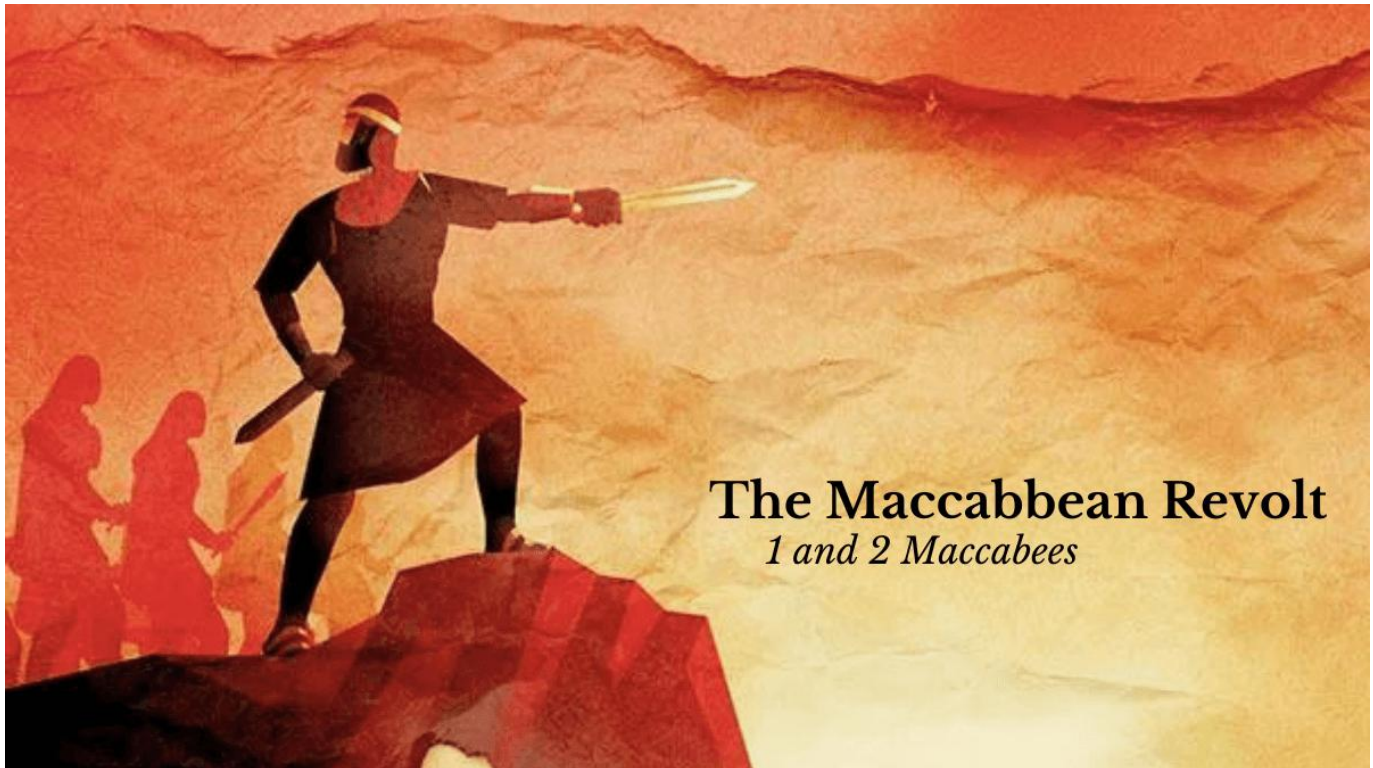


Understanding the Books of Maccabees

In our survey course of the Old Testament, we have just finished the *Minor Prophets*, which brought us into the Post-Exilic period of Jewish history. Maccabees is placed some 280 years after the time of Nehemiah, Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The two Books of Maccabees are not prophetic books but are best thought of as historical books in the tradition of the *Book of Judges*. Like *Judges* it tells of a time in the history of the people of God when their identity was at stake - would they or would they not be covenant people as they were surrounded by other nations. Like *Judges*, at critical points, a key figure arises to restore some aspect of the covenant relationship - and like *Judges*, the ones raised up are, in part, controversial.



The Historical Context

After the Babylonian Exile (587-537 BC), the province of Judah - including Jerusalem - was never independent but always existed as a province of some greater empire. For most of the period it was better described as a city-state with “boundaries” approximately 20 miles around the city of Jerusalem. There were small periods when benign neglect from the Emperors allowed some degrees of freedom, but the province was always dependent on financial support, permissions, and owed allegiance to the series of empires that sought control of the land bridge between Egypt, Asia Minor, the lands of the Near East.

Cyrus the Great of Persia was the king/emperor who directed the Jews to return to Judah and Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its Temple (537 BC). The Persian control of the region endured for about 200 years. Persian dominance over the region eventually fell before the campaigns of Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great (332-323 BC) the king of Macedon, conquered the Persian Empire, including Judah in 332 BCE. Under Alexander, Judah became part of the Hellenistic world, though he allowed a degree of religious and cultural autonomy.

The Ptolemaic Rule (323-198 BC) - After Alexander's death in 323 BC, his empire was divided among his generals, leading to the creation of several Hellenistic kingdoms. Judah initially came under the

control of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ruled from Egypt. Under Ptolemaic rule, Judah enjoyed a relatively peaceful period, with the local Jewish leadership (especially the High Priests) maintaining some authority in religious and civil matters. However, Hellenistic influences began to permeate Jewish society.

The Seleucid Rule (198-167 BC) - The two legacies of Alexander eventually came into conflict as the eastern Seleucid Empire sought to reestablish the full Alexandrian Empire. In 198 BC, Judah was taken over by the Seleucid Empire following the Battle of Panium (near Caesarea-Philippi), where the Seleucids defeated the Ptolemies. The Seleucids, ruled from Syria, initially allowed religious freedom but later sought to impose Hellenistic culture more forcefully.

Antiochus III, the Seleucid king, was relatively tolerant of Jewish customs. However, his successor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (reigned 175-164 BC), eventually and aggressively promoted Hellenization and attempted to suppress Judaism, leading to increased tension in Judah. Antiochus IV's policies included banning Jewish religious practices, desecrating the Temple in Jerusalem by installing an altar to Zeus, and forcing Jews to adopt Greek customs. His harsh measures provoked widespread unrest and resistance among the Jewish population. In his own way, he was following the practice of the ancient Assyrians: eliminate the native language, customs and religious practices and you thereby eliminate the nexus of any future rebellion.

The Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BC) began in 167 BC as a response to the oppressive policies of Antiochus IV. The revolt was led by Mattathias, a Jewish priest, and his sons, particularly Judas Maccabeus. The Maccabees (also known as the Hasmoneans) led a guerrilla war against the Seleucid forces. The revolt culminated in the recapture of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Temple in 164 BC, an event commemorated by the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. Although the conflict continued for several years, the Maccabees eventually secured a degree of autonomy for Judah.

The Maccabees eventually established the Hasmonean dynasty, which ruled Judah as an independent state, initially as a client kingdom under the Seleucids and later as a fully independent entity. The Hasmonean rule marked a period of Jewish sovereignty that lasted until the Roman conquest in 63 BC.

Where to start?

Oddly, the 2nd Maccabees might be a better starting point. The first book records the deliverance of Israel that God worked through the family of records the deliverance of Israel that God worked through the family of Mattathias (1 Mc 2:1)—especially through his three sons, Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, and his grandson, John Hyrcanus. The writer compares their virtues and their exploits with those of Israel's ancient heroes, the Judges, Samuel, and David.

The central figure of the narrative is Judas Maccabeus, who leads a successful guerrilla campaign against the Seleucid forces, eventually recapturing Jerusalem and rededicating the Temple, an event commemorated by the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. The book goes on to describe the continued struggles of the Jewish people under the leadership of Judas' brothers, Jonathan and Simon, who both play key roles in securing Jewish autonomy and eventually establishing a brief period of independence for Judea.

Throughout the book, the Maccabees are depicted as pious leaders who are zealous for the Law of Moses and dedicated to the defense of their faith and people against foreign oppression. The narrative emphasizes the themes of faithfulness to God's covenant, the importance of religious freedom, and the righteousness of resistance against tyranny.

The Second Book of Maccabees is not a continuation of the First Book, but a completely independent book. While it covers some of the same time and materials as the first book, its value is that it covers far

more details and information about the parties and factions in Jerusalem prior to the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Selucid Emperor.

The book has a formal prologue and epilogue and is structured around three attacks on the Jerusalem Temple by:

1. **Heliodorus during the reign of Seleucus IV** (180 BC | 2 Mc 3:1-40)

Heliodorus was a chancellor of Seleucus IV Philopator who attempted to tax the Temple in Jerusalem. The Seleucid Empire of the era suffered under the harsh indemnities imposed by the Treaty of Apamea: the Seleucids had to pay the Roman Republic a substantial amount of tribute each year to remain in compliance. This likely resulted in higher taxes and a general search for money by the government which could be used to pay the Romans off. Around 178 BCE, Seleucus sent Heliodorus to Jerusalem to collect money, possibly after hearing rumors of wealth hidden in the Temple in Jerusalem. 2 Mc 3:24 reports that Heliodorus entered the Temple in Jerusalem in order to take its treasure, but was turned back by spiritual beings. “*But just as Heliodorus was arriving at the treasury with his bodyguards, the Lord of spirits and all authority produced an apparition so great that those who had been bold enough to accompany Heliodorus were panic-stricken at God’s power and fainted away in terror.*”

2. **Antiochus IV Epiphanes** (167 BC | 2 Mc 3:40 - 10:8)

The Seleucid Emperor, brother of Seleucus IV and his successor. Antiochus's often eccentric behavior and capricious actions led some of his contemporaries to call him *Epimanes*, “The Mad,” a wordplay on his title Epiphanes. His persecution of Jerusalem and profanation of the Temple are described in great detail in both *Books of Maccabees*.

3. **Nicanor under Demetrius I** (161 BC | 2 Mc 14:9 - 15:37)

Nicanor was a Syrian general who served Antiochus IV and a subsequent successor, Demetrius I. He fought against the Maccabeans under both rulers, but was apparently also assigned as governor over Jerusalem. Like Heliodorus he schemed to extract money/gold from the Judeans.

Before and Between

Where 1st Maccabees is a hero-account of the Hasmonean family in restoring the Temple, leading Judah to some semblance of independence, 2nd Maccabees makes clear there was “trouble in River City” before, during and after the victories of the Maccabeans. Judah was a minor player on the board of world empires, occupying a place on the land bridge between Rome/Greece - Egypt - Syria/Persia. Depending on the year, the alliances, and machinations of those who would be king, there were always Jews who were vying for power, influence, and especially the positions of High Priest of the Temple and Tax Collector. As well, there were “renegades” who wanted to accommodate the way of Hellenistic life. At the center of such accommodations was the *gymnasium*. This was a source of internal conflict with the Jewish community.

According to a decree recorded in the works of the 1st century AD Jewish historian, Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*) the pre-Maccabean era of Judah/Jerusalem was governed by a council in which the High Priest had a prominent role. Also found in *Antiquities* is a decree from Antiochus III affirming the right of the Jews to live according to their ancestral religion.

The defeat of Antiochus by the Romans in 190 BC placed the Seleucid Empire under a heavy indemnity. As noted above, the Temple treasury became a target and means to satisfy the indemnity. But not to be lost is that at the same time 2 Maccabees recounts how Jason, the brother of the High Priest Onias III

outbid his brother to take over the office. This practice seems to have certainly been continued under Antiochus IV. The narrative of 2 Maccabees holds up for us the rivalries with the Jewish families for control and positions of leadership - often as a means to enrich themselves. A close reading of both Maccabees would yield a long list of competing families (Hasmoneans, Zadokite, Hakkoz, Bilgah, Jakim, Tobian, and others), several of which Josephus reports as urging Antiochus IV to invade Jerusalem.

At the same time, there seemed to be a group among the common folk called the Hasideans, a name that means “pious” or “loyal” ones that was opposed to all the intrigue and machinations of the key families. Clearly, not everyone thought all was well in Judah.

Antiochus IV

Simply said, each of the books treats Antiochus IV and his motivations differently. Both books agree that he built a gymnasium and both agree that in the end he imposes a Hellenistic cult on Judea, profanes the Temple, and prohibits Mosaic Law. They disagree on the motivation.

The larger history of the rule of Antiochus IV is that he encouraged the maintenance of local customs and traditions and did not seek to suppress them. Some historians offer that a civil war broke out among families seeking the position of High Priest (Jason and Menelaus) - a last straw for the emperor who was just forced to stop his invasion of Egypt by Roman order and again has to deal with truculent Judea. It is at this point in history that harsh treatment of Jerusalem and the Temple occurs. This and two subsequent invasions by Selucid armies likely indicate that the emperor decided suppression of Judaism was the only solution to keep peace in Jerusalem.

Antiochus would later revoke the persecution (2 Mc 11:27-33) but it remains a bit of a historical enigma as to why Antiochus was so at odds with his policies in all other vassal lands.

With that I think we have a much better context for 1st Maccabees, perhaps simply described by an outline:

I. The Hellenization and Persecution of the Jews (1 Maccabees 1:1-64)

1. The Rise of Alexander the Great (1:1-10)

- Alexander's conquests and the spread of Greek culture.
- The division of his empire among his generals after his death.

2. Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the Hellenization of Israel (1:11-15)

- Introduction of Hellenistic practices in Israel.
- Some Jews adopted Greek customs, abandoning the law.

3. The Desecration of the Temple (1:16-64)

- Antiochus' campaigns in Egypt.
- The plundering and desecration of the Jerusalem Temple.
- The imposition of pagan worship and severe persecution of faithful Jews.

II. The Maccabean Revolt (1 Maccabees 2:1-9:22)

1. The Revolt Led by Mattathias (2:1-70)

- Mattathias' refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods.
- The killing of a Hellenized Jew and the call to arms.
- Mattathias and his sons flee to the hills, beginning the revolt.

2. Leadership of Judas Maccabeus (3:1-9:22)

- Judas Maccabeus assumes leadership after Mattathias' death.

- Series of successful battles against the Seleucid forces.
- Purification and rededication of the Temple (Hanukkah).
- Continued warfare and alliances with Rome and Sparta.
- The death of Judas Maccabeus.

III. The Leadership of Jonathan and Simon (1 Maccabees 9:23-16:24)

1. Jonathan Takes Command (9:23-12:53)

- Jonathan succeeds Judas and continues the struggle.
- Secures leadership through diplomacy and military success.
- Establishment of an alliance with Rome.
- Jonathan's capture and eventual execution.

2. Simon's Leadership and the Establishment of Jewish Independence (13:1-16:24)

- Simon assumes leadership after Jonathan.
- Consolidation of power and the establishment of peace.
- Recognition of Jewish independence by the Seleucid king.
- Simon's achievements and his murder by Ptolemy.

By the way

The name Maccabee, probably meaning “hammer,” is actually applied in the Books of Maccabees to only one man, Judas, third son of the priest Mattathias and first leader of the revolt against the Seleucid kings who persecuted the Jews (1 Mc 2:4, 66; 2 Mc 8:5, 16; 10:1, 16). Traditionally the name has come to be extended to the brothers of Judas, his supporters, and even to other Jewish heroes of the period, such as the seven brothers (2 Mc 7). Another popular etymology of the word “Maccabee” is that it is composed of the initial letters of a verse the Jewish people sang after the Lord divided the water of the Reed Sea during the escape from Egypt: “*Mi kamocha ba'eilim Hashem* (מי כמוך באיילים), “*Who is like you among the gods, O LORD.*” (Ex 15:11) It is said that this phrase was the battle cry of Maccabees, written upon their banners and shields.

Why part of the Deuterocanonical Books? Controversial Doctrines

When the folks at BibleProject were asked if they were going to cover the Deuterocanonical books, the comment was made in passing that the books were theologically not needed, added nothing, and, for example, “Maccabees seems to be a marketing and promotion campaign for the Hasmonean dynasty.” At some level, the point has some insight. However, the Protestant Reformers had several theological concerns regarding the Book of Maccabees, which contributed to their decision to exclude these books from the Protestant Bible. These concerns were centered around doctrines and practices that the Reformers believed were incompatible with core Christian teachings as they understood them. Here are the key concerns cited by the Reformers:

Doctrine of Purgatory

- **2 Maccabees 12:45-46:** The passage in 2 Maccabees describes Judas Maccabeus making atonement for the dead so that they might be delivered from their sin, which suggests the practice of praying for the dead and implies a belief in an intermediate state where souls could be purified after death. This was interpreted by the Catholic Church as support for the doctrine of Purgatory.
- **Reformers' Concern:** The Reformers rejected the doctrine of Purgatory, arguing that it had no basis in the canonical books of the Old or New Testaments. They believed that the idea of an intermediate state where souls are purified before entering heaven undermined the sufficiency of

Christ's sacrifice and the doctrine of justification by faith alone - even as they ignored the text of Revelation 21:27 that nothing unclean or impure will enter heaven, the refiner's fire of Malachi 3, and other texts that indicate a purgation of the last vestiges of corrupt humanity.

Prayers for the Dead

- **2 Maccabees 12:44-46:** As mentioned earlier, this passage discusses the offering of prayers and sacrifices for the dead. The text praises the act of praying for the dead, suggesting that it is beneficial for their salvation.
- **Reformers' Concern:** The Reformers argued that this practice had no basis in the canonical Scriptures and was contrary to their understanding of salvation. They held that after death, a person's eternal destiny is sealed, making prayers for the dead ineffective and theologically unsound.

A Catholic Counterpoint

The Catholic Church teaches the "Communion of Saints," which refers to the spiritual solidarity between the faithful on earth, the souls in Purgatory, and the saints in Heaven. All members of the Church, whether living or deceased, are united in Christ and can assist each other through prayer. The Scriptural basis is:

- Hebrews 12:1 refers to a "great cloud of witnesses" surrounding Christians, implying that those in Heaven are aware of and concerned with the lives of those on earth.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 emphasizes the unity of the Body of Christ, where all members are interconnected.

It is part of a broader understanding of Intercessory Prayer. Catholics believe that just as Christians on earth can pray for one another, those in Heaven can also pray for us. The saints and angels can intercede on behalf of those on earth. The Scriptural basis is:

- Revelation 5:8 describes the saints in Heaven offering the prayers of the faithful to God, symbolized as "golden bowls full of incense."
- James 5:16 underscores the efficacy of the prayers of a righteous person, which is extended to those who are in Heaven.

As regards the unique Mediatorship of Christ, the Catholic Church acknowledges that Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). However, this does not exclude the participation of others in intercession, as all intercession is ultimately through Christ and dependent on His unique mediatorship. As such, the Saints and angels, as part of the Body of Christ, participate in His mediation by interceding for others. Their intercession does not detract from Christ's unique role but rather is a way in which His grace is made manifest.

Sources

- Robert Doran, "The First Book of Maccabees" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Old Testament Survey* (Abingdon Press, Nashville | 2005)
- Robert Doran, "The Second Book of Maccabees" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Old Testament Survey* (Abingdon Press, Nashville | 2005)