

**MACCABEES, FIRST AND SECOND BOOKS OF** The last of the Historical Books of the Old Testament. They narrate the struggle led by **Judas Maccabeus** and his brothers against the Seleucid kings in the second century B.C. Although related to some extent because of common subject matter, the two books are independent of each other. Both books are among the **deuterocanonical** books, accepted as Scripture by Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

## I. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

In all probability, 1 Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew. Testimony to this effect comes from Saint Jerome, who wrote that he saw the book in Hebrew. Internal evidence also suggests that the books were translated into Greek from a Semitic original. The author is unknown, although the language indicates that the work was composed in Palestine by a writer who was familiar with Palestinian geography and who was deliberately trying to imitate the historical style of an earlier period (e.g., 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings). The date of its composition is uncertain, but it was probably written after 134 B.C., following the death of Simon and during the period of John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.).

The Second book of Maccabees was written in Greek as an abridgment of a five-volume history of the Maccabees written by Jason of Cyrene (2 Macc 2:19–31). The larger work is now lost, and nothing further is known of Jason, except that he probably lived in Palestine, as his work shows considerable geographical knowledge. As for the author of 2 Maccabees, he may have lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and his mention of the resurrection of the dead (7:14) raises the possibility that he may have been a Pharisee. The book was probably composed in Greek, given its limited number of Hebraisms and the presence of native Greek idioms and constructions. The date for its composition has been estimated at a time after 124 B.C. and perhaps as late as 80 B.C.

## II. CONTENTS

### 1 MACCABEES

- I. *Introduction (chaps. 1–2)*
  - A. *Alexander the Great and the Seleucid Persecution (1:1–63)*
  - B. *Mattathias and His Sons (2:1–70)*
- II. *The Leadership of Judas Maccabeus (3:1–9:22)*
- III. *The Leadership of Jonathan (9:23–12:53)*
- IV. *The Leadership of Simon (13:1–16:17)*
- V. *The Reign of John Hyrcanus (16:18–24)*

### 2 MACCABEES

- I. *Introduction (chaps. 1–2)*
  - A. *A Letter to the Jews in Egypt (1:1–9)*
  - B. *A Letter to Aristobulus (1:10–2:18)*
  - C. *Preface (2:19–32)*
- II. *Heliodorus and the Temple Treasury (3:1–40)*
- III. *The High Priesthood—Simon, Jason, and Menelaus (4:1–5:27)*

- IV. *Persecution of the Jews (6:1–7:42)*
- V. *The Rebellion of Judas Maccabeus (8:1–15:38)*

### III. PURPOSE AND THEMES

The First and Second books of Maccabees recount the background and events of the forty-year (175–135 B.C.) struggle against the invasion of paganism and Hellenization into Jewish Palestine. Hellenization was a government policy of Alexander the Great and his successors. It brought especially difficult challenges to Judaism when the Seleucids promoted the pagan Greek cults in opposition to monotheism. Complicating the situation in Palestine was the emergence of a pro-Hellenizing party among the Jewish leadership. In 167 B.C., Antiochus IV Epiphanes (*see Seleucids*) of Syria brought the cult of Zeus into the sacred precincts of the Jerusalem Temple. A revolt ensued, sparked by the zeal of **Mattathias** (1 Macc 2:23–33) and carried forward by his sons Judas Maccabeus (1 Macc 3–9; 2 Macc 8–15), Jonathan (1 Macc 9:23–12:53), and Simon (1 Macc 13:1–16:17). The victory of the Jewish cause was symbolized by the recapture of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Temple (1 Macc 4:36–61; 2 Macc 10:1–8).

The author of 1 Maccabees equates the survival of Jewish monotheism with the survival of Israel, thus forging a close link between religion and patriotism. “Israel” means the faithful people of God, and those who forsake the Law no longer belong to Israel: “Many of the people, every one who forsook the law, joined the Syrians, and they did evil in the land; they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had” (1 Macc 1:52–53).

The narrative of 1 Maccabees presents the Maccabean line as the custodians of the Mosaic Law. They are raised up by the Lord to fight the forces of Hellenism that were threatening the purity of the Jewish faith. The style of the work emulates that of the earlier Historical Books, but with an even greater emphasis on the Law as the manifestation of God’s will. The revolt is seen in terms of the Law’s triumph over the enemies of the Lord.

The Second book of Maccabees covers much the same ground as 1 Maccabees 1–7, but it is more explicit in giving a theological interpretation of the events of the period. It explains the feast of the dedication of the Temple, a key event in the survival of Judaism (commemorated in the feast of Hanukkah; *see Dedication, feast of*); it also stresses the primacy of God’s action in the struggle for survival and gives witness to a firmly held belief in an afterlife and the resurrection of the body (2 Macc 7:14; 12:43–45). Thus, the religious interpretation of the Maccabean struggle is more important here, and because of the writer’s theology of history he sees the war given support by divine will even as he recognizes that the persecution of the Jewish people and the very desecration of the Temple were consequences of the people’s sinfulness (5:17–20; 6:12–17). The author exalts the Temple of Jerusalem as the center of Jewish worship and several times reminds the reader of its greatness (cf. 2:19, 22; 5:15; 14:31). He calls upon the Jews to be faithful to the Law, and reminds them of God’s fidelity to the covenant. The Lord will not abandon his people if they repent and are faithful to him. The power of God is manifested in miraculous and supernatural deeds that prove God’s presence among his people (3:24–27; 5:2–3; 10:29–30). Martyrdom is extolled as a noble sacrifice (6:18–7:42).

Two similar books, 3 and 4 Maccabees, are also extant. The Third book of Maccabees, which is not in the Catholic canon but is accepted by Eastern Orthodox churches, tells the story of the Jewish persecution in Egypt under Ptolemy IV Philopator (r. 221–205 B.C.); it is thus unrelated to

the events of 1 and 2 Maccabees. The Fourth book of Maccabees, which is an appendix in some Orthodox Bibles, is a Jewish philosophical treatise on “whether devout reason is sovereign over the emotions”; it uses stories like the martyrdom of Eleazar and of the seven brothers as illustrations (cf. 2 Macc 6–7).