

Summary for Session 17: Maccabean Revolt

Prep work: 1 Maccabees

DVD: Jeff begins this session by noting that this period is the last we will be studying of the Old Testament. It is sometimes called the 400 Silent Years, because there is no prophecy from Malachi at the beginning of the period of Return until Jesus' time. The Wisdom books of "The Wisdom of Solomon" (or just "Wisdom") and "Sirach" were written during this period. Jeff also explains that 2 Maccabees is a focused look at the beginning of 1 Maccabees, not a continuation of the story.

During this period, a new world power, Greece, has arrived in the form of Alexander the Great. Alexander's empire is huge, stretching all the way to the fringes of India, and he embarks on a vast project to convert these many peoples to Greek culture and thinking—a process called "Hellenization." After visiting Jerusalem, however, he is impressed by the Jewish culture and religion, and tolerantly grants them exemption from forced conversion. He is not long in power before he becomes ill and is resigned to his deathbed. Before he dies, however, he divides his empire up among his most trusted generals. Roughly speaking, there remains the kingdom of Macedonia (northern Greece), Syria (the rest of the northern empire stretching east), and Alexandria (Egypt). It is these last two kingdoms who will toggle Israel (the land of the Jews, not the old Northern Kingdom) between them. First, Israel is under the Ptolemies, rulers of Alexandria. They are tolerant of the Jewish religion and culture, which is important to note, as Jeff tells us that it is during this time that the first translation of the Torah into Greek is undertaken and accomplished. It is a mark of how many Jews are living outside of Israel by this time, and the pervasiveness of a common language in the near East (Greek). This Greek translation, the Septuagint (meaning 70), is so called because, supposedly, 70 Jewish scholars were selected and then separated and told to translate the whole of the Law and the Prophets into Greek. The translations were then compared (and allegedly matched word-for-word). The Septuagint is important for us Catholics because it is from this that we draw our Canon, or list of official books, of the Old Testament. The Septuagint included seven books that were not in the original Hebrew canon. When Martin Luther, breaking from the Church in 1517, went back to the original Hebrew to organize his canon, he excluded those extra seven found in the Septuagint. This is the reason Catholic Bibles have seven more books than Protestant ones, and extensions in a few other Old Testament books. Since the early Church, these seven (called Deuterocanonical books or Apocrypha, depending on whether you're Catholic or Protestant, respectively) have been accepted as inspired writing and the Church has maintained that position.

Picking up the story, power over Israel changed hands from the Ptolemies of Egypt to the Seleucids of Syria. Early Seleucid rulers also proved tolerant of Judaism, but then Antiochus came to power and decided to enforce Hellenization in an utterly harsh way: he would take away the Jewish Story by destroying once more their worship, word, and wall. He entered the Temple and desecrated it, setting up pagan idols upon the sacred altars. He had the written Torah burned wherever it was found, and those hiding it in safety were sought out and killed. He lured the youth by opening a gymnasium in

Jerusalem, acculturating them into Greek ideas and encouraging them to drop their Jewish ways. Many would even undergo surgery to reverse their circumcisions, the mark of their faith. Jeff pauses here to note that we face a similar problem as the Jews of the Maccabean time period did: our modern culture also tries to pull us from our Story and faith. Do we, like some of them, hide the signs of our faith or go so far as to forcibly remove ourselves from our Story in order to fit in? Jeff submits that we need a new Maccabean revolt, a spiritual one, to bring us back to our roots.

Back into the story, there was a contingent of faithful Jews who refused to be Hellenized. Perhaps they had finally learned the lesson of their ancestors and chose to remain faithful to God. For them, there was no separation between politics and religion and they would not bend the rules of their faith to appease the current rulers (Jeff suggests that perhaps we, today, need to take note of this?). Their stronghold was the town of Modein, and it is there that Mattathias, a priest, went with his sons. When the king's soldiers came there to force the people to sacrifice to pagan gods, they leaned on Mattathias to set the example, as he was “a leader, an honorable and great man in this city” (1 Maccabees 2:17). Instead, Mattathias proclaims his adherence to God and is moved with zeal to kill the first Israelite who steps forward to apostacize, as well as the soldier overseeing the sacrifices. On his deathbed, Mattathias calls his sons to him and reminds them of their Story, recounting the deeds of their great ancestors in a mini “Torah-timeline.” Jeff notes that we, too, must remember and teach our children our Story, the Story of Salvation, if we wish to remain faithful in the face of pagan dominance.

It is Mattathias' sons, specifically Judas Maccabeus, Jonathan, and Simon, who will lead the revolt to rally the people and take back the Temple. Judas will be leader, and in three years, they will reclaim the Temple, cleaning out the desecration and rebuilding the altars anew so as to be worthy of God. The sacrifices to finish the re-dedication would last eight days, during which time the lamps must be constantly lit. Even though they did not have enough oil to keep the lamps alight the whole time, they pressed forward with the re-dedication and lo, and behold, the oil lasted all eight days. This feast has been passed down through the generations as Hanukkah. Later, Simon would become governor of the people, and his line would continue as the Hasmoneans, though they would become corrupted by Roman influence eventually.

Jeff then reviews two stories from 2 Maccabees that epitomize the other response by the faithful under pressure to apostatize: accept martyrdom (Judas Maccabeus epitomized the fight response). These martyrs did not distinguish between laws of God; no matter how “minor” a tenet of Torah might be, it was all God's Word and should be followed (a lesson for “cafeteria Catholics?” interjects Jeff). The first story recounts how an elderly pious scribe, Eleazar, is brought forward to eat pork in a show of renouncing his religion. He refuses, and even when the guards offer to let him eat kosher meat and merely pretend it's pork, he remains adamant, citing the principle of the matter. Before he is executed, he makes a brilliantly courageous speech and is held up as a model of virtue. Jeff pauses to ponder whether we have such courageous people of faith today, and mentions the North American martyrs and others as examples.

The other story is a brutal account of a mother and her seven sons also choosing to die

rather than eat pork. One son is killed at a time in front of the others, until the mother, after watching all her sons die, is killed, too. They encourage each other in their martyrdom and speak of the hope they have in a better life after death (the first mention of belief in heaven in the Old Testament). Their speeches also reflect a belief that their suffering contributes to the restoration of Israel and serves as atonement for Israel's past. Allegorically, this atonement will be perfected and completed in Jesus' death and resurrection. There are also intimations in this story of what Paul will write later: that we, too, can join our sufferings to Christ for the salvation of others (2 Timothy 2:10). The mother of this story should remind us of Mary, who also suffered the agony of watching her son being martyred and who joined her spiritual martyrdom to Jesus' sacrifice. Finally, Jeff notes that St. John Paul II spoke to the youth of our time in calling us to a new martyrdom of chastity, purity, and peace (Address of the Holy Father John Paul II at the Prayer Vigil of the 15th World Youth Day).

Jeff concludes this session by a brief review of rise of Rome as the next empire. Pompey will capture Jerusalem in 63 BC and the 1st Triumvirate of the Roman Republic will be formed of Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Crassus. Julius Caesar will be assassinated by Cassius and Brutus, Roman senators. The 2nd Triumvirate will be formed of Mark Antony (a general), Octavian (Julius Caesars' named heir), and Marcus Lepidus. The battles of Philippi and Actium saw Octavian's rivals die, and Octavian is named Augustus, caesar of Rome, by the Senate in 27 BC. Caesar worship begins, as Augustus proclaims himself "the son of god" and ushers in the great *Pax Romana* (Peace-time of Rome). His birthday is declared the "*euangelion*" (the good news) for the Roman Empire. A document proclaiming his birthday highlights Augustus' role as "prince of peace" "unsurpassed" and "savior". If all of these titles sound strikingly familiar (but only as applied to Jesus Christ!), then you now understand the political climate Jesus was born into, and how his proclamations and the announcements by Christians that *Jesus* is "Savior" and "Prince of Peace" were a total upset of the dominant culture and ruling order. We are ready for the next session: the Messianic Fulfillment.