

MACCABÆUS

Before the Oil, There Was Fire.

SCREENPLAY SAMPLE

Based on actual events.

ON BLACK:

Return to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope...

For I have bent Judah for Me as a bow... and I will raise up
thy sons, O Zion, against thy sons, O Greece, and make thee
as the sword of a hero...

The Lord of Hosts shall protect them, and they shall devour.

- ZECHARIAH

FADE IN:

EXT. JERUSALEM STREETS - DAY

Seleucid-occupied Jerusalem. Jews, Syrians, Greeks, and
travelers from across the empire crowd the marketplace
beneath foreign banners.

SUPER: "Jerusalem, 178 B.C.E."

ZECHARIAH (V.O.)

A great darkness had fallen upon
the Land of Israel.

HELIODORUS, a middle-aged Syrian nobleman with a shrewd face
and arrogant bearing, cuts through the market on horseback.

A small cavalry escort follows, forcing merchants and
bystanders aside.

ZECHARIAH (V.O.)

After Alexander, his generals
crowned themselves kings, and their
sons after them. Judaea became a
prize to be fought over by more
powerful nations.

Heliodorus does not slow as frightened locals clear a path.

EXT. TEMPLE GATE - DAY

Heliodorus and his men dismount before the Temple. The horses
snort and stamp against the stone. ONIAS III, High Priest of
Israel, hurries forward in white linen robes and matching
turban.

ONIAS

Lord Heliodorus. Shalom aleichem,
Your Excellency. We were not
expecting you.

HELIODORUS

Then my arrival has gone as
intended.

ONIAS

Of course. My apologies. To what do
we owe the privilege?

HELIODORUS

The treasury.

ONIAS

His Majesty's tribute is collected
with care.

HELIODORUS

It is not your people's ability to
collect money that concerns me.

ONIAS

My lord?

HELIODORUS

We have it on good information that
this Temple holds wealth far beyond
the needs of the community, and
that the surplus has gone
unreported.

ONIAS

The treasury holds what is needed
for the Sanctuary, the daily
offerings, and tzedakah for the
poor.

Heliodorus smiles thinly. He starts toward the entrance with
his men. Onias steps into his path.

ONIAS

No. You cannot go in there.

Heliodorus' BODYGUARD pins Onias to the wall with the shaft
of his spear.

ONIAS

This is hallowed ground. You cannot
march armed men into God's House.

HELIODORUS

I was sent by order of His Majesty
King Seleucus.

Another priest emerges from the gathering crowd: JASON,
Onias' brother--finer linen, immaculate folds, his beard
trimmed in the Greek fashion.

JASON

Forgive him, my lord.

He turns sharply to Onias.

JASON

Be silent, brother.

ONIAS

You would let them trample the
inner sanctum?

JASON

If God did not want guests in His
house, He would not have given
Judaea into their hands.

Onias looks to the gathered priests. Not one meets his eyes.
Heliodorus resumes his march.

ONIAS

Your Excellency, you do not
understand.

HELIODORUS

No, priest. You do not understand.
I am going into that treasury. And
if I detect the slightest
impropriety, I will seize whatever
is rightfully ours. A few boot
prints will be the least of your
worries.

INT. TEMPLE INNER CHAMBER - DAY

Heliodorus ducks beneath a low stone doorway and enters. The
noise behind him dies. He turns. Guards and priests--gone. A

wall of ethereal blue flame seals the doorway. Consecrated vessels and sealed chests glint along the walls, their gold turned cold by the blue flame. Heliodorus draws his sword.

A fearsome RIDER sits astride a rearing horse. Linen shows beneath a full panoply of gold. On either side hovers an AVENGING ANGEL, hooded, black wings furled like a storm cloud at rest. Noble in bearing, terrible in beauty, they hold whips of living lightning in holy stillness.

One angel spreads its wings and raises the whip.

CRACK!

The thunderclap drops Heliodorus to his knees. His sword clatters away. He clamps both hands over his ears and screams.

The Rider dismounts. Beneath an open-faced helm: ZECHARIAH--radiant and grave--a golden sword in hand.

ZECHARIAH

(in Hebrew)

דע לפני מי אתה עומד

(Know before Whom you stand.)

Zechariah raises the sword. Heliodorus rises with it, helpless, his arms and legs locked in place.

HELIODORUS

In the name of the king, I order
you to release me.

Zechariah smiles without warmth.

ZECHARIAH

You stand in the House of the
Living God, yet issue proclamations
in the name of a dead man?

HELIODORUS

How dare you speak of the emperor
that way. My men shall--

Heliodorus gasps for air.

ZECHARIAH

Your men have left you.

With a flick of his wrist, Zechariah releases him.

Heliodorus collapses. Zechariah is suddenly beside him.

ZECHARIAH

Your emperor steals bread from
widows and orphans and calls it
tribute. The Lord of Hosts has not
abandoned His House, nor will He
suffer those who profane it.

Zechariah bends close.

ZECHARIAH

(a whisper)

Run, dog. Tell your master:
judgment follows.

Zechariah turns toward the blue flame. Heliodorus convulses.
The flame vanishes--and Zechariah with it. Noise crashes
back. Soldiers and priests rush to Heliodorus' aid. A
PHYSICIAN pushes through the crowd.

INT. PRIVATE RESIDENCE - DAY

Heliodorus lies in bed, pale and slick with sweat. He wakes
with a start as his Bodyguard approaches, followed by Onias.

ONIAS

Your Excellency, thank God you are
all right. Our physicians have--

Heliodorus waves him away. His soldiers hustle Onias out.

HELIODORUS

(to Bodyguard)

What happened?

BODYGUARD

You collapsed, my lord.

HELIODORUS

The rider. The angels. Where were
you?

The Bodyguard hesitates.

BODYGUARD

There was no rider.

Heliodorus stares at him.

BODYGUARD

You struck your head entering the
chamber, fell, and began
convulsing. The physician said--

PHYSICIAN

Epilepsis, my lord.

The room stills.

HELIODORUS

You think I have gone mad.

Heliodorus tries to rise. The Bodyguard reaches to stop him.

BODYGUARD

My lord, you need time to recover.

HELIODORUS

Remove your hand, or I shall have
it removed from you.

The Bodyguard withdraws. Heliodorus rises, still shaking.

HELIODORUS

We return to Antioch at once.

EXT. SELEUCID PALACE, ANTIOCH - NIGHT

Greco-Syrian nobility drift across palace terraces while
servants hurry around them.

SELEUCUS (PRE-LAP)

You had but one task.

INT. ROYAL DINING CHAMBER - NIGHT

KING SELEUCUS IV enters, furious, followed by Heliodorus, wan
and hollow-eyed. Seleucus dismisses the guard and closes the
chamber.

SELEUCUS

My foremost minister, escorted by
my own guard--routed by some Hebrew
priests.

HELIODORUS

It was not the Jews.

SELEUCUS
Sorcery, then?

Torchlight warps Heliodorus' reflection in a polished serving plate. He looks away.

HELIODORUS
No. Something beyond mortal ken.

Seleucus sits at a royal table and takes up a golden RHYTON, its spout shaped like a bull's head. He dips it into a bowl of wine and seals the spout with his thumb.

SELEUCUS
Nonsense. You failed in your charge, and now you seek to appease me with wild stories of angels.

HELIODORUS
I saw what stood between us and the treasury.

SELEUCUS
You found priests and shadows.

HELIODORUS
I found power.

SELEUCUS
You found fear.

HELIODORUS
Yes. But not theirs.

SELEUCUS
Your failure could not have come at a worse time. We are behind in tribute to Rome. The wealth those Jews are hoarding would have replenished the treasury.

HELIODORUS
Your Majesty, I--

Seleucus angrily shushes him, as if disciplining a child. He lets wine pour from the rhyton into his mouth, then grabs a few morsels of food and chews with vulgar impatience.

SELEUCUS

Rome still holds my son Demetrius.
And now the army whispers that a
handful of unarmed Jews sent you
fleeing Jerusalem in terror.

Heliodorus stares at the bull-headed vessel in Seleucus'
hand. His breathing changes.

HELIODORUS

(under his breath)

Even an ox knows his owner...

Seleucus stops chewing.

SELEUCUS

What did you say?

Heliodorus' hair is damp with sweat. His hands tremble. But
his eyes are clear.

HELIODORUS

Even an ox knows his owner. An ass,
his master's trough.

SELEUCUS

You return from Judaea speaking
like one of them.

HELIODORUS

No. I return from Judaea alive.

Seleucus tightens his grip on the rhyton.

SELEUCUS

I am king.

Heliodorus' trembling stops.

HELIODORUS

Not before Him.

Seleucus' eyes flash with murderous rage. He starts for the
door. Heliodorus moves first. He wrenches the golden rhyton
from Seleucus' hand and drives its bull-headed spout into the
king's mouth.

Heliodorus slams Seleucus against the tiled wall. Wine
splashes. Or blood. Seleucus claws at the vessel, gagging.
Heliodorus holds him there.

HELIODORUS

You have eyes, yet do not see. You
have ears, yet do not hear.

He leans closer.

HELIODORUS

But you will.

Heliodorus seizes Seleucus by the hair with one hand. With
the other, he lifts the wine pitcher. Heliodorus opens his
mouth. Hebrew comes out.

HELIODORUS

מה טובו אוהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל
(How goodly are your tents, O
Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!)

He pours wine into the rhyton. Seleucus convulses as the red
liquid spills down his throat. Heliodorus' voice deepens.
Divine wrath speaks through a broken vessel.

HELIODORUS

אם שנותי ברק חרבי ותאחז במשפט
ידי אשיב נקם לצרי ולמשנאי אשלם
(When I sharpen My glittering
sword, and My hand grasps judgment,
I will bring vengeance upon Mine
adversaries and repay those who
hate Me.)

Heliodorus slams the back of Seleucus' head against the wall.
The tile cracks. He does it again. The king's resistance
weakens.

HELIODORUS

אשכיר חצי מדם וחרבי תאכל בשר
(I will make Mine arrows drunk with
blood, and My sword shall consume
flesh.)

One last blow. Seleucus' hands fall away from the vessel. The
rhyton remains lodged in his mouth, wine and blood dripping
from the bull's head. Heliodorus releases him. Seleucus
spills to the floor. Guards burst in.

Heliodorus, drenched red and shaking, does not resist. He
whispers, almost weeping:

HELIODORUS

הַרְנִינוּ גּוֹיִם עַמּוֹ כִּי דָם עֲבָדָיו יִקּוֹם
(Sing out praise, O nations, for
His people. For He will avenge the
blood of His servants.)

The guards seize him. Heliodorus looks past them, toward something none of them can see. They place a black bag over his head.

INT. ANTIOCH PALACE - THRONE HALL - DAY

The royal court stands in ordered ranks beneath a great bronze sun disk. PHILIP, composed and immaculate in court robes, stands among the ministers. GORGIAS, a campaign-worn officer in ceremonial armor, stands among the officers.

GOVERNOR LYSIAS, silver-haired and severe, strikes the butt of his spear against the stone.

BOOM.

LYSIAS

Basileus Antiochos.

An aged PRIEST OF THE ROYAL CULT approaches, bearing a golden radiate crown. He raises it before Antiochus.

Antiochus takes the crown and places it on his own head.

LYSIAS

Theos Epiphanes.

The court genuflects in mechanical unison.

COURT

Theos Epiphanes.

Again. Louder. The chant swells until it fills the hall.

ZECHARIAH (V.O.)

With the king dead and his heir
held by Rome, Seleucus' brother
claimed the throne. Antiochus
claimed for himself the title
Epiphanes--God Manifest. To the
Jews, he would become known simply
as Epimanes.

Antiochus lifts his chin and receives worship as his due.

ZECHARIAH (V.O.)

The Mad.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK:

TITLE CARD: MACCABÆUS

EXT. MODI'IN - DAY

Birdsong carries across the olive groves and low stone houses of Modi'in. A modest Judaeon village tucked among rocky hills. Quiet. Old. Stubbornly alive.

INT. MATTATHIAS' HOUSE - DAY

MATTATHIAS sits at a wooden table, aged but vigorous, dressed in a coarse robe of sackcloth. Across from him sits Philip, a polished Seleucid official used to being welcomed. Two court functionaries stand behind him.

A pair of soldiers linger near the doorway, close enough to be seen, far enough to preserve the fiction of courtesy. Philip smiles.

PHILIP

Rabbi Mattathias. Priest of a noble house. Leader of Modi'in.

Mattathias dips his head, unsmiling.

PHILIP

Men like you are the reason His Majesty prefers persuasion to force.

Mattathias looks toward the soldiers at the door. Philip follows his gaze.

PHILIP

A precaution. The king asks only a public gesture. Nothing more.

MATTATHIAS

A gesture.

PHILIP

An offering upon the altar.

MATTATHIAS

Whose altar?

PHILIP

The king's.

MATTATHIAS

And if I decline this gesture?

PHILIP

Then others will make it. Less worthy men. Men without your learning, your lineage, your influence. No one asks you to abandon the Law of Moses, Rabbi. Only to show the king that Modi'in understands its place.

Mattathias says nothing.

PHILIP

Be first. Do this, and your family will be counted among the King's Friends. Peace. Wealth. Honor. Protection for your sons.

MATTATHIAS

Honor?

PHILIP

The king's favor.

MATTATHIAS

Then call it favor. Honor is earned, not given.

Mattathias looks past him to the soldiers.

MATTATHIAS

Protection from whom?

PHILIP

From the disorder that follows when good men make enemies of necessity.

MATTATHIAS

You speak as though the matter is settled.

PHILIP

It is.

MATTATHIAS

Then you did not come to ask me.

PHILIP

No. I came to spare you.

A silence.

MATTATHIAS

All the nations of the king's realm may forsake the customs of their fathers.

Philip's smile fades slightly.

MATTATHIAS

But I and my sons will not offer sacrifice on that altar.

PHILIP

Will not?

MATTATHIAS

Cannot.

PHILIP

I had hoped age would make you practical.

MATTATHIAS

It has.

Philip stands. The soldiers straighten.

PHILIP

Then we will find someone more practical.

MATTATHIAS

I don't doubt it.

Philip exits. Mattathias remains standing until the footsteps fade, then grips the table to steady himself and sits.

NAPHTALI (O.S.)

Rebbi!

NAPHTALI, young, breathless, and dust-covered, bursts in.
Mattathias stands at once to greet him.

MATTATHIAS

Naphtali. Sit. Water first, then
news.

NAPHTALI

No time.

MATTATHIAS

There is always time to breathe.

NAPHTALI

Soldiers have sealed the Temple
precincts. Onias is confined to his
house. The priests are divided. No
one knows who speaks for Jerusalem.

MATTATHIAS

But you did not run all this way
just to tell me Jerusalem bleeds.

NAPHTALI

No, Rebbi. They have come here.

MATTATHIAS

Where?

NAPHTALI

The town square. Philip's men.
Soldiers. Some of the town elders.

MATTATHIAS

They've constructed an altar.

NAPHTALI

They say the whole village is to
gather before sunset.

Mattathias looks toward the door Philip just exited through.

MATTATHIAS

Go to the inn. Bring my sons to the
square.

NAPHTALI

All of them?

Mattathias takes his walking stick and heads through the door.

MATTATHIAS (O.S.)

All of them.

INT. TOWN INN - DAY

A clandestine Torah lesson masquerades as idle tavern conversation.

ELAZAR, pale and narrow-shouldered, bends over a small SCROLL with fierce concentration. JOHN keeps watch near the entrance, too large for the chair beneath him. JONATHAN trades easy banter with a merchant while missing nothing around him. SIMON sits beside his wife, YAEL, who mends a torn sleeve while listening to every word. JUDAH sits between the door and the youngest students.

ZECHARIAH (V.O.)

Mattathias had five sons: John,
called Gadi; Simon, called Thassi;
Elazar, called Avaran; Jonathan,
called Apphus. And Judah, called
Maccabee.

Treasured one. Guide. Piercer.
Diplomat. Hammer. Names they would
carry into war. Names they would
carry into history.

ELAZAR

"Not by power," the prophet
declares, "nor by might. But by My
spirit, says the Lord of Hosts."
Who can tell me what this verse
teaches?

URIEL, eight years old and painfully earnest, raises his hand. Elazar nods to him.

URIEL

That the biggest army does not
always win.

ELAZAR

Why not?

URIEL
Because God decides.

ELAZAR
Exactly. Everything is in the hands
of Heaven. You know the punishment
for Torah study, and still you
came.

He looks around the room.

ELAZAR
That is how Am Yisrael survives.

Bootsteps outside. Yael looks to John. John checks the narrow
slot in the door. A pair of Seleucid troops approach.

JOHN
Patrol.

Elazar rolls the scroll. Yael hides it beneath the cloth in
her sewing basket and draws the torn sleeve across her lap.
Elazar produces cards; Jonathan scatters coins; Judah slides
bread and olives to the center. Dreidels spin. Within
seconds, Torah study has become gambling.

A SELEUCID SOLDIER enters. His eyes scan the room. The
students laugh a little too loudly. Elazar deals cards with
surgical focus. The soldier's gaze lands on Uriel. Uriel
freezes. Judah smiles and ruffles the boy's hair.

JUDAH
You'll lose your father's whole
purse if you keep playing like
that.

The table laughs. Uriel manages a smile. Outside, another
soldier calls. The soldier in the doorway hesitates, then
exits. Breath returns. Cards, coins, and dreidels vanish.
Yael lifts the folded cloth. Elazar retrieves the scroll.

ELAZAR
Now. The prophet spoke these words
when we were coming out of exile in
Babylonia. Keep that in mind,
because--

The door bursts open. Naphtali rushes in and slams straight
into John. John barely moves. Naphtali stumbles back,
mortified.

NAPHTALI

My teachers. Forgive me.

John steadies him. The alarm on Naphtali's face ends the lesson.

SIMON

I take it you did not come to learn
with us.

Naphtali crosses to them and speaks in hushed, urgent tones. The brothers rise together. Elazar rolls the scroll, slips it into a small leather scroll case, and tucks the case beneath his cloak.

JUDAH

Class dismissed. Straight home. No
lingering.

The students obey. The brothers start for the door. Simon turns to Yael.

SIMON

Get them home.

His hand lingers on her shoulder. She covers it with hers.

Yael

Go.

EXT. MODI'IN PUBLIC SQUARE - DAY

The crowded village square is hushed--a courtroom awaiting its verdict.

An unfinished ALTAR stands atop a raised platform. Beside it: a painted statue of ARES with Antiochus' features. A bound PIG strains against the rail.

Seleucid soldiers hold the edges of the crowd--not enough to fight the whole village, enough to remind it what fighting would cost.

At the center of the platform stands a GREEK EMISSARY.

Beside him stands PERETZ SON OF ALEXANDER, a wealthy Hellenized priest, his eyes fixed on the altar rather than the familiar faces below.

Among the villagers stands ALCIMUS, Peretz's grown son--a young priest in Greek dress, glancing between his father and the soldiers.

Mattathias and his sons arrive. Mattathias sees the altar. Sees the pig. Sees the statue. His face goes still. Simon steps closer.

SIMON

Abba, not here.

Mattathias keeps his eyes on the platform.

SIMON

There are soldiers among the crowd.
If this turns--

MATTATHIAS

I see them.

JUDAH

Then we leave and choose our
ground.

Mattathias meets Judah's eyes, then returns his attention to the platform.

MATTATHIAS

The ground has chosen us.

The Emissary raises his hands. The murmurs thin.

EMISSARY

People of Modi'in. His Majesty
Antiochus Epiphanes extends his
hand to every people beneath his
dominion.

A few scattered villagers clap. Most do not.

EMISSARY

No longer shall Syrian, Greek, Jew,
or any other tribe divide itself
from the peace of the realm. One
king. One law. One people.

The Emissary turns to Peretz.

EMISSARY

And here, among you, stands a son
of Israel loyal enough to welcome
that peace.

PERETZ

My neighbors. You know me. When the
harvest failed, I gave bread. When
the taxes came, I lent silver.

He faces them at last.

PERETZ

The king asks one offering. I will
not see every house in Modi'in
answer for our refusal.

A hard murmur moves through the crowd.

PERETZ

A people survives by knowing when
to bend.

Mattathias watches him, stricken.

EMISSARY

Well spoken.

The Emissary gestures to the pig.

EMISSARY

Proceed.

Peretz turns toward the altar. Simon takes Mattathias by the
arm.

SIMON

Abba.

Mattathias does not move. Peretz reaches for the sacrificial
knife. Mattathias looks to Judah.

MATTATHIAS

Your sword.

JUDAH

Pardon?

MATTATHIAS

Lend me your sword.

JUDAH

Father, you know as well as I that
bearing arms has been expressly
forbidden by royal edict.

Mattathias holds out his hand.

JUDAH

It's for emergencies.

MATTATHIAS

Look around.

Judah takes in the altar, the pig, the soldiers.

JUDAH

Abba--

MATTATHIAS

Judah.

A beat. Judah opens his cloak and draws a small bronze
XIPHOS. He passes it to his father, hilt first, shielded by
their cloaks. Simon clocks the exchange.

SIMON

Father, no.

Mattathias conceals the weapon beneath his cloak and steps
forward. The crowd parts for him. At the base of the platform
stairs, two SOLDIERS cross their spears.

SOLDIER #1

Back.

MATTATHIAS

I am Mattathias, son of Yohanan, a
priest of this village.

The soldiers glance at each other.

MATTATHIAS

I have had time to reconsider, and
I am here to bestow my blessing.
Everyone knows it is not kosher
unless a rabbi blesses it.

The Emissary weighs the watching crowd.

EMISSARY

Let him pass.

The soldiers lower their spears. Mattathias climbs slowly. Judah drifts closer to the platform steps. Simon follows. Peretz turns as Mattathias approaches.

PERETZ

Rabbi--

Mattathias stops before him. He speaks low enough that only Peretz hears.

MATTATHIAS

Do not do this.

Peretz keeps his face toward the crowd.

PERETZ

You think refusing will stop them?

MATTATHIAS

No.

Only now does Peretz look at him.

PERETZ

We have to protect our people.

MATTATHIAS

You're right.

Relief crosses Peretz's face.

MATTATHIAS

We do.

Mattathias embraces him. Peretz lets himself be held--then grunts.

The crowd goes still. Mattathias grips him tighter, tears standing in his eyes, and drives the concealed sword deeper. The bronze tip bursts through Peretz's back. A woman screams.

Peretz looks over Mattathias' shoulder, stunned. Mattathias whispers into his ear.

MATTATHIAS

Forgive me.

He pulls the blade free. Peretz collapses against the altar. The square erupts. The pig tears loose and bolts through the crowd. Villagers scatter. Soldiers shove forward.

The nearest soldier lunges for Mattathias. Judah drives into him before the spear can reach his father. John takes the steps in two bounds and hurls another soldier off the platform. Jonathan yanks two frozen villagers out of the way.

SIMON

Get him down!

Mattathias stands on the platform, Judah's sword slick with blood. He sets his eyes on the Emissary. The Emissary backs away, suddenly pale.

EMISSARY

Stop him!

No one does. Mattathias advances. The Emissary stumbles backward, catches his heel in the pig's rope, and falls hard from the platform. A sickening crack stills the square--then chaos swallows it again.

Mattathias fixes on the statue of Ares. On Antiochus' painted face.

MATTATHIAS

Not here.

John follows his eyes. He seizes the rope still looped around the platform rail. Simon joins him. Judah reaches them a beat later, bloodied and breathing hard. The three sons pull.

The statue rocks but does not fall. More villagers grab the rope. Mattathias, blood on his hands, takes hold too.

MATTATHIAS

Again.

They pull. The idol tips. For one suspended instant, Antiochus' painted face seems to look down upon them. Then the statue crashes to the stones and shatters.

Mattathias climbs down from the platform with Judah's help and turns to the crowd.

MATTATHIAS

Whoever is for the Lord--to me!

Elazar lifts a shofar to his lips. The blast tears through the square. Raw. Ancient. Terrible. A cry rises from the crowd--fear, grief, defiance, all bound together.

The brothers mount the nearest soldiers' horses. Judah helps Mattathias onto another. After one last glance at the shattered idol, he turns toward the mountains. Judah rides at his side. Simon, John, Jonathan, and Elazar follow.

Behind them, Alcimus forces his way onto the platform and falls beside Peretz. He gathers his father into his arms, his cry lost beneath the chaos. One by one, villagers break from the square and follow after them. Not all. Enough.