

MACCABEES

Introduction

These events happen towards the year 200B.C. The Israelites are a small estate under the kings of Syria, successors of Alexander Magnus' empire. One of them, Antiochus Epiphanes, tries to force the Israelites to accept Greek customs, completely opposed to the prescriptions of the Law. The people of Israel resists passively but, later on, reach martyrdom before disobeying Yahweh. Afterwards the armed rebellion explodes, steered by one family: the Maccabees.

In these books, besides the regular theme of Yahweh's protection for his people, when the people are faithful there is another very interesting theme: faith in eternal life, and the recompense that the just ones will receive after death.

1 MACCABEES

Historical introduction

1 Everything began with the conquests of Alexander the first, son of Philip, the Macedonian. Setting out from Greece, he killed Darius, king of the Persians and the Medes. Being already King of Greece, he took the throne of Darius. ²After fighting many battles, conquering strongholds and putting to death the kings of those nations, ³he reached the ends of the earth and plundered several nations. And when the world became quiet and subject to his power, he became proud. ⁷Alexander had reigned for twelve years when he died.

⁸His generals assumed power, each one in the region assigned to him. ⁹And immediately after Alexander's death, they made themselves kings and their sons after them, filling the earth with evil for many years.

Persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes

¹⁰From their descendants there came a godless offshoot, Antiochus Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus, who had been held as hostage in Rome. He became king in the one hundred and thirty-seventh year of the Greek era (175 B.C.).

¹¹It was then that some rebels emerged from Israel, who succeeded in winning over many people. They said:

—Let us renew contact with the peoples around us for we have endured many misfortunes since we separated from them!

¹²This proposal was well-received ¹³and some eagerly went to the king. The king authorized them to adopt the customs of the pagan nations. ¹⁴With his permission, they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem in the pagan style. ¹⁵And as they wanted to be like the pagans in everything, they made artificial foreskins for themselves and abandoned the Holy Covenant, sinning as they pleased.

²⁰In the year one hundred and forty-three (169B.C.), when Antiochus returned after defeating Egypt, he passed through Israel and went up to Jerusalem with a strong army.

²¹He arrogantly broke into the sanctuary and removed the golden altar, the lampstand for the light with all its accessories, ²²the table for the bread of offering, the libation vessels, the cups, the golden censers, the curtains and the crowns, and stripped away all the decorations, the golden moldings that used to cover the Temple entrance. ²³He also took possession of the silver, gold, valuable objects and all the hidden treasures he could find. ²⁴He took everything with him and left for his country, after shedding much blood and making arrogant statements.

²⁹After two years, the king sent to the cities of Judah the chief tax collector and he came to Jerusalem with a strong army. ³⁰He spoke to the people with words of peace in order to deceive them. But when he had gained their confidence, he suddenly fell on the city and dealt it a terrible blow, killing many Israelites. ³¹He plundered the city, burning and destroying the palaces and the surrounding walls.

³²He took women and children captive and seized the livestock. ³³Then they rebuilt the city of David with a high and solid wall protected by strong towers, and this became their fortress. ³⁴There they set evil men and apostates who defended it. ³⁵They stored up weapons and provisions, and everything they looted in the city, posing a constant threat. ³⁶It became an ambush for the sanctuary, a grave and constant threat to Israel.

⁴¹Antiochus issued a decree to his whole kingdom.

Mattathias' rebellion

2 ¹⁵In the meantime, the king's representatives, who were forcing the Jews to give up their religion came to Modein to organize a sacred gathering.

¹⁶While many Israelites went to them, Mattathias and his sons drew apart.

¹⁷The representatives of the king addressed Mattathias, and said to him:

—You are one of the leaders of this city, an important and well-known man, and your many children and relatives follow you. ¹⁸Come now and be the first to fulfill the king's order, as the men of Judah have already done, and the survivors in Jerusalem as well. You and your sons will be named Friends of the King and the king will send you gold, silver and many other gifts.

¹⁹But Mattathias answered in a loud voice:

—Even if all the nations included in the kingdom should abandon the religion of their ancestors and submit to the order of King Antiochus, ²⁰I, my sons and my family will remain faithful to the Covenant of our ancestors. ²¹May God preserve us from abandoning the Law and its precepts. ²²We will not obey the orders of the king nor turn aside from our religion either to the right or to the left.

²⁷Mattathias then began to proclaim loudly in the city:

—Everyone who is zealous for the Law and supports the Covenant, come out and follow me!

²⁸Immediately he and his sons fled to the mountains and left behind all they had in the city.

Judah makes alliance with Rome

8 ¹In the meantime, Judas was informed about the Romans. He was told that the Romans were valiant in war and that they showed goodwill towards all who sided with them; that they offered friendship to all who approached them, ²and were a strong ally in war.

He was told of their wars and of their exploits among the Gauls whom they conquered and forced to pay taxes, ³and of all they had done in Spain to gain possession of the silver and gold mines, ⁴and how they had conquered that land by dint of intelligence and perseverance, despite

its great distance from their own land. He also learned how they had defeated the kings who came from the ends of the earth to attack them, how they managed to conquer and crush them. There were others who paid them an annual tax.

¹⁷So Judas sent Eupolemus the son of John, and Jason the son of Eleazar to Rome, entrusting them with the mission to make a covenant of friendship with the Romans. ¹⁸Since the Greeks treated the Israelites as slaves, Judas hoped to liberate them from oppression in this way.

¹⁹The envoys from Judas went to Rome, where they arrived after a long journey. When they entered the Senate they addressed the assembly:

²⁰—Judas Maccabeus, his brothers and the people of Israel have sent us to you to conclude a covenant of peace with you and to be numbered among your allies and friends.

²¹The Romans approved this proposal.