

Hope When All Is Hopeless (1 & 2 Maccabees)

Introduction

In Esther we learned the beginning of the Feast of *Purim* when the Jews escaped annihilation at the hands of Haman, the Ammonite Vizier to the King of Persia. In the Books of the Maccabees we learn of the beginning of the Feast of *Hanukkah* when the Jews escaped annihilation at the hands of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Macedonian King of the Hellenic Kingdom of Syria.

After Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, most of the Middle East fell under Greek control. When he died without an heir in 323 B.C., his generals partitioned the empire amongst themselves and began a long history of squabbles that eventually made them vulnerable to Roman expansion. The Jewish conflict with their new Syrian overlords (the Seleucids), with whom they peacefully coexisted up to a point, breaks out at the end of one of these squabbles.

The four extant books are *very* different from each other. 1 Maccabees may have been written in either Hebrew or Aramaic in the First Century B.C. after the death of the High Priest and Ethnarch John Hyrcanus (a third-generation Maccabee) whose reign began the independent Hasmonean dynasty; it is considered an historically solid work. 2 Maccabees is a Cliff-Notes version of a larger history written in Greek in the late First Century B.C. or even early First Century A.D. and is considered less accurate and discerning, but still of value. 3 Maccabees is not part of this history at all, concerned with an unrelated incident in Ptolemaic Egypt, written in Greek, and is concerned with due observances of the Law. 4 Maccabees is a study of martyrdom under the Seleucids, written in Greek in the early First Century A.D. and is not canonical but does show how orthodox Judaism can coexist with Stoic philosophical ideals.

This study will only look at excerpts from 1 and 2 Maccabees as they concern the history of the events of the Hellenistic period before the events of the New Testament.

Study

Week 1 (Nov. 29): 1 Mac. 1.20-64

This starts with Antiochus comes back from his campaign against the Ptolemies of the Hellenistic Kingdom of Egypt. While his Hellenization in Judea had gained some ground, he ups the ante and embarks on a program of cultural eradication, which included the desecration of the Temple in Jerusalem on 15 Chislew, 167 B.C.

Week 2 (Dec. 6): 1 Mac. 2.1-48

This is the beginning of the revolt under Matthias, whose son Judas Maccabeus (Yehuda Ha'Makabi) becomes the chief of the resistance after his father's death.

Week 3 (Dec. 13): 2 Mac. 15.1-36

Nicanor was one of the Syrian generals that was a thorn in the side of the Resistance. His defeat happens on 13 Adar, which is the day before Mordecai's day also known as *Purim* (14 Adar), and was celebrated yearly until the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

Week 4 (Dec. 20/27 Chislev): 1 Mac. 4.36-59 and 2 Mac. 1.18-36

These are the canonical (Christian) Scriptures concerning the Festival of Lights, which is both a translation of *Sukkoth* which was delayed that year due to hostilities, and the beginning of a new feast. The story of the oil is, however, Talmudic and not found in Christian or Jewish Scripture.