

First Maccabees

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

THE CONTEXT

First Maccabees tells the story of the rise of a relatively obscure priestly family to the throne in Jerusalem. It first recounts the deeds of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) that led to the Maccabean revolt. The Seleucids, descended from one of Alexander the Great's successors, ruled the Hellenistic kingdom of Syria, which included Jerusalem.

SUMMARY

In 167 BCE, Antiochus outlawed the practice of Judaism in Judea and defiled the temple by erecting a statue of Olympian Zeus in it and sacrificing a pig to it. Then he sent troops to the surrounding villages and forced the people to offer incense to other gods, thinking this would quell any revolt. When the soldiers got to Modein, they tried to convince the old priest Mattathias to sacrifice to other gods. He refused; and when another person of the town was about to comply, Mattathias killed that man and the soldier before disappearing into the crowd. The rest of the book tells of how Mattathias and his sons, including Judas "called Maccabeus," defeated their Seleucid (Syrian) overlords and established an independent nation of Israel. It ends with Mattathias' grandson, John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE), on the throne.

DIGGING DEEPER

While this book chronicles the events of about a 60-year span, it is a thoroughly theological book. It cares more about the meaning of the events than about the accuracy of their description. As it tells the story of the success of this revolution, there are echoes of the descriptions of the original conquest of the land in the biblical book Joshua. This book also shares the perspective of the

Deuteronomistic historians that when Israel is faithful, God will save them from their enemies, but when the people are unfaithful, God will give them over to defeat.

This book is also a vigorous defense of the reign of the Hasmonean family (also known as the Maccabeans, after Judas Maccabeus). One of the reasons for the unrest in Judea that led to the crackdown by Antiochus IV was that Antiochus appointed people as high priest in Jerusalem who were not from the high priestly family. According to the story in Numbers 3:1-4 and 1 Kings 2:35, all high priests were to come from just one family of the descendants of Aaron (Moses' brother and first high priest). The Hasmonean family was not in that group, but when Mattathias's son Jonathan took over as the civil ruler (152 BCE), he also assumed the post of high priest. There was significant opposition to this move among Jews. It is probably the reason that a group of priests withdrew and established a monastic community at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. It is that group that eventually wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.

This book takes a different viewpoint. By attributing the success of the Maccabeans to the will of God, 1 Maccabees tries to assure its readers that the taking of the office of high priest by Jonathan was legitimate. The military and political success of the Maccabeans is given as evidence that God allows this family to hold the high priesthood.

We can date this book fairly precisely. Since it knows of the reign of John Hyrcanus, it must be written near the end of it or just after it. It was written before 63 BCE because it has a favorable view of the Romans. That is not possible after 63 because in that year, the Roman general Pompey defiled the temple and brought an end to independent rule in Judea. The most likely date for the book is between 104 and 90 BCE, since one of its main purposes is to legitimate the Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty.

Similar to the Deuteronomistic history, 1 Maccabees approves of the killing of whole towns when they oppose the Maccabeans. It seems to agree with those earlier books that the only way for God's people to be faithful is remove the temptation to worship other gods. While such massacres are clearly unacceptable to us today, we can consider that the chief point they want to make is that faithfulness to God is more important than even life.