

Study 15: Let Us Go and Make a Treaty With the Heathen

Introduction.

The two books of Maccabees are about civil disobedience, persecution, martyrdom, church-state relations, religious liberty, and just warfare. But most importantly they are about faith and trust in God. Reading and understanding these two books can give us real insight into the extent and quality of our own commitment to defend religious values in the face of strong governmental (or societal) opposition. Some of the questions arising from these two books include:

- ✠ What should a religious people do when faced with a real threat to their faith in the form of persecution?
- ✠ Does persecution have a positive side? Does it provide opportunities? How? What kind?
- ✠ How does persecution – even in its most subtle forms – affect each of us personally? How can we oppose it? How does it affect our willingness to publicly profess our faith?

These are just a few of the important questions prompted by these two historical books. They are questions not just for the Jews of the 2nd Century B.C., but for us as well. We should not dismiss them or treat them lightly since the persecution of Christians is on the rise throughout the world today and is even beginning to show its face in our own country. We and those who come after us may well be faced by challenges not unlike those that confronted the Jewish people 22 centuries ago.

The Books.

The title of the two books of Maccabees is taken from the surname (really a kind of nickname) of Judas Maccabaeus, the hero of the war of Jewish independence against the Greek rulers of Syria and Palestine. The actual origin of the word “Maccabee” is unclear, but likely derives from the Hebrew word meaning “hammer” – a probable reference to Judas’ physical strength and accomplishments in warfare. The name, also applied to his brothers, was extended as well to the martyred brothers depicted in 2 Mac 7.

The two books were not written by the same author. Indeed, 2 Mac was likely written a quarter-century before 1 Mac. The books are not sequential and each presents the story of the Jewish uprising, what is commonly called the *Maccabean Revolt*, from a different perspective, both historically and theologically. It is best to read the two books in parallel, comparing their narratives of the same events.

The Catholic Church has always considered both books to be inspired and they were recognized as such by the Church Fathers. The books were later formally defined as canonical by the Council of Trent. Protestants do not include them in their Old Testament canon.

The First Book of Maccabees. This book gives an extremely vigorous account of the attempts by the Maccabees (Mattathias, the priest, and his five sons) to maintain the Jewish religion and way of life by force of arms. It covers the period from the time Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power in 175 B.C. until shortly after the death of Simon, the last of the Maccabean brothers and the installation of John Hyrcanus I as high priest in Jerusalem in 134 B.C.

The book was written a little more than 100 years before the birth of Christ, most likely by a Palestinian Jew who was an eye-witness to many of the events he described. The author, almost surely a resident of Jerusalem and a supporter of the Hasmoneans (Maccabees), was really quite a good historian, even by our standards. 1 Mac was written originally in Hebrew, although all we have today is a Greek translation.

In reading 1 Maccabees we are reminded of the campaigns undertaken by the earlier heroes of the Old Testament: Moses, Joshua, David... The author clearly supports and applauds the armed resistance of the Maccabees, along with the guerrilla warfare they conducted against the occupying Syrian forces. He obviously agreed with those who would defend the integrity of Judaism by whatever means.

Although at first reading it may seem to be an almost purely secular history, 1 Maccabees is far more than that because of its insistence that the people of God must live out their faith within the political tensions of the real world. The author also illustrates how the Maccabean revolt and the creation of independent

rule are really a significant part of the history of salvation. Furthermore, he attributes the success of the opposition to Seleucid persecution to the spirituality of the Maccabees, the result of their prayer and reverence for the Law [See 1 Mac 3:48; 4:10; 4:36-59; 12:9-15; 13:51]. The Maccabees also fought against oppression and apostasy and for the Temple and the Law. This reverence for the institutions that define Jewish life and worship is a key motivating factor behind the revolt [1 Mac 3:58-59; 5:1,9; 14:29] which reached its climax in the recapture and rededication of the Temple [1 Mac 4:36-61].

The Second Book of Maccabees. This book was written originally in Greek by a Hellenistic Jew who was likely an important figure in the Jewish community in Alexandria (Egypt). Key information in the book indicates that it was written at approximately 124 B.C.

The book overlaps 1 Mac in time, but takes up the story a few years earlier, during the last years of the reign of Antiochus IV's bother and predecessor, Seleucus IV. It concludes with the defeat of the Seleucid general Nicanor by the Maccabees in 160 B.C. and, therefore, covers a period of less than 20 years. While 1 Mac spans the public careers of all the Maccabees (Mattathias and three of his sons, Judas, Jonathan and Simon), Mac 2 focuses exclusively on the exploits of Judas, the same period covered in 1 Mac 1:10-7:50.

The author's purpose is to build up the morale of the Jews by showing that Judas' victory was due to God's powerful aid [2 Mac 2:19-22]. 2 Maccabees provides a very different perspective on the persecution and the revolt, in that it subordinates militarism to martyrdom. Accordingly, we encounter a whole different set of heroes. Instead of focusing on the freedom fighters celebrated in 1 Mac, 2 Mac honors the ordinary Jews who remained faithful to the Law even in the face of unbelievably harsh persecution by the Seleucids. Among the Maccabees only Judas merits attention because he was such a strong defender of the faithful.

The author also wants to show that God's purpose in permitting persecution is to discipline the Jews "*in order that he may not have to punish us more severely later, when our sins have reached their fullness.*" [2 Mac 6:15]

2 Maccabees clearly suggests that spiritual protest and faithfulness are superior to the act of taking up arms in opposition to religious persecution. Keep in mind, however, that it does not necessarily condemn those who took part in the revolt but simply posits that spiritual resistance is a higher form of opposition. The author, who interprets the events largely from a religious perspective, was almost surely one of the Hasidim, a group of the period who countered persecution solely through spiritual resistance. We see the same perspective in Daniel, a book quite likely also written by someone in the tradition of the Hasidim.

Historical Background.

"The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia."

From the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (c. 433 B.C.) the children of God had been forced to live as inhabitants of a Persian province. We have already discussed the renewed emphasis given to the Law and Worship (ritual) in the Temple now that the Chosen People no longer formed even a minor political power on the world stage. And so an apparently peaceful and uneventful stretch of more than 200 years followed.

"The whole earth was silent before him."

This peace was, however, broken by a chain of external events. First, Persia fell before a new force that came out of the West, a force led by one man in particular: Alexander the Great. As he and his armies swept eastward across the known world, Alexander in 331 B.C. added Palestine and Syria to the expanding Greek empire. At his death just a few years later in 323 B.C., Alexander's empire was divided into four parts, each ruled by one of his generals. Ptolemy ruled the portion of the empire centered in Egypt, which included Palestine. For 100 years the Ptolemies ruled Palestine and were inclined to be tolerant of the Hebrews, permitting them to retain their religion and way of life.

Seleucus, the son of another of Alexander's generals, ruled the eastern regions of the empire, including Babylon, Syria and most of Asia Minor. Although initially allies, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids became bitter rivals over control of Palestine, and in 198 B.C. the Seleucid forces of Antiochus II defeated the Ptolemies at what would later be the site of Caesarea Philippi. With the defeat of the Ptolemies, Palestine fell under the domination of the Seleucids who ruled from their capital in Antioch. The early Seleucid rulers were also relatively tolerant of the political and religious cultures of the territories they controlled, but all this changed when Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Greek for "The Illustrious") came to power.

"A sinful shoot named Antiochus Epiphanes."

As a young man Antiochus IV Epiphanes had been held captive by the Romans for 14 years. He had been, in effect, a hostage to ensure the Seleucids remained under control. Shortly after his release by the Romans, his brother, the current ruler, was assassinated and Antiochus seized power.

Antiochus' persecution of the Jews began when he removed the Jewish high priest and installed another in his place. This began the Hellenization of Jerusalem, which was even given a new name, Antiochia. The new high priest even suspended observance of the Law and substituted Greek games and cultural activities in its place. The high priest now focused more on his role as a representative of the Seleucid rulers than on his position as the religious leader of the Jewish people.

After a number of minor revolts by the people, Antiochus IV entered Jerusalem with his army and plundered the Temple treasury. Antiochus also made an incursion into Egypt [Dan 11:25-28] but was forced to retreat by the Romans who reprimanded him, made him restore all the land he had captured, and sent him back to his own territory [Dan 11:29]. This was humiliating for him, so on his return he stopped at Jerusalem and killed all the Jews who had risen up against his representatives there.

Antiochus now decided to institute a policy of enforced cultural and religious conformity. In other words, everyone under Seleucid rule must become Greek in language, custom, religion, and thought. This pressure to conform and the Jewish people's resistance to it exploded in 168 B.C. when Antiochus IV further desecrated the Temple at Jerusalem by introducing into these holy precincts the worship of Zeus, the *father-god* of the many gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon. He also introduced the Syrian god, Baal-Shamem, who was equated with the Jewish YHWH [1 Mac 1:54].

The Temple had thus become a place for the worship a variety of Hellenistic and other pagan deities along with the orgiastic rites that accompanied such worship. Antiochus went further and prohibited all Jewish worship, forbidding the Jews under penalty of death to practice the Law in any form. They could no longer observe the Sabbath, perform circumcisions, or adhere to the dietary prescriptions [1 Mac 1:41-64; 2 Mac 6:1-11].

"Let everyone who is zealous for the Law come out after me."

These sacrilegious acts and decrees had a powerful effect on the Jewish people. All faithful Jews were driven out of Jerusalem into the countryside. One leading Jewish family, the Hasmonians – better known to us as the Maccabees – launched a full-scale revolt against Seleucid rule, a revolt that would rage for thirty years. For the first time since the Divided Kingdom, some 500 years before, the Jews tasted both military victory and political importance.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:

1 Maccabees 1-4, 6-8, 14

2 Maccabees 1-12

(I recommend that you return to both books at some time and read them in their entirety.)

Behind the Words.***The Link between the Old and the New.***

The Books of Maccabees are an important link between Old and New Testaments times. Together with the other late books of the Old Testament, they form a kind of prelude and background to the Gospels. In them we already find three evident characteristics of Judaism at the time of Christ:

- ✠ A profound consciousness of God's supremacy over His creation [1 Macc 3:18-22]
- ✠ Unbreakable attachment to the Temple and Holy City, Jerusalem [1 Macc 4:36-60]
- ✠ Complete fidelity to the observance of the Law [1 Macc 3:47-51]

It would seem that the work of both Ezra and Nehemiah bore lasting fruit among God's People. Although these features of the religious life of the people were maintained at heroic cost, they were gradually mixed with a certain rigidity and narrowness by some. This resulted in the later travesty of the service of God typified for all time by those Pharisees condemned by Christ in the Gospels. Nevertheless, at the time of the Maccabees, these qualities helped to preserve and maintain the people in fidelity to God in the face of the very real danger of absorption by Greek religion and culture.

My Kingdom is not of this world."

The events of Maccabees also served a *negative* purpose in God's plan for our happiness. After a long struggle, the Hasmoneans succeeded in regaining national independence and even a certain political prominence in the region.

But pious Jews were quick to learn the lesson that this was *not* how the world would come to realize the "blessings for all nations" promised by God to come through Abraham's descendants. Political eminence faded almost as quickly as it had arrived. In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem and absorbed all of Palestine into the expanding Roman Empire. To the knowing Jew the world was no better place and humanity was no closer to friendship with God than 100 years earlier when the fires of revolt had been ignited in 168 B.C.

The resurrection of the dead is also clearly addressed in 2 Mac. We see it especially in the story of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons and in Judas' prayers for the souls of his slain soldiers [2 Mac 7; 12:43]. Purgatory, the intercession of the saints, and prayers for the dead are also stressed in 2 Mac, forming the basis of the dogma of the communion of saints [2 Mac 12:38ff; 12:43-46]. It also asserts the resurrection of the just and tells us what we need to know about the fate of the unjust [2 Mac 7:9-29; 14:46].

The Cast of Characters.

The historical figures mentioned in Maccabees are not only figures on the stage of history but are also, in a sense, larger than life. They are players in the great drama of ideas that has fascinated us human beings since the dawn of history.

First of all, it's important to understand the reality of what happened. The war is not really between the Seleucids and the Hasmoneans, nor between the Jews and the Pagans; rather, it is between the observers of the Law and its adversaries, whether Jew or Greek.

Mattathias, father of the Maccabees, is a key figure in the great debate over the freedom and integrity of individual conscience in the face of the demands of the totalitarian or absolute state.

Alexander and Antiochus IV are, for the author, two examples of humanity's overweening pride, a pride which completely inverts what should be our proper relationship with God.

Judas, the soldier, Jonathan, the guerrilla leader, and Simon, the shrewd politician, are all in their various ways struggling to rescue their people from the first full-blown religious persecution in history.

Some Key Passages. In your Bible mark the following key passages from the First Book of Maccabees:

History, Secular and Sacred – 1 Mac 1

Revolt of the Maccabees – 1 Mac 2

The Cleansing of the Temple – 1 Mac 4:36-60

The Roman Alliance – 1 Mac 8

The Martyrdom of the mother and her sons – 2 Mac 7

Expiation for the dead – 2 Mac 38-46

Highpoints of these Passages.

Alexander the Great [1 Mac 1:1-10]. This almost legendary figure of world history set out on his conquest of the known world in 332 B.C. It is interesting to note that as a youth this future ruler of the world was personally educated by Aristotle.

The “Hellenizers” [1 Mac 1:11-16]. Not all Jews were so adamantly opposed to the *Greek Way*. Not a few felt that the wiser course was to cooperate and curry favor with the Seleucids, while a great many more had a real admiration for Greek ways and wanted to combine them with Hebraic culture to the improvement of both.

Persecution Rages [1 Mac 1:26-29, 38-42]. These verses provide interesting examples of the poetical heights to which our ordinarily matter-of-fact historian occasionally rises. Compare these passages to Psalm 78, which was likely written about the same time as 1 Maccabees. Do you notice any similarity in either style or spirit?

The Sons of Hammer [1 Mac 2:1-26]. The family of the priest, Mattathias, came from the small town of Modin about 15 miles northwest of Jerusalem. For the reference to Phineas in 2:24, refer to Num 25:7 and following.

The Pious Ones [1 Mac 2:42]. The “Hassidim” or Pious Ones were the forerunners of the Pharisees we encounter in the Gospels. They were a group of pious Jews who rose to the occasion at this moment of religious peril by joining the Maccabees in their revolt.

Feast of Dedication [1 Mac 4:36-59]. The event described in these verses was commemorated for future generations by the feast of Hanukkah or “lights.” This feast is still celebrated by modern Jews and usually falls around Christmas time. For its mention in the New Testament, see John 10:22.

The Elephant War [1 Mac 6:32-46]. The juice of grapes and mulberries was used to suggest blood to the elephants and thus excite them to savagery in the ensuing battle.

Alliance with Rome [1 Mac 8:1-32]. There is an old Arab saying: “Never let the camel get his nose under the tent. For, if he does, he will soon be sleeping inside and you will be out in the cold.” This observation was borne out in the case of the Roman alliance with the Jews. This treaty was really just the first step of a Roman conquest that ultimately led to the fall of Jerusalem to General Pompey in 63 B.C. Needless to say, Rome has no intention of supplying the promised military aid. The treaty was simply an attempt to embarrass the Seleucid monarchs by recognizing their rebellious province as a nation. The Jews, then, were merely pawns on a global chessboard controlled by the major powers of the period. Better to have trusted in God.

Resurrection of the Dead [2 Mac 7]. The mother in 2 Mac 7 proclaimed her assurance of God’s power to raise the dead to life, an assurance eternally authenticated in the Resurrection of the crucified Christ. [See Acts 2:33-36; 2 Mac 7:22-29.] It is an assurance that is also echoed by St.

Paul when he writes, “For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...” [See 2 Cor 4:17 and 2 Mac 7:36.]

Unity of the Two Testaments.

The Book of Maccabees is deeply concerned with one aspect of the problems that derive from the conflicts that often arise between our relationship to the state and our relationship to God. The New Testament also addresses this question. Read the following New Testament passages and consider their relationship with what we have read in 1 Maccabees:

- ✠ Mt 22:15-22
- ✠ Rom 13:1-8
- ✠ 1 Thess 3:1-13
- ✠ Mk 8:31-33; Jn 12:31-36
- ✠ Connection between Lk 19:45-21:38 and 1 Mac 4:36-59
- ✠ Mt 5:43-48; 26:51-52; Lk 22:49-52 (Jesus’ attitude toward enemies)
- ✠ Lk 7:1-10 (Jesus’ attitude toward occupiers of the land)
- ✠ Mk 13:14 and Mt 24:15 with 1 Mac 54; 6:7
- ✠ Acts 7:54-8:1; 12:1-2 with 2 Mac 7

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. What is your reaction to the episode described in 1 Macc 2:29-41? What do you think of Mattathias’ decision in 2:41?
2. Describe your thoughts about Mattathias’ death-bed speech in 1 Macc 2:49-69?
3. Does the following quotation from C. S. Lewis have any bearing on the Maccabean period? *“It is great men, potential saints, not little men, who become merciless fanatics. Those who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it.”*
4. We saw earlier when discussing Isaiah that the Jews were condemned for placing their trust in foreign alliances rather than God. In the light of the judgment of the Prophet, what do you think of the alliance with Rome, described in 1 Macc 8?
5. Do the Book of Maccabees and the above selections from the New Testament [Matthew, Romans, 1 Thessalonians] shed any light on the Christian’s proper relationship with the state?
6. Why do you think the Book of Maccabees is important in God’s plan?
7. How do you think that the concepts of martyrdom and resurrection found in 2 Maccabees might have been important to the early Church?
8. Describe the role of suffering to bring God’s people to holiness.
9. Compare the difference between Maccabean hope in a Messiah and Jesus’ fulfillment of that hope and instruction on how to live in the Kingdom.
10. Discuss how you deal with the idols of modern culture – the emphasis on sexual gratification as an end in itself; a materialistic culture revolving around consumer goods such as cars and technology – and how you can better resist them.