

II MACCABEES 8:1 – 10:8
JUDAS MACCABAEUS
& ANTIOCHUS IV 167-164

¹Meanwhile Judas, who was also called Maccabaeus, and his companions secretly entered the villages. They summoned their kinsmen and enlisted those who had continued in the Jewish faith, and so they gathered about six thousand. ²They implored the Lord to look upon the people who were oppressed by all; and to have pity on the temple that had been profaned by the godless; ³to have mercy on the city that was being destroyed and about to be levelled to the ground; to hearken to the blood that cried out to him; ⁴to remember also the lawless destruction of the innocent babies and the blasphemies committed against his name; and to show his hatred of evil.

⁵As soon as Maccabaeus got his army organized, the Gentiles could not withstand him, for the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy.

⁶Coming without warning, he would set fire to towns and villages. He captured strategic positions and inflicted many severe reversals on the enemy. ⁷He found the nights most advantageous for such attacks. Talk of his valour spread everywhere.

⁸When Philip saw that the man was gaining ground little by little, and that he was pushing ahead with more frequent successes, he wrote to Ptolemy, the governor of Coele-Syria and Phoenicia, to come to the aid of the king's government. ⁹Then Ptolemy promptly appointed Nicanor son of Patroclus, one of the king's chief Friends, and sent him, in command of no fewer than twenty thousand Gentiles of all nations, to wipe out the whole race of Judea. He associated with him Gorgias, a general and a man of experience in military service. ¹⁰Nicanor determined to make up for the king the tribute due to the Romans, two thousand talents, by selling the captured Jews into slavery. ¹¹So he immediately sent to the towns on the seacoast, inviting them to buy Jewish slaves and promising to hand over ninety slaves for a talent, not expecting the judgment from the Almighty that was about to overtake him.

Verses 1-4 offer a summary statement of Judas's organising his freedom fighters and of their grievances and their pleas to God. 2Maccabees does not mention Mattathias.

On the profaning of the temple see 2Maccabees 6:2-5 and 5:15-16. 1Maccabees 1:29-32 describes the destruction of Jerusalem. On the massacre of children see 5:13; 6:10. The chief 'blasphemy' was the dedication of the temple to Zeus (see 6:2).

Typically, the author sees the changing in Jewish fortunes as a sign of a change in God, from anger at sin to mercy (verse 5).

The burning of towns and villages is detailed in 1Maccabees 2:45-48. One 'strategic position' was Beth-horon (see 1Maccabees 3:16). One 'severe reversal' was the victory over Apollonius and Seron (see 1Maccabees 3:10-24).

'Philip', the Syrian commissioner in Jerusalem (see 5:22), is not mentioned in 1Maccabees. Ptolemy has already been mentioned (2Maccabees 4:45). 1Maccabees 3:38 also names Ptolemy, Nicanor and Gorgias. 1Maccabees 3:41-42 agrees on the aim of the campaign against Judea. Syria was behind in its payments of the tribute due to Rome after Rome's victory over Antiochus III at Magnesia (see page 9).

1Maccabees 3:42-60 and 4:8-11 describe Judas's strategy against Gorgias.

The Jews are relying on the commitment made by God to Abraham (and renewed to Isaac and Jacob):

I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.

– Genesis 17:8

Verses 16-18 make much the same points as the equivalent exhortation given in 1Maccabees 3:58-60.

In 1Maccabees 4:8-11 Judas speaks of the defeat of Pharaoh. Here 2Maccabees refers to the failure of Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem in 701BC (compare 1Maccabees 7:41 and 2Maccabees 15:22).

The victory in Babylonia is not recorded elsewhere. The Galatians were Gauls from western Europe who arrived in Asia Minor in 278BC.

'Macedonians' may be a reference to the Syrian Seleucids whose presence and power in Syria was the result of the conquest by Alexander the Great from Macedonia.

¹²Word came to Judas concerning Nicanor's invasion; and when he told his companions of the arrival of the army, ¹³those who were cowardly and distrustful of God's justice ran off and got away. ¹⁴Others sold all their remaining property, and at the same time implored the Lord to rescue those who had already been sold by the ungodly Nicanor before even engaging them in battle. ¹⁵If they could not ask this for their own merits, they did so on the grounds of the covenants God made with their ancestors, and because he had called them by his holy and glorious name.

¹⁶Maccabaeus gathered his forces, to the number of six thousand, and exhorted them not to be frightened by the enemy and not to fear the great multitude of Gentiles who were wickedly coming against them. Rather, they should fight nobly, ¹⁷keeping before their eyes the lawless outrage that the Gentiles had committed against the holy place, and the torture of the derided city, and besides, the overthrow of their ancestral way of life. ¹⁸"They trust to arms and acts of daring," he said, "but we trust in the Almighty God, who is able with a single nod to strike down those who are coming against us, and even, if necessary, the whole world." ¹⁹Moreover, he told them of the occasions when help came to their ancestors: how, in the time of Sennacherib, one hundred eighty-five thousand perished, ²⁰and how at the time of the battle against the Galatians that took place in Babylonia, eight thousand Jews fought along with four thousand Macedonians; yet when the Macedonians were hard pressed, the eight thousand, by the help that came to them from heaven, destroyed one hundred twenty thousand Galatians and took a great amount of booty.

²¹With these words he filled them with courage and made them ready to die for their laws and their country. He then divided his army into four divisions, ²²and appointed his brothers Simon and Joseph and Jonathan, each to command a division, putting fifteen hundred men under each. ²³Besides this, he appointed Eleazar to read aloud from the holy book. He gave the watchword, "The help of God". Then, leading the first division himself, he joined battle with Nicanor.

²⁴With the Almighty as their ally, they killed more than nine thousand of the enemy, and wounded and disabled most of Nicanor's army, and forced them all to flee.

²⁵They captured the money of those who had come to buy them as slaves. After pursuing them for some distance, they were obliged to return because the hour was late. ²⁶It was the day before the sabbath, and for that reason they did not continue their pursuit. ²⁷When they had collected the arms of the enemy and stripped them of their spoils, they kept the sabbath, giving great praise and thanks to the Lord, who had preserved them for that day and allotted it to them as the beginning of mercy. ²⁸After the sabbath they gave some of the spoils to those who had been tortured and to the widows and orphans, and distributed the rest among themselves and their children. ²⁹When they had done this, they made common supplication and implored the merciful Lord to be wholly reconciled with his servants.

1Maccabees 2:1-5 does not mention 'Joseph' (verse 22) as one of Judas's brothers.

Whereas the author of 1Maccabees enjoys detailing the military tactics (see 1Maccabees 4:13-25), the author of 2Maccabees refers the reader to the five volume work of Jason of Cyrene for details. He is more interested in highlighting the action of God in the military victory, and the piety of Judas and his followers: their trust in God; their devotion to the law; their keeping of the sabbath; and their care for the poor.

In verse 28 Jason underlines the significance of the role played by the heroic martyrs in gaining victory from God for the Jews.

Verses 30-32 are out of place here. They belong to the campaign of Judas in Ammon (see 1Maccabees 5:6, 24-54). He places it here to portray Judas, too, as one who relied on the efficacy of the martyrs. He wants to down play the attempt by the author of 1Maccabees to paint Judas as a brilliant military strategist, of a priestly family who, fittingly became high priests.

In his attempt to offer a summary account, the author of 2Maccabees is less concerned with chronology and context than in highlighting the presence of God, acting to protect and have mercy on his people.

On Timothy (verse 30) see 1Maccabees 5:6-7. On Bacchides see 1Maccabees 7:8).

‘Kallisthenes’(verse 33) is not named anywhere else in Maccabees.

Nicanor escaped back to Antioch ‘like a runaway slave’(verse 35).

³⁰In encounters with the forces of Timothy and Bacchides they killed more than twenty thousand of them and got possession of some exceedingly high strongholds, and they divided a very large amount of plunder, giving to those who had been tortured and to the orphans and widows, and also to the aged, shares equal to their own. ³¹They collected the arms of the enemy, and carefully stored all of them in strategic places; the rest of the spoils they carried to Jerusalem. ³²They killed the commander of Timothy’s forces, a most wicked man, and one who had greatly troubled the Jews.

³³While they were celebrating the victory in the city of their ancestors, they burned those who had set fire to the sacred gates, Kallisthenes and some others, who had fled into one little house; so these received the proper reward for their impiety.

³⁴The thrice-accursed Nicanor, who had brought the thousand merchants to buy the Jews, ³⁵having been humbled with the help of the Lord by opponents whom he regarded as of the least account, took off his splendid uniform and made his way alone like a runaway slave across the country until he reached Antioch, having succeeded chiefly in the destruction of his own army! ³⁶So he who had undertaken to secure tribute for the Romans by the capture of the people of Jerusalem proclaimed that the Jews had a Defender, and that therefore the Jews were invulnerable, because they followed the laws ordained by him.

¹About that time, as it happened, Antiochus had retreated in disorder from Persia. ²He had entered the city called Persepolis and attempted to rob the temples and subdue the city. The people rushed to the rescue with arms, and Antiochus and his army were defeated, with the result that Antiochus was put to flight by the inhabitants and beat a shameful retreat. ³While he was near Ecbatana, news came to him of what had happened to Nicanor and the forces of Timothy. ⁴Transported with rage, he conceived the idea of making the Jews pay for the injury done by those who had put him to flight; so he ordered his charioteer to drive without stopping until he completed the journey. But the judgment of heaven rode with him! For in his arrogance he said, "When I get there I will make Jerusalem a graveyard of Jews."

⁵But the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him with an incurable disease, one never before seen. As soon as he stopped speaking he was seized with a pain in his bowels, for which there was no relief, and with sharp internal tortures – ⁶and that very justly, for he had tortured the bowels of others with many and strange inflictions. ⁷Still he did not in any way stop his insolence, but was even more filled with arrogance, breathing fire in his rage against the Jews, and giving orders to drive even faster. And so it came about that he fell out of his chariot as it was rushing along, and the fall was so hard as to dislocate every limb of his body. ⁸He who only a little while before had thought in his superhuman arrogance that he could command the waves of the sea, and had imagined that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance, was brought down to earth and carried in a litter, making the power of God manifest to all. ⁹And so the ungodly man's body swarmed with worms, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away, and because of the stench the whole army felt revulsion at his decay. ¹⁰Because of his intolerable stench no one was able to carry the man who a little while before had thought that he could touch the stars of heaven.

Antiochus left for Armenia and Persia in spring 165BC. For the location of Persepolis (verse 2) and Ecbatana (verse 3) see map page 43.

His death was at the end of 164, about the same time as Judas retook the temple in Jerusalem. 1Maccabees describes the action of Judas first (see 1Maccabees 4:36-61 and 6:1-16). This is an example of the author's failure to realize that the Syrian and Judean dating systems were different (see pages 7-8).

On the defeat of Timothy (verse 3; also 8:30) see 1Maccabees 5:34, 43.

The description of Antiochus is the stuff of Greek tragedy. His overweening pride ensures his humiliating downfall. Verse 10 echoes the criticism of the king of Babylon:

You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit on the mount
of assembly on the
heights of Zaphon; I
will ascend to the tops
of the clouds, I will
make myself like the
Most High." But you
are brought down to
Sheol, to the depths of
the Pit.

– Isaiah 14:13-15

Antiochus is portrayed as recognising that he must be subject to divine judgment, punished for his arrogance (verses 11-12).

Antiochus repents and declares that Jerusalem is to be recognised as a 'holy city', free from taxation (compare the declaration of Demetrius in 1Maccabees 10:31).

The author's love of pious legend reaches an extreme when he has Antiochus declaring his desire to 'become a Jew' (verse 17). We are reminded of the story included in the Book of Daniel which ends with Nebuchadnezzar declaring:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are truth, and his ways are justice; and he is able to bring low those who walk in pride.

– Daniel 4:37

¹¹Then it was that, broken in spirit, he began to lose much of his arrogance and to come to his senses under the scourge of God, for he was tortured with pain every moment.

¹²And when he could not endure his own stench, he uttered these words, "It is right to be subject to God; mortals should not think that they are equal to God."

¹³Then the abominable fellow made a vow to the Lord, who would no longer have mercy on him, stating

¹⁴that the holy city, which he was hurrying to level to the ground and to make a graveyard, he was now declaring to be free; ¹⁵and the Jews, whom he had not considered worth burying but had planned to throw out with their children for the wild animals and for the birds to eat, he would make, all of them, equal to citizens of Athens; ¹⁶and the holy sanctuary, which he had formerly plundered, he would adorn with the finest offerings; and all the holy vessels he would give back, many times over; and the expenses incurred for the sacrifices he would provide from his own revenues; ¹⁷and in addition to all this he also would become a Jew and would visit every inhabited place to proclaim the power of God.

¹⁸But when his sufferings did not in any way abate, for the judgment of God had justly come upon him, he gave up all hope for himself and wrote to the Jews the following letter, in the form of a supplication. This was its content:

¹⁹"To his worthy Jewish citizens, Antiochus their king and general sends hearty greetings and good wishes for their health and prosperity. ²⁰If you and your children are well and your affairs are as you wish, I am glad. As my hope is in heaven, ²¹I remember with affection your esteem and goodwill. On my way back from the region of Persia I suffered an annoying illness, and I have deemed it necessary to take thought for the general security of all. ²²I do not despair of my condition, for I have good hope of recovering from my illness, ²³but I observed that my father, on the occasions when he made expeditions into the upper country, appointed his successor, ²⁴so that, if anything unexpected happened or any unwelcome news came, the people throughout the realm would not be troubled, for they would know to whom the government was left. ²⁵Moreover, I understand how the princes along the borders and the neighbours of my kingdom keep watching for opportunities and waiting to see what will happen. So I have appointed my son Antiochus to be king, whom I have often entrusted and commended to most of you when I hurried off to the upper provinces; and I have written to him what is written here. ²⁶I therefore urge and beg you to remember the public and private services rendered to you and to maintain your present goodwill, each of you, toward me and my son. ²⁷For I am sure that he will follow my policy and will treat you with moderation and kindness."

²⁸So the murderer and blasphemer, having endured the more intense suffering, such as he had inflicted on others, came to the end of his life by a most pitiable fate, among the mountains in a strange land. ²⁹And Philip, one of his courtiers, took his body home; then, fearing the son of Antiochus, he withdrew to Ptolemy Philometor in Egypt.

If this letter comes from Antiochus it was probably written to Antioch, hardly to the Jews.

The author has already described his 'annoying illness' (verse 21; see verses 5-12).

Antiochus III took this precaution in 210 before heading east.

The 'neighbours' (verse 25) are especially Ptolemy VI of Egypt and King Arsakes of Parthia (the northeast region of modern Iran).

According to the author of 1 Maccabees, Antiochus IV had appointed Philip as regent while he campaigned in the east, and had entrusted his son, Antiochus, to Philip's care (see 1 Maccabees 6:15, 55).

Philip tried to take over the government (see 1 Maccabees 6:56). He took control of Antioch (1 Maccabees 6:63), but was defeated by Lysias, and escaped to Egypt.

This passage (10:1-8) appears to be misplaced. A better position would be immediately after 8:36, and before the account of the death of the king in chapter 9.

Judas recovered control of the city and the temple in December 164BC (see 1Maccabees 4:36-59). Control over the city was incomplete, because of the Syrian garrison which controlled the citadel (see 1Maccabees 6:18).

The author of 2Maccabees named the purification of the sanctuary as a central theme of his summary (see 2:19). Because of the desecration, they had to make 'another altar of sacrifice' (verse 3; see 1Maccabees 4:44-47). The importance of the fire from heaven is stressed in the second appended letter (see 1:10 – 2:18).

'Two years' (verse 3) is a mistake. It should read 'three' (167-164; see 1Maccabees 1:54; 4:52). The author has already reflected on divine punishment as discipline with a view to repentance (see 6:12-17).

In verse 6 the author likens the festival of the rededication of the sanctuary to the festival of booths (tabernacles). Both the letters appended at the beginning of the book focus on this festival (see 1:9 and 1:18). The 'branches with their fruits' and the 'fronds of palm' are part of the traditional festival of booths (see Leviticus 23:40). The 'ivy-wreathed wands' are unexpected as they were part of the ritual associated with the Greek worship of Dionysus (see 6:7). Verse 8, see 1Maccabees 4:59.

¹Meanwhile, Maccabeus and his followers, led by the Lord, recovered the temple and the city. ²He tore down the altars that had been built in the public square by the foreigners, and also destroyed their sacred precincts. ³They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices, after a lapse of two years, and they offered incense and lighted lamps and set out the bread of the Presence. ⁴When they had done this, they fell prostrate and implored the Lord that they might never again fall into such misfortunes, but that, if they should ever sin, they might be disciplined by him with forbearance and not be handed over to blasphemous and barbarous nations.

⁵It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Kislev. ⁶They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the festival of booths, remembering how not long before, during the festival of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. ⁷Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and branches with their fruits, as well as fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. ⁸They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year.

