

2 MACCABEES

The Final Period of the Old Testament (Part Two)

Chapters 1-15

The Second Book of Maccabees is *not* a continuation of the First Book. Rather, it is in part parallel to it. Leslie Hoppe, O.F.M., writes: *Second Maccabees is an independent witness of some of the same events covered in 1Mc. There is, however, a significant difference in the response that the two books give to the policy of forced Hellenization begun by Antiochus IV and 1Mc supports armed resistance to Antiochus and his policies. It tells the story of the one family of priests, the Maccabees, who successfully led an armed revolution against the Seleucid Empires, leading to the establishment of Jewish independence.*

2Mc, on the other hand, sees Judah's future as in the hands of its God. The author places less emphasis on the military exploits of the Maccabees and their followers while focusing more attention on the witness of people like Eleazar, who embraced martyrdom when forced to choose between violating the Torah and accepting death.

Of theological importance are the author's teachings on the resurrection of the just on the last day (7:9, 11, 14, 23; 14:46), the intercession of the saints in heaven for people living on earth (15:11-16), and the power of the living to offer prayers and sacrifices for the dead (12:39-46).

Key themes: Heroism in the face of persecution, trust in God, the glory of martyrdom, heavenly reward of the just.

Division of chapters

As with books of the Bible, scholars divide the chapters of this book in different ways. The following is one way.

- Part 1:** Letters to Jews in Egypt (author's preface, Chapters 1-2)
- Part 2:** Wonders in the Temple—the case of Heliodorus (Chapter 3)
- Part 3:** Judas Maccabeus leads the holy war (Chapters 3-9)
- Part 4:** Later campaigns of Judas Maccabeus (Chapter 10:9-15)

COMMENTARY

The first two chapters of the Book consists of two letters to the Jews in Egypt and the author's own preface.

CHAPTERS 1:1-2:18: Two letters to Jews in Egypt

“The Jews in Jerusalem and in the land of Judea send greetings to their brethren, the Jews in Egypt, and wish them true peace! May God bless you and remember his covenant with his faithful servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

May he give to all of you a heart to worship him and to do his will readily and generously.

May he open your heart to his law and his commandments and grant you peace.

May he hear your prayers, and be reconciled to you, and never forsake you in time of adversity.

Even now we are praying for you here.” (vv 1-6)

Verses 1-10—First letter. The first six verses quoted above are a typical greeting and prayer for fellow Jews living in Egypt. The God who cared for their ancestors in the faith will care for the current generation of Jews. Jason is a high priest who buys the office from the Seleucid king and brings violence and destruction to the land. Prayer results in God rescuing the people from these calamities. The letter ends with an exhortation to the people to celebrate Hanukkah, called the Feast of Booths because of its resemblance to that great feast which recalled Israel's years in the wilderness.

Verses 1:10-2:18—Second letter. The focus of this letter is also the temple and the feast of Hanukkah. The killing of Antiochus and his attendants (1:15-18) is intended to communicate God's punishment on those who show disregard for God's holy place. 2:17 underlines the central role of God in the deliverance of the people from attackers.

Author's preface—2:19-32. The author of 2Maccabees tells us that his book is the story of Judas Maccabeus and of “heavenly manifestations” who

fought bravely for Judaism. The book is a single volume version of a much larger account of the same events.

Pause: What is special about sending or receiving a letter from a friend?

PART 2: WONDERS IN THE TEMPLE (THE CASE OF HELIODORUS)

CHAPTER 3: God defends his Temple

“He who has his dwelling in heaven watches over that Place and protects it, and he strikes down and destroys those who come to harm it.” (v.39)

In Israel’s history, we often notice that a period of blessing is followed by a period of sin which leads to punishment. We will see this cycle in operation in the coming chapters: *blessing* (ch. 3), *sin* (chs 4-5), and *punishment* (chs. 6-7).

Jerusalem is described as living in peace for two reasons: 1) the high priest Onias is holy and 2) the people observe the Torah.

Simon, an official in Jerusalem, has a quarrel with the high priest Onias, which leads Simon to betray his people by lying about the funds in the Temple. The Syrian King sends a representative named Heliodorus to confiscate the excessive funds. The arrival of Heliodorus in Jerusalem causes panic. “There was great distress throughout the city. Priests prostrated themselves in their priestly robes before the altar and loudly begged him in heaven.... Whoever saw the appearance of the high priest was pierced to the heart, for the changed color of his face manifested the anguish of his soul” (vv 15-16).

Verses 22-34 describe God’s most unusual response to the people’s prayer and anguish. Heliodorus being carried off in a stretcher shows his utter helplessness before the power of God, a power he is very willing to testify to before the king (vv 35-40).

Pause: What is the most miraculous intervention of God that you have witnessed in your life or the lives of others?

PART 3: DESECRATION AND PURIFICATION OF THE TEMPLE

CHAPTER 4: Jason and Menelaus purchase the high priesthood while Onias is murdered

“It is no light matter to flout the laws of God, as the following period will show.” (v.17)

The events described in chapters 4-7 cover the period from 175-167BC and tell the story of the assault of evil on the Jewish nation and its religion.

In this chapter, Simon continues his attacks on Onias (vv 1-6) whose brother Jason obtains the high priesthood by corrupt means (v.7). To ingratiate himself to the king, Jason proceeds to “initiate his countrymen into the Greek way of life” (v.10). Jason, who gained the high priesthood by corrupt means, is now cheated out of this office by Menelaus who promises lots of money to the king but which he never pays (vv 21-29).

Verses 30-38 describe how Menelaus and Antiochus conspire to murder the priest Onias. Verses 39-50 describe the evil deeds of Lysimachus and Menelaus against their own people. Lysimachus is killed by the people, but Menelaus gets off scot-free when his evil deeds are presented to the king.

CHAPTER 5: Jerusalem is ravaged

“There was a massacre of young and old, a killing of women and children, a slaughter of virgins and infants.” (v.13)

After doing some more horrible things against his own people (v.6), Jason becomes a hunted man and finally dies as an exile in Egypt. Verses 11-26 describe a brutal attack on Jerusalem by Antiochus and his men. “Puffed up in spirit, Antiochus did not realize that it was because of the sins of the city’s inhabitants that the Lord was angry for a little while and hence disregarded the holy place” (v.17).

CHAPTER 6: Desecration of the Temple; Martyrdom of Eleazar

“God never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with misfortunes, he does not abandon his own people. Let these words suffice for recalling this truth.” (v.6)

“Eleazar told them to send him at once to the abode of the dead, explaining: ‘At our age it would be unbecoming to make such a pretense; many young men would think the ninety-year-old Eleazar had gone over to an alien religion. Should I thus dissimulate for the sake of a brief moment of life, they would be led astray by me, while I would bring shame and dishonor on my old age. Even if, for the time being, I avoid the punishment of men, I shall never, whether alive or dead, escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will prove myself worthy of my old age, and I will leave to the young a noble example of how to die willingly and generously for the revered and holy laws.’” (vv 23-29)

Verses 1-11 describe the desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV. *The Collegeville Commentary* calls verses 12-17 a theology of persecution stating: *“The reader was advised earlier that the reason for the ills that befell Jerusalem and the people was that the people had sinned by engaging in various Hellenizing activities. The author now explains that the punishment was not meant to be destructive but corrective, like a parent disciplining a child. In effect, the author states that God gives other nations enough rope to hang themselves; with Israel, God punishes them before they reach the fullness of their sinfulness so that they can then experience God’s mercy. The assertion that God does not abandon the covenanted people is found throughout Jewish tradition”* (p.403).

Verses 18-31—Martyrdom of Eleazar. In these verses and in the next chapter, we have two powerful examples of people willing to die rather than deny their religious beliefs. In 1Maccabees, we observed a *violent resistance* to the hellenization policies of Antiochus; now we will witness a *non-violent response*—the path of martyrdom.

“But preferring a glorious death to a life of defilement, Eleazar spat out the pork that had been forced into his mouth...” (v.19). He states his readiness to “leave to the young a noble example of how to die willingly and generously for the revered and holy laws” (v.29). He opts to live forever in the memory of all for his courage and integrity rather than extend his life for a few moments in weakness and dishonor.

CHAPTER 7: Martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons

“We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.” (v.2)

“God gave you breath of life in this life. God will give you back breath and life.” (v.23)

Commenting on this powerful witness to God and his sacred laws, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: *This narrative is skillfully written, with each character providing another element of the theological argument in favor of martyrdom. The number seven, in Jewish tradition, symbolizes perfection; accordingly, the reader may look upon this as a “perfect” family. The story, despite its gruesome details, is meant to edify. It underlines the premise that observance of the law is more important than life itself. The presence of the king adds further import to the story.*

Each of the seven sons presents a part of the theological argument: (1) it is better to die than to transgress the law; (2) the king may take their lives, but God will raise them up again; (3) the king may dismember them, but God will restore their limbs; (4) they will be restored to life, but the king will not be restored; (5) God will not forsake the people but will torment the king and his nation; (6) they are suffering because they have sinned as a people.

The mother exhorts her sons to remain faithful by recalling for them God’s power to create and to restore life (v.23). When the king intercedes on behalf of the youngest boy, the mother returns to the theme of God’s creation and re-creation, arguing that if God can make the whole universe and humanity out of nothing God can also restore life. The last son then sums up all the preceding arguments, adding a new one at the same time: the martyr’s deaths play a role in bringing to an end the divine discipline that the people are undergoing. Martyrdom makes a difference in the life of the people. In the end the mother also becomes a martyr. Eleazar’s example has been followed, and it is time to move on in the narrative to demonstrate the effects of the martyrdoms” (p.403).

This chapter of 2Maccabees is important because of its explicit statement about belief in the resurrection of the dead—a key reason for its inclusion in the Catholic and Orthodox canon of Sacred Scripture.

A final reflection. In their reflection on 2Maccabees, the authors of *Walking with God* write: “Not only do the martyrs during the time of the Maccabees foreshadow Christ’s own suffering, but they also foreshadow the courage and suffering of his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is not hard to imagine that during the events of Good Friday, Mary might have often recalled the noble spirit of the woman from 2 Maccabees 7, whose heart was broken having to watch the cruel torture and death suffered by her seven sons – but who was still able to encourage her sons to be faithful to God’s will and to hope in God’s ability to raise them from the dead. Mary’s heart, pierced even deeper, fulfills even more perfectly this mother’s love, courage, and fidelity” (p.222).

Pause: What speaks to you most about the witness of Eleazar, the mother and her seven sons? What would you be willing to die for?

CHAPTER 8: Judas defeats Nicanor

“Maccabeus assembled his men, six thousand strong, and exhorted them not to be panic-stricken before the enemy, nor to fear the large number of the Gentiles attacking them unjustly, but to fight courageously, keeping before their eyes the lawless outrage perpetrated by the Gentiles against the holy Place and the affliction of the humiliated city, as well as the subversion of their ancestral way of life. ‘They trust in weapons and acts of daring,’ he said, ‘but we trust in almighty God, who can with a mere nod destroy not only those who attack us, but the whole world.’” (vv 16-18)

“In rapid succession Judas Maccabeus defeats an important adversary. Antiochus IV dies a horrible death, and the people purify the temple and Jerusalem. God brings this about, partly because of the faithful witness of the martyrs. The text moves from the assault of evil to its elimination.” (Collegeville Commentary, p.404)

Verse 5 tells us that “once Maccabeus got his men organized, the Gentiles could not withstand him, for the Lord’s wrath had now changed to mercy.” The Gentiles and Hellenizers will be helpless before the mighty power of God.

Before going into battle with Nicanor, Judas sums up their theological position “the Gentiles trust in their weapons, whereas the Jews trust in their almighty

God” (v.18). The booty from the victory is not only divided between the soldiers, some are also saved for widows and orphans (vv 28, 30), as called for by the Mosaic Law. Those who persecuted the people receive their punishment (v.33). As for Nicanor, the one who sought to enslave the Jews, he flees the country dressed like a runaway slave. Verse 35 describes his defeat with sarcasm: he was “eminently successful in destroying his own army.”

Pause: What does chapter 8 teach us about the power of prayer and our obligation to care for the needy members of our community?

CHAPTER 9: Antiochus IV gets his comeuppance

“Yet the condemnation of Heaven rode with Antiochus, since he said in his arrogance, ‘I will make Jerusalem the common graveyard of the Jews as soon as I arrive there.’ So the all-seeing LORD, the God of Israel, struck him down with an unseen but incurable blow; for scarcely had he uttered those words when he was seized with excruciating pains in his bowels and sharp internal torment, a fit punishment for him who had tortured the bowels of others with many barbarous torments.” (vv 4-6)

“So the murderer and blasphemer, after extreme sufferings, such as he had inflicted on others, died a miserable death in the mountains of a foreign land.” (v.28)

As Antiochus drives his chariot with haste, God’s condemnation rides with him (v.4). Even after receiving a painful disease in his bowels, he continues to plot evil things against God and his people. Then God throws him from his chariot and, like Heliodorus, this arrogant man is carried away helpless on a stretcher.

Verses 11-27 describe Antiochus’ so called deathbed conversion and the hypocritical letter he sends to his “esteemed Jewish citizens” whom he had tried to destroy. Most likely, the real purpose of the letter was to notify the Jews of the appointment of his son as his successor. There is no good reason to believe that Antiochus’s conversion was sincere.

10:1-8 describe the purification of the temple and city.

Pause: Have you ever run to God after you knew you had blown it big-time?

PART 4: LATER CAMPAIGNS OF JUDAS MACCABEUS

CHAPTER 10:9-38: Victories over the Idumeans and Timothy

“Lying prostrate at the foot of the altar, they begged God to be gracious to them, and to be an enemy to their enemies and a foe to their foes, as the law declares.” (v.26)

The narrative opens with a potential friend of the Jews being accused of treason, an accusation that led Ptolemy to commit suicide (v.13).

Verses 14-23 describe how Judas dealt with the Idumeans who were harassing the Jews and welcoming fugitives (Hellenizers) from Jerusalem.

Verses 24-38. When Timothy approaches Judea with a large force, Judas and his followers *pray* before advancing against the enemy. He receives heavenly help which of course means that he will win the battle.

CHAPTER 11: Defeat of Lysias

“Lysias did not take God’s power into account at all, but felt exultant confidence in his myriads of foot soldiers, his thousands of horsemen....” (v.4)

“When Maccabeus and his men learned that Lysias was besieging the strongholds, they and all the people begged the Lord with lamentations and tears to send a good angel to save Israel.” (v.6)

Once again, God is happy to send an angel to battle with Judas and his men. With the heavenly horseman leading the charge, all of Judas’ men become so filled with new courage that they are ready not only to attack the enemy, but “also the most savage beasts and yes, even walls of iron” (v.9).

As a result of his defeat and realizing that the ‘mighty God is their ally’ (v.13), Lysias brokers a peace with Judas Maccabeus (vv 13-38).

CHAPTER 12: Persecution renewed; prayers and offerings for the dead

“Judas then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.” (vv 43-46)

Commenting on the above verses, *The Catholic Bible-Personal Study Edition* states: “One of the most important texts in this book for Roman Catholic theology is 12, 42-46. The author tries to show that Judas Maccabee believed in the resurrection of the dead, because he ordered prayers and sacrifices for those who had fallen in battle. Such prayers would be useless unless Judas believed that they would rise again (12:44). This text is sometimes used as support for the Roman Catholic belief in purgatory and the power of prayers for the living and the dead. Another important text for Roman Catholics is 2 Maccabees 15, 12-16. Here Judas Maccabee sees the prophet Jeremiah in a dream praying for the Jews and Jerusalem. Catholic tradition accepts this text as one support for the belief in the power of the intercession of the saints” (p.167).

CHAPTER 13: Skirmish near Modein

“The king was advancing, his mind full of savage plans for inflicting on the Jews worse things than those they suffered in his father’s time. When Judas learned of this he urged the people to call upon the Lord night and day, to help them now, if ever, when they were about to be deprived of their law, their country, and their holy temple; and not to allow this nation, which had just begun to revive, to be subjected again to blasphemous Gentiles. When they had all joined in doing this, and had implored the merciful Lord continuously with weeping and fasting and prostrations for three days, Judas encouraged them and told them to stand ready.” (vv 9-13)

The prayers for victory in battle are once again answered. After the night attack on the enemy, they withdraw in terror and confusion.

CHAPTER 14: Devious Alcimus

“Alcimus said to the king, ‘Those Jews...led by Judas ...are warmongers who stir up sedition and keep the kingdom from enjoying peace and quiet.’” (v.6)

This chapter describes well the devious nature of Alcimus. After buttering up the new king Demetrius, he tells him that Judas and his men are only a bunch of warmongers with no desire to live peacefully. Next he badmouths Nicanor to the king (v.26).

CHAPTER 15: God’s men defeat the evil Nicanor

“Maccabeus, contemplating the hosts before him, their elaborate equipment, and the fierceness of their elephants, stretched out his hands toward heaven and called upon the Lord who works miracles; for he knew that it is not through arms but through the Lord’s decision that victory is won by those who deserve it. He prayed to him thus: ‘You, O Lord, sent your angel in the days of King Hezekiah of Judea, and he slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand men of Sennacherib’s army. Sovereign of the heavens, send a good angel now to spread fear and dread before us. By the might of your arm may those be struck down who have blasphemously come against your holy people!’ With this he ended his prayer.” (vv 21-24)

This final chapter of 2Maccabees opens with Nicanor setting himself up for defeat by arrogantly insulting the Creator and declaring himself “the ruler of the earth” (v.4).

Judas, meanwhile, rallies his troops in a way reminiscent of the holy war. With his men he shares a dream he has had of the holy priest Onias and the prophet Jeremiah who presents Judas with a golden sword saying: “Accept this holy sword as a gift from God; with it you shall crush your adversaries” (v.16). After such a dream, we need have no doubt as to who will be victorious in this battle.

Pause: What causes individuals to be arrogant? Why is this sin so hateful to God?

RESOURCES

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary. For both of the books of Maccabees, I relied heavily on this resource.
- The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition