

II MACCABEES 14-15
JUDAS MACCABEUS
& DEMETRIUS 161

¹Three years later, word came to Judas and his men that Demetrius son of Seleucus had sailed into the harbour of Tripolis with a strong army and a fleet, ²and had taken possession of the country, having deposed Antiochus and his guardian Lysias.

³Now a certain Alcimus, who had formerly been high priest but had willfully defiled himself in the times of separation, realized that there was no way for him to be safe or to have access again to the holy altar. ⁴He went to King Demetrius in about the one hundred fifty-first year, presenting to him a crown of gold and a palm, and besides these some of the customary olive branches from the temple. On that occasion he kept quiet; ⁵but he found an opportunity that furthered his mad purpose when he was invited by Demetrius to a meeting of the council and was asked about the attitude and intentions of the Jews.

⁶He answered: "Those of the Jews who are called Hasideans, whose leader is Judas Maccabeus, are keeping up war and stirring up sedition, and will not let the kingdom attain tranquility. ⁷Therefore, although I have laid aside my inherited dignity – I am speaking of the high priesthood – I have come here now, ⁸first because I am genuinely concerned for the interests of the king, and second because I have regard also for my compatriots. For through the folly of those whom I have mentioned our whole nation is now in no small misfortune. ⁹Since you are acquainted, O king, with the details of this matter, may it please you to take thought for our country and our hard-pressed nation with the gracious kindness that you show to all. ¹⁰For as long as Judas lives, it is impossible for the government to find peace."

See 1 Maccabees 7 for the account of the arrival of Demetrius, son of Seleucus IV, in Syria, the appointment of Alcimus (a descendant of Aaron) as high priest, and for the defeat of Nicanor by Judas. All this happened in the year 161BC ('the one hundred fifty-first year' of Seleucid rule in Syria; verse 4). The author of 2Maccabees chose to end his historical summary at this point.

1Maccabees 7:4 reports that Demetrius had Antiochus V and Lysias executed.

It was the third year since the death of Menelaus (see 13:7), who was high priest from 172-163.

On the Hasideans see 1Maccabees 2:42.

'Gracious kindness'(verse 9) translated the Greek philanthropia (see 6:22).

This is not Nicanor's first campaign in Judea (see 8:9-36).

As is his wont, the author of 2Maccabees focuses on the prayer offered to God by the Jewish army (verse 15; see 1:24-29; 2:21; 10:25). The Jews saw themselves as a special possession of YHWH, God's 'own people', his 'own heritage' (see Deuteronomy 32:9).

On Adasa as the location of the battle see 1Maccabees 7:40, 45.

¹¹When he had said this, the rest of the king's Friends, who were hostile to Judas, quickly inflamed Demetrius still more. ¹²He immediately chose Nicanor, who had been in command of the elephants, appointed him governor of Judea, and sent him off ¹³with orders to kill Judas and scatter his troops, and to install Alcimus as high priest of the great temple.

¹⁴The Gentile population of Judea, who had fled before Judas, flocked to join Nicanor, thinking that the misfortunes and calamities of the Jews would mean prosperity for themselves.

¹⁵When the Jews heard of Nicanor's coming and the gathering of the Gentiles, they sprinkled dust on their heads and prayed to him who established his own people forever and always upholds his own heritage by manifesting himself. ¹⁶At their leader's command, they set out from there immediately and engaged the enemy in battle at a village called Adasa.

¹⁷Simon, the brother of Judas, had encountered Nicanor, but had been temporarily checked because of the sudden consternation created by the enemy.

¹⁸Nevertheless Nicanor, hearing of the valour of Judas and his troops and their courage in battle for their country, shrank from deciding the issue by bloodshed. ¹⁹Therefore he sent Posidonius, Theodotus, and Mattathias to give and negotiate a settlement.

²⁰When the terms had been fully considered, and their leader had informed the people, and it had appeared that they were of one mind, they agreed to the covenant.

²¹The leaders set a day on which to meet by themselves. A chariot came forward from each army; seats of honour were set in place;

²²Judas posted armed men in readiness at key places to prevent sudden treachery on the part of the enemy; so they duly held the consultation.

²³Nicanor stayed on in Jerusalem and did nothing out of the way, but dismissed the crowds that had flocked around him, ²⁴and kept Judas always in his presence. He was warmly attached to him. ²⁵He urged him to marry and have children; so Judas married, and settled down to the quiet life of an ordinary citizen.

²⁶When Alcimus noticed their goodwill for one another, he got hold of the covenant that had been made and went to Demetrius. He told him that Nicanor was disloyal to the government, since he had appointed that traitor against the kingdom, Judas, to be his successor. ²⁷The king became agitated and, provoked by the false accusations of that depraved man, wrote to Nicanor, stating that he was displeased with the covenant and commanding him to send Maccabeus to Antioch as a prisoner without delay.

²⁸When this message came to Nicanor, he was troubled and grieved that he had to annul their agreement when the man had done no wrong. ²⁹Since it was not possible to oppose the king, he watched for an opportunity to accomplish this by some stratagem. ³⁰Maccabeus, noticing that Nicanor was more austere in his dealings with him and was meeting him more rudely than had been his custom, concluded that this austerity did not spring from the best motives. So he gathered not a few of his men, and went into hiding from Nicanor.

Unlike the author here, the author of 1 Maccabees highlights Nicanor's insincerity.

³¹When the latter became aware that he had been cleverly outwitted by Judas, he went to the great and holy temple while the priests were offering the customary sacrifices, and commanded them to hand him over. ³²When they declared on oath that they did not know where the man was whom he wanted, ³³he stretched out his right hand toward the sanctuary, and swore this oath: "If you do not hand Judas over to me as a prisoner, I will level this shrine of God to the ground and tear down the altar, and build here a splendid temple to Dionysus."

³⁴Having said this, he went away. Then the priests stretched out their hands toward heaven and called upon the constant Defender of our nation, in these words: ³⁵"O Lord of all, though you have need of nothing, you were pleased that there should be a temple for your habitation among us; ³⁶so now, O holy One, Lord of all holiness, keep undefiled forever this house that has been so recently purified."

Verse 35 recalls the following:

In Judah God is known, his name is great in Israel. His tent is pitched in Salem, his battle-quarters in Zion.

– Psalm 76:1-2

³⁷A man called Razis, one of the elders of Jerusalem, was denounced to Nicanor. He was a man who loved his compatriots and was very well thought of. For his goodwill he was called 'Father of the Jews'.³⁸In former times, when there was no mingling with the Gentiles, he had been accused of Judaism, and he had most zealously risked body and life for Judaism.³⁹Nicanor, wishing to demonstrate the enmity that he had for the Jews, sent more than five hundred soldiers to arrest him.⁴⁰He thought that by arresting him he would do deal them a severe blow.

⁴¹When the troops were about to capture the tower and were forcing the door of the courtyard, they ordered that fire be brought and the doors burned. Being surrounded, Razis fell upon his own sword,⁴²preferring to die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth.⁴³But in the heat of the struggle he did not hit exactly, and the crowd was now rushing in through the doors. He courageously ran up on the wall, and bravely threw himself down into the crowd.⁴⁴But as they quickly drew back, a space opened and he fell in the middle of the empty space.⁴⁵Still alive and aflame with anger, he rose, and though his blood gushed forth and his wounds were severe he ran through the crowd; and standing upon a steep rock,⁴⁶with his blood now completely drained from him, he tore out his entrails, took them in both hands and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again. This was the manner of his death.

This account of the suicide of Razis is yet another example of the fact that the author never exhibits a tendency to under-state events! We might compare the story of Eleazar in chapter 6, or that of the seven sons and their mother in chapter 7.

Before describing the battle, the author wants his readers to see Nicanor as a bragging blasphemer (see also verse 32). His defeat is God's punishment for this.

The author wants to portray Judas and his followers as strictly observing the sabbath regulations (but see 1Maccabees 2:41).

¹When Nicanor heard that Judas and his troops were in the region of Samaria, he made plans to attack them with complete safety on the day of rest. ²When the Jews who were compelled to follow him said, "Do not destroy so savagely and barbarously, but show respect for the day that he who sees all things has honoured and hallowed above other days," ³the thrice-accursed wretch asked if there were a sovereign in heaven who had commanded the keeping of the sabbath day. ⁴When they declared, "It is the living Lord himself, the Sovereign in heaven, who ordered us to observe the seventh day," ⁵he replied, "But I am a sovereign also, on earth, and I command you to take up arms and finish the king's business." Nevertheless, he did not succeed in carrying out his abominable design.

⁶This Nicanor in his utter boastfulness and arrogance had determined to erect a public monument of victory over Judas and his forces. ⁷But Maccabeus did not cease to trust with all confidence that he would get help from the Lord. ⁸He exhorted his troops not to fear the attack of the Gentiles, but to keep in mind the former times when help had come to them from heaven, and so to look for the victory that the Almighty would give them. ⁹Encouraging them from the law and the prophets, and reminding them also of the struggles they had won, he made them the more eager. ¹⁰When he had aroused their courage, he issued his orders, at the same time pointing out the perfidy of the Gentiles and their violation of oaths. ¹¹He armed each of them not so much with confidence in shields and spears as with the inspiration of brave words, and he cheered them all by relating a dream, a sort of vision, which was worthy of belief. ¹²What he saw was this: Onias, who had been high priest, a noble and good man, of modest bearing and gentle manner, one who spoke fittingly and had been trained from childhood in all that belongs to excellence, was praying with outstretched hands for the whole body of the Jews. ¹³Then in the same fashion another appeared, distinguished by his gray hair and dignity, and of marvellous majesty and authority. ¹⁴Onias spoke, saying, "This is a man who loves the family of Israel and prays much for the people and the holy city – Jeremiah, the prophet of God." ¹⁵Jeremiah stretched out his right hand and gave to Judas a golden sword, and as he gave it he addressed him thus: ¹⁶"Take this holy sword, a gift from God, with which you will strike down your adversaries."

This account of Judas's preparation for the battle is not found in 1Maccabees. As is his custom, the author of 2Maccabees wanted to highlight the religious preparation for the battle that marked the high point of the power given by God to Judas.

For former victories given by God (verse 8) see 10:28; 13:14ff.

The two main sections of the Hebrew Scriptures are 'the law and the prophets' (verse 9).

Onias III (verse 12; see chapter 3) has already been portrayed as interceding for Heliodorus (see 3:32-33).

Jeremiah (verse 14) wanted to intercede for his people (see Jeremiah 11:14).

The description of Jeremiah in verse 13 recalls that of Eleazar in 6:23.

Verse 16 recalls the following

A sword against the Chaldeans,
says YHWH ... A sword against
the diviners ... A sword against
her warriors, so that they may
be destroyed! A sword against
her horses and against her
chariots, and against all the
foreign troops in her midst!

– Jeremiah 50:35-37

Nicanor has already threatened the temple (see 14:33). If Judas loses, the Hellenizers will have won. The future of Judaism is at stake (verse 17).

Judas's tactic to this point has been that of a guerrilla war. An 'encounter in the open country' (verse 19) is immensely risky granted the far superior forces of the Syrian army.

¹⁷Encouraged by the words of Judas, so noble and so effective in arousing valour and awaking courage in the souls of the young, they determined not to remain in camp but to attack bravely, and to decide the matter by fighting hand to hand with all courage, because the city and their religion and the temple were in danger. ¹⁸Their concern for wives and children, and also for brothers and sisters and relatives, lay upon them less heavily; their greatest and first fear was for the consecrated sanctuary. ¹⁹And those who had to remain in the city were in no little distress, being anxious over the encounter in the open country.

The battle

²⁰When all were now looking forward to the coming issue, and the enemy was already close at hand with their army drawn up for battle, the elephants strategically stationed and the cavalry deployed on the flanks, ²¹Maccabeus, observing the masses that were in front of him and the varied supply of arms and the savagery of the elephants, stretched out his hands toward heaven and called upon the Lord who works wonders; for he knew that it is not by arms, but as the Lord decides, that he gains the victory for those who deserve it. ²²He called upon him in these words: "O Lord, you sent your angel in the time of King Hezekiah of Judea, and he killed fully one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of Sennacherib. ²³So now, O Sovereign of the heavens, send a good angel to spread terror and trembling before us. ²⁴By the might of your arm may these blasphemers who come against your holy people be struck down." With these words he ended his prayer. ²⁵Nicanor and his troops advanced with trumpets and battle songs, ²⁶but Judas and his troops met the enemy in battle with invocations to God and prayers. ²⁷So, fighting with their hands and praying to God in their hearts, they laid low at least thirty-five thousand, and were greatly gladdened by God's intervention.

The Syrians are relying on their military superiority (verse 20). The Jews are relying on YHWH 'who gains the victory for those who deserve it' (verse 21).

The author has already spoken of the victory given by YHWH to Hezekiah over the Assyrian forces under Sennacherib (see 8:19-20).

'Intervention' translates the Greek *epiphaneia*. Not for the first time God has manifested his presence and power in times of crisis (see 2:21; 3:23-40; 5:1-4; 10:29; 11:8).

We know from 1Maccabees 14:36 that the Syrian garrison in the citadel in Jerusalem was finally ousted only by Simon, some twenty years after this battle.

For Nicanor's blasphemous words see 14:33.

The date (verse 36) is the 17 March 160BC. The background to 'Mordecai's day' is found in the Book of Esther 9:1-2, 20-22).

According to 1Maccabees 7:50 this victory meant that 'the land of Judah had rest for a few days'. Hardly a sufficiently grand conclusion to an account of Judas Maccabeus!

²⁸When the action was over and they were returning with joy, they recognized Nicanor, lying dead, in full armour. ²⁹Then there was shouting and tumult, and they blessed the Sovereign Lord in the language of their ancestors.

³⁰Then the man who was ever in body and soul the defender of his people, the man who maintained his youthful goodwill toward his compatriots, ordered them to cut off Nicanor's head and arm and carry them to Jerusalem.

³¹When he arrived there and had called his compatriots together and stationed the priests before the altar, he sent for those who were in the citadel. ³²He showed them the vile Nicanor's head and that profane man's arm, which had been boastfully stretched out against the holy house of the Almighty. ³³He cut out the tongue of the ungodly

Nicanor and said that he would feed it piecemeal to the birds and would hang up opposite the sanctuary the evidence of what Nicanor's folly had brought upon him. ³⁴Looking to heaven, they all blessed the Lord who had manifested himself, saying, "Blessed is he who has kept his own place undefiled!" ³⁵Judas hung Nicanor's head from the citadel, a clear and conspicuous sign to everyone of the help of the Lord. ³⁶They all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month – which is called Adar in the Aramaic language – the day before Mordecai's day.

³⁷This, then, is how matters turned out with Nicanor, and from that time the city has been in the possession of the Hebrews.

Conclusion

³⁸So I will here end my story. If it is well told and to the point, that is what I myself desired; if it is poorly done and mediocre, that was the best I could do. ³⁹For just as it is harmful to drink wine alone, or, again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment, so also the style of the story delights the ears of those who read the work. Let this be the end.

As in his Preface (see 2:19-32) the author asserts his desire to tell a good story. He touches on historical data that can enrich our understanding of the period. His focus on religious piety and his love of portraying divine intervention, often accompanied by heavenly apparitions, warns us to read 2Maccasbees with care if we are looking for an accurate history.