



## **The Historical Books of the Old Testament**

### **Lesson 8**

#### **Lesson 8 Commentary      The Maccabees and Recap**

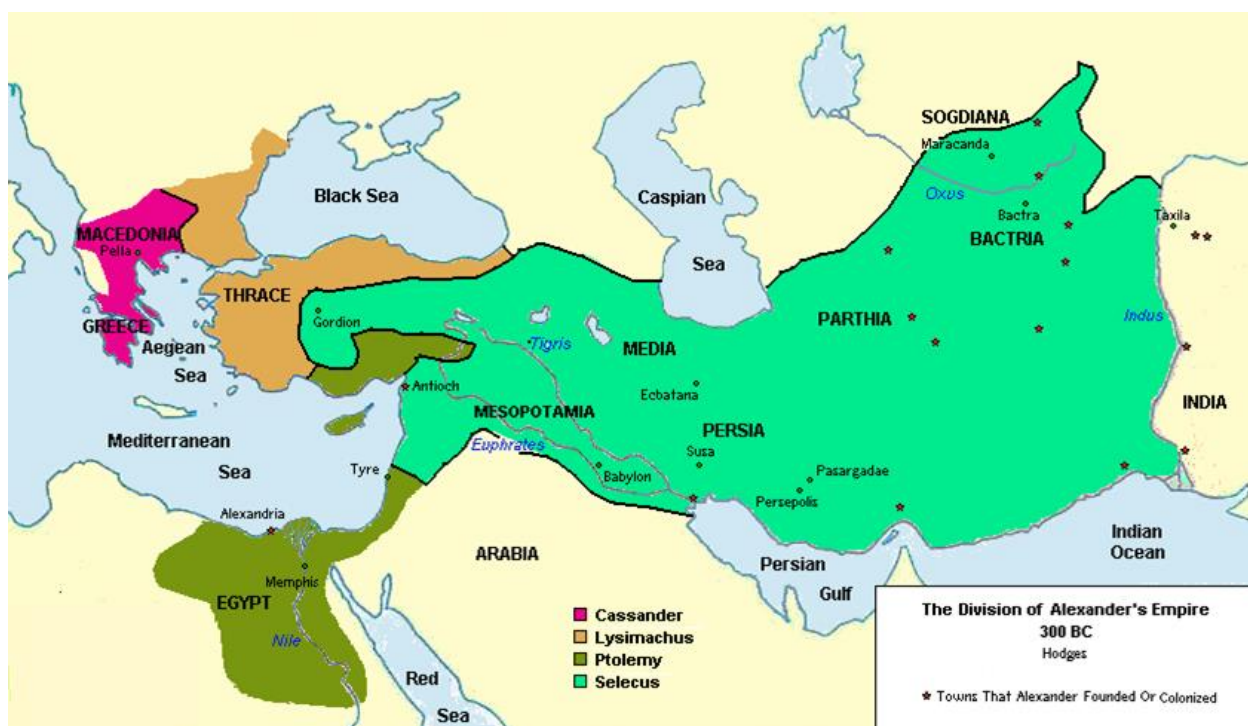
#### **Introduction**

Here we are at the books of the Maccabees, our last session. When we left off the Jews from the kingdom of Judah had returned from the Babylonian exile. The various kings of Persia had worked with the Jews on rebuilding the Temple and the City of Jerusalem. At the conclusion of Ezra/Nehemiah, we left off sometime around 430 - 420 B.C. With the start of the Maccabees, we now jump forward about three centuries. A great deal happened in the intervening time.

A young man, named Alexander, ascended to the throne in Macedon in northern Greece in 336 B.C. and became known as Alexander the Great. He only reigned for thirteen years. However, he changed the world in that short period, largely through his conquest of nearly half of the known world. In 332 B.C. he conquered Persia, starting the “Hellenization” of Palestine. Greek became the language of the period. He ruled a majority of the known world reaching as far east as India and as far west as the eastern Mediterranean. Around 332 B.C., he established Alexandria in Egypt. However, at the young age of about 33, he died, and his kingdom was split between four of his generals, Cassander, Lysimachus, Ptolemy, and Seleucus. Jerusalem sat in the empire of Seleucus but was very near to the empire of Ptolemy. Both empires had a great deal of influence on events in Palestine during the period leading up to time of the Maccabees. “The Ptolemies and the Seleucids fought a series of six wars known as the Syrian Wars, which lasted most of the third century and a significant portion of the second century B.C. In 198 B.C., during the Fifth Syrian War (202–195 B.C.), the Seleucid king, Antiochus III the Great, defeated the Ptolemies at the battle of Panium and gained definitive control over Palestine.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wesley Crouser, “Seleucid Empire,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).



The Seleucid Dynasty consisted of the following kings:

- Seleucus I Nicator (r. 312–281 B.C.)
- Antiochus I Soter (r. 281–261 B.C.)
- Antiochus II Theos (r. 261–246 B.C.)
- Seleucus II Callinicus (r. 246–226 B.C.)
- Seleucus III Soter (r. 226–223 B.C.)
- Antiochus III the Great (r. 223–187 B.C.)
- Seleucus IV Philopator (r. 187–175 B.C.)
- Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175–164 B.C.)
- Antiochus V Eupator (r. 164–162 B.C.)
- Demetrius I Soter (r. 162–150 B.C.)
- Alexander Balas (r. 150–145 B.C.)
- Demetrius II Nicator (r. 145–139 B.C.)
- Antiochus VI Dionysus (r. 145–142 B.C.)
- Antiochus VII Sidetes (r. 138–129 B.C.)<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 823.

Of importance to our discussion of the books of the Maccabees is Antiochus IV Epiphanes. It was his harsh treatment of the Jews that started the Maccabean War that created what became known as the Hasmonean Dynasty.

Unlike 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, 1 and 2 Maccabees are not a two-volume set that are set in sequence. They are “two very different but complementary accounts of roughly the same events: the Jewish struggles for independence, under the leadership of the Maccabees, against the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes...as well as his successors.”<sup>3</sup> Most likely, 1 Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew and then translated to Greek, primarily based on certain word usages that are commonly found in Hebrew. 2 Maccabees appears to have been originally written in Greek. Both books were not accepted into the Hebrew Scriptures and, while they were included in the Christian scriptures from the earliest records (Council of Rome 382 A.D.), they were removed from the scriptures by the Protestant reformers.

## 1 Maccabees

The outline of I Maccabees is as follows:

- I. Background of the Revolt: The Persecution under Antiochus IV (1 Mac 1)
  - a. The Life and Death of Alexander the Great 7)
  - b. The Rise of Antiochus Epiphanes (1:8-10)
  - c. The Persecution of the Jews and Jerusalem by Antiochus (1:1-64)
- II. The Revolt of the Sons of Mattathias (1 Mac 2-16)
  - a. The Career of Mattathias (2)
  - b. The Career of Judas Maccabeus (3:1-9:19)
  - c. The Career of Jonathan (9:20-12:53)
  - d. The Career of Simon (chaps. 13-16)<sup>4</sup>

The first chapter of the book describes what Antiochus Epiphanes did in the process of trying to hellenize the Jews, including ransacking and profaning the Temple. The remainder of the book talks about the successive acts of Mattathias and his sons. Judas, Mattathias’s son, went by the nickname of “*Maccabaeus*,” Greek for “hammer.” “In time, however, Judas’ nickname became

---

<sup>3</sup> John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (Ignatius Press, 2018), Kindle Edition, Chapter 21, Location 10801.

<sup>4</sup> Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 21, Location 10843.

used as a surname for his whole family, although they are more accurately called the “Hasmoneans” after their ancestor Asamoneus.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the more important events of 1 Maccabees is the rededication of the Temple after it is profaned by Antiochus Epiphanes.

They rose early on the morning of the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, that is, the month of Kislev, in the year one hundred and forty-eight, and offered sacrifice according to the law on the new altar for burnt offerings that they had made. On the anniversary of the day on which the Gentiles had desecrated it, on that very day it was rededicated with songs, harps, lyres, and cymbals. All the people prostrated themselves and adored and praised Heaven, who had given them success. For eight days they celebrated the dedication of the altar and joyfully offered burnt offerings and sacrifices of deliverance and praise. They ornamented the facade of the temple with gold crowns and shields; they repaired the gates and the priests’ chambers and furnished them with doors. There was great joy among the people now that the disgrace brought by the Gentiles was removed. Then Judas and his brothers and the entire assembly of Israel decreed that every year for eight days, from the twenty-fifth day of the month Kislev, the days of the dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness on the anniversary.<sup>6</sup>

This is the institution of the celebration of *Hanukkah*.

## 2 Maccabees

The outline of 2 Maccabees is as follows:

- I. Introduction (chaps. 1–2)
  - a. A Letter to the Jews in Egypt (1:1–9)
  - b. A Letter to Aristobulus (1:10–2:18)
  - c. Preface (2:19–32)
- II. Heliodorus and the Temple Treasury (3:1–40)
- III. The High Priesthood—Simon, Jason, and Menelaus (4:1–5:27)
- IV. Persecution of the Jews (6:1–7:42)
- V. The Rebellion of Judas Maccabeus (8:1–15:38)<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 21, Location 10801.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Macc 4:52–59. All biblical citations are from the NABRE.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 562.

Unlike 1 Maccabees, the author tells us that he or she is summarizing a five-volume work of one Jason of Cyrene into a single book. The five-volume work nor anything written by a Jason of Cyrene has survived.

One of the more important aspects of 2 Maccabees is the narrative witness to prayer for the dead:

Judas rallied his army and went to the city of Adullam. As the seventh day was approaching, they purified themselves according to custom and kept the sabbath there. On the following day, since the task had now become urgent, *Judas and his companions went to gather up the bodies of the fallen and bury them with their kindred in their ancestral tombs.* But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So, it was clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. They all therefore praised the ways of the Lord, the just judge who brings to light the things that are hidden. *Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out.* The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. *In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind; or if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead.* But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. *Thus, he made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin.*<sup>8</sup>

This is, perhaps, the most explicit biblical witness supporting the concepts of Purgatory and prayer for the dead. While Protestants do not consider the books of the Maccabees as canonical, it shows how the Jews of the time period believed.

### **The Hasmonean Dynasty**

While the books of the Maccabees end with the accession of John Hyrcanus I to the throne after the murder of his father, Simon, and his brothers, the Hasmonean dynasty did not end there:

---

<sup>8</sup> 2 Macc 12:38–46 (emphasis added).

- **John Hyrcanus** (r. 135–105 B.C.) The son of Simon who enjoyed the rule of Judea under the titles of priest and ethnarch. He proved an aggressive ruler, extending Jewish influence over Edom and compelling the Idumeans to accept circumcision. He then attacked the Samaritans and destroyed their temple on Mount Gerizim.
- **Aristobulus I** (r. 105–104 B.C.) The son of John Hyrcanus, he claimed the title of king. He came to the throne by imprisoning his mother—who had been named heir to John—along with his brothers. He was assassinated after ruling for only a year.
- **Alexander Jannaeus** (r. 104–76 B.C.) The brother of Aristobulus I, he was released from imprisonment by his sister-in-law, the royal widow Salome (whom he then married) and was given the throne. He devoted himself to the expansion of Hasmonean influence and ultimately during his reign the kingdom reached its greatest expanse, approximately the dimensions of the Davidic realm. This program of expansion entailed conflicts with Ptolemaic Egypt and the Nabateans. By the time of his death, he had very poor relations with the Pharisees, and he left instructions to his widow for her to improve the situation.
- **Salome** (r. 75–67 B.C.) The widow of Alexander Jannaeus, she presided over the gradual decline of the dynasty, although she did appoint Alexander’s son, Hyrcanus II, to the post of high priest.<sup>9</sup>

As you can see, while the Hasmoneans came to power because of their zeal for the law, they quickly fell prey to temptations introduced by power. When Salome died, a war erupted between the two remaining heirs. The Roman General, Pompey, seized Jerusalem in 63 B.C. making all of Palestine a protectorate of Rome.

However, the Romans still allowed the Hasmoneans to rule under their supervision. The relationship between Pontius Pilate and King Herod on display in the Gospel narratives of the Passion of Christ is testament to this agreement. But how did Herod the Great come to power, creating the “supervised” Herodian dynasty? Marriage! Herod married the Hasmonean princess, Mariame. Herod was not a Jew by birth -- he was an Edomite (a descendant of Esau, the brother of Israel). However, the marriage to Mariame gave him a claim to the royal throne of the Hasmoneans. Augustus Caesar, the adopted son of Julius Caesar and by then emperor of Rome, favored the selection of Herod as king of Judea. “Consumed by fears of conspiracies, [Herod] had many in the royal household executed, including his wife, Mariame, and three sons, as well as many subjects who were accused of conspiring against him.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 344.

<sup>10</sup> Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 358.

## **Recap**

Well we have done it. We followed the Israelites under the command of Joshua taking the land promised to Abraham. We looked at the time of the Judges before there was a king in Israel. We then saw the golden age of the kingdoms of David and Solomon to the complete destruction of ten tribes and the exile of two tribes. We saw how Persian kings facilitated the return of the Jews in exile back to the promised land and the rebuilding of the Temple and the Jerusalem. We saw how the zeal of Mattathias freed the Israelites from the Greeks, creating the Hasmonean dynasty, only to be ruled again by a foreign kingdom, Rome. Finally, we saw the rise of Herod the Great, which leads us to the time of Jesus Christ.