

The Age of The Maccabees (1)

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Introductory Remarks:

Because it is impossible to finish the printing of a story of the usual size in this volume, which will run only through the month of May, the undersigned sought for, but could not obtain a short story for this department of "Beacon Lights". Consequently, he presents to our readers this short history of "The Age of the Maccabees". It has historical value for our youth, and gives us a glimpse into the history of a few faithful Jews during the darkest period of Israel's history, the few centuries before the coming of our Savior. The booklet has seven chapters and fills 94 pages so we hope it may be printed in its entirety in the next four issues of our magazine. It is written by the Rev. H. F. Henderson of England. The copyrights have been cancelled so that we have free use of its publication. Even as the late Bishop Westcott writes about this booklet: "History offers no parallel to the undaunted courage with which the Maccabean brothers dared to face death, one by one, in the maintenance of a holy cause. The result was worthy of the sacrifice." We urge our young people (and it is of immense interest also to our older men and women) to carefully follow this story.

Chapter I

Contact With Hellenism

1. The Persian and Greek Yokes.—During the post-exilic period, the Jews of that time felt the Persian yoke a grievous and intolerable burden. They accordingly welcomed a change of tyrant in the person of Alexander the Great. To that victorious commander they cheerfully resigned themselves, looking to him for a measure of toleration and favor they had not hitherto enjoyed. If we are to believe Josephus, the Macedonian ruler bestowed upon them certain substantial benefits as a token or sample of what they might expect under his rule. After his day, a serious struggle ensued for the government of the country, in which three different competitors aspired to the position of ruler, Antigonus, Seleucus, and Ptolemy. The Battle of Ipsus in 301 B.C. decided the quarrel in Ptolemy's favor. On the whole, this was a happy conclusion of the matter so far as concerned both the religious and the secular interests of the Jews. The first three Ptolemies were wise statesmen, who permitted the Jews to indulge their own peculiarities and to sit under their vine and fig trees without molestation. In process of time, however, a change of affairs took place. Somewhere about 198 B. C. the Egyptian army was driven from the Holy Land, a new reign inaugurated—that of the Seleucids—and a set of influences introduced destined to exercise a dangerous fascination over the inhabitants of the land. And so, the dream of Alexander the Great bade fair to be realized. His ambition to conquer the world had been only the means to an end. His desire was to see Greek culture and custom universally spread, and his plan was to plant colonies of his countrymen in all the lands he conquered. This work went on after him until the spirit of Hellenism, as it is called, reached Palestine itself.

2. How the Jew regarded his Gentile Neighbour.—To the mind of an orthodox Jew, to whom the traditions and custom of his land were sacred, the world of Gentile habits and ideas was evil and abhorrent. Nor was such a man greatly moved by the threatened annihilation of Israel's faith and nationality under the influence of heathen government and thought. The power of paganism might prosper for a time. Sooner or later Jehovah would stir up His strength, and the arm of heathenism would be broken. This was the creed of the conservative Jew, and his attitude

towards rampant Gentilism was a sullen endurance of insult and injustice and a stubborn abhorrence of Gentile novelties and innovations. He regarded these things with silent detestation, remembered the covenant which God made with his fathers, and bided his time.

But there was another type of Jew who was more conciliatory and compromising. To him also the Gentile was an enemy of Jehovah, a despiser of the Divine law, not to be tolerated for what he was at present. But as he looked forward to the day when the Gentile would be Jehovah's subject and servant, he held him worthy to be regarded, not as an object of dislike, but of interest; one to be approached as near as it was safe to do so, rather than at arm's length. He felt it his duty to find .as many points of agreement as possible. About the time of the Maccabees this new spirit of comity between Jew and Gentile began to appear, and is seen reflected in books like Jonah, Coheleth. and Ecclesiasticus. In these books Jehovah is seen displaying an interest in the Gentiles, in one case sending them a prophet to warn them of their sins, in another throwing the requirements of Jewish legalism into the background as something not at all fundamental, but fated to pass away, the essential and eternal requirement being to fear God and keep His commandments.

Now although the two different attitudes here described were not necessarily antagonistic or incompatible with one another, but might be found co-existing side by side, in point of fact they constituted two different ways of looking at the subject and divided people into sides. On the one hand, there were those who ever held themselves separate and aloof from the ways of the Gentiles, and opposed them by a determined and unyielding resistance. Such persons would not conform to Gentilism in the smallest jot or tittle. Let the Gentile come over to their law, or let his power be broken. Israel cannot turn her back upon her glorious past or be drawn into the vortex of heathen corruption. On the other hand, there were Jews who saw in vision a larger Divine polity and a world-wide Kingdom of God. They felt the spell of Greek life and culture, and they wished to share it. To them it might not be altogether an innocent world, but neither was it forbidden ground.

The party of stern principle and the party of accommodation, as they may be called, then divided Jewish society. Each contended for the mastery, and at time passed they were not brought nearer, but went farther apart. Both parties plied their followers with plausible arguments. The one appealed to the patriotic instinct and the august claims of the Divine law. The other counted on the power of liberal ideals, the love of novelty, and the favor of the ruling classes to win the day. "They who wanted to effect anything in the political world", says Schurer, "found that they must stand on a friendly footing with Hellenism". Hellenism accordingly proved attractive to all worldly-minded Jews, and to the upper ranks of the priesthood. For a time, as we shall see, the puritanical party fell into the shade, while the party of conformity became ascendant. Heathen habits of life and worship thrust themselves forward without let or hindrance. Ultimately, however, under Judas Maccabaeus and his successors, a powerful tide of resistance set in which, rising higher and higher, swept back the flood of heathen encroachment and arrogance, and at last restored the supremacy of strict Judaism.

3. Spread of Hellenism.—The liking for Hellenistic forms of life just referred to was not a growth natural to the soil of Judaism, but an importation from foreign lands where the Dispersion had taken deep root and flourished. The philosophic soil of Alexandria was its natural home. There, under the enlightened rule of Ptolemy I, and II, the Jews who had made Alexandria their home found much to encourage them in the cultivation of liberal sentiment. They found a ruler so emancipated from bigotry and intolerance that he sanctioned the translation of the Jewish Scriptures into Greek. Then again in the army and the civil service of Egypt, the Jews of the

Dispersion who made Egypt their home, by their conspicuous ability won their way to appointments of influence and honor, to the deep mortification of the natives of the country, whoever afterwards regarded them with feeling of envy and dislike.

In this heathen atmosphere, so favorable to the destruction of provincialism, the Jewish character underwent changes of the most critical kind. Such changes were at first more frequently seen in places like Alexandria, where Jews abounded, and where, as we have just seen, they learned so well how to take occasion by the hand. In such places the Jew rapidly succumbed to Greek habits of life, as we have said, found it advantageous and necessary to do so. By degrees the spirit of conformity travelled home to Jerusalem. The time came when the upper classes began to affect the peculiar tones and mannerisms of their Greek neighbors, and even to be ashamed of their own racial peculiarities.

In this degenerate yielding to the fashion of the hour, there were no transgressors so guilty as the higher ranks of the priesthood. The high priest himself often led the way in these unpatriotic courses. The high priest Jason, for instance, contributed a large amount of money to the maintenance of a heathen shrine at a festival in honor of Hercules. It is true the bearers of the gift, having the fear of God before their eyes, were shocked beyond measure at the conduct of the high priest, and instead of devoting the money to the purpose intended, spent it in building several war-galleys (2 Macc. IV. 18). The incident shows that many belonging to humbler walks of life than that of the aristocratic priestly caste refused to bow the knee to Baal or take the wages of unrighteousness.

4. Introduction of Greek Manners and Customs.—The Hellenising tendencies, which in the second and third centuries before Christ, influenced the ruling classes among the Jews, manifested themselves in the ordinary and familiar things of life. Thus, they changed the naming of the months from the Hebrew to the Greek nomenclature, and the era of the Seleucids, dating from 312 B. C., the year that saw Seleucus victorious over Antigonus, became now the point of reckoning in all civil contracts among the Jews, and so continued till the Middle Ages. Personal and family names also changed from the Hebrew to the Greek: Jehoiakim becoming Alcimus; Solomon, Alexander; Joseph, Menelaus; Judas, Aristobulius, and so forth. In still another detail of nomenclature the Hellenising spirit made its appearance. The Jewish inhabitants of Judaea and Jerusalem called themselves from this time, and allowed themselves to be called Antiochians, or citizens of Antioch.

But these after all were trifling innovations, that even the stricter sort of Jews might easily tolerate. It was a different thing when the Greek palaestra was set up in Jerusalem under the immediate shadow of the Citadel. That was a graver symptom of corruption. In the palaestra young men belonging to well-known Jewish families might be seen taking part in the Greek sports instituted originally in honor of Hercules. They stripped themselves bare, ran, wrestled, leaped, and donned the hat used by the youth of Athens on such occasions. The love of the Greek games grew on the Jews so overpoweringly, that old and venerable men were to be found who could converse about nothing else: and it is said that during the pontificate of the worldly-minded Jason the very priests would run from the altar, leaving their religious duties unfinished, in order to witness the games and enjoy the excitements of the palaestra: "by reason whereof", adds the chronicler, "sore calamity came upon them: for they had them to be their enemies and avengers whose custom they followed so earnestly and unto whom they desired to be like in all things. For it is not a light thing to do wickedly against the laws of God; but the time following shall declare these things."

The Pontificate

1. Its Military and Political Importance.—During the period covered by “the age of the Maccabees”, and indeed all through the period of Greek domination, the high priest was the most prominent official figure in the world of Jewish politics. He was to all intents and purposes a sovereign and a prince, a member of state more than a minister of religion. He spent part of his life no doubt performing religious duties—he officiated, for example, on, the great day of Atonement, but hardly ever on ordinary occasions; more frequently his duties called him to the palace, to the council chamber, to the military camp, rather than to the temple and the altar.

It is important to remember this unique public character attaching to the office of high priest in the period with which we are dealing; and it is interesting to know how the office, at first so closely associated with purely religious work, came to have this worldly character. This was how it came about. When the Jewish people ceased to have a king of their own and became subject to a foreign power, the Temple and the priesthood began to acquire a position and importance they had not in earlier and happier times. In the absence of a throne of the house of David, the Temple came to be looked upon as something more than a sacred shrine, and its priests regarded in another light than mere ministers of religion. They became heirs to many rights and privileges formerly invested in the sovereign—among them being the collecting of certain tithes and taxes that used to flow into the royal treasury—and they began to be regarded as the chief representatives of the nation, the guardians of the nation’s weal, and the keepers of her honor. In the same way, the Temple was not merely God’s house of worship and prayer, but the one surviving monument of the people’s national life, the last visible memorial of a great historic past. It is true the high priests of former times had always moved in the best circles of society: but in the period with which we are dealing the high-priestly house was the only hereditary family with acknowledged aristocratic claims, and the pontifex himself the chief magistrate of the state. As has been said, “When the high priest stood at the altar in all his princely state, when he poured out the libation amidst the blare of trumpets, and the singers lifted up their voice and all the people fell prostrate in prayer till he descended and raised his hands in blessing, the slaves of the Greek or the Persian forgot for a moment their bondage and knew that the day of their redemption was near. The high priest, at such a moment, seemed to embody all the glory of the nation as the kings had done of old and when the time came to strike a successful blow for freedom, it was a priestly house that led the nation to the victory which united in one person the functions of high priest and prince” (vid. E. Hibiica,” “Priest” 3846).

As the office of high priest rose in secular importance and increased in power and opulence, it was natural that worldly men should grasp at it, not for any moral and religious influence that still clung to it, but solely for its political splendor and princely revenues. Whenever it happened that the enviable post became vacant, bribery and corruption were regularly resorted to by those interested in the appointment. If at such a time the Syrian exchequer happened to be low, the office of high priest could be counted on as bringing in a goodly price. Yet it would be unjust to insinuate that all the holders of the office at this time were wolves in sheep’s clothing although the majority of them were so.

To be continued.

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