

Introduction to the Apocrypha – Second Maccabees Session One



The Martyrdom of Eleazar the Scribe by Gustave Doré 1866

Introduction to The Apocrypha; The Maccabean Revolt; Types of Literature found in the Apocrypha; Jason of Cyrene: The Second Book of Maccabees (Chapters 1 & 2)

The Maccabean Revolt

The expression “Maccabean revolt” refers to a series of events in the mid-second century B.C. by which one Jewish family, known as the Maccabees, gained political, military, and religious power in Judea. The adjective “Maccabean” derives from the nickname (usually interpreted as “the hammer”) given to Judas in 1 Maccabees 2:4.

The primary sources for the Maccabean revolt are the two books known as 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees. First Maccabees covers the period from roughly 175 to 134 B.C., and it reports the exploits and achievements of three generations of the Maccabee family; the priest Mattathias; his sons Judas, Jonathan, and Simon; and Simon’s son John Hyrcanus. Second Maccabees provides important background information about the intrigues surrounding the Jewish high priesthood before the revolt started in earnest and take the story of the revolt up to 161 B.C., shortly before the death of Judas. The focus of its interest is God’s concern for and defense of the Jerusalem temple through the agency of Judas Maccabeus.

The book of Daniel seems to have been composed in 165 B.C., around the time of the events described in the early chapters of 1 and 2 Maccabees. Thus, it is a precious resource for understanding the circumstances leading up to the Maccabean revolt. Whereas the book of Daniel looks for imminent divine intervention to put Israel's enemies to flight and establish God's kingdom, 1 Maccabees presents the Maccabean dynasty as bringing about Israel's salvation. Whereas 2 Maccabees focuses on Judas in his role as savior of the Jerusalem temple, 1 Maccabees considers three generations of the Maccabean family and attends to their military exploits as well as their ability to deal in the political arena.

The historical consequences of the Maccabean revolt have been great. From being a small and insignificant client people in the Seleucid Empire, the Jews of Judea moved toward political independence with their own native rulers and with Rome as a powerful ally. From being on the edge of cultural and religious extinction, the Jews of Judea moved toward a form of religious life that was both traditional to their heritage and adaptable to the realities of the Greco-Roman world. In the crisis period under the high priests Jason and Menelaus (175 to 162 B.C.) the fate of Judaism (and with it Christianity and Islam) was uncertain. The result of the Maccabean revolt was a renewed Judaism that had both clarity and flexibility. The revolt established the Torah and the Jerusalem temple as the central features in Second Temple Judaism.

—from *First and Second Maccabees* by Daniel J. Harrington

The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

The apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books are those works that were included in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, referred to as LXX) or in the Old Latin and Vulgate translations, but are not included in the Hebrew text that forms both the canon for Judaism and the Protestant Old Testament. All of these works, whether they are individual books or additions to the Hebrew texts of Esther and Daniel, have been regarded as canonical by one or more Christian communities, but not by all. (The exception is 4 Maccabees, which appears only in an appendix to the Greek Bible.)

“Apocrypha means “hidden things,” but it is not clear why the term was chosen to describe these books. In antiquity “hidden books” sometimes referred to books that were restricted because they contained mysterious or esoteric teaching, too profound to be communicated to any except the initiated. Some early Christian writers used the term to describe works they considered to be spurious or heretical. But neither usage aptly describes the set of books that now goes by this name. The use of the term to refer to this group of books can be traced to the Christian scholar Jerome at the turn of the fifth century C.E. It serves to distinguish them from books of the Christian Old Testament that are also found in the Jewish canon.

“Deuterocanonical,” along with its coordinate term “protocanonical,” is used in Roman Catholic tradition to describe the status of the two groups of books of the Old Testament. The “protocanon” consists of the books of the Hebrew Bible, concerning which there was no debate as to their canonical status. The “Deuterocanon” refers to those additional

books whose canonical status was reaffirmed at a later date. This distinction introduced by Sixtus of Sienna in 1566, acknowledges the differences between the two categories while making clear that Roman Catholics accept as fully canonical those books and parts of books that Protestants call the Apocrypha (except the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3 and 4 Maccabees, and 1 and 2 Esdras, which both groups regard as apocryphal). Thus, although the terms “Deuterocanonical” and “Apocryphal” can describe the same collections of writings, they clearly indicate the differences in status of the writings among different groups. In the NRSV translation, subheadings in the table of contents for these books, and in the text itself, explain the differing canonical status of various writings.

– *from the New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha – New Revised Standard Version*

Types of Literature in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

Historical Fiction

Tobit (*Diaspora*)

Judith (*Judah*)

Susanna (*Diaspora*)

Bel and the Dragon (*Diaspora*)

3 Maccabees (*concerns suffering of Jewish people in Egypt under Ptolemaic rulers – half century before the rise of the Maccabees*)

Additions to Esther

Devotional Writings

Prayer of Manasseh (*hymnic lament*)

The Prayer of Azariah (*psalm – liturgical in form*)

The Song of the Three Jews (*psalm – liturgical in form*) Psalm 151 (*psalm*)

Letters

Letter of Jeremiah (*perhaps a model for New Testament compilers*)

Apocalyptic

2 Esdras (*uses metaphoric language, symbolic numbers and angelic messengers who reveal hidden information*)

Wisdom literature (Didactic)

The Wisdom of Solomon – (*Greek literary style – probably from Alexandria, Egypt*)

The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach (Sirach or Ecclesiasticus) –

(*originally written in Hebrew. Similar in style to Proverbs*) 4 Maccabees (*Greek philosophical treatise addressed to Jews on the supremacy of reason over the passions of the body and soul.*)

Baruch (*Mixture of kinds. May have been originally written in Hebrew*)

Histories

- 1 Esdras (*summarizes 2 Chronicles 35 – 36 and Ezra and Nehemiah*)
- 1 Maccabees (*Seleucid persecution and rebellion and rise of Maccabees*)
- 2 Maccabees (*"Pathetic history" used to stimulate emotions of readers*)

– from the *New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha – New Revised Standard Version*

JASON OF CYRENE

Judæo-Hellenistic historian. He wrote a history of the Maccabean revolt in five books, from which the author of II Maccabees took his data (II Macc. ii. 23), this book being practically an abstract (ἐπιτομή; *ib.* ii. 26, 28) of Jason's work. The author of II Maccabees himself gives a short account of Jason's work, in which he indicates the moral value of reading it.

Jason doubtless presented the events in fine rhetorical language, his style being still easily recognizable in II Maccabees. The four letters incorporated in II Macc. xi. 16 *et seq.*, as well as the legendary stories of the martyrdom of Eleazar and the seven brothers (*ib.* vi.-vii.), were written probably by Jason himself. Jason no doubt described the occurrences in detail for the purpose of edifying his readers, chiefly Jews, and of confirming them in their faith. This explains why he required five books for a narrative that was compressed into one small book like II Maccabees. The epitome preserved covers a period of fifteen years, from the death of Seleucus IV. to the victory over Nicanor (175-161). The abrupt ending is probably due to the epitomist; for this victory marks no period in the Maccabean uprising.

The many important details in Jason's work prove that he was not far removed from the events; he therefore probably did not make use of written notes, but obtained his information by word of mouth. In any case he wrote his work in Greek, and II Maccabees also is in pure Greek, and is not a translation. The epitomist probably copied many passages outright; but he may also have incorporated material of his own. The two letters in the beginning of the book are not by Jason.

Nothing is known about Jason beyond the references to him in II Maccabees. A Jason of Cyrene who inscribed his name on the temple of Thothmes III. in Egypt (Sayce, "Revue des Etudes Grecques," vii. 297) may be identical with the subject of this article. In this case he must have traveled: and he may therefore have been in Palestine also and have gathered his material on the spot.

Polybius may be regarded as a source used by Jason, though doubtless only for the dates of general history (Willrich, "Judaica," p. 140). It is also assumed that Jason drew upon III Maccabees; *e.g.*, the account of the Dionysus celebration (II Macc. vi. 7) is said to have been taken from III Macc. ix. 29 (Willrich, *l.c.* p. 165), though this can not be proved. If it is rightly assumed that the Hebrew "Yosippon," or Gorionides, shows traces of Jason's work, as was stated first by Trieber, and, following him, by Willrich (*l.c.* p. 170), further reference might be found to Jason's lost work. It must have been one of the finest examples of Judæo-Hellenistic

literature; and its loss is irreparable. Even Philo did not know Jason's work itself, but only the extract in II Maccabees; it was this epitome therefore that caused the original work to be forgotten so quickly.

– Richard Gottheil and Samuel Krauss (*Jewish Encyclopedia*)

The Second Book of Maccabees (NRSV- Updated) Chapter 1

1 The Jews in Jerusalem and those in the land of Judea,

To their Jewish kindred in Egypt,

Greetings and true peace.

2 May God do good to you, and may he remember his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, his faithful servants. **3** May he give you all a heart to worship him and to do his will with a strong heart and a willing spirit. **4** May he open your heart to his law and his commandments, and may he bring peace. **5** May he hear your prayers and be reconciled to you, and may he not forsake you in time of evil. **6** We are now praying for you here.

7 In the reign of Demetrius, in the one hundred sixty-ninth year, we Jews wrote to you, in the critical distress that came upon us in those years after Jason and his company revolted from the holy land and the kingdom **8** and burned the gate and shed innocent blood. We prayed to the Lord and were heard, and we offered sacrifice and grain offering, and we lit the lamps and set out the loaves. **9** And now see that you keep the Festival of Booths in the month of Chislev, in the one hundred eighty-eighth year.

10 The people of Jerusalem and of Judea and the council and Judas,

To Aristobulus, who is of the family of the anointed priests, teacher of King Ptolemy, and to the Jews in Egypt,

Greetings and good health.

11 Having been saved by God out of grave dangers, we thank him greatly for taking our side against the king, **12** for he drove out those who fought against the holy city. **13** When the leader reached Persia with a force that seemed irresistible, they were cut to pieces in the temple of Nanea by a deception employed by the priests of the goddess Nanea. **14** On the pretext of intending to marry her, Antiochus came to the place together with his Friends, to secure most of its treasures as a dowry. **15** When the priests of the temple of Nanea had set out the treasures and Antiochus had come with a few men inside the wall of the sacred precinct, they closed the temple as soon as he entered it. **16** Opening a secret door in the ceiling,

they threw stones and struck down the leader and his men; they dismembered them and cut off their heads and threw them to the people outside. ¹⁷ Blessed in every way be our God, who has delivered up those who have behaved impiously.

¹⁸ Since on the twenty-fifth day of Chislew we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the Festival of Booths and the fire given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices.

¹⁹ For when our ancestors were being led captive to Persia, the pious priests of that time took some of the fire of the altar and secretly hid it in the hollow of a dry cistern, where they took such precautions that the place was unknown to anyone. ²⁰ But after many years had passed, when it pleased God, Nehemiah, having been commissioned by the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to get it. And when they reported to us that they had not found fire but only a thick liquid, he ordered them to dip it out and bring it. ²¹ When the materials for the sacrifices were presented, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid on the wood and on the things laid upon it. ²² When this had been done and some time had passed, and when the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marveled. ²³ And while the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests offered prayer—the priests and everyone. Jonathan led, and the rest responded, as did Nehemiah. ²⁴ The prayer was to this effect:

“O Lord, Lord God, Creator of all things, you are awe-inspiring and strong and just and merciful; you alone are king and are kind;²⁵ you alone are bountiful; you alone are just and almighty and eternal. You rescue Israel from every evil; you chose the ancestors and consecrated them. ²⁶ Accept this sacrifice on behalf of all your people Israel and preserve your portion and make it holy.²⁷ Gather together our scattered people; set free those who are slaves among the nations; look on those who are rejected and despised; and let the nations know that you are our God. ²⁸ Punish those who oppress and are insolent with pride. ²⁹ Plant your people in your holy place, as Moses promised.”

³⁰ Then the priests sang the hymns. ³¹ After the materials of the sacrifice had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured on large stones. ³² When this was done, a flame blazed up, but when the light from the altar shone back, it went out. ³³ When this matter became known and it was reported to the king of the Persians that, in the place where the exiled priests had hidden the fire, the liquid had appeared with which Nehemiah and his associates had burned the materials of the sacrifice, ³⁴ the king investigated the matter and enclosed the place and made it sacred. ³⁵ And with those persons whom the king favored he exchanged many excellent gifts. ³⁶ Nehemiah and his associates called this “nephthar,” which means purification, but by most people it is called “naphtha.”

Chapter 2

¹One finds in the records that the prophet Jeremiah ordered those who were being deported to take some of the fire, as has been mentioned, ² and that the prophet, after giving them the law, instructed those who were being deported not to forget the commandments of the Lord or to be led astray in their thoughts on seeing the gold and silver statues and their adornment. ³ And with other similar words he exhorted them that the law should not depart from their hearts.

⁴ It was also in the same document that the prophet, having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. ⁵ Jeremiah came and found a cave dwelling, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance.⁶ Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way but could not find it. ⁷ When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared, "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy.⁸ Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated."

⁹ It was also made clear that, being possessed of wisdom, Solomon offered sacrifice for the dedication and completion of the temple. ¹⁰ Just as Moses prayed to the Lord and fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifices, so also Solomon prayed, and the fire came down and consumed the whole burnt offerings. ¹¹ And Moses said, "They were consumed because the purification offering had not been eaten." ¹² Likewise Solomon also kept the eight days.

¹³ The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets and the writings of David and letters of kings about votive offerings. ¹⁴ In the same way Judas also collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war that had come upon us, and they are in our possession. ¹⁵ So if you have need of them, send people to get them for you.

¹⁶ Since, therefore, we are about to celebrate the purification, we write to you. You will do well if you celebrate these days. ¹⁷ It is God who has saved all his people and has returned the inheritance to all and the kingship and the priesthood and the consecration,¹⁸ as he promised through the law. We have hope in God that he will soon have mercy on us and will gather us from everywhere under heaven into his holy place, for he has rescued us from great evils and has purified the place.

¹⁹ The story of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, and the purification of the greatest temple, and the dedication of the altar,²⁰ and further the wars against Antiochus Epiphanes and his son Eupator, ²¹ and the appearances that came from heaven to those who fought bravely for Judaism, so that though few in number they seized the whole land and pursued the barbarian hordes²² and regained possession of the

temple famous throughout the world and liberated the city and reestablished the laws that were about to be abolished, while the Lord with great kindness became gracious to them—²³ all this, which has been set forth by Jason of Cyrene in five volumes, we shall attempt to condense into a single book.²⁴ For considering the flood of lines written and the difficulty there is for those who wish to enter upon the narratives of history because of the mass of material,²⁵ we have aimed to please those who wish to read, to make it easy for those who are inclined to memorize, and to profit all readers.²⁶ For us who have undertaken the toil of abbreviating, it is no light matter but calls for sweat and loss of sleep,²⁷ just as it is not easy for one who prepares a banquet and seeks the benefit of others. Nevertheless, to secure the gratitude of many we will gladly endure the uncomfortable toil,²⁸ leaving the responsibility for exact details to the compiler, while devoting our effort to arriving at the outlines of the condensation.²⁹ For as the master builder of a new house must be concerned with the whole construction, while the one who undertakes its painting and decoration has to consider only what is suitable for its adornment, such in my judgment is the case with us.³⁰ It is the duty of the original historian to occupy the ground, to discuss matters from every side, and to take trouble with details,³¹ but the one who recasts the narrative should be allowed to strive for brevity of expression and to forego exhaustive treatment.³² At this point, therefore, let us begin our narrative, without adding any more to what has already been said, for it would be foolish to lengthen the preface while cutting short the history itself.

The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version – Fully Revised Fourth Edition, Michael D. Coogan, Editor, Amy-Jill Levine, Contributor, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2010

First and Second Maccabees by Daniel J. Harrington, New Collegeville Bible Commentary, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2012

The First and Second Books of the Maccabees, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible, by John R. Bartlett, Cambridge at the University Press, New York, Cambridge, UK, 1973