



## Feast of the Holy Maccabees

Feast Day: August 1

Died: circa 165 B.C.

The Feast of the Holy Maccabees commemorates the brutal martyrdom of seven brothers and their mother at the hands of Greek occupiers as recorded in the Old Testament. The martyrdom of the elderly scribe Eleazar preceded their death (2 Mac 6) and he is pictured in art with the 7 sons and their mother.

In 539 BC, the Persians conquered the Babylonian empire which had exiled the Jews from the land of Israel. The Persians were kind to the Jews and allowed them to return to their land. In 332 BC, the Greeks under Alexander the Great had conquered the Persian empire. The empire was divided into kingdoms and Antiochus IV ruled over the Jews. The Greeks demanded that the Jews worship their pagan gods. They desecrated the Jewish temple and tried to force the Jews into breaking the Mosaic Laws. The Jewish people had gained a reputation for their sacred law forbidding them to eat pork. This law was meant to set them apart from other races to show that they had a special fidelity to God.

Greek officials went to each town, forcing Jews to worship pagan gods and to eat pork. Seven brothers and their mother were brought before the king for torture because they would not comply. 2 Mac 7. One brother spoke up, "We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers." The king was enraged and ordered him to be tortured. First his tongue was cut out. Then he was scalped. Next his hands and feet were cut off. Finally, he was burned alive. The mother encouraged her sons to "die nobly", saying, "The Lord is watching over us." The 2nd brother was tormented in like manner. Upon his death, he said, "...the King of the universe will raise us up to everlasting renewal of life because we have died for his laws." The 3rd brother willingly stretched out his hands, expressing hopefulness that he will regain his limbs in Heaven. All present, including the king, were astonished at the willingness of the brothers to be tortured for the sake of Mosaic Law. As the 4th brother was being tortured, he warned his tormenters that there would be no resurrection for them as there would be for him and his brothers. Before death, the 5th and 6th brothers warned the king that his evil acts will not go unpunished by God. The brother still alive was the youngest. The king changed his tone, offering him riches and a power. The young brother would not listen, so the king urged the mother to intervene and convince the son to eat the pork. Instead, the mother spoke to her son in their native tongue, reminding him that God who made everything out of nothing, even man, can raise him to new life. She implored him, "Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers." The young man told the king that the Jews suffer because of their sin; but God's rebuke is for a short time before He is reconciled again to his people; but the king and his men will be judged by God and endure His punishment. The young brother then appealed to God that his suffering and death as well as his brothers' may bring an end to God's wrath toward the Jewish people. *The next chapter ushers in the Maccabean revolt that changed the tide in favor of the Jewish people.* The young brother was put to death enduring worse suffering than the others. "Last of all, the mother died, after her sons." 2 Mac 7:41.

Since seven is a Biblically symbolic number meaning "completeness," the Feast of the Seven Holy Maccabees is also a commemoration of all of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament.

The relics of the Holy Maccabees was kept in a synagogue in Antioch. In 1164, they were transferred to St. Andrew's Church in Cologne, Germany where they are still venerated today.

*May we be courageous in suffering for the Gospel as the Holy Maccabees were for the Law of Moses!*