

I MACCABEES – SHORT VERSION

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)

Suggested texts to read

Since this book is a continuous story of a family’s revolt against oppression, it is hard to pick out a particular section of the story.