



The Maccabean Revolt: Between Tradition and History

By Steven H. Werlin

In modern Judaism, the holiday of Chanukah celebrates the victorious revolt of the Jews against the Seleucid Greeks in 167-164 BCE (“before the common era” = BC). Today we refer to these events as the Maccabean Revolt, named after the Jewish leader, Judah Maccabee. Like many biblical episodes, the story begins with a dramatic struggle against hatred and tyranny, and it ends with a miracle.

The Story of Chanukah

As the tale is told, it was a time of injustice and persecution. The empire of the **Seleucids** stretched throughout Syria and southward into Judaea, the region surrounding Jerusalem. Jewish customs, such as the teaching of **Torah** and the practice of circumcision, had been outlawed, while the holy Temple in Jerusalem had been defiled with the sacrifice of swine, an “unclean” animal. The Seleucid king, **Antiochus Epiphanes**—whose self-given nickname means “the manifest-god”—had decreed that the Jews worship the Greek god, Zeus, rather than the God of Israel.

Enter **Matthias**, a pious Jew from the village of Modi’in, just outside Jerusalem. When one of his countrymen succumbed to the will of the maniacal king and sacrificed to Zeus, Matthias rose up and killed the apostate. He then fled to the wilderness of Judaea, along with his five sons. It was not long before Matthias, a very old man at the time, died. His bravest son, Judah, took up his father’s cause and led the Jewish people in a revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes. His strength as a warrior and leader earned Judah the nickname “the Hammer,” or in Hebrew, Maccabee.

Despite the odds, **Judah Maccabee** and his passionate band of freedom-fighters triumphed over the massive Seleucid army of Antiochus Epiphanes. Following their initial victories, the Jews retook Jerusalem and its holy Temple. Judah and his followers purged the Temple precinct of all remnants of the foreign gods and their sacrifices. Then they *rededicated* the Temple to the God of Israel. (The word “Chanukah” means “rededication,” in reference to the Jerusalem Temple.)

In order to reestablish the daily sacrifices in the Temple, the priests had to light the holy **menorah**, a seven-branched candlestick that provided light and stood

as an important symbol within the sanctuary.



In this part of Titus' triumphal procession (from the Arch of Titus in Rome), the treasures of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem are being displayed to the Roman people. Hence the Menorah. (from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sack_of_jerusalem.JPG)

Supplies in the rededicated Temple were scarce however and there was not enough oil to keep the flames of the menorah burning beyond a single day. It would take eight days before additional oil could be obtained, but despite the delay, the tiny amount of oil kept the flames of the menorah burning for all that time. So, the miracle was two-fold: An unlikely victory over an insurmountable enemy, and the preservation of the menorah's oil to enable the continuation of the Temple sacrifices.

Countless generations of Jews have commemorated these events with the annual festival of Chanukah. Each household lights their own menorah, or more properly a **hanukiyah** (a nine-branched candlestick used only on Chanukah) for eight days, while enjoying oil-based foods like doughnuts and latkes (potato pancakes fried in oil).

Behind the Legend

Traditional histories tend to view ancient events in black-and-white, right-and-wrong, Judah Maccabees and Antiochus Epiphaneses. But real life is rarely so neat. As the saying goes, there are two sides to every story, but history is written by the winners. So, when we study history, it is important to look at the information that has been passed down to us with a critical eye. How can we get to the historical reality behind this traditional tale? What sorts of critical questions can we ask about the story?

In any study of ancient history, we should consider our sources. Where does this story come from? For those who grew up in a Jewish household, perhaps the story was told by one's parents or grandparents. Historians call this the **oral**

tradition: The story is told over and over again as it is passed down from one generation to another. But if you've ever played the game "Telephone" you know that the details tend to change slightly with each re-telling. Perhaps the heroes of the story and the victories are embellished, while the villains are increasingly vilified.

Luckily, in addition to oral tradition we have ancient Jewish literature. The Books of the Maccabees—specifically **First** and **Second Maccabees**—were written in the 2nd century BCE, within a few decades after these events took place. These are distinct accounts written by different authors. They are not included in the Jewish Bible, but they *are* included in the Catholic Bible and the biblical canons of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The early Christians preserved these Jewish texts written centuries earlier which many scholars believe attest to the events of the Maccabean Revolt.

Similar to the traditional tale though, the books of First and Second Maccabees portray Judah and his followers as heroes and Antiochus Epiphanes as unreasonably cruel. The authors of these books were themselves Jews, so the passionate national pride expressed should not come as a surprise. All historians of course—both ancient and modern—have *some* bias. Nowadays historians try to overcome those biases and present only the facts as best they can. But in the ancient world, this was not usually the case. Rather than simply recording facts, ancient historians wrote to entertain, make an argument, or, in the case of First and Second Maccabees, glorify people and events.

Nevertheless, there are occasional hints throughout the Books of the Maccabees of a much more complex reality. For example, we read that "certain renegades came out from among [the people of] Israel and misled many, saying 'Let us go and make a pact with the Gentiles [i.e. non-Jews] around us.' ... So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom, and removed their marks of circumcision, and abandoned the Holy Covenant with God. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to evil" (1 Macc. 1:11-5). Apparently some Jews were eager to adopt the Greek customs. The author refers to these Jews as "renegades" who "misled" other Jews; his choice of words portrays them as "evil"-doers. Here history goes beyond just the facts.

It is of course always much easier to label what is evil and what is righteous in hindsight. In the generation after the Revolt, the authors of First and Second Maccabees labeled anyone who had followed Judah and his family the "righteous," and anyone who had not, the "evil." These labels however are dependent on one's point-of-view. For those Jews who apparently fought alongside the Seleucids, this was *not* a Revolt, but a civil war. From the viewpoint of the "renegades," *they* were right, and Judah Maccabee and his followers were the hateful and intolerant ones—intolerant of Greek practices, that is.

The Legend Continues ...

The story of Chanukah ends with the miracle—it's a nice way to wrap up the tale! But our ancient sources indicate that the Revolt actually continued for several more decades. The capture of Jerusalem was a major victory for Judah and his followers, and it probably helped to unite the Jewish people behind an anti-Seleucid banner. If nothing else, it gave Judah and his brothers some legitimacy as leaders. Although Judah's family, known as the **Hasmonean family**, were priests of the Jerusalem Temple, they had not been politically powerful prior to the Maccabean Revolt. As with many victorious generals throughout history, Judah's successful military record legitimized him as a leader of his people.

But Judah was a warrior, first and foremost, so the battles with the Seleucids continued in the hopes of securing political independence for Judaea. Judah Maccabee took the additional step of extending the territory of Judaea beyond the immediate region surrounding Jerusalem. Throughout history, countless empires have demonstrated that when a leader's authority is based on military might, the country's borders either must grow, or risk encroachment from neighboring powers.

A few years after the rededication of the Temple, Judah himself was killed in battle. His brother **Jonathan**, took over as the leader of the Jewish forces. At the same time, Jonathan assumed the religious position of **High Priest** in the Jerusalem Temple. The High Priest was responsible for maintaining operations in the Temple and, on the most sacred days of the year, even officiating over the sacrifices personally. He was considered the primary representative of his people to God.

Jonathan continued to fight the Seleucids for two decades until he was captured and executed. His older brother, **Simon** succeeded him as general of the army and High Priest. It was under the administration of Simon that the Seleucids were finally expelled from Jerusalem once and for all. By this time, the Seleucids had been fighting several uprisings throughout their weakened empire. Finally, around the year 138 BCE, the Seleucids formally granted independence to the Jews. Simon was assassinated a few years later by a treacherous son-in-law. Although he was the last of the sons of Matthias to lead the Jewish people, the Hasmonean family ruled from Jerusalem as a dynasty for a century, until the rise of Herod the Great.

The story of Chanukah is a simplified version of a complex situation. Both in the ancient world and today, the causes and results of war are never as simple as we want them to be. Religion, politics, and clashes of cultures combined in 2nd-century BCE Judaea to compel pious Jews to take up arms against both foreign powers and fellow countrymen. So where do we find the truth of the Maccabean Revolt? In some combination, perhaps, of tales passed down from grandparent to grandchild, and between the lines of ancient texts, read with a critical eye.

GLOSSARY

Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who imposed a series of religious limitations on the Jews, and considered the villain of the traditional story of Chanukah.

Books of the Maccabees, the ancient Jewish works in which the events of the Maccabean Revolt are recorded; most well-known are First and Second Maccabees (abbreviated 1 Macc. and 2 Macc.).

Chanukah, the annual Jewish festival commemorating the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple in 164 BCE.

Hanukiyah, a nine-branched candlestick used during Chanukah to mark each of the eight days of the festival.

Hasmonean Family, the clan headed by Matthias of Modi'in and his sons.

High Priest, the highest ranking religious authority among the Jews when the Temple was still standing.

Jerusalem, the religious and political capital of the Jews during the period of the Maccabean Revolt.

Jerusalem Temple, the only place of sacrificial worship for Jews during the period of the Maccabean Revolt; not to be confused with modern synagogues.

Jonathan, the fifth and youngest son of Matthias, and brother of Judah Maccabee, and was the first Hasmonean to assume the role of High Priest.

Judaea, the region immediately surrounding the city of Jerusalem, and the ancestral heartland of Judaism.

Judah Maccabee, son of Matthias of Modi'in, who led the Jewish fighters at the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt.

Matthias, a priest from the village of Modi'in, just outside of Jerusalem, and patriarch of the Hasmonean family.

Menorah, the seven-branched candlestick in the Jerusalem Temple during the period of the Maccabean Revolt.

Oral Tradition, a manner by which stories are passed down through their telling from one generation to another; generally considered to be rather inaccurate for the preservation of details.

Seleucids, an empire based in northern Syria, and descended from one of the successors of Alexander the Great, whose culture was mainly derived from the Greeks.

Simon, the second son of Matthias, who took over as High Priest and general after the death of his younger brother, Jonathan; Simon succeeded in gaining for Judaea official independence from the Seleucids.

Torah, the first five books of the Bible, from Genesis to Deuteronomy.

CLASSROOM AND HOMEWORK ACTIVITY

The following classroom exercise is meant to highlight the major points of the article regarding the roles of perspective and oral tradition in our understanding of history.

Set-up/Hook: After reading the above article, recount to the students the well-known American tale about George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, which ends with his famous saying, “I cannot tell a lie.” Ask the students what the moral of the story is. Then indicate that the story itself is an entire fabrication, meant to emphasize the morality of one of our nation’s founding fathers. Does our knowledge of the story’s fabricated origin indicate that George Washington was *not* an honest and moral individual? Or does the story perhaps relate a more significant aspect of the man, even if it didn’t happen?

Opening Discussion: Now relate the issue of historical accuracy and perspective back to Maccabean Revolt. Start with the miracle of the oil told in Jewish tradition. Why would the oral tradition pass down this story of the miracle? How does this tale illustrate a significant aspect of the Maccabean victory?

Group Work: Divide the students into groups of three or four. Have them read together the passage about the Martyrdom of the Seven Brothers, and discuss the following questions:

- (1) What is the author’s opinion of the King in this section?
- (2) What is the author’s opinion of the Jews in this section?
- (3) How does the author make *you* feel about what is happening? What is the author’s goal in recounting this episode?
- (4) Do you think this was written by a Jewish author or a Seleucid Greek author?

In their groups, have the students write a short account of this episode from the perspective of the King. How would the King’s account differ from the version seen here?

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The Martyrdom of Seven Brothers

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, 'What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.'

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and cauldrons heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, 'The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, "And he will have compassion on his servants."'

After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, 'Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?' He replied in the language of his ancestors and said to them, 'No.' Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. And when he was at his last breath, he said, 'You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.'

After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, 'I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again.' As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

After he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. When he was near death, he said, 'One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!'

Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. But he looked at the king, and said, 'Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our

people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!

After him they brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, 'Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!'

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honourable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, 'I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.'

Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his ancestors, and that he would take him for his Friend and entrust him with public affairs. Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the youth to save himself. After much urging on his part, she undertook to persuade her son. But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native language as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: 'My son, have pity on me. I carried you for nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers.'

While she was still speaking, the young man said, 'What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses. But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all mortals, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped the judgement of the almighty, all-seeing God. For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life,

under God's covenant; but you, by the judgement of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.'

The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord.

Last of all, the mother died, after her sons.

Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures.

[From the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.]

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<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>