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978-0-521-09749-9 - The First and Second Books of the Maccabees

John R. Bartlett

Excerpt

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THE FIRST AND SECOND BOOKS
OF THE
MACCABEES

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Before one begins to read a book written in a long past age, some explanation of things that the writer took for granted and of the way in which he approached his task is often helpful. The next few pages give, very briefly, some background information about the world to which the Maccabees belonged and about the writers who have left us some account of the Maccabees. Most of the material here concerns both 1 and 2 Maccabees, but something will be said about each book separately before the reader turns to the text and commentary.

THE WORLD OF THE MACCABEES

1 Maccabees writes of events from the accession of the Syrian king Antiochus IV in 175 B.C. to the death of the high priest Simon in 134 B.C. 2 Maccabees writes of a more limited period, 175–160 B.C. Both books, therefore, are concerned with what went on in the middle of the second century B.C. in a province of the Syrian empire called Judaea. The stage is set by the opening verses of 1 Maccabees; the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. and the consequent division of his empire (which stretched from Greece to India) meant to Judaea that, as so often before, she became an area whose possession was a matter of dispute between the two powers of the Euphrates and Nile valleys. From 312 B.C. Seleucus I ruled in Syria and Babylon, and Ptolemy I, son of Lagus, ruled Egypt; each was the founder of a dynasty, the ‘Seleucids’ and the ‘Ptolemies’ (sometimes called the ‘Lagides’). Egypt controlled Judaea

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until 198 B.C. when Antiochus III, having defeated Ptolemy V's general, Scopas, at Pancion near the source of the Jordan, took it over. From now till the end of Antiochus VII's reign Judaea was technically a Syrian province, though gradually becoming more and more independent. This gaining of independence was the work of the Maccabees (sometimes called the 'Hasmonaeans'; see the genealogy on p. xi). This family emerged from a country district of Judaea in 167 B.C. to lead resistance to the policies of Syria and her Jewish supporters.

It may help the reader to refer from time to time to the charts of Syrian and Egyptian kings, contemporary Jewish high priests, and the Maccabean family, on pp. xi-xii.

Political independence, however, was not the only point at issue in the Maccabean struggle. Before the arrival of Alexander the Great, Judaea was a province of the Persian empire, ruled by a governor appointed by Persia and by a high priest appointed on hereditary principles. Such joint rule was made necessary by the Jewish devotion to the law of Moses and the Jerusalem temple, and Persia appears to have made special provision for the Jews to live within the Persian empire under their own internal law. At one stage a Jewish scribe, Ezra, was appointed to enforce 'the law of your God and the law of the king' (Ezra 7: 26). Special provision for the conscience of Jewish subjects became a regular feature of imperial rule; both the Syrian emperor Antiochus III and the Roman Julius Caesar and his successors followed this course in ruling the Jews. The occasional breakdown of this provision was usually due to internal troubles within Judaea rather than to imperial ill-will.

The later years of Persian rule, however, saw the increase of something which did in due course produce internal division among the Jews. This was the influence of Greece. This influence was not new; from the seventh century B.C. onwards Greek pottery and other exports had been known on the Palestinian coast. In the fourth century B.C. Jewish coins were minted bearing an owl on one side and a human bearded head

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on the other in imitation of the coins of Athens. But the arrival of Alexander in 331 B.C. and the subsequent settling of Greek or hellenized soldiers in colonies throughout the east opened new doors to the Greek way of life with its commerce, its art and literature, its athletic training, its town-planning, its inquiring and inventive spirit. Greeks were beginning to discover Palestine; about Alexander's time a Greek we call Pseudo-Skylax described the coast of Palestine in his *Periplus* ('sailing round'). Excavation has found Greek or Phoenician coins and pottery in virtually every city of the coast and coastal plains. Alexander initiated a period of the building of new Greek towns in the east, of which the greatest was his own foundation of Alexandria in Egypt. Seleucus I founded Seleucia-on-Tigris and Antioch, his capital. Jerash, whose beautiful remains are still to be seen in north Jordan, was probably one of the many towns founded by the Seleucids. Ptolemy II made the ancient Acco on the coast into a new city, renamed Ptolemais (1 Macc. 5: 15); ancient Rabbah, chief city of the Ammonites (modern Amman), he renamed Philadelphia. Bethshan became Scythopolis (cp. 1 Macc. 5: 52; 2 Macc. 12: 29). Marisa (1 Macc. 5: 66) and Adora in Idumaea (1 Macc. 13: 20) were busy, hellenized commercial towns, as were Joppa, Ascalon and Gaza on the coast (most of these can be found on the map on p. 50). Thus contact between the Jews, surrounded by hellenized cities, and the Greek world was bound to grow, and 1 Macc. 5 and 2 Macc. 12 tell us of Jews who lived in these cities.

There was in particular a large and growing settlement of Jews in Alexandria, perhaps originally transported there by Ptolemy I, though, as we know from Jer. 42-4 and from the Elephantine papyri (see *Old Testament Illustrations* in this series, pp. 99-101), there had been Jews in Egypt since the sixth century B.C. These Jews were allowed, under the Ptolemies, to keep their own way of life, but many were deeply influenced by the hellenistic way of life they met at Alexandria, which was a centre of learning and literature with a famous library, as well

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as being a centre of trade and commerce. In the reign of Ptolemy II the Jewish law was translated into Greek for the benefit of Alexandrian Jews who could no longer read Hebrew fluently. This was the beginning of what is called the 'Septuagint' translation (see *The Making of the Old Testament* in this series, pp. 147–51).

In the third century B.C. Egypt was responsible for the administration of Palestine, and Egypt's tax- and trade-interests gave scope for the rise of a new class of person among the Jews – the businessman in public life. Ptolemy II's finance minister Apollonius sent his agent Zeno in 259 B.C. on a trade mission, and from Zeno's correspondence we read of his contact with one Tobiah, a land-owner and military garrison commander in Transjordan and probably a descendant of Nehemiah's adversary Tobiah, an Ammonite (Neh. 2: 10). Tobiah married the sister of the Jewish high priest Onias II, and was clearly a man of some importance. His son Joseph was probably also an Egyptian official. In about 240 B.C. Onias II ceased to pay tribute to Egypt, perhaps hoping that Seleucus II's recent victories over Egypt would mean a change of master for the Jews. On this occasion, it was Joseph who negotiated with Ptolemy, and in fact he seems to have taken over from the high priest the duties of collecting and paying the Jewish taxes to Egypt and of representing the Jewish people at Ptolemy's court. For twenty-two years he was tax-collector for Coele-syria, Phoenicia, Judaea and Samaria. The success of this latter-day Joseph in Egypt did two things: it diminished the power and status of high priest in the eyes of foreign rulers, and it created a second family rivalling the high priest's in power and influence, the 'sons of Tobiah'. It was a son of Joseph called Hyrcanus (2 Macc. 3: 11) who (by bribery) took over Joseph's job, thus alienating his elder brothers. And so by the beginning of the second century B.C., when Syria took over the rule of Judaea, there were in Judaea, as one might expect, two political parties: Hyrcanus and his followers supported Egypt, while his brothers and the then high priest,

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Simon II, supported Syria. High priests did not always support Syria, however; thus Simon's successor, Onias III, in whose high-priesthood the real trouble began, supported Egypt.

Families like that of Tobiah, linked with the ruling high-priestly family yet involved in commerce and in contact with the Greek world, made a difference to Judaea. Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* XII. 4. 10; for this work see p. 11) says that Joseph 'brought the Jewish people from poverty and a state of weakness to more splendid opportunities of life', though Jesus son of Sirach, writing in the book known as *Ecclesiasticus*, about 180 B.C., was quick to point to the disadvantages of the growth of a new monied class:

Do not lift a weight too heavy for you,
keeping company with a man greater and richer than
yourself.

How can a jug be friends with a kettle?

If they knock together, the one will be smashed.

A rich man does wrong, and adds insult to injury;
a poor man is wronged, and must apologize into the
bargain.

If you can serve his turn, a rich man will exploit you,
but if you are in need, he will leave you alone.

(*Ecclus.* 13: 2-4)

The gulf which Jesus son of Sirach portrays between rich and poor may reflect a growing gulf between the old country peasantry and the new monied, cosmopolitan aristocracy. And with this development came also the entry into Judaea of Greek ways of thought, which had what might be called a 'secularizing' effect on the Jewish traditions. Opposition to this also may be seen in *Ecclesiasticus*:

Do not pry into things too hard for you
or examine what is beyond your reach.

Meditate on the commandments you have been given;
what the Lord keeps secret is no concern of yours.

Do not busy yourself with matters that are beyond you;

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even what has been shown you is above man's grasp.

Many have been led astray by their speculations,

and false conjectures have impaired their judgement.

(Ecclus. 3: 21-4)

Ecclesiasticus urges respect for the Jewish law (which is equated with wisdom) and for the priesthood; above all he praises the scholar who studies the law, of whom he gives a portrait in 39: 1-11. The author himself, according to the prologue, 'had applied himself industriously to the study of the law, the prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors', and he may have been an earlier member of the Hasidæans who supported the Maccabæan movement (see 1 Macc. 2: 42 and the note on that verse).

Behind the Maccabæan struggle, then, lay factors like these – the rival claims of Syria and Egypt to Judæa, the particular status within an empire of Jewish law, the influence of the Greek world on Jewish society, the rival families and loyalties within Judæa, the growing division in Judæa between rich and poor, rulers and people, often parallel with the division between hellenizers and orthodox. In such a situation trouble could begin very easily.

THE DATING OF EVENTS IN 1 AND 2 MACCABEES

Some events are described by both 1 and 2 Maccabees, but they are not always easy to date, because, first, the two books do not always give the same order of events, and secondly, the two books use slightly different dating systems. Both books date events by 'the Greek era' (1 Macc. 1: 10), which began with the start of the reign of Seleucus I. But there were two ways of reckoning this:

(1) the official Syrian usage (the 'Seleucid' era). This counted the years from the first day of the month Dios (October) 312 B.C. This is followed, at least in the dating of some events, by 1 Maccabees;

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(2) the traditional Babylonian usage (the 'Babylonian' era). This counted the years from the first day of Nisan (April) 311 B.C. The Jews followed this usage, though their calendar varied by a few days from the Babylonian calendar. This system is used in 2 Maccabees, and also in 1 Maccabees when the author was drawing on Jewish, not Syrian, archives. These dates may be those given in 1 Macc. 1: 20, 29, 54, 59; 2: 70; 4: 52; 7: 43; 9: 3, 54; 10: 21; 13: 41, 51; 14: 27; 16: 14.

The months are sometimes numbered, and this helps us decide which system is in use. Thus 1 Macc. 10: 21 mentions the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month of year 160. As this feast takes place in autumn, clearly the 'Babylonian' era is being used here. Apart from numbers, the months are referred to by Jewish or Greek names, which are given below:

1	Nisan	Artemisios	(approx. April)
2	Iyyar	Daisios	(May)
3	Sivan	Panemos	(June)
4	Tammuz	Loos	(July)
5	Ab	Gorpaios	(August)
6	Elul*	Hyperberetaios	(September)
7	Tishri	Dios	(October)
8	Marchesvan	Apellaios	(November)
9	Kislev*	Audynaïos	(December)
10	Tebeth	Peritios	(January)
11	Shebat*	Dystros*	(February)
12	Adar*	Xanthicus*	(March)

Names actually used in 1 and 2 Maccabees are asterisked.

A further aid to certain dates is found in the first-century A.D. Jewish writing, the *Megillath Ta'anith*, the 'Scroll of Fasting', which lists days (and the events commemorated on them) on which fasting was not allowed. The following dates relevant to 1 and 2 Maccabees are mentioned:

- 23 Iyyar: the sons (i.e. men) of the citadel left Jerusalem (cp. 1 Macc. 13: 51)

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- 27 Iyyar: the crown-tax was withdrawn from Judah and Jerusalem (cp. 1 Macc. 13: 39)
- 17 Sivan: the tower of Sur was captured (perhaps the capture of Bethsura is meant, cp. 1 Macc. 11: 66)
- 23 Marchesvan: the *sirouga* was hidden away from the temple court (cp. 1 Macc. 4: 43–6)
- 3 Kislev: the *simoth* were taken out of the temple court (cp. 1 Macc. 4: 43–6)
- 25 Kislev: the eight days of Hanukkah begin (cp. 1 Macc. 4: 52)
- 28 Shebat: King Antiochus left Jerusalem (cp. 1 Macc. 6: 63)
- 13 Adar: the day of Nicanor (cp. 1 Macc. 7: 49; 2 Macc. 15: 36)
- 28 Adar: the Jews heard the good news that keeping the commands of the law was no longer forbidden (cp. 2 Macc. 11: 25)

(The meaning of *sirouga* and *simoth* is uncertain, but they are probably connected with the defiled altar of burnt offering.)

THE SYRIAN ADMINISTRATION

1 and 2 Maccabees contain several references to various officials of the Syrian empire, and a description of its administration may be found helpful.

The empire was divided into provinces called ‘satrapies’, a name inherited from the Persian administration (cp. 2 Macc. 9: 25). Among these were Cilicia (2 Macc. 4: 36), Persia (1 Macc. 3: 31), Media (see the note on 2 Macc. 9: 3), the ‘upper provinces’ (which perhaps included the lower regions of Mesopotamia and Babylonia as well as the higher regions of Persia and Media, 1 Macc. 3: 37), Syria Seleucis (northern Syria, around Antioch), and the province we hear most of, Coele-syria and Phoenicia. Most of these provinces will be found on the maps on pp. 79 and 146. These provinces were

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ruled by 'governors' (Greek *strategoi*, 2 Macc. 4: 4), and for Coele-syria and Phoenicia we know of four by name: under Seleucus IV, Apollonius (2 Macc. 4: 4), under Antiochus IV, Ptolemaeus son of Dorymenes (2 Macc. 4: 45 ff.) and Ptolemaeus Macron (2 Macc. 10: 11 ff.), and under Demetrius I, Bacchides (1 Macc. 7: 8).

The province was subdivided into 'eparchies' – probably the regions of Phoenicia, Coele-syria, Idumaea (of which Gorgias was *strategos*, 2 Macc. 12: 32) and 'the coastal zone' (of which Simon was made *strategos*, 1 Macc. 11: 59, and later Kendebaeus *epistrategos*, 1 Macc. 15: 38) or possibly Trans-jordan. These eparchies in turn were subdivided into 'parts' (Greek *merides*), each governed by a 'meridarch'; thus Apollonius was meridarch of Samaria (cp. 1 Macc. 3: 10 ff., Josephus, *Antiquities* xii. 5. 5) and Jonathan became meridarch of Judaea (1 Macc. 10: 65). Below them were more local governors; we hear of Philip and Andronicus, the 'commissioners' (Greek *epistatai*) of Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim (2 Macc. 5: 22). Presumably there were administrative officials in charge of 'toparchies' such as the three districts of Samaria (1 Macc. 11: 34).

Alongside the civil administration was the army; indeed, the civil administrator often had military rank as well. We hear of an army officer Seron (1 Macc. 3: 13) and of the 'distinguished commander' Nicanor (1 Macc. 7: 26), of mercenary troop commanders (2 Macc. 4: 29; 12: 2) and commanders of the elephant corps (2 Macc. 14: 12), and of the garrison commander in Jerusalem, Sostratus (2 Macc. 4: 29). But Nicanor could be made a *strategos* of Judaea (2 Macc. 14: 12), Bacchides was governor of a province (1 Macc. 7: 8), Gorgias of an eparchy (2 Macc. 12: 32), and Apollonius was a meridarch (1 Macc. 3: 10), yet all these led troops in the field, as might the king and his chief minister in person.

At the head of the empire was the king, assisted by his Friends. The Friends had their own internal hierarchy; thus Alexander enrolled Jonathan 'in the first class of the order'

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(1 Macc. 10: 65), and Demetrius II later ‘appointed him head of the first class’ (1 Macc. 11: 27). Friends closest to the king might be called ‘the King’s Kinsmen’ (cp. 1 Macc. 10: 89; 11: 31 f.) or ‘intimate friend’ (2 Macc. 9: 29). From these Friends might be selected the chief ministers of state, men like Heliodorus, the ‘chief minister’ (2 Macc. 3: 7). The ‘minister’ Andronicus was left as ‘regent’ when Antiochus IV went to Cilicia (2 Macc. 4: 31), and later Lysias is similarly left as ‘viceroy of the territories between the Euphrates and the Egyptian frontier’ (1 Macc. 3: 32) or as ‘vicegerent’ (2 Macc. 11: 1) and as ‘guardian’ of the heir to the throne. The Friend Philip was appointed ‘regent over his whole empire’ (1 Macc. 6: 14).

ANCIENT WRITERS WHO DESCRIBE THIS PERIOD

1 and 2 Maccabees are not the only ancient books which describe the achievements of the Maccabees or the political history of this period. We have other sources, both Jewish and Greek, with which to compare the material found in 1 and 2 Maccabees. The most important are the following:

(1) *The Book of Daniel*. It is now generally agreed that this book was written at the height of the Maccabean struggle, shortly before the death of Antiochus. It uses stories and legends about an ancient figure called Daniel, and the literary device of the vision, to encourage men to resist Antiochus. The kingdoms of this world, including his, will soon be swept away by the arrival of God’s kingdom (cp. Dan. 2: 44). ‘The kingly power, sovereignty, and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High’ (7: 27) – that is, to the Jews.

Certain passages refer particularly to Antiochus, who is seen as an arrogant persecutor of the Jews who will be punished by God (7: 24–5; 8: 23 ff.; 9: 26–7), but in ch. 11 Daniel hears from an angel a summary of events from the rise of Alexander the Great to the death of Antiochus. No names are