

PREFACE

These two very different books tell the story of the successful struggle of the Jews to hold on to their faith and their religious traditions against the overwhelming pressure to be part of the Hellenistic culture that threatened to swamp them in the second century BC.

I Maccabees highlights the heroic resistance of the priest Mattathias, and the brilliant and finally successful guerrilla campaign led by his son Judas, followed by his two other sons, Jonathan and Simon. The author begins his account with the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of Syria (175-164) and concludes with the death of Simon in 134 and the handing on of the high priestly office and leadership of the Jews to his son, John Hyrcanus. The author is a propagandist for Mattathias and his descendants (the Hasmonaean dynasty) that still ruled Judea when he was composing his history in the first decade of the first century BC.

II Maccabees was written a decade later. It recognizes the providential significance of Judas Maccabaeus (after whom the books are named), but the author's focus is on God, not on the Hasmonaean dynasty of which he clearly disapproves. He begins his account during the reign of Antiochus's predecessor, Seleucus IV (187-175), and concludes his history in 160BC, when God used Judas to inflict a crushing blow on the Syrian army.

For suggestions as to further reading I recommend the bibliography prepared by Father Jean Louis Ska SJ, who is currently professor of Old Testament Studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome (see his website: http://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska_bibl.html). Go to Section XI. I would add *I Maccabees* by Jonathan A. Goldstein (Doubleday 1976, Anchor Bible Series n. 41), and *II Maccabees* by the same author (Anchor Bible Series n. 41A). This translation is heavily dependent on the NRSV and the work of many scholars.

I thank Father Warrick Tonkin for the time and care he put into reading the manuscript and granting it the 'Nihil Obstat', and Archbishop Mark Coleridge for permission to publish. I thank Father Paul Stenhouse for adding this volume to the scriptural commentaries published by Chevalier Press. My prayer is that this Introductory Commentary will enrich your appreciation of these ancient and inspiring books.

– Palm Sunday, 2012

FIRST BOOK OF MACCABEES

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The First Book of Maccabees was published probably some time in the first decade of the first century BC when Alexander Jannaeus (his Hebrew name was Jonathan) was high priest and king of the Jews. Alexander Jannaeus was a son and successor of John Hyrcanus (high priest and king from 134 to 104), whose father, Simon, was high priest before him (from 143 to 134). Simon succeeded his brother Jonathan (high priest from 152 to 143), and they were both brothers of the famous Judas Maccabaeus ('the hammer') whose brilliance as a military commander set the stage for the Jews achieving independence from their Syrian overlords. So central is Judas to this story that the history came to be called 'The First Book of Maccabees'.

The anonymous historian responsible for First Maccabees sets out to record the history of the Jewish uprising and the achievement of Jewish independence. To appreciate the importance of this independence we have only to remember that Judah had been continuously under foreign rule since 598BC when Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. The First Book of Maccabees covers the period from the accession of Antiochus IV Epiphanes to the throne of Syria in 175BC to the death of the high priest, Simon, in 134BC. The original Hebrew has been lost. We have a Greek translation.

The rebellion was initiated by a priest, Mattathias, father of Judas, Jonathan and Simon, grandfather of John Hyrcanus and great-grandfather of Alexander Jannaeus. The dynasty he founded is called the 'Hasmonaeans', after Mattathias's grandfather Symeon who is called 'the Hasmonite' or 'son of Hasmon'. The uprising occurred some seventy years before the writing of this history. None of the historian's sources is extant, but he would have been able to draw, directly or indirectly, on the Syrian court records for his information regarding Syria, and, for specifically Jewish matters, he would have had the records kept by the succession of Hasmonaeon rulers and high priests. Like any historian, he has his point of view and he brings to his record his own bias. Those who disagreed with him (and, as we will see, this includes the author of Second Maccabees) would see his work as propaganda to justify the dynastic claims of Alexander Jannaeus (see 1Maccabees 5:62) – claims that many Jews did not accept for reasons that will emerge as we examine the text.

Apart from the Books of Maccabees, for the history of the period we have the Book of Daniel, which focuses on the final years of the reign of Antiochus IV (167-164). The author of Daniel did not agree with the tactics espoused by the Hasmonaeans, and the author of 1Maccabees does not agree with some of the views expressed in Daniel 7-11. We also have the Greek historian Polybius in his *The Histories*, and the Jewish writer Josephus in his *The Jewish Wars* 1:1-2 and *Jewish Antiquities* Books 12 and 13.

1Maccabees as history

Today we have strict expectations of the style and method which we judge appropriate for historians. While we expect historians to be imaginative in the way they arrange their material, they should present the 'facts' without adornment. The writing of 'history' in the ancient world allowed for more liberty of expression, but there were criteria to which historians were expected to adhere. In his *The Histories* (12.4c), Polybius (died c.122BC) asserts that it is best if a historian writes about matters which he has personally witnessed. However, he acknowledges that this is not always possible.

Since many events occur at the same time in different places, and one man cannot be in several places at one time, nor is it possible for a single person to have seen with his own eyes every place in the world and all the peculiar features of different places, the only thing left for a historian is to inquire of as many people as possible, to believe those worthy of belief, and to be an adequate critic of the reports that reach him.

– The Histories 12.4c

Lucian of Samosata (died 180AD) agrees with modern historians in stating that ‘the sole task of the historian is to tell things just as they happened’ (*How to write History*, n. 39). However, a little later he writes: ‘If someone has to be brought in to give a speech, above all let the language suit the person and the subject ... It is then that you can exercise your rhetoric and show your eloquence’ (n. 58). This idea is as old as Thucydides (died c.400BC) who allows historians to compose speeches, but only after careful investigation and only with the aim of giving ‘the general sense of what was actually said’ (*Histories* 1.22.1).

This last point is of special importance in reading 1Maccabees. Much of it consists in military campaigns. Every military commander in that epoch, Jew and non-Jew alike, offered prayers to their god before going into battle. They also spoke words of encouragement to their troops. In the event of a victory, they repaired to the temple to offer sacrifices and prayers of thanksgiving. The historian responsible for 1Maccabees offers a selection of prayers (see 3:46-53; 4:30-33; 7:37-42), speeches (see 3:17-22; 3:58-60; 4:8-11, 17-18; 5:32), and expressions of thanksgiving (see 4:24; 5:24). As with other histories of the day, these were composed by the historian himself. They express his ‘take’ on the significance of the battle.

Post-exilic Judah

After the return of the exiles from Babylon, beginning in 538, through the fifth and fourth centuries, Judah, though economically depressed, was free to practise the Jewish faith. In fact it was encouraged and helped to do so by its Persian overlords. It was from Babylon that Ezra, the scribe and priest, was sent in the middle of the fifth century, to strengthen the religious, social and cultural life of Judah, based on the Torah. At the same time Nehemiah was appointed governor with the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem that were destroyed in 587BC. The prevailing assumption among the Jews was that it must have been God’s will for them to be subject, and that they should, therefore, obey their overlords as long as they were not required to disobey the Jewish law.

Judah ruled from Egypt (third century BC)

Alexander the Great overran the Persian Empire in the final decades of the fourth century. After his death in 323BC there was fighting among his generals. In 304 Ptolemy I Soter gained control of Egypt, which he ruled till 285. Asia Minor, Syria, Babylonia, Media and Persia were ruled by another of Alexander’s generals, Seleucus I Nicator. The dating system used in the Syrian Empire begins with his accession to the throne. The first year of his reign began from the first New Year after he became king. In Syria the New Year was in autumn (October 312), whereas in Babylon (and in Judea) it was in spring (April 311). The difference meant different dating of some events.

Hellenization

The author of 1Maccabees appears to have overlooked the difference. When he is working from Syrian archives his dates follow their system. When he is working from Jewish archives his dates follow their system. The result is that events that fall between October and April are sometimes placed in one year and sometimes in the following year. The author of 2Maccabees is consistent in following the Jewish dating system.

In 301BC Ptolemy I emerged victorious from the battle of Ipsos (see map page 9), with the result that throughout the third century Judah was ruled from Egypt. Alexandria joined Babylon as a growing centre for Judaism outside Judah.

Greek influence in Judah was much more aggressive than had been the case with Persia. There is evidence of Greek trade in the area as early as the seventh century. However, once Judah became part of the Greek Kingdom of Egypt ('Judea' is a Greek adaptation of 'Judah'), the Jews found themselves struggling to remain faithful to the Torah while being attracted to take advantage of the benefits that flowed from being part of the Greek (Hellenist) culture.

Ptolemy's son, Ptolemy II Philadelphos (285-246), developed Acco (just north of Haifa) as a Greek city and changed its name to Ptolemais (see 1Maccabees 5:15). Similarly, Beth-shan, close to the Jordan, on the eastern end of the valley of Esdraelon, which he renamed Scythopolis, and Rabbah, the capital city of ancient Ammon, which he renamed Philadelphia. In Idumea, bordering Judea on the south, he built the Hellenized towns of Marisa (see 1Maccabees 5:66) and Adora (see 1Maccabees 13:20). Similarly with Joppa, Askalon and Gaza on the Mediterranean coast to the west of Judea.

Some in Judea embraced Hellenism, wanting to be part of the prevailing Greek culture. Among these was the leading family of the Tobiads. Tobiah (probably descended from the Tobiah who opposed Nehemiah; see Nehemiah 2:10), was a land-owner and commander of a military garrison in Transjordan. He married the sister of Onias II, high priest from c. 245-220. Hellenization brought new wealth to those who took advantage of it, and with wealth came a level of secularism, with the temptation to disregard the Torah. Others, including Onias II, determinedly resisted any attempt to water down the Jewish culture.

The third century was a period of considerable unrest in Judah. The rivalry between Egypt and Syria made Palestine a constant military corridor, there being no fewer than five drawn-out wars during the century (274-272; 260-252; 246-241; 221-217 and 201-198; see Cate, R. *A History of the Bible lands in the Interbiblical period* (Nashville: Broadman, 1989).

Judah ruled from Syria (second century BC)

In 198 Antiochus III of Syria (223-187) defeated Ptolemy V of Egypt (203-180) at Panias, the northernmost point of Palestine, and established Coele-syria (the name given to the region of Syria which included Palestine). Initially the people of Judah welcomed what appeared to be liberation from heavy Egyptian taxation. However in 190 Antiochus III was defeated by the new power, Rome, at the battle of Magnesia, and his son (later to be Antiochus IV) was taken as a hostage to Rome. The Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire, and Rome imposed upon Syria an impossible yearly tribute. This created the need for heavy taxation, including taxation of Judea.

In 187 Antiochus III was succeeded by his son, Seleucus IV, who ruled till he was assassinated in 175. He was succeeded by his younger brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164. The rivalry between the families of the two brothers, Seleucus IV and Antiochus IV, is a constant factor throughout the period covered by the Books of the Maccabees.

Desperate for money, Antiochus IV presumed to offer the high priesthood (traditionally an hereditary position) to the highest bidder, and in 175 removed Onias III and appointed his brother Jason as high priest. This cut right across Jewish tradition in a most sacred area and established a precedent. In 172, Menelaus, a member of the rival Tobiad family from Transjordan, bribed his way to replace Jason as high priest. He set about to establish Jerusalem on the model of a Greek city. In 167, Jason led an army into Jerusalem in an unsuccessful attempt to regain control of the high priesthood. Antiochus saw the disturbance in Jerusalem as rebellion. He blamed the anti-Hellenizing group of Jews whom he saw as fanatics and issued a decree prohibiting observance of the Torah. Later in 167, on the 15th Chislev (December 6; see 1Maccabees 1:54), as part of enforcing his decree he erected a statue of Zeus in the temple sanctuary. This is the famous “abomination of desolation” mentioned in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) and, in the Newer Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 24:15). This set the stage for the uprising recorded in 1Maccabees.

Mattathias, a priest of the Hasmon clan (hence ‘Hasmonean’), led an insurrection against the Syrians. Upon his death in 166, his son Judas (166-160), nicknamed the ‘Maccabee’ (‘hammer’), took over leadership of the movement and defeated the Syrian army in three successive guerilla campaigns, finally recapturing Jerusalem. In 164 on the 25th Chislev (16th December), the temple was re-consecrated and worship restored.



Kings of Syria

Kings of Syria (6-13) in the period covered by 1&2 Maccabees

7. Seleucus IV (187-175)	10. Demetrius I (161-150)	12. Demetrius II (145-138)	
			13. Antiochus VII (138-129)
6. Antiochus III (223-187)			
	9. Antiochus V (164-161)		
8. Antiochus IV (175-164)			
	11. Alexander (150-145)	12. Antiochus VI [Trypho] (145-142) (142-138)	

Note: Antiochus III (6) was sixth in line from Seleucus I (312-280)

Seleucus IV (7) and Antiochus IV (8) were brothers; sons of Antiochus III (6)

Antiochus V (9) was son of Antiochus IV (8)

Demetrius I (10) was son of Seleucus IV (7)

Alexander (11) claimed to be a brother of Antiochus V (9)

Demetrius II (12) and Antiochus VII (13) were brothers; sons of Demetrius I (10)

Antiochus VI (12) was son of Alexander (11)

Demetrius II (12) and Antiochus VI (12) were rivals for the throne

Trypho (12) was not a Seleucid

The Hasmoneans ('Maccabees' - sons of Mattathias)

Judas (died 160) led the fight for Jewish independence during the reigns of Antiochus IV, his son, Antiochus V, and the first year of his nephew Demetrius I.

Jonathan (died 143) led the Jews during the reigns of Demetrius I, his cousin Alexander, and the first years of the rivalry between Demetrius II and Antiochus VI.

Simon (died 134) led the Jews during the reigns of Demetrius II and his son Antiochus VI, and their rivals, Antiochus VI and Trypho.

John Hyrcanus (died 104), son of Simon, was leader and high priest, like his uncle Jonathan and father Simon. He was the father of Alexander Jannaeus.