

II MACCABEES 1-2
LETTERS & PREFACE

¹The Jews in Jerusalem and those in the land of Judea, To their Jewish kindred in Egypt, Greetings and true peace.

²May God do good to you, and may he remember his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, his faithful servants. ³May he give you all a heart to worship him and to do his will with a strong heart and a willing spirit. ⁴May he open your heart to his law and his commandments, and may he bring peace. ⁵May he hear your prayers and be reconciled to you, and may he not forsake you in time of evil. ⁶We here are continually praying for you.

⁷In the reign of Demetrius, in the one hundred sixty-ninth year, we Jews wrote to you: 'In the affliction and distress that came upon us in those years after Jason and his company rebelled against the Holy Land and the Kingdom ⁸and set fire to the temple gateway and shed innocent blood, we prayed to the Lord and were heard. We offered animal sacrifices and grain offerings, and we lit the lamps and set out the loaves. ⁹And now we ask you to keep the Days of Tabernacles in the month of Kislev.

¹⁰Written in the one hundred eighty-eighth year.

Verse 10 tells us that this letter was composed in 124BC ('the one hundred eighty-eighth year' since the beginning of the Seleucid rule in Syria in 312). It is written by 'Jews in Jerusalem' (note, not by the high priest) to Jews in Egypt. We know that Jews went to Egypt in 586 after the destruction of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 43:1-7). There was a Jewish military colony at Elephantine near Aswan in the fifth century BC. In 312 Ptolemy I deported Jews to Alexandria. About 160 the high priest, Onias IV, founded a military colony, and 145 built a Jewish temple at Leontopolis. In 124 it is reasonable to estimate that there were tens of thousands of Jews in Egypt. The prayer that God may be reconciled with them (verse 5) may be a tactful reference to the temple at Leontopolis. The Jerusalem Jews see the successful revolt against Syria as God's sign of approval of the Jerusalem temple as the one and only chosen place for worship of YHWH. The 'time of evil' (verse 5) may refer to persecution under Ptolemy VIII (145-116). The Jews sided with his sister Cleopatra II in the civil war won by Ptolemy.

Verses 7-9 refer to an earlier letter of 143BC. The Syrian king at that time was Demetrius II (see page 8). The distress at that time is traced back to Jason who in 175 bribed his way into replacing his brother Onias III as high priest (see 2Maccabees 4:7). He was replaced by Menelaus, but in 167 he led an army into Jerusalem to try to regain control of the high priesthood (see 4:23-26; 5:5-7). He burned the temple gate 'and shed innocent blood' (verse 8). He also rebelled against the king of Syria whom the Lord had set over the Jews because of their sins (compare Nehemiah 9:37; Daniel 11:14).

The Jews remind their fellow-Jews in Egypt that they remained faithful when they were being persecuted (verse 8), and they are encouraging them to do the same, and especially to observe the Festival celebrating the restoration of the cult in the Jerusalem temple (verse 9; see 1Maccabees 4:59). They liken this feast to the main festival of the Jewish calendar: 'the Days of Tabernacles' (see 2Maccabees 10:6).

1:10 - 2:18 appears to be a forgery (see Goldstein *II Maccabees*, pages 157-167), purporting to have been written to Aristobulus and the Jews in Egypt, some time between the death of Antiochus IV in December 164 and the death of Judas Maccabaeus in May 160. Aristobulus was of the high priestly line. He dedicated a book on the Torah (now lost) to Ptolemy VI (180-145).

There were numerous occasions during the leadership of Judas that the Jews were 'saved out of great dangers' (verses 12-13; see, for example, 1Maccabees 4:28-35; 2Maccabees 5:11-26).

The death of Antiochus IV (verses 13-17) is described in 1Maccabees 6:1-17 and a different version in 2Maccabees 9 differs from the account given here in this letter.

'Nanaia' (verse 13; 'Lady of love') was a Sumerian goddess of love and fertility.

The author appears to be influenced by folk memories of the death of Antiochus III.

God punished people like Antiochus (verse 17).

¹⁰The people of Jerusalem and of Judea and the senate and Judas, To Aristobulus, who is of the family of the anointed priests, teacher of King Ptolemy, and to the Jews in Egypt, Greetings and good health.

¹¹Having been saved by God out of grave dangers we thank him greatly for taking our side against the king, ¹²for he drove out those who fought against the holy city. ¹³When the leader reached Persia with a force that seemed irresistible, they were cut to pieces in the temple of Nanea by a deception employed by the priests of the goddess Nanea.

¹⁴On the pretext of intending to marry her, Antiochus came to the place together with his Friends, to secure its treasures as a dowry.

¹⁵When the priests of the temple of Nanaia had set out the treasures and Antiochus had come with a few men inside the wall of the sacred precinct, they closed the temple as soon as he entered it. ¹⁶Opening a secret door in the ceiling, they threw down stones and struck down the leader and his men; they dismembered them and cut off their heads and threw them to the people outside.

¹⁷Blessed in every way be our God, who has brought judgment on those who have behaved impiously.

The temple is plundered

¹⁸Since on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev we will celebrate the Purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate it as Days of Tabernacles and Days of the Fire as when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices.

¹⁹When our ancestors were being led captive to Persia, the pious priests of that time took some of the fire from the altar and secretly hid it in the hollow of a dry cistern, where they took such precautions that the place was unknown to anyone. ²⁰But after many years had passed, when it pleased God, Nehemiah, having been commissioned by the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to recover it. When they reported that they had not found fire but only a thick liquid, he ordered them to gather it up and bring it to him. ²¹When the materials for the sacrifices were presented, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid on the wood and on the offerings laid upon it. ²²When this had been done and some time had passed, and when the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marvelled. ²³As the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests offered prayer – the priests and the whole assembly. Jonathan led, and the rest, following Nehemiah, responded. ²⁴The prayer was as follows:

“Lord, Lord God, Creator of all things, you are awe-inspiring and strong and just and merciful, you alone are king and are kind, ²⁵you alone are bountiful, you alone are just and almighty and eternal. You rescue Israel from every evil; you chose the ancestors and consecrated them. ²⁶Accept this sacrifice on behalf of all your people Israel and preserve your portion and make it holy. ²⁷Gather together our scattered people, set free those who are slaves among the Gentiles, look on those who are rejected and despised, and let the Gentiles know that you are our God. ²⁸Punish those who oppress and are insolent with pride. ²⁹Plant your people in your holy place, as Moses promised.” ³⁰Then the priests sang the hymns.

The feast of ‘Purification of the temple’ (verse 18) is also referred to as the ‘Festival of Light’. Here is recounted a legend which connects the sacred fire of the pre-exilic temple with the post-exilic temple. This was built in 516, some seventy years before the governorship of Nehemiah. The legend, however, is connected with the establishment of Jerusalem as a walled city by Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century.

The legend is included here to demonstrate from authoritative tradition that the second temple (not the temple in Leontopolis) is still the place chosen by God, who would, in his own time, restore what it lacked. The ‘thick liquid’ (verse 20) is petroleum.

The high priest at the time of Nehemiah’s arrival from Persia was Eliashib, not Jonathan (see Nehemiah 3:1; 13:4).

The prayer suits the period of the Maccabees. The Syrian kings oppressed ‘with insolent pride’ (verse 28); not so the Persians.

For verse 29 see Exodus 15:17.

The legend continues.

‘Nephthar’ (‘oil of fire’) was a purifying agent. Hence its use here as a link with the feast celebrating the purification of the temple in 164 by Judas Maccabaeus (see 1Maccabees 4:36-59; 2Maccabees 2:18; 10:3; 14:36). Though the author attempts to provide a Hebrew origin for the word, it comes, in fact, from Akkadian. Petroleum was known to the Sumerians, Babylonians and Egyptians by the year 2000BC.

³¹After the materials of the sacrifice had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured on large stones. ³²When this was done, a flame blazed up, and when the fire of the altar lit up, it went out. ³³When this matter became known, and it was reported to the king of the Persians that, in the place where the exiled priests had hidden the fire, the liquid had appeared with which Nehemiah and his associates had burned the materials of the sacrifice, ³⁴the king investigated the matter, and enclosed the place and made it sacred. ³⁵And with those persons whom the king favoured he exchanged many excellent gifts. ³⁶Nehemiah and his associates called this “nephthar,” which means “purification”, but by most people it is called “nephthai”.

¹The records show that it was the prophet Jeremiah who ordered those who were being deported to take some of the fire, as has been mentioned, ²and that the prophet, after giving them the Torah, instructed those who were being deported not to forget the commandments of the Lord, or to be led astray in their thoughts on seeing the gold and silver statues and their adornment. ³And with other similar words he exhorted them not to let the Torah depart from their hearts.

⁴It was also in the same document that the prophet, having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the promised land. ⁵Jeremiah found there a cave-dwelling, and he took in the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance. ⁶Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the path, but could not find it. ⁷When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. ⁸Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as happened in the time of Moses, and when Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated."

⁹It was also related that being possessed of wisdom Solomon offered sacrifice for the dedication and completion of the temple.

¹⁰Just as Moses prayed to the Lord, and fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifices, so also Solomon prayed, and the fire came down and consumed the whole burnt offerings. (¹¹And Moses said, "The sin offering was consumed in the same way; it was not eaten").

¹²Likewise Solomon also kept the eight days.

The legend involving Jeremiah recorded here is not found in the Jeremiah scroll. The letter sets out to connect the altar-fire in the new feast of Purification of the temple with the stories about fire consuming the sacrifices of Moses and Solomon.

Is the author drawing on the "Letter of Jeremiah" (Baruch 6)?

The mountain of verse 4 is Mount Nebo (see Deuteronomy 34:1). The legend is that when the temple was destroyed Jeremiah hid the Tent of Meeting, the ark and the incense altar in the cave where Moses was buried. In Jeremiah 3:16 the prophet is recorded as saying that the ark has no more relevance.

The cloud (verse 8), symbol of the mysterious presence of the transcendent God, features on Sinai (see Exodus 24:16ff), and at the dedication of Solomon's temple (see 1Kings 8:10-11; 2Chronicles 5:14).

Fire is said to have consumed the offerings when Solomon dedicated the first temple (2Chronicles 7:1). Similarly when Moses entered the tabernacle (see Leviticus 9:23-24). Verse 11 appears to refer to Leviticus 10:17.

Solomon celebrated the dedication of the temple for eight days (2Chronicles 7:9). The dedication (*hānukkāh*) by the Maccabees in 164 was also celebrated for eight days (see 1Maccabees 4:56).

For the memoirs of Nehemiah (verse 13) see Nehemiah 1:1 – 7:72; 11:1-2; 12:27-43; 13:4-31.

Verse 14 speaks of Judas's collection of books.

Verse 16 expresses what appears to be the main point of this letter. The Jews in Judea want their fellow-Jews in Egypt to celebrate the feast of the Purification and Dedication of the temple by Judas in 164BC.

The claim in verse 17 that God has restored the kingship and the priesthood is difficult. In 164 Menelaus was still high priest. He was followed by Alcimus and then seven years when there was no high priest. Judas Maccabaeus was never king. Nor were his brothers, Jonathan and Simon. The forged letter is best placed at the beginning of the reign of Alexander Jannaeus in 103BC, a year of civil strife in Egypt and a time of 'great evils'(verse 18) for the Jews there.

'Consecration' may refer to the hope expressed in the following:

You will be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

– Exodus 19:5-6

For the promise that YHWH will gather Israel, see the following:

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where YHWH your God has driven you, and return to YHWH your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then YHWH your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom YHWH your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there YHWH your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. YHWH your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.

– Deuteronomy 30:1-5

¹³The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings.

¹⁴In the same way Judas also collected all the books that had been scattered on account of the war that had come upon us, and they are in our possession. ¹⁵So if you have need of them, send people to fetch them.

¹⁶Since, therefore, we are about to celebrate the Purification, we write to you. Will you therefore please keep the days? ¹⁷It is God who has saved all his people, and has returned the inheritance to all, and the kingship and the priesthood and the consecration, ¹⁸as he promised through the Torah. We have hope in God that he will soon have mercy on us and will gather us from everywhere under heaven into his holy place, for he has rescued us from great evils and has purified the place.

¹⁹Jason of Cyrene has set out the history of Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, the purification of the great temple, and the dedication of the altar. ²⁰He has also described the wars against Antiochus Epiphanes and his son Eupator, ²¹and the apparitions that came from heaven to those who fought bravely for Judaism. Though few in number, they seized the whole land and routed the barbarian hordes. ²²They regained possession of the temple famous throughout the world, liberated the city, and re-established the laws that were about to be abolished. They achieved all this because the Lord was merciful and gracious to them.

²³What Jason of Cyrene told in five books, we will attempt to abridge into a single volume.

²⁴His work is a sea of words, and the sheer mass of material is formidable to anyone who wishes to plunge into the historical narrative.

In light of these obstacles, ²⁵we have set ourselves the goals of providing entertainment for lovers of literature, a clear and memorable style for pursuers of wisdom, and edification for all who look into this book

We now hear from the author of 2Maccabees.

The author attracts attention by mentioning Judas and his brothers. In fact they play only minor roles in the history, one aim of which is to undermine support for the dynastic claims of the Hasmonaeans.

‘Jason’ is the Greek equivalent of Joshua. Cyrene is about 800ks west of Alexandria (see map page 98). It was a Hellenistic city with a large Jewish population (see 1Maccabees 15:23). Jason’s history has not survived.

The author has no trouble speaking of the ‘dedication’ (verse 19), though Jason himself carefully avoids it (see 10:1-8).

Antiochus Epiphanes is Antiochus IV who was king of Syria from 175-164. His son Eupator is Antiochus V (164-161. The battles described in 3:1 – 4:6 belong to the reign of Seleucus IV (187-175), and those of chapter 14 belong to the reign of Demetrius I (161-150).

2Maccabees features ‘apparitions’ (*epiphanēia*; verse 21; see 3:23-40; 5:1-4; 10:29; 11:8).. The author loves to stress how small the Jewish forces were who were victorious over much larger Gentile armies (see 8:1-7).

Verse 21 contains the earliest known occurrence of the Greek word *Ioudaïsmos* (‘Judaism’).

The liberation is attributed, not to the military genius of Judas, but to God (verse 22).

The author goes on to stress how difficult his task has been. He wants his readers to expect only a summary. If they want a detailed history, they can consult Jason.

²⁶For me, undertaking the toil of abbreviating is no light matter but calls for sweat and loss of sleep, ²⁷just as it is not easy for one who prepares a banquet and aims to satisfy his guests. Nevertheless, to perform a public service I have gladly endured the uncomfortable toil.

²⁸I will leave to the original author the minute discussion of every detail, and focus on the main points that I am including in my summary. ²⁹For as the master builder of a new house must be concerned with the whole construction, while the one who undertakes its painting and decoration has to consider only what is suitable for its adornment, such in my judgment is the case with us. ³⁰It belongs to the original historian to occupy the ground, to discuss matters from every side, and to take trouble with details. ³¹The one who recasts the narrative should be allowed to strive for brevity of expression and to forego exhaustive treatment.

³²Without more ado, let us begin our narrative, without adding any more to what has already been said; for it would be foolish to lengthen the preface while cutting short the history itself.

