

# Second Maccabees

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

## THE CONTEXT

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A central purpose of 2 Maccabees is to encourage Jews outside Palestine to celebrate the feast of Hanukkah. The book opens with two letters, one to all Jews in Egypt and one to Aristobulus, a member of the high priestly family, as well as to all the Jews in Egypt. It provides a selective account of the Maccabean revolt that tells only of the exploits of Judas, the oldest son of Mattathias; it does not even mention that the revolt was begun by Mattathias. The book does include stories of faithful martyrs, particularly that of the seven brothers and their mother who were all tortured and killed in a single day by Antiochus IV. (The whole book of 4 Maccabees is dedicated to this story.) In the preface, the author says this book is a condensation of a five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene that recounts the history of the revolt (2:19-32). He says further that he intends to write an account that is entertaining and that encourages faithfulness.

The letters that open this work have a date of 124 BCE, so it was probably written in that year or shortly afterward. It was written before 63 BCE because it has a fairly positive view of the Romans. That would not be the case after Pompey entered the Jerusalem temple in 63 BCE. Most interpreters think it was written before the year 100 BCE because of the absence of support for the Maccabeans as rulers.

## DIGGING DEEPER

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The narrative sees Judas (whom it calls Maccabeus) as the faithful leader that God is with. Judas prays and has Scripture read before battles. He tells the stories of God's earlier acts to rescue the ancestors of Israel (for example in 8:19-23). He is even careful to keep the Sabbath, even when it means that he must break off pursuit of the fleeing enemy. He is the example of a pious leader of God's people.

Not only does this book fail to mention that Mattathias began the revolt, it also omits any reference to the brothers and nephew of Judas who were leaders of the movement after Judas's death. This seems to indicate that this author approved of the religious goal of regaining the temple but was not pleased at the seizure of political power that came after Judas's time. This suggests that the book comes from the movement known in the New Testament as the Pharisees. They did not support the taking of the high priesthood or civil power by the Maccabeans. In addition, like the Pharisees, the author of 2 Maccabees believes in an afterlife with rewards and punishments. So the work celebrates the religious goals of Judas and the Maccabean Revolt, but probably not the political aims of his successors.

The narrative has God participate directly in the events that lead up to and happen during the Revolt. At the first attempt to plunder the temple, God sends angelic beings to thwart the effort. But after the people show themselves to be unfaithful, God withdraws and allows Antiochus to defile the temple. Then it is with God's help that Judas successfully defeats Antiochus' generals and retakes the temple. It is also God who strikes Antiochus with the affliction that leads to his speedy death.

As is the case for 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees interprets the events of the Revolt through the method of the Deuteronomistic historians. This author believes that when the people are faithful, God protects them; but when they are unfaithful, God gives them over to their enemies. Again, these victories sometimes include mass killings. The author thinks such actions are acceptable, even good, made necessary both by the justice of God that punishes evil and by the need for human faithfulness that can only be achieved if the faithless are removed. We may reject these inhumane tactics, even as we recognize that the point of the author is that faithfulness to God is more important than anything else.

A kind of martyr theology appears in this work. Faithful martyrs die for the sins of the people. Their suffering is seen as discipline that is intended to turn the people back to God (7:37-38). The author sees this as merciful because God immediately disciplines Israel so they turn back to God, but God allows the sins of other nations to accumulate so that they must be destroyed (6:11-17). God responds to the faithfulness of the martyrs by being with Judas as he begins the Revolt. These martyrs also are also

given a blessed afterlife (7:14, 29). This is one of the earliest evidences of belief in an afterlife among Jews.

As much as 2 Maccabees focuses on ridding the nation of the foreign troops who force the Jews to sin, it is also open to interaction with Gentiles. If Gentiles do not provoke unfaithfulness, its author thinks Jews and Gentiles can live together harmoniously. The writer says that Jews want to live in harmony with others. This is an important claim because this book is written to a community in the Diaspora, to Jews who live outside Palestine and are a minority population in their cities. 2 Maccabees encourages them to participate in the majority culture, but not to participate so fully that it leads them to violate God's will.