

II MACCABEES 3-7

SYRIAN OPPRESSION OF JUDEA

¹While the holy city was inhabited in unbroken peace and the laws were strictly observed because of the piety of the high priest Onias and his hatred of wickedness, ²it came about that the kings themselves honoured the place and glorified the temple with the finest presents, ³even to the extent that King Seleucus of Asia defrayed from his own revenues all the expenses connected with the service of the sacrifices.

⁴A man named Simon, of the tribe of Benjamin, held the post of the chief administrator of the temple. He had a disagreement with the high priest over the city office of market controller.

⁵Since he could not prevail over Onias, he went to Apollonius of Tarsus, who at that time was governor of Coele-syria and Phoenicia, ⁶and reported to him that the treasury in Jerusalem was full of untold sums of money, so that the amount of the funds could not be reckoned, and that they did not belong to the account of the sacrifices, but that it was possible for them to fall under the control of the king. ⁷When Apollonius met the king, he told him of the money about which he had been informed. The king chose Heliodorus, who was in charge of his affairs, and sent him with commands to effect the removal of the reported wealth. ⁸Heliodorus at once set out on his journey, ostensibly to make a tour of inspection of the cities of Coele-syria and Phoenicia, but in fact to carry out the king's purpose.

The author of 2 Maccabees chose to begin his summary account with a scene that highlights the holiness of the Jerusalem temple, and the miraculous intervention of God against the emissary of the king of Syria. The author of the Book of Daniel alludes to this in Daniel 11:20.

During the period when Onias III was high priest (c. 200-175), Jerusalem was at peace. Antiochus III, king of Syria from 223-187, did not interfere in Jewish affairs. At first his son and successor, Seleucus IV (187-175), continued this policy.

However, a quarrel broke out between Onias III and a certain Simon over the administration of the city market (verse 4). It is likely that Simon was a Hellenizer who favoured embracing the wider world of Greek culture, while Onias saw himself as responsible for maintaining Jewish culture by fidelity to the Torah.

Simon appealed to Apollonius, the governor responsible for Coele-syria (Palestine) and Phoenicia (verse 5). Since the temple was a centre of civic as well as cultic life, he argued that the king had a right to funds not needed for the upkeep of the temple (verse 6).

The idea attracted Seleucus who needed money to pay the hefty tribute levied on Syria by Rome, so he sent Heliodorus to investigate the matter.

Since relations between the Syrian king and Judea were friendly, Heliodorus was welcomed by Onias, who explained that the extra money kept in the temple was there to care for widows and orphans (verse 10). Some of it belonged to a certain Hyrcanus (verse 11) who was a member of the Tobiad family of Transjordan.

Normally Greek rulers were scrupulously careful not to violate temples. Perhaps it was the fact that some of the deposits belonged to Hyrcanus that emboldened Heliodorus to act, since Hyrcanus, though second cousin of the high priest Onias III, was known to be sympathetic to the Egyptian cause. He declared that the money should go to the king of Syria (verse 13).

The rest of chapter three presents a pious legend in which God miraculously preserves the temple treasury.

To reach the treasury, Heliodorus had to go only as far as the outer court. Gentiles were permitted there. So it appears that the problem was not that he violated the sanctity of the temple, but that he intended to take treasures that had been deposited there. Deposits were considered sacred, under the care of God ('heaven', verse 15).

It was primarily the responsibility of the high priest to ensure the holiness of the sanctuary (verse 16).

⁹When he had arrived at Jerusalem he was warmly welcomed by the high priest and the city. He told about the disclosure that had been made and stated why he had come, and he inquired whether this really was the situation. ¹⁰The high priest explained that there were some deposits belonging to widows and orphans, ¹¹and also some deposits of Hyrcanus son of Tobias, a man of very prominent position, and that it totaled in all four hundred talents of silver and two hundred of gold. The impious Simon had misrepresented the facts. ¹²And he said that it was utterly impossible that wrong should be done to those people who had trusted in the holiness of the place and in the sanctity and inviolability of the temple that is honoured throughout the whole world.

¹³But Heliodorus, because of the orders he had from the king, said that this money must in any case be confiscated for the king's treasury.

¹⁴So he set a day and went in to direct the inspection of these funds. There was no little distress throughout the whole city. ¹⁵The priests prostrated themselves before the altar in their priestly vestments and called toward heaven upon him who had given the law about deposits, that he should keep them safe for those who had deposited them. ¹⁶To see the appearance of the high priest was to be wounded at heart, for his face and the change in his colour disclosed the anguish of his soul. ¹⁷For terror and bodily trembling had come over the man, which plainly showed to those who looked at him the pain lodged in his heart.

God miraculously protects the temple

¹⁸People were hurrying in droves from their houses to make a general supplication because the holy place was about to be brought into dishonour.

¹⁹Women, girded with sackcloth under their breasts, thronged the streets. Some of the young women who were kept indoors ran together to the gates, and some to the walls, while others peered out of the windows. ²⁰Holding up their hands to heaven, they all made supplication. ²¹There was something pitiable in the prostration of the whole populace and the anxiety of the high priest in his great anguish.

²²While they were calling upon the Almighty Lord that he would keep what had been entrusted safe and secure for those who had entrusted it, ²³Heliodorus went on with what had been decided.

²⁴But when he arrived at the treasury with his bodyguard, then and there the Sovereign of spirits and of all authority caused so great a manifestation that all who had been so bold as to accompany him were astounded by the power of God, and became faint with terror. ²⁵For there appeared to them a magnificently caparisoned horse, with a rider of frightening mien; it rushed furiously at Heliodorus and struck at him with its front hoofs. Its rider was seen to have armour and weapons of gold. ²⁶Two young men also appeared to him, remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed, who stood on either side of him and flogged him continuously, inflicting many blows on him. ²⁷When he suddenly fell to the ground and deep darkness came over him, his men took him up, put him on a stretcher, ²⁸and carried him away – this man who had just entered the aforesaid treasury with a great retinue and all his bodyguard but was now unable to help himself. They recognized clearly the sovereign power of God.

²⁹While he lay prostrate, speechless because of the divine intervention and deprived of any hope of recovery, ³⁰they praised the Lord who had acted marvellously for his own place. The temple, which a little while before was full of fear and disturbance, was filled with joy and gladness, now that the Almighty Lord had appeared.

All the inhabitants of Jerusalem are in mourning, pleading with God to keep the temple deposits safe.

In verse 25 is described the apparition of a supernatural horse and rider, from the heavenly forces of the God of hosts. The two young men (verse 26) are messengers (angels) sent from heaven. A biblical precedent is found in the story of divine intervention against Sennacherib (see Isaiah 37:36; 2Kings 19:35)

Heliodorus had dared to enter the sanctuary to take the riches deposited there. He must now acknowledge 'the sovereign power of God' (verse 28).

There are many examples in Hellenistic histories, both in Greece and in the Near East, of gods defending their sanctuaries against intruders.

Jason of Cyrene may be drawing on the memoirs of the high priest Onias IV.

They turn to Onias, begging him to intercede for Heliodorus (verse 31).

The same young men appear with a message from heaven. Onias's prayers have been successful, but Heliodorus must acclaim to all 'the majestic power of God'(verse 34).

Verse 38 may allude to the fact that it was Heliodorus who was to conspire against Seleucus and bring about his death. His plan to make himself king, however, was thwarted by Eumenes, king of Pergamum, who had Antiochus IV, the brother of Seleucus IV, crowned king of Syria.

³¹Some of Heliodorus's friends quickly begged Onias to call upon the Most High to grant life to him who was lying quite at his last breath. ³²So the high priest, fearing that the king might get the notion that some foul play had been perpetrated by the Jews with regard to Heliodorus, offered sacrifice for the man's recovery. ³³While the high priest was making an atonement, the same young men appeared again to Heliodorus dressed in the same clothing, and they stood and said, "Be very grateful to the high priest Onias, since for his sake the Lord has granted you your life. ³⁴And see that you, who have been flogged by heaven, report to all people the majestic power of God." Having said this they vanished.

³⁵Then Heliodorus offered sacrifice to the Lord and made very great vows to the Saviour of his life, and having bidden Onias farewell, he marched off with his forces to the king. ³⁶He bore testimony to all concerning the deeds of the supreme God, which he had seen with his own eyes. ³⁷When the king asked Heliodorus what sort of person would be suitable to send on another mission to Jerusalem, he replied, ³⁸"If you have any enemy or plotter against your government, send him there, for you will get him back thoroughly flogged, if he survives at all; for there is certainly some power of God about the place. ³⁹For he who has his dwelling in heaven watches over that place himself and brings it aid, and he strikes and destroys those who come to do it injury." ⁴⁰This was the outcome of the episode of Heliodorus and the protection of the treasury.

¹The previously mentioned Simon, who had informed about the money against his own country, slandered Onias, saying that it was he who had incited Heliodorus and had been the real cause of the misfortune. ²He dared to designate as a plotter against the government the man who was the benefactor of the city, the protector of his compatriots, and a zealot for the laws.

³When his hatred progressed to such a degree that even murders were committed by one of Simon's approved agents, ⁴Onias recognized that the rivalry was serious and that Apollonius son of Menestheus, and governor of Coele-syria and Phoenicia, was intensifying the malice of Simon. ⁵So he paid a visit to the king. He did so, not to accuse his compatriots, but out of concern for all the Jews, the nation as well as individuals. ⁶For he saw that without the king's attention public affairs could not again reach a peaceful settlement, and that Simon would not stop his folly.

We are left with the suspicion that it was some Jewish zealots who had attacked Heliodorus, and that the legend recounted in the previous chapter had been invented to cover up an act against the king's ambassador that could only have dire consequences for Judea. Whether or not Onias was behind the assault is another matter. Jason of Cyrene, followed by the author of 2Maccabees saw Onias as a 'zealot for the laws'(verse 2; laws of Syria as well as of the Torah!).

Apollonius supported Simon (verse 4; see 3:5).

Things changed when Seleucus's brother, Antiochus IV, came to the throne in 175 (see 1Maccabees 1:10). He got rid of Heliodorus. Seleucus's son, Demetrius (crowned king later, in 161), was hostage in Rome at the time.

When Jason, Onias's brother, offered money to Antiochus, the king removed Onias from office and appointed Jason to the high priestly office. Though Jason is not named in 1Maccabees, see 1Maccabees 1:10-15 for his account of the introduction into Jerusalem of Greek ways (verse 13). Jason wanted to set Jerusalem up as a Greek city-state, with its citizens enjoying the benefits of being citizens of Antioch ('Antiochenes'; compare 1Maccabees 1:41-43).

This new arrangement set aside the privileges granted by Antiochus III which permitted Judea to be ruled in accordance with the Torah (verse 11). For Eupolemus see 1Maccabees 8:17.

The citadel (verse 12) dominated the north-west corner of the temple area.

Judaism was not yet forbidden. Greek ways, however, were introduced with the blessing of the king of Syria. This will quickly lead to a struggle between 'the citizens of Antioch' (those favouring Greek ways) and the Jews determined to be faithful to the Torah. It was this that built up to the uprising led by Mattathias and his son (the 'Hasmonaeans').

7When Seleucus died and Antiochus, who was called Epiphanes, succeeded to the kingdom, Jason the brother of Onias obtained the high priesthood by corrupt means.

8He met with the king and promised him three hundred sixty talents of silver, and a further eighty talents from future revenue.

9In addition to this he promised to pay one hundred fifty more if permission were given to establish by his authority a gymnasium, for the education there of a body of young men, and to enroll the people of Jerusalem as citizens of Antioch. 10The king consented. On taking office, Jason at once shifted his compatriots over to the Greek way of life.

11He set aside the existing royal concessions to the Jews, secured through John, the father of Eupolemus, who went on the mission to establish friendship and alliance with the Romans. He abolished the ways of living according to the Torah, and introduced new customs contrary to the law. 12He took delight in establishing a gymnasium right under the citadel, and he induced the noblest of the young men to wear the Greek hat.

13There was such an extreme of Hellenization and increase in the adoption of foreign ways because of the surpassing wickedness of Jason, who was ungodly and no true high priest, 14that the priests were no longer intent upon their service at the altar. Despising the sanctuary and neglecting the sacrifices, they hurried to take part in the unlawful proceedings in the wrestling arena at the sounding of the gong, 15disdaining the honours prized by their ancestors and putting the highest value upon Greek honours. 16For this reason heavy disaster overtook them, and those whose ways of living they admired and wished to imitate completely became their enemies and punished them. 17It is no light thing to show irreverence to the divine laws – a fact that later events will make clear.

¹⁸When the quadrennial games were being held at Tyre and the king was present, ¹⁹the vile Jason sent a delegation representing the Antiochenes from Jerusalem, to carry three hundred silver drachmas for the sacrifice to Herakles. Those who carried the money, however, thought best not to use it for sacrifice, because that was not proper, but donate it to be spent for another purpose. ²⁰So this money, intended by the sender for the sacrifice to Herakles, by the decision of its carriers was applied to the fitting out of triremes.

²¹When Apollonius son of Mene-theus was sent to Egypt for the *Protoklisia* of Philometor as king, Antiochus learned that Philometor had become hostile to his government, and he took measures for his own security. Therefore upon arriving at Joppa he proceeded to Jerusalem. ²²He was welcomed magnificently by Jason and the city, and ushered in with a blaze of torches and shouts of applause. Then he marched his army into Phoenicia.

The athletic games held at Tyre every four years were modelled on the Olympic Games. The god of Tyre was Melkart, identified as the local form of Heracles (verse 19).

Though it was customary for the entrance fee for participants to be used for sacrifices to the local god, the Tyrians respected the scruples of the Jews and accepted the money for the fitting out of their triremes (verse 20).

Apollonius, the governor of Coele-syria (Palestine) and Phoenicia (see verse 4) was sent to Egypt to be present at a significant ceremony of the young king, Ptolemy VI Philometor. One suggestion is that it was the first time that he presided over a formal state banquet. His ministers were planning to recover Palestine for Egypt.

Both Joppa and Jerusalem were front-line defences against Egypt. Having been reassured that they were with him and not with Egypt, Antiochus had his army prepare for action in Phoenicia (verse 22). In his summary the author of 2Maccabees does not describe the campaign (see, however, Daniel 11:25-28 and 1Maccabees 1:16-19).

Jason's action in 175 meant that the position of high priest could be determined by the Syrian king. He held the office for only three years (verse 23), because a certain Menelaus (brother of the Simon who opposed Onias; see 3:4), who did not belong to the high priestly family, offered even more money, and was appointed in 172. He was high priest from 172 to 163.

Jason fled to Ammon to await an appropriate time to regain his office (verse 26).

It appears from verse 29 that the citadel commanding the temple mount (see verse 12) was garrisoned with mercenaries from Cyprus.

²³After a period of three years Jason sent Menelaus, the brother of the previously mentioned Simon, to carry the money to the king and to carry out royal decisions on pressing matters.

²⁴On being presented to the king, he so extolled himself as to give the impression that he was a man of authority, and he secured the high priesthood for himself, outbidding Jason by three hundred talents of silver.

²⁵After receiving the king's orders he returned, possessing no qualification for the high priesthood, but having the hot temper of a cruel tyrant and the rage of a savage wild beast. ²⁶So Jason, after supplanting his own brother was supplanted by another man, and was driven as a fugitive into the land of Ammon.

²⁷Although Menelaus continued to hold the office, he did not pay regularly any of the money promised to the king.

²⁸Sostratus the captain of the citadel, who was responsible for the collection of the revenue, kept requesting payment, till the two of them were summoned by the king. ²⁹Menelaus left his own brother Lysimachus as deputy in the high priesthood, while Sostratus left Krates, the commander of the Cyprian troops.

Onias III is murdered

³⁰While such was the state of affairs, it happened that the people of Tarsus and of Mallus revolted because their cities had been given as a present to Antiochis, the king's concubine. ³¹So the king went hurriedly to settle the trouble, leaving Andronikos, a man of high rank, to act as his deputy. ³²Menelaus, thinking that this provided a suitable opportunity, stole some of the gold vessels of the temple and gave them to Andronikos; other vessels, as it happened, he had sold to Tyre and the neighbouring cities.

³³When Onias became fully aware of these acts, he publicly exposed them, having first withdrawn to a place of sanctuary at Daphne near Antioch. ³⁴Therefore Menelaus, taking Andronikos aside, urged him to kill Onias. Andronikos came to Onias, and resorting to treachery, offered him sworn pledges and gave him his right hand. He persuaded him, though still suspicious, to come out from the place of sanctuary; then, with no regard for justice, he immediately did away with him.

³⁵As a result, not only Jews but many also of other nations were grieved and displeased at the unjust murder of the man.

³⁶When the king returned from the region of Cilicia, the Jews in the city appealed to him with regard to the unreasonable murder of Onias, and the Greeks shared their hatred of the crime. ³⁷Therefore Antiochus was grieved at heart and filled with pity, and wept because of the moderation and good conduct of the deceased. ³⁸Inflamed with anger, he immediately stripped off the purple robe from Andronikos, tore off his clothes, and led him around the whole city to that very place where he had committed the outrage against Onias, and there he dispatched the bloodthirsty fellow. The Lord thus repaid him with the punishment he deserved.

Tarsus and Mallus were cities in Cilicia, bordering Syria to the north-west (see map page 81).

Antiochus IV had Andronikos (verse 31) murder the young son of his brother, Seleucus IV, in 175, to eliminate one rival to his becoming king. Menelaus, again using bribery, sought Andronikos's support (verse 32).

There is evidence that there was a Jewish synagogue in Daphne, though Onias may well have thought it safer to be in a sanctuary recognised by his Gentile rulers (verse 33).

In late 170, Andronicus kills Onias, but the upset this caused to the Jews and to the Greeks persuaded Antiochus to have Andronicus killed at the scene of his crime (verse 38).

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, Lysimachus, Menelaus's brother who was standing in for Menelaus who had been summoned to meet with the king (see verse 29), continued despoiling the temple for personal gain.

This aroused the people of Jerusalem, and when Lysimachus tried to crush them, they mounted a successful revolt (verses 41-43).

Charges were brought against Menelaus, but, once again, he bribed his way out of trouble, and was acquitted (verse 47). For Ptolemy see 1Maccabees 3:38.

The deputies of the senate, who had accused Menelaus were executed. The author comments that not even the barbarous Scythians would have acted so unjustly (verse 47). The citizens of Tyre, a Greek city, showed their disapproval by giving the deputies a lavish burial (verse 49).

³⁹Meanwhile, back in the city, many acts of sacrilege had been committed by Lysimachus with the connivance of Menelaus. When report of these crimes had spread abroad, the populace gathered against Lysimachus. By then, many of the gold vessels had already been stolen. ⁴⁰Since the crowds were becoming aroused and filled with anger, Lysimachus armed about three thousand men and launched an unjust attack, under the leadership of a certain Auranus, a man advanced in years and no less advanced in folly. ⁴¹But when the Jews became aware that Lysimachus was attacking them, some picked up stones, some blocks of wood, and others took handfuls of the ashes that were lying around, and threw them in wild confusion at Lysimachus and his men. ⁴²As a result, they wounded many of them, and killed some, and put all the rest to flight; the temple robber himself they killed close by the treasury.

⁴³Charges were brought against Menelaus about this incident. ⁴⁴When the king came to Tyre, three men sent by the senate presented the case before him. ⁴⁵But Menelaus, already as good as beaten, promised a substantial bribe to Ptolemy son of Dorymenes to win over the king. ⁴⁶Therefore Ptolemy, taking the king aside into a colonnade as if for refreshment, induced the king to change his mind. ⁴⁷Menelaus, the cause of all the trouble, he acquitted of the charges against him, while he sentenced to death those unfortunate men, who would have been freed uncondemned if they had pleaded their case even before Scythians. ⁴⁸And so those who had spoken for the city and the villages and the holy vessels quickly suffered the unjust penalty. ⁴⁹Therefore even the Tyrians, showing their hatred of the crime, provided magnificently for their funeral. ⁵⁰But Menelaus, because of the greed of those in power, remained in office, growing in wickedness, having become the chief plotter against his fellow Jews.

Jason fails to retake the office of high priest

¹About this time Antiochus made preparations for his second invasion of Egypt.

²And it happened that, for almost forty days, there appeared over all the city golden-clad cavalry charging through the air, and troops of armed spearmen formed into regiments; sabres were drawn; ³squadrons of cavalry in battle formation; attacks and counterattacks made on this side and on that, brandishing of shields, massing of spears, hurling of missiles, the flash of golden trappings, and armour of all kinds.

⁴Everyone prayed that the apparition might prove to have been a good omen.

⁵When a false rumour arose that Antiochus was dead, Jason took over a thousand men and made an surprise assault on the city. When the troops on the wall had been forced back and at last the city was being taken, Menelaus took refuge in the citadel.

⁶Jason kept relentlessly slaughtering his compatriots, careless of the fact that success at the cost of one's kindred is the greatest of defeats. Instead he imagined that he was setting up trophies of victory over enemies and not over compatriots. ⁷He did not, however, gain control of the government; in the end he got only disgrace from his conspiracy, and fled again into the country of the Ammonites.

⁸Finally he met a miserable end. Accused before Aretas the ruler of the Arabs, fleeing from city to city, pursued by everyone, hated as a rebel against the laws, and abhorred as the executioner of his country and his compatriots, he was cast ashore in Egypt.

⁹There he who had driven many from their own country into exile died in exile, having embarked to go to Sparta in the hope of finding protection because of their kinship.

¹⁰He who had cast out many to lie unburied had no one to mourn for him; he had no funeral of any sort and no place in the tomb of his ancestors.

Daniel 11:29-30 mentions this second campaign of Antiochus against Egypt in 168BC. However, the author of 1Maccabees rightly places Antiochus's attack on Jerusalem in 169, after his first (not second) invasion of Egypt (see 1Maccabees 1:20-24).

In verses 2-5, once again (see 3:23-28) the author (is he following Jason of Cyrene in this?) shows his delight in heavenly apparitions. The 'forty days' (verse 2) reminds the reader of the divine apparitions on Sinai (Exodus 24:18) and Horeb (1Kings 19:8-18).

If the king was dead (verse 5), Jason judged he could attack Jerusalem without being accused of rebellion. His attack on Jerusalem was mentioned in the first letter attached to this history (see 1:7-8). Menelaus took refuge in the citadel (verse 5; see 4:12).

Sparta's kinship with the Jews (verse 9) was a diplomatic fiction.

Antiochus was forced by Rome to leave Egypt (see Daniel 11:30). He could not afford to have Judea in an unsettled state, so on his return from Egypt he asserted his authority. In verses 12-14 Jason paints the worst possible picture of Antiochus's brutality against Jerusalem.

1Maccabees 1:20-24 puts the king's entry into the temple in 169BC after the *first* campaign in Egypt, not in 168BC after the second campaign. This is probably correct. After all the author of 2Maccabees admits that it is not easy to crowd five volumes into a few chapters (see 2:23-32). He tends not to be careful about the sequence of events.

In verses 17-20 the author, who shares the view of the Older Testament that whatever happens is willed by God, explains that God allowed the desecration of the temple 'because of the sins of those who lived in the city' (verse 17). It does not at all mean that God is not powerful enough to defend his temple if he chose to do so.

¹¹When news of what had happened reached the king, he concluded that Judea was in a state of rebellion. So, raging inwardly, he left Egypt and took the city by storm. ¹²He commanded his soldiers to cut down relentlessly everyone they met and to kill those who withdrew into their houses. ¹³Then there was massacre of young and old, destruction of boys, women, and children, and slaughter of young girls and infants. ¹⁴Over three days eighty thousand were destroyed, forty thousand in hand-to-hand fighting, and as many were sold into slavery.

¹⁵Not content with this, Antiochus dared to enter the most holy temple in all the world, guided by Menelaus, who had become a traitor both to the laws and to his country. ¹⁶He took the holy vessels with his polluted hands, and swept away with profane hands the votive offerings that other kings had made to enhance the glory and honour of the place. ¹⁷Antiochus was elated in spirit, and did not perceive that the Lord was angered for a little while because of the sins of those who lived in the city, and that this was the reason he was disregarding the holy place. ¹⁸But if it had not happened that they were involved in many sins, this man would have been flogged and turned back from his rash act as soon as he came forward, just as Heliodorus had been, whom King Seleucus sent to inspect the treasury. ¹⁹But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation. ²⁰Therefore the place itself shared in the misfortunes that befell the nation and afterward participated in its benefits; and what was forsaken in the wrath of the Almighty was restored again in all its glory when the great Lord became reconciled.

²¹So Antiochus carried off eighteen hundred talents from the temple, and hurried away to Antioch, thinking in his arrogance that he could sail on the land and walk on the sea, so puffed up with pride was he. ²²He left governors to oppress the people: at Jerusalem, Philip, by birth a Phrygian and in character more barbarous than the man who appointed him; ²³and at Gerizim, Andronikos; and besides these Menelaus, who lorded it over his compatriots worse than the others did. In his malice toward the Jewish citizens, ²⁴Antiochus sent Apollonius, the captain of the Mysians, with an army of twenty-two thousand, and commanded him to kill all the grown men and to sell the women and boys as slaves. ²⁵When this man arrived in Jerusalem, he pretended to be peaceably disposed and waited until the holy sabbath day; then, finding the Jews not at work, he ordered his troops to parade under arms. ²⁶He put to the sword all those who came out to see them, then rushed into the city with his armed warriors and killed great numbers of people.

²⁷Judas Maccabeus, with about nine others, got away to the wilderness, and kept himself and his companions alive in the mountains as wild animals do; they continued to live on what grew wild, so that they might not share in the defilement.

The author depicts Antiochus as arrogant (verse 21). Compare the following:

The king shall act as he pleases.
He shall exalt himself and consider himself greater than any god, and shall speak horrendous things against the God of gods.

– Daniel 11:36

Throughout the empire governors connected city-states with the central government. Philip (not the Philip of 1Maccabees 6:14), from Phrygia in west central Asia Minor, replaced Menelaus in civic affairs in Jerusalem. Andronikos (not the Andronikos killed in 4:38) was appointed governor of Mount Gerizim (Shechem) in Samaria.

For the expedition of Apollonius in 167 (verse 24) see 1Maccabees 1:29-32.

The massacre was followed by the setting up of a Syrian garrison dominating the temple mount (see 1Maccabees 1:33-36). The author of 2Maccabees passes over this very significant detail. His first mention of the citadel is in 15:31.

In verse 27, after five chapters, for the first time we have mention of Judas Maccabeus. The author does not mention Judas's father, Mattathias, or the incident at Modein. However, though Judas is mentioned here, the author of 2Maccabees does not take up the history of the Maccabee revolt till chapter 8.

In chapters 6-7 he records the terrible persecution that followed on the decree of Antiochus to wipe out Judaism (see also 1Maccabees 1:41-63). Because of his love of telling edifying stories, he picks out two events that highlight the heroic fidelity of the Jews who refused to give up their faith.

To this point we have witnessed a process of Hellenization of Judea, aided and abetted by Jews who wanted to enjoy the benefits of belonging to the surrounding culture.

Now things get much worse. Verses 1-9 record the determination of Antiochus to stamp out Judaism (compare Daniel 7:25). He sees it as a source of festering rebellion in a region that bordered Egypt. This persecution was mentioned in 1Maccabees 1:41-61. The decree that is being enforced here (see 1Maccabees 1:44) was issued in early spring 167.

Zeus Olympios ('God of the skies') and Zeus Xenios ('Zeus, Protector of strangers'; verse 2) could be applied to many local deities, including YHWH.

Ritual sex (verse 4) was seen as helping to ensure the fertility of the land.

2Maccabees does not mention the 'desolating sacrilege' (1Maccabees 1:54) that took place in December 167 (the 15th Kislev).

1Maccabees 1:60-61 also records the treatment of women who dared to circumcise their children.

1Maccabees 2:31-38 gives another example of slaughter perpetrated on the sabbath.

¹Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their ancestors and no longer to live by the laws of God. ²He was also to defile both the temple in Jerusalem and the temple on Mount Gerizim, and to call the former the temple of Zeus Olympios, and the latter the temple of Zeus Xenios, following the practice of the local inhabitants.

³Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. ⁴For the temple was filled with debauchery and revelling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts. They also brought in things for sacrifice that were forbidden. ⁵The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the law. ⁶People could neither keep the sabbath, nor observe the festivals of their ancestors, nor so much as confess themselves to be Jews.

⁷On the monthly celebration of the king's birthday, the Jews were compelled, under bitter constraint, to partake of the sacrifices; and when a festival of Dionysus was celebrated, they were compelled to wear wreaths of ivy and to walk in the procession in honour of the god. ⁸At the suggestion of the people of Ptolemais a decree was issued to the neighbouring Greek cities that they should adopt the same policy toward the Jews and make them partake of the sacrifices, ⁹and should kill those who did not choose to change over to Greek customs. Their miserable fate was there for all to see.

¹⁰For example, two women were brought to trial for having circumcised their children. They publicly paraded them around the city, with their babies hanging at their breasts, and then hurled them down headlong from the wall.

¹¹Others who had assembled in the caves nearby, in order to observe the seventh day secretly, were betrayed to Philip and were all burned together, because their piety kept them from defending themselves, in view of their regard for that most holy day.

Divine discipline

¹²Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. ¹³In fact, it is a sign of great kindness not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately. ¹⁴For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, ¹⁵in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. ¹⁶Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people. ¹⁷Let what we have said serve as a reminder; we must go on with the story.

In keeping with traditional Hebrew thought, the author has already interpreted the suffering of the Jews as an expression of God's anger at their failure to be faithful to the covenant (see 5:17-20).

Here he points out the purpose of divine punishment. God does not intend to destroy, but to discipline in order to bring about a change of heart so that the people can enjoy the communion with God that they desire.

God doesn't appear to be punishing others the way he is punishing the Jews. This is to be seen as a sign of special love. They are being punished before it is too late. There are echoes here of the following:

YHWH reproves those he loves, as a
father the son in whom he delights.

– Proverbs 3:12

This is the first of two edifying stories that demonstrate the heroic fidelity of the Jews under persecution.

Eating the flesh of pigs was forbidden because of its association with worship of the dead and the practice of necromancy in Canaan (see Leviticus 11:7; Isaiah 65:3-4).

If Eleazar honours the king by eating the pig flesh he will be treated 'kindly'(verse 22. The Greek is *philanthropia*).

Eleazar refuses to comply. He wants to give the young (see chapter 7) an example of fidelity to 'the revered and holy laws'(verse 28).

¹⁸Eleazar, one of the leading scribes, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being forced to open his mouth to eat swine's flesh. ¹⁹But he, welcoming death with honour rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh, ²⁰as all ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste, even for the natural love of life.

²¹Those who were in charge of that unlawful sacrifice took the man aside because of their long acquaintance with him, and privately urged him to bring meat of his own providing, proper for him to use, and to pretend that he was eating the flesh of the sacrificial meal that had been commanded by the king, ²²so that by doing this he might be saved from death, and be treated kindly on account of his old friendship with them. ²³But making a high resolve, worthy of his years and the dignity of his old age and the gray hairs that he had reached with distinction and his excellent life even from childhood, and moreover according to the holy God-given law, he declared himself quickly, telling them to send him to Hades.

²⁴"Such pretence is not worthy of our time of life," he said, "for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, ²⁵and through my pretence, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. ²⁶Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals, yet whether I live or die I will not escape the hands of the Almighty. ²⁷Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age ²⁸and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws."

²⁸When he had said this, he went at once to the rack. ²⁹Those who a little before had acted toward him with goodwill now changed to ill will, because the words he had uttered were in their opinion sheer madness. ³⁰When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned aloud and said: "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him."

³¹So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation.

The sentiments of verse 29 are expressed in the following:

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself.

– Wisdom 3:1-5

The second example is the heroic martyrdom of a mother, who encouraged her seven sons, and then forfeited her own life.

On the law forbidding the eating of pig flesh see 6:18.

Verse 6 quotes from the Torah:

Indeed YHWH will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants.

– Deuteronomy 32:36

Verse 9 speaks of being ‘raised up to an everlasting renewal of life’. A comparison with Daniel 12:1-3 suggests that the idea of a personal resurrection emerged into people’s consciousness at this time, because a just God would surely reward such heroic martyrdom.

Let us pause to look at the development of this idea in the Older Testament.

¹It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs, to partake of unlawful swine’s flesh. ²One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, “What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.” ³The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. ⁴These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. ⁵When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, ⁶“The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, ‘And he will have compassion on his servants.’” ⁷After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, “Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?” ⁸He replied in the language of his ancestors and said to them, “No.” Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. ⁹And when he was at his last breath, he said, “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.”

Resurrection

Traditionally, the Jews, like their Gentile neighbours, assumed that human life, which depended on the life-breath given by God, ended with death when, as Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes writes in his conclusion: 'the life-breath returns to God who gave it' (12:7). The dead go down into the shadowy and lifeless existence of Sh^eol (Greek: Hades).

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;
fathers make known to children your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18-19

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
in place of the living who give thanks?
From the dead, as from one who does not exist,
thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well
sing the Lord's praises.

– Sirach 17:27-28

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow, and against all the evidence, preserve them from death and the underworld:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

The notion of resurrection from the dead, which includes the notion of a continuance of communion with God (and therefore a continuance of life) beyond the grave emerges at the time of the publication of the Book of Daniel, and continued to be disputed into the first century AD (see Mark 12:18; Acts 23:8).

This idea grew out of faith in the fidelity of God. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the persecutions instigated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2

Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance.

– 2Maccabees 7:36

Another possible witness to a belief that physical death is not the end of life, at least for those who have proved faithful to the covenant, is the following text that was included in the Isaiah scroll. On the other hand it may, like Ezekiel 37, be referring to God's restoring the nation. We read:

The dead do not live; shades do not rise — because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them.

– Isaiah 26:14

This fits with the tradition. However, the text goes on to say something that cuts right across the tradition:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:19

Though the situation of the heroic death of the Jewish martyrs during the persecution under Antiochus greatly influenced the notion of individual resurrection, we must also consider the influence of Egypt and of Persia where belief in the afterlife was integral to their religious consciousness.

¹⁰After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, ¹¹and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." ¹²As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

¹³After he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. ¹⁴When he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"

¹⁵Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. ¹⁶But he looked at the king, and said, "Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. ¹⁷Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!"

¹⁸After him they brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, "Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. ¹⁹But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!"

In verse 11 the third brother appears to expect a bodily resurrection.

The fourth brother believes that those instigating the persecution will not rise again (perhaps an echo of Isaiah 26:14, 19 (quoted page 141)).

The fifth brother warns the king. 2Maccabees 9:28 has Antiochus die in torment. His son was murdered by the supporters of Demetrius (see 14:2; 1Maccabees 7:4). Alexander, who claimed to be his son, was beheaded (see 1Maccabees 11:17, and Alexander's son was killed as a child (see 1Maccabees 11:39-40; 13:31).

The sixth brother recognises that the sufferings are because of sin, but those responsible for the suffering will not go unpunished 'for having tried to fight against God' (verse 19).

In verses 16-19 there are a number of allusions to Daniel 8:24-25.

Verses 22-23 recall the following:

It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

– Psalm 139:13

She has been encouraging each of her sons with the assurance that the Creator can 'give life and breath back to you, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws'(verse 23).

There is a long tradition which read verse 28 as asserting that God created our of nothing, and not from some pre-existing matter. The mother's words, however, cannot be construed as taking sides in a philosophical debate.

She encourages the seventh boy to 'accept death so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers'(verse 29)

²⁰The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honourable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. ²¹She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, ²²"I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. ²³Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

²⁴Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his ancestors, and that he would take him for his Friend and entrust him with public affairs. ²⁵Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the youth to save himself. ²⁶After much urging on his part, she undertook to persuade her son. ²⁷But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native language as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: "My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. ²⁸I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. ²⁹Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers."

³⁰While she was still speaking, the young man said, "What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses. ³¹But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. ³²For we are suffering because of our own sins. ³³And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. ³⁴But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all mortals, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. ³⁵You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. ³⁶For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. ³⁷I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, ³⁸and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation."

³⁹The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. ⁴⁰So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord.

⁴¹Last of all, the mother died, after her sons.

⁴²Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures.

The youngest boy repeats ideas we have already heard from his older brothers.

In verses 37-38, he adds the thought that their heroic death will move the Gentiles to admit that the God of the Jews alone is God (verse 37), and will move God to end the punishment that has justly fallen on the nation (verses 37-38; see 2Maccabees 6:12-17).

The author feels he has said enough about the persecution and the heroic resistance of the Jews (verse 42).

2Maccabees 1-7 and 1Maccabees 1

The following is a list of the small number of connection between 2Maccabees 1-7 and 1Maccabees (mostly in the opening chapter, 1Maccabees 1). Though Judas Maccabaeus is mentioned in passing in 2Maccabees 5:27, the story of the revolt led by the Maccabees begins only in chapter 8.

1. Two letters from Jerusalem to the Jews in Egypt are appended to the beginning of 2Maccabees. The first letter, written in 124BC, refers to an earlier letter composed in 143BC, the year Simon began his ministry as high priest. The earlier letter mentions Jason's attack on Jerusalem in 168BC when he attempted to take back the office of high priest (see 2Maccabees 1:7-8). This attack is given in more detail in 2Maccabees 5:1-10. The episode is not mentioned in 1Maccabees. It also mentions the festival celebrating the rededication by Judas Maccabaeus of the temple in 164BC (see 2Maccabees 1:9). This festival is mentioned also in the second undated letter (see 2Maccabees 1:18 and 2:16). We find an account of this dedication in 1Maccabees 4:59 at the conclusion of the first phase of the successful revolt led by Judas.
2. After his preface, the author of 2Maccabees begins his summary account of the five-volume work of Jason of Cyrene. The opening scene is set during the reign of the Syrian king, Seleucus IV (2Maccabees 3:1 - 4:6). None of this is covered in 1Maccabees, which begins in the reign of Antiochus IV, brother and successor of Seleucus, in 175BC (see 1Maccabees 1:10).
3. The author of 2Maccabees records the beginning of the movement to introduce Greek customs into Jerusalem, the process of Hellenization (see 2Maccabees 4:11-15). This is noted also in 1Maccabees 1:11-15.
4. Much of 2Maccabees 3-5 is concerned with the conflicts surrounding the high priesthood: Jason bribing the king to make him high priest in place of his brother Onias III; Menelaus replacing Jason in the same way; and Jason's failed attempt to regain the office. The only mention of Onias in 1Maccabees is a reference to contact between Judea and Sparta (see 1Maccabees 12:7ff). Jason and Menelaus are not mentioned.
5. 2Maccabees 4:21-22 gives the build up to Antiochus's first campaign in Egypt, but omits the campaign itself. 1Maccabees 1:16-19 gives a brief account of the campaign.
6. 2Maccabees 5:11-21 recounts Antiochus's sacrilegious entry into the temple and his cruelty in Jerusalem. This is recounted also in 1Maccabees 1:20-24. 2Maccabees 5:23-26 records the follow-up campaign when Antiochus sent an army led by Apollonius to Jerusalem. This is recorded also in 1Maccabees 1:29-32, which goes on to record the establishing of a citadel in Jerusalem to control the city for Syria (1Maccabees 1:33-40).
7. Then, in chapters 6-7 2Maccabees records the terrible persecution that followed on the decree of Antiochus to wipe out Judaism. A briefer account of this persecution is given in 1Maccabees 1:41-63. Because of the author of 2Maccabees's love of telling edifying stories, he picks out two events that highlight the heroic fidelity of the Jews who refused to give up their faith.

