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The Maccabees in history

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Some of the great military duels of history are designated as decisive battles. And well are they named. For, a Waterloo, has determined the political face of Europe until the present time; and a Gettysburg, will be reckoned by Americans as a balance in the political scale for half a millennium to come. As there are decisive battles in history, so are their crucial periods and epoch making characters. The age of the Maccabees was such a period, and the sons of Mattathias were such characters. That the period was crucial, is seen in the fact that Judaism, out of which Christianity was to spring, was fighting for its life; and that the Maccabees were epoch making characters is witnessed by the fact that, in their hands, Judaism was saved from death and made to live for 200 years. Thus, an appropriate religious and moral background was preserved for the coming of Christianity when the time was fully ripe.

A consideration of the Maccabean period of history might lead us into various channels of thought. It would, no doubt, be interesting to observe the immediate political result of the struggle of the Maccabees upon the surrounding nations. Again, a fruitful field would be found in a contemplation of the effect of the Maccabean revolt on the Jewish people themselves. But in this paper it is our purpose to note the significance of the Maccabean age in its relation to Christianity.

In order to understand the causes of the Maccabean revolt, it is necessary, briefly, to review the history of the Hebrew nation from the time of their captivity. About the year 435 B.C. the Jews returned from captivity, Jerusalem and the Temple were rebuilt and the priesthood was once again established. Little is known of the nation during this century, beyond the fact that the people lived peacefully under the Persian rule, enjoying religious freedom, and governed by native chiefs. It was in 333 B.C. that Alexander the Great made his appearance in Palestine. Reports of his power deterred the Jews from any ideas of resistance. Ambassadors were sent to Alexander who were received kindly and Palestine passed without a struggle from Persian into Greek hands. All went well until 324 B.C., when Alexander the Great died, and Palestine became part of the Asiatic kingdom of the family of Seleucus, reigning in Antioch. Under the earlier Seleucidae the Jews enjoyed political consideration and prosperity. But a sad day was coming. For in the manipulation of affairs at Antioch, Antiochus Epiphanes became King in 176 B.C.

At this very time the internal dissension of the Jews drew attention to their affairs. The High Priest, Onias, died and was succeeded by his brother Jason. Onias also left a son named Onias, and had a third brother named Menelaus, and these two became claimants for the office of High Priest. Antiochus took up the cause of Menelaus and in 172 B.C. installed him as High Priest. The feeling was bitter, and upon hearing that Antiochus had been killed in Egypt, Jason with a large party imprisoned Menelaus. Unfortunately for the Jews, Antiochus had not been killed, and on hearing of Jason's revolution at Jerusalem, advanced on the city and was admitted by the faction of Menelaus. A general massacre of the inhabitants ensued. Public buildings were burnt, the Temple desecrated and many Jews carried off and sold in Antioch. Menelaus was again installed as High Priest, and Jason fled to Egypt.

Such is a brief resume of the events from the captivity to the eve of the Maccabean revolution. (435-168 B.C.). Having narrated the history leading up to the Maccabees, we may now glance at the social and religious condition of the Jewish people at this time.

"We neither inhabit a maritime country, nor do we delight in merchandise, nor in such a mixture with other men as arises from it; but the cities we dwell in are remote from the sea, and having a fruitful country for our habitation, we take pains to cultivate that only. Our principal care is this--to educate our children well, to observe the laws that have been delivered us and to keep those rules of piety that have been delivered down to us." Such is the description Josephus gives of Jewish life in his own time. If such an account represents the national life in his day, it must evidently apply still better to the less advanced civilization of the earlier period now under consideration.

One remarkable peculiarity of the social system of the Jews was the entire absence of the middle class. At this time the nation seems to have been divided into two classes--the educated and the ignorant. The priests and the dwellers in towns and cities belonged to the former; while the dwellers in villages and rural communities belonged to the latter. The upper class traced their genealogy to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and referred to the lower class with contempt. The lower class or "ignorant," consisted, probably, of the descendants of the aboriginal Canaanite population mixed with other elements. This class was imposed upon by the other and had little to hope for, from the political order then in force.

The central idea of Jewish government, religious and civil and of Jewish education, moral or intellectual was the fulfil-

ment of the Law. Government meant enforcing the Law. The commands of Moses formed the standard by which the value of everything, moral, political and religious, was to be measured.

The Jewish method of government seemed to be the development of a system of councils formed from the elders and most distinguished local citizens. The smaller councils were located in the various towns and cities throughout the land and consisted of twenty-four members. The principal Council, the Sanhedrin, sat in Jerusalem and consisted of seventy-one members. "Men of every class, high or low, rich or poor, priest or lay, were eligible, if qualified by a reputation for sagacity and knowledge of the Law."

The education of the young was, as Josephus tells us, the first care of the Jews. This same sentiment is expressed elsewhere in Hebrew literature. But by education was understood simply the teaching of the Law of Moses. A Jewish child learned to read the X Holy Books at eight years of age. This education was, however, confined to the upper class, and could be obtained only in places where schools and teachers existed. The children in the rural districts and far off villages must have grown up in ignorance.

* All the schooling was directly connected with the religious service of the people and lacked everything similar to the liberal arts of the present day. Science formed no part of the orthodox education. The study of Greek, or any foreign tongue, was discouraged by the teachers. Art and even music made no progress and poetry alone was unhampered by national prejudice.

It is impossible to lay too much stress on the religious side of Jewish life. For religion formed the very essence of the lives of the people. Every earthly consideration was made subservient to that of following the commandments of the Law. Even danger and death were cheerfully suffered rather than infringe the observance of the Law. Twice every year every male Jew was commanded to go to Jerusalem. There were many religious festivals. In April the Passover was observed. At the end of May the Feast of Weeks was celebrated and in October came the Feast of Tabernacles. To these must be added the Feast of Purim, celebrated in March. There were other secondary observances and religious exercises which we cannot here mention. In fact, there was a complete subordination of everything to the religious. The religious duties formed the main employment of the Jewish life among the higher class.

Such is a brief summary of the social and religious condition of the Jewish nation at the beginning of the Maccabean age. But in order to better understand the age, we must take

just one glance at the religious parties of the time.

When the Jews returned from captivity they found their land occupied by a mixed Semitic people. It was the party headed by Ezra and Nehemiah which first advocated separation from those of mixed descent. The party of separatists was at first small. The rulers and the majority of the nation were content to take things as they were. But gradually the Puritanical spirit increased the numbers of the separatists until they became more powerful than the original ruling party. These two parties were well defined in 176 B.C. The separatists demanded isolation; those who were content maintained that such a course was not practical. The one repudiated anything foreign and demanded a subordination of everything to the religious; the other took kindly to innovations and perceived a distinction between the secular and the religious. Later these parties became the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Hebrews had dwelt in many lands and were tinged with many customs and beliefs; but through it all they maintained their religion and morals. However from the time of Alexander the Great, there came to the Jews a new influence, more powerful, because more attractive, than any force they had encountered in all their checkered history. It was the Greek culture, known as Hellenism. The toleration of Alexander had brought Jew and Gentile into new and friendly relations. A silent revolution was taking place in Jewish thought and habits. The influence of Greek culture was beginning to be felt not only in Egypt and Syria, among the foreign Jews, but even in Palestine and the Holy City itself. A gymnasium had been established in Jerusalem and Greek festivals began to be celebrated throughout Palestine, and were attended by Jews. Some of the priests on one occasion cast aside their sacred robes and contended for popular applause in the Greek game of Discus.

On such innovations the orthodox looked with much horror. For every practice not based on the Law must be spurned. To the pious Jew, these things were ill omens and they beheld them with strange emotions.

This was the situation when Antiochus Epiphanes came to the throne in Antioch. Had he been content to leave the Jews to themselves, and had he given time for the gradual spread of Hellenism, which was then beginning to sap the very foundations of Judaism, the history of the world must have been materially modified and the basis on which Christianity was first founded might, perhaps, never have been consolidated. But Antiochus could not wait. He must Hellenize the Jews at once.

At this time there was a small but zealous party already

referred to, which opposed the encroachments of Hellenism, and would preserve the tradition of "separation" handed down from Ezra. This party demanded a return to the strictest and most literal interpretation of the Law and the entire repudiation of everything derived from the outer heathen world. This party only required leaders to rally it, and a persecutor to fan the flame of its zeal. The persecutor was Antiochus Epiphanes; the leaders were the Maccabean brothers.

Such briefly, was the life, manners customs, national feeling and history of the Jewish people from the captivity to the Maccabean age. It was then that the savage Antiochus formed the rash project of destroying all that was distinctively Jewish among the people of Palestine and inaugurating a complete Hellenistic schedule. He judged the temper of the people, no doubt, from the renegade Jews whom he had encountered at Antioch. He understood neither the attachment with which the majority of the nation regarded their ancient Law, nor the stubborn courage and endurance of which the Jews were capable.

So, learning of the quarrel among the candidates for the office of High Priest, Antiochus detached a party under one of his officers, Appolonius, to go to Jerusalem. Appolonius was instructed to collect taxes, and to put down by stringent measures every distinguishing Jewish custom. Circumcision was forbidden, the Sabbath was to be desecrated, the copies of the Law to be collected and burnt, the Jews to be forced to eat swine's flesh, and the Temple to be desecrated by foreign worship and re-consecrated to Jupiter Olympus.

Appolonius entered Jerusalem peacefully, but when once established his cruel edict fell like a thunder bolt on the nation. A terrible persecution followed. Women who had dared to circumcise their children were tortured and paraded with their murdered infants hanging round their necks. Aged men were put to cruel and lingering deaths. Blood flowed like water in the streets of Jerusalem and for a moment the policy of Antiochus triumphed. Incense was burned at pagan altars in the streets of the city. A citadel was erected in the lower city. And on the 15th of Chislen, an idol altar was erected in the Temple Court. Some days later sacrifices of swine were offered on this altar and a statue erected and consecrated to Jupiter Olympus. The Jewish ritual was abolished and Greek rites substituted for it. Thus, in the pathetic language of the Chronicler, "Her sanctuary was laid waste like a wilderness; her feasts were turned into mourning, her Sabbaths into reproach, her honor into contempt. And there was very great wrath on Israel."

Although Jerusalem was the first to suffer from this violent decree, it was not there that the desperation of the Jews

first lent them courage to resist. The same idiot went to every town and village in the land. It would seem that the Hellenists were in the majority at the capital, and consequently the decree was put into effect. But, the views and habits of the countrymen were entirely different from those of the educated city inhabitants. Those who dwelt in the rural districts had, no doubt, adhered with much greater loyalty to the ancient customs and beliefs of their fathers and there it was far more difficult to carry out the resolution of Antiochus.

About twenty miles north of Jerusalem lay the little town of Modein. In this quiet little village lived Mattathias an aged priest; and when trouble came, he with his five sons withdrew to this quiet retreat. They had not been there long when an officer appeared for the purpose of establishing the new heathen worship. The old priest was asked to set the example of compliance with the king's command, by making the first heathen sacrifice on the newly erected altar. Mattathias flatly refused in the following words: "If all the nations that are under the king's dominions obey him and fall away every one from the worship of their fathers, and give consent to his commandments; yet will I and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers. God forbid that we should forsake the law and ordinances. We will not hearken to the king's words to go aside from our worship either to the right hand or to the left." He had scarcely ceased speaking when an apostate Jew stepped forward to make the sacrifice. Mattathias in an instant had killed him. Then turning upon the king's agent, he also struck him down beside the altar, and ordered the altar immediately broken to pieces.

This deed of Mattathias was really the beginning of the Maccabean revolt. It was a call to arms, and the initiation of one of the bravest and noblest struggles for religious and political freedom in all history. Mattathias with his sons and immediate followers fled to the mountains where a guerrilla warfare was maintained for a time. In 167 B.C. Mattathias died and Judas Maccabaenus became the leader of a small but resolute and united band of enthusiasts, who were determined not only to resist the tyranny of Antiochus, but to free their brethren from both the Greeks and the Hellenistic Jews, and to re-establish the independence of the nation.

To the unprejudiced observer, this brave resolution appears noble but futile. For a subject nation, divided within itself, to attempt to rescue and reestablish a political and ecclesiastical system which had already fallen into decay, would seem to be the height of folly. The more hopeless would the struggle appear when viewed on the background of the great Seleucid kingdom. Without a stronghold, the Maccabees went forth to measure

arms with the king of Antioch. With nothing but courage and faith in their cause they dared to flaunt the banner of defiance in a king's face. Every day added followers to their little band. Army after army was sent against them only to be tricked and then defeated. Stronghold after stronghold was taken. It is true that brother after brother fell heroically, but the next always took his place; until at the end of four decades the banner of the Maccabees floated over the Holy City, the cohorts of Hellenism had been driven back into the darkness from whence they came, and the Jews again enjoyed both their religious and political independence. The world has rarely seen such a spectacle, and we may doubt if history will be permitted to record another. The golden days of Joshua and David furnish no comparison in heroism and fortitude. Hellenism had conquered every people and religion with which it had come into contact. But here in the hills of Palestine it encountered a people and religion furnished with the breath of Jehovah, the eternal God. This it failed to conquer; and in turn was conquered by Christianity, the child of Judaism.

AS we said at the beginning the Maccabean age was crucial. Judaism was on trial for its life, and on the issue of the Maccabean revolt depended the society that should exist in Palestine when the Christ should come. If the Maccabees had failed and the onward march of Hellenism had not been checked, it is difficult, humanly speaking, to see how Christianity could have been born. Though Judaism itself was cold, formal and lifeless, though it revealed woeful mistakes, and exhibited the hopelessness of its most fascinating hopes; though it was, really, legality gone mad: yet it was far superior to Hellenism as a moral and religious ground for receiving the seed Christ was to sow. Humanly speaking, Judaism was needed and the Maccabees spared it to posterity.

But, some one asks, "why do you prefer Judaism to Hellenism? Is not our whole culture and civilization today based upon Hellas and what that favored race gave to mankind?" To the second question we answer, yes. But at the time of which we are speaking, Greece itself had long passed its Golden Age, its intellectual and political meridian. It no longer had anything to offer that was worth the taking.

The case of the Greeks shows very clearly whither a civilization leads which lacks religious and moral foundation and is solely a product of the unrestrained human spirit. With Greek intellectual perfection went hand in hand "a moral decay whose dreadful depths could not be hidden even by the roses that flourished on the edge of the abyss." Cornill says, "Aside from the sole shining figure of Epaminoudas, who as a Boeotian was a semi-booer in the eyes of every genuine Hellene, Greek hist-

ory from the end of the Peloponnesian War to the time of Alexander the Great presents a truly depressing picture of abjectness and worthlessness. Very soon the average Greek had of civilization only moral decay, of culture only conceited arrogance." The Greeks did indeed carry a species of civilization to the east, but they also carried moral degeneration. Wherever Hellenism went, frivolity, skepticism and moral laxity accompanied it, which was more repulsive under its veneer of culture than barbarism itself.

Hellenism was such a force, and it was this force that Judaism met in mortal combat. It is indeed true, that there was a certain charitableness and liberality in Hellenism which ~~is~~ to be desired. Judaism was, on the other hand, cold and uncharitable. But in spite of its defects, Judaism possessed a morality ennobled by religion, and a religion manifested in morality which was needed for the coming Kingdom. It only needed to be cleansed of its narrow legality and rebaptized by divine sympathy and love; and this cleansing and baptism Judaism received at the hands of Jesus of Nazareth. With this regeneration, and with the Messianic hope, Judaism took a new name and went on its way to conquer the world in the name of Christianity. And while Christianity has been marching on for 2000 years, Hellenism has been slumbering in the tomb of death for twenty centuries. Had Antiochus Epiphanes stamped out the Jewish faith, no such development as Christianity would have resulted. Had the Maccabees lacked the genius or courage through which they triumphed, the lessons of love and duty taught by Christ would, humanly speaking, never have been proclaimed to the world.

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