Foils or Heroes? On Martyrdom in First and Second Maccabees

Daniel R. Schwartz

The First and Second Books of Maccabees tell the story of Judaeans who rebelled against Greek rule and established a sovereign Jewish state in its stead. The authors of these two works, however, came from very different historical contexts: 1 Maccabees reflects the partisan viewpoint of a mouthpiece of the native dynasty that led the rebellion and came to rule the state, while 2 Maccabees is the work of a diasporan Jew accustomed to living under Greek rulers. Accordingly, anyone who compares these two Jewish works of the second century BCE to one another will easily notice manifold differences.

For example, 1 Maccabees naturally portrayed Greek kings as typically evil, summarizing one-hundred-fifty years of Hellenistic kings—from Alexander the Great until Antiochus Epiphanes—with the observation that "they caused many evils on the earth" (1:9). Indeed, Gentiles in general are evil: the frequent attempts of "the Gentiles roundabout" to attack the Jews and wipe them out are underlined with relish (5:1, 10; 12:53), for they serve quite well to justify the need for independent rule.

In contrast, the author of 2 Maccabees frequently stresses that Gentile kings were usually benevolent to the Jews, laying special emphasis on the fact that they showed great respect for the Temple of Jerusalem (3:2–3; 5:16) and thus indicating that Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who persecuted the Jews and defiled the Temple, was merely an unfortunate exception to the general rule. Similarly, Gentiles, especially Greeks, were by and large full of respect for the Jews, which is of course only to be expected, since we are all "men" (4:35). Indeed, even Antiochus himself wasn't so bad: chapter 4 depicts him as enraged at the murder of a Jew and punishing the perpetrator quite demonstratively (4:37–38), just as it explains that Antiochus would have punished another such villain too were it not for the influence exercised by a corrupt courtier (4:45–46). Accordingly, if chapter 5 has Antiochus attacking Jerusalem and robbing the Temple, it also assures us that this happened only as the result of a misunderstanding (5:5–11).

> For 2 Maccabees, sin is the problem and martyrdom is the solution.

Among other things, 1 and 2 Maccabees also differ with regard to martyrdom, although neither this difference nor its correlation with the two books' disparate origins are immediately apparent. In 2 Maccabees, the role of martyrs is clear: they are the very pivot of the story. The book has a simple structure: after the first three introductory chapters the story goes downhill quickly, with sinful Hellenization in chapter 4 entailing divine punishment (4:16–17), which takes its form in Antiochus's attack on Jerusalem and the Temple in chapter 5 and his decrees against Judaism in the first verses of chapter 6. But that is followed in the rest of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7 by lengthy and graphic accounts of martyrdom (of the old Eleazar, and of a woman later known as Hannah in Jewish tradition, and her seven sons). Accordingly, if the story turns around at the beginning of chapter 8, that is because God hears the blood calling out to Him from the ground (8:3) and, in response, His wrath turns into mercy (8:5). It is, in other words, the martyrdoms of chapters 6–7 that allow for Judas Maccabaeus's victories, which begin in chapter 8 and continue until the end of the book. Thus, for 2 Maccabees, sin is the problem and martyrdom is the solution. As the seventh son puts it in 7:38, his suffering and that of his brothers stayed the Almighty's anger, which had justly been loosed against the nation.

In 1 Maccabees, in contrast, sin is not the problem. Non-Jews are the problem. As summarized above, Gentile kings are wicked, Gentiles are wicked (unless, as the Romans, they are not our neighbors and are far enough away not to bother us, chapter 8), and Jews who "yoke themselves" together with Gentiles (1 Macc. 1:15, echoing Num. 25:3, 5, the Phineas story; see below) are wicked. Therefore, what is needed is not atonement but, rather, heroic opposition and that is where the Hasmoneans come in. The author, writing on behalf of the Hasmonean dynasty, is careful to portray the founder of the dynasty, Mattathias, as a latter-day Phineas, who too "was zealous" (2:24), "zealous for the law, as had been Phineas" (2:26). He consequently killed a Jew who was about to sacrifice as the king required, killed the royal official enforcing the decree as well, and raised the first call to rebellion. That the biblical parallel also explains why Mattathias's descendants, as Phineas (Num. 25:10–13), are entitled to the high priesthood, is not merely a coincidence. The list of "whereas" clauses in chapter 14, documenting all the Hasmoneans' accomplishments in their wars over the next decades, completes the same picture and

justifies the proclamation, preserved in that chapter, that they are to remain the nation's rulers forever.

Martyrs have no place in this story, except insofar as they show how bad the Gentiles are. Accordingly, martyrs figure in 1 Maccabees on only three occasions, briefly and solely for that purpose and, thus, as foils for the real heroes. First, at the very end of chapter 1 a few verses (vv. 60–63) record the execution of those who persisted in circumcising their children and refrained from eating forbidden foods; that passage is followed by chapter 2, which opens elsewhere, and with no causal nexus, à la "Meanwhile, on the other side of town," by introducing Mattathias and his five sons and then recounting the way they began the rebellion. That is, chapter 1 portrays the problem and chapter 2 introduces the solution, a far cry from the move from 2 Maccabees 6–7 to 2 Maccabees 8, where the martyrdoms *are* the solution. In 1 Maccabees, in the move from chapter 1 to chapter 2, martyrdoms function only to show that the Hasmonean solution, which is the opposite of martyrdom, is what is needed instead.

Similarly, in 1 Maccabees 2:29–38, we read of pious Jews who refuse to defend themselves on the Sabbath; as a result, all one thousand of them are easily killed by royal troops. This leads the wiser Mattathias and his men to decide to defend themselves if they are ever attacked on the Sabbath (1 Macc. 2:39–41), a policy indeed followed at 9:43–47. Thus, here too pious and well-meaning martyrs serve only as foils for those who see things the way they really are and draw the requisite practical conclusions.

Finally, in chapter 7 we read of a Syrian governor, Bacchides, sent to Judaea together with a villainous Jewish priest, Alcimus. When Bacchides sent a treacherous peace feeler to Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, they saw through it and prudently kept their distance, but "a congregation of scribes," some sixty "pious people," convinced that "a priest of the seed of Aaron" would not hurt them, accepted the treacherous overtures and were

Silver Tetradrachm of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, 164 BCE. Courtesy of the Center for Online Judaic Studies, www.cojs.org.

promptly arrested and executed (1 Macc. 7:10–17). If, in the first two cases of martyrdom in chapters 1–2, we saw open-eyed people choosing to pay the ultimate price rather than disobey the Torah, here the author takes off his gloves and presents those foils as pious fools, who make the Hasmoneans' wisdom, and the rightness of their way, stand out all the more. For the dynastic historian, the author of 1 Maccabees, this was the point of the story.

A minimalist analysis of this comparison of the two books would restrict itself to noting that Jews of the Diaspora possess, qua Jews, no army. Having at their disposal no other route to a "noble death" than martyrdom, they make martyrs the heroes of 2 Maccabees. In contrast, the Jews of Judaea in the Hasmonean period (as today), had the option of being soldiers in their own army, and accordingly make valiant soldiers, including those who died nobly—the heroes of 1 Maccabees. Each book naturally lionizes the role models of its community. A broader, deeper, and more unsettling conclusion would add that those who view martyrs positively relativize the value of life in this world, and, as in 2 Maccabees, place more of an emphasis on life after death, and, consequently, on the distinction between the body (which stays in the grave) and the soul. In contrast, those, like the author of 1 Maccabees, who view martyrs as pious fools, lambs, led uselessly to slaughter, limit their view to this world: what you see is what you get. Insofar as religion has something fundamental to do with what there is beyond this world and beyond what we see, and insofar as Judaism is a religion, it becomes easy to understand why the term "Judaism" appears (for the first time in extant literature) and is showcased in 2 Maccabees (2:21; 8:1; and 14:38), and harder to understand how Judaism might play a significant role in a Jewish state. This, in turn, goes some of the way toward explaining why exponents of Judaism, such as Pharisees and Qumran sectarians, found themselves in opposition to the Hasmonean state, and may also contribute to the understanding of similar situations in Israel today.

Daniel R. Schwartz is professor in the Department of History of the Jewish People at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of 2 Maccabees *(Walter de Gruyter, 2008).*