

PRIESTS OF WAR

*Trailer & Historical Background
For the Series Lions of Judea*

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Priests of War

Lions of Judea

Amit Arad

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LIONS OF JUDEA

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AMIT ARAD

Judean Mountains, 166 BCE

Dramatis Personae

Bold = main character

* = historical figure

- Apollonius*—Meridarch (governor) of Samaria
- Helena—Mistress of Apollonius
- Helios—Coachman of Apollonius
- **Tario**—Commander of the Seleucid garrison in the meridarchy of Samaria
- Nexus—Commander of an infantry company in the Samaria garrison
- **Phryne**—A Jewish slave girl of Apollonius
- **Judah***—Commander of the Jewish rebels

In spite of the parched air, beads of sweat poured down Helios' skin with the effort of keeping focused on driving the carriage. He constantly shifted his position, trying to evade the attentions of the woman who tantalized him with her feminine wiles, trying to entice him into handing her the reins of the horses.

In the interior of the wagon, a powerfully built man dozed, his hands behind his head serving as an improvised

pillow. He could hear the whispers and giggles of Helena, seemingly always tipsy, and smiled at the thought of his loyal driver and the effort he must be making to concentrate on the path before him. He opened his eyes and glanced at the corner of the wagon, where a young woman was curled up. She lay on her stomach, covered with a thin sheet. In his imagination he pulled the sheet away, fantasizing about the sight which would be revealed beneath it. Her darkly tanned skin, testimony to the long and warm summer, sharply contrasted with her white linen nightgown, which revealed more than it concealed. Her wavy brown hair was bound in a thick braid from the middle of her back downwards, but remained unbound further up, spreading like a fan across her bare shoulders.

Phryne. Just thinking of her name aroused him. He had yet to try her out. His wife was used to the comely slave girls he surrounded himself with, and knew that he slaked his lusts with some of them. And yet, this Jewish maid aroused her resistance. His wife warned him not to bed her, for this would be unwise given his intention of crushing the Judean revolt. Apollonius suspected that the true reason for her interference was her jealousy of the comely maiden, but was forced to accept her reasoning. As a small compensation, and as a petty revenge against his jealous wife, he had decided to take the Jewish slave girl with him to Jerusalem, intending to use her presence as a symbol of his triumph over the Judean rebels.

In the front seat of the wagon, Helena and Helios heard the clanking of metal from within the wagon, testimony to their master awakening and donning his arms and armor.

Helena immediately stopped her flirting and sat down besides Helios. "Behave yourself," she said with facile seriousness, "Do you dare to lust after the companion of the Governor of Samaria?!"

Helios' face reddened, and he angrily stared straight ahead. Helena choked down her provocative laughter as the awning of the wagon was drawn aside and Apollonius exited to stand beside the pair.

"Get inside woman! You've harassed him enough."

Helios glanced gratefully at his master.

The governor stared forward. A broad-shouldered horseman broke off from the convoy's vanguard and cantered towards the carriage. It was Tario, the commander of Samaria's regular garrison. "The ravine is right ahead of us, Governor," reported Tario as he rode alongside the carriage, "We will not be able to cross it before sundown."

Apollonius' forehead crinkled. The mountain highway on which his force advanced crossed the land from north to south, mostly following the ridges of the central mountain spine connecting rebellious southern Judea with his home province of Samaria to the north. It was a largely convenient and secure road, but in the section just before them it descended into a deep ravine formed by a stream, which was narrow and winding. This was the only section of the road considered hazardous, given its vulnerability to ambush and bandit attacks. Apollonius gestured, and a servant hurried from behind the carriage, leading the governor's horse.

"Prepare yourself and the wagon," Apollonius commanded as he mounted his horse from the slowly moving carriage.

Helios stared at his master in astonishment, "Bandits

would never dare attack us, master.”

“We are not facing bandits but priests—never underestimate the enemy,” replied Apollonius, and turning his attention to Tario, he continued “from what we know of the leader of the rebels, he is taking up the torch lit by his father the priest. I have no intention of providing him with his first great victory.”

“What do you want us to do?” asked Tario, “Should we set up our night camp here, north of the ravine crossing?”

“If we do that, they can organize during the night and prepare a deadlier ambush for us tomorrow. No. We cross today, even if we have to complete the crossing in the dark. Ensure that everyone is prepared for fighting, even if the esteemed gentlemen think we are just out on a field trip,” Apollonius said, jerking his head back at his force—at the Hellene citizens. The force he commanded included six hundred warriors and many clerks and slaves. Two hundred regular garrison troops, two hundred local Samaritan auxiliaries, and a similar number of Hellene citizens—Greco-Macedonian-descended residents of Samaria who were recognized citizens of the polis of Samaria. The Greco-Macedonian citizens showed conspicuous lack of discipline. They did not maintain formation, conversed loudly, and laughed at the top of their lungs. Beside them walked their slaves, carrying their personal equipment, weapons, and shields.

Tario smiled, “When push comes to shove, we can rely on them more than on all the others. They were all veteran soldiers before they were settled in Samaria.”

“Yes, yes,” grumbled the governor, unconvinced, “take your citizens, cavalry, and infantry, and advance before us

in the vanguard. If you run into an ambush, show me your mettle and fight as you know so well.”

Apollonius fell silent for a moment and inspected Tario. The man was an extremely experienced warrior. He would not let him down. With his veteran soldiers he could overcome any ambush.

“Concentrate the wagon train in the back and secure it with a detachment of infantry,” Apollonius continued to outline the plan, “I, together with the rest of the force, will advance behind you. If there are no other surprises, we will continue advancing until we ascend from the ravine, and that is where we will camp for the night. Send all of your officers and commanders to me; we hold council. The field trip is over; we are now entering enemy territory.”

Tario rode to the vanguard of the column’s cavalry screen and gestured at them to advance. As soon as they broke away from the column, he ordered an increase of the pace. Tario wanted to make it through the ravine before darkness descended. The infantry company also advanced rapidly, just behind the cavalry screen in a measured trot, trying to keep up with the cavalry preceding them. The path wound down the mountains into the deep and winding ravine, clinging to the mountain slope. Sometimes the road rose as if it was trying to climb the mountain, and sometimes it descended once again, clinging to the route of the dry streambed. Here and there small pools of stagnant water still lurked, evidence of the water that had flowed in the stream in the winter.

The many winding and twisting turns of the path troubled him—they blocked his field of view and provided many

possible ambush sites. The possibility of a surprise attack on them from the top of the mountain endangered them and further complicated the situation. Apollonius was right to send part of the force ahead, he thought. They approached another sharp leftwards turn in the ravine. The ravine had now become deep and narrow. His danger sense sent a prickle down his spine, and he slowed his horse down. He inspected every rock on the steep slope to his left and shifted his balance on the horse as he momentarily raised his shield arm. He passed the curve in the ravine and immediately halted, tensely observing the narrow ravine before him. A large pile of rocks blocked the path ahead of them, exactly at the point where the ravine began twisting again in a manner which could serve as a perfect spot for an ambush party. The mountain slope to the left of the narrowing path rose into a steep cliff.

The sensation of danger constricted his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. There was no room for doubt, he reflected; the rock pile blocking the path was clearly manmade. It would be only an hour's work to dismantle it—but the men dismantling it, and the entire column, would be hideously vulnerable to an ambush from above in the meantime. He cast his eyes upwards, trying to look through the mountainside with his gaze, imaging in his mind's eye the rebels hiding away, silently prepared, just waiting for him and his troops to ride into the trap. We were saved by pure luck, just because I chose this place to halt, he thought, angry at himself. I should have sent a scouting party ahead of us. He turned his horse around and instructed the nearby horsemen to head back. The force obediently and rapidly followed

his orders and turned back the way they came.

Nexus, the commander of the infantry company that followed in the footsteps of the cavalry, noticed the cavalry turning back and ordered his infantry to halt. The infantry halted at a place where the road converged with the ravine into a small valley, wide enough to enable the soldiers to spread across it. The cavalry arrived at a light canter and took up positions alongside them.

Tario intently scanned the ridge of the mountain overlooking them. The small valley where they had stopped was far safer than the narrow path ahead where they had nearly fallen prey to an ambush, but they still held an inferior position against any force which might assault them from the ground overlooking them. The sun was about to set. Within a short period Apollonius would arrive with the entire column and then the valley would be clogged up with hundreds of people. If the entire expedition were clogged into the small valley, they would place themselves in incredible peril in the case of an enemy attack.

Nexus approached him. "Tario, we need to act quickly!"

"What do you propose?" asked Tario, happy to share the responsibility.

"The slope is not incredibly steep", Nexus pointed at the top of the mountain. "I will take some of the men with me and secure the high ground. Then you can advance and break up the barrier down below."

Tario considered the possibilities facing them. "I'm joining you," he said, without giving Nexus the opportunity to express opposition.

The climb was more difficult than expected. Tario stopped

for a moment to catch his breath, feeling the blood pound in his temples. The sun was setting, and the sky had begun to redden. Behind him, fifty warriors were trying to keep up with his pace. Nexus, leading twenty especially fit warriors, was in front. They were climbing the mountain at a near run, grabbing on to rocks and bushes with their bare hands.

Suddenly, Nexus's voice rose loud and clear: "Enemy straight ahead!"

Nexus and his men had already deployed in a combat formation on the mountainside by the time Tario and the other warriors had reached them, huffing and puffing with the effort. About two hundred paces ahead of them, roughly above where the ravine had been blocked by the rock barrier, were fifty or so armed men, some standing and some hiding behind the rocks. The ambushers were shouting and arguing amongst themselves, gesticulating wildly. It was clear that they had made no preparation for their intended victims climbing up the mountain to their ambush position.

Tario took his place at the head of the force. Three lines of warriors advanced in perfect form up the mountain, their swords drawn and their tower shields concealing almost all of their bodies. The rebels continued to argue amongst themselves and could not make up their mind on how to conduct themselves—and then some of them began to flee.

Tario and his men increased their pace to a steady run. The final rebels, those brave enough to still hold the ridge-line, scattered in all direction in the face of the advancing professional soldiers. Some disappeared over the ridge, others ran back along the side of the mountain. The more heavily armed and armored soldiers chased the fleeing rebels,

hurling jeers and curses at their backs for a while, and then halted, gasping for air and smiling.

Apollonius was well satisfied with the developments, and ordered the establishment of a camp to pass the night in the valley before the makeshift barrier established by the rebels and dismantled by Tario's men. Soon, the din of organization filled the locale. Tree branches were rapidly gathered, and torches and bonfires were lit all over and around the camp. The dignitaries reclined in the tents put up for them, while the slaves labored at preparing a meal. The small valley was too narrow to hold all of them, so some of the soldiers spread out down the ravine. Apollonius gathered all of his officers and praised Tario to them, while giving him full credit for the detection and defeat of the rebel ambush.

"My lord, it is all thanks to Nexus," protested Tario humbly, "it was his idea to scale the mountain."

"You both have my full appreciation," responded Apollonius. "Let the men eat and rest. The rebels will not trouble us further tonight."

"It appears that the only thing they are good at is assaults on civilians and ambushes," said Tario. "They didn't really have any intention of fighting us."

"That is probably it," said Apollonius dismissively. "We will have to give some thought about how to capture and eliminate them, but we will cross that bridge when we reach it. Eat well; you deserve it."

Phryne curled up in a blanket in the back corner of the governor's wagon, leaning from without on the canvas of the

wagon. The camp had darkened as the fires slowly died down. Most of the soldiers had fallen asleep, full of a generously portioned supper and exhausted from the day-long march in the heavy heat. To her rear, between the campfires of the clerks and staff of the governor, faint conversations could be heard between those who were still awake. Within the wagon, Helena slept peacefully, her breath rising and lowering at a steady pace. The night was cold, sharply contrasting with the oppressive heat during the day. From time to time the chirps and calls of night birds could be heard. Phryne raised her eyes up to the stars, imagining herself spreading wings and flying towards them, to the heavenly dome above.

Sad thoughts rose up within her, mixing past, present, and future. She was sold as a slave when she was too young to know her parents. The only thing she was told about them was that they were poor Jews. Her knew name was granted to her by her new masters, who, impressed with her beauty, named her for a famous Athenian Hetaira. Legend had it that she was so beautiful that she served as the model for the statue of Aphrodite, the Hellene goddess of love and beauty. As a child-slave in the home of the governor of the Samaria province, she had spent most of her time in the kitchen and in various cleaning duties. Sometimes she was sent to the market or to various stores in the city, which is how she'd had the chance to wander the streets of the city. She walked barefoot, her brown hair sliding down her shoulders, drawing the attention of her male peers. When she grew from a girl into a young woman she began drawing more and more compliments and stares from the older merchants in the market, until they became a major annoyance. It was at

that time that the attitude of the women of the household towards her changed and became chilly and hostile.

Her beauty also drew the attention of the governor, who proved unable to ignore the attractive slave girl who had blossomed in his household. It was not long before she was assigned to the personal service of the governor and his household. Everyone in the governor's house knew that only particularly attractive young women served in this capacity—and that they were required to provide special services to the master of the household. Phryne was all too aware of the way the governor gazed upon her body every time she was in his presence. When she found out that the governor had ordered her and his mistress Helena to join him in his expedition to Jerusalem, she fearfully understood what she could expect once they arrived.

A prolonged howl from the other side of the ravine returned her back to reality. A howl immediately rose in response from her side of the ravine. Phryne shook and felt shivers run down her spine. The night suddenly seemed alive with all manners of sounds and for a moment it seemed to her that the very mountains overlooking the camp had begun to rumble and growl. A luminescent light of an unfamiliar character descended from the overlooking mountains into the ravine, accompanied by a growing thunderous rumble. As the rumbling sound grew so did the intensity of the light. Phryne wanted to scream and wake up Helena, but fear paralyzed her, and she could not speak, let alone move. Around her, people woke up from the noise and began to shout in panic, waking up their still-slumbering comrades. Within seconds, the situation became clear, but too late for

anyone to react. Massive balls of fire hurled down the mountain slopes into the camp, rolling with incredible speed into the ravine, some of them collapsing into piles of burning brambles and thorns, while others continued to roll intact through the camp, crushing and burning everything in their path—men, equipment, and wagons alike. More and more fireballs continued to roll down the mountainside, leaving destruction, panic, and death in their wake.

Within seconds the camp was gripped by chaos. The tethered horses and mules panicked, and those who managed to break free of their tethers rampaged throughout the camp in all directions, trampling and injuring both soldiers and slaves. Some of the beasts were injured when they stumbled over rocks, breaking their legs and collapsing, their cries of pain adding to the cacophony and panic. Flames lit up the entire camp, consuming everything around them.

And then the arrows began to fall on the camp. One moment there was the distant buzz of an unleashed bee-swarm, and immediately thereafter the night was pierced with sharp whistles, some of which ended with cries of terror from the injured. A rain of cruel arrows sought and found their targets, as if they had a malignant consciousness directing their paths.

Then, suddenly, there was silence. The mountains ceased raining down destruction on the valley below and seemed to pause to observe the result of their handiwork. Apollonius, bare-chested, his body glistening with cold sweat, arrived at a run from his flame-enshrouded tent, taking shelter behind his wagon. He stood by Phryne, not noticing her existence. He held a drawn sword in his hand, his eyes scurrying

from side to side in horror. His men—soldiers, clerks, and slaves—were fleeing in all directions up and down the ravine, consumed with fear and with no thought but flight on their minds. There were also some who took shelter, using their shields, hiding in between the rocks or behind a rare unburnt wagon. The injured and the dead lay scattered across the camp, their wounds bleeding and arrows protruding from their bodies. Arrows from the mountain slope once again fell on the camp, but this time not in dense volleys, but as single, carefully aimed shots, each arrow directed at a single target. Occasionally a heavy javelin was hurled from above as well, causing horrific wounds and instilling terror even when it missed its mark.

From her shelter at the flanks of the wagon, Phryne was the first to see the approaching figures. Under the cover of darkness, they were nearly invisible. The first figures were nearly at the camp before Apollonius noticed them. A cry of helpless rage rose from him as four groups of rebels charged down the lower slopes of the mountains, advancing into the ravine, directly at the governor's wagon, which had miraculously remained whole throughout the assault. The warriors of the first group wielded spears. Those in the front rank aimed them forward, whereas the others aimed them diagonally upwards in order to avoid harming their comrades. It was hardly a Macedonian phalanx, but it was still a surprising display of military organization from what Apollonius had imagined to be no more than a band of ragtag rebels. Two particularly muscular warriors led them, each wielding a sword in one hand and a tower shield in the other.

Night seemed to fall once more on the ravine, and an odd

moment of silence occurred as the cries of the wounded stilled. The four groups of the attacking force converged in front of the governor's wagon and then split, each to its assigned task. The first, headed by the two Herculean rebels, surrounded the governor's wagon in an arc. The second and third groups began to advance in parallel up the ravine. A fourth group stood ready at the downstream side of the ravine but did not advance.

Phryne glanced from side to side in trepidation. What had been, until a short time ago, the night camp of a well-ordered military force, was now no more than a chaotic scene of injured and dead men, scattered equipment, and fires run rampant. The lightly injured and a few lucky souls who were spared injury and had not taken the opportunity to flee were trying to aid their wounded comrades. Down the ravine, some soldiers were trying to gather arms and shields and organize into a fighting formation, intending to come to the aid of the governor, or perhaps just to prepare for the upcoming enemy attack. Regardless, the aimed arrow fire made it more difficult for them to do so.

The two Herculean warriors leading the force surrounding the governor's wagon strode forward and halted in front of Apollonius. Phryne stared at them, feeling somehow both connected to these rebels and distant from them, as if in a dream. She felt no fear; in fact, she barely felt anything. In the distance she heard Tario calling out the governor's name. The warrior closer to Apollonius aimed his sword at the governor's chest. He displayed none of the warrior's battlefield fury Phryne had expected. His stance and expression revealed nothing but self-confident power.

Apollonius, her master and the governor of Samaria, stood only an arm's length away from her, with his back to her. His body slackened, his shoulders stooped, and he pointed his sword at the ground.

"Judah," Apollonius slowly pronounced the name, his voice heavy with defeat. The Herculean warrior nodded without saying a word and lightly gestured at Apollonius, inviting him to attack and permitting him to make the first move. In spite of the darkness, Phryne thought that she noticed a sparkle of pleasure in his eyes, though his expression remained serious.

Loyal to the warrior's code on which he was raised, Apollonius accepted the offered opportunity with a certain relief. It was better to die in battle with a sword in hand. Phryne could no longer see Apollonius' face, but by the way he drew up and raised his head, she could sense his determined expression. He charged rapidly forward, extending his sword. His opponent responded immediately, taking a rapid diagonal half step forward, keeping his tower shield close, and extending his sword hand forward.

The exchange was so swift that Phryne could barely take it in. She choked down a whimper when she suddenly realized a blade was sticking out of the governor's bent back. She covered her mouth with both hands in terror. Apollonius stood for another moment and then the man who slew him pulled out his sword with a jerk and Apollonius collapsed in place, lifeless.

Judah sheathed his sword and bent over to retrieve the sword of the deceased Governor of Samaria, raising it high above his head in victory.

The few soldiers who yet remained fit and were attempting to form up into a fighting formation under Tario's command observed the occurrences from the distance. They turned away and clustered together, having lost the will to fight after the death of their governor.

Before he turned away, the eyes of the rebel leader and the Jewish slave girl met. She gasped, overcome by fear. She noticed his eyes widening in surprise. But then he nodded at her, as if in greeting. Phryne could swear that he even flashed a smile in her direction. For a moment time stood still: a battle raged around them, people were shouting and crying out, but Phryne knew that no harm would befall her. She smiled back in relief.

The commander of the rebels turned around, barked a short order, and began to advance down the ravine, his men at his back. Phryne plunged back into reality: it was the middle of the night in a dry wilderness streambed, and she was watching a battle in which the men of the group she had been a part of up until that time were being slaughtered by the rebels—her people and coreligionists.

The rebels advanced down the ravine, striking down soldiers too wounded to flee but who still wielded weapons. Their comrades continued to fire arrows from above. They met no real opposition. The army of the Governor of Samaria had been routed and was unable to resist.

Historical background

In the late second millennium BCE, the Children of Israel were divided into tribes, each tribe residing primarily on part of the Land of Canaan. The Tribes lived under the pressure of common external enemies such as the Sea Peoples, the Philistines, the Midianites, other nations and tribes (Amon, Moab, Edom, Aram) on the outskirts of Canaan, and the Egyptians to the South. To face these threats some of the tribes would occasionally join forces under the authority of a single leader, whose influence would sometimes include more than one tribe. Gradually, throughout this period, a belief in one supreme God grew, alongside belief and worship in other gods. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is a belief in the creation of a supreme god heading the divine hierarchy but ruling over many servitor and subject gods.

At some point, in the face of the growing power of the Philistine kingdoms and their cooperation in the struggle against the Tribes of Israel, voices within the Tribes supporting unity under a single king grew. Saul of the Tribe of Benjamin was anointed to be the first king of the Tribes of Israel. He was followed by King David, of the Tribe of Judah, the largest and apparently strongest of the Tribes of Israel. King David solidified his rule over all the Tribes of

Israel and extended his writ throughout the entire Land of Israel—and beyond. As part of the process of the unification of the Tribes into a single kingdom, Jerusalem was established as the Capital. King Solomon, David's heir, established the Temple in Jerusalem, which was declared to be the sole center of worship in the kingdom, with other centers of worship being forbidden. The High Priesthood was awarded to the priest Zadok, a longstanding loyalist of both David and Solomon.

The United Kingdom of Israel lasted no more than seventy years. Immediately following the death of King Solomon in the ninth century BCE, the kingdom split into the Kingdom of Judah under the rule of the house of David (who, aside from the Tribe of Judah, only ruled over the Tribe of Binyamin), and the Kingdom of Israel, which incorporated all the rest of the tribes under the rule of kings from a variety of dynasties.

The Kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 722 BCE by the then-dominant regional superpower, the Neo-Assyrian Empire. A significant portion of its population was exiled to the Assyrian heartland in northern Iraq and vanished from known history. Some of those who remained in the land were assimilated by the tribe of Judah; others apparently merged into the populations settled in the former Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and formed the basis for the formation of the Samaritan People, whose faith is similar to that of Judaism.

The Kingdom of Judah was led by two dynasties throughout its existence: the House of David and the House of Zadok. The House of David was the royal dynasty which

formally managed the kingdom. Under its purview were foreign policy, the military, tax collection, and so forth. The House of Zadok provided spiritual and religious leadership. From time to time a prophet would arise amongst the people, take center stage, and influence the kingdom through charismatic leadership and the strength of his personality—as well, of course, as his faith in bearing the word of God and ability to sway his audience to accept this certainty.

In the early sixth century BCE, the Kingdom of Judah came into conflict with the new regional superpower, Babylon. As a result, the First Temple was destroyed and the political, economic, cultural, and spiritual elite of the Kingdom of Judah were exiled to Babylon. From this time onwards, the royal dynasty was shunted aside and never again took center stage in Jewish history.

In Babylon, the exiles encountered an extraordinarily powerful and wealthy culture which constructed vast monuments and temples that dwarfed the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. Under the shock of their seeming insignificance, the exiles reforged their faith anew as a clearly defined monotheistic faith. Rather than losing their faith in the God of Israel and disappearing from history, as occurred to the Tribes of Israel exiled by the Assyrians (and many other nations who suffered the same fate under both the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires), the Jewish Exiles defined their God as a God holding dominion over all nations, including their conquerors, and their exile as an expression of divine punishment for their failure to adhere fully to his will.

Within a few decades, Babylon fell in turn to the Persian

Empire, which established a vast empire stretching across the known world from India to Kush (modern Sudan) and into the outskirts of Europe. The Persian self-perception was of themselves as kings of kings, and they permitted a wide-ranging level of autonomy to the kingdoms under their rule, as well as displaying religious tolerance towards all those who were loyal to their rule.

The Persian Empire found the exiled Jews, who were relatively literate and highly skilled but who lacked national ambitions or military power, to be reliable subjects. Persian rulers recruited Jews into both their military and civil administrations and permitted the Jews to maintain and establish communal cultural and religious institutions, which managed many aspects of Jewish life in the Persian Empire. Jews who so desired were permitted to return from Babylon to the Land of Israel and re-establish their Temple in Jerusalem.

Following the return to Zion and the establishment of the Second Temple, the Zadok dynasty was left in an exclusive leadership position over the Jewish People in the Land of Israel. The High Priest became their spiritual and national leader, a supreme and decisive authority in all fields of life, and the representative of the Jewish People towards external rulers and Jewish communities throughout the world.

In 334 BCE, Alexander of Macedon launched his campaign against the far larger Persian Empire; within a few years, he brought about the collapse of Persia and the establishment of a Hellenistic Empire in its place. The Land of Israel was conquered by Alexander in 332 BCE and became part of the new Hellenistic world order.

Following the death of Alexander the Great, his Empire collapsed into rival Hellenistic kingdoms ruled by his former generals. The leading kingdoms were Seleucia (centered on Syria and Mesopotamia, and, at its height, the Iranian Plateau), Macedonia, and Egypt. The Seleucid Empire and Egypt battled for control over Coele-Syria and Phoenicia (known today as Israel and part of Lebanon) for over a century and a half—wars which were named the Coele-Syria wars. In 202 BCE, during the fifth Coele-Syria war, the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, also known as “the Great,” captured the Land of Israel from Egypt. The events described in the historical novel series *Lions of Judea* occur during this period, when the Land of Israel is under the Seleucid rule of the sons and heirs of Antiochus III.

The Hellenistic age brought with it a widespread immigration of “Greeks” (residents of Greece proper, Macedon, Epirus, Thessaly, Thrace, and Asia Minor who shared the Hellenistic culture were perceived by the people of the East as “Greeks”) throughout the ancient East. These “Greeks” brought with them their customs and culture, established polis cities upon the same pattern as polis in the Greek homeland, and formed islands of Hellenistic culture and influence. Throughout the conquered territories in the East, a three-layered social hierarchy formed. The highest position was held by “Hellenes,” which included people who immigrated to the east from Hellas and its proximate neighbors. The second was that of Hellenizers, locals who adopted Hellenistic culture. The third was that of locals who remained loyal to their original cultures, including language, faith and tradition, customs, and lifestyles. An unusual and

fourth component of this hierarchy were the Jews, who had, due to prior exiles under force and voluntary migration, formed Jewish communities throughout the East where they safeguarded separate customs, lifestyles and cultures, though they interacted freely with their gentile surroundings in secular aspects of life.

In Judea, the heartland of the Land of Israel and the ancient kingdom of Judah, the High Priests of the house of Zadok continued to lead the Jewish People. Alongside the High Priest existed the great Knesset (assembly) institution, which was made up of elders and notables. However, this was apparently a body that lacked any real authority and which was largely under the influence and perhaps even control of the High Priest. Over time, social and economic shifts took place amongst the Jews in the Land of Israel and abroad. Central among such shifts were (a) Hellenization; (b) the development of the scholastic sages in the Land of Israel; and (c) the growth of local leadership in the Jewish communities around the world, which ceased to be based on the priesthood. These trends undermined the status of the ruling priestly family in Judea.

The status of the priests in general, and especially that of the high priesthood in Jerusalem, gradually declined into an open struggle for power between the priests of the House of Zadok and the Hellenizers, with the sages seeking to establish their new authority in this context. During the period described in *The Lions of Judea* series, this struggle reached its peak.

The first book in the series, *The Rise of the Maccabees*, describes the events leading to the collapse of the ancient

priestly dynasty. Its fall heralded the near extinction of monotheism—which at that time existed only in the form of Judaism—and the rise of Hellenizer rule over the land in Israel. Concurrently, the Roman superpower rose to dominate the Mediterranean basin. The second book in the series, *The Maccabee Rebellion*, describes the incredible story of the Maccabee family, who led a nation of farmers and priests to reconnect with their heroic warrior past to seek, and eventually achieve independence.