

## What's the Message – Lesson 89

Our lesson today brings us to the revolt of the Maccabees, and its outcome.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is that You help us to see the good model of a servant truly focused on working Your will, and the bad model of that same servant who then turns work, allegedly devoted to You, into his own self-serving interest. Amen.

Last time we saw Antiochus IV bring extreme pressure upon the people of Judea to embrace Hellenism and all of its pagan implications. If the people had all been of one mind – either all for it, or all against it – then Hellenism would have been a much simpler problem to deal with. But many in Judea had already succumbed to the appeal of Hellenism, and the ringleaders in favor of it were the very ones you would expect to oppose it – the wealthy and priestly aristocracy who enjoyed the privileges of the royal court and curried the favor of the king. There were always men in Jerusalem ready to offer money in return for power.

So it was not just a simple matter of Jews against Antiochus and the Seleucids, it was a matter of Jew against Jew. In truth, there were two Jewish parties, or factions. The High Priest and most of the Sanhedrin favored working with Antiochus. The opposition came from the orthodox Jew, particularly the Hasidim – or Pious Ones, that we first met in our study of Ezra. These were deeply incensed at the rise and spread of Hellenism. It has been said that during this time the statement “Jerusalem versus Judea” was an apt description of the internal affairs of the little Jewish state.

It did not take long for the war of words to turn into a war of violence and bloodshed. An old priest by the name of Mattathias, of the house of Hasmon, had moved his family away from routine contact with the Temple priests, to a small village northwest of Jerusalem. He soon became highly respected and a leader within the community. One day a Syrian official came to him, asking him to use his influence to get the people of the village to make sacrifices to Zeus. Mattathias refused, but another Jew started to comply with the official's request and make a sacrifice. Thereupon, Mattathias killed the apostate Jew, then the Syrian official, and pulled down the heathen altar.

Knowing that reprisal would follow against him and his family, he took his five sons and fled to the wild hill country. The Maccabean revolt had begun.

The third son of Mattathias was named Judas, and was chosen by his brothers to be their leader. Judas became so adept at guerrilla warfare, that people called him Maccabeus, “the Hammer.” There were a series of battles, always against a much larger military opponent from Syria, but Judas won most of these. Antiochus was faced with obeying the demands of Rome for more tribute, and had to divide his army to attend to collecting tribute money in the east. This left a smaller army to deal with Judas, and the Maccabee outsmarted them. By 164 B.C. Judas had dealt the Syrians a sufficient blow to enable him to enter Jerusalem, remove the statue of Zeus from the Temple, have the Temple cleansed and ceremonially purified, and restore daily sacrifices and worship.

This event was joyously celebrated and became the annual event known today as Hanukkah, or, the Feast of Dedication, and is also sometimes called the Feast of lights. This occurred in mid-December, exactly three years after the desecration by Antiochus. But the fighting was far from over. Just four years after his great triumph in Jerusalem, Judas was killed in a battle, and was succeeded by his brother Simon. A wise leader, Simon achieved 8 years of relative peace and a considerable measure of prosperity. Events in Rome were not static, either. The long war with Carthage that had so occupied Rome was finally over with the defeat of Hannibal, and Rome was now able to involve itself more with Syria and Judea.

In the year 142 B.C., after 25 years of fighting that saw the death of all of his brothers, Simon negotiated peace and independence for the Jews. Two years later, Simon and his descendants were named hereditary High Priests and rulers of Judea.

But lasting peace was not to come to the family of Mattathias. Simon, the last remaining son, was killed by his own son-in-law in an attempt to grab power. The coup failed, and Simon was succeeded by his son, John Hyrcanus. Under Hyrcanus the borders of Judea were re-enlarged and approached its former extent under King David. However, to accomplish this feat, Hyrcanus resorted to hiring a mercenary army. To pay them, he burrowed into the tomb of David and extracted the treasures there sufficient to his needs of the

moment. As you might imagine, it was not a popular move. The Hasidim, who had initially supported the Maccabees because of their opposition to Hellenism, now started criticizing Hyrcanus for building up a private army, paying more attention to being a soldier than to the duties of the High Priest . . . and stealing from the tomb of David was the last straw! From this time, about 129 B.C., the public approval of the reigning house of Judea began to diminish. Hyrcanus responded to this criticism by turning his back on the Hasidim and casting his lot with another group.

Who was this group? The pro-Hellenists, the priestly leaders who supported the Seleucids. From this point on they became known as the Sadducees. And the opponents of Hyrcanus? They became known as the Pharisees.

And the struggle between these two parties continued, and grew more heated, continuing to the 5<sup>th</sup> generation after Mattathias. And we see the descendants of the House of Hasmon, or the Hasmoneans as they were then known, fighting against each other for the position of leadership. We now see one of the ugliest periods in Jewish history, with brother plotting against brother, and son against mother; with jailings, murders, and scandalous behavior. At one point, in 76 B.C., there were two Hasmonean sons – Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II – contending for the office of High Priest, one backed (as you might expect) by the Sadducees, the other by the Pharisees. Only one could win, of course, but this time there were to be no real winners, for the days of independence for Judah were limited.

We must now meet two more people who play very major roles in the next chapter of our story: one is a second class citizen of the desert; the other is a Roman general.

Events would have worked out differently had it not been for a certain man named Antipater. He was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau (not a Jew by birth), and had been forced to become a Jew years back when the Maccabees had been at the height of their power. A clever and scheming man, Antipater had become the “advisor” to one of the two principals in the struggle between the Hasmonean brothers

and, naturally, he wanted his man – Hyrcanus II – to win. With some outside help – from Rome and its famous general, Pompey – Antipater’s man did win, but it was Antipater who became the real power behind the throne, the real governor of Judea, governing it as a servant of Rome. The independent Maccabean period came to an end in 63 B.C. when Pompey and his army marched into Jerusalem and conquered Judah.

Judah had been an independent nation again for only 79 years, and even these were years of civil war and internal strife. It seems that the Jews just couldn’t stand peace. And why do we mention Antipater? He was the father of Herod the Great.

Next time we meet Herod, Caesar, and a regal cast of characters.