

Old Testament History
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Part Eight
Between the Testaments:
The Hellenistic Period

CHAPTER 89

The Maccabees and the Struggle Against Hellenism

The oppressions of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes produced a reaction which stunned Antiochus and surprised many of the Jews themselves. The Hasidim needed but a leader. From the obscure village of Modin one emerged.

1. Mattathias

The emissaries of Antiochus erected a pagan altar at Modin. In order to show their loyalty to the government, the Jews were asked to come forward and sacrifice at the altar. The aged priest of the village, Mattathias, was asked to come forward first to set a good example for the others. Mattathias refused to sacrifice at the pagan altar. Fearing the wrath of Antiochus, a timid Jew made his way to the altar. Mattathias was enraged. He approached the altar, slew the apostate Jew and the emissary of Antiochus. With his five sons, Mattathias destroyed the heathen altar and fled to the hills to avoid the certain reprisals which might be expected from Antiochus. Others joined the family of Mattathias.

The early days of the Maccabean revolt, as the struggle against Antiochus and Hellenism came to be called, were days of guerrilla warfare. From their mountain strongholds, the sons of Mattathias and their allies raided the towns and villages, killing the royal officers and the Hellenistic Jews who supported them. A religious factor, however, favored the Syrians. Religious scruples kept the Maccabees from fighting on the Sabbath. On one Sabbath, a band of Maccabees was surrounded and slaughtered. They would not defend themselves. Sensing the gravity of the situation, Mattathias adopted the principle that fighting in self-defense was permissible even on the Sabbath day.

2. Judas the Maccabee

Soon after the beginning of the revolt, Mattathias died. He urged his followers to choose as military leader his third son Judas (Hebrew, *Judah*), known as "the Maccabee" (usually interpreted as "the hammer"). Continuing victories in guerrilla warfare proved the choice

a good one. More and more Jews rallied to the banner of Judas.

In the early days of the revolt the Syrians underestimated the strength of the Maccabees. Thinking the revolt only a minor skirmish, they sent inferior generals and small detachments of soldiers into the field. The Maccabees, however, were able to hold their own. They defeated one after another of the Syrian armies thrown against them.

Before long Antiochus realized that he had a full-sized rebellion in his hands. Because of its proximity to Egypt, Judea was particularly important. Yet Antiochus could not throw his full strength into Judea because he was faced with another revolt in Parthia at the same time. Antiochus moved eastward to Parthia, leaving his general Lysias to take care of the revolt in Judah.

Lysias sent an army of Syrians, Hellenistically minded Jews, and volunteers from the neighboring countries to defeat the Maccabean rebels. Nicanor and Gorgias, subordinates of Lysias, were in charge of the engagement. Judas, however, by a surprise night attack, annihilated the Syrian army and seized enormous stores of booty. This victory at the town of Emmaus opened the road to Jerusalem to the Maccabees.

Judas and his army moved on toward Jerusalem. Menelaus and his sympathizers fled. The Maccabees entered the city and were able to take everything except the fort known as the Akra. They entered the Temple and removed all of the signs of paganism which had been installed there. The altar dedicated to Jupiter was taken down and a new altar was erected to the God of Israel. The statue of Zeus-Antiochus was ground to dust. Beginning with the twenty-fifth of Kislev (December) they observed an eight-day Feast of Dedication, known as Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights. In this way they celebrated the end of the three-year period during which the Temple had been desecrated.

Peace was short-lived, however. The neighboring lands had been sympathetic with the Syrians and had constantly harassed the Jews. Lysias, himself, marched against the Maccabees and defeated them in a battle near Jerusalem. He next besieged Jerusalem, hoping to starve the Maccabees into submission. During his siege, however, he learned that a rival was marching against Antioch, the capital of Syria. Anxious to head north, Lysias made an offer of peace to the Jews.

In the name of Syria, Lysias offered to refrain from interference in the internal affairs of Judea. Laws against the observance of Judaism would be repealed. Menelaus was to be removed from office, and the high priesthood given to a certain Jakim or Eliakim, better known by his Greek name of Alcimus. In this way a mild Hellenizer was to be recognized as High Priest. Lysias promised that Judas and his followers would not be punished. The walls of Jerusalem were to be razed, however.

These terms of peace were considered by the council at Jerusalem, a kind of provisional

government. This council included the Maccabean army officers and the respected scribes and elders associated with the Hasidim, the party of orthodox Jews which had supported Judas.

The goal of the Hasidim had been religious liberty. This goal seemed to be in sight. Judas was not satisfied with anything short of full political as well as religious liberty. However, the appeal of a combination of peace and religious freedom won the day. The Hasidim had achieved their goal, and they were able to outvote the followers of Judas. The peace terms were accepted. Alcimus was installed as High Priest. Menelaus was executed. Judas and a few of his followers left the city.

The fears of Judas proved to be correct. Alcimus had a number of the Hasidim seized and executed. Many loyal Jews turned to Judas again and the civil war was renewed. This time, however, Judas was faced with more formidable opposition. Alcimus appealed to Syria for aid, and a sizable army was sent. The Hellenizing Jews adopted a more moderate attitude and won over large segments of the followers of Judas. Left with an ill-equipped army of eight hundred men, Judas bravely met the large Syrian army. He died in battle, ending the first phase of the Maccabean struggle.

3. Jonathan

Simon, Jonathan, and Johanan, brothers of Judas, with several hundred Maccabean soldiers, fled across the Jordan. From the standpoint of Syria they were a band of outlaws. To many of the Jews, however -- even those who had made their peace with Alcimus -- they were the true patriots. Jonathan became the leader of the band, and young Jews were constantly being attracted to their ranks. Syrian attempts to destroy this band of patriots were uniformly unsuccessful.

Victory finally came to Jonathan by diplomacy rather than by war. When a pretender, Alexander Balas, claimed the Syrian throne of Demetrius II, both parties sought help from the Jews. They turned to Jonathan as the man best able to raise and lead a Jewish army, bypassing the Hellenistic Jews. Jonathan had no interest in either the pretender or Demetrius, who had tried to destroy him several times. He played a delaying action which proved successful. He supported Balas and made treaties with Sparta and Rome. Before the war was over, Jonathan was High Priest, governor of Judea, and a member of the Syrian nobility. Jonathan's brother Simon was governor of the Philistine coastal area.

Since both Judah and Rome were hostile to Syria, an alliance seemed desirable. The Roman senate declared itself the "Friend" of Judah, but no efforts were made to implement the declaration. In time, of course, Rome was to prove as much of an enemy as Syria.

Jonathan's foreign policy promoted the internal prosperity of Judah. The coastal cities, ruled by Simon, were practically annexed. When Judah died at the hand of a Syrian

general, his brother Simon succeeded him as ruling High Priest.

4. Simon

Simon was advanced in years when he assumed office. Syria was again rent between two factions, one looking to Demetrius II as a king, and the other recognizing the legitimacy of Antiochus VI, a boy under the guardianship of Tryphon. This Tryphon deposed Antiochus "and reigned in his stead, and put on him the diadem of Asia" (I Maccabees 13:31-32). Tryphon was the first Syrian king who was not of the Seleucid line. Simon ignored him, recognizing Demetrius as rightful king in Syria. Demetrius, in return, granted the Jews full immunity from taxes. This was interpreted as an acknowledgment of independence, and occasioned great rejoicing among the Jews. Simon was also able to starve out the Syrian garrison at the Akra and to occupy the cities of Joppa and Bethsura.

During the period of peace which marked the high priesthood of Simon, the question of the legitimacy of the Maccabean priests was settled. The Hasidic party recognized the line of Onias as the legitimate heirs to the Aaronic priesthood. The family of Onias had gone to Egypt during the Maccabean conflict, however, and any claims they had to the priesthood were thereby forfeited. In recognition of his wise rule, a convocation of the leaders in Israel named Simon "leader and High Priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet" (I Maccabees 14:25-49).

This act legitimized a new dynasty which is known in history as the Hasmoneans. The name is thought to be derived from an ancestor of the Maccabeans named Asmonaeus, or (in Hebrew) Hashmon. Simon was the last of the sons of Mattathias. Under him, however, the concept of a hereditary high priesthood in the Hasmonean family was legitimized.

In 134 B.C., Simon and two of his sons were murdered by an ambitious son-in-law. A third son, John Hyrcanus, managed to escape. He succeeded his father as hereditary head of the Jewish state.