



Religion resisting empire: The Maccabean Revolt (Events described: 331-167 BCE)

Throughout history, people have used religious resources to both support and resist imperialism. The Maccabean Revolt is an example, from the ancient world, of religion engaging in **armed resistance** against an empire. The revolt was initiated in 167 BCE by a Jewish priest named Mattathias. He was resisting a campaign of forced cultural assimilation that had been violently imposed in Israel under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, one of the successors of the Greek emperor Alexander the Great. Mattathias died not long after launching the revolt, but it continued under the leadership of his son Judas Maccabeus, or Judah Maccabee, for whom the revolt is named. In 164 BCE, imperial forces retreated from the Israelite capital, Jerusalem, and Judas's forces took control of the city for the next few years. The Jewish festival of Hanukkah commemorates that Maccabee victory.

The following pro-Maccabee narrative of the revolt's beginnings was written by a Jewish author around 100 BCE (give or take a few decades). The text may originally have been written in Hebrew, but if so, it has survived only in Greek translation. The Greek text circulated among Jews living in Hellenized lands—lands conquered by Alexander—outside Israel. Evidently, these Jewish readers were equally or more fluent in Greek, the imperial lingua franca, than they were in Hebrew, their ancestral language. The Greek text was incorporated into the Christian scriptures as 1 Maccabees.

[331-175 BCE: From Alexander to Antiochus Epiphanes]

After Alexander the Macedonian, son of Philip, who came from the land of Kittim and struck down Darius, king of the Persians and Medes—after Alexander struck down Darius, he reigned in Darius's place, being already ruler over Greece. Alexander fought many battles, seized many strongholds, killed the kings of the earth, advanced to the ends of the earth, and took spoils from many nations. The earth was quiet before him. He was exalted, and his heart was lifted up. He assembled an extremely strong army and ruled over countries, nations, and principalities; they became his tributaries.

After these things, he fell sick and perceived that he would die. He called his honorable servants, who had been brought up with him from his youth, and he divided among them his kingdom while he was still alive. Having reigned twelve years, Alexander died. Then his servants ruled, each one in his place. They all put on diadems after Alexander was dead, as did their descendants after them for many years, and they made evils multiply on earth.

There came forth from them a sinful root, Antiochus Epiphanes, son of Antiochus the king, who had been a hostage in Rome. He began to reign in the 137th year of the Greeks' kingdom.

[175-167 BCE: Voluntary and forced assimilation in Israel]

In those days, there arose in Israel transgressors of the Law. They persuaded many people, saying, "Let us go make a covenant with the Gentiles around us; for since we separated from them, many evils have befallen us." This saying appeared good to them. Certain of the people took action and went to Antiochus, and he gave them permission to follow the Gentiles' customs. They built a place of exercise in Jerusalem in keeping with the Gentiles' laws; they

uncircumcised themselves, abandoned the holy covenant, united with the Gentiles, and sold themselves to do evil.

When Antiochus deemed his kingdom to be well ordered, he aspired to reign also over Egypt, so he could reign over both kingdoms. He entered Egypt with a numerous force—with chariots, elephants, horsemen, and a great navy—and he made war against Ptolemy, king of Egypt. Ptolemy was put to shame before him and fled; many men fell, wounded to death. Antiochus's forces took possession of the strong cities of Egypt, and he took the spoils of Egypt.

After striking down Egypt, Antiochus returned, in the 143rd year, and went up with a numerous force against Israel and Jerusalem. He presumptuously entered the temple and took the golden altar, the candelabrum and everything that went with it, the table of the showbread, the pouring cups, the bowls, the golden censers, the veil, the crowns, and the gold adornment on the temple façade (which he scraped off completely). He took the silver, the gold, the precious vessels, and the hidden treasures he found. When he had taken everything, he went away into his own land.

[...] Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom that they all should be one people and abandon their own laws. All the Gentiles complied with the king's word. Many Israelites, too, submitted to the king's way of worship; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath. The king sent letters, by messengers, to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, commanding them to follow foreign laws: to ban the burnt offerings, sacrifices, and drink offerings prescribed by the Law for the temple; to profane the sabbath and the festivals and to make the temple and the priests unclean; to build altars, temples, and shrines for idols and to sacrifice swine's flesh and other unclean animals; to leave their sons uncircumcised and to make their souls loathsome through all kinds of uncleanness and profaneness, so they would forget the Law and change all its dictates. "And whoever will not comply with the king's word shall die." He wrote words such as these to his whole kingdom.

He appointed overseers over all the people, and he commanded the cities of Judah to offer sacrifice, one city after another. Many of the people, everyone who had abandoned the Law, gathered to the overseers and did evil things in the land [...] In the cities throughout Judah, they erected idolatrous altars, and they burned incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets. All the books of the Law that they found, they tore in pieces and set on fire. Anyone who was found with a book of the covenant or who submitted to the Law was condemned to death in keeping with the king's command. [...] Women who had their sons circumcised were also put to death, with their babies hung around their necks, along with their families and those who performed the circumcisions. [...]

[167 BCE: Mattathias starts a guerilla rebellion]

In those days, Mattathias, son of John, son of Simeon, a priest descended from Joarib, left Jerusalem to live in Modein. He had five sons: John, surnamed Gaddi; Simon, called Thassi; Judas, called Maccabeus; Eleazar, called Avaran; and Jonathan, called Apphus. [...]

The king's officers, who were enforcing the apostasy, came to Modein to conduct the sacrifice. Many Israelites came to them; Mattathias and his sons also gathered. The king's officers said to

Mattathias, “You are a ruler, a great and honorable man in this city, supported by sons and brothers. Come first, therefore, and fulfill the king’s command, as all the Gentiles have done, as well as the men of Judah and those who still live in Jerusalem. Then you and your family will be numbered among the Friends of the King, and you and your sons will be honored with silver and gold and many gifts.”

Mattathias answered in a loud voice, “Even if all the Gentiles who live in the king’s dominion heed him and fall away from their ancestors’ ways of worship; even if they all have chosen to submit to his commands—still I and my sons and my brothers will walk in the covenant of our ancestors. Heaven forbid that we should abandon the Law and its dictates! We will not heed the king’s words and turn aside from our way of worship, neither to the right nor to the left.”

When Mattathias had left off speaking these words, a Jew came, in the sight of everyone, to sacrifice on the altar in Modein in compliance with the king’s command. When Mattathias saw it, his zeal was kindled, and he trembled inside. He burst out in righteous wrath and ran and killed the man on the altar. He killed also the king’s officer, who had come to compel people to sacrifice, and he pulled down the altar. He was zealous for the Law, like what Phinehas did to Zimri, son of Salu.^a

Mattathias cried aloud in the city, “Whoever is zealous for the Law and still keeps the covenant, come out after me!” He and his sons fled into the mountains, abandoning everything they had in the city. [...]

Then Mattathias and his friends were joined by a company of Hasideans, mighty men of Israel, each of whom offered himself willingly for the Law. Everyone who fled from the evils in the land added to their numbers and became a strong support for them. They became an army. They struck down sinners in their anger and transgressors of the Law in their wrath; those who were left fled to the Gentiles for safety. Mattathias and his friends went around pulling down the idolatrous altars and forcibly circumcising all the uncircumcised boys they found within Israel’s borders. They pursued the proud, and the work prospered in their hand. They rescued the Law from the hands of the Gentiles and the kings, and they did not allow the sinner to triumph.

^a See Numbers 25:1-15, in the Hebrew Bible.

Source: 1 Maccabees 1:1-24, 41-61; 2:1-5, 15-28, 42-48, Revised Version (RV). *The Apocrypha, Translated out of the Greek and Latin Tongues, Being the Version Set Forth A.D. 1611, Compared with the Most Ancient Authorities and Revised A.D. 1894* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, [1895]), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015008609458>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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This modernized adaptation of the RV translation of 1 Maccabees is intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above or a more recent translation.



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