

Lesson 21: The Maccabean Revolt, part 1 (1 Maccabees 1-6)¹

The Historical Context

Ezra and Nehemiah oversee the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. This is a time of great hope among the Israelites since it seems that God has reestablished a Jewish nation to possess the Holy Land. It is likely that the Jews of the time saw the new situation as a confirmation of their faith in Yahweh and their favored position among other nations. National peace, however, is not permanent.

The books of First and Second Maccabees give the story of the Jewish history just before the coming of Christ. From the time of the last prophets in the 5th century BC (Haggai, Malachi) up to the mid-2nd century, things in Jerusalem are quiet. In fact, there is little history written about the Jews from this period. Things change, however, in the 2nd century BC, which is what First and Second Maccabees covers. The books are a history of the struggle of the Jewish people for religious freedom. These two books are not to be read so much sequentially, but concurrently, as two colors merging together to form one picture. It is the history of the rise of Greek influence over Judea, the corruption of some of the Jewish people to secular power, and the fidelity of other Jews to Yahweh. The author himself explains the books:

The story of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, and the purification of the great temple, and the dedication of the altar, and further the wars against Antiochus Epiphanes and his son Eupator, and the appearances which came from heaven to those who strove zealously on behalf of Jerusalem, so that though few in number, they seized the whole land and pursued the barbarian hordes, and recovered the temple famous throughout the world and freed the city and restored the laws that were about to be abolished, while the Lord with great kindness became gracious to them – all this, which has been set forth by Jason of Cyrene in five volumes, we shall attempt to condense into a single book.²

From the time of the third return (445 BC) to the second century BC there is relative peace. The Israelites are able to live in Judah and worship in the Temple. Wars abound around Judah, but the Israelites are mostly left alone. In fact, the Persian rule, which the Israelites were under, encouraged local populations to their own customs, and even subsidized local customs. For the people of Judea, this means the Persian kings actually gave subsidies to the Temple. Unfortunately, the Persian Empire could not last forever and it came to a sudden and catastrophic end.

As trade routes through the Mediterranean expand during the fourth century BC, Greece grows in wealth, power and influence. In many respects, this is a great blessing for the world because the Greek culture is more than power and wealth. It is during the expansion of the Greek Empire that the philosophical contributions of Plato, Socrates and

¹ Protestant bibles do not contain the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees because Martin Luther stripped them from the version of the Reformation due, in part, to references to the doctrine of purgatory in 2 Maccabees 12:39-45. While Catholics do consider the books part of the canon of Holy Scriptures, the books are of historical importance regardless of their canonical status.

² 2 Maccabees 2:19-23

Aristotle occur as well as a boom in other forms of art and culture. The work of the philosophers will become the foundation for much of Christian thought and western culture as it develops in the late Middle Ages up to today. During this time the Greek language becomes the dominant language of the civilized world.³ Along with the intellectual contributions, however, is a thirst for military conquest. Alexander the Great builds an army that quickly conquers Egypt and the entire Persian Empire.⁴ The world is turned into a Greek (Hellenized) world in a matter of a few short years.⁵ Greek becomes the language of commerce, art and politics. Consequently, those who wanted to participate in the spirit of the day became Greek in thought and expression.

When Alexander defeats the Persian Empire, which until that moment controlled the Holy Land, the Jewish settlement in Judea is threatened by Alexander's thirst for world power. While initially unaffected by the Greek conquest, upon Alexander's untimely death there is a power play for his succession.⁶ After his death there is a long and dreary struggle for power among his successors.⁷ Alexander's rule shakes down into two kingdoms: the Seleucid (based in Syria – modern day Jordan) and the Ptolemaic (based in Egypt). Caught in the middle of the civil war that ensues, the territory of Judah falls into the hands of the Seleucid Empire with their Greek identity and culture.⁸ Their king, Antiochus III, allows the Jews within Jerusalem to maintain their Jewish identity and worship. In fact, the king recognizes "scribes of the sanctuary" who are scholars devoted to the study, teaching and administration of the Law of Moses, and for teaching and maintaining the Jewish traditions. These scholars are characterized by love for study of God's word and strict observance of the Law. The great high priest at this time, Simon the Just, gives scribal interpretations of the Law, which become popular teaching among some of the Jews who are called the Hasidim ("the pure"), later to be called the Pharisees.⁹

Antiochus IV Epiphanes

Things take a major turn for the worse for the Israelites during the reign of the next Greek emperor, the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175 BC).¹⁰ Prior to King Antiochus IV, the Jews, while under Greek influence, could retain their religious freedom if they so chose. Antiochus IV changes this policy since it is his ambition to bring all nations under his Greek empire. Antiochus IV is the "little" horn prophesized by

³ The Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) is written in 283 BC.

⁴ 1 Maccabees 1:1-4. Legend has it that Alexander conquered the entire known world and broke down and wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. Jerusalem is such an insignificant city at this point that Alexander passes through Jerusalem on his conquests and does not even stop.

⁵ Historians call the Greek world as "Hellenistic" from the term the Greeks called themselves.

⁶ 1 Maccabees 1:5-7. Alexander dies in the spring of 323 BC.

⁷ 1 Maccabees 1:8-9

⁸ The Seleucids form one of the kingdoms that comes out of the splintering of the Greek Kingdom after the death of Alexander the Great.

⁹ Jesus ben Sirach becomes the greatest of these. He is the author of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) around 190 BC.

¹⁰ 1 Maccabees 1:10; Antiochus gave himself the added name "Epiphanes," which means "God Manifest." He considered himself a living deity, whereas his subjects called him "Epimanes," or "Out of His Mind," which offers a very different perspective from what he thought of himself.

Daniel.¹¹ In Daniel's vision of worldly powers, he sees the political powers in the form of animals.¹² There is a ram with two horns, representing the Medes and the Persians, pushing victoriously toward the west, north and south, until it is struck by the he-goat (the Greeks) with a great horn, representing Alexander, between the eyes. This great horn is soon broken and gives rise to four others kingdoms: Ptolemaic (Egypt); Seleucid (Syria, Antiochus IV comes from here); Macedonia (Macedon, Alexander comes from here); Thrace (Thrace in Greece).

In his ambition to make the entire kingdom Greek in culture and thought, Antiochus IV orders that all local customs must give way to a Greek (Hellenized) state.¹³ Antiochus seeks to erase Judaism by forcing Greek paganism on his Jewish subjects. Unfortunately, there are many willing Jews, especially among the rich and powerful, who allow the imposition of Greek influence, including the adoption of a few pagan gods and the accompanying religious rites. Needless to say, the faithful Jews take offense to this. The idea of Greek fashions, not to mention Greek religions, influencing the purity of God's chosen people is an affront to the families that know their Jewish history.

With the division of the Greek kingdom and the rise of Antiochus IV as the authority over Judea, the peaceful existence of the Jews will soon be broken. Antiochus finds a key Jewish collaborator in Jason, the brother of the high priest.¹⁴ Jason bribes Antiochus to appoint him as high priest, deposing his brother. Immediately Jason asserts his Greek loyalties and goes about destroying the Jewish culture. One of the first things he does is to build a Greek gymnasium near the Temple where Greek sports attract the people away from the prayer and worship in the Temple. This is so successful that many of the priests join in the fun, neglecting their duties at the Temple. The Greek culture becomes such the fad that some of the Jewish men try to hide their Jewish religious identity by covering up the mark of their circumcision.¹⁵ It is an ominous sign when the Israelites are ashamed of the mark of God's covenant with them through Abraham.

In the meantime, Antiochus hopes to increase his power by invading Egypt.¹⁶ The Ptolemaic factions within Egypt are unable to effectively defend Egypt and so they appeal to Rome for help.¹⁷ Rome sends one of their great generals, Popilius, to deal with the problem, and he goes and meets Antiochus just outside Alexandria. Popilius tells Antiochus to get out of Egypt, otherwise the Roman army will kick his army out (and kill him). Antiochus says he needs time to deliberate. In a scene that is worthy of Hollywood, the frail but tough as nails Popilius draws a circle in the sand with his cane around Antiochus and tells him to deliberate in the circle. While Antiochus had grown in arrogance and self-adulation (he is the successor of Alexander the Great), he is intelligent

¹¹ Daniel 7:8; 8:9-11

¹² Daniel 8

¹³ 1 Maccabees 1:10-15; 2 Maccabees 4:7-17

¹⁴ The fact that Jason has already dropped his Jewish name, "Jesus," suggests he is well on his way to renouncing his Jewish heritage in favor of the Greek culture.

¹⁵ 1 Maccabees 1:14-15

¹⁶ 1 Maccabees 1:16-20

¹⁷ In 202 BC Rome defeats Carthage and becomes the strongest world power.

enough to know that he has no choice against the Roman army but to submit or be destroyed. The self-worshipping Antiochus is humiliated.

The Sacking of Jerusalem and the Desecration of the Temple¹⁸

In crazy rage, Antiochus leaves Egypt and heads back to Syria. On his way he passed through the Holy Land, venting his anger and humiliation on Jerusalem, killing over 40,000 men (and selling an additional 40,000 women and children into slavery).¹⁹ His initial attack occurs on the Sabbath, when the faithful Jews would not defend themselves. It seems to be an act of desperation to prove to others and to himself that he is still Epiphanes, “God Manifest.” His humiliation in Egypt turns him into a violent aggressor trying to prove himself deserving of Alexander’s legacy. As violent as all of this is, he goes further with unimaginable acts of desecration and blasphemy. He drives out Jason, the conspiring high priest, tears down the walls that Nehemiah built, builds his own fortress within the heart of the city, and then goes after the Temple and the Jewish culture.²⁰

In place of worship of Yahweh, Antiochus imposes pagan worship, including worship of himself. He insists that everyone must participate in the pagan sacrifices. He brings in the “Chief collector of tribute”²¹ as the architect of the destruction of the Jewish faith with its replacement by Hellenistic cults.²² Antiochus is so deranged that he has a statue of Jupiter Olympus erected within the Temple with his image as the face.²³ All the books of the Law are burned and any parents that have their boys circumcised are killed. It is nothing short of genocide. On December 25, 167 BC the Temple is dedicated to Antiochus with a sacrifice of a pig on the altar as deliberate mockery of the Mosaic Law. The Temple then becomes a place for ritual prostitution and pagan orgies.²⁴ Those who refused to participate were either tortured or killed.²⁵ In a short amount of time Jerusalem turns from a peaceful, Jewish city, to a place of death and sacrilege.²⁶ It seems the Jewish religion is on the precipice of disappearing.

The Meaning of the Persecution (the meaning of suffering)

The Jews must have been crushed not only physically but in spirits as well. They had been through so much and now that some of them are actually faithful to the Law, they are killed and nearly extinguished. For perhaps the first time they could say that they had been faithful to the Covenant, defending it against the Greek culture and the pagan religion that was being imposed on them. The faithful Jews would be right in asking, “How can God allow this to happen?” It is a question that needs to be answered, and the only way to understand this issue is from a spiritual perspective.

¹⁸ 1 Maccabees 1:20-67; 2 Maccabees 5:24-7:41

¹⁹ 2 Maccabees 5:11-14

²⁰ 1 Maccabees 1:20-28

²¹ A Greek term that likely referred to the chief mercenary or chief of taxes. Either way, it is clear that Antiochus is bringing in a person who can inflict great damage on the people.

²² 1 Maccabees 1:29-64; 2 Maccabees 6:1-11

²³ 1 Maccabees 1:54

²⁴ 2 Maccabees 6:4; cf. Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11

²⁵ It is clear that there is a small group of Jews that resist the Greek laws (1 Maccabees 1:53).

²⁶ see 1 Maccabees 1:41-61; 2 Maccabees 6

The first answer to this question is that God made us free, and so He allows us to choose something other than Himself. This is what happened throughout salvation history and it is what happens in 2nd century BC with some of the Jews. Not all remain faithful to the Covenant, and those who participate in the Hellenistic culture allow the devil to infiltrate their land. Belonging to the People of God requires a moral and religious life very different from the Gentiles, and yet some of the Jews blurred, if not abandoned, the differences, which allowed the Greek powers to impose itself more effectively on the people as a whole. This should be an important lesson for us today. We need not isolate ourselves from the secular world, but we should protect our Christian identity. Our freedom is not an absolute good. It is good to the degree to which we choose the good (ultimately God), that is, the degree to which we conform ourselves to the truth.²⁷ God desires us to choose Him, but allows us to do otherwise. And so when evil comes into our lives it is not because God puts it there, but because our bad choices cause the evil and God simply respects our freedom. The flip side of this negative aspect of freedom is that when we choose God, when we choose the true good, it is a great beauty that reflects our true dignity as sons and daughters of God. In this sense, the possibility of evil is what makes our choice for the good so beautiful.

The second answer to the question of evil is that we are perfected through suffering. Maccabees itself gives an answer to this question:

Now 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. In fact, not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately, is a sign of great kindness. For 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, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people.²⁸

God does not cause evil to befall us, but He allows it to happen so we might be tested and forced to leave sin behind.²⁹ Through the suffering of evil we are forced to examine our lives and reconsider our choices. From this perspective, God allows persecution to happen to elicit our fidelity to Him. This is true for 2nd century Israel and it is true for the Church today. Love is not always easy – sometimes it comes in the form of discipline so we might become more perfect in our love for God. In this sense, God allows suffering to happen so that we might grow in our capacity to love. We might say, then, that the difficulties of life can be great gifts that perfect us in ways that would otherwise be impossible. They transform our weak love into heroic love, they bring greater glory to our souls, and they bring grace to others.

²⁷ cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, ##17, 35

²⁸ 2 Maccabees 6:12-16

²⁹ cf. Hebrews 12:3; James 1:2-4

Finally, our faith tells us that God allows evil and suffering only because he is capable of bringing forth an even greater good from the evil. This is the meaning of the Latin phrase, “Felix culpa,” Oh happy fault. That is not to say we should pursue sin so that God might work through it, but, rather, that if we truly desire to cooperate with God’s grace He can take our sin and the sin of others and use it for good. Just as the first sin of Adam and Eve is the catalyst for Christ’s outpouring of Himself for us on the Cross, our personal sin can be transformed by the grace of Christ for a greater good. This is, admittedly, a difficult reality to see at times, but our faith is clear that Christ is bigger than our sin. It is clear that throughout the Old Testament God uses secular history to bring about His plan of salvation, and so our faith tells us that providence uses that which is not explicitly faith-related to bring about His divine will. We will soon see how the story of the Maccabees is the historical context for the coming of the Messiah. Their present struggles will bear the fruit of a historical setting that makes Christ’s arrival possible.

Martyrdom and the Resurrection of the Dead

This last stage of the Old Testament introduces a new concept into the divine economy – life after death as witnessed by martyrdom. The Jews of Judea must choose between following the orders of Antiochus in order to save their lives, or risk death in fidelity to the Law. If there is no thing as life after death then the choice is easy. Contrary to this wisdom, however, a number of the Jews choose to risk their lives by remaining faithful to the Law. This elicits heroic fidelity to the Covenant in a way previously unseen. This is certainly a difficult position to be in but sometimes there are only two options: sin or heroism – to try and find a third way only leads to deception and, ultimately, spiritual death.

Prior to this time the expectation of God’s blessings is always expressed in terms of temporal gain. Now there is recognition that there is more to life and God’s blessing of His people than simply some hope of political vindication. We see this most dramatically in the story of the mother and her seven sons who must choose whom they will serve.³⁰

Seven brothers and their mother are arrested for not renouncing their Jewish faith and submitting to the imposition of Greek pagan worship. They are fearless in the face of torture and death.³¹ Their witness (which is where the word “martyrdom” comes from) offers new insight into the development of the Jewish understanding of divine judgment and life after death. The first brother says that it is better to die than to sin;³² the second proclaims that God will reward them with new life;³³ the third says that they will be given new bodies;³⁴ the fourth asserts that the unjust will not be resurrected;³⁵ the fifth says that

³⁰ 2 Maccabees 7

³¹ It should be noted that their heroism was likely inspired by the witness of Eleazar (2 Maccabees 6:18-31), a scribe “in high position” who died for his faith rather than apostatize. This is a prime example of how a person in the public eye can greatly influence others for good or for bad, but in this case for good. Public officials have a unique responsibility to give witness to what is true and good since their actions will likely influence others.

³² 2 Maccabees 7:2, 6

³³ 2 Maccabees 7:9

³⁴ 2 Maccabees 7:11

sinner will be punished;³⁶ the sixth brother says that each will suffer for his or her own sins;³⁷ the youngest brother proclaims that suffering and righteous works can atone for the sin of others.³⁸ This is all a development in the thinking of the Old Testament church regarding the resurrection of the dead, which shows the progressive understanding of Revelation.³⁹

The assertion that the death of martyrs has redemptive value prepares the faithful to accept the meaning of Christ's own suffering and death.⁴⁰ In a real way the new degree of (heroic) fidelity prepares the way for Christ. This is an important development in the economy of salvation that will enable the early Christian church to understand the suffering and death of Christ. The Church today is blessed to have the witness of the 2nd century BC Jews to prepare for the fullness of Christ's own life and death.

³⁵ 2 Maccabees 7:14

³⁶ 2 Maccabees 7:17

³⁷ 2 Maccabees 7:18

³⁸ 2 Maccabees 7:37-38

³⁹ CCC, #992

⁴⁰ It should be emphasized that Christ's suffering and death not only deflects the punishment due all sinners, but that through his grace we are truly made righteous in the eyes of God (cf. Romans 3:21-26).