

## Behind the Scenes of the Hanukkah Story: The Books of the Maccabees

Miryam Brand

### Background of Chanukah

Note: All translations are based on the New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS), with some minor changes.

#### 1 Maccabees 1

10 And out of them arose a sinful root, Antiochus Epiphanes son of Antiochus the king, who had been a hostage in Rome and became king in the one hundred thirty-seventh year of the kingdom of the Greeks.

11 In those days out of Israel came sons, transgressors of the law, and persuaded many, saying, "Let us go and make a covenant with the nations around us, because from the time we separated ourselves from them many evils have found us." 12And the proposition seemed good in their eyes; 13so some of the people took courage and went to the king, and he gave them the authority to follow the statutes of the nations. 14And they built a gymnasium in Hierosolyma according to the precepts of the nations, 15and they fashioned foreskins for themselves and apostatized from the holy covenant and joined themselves to the nations and sold themselves to do evil. 16 And the kingdom was ready in the sight of Antiochus, and he undertook to become king of the land of Egypt so that he might rule over the two kingdoms. ... 20 And Antiochus returned after conquering Egypt in the one hundred forty-third year and went up against Israel and went up against Hierosolyma with a heavily armed host. 21And he entered the holy precinct with arrogance and took the golden altar and the lamp stand for the light and all its utensils 22and the table of presentation and the libation bowls and the saucers and the golden censers and the veil and the crowns, and he stripped off all the gold ornamentation on the façade of the shrine. 23And he took the silver and the gold and the precious vessels, and he took the hidden treasures, which he found. 24And taking everything, he left for his own land and carried out murder and spoke with great arrogance....31And he took the spoils of the city and burned it with fire and tore down its houses and the walls around it. 32And they took the women and the children captive and took possession of the livestock. 33And they reconstructed the city of Daudid with a large and fortified wall with fortified towers, and it became a citadel for them. 34And they stationed a sinful nation there, lawless men, and they became strong in it. 35And they stockpiled weapons and food, and gathering the plunder of Ierousalem, they stored it there and became a great threat.

#### 2 Maccabees 5

5 When a false rumor arose that Antiochus was dead, Jason took no fewer than a thousand men and suddenly made an assault on the city. When the troops on the wall had been forced back and at last the city was being taken, Menelaus took refuge in the acropolis. 6But Jason kept relentlessly slaughtering his compatriots, not realizing that success at the cost of one's kindred is the greatest misfortune but imagining that he was setting up trophies of victory over enemies and not over compatriots. 7He did not, however, gain control of the government; in the end he got only disgrace from his conspiracy and fled again into the Ammanitis. 8Finally he met a miserable end. Accused before Aretas the ruler of the Arabs, fleeing from city to city, pursued by everyone, hated as a rebel against the laws and abhorred as the executioner of his country and his compatriots, he was cast ashore in Egypt. 9There he, who had driven many from their own country into exile, died in exile, having embarked to go to the

Spartans in hope of finding protection because of their kinship. 10He who had cast out many to lie unburied had no one to mourn for him; he had no funeral of any sort and no place in his ancestral tomb.

11 When news of what had happened reached the king, he took it to mean that Judea was in revolt. So, raging inwardly, he left Egypt and took the city by force. 12He commanded his soldiers to cut down relentlessly everyone they met and to kill those who went into their houses. 13Then there were massacres of young and old, destruction of women and children, slayings of virgins and infants. 14Within the total of three days eighty thousand were destroyed, forty thousand in hand-to-hand fighting, and as many were sold into slavery as were killed.

15 Not content with this, Antiochus dared to enter the most holy temple in all the world, guided by Menelaus, who had become a traitor both to the laws and to his country, 16 taking the sacred vessels with his polluted hands and pulling down with profane hands the votive offerings that other kings had made to enhance the glory and honor of the place.

### **What is Chanuka (מאי חנוכה)?**

#### **1 Maccabees 4**

34 And they joined battle with each other, and from the army of Lysias fell five thousand men, and they fell from before them. 35And seeing the developing rout of his own formation but the complete boldness of Ioudas and how they were ready to live or die bravely, Lysias departed to Antioch and was enlisting foreign troops, [and] becoming numerous again in order to return to Judea.

36 But Ioudas and his brothers said, "Look, our enemies have been smashed. Let us go up to purify and rededicate the Temple." 37And the whole company gathered together and went up to Mount Sion. 38And they saw the holy precinct desolate and the altar defiled and the doors burned and plants growing in the courts as in a thicket or as in one of the mountains and the chambers of the priests demolished. 39And they tore their garments and mourned with great mourning. And they spread ashes on themselves 40and fell on their faces on the ground. And they trumpeted with the signal trumpets and cried out to heaven.

41 Then Ioudas ordered men to fight those in the citadel until he could purify the Temple.

42And he selected uncorrupted priests, devotees of the law, 43and they purified the Temple and took the stones of pollution to an unclean place. 44And they took counsel concerning the altar of whole burnt offering, which had been defiled, as to what they should do with it. 45And there fell to them a good counsel, to tear it down so that it would not become a reproach to them, because the nations defiled it. And they tore down the altar 46and put away the stones on the mount of the house in a suitable place until a prophet would come to give an answer concerning these things. 47And they took whole stones according to the law and built a new altar like the former one. 48And they built the Temple and the inner areas of the house and sanctified the courts. 49And they made new holy vessels and brought the lamp stand and the altar of incense and the table into the shrine. 50And they burned incense on the altar and lit the lamps, which were on the lamp stand, and they gave light in the shrine. 51And they placed loaves on the table and spread out the veils and finished all the works which they made. 58And very great gladness came upon the people, and their disgrace before the nations was removed. 59 And Ioudas, his brothers and the whole assembly of Israel established that the days of the rededication of the altar would be commemorated in their times, year by year, eight days from the twenty-fifth of the month Cheseleu, with gladness and joy.

## 2 Maccabees 1

1 The fellow Judeans in Hierosolyma and those in the land of Judea, to their Judean brothers in Egypt, greetings and true peace. 2 May God do good to you, and may he remember his covenant with Abraam and Isaak and Iakob, his faithful slaves. 3 May he give you all a heart to worship him and to do his will with a strong heart and a willing spirit. 4 May he open your heart to his law and his ordinances, and may he bring peace. 5 May he heed your prayers and be reconciled to you, and may he not forsake you in a time of evil. 6 We are now praying for you here.

7 In the reign of Demetrius, in the one hundred sixty-ninth year, we Judeans wrote to you in the critical distress that came upon us in those years after Jason and his company revolted from the holy land and the kingdom 8 and burned the gate and shed innocent blood. We prayed to the Lord and were heard, and we offered sacrifice and grain offering, and we lit the lamps and set out the loaves. 9 And now see that you keep the days of the feast of tent pitching in the month of Chaseleu.

10 In the one hundred eighty-eighth year, the people of Hierosolyma and of Judea and the senate and Ioudas, to Aristobulus, who is of the family of the anointed priests, teacher of King Ptolemy, and to the Judeans in Egypt, greetings and good health.

11 Having been saved by God out of grave dangers we thank him greatly as men drawing up in battle-order against the king, 12 for he drove out those who drew up in battle-order against the holy city. 13 When the leader and his army, which seemed irresistible, reached Persia, they were cut to pieces in the temple of Nanea by a deception employed by the priests of the goddess Nanea. 14 On the pretext of intending to marry her, Antiochus came to the place together with his Friends, to take most of the money in name of a dowry. 15 When the priests of the temple of Nanea had set it out and that man had come with a few men inside the wall of the sacred precinct, they closed the temple as soon as he had entered it. 16 Opening a secret door in the paneled ceiling, they threw stones and struck down the leader, and they dismembered them and cut off their heads and threw them to the people outside. 17 Blessed in every way be our God, who has delivered up those who have behaved impiously.

18 Since we intend to celebrate the purification of the temple on the twenty-fifth of Chaseleu, we thought it necessary to notify you in order that you also may celebrate it, as the feast of tent pitching and of the fire, given when Neemias, who built both the temple and the altar and offered sacrifices.

## 2 Maccabees 10

5 It happened that on the same day on which the shrine had been profaned by foreigners the purification of the shrine took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Kislev. 6 They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of booths, remembering how not long before, during the feast of booths, they had been inhabiting the mountains and caves like wild animals. 7 Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. 8 They decreed by public ordinance and by vote that the whole nation of the Judeans should observe these days every year.

**After הנוכח**

**1 Maccabees 6**

18 And the men from the citadel (Hakra) had shut Israel in around the Temple and were seeking to do harm by every means and to support the nations.

19 And Ioudas determined to eliminate them and summoned all the people together to besiege them.

48 But the men from the army of the king went up to meet them in Ierousalem, and the king camped in Judea and at Mount Sion. 49 And he made peace with the people of Baithsoura, and they came out of the city, because there was no food for them there to be shut in it, because it was sabbath in the land. 50 And the king took Baithsoura and stationed a guard there to hold it.

**Battle of Nicanor**

**1 Maccabees 7**

33 After these developments Nicanor went up to Mount Sion, and some of the priests from the bholy placesb and some of the elders from the people came out to greet him peacefully and to show him the whole burnt offering that was being offered in behalf of the king. 34 But he mocked them and ridiculed them and defiled them and spoke arrogantly. 35 And he swore with anger, saying, "If Ioudas and his army do not surrender themselves into my hands now, in the future, if I return in peace, I will burn down this house." And he went out with great anger. 36 And the priests went in and stood in front of the altar and the shrine and wept and said, "You have selected this house for your name to be invoked in it, to be a house of prayer and supplication for your people. 38 Execute vengeance on this man and on his army, and let them fall by the sword. Remember their blasphemies, and do not allow them to endure."

**2 Maccabees 15**

34 And they all offered praise to heaven, blessed the manifest Lord, saying, "Blessed is he who has kept his own place undefiled!" 35 Ioudas fastened Nikanor's head to the citadel, visible to all and an obvious sign of the help of the Lord. 36 And they all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved but to have the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is called Adar in the Syrian language, marked, the day before Mardochaios' day.

37 This is how it went with Nikanor, and from that time the city has been ruled by the Hebrews. So I myself will here bring my story to a halt.

**Timeline:**

167 BCE – Decrees of Antiochus

164 BCE – Purification of the Temple

End of 164 BCE – Antiochus IV dies:

163-162 BCE – Alcimus appointed high priest

161 BCE – Battle of Nicanor

159 BCE – Death of Yehuda and beginning of Yonatan's leadership

159 BCE – Alcimus dies

159-152 BCE – No high priest

152 BCE – Yonatan appointed high priest

142 BCE – Demetrius II recognizes Judean independence

Iyyar 141 BCE – Shimon conquers the Hakra:

134 BCE – Shimon is murdered, Yohanan Hyrkanus ascends to the throne