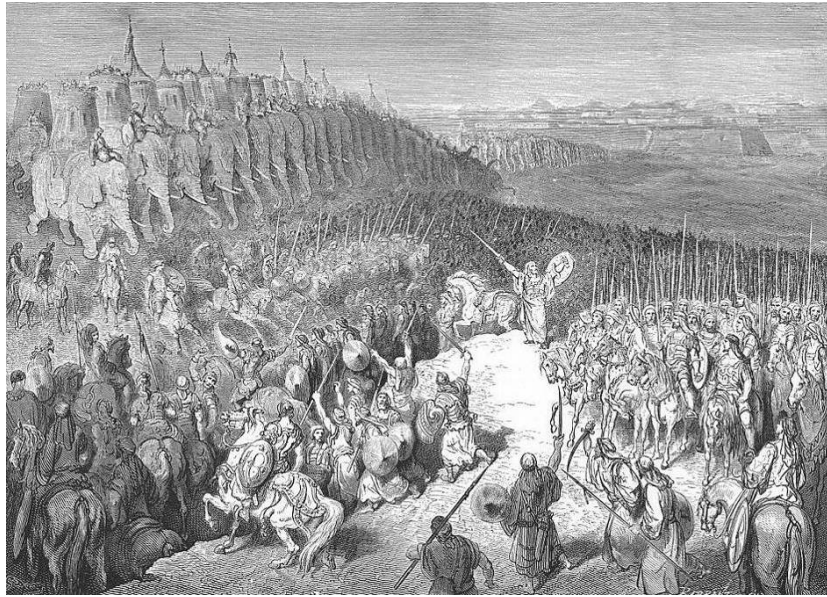


Introduction to the Apocrypha – 2 Maccabees

Session Six – The Death of Nicanor



Judas Maccabeus before the Army of Nicanor (1 Macc. 7:26–32).
Gustave Doré (1832–1883)

The Value for Us of 1 and 2 Maccabees
The Ancient Judean Holiday: Yom Nicanor
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The Second Book of Maccabees (13:1 – 15:39)

The Value for Us of 1 and 2 Maccabees

In Berlin in 1937 – the place and date are significant – Elias Bickermann published in German his book *The God of the Maccabees: studies in the meaning and origin of the Maccabaeen rising*. In two fascinating opening chapters he shows how our ancient sources explain the historical events of the Maccabaeen period from quite different theological or political viewpoints, and how through the centuries since the Maccabees the explanations given of Antiochus' persecution have reflected faithfully theological and political trends of the times. Thus 2 Maccabees explains events by saying that the Jews were being disciplined for their sins by Antiochus, who would be punished for his pride. 1 Maccabees blames events simply on the pride of Greek imperialism and the Hellenizing apostasy of some of the Jews. But there were also non-Jewish explanations of these events, which justified the behavior of Antiochus by regarding it as punishment for the Jewish rebellion, and later by portraying Antiochus as a champion of Greek liberalism against Jewish barbarism. If many Jews disliked the Hellenistic world, there were, after all, many Hellenistic neighbors

of the Jews who had good reason to dislike the Jews, first, on political and economic grounds, and then, inevitably, because culturally and religiously they were different. Bickermann goes on to point out how in the Christian world for sixteen centuries the Jewish explanation prevailed. The Maccabees were above all champions of faith against tyrants (though there was some doubt as to whether one could follow their lead if the tyrant was a Christian and legally constituted head of state).

But then came a change, and the Greek view prevailed; Antiochus was a cultivated monarch, the rightful king of Jerusalem, who needed to unify his empire, while the Jews were rebels who had to be dealt with for the sake of the whole empire. In the late nineteenth century A.D. Antiochus was seen as trying to remove local nationalism; the Jews were to give up their particularism and become fully integrated into the empire. This corresponded with the cry in Germany that the Jews should become fully German. The state was championing a culture which a stubborn minority were rejecting.

The historical Antiochus was certainly no Hitler, except perhaps in certain Jewish and Christian portrayal, as Bickermann demonstrated; but the publication of such studies 'in the meaning and origin' of the Maccabean rising in Germany in 1937 was surely an act of courage. But the theme of the use of violence by a section of the community which as its own particular cultural history and deep-seated frustrations is a highly contemporary one. We hear much of 'urban guerillas' today, and in the Maccabees and their supporters we see something very similar. The social and economic difficulties of the rebels, the inner struggles for power at the top, the difficulties of finding a policy that will keep the peace and satisfy everybody, the embarrassment of army commanders - all these appear in 1 and 2 Maccabees and are familiar sights in the world today.

But circumstances alter cases, and the presence of 1 and 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha or the bible does not compel us to adopt Maccabean solutions for any apparently similar modern problems. What these books can do, however, is open our eyes to the feelings and passions that are bred in minorities with deep convictions, and help us to sympathize with them. Possibly these books will only take on full meaning for us if ever we ourselves are deeply involved in the fortunes of a persecuted minority. If that happens, then the faith and conviction so clear in both the Maccabees and their chroniclers might become a most effective source of inspiration.

– John R. Bartlett (*from The First and Second Books of the Maccabees*)

The Ancient Judean Holiday: Yom Nicanor ***– 13th of Adar***

During the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods, the Jewish calendar had many more holidays than it does now. These were listed in a text called *Megillat Ta'anit*. Sometime during the Rabbinic Period or shortly thereafter, this list was cancelled, and the holidays—with the exception of Purim and Chanukah—are all but forgotten. Why this happened and whether this can or should ever be changed is a subject for another essay, but one holiday has always called out to me as being worthy of special attention: the 13th of Adar, Nicanor Day (יום נקנור).

What is Nicanor Day?

Nicanor day celebrates Judah Maccabee's defeat of Nicanor the elephantarch, meaning "master of elephants." Nicanor was a Syrian-Greek military officer, whom King Demetrius I Soter (nephew of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the "villain" of Chanukah) appointed governor of Judea. This was after the Chanukah story, as Antiochus Epiphanes had already died. The Judeans, under Judah Maccabee had already recaptured the Temple and rededicated it, and were living in a sort of rapprochement with the Syrian Greeks, who were engaged in factional strife.

The story behind the day of celebration begins when the former high priest named Alcimus, who was fully Hellenized and no longer observant of Judaism, wishes to regain his position as high priest. To do so, he goes to King Demetrius, who was a relative newcomer to local politics, having only recently taken the kingdom from his cousin, Antiochus V Eupator (Epiphanes' son). Alcimus brings expensive gifts to the king and claims that the Maccabees and his followers were dissidents (a half-truth) and had forcibly removed him from his office (an untruth, though I imagine Judah would have removed Alcimus if he had still been in office).

Demetrius accepts the story and sends Nicanor to Judea as governor, with the express command to protect Alcimus' position and keep Judah Maccabee at a distance. Nicanor at first attempts to compromise with Judah, but under pressure from Demetrius he decides to arrest Judah and his followers. Judah escapes and Nicanor, furious, enters the Temple looking for him. When the priests say they have no idea where Judah is, Nicanor stretches out his right arm and issues his infamous threat:

"If you do not hand over Judah to me as a prisoner, I will level this precinct of God to the ground and tear down the altar and build here a notable temple to Dionysus!" (2 Maccabees 14:33; NETS translation).

Only a few years after Chanukah, the Temple was threatened yet again.

Nicanor gathers an army of forced Judean conscripts and chases down Judah and his followers. At first, Nicanor imagines that he will trick Judah by attacking on Shabbat, but his own army refuses to comply since they also keep Shabbat. Meanwhile, Judah, encamped with his forces, has a vision. In this vision the murdered high priest, Onias (Chananiah), visits him and gives him words of encouragement. He then introduces Judah to another specter who was standing with him, an old man that turns out to be none other than the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah stretches out his arm to Judah and hands him a golden sword. "Take the holy sword," says Jeremiah, "as a gift from God with which you will strike down your adversaries" (2 Macc. 15:15-16).

Judah awakens and tells his followers of the vision. They are encouraged and go out to do battle against Nicanor's tremendous force (including his beloved elephants). After offering a prayer, Judah Maccabee engages Nicanor's troops and wins a decisive victory. After Nicanor's army flees, Judah finds his body among the slain. He cuts off Nicanor's head and right arm and brings them to Jerusalem. Entering the Temple precinct, Judah calls all the priests to stand by the altar and shows them the head and arm, declaring that Nicanor's blaspheming tongue be cut out and fed to the birds. The priests react with relief and say, "Blessed is He who has kept His own place undefiled!"

After Judah fastens Nicanor's head to the citadel and declares a holiday, the storyteller finishes his account: "This is how it went with Nicanor, and from that time the city has been ruled by the Hebrews, so I myself will here bring my story to a halt" (2 Macc. 15:37).

Second Maccabees as a *Megillah*

The Talmud records a barebones version of Nicanor Day in (j. *Ta'anit* 2:12; b. *Ta'anit* 18b), as it does for several other *Megillat Ta'anit* holidays. But this is not the source for the story just related. Nicanor day actually has an entire book dedicated to telling its story—The Second Book of Maccabees. Unlike 1 Maccabees, which describes the history of the Hasmonean revolt beginning with Mattathias and continuing through the death of Judah, Jonathan and Simon, and ending with the rule of John Hyrcanus, 2 Maccabees begins and ends with Judah Maccabee.

The book is an edited work—an abridged version of a long five volume work by Jason of Cyrene about the Maccabean revolt. The editor's agenda is promoting Chanukah among the Greek speaking Jews of Egypt, and to this end, he adds a long introduction, which notes the importance of Chanukah.

Despite its emphasis on Chanukah, the focus of the book is the defeat of Nicanor and the protection of the Temple from his threat to destroy it. This is told in great detail in chapters 13-15. The end of the work brings forward a parallel between the purpose of the Book of Esther and that of 2 Maccabees. Immediately before the editor/author bids farewell to his readers, he caps off the narrative with the following:

Judah fastened Nicanor's head to the citadel, visible to all and an obvious sign of the help of the Lord. And they all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved but to have the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is called Adar in the Syrian language, marked, the day before Mordechai's day.

Judah Maccabee himself, together with his followers, declares Nicanor Day to be a day of celebration for all time. In the author's mind, the connection with Mordechai's Day (Purim) seems more than just calendrical coincidence. It seems to be an attempt to link the two holidays, perhaps as one long celebration. Each holiday marked the saving of the Jews, and each holiday had its own "*megillah*" to tell its story.

– Dr. Rabbi Zev Farber (Senior Editor of *The Torah.com*)

Chronological Table of Seleucid Rulers

223 – 187:	Antiochus III
187 – 175:	Seleucus IV Philopator
175 – 164:	Antiochus IV Epiphanes
164 – 162:	Antiochus V Eupator (and Lysias)
162 – 150:	Demetrius I Soter
150 – 145:	Alexander I Balas
145 – 139:	Demetrius II Nicator
139 – 142:	Antiochus VI (and Trypho)
138 – 129:	Antiochus VII Sidetes

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

Second Maccabees – Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapter 13

¹In the one hundred forty-ninth year, word came to Judas and his men that Antiochus Eupator was coming with a great army against Judea, ²and with him Lysias, his guardian, who had charge of the government. Each of them had a Greek force of one hundred ten thousand infantry, five thousand three hundred cavalry, twenty-two elephants, and three hundred chariots armed with scythes.

³ Menelaus also joined them and with utter hypocrisy urged Antiochus on, not for the sake of his country's welfare but because he thought that he would be established in office. ⁴ But the King of kings aroused the anger of Antiochus against the scoundrel, and when Lysias informed him that this man was to blame for all the trouble, he ordered them to take him to Beroea and to put him to death by the method that is customary in that place. ⁵ For there is a tower there, fifty cubits high, full of ashes, and it has a rim running around it that on all sides inclines precipitously into the ashes. ⁶ There they all push to destruction anyone guilty of sacrilege or notorious for other crimes. ⁷ By such a fate it came about that Menelaus the lawbreaker died, without even burial in the earth. ⁸ And this was eminently just; because he had committed many sins against the altar whose fire and ashes were holy, he met his death in ashes.

⁹ The king with barbarous arrogance was coming to show the Jews things far worse than those that had been done in his father's time. ¹⁰ But when Judas heard of this, he ordered the people to call upon the Lord day and night, now if ever to help those who were on the point of being deprived of the law and their country and the holy temple, ¹¹ and not to let the people who had just begun to revive fall into the hands of the blasphemous nations. ¹² When they had all joined in the same petition and had implored the merciful Lord with weeping and fasting and lying prostrate for three days without ceasing, Judas exhorted them and ordered them to stand ready.

¹³ After consulting privately with the elders, he determined to march out and decide the matter by the help of God before the king's army could enter Judea and get possession of the city. ¹⁴ So, committing the decision to the Creator of the world and exhorting his troops to fight bravely to the death for the laws, temple, city, country, and way of life, he pitched his camp near Modein. ¹⁵ He gave his troops the watchword, "God's victory," and with a picked force of the bravest young men, he attacked the king's pavilion at night and killed as many as two thousand men in the camp. He stabbed the leading elephant and its rider. ¹⁶ In the end, they filled the camp with terror and confusion and withdrew in triumph. ¹⁷ This happened, just as day was dawning, because the Lord's help protected him.

¹⁸ The king, having had a taste of the daring of the Jews, tried strategy in attacking their positions. ¹⁹ He advanced against Beth-zur, a strong fortress of the Jews, was turned back, attacked again, and was defeated. ²⁰ Judas sent into the garrison whatever was necessary. ²¹ But Rhodocus, a man from the ranks of the Jews, gave secret information to the enemy; he was sought for, caught, and put in prison. ²² The king negotiated a second time with the people in Beth-zur, gave pledges, received theirs, withdrew, attacked Judas and his men, was defeated; ²³ he got word that Philip, who had been left in charge of the government, had revolted in Antioch; he was dismayed, called in the Jews, yielded and swore to observe all their rights, settled with them and offered sacrifice, honored the sanctuary, and showed generosity to the holy place. ²⁴ He received Maccabeus, left Hegemonides as governor from Ptolemais to Gerar, ²⁵ and went to Ptolemais. The people of Ptolemais were indignant over the treaty; in fact, they were so angry that they wanted to annul

its terms. ²⁶ Lysias took the public platform, made the best possible defense, convinced them, appeased them, gained their goodwill, and set out for Antioch. This is how the king's attack and withdrawal turned out.

Chapter 14

¹Three years later, word came to Judas and his men that Demetrius son of Seleucus had sailed into the harbor of Tripolis with a strong army and a fleet ² and had taken possession of the country, having made away with Antiochus and his guardian Lysias.

³ Now a certain Alcimus, who had formerly been high priest but had willfully defiled himself in the days of separation, realized that there was no way for him to be safe or to have access again to the holy altar⁴ and went to King Demetrius in about the one hundred fifty-first year, presenting to him a crown of gold and a palm and besides these some of the customary olive branches from the temple. During that day he kept quiet. ⁵ But he found an opportunity that furthered his mad purpose when he was invited by Demetrius to a meeting of the council and was asked about the attitude and intentions of the Jews. He answered:

⁶ "Those of the Jews who are called Hasideans, whose leader is Judas Maccabeus, are keeping up war and stirring up sedition and will not let the kingdom attain tranquility. ⁷ Therefore I have laid aside my ancestral glory—I mean the high priesthood—and have now come here, ⁸ first because I am genuinely concerned for the interests of the king, and second because I have regard also for my compatriots. For through the folly of those whom I have mentioned our whole nation is now in no small misfortune. ⁹ Since you are acquainted, O king, with the details of this matter, may it please you to take thought for our country and our hard-pressed nation with the gracious kindness that you show to all. ¹⁰ For as long as Judas lives, it is impossible for the government to find peace." ¹¹ When he had said this, the rest of the king's Friends, who were hostile to Judas, quickly inflamed Demetrius still more. ¹² He immediately chose Nicanor, who had been in command of the elephants, appointed him governor of Judea, and sent him off ¹³ with orders to kill Judas and scatter his troops and to install Alcimus as high priest of the great temple. ¹⁴ And the nations throughout Judea, who had fled before Judas, flocked to join Nicanor, thinking that the misfortunes and calamities of the Jews would mean prosperity for themselves.

¹⁵ When the Jews heard of Nicanor's coming and the gathering of the nations, they sprinkled dust on their heads and prayed to him who established his own people forever and always upholds his own heritage by manifesting himself. ¹⁶ At the command of the leader, they set out from there immediately and engaged them in battle at a village called Dessau. ¹⁷ Simon, the brother of Judas, had encountered

Nicanor but had been temporarily checked because of the sudden consternation created by the enemy.

¹⁸ Nevertheless, Nicanor, hearing of the valor of Judas and his troops and their courage in battle for their country, shrank from deciding the issue by bloodshed. ¹⁹ Therefore he sent Posidonius, Theodotus, and Mattathias to give and receive pledges of friendship. ²⁰ When the terms had been fully considered and the leader had informed the people and it had appeared that they were of one mind, they agreed to the covenant. ²¹ The leaders set a day on which to meet by themselves. A chariot came forward from each army; seats of honor were set in place; ²² Judas posted armed men in readiness at key places to prevent sudden treachery on the part of the enemy; so they duly held the consultation.

²³ Nicanor stayed on in Jerusalem and did nothing out of the way but dismissed the flocks of people who had gathered. ²⁴ And he kept Judas always in his presence; he was warmly attached to the man. ²⁵ He urged him to marry and have children, so Judas married, settled down, and shared the common life.

²⁶ But when Alcimus noticed their goodwill for one another, he took the covenant that had been made and went to Demetrius. He told him that Nicanor was disloyal to the government, since he had appointed that conspirator against the kingdom, Judas, to be his successor. ²⁷ The king became excited and, provoked by the false accusations of that depraved man, wrote to Nicanor, stating that he was displeased with the covenant and commanding him to send Maccabeus to Antioch as a prisoner without delay.

²⁸ When this message came to Nicanor, he was troubled and grieved that he had to annul their agreement when the man had done no wrong. ²⁹ Since it was not possible to oppose the king, he watched for an opportunity to accomplish this by a stratagem. ³⁰ But Maccabeus, noticing that Nicanor was more austere in his dealings with him and was meeting him more rudely than had been his custom, concluded that this austerity did not spring from the best motives. So he gathered not a few of his men and went into hiding from Nicanor. ³¹ When the latter became aware that he had been cleverly outwitted by the man, he went to the great and holy temple while the priests were offering the customary sacrifices and commanded them to hand the man over. ³² When they declared on oath that they did not know where the man was whom he wanted, ³³ he stretched out his right hand toward the sanctuary and swore this oath: "If you do not hand Judas over to me as a prisoner, I will level this shrine of God to the ground and tear down the altar and build here a splendid temple to Dionysus."

³⁴ Having said this, he went away. Then the priests stretched out their hands toward heaven and called upon the constant Defender of our nation, in these words: ³⁵ "O Lord of all, though you have need of nothing, you were pleased that there should be a temple for your habitation among us, ³⁶ so now, O holy One, Lord of all holiness, keep undefiled forever this house that has been so recently purified."

³⁷ A certain Razis, one of the elders of Jerusalem, was denounced to Nicanor as a man who loved his compatriots and was very well thought of and for his goodwill was called father of the Jews. ³⁸ For before the days of separation, he had been accused of Judaism, and he had most zealously risked body and life for Judaism. ³⁹ Nicanor, wishing to exhibit the enmity that he had for the Jews, sent more than five hundred soldiers to arrest him, ⁴⁰ for he thought that by arresting^l him he would do them an injury. ⁴¹ When the troops were about to capture the tower and were forcing the door of the courtyard, they ordered that fire be brought and the doors burned. Being surrounded, Razis fell upon his own sword, ⁴² preferring to die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth. ⁴³ But in the heat of the struggle he did not hit exactly, and the crowd was now rushing in through the doors. He courageously ran up on the wall and bravely threw himself down into the crowd. ⁴⁴ But as they quickly drew back, a space opened and he fell in the middle of the empty space. ⁴⁵ Still alive and aflame with anger, he rose, and though his blood gushed forth and his wounds were severe he ran through the crowd, and standing upon a steep rock, ⁴⁶ with his blood now completely drained from him, he tore out his entrails, took them in both hands, and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again. This was the manner of his death.

Chapter 15

¹When Nicanor heard that Judas and his troops were in the region of Samaria, he made plans to attack them with complete safety on the day of rest. ² When the Jews who were compelled to follow him said, "Do not destroy so savagely and barbarously, but show respect for the day that he who sees all things has honored and hallowed above other days," ³ the thrice-accursed wretch asked if there were a sovereign in heaven who had commanded the keeping of the Sabbath day. ⁴ When they declared, "It is the living Lord himself, the Sovereign in heaven, who ordered us to observe the seventh day," ⁵ he replied, "But I am a sovereign also, on earth, and I command you to take up arms and finish the king's business." Nevertheless, he did not succeed in carrying out his abominable design.

⁶ This Nicanor in his utter boastfulness and arrogance had determined to erect a public monument of victory over Judas and his forces. ⁷ But Maccabeus did not cease to trust with all confidence that he would get help from the Lord. ⁸ He exhorted his troops not to fear the attack of the nations but to keep in mind the former times when help had come to them from heaven and so to look for the victory that the Almighty would give them. ⁹ Encouraging them from the Law and the Prophets and reminding them also of the struggles they had won, he made them the more eager. ¹⁰ When he had aroused their courage, he issued his orders, at the same time pointing out the treachery of the nations and their violation of oaths. ¹¹ He armed each of them not so much with confidence in shields and spears as with the

inspiration of brave words, and he cheered them all by relating a dream, a sort of vision, that was worthy of belief.

¹² What he saw was this: Onias, who had been high priest, a noble and good man, of modest bearing and gentle manner, one who spoke fittingly and had been trained from childhood in all that belongs to excellence, was praying with outstretched hands for the whole body of the Jews. ¹³ Then in the same fashion another appeared, distinguished by his gray hair and dignity, and of marvelous majesty and authority. ¹⁴ And Onias spoke, saying, "This is a man who loves the family of Israel and prays much for the people and the holy city: Jeremiah, the prophet of God." ¹⁵ Jeremiah stretched out his right hand and gave to Judas a golden sword, and as he gave it he addressed him thus: ¹⁶ "Take this holy sword, a gift from God, with which you will strike down your adversaries."

¹⁷ Encouraged by the words of Judas, so noble and so effective in arousing valor and awaking courage in the souls of the young, they determined not to carry on a campaign but to attack bravely and to decide the matter by fighting hand to hand with all courage, because the city and the sanctuary and the temple were in danger. ¹⁸ Their concern for wives and children and also for brothers and sisters and relatives lay upon them less heavily; their greatest and first fear was for the consecrated sanctuary. ¹⁹ And those who had to remain in the city were in no little distress, being anxious over the encounter in the open country.

²⁰ When all were now looking forward to the coming issue and the enemy was already close at hand with their army drawn up for battle, the elephants strategically stationed and the cavalry deployed on the flanks, ²¹ Maccabeus, observing the masses that were in front of him and the varied supply of arms and the savagery of the elephants, stretched out his hands toward heaven and called upon the Lord who works wonders, for he knew that it is not by arms but as the Lord decides that he gains the victory for those who deserve it. ²² He called upon him in these words: "O Lord, you sent your angel in the time of King Hezekiah of Judea, and he killed fully one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of Sennacherib. ²³ So now, O Sovereign of the heavens, send a good angel to spread terror and trembling before us. ²⁴ By the might of your arm may these blasphemers who come against your holy people be struck down." With these words he ended his prayer.

²⁵ Nicanor and his troops advanced with trumpets and battle songs, ²⁶ but Judas and his troops met the enemy in battle with invocations to God and prayers. ²⁷ So, fighting with their hands and praying to God in their hearts, they laid low at least thirty-five thousand and were greatly gladdened by God's manifestation.

²⁸ When the action was over and they were returning with joy, they recognized Nicanor, lying dead, in full armor. ²⁹ Then there was shouting and tumult, and they blessed the Sovereign Lord in the language of their ancestors. ³⁰ Then the man who was ever in body and soul the defender of his people, the man who maintained his

youthful goodwill toward his compatriots, ordered them to cut off Nicanor's head and arm and carry them to Jerusalem.³¹ When he arrived there and had called his compatriots together and stationed the priests before the altar, he sent for those who were in the citadel.³² He showed them the vile Nicanor's head and that profane man's arm, which had been boastfully stretched out against the holy house of the Almighty.³³ He cut out the tongue of the ungodly Nicanor and said that he would feed it piecemeal to the birds and would hang up these rewards of his folly opposite the sanctuary.³⁴ And they all, looking to heaven, blessed the Lord who had manifested himself, saying, "Blessed is he who has kept his own place undefiled!"³⁵ Judas hung Nicanor's head from the citadel, a clear and conspicuous sign to everyone of the help of the Lord.³⁶ And they all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—which is called Adar in the Aramaic language—the day before Mordecai's day.

³⁷ This, then, is how matters turned out with Nicanor, and from that time the city has been in the possession of the Hebrews. So I will here end my story.

³⁸ If it is well told and to the point, that is what I myself desired; if it is poorly done and mediocre, that was the best I could do.³⁹ For just as it is harmful to drink wine alone or, again, to drink water alone, while wine already mixed with water is delicious and enhances one's enjoyment, so also the style of the story delights the ears of those who read the work. And here will be the end.

The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version – Fully Revised Fourth Edition, Michael D. Coogan, Editor, John R. Bartlett, 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

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