

ספר המקבים

The holiday of הנוכה presents us with the opportunity to look at one of the ספרים, the Apochrypha, as a source for information on Jewish life during the Second Commonwealth, בית שני. The ספר המקבים is one of those ספרים החיצונים and was omitted from חז"ל by תנ"ך. It is not this author's intention to either encourage or to discourage the use of the ספרים החיצונים. This discussion is included solely to allow anyone who is interested to learn of the availability of these sources.

The ספר המקבים is divided into four volumes. English translations of each volume and other books of the Apochrypha can be found at: www.sacred-texts.com. An annotated Hebrew version edited by Ben Zion Kahana was published in 2006 by הוצאת בית הלל.

I am including excerpts from two books that refer to the ספר המקבים. In the first book, *The Rise and Fall of the Judaeen State: A Political, Social and Religious History of the Second Commonwealth - Vol. 3*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978, the author, Solomon Zeitlin gives examples of how some of earliest sources for some Jewish practices and beliefs appear in the ספר המקבים. The excerpt from the second book, *The Story of the Apocrypha*, Edgar J. Goodspeed, The University of Chicago Press, 1939, is a discussion as to who authored the First and Second of the ספר המקבים. The author raises the question because the two books cover much of the same period of history but in his opinion, each book presents the story from two distinct viewpoints.

An Excerpt from The Rise and Fall of the Judaeen State: A Political, Social and Religious History of the Second Commonwealth - Vol. 3, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978, Solomon Zeitlin, page 269

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Death itself was a profound mystery to the ancients. The author of the (Kohelet) declares, *For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth, so dieth the other. Yea, they have all one breath, so that man hath no preeminence above a beast.* This is the old Epicurean thesis. But among the Judaeans it was understood that G-d's creation of man had a purpose and that man's short life span was not an end in itself. The Judaeans contended that while man's body is indeed mortal, his spirit will never die. This view was forcefully advanced by the Pharisees, together with the idea of the world to come. But while the immortality of the soul was emphasized, Rabbinic literature before the destruction of the Temple contains no reference to the resurrection of the body.

The belief in physical resurrection was strongly held by some Greeks and also by those Judaeans who lived in the Hellenistic Diaspora. The author of the Apocalyptic book of

Enoch upholds the idea of physical resurrection:

And in those days shall the earth also give back that which has been entrusted to it, and *sheol* shall also give back that which it has received, and Hades shall give back that which it owes.

He links the resurrection of the dead with the coming of the Messiah, whom he calls "the Elect One" :

For in those days the Elect One shall arise, and he shall choose the righteous and the holy from among them, for the day has drawn nigh that they should be saved. And the Elect One in those days shall sit upon My throne.

The Second Book of Maccabees incorporates the idea of physical resurrection in the story of the Seven Martyrs. (II Macc. 7.)¹

The epitomist in this work maintains that if a crippled person has lived a righteous life, he will be resurrected free of his physical handicap.² In speaking about Judah Makkabee offering sacrifices in atonement for the men who were slain in battle, the epitomist says, "For if he had had no hope that those who had fallen would rise again it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead."³ It is noteworthy that Paul, arguing for the truth of resurrection in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, uses the identical argument: "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then JC has not risen, and if JC has not risen, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain also." This is indeed a striking parallel.

PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

The epitomist in the Second Book of Maccabees also sanctions the practice of praying for the dead⁴. This custom was not originally observed among the Judaeans. The heathens in other lands offered both prayers and sacrifices not for, but to, their dead, particularly their departed ancestors. This practice had an impact on the customs of Judaeans who lived among these people in the Diaspora, but instead of praying *to* the dead, the Judaeans began to pray *for* them. Eventually the custom of offering prayers for the dead, though originally foreign to Judaea and Judaism, became widespread among Jews, and Rabbinic literature

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1. מקבים ב', ז', ט': ובנשימתו האחרונה אמר: אתה הרשע, נוטל אותנו מחיי העולם הזה, ומלך העולם יעיר אותנו המתים בעד תורתו לשוב אל חיי נצח.
 2. מקבים ב', ז', יד': ויהי בעת מותו ויאמר נבחר לסבול המות מידי בני אדם ולצפות לתקות שנתנו מאת הא-להים כי על ידו נשוב לתחיה ולך לא תהי תקומה לחיים.
 3. מקבים ב', יב', מד': כי לולא היה מקוה לתחית הנופלים הלא דבר מיתר היה וסכלות להתפלל על המתים.
 4. מקבים ב', יב', מה': ומהשיגו בשכלו כי המתים ביראת שמים מוכן להם הגמול הטוב ביותר והיא מחשבת קדשה וחסידות על כן הביא חטאת בעד המתים לכפר על החטא.

makes reference to it. It is stated in *Sifre* (the halakhic Midrash to the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy) that the dead are in need of atonement, meaning that the living should pray for the dead and atone for the sins committed by the latter while they dwelt on earth. A late Midrash tells of the custom of remembering the dead and donating alms in their behalf on the Day of Atonement. The present custom of reciting *hashk'abah* (Sephardic) and *yizkor* (Ashkenazic), on the last days of the major Festivals and on Yom Kippur, represent the development of the idea of praying for the dead, as mentioned in the Second Book of Maccabees; the custom of reciting prayers *for* (note again, not *to*) the dead at the grave and almsgiving in their memory undoubtedly derives from the same source. The pagan idea of praying *to* the dead has also left a trace in Judaism: at times of great distress many people will go to the cemetery and beseech their departed kinfolk -- particularly if these had been pious individuals -- to intercede with G-d in their behalf.

An Excerpt from The Story of the Apocrypha, The University of Chicago Press, 1939, Edgar J. Goodspeed, page 76

CHAPTER XI THE FIRST BOOK OF MACCABEES

Less than a hundred years before the birth of Jesus a Sadducean admirer of the Maccabees wrote in Jerusalem, in Hebrew, the story of the three great brothers -- Judas, Jonathan, and Simon -- who had freed Judea from her Syrian oppressors and restored her worship. He was not a Pharisee, or Puritan, but belonged to the other branch of the Maccabean supporters, the Hasmoneans, the patriotic party who fought for more than religious liberty; they aspired to political liberation. And this the Maccabean brothers had fiobly won, at the cost of their own lives, for Judas and Eleazar had died in battle, and Jonathan and Simon were treacherously murdered.

He wrote in the days of the Sadducean ascendancy under Alexander Jannaeus, the grandson of Simon, 103-76 B.C.E., after full political independence had at last been secured, when a Sadducee would naturally be moved to record the deeds of the three great brothers to whom his world owed so much.

While the book opens with a general paragraph on Alexander's conquests, its narrative really begins with the accession of Antiochus Epiphanes as king of Syria in 175 B.C.E. and the emergence of a hellenizing party in Jerusalem, which welcomed and adopted heathen practices. Antiochus embarked upon a policy of compelling the Jews to accept Greek civilization, and a series of clashes with faithful Jews resulted, culminating after the desecration of the Temple in the outbreak of revolt under Mattathias and his sons at the town of Modin, when they killed the king's officer and fled to the mountains.

Judas is the hero of the period that follows (3:1-9:22); with small bodies of men he defeats

one Syrian commander after another; and carries on such a spirited campaign against the Syrian forces sent against him that just three years after its desecration the Temple is recovered (1:59; 4:52), the altar rededicated, and the Jewish worship there resumed. Judas punishes outlying foes of the Jews but has to contend with hellenizing forces among the Jews as well as with his Syrian foes. He sends ambassadors to Rome, to make friends with the Romans. This and his evident political aims led the Puritans -- the Chasidim, the Pharisees of later days who wanted only religious liberty -- to desert his cause. He met the Syrian commander, Bacchides, with an inferior force and was defeated and killed, in 160 B.C.E.

His brother Jonathan succeeded him as leader of the Jewish cause, 160-142 B.C.E. (I Macc. 9:2312:53). His generalship and diplomacy extended the borders of his country. A new king of Syria appointed him high priest. But he was finally trapped in Ptolemais by his Syrian enemies and put to death.

He was followed by his brother Simon, the third of the three great Maccabean brothers (142-135 B.C.E.), who carried Jewish resistance to Syria on until practical political independence was achieved. He dislodged the Syrian garrison from the citadel of Jerusalem, cultivated foreign alliances, and practically made the Sadducees' dream of political independence come true. But he, like Jonathan, lost his life through treachery, being murdered at a banquet given in his honor near Jericho. His son John Hyrcanus succeeded him in the high priesthood, which now united the civil, military, and religious leadership of the Jewish people.

Such a heroic story might well attract a Sadducee living in times of Sadducean leadership in the days of Alexander Jannaeus, Simon's grandson, and he tells it with enthusiasm indeed, but without much exaggeration. Heaven he felt was on the side of the three brothers, or they were on heaven's side, but there was nothing miraculous about it all. There are no angelic appearances in the book. The Law is sacred, but it was unwise to carry the observance of the Sabbath to the extreme of not resisting armed force on that day. Judas and his men were wiser when they said, "If anyone attacks us on the Sabbath day, let us fight against him and not all die, as our brothers died in the hiding places [2:41]."

The date of the writing of I Maccabees is pretty definitely fixed by its closing statement, that the rest of the acts of John and his wars and the exploits that he performed, and the building of the walls that he effected, and his deeds, are written in the chronicles of his high priesthood. This sounds as though John's reign was over and the writer was writing early in the reign of his son, Alexander Jannaeus, who became king in 103 B.C.E. The book was probably written in the early years of the first century before Jesus, therefore, and very soon made its way to Alexandria and was translated into Greek, undergoing some expansion in the process.

It is a curious fact that the writer of I Maccabees never mentions the name of G-d, but this is perhaps only a mark of his extreme reverence for the divine name. Certainly, he is by no

means irreligious; the reader feels that he believes in G-d and in his participation in the deliverance of his people. In fact Judas says to his men at one crisis in the struggle, "He himself will crush them before us, and you must not be afraid of them [3:22]." On another occasion, when hard pressed,

they called aloud to heaven, "What are we to do to these men [the Nazarites], and where can we take them, when your sanctuary is trodden down and profaned, and your priests are grieved and humiliated? Here the heathen are gathered together against us to destroy us; you know their designs against us. How can we make a stand before them unless you help us [13:50-53]?"

It is evident that the only thing lacking in this prayer is the name of G-d. Immediately after, Judas says, as he prepares for battle, "But he will do just as shall be the will of heaven [13:60]." He seems sometimes to be using the name Heaven in the sense of G-d. So in 4:10, Judas says, "So now let us cry to heaven, if perhaps he will accept us, and remember his agreement with our forefathers, and crush this camp before us today. Then all the heathen will know that there is one who ransoms and preserves Israel." Later on, when he faces a fresh Syrian army, he prays, "Blessed are you, Savior of Israel, who stopped the rush of the champion by the hand of your slave David. . . . In like manner shut up this camp in the hand of your people Israel [4:30, 31; cf. 7:41]." Even the priests (7:37) pray to G-d without mentioning his name.

Jonathan too calls on his men to "cry out to heaven that you may be delivered from the hands of our enemies [9:46]." It was evidently a part of the writer's religion to revere the name of G-d too much to utter it.

His religious position is also reflected in his avoidance of the miraculous or marvelous, his sincere concern for the Law, rather than for any Pharisaic refinements of it, and his interest in the Temple and the priesthood. The scope of his narrative also reveals the range of his interest, for he does not stop when religious freedom has been achieved under Judas (9:22), but pursues the story until, under Simon, Judea is politically liberated as well.

Of the dozen or more state papers -- letters, decrees, and proclamations -- preserved in the book, some letters to Rome and to Sparta, in so far as they are genuine at all, belong to later dates than are here given them, while the decrees of the Syrian kings may have been inserted in the book by the hand of the Greek translator from the history of Jason of Cyrene mentioned in II Macc. 2:23, for Jason's five-volume history was written in Greek. The purpose of their inclusion by any hand was of course to enhance the importance of the Maccabean enterprise in the eyes of the reader.

While Jerome in his *Prologus Galeatus* declares that he has seen a Hebrew copy of I Maccabees, it was only the Greek translation of it that survived or had any literary influence. It was probably in its Greek form that it was used by Josephus (*Antiquities*, xii and xiii), and it was in that translation that it from the first formed part of the Greek Bible

of the early church. Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus in Rome, Origen, and Eusebius all know it as part of the Bible. I Maccabees is included in most of the leading manuscripts of the Greek Bible -- the Alexandrian, the Sinaitic, and the Venetus -- but not in the Vatican codex. With II Maccabees it is included in the Clermont list of books of scripture, representing the practice of Egypt about C.E. 300. Both books passed into the Latin Bible, and so into the use of the medieval church, and into all the early German and English Bibles, Catholic and Protestant.

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CHAPTER XII THE SECOND BOOK OF MACCABEES

II Maccabees is not a sequel to I Maccabees, but a parallel account of the Maccabean struggle. A Pharisee of Alexandria, possessed of a five-volume work on the subject by one Jason of Cyrene, and dissatisfied with the cold Sadducean character of I Maccabees, undertook to summarize Jason's book and tell from the Pharisaic point of view what caused the Maccabean uprising and how G-d enabled his people under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus to triumph over his enemies. We have seen how the Greek translator of Esther felt it necessary to remedy that book's failure to mention the name of G-d, by inserting long religious passages in it, and it is not strange that in a time of great tension between Pharisees and Sadducees, so Sadducean an account as I Maccabees would lead a Pharisee to retell the story in the Pharisaic vocabulary.

And Pharisaic the vocabulary certainly is. Miracle, angels, martyrdom, resurrection, feasts, Law, Sabbath are points of interest and emphasis for the Pharisaic writer. How far these also marked the history by Jason which he is epitomizing we cannot be sure, but our writer, while he summarizes some of Jason's narrative most abruptly, dwells fondly upon these.

The scope of his story is also significant; he stops with Judas' victory over Nicanor and the Feast of Nicanor, instituted in memory of it. Judas himself was killed a few months later, but that he does not mention. Judas is the only figure among the Maccabeans that interests him; of the work of Jonathan and Simon, his successors, he has nothing to say. For it was under them and Simon's son John that the Sadducean dream of political independence was realized, and the Sadducees gained the ascendancy. Their work would not interest a Pharisee. For him Judas was the true and only hero of the great struggle, and its significant result was the restoration of the Temple and the Law, celebrated in the festival of Hanukkah, or Dedication.

The narrative of II Maccabees indeed is organized about these celebrations. It begins with two letters from the Jews of Palestine to the Jews of Egypt, urging them to keep the festival of Dedication. The writer wants to have the Jews of Egypt as well as of Palestine observe it. He declares his intention of writing an epitome of the history of Jason of Cyrene, a work of which nothing else is known. He begins with the sacrilegious attempt of Heliodorus,

acting for the king of Syria, to rob the Temple of the money deposited in it, when he was struck down and beaten by angels. The high priest is ousted and murdered; first one and then another obtains the office by bribery. Antiochus Epiphanes enters Jerusalem, killing fabulous numbers of the people. He robs and profanes the Temple, and tortures and kills those who will not give up the Jewish religion. Some Pharisaic martyrdoms -those of Eleazar and the seven brothers -- are related in horrible detail. Judas Maccabeus now rallies his countrymen (8:1) and defeats the Syrian generals; King Antiochus who is away in Persia hears of it and starts back to punish the Jews, but dies a horrible death on the way, repenting of his wickedness before the end. Judas and his men recover Jerusalem and rededicate the Temple, instituting the festival of Dedication (10:1-8).

Judas continues his victories, sometimes aided by heavenly horsemen and portents. In a final struggle with Nicanor he defeats him again, and Nicanor is killed. Judas cuts off his head and arm and displays them before the Temple Nicanor had threatened to destroy. The Jews vote to celebrate the day ever after, with the festival of Nicanor's Day (15:36). As the city remained in Jewish hands from that time on, there seems to be nothing more to be said, and the writer concludes his account (15:37-39).

How much of this the writer obtained from Jason's history we cannot tell; some of it is almost certainly his own elaboration or insertion. But the full treatment of some events side by side with the mere listing of others (14:25) gives the impression of an unskilled and uneven epitomist. The writer's style is elaborate and stilted, his attitude is bitter and partisan, he revels in horrible details of disease and torture. He is extravagantly fond of the supernatural, and his efforts at fine writing, his homiletical observations (such as 6:12-17), and his lack of restraint defeat the purposes of his book. His martyrs are all dearly Pharisees, and he represents the Chasidim, the Puritan party, as the only real supporters of Judas (14:6). In effect, he claims Judas as the leader of the Chasidim -- the Pharisees -- and disowns his politically minded successors.

II Macc. 4:7-15:36 deals with the period covered by I Macc. 1:10-7:50 (175-160 B.C.E.). The book leaves off before the death of Judas, and says nothing at all about the work of Jonathan and Simon; in fact it barely mentions their names (8:22), telling elsewhere how it was Simon's men who were covetous and took bribes from the Idumeans in a beleaguered fort and let some of them escape (10:19, 20) -- a palpable slur upon the founder of the Hasmonean line.

The history by Jason of Cyrene on which the writer bases his book is said in 2:19-23 to cover the story of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, down to the recovery of the Temple, the liberation of the city, and the restoration of the laws. It was probably written toward 100 B.C.E. or not long after that date.

II Maccabees itself evidently rests upon I Maccabees as well as upon Jason's book, and its strong Pharisaic color makes it altogether probable that it was in part a counterblast to I Maccabees, with its pronounced Sadducean attitude. If I Maccabees was written early in the

first century before Jesus -- the times of Jannaeus, 103-76 B.C.E. -- and in a few years was brought to Alexandria and translated into Greek, it would be natural for a Pharisee soon to seek to offset its picture by re-writing the story from the Pharisaic point of view, for which the history of Jason of Cyrene would give him sufficient material. It would be a natural product of the resurgence of the Pharisees in the early years of Alexandra's regency, which began in 76 B.C.E. On the other hand, if Pompey's capture of Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. had already taken place, even a Pharisee could hardly quote or invent the friendly Roman letter to the Jewish people that appears in 11: 34- 38. II Maccabees was probably written between 76 and 63 B.C.E. although its date cannot be determined with certainty. But the closing statement that the city has been held by the Hebrews from that time (the time of Judas Maccabeus) would be impossible after Pompey in 63 B.C.E. besieged and captured the city and entered the Holy of Holies. II Maccabees was written in Alexandria, and it was known to Philo, who died about A.D.45. Josephus also may have known it and used it in his Antiquities; it was certainly used by the author of Hebrews in the last decade of the first century (Heb. 11:35-37):

Women had their dead restored to them by resurrection. Others endured torture, and refused to accept release, that they might rise again to the better life. Still others had to endure taunts and blows, and even fetters and prison. They were stoned to death, they were tortured to death, they were sawed in two, they were killed with the sword.

The reference to the martyrs of II Macc. 6: 29 and chapter 7 is unmistakable. Every historian chiefly records himself, and it is of great interest and importance that we possess in I and II Maccabees these self-portraits of Sadducee and Pharisee from the first half of the last century before Jesus.