



1 and 2 Maccabees

1 and 2 Maccabees are set during the reign of the Seleucid Greek empire (the part of the Greek empire that found its roots in Syria). It tells the story of how the Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to suppress Temple worship and to destroy the practice of Jewish law. This caused the Maccabean revolt, led by Mattathias and his sons. As a part of the revolt, the Temple was freed from the control of the Greek empire and rededicated (an act that is still commemorated yearly in the festival of Hanukkah). The Maccabees then ruled over Israel, first as High Priests and then as High Priests and Princes of Israel.

1 Maccabees follows this story until the death of Simon (the third son of Mattathias to rule over Israel) at the hands of the some Egyptian Greeks (from about 175-134 BC).

2 Maccabees recaps some of the story (until the events of 161 BC) and adds in details about God's intervention into the events reports.



How long will it take?

- Reading time:** Around 4 hours for both books or 2 hours for one.
- Short of time?** Just read 1 Maccabees 1.1-25; 4.1-49; 16.1-24



Genre

Inspirational History



Inspiring quotes

⁶²Do not fear the words of sinners, for their splendour will turn into dung and worms. ⁶³Today they will be exalted, but tomorrow they will not be found, because they will have returned to the dust, and their plans will have perished. ⁶⁴My children, be courageous and grow strong in the law, for by it you will gain honour.

(1 Maccabees 2.62-64)



About the Author

Nothing is known about the author of 1 Maccabees other than that the attention to detail and knowledge of events suggests that he was an eye witness or had access to eyewitness accounts. A supporter of the Hasmonean dynasty. It is probably a Greek translation of a Hebrew account of Israel's independence struggle between 174 and 134 BC.

Similarly little is known about the author of 2 Maccabees, although it is clear that he was not the same person as the author of 1 Maccabees. He claims to have used and condensed a five-volume work by someone called Jason of Cyrene (which no longer exists) and appears to have introduced theological reflections onto the events as he went.



About the times

Although 1 Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew (some you can tell from the sentence structure) it exists now only in Greek. It was probably written sometime in the second century BC, in other words very shortly after the events it described.

2 Maccabees is harder to date but many scholars locate it in the early first century BC.

What were people feeling?

The big question from this period is the question of self-definition. What did it mean to be Jewish in a predominantly Greek culture? 1 and 2 Maccabees reflect on this question in slightly different ways.



How is it structured?

1 Maccabees:

- 1.1–2.70 The rise of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and subsequent crisis
- 3.1–9.22 The leadership of Judas Maccabeus in the revolt against the Greeks
- 9.23–12.53 The leadership of Jonathan (Judas' brother)
- 13.1–16.24 The leadership and subsequent assignation of Simon (also a brother of Judas)

2 Maccabees:

- 1.1–2.32 Letters from Jews in Jerusalem to those in Egypt
- 3.1–6.31 The conquest of Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes
- 7.1-42 The torture and murder of seven brothers and their mother
- 8.1–9.29 The victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Greeks
- 10.1-38 The purification of the Temple
- 11.1–15.39 Ongoing conflict and the eventual victory of Judas



What kind of Book is it?

1 Maccabees is a historical book, concerned to relay the events of the period as closely as possible.

2 Maccabees falls more into theological history, in other words the attempt to reflect on God's role in the events described. It gives detailed accounts of the Maccabean revolt led by Judas Maccabeus, as well as the martyrdoms of Eleazar and seven brothers.

It promotes commitment to God's covenant as the path to prosperity, and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Hope for life beyond death enabled the people of God to commit their lives fully to the God who had called them, even when this seemed of no benefit in worldly terms.



Look out for...

1 and 2 Maccabees tell the same story in two different ways. Look out for the similarities and differences between the two.

These two books tell you a lot about Jewish self-definition in the second and first century BC. Look out for what you might learn about the Judaism of the period from the story.



What could this mean for me?

1 and 2 Maccabees are stories that reflect on oppression and resistance. Reflect on whether you think that Mattathias and his sons were right to rebel against their Greek oppressors.

We are challenged about how we should behave towards our 'enemies' and how we should act as God's agents, wherever we live in the world.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Why do you think the story of the Maccabees remains so important for Jews even today?
- Do a bit of research on Hanukkah and talk about or share what you have learnt about this very important Jewish festival.
- The victory of the Jews over their Greek oppressors loomed large in the popular imagination of the Jews of Jesus' day. Talk about how this story might have inspired the Jews of Jesus' day in the light of their oppression by the Romans.
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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