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The Maccabean struggle for independence

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B.U.S.T.- '03. Robert L. Roberts.

In nature there is a law according to which a season of great fertility is followed by a period of depression as though in the birth throes of so unusual a product she had exhausted her resources, and must recuperate before a like effort can be repeated. A similar law is seen in all the animate creation and so prominent is it, that some eminent scholars have tried to defend the idea of the original glory of man on this ground. After nature had focussed all her powers in bringing forth this highest product of her handiwork, it would appear reasonable that there should follow the degeneration which the Bible declares to have occurred.

Now we find the same law at work in the history of nations. It was after a period of depression such as she had seldom, if ever, seen before that England aroused in her might, and by a series of brilliant victories both naval and military, which finally culminated in the overthrow of the "Scourge of Europe" at Waterloo, placed herself in the van of the world's Empires. It was likewise after the darkest hour in the history of the American War of Independence, that the light suddendly broke, and the dispair of Valley Forge was turned into the hope of a French Alliance, and later the glory of Yorktown.

So was it with the Jews. Never in all their checkered history had Israel seen a darker hour than that which preceded the dawn of the Maccabaean struggle for Independence, which began in 168 B.C. and ended in 142 B.C. covering in all a

stormy period of twenty-six years, which may be divided into two sections,- that for religious freedom 168 - 162, and that for political independence 162 - 142 B.C.

Every great event ought to have an adequate cause, and we shall find that this was no exception to the rule. The influences which brought about this remarkable outburst of national and religious spirit were at work in the days of Alexander the Great. They were rooted in his desire to establish Greek culture and modes of worship in every province conquered by his arms. This unwise policy was followed by the various successors of his vast dominions, and it succeeded in an eminent degree. It exerted a powerful influence over the Alexandrian Jews, and there is some reason to believe that had its promoters been wiser, and consequently more cautious, it might have gained a very strong following among the Judean Jews as well. 1 Mac 1:13-15; 2 Mac 4:7,9,15. Though we may allow this much, still there was on the other side the implacable legelistic party which regarded with horror all such paganic movements. There were the Patriots which stood for judaism in its distinctive type, both religious and national. With the return from the exile had come a new national life, permeated with an intense religious feeling, and an ardent zeal for the letter of the law. The watchword of this party was,- "Separation from everything pagan"- and so zealous were they for the letter of the law that it was worshipped to the exclusion of the Spirit, and every man was

ready to die rather than violate its sacred precepts. 1 Mac 2: 34. Their religious ideals were the points around which Jewish patriotism rallied, and everything else must bend towards the maintenance of these standards. Church and state were united, the high-priest being both civil and religious leader. In this way much corruption gradually crept in, and we soon find the sacred office becoming a matter of commerce, to be sold to the highest bidder. Added to this internal disorder, were causes from without which were so galling as to goad the fiery patriots almost to madness. These abuses were slowly but surely agitating the people to a point where redress must be found. The Jews, ever impatient of foreign rule, were groaning under the hated yoke of Syria, which at this time was ruled over by Antiochus Epiphanes whose policy it was to abolish all traces of Jewish worship and establish Greek customs and religious practices in its stead. Accordingly orders were issued that the work be carried forward with all possible dispatch. In order to execute this edict the Syrian General Appolonius, with a large army marched upon Jerusalem and falling upon the Jews on the Sabbath, when it was against the law to fight, massacred hundreds of them in cold blood, besides dismantling and pulling down the Temple. 1 Mac 1:31,32,39; Ant 12:4,5. A pagan altar was built on the temple mount, where the altar of burnt offering stood, and dedicated to the Olympian Zeus. Swine were driven into the sacred courts and their blood sprinkled in the "holy place."

As if this were not enough, the people were forced to take part in these horrible abominations, and Menelaus, the faithless high-priest, went even so far as to congratulate Antiochus on the success of his enterprise. A few faithful souls however beheld this desecration with mingled horror and indignation, and resolved to die rather than submit to such unholy practices. 1 Mac 1: 62 - 64. This show of opposition only aroused Antiochus to fresh outrages and new devises of cruelty in order to force these stubborn patriots into submission. They bore these insults and tortures until further endurance seemed impious, then resolved to draw the sword and win their rights, or die in the attempt. Matters had now assumed such a critical aspect that an outbreak was hourly expected, hence they cast about for a leader, nor had they far to look, nor long to wait. An event soon occurred which sounded the tocsin of war, and Judaism was compelled to draw the sword which was sheathed no more until independence both political and religious, burned upon her banners. An attempt was made to force an old patriot named Mattathias of Modein, to take part in the heathen sacrifices as an example to his fellow townsmen, among whom he had great influence. This he positively refused to do, but instead made a patriotic and noble speech against such practices. Upon his refusal another man stepped forward to do the deed, when the old hero in an outburst of rage, slew both the man, and the King's officer who was Master of ceremonies. This was the spark which was needed to kindle into a flame the religious and national

feeling that was smouldering in so many breasts ready to burst forth with terrible fury when the opportunity came. Further caution was folly, so calling upon all who were zealous for the law to follow, Mattathias with his five gallant sons fled to the mountains to prepare for the impending contest. 168 B.C.

The long struggle that followed has few equals and no superiors in the annals of warfare. Like most other great events it centers wholly around a single family and largely around the third son who is known as Judas Maccabees (or the hammerer, as the name denotes). The strain of leadership was too great for the gallant old man and he soon gave way beneath it, and the mantle of the illustrious father fell upon the shoulders of his still more distinguished son, Judas, who at once assumed command of the little army. He soon proved his fitness for the post. Inspiring his followers with his own dauntless spirit he led them on to victories which were little short of miracles. Fighting as he was for religious freedom, he felt that his battles were the Lord's, and like Cromwell's Ironsides he carried everything before him. Army after army was sent against him, often outnumbering his little force ten to one; but he flung them all back battered and defrated. Thus for almost three years he more than held his own against the armies of Syria besides chastising other nations which tried to take advantage of the trouble with Syria to murder the Jews who dwelt in their cities. Jerusalem, the center around which the conflict waged, was taken; the

heathen altar destroyed and the altar of Jehovah again erected in the renovated courts of the temple.

These successes could not continue very long however. Syria had all the resources of a kingdom at her command; Judas had but a handful of outlaws fighting for mere existence.

About 164 B.C. Antiochus Epiphanes died and his young son Antiochus Eupator, was placed on the throne by Lysias and a new campaign was undertaken for the relief of the garrison at Jerusalem. Lysias took the field in person and so overwhelming was his equipment that the Jews were forced to retreat, though they fiercely contested every inch of the ground. But valor and bravery could avail nothing against such fearful odds. Bethsura capitulated and Lysias marched unhindered to Jerusalem; relieved the garrison in the citadel and laid seige to the temple enclosure. To add to the general calamity, a famine occasioned by the Sabbathic year was pressing upon the people. It really seemed as though Patriotism's sun had gone down to rise no more. The darkest hour in its history had come. Everything seemed to indicate that the bitter end was at hand and that all their struggles were but for a lost cause.

But the hand that had always guided the destinies of Israel was again stretched out to rescue them in this crucial hour. The aid came not from themselves but from a totally unexpected source. With the prize almost in his grasp Antiochus was forced to make peace with the patriots on favorable terms, which gave them that religious freedom which was the real object of their rebellion.

Word came that Philip was marching to Antioch with the army of Antiochus Epiphanes to assume the government in accordance with the dying wishes of the King. 1 Mac 6: 5-6. Unwilling to give up the honor he was holding Lysias offered peace to the Jews in order that he might be free to protect his interests at the Capital, guaranteeing to them as terms of surrender, the free use of their religious privileges, and the preservation of the temple walls. After violating the latter clause of his agreement Lysias marched away leaving the patriots in the possession of that religious freedom which was taken away no more until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Thus far the struggle was successful, the vital point was gained, Conscience had conquered.

The religious war ended in 162 B.C. henceforth the political issue was paramount. Up to this point the contest was wholly for religious freedom occasioned, as we have seen, by the attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes to root out the Jewish religion and plant in its stead Greed customs and modes of worship. To this policy, many Jews readily assented, and were known as the hellenistic party. Thus two hostile camps were formed in the nation itself. The withdrawal of the Syrian army left these two antagonistic sects,- the hellenistic and the national,- face to face. Menelaus was removed from office of high-priest, by Antiochus, and the Alcimus, a man of priestly line but hellenistic principles, was appointed in his stead.

He soon discovered that, with Judas at the head of affairs at Jerusalem, he had the title without the office. Being a hellenist, Judas could not permit him to minister in the sacred office, hence he retired to Antioch to await his opportunity. Nor had he long to wait. Demetrius, having escaped from Italy landed at Tripolos on the Phoenician coast, and at once announced his intention of becoming the future king of Syria. The army having declared in his favor Antiochus and Lysias were put to death and Demetrius ascended the throne.

Alcimus and the Apostate Jews in Antioch, at once ingratiated themselves into the King's favor and accused Judas of being guilty of opression to the hellenists and also of treason to the King in putting to death those who would have been his supporters. Demetrius lending a ready ear to these accusations confirmed Acimus in his office, and took measures to see that he was duly installed, and the enemies of the King were punished. This work was entrusted to Bacchides one of the ablest of his generals, who was peculiarly fitted for the task, since he hated the Jews with all his little soul. Thus the war-cloud settled once more over the fair Judean hills. Finding that no trust could be placed in the newly appointed high-priest, the nationals turned again to Judas as their leader and champion.

Alcimus with the troops left by Bacchides, as a means of protection, were soon routed by the patriots, and he was forced to recourse to Syria for fresh aid from the King. With the

appearance of the Syrian army under Nicanor, the real struggle began. The two armies faced each other at Capharsalama where Judas gained a brilliant victory, Nicanor being forced to fall back on Jerusalem in order to secure the support of the garrison in the citadel. This was followed soon after on the thirteenth day of Adar 161 B.C., by the famous battle of Adasa where Judas with three thousand men engaged, and utterly defeated the Syrian Army of nine thousand, Nicanor was killed and his head and his right hand taken to Jerusalem as an object lesson to the enemy. This victory gave the Jews a breathing spell. For the time being the patriots were master of the situation, and Judas took advantage of this to make a treaty with the Romans, which - had it come into effect soon enough - would have saved much bloodshed. Before the message from Rome forbidding Syrian interference in Jewish affairs, had time to reach the King, the cause of the patriots had assumed a critical aspect.

Syria, burning with anger and shame at her defeat, sent Bacchides at the head of a large army to wipe out the disgrace and rid the country of this troublesome Jewish wizard, who managed to hold his own against such fearful odds. Judas could only muster a few thousand men with which to meet this immense force, and these, discouraged with the great disparity in numbers between the two combatants, steadily deserted until but eight hundred remained to face Syria's thousands. Even these urged Judas to fly and wait a better opportunity,

but he answered in words which may have been prophetic of his death: "If our time be come let us die manfully like our brethren and let us not stain our honor." He attacked the right wing of Bacchides' army where its greatest strength lay, and so impetuous was his onset that the enemy gave way before him and fled in terror, but the left wing finding no opposition wheeled and enclosed the little band of heroes. It was in vain that they performed prodigies of valor; they were hemmed in by thousands of foes, and though every man seemed to have the "strength of ten in his single arm" still they were overwhelmed by the awful odds against them. Judas was killed and his followers seeing him fall broke and fled.

His body was recovered and buried in the sepulchre of his father at Modien, amid the lamentations of the people, whose darling hero and champion he was. As a man and a soldier he stands in the front rank of the heroes of history and his name may well be coupled with that of Leonidas. Dean Milman says: "Among those who have asserted the liberty of their native land against wanton and cruel oppression, none have surpassed the most able of the Maccabees in accomplishing a great end with inadequate means; none ever united more generous valor with a better cause."

A reign of terror followed the fall of Judas and his friends were hunted down and slaughtered without mercy. These outrages had the usual effect; they aroused opposition and the sword of Judas was taken up by his brother Jonathan, the fifth

and youngest son of Mattathias, who was aided by the counsel of Simon whose political sagacity and sterling qualities served his country so well in later times.

After the death of Judas the work took on a different aspect. Jonathan while possessing many of the warlike qualities of his family, was nevertheless more of a politician than a soldier and it was in this milder but no less fiercely contested field that his laurels were won, in the conduct of the war with Syria. He carefully avoided any great battles, unless forced to defend himself, then like a wounded animal at bay, he generally forced his opposers to retreat.

Bacchides also adopted a new policy, and instead of pursuing a band of outlaws into their mountain fastnesses, he built a chain of forts accross the country from which centers successful sallies might be made. By this wise scheme he did more for his cause than all the former efforts put together, and showed the superior military capacity which he seems to have possessed. It gave the hellenistic party freedom to act as they chose, but so radical were the measures of the high-priest that a wave of indignant protest swept over the land, and his death which followed soon after was hailed as a judgment of God for such impious procedure. The high-priest's office was now vacant and remained so until Jonathan himself was appointed to it in 153 B.C.

Two years of quiet followed the return of Bacchides to Syria, which cessation in the strife was taken advantage of by

Jonathan to raise the spirits of the national party and thus fit them for any emergency that might arise. An unsuccessful expedition into Judea, for the capture of the Nationalistic leaders, placed Bacchides in an embarrassing situation, in which the wily Jew saw an opportunity of advancing his own interests, and proposed a friendly alliance for each others good, to which plan the Syrian general readily assented as a dignified way out of an awkward predicament, and having exchanged prisoners he left Syria forever. Six years of rest followed this treaty. The country was still under Syrian rule and thus far little had been gained towards political independence. The long struggle had not been without its rewards however. Religious freedom had been attained and now the political results were about to be manifested. A rival claim to the Syrian throne made the conditions for this effect, and the shrewd leader of the Jews was now slow in availing himself of the advantages which fortune offered. The long war with Syria had taught, not only her, but the surrounding nations as well, that the Hebrews were no mean antagonists, and they were consequently feared and respected.

Both rivals knew the immense value of a treaty with this warlike people, hence both offered large inducement for the coveted alliance, so that by cautious management Jonathan obtained many privileges for his nation. He received from Demetrius, the right to raise an army, and at once began repairing the fortifications of Jerusalem. Seeing those war-

like preparations, all the fortified cities, except Bethsur, were deserted by their alarmed garrisons, and Judea was thus left practically free from Syrian troops.

From the other rival, Alexander Balas, the wily Jew, received nomination to the high-priest's office, besides a purple robe and a crown of gold. These favors were received with the same good grace as were those of Demetrius and in this way began the priest-princes of the Asmonaean family. Thus by the exercise of great political tact, Jonathan steadily gathered in the fruits of the heroic conflict, until Judea was practically independent, though nominally under Syrian rule. In the midst of his successes however, the high-priest was decoyed to Ptolemias, by Tryphon, a plotter for the Syrian throne, where he was taken prisoner, and later murdered. The news of his death created the wildest confusion. His followers mourned his untimely death as much as that of Judas, while his enemies held high carnival over the downfall of so clever a foe who had foiled all their schemes. The demonstration of both parties however, testified to his worth.

Simon alone remained of all the brothers, and attention was directed towards him, as the only one to take up the standard of his illustrious family. He did not shrink from the task but bravely took the sceptre which had been so treacherously snatched from his brother's hand, and so well did he weild it, that he outdid any of his predecessors, in some respects at least. He was loved and respected by all his

people and under his wise and mild rule Judea attained her complete independence and the long glorious struggle was at last crowned with success.

The results of the war were in part permanent, though political independence lasted but for a brief period. The Asmonaean Kings soon proved themselves incapable of retaining the splendid inheritance which was handed down from a family of warriors and statesmen. The contrast between their disgraceful conduct, and the inspiring example of their predecessors, is too painful for relation,and it was a mercy rather than a misfortune that the Romans threw about Judea the iron hand of their power, which was never taken away while the chosen nation held together.

The religious results however were permanent. These the Romans permitted to remain unmolested as was their custom. Thus the struggle gave the final impetus to the old form of the World Religion, which in a century and a half burst forth into its highest type with the coming of the Son of Man, and "the typical kingdom gave place to a universal church."