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### **1 Maccabees 2:23–26, New Revised Standard Version, updated edition.**

*<sup>23</sup> When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein, according to the king's command. <sup>24</sup> When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal, and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and slaughtered him on the altar. <sup>25</sup> At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. <sup>26</sup> Thus he burned with zeal for the law, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu.*

### **The not-so-silent period.**

The term “Silent Period” refers to the period between the last of the writing of the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus. This “Inter-Testamental Period” covers an estimated 400 years, from the time of the prophet Malachi until John the Baptist, who is called a prophet. In Matthew, Chapter 11, Jesus speaks of John the Baptist:

*<sup>9</sup> What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’*

*<sup>11</sup> “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

But there is material that many consider biblical and was written during this period of 400 years, during this time when most Christian Bibles contain nothing prophetic, nothing from the mouth of God. We call this very diverse collection of

materials “the Apocrypha”. This is from a Greek word, meaning “hidden away” or “to hide away”. These are materials that Christians and Jews once called scriptural, and then were later excluded. They are all Old Testament in nature, as they concern the Chosen People living under the Old Covenant. The last canonical book in most Protestant Bibles, Malachi, shows the Jews being told by Malachi that once again, God is not happy with them. They have wandered from the teachings of God. They had returned home from exile in Babylon but are now living in a land devastated by war. A drought has destroyed the crops. The people are poor. They are still under the control of a foreign power, Persia, which conquered Babylon.

Malachi appears to predict the arrival of Jesus 400 years later:

*3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?*

The books that appear in the Apocrypha, which are not considered biblical to most Protestants, but are in the Roman and Eastern Orthodox Catholic Bibles, and which some Jews do consider valuable as spiritual writings, are useful to Christians for one very powerful reason: they give us a lot of insight into what was happening in and around Jerusalem when Jesus was born. These Books include some additions to the existing Old Testament books, and several new books. My

favorite is called the Wisdom of Solomon, which is written in a poetic style, and praises a life of wisdom. We see that if we are willing to consider books that have not been included in Jewish scripture and not in most Christian bibles, the silent period wasn't so silent at all. Today, I'd like to consider a few Apocryphal books that are called 1, 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees. Keep in mind that "apocryphal" does not mean false or not trusted. They simply are not included in the Bible. The Maccabee books - and some collections only contain the first two of them - give us tremendous insight into the world into which Jesus was born.

The Maccabees were a priestly Jewish family. 1 Maccabees was written in Hebrew, but what we have is a Greek translation of it. 2 Maccabees is a very different document, and it was written in Greek originally. This is part of the reason that these books are not considered scriptural by Jews: they were in part not written in their holy language, Hebrew. Here is a very important fact. 2 Maccabees was written in Greek because the Persians were no longer in control of the Holy Land, as they had been since the return from exile. Greek speaking people were in charge. Although he didn't live long, Alexander the Great, a young king of Greece, had swept through and conquered the Persians, and took control of Israel in 332 B.C. By the time Jesus was born, the Romans were in charge, the Roman general Pompey having taken control of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. Greek rule had pretty much

ended by 143 B.C., but the influence of the Greek empire in the centuries before Jesus was born was the reason that the New Testament was written in Greek. The Jews spoke Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew, but somewhat different. They worshipped in Hebrew. But during the rule of Greece and other Greek speaking people, Jews became very Hellenized, meaning that they had willingly and aggressively adopted much of the Greek culture, including their written language. Many Jews identified more as Greek people than Hebrew people. This is the theme that underlies the Maccabee books: there is a great conflict between Jews who have retained Hebrew culture and still worship God in the Temple in Jerusalem (the so-called Second Temple) and Jews who have become Hellenized and are worshipping Greek gods. At this time, many loyal Jews are praying that God will send an earthly Messiah to once again bring the People back to God - and crush the Greek culture and empire. This is why when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, people yell "Hosanna", meaning "Save us, now", pleading with Jesus to destroy the new occupier, Rome.

In the second chapter of 1 Maccabee, the Greek king Antiochus IV, has ordered Jews to come to a pagan altar and offer a sacrifice. The king demands that Mattathias, a Jewish priest, force his people to fall in line. We are told this:

*<sup>15</sup> The king's officers who were enforcing the apostasy came to the town of Modein to make them offer sacrifice. <sup>16</sup> Many from Israel came to them, and Mattathias and his sons were assembled. <sup>17</sup> Then the king's officers spoke to Mattathias as follows: "You are a leader, honored and great in this town, and supported by sons and brothers. <sup>18</sup> Now be the first to come and do what the king commands, as all the nations and the people of Judah and those who are left in Jerusalem have done. Then you and your sons will be numbered among the Friends of the king, and you and your sons will be honored with silver and gold and many gifts."*

Mattathias defies this order, saying that he will continue to honor their covenant with God, what we call the Old Covenant or the Covenant of Moses:

*<sup>19</sup> But Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice: "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him and have chosen to obey his commandments, every one of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, <sup>20</sup> I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors. <sup>21</sup> Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. <sup>22</sup> We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left."*

Mattathias kills a Jew who tries to offer a pagan sacrifice. He also kills an official of the king:

*<sup>23</sup> When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein, according to the king's command. <sup>24</sup> When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal, and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and slaughtered him on the altar. <sup>25</sup> At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar.*

This is the beginning of a two-front war. There is a son of Mattathias, named Judah, who becomes known as Maccabee, which we believe derives from the Aramaic word "hammer". He and his army don't just fight the Greeks: they fight against

fellow Jews who have become Hellenized and have adopted Greek gods. This is very much in keeping with the Old Testament theme of violence, including violence within the community of the Chosen People - as a way of enforcing the primary goal of the prophets and of God: the loyalty of the Chosen People to their God.

But we live under the New Covenant, and knowing and loving only one God is a given. We have moved beyond that simple fact. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells us that the laws of Moses and the Ten Commandments are superseded:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."*

But Christians, historically, have not lived up to these commandments. In 451 A.D. there was a council in a place called Chalcedon where the divine nature of Jesus was hotly debated. The council concluded that Jesus had two intertwined natures, one fully divine and one truly human. This caused a major schism in the church, with the western and the eastern churches going to war with each other. It's believed that tens of thousands of people were killed.

In 1517 A.D., Martin Luther set off the Protestant Reformation. Within eight years, large areas of Europe were at war. The fighting didn't end until 1648, with the Peace of Westphalia that allowed various European princes to choose

the faith of their own regions. But somewhere between 25% and 50% of the people of France and Germany were killed during a war over church doctrine.

In World War II a supposedly Christian nation tried to take over much of the world. Millions were killed. In 1994, in Rwanda, the dominant ethnic group, the Hutus, attacked the less powerful Tutsis. As many as a million people were killed. What few in the West know is that both groups were Christian. In the former Yugoslavia, in 1991, there was a war between Bosnians and Serbians. Both were Christian. Russia today is attacking Ukraine. Both are predominantly Christian.

My point is that yes, since the time of Jesus, evil has been perpetrated by people who did not profess to be followers of our God. But Christians have been violent and hateful, too, and often toward other Christians.

Jesus would have been well aware of the Maccabee revolution, with Jews killing fellow Jews who had become Hellenized and adopted the Greek language, Greek clothing, Greek customs, and Greek gods. He knew Hebrew Scripture, and he was fully aware of the long history of violence within the community of the People of God. He made a firm goal of his to change this. Under the New Covenant, we were to love each other, and in fact, to love our enemies. We were to never resort to bloodshed. The Kingdom of God is more important than any Kingdom of people. This big change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant

hasn't happened in the way Jesus asked of us. Things did go very wrong. We didn't go from being violent people to being people of love.

The problem has to do with the depth of people's relationship with God. In Luke, Chapter 16, Jesus speaks to the Pharisees, men who work hard to get the approval of those around them by acting pious and carefully following the laws of their faith. But he knows they are phony and he says to them: *"You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by humans is an abomination in the sight of God."* The point is obvious, and it is something that we all know. Since the time of Christ, that has been the problem with Christians, thinking they can fool God the way they fool themselves. We are not to be hypocrites. Even if we fool each other, we cannot trick God. In truth, Christians have always known what has been asked of us. We have always had the Gospels. Jesus told us that everything that matters from a moral standard can be boiled down to two simple commandments, loving God and loving other people. And God knows whether we are serious about this or not.

God is fully aware of how our faith touches our hearts. Our faith isn't a set of philosophical concepts that we entertain intellectually, that we reevaluate in the context of the demands of society. Faith in God, the belief that we should live by Jesus' two great commandments, isn't something to be compromised by the



need to be accepted by other people or the desire to be rewarded economically. Some beliefs can indeed be balanced against the practicalities of life. But not a true belief in God. The problem, the thing that makes our faith shallow and a secondary thing in life is our ego, our need to feel important and secure in the world. We must let go of our need for control, to be assured that our futures are all set, that we have it made. We must let go of the world and embrace the teachings of Christ without any compromise or any distractions.

Faith is truly deep when all that we do and think goes through the filter of our belief in God and our desire to live by those two great commandments. Imagine what the history of the world between the execution of Jesus and today would have been like if anyone who called themselves Christians had lived by that simple principle. Do nothing, think nothing until you have asked yourself if what you are about to do or think is a result of truly loving God and truly loving all people, including your enemies. It sounds easy, but we all know that life makes it hard to live by the two great commandments. We suffer hardships. We are treated cruelly or unfairly. We get nervous about our financial futures or the security of our neighborhood or our nation, or we become the target of ridicule. People today tell us that what we believe as people of faith is dated and ridiculous. We have the urge to lash out, perhaps in a sincere belief that we are

defending ourselves. If we stop and we take an honest look at the situation, and consider those two great commandments, we often react in a very different way.

God isn't silent anymore. God does not order us to go to war anymore. We are in a period of nonstop communication from God, and God is calling for peace, love, forgiveness, and a respect for others. We don't need a prophet to tell us what God is saying because today, God is within each of us, and God has a relationship with each of us. We just have to listen, put our faith first at all times, and then act and think accordingly. If we do this, the next revival of Christianity might be the revival that truly changes the world for the better.

Please pray with me.

*God, help us reject the things of this world, the need to have the approval of others, and the fear of living only by our faith. Let us live by the two great commandments - and let us live by nothing else. Amen.*