

The Impact of the Maccabees on First Century Judaism

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For most Messianics I know who celebrate *Chanukah*, they hear a great deal about the military exploits of the Maccabees and the rededication of the Temple. Many of them honestly take the time to flip through the Books of 1&2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha, the principal historical record that influences our understanding of the wars fought by the Maccabees. When Jerusalem was recaptured and the Temple was rededicated, much more really did take place. *This goes beyond the lives of Judah Maccabee and his brothers*. Sadly, too many congregations and fellowships that honor *Chanukah* are not that familiar with this period of complicated history—not only for what took place in the Second Century B.C.E., but how it would influence the First Century C.E.

Good Relations that the Jews Had With the Seleucids

When surveying 1&2 Maccabees, one easily finds how Judea has been encroached between two divisions of Alexander the Great's divided Greek Empire. The Ptolemaic Greeks dominate Egypt to the south, and the Seleucid Greeks dominate Syria to the north. Originally, it seems that the Jewish nation had fairly good relations with the Seleucid regime, and had no problems serving as a vassal state. Two of the preceding monarchs to Antiochus Epiphanes, Antiochus the Great or Antiochus III (222-187 B.C.E.), and Seleucus IV (187-175 B.C.E.), are recorded to have been favorable toward the Jews.

King Antiochus III actually writes a letter, indicating how a population of Jews are to be moved out of Mesopotamia and Babylon, into Lydia and Phrygia. These are people, he attests, who will be loyal to the state, if they are simply left alone to worship their God and observe their religious laws. They will be productive and honorable citizens. As the historian Josephus recorded,

King Antiochus to Zeuxis his father, sends greetings. "If you are in health, it is well. I also am in health. Having been informed that a sedition has arisen in Lydia and Phrygia, I thought that matter required great care; and upon advising with my friends what was fit to be done, it has been thought proper to remove two thousand families of Jews, with their effects, out of Mesopotamia and

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Babylon, to the citadels and places that lie most convenient; for I am persuaded that they will be well disposed guardians of our possessions, because of their piety toward God, and because I know that my predecessors have borne witness to them, that they are faithful, and with alacrity do what they are desired to do. I will, therefore, though it be a laborious work, that you remove these Jews; under a promise that they shall be permitted to use their own laws; and when you shall have brought them to the places before mentioned, you shall give everyone of their families a place for building their houses, and a portion of the land for their husbandry, and for the plantation of their vines; and you shall discharge them from paying taxes of the fruits of the earth for ten years; and let them have a proper quantity of wheat for the maintenance of their servants, until they receive grain out of the earth; also let a sufficient share be given to such as minister to them in the necessities of life, that by enjoying the effects of our humanity, they may show themselves the more willing and ready about our affairs. Take care likewise of that nation, as far as you are able, that they may not have any disturbance given them by anyone.” Now these testimonials which I have produced are sufficient to declare the friendship that Antiochus the Great bore to the Jews (*Antiquities of the Jews* 12.148-153).¹

Some Colossians commentators note how, even though there were Jews in the region of Phrygia and Lydia going back from much earlier, this group that was transplanted may have been the more immediate forbearers of any Jews in Colossae and the Lycus Valley, that either would have recognized Yeshua as Messiah²—or who would have errantly influenced the Colossian Believers.³

Seleucus IV did not rule as long as Antiochus the Great, but the Epitomist of 2 Maccabees certainly does issue some complimentary words of him. He remarks, “the kings themselves honored the place and glorified the temple with the finest presents, so that even Seleucus, the king of Asia, defrayed from his own revenues all the expenses connected with the service of the sacrifices” (2 Maccabees 3:2-3). The Jewish nation by no means always had bad relations with the Seleucid Greek Empire. As long as they were allowed to worship in the way that the Torah required, things stayed somewhat cordial. Things may have not exactly been perfect, especially since the Babylonian exile—but having to pay tribute to a nearby great power was certainly better than another exile. The office of high priest may have become a political appointment that needed to be approved by a nearby governor or Seleucid monarch—but that was certainly preferable to having no Temple or priesthood.

Bad Relations that the Jews had with the Seleucids

The fact that Judea had become a vassal of the Seleucid Empire, with the high priesthood often up for sale to the highest bidder, meant that sooner or later things were going to get complicated. This is exactly what we see in the opening chapters of 2 Maccabees. The Epitomist records how a certain Simon had told the Seleucid governor Apollonius, that the Temple treasury “was full of untold sums of money”

¹ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), pp 317-318.

² The gospel made it to Colossae via the preaching of Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), who presumably had heard it during Paul's tenure in the neighboring city of Ephesus (Acts 19:9-10).

³ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp 8-13.

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(2 Maccabees 3:6) which were being withheld from the royal tribute. While these funds were found out to be mainly in trust for widows and orphans (2 Maccabees 3:10), and via angelic intervention they were not stolen (2 Maccabees 3:22-30), a trend of incidents began. The high priest Onias was slandered by Simon (2 Maccabees 4:1-5), and so Onias goes to Apollonius and pleads how “without the king’s attention public affairs could not again reach a peaceful settlement” (2 Maccabees 4:6)—with Simon actually being considered a threat to peace in the region.

When Antiochus Epiphanes succeeds his brother, King Seleucus, Onias’ brother, Jason, “obtained the high priesthood by corruption” (2 Maccabees 4:7). Significant actions promoting Hellenism also are seen, with the founding of a gymnasium (presumably where men would train nude) and an order of Antiochenes (2 Maccabees 4:9). The author of 1 Maccabees considers these things to be considerable acts of renegade apostasy, describing,

“In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, ‘Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us.’ This proposal pleased them, and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil” (1 Maccabees 1:11-15, NRSV).

Take important notice of how these acts of Hellenism were willfully imposed by a corrupt high priest who wanted to curry favors with the Seleucid Empire. Yet the corruption ran deeper, because when the high priest Jason sends Menelaus, a brother of the Simon who had informed Apollonius of the Temple treasury, to King Antiochus—he loses his high priesthood. The Epitomist of 2 Maccabees recounts, “But he, when presented to the king, extolled him with an air of authority, and secured the high priesthood for himself, outbidding Jason by three hundred talents of silver” (2 Maccabees 4:24). Menelaus is not at all a person whom the Epitomist of 2 Maccabees approves of, recognizing how he used his high priesthood to appropriate gold objects from the Temple for bribes, and then selling them for personal profit (2 Maccabees 4:32).

Onias, the previously respected and Torah-faithful high priest (2 Maccabees 3:1), now deposed from that office, makes his way to Antioch to protest the crimes Menelaus has committed (2 Maccabees 4:33). Antiochus Epiphanes is away putting down a rebellion in Tarsus and Mallus, and so Menelaus convinces his deputy, Andronicus, to have Onias put away—which he does (2 Maccabees 4:34-35). The murder of Onias, the former Jewish high priest, is met with a great deal of anger, so much so that “many also of other nations, were grieved and displeased at the unjust murder of the man” (2 Maccabees 4:35). When Antiochus returns, he is actually saddened, and has Andronicus humiliated, and then executed on the very spot where Onias was killed (2 Maccabees 4:37-38).

Simply because King Antiochus does briefly show a moment of human feeling, by no means is an indication that he was not an opportunistic leader. A mob scene takes place when Menelaus is away from the Temple in Jerusalem, caused by the sacrilege committed by his brother Lysimachus, creating a huge uproar among the people with Lysimachus himself killed near the Temple treasury (2 Maccabees

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4:39-42). Charges are brought against Menelaus over this mob riot, when King Antiochus comes to Tyre (2 Maccabees 4:43-46). Yet as the Epitomist of 2 Maccabees says, “through the covetousness of them that were of power Menelaus remained still in authority, increasing in malice, and being a great traitor to the citizens” (2 Maccabees 4:50, KJV). The relationship that the Jewish nation has with the Seleucid Empire gets increasingly more difficult, due to bribery, corruption, and the desire for certain men to be in positions of power.

Preceding some of the events that we commemorate at *Chanukah*, visions of horsemen and soldiers had appeared over the skies of Judea (2 Maccabees 5:1-4), as Antiochus Epiphanes is overseeing his second invasion of Egypt. A rumor is circulated that he has fallen dead in battle, and so the deposed high priest Jason uses this as an opportunity to attack Jerusalem and retake his prior office (2 Maccabees 5:5-6). All that can be said is that he utterly failed, and then he has to flee—first to Egypt, and then onto Sparta, where he dies in exile (2 Maccabees 5:7-10).

What happens when there is all of this internal fighting and politicking among the Jews? First, Jewish religious leaders embrace various ungodly ways from Hellenism. Secondly, different men vie for the office of the high priest. And although not entirely unsuccessful in Egypt, Antiochus Epiphanes hears that Judea is in revolt, and he feels compelled to come and “intervene” in what is happening—asserting Seleucid Greek dominance.

Things Fought and Died For

After the failed attempt by Jason to reclaim his priesthood, Antiochus Epiphanes invades Jerusalem, kills many people, and then ransacks the Temple. Sadly enough, the high priest Menelaus is said to have actually collaborated with him, as Antiochus took a great spoil from the Temple:

“Not content with this, Antiochus dared to enter the most holy temple in all the world, guided by Menelaus, who had become a traitor both to the laws and to his country. He took the holy vessels with his polluted hands, and swept away with profane hands the votive offerings which other kings had made to enhance the glory and honor of the place” (2 Maccabees 5:15-16).

This was not the later, and much more serious defilement that the Maccabees would have to come and clean up—but just a matter of Antiochus Epiphanes wanting to demonstrate his supremacy, as well as make up for an unsuccessful military campaign elsewhere. Even though all Antiochus did here was steal a great deal of sacred objects (1 Maccabees 1:20-24), the Jews were absolutely distraught over it. The author of 1 Maccabees describes how there was great mourning and despair among the people:

“Taking them all, he departed to his own land. He committed deeds of murder, and spoke with great arrogance. Israel mourned deeply in every community, rulers and elders groaned, maidens and young men became faint, the beauty of women faded. Every bridegroom took up the lament; she who sat in the bridal chamber was mourning. Even the land shook for its inhabitants, and all the house of Jacob was clothed with shame” (1 Maccabees 1:24-28).

As terrible as this is, however, the Epitomist of 2 Maccabees observes how because of the sin present, this was considered to be rightful punishment from the Lord:

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“But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation. Therefore the place itself shared in the misfortunes that befell the nation and afterward participated in its benefits; and what was forsaken in the wrath of the Almighty was restored again in all its glory when the great Lord became reconciled” (2 Maccabees 5:19-20).

Following this sacrilege, the author of 1 Maccabees further details how Jerusalem was transformed into a military citadel, where the Seleucid Greeks stationed “sinful people, lawless men” (1 Maccabees 1:34). Several years after the sacking of the Temple, Antiochus Epiphanes issues a decree that his entire kingdom “should be one people, and that each should give up his customs” (1 Maccabees 1:41). Many obey his orders (1 Maccabees 1:42), but the Jewish people would prove to be a very serious problem. This would require the Jews to give up various Torah practices, including the Temple sacrifices and worship (1 Maccabees 1:45a-b), the weekly Sabbath and appointed times (1 Maccabees 1:45c), they would have to build idolatrous idols and shrines (1 Maccabees 1:47), and they would have to leave their sons uncircumcised (1 Maccabees 1:48). The decree issued by Antiochus Epiphanes meant that the Jerusalem Temple would itself be desecrated. The author of 1 Maccabees, and the Epitomist of 2 Maccabees, describe what takes place from their two vantage points:

Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding cities of Judah (1 Maccabees 1:54).

Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their fathers and cease to live by the laws of God, and also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and call it the temple of Olympian Zeus, and to call the one in Gerizim the temple of Zeus the Friend of Strangers, as did the people who dwelt in that place. 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. On the monthly celebration of the king's birthday, the Jews were taken, under bitter constraint, to partake of the sacrifices; and when the feast of Dionysus came, they were compelled to walk in the procession in honor of Dionysus, wearing wreaths of ivy. At the suggestion of Ptolemy a decree was issued to the neighboring Greek cities, that they should adopt the same policy toward the Jews and make them partake of the sacrifices, and should slay those who did not choose to change over to Greek customs. One could see, therefore, the misery that had come upon them (2 Maccabees 6:1-9).

Yeshua's later words to the moneychangers, “It is written, ‘MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER’; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN” (Matthew 21:13; cf. Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11),⁴ on how people were being shortchanged—as serious as they were—actually seem pretty light compared to what is going on here

⁴ Cf. Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46.

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a century-and-a-half earlier. When the decree of Antiochus Epiphanes was enacted, God's House *literally became* a whorehouse!

The considerable bulk of the Books of 1&2 Maccabees is spent detailing how Judah Maccabee and his brothers stood against what was happening, raising an army, and fighting against the Seleucid invaders of Judea. At *Chanukah*, we remember how they were able to cleanse and rededicate the Temple (1 Maccabees 4:36-59; 2 Maccabees 10:1-8). We rightfully commemorate their tenacity and sacrifice. **But do we really think about what they were fighting for?** We know they were fighting for the rights of the Jewish people, and for a religion based in God's Torah, to survive. But do we really understand how the Maccabees fought and died for the injustices delivered against normal, everyday Jews? These were people who did not allow themselves to be engulfed by the corruption of the different priests, or the decrees of the Seleucid Empire. They were people who loved God, obeyed God, and simply wanted to do what was required of God's chosen people.

There are a number of religious issues that are given attention in 1&2 Maccabees, for which the Jewish fighters, who followed Judah Maccabee, were willing to die. Antiochus Epiphanes' decree that the Jews should dismiss both God's Torah and their ancestral customs was very much designed to see them eventually assimilated into the religious and cultural milieu of his empire. You have probably already noticed how many of the Jews appearing in the Books of 1&2 Maccabees have Greek names.⁵ But this would even go further—eventually because of Antiochus' policies *there was to be no recognizable Jewish people*. The identity of the Jewish people, as the physical remnant of Israel, was understandably tied up in God's Torah and the Temple. And so, as the author of 1 Maccabees asserts, Antiochus Epiphanes wanted them to “forget the law and change all the ordinances” (1 Maccabees 1:49). If Jews in the Holy Land itself willingly gave up on God and the Temple, what would that signal? Could the Jewish people survive?

The overarching insult for any faithful Jew at the time would be to not only see the scrolls of God's holy Torah torn up and burned, but also people killed for obeying God's Law:

“The books of the law which they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Where the book of the covenant was found in the possession of any one, or if any one adhered to the law, the decree of the king condemned him to death” (1 Maccabees 1:56-57).

While it is easy for us to simply think of the Torah as being a spiritual document, describing how God wanted His people to live their lives in obedience to Him, the period of the Maccabees shows us how it very much became a national symbol—**perhaps mores than ever before**—of Jewish identity. Jews faithful to God could be rounded up and slaughtered if they obeyed His commandments, not turning their back on Him and worshipping the gods and goddesses of the Greeks. There are a number of specific areas of the Torah that are targeted by the Seleucid Greeks that needed to be put down, beyond just general obedience. Both 1&2 Maccabees record instances how various Jews were martyred because they refused to give into the decrees of a wicked king.

⁵ I.e., the Menelaus of fame was the estranged husband of Helen of Troy, and brother of King Agamemnon, from Homer's *Iliad*.

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Circumcision

It is not difficult to see that circumcision is a major issue of importance to the time period of the Maccabees. Before the desecration of the Temple by the order of Antiochus Epiphanes, there were already Jewish men who “removed the marks of circumcision” (1 Maccabees 1:15). How did they do this? *IDB* observes, “When Hellenistic influence grew strong in Palestine, the Jews came into contact with Greeks who did not practice circumcision. Some Jews sought to overcome the effect of circumcision by epispasm, making foreskins for themselves.”⁶ According to Josephus, when the gymnasium had been established in Jerusalem, the Jewish men “hid the circumcision of their genitals, that even when they were naked they might appear to be Greeks” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 12.241).⁷ The Apostle Paul, speaking of a Jewish man first being called to faith in Yeshua, says, “Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision” (1 Corinthians 7:18, NRSV).

Apparently in ancient times there did exist a (primitive) medical procedure that could remove the marks of circumcision. The verb *epispāō* (ἐπισπάω), appearing in 1 Corinthians 7:18, can mean “to pull the foreskin over the end of the penis” (*BDAG*).⁸ To the author of 1 Maccabees, Jewish men who would go through the hassle of having to stretch over and grow a new foreskin, “abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil” (1 Maccabees 1:15).

Even though there were Jewish men who abandoned the rite of circumcision, and were effectively considered traitors to God—the real attention in 1&2 Maccabees is given to those who continued to circumcise their sons. 1 Maccabees 1:60-61 describes the brutal murder of those who practiced circumcision: “According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks.” 2 Maccabees 6:10 further says, “two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. These women they publicly paraded about the city, with their babies hung at their breasts, then hurled them down headlong from the wall.” For simply obeying the Torah's requirement that male children be circumcised (Leviticus 12:3), these women were murdered as criminals against the state.

So serious was this to the Maccabees, that when Mattathias, Judah Maccabee's father, begins his campaign with those “who offered [themselves] willingly for the law” (1 Maccabees 2:42)—they not only smash down idolatrous shrines, but they also see that uncircumcised Jewish boys are promptly circumcised:

“And Mattathias and his friends went about and tore down the altars; they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel” (1 Maccabees 2:45-46).

Circumcision became an issue that the Maccabean Jews considered to be one worth dying for, especially if Jewish women were unjustly murdered by the Seleucid regime for only obeying God.

⁶ J.P. Hyatt, “Circumcision,” in *IDB*, 1:629.

⁷ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 323.

⁸ *BDAG*, 380.

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Keeping the Sabbath

Another major sign, of Jewish apostasy against the Torah, is considered to be how “Many even from Israel...profaned the sabbath” (1 Maccabees 1:43). While a Creation ordinance (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:9, 11), the Sabbath was also to be a special sign of how God led the Ancient Israelites out of slavery from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15), and how His people could now rest one day each week, being free. Keeping the Sabbath was an integral part of obedience to God, and so it is not at all surprising how when faithful Jews continued to keep the Sabbath—in spite of Antiochus’ decrees against it—they often died. 1 Maccabees 2:31-38 records an incident of how many Jews, who had fled into hiding, were slaughtered because they refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath:

“And it was reported to the king's officers, and to the troops in Jerusalem the city of David, that men who had rejected the king's command had gone down to the hiding places in the wilderness. Many pursued them, and overtook them; they encamped opposite them and prepared for battle against them on the sabbath day. And they said to them, ‘Enough of this! Come out and do what the king commands, and you will live.’ But they said, ‘We will not come out, nor will we do what the king commands and so profane the sabbath day.’ Then the enemy hastened to attack them. But they did not answer them or hurl a stone at them or block up their hiding places, for they said, ‘Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly.’ So they attacked them on the sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and cattle, to the number of a thousand persons.”

The soldiers who tracked these people down actually gave them the option of recanting on their convictions, letting them keep their lives. These faithful Jews retorted back that they would not profane the Sabbath, and so they were attacked and were killed. When Mattathias and the other Maccabees heard of this “they mourned for them deeply” (1 Maccabees 2:39), recognizing how they died for their piety. Yet at the same time, acknowledging the severe gravity of the circumstances, the Maccabees all agreed that if they were attacked on the Sabbath, that they would defend themselves, lest their entire cause be lost:

“And each said to his neighbor: ‘If we all do as our brethren have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth.’ So they made this decision that day: ‘Let us fight against every man who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our brethren died in their hiding places’” (1 Maccabees 2:40-41).

Today in Judaism, because of examples like this, it is considered appropriate to violate any ritual commandment—save committing idolatry—to save a life. This is why in modern Israel, the military, police, and doctors, can all work on *Shabbat*. The historical record does include a reference to how, when faced with an opposing force, the Maccabees did fight on the Sabbath (1 Maccabees 9:43-49). At the same time, the Maccabees’ faithfulness to the Torah is recognized, in that they did keep the Sabbath when they could (2 Maccabees 8:24-29).

The record in 2 Maccabees similarly describes how the holy institution of the Sabbath was turned against the Jews. In the two-year time period between Antiochus Epiphanes’ ransacking of the Temple, and his later decree for all to Hellenize which saw the Temple defiled, an Apollonius, captain of some Mysian mercenaries, came to inflict considerable damage on the people (2 Maccabees 5:24).

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The Epitomist describes how he waited for the Sabbath, when the Jews would not be working, to attack:

“When this man arrived in Jerusalem, he pretended to be peaceably disposed and waited until the holy sabbath day; then, finding the Jews not at work, he ordered his men to parade under arms. He put to the sword all those who came out to see them, then rushed into the city with his armed men and killed great numbers of people” (2 Maccabees 5:25-26).

The Epitomist also records how, along with the women who were murdered for circumcising their sons, “Others who had assembled in the caves near by, to observe the seventh day secretly, were betrayed to Philip and were all burned together, because their piety kept them from defending themselves, in view of their regard for that most holy day” (2 Maccabees 5:11). In the later fighting against Nicanor, occurring after the rededication of the Temple but still in a tenuous time, Nicanor mocks the Jews among his army who ask him to remember the Sabbath day:

“When Nicanor heard that Judas and his men were in the region of Samaria, he made plans to attack them with complete safety on the day of rest. And when the Jews who were compelled to follow him said, ‘Do not destroy so savagely and barbarously, but show respect for the day which he who sees all things has honored and hallowed above other days,’ the thrice-accursed wretch asked if there were a sovereign in heaven who had commanded the keeping of the sabbath day. And when they declared, ‘It is the living Lord himself, the Sovereign in heaven, who ordered us to observe the seventh day,’ he replied, ‘And 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” (2 Maccabees 15:1-6).

Suffice it to say, it is not difficult to see how important the Sabbath would become to later Jewish generations—including the imposition of many extra-Biblical rulings and regulations designed to protect its sanctity. Since people departing from Sabbath remembrance was believed to be a partial cause of Antiochus’ desecration, guarding the Sabbath would have to be enacted to see that a catastrophe would not take place again. While some of the Rabbinical views of guarding the Sabbath might go overboard here or there (*m.Shabbat* 7:2), we should at least understand *why* such regulations would be formulated.

Eating Pork

One of the most significant, yet allusive features, of Jewish culture to many outsiders, is in understanding why many religious Jews are adamant about not eating pork. While the Torah does say that the pig is unclean, both Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 also list other animals that are unclean. The only reason why the pig is considered unclean is “because it divides the hoof but *does not chew* the cud.” Also to be noted is “You shall not eat any of their flesh nor touch their carcasses” (Deuteronomy 14:8; cf. Leviticus 11:7). But other than these regulations, what makes the pig so detestable to religious Jews? It all goes back to the Maccabean period, and how the Seleucid Greeks sacrificed pigs in the sacred precincts of the Temple (1 Maccabees 1:47).

But sacrificing swine and other unfit animals on the altar in the Temple is only a part of the problem. The Epitomist of 2 Maccabees records two examples of

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people who were murdered by the authorities because they refused to eat pork. The first, a scribe named Eleazar, was an old man willing to give up his life rather than eat pork:

“Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being forced to open his mouth to eat swine's flesh. But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh, as men ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste, even for the natural love of life” (2 Maccabees 6:18-20).

Eleazar's colleagues actually urged him to just pretend to eat pork, so that he might save his life in the process, but he refused (2 Maccabees 6:21-23). He responded to them, “Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life...lest many of the young should suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year has gone over to an alien religion” (2 Maccabees 6:24). He further said, “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 Maccabees 6:26). And so for not eating pork, Eleazar went to the rack and was martyred (2 Maccabees 6:28-31).

The second, and by far most serious scene of not eating pork, is witnessed in 2 Maccabees 7. Seven brothers are taken before their mother, and with Antiochus Epiphanes present, each one of them is tested as to whether he will “partake of unlawful swine's flesh” (2 Maccabees 7:1). 2 Maccabees 7 summarizes how each one of the brothers defiantly refuses to give in, facing a painful death. They appeal to the God of Israel as their final Vindicator, and how they will each be resurrected into the new world He will one day inaugurate. The mother who has had to watch all of this too dies, and all the Epitomist can say afterward is, “Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures” (2 Maccabees 7:42).

The horror of thinking about Torah-faithful Jews being tortured, and dying, for not eating pork, is not something that goes away easily. (And recall here how we are dealing with the broad Biblical period, not Jews during the Middle Ages being forced to convert to Christianity by Roman Catholicism, and then forced to eat pork as a sign of loyalty.) Later in 2 Maccabees, following the death of Antiochus Epiphanes, and as his son Antiochus V becomes king, attempts are made (albeit temporarily) to patch up relations with the Jewish nation. A letter is sent from the new King Antiochus to the Jewish leaders, and permission is extended “for the Jews to enjoy their own food and laws, just as formerly” (2 Maccabees 11:31). For a very brief moment, the Seleucid Greek leaders recognized that forcing the Jews to give up the Torah was a foolish errand. They also recognized how important it was for the Jews to follow their kosher dietary laws, and that by forcing people to eat pork—it only made the Jews hate them even more.

New Theology from the Greeks, or Old Theology for Inspiration?

Today's New Testament theologians recognize that understanding the period of the Maccabees is extremely important for understanding Judaism in the First Century C.E. It is quite easy to see how the Maccabean crisis, where the Jewish people faced religious and cultural extermination, would leave a significant mark on succeeding generations, and with it a general suspicion of anyone outside of the

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Jewish community (discussed further). Yet we also cannot overlook the fact that some of today's interpreters argue that the time period of the Maccabees reflects a significant change in Jewish theology—in particular when it comes to beliefs and convictions that you and I probably hold quite dear to us. Consider the words of George Robinson's *Essential Judaism*,

“Belief in the resurrection of the dead, a key element in traditionally observant Judaism's vision of the Messianic age, dates from the period of the Pharisees, and may be an outgrowth of Greek or Persian influence...According to at least one Jewish historian...the idea of resurrection of the dead gained its first currency at the time of the Maccabees, around the second century B.C.E., a period of great suffering for the Jews. In the face of such trauma...the notion of another life after death promised a final, cosmic release.”⁹

It is correct that in the Apostolic Scriptures, the Pharisees are known for their staunch belief in the resurrection of the dead (i.e., Acts 23:6), but did this view originate entirely from the period of the Maccabees?

Liberal theologians commonly argue that the doctrine of resurrection was not fully developed until the time period of the Maccabees, and it is thus a rather late import to Judaism, not really being witnessed to in the Tanach (Old Testament). It is absolutely undeniable that for the martyrs of 2 Maccabees 7, the resurrection played an important reason in why they willingly gave up their lives. In the future, they would be resurrected and would enter into a new world that their tormenters would not be permitted to enter:

the second brother: “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 Maccabees 7:9).

the fourth brother: “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 Maccabees 7:14).

the mother: “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” (2 Maccabees 7:23).

It would seem rather difficult to argue that the concept of resurrection was imported from Hellenistic philosophy, because even though there were diverse Greek views about the afterlife (including no afterlife and just oblivion), classic Platonic philosophy argued that death involved the permanent separation of the soul from the body.¹⁰ No future recomposition of a disembodied human

⁹ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 192.

¹⁰ In the words of Socrates, Plato's predecessor from the Fifth Century B.C.E.,

“Death, as it seems to me, happens to be nothing other than the separation of two things, the soul and the body, from each other. When, therefore, they are separated from each other, each of them is in a condition not much worse than when the human being was alive, and the body has its own nature”

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consciousness, with a resurrected and restored body, was to take place according to these Hellenists. Many Greeks, and likewise Romans, looked forward to death, and rather than their bodies being buried with respect in anticipation of a future resurrection, they were often cremated and thrown away as though they were garbage.

Was the concept of resurrection a late import to Judaism, popularized during the Maccabean period? No. The Tanach itself does speak of the resurrection. Isaiah 26:19 declares, "Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. you who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew *is as* the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits." In the dry bones prophecy of Ezekiel 37:6, the Lord declares to a restored Israel "I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive." And the famed Daniel 12:2 says, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt."

If one holds to Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all including genuine prophecies of authentic prophets who bore these names, it should not be difficult to see how belief in the resurrection was *not* a late import into Judaism from the Maccabean period. **From the Tanach, the Maccabean martyrs would have known that their deaths were not in vain.** They would one day be resurrected into a new world, where God's peace and justice reigned supreme, something that their captors would not experience. Yet liberal theologians, in varying degrees, have all dated Isaiah, Ezekiel, and most especially Daniel, rather late." Furthermore, rather than speaking of a future resurrection of righteous individuals, the above prophecies are frequently allegorized, believed to only be speaking of the corporate restoration of Israel.

A much longer account of the seven brothers being martyred is seen in 4 Maccabees chs. 8-12. Interjected into the narrative is a great deal of philosophizing about their faithfulness. Nothing is stated that would contradict the emphasis in 2 Maccabees about the resurrection, but what is added to what they say concerns what happens immediately after death. The seven brothers are portrayed as eagerly waiting to die, taunting Antiochus Epiphanes with these words:

"For we, through this severe suffering and endurance, shall have the prize of virtue and shall be with God, for whom we suffer; but you, because of your bloodthirstiness toward us, will deservedly undergo from the divine justice eternal torment by fire" (4 Maccabees 9:8-9).

When the seventh brother prepares to die, he tells King Antiochus, "on you he will take vengeance both in this present life and when you are dead" (4 Maccabees 12:18). When observations are made of the seven brothers' death, it is simply asserted, "For if we so die, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will welcome us, and all the fathers will praise us" (4 Maccabees 13:17). These sentiments all point to a belief in some kind of conscious, disembodied state immediately after death. The

(*Gorgias* 524b; Plato: *Gorgias*, trans., James H. Nichols, Jr. [Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1998], 125).

" Consult the entries for Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee. Also consult Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, and Raymond B. Dillard and Temper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), for two conservative, evangelical resources.

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righteous will experience some kind of time in a Paradise (cf. Luke 23:43), and the unrighteous will experience some kind of punishment, culminating in an eternal torment. The seven brothers who were martyred knew that after death, they would be welcomed into something wonderful, something that King Antiochus would never be able to experience.

Similar to how liberal theologians will argue that belief in the resurrection was late and is not found in the Tanach, so do they conclude that a belief in an intermediate afterlife prior to the resurrection is also a late import from the Maccabean period. Quite contrary to this, though, the Tanach does allude to an existence for the deceased in *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל), the location of which is often contrasted to be as low in the cosmic spectrum, as Heaven being the realm of God, is high in the cosmic spectrum (Deuteronomy 32:22; Isaiah 7:11).¹² The Torah forbids the Ancient Israelites from consulting spiritists and mediums (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; cf. Isaiah 8:19-20), which very much presupposes that the consciousness of a human person can exist separate from the body. The spirit of Samuel came to taunt King Saul, prior to his defeat (1 Samuel 28:13-15). And, the King of Babylon is actually greeted by other fallen kings, as he enters into Sheol after his death (Isaiah 14:9-11, 18-20).

Without getting into the much larger debate over what takes place between death and resurrection, suffice it to say the Tanach gives ample clues that some kind of temporary, disembodied, post-mortem state, is to be expected for people. The belief in an intermediate afterlife, affirmed by the Jewish Pharisees of the First Century C.E.,¹³ by no means had to come as a late import during the Maccabean era—even if ultimately resurrection into a restored Kingdom of God on Earth is to be expected.

The Holy Scriptures teach that a redeemed person's salvation will not be fully consummated until the resurrection, when the human consciousness and human body will be entirely restored (Romans 8:22-23). This is an affirmation that the human being is different from the animal creation, being made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), and being partially made of another dimension. An intermediate, disembodied afterlife attended by a future resurrection runs completely contrary to Platonic Greek philosophy, because a Biblical worldview sees the physical Creation as ultimately good. Even if a Believer is to enter into the presence of the Lord at time of death (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23), such a disembodied condition is only a temporary time until the resurrection (Philippians 3:21).¹⁴

If one is tempted to think that the doctrine of an intermediate afterlife prior to resurrection, originated exclusively from Jewish interactions with the Greeks—he or she really needs to consider the source from which such sentiments originate. Do the teachings of Holy Scripture, something which we believe to be inspired by God's Spirit via the hands of human beings, not ultimately come from God? Or is Holy Scripture *entirely* the product of human beings interacting with other human beings—including copying off mythology—adopting it for the sake of the Supreme

¹² *Sheol* is not the same as the grave, as a burial place or tomb in Hebrew is a *qever* (קֶבֶר). The Greek LXX and NT equivalent of *Sheol* is *Hadēs* (ᾍδης), whereas in contrast the word for a burial place or tomb would be *mnēma* (μνημα).

¹³ Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.14.

¹⁴ For a further, and much more detailed discussion, consult the article "To Be Absent From the Body" by J.K. McKee.

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Being? I say this only to warn you that as important as it is to understand the period of the Maccabees, many liberal theologians and interpreters will consider this to be a time of significant change for ancient Judaism—and you need not be caught thinking that ultimately, Yeshua the Messiah resurrected from the dead, is some kind of “Greek” concept.

The Torah and Establishing God’s True Israel —and the Maccabean Priesthood

When reviewing the complicated events that transpired in the Maccabean crisis, we need to seriously consider putting ourselves in the place of the Maccabees. If we had seen it mandated by law that it was illegal for us to worship God, how would we respond? Many, if not most of us, would “head for the hills” and escape. But in the case of the Maccabees, they stood their ground and fought against it.

The rallying cry for battle by Mattathias was, “Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!” (1 Maccabees 1:27). The Torah became every bit as much a **national symbol** as it did a religious symbol for the Maccabees. Those who were loyal to the Torah, were loyal to God *and* they were loyal to Israel.

Several of the usages of “Israel” or “Israelites,” appearing in 1 Maccabees, have an undeniable nationalistic tenor to them. The Seleucids “drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had” (1 Maccabees 1:53) and “They kept using violence against Israel” (1 Maccabees 1:58). The resolve was that “many in Israel stood firm” (1 Maccabees 1:62), and of those who were loyal that “Many from Israel came to” the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 2:16), assembling “mighty warriors of Israel” (1 Maccabees 2:42), and how they all “gladly fought for Israel” (1 Maccabees 3:2). We see that “the Gentiles in Gilead gathered together against the Israelites who lived in their territory” (1 Maccabees 5:9), but then after being defeated “Judas gathered together all the Israelites in Gilead” (1 Maccabees 5:45), leading them to safety. Other usages of Israel, from a cursory reading of 1 Maccabees, are likely reflective of how the Jews in the Maccabean period were fighting as the covenant people of God, formed at Mount Sinai. There is a definite rhetorical effect of being “Israel” in various places, and of who is loyal to God—something that goes beyond ethnicity.

2 Maccabees too reflects on how the Torah became a symbol of national identity for the Jewish people during this period of crisis. The Epitomist writes how when defeated, Nicanor had to recognize, “that the Jews had a Defender, and that therefore the Jews were invulnerable, because they followed the laws ordained by him” (2 Maccabees 8:36).

As the Torah took on a very nationalistic role during this period, it is also difficult to avoid how the Maccabees themselves took on a very prominent political role. The Maccabean movement started out initially to oppose the persecution and intended Hellenization of the Jews, so that the Torah—and most especially worship of the One True God—would be preserved. Yet after the rededication of the Temple, the Maccabean movement shifted to wanting to impose a political order, an Israel independent from the neighboring powers. Some people, reviewing the historical record of 1 Maccabees, are very uncomfortable with seeing how the Maccabees took over direct oversight of the office of high priest. Furthermore, some of those same people believe that it is inappropriate for

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us to honor *Chanukah*, because they think that a non-Levitical priesthood is totally contrary to the intent of the Torah. They overlook some important things.

Prior to the desecration of the Temple ordered by Antiochus, the office of high priest was already something that had to be approved by the Seleucid monarch. The opening chapters of 2 Maccabees show how different people vied for the position of high priest—some being loyal to the Torah, and others being opportunists. Inevitably in this environment, men of non-Levitical descent would become high priest. And the larger issue of—Can we even have a high priest and Temple?—cannot be overlooked. This is where a simplistic interpretation of the events will not suffice for us.

Because of the corruption that had been allowed to fester, which included the high priest Menelaus *helping* Antiochus Epiphanes loot the Temple (2 Maccabees 5:15), it is very easy to see why the Maccabees thought it significant to impose a kind of military government, and see that the old Jewish leadership be replaced with a new Jewish leadership and priesthood. The Maccabees themselves (Jonathan, Simon, and John) becoming “priests” actually did have a basis in prior history, because their father Mattathias, is recorded as being “the son of John, son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib” (1 Maccabees 2:1; cf. 14:29). “Mattathias’ family might have been a prominent one, since it is so described in 1 Macc 2:17 and because it belonged to the order of Jehoiarib, which is the first in the priestly orders’ list in 1 Chr 24:7” (*ABD*).¹⁵ Assuming that Mattathias was indeed a legitimate descendant of a recognized priestly line, it would not be inappropriate for his two sons and grandson—in some capacity—to serve as either priests or caretaker priests.

Looking at the two sons and grandson of Mattathias, who serve as priests, what do they actually do? Alexander, one of the men vying for control of the Seleucid throne, writes a letter to Jonathan, brother of the late Judah Maccabee. He says, “We have heard about you, that you are a mighty warrior and worthy to be our friend. And so we have appointed you today to be the high priest of your nation; you are to be called the king’s friend’ (and he sent him a purple robe and a golden crown) ‘and you are to take our side and keep friendship with us” (1 Maccabees 10:19-20). While Jonathan being high priest certainly had political ramifications, as it is said that in attaining this office, “he recruited troops and equipped them with arms in abundance” (1 Maccabees 10:21b), it also had spiritual ramifications: “Jonathan put on the holy garments in the seventh month of the one hundred and sixtieth year, at the feast of tabernacles” (1 Maccabees 10:21a).

The focus of the author of 1 Maccabees, though, is more on the political, rather than spiritual function, of Jonathan as high priest. Later in his record, Jewish diplomats go to the Roman Senate, telling them, “Jonathan the high priest and the Jewish nation have sent us to renew the former friendship and alliance with them” (1 Maccabees 12:3). Likewise, in a letter Jonathan writes to the Spartans, he says, “Jonathan the high priest, the senate of the nation, the priests, and the rest of the Jewish people...” (1 Maccabees 12:6).

After Jonathan is killed, his brother Simon takes over in the role of high priest. When the people know that a successor is to be chosen, they declare “You are our

¹⁵ Uriel Rappaport, “Mattathias,” in *ABD*, 4:615.

This entry, from a largely liberal encyclopedia, does go on to say: “Yet we may suspect some effort on the part of our sources to promote the status of the Hasmoneans” (*Ibid.*).

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leader in place of Judas and Jonathan your brother” (1 Maccabees 13:8), indicating that the role of high priest has become more political than spiritual. Later in the record, King Demetrius writes to Simon, with the opening greeting, “King Demetrius to Simon, the high priest and friend of kings, and to the elders and nation of the Jews, greeting” (1 Maccabees 13:36). Simon’s role as a political leader can be seen later when “the yoke of the Gentiles was removed from Israel...the people began to write in their documents and contracts, ‘In the first year of Simon the great high priest and commander and leader⁶ of the Jews’” (1 Maccabees 13:41-42). The role of Simon as a political high priest is also seen in the narrative of what occurs when the Romans and Spartans hear of Jonathan’s death: “they heard that Simon his brother had become high priest in his place, and that he was ruling over the country and the cities in it” (1 Maccabees 14:17).

There is no significant record in 1 Maccabees of either Jonathan or Simon really performing priestly duties, as much as them exercising political power and diplomacy. We could wonder if these two men really did take on the daily religious tasks of high priest, or instead served more as overseers and caretakers of the office of “high priest”—not too dissimilar to how today the British monarch is considered to be head of the Church of England, and “defender of the faith,”⁷ even though the current Queen plays no role in the determination of religious policy. When King David took over Jerusalem, “Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites; and David’s sons were chief ministers” (2 Samuel 8:18) or “priests” (RSV).⁸ This indicates, at least in a titular capacity, that King David probably inherited the role originally possessed by the figure Melchizedek, king of Salem (cf. Genesis 14:18-20). So with this in mind, Jonathan and Simon serving as high priest may have had a more titular role. And such a titular role would have been very important—because of all the corruption that had preceded them, **and how what the Maccabees fought for need not have been lost.**

The last major figure to occupy the office of high priest is John, the son of Simon, making him the grandson of Mattathias. We do not see that much of him in 1 Maccabees, as he enters in at the close of the book. What we do see is fairly positive, as the author says, “The rest of the acts of John and his wars and the brave deeds which he did, and the building of the walls which he built, and his achievements, behold, they are written in the chronicles of his high priesthood, from the time that he became high priest after his father” (1 Maccabees 16:23-24). This John, while attested to have been supported by the people “because of the benefits they had received from his father” (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.229),⁹ was not altogether popular with the people, particularly in actions that he took when Jerusalem was later attacked and had to submit again to the Seleucid

⁶ Grk. *archiereōs megalou kai stratēgou kai hēgoumenou* (ἀρχιερέως μεγάλου καὶ στρατηγού καὶ ἡγουμένου); “eminent high priest, commander-in-chief and ethnarch” (New Jerusalem Bible).

⁷ Unlike the Church of England, which has sitting bishops in Parliament, the Church of Scotland has no bishops. However, when the British monarch is in Scotland, he or she is automatically considered to be a Presbyterian. As such, the monarch is permitted to send representatives to the Church of Scotland’s annual General Assembly.

⁸ Heb. *kohanim hayu* (כֹּהֲנִים הָיוּ).

⁹ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 350.

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Empire. Yet later in history, John Hyrcanus did achieve full independence for the Jewish nation, and saw its influence increase.²⁰

Prejudices to Overcome

The Jewish people have always had enemies who have wanted to destroy them. Simply read the Book of Esther, and see how there have been people who have wanted to wipe out the Jews—the remnant of Israel—off the face of the Earth. But the Maccabean crisis was a rather unique one, insomuch that a tyrannical king actually wanted to see the Jewish people wiped out via cultural and religious assimilation, a far more insidious form of destruction than just exterminating them by killing. He saw that the Jerusalem Temple was defiled, and that those who followed God's Torah—circumcising their sons, keeping the Sabbath, and even eating kosher—be put to death. While things later returned to some level of normalcy for your average Jew, with the Temple cleansed and with people permitted once again to keep God's Law, **memories of these events are not at all to be forgotten.** So serious is the period of the Maccabees for the Jewish people, that one cannot blame the later Jews of the First Century for not only being suspicious, *but even a bit paranoid*, when it came to interacting with other people. This was especially true of any outsider who expressed some kind of belief in the God of Israel, connecting themselves to the Jewish community.

How significant an impact did the Maccabees leave on First Century Judaism? Because the Books of the Maccabees are a part of the historical record, and not a part of the Protestant canon, too many of today's evangelical Christian Bible readers fail to even know about what the Jewish people had undergone prior to the arrival of Yeshua and the missionary endeavors of the Apostles. Not enough of today's Believers understand the nationalistic role that Torah had taken, precisely because of the injustices decreed by Antiochus Epiphanes, and how many Jews fought and died for God's Law. The crisis of the Maccabean period would very much be remembered by First Century Jews, and then compounded with more recent history as the Roman Empire had expanded, engulfing Judea in the process.

One of the most significant Rabbinical sentiments seen in the Mishnah, which would have guided a great deal of Jewish identity in the First Century C.E., is "All Israelites have a share in the world to come" (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1).²¹ With some exceptions, what this would equate to is that all ethnic Jews were believed to be granted an inheritance in the future age simply because they were born Jewish. If an outsider wanted to participate in the future resurrection age, then that person had to become a part of the covenant people. And for many of the Jewish leaders of the First Century, that process began with circumcision—but not so much circumcision as a medical procedure—as much as *ritual proselyte circumcision*.

In too many cases, this kind of circumcision took precedence to people entering into covenant with God first on the basis of *faith in Him*. The Biblical pattern seen in the Torah is that the Patriarch Abraham first believed in God, and was then circumcised at a later point in time (Romans 4:9-11; cf. Genesis 15:6). Even though God-fearers were allowed on the outside of the Synagogue, as they

²⁰ "John Hyrcanus," in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 337.

²¹ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 604.

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expressed some belief in the God of Israel and accepted a basic Torah morality, I. Howard Marshall notes that “such people were regarded as still pagans by the Jews in Palestine, [although] there appears to have been a more liberal attitude in the Dispersion.”²² Only proselytes who had undergone ritual circumcision would not be considered fully “pagan,” or at least not treated with a high degree of suspicion.

Was not the need to be circumcised based on Torah passages such as Genesis 17:9, 14, which insisted “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations...But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant”? To Jews of the First Century C.E. the need to be circumcised in order to stand in covenant with God was absolute. Yet this was an unbalanced reading of the Torah, because earlier in Genesis 15:6, because of Abraham’s trust in the Almighty, “He reckoned it to him as righteousness”—a covenant status noted *before* Abraham was circumcised. **Belief in God always precedes the sign of the covenant**, something that many Jews in the First Century C.E. had overlooked.

It is not at all difficult, though, to see why many First Century Jews would have had an unbalanced reading of the Torah. In lieu of the Maccabean crisis and the illegalization of circumcision by the Greek Seleucids on threat of death, the Jewish religious establishment deemed that circumcision for proselytes was *the only* viable way for an outsider attracted to the God of Israel to be considered a full member of the Jewish community. Josephus expresses the opinion that the reason God gave Abraham circumcision was “in order to keep his posterity unmixed with others” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.192).²³ To the Jewish person of the First Century, a non-Jew undergoing circumcision was going to do more than lose his foreskin—he was going to become one with an ethnic people in a very significant, physical, and visible way. James D.G. Dunn further describes,

“The Maccabean crisis simply reinforced the teaching of Genesis that circumcision was a ‘make or break’ issue for Jews; insistence on circumcision was integral to the emergence of ‘Judaism’...The position, then, was simple for most Jews: only the circumcised were Jews; only the circumcised were members of the covenant; only the circumcised belonged to the people chosen by God to be his own.”²⁴

Having once faced religious and cultural assimilation by the decrees of Antiochus Epiphanes, any outsider wishing to become a member of the Jewish community, would be subject to some extreme scrutiny. Ritual proselyte circumcision would only reckon one a full member of God’s covenant people, requiring a convert to take a significant step in recognizing the God of Israel as his (or even her)²⁵ single Deity to worship.²⁶

²² I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp 183-184.

²³ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 40.

²⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Black’s New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 96.

²⁵ In speaking against this ritual proselyte circumcision in Galatians 5:3, Paul directs his words not to “every man,” but *pantū anthrōpō* (παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ), “every human being.” While this may sound strange, as it would include females, it really does not if we consider “circumcision” to be a shorthand for ritual proselyte conversion. The issue in Galatians is not against a medical procedure, but instead

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Was ritual proselyte circumcision as *the main* process for one being considered a member of God's covenant—often over and against faith in God—a direct result of Jewish paranoia stemming from the Maccabean period? What we can detect is that the Maccabean period stirred an entire array of important social and political changes among the Jewish people, that would later affect the mission of the Apostles and the early controversies the *ekklēsia* would face.

Some theologians today conclude that the Jewish people felt threatened by external forces, beginning with the Seleucid Greek invasion of the 160s B.C.E. all the way to the Roman occupation of Judea. In the 40s C.E.—when the gospel started significantly going out to the nations—an entire series of events helped fuel Jewish xenophobia toward Greeks and Romans, including (but by no means limited to): Caligula insisting that a statue of himself be set up in the Jerusalem Temple (40 C.E.), a series of poor Roman governors and administrators (44-46 C.E.), and the demand that the vestments of the high priest be held for safekeeping by the Romans (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.1-9).²⁷ When we add to this the challenges caused by the Zealot movement, and increasingly disparate relations with Rome—at the very least we see that Jews would often want to remain constrained to themselves and limited in their contact with others.

The xenophobia that many First Century Jews had toward outsiders was also compounded with some of the common views that those same outsiders had toward Judaism. While written near the end of the First Century C.E., the Roman historian Tacitus makes some very anti-Semitic remarks, which could have easily been shared by many of the Greeks and Romans in the Apostles' era. The following is a fair summary of the social anti-Semitism present:

Whatever their origin, these observances are sanctioned by their antiquity. The other practices of the Jews are sinister and revolting, and have entrenched themselves by their very wickedness. Wretches of the most abandoned kind who had no use for the religion of their fathers took to contributing dues and free-will offerings to swell the Jewish exchequer; and other reasons for their increasing wealth may be found in their stubborn loyalty and ready benevolence towards brother Jews. But the rest of the world they confront with the hatred reserved for enemies...Proselytes to Jewry adopt the same practices, and the very first lesson they learn is to despise the gods, shed all feelings of patriotism, and consider parents, children and brothers as readily expendable (*The Histories* 5.5).²⁸

Simply considering the rise of ritual proselyte circumcision, required in order for an outsider to be reckoned among the redeemed, and common Greco-Roman

non-Jewish people undergoing conversion to Judaism to be reckoned as members of God's covenant people. (Women, of course, would not undergo any physical operation.)

²⁶ Also not to be overlooked is the erection of a barrier wall in the Second Temple complex (cf. Ephesians 2:14-15), separating the inner sanctuary from the so-called Court of the Gentiles. Those who passed unauthorized were threatened with death (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.417; *Jewish War* 5.194). This ran entirely contrary to the House of God being a place for all nations to stream toward (1 Kings 8:41-43; Isaiah 56:6-7).

For a further examination, consult the commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

²⁷ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 525.

²⁸ Cornelius Tacitus: *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp 273-274. See also Juvenal *Satires* 14.95-104.

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attitudes toward the Jews—how did this all affect the Apostles’ mission in the First Century?

When we take these things into consideration, we should more easily understand some of the negative attitudes that the early Jewish Believers displayed toward the non-Jewish Believers, which were very difficult for many to overcome. Many of them thought that short of proselyte conversion, that non-Jews should not be allowed into the assembly as members, even if they did acknowledge Yeshua. They would have been very hostile to the Apostle Paul—who taught that the entryway for inclusion among God’s people *was faith in Israel’s Messiah*, as opposed to more national and/or sectarian identity markers like ritual proselyte circumcision. In his rather emotional letter to the Galatians, addressing the early issue of how non-Jewish Believers were to be considered a part of God’s covenant community, he has to remind his audience that faith in God is what first reckoned Abraham as righteous:

“Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, ‘ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Galatians 3:7-8).

The issue of faith in God, and by extension the Messiah He has sent—coming first—is considered by Paul to be a gospel issue. His quotation of Genesis 12:3, “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed,” is that very early promise of God to bless all via Abraham. Immediately requiring ritual proselyte circumcision of new, non-Jewish Believers, would skew such a serious mandate. Paul is clear in later writing that circumcision does have value (Romans 3:1-2), but in no small part due to the Maccabean crisis, many people in the Jewish community *overvalued* circumcision and *undervalued* faith in God. This was an unacceptable understanding for people placing their trust in the Messiah who died for their sins, was resurrected, and then who ascended into Heaven.

The early Jewish Believers would need to quickly get over any prejudices they had toward the non-Jewish Believers. They needed to recognize that all were reckoned as a part of God’s covenant community not via any “works of law” or sectarian *halachah* (cf. 4QMMT) requiring ritual proselyte circumcision,²⁹ but instead *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), “through the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah” (Galatians 2:16, my translation). People were recognized as a part of God’s covenant community by the **faithful obedience of Yeshua to His Father unto death, to atone for humanity’s sin.**³⁰

For many Jews of the First Century C.E., the Torah, and most especially circumcision, became symbols of national pride and identity. Was circumcision not something that the Maccabees fought and died for? It is certainly understandable that many of the first Jewish Believers, upon hearing that significant numbers of non-Jews were recognizing Yeshua as *Israel’s Messiah*, would require them to become Jewish proselytes before moving any further. But Biblically given the

²⁹ Consult the article “What Are ‘Works of the Law?’” by J.K. McKee.

³⁰ Consult the article “The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah” by J.K. McKee.

For an analysis of the surrounding issues, and engagement with proposals made in contemporary scholarship, consult his commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

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example of Abraham, this was no different than putting the cart before the horse. Acknowledging Israel's Messiah as Savior takes precedence over anything else.

After the problems addressed in Galatians, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 would meet to rule on the claim that some Jewish Believers were making: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). According to these early Jewish Believers, to not be circumcised was tantamount to not being a member of God's people. The Jerusalem Council ruled against this, concluding that instead the early non-Jewish Believers did not have to undergo ritual proselyte circumcision, because as the Apostle Peter testified, "He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). James the Just would rule that the new, non-Jewish Believers could start their discipleship with four basic principles (Acts 15:19-21).³¹ The New Covenant promise of God writing His Law onto the hearts of all His people would come steadily at the right pace (Jeremiah 31:31-34) by His Spirit—and the non-Jewish Believers would start not with circumcision, but with faith in God and in His Messiah, who Himself taught that love for God and neighbor was the essence of the Torah (Matthew 19:16-19; 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28).³²

While the Maccabees rightfully fought and died for the right of the Jewish people to not only practice the Torah, including circumcision—but also to **survive**—subsequent Jewish generations would forget the Divine mandate that Israel had to be a light to the nations and a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 49:6). The Apostolic Scriptures give witness to how many of the early Jewish Believers in the Messiah had prejudices to overcome when scores of non-Jews came to faith in the same Messiah. The Pauline Epistles are spent addressing how these non-Jewish Believers are to be reckoned as equal members of the *ekklēsia* on the basis of their faith, and not whether they had undergone ritual proselyte circumcision (Romans 3:29-30). The most important issue that many early Jewish Believers had to overcome—and even some Messianics today—is seen in Paul's words:

"But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Yeshua the Messiah [or, the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah]³³ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:21-23).

Up until this point in history, the main event that would have defined God's people would have been the Exodus from Egypt. As important as the Exodus is for Paul (1 Corinthians 10:1-4), the same righteousness of God³⁴—"God's saving justice" (Romans 3:21, New Jerusalem Bible) that delivered Ancient Israel—has now been manifested in an event separate from the Torah. This event is the Messiah's faithfulness to His Father unto death for humanity's sin. But the thought that this is somehow contrary to God's Torah is the last suggestion in Paul's mind. He is clear to say that "the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it" (Romans 3:20, ESV),

³¹ Consult *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee (forthcoming).

³² Consult the article "Is Circumcision for Everyone?" by J.K. McKee, for an analysis that circumcision as a medical procedure (not ritual proselyte circumcision) could have played for some of the early non-Jewish Believers.

³³ Grk. *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

³⁴ Grk. *dikaioσunē Theou* (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ).

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preceded earlier with his attestation that the gospel was “promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2).

The ultimate challenge is that if the Torah is viewed too much from the perspective of being a nationalistic possession, one can overlook the fact that it points to something much greater, **the Messiah Yeshua**, who is “the culmination of the law” (Romans 10:4, TNIV). A main purpose of the Torah is that it condemns all people (Romans 3:10-18)—including Jews (Romans 2:17-29)—as sinners, requiring all people to fall on the Father’s grace via Yeshua for redemption. It was difficult for many of the early Jewish Believers to fully see this, as nationalistic possession of the Torah was sometimes believed to be enough for final redemption, a thought stemming from the long-term affects of the Maccabean crisis.

Appreciating the Maccabees, but Recognizing the Effect on Later Generations

As men and women of faith, we all need to be very appreciative for what the Maccabees struggled and died for. Without the sacrifice of the Maccabees, the Jewish people could have been wiped out, and with them the hope that there would be a chosen people from whom the Messiah would come forth and save the world. **I fully believe that every year the Messianic community should remember the Festival of Dedication, *Chanukah*, and honor what they endured.** But we need not remember *Chanukah* in ignorance of how this period affected later generations of Jews. The message and themes contained in the Books of Maccabees highly influenced the Jews of the First Century, who first heard the good news of Messiah Yeshua. It also gives us a witness to how negative, inappropriate Jewish attitudes toward outsiders in the First Century arose.

These negative Jewish attitudes toward outsiders complicated the spread of the gospel among the nations, in the early decades of the Messianic movement, as many Jewish Believers (but certainly not all) still had ungodly prejudices and paranoia to overcome. For many Jews, even Believers in Yeshua, God’s Torah had become a nationalistic document, rather than a testament to His plan of salvation history and how “the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Galatians 3:8, NRSV; cf. Genesis 12:2-3). Circumcision was a matter of who was “His,” rather than faith in the Messiah designating who was “His.”

How we learn to appreciate what the Maccabees fought and died for, being sensitive to the legitimate Jewish needs of the First Century, but also how many Jewish Believers found it difficult to embrace non-Jewish Believers as their fellow brothers and sisters—**will doubtless be a feature of our Biblical Studies in the future.** Knowing about the Maccabees, and those who came after them, will assist us greatly in understanding some of the early controversies faced in the Book of Acts, as well as in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Romans,³⁵ which affirm how the non-Jewish Believers did not at all have to become proselytes. Knowing about the long-term impact of the Maccabees on the First Century Jewish psyche, can aid us to adequately piece together the complex circumstances of the early Believers.

³⁵ Consult the articles “The Message of Galatians” and “The Message of Romans” by J.K. McKee.

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Most intriguing of all will be examining what the First Century Believers experienced—including all of the prejudices they had to overcome—and how much of it is being paralleled now in today's Messianic movement. There may very well be more going on than we realize, *and we may need to learn the lessons of history a bit closer*. We need to learn to be a people who will fight for the sanctity of God's Torah (1 Maccabees 2:27, 42), but also be a people who should desire their righteousness to be a Divine righteousness based in trusting Yeshua (Philippians 3:9). In so doing, **may we learn to overcome any prejudices that may keep Yeshua from being recognized as the Savior of all.**