

Alexander the Great

¹ This history begins when Alexander the Great, son of Philip of Macedonia, marched from Macedonia and attacked Darius, king of Persia and Media. Alexander enlarged the Greek Empire by defeating Darius and seizing his throne. ² He fought many battles, captured fortified cities, and put the kings of the region to death. ³ As he advanced to the ends of the earth, he plundered many nations; and when he had conquered the world, he became proud and arrogant. ⁴ By building up a strong army, he dominated whole nations and their rulers, and forced everyone to pay him taxes.

⁵⁻⁷ When Alexander had been emperor for twelve years, he fell ill and realized that he was about to die. He called together his generals, noblemen who had been brought up with him since his early childhood, and he divided his empire, giving a part to each of them. ⁸ After his death, the generals took control, ⁹ and each had himself crowned king of his own territory. The descendants of these kings ruled for many generations and brought a great deal of misery on the world.

Antiochus Epiphanes and the Renegade Jews

¹⁰ The wicked ruler Antiochus Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus the Third of Syria, was a descendant of one of Alexander's generals. Antiochus Epiphanes had been a hostage in Rome before he became king of Syria in the year 137.

¹¹ At that time there appeared in the land of Israel a group of traitorous Jews who had no regard for the Law and who had a bad influence on many of our people. They said, "Let's come to terms with the Gentiles, for our refusal to associate with them has brought us nothing but trouble." ¹² This proposal appealed to many people, ¹³ and some of them became so enthusiastic about it that they went to the king and received from him permission to follow Gentile customs. ¹⁴ They built in Jerusalem a stadium like those in the Greek cities. ¹⁵ They had surgery performed to hide their circumcision, abandoned the holy covenant, started associating with gentiles, and did all sorts of other evil things.

Antiochus Attacks Egypt

¹⁶ When Antiochus had firmly established himself as king, he decided to conquer Egypt and rule that country as well as Syria. ¹⁷ He invaded Egypt with a large fleet of ships and a powerful army, including chariots, elephants, and cavalry. ¹⁸ When the attack came, King Ptolemy of Egypt turned and fled, and many of his soldiers were killed. ¹⁹ Antiochus was able to capture the fortified cities of Egypt and plunder the whole land.

Antiochus Persecutes the Jews

²⁰ In the year 143,^[c] after the conquest of Egypt, Antiochus marched with a great army against the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. ²¹ In his arrogance, he entered the Temple and took away the gold altar, the lampstand with all its equipment, ²² the table for the bread offered to the Lord, the cups and bowls, the gold fire pans, the curtain, and the crowns. He also stripped all the gold from the front of the Temple ²³ and carried off the silver and gold and everything else of value, including all the treasures that he could find stored there. ²⁴ Then he took it all to his own

country. He had also murdered many people and boasted arrogantly about it.²⁵ There was great mourning everywhere in the land of Israel.

²⁶ Rulers and leaders groaned in sorrow. Young men and young women grew weak. The beauty of our women faded.²⁷ Every bridegroom sang a funeral song, and every bride sat mourning in her room.²⁸ All our people were clothed with shame, and our land trembled for them.

²⁹ Two years later Antiochus sent a large army from Mysia against the towns of Judea. When the soldiers entered Jerusalem,³⁰ their commander spoke to the people, offering them terms of peace and completely deceiving them. Then he suddenly launched a fierce attack on the city, dealing it a major blow and killing many of the people.³¹ He plundered the city, set it on fire, and tore down its buildings and walls.³² He and his army took the women and children as prisoners and seized the cattle.

³³ Then Antiochus and his forces built high walls and strong towers in the area north of the Temple, turning it into a fort.³⁴ They brought in a group of traitorous Jews and installed them there.³⁵ They also brought in arms and supplies and stored in the fort all the loot that they had taken in Jerusalem. This fort became a great threat to the city.

³⁶ The fort was a threat to the Temple, a constant, evil menace for Israel.³⁷ Innocent people were murdered around the altar; the Holy Place was defiled by murderers.³⁸ The people of Jerusalem fled in fear, and the city became a colony of foreigners. Jerusalem was foreign to its own people, who had been forced to abandon the city.³⁹ Her Temple was as empty as a wilderness; her festivals were turned into days of mourning, her Sabbath joy into shame. Her honor became an object of ridicule.⁴⁰ Her shame was as great as her former glory, and her pride was turned into deepest mourning.

⁴¹⁻⁴³ Antiochus now issued a decree that all nations in his empire should abandon their own customs and become one people. All the Gentiles and even many of the Israelites submitted to this decree. They adopted the official pagan religion, offered sacrifices to idols, and no longer observed the Sabbath.

⁴⁴ The king also sent messengers with a decree to Jerusalem and all the towns of Judea, ordering the people to follow customs that were foreign to the country.⁴⁵ He ordered them not to offer burnt offerings, grain offerings, or wine offerings in the Temple, and commanded them to treat Sabbaths and festivals as ordinary work days.⁴⁶ They were even ordered to defile the Temple and the holy things in it.^[e]⁴⁷ They were commanded to build pagan altars, temples, and shrines, and to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals there.⁴⁸ They were forbidden to circumcise their sons and were required to make themselves ritually unclean in every way they could,⁴⁹ so that they would forget the Law which the Lord had given through Moses and would disobey all its commands.⁵⁰ The penalty for disobeying the king's decree was death.

⁵¹ The king not only issued the same decree throughout his whole empire, but he also appointed officials to supervise the people and commanded each town in Judea to offer pagan sacrifices.

⁵² Many of the Jews were ready to forsake the Law and to obey these officials. They defiled the land with their evil,⁵³ and their conduct forced all true Israelites to hide wherever they could.

⁵⁴ On the fifteenth day of the month of Kislev in the year 145,^[f] King Antiochus set up 'The Awful Horror' on the altar of the Temple, and pagan altars were built in the towns throughout

Judea. ⁵⁵ Pagan sacrifices were offered in front of houses and in the streets. ⁵⁶ Any books of the Law which were found were torn up and burned, ⁵⁷ and anyone who was caught with a copy of the sacred books or who obeyed the Law was put to death by order of the king. ⁵⁸ Month after month these wicked people used their power against the Israelites caught in the towns.

⁵⁹ On the twenty-fifth of the month, these same evil people offered sacrifices on the pagan altar erected on top of the altar in the Temple. ⁶⁰ Mothers who had allowed their babies to be circumcised were put to death in accordance with the king's decree. ⁶¹ Their babies were hung around their necks, and their families and those who had circumcised them were put to death. ⁶² But many people in Israel firmly resisted the king's decree and refused to eat food that was ritually unclean. ⁶³ They preferred to die rather than break the holy covenant and eat unclean food—and many did die. ⁶⁴ In his anger God made Israel suffer terribly.

The Faithfulness of Mattathias

2 During that time, a priest of the Jehoiarib family named Mattathias, who was the son of John and the grandson of Simeon, moved from Jerusalem and settled in Modein. ² Mattathias had five sons: John (also called Gaddi), ³ Simon (also called Thassi), ⁴ Judas (also called Maccabeus), ⁵ Eleazar (also called Avaran), and Jonathan (also called Apphus).

⁶ When Mattathias saw all the sins that were being committed in Judea and Jerusalem, ⁷ he said:

Why was I born to see these terrible things,
the ruin of my people and of the holy city?
Must I sit here helpless
while the city is surrendered to enemies
and the Temple falls into the hands of foreigners?
⁸ The Temple is like someone without honor.
⁹ Its splendid furnishings
have been carried away as loot.
Our children have been killed in the streets,
and our young men by the sword of the enemy.
¹⁰ Every nation in the world has occupied the city
and robbed her of her possessions.
¹¹ All her ornaments have been stripped away;
she is now a slave, no longer free.
¹² Look at our Temple, profaned by the Gentiles,
emptied of all its splendor.
¹³ Why should we go on living?

¹⁴ In their grief, Mattathias and his sons tore their clothes, put on sackcloth, and continued in deep mourning. ¹⁵ Then the king's officials, who were forcing the people to turn from God, came to the town of Modein to force the people there to offer pagan sacrifices. ¹⁶ Many of the Israelites came to meet them, including Mattathias and his sons. ¹⁷ The king's officials said to Mattathias, You are a respected leader in this town, and you have the support of your sons and relatives. ¹⁸ Why not be the first one here to do what the king has commanded? All the Gentiles, the people of Judea, and all the people left in Jerusalem have already done so. If you do, you and your sons will be honored with the title of Friends of the King, and you will be rewarded with silver and gold and many gifts.

¹⁹ Mattathias answered in a loud voice, I don't care if every Gentile in this empire has obeyed the king and yielded to the command to abandon the religion of his ancestors. ²⁰ My children, my relatives, and I will continue to keep the covenant that God made with our ancestors. ²¹ With God's help we will never abandon his Law or disobey his commands. ²² We will not obey the king's decree, and we will not change our way of worship in the least.

²³ Just as he finished speaking, one of the men from Modein decided to obey the king's decree and stepped out in front of everyone to offer a pagan sacrifice on the altar that stood there. ²⁴ When Mattathias saw him, he became angry enough to do what had to be done. Shaking with rage, he ran forward and killed the man right there on the altar. ²⁵ He also killed the royal official who was forcing the people to sacrifice, and then he tore down the altar. ²⁶ In this way Mattathias showed his deep devotion for the Law, just as Phinehas had done when he killed Zimri son of Salu.

The Guerrilla Warfare of Mattathias

²⁷ Then Mattathias went through the town shouting, everyone who is faithful to God's covenant and obeys his Law, follow me! ²⁸ With this, he and his sons fled to the mountains, leaving behind all they owned. ²⁹⁻³⁰ At that time also many of the Israelites who were seeking to be right with God through obedience to the Law went out to live in the wilderness, taking their children, their wives, and their livestock with them, because of the terrible oppression they were suffering. ³¹ The report soon reached the king's officials and the soldiers in the fort at Jerusalem that some men who had defied the king's command had gone into hiding in the wilderness. ³² A large force of soldiers pursued them, caught up with them, set up camp opposite them, and prepared to attack them on the Sabbath.

³³ There is still time, they shouted out to the Jews. Come out and obey the king's command, and we will spare your lives.

³⁴ We will not come out, they answered. We will not obey the king's command, and we will not profane the Sabbath. ³⁵ The soldiers attacked them immediately, ³⁶ but the Jews did nothing to resist; they did not even throw stones or block the entrances to the caves where they were hiding. ³⁷ They said, We will all die with a clear conscience. Let heaven and earth bear witness that you are slaughtering us unjustly. ³⁸ So the enemy attacked them on the Sabbath and killed the men, their wives, their children, and their livestock. A thousand people died.

³⁹ When Mattathias and his friends heard the news about this, they were greatly saddened ⁴⁰ and said to one another, If all of us do as these other Jews have done and refuse to fight the Gentiles to defend our lives and our religion, we will soon be wiped off the face of the earth. ⁴¹ On that day they decided that if anyone attacked them on the Sabbath, they would defend themselves, so that they would not all die as other Jews had died in the caves.

⁴² Then Mattathias and his friends were joined by a group of devout and patriotic Jews, the strongest and bravest men in Israel, who had all volunteered to defend the Law. ⁴³ In addition, everyone who was fleeing from the persecution joined them and strengthened their forces. ⁴⁴ Now that they had an army, they gave vent to their anger by attacking the renegade Jews. Those who escaped were forced to flee to the Gentiles for safety. ⁴⁵ Mattathias and his friends went everywhere tearing down pagan altars ⁴⁶ and circumcising by force every uncircumcised boy they found within the borders of Israel. ⁴⁷ They were also successful in hunting down the

arrogant Gentile officials. ⁴⁸ They rescued the Law of Moses from the Gentiles and their kings and broke the power of the wicked King Antiochus.

The Death of Mattathias

⁴⁹ When the time came for Mattathias to die, he said to his sons, These are times of violence and distress. Arrogant people are in control and have made us an object of ridicule. ⁵⁰ But you, my sons, must be devoted to the Law and ready to die to defend God's covenant with our ancestors. ⁵¹ Remember what our ancestors did and how much they accomplished in their day. Follow their example, and you will be rewarded with great glory and undying fame. ⁵² Remember how Abraham put his trust in the Lord when he was tested and how the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him. ⁵³ Joseph, in his time of trouble, obeyed God's commands and became ruler over the land of Egypt. ⁵⁴ Phinehas, our ancestor, because of his burning devotion, was given the promise that his descendants would always be priests. ⁵⁵ Joshua was made a judge in Israel because he obeyed the command of Moses. ⁵⁶ Caleb brought back a good report to the community and was given a part of the land as a reward. ⁵⁷ David was made king and was given the promise that his descendants would always be kings because of his steadfast loyalty to God. ⁵⁸ Elijah, because of his great devotion to the Law, was taken up into heaven. ⁵⁹ Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were saved from the flames because they had faith. ⁶⁰ Daniel was a man of integrity, and the Lord rescued him from the mouth of the lions. ⁶¹ Take each of these ancestors of ours as an example, and you will realize that no one who puts his trust in the Lord will ever lack strength. ⁶² Don't be afraid of the threats of a wicked man. Remember that he will die and all his splendor will end with worms feeding on his decaying body. ⁶³ Today he may be highly honored, but tomorrow he will disappear; his body will return to the earth and his scheming will come to an end. ⁶⁴ But you, my sons, be strong and courageous in defending the Law, because it is through the Law that you will earn great glory.

⁶⁵ Your brother Simon is wise, so always listen to him as you would to me. ⁶⁶ Judas Maccabeus has been strong all his life; he will be your commander and will lead you in battle against the enemy. ⁶⁷ Call everyone who obeys God's Law to rally around you; then avenge the wrongs done to your people. ⁶⁸ Pay back the Gentiles for what they have done, and always obey the Law and its commands.

⁶⁹ Then Mattathias gave them his blessing and died. ⁷⁰ He was buried in the family tomb at Modein, and all the people of Israel went into deep mourning for him. This happened in the year 146.[†]