

MACCABEES MAKE DANDY HOLIDAY READING

You want to read a good story, one that's appropriate for the December holiday season? Try dabbling around in 1 Maccabees.

But first you'll have to find it! It's one of the so-called apocryphal writings. At one time it was part of the Jewish scriptures, at least the versions that circulate in Greek translation.

But after the rabbis opted for a Bible limited to Hebrew-only documents, 1 Maccabees was preserved largely in Christian collections. But since most Protestant publishers eliminated the apocryphal books from the English editions, it can be found chiefly in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

Look around long enough, however, and chances are you can lay your hands on a copy of 1 Maccabees. If all else fails, try the local library. You won't be disappointed. It's a dandy story.

The background is the empire of Alexander the Great, the Greek king who conquered the world (that is, the eastern end of the Mediterranean, from Egypt to India) before he died of malaria or poisoning or whatever at the ripe old age of 33.

Several of his generals divided up the pot. One of them ended up ruling the territory which included the Jewish state.

A hundred and fifty years later the Seleucids hit the fan. The current king decided that everybody should adopt Greek customs. And worship Greek gods.

He imported statues of Zeus into Jewish communities, and added insult to injury by sacrificing a pig on the altar in the temple at Jerusalem.

That was the last straw. An old priest out in the sticks, a man named Mattathias, got so mad he killed the Greek soldier in charge of enforcing the religious decrees in his home town.

Soon he and his boys and a renegade band of sympathizers headed for the hills.

Their guerrilla tactics proved a real pain in the backside of the occupation forces. When Mattathias died, his sons carried on the liberation effort.

One son, Judas, was so powerfully effective he earned the nickname "the hammer." (That's where the book gets its name; "Maccabee" means "hammer.") His brothers Jonathan and Simon carried on after he was killed.

Eventually they won. For a century the Jewish people enjoyed a relatively stable state of political independence. But that's getting ahead of the story and way beyond the end of 1 Maccabees.

The early struggles are the best. Time after time the enemy king sends troops and cavalry and elephants and battering rams and catapults against the Jews.

And each time the brothers Maccabee ambush the invaders or outlast their sieges or otherwise come off as winners.

One of the high points in the early chapters is the recapture of Jerusalem. They scrub down the temple and rebuild the chief altar.

Three years to the day after the foreigners had desecrated their house of worship the Jews rededicate it. They light their menorahs, burn their incense, and sing their songs. And they keep it up for eight days.

Now known as Hanukkah or the Feast of Lights, the rededication of the temple is still celebrated by Jewish congregations in December.

So there you have it. A dandy story full of battles and heroes and winners against impossible odds. Just the sort of thing to read during the holidays.

It probably doesn't make a lot of difference whether you're observing the Jewish holidays or the Christian holidays or just the end of the year jollies.

In any case, you could do worse than thumb through 1 Maccabees sometime during the last few weeks of the year and enjoy a good story.

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