

Revolt of The Maccabees

“And the temple, which a little while before was full of fear and disturbance, was filled with joy and gladness, now that the Almighty Lord had appeared.”

2 Maccabees 3: 30

Chapter 15

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Read

1 Maccabees

1:41 - 2:28

2 Maccabees

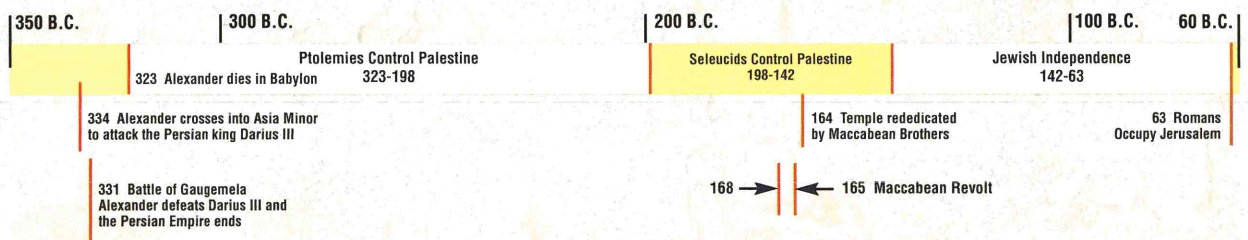
6:18 - 7:42

12:39 - 45

Persian rule was good for the faithful remnant of Israel. The Persians encouraged local populations to keep their own customs, and (as we saw earlier) the Persian kings even gave generous subsidies to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jews throughout the rest of the Empire prospered, too. Jewish merchants settled everywhere the Persians went, and Persian kings put a high value on Jewish advisors.

But the Persian Empire could not last forever. Its end was sudden and catastrophic.



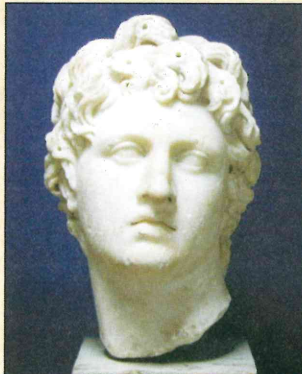
Only One World To Conquer

Over in Greece, a handful of cities had grown rich by trading throughout the Mediterranean. Greek culture also flourished: poets, philosophers, sculptors, and playwrights created masterpieces of art and literature that are still models for us today. And even though the Greek cities were always warring against each other, they managed to band together long enough to keep the Persians from expanding westward.

Philip of Macedon finally brought most of Greece under his rule by a combination of war, diplomacy, and cheating. It was a spectacular achievement, considering the fierce independence of the Greek cities.

But Philip's son Alexander had much bigger ideas. With lightning speed he conquered Egypt and the whole Persian Empire. He got as far as India, the end of the known world—and he conquered that, too. Then, according to one favorite story, he broke down and wept because there were no more worlds to conquer.

The world was “Hellenized” overnight. (The Greeks called themselves “Hellenes,” so the Hellenized civilization after Alexander is known as “Hellenistic” to historians.) Everywhere, Greek had become the language of commerce. Greek ideas of art permanently changed sculpture and painting even as far away as India, and the whole eastern Mediterranean sprouted Greek temples and libraries. Everyone who wanted to be up to date started dressing and acting like a Greek.



Marble sculpture of Alexander the Great 3rd century B.C.



This silver coin is a tetradrachm minted in 314-310 B.C. by Ptolemy I Soter, Satrap and King of Egypt (323-285 B.C.). It depicts Alexander the Great wearing an elephant's scalp and the coiled ram's horn of Ammon, an Egyptian deity. A tetradrachm was worth four drachmas, a Greek monetary unit.



The Entry of Alexander into Babylon by Charles Le Brun. Alexander defeated the Persians in 333 B.C.

Conquests Of Alexander The Great, ca. 336-323 B.C.



Ruins of the Temple of Artemis (a Greek goddess of the hunt and twin of Apollo) in the Hellenistic city of Gerasa (modern Jerash, Jordan) one of a league of ten cities east of the Jordan river known as the Decapolis.



Alexander died of fever in Babylon at the age of 33 in 323 B.C. His conquests were divided up among five of his generals. By 312 B.C. after years of struggle, two emerged as the leading powers in the Near East, Ptolemy controlled Egypt and Seleucus controlled the old Babylonian empire. Palestine lay between the two powers and changed hands several times until the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III Megas won control in 199 B.C. He was followed by Seleucus IV Philopator 187-175 B.C. then Antiochus IV Epiphanes 175-164 B.C. who provoked the Maccabean Revolt.

Ptolemy I Soter 323-285 B.C. resettled many Jews in Alexandria, Egypt. Under Ptolemy II Philadelphus 285-246 B.C., the Scriptures were translated into Greek. This work is known as the Septuagint because it was translated by seventy (Latin *septuaginta*) scholars brought to Egypt by Ptolemy II to serve the needs of the Greek-speaking Jewish community.

Jerusalem In The Middle

Alexander himself died very young, leaving no successor. After many civil wars, his empire was divided three ways, with one ruler in Greece, one in Egypt, and one occupying about the territory of the old Persian Empire.

The Greek rulers in Egypt were the Ptolemies, of whom the most famous would be the last, Cleopatra. The Seleucids ruled the old Persian Empire, including Syria.

As usual, Palestine was caught in the middle. At first it belonged to the Ptolemies; then the Seleucids conquered it. Just as had happened with Babylon and Egypt, and before that with Assyria and Egypt, there were factions supporting each side in Jerusalem, and sometimes people who thought they were clever enough to play one empire off against another. There was also a “Hellenizing” faction, especially among the rich and powerful, who were attracted by Greek civilization, and didn’t mind if a few pagan gods went with it.

Faithful Jews were deeply offended when they saw fashionable young men wearing Greek hats and going to Greek festivals. But until the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, at least the Jews who wanted to could worship the True God in peace.

Antiochus IV called himself Epiphanes—Greek for “God Manifest.” He thought more highly of himself than many of his subjects did. They called him Epimanes—Greek for “Out of His Mind.” He was just crazy enough to think of himself as a god, and brutal enough that no one dared to speak against him to his face. Even his most debauched courtiers were thoroughly embarrassed by his behavior. They could hardly bear to watch when the exalted king of the world’s greatest empire stood up on the stage in the public theater to perform lewd dances.

It was Antiochus’ greatest ambition to make his whole vast empire Greek. Greek culture—and Greek religion—would be brought to every province. Local customs would have to give way to a uniformly Hellenized state.

Under Antiochus’ empire, the Jewish high priest was also the secular ruler of his people. It was a powerful position, and Antiochus sold it to the highest bidder, regardless of qualifications. The winning bidder offered Antiochus 440 talents of silver. It was literally tons of money—about sixteen tons, to be precise.

Now that the high priesthood was in the hands of the rich Hellenists, the young men of the best families adopted Greek customs and forgot about the Law of Moses. Even the priests joined the fun, neglecting the sacrifices so they could go to the arena and watch wrestling.¹ The high priest himself sent some of the Temple revenue off to buy sacrifices to Hercules.²

The Final Desecration

Greeks often saw local deities as alternate manifestations of their own gods, so it made perfect sense to Antiochus to Hellenize the worship of his Jewish subjects. The Temple of God in Jerusalem was made the temple of Olympian Zeus. The temple of the Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim was made a temple of Zeus-Friend-of-Strangers.³

Far more than the name changed. Antiochus and his followers introduced Greek styles of worship at the Temple. Greek worship was full of immoralities that shocked the faithful remnant of Israel.

Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with harlots and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings which were forbidden by the

laws. A man could neither keep the Sabbath, nor observe the feasts of his fathers, nor so much as confess himself to be a Jew. (2 Mc 6:3-5)

Anyone who openly practiced Judaism—which is what the Jews began to call their religion, to distinguish it from “Hellenism”—was in mortal danger. Antiochus insisted that everyone must take part in the pagan sacrifices. That meant not only eating food sacrificed to idols, but also eating things like pork that were forbidden to Jews who followed the Law of Moses.

Still many of the remnant of faithful Israel defied Antiochus, even when the king resorted to murder and torture to make his point. Mothers who had their children circumcised were killed with their children. Old men died for refusing to eat unclean meats. Antiochus topped off his campaign of terror by desecrating the Temple itself, filling it with harlots and offering unclean sacrifices on the altar.

God revealed the resurrection of the dead to his people progressively. Hope in the bodily resurrection of the dead established itself as a consequence intrinsic to faith in God as creator of the whole man, soul and body. The creator of heaven and earth is also the one who faithfully maintains his covenant with Abraham and his posterity. It was in this double perspective that faith in the resurrection came to be expressed. In their trials, the Maccabean martyrs confessed:

The King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws (2 Mc 7:9). One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him (2 Mc 7:14; cf. 7:29; Dn 12:1-13). (CCC 992)

Amazing Success Of The Maccabees

At first the resistance was individual and unorganized. But soon one family became the standard-bearers for the revolt. An old priest named Mattathias and his five sons retreated to the countryside and started organizing the resistance. It was an obviously hopeless effort; they could never succeed against the power of the world’s greatest empire. The only reason for resisting was that it was better to die than to be unfaithful to God.

Yet against all odds the revolt did succeed. Trusting in God, the sons of Mattathias began to take back bits and pieces of territory. Judas Maccabeus, the most talented soldier among them, gained amazing victories against the pagan armies. Within three years, the faithful Jews were able to purify and rededicate the Temple. Jewish families still celebrate that event as the festival of Hanukkah.

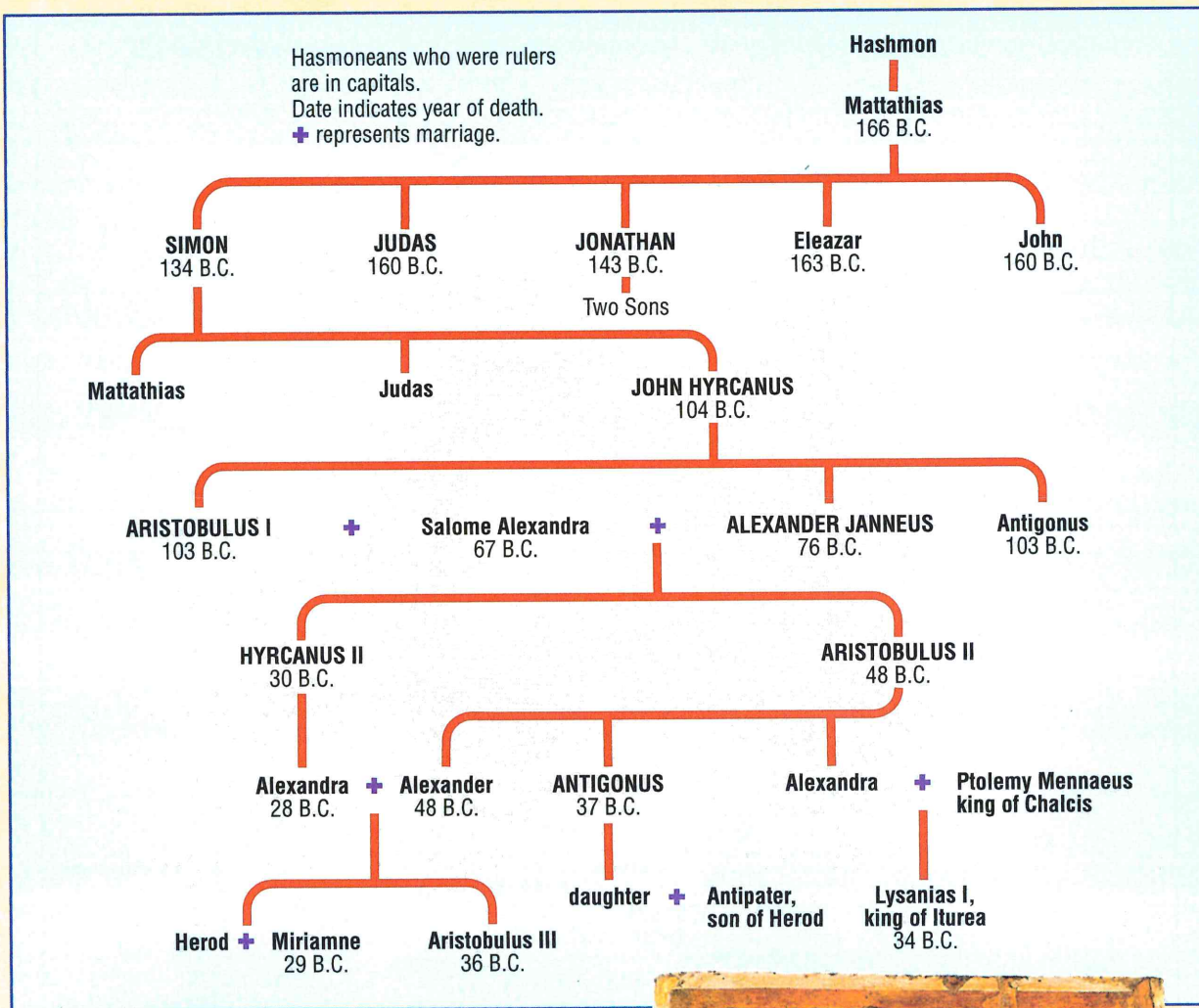
When Judas died, the victories continued under his brothers. The pagan kings were forced to come to terms with the Maccabees, as Judas and his brothers were called. Soon they controlled most of Judah. From there they pressed their successes outward, until they had actually conquered most of the territory of David’s kingdom. They made alliances with Sparta and with Rome, a rising power in the west. The Greek kings were forced to admit what had already in fact happened: Israel was now an independent power. About 125 years before the birth of Christ, an independent Israel had finally been restored.

Was this the fulfillment of all the prophecies? It certainly must have looked that way to many faithful Jews. Israel was whole again, and the shackles of the oppressors had been thrown off. All that was needed to complete the fulfillment was a king of David’s line, a branch from the stump of Jesse.

The Hasmonean Kingdom, ca. 165-37 B.C.



Maccabees Family Tree



Full independence was achieved under the last Maccabee brother, Simon Hasmoneus. Named for Simon, this period is called the Hasmonean Period. The Jews began to date contracts and agreements from 142 B.C.

“In the first year of Simon the great high priest and commander and leader of the Jews.” (1 Mc 13: 42)



A Hasmonian coin from Mattathias Antigonus, 40-37 B.C. Traces of a Greek inscription surround the seven-branched Menorah. This coin is unusual because Jewish religious law forbade the Menorah image to be used in art.

This icon's inscription is “The Holy Seven Maccabees.” Next to each portrait is the saint's name. The seven young saints and the elder Eleazar hold rolled-up scrolls rather than more traditional martyr's crosses.



What The Jews Believed

The two books of the Maccabees are valuable as history, but they are just as valuable for what they tell us about Jewish beliefs. Written only about a century before the birth of Jesus Christ, they give us a glimpse of Jewish life just before the Incarnation.

1. “Israel” is the faithful remnant.

For the authors of the books of Maccabees, the name “Israel” does not mean everyone of Jewish descent. It means the people who were faithful to God—often a small minority.

And he [Antiochus Epiphanes] appointed inspectors over all the people and commanded the cities of Judah to offer sacrifice, city by city. Many of the people, every one who forsook the law, joined them, and they did evil in the land; they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had. (1 Mc 1: 51-53)

Many of the people of Judah offered the sacrifices, but “Israel” went into hiding. The author is making a clear distinction: only the people who refused to forsake the law can be called “Israel.”

This is exactly the meaning of “Israel” that St. Paul often used in the New Testament.

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants...it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. (Rom 9: 6-8)

“Israel” meant all the people who were faithful to God. But because the New Covenant extended God’s kingdom to all the nations, every person from every race is now called to enter into the Family of God, with no distinction between Jewish and Gentile.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3: 28-29)

“Israel” is a foreshadowing of the Church.

2. The saints who die will rise again to an eternal reward.

By the time the books of Maccabees were written, many Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead. (Not everyone believed: even in the time of Jesus, the Sadducees still denied the resurrection.) After we die, we expect to be judged by God.

For even if for the present I should avoid the punishment of men, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. (2 Mc 6: 26)

Those who have been faithful to God’s commandments will have everlasting life as their reward.

And when he was at his last breath, he said, “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.” (2 Mc 7: 9)

This eternal life would be a resurrection of the *body*, as Christians still confess in the Apostles’ Creed.

When it was demanded, he quickly put forth his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, “I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again.” (2 Mc 7: 12)

But the wicked would have no share in this eternal reward.

And when he was near death he said, “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!” (2 Mc 7: 14)

3. Martyrdom is preferable to apostasy.

Because God's saints expect to receive eternal life as their reward, it is far better to lose this life than to turn away from God. Apostasy—the sin of turning away from the worship of the True God—is never worth while, no matter how tempting tyrants may try to make it look. When we compare the shortness of this life to eternity, nothing that happens to us on earth is worth giving up our chance at everlasting life.

As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing. (2 Mc 7:12)

For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of everflowing life under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. (2 Mc 7:36)

Scripture bears witness to faith in creation "out of nothing" as a truth full of promise and hope. Thus the mother of seven sons encourages them for martyrdom:

I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws... Look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being (2 Mc 7:22-23, 28). (CCC 297)

4. God judges his people as a father judges his children.

The people of God may suffer from time to time, but these sufferings come because Israel needs discipline, not because God wants revenge.

For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living LORD is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. (2 Mc 7:32-33)

5. It is good and wise to pray for the dead.

When Judas Maccabeus found that some of his soldiers had died with pagan amulets, he prayed to God to forgive their sin. Although they were dead, he didn't regard their state after death as a closed issue.

Then under the tunic of every one of the dead soldiers they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to them that this was why these men had fallen. So they all blessed the ways of the LORD, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out... He [Judas] also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superstitious and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking for the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin. (2 Mc 12:40-45)

Because of his firm belief in the resurrection, Judas did what he could to make atonement for the sin of the soldiers who died. That entails a belief that the dead can still be helped by our prayers, which is the basis for the Christian doctrine of Purgatory.

This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Mc 12: 46). From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God (cf. Council of Lyons II (1274): DS 856). The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.⁴ (CCC 1032)

Judas Maccabeus And The Story Of Hanukkah



Hanukkah is a Hebrew word meaning "dedication." It is also spelled Chanuka, Chanukah or Hannukah.

In 167 B.C., Antiochus IV ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the Jewish Temple. After the successful revolt against the Seleucid monarchy by the Maccabees, the Temple was liberated, cleansed and rededicated in 164 B.C.

The festival of Hanukkah was instituted by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers to celebrate this rededication of the Temple (1 Mc 4: 59). Judas ordered the Temple to be cleansed, a new altar to be built in place of the polluted one, and new holy vessels to be made. When the fire had been rekindled upon the altar and the lamps of the candlestick lit, the dedication of the altar was celebrated for eight days amid sacrifices and songs (1 Mc 4: 36).

Some historians believe that the reason for the eight day celebration was that the first Hanukkah was a belated celebration of the festival of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles (2 Mc 1: 9; 10: 6). During the revolt, the Jews were not able to celebrate Sukkot properly. Sukkot also lasts for eight days, and was a holiday in which the lighting of lamps played a prominent part during the Second Temple period. Lights were also kindled in the household, and the popular name of the festival was "Festival of Lights."

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**Clement of Alexandria: *Miscellanies*,
Book IV**

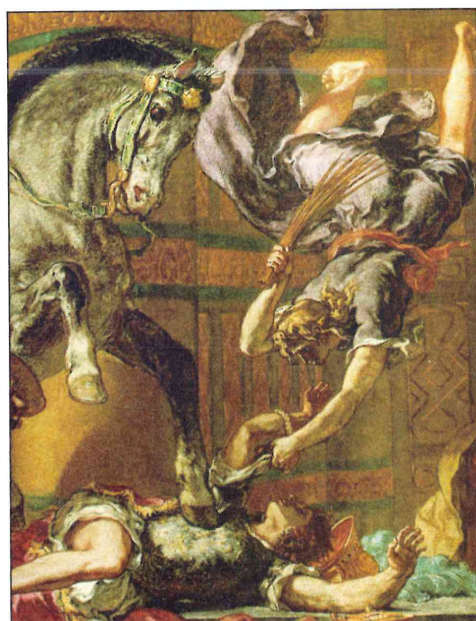
Chapter 9: Christ's Sayings Respecting
Martyrdom.

On martyrdom the Lord hath spoken explicitly, and what is written in different places we bring together. "But I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess in Me before men, the Son of man also shall confess before the angels of God; but whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I deny before the angels." "Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me or of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him shall the Son of man also be ashamed when He cometh in the glory of His Father with His angels. Whosoever therefore shall confess in Me before men, him will I also confess before my Father in heaven." "And when they bring you before synagogues, and rulers, and powers, think not: beforehand how ye shall make your defense, or what ye shall say. For the Holy Spirit shall teach you in the same hour what ye must say."



But if the Spirit of the Father testifies in us, how can we be any more hypocrites, who are

said to bear testimony with the voice alone? But it will be given to some, if expedient, to make a defense, that by their witness and confession all may be benefited—those in the Church being confirmed, and those of the heathen who have devoted themselves to the search after salvation wondering and being led to the faith; and the rest seized with amazement. So that confession is by all means necessary. For it is in our power. But to make a defense for our faith is not universally necessary. For that does not depend on us. "But he that endureth to the end shall be saved." For who of those who are wise would not choose to reign in God, and even to serve? So some "confess that they know God," according to the apostle; "but in works they deny Him, being abominable and disobedient, and to every good work reprobate." And these, though they confess nothing but this, will have done at the end one good work. Their witness, then, appears to be the cleansing away of sins with glory. For instance, the Shepherd says: "You will escape the energy of the wild beast, if your heart become pure and blameless." Also the Lord Himself says: "Satan hath desired to sift you; but I have prayed."



"For there appeared to them a magnificently caparisoned horse, with a rider of frightening mien, and it rushed furiously at Heliodorus and struck him with its front hoofs." (2 Mc 3: 25)

VOCABULARY

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The Greek conqueror who spread his empire as far as India. Despite the empire's breakup after his death, Alexander's conquests spread Greek culture throughout the known world.

ANTIOCHUS IV ("EPIPHANES")

The Seleucid king who tried to force Hellenism, including Greek religion, on his Jewish subjects.

GERIZIM

The mountain on which the Samaritans had their temple to God.

HELLENISM

The fashion of adopting Greek culture and ideas, popular all over the Middle East after Alexander's conquests.

JUDAISM

The practice of traditional Jewish religion, defined in opposition to "Hellenism."

JUDAS MACCABEUS

The Jewish general who led the revolt against Antiochus IV.

MACCABEES

The collective name of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, leaders of the Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV.

MARTYR

One who dies for the sake of faith in God. Greek for "witness."

MATTATHIAS

A priest who touched off the Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV. He was the father of Judas Maccabeus.

PURGATORY

A state of final purification after death and before entrance into heaven for those who died in God's friendship but were only imperfectly purified. God's people knew their prayers were efficacious for the dead even in the time of the Maccabees.

RESURRECTION

The time when the faithful people who have died will come back to eternal life. "All the dead will rise, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (CCC 998).

SELEUCIDS

The Greek rulers of the eastern part of Alexander's empire. Their territory included Palestine.



Greek columns in the Hellenized city Gerasa, Jordan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does "Hellenized" mean?
2. Who were the Greek rulers in Egypt?
3. What notorious king began the persecution of Jews who refused to convert to Greek forms of worship?
4. What did Antiochus IV do to the Jewish and Samaritan temples?
5. Why would a revelation like that described in CCC 992 be important during times of persecution?
6. What position did Antiochus IV sell to the highest bidder?
7. What loyal priest led the resistance to the persecution?
8. Which of that priest's sons became famous for his military victories?
9. What does the Jewish Feast of Hanukkah celebrate?
10. According to 1 Maccabees, who deserves the name of "Israel"?
11. What truths can be determined from the Books of Maccabees?
12. What is apostasy?
13. Why is it good and wise to pray for the dead?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. In the story of the Maccabees, Antiochus puts all seven brothers to death when they refuse to turn from God. Read 2 Maccabees 7: 20-30. Discuss the mother's fortitude when facing the death of her sons. How does the youngest son respond to Antiochus' offers? In the end, the mother dies along with her seven sons. How can this story of fortitude and love for God be an inspiration to us? When might we need the same sort of fortitude?
2. God's promise of eternal life in heaven was one of the great sources of strength for the Maccabees and the rest of the martyrs. God created humans with the sole purpose of serving him and being with him forever in heaven. Heaven is our end. It is the only place where we can be truly fulfilled and truly happy. What do you know about heaven? What will it be like to see God there? Can we know anything about heaven without God revealing it to us?
3. Because Judas Maccabeus had a firm belief in the resurrection, he prayed for his soldiers who had died wearing the pagan amulets. The Church dedicates the month of November, which starts with All Saints Day and All Souls Day, to praying for the deceased. How do our prayers for people after their deaths offer them any help? Why do we believe it is necessary to pray for the dead?

Endnotes

1. 2 Mc 4: 12-15.
2. 2 Mc 4: 19.
3. 2 Mc 6: 2.
4. St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in 1 Cor. 41, 5: PG 61, 361; cf. Job 1: 5.