

The Maccabean Revolt of the Jews Against the Greeks

167 BC to 142 BC

Review: From the rise of human civilization to the time of Christ, the world has had five world empires.

The Assyrian Empire (911 to 609 BC); the Babylonian Empire (609 to 539 BC); the Persian Empire (539 to 333 BC); the Greek Empire (333 to 146 BC); the Roman Empire (146 BC to AD 476).

The death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC led to the breakup of the Greek empire as his generals fought for supremacy and divided the Middle East among themselves. General Ptolemy secured control of Egypt and the Land of Israel. General Seleucus took Syria and Asia Minor, and Antigonus took Greece.

The land of Israel (Judea) was sandwiched between Ptolemy's region and Seleucus' region. For the next 125 years the Seleucids and the Ptolemies battled over the land bridge of Judea. The Seleucids finally won in 198 BC when Antiochus III defeated the Egyptians and incorporated Judea into his empire. Initially, he continued to allow the Jews autonomy. But after a series of stinging defeats at the hands of the Romans (192-188 BC), Antiochus III began a program of Hellenization that threatened to force the Jews to abandon their monotheism for the Greeks' paganism. Antiochus eventually backed down in the face of Jewish opposition to introducing idols in their temples, but then his son came to the throne.

Antiochus IV "The Great" Epiphanes (Seleucid King from 176 to 164 BC)

His original name was Mithradates, but he assumed the name Antiochus after he ascended the throne. Antiochus IV insisted the people call him "Antiochus Epiphanes" (God manifested), but the people in Judea called him Antiochus Epimanes ("The Mad One"). The Jews, tiring of the Hellenization of Judea (including the blasphemy of the Greek leaders), were ripe for revolt under Antiochus Epiphanes. According to the authors of the *Books of the Maccabees*, while Antiochus was busy in Egypt, a rumor spread that he had been killed. Jason, the deposed Jewish High Priest, gathered a force of 1,000 soldiers and made a surprise attack on the city of Jerusalem (read **II Maccabees 5:11-14**). In 167 BC, Antiochus decided to side with the Hellenized Jews in order to consolidate his empire and to strengthen his hold over the region. He outlawed Jewish religious rites, including Sabbath observance and circumcision, and he ordered the worship of Zeus as the supreme god and erected an altar to Zeus in the Temple and sacrificed a pig (2 Maccabees 6:1–12). This act was anathema to the Jews. It led to a revolt led by a Jewish priest named Mattathias.

The Jewish Hammer (Mattathias ben Johanan, a Jewish priest and founder of the Maccabees in 167 BC)

In 167 BC, when a Greek official tried to force a priest named Mattathias to make a sacrifice to a pagan god, the Jew murdered the man. Mattathias lived in the city of Modein, and the people rose up behind him to fight against Antiochus Epiphanes. I Maccabees 2:27 has Mattathias saying, "Let everyone who has a zeal for the Law and who stands by the covenant follow me!" The Maccabean Revolt began (167 BC).

The family of Mattathias became known as the Maccabees for two possible reasons:

1. From the Hebrew word for "hammer" (*makabah*) used in I Kings 6:7, and the family of Mattathias was said to strike hammer blows against their enemies; or
2. From the Hebrew in **Exodus 15:11** which was the "battle cry" for the followers of Mattathias: "**Mi chamocha ba'elim YHWH,**" "Who is like You among the heavenly gods, LORD!"

Antiochus underestimated the will and strength of the Maccabees. He sent a small force to put down the rebellion. When that force was annihilated, he led a more powerful army into battle only to be defeated again. In 164 BC, Jerusalem was recaptured by the Maccabees and the Temple purified (See Appendix VI).

Mattathias did not survive to see that first Hanukkah. Before he died in 166 BC, he gathered his five sons around him and urged them and the Jewish people to continue steadfast in defense of their ancestral religion. **Judah Maccabeus**, son of Mattathias, led the Jews to overtake the Temple in 164 BC. After capturing the city, the Maccabees still had to deal with a Hellenized priesthood that often differed with the conservative Maccabean leadership of Jerusalem. One of the significant acts of Judah Maccabeus was agreement made between Judah Maccabee and the Roman Republic in 161 BC, according to **1 Maccabees 8:17-20** and Josephus. *It is the first recorded contract between the Jewish people and the Romans.* For the next 20 years, the Maccabees fought to reform the religion of the Jews to reflect more ancestral traditions.

The Hasmonaean Kingdom (142 to 37 BC)

Our next two studies will concentrate on this time period, a very significant time in the development of Judah in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. In 142 BC, after twenty-five years of fighting the Seleucids and Hellenized priests in Judah, the Maccabees under the leadership of Simon Maccabeus (the only surviving son of Mattathias) took over the priesthood in Jerusalem and ushered in a century of self-governance, the first since the days of the Judean kings before the Babylonian exile (586 BC).

The Maccabees are also known as THE HASMONEANS because, according to Josephus in Antiquities of the Jews, Hasmoneus was the ancestor of Mattathias. Simon Maccabeus became the first “high priest, ruler, and ethnarch of Judea,” completely independent of the Greeks (and in alliance with the Romans). These three offices were hereditary, so Simon was succeeded by his son John Hyrcanus I.

In 103 BC, John Hyrcanus died, and his son, Aristobulus I, added a fourth title – **King of Israel**. So the Hasmoneans claimed not only the post of High Priest, but the throne of Judah! The Hasmonean kings of Israel – and one queen (Salome Alexandra) – led Israel until 37 BC when the last Hasmonean king, Antigonus, was deposed and executed by the Romans under Mark Antony. The Romans installed an Idumean named Herod as the Roman client King of Israel. Herod married a Hasmonean to assuage the Jews. During the next two studies we’ll examine the Hasmoneans and the rise of Herod (Lessons 7 and 8).

The Books of the Maccabees

There are four books of the Maccabees: I, II, III, and IV Maccabees.

I Maccabees: The First Book of the Maccabees covers the period of forty years from the accession of Antiochus (175 BC) to the death of Simon the Maccabee (135 BC).

II Maccabees: Opens with two letters written by Jews living in Palestine. The letters are sent to Jews dwelling in Egypt, describing the Maccabean Revolt. The time covered by II Maccabees is barely fifteen years (175-160 BC). The author is religious teacher, and the work is more rhetorical than historical.

III and IV Maccabees: Not accepted by Jews, any Christian denomination, or other religion as inspired. III Maccabees has nothing to do with the Maccabees but discusses Jewish persecution from 222-205 BC. IV Maccabees is a semi philosophic discourse or sermon on the “supremacy of pious reason” (ch. 1:1).