

## The Maccabees

The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, tried to unify his far-flung empire by forcing Hellenistic (Greek) cultural institutions on Judea. That provoked violent resistance from a country priest, Mattathias, and his sons, nicknamed the Maccabees "hammers." From 167 to 164 B.C.E., they led an armed revolt against the Seleucid kingdom.



As a result, Judea became semi-autonomous and, eventually, independent. War continued for two more decades, during which the Maccabean brothers, Judah, Jonathan, and Simon established themselves as dynastic rulers of Judea. Starting with Jonathan, they took the title and functions of "high priest" for themselves. Simon's son, John Hyrcanus, also took the title "king." Thus, for the first time since the 7th century, a Jewish king ruled an independent Judea. The Hasmonean kingdom lasted for a century until the Romans conquered it in 63 B.C.E.

The sources do not give much information about the Hasmonean's influence over Judean literature, but most scholars believe their reign coincided with the growing influence of the books classified as "prophets" and "writings." As Aaronide priests, the Hasmoneans benefitted from the Torah's rhetoric authorizing (their) priesthood and the Jerusalem temple. But as kings of a wider territory around Jerusalem, they needed to counter influence of Hellenistic literature among upper-class lay people as well. To that end, they seem to have authorized a larger and more diverse collection of Hebrew texts to define "classical" Jewish culture and education over against the Hellenistic model.

They distinguished the books in this collection by (1) their language, Hebrew, no longer the common language of Judea and so a mark of "classical" learning, and (2) their association with the age of prophecy, now considered to have ended. Only books appearing to have been written before the fourth century and mostly in Hebrew were counted as among "the Prophets." (The division into "Prophets and Writings" probably developed somewhat later.)

Thus from the second century Hasmonean period on, mastery of the Torah and Prophets came to represent an ideal of Jewish education for priests and lay people alike. Though only elite families had the resources to master these texts, the ideal itself became a hallmark of Jewish identity and of resistance to Hellenistic culture.

(James W. Watts © 2014)

### **Further Reading on the Maccabees:**

David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987)

