

Who was Antiochus Epiphanes?

Antiochus Epiphanes was a Greek king of the Seleucid Empire who reigned over Syria from 175 BC until 164 BC. He is famous for almost conquering Egypt and for his brutal persecution of the Jews, which precipitated the Maccabean revolt. Antiochus Epiphanes was a ruthless and often capricious ruler. He is properly Antiochus IV, but he took upon himself the title “Epiphanes,” which means “illustrious one” or “god manifest.” However, his bizarre and blasphemous behavior earned him another nickname among the Jews: “Epimanes,” which means “mad one.”

An altercation between Antiochus Epiphanes and a Roman ambassador by the name of Gaius Popillius Laenas is the origin of the saying “to draw a line in the sand.” When Antiochus brought his army against Egypt in 168 BC, Popillius stood in his way and gave him a message from the Roman Senate ordering him to stop the attack. Antiochus responded that he would think it over and discuss it with his council, at which point Popillius drew a circle in the sand around Antiochus and told him that, if he did not give the Roman Senate an answer before crossing over the line in the sand, Rome would declare war. Antiochus decided to withdraw as Rome had requested.

But the most famous conflict connected to Antiochus Epiphanes is the Maccabean revolt. During that time of history, there were two factions within Judaism: the Hellenists, who had accepted pagan practices and the Greek culture; and the Traditionalists, who were faithful to the Mosaic Law and the old ways. Supposedly to avoid a civil war between these two factions, Antiochus made a decree outlawing Jewish rites and worship, ordering the Jews to worship Zeus rather than Yahweh. He wasn’t just trying to Hellenize the Jews but to totally eliminate all traces of Jewish culture. Of course, the Jews rebelled against his decrees.

In an act of brazen disrespect, Antiochus raided the temple in Jerusalem, stealing its treasures, setting up an altar to Zeus, and sacrificing swine on the altar. When the Jews expressed their outrage over the profaning of the temple, Antiochus responded by slaughtering a great number of the Jews and selling others into slavery. He issued even more draconian decrees: performing the rite of circumcision was punishable by death, and Jews everywhere were ordered to sacrifice to pagan gods and eat pig flesh.

The Jewish response was to take up arms and fight. In 167–166 BC, Judas Maccabeus led the Jews in a series of victories over the military forces of the Syrian-Greeks. After vanquishing Antiochus and the Seleucids, the Jews cleaned and restored the temple in c. 165.

Antiochus Epiphanes is a tyrannical figure in Jewish history, and he is also a foreshadowing of the coming Antichrist. The prophet Daniel predicts an atrocity in the temple in the end times (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Daniel's prophecy concerns a coming ruler who will cause the offerings to cease in the temple and set up "an abomination that causes desolation." While what Antiochus did certainly qualifies as an abomination, Jesus speaks of Daniel's prophecy as having a still-future fulfillment (Matthew 24:15–16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20–21). The Antichrist will model Antiochus Epiphanes in his great pride, blasphemous actions, and hatred of the Jews.