

Part 1: Book Background

While fairly unknown in the modern church, 1 Maccabees tells of a significant period of Jewish history that sets the stage for a transformational period in Judea in the first century. The author of the book is unknown, but seems to be educated and have a Hebraic background due to his significant knowledge of the Scriptures and his perspective on the Jews, specifically not being critical of the Maccabean revolt. The book was written sometime after or during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134–104 BCE), and documents the history of the Jewish people from the time of Alexander the Great until the beginning of John's reign. The book was most likely written before 63 BCE or not long after, as the book portrays the nation of Rome in a positive light.

1 Maccabees, although our earliest manuscripts are in Greek, was originally composed in Hebrew according to the early Christian writer Jerome (*Prologus Galeatus*, paragraph 23). But even in the Greek text it reads much like a Hebrew historical narrative, similar to the canonical books Joshua and Kings. While Josephus did not reference the book explicitly, he clearly used it (or a very similar Hebrew source) when writing *Antiquities of the Jews*. Even though this was a Jewish writing, it was not preserved by the Jewish community but by the Christian community. The book was included in the Codex Sinaiticus (330–360 CE) and Codex Alexandrinus (400–440 CE) in some of our earliest major Septuagint codices, showing it was valued by the Greek-speaking church, and is commonly included in the medieval LXX copies. Early church fathers are mixed on how they understand the text, with Augustine of Hippo treating the text as canonical (*De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 2), while Jerome believed the book was useful but not

considered canonical (*Prologus Galeatus* [Helmeted Preface]). Today the book is largely identified in the group of books called the Apocrypha in Protestant traditions while holding a canonized title in the Catholic and some Eastern traditions.

Part 2: Book Summary

The Book of 1 Maccabees is a historical narrative recounting the Jewish revolt against Seleucid rule in the second century BCE and the rise of the Hasmonean dynasty. The narrative opens by situating Judea within the aftermath of the empire of Alexander the Great. Following his death, the empire was divided among his generals (1:5–9). Judea initially came under the rule of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, founded by Ptolemy I Soter. For roughly a century (320–200 BCE), Judea remained under Ptolemaic administration and enjoyed fairly stable governance. Life continued without religious persecution, the High Priest continued to serve as an important local authority, and Jewish covenantal life largely remained intact.

This all changed in 200 BCE, when Antiochus III defeated the Ptolemies in the Battle of Panium, and Judea passed into the hands of the competing Seleucid Empire (centered in Syria/Antioch). While the Seleucid Empire originally was not hostile toward Jewish religious practices, instability in the empire caused pressures that changed their view of the Jewish people in Judea.

This all began when Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who after the Seleucid defeat from Rome (190 BCE) was looking to stabilize the economy of his kingdom and assert his authority, went to war against the Ptolemaic Empire. After battling in Egypt, he stopped in Judea and intervened in religious affairs, plundered the temple (1:20–24), and issued decrees prohibiting key Jewish practices such as circumcision, Sabbath, and Torah study (1:44–50). In addition, in an attempt to

unify the kingdom under Hellenized culture, he compelled Jews to offer pagan sacrifices and profane the Sabbath, erected an altar to Zeus in the temple, burned copies of the Torah, and executed mothers who circumcised their children (1:43–61).

A priest named Mattathias from Modein sought relief from the pressures of forced assimilation and covenantal unfaithfulness. When he was commanded to offer a pagan sacrifice he refused, and when a fellow Jew stepped forward to offer the sacrifice he killed both the Jew and the king's officer (2:23–25). He and his sons fled to the wilderness and gathered others who were zealous for the law. They went around Judea tearing down altars, hunting down the arrogant, and circumcising boys. As Mattathias was about to die, he exhorted his sons to remember the deeds of their ancestors and imitate the zeal of Phinehas, and went on to appoint his son Judah "Maccabee" as their military leader (2:66).

Judah was a valiant military leader and led a series of successful military campaigns against the Seleucids. He defeated Apollonius, Seron, Gorgias, and Lysias. Throughout the narrative, Judah's emphasis on prayer, fasting, and reliance on God before battle is emphasized (3:46–60; 4:8–11). In 164 BCE Judah captured Jerusalem, removed the defiled altar, rebuilt the sanctuary, rededicated the temple, and established the Festival of Dedication (4:43–59). Despite Judah's military success, Judea still did not have political independence. Judah continued campaigns against Idumeans and Jews residing outside of Judea (ch. 5), and faced additional opposition from the Seleucid leaders Bacchides and Nicanor (7:26–50). Despite his military prowess, he was eventually killed in battle against Bacchides (9:17–18).

Leadership then passed to Judah's brother Jonathan, who continued to struggle against a destabilized Seleucid Empire. Jonathan navigated the chaotic leadership of the empire by forming trusted relationships with Seleucid rulers. The first notable relationship was with

Alexander Balas, who appointed Jonathan as High Priest (10:18–21). Although the Hasmoneans were priests, they were not from the traditional Zadokite lineage that would qualify them for the position of High Priest. This marked a significant change in the leadership of Judea, and one that would spur on the development of Jewish sectarian pluralism in the first century.

Jonathan continued to strengthen the position of Judea further by fortifying Jerusalem and negotiating tax exemptions and territorial concessions (10:28–30; 11:34–37), as Jonathan developed strong relationships with Demetrius I Soter and Demetrius II Nicator. But he was eventually betrayed by General Diodotus Tryphon, who captured and then executed him (13:23). The final surviving brother of Mattathias was nominated by the people and assumed leadership of Judea. Simon took advantage of the weakness of the Seleucid Empire and secured political concessions, tax relief, and autonomy from Demetrius II, including the removal of the garrisons in Jerusalem in 142 BCE. The people of Judea declared Simon as their leader, high priest, and commander “forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise” (14:41). This is where many historians mark the independence of the Jewish nation and the official beginning of the Hasmonean dynasty. Under Simon’s rule Judea experienced stability, prosperity, and peace (14:4–15). The book closes with the assassination of Simon by Ptolemy, a governor of the plains of Jericho seeking full control of the kingdom, and the succession of Simon’s son John Hyrcanus, who continued to build on his father’s legacy.

Part 3: Why Does This Book Matter?

The book of 1 Maccabees is essential for understanding the historical, political, and religious world into which Jesus of Nazareth was born. The events captured in the book preserve

decisive events that shaped Jewish identity in the two centuries preceding the time of the New Testament.

1 Maccabees explains the origins of Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication, in which the Gospel of John places Jesus in Jerusalem during the time of the festival (John 10:22). As Jesus speaks in the temple during the festival and declares himself the “good shepherd” (10:11), he does so in the shadow of Maccabean memory. Jesus contrasts the priestly family who liberated the temple through military force with a different mode of deliverance altogether—one rooted in sacrificial self-giving instead of armed revolt. This context helps the readers of the book of John sharpen the political and theological weight of Jesus’ teaching.

The book of 1 Maccabees also helps us understand the developing Judean world in the first century. The Jews of the first century would have been very familiar with the stories of the Maccabean revolt and the Hasmonean dynasty. In fact, many people in the first century (including many disciples) bore names from the narratives, as many people looked back on the stories of God’s deliverance in that season and looked forward to God doing it again in his faithfulness. The Judeans of the first century knew that foreign rule could be overthrown and God could restore them through courageous leaders. This influenced their understanding and hopes for a Davidic Messiah who would defeat their enemies. This was especially heightened during Jesus’ lifetime as the relationship between Rome and Judea continued to sour. When people interacted with Jesus, they often attempted to make him a political king (John 6:15), or would question him on his status as the Messiah (John 10:24), both of which understandings would have been shaped significantly by the precedent of the Maccabees. This is why many during his time were confused and disappointed when Jesus refused to lead a political uprising.

1 Maccabees also explains the development of a form of Jewish political independence that began the splintering of the Jewish faith into the sectarian pluralism that it was in the first century. Although still debated in scholarship, many understand the merging of the priesthood and the kingship as creating a controversy that contributed to the formation of groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, etc., as a response to the Hasmonean dynasty and its aftermath. The Gospels assume the existence of the groups and help the reader better understand Jesus' interactions with Pharisees, Sadducees, and other Jewish sects of the first century as intra-Jewish debates, with many topics of disagreement coming from the controversies of the Hasmonean dynasty.

Lastly, 1 Maccabees shows the centrality of the temple. The revolt began and ended around the temple's defilement and purification. This same temple, although looking quite different after Herod the Great's investments, stood at the heart of Jewish identity. Jesus' actions in the temple—his cleansing of it (Mark 11:15–17), and his predictions of its destruction—must be seen in the backdrop of the earlier desecration and restoration.

In summary, 1 Maccabees bridges the historical gap between the Old and New Testaments. It explains the origins of Jewish independence, sectarian division, messianic expectation, and Temple-centered devotion. The life and ministry of Jesus unfolded in a world profoundly shaped by the events recorded in this book.