

1 MACCABEES

The Final Period of the Old Testament (Part One)

Chapters 1-16

The Bible is silent about the history of the Jews from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (about 400BC) until the time of the Maccabees revolt (around 165BC). But in the larger world, that period of about 250 years was one of intense political activity, a period in which the Persian empire weakened and crumbled before the Greeks led by a young king, Alexander the Great.

Alexander (who had been a student of Aristotle) had a deep love for everything Greek and dreamed of transforming and uniting the Eastern world by means of Greek culture, including its language. After winning many battles, the young king died in his early thirties in Babylon in 323BC.

In his book *Salvation History – an Introduction to Biblical Theology*, Fr. Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., states that Alexander’s dream of one world occurred in a way he would never have dreamed. He writes:

Paradoxical as it might appear, Alexander’s dream of one world was eventually brought to a far more successful realization through the power of prayer and the Spirit than through that of sword and armor. In the first fifty years after Christ’s death, Christianity swept like a wind-driven fire through the world which Alexander had conquered—Christianity, in which there was neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor freeman, but all men one in Christ. On the natural level this rapid extension of Christ’s Church owed a sizeable debt to Alexander whose conquests had spread the Greek language throughout the civilized world of his time. It was with that language, and because of its universality, that the first Christian preachers, notably St. Paul, were able to announce effectively the good news of the world’s salvation (p.130).

Let’s now go back to the historical context for the books of Maccabees. After Alexander’s death, his kingdom is divided up among his generals. Two of the generals are Ptolemy and Seleucus. Both of these dynasties will rule the Palestine territory in the coming years. For about one hundred years, Palestine is ruled by General Ptolemy and his successors. Initially, these rulers were tolerant of Israel’s religious beliefs and practices. But by then, the Greek way of life, called “Hellenism” (from *Hellen*,

meaning Greek) has spread to all of the lands that Alexander had conquered. The civil leaders seek to “Hellenize” their people as a way of achieving unity. The upper class in Judah (now called Judea) embrace the Greek way of life for business reasons. This creates a great tension in Judea between those who believe in a future under Hellenistic culture and those who resist it and see it as pagan, and are unfaithful to the Israelite religion.

The conflict escalates. About 198BC, the Seleucid dynasty defeats the Ptolemies and takes over the Palestine territory. At first they were tolerant of Israel’s religion even as they pushed to Hellenize the people. But when Antiochus IV becomes king of the Syrian section of Alexander’s empire, everything changes drastically for the faithful Jew.

Antiochus IV is infuriated at how some Jews continue to resist the hellenization of their city and towns. So he begins a campaign to *destroy* Judaism. He builds a gymnasium for pagan games near the Temple. He forbids under the pain of death the honored observances of the Mosaic covenant: circumcision, Sabbath and sacrifice. He confiscates their copies of the Old Testament and burns them publicly. He loots their beloved Temple and, as a final horror, sets up on the altar of holocausts a statue of the pagan god Zeus. What began as the imposition of an alien culture ends as a full-scale religious persecution of devout Jews who are determined to hold on to the religious beliefs and practices of their ancestors.

The Maccabees. The family which spearheads the revolt against Antiochus is known as the Maccabees. The leader and head of the family is Mattathias, an aged priest. After Mattathias dies, his sons take up the fight. Judas, the third son, is the most skillful fighter in the family. Because of his fighting skills, he is called Maccabeus, “the Hammer”—the name the family becomes identified with. In time the family and their descendants become known as the “Hasmoneans”—perhaps from some ancestor named Hasmon. When the successors of Judas become too worldly and take on the trappings of the princes of the Hellenistic world and, worst of all, proclaim

themselves high priests, the most observant Jews, known as “Hasidists” (“pious ones”), revolt.

The story told in 1 and 2 Maccabees covers about forty years—from the accession of Antiochus IV in 175BC to the death of Simon in 134BC. 1Maccabees was probably written by a Palestinian Jew around 100BC. In its introduction to Maccabees, the Jerusalem Bible states:

“For despite the space he devotes to battle and political intrigue, the author of 1 Maccabees means to write a religious history. For him the nation’s distress is a punishment for sin, and the successes of his leading figures are won by the help of God. He is a Jew, jealous for the faith which he perceives to be at stake in the struggle between pagan infiltration and ancestral custom, he is therefore an uncompromising foe of hellenization and an ardent admirer of the heroes who fought for Law and Temple, winning first religious liberty and, next, national independence. His story tells how Judaism, the trustee of revelation, was preserved to the world” (p.655).

Division of chapters of 1Maccabees

- Part 1:** Brutal suppression of Judaism by Antiochus Epiphanes (Chapter 1)
- Part 2:** Mattathias initiates a revolt (Chapter 2)
- Part 3:** Judas Maccabeus leads the holy war (Chapters 3-9)
- Part 4:** Jonathan leads the revolt (Chapters 9-12)
- Part 5:** Simon leads the revolt (Chapters 13-16)

PART 1: BRUTAL SUPPRESSION OF JUDAISM BY ANTIOCHUS EPIPHANES

CHAPTER 1: Events that led to the Maccabean revolt

“In those days there appeared in Israel men who were breakers of the law, and they seduced many people, saying: ‘Let’s go and make an alliance with the Gentiles all around us....’” (v.11)

A bloody confrontation takes place between the Jews and Seleucids, whose leader is now Antiochus Epiphanes. Verse 8 tells us that after Alexander dies, his kingdom is divided between his generals. After this division, Palestinian Jews find themselves caught between two rival kingdoms; eventually, the Seleucid kingdom prevails and takes over Palestine in 198BC.

When Antiochus Epiphanes becomes king of the Seleucids, he continues the policy of hellenization—imposing the Greek way of life on the countries he has conquered. He builds a gymnasium in Jerusalem, a symbol of Greek athletic and intellectual life, the chief instrument of Hellenistic propaganda. Jewish youth who go to the gymnasium are often won over to the pagan ways of Greek culture. A perennial theme throughout the Old Testament is that the people want to be “like their neighbors,” whereas God wants them to be holy and chosen, consecrated people, clearly *not* like everyone else.

Jewish tradition is clear: if Israel is faithful to the covenant, things will go well for them and vice versa. When the people start to embrace the ways of pagans, we can expect trouble.

Verses 21-40—Hellenizing policies of Antiochus. Antiochus persists in carrying out his destructive policies: Jerusalem is destroyed, its walls torn down, the sanctuary defiled, and a citadel housing foreigners and apostates established in a corner of the Temple area. The narrative describing these events is interspersed with two laments (vv 24-28, 36-40) resembling those that were sung after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (see Book of Lamentations).

Verses 41-61—Reaction of the Jews to the Hellenizing policies. The brutal religious persecution of the Jewish faith continues, reaching its climax when the pagan god Zeus’ “horrible abomination” is erected in the Holy of Holies (v.54). Those who refuse to go along with the policies are executed (v.50). Verse 52 states that *“many of the people abandoned the law, joined them and committed evil in the land.”* Collaboration with Antiochus brings with it economic and political benefits that some of the Jews do not wish to miss out on. On the other hand, *“many in Israel were determined and resolved in their hearts not to eat anything unclean; they preferred to die rather than be defiled with unclean food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die”* (vv 62-63).

Pause: What are examples of ways that Christians are pressured into adapting secular values contrary to the gospel of Christ?

PART 2: MATTATHIAS INITIATES A REVOLT

CHAPTER 2: Mattathias rises up

“Mattathias said, ‘Woe is me! Why was I born to see the ruin of my people and the ruins of the holy city, and to sit idle while it is given into the hands of enemies, and the sanctuary into the hands of strangers?’” (v.7)

We are introduced to the head of the family who dominates the rest of this book. His name is Mattathias. His initial reaction to the horrible things happening in his country, especially Jerusalem, is lament (vv 8-13) and mourning.

Verses 15-46—Mattathias sparks off a revolt. Representatives of the king come to Modein to get the locals to comply with the new policy of the king. The king’s officers seek to bribe Mattathias into abandoning his religion and leading others to follow him. Mattathias responds: *“God forbid that we should forsake the law and the commandments”* (v.21). When a fellow Jew comes forward to sacrifice on the pagan altar, Mattathias kills him and the king’s messenger. Then he says: *“Let everyone who is zealous for the law and who stands by the covenant follow after me. Thereupon he fled to the mountains with his sons...”* (v.28). This incident sparks off the Maccabean Revolt, which goes on for seven years (167BC to 160BC) when the Jews are able to establish an independent state. One purpose of 1Maccabees is to establish the legitimacy of violence as a way to end the threat Antiochus posed to Judaism. One way to do that is to liken Mattathias’ action to that of Phinehas, the priest who killed Israelites who worshipped Baal (Num 25:6-14).

When the officers of the king take after those who flee to the desert out of respect for the Sabbath, the Israelites surrender to a violent death. Mattathias and his followers mourn the passing of their fellow Israelites, but they are not willing to surrender so easily. They decide to even fight on the Sabbath so that *“we may not die as our kinsmen died in the hiding places”* (v.41).

In verse 42, Mattathias and his sons are joined by a group of Hasideans, devout Jews but also mighty warriors. They strike down ‘sinners’ (Hellenizing Jews) and the ‘arrogant’ (Antiochus’ people) and save the law from the Gentiles.

Verses 49-36—Farewell address and death of Mattathias. Before he dies, Mattathias gives a moving address to his sons about the importance of fidelity to the law. After listing a number of their ancestors who remained faithful under duress, he says: *“Children! Be courageous and strong in keeping the law, for by it you shall be glorified”* (v.64). After handing over the military leadership role to his third son Judas, he blesses them and dies.

Pause: Who are some zealous leaders in our world today? How do you feel about the use of violence as a way to achieve freedom from oppression?

PART 3: JUDAS MACCABEUS LEADS THE HOLY WAR

CHAPTER 3:1-4:35: With God on his side, Judas is invincible

“Judas said: ‘It is easy for the many to be overcome by the few; in the sight of Heaven there is no difference between deliverance by many or by few for victory in war does not depend upon the size of the army but in the strength that comes from Heaven.’” (v.18)

Those of us who feel good about the victory of the small guys over the big and much more talented guys, will love chapters 3 and 4 of this book. These chapters remind us of God’s victory over the powerful Egyptians at the Red Sea and David’s triumph over the mighty Goliath. In each battle described in these chapters, all the odds are stacked against Judas and his army, yet amazingly they succeed in each case in pulling off a great victory. Why? Because Judas firmly places his trust in God. Before each battle, Judas prays and trusts that God will give him victory. Prior to one battle, Judas even *reduces* the size of his army (13:56) to make it clear to all that victory comes from God and not from the army. After each victory, Judas gives praise to God.

4:36-61—Purification of the Temple. When Judas and his followers arrive at the temple, they find it a sorry sight: *“the sanctuary was desolate, the altar desecrated, the gates burnt, weeds growing in the courts...and the priests’ chambers demolished”* (v.38). Judas’ first reaction is one of lamentation.

Then Judas chooses ‘blameless priests’ (ones who are *not* supporters of the hellenizers) to purify the sanctuary, a task which involves building a new altar and obtaining new vessels and furnishings. When the work of purification is completed, the Temple is rededicated to the Lord amidst great rejoicing that lasts eight days. The rededication takes place on December 14, 164BC, exactly three years after it was desecrated.

This wonderful event in Israel’s history—a military defeat over a powerful enemy that paved the way for the rededication of the Temple—is the origin of the Jewish feast of *Hanukkah* (meaning dedication) or the Feast of Lights. While this feast is not mentioned in Jewish canonical texts, it became a popular festival, especially after the establishment of the modern State of Israel. The rededication involves rekindling the Temple’s Menorah (lampstand with seven branches). Jews observe this festival at home by lighting one candle or a special Hanukkah Menorah each night.

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapters 3 and 4? What are your impressions of Judas as a leader?

CHAPTER 5: Judas responds to the persecution and execution of Jews

“When the Gentiles round about heard that the altar had been rebuilt and the sanctuary consecrated as before, they were very angry. So they decided to destroy the descendants of Jacob who were among them, and they began to massacre and persecute the people.” (vv 1-2)

Judas and his army respond to the hatred of Jews that sprang up amongst the Gentiles when they see how the Jews refuse to kowtow to the Hellenizing policies of Antiochus. Rebuilding the sanctuary of the Temple and keeping their own form of worship are an insult to the king. As we read chapter 5, we notice how God blesses Judas with many victories. The only ones who suffer defeat are those who try to make a “name for themselves” (vv 61, 67).

The Colledgeville Commentary notes: “The headiness of victories won by the Maccabees should not distract them or the reader from the real purpose of the military operations: to bring salvation to God’s people, not to provide opportunities for individuals to realize personal ambitions” (p.379).

Pause: Life is not about us, but about allowing God to use us to serve others and give him the glory. Comment.

CHAPTER 6: Death of Antiochus IV

“But I now recall the evils I did in Jerusalem, when I carried away all the vessels of gold and silver that were in it, and for no cause gave orders that the inhabitants of Judah be destroyed. I know that this is why these evils have overtaken me; and now I am dying, in bitter grief, in a foreign land.” (vv 12-13)

Commenting on verses 1-13, Scripture scholar Leslie Hoppe, O.F. M., writes:

“As one should expect, the author of 1 Mc describes Antiochus’ death as a consequence of what he did to Jerusalem. Indeed, he has Antiochus himself make this assertion in the course of a confession he makes in the presence of his courtiers as he was dying. For the author of 1 Mc, this was the supreme irony: While Antiochus was on his deathbed, the Jews were ending his desecration of Jerusalem’s temple. Once again Jerusalem would be a ‘holy city,’ i.e., set apart for the service of God. Antiochus, however, would be left to die ‘in bitter grief, in a foreign land.’ For 1 Mc the death of Antiochus was the triumph of divine justice.”

The rest of chapter 6 describes a campaign of Antiochus’ men against Judas which ends in a peace treaty (vv 55-63).

CHAPTER 7: Defeat of Nicanor

“Judas uttered this prayer: ‘When they who were sent by the king blasphemed, your angel went out and killed a hundred and eighty-five thousand of them. In the same way, crush this army before us today, and let the rest know that Nicanor spoke wickedly against your sanctuary; judge him according to his wickedness.’” (vv 41-42)

Verses 1-25 describes the intrigues of Alcimus, a Jew who wants very much to be high priest but who also embraces the hellenization of Israel.

Verses 26-50 relate Judas' impressive victory over Nicanor, a man with a big army who hates the Jews. In these verses, God is asked to do to Nicanor what he did to Sennacherib (2Kgs 19:32-36). God obliges.

Pause: When it comes to great battles here or in Europe, past or present, which one victory stands out for you?

CHAPTER 8: Treaty with the Romans

“Judas had heard of the reputation of the Romans. They were valiant fighters and acted amiably to all who took their side. They established a friendly alliance with all who applied to them.” (v.1)

The Collegeville Commentary notes: “Judas attempts to break the stalemate of power among the Jews by engaging the Romans as allies. The description of the Romans is decidedly positive in tone. The author has not yet had direct experience of them. He is at pains to point out how similar the Romans are to the Jews! He especially respects their renowned organization and military power as well as their longstanding opposition to the Greeks” (p.383).

While Judas may have thought it a good idea to enter into an alliance with Rome, the prophets often warn against foreign alliances. Instead they ought to trust God. The consequences of Judas' alliance with Rome will not be seen until later, when the Roman General Pompey invades Jerusalem and captures it in 63BC. Not in vain did Isaiah liken earthly powers to the broken reed of a staff, “which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it” (Is 36:6).

9:1-21—Death of Judas. Despite the big victory over Nicanor and even after the return of the ambassadors from Rome with what looks like a great deal, it seems that Judas does not have wide support among the people. Verse 6 tells us that the morale among the soldiers is very low. On previous occasions, when the odds were stacked heavily against Judas and his men, he turned to God and prepared for battle with prayer. On this occasion, Judas adopts a fatalistic approach and speaks about dying with bravery. Judas and his men fight with bravery, but in the end they are defeated and Judas is killed.

PART 4: JONATHAN TAKES OVER LEADERSHIP

CHAPTER 9:23-73

“Then all the friends of Judas came together and said to Jonathan: ‘Since your brother Judas died, there has been no one like him to oppose our enemies, Bacchides and those who are hostile to our nation. Now therefore we have chosen you today to be our ruler and leader in his place, and to fight our battle.’” (vv 28-30)

After the death of Judas, the Maccabean revolt is almost totally wiped out. Tired of being attacked by Bacchides, governor of the province, the friends of Judas ask his younger brother Jonathan to be their leader. Even though Jonathan has much less resources than Judas, he successfully conducts guerrilla warfare against the Syrian forces. His accomplishments wear down the Syrians so much that he is able to make peace with his enemy.

CHAPTER 10: Jonathan plays rival kings against each other to his advantage

“When Jonathan and the people heard these words, they neither believed nor accepted them, for they remembered the great evil that Demetrius had done in Israel, and how sorely he had afflicted them. They therefore decided in favor of Alexander, for he had been the first to address them peaceably, and they remained his allies for the rest of his life.” (vv 46-47)

Jonathan's fortunes change rather dramatically for the good when a rival (Alexander) seeks to unseat the reigning king Demetrius from his throne. Jonathan successfully exploits the rivalry to his advantage. He is even made high priest even though he is not from the line of Aaron.

Chapters 11-12 narrate the events that lead to Jonathan's death.

PART 5: SIMON LEADS THE REVOLT

CHAPTER 13: Simon, leader of the Jews

“When the people heard Simon's words, their spirit was rekindled. They shouted in reply: ‘You are our leader in place of your brothers Judas and Jonathan. Fight our battles and we will do everything you tell us.’” (vv 7-8)

Simon, the last of Mattathias' sons, takes Jonathan's place and sides with Demetrius II against Trypho, his

brother's captor and murderer. For his support, Demetrius releases the Jewish people from all taxes and effectively grants independence to the nation. Not since the attacks of the Babylonians in the seventh century BC has Judea known such freedom. *The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition* states: "The first book of Maccabees reaches its climax with the succession of Simon as leader and high priest. Remember, the purpose of the book is the establishment of the Hasmonean house as the legitimate political and religious dynasty for the Jews in Palestine" (p. 163).

CHAPTER 14: Praise for Simon

"The land was at rest all the days of Simon, who sought the good of the nation He supplied the cities with food... He made the temple splendid...." (vv 4-15)

The poem in verses 4-15 is a combination of biblical themes, suggesting that with Simon has come to the Jews a state of peace and prosperity not seen since the days of David and Solomon. A beleaguered minority stands up to a powerful empire for the sake of their religion. The author of 1 Maccabees believed that God was working through the Hasmonean family.

Verses 16-24. Rome renews its alliance with Simon and the Jewish people.

Verses 17-49. Simon's own people bestow honors on him. He will be their permanent leader, high priest and governor-general. In effect, we have here a new constitution that outlines Simon's responsibilities and his acceptance of them, as well as the implied responsibilities of the people who have offered these positions to him.

Pause: When people heap praise on you, how do you respond? How should you respond?

CHAPTER 15: Alliances renewed and broken

Antiochus "broke all the agreements he had previously made with Simon and became hostile to him" (v.27).

Rome's alliance is renewed but relations with Antiochus go downhill. Antiochus wants Simon to

give back to him some cities that he has taken. Simon reminds Antiochus that these cities are part of his ancestral heritage.

CHAPTER 16: Simon hands over leadership to his sons before he is murdered

"Simon called his two oldest sons, Judas and John, and said to them: 'I and my brothers and my father's house have fought the battles of Israel from our youth until today, and many times we succeeded in saving Israel. I have now grown old, but you, by the mercy of Heaven, have come to man's estate. Take my place and my brothers', and go out and fight for our nation; and may the help of Heaven be with you!'" (vv 2-3)

Verses 4-10 describe John's first impressive victory after Simon hands over the military leadership to his sons. 1 Maccabees ends on a tragic note of Simon's murder by a political rival when he was drunk at a banquet. But the murderer is captured and executed by John, Simon's son. The succession is safe with another Hasmonean, John Hyrcanus, continuing the line of "men to whom it was granted to achieve Israel's salvation" (5:62).

Pause: What political assassination in our time has had the most impact on our world?

George Frederick Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* tells the story of the Maccabean Revolt. It includes the famous chorus "Hallelujah, Amen."