahaffy, *P. Petrie*, iii, 15, more cautiously, printed only [...]v[.]. Skepticism on Wilcken's reconstruction is expressed by Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 498 — a shift from his earlier position in *CPJ*, I, 245-6. See also Kasher, *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, 60-1.

⁴⁴ *Jos. BJ* 7.436.

⁴⁵ This has not prevented some scholars from embracing that date; e.g., Hirsch, *Jews' College Jubilee Volume*, 54-6, 74-7; M.A. Beek, *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, 2 (1943), 126-9.

⁴⁶ *Jos. BJ* 1.33, 7.421-423. The emendation has been widely adopted; see a summary of opinions by Hirsch, *Jews' College Jubilee Volume*, 54-5; also Murray, *JTS*, 18 (1967), 365, n. 2. Jerome gives a similar figure, 250 years for the lifetime of the temple; *In Dan.* 3.11.14.

⁴⁷ See R. Hayward, *JJS*, 33 (1982), 436-7, with earlier bibliography.

The results of this discussion need to be faced. The inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and wild improbabilities in Josephus' two versions shake faith in any reconstruction. It does not help to adopt the tale in *Antiquitates* as against that in *Bellum Judaicum*, or vice-versa, since each is independently confounded and muddled. Josephus exercised few analytic powers in scrutinizing his sources and paid little attention to the incongruities of his own narratives. They provide neither a clear chronology of events nor a meaningful understanding of the circumstances.

We turn now to Josephus' ascription of motives to Onias. Do they carry any greater authority?

Characteristically, Josephus supplies more than one motive, with confusing and incompatible results. To summarize once again in brief the reasons that he puts into the head of Onias (III or IV) for abandoning Palestine and creating a sanctuary in Egypt: the *Bellum Judaicum* has Onias enmeshed in internal Palestinian politics, his enemies gaining success through alliance with Antiochus Epiphanes, thereby prompting his own flight to Ptolemy.⁴⁸ The building of the temple constituted an element in the power struggle: Onias promised that a center for Jewish worship would galvanize support of Jews everywhere behind the Ptolemaic contest with Antiochus.⁴⁹ And Onias had a private grudge of his own to indulge: his new temple would attract Palestinian Jews away from rivals in the homeland who had brought about his exile.⁵⁰ The *Antiquitates* give a somewhat different set of purposes — though hardly any more to the credit of Onias. The young heir to the high priestly line headed for Egypt when the Seleucid king removed his clan from the office and installed Alcimus.⁵¹ Onias' drive to build a temple in Heliopolis stemmed not only from distress at seeing the travails of his native land caused by Macedonians and their monarchs, but also from desire for permanent reputation and glory of his own.⁵² Still another motivation surfaces in Onias' supposed letter to Ptolemy. He expresses the aim of a central and uniform worship, to supersede the diverse, questionable, and mutually antagonistic Jewish communities in Egypt — and also to form a solid core of backing for the Ptolemaic regime.⁵³

Little reason exists for confidence in any of these excogitated motives. Josephus' demonstrable confusion over the facts hardly renders him trustworthy when he supplies explanation for them. The account in *Bellum Judaicum* lumps

⁴⁸ Jos. *BJ* 1.31-33, 7.421-423.

⁴⁹ Jos. *BJ* 7.424-425: οὕτως γὰρ Ἀντιόχῳ μὲν ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐκπολεμώσασθαι τοὺς Ἰουδαίους . . . πρὸς αὐτὸν δ' εὐνοικωτέρως ἔξειν.

⁵⁰ Jos. *BJ* 7.431: καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἱερὸν ἐνόμιζε κατασκευάσας εἰς αὐτὸ περισπάσειν ἀπ' ἐκείνων τὸ πλήθος.

⁵¹ Jos. *Ant.* 12.387.

⁵² Jos. *Ant.* 13.62-63: βουλόμενος αὐτῷ μνήμην καὶ δόξαν αἰώνιον κατασκευάσαι.

⁵³ Jos. *Ant.* 13.65-67.

together internal dissension, a contest for political supremacy between Oniads and their opponents, and the larger international conflict between Seleucids and Ptolemies. The analysis reduces itself to a gross simplification. Whatever the truth of the factional strife in Judaea, the situation had changed markedly by the time Onias established his position in Egypt and could expect authorization for a temple. Antiochus IV had been ordered out of Egypt by a Roman directive, the Maccabean movement led resistance to the Seleucids and their surrogates in Judaea (while stirring up animosities to themselves among other communities in Palestine), and internal rivalries within both the Ptolemaic and Seleucid houses consumed their energies in the mid 160s.⁵⁴ Given those turbulent circumstances, the notion that Onias built his temple as retaliation against the foes who had brought about his exile seems peculiarly senseless. Nor would Ptolemy VI have had much use for it against the Seleucids who had their hands full in Syria and Palestine, while he was occupied by contests within his own family.⁵⁵ Josephus' conclusions collapse.

Recourse to the *Antiquitates* does not improve matters. As we have seen, the Oniad stranglehold on the High Priesthood ended with the occupancy of that office by Menelaus. The subsequent installation of Alcimus, therefore, hardly accounts for Onias' precipitate departure. Nor is it obvious why a temple in Leontopolis should ease Onias' anxieties about the assaults on Judaea by the Macedonians. Nothing suggests that the new sanctuary provided a refuge for exiles and fugitives from the homeland. Onias may well have looked to increase his prestige and promote his reputation for posterity, perfectly reasonable impulses — though no more than speculation by Josephus. But they alone cannot explain the authorization, backing, and endurance of the temple. The assertion in Onias' letter to Ptolemy and Cleopatra that he would end divisiveness among Egyptian Jews and unite them behind the regime has ostensible logic. Yet one wonders how much value a Jewish temple in the remote district of Heliopolis, far from the Ptolemaic capital of Alexandria, would have for rulers whose power was in jeopardy.⁵⁶ Josephus' hypotheses about motivation have no greater credibility than his reconstruction of events or his confused chronology.

What then is the significance of Onias' temple? Some have been tempted to downplay it altogether: a mere shrine attached to what was essentially a military

⁵⁴ Principal evidence on these matters in I Macc. 3-9; II Macc. 8-15.

⁵⁵ See Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire des Séleucides*, I, 262-322; Otto, *AbhMünch*, 11 (1934), 82-124; cf. E.S. Gruen, *Chiron*, 6 (1976), 76-93; *idem*, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley, 1984), 692-702.

⁵⁶ Tcherikover's idea, *CPJ*, I, 45, that Ptolemy hoped to use the temple as anti-Seleucid propaganda among the Jews in Palestine, is far-fetched. G. Bohak, *JSJ*, 26 (1995), 36-8, proposes that Ptolemy needed a strong and loyal military commander in Heliopolis to ward off foreign foes and help to control restive natives. But Onias' prior background would hardly seem to fit that description.

colony.⁵⁷ But that theory fails to account for the endurance of the sanctuary, its importance as a center of Jewish resistance as late as the Great Revolt, and, even more telling, its continued reputation, long after the Romans put it out of commission, in rabbinic literature. What reason is there to believe that Onias had established credentials as a military leader at all? His claim in the purported letter to have performed many great services in a war in Coele-Syria and Phoenicia carries no weight.⁵⁸ No such war was fought, Onias was too young anyway, and the letter is a fabrication. It is methodological madness to base any inferences on that information. To be sure, two Jewish generals, one of them named Onias, led armies in support of Queen Cleopatra against Ptolemy Physcon after the death of Ptolemy Philometor in 145.⁵⁹ But, despite unanimity among scholars in identifying this Onias with the founder of the temple, there is no hint in the texts to support such an identification.⁶⁰ The actions of Onias, both diplomatic and military, took place in Alexandria. Did Cleopatra call up a garrison all the way from Heliopolis to rescue her from the hostility of the Alexandrians? Or had Onias' ministry at the temple been so impressive that Philometor and Cleopatra transferred him earlier to take charge of the royal armies in or near the capital? It will not do to pile hypothesis upon hypothesis. The notion of Onias the soldier-priest is essentially a modern concoction.⁶¹

⁵⁷ So Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 278-80; S. Safrai, *Die Wallfahrt im Zeitalter des zweiten Tempels* (Düsseldorf, 1981), 79-81; J. Mélèze-Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt* (Philadelphia, 1995), 128.

⁵⁸ Jos. *Ant.* 13.65: πολλὰς καὶ μεγάλας ὑμῖν χρεῖας τετελεκὼς ἐν τοῖς κατὰ πόλεμον ἔργοις . . . ἐν τε τῇ κοίλῃ Συρία καὶ Φοινίκη.

⁵⁹ Jos. *C. Apionem*, 2.49-52.

⁶⁰ See above, n. 23.

⁶¹ Josephus does elsewhere refer to two Jewish generals, Chelkias and Ananias, whom he designates as sons of the Onias who built the temple in Heliopolis. The historian cites Strabo for the information that they remained steadfastly loyal to Cleopatra III in the contest with her son Ptolemy Lathyrus; *Ant.* 13.284-287. For this war, see now E. Van't Dack, et al., *The Judaeo-Syrian-Egyptian Conflict of 103-101 B.C.* (*Collectanea Hellenistica*, I, Brussels, 1989), *passim*; J. Whitehorne, *Cleopatras* (London, 1994), 138-44. The father of these generals is likely to have been the man who commanded the forces in Alexandria for Cleopatra's mother, Cleopatra II. But Josephus may simply have assumed that Onias the father was identical with the founder of the temple. That datum certainly did not come from Strabo; cf. M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, I (Jerusalem, 1976), 269-70. It is noteworthy that Josephus says nothing in the *Antiquitates* about Onias the priest as a Ptolemaic general, and, conversely, nothing in the *Contra Apionem* about Onias the general as a priest in Heliopolis. A certain Chelkias is mentioned, perhaps as a στρατηγός, in a fragmentary inscription from the Heliopolite nome; *CPJ*, III, 1450 = W. Horbury and D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Greco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge, 1992), #129, with full references. See the discussions of Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, I, 270; Kasher, *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, 61, 123, n. 55; G.

The installation of a temple in the Heliopolite nome had religious and cultural meaning, no simple appendage to a soldiers' settlement. Its implications need to be explored. The existence of Jewish places of worship in Egypt was nothing new in the 2nd century B.C.E. Even the spurious letter of Onias to the Ptolemaic court alludes to various Jewish communities with sanctuaries of whose practices he disapproves.⁶² And documentary evidence discloses a number of synagogues in a variety of Egyptian locations.⁶³ The Idumaeans too established houses of worship in Egypt in the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C.E., setting up local ethnic communities, particularly in Memphis and Hermopolis.⁶⁴ From the Ptolemaic vantage point, Onias' temple may not have seemed out of the ordinary. But Onias had quite a different vision. This structure would be consciously modelled on the Temple in Jerusalem, a parallel shrine to minister to the spiritual needs of all Egyptian Jews, and presided over by a member of the most august family, next in succession to the Zadokite line of High Priests. This sets the Heliopolite sanctuary outside conventional categories. Onias' temple would make a bold statement.

We arrive now at the heart of the matter. Did the new shrine represent a schismatic Judaism, a challenge to usurpers in Jerusalem, an appeal for Palestinian Jews to escape the woes of the homeland and join the faithful in the more authentic community of Leontopolis? We have observed already that Josephus' interpretations along these lines rest on unfounded and unreliable surmise. Better to scrap them and confront the issue anew.

That Jews everywhere looked to the Temple in Jerusalem as the seat of religious authority is clear and uncontroversial. Numerous biblical and post-biblical references attest to it. The *locus classicus* occurs in Deuteronomy: Moses asserts that the Lord will choose a dwelling for his worship across the Jordan where all sacrifices and ritual offerings are to be made.⁶⁵ Deuteronomic historiography reinforced the principle by hailing kings who stamped out sacrifices at the "high

Cohen, in E. Van 't Dack, et al., *The Judaean-Syrian-Egyptian Conflict*, 123, n. 47, with further bibliography. This does not prove, despite the term $\tau\epsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}[\nu\epsilon\iota]$ in the document, that the Jewish temple served as a military stronghold governed by Onias and his heirs. Little can be made of "Chelkias the *strategos*" in P. Med. inv. 69.59; see A. di Bitonto, *Aegyptus*, 54 (1974), 20-1; D. Hagedorn and P.J. Sijpesteijn, *ZPE*, 65 (1986), 103-4. Neither date nor provenance is known — nor is the name itself certain.

⁶² Jos. *Ant.* 13.66: $\pi\lambda\epsilon\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\rho\omega\acute{\nu}\ \pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\omicron\ \kappa\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\omicron\nu\ \acute{\epsilon}\chi\omicron\nu\tau\alpha\varsigma\ \iota\epsilon\rho\acute{\alpha}$.

⁶³ See the summary record by Tcherikover, *CPJ*, I, 8. An extensive discussion by Kasher, *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, 106-67.

⁶⁴ Evidence and discussion in U. Rappaport, *RevPhil*, 43 (1969), 73-82; D.J. Thompson, *Memphis under the Ptolemies* (Princeton, 1988), 99-103.

⁶⁵ Deut. 12.4-18; cf. Jeremiah, 7.3-15; Ezekiel, 24.21. Other references usefully collected by Wasserstein, *Illinois Classical Studies*, 18 (1993), 120, n. 2.

places," and denouncing those who encouraged them.⁶⁶ Later writers, like Philo and Josephus, transformed the pronouncement of Deuteronomy into the unambiguous assertion that no site other than Jerusalem can have an altar or temple.⁶⁷

How then could Onias expect to get away with his new foundation? Did he fly directly in the face of biblical prohibitions, a deliberate break with Jerusalem? Not a likely proposition. Onias needed to attract and build a constituency of Jews who were presumably familiar with scriptural traditions. And he held some cards that could be played. The prophecy of Isaiah supplied strong authority. Isaiah's forecast that an altar to Yahweh would someday rise in the midst of Egypt doubtless bolstered Onias' purpose.⁶⁸ If he faced any criticism based on Deuteronomy 12, he would not lack responses. Ambiguity, as so often, inheres in the biblical verses, giving rise to divergent exegetical interpretation. Moses issued a prohibition against sacrificing burnt offerings wherever one wishes, permitting them only in a place that the Lord has chosen. The rabbinical commentary on that passage allows that the ritual can be performed in any place that a prophet directs.⁶⁹ To Egyptian Jews eager for a holy shrine of their own, a similar rationalization might well suffice. Onias could indeed stretch a point and claim that what really mattered in regard to sacrifice was the recipient of the offerings, not the location of the practice, a claim for which biblical authority was available.⁷⁰ The strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 12 delivered by Philo and Josephus may not have prevailed in the age of the Maccabees. And, more striking still, even Josephus, in his varied accounts of Onias' temple, nowhere states or implies that the institution violated Jewish law or practice.⁷¹ Onias had

⁶⁶ E.g. II Kings, 12.4, 14.4, 15.4, 15.35, 16.4, 16.10-16, 17.7-12, 18.1-4, 21.2-3, 23.8-20.

⁶⁷ Philo, *De Spec. Leg.* 1.67; *Jos. Ant.* 4.200-201; *C. Apionem*, 2.193.

⁶⁸ Note that, in Josephus' account, Onias plainly expanded on Isaiah to suit his own ends. The biblical text forecasts an altar to the Lord in Egypt; Isaiah, 19.19. Onias interpreted it as a temple to be erected by a Jew; *Jos. BJ* 7.432; *Ant.* 13.62-64.

⁶⁹ Deut. 12.13-14. See the Sifre to Deuteronomy, Pisqa 70, translated by J. Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, 1987), vol. 1, 203.

⁷⁰ Cf. II Chron. 33.17; see M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York, 1971), 139-40.

⁷¹ It is particularly noteworthy that Josephus juxtaposes to his narrative of the Onias/Ptolemy correspondence a report that representatives of Jews and Samaritans disputed the legitimacy of one another's temples in a debate before Ptolemy in Alexandria: the king ruled on behalf of the temple in Jerusalem; *Jos. Ant.* 13.74-79. The historicity of this story is more than dubious. Why should such a quarrel be arbitrated in Alexandria? And what force would Ptolemy's ruling have at a time when Palestine was outside his authority? The matter cannot here be explored in detail. Whatever the authority of the tale, however, it is remarkable that the issue of a rival temple to Jerusalem, the central question regarding the Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim, does not arise at all in the adjoining passage on Leontopolis. The Samari-

a defensible case to make. Imitation of the temple in Jerusalem need not constitute defiance or schism.

The "house of Onias," surprisingly and revealingly, continued to be a topic of discussion and a source of dispute among the rabbis. The Mishnah cites R. Simeon as stating that priests who ministered in the temple of Onias could not serve in the temple of Jerusalem. But he clearly distinguished them from idolators. That opinion is confirmed in the Babylonian Talmud which asserts that Onias' shrine was no idolatrous one.⁷² To be sure, the consensus of rabbis set Onias' sanctuary below the level of Jerusalem. But they did not reckon it as a breakaway alternative.⁷³ Onias' creation, as is obvious, was still taken seriously in Talmudic times. Whatever the upshot of rabbinic opinion, however, it has no direct bearing upon attitudes in the mid-2nd century BCE. Onias did not have to contend with the pronouncements of the sages.

Reactions contemporary or near contemporary to the founding of the temple escape record, a source of high frustration. Yet indirect testimony supplies some clues. The text of II Maccabees contains two letters attached as a preface and quite independent of the body of the work. Both are addressed by Jews in Jerusalem and Judaea to their kinsmen in Egypt. The epistles abound in prob-

tan temple, located within easy reach of Jerusalem, naturally offended Hasmonaean sensibilities, leading to its destruction at the hands of John Hyrcanus in 128 B.C.E.; *Jos. Ant.* 13.254-256. But the temple of Onias, far off in the region of Memphis, remote from any Hasmonaean influence, would not have been a comparable irritant.

⁷² Menahot, 13.10; b. Menahot, 109b; cf. t. Menahot, 13.12-15. And see Parente, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 77, 81. The discussion itself has interesting implications. The fact that Jewish sages still debated the propriety of actions in the temple of Onias long after its demise plainly indicates a stature well beyond that of a mere local shrine, as some have described it; see above n. 57.

⁷³ Differences among the rabbis surfaced with regard to the origins of the Egyptian temple. The tale, conveyed in slightly different versions in both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds, depicts a quarrel between the two sons of Simon the Just over succession to the High Priesthood, a quarrel resulting in Onias' flight to Egypt where he would build a new shrine. Onias appears in the story as a less than admirable figure. But his Temple drew mixed responses from the Talmudic sages. R. Meir considered the new religious center to be idolatrous, but R. Judah observed that Onias had the authority of Isaiah 19.19. See b. Menahot, 109b; p. Yoma, 6.3. Discussions of the talmudic material in Hirsch, *Jews' College Jubilee Volume*, 60-70; Brand, *Yavneh*, 1 (1939), 76-84 (Hebrew); B.Z. Luria, *Beit Miqra*, 31 (1967), 65-81 (Hebrew); Parente, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*, 77, 81. R. Yankelevich, in A. Oppenheimer, I. Gafni, and M. Stern, *Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple, Mishnaic, and Talmudic Periods* (Jerusalem, 1993), 107-15 (Hebrew), plausibly proposes that the rabbinic arguments reflect a dispute between Palestine and the Diaspora communities over the source of legitimacy after the destruction of the Temple and the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt.

lems and difficulties, stimulating a veritable library of modern scholarship.⁷⁴ This is not the place to enter that particular thicket. We concentrate upon the possible relevance of the letters for relations between the temples in Jerusalem and Leontopolis.

The first letter carries a date of year 188 of the Seleucid era, i.e. 124 B.C.E. Its prescript brings the greetings of Jews in Jerusalem and in the country of Judaea to their “brothers” in Egypt.⁷⁵ The purpose is to report their prayers to God, asking that he be reconciled to the Egyptian Jews, that he open their hearts to his commandments, and that he not forsake them in an evil time.⁷⁶ Further, the writers request that their Egyptian kinsmen celebrate with them the Hanukkah festival, here termed the “feast of Tabernacles of the month of Kislev,” as it was indeed known at the outset.⁷⁷ The text notes also that an earlier message too had been sent, dating to the year 169 (143 B.C.E.) and recounting the distress that Palestinian Jews had suffered in the time of the persecutions.⁷⁸

The second letter in the text is far longer. It purports to date from the time of Judas Maccabaeus himself, directed to Aristobulus who is described as tutor of king Ptolemy and a member of the high priestly clan, and to the Jews of Egypt generally.⁷⁹ The epistle reports a version of the death of Antiochus Epiphanes and announces the Jews’ rescue by God from their perils.⁸⁰ Like the other letter, it invites the Egyptian Jews to celebrate the purification of the Temple by honoring the feast of Tabernacles on the 25th of Kislev.⁸¹ The epistle proceeds to a lengthy and largely fanciful account of the background to the festival, linking it to miraculous occurrences connected with the foundation and dedication of the First and Second Temples.⁸² The authors claim documentary authority, citing the scrupulous collection of records by Nehemiah and the assemblage of scattered materials by Judas himself — all of which the Egyptian Jews are welcome to

⁷⁴ See particularly the treatments in Abel, *Les Livres des Maccabées*, 285-310; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 32-152; C. Habicht, *2. Makkabäerbuch (Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, I)* (Gütersloh, 1976), 199-207; R. Doran, *Temple Propaganda: The Purpose and Character of 2 Maccabees* (Washington, 1981), 3-12; Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 137-88. Extensive bibliographical citations can be found in B.Z. Wacholder, *HUCA*, 49 (1978), 89-133.

⁷⁵ II Macc. 1.1: τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς τοῖς κατ’ Αἴγυπτον Ἰουδαίοις χαίρειν οἱ ἀδελφοὶ οἱ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οἱ ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας εἰρήνην ἀγαθὴν.

⁷⁶ II Macc. 1.2-6.

⁷⁷ II Macc. 1.9.

⁷⁸ II Macc. 1.7-8.

⁷⁹ II Macc. 1.10.

⁸⁰ II Macc. 1.11-17.

⁸¹ II Macc. 1.18: μέλλοντες ἀγειν ἐν τῷ Χασελευ πέμπτη καὶ εἰκάδι τὸν καθαρισμόν τοῦ ἱεροῦ δέον ἡγήσάμεθα διασαφῆσαι ὑμῖν. ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἀγῆτε σκηνοπηγίας καὶ τοῦ πυρός.

⁸² II Macc. 1.19-2.12.

consult.⁸³ The letter concludes by reiterating the importance of the festival: it commemorates the fulfillment of God's promise to restore to the Jews control over their religious and political heritage. The authors once again call upon Egyptian Jews to honor that festival. And they express the hope that God will speedily regather his people from everywhere to his holy place.⁸⁴

What implications do these epistles have for the image of Onias' temple in the eyes of Palestinian Jews? A distinguished assemblage of scholars has interpreted the letters as anti-Oniad propaganda, a polemic against the temple in Heliopolis: they aimed to rebuke the schismatic Jews of Egypt and to regather the faithful under the umbrella of the establishment in Jerusalem.⁸⁵ The analysis lacks textual support and rests on infirm foundations. To begin, the letters make no explicit reference to Onias, Leontopolis, or any rival temple in the Heliopolite nome. The first letter does suggest a need for reconciliation to God by Egyptian Jews and a revival of obedience to divine law and precepts.⁸⁶ This evidently alludes to troubled times in Egypt and sufferings by Jews, circumstances that, as is customary in Biblical traditions, are ascribed to a falling away from adherence to God's commands. But nothing implies that this stems from a schismatic temple. The Jews of Judaea had to request more than once, so it is claimed, that their Egyptian kinsmen celebrate the Hanukkah festival. Does this then imply recalcitrance on the part of Onias' followers who preferred independence and disengagement?⁸⁷ The inference is unfounded. Reference to a letter in 143 B.C.E. gives no indication of its contents. It need not have included a request to celebrate Hanukkah. Nor do we know that it was addressed to Leontopolis anyway. The recipients may well have been the Jews of Alexandria. Certainly the second

⁸³ II Macc. 2.13-15.

⁸⁴ II Macc. 2.16-18: μέλλοντες οὖν ἄγειν τὸν καθαρισμόν ἐγράψαμεν ὑμῖν. καλῶς οὖν ποιήσετε ἄγοντες τὰς ἡμέρας ... ἐλπίζομεν γὰρ ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ ὅτι ταχέως ἡμᾶς ἐλεήσει καὶ ἐπισυνάξει ἐκ τῆς ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰς τὸν ἅγιον τόπον.

⁸⁵ So, in various formulations, Kahrstedt, *Syrische Territorien*, 133-45; E. Bickermann, *ZNW*, 32 (1933), 250-51 = *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden, 1980), 2, 154-5; Momigliano, *Prime Linee*, 93-4; *CP*, 70 (1975), 82-3; Abel, *Les Livres des Maccabées*, xlv; Cavaignac, *RHR*, 130 (1945), 42-3, 48-52; Habicht, *2. Makkabäerbuch*, 186; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 595-602; Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 34-6, 545-50; *II Maccabees*, 24-6. The thesis is rightly questioned by D. Arenhoevel, *Die Theokratie nach dem 1. und 2. Makkabäerbuch* (Mainz, 1967), 100-2; Doran, *Temple Propaganda*, 11-2; J.J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem* (New York, 1983), 73-9; A. Kasher, in M. Mor, *Eretz Israel, Israel and the Jewish Diaspora* (Lanham, 1991), 30-2.

⁸⁶ II Macc. 1.2-6.

⁸⁷ II Macc. 1.7. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 78-9, rightly rejects the idea of the letters as anti-Oniad propaganda, but he believes nonetheless that the Oniads had estranged themselves from the Jerusalem Temple and that the festal letters endeavored to bring them back into the fold.

letter was purportedly sent to Aristobulus in Alexandria, still reckoned as the proper destination for transmittal to the Jews of Egypt. The thesis of "anti-Oniad propaganda" evaporates.

The festal letters may nonetheless bear some relevance. A scholarly consensus accepts the authenticity of the letter dated to 124 and the existence of a prior one in 143.⁸⁸ The second extant letter is more dubious. Judas Maccabaeus had little occasion to dictate missives of historical interest in the wake of cleansing the Temple, with numerous enemies and much fighting still ahead.⁸⁹ But, whatever the date of the epistle, its author or forger had it reinforce the message of the other, a significant reflection of Judaeon opinion in the late 2nd or early 1st century. The urging of an Egyptian celebration of Hanukkah communicates unity between Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism. Restoration and purification of the Temple held high symbolic value as expression of that unity. The letters do not represent an imperialist extension of authority by Jerusalem over the separatist sect of Onias. The concluding wish in the second epistle of a regathering of the faithful at the Holy Place may well articulate the sentiments of Oniad and Jerusalemite alike.

This idea finds support in the body of II Maccabees itself. The work, as is well known, places Jerusalem at the center and celebrates the exploits of Judas Maccabaeus, resolute champion of its cult.⁹⁰ At the same time, II Maccabees evinces great regard and admiration for Onias III. He emerges as a model of piety and righteousness, the upholder of ancient traditions against the machinations of Seleucid officials, a man of broad sympathies and unsullied reputation. His assassination triggered the horrors that were about to befall the Jewish people.⁹¹ The climax and conclusion of the book underscore the author's attitude most dramatically. On the eve of Judas' greatest victory, the culminating contest with Nicanor, a vision appeared in his dream. The figure of Onias himself, the very emblem of temperance and gentleness and the embodiment of the good life, materialized in the dream and introduced the aged prophet Jeremiah who extended to Judas a golden sword that would assure his triumph.⁹² This striking passage pointedly denies any cleavage between the clan of the Oniads and the

⁸⁸ The consensus rests on an influential article by Bickermann, *ZNW*, 32 (1933), 233-54 = *Studies*, 2, 136-58.

⁸⁹ The genuineness of the letter has been argued by Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 32-55; Wacholder, *HUCA*, 49 (1978), 89-133; Th. Fischer, *Seleukiden und Makkabäer* (Bochum, 1980), 86-100; D. Flusser, in Gafni, Oppenheimer, and Schwartz, *Jews in Hellenistic-Roman World*, 55-82. But see Habicht, *2. Makkabäerbuch*, 201; Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 157-9.

⁹⁰ For Doran, *Temple Propaganda, passim*, the Temple cult itself is the principal focus of the text. But see D.R. Schwartz, in M. Poorthuis and Ch. Safrai, *The Centrality of Jerusalem* (Kampen, Netherlands, 1996), 122-3.

⁹¹ II Macc. 3.1-5, 3.31-34, 4.1-6, 4.32-38.

⁹² II Macc. 15.11-16.

ruling dynasty of Judaea. II Maccabees was composed in the latter part of the 2nd century, at a time when the Hasmonaeans controlled the High Priesthood in the homeland and heirs of the Oniads held sway in Leontopolis. The message delivered by II Maccabees articulates a harmony of purpose. The two branches had a common commitment to Jewish unity.

Only sparse evidence survives for the later history of the Oniad temple.⁹³ But that remainder helps to confirm the above interpretation. Cleopatra III gained the advantage in the war with her son Ptolemy Lathyrus at the end of the 2nd century. Lathyrus had had to give up his gains in Judaea and withdraw from the land. The Hasmonaean High Priest Alexander Jannaeus, much relieved and restored to his holdings, sent gifts of gratitude to Cleopatra, on whose favor he now relied. The queen, however, with the advice of some of her counselors, contemplated invasion of the country herself, prepared to put it under Ptolemaic suzerainty. The plan might have been implemented but for the intervention of Ananias, the Jewish general who, together with Chelkias, had been a consistently loyal and successful commander for Cleopatra. Ananias advised the queen against invasion, pointing out the injustice of attacking an ally and, most importantly, declaring that an injustice done to the Jewish High Priest would make all Jews her enemies.⁹⁴ This is telling testimony. If Ananias was really the son of Onias IV, as Josephus states, his advice becomes all the more remarkable. It signals solidarity between the house of Onias and the Hasmonaean regime in Jerusalem.⁹⁵ But even if the general comes from another clan of Egyptian Jews, his assertion of Jewish unanimity everywhere behind the High Priesthood carries real significance. It coheres with the rest of our evidence, denies any schismatic movement among Egyptian Jews, and affirms harmony between the homeland and the Diaspora.

One other piece of testimony can be brought into the reckoning. When Julius Caesar was besieged in Alexandria during the civil war in 48/7, a contingent of Jewish forces under Antipater made its way from Palestine to assist in his rescue. The troops were held up, however, in the "land of Onias," blocked by the Jews who dwelled there and prevented their progress. Antipater, however, appealed not only to their common kinship but, more significantly, to their

⁹³ See the summary of epigraphic testimony by D. Noy, in J.W. van Henten and P.W. van der Horst, *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy* (Leiden, 1994), 162-72. The texts are set out with translations and commentaries now by Horbury and Noy, *JIGRE*, 51-196 (#29-#115).

⁹⁴ Jos. *Ant.* 13.352-354: οὐ γὰρ ἀγνοεῖν βούλομαι σε. φησὶν. ὅτι τὸ πρὸς τοῦτον ἄδικον ἐχθροῦς ἅπαντας ἡμᾶς σοι τοὺς Ἰουδαίους καταστήσει. Cf. Stern, *Zion*, 50 (1985), 101-2 (Hebrew).

⁹⁵ For Ananias and Chelkias as sons of Onias, see Jos. *Ant.* 13.285-7. But his testimony is not decisive; see above, n. 51. Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 83-7, interprets Ananias' advice in terms of pragmatic calculation.

allegiance to the High Priesthood. He displayed a letter from Hyrcanus II, High Priest in Jerusalem, who exhorted them to support Antipater's contingent and take the side of Caesar. The wish of the High Priest sufficed. Jews both in the Oniad district and in the vicinity of Memphis joined in the cause of Antipater.⁹⁶ The episode provides still one more instance of unquestioned loyalty by the inhabitants of Oniad land to the temple in Jerusalem.⁹⁷

The favorable portrait conveyed in II Maccabees did not monopolize subsequent opinion. A less flattering depiction of the temple founder surfaced in later years. It found its way into Josephus' analysis which assigned somewhat disreputable motives for Onias' departure from Palestine and his religious shrine in Egypt — even reckoning Ptolemy's respect for Jewish traditions as more genuine than Onias' own. That ensuing generations may have had reason to question the Oniad achievement is plausible enough. Onias might seem in retrospect to have abandoned the Jewish cause in Palestine too hastily and prematurely. It was easy to manufacture selfish motives or to imagine a conflict with personal rivals. Disputes over the interpretation of the Deuteronomic text, analogous to those which embroiled the rabbis, may have surfaced by the time of Josephus. Priestly attitudes in Jerusalem, perhaps reflected in the historian's analysis, could have contributed to the negative tradition on Onias. It does not follow, however, that critics at the time stigmatized Leontopolis as a schismatic sect that rejected the authority of Jerusalem.⁹⁸

Dispute over Onias' reputation in posterity has also been read by scholars in variants that occur in the text of Isaiah. Onias cited a verse in Isaiah to justify the building of his temple: the prophet had foretold that a sanctuary to God would be raised in Egypt by a Jew.⁹⁹ The claim rests on Isaiah 19.19 which looks ahead to

⁹⁶ Jos. *Ant.* 14.127-132: καὶ οἱ μὲν ὡς ἐώρων τὸν Ἀντίπατρον καὶ τὸν ἀρχιερέα συνθέλοντας ὑπήκουον. A briefer version in Jos. *BJ* 1.190.

⁹⁷ As is well known, Jews everywhere made regular contributions to the Temple in Jerusalem, a practice enjoined by Biblical prescription and widely attested; Exodus, 30.11-15; Philo, *Leg. ad Gaium*, 156-157, 216, 291, 311-316; Jos. *Ant.* 14.110, 16.166-171; Cic. *Pro Flacco*, 67; Tac. *Hist.* 5.5. Egyptian Jews were certainly no exception. The notion of S.L. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian* (Princeton, 1938), 174-5, that Jews in Egypt paid their tax to Onias' temple rather than to Jerusalem has no textual support and little probability; see E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden, 1981), 368.

⁹⁸ As we have seen, Josephus himself, who believed that Jews were prohibited from having more than one temple (*Ant.* 4.200-201; *C. Apionem*, 2.193), did not attack Onias' institution on that score. The thesis of S.H. Steckoll, *Revue du Qumran*, 21 (1967), 55-69, that priests at Qumran came from the temple at Leontopolis, has been adequately refuted by Delcor, *RevBibl*, 75 (1968), 196-9, with a postscript by R. de Vaux, *loc. cit.*, 204-5.

⁹⁹ Jos. *BJ* 7.432; *Ant.* 13.64, 13.68.

an altar of the Lord in the heart of Egypt. The expansion on that text which appears in Josephus, authorizing construction of the temple by a "Jewish man" may well derive from circles favorable to the Oniads. A similar inference has been made regarding the Septuagint version of Isaiah 19.18, the immediately preceding verse, which speaks of five cities in Egypt, one of which was to be called "City of Destruction" — so, at least, most of the manuscripts of the Masoretic text have it. The Septuagint preferred a positive rendition: "City of Righteousness," thus bringing the verse into line with Isaiah 1.26 and making it a mirror of Jerusalem. Translators of the Septuagint, on this view, altered the Biblical phrase in order to enhance the stature of Onias' foundation. Or, as an alternative hypothesis, the process can be reversed. Perhaps the Septuagint reflects an earlier reading of the Hebrew text, whereas the extant manuscripts incorporate an "anti-Oniad" revision.¹⁰⁰ In fact, the matter is more complicated and undermines confidence in simplistic speculation. Our earliest version of Isaiah, in a Qumran text, has "City of the Sun." If that is indeed the correct reading, Oniad apologists should have seized upon it as an obvious buttress for a sanctuary in Heliopolis.¹⁰¹ The appearance of "City of Righteousness" in the Septuagint need have nothing to do with followers of the Oniads, nor the variant "City of Destruction" with their opponents. The notion of a tug of war between pro and anti-Leontopolis propaganda has bedevilled scholarship for too long.¹⁰²

The temple in Heliopolis deserves a better press than it has received in the pages of Josephus. The historian's tendentious presentation clouds our vision of the founder, date, and motive for the new sanctuary. Neither the circumstances nor the consequences of its creation suggest that it represented defiance of the

¹⁰⁰ On all this, see the discussions of G.B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah, I-XXVII*, I (Edinburgh, 1912), 332-9; Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah*, 68; Luria, *Beit Miqra*, 31 (1967), 65-81 (Hebrew); Delcor, *RevBibl*, 75 (1968), 199-201; Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 585-8; Hayward, *JJS*, 33 (1982), 438-41; Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 22-3, 90-1.

¹⁰¹ Acutely noted by Murray, *JTS*, 18 (1967), 365, n. 1. The text is IQ Is^a.

¹⁰² Murray, *JTS*, 18 (1967), 365-6, unfortunately, also falls prey to this tendency, labelling the different accounts in Josephus as "pro-Leontopolis" or "anti-Leontopolis," depending upon whether they identify Onias III or Onias IV as founder. Cf. also Beek, *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, 2 (1943), 121-5. Bunge, *Untersuchungen*, 589-94, reckons every reference to Heliopolis or "On" in the Septuagint as representing polemic against the temple of Onias — an extreme position. Reference to the sanctuary at Leontopolis has also been found in the fifth book of the Sibylline Oracles, 501-503, compiled probably in the early 2nd century C.E. The verses speak of a great holy temple in Egypt whose residents are sanctioned by God and who sacrifice to him there. If this is meant to signify Leontopolis, it is a most favorable allusion. But the author may simply be elaborating upon Isaiah 19.19; cf. J. Geffcken, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der Oracula Sibyllina* (Leipzig, 1902), 26.

Temple in Jerusalem. Chronology remains murky. The specific occasion of Onias' exit from Palestine eludes our grasp. It may indeed have come shortly after the assassination of his father in 172, a murder engineered by Menelaus and his Seleucid supporters. The life of young Onias could well have been in danger, and a precipitate departure quite intelligible. Insofar as it was an act of rejection, it rejected the current occupant of the High Priesthood and the Seleucid regime — but not the authority of the Temple. Construction of a shrine in the Heliopolite nome came at an unspecified later time, after some years in Alexandria and, presumably, a process of maturation by Onias. The situation in Judaea had altered markedly by then. Judas Maccabaeus' recapture and purification of the Temple had not resolved the situation. A Seleucid garrison remained in the Akra, Seleucid influence still permeated the land of Palestine, an appointee of the king took over as High Priest, and the Maccabean movement resolved itself into warfare with neighboring peoples and periodic compromises with Hellenistic princes. A lesser replica of the Jerusalem Temple in the Heliopolite nome would provide a center of worship for pious Jews in Egypt for whom the fate of their homeland must have seemed to be in grave jeopardy. A new temple would serve as a beacon announcing that the faith remained alive and strong.¹⁰³

When might such an event have taken place? A novel postulate perhaps deserves consideration: some time between 159 and 152, when the High Priesthood stood vacant in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁴ Leontopolis would thereby carry the message that religious continuity remained despite upheavals in the homeland. The house of Onias directed its defiance to the enemies of the Jews, not to Jerusalem. Nor would the conferral of the High Priesthood upon Jonathan in 152 deprive the Egyptian sanctuary of its *raison d'être*. Onias indeed very likely avoided the title of High Priest in Egypt, thus to shun even ostensible conflict.¹⁰⁵ The symbolic

¹⁰³ One can, of course, raise the question of why Heliopolis and not Alexandria. Cf. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 277-8. But the decision need not have been Onias's. It is appropriate to recall that permission was needed from Ptolemy. And Ptolemy may well have preferred a Jewish center remote from the capital, where it would not upset the Alexandrian Greeks.

¹⁰⁴ I Macc. 9.54, 10.21; Jos. *Ant.* 20.237. Josephus' contradictory notices that Judas was named High Priest upon the death of Alcimus (*Ant.* 12.413-414, 12.419, 12.434) are plainly false. Judas, in fact, died before Alcimus; I Macc. 9.54-56. The thesis of H. Stegemann, *Die Entstehung der Qumrangemeinde* (Bonn, 1971), 210-25, followed by Bunge, *JSJ*, 6 (1975), 27-8, 43-7, argues that there was no *interregnum*. He contends that the "Teacher of Righteousness" who appears in the Qumran texts held the High Priesthood until ousted by Jonathan. The conjecture has little to recommend it. See the refutation by H. Burgmann, *JSJ*, 11 (1980), 135-76; cf. J. Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and their Supporters* (Atlanta, 1990), 75-7.

¹⁰⁵ Such a possibility has never been considered by modern scholars. Yet the evidence points in that direction. Only in his summary of the roster of High Priests at the end of the *Antiquitates* does Josephus say that Onias asked Philometor and Cleopatra to

significance had greater force than any personal advantage for Onias. A common purpose between Hasmonaeans and Oniads received evocative expression in II Maccabees. And unity of the faith had practical application as well: in the advice of Ananias to Cleopatra III, and in the allegiance of Egyptian Jews to the High Priesthood at the time of Julius Caesar. The Jewish sanctuary in Egypt was a reinforcement, not a rival, of Jerusalem.¹⁰⁶

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name him High Priest; *Ant.* 20.236. There is no hint of that in his narratives of events. Indeed, Josephus elsewhere has Onias appoint others to minister to the cult in Heliopolis; *Jos. Ant.* 13.63, 13.73.

¹⁰⁶ Despite numerous differences in interpretation, this paper has gained much profit from correspondence with and from the fine study of G. Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (Atlanta, 1996), soon to be published by Scholars Press. Analysis of the Talmudic texts owes a debt to consultations with Professor Daniel Boyarin. A valuable conversation with Daniel Stoekl resulted in some salutary changes. The acute suggestions of referees for *SCI* prompted additional improvements — which is not to say that they will now concur with the conclusions. Most important, the meticulous reading (more than once) and the incisive advice of Professor Daniel Schwartz deserve special commendation.