

# **SECOND BOOK OF MACCABEES**



# **INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction

The author of the Second Book of Maccabees states in the Preface to his work that he is offering a condensed version of a five volume history by Jason of Cyrene (see 2Maccabees 2:23). Jason's history has not survived. Whereas 1Maccabees begins with the reign of Antiochus IV, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164, 2Maccabees takes us back to the previous reign of Antiochus's brother, Seleucus IV (187-175). He goes only as far as 160BC when Judas Maccabaeus is at the height of his power, having defeated the Syrian army led by Nicanor.

The author of 1Maccabees writes in support of the dynastic claims of the Hasmonaeans to rule the Jews as their high priest. Jason of Cyrene acknowledges the providential role played by Judas Maccabaeus, but his focus is on God who miraculously intervened because of the heroism of the martyrs and because of the blasphemous behaviour of the enemies of the Jews. Judas was God's instrument, and Jason is not in favour of the Hasmonaeans. Not only does he represent an opposing view to that espoused by the author of 1Maccabees, it is possible that he composed his history precisely to counter what he saw as 1Maccabees's propaganda (see Jonathan Goldstein in his commentary on 2Maccabees in the Anchor Bible Series n. 41A, page 82). The author of 2Maccabees made his condensed version to spread Jason's ideas more widely. Jason is perhaps drawing on the memoirs of Onias IV (131-129), who was in exile in Egypt and who was the rightful high priest. He saw the Hasmonaeans as usurpers.

Jason wrote in Greek some time in the 80's BC, and 2Maccabees, also in Greek, followed shortly afterwards.

The style of Jason of Cyrene's history is typical of Hellenistic history writing of the time. He has a liking for pious legend. His history is punctuated with divine apparitions, and is teeming with miracles. He sets out to inspire fidelity to the Torah, for it is this (not the military heroics of Judas) that ensures divine blessing and intervention. In this he is close to the author of the Book of Daniel, who was not pleased with the military stand taken by Judas and his brothers. If independence is to be achieved, it will be something done by God and in God's time.

The comments on 1Maccabees as history on pages 6-7 apply also to 2Maccabees. This is especially important when we come to read the many prayers and speeches that feature in 2Maccabees. The author of these prayers and speeches is Jason of Cyrene who loves to include them wherever possible. There are already plenty in the selection which the author of 2Maccabees chose to condense. The original probably had many more. A feature of the history presented by the author of 2Maccabees is that he is content to offer a chain of events with little concern for chronological sequence. Unlike 1Maccabees, which at times follows the Syrian dating system, 2Maccabees consistently follows the Babylonian dating system (see the Introduction to 1Maccabees, page 8).

The version of 2Maccabees that has come down to us has an unexpected feature. The author's condensed version of a section of Jason's history begins in chapter 3. This is preceded by the author's Preface, which begins in 2Maccabees 2:19. Someone thought to attach 2Maccabees to two letters, purportedly written from the Jews in Jerusalem to the Jews in Egypt.

The first letter (2Maccabees 1:1-10) is genuine, composed in 124BC (see 2Maccabees 1:10) during the high priesthood of John Hyrcanus (134-104). It implicitly condemns the temple of Leontopolis in Egypt and recommends the observance of the Days of Dedication. The second letter is a forgery by an Egyptian Jew who is opposed to the temple at Leontopolis. It appears to have been composed at the beginning of the rule of Alexander Jannaeus (c.103BC). It stresses the sanctity of the Jerusalem temple and its priesthood and (like 1Maccabees, but unlike 2Maccabees) supports the legitimacy of the Hasmonaean dynasty.

Modelling himself perhaps on the Book of Esther which offers a historical basis for the festival of Purim, the author appears to have attached 2Maccabees to the letters in order to provide a historical background to support the Festival of Dedication.

