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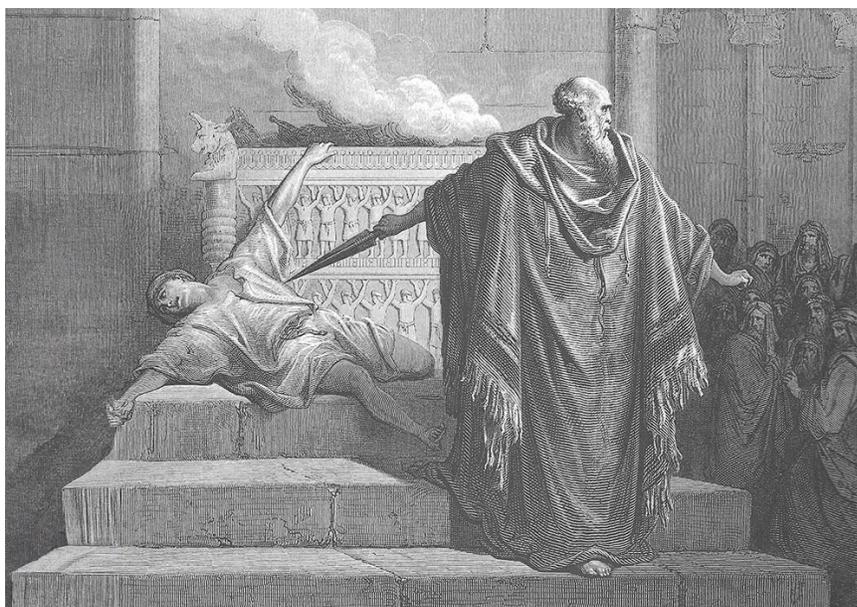
The Torah

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The Maccabean Victory Explained: Between 1 and 2 Maccabees

1 and 2 Maccabees have different understandings of why the Maccabean revolt succeeded. 1 Maccabees emphasizes the zealous killing of sinners as the element that wins God's favor, while 2 Maccabees emphasizes the tragic death of righteous Jewish martyrs as bringing about God's mercy and compassion.

Prof. Katell Berthelot



Mattathias and the Apostate (1 Macc. 2:1-25). Doré's English Bible, 1866. Wikimedia adapted using Dall-E

The festival of Chanukah, celebrated by Jews for more than two millennia, commemorates the victorious battle of Judah Maccabee (Judas Maccabaeus) and his brothers, and their rededication of the Jerusalem Temple. Yet, rabbinic literature, which canonizes the holiday and speaks mostly about how a small tin of holy oil that should have lasted for one day lasted for eight, says very little about the Maccabees.^[1] Instead, our main source of knowledge about the Maccabean revolt comes from 1 and 2 Maccabees, two books that are not part of the Masoretic (mainstream Jewish) canon, but became part of the Greek Jewish canon (known as the Septuagint).

Both of these works describe the war waged by Judah against the Seleucids—the Greek kings to the

northwest of Israel who ruled over Judea in the early 2nd century C.E.—and against the wicked Judeans who had joined forces with them, and celebrate the Jews' regained ability to live according to their ancestral laws. Both stories convey an ideology of resistance to Seleucid policies, but their accounts take two very different shapes.^[2]

1 Maccabees: Zealous Like Phinehas

1 Maccabees, written in Hebrew in the court of John Hyrcanus (135–105/4 B.C.E.), but preserved only in a Greek translation, emphasizes armed struggle. This begins with the king's order to the Jews of Modein, a town to the northwest of Jerusalem, to sacrifice to foreign gods:

^{1 Macc 2:15} And the agents of the king, who were enforcing the apostasy, came to the city of Modein to sacrifice. ^{2:16} And many from Israel came to them, and Mattathias and his sons gathered together.^[3]

The soldiers turn to a local leader, Mattathias, pressuring him to comply:

^{2:17} And the agents of the king answered and said to Mattathias, saying, “You are a ruler, both glorious and great in this city, and supported by sons and brothers. ^{2:18} Now you come forward first and execute the ordinance of the king, as have done all the nations and the men of Judea and those remaining in Jerusalem. And you and your sons will be among the friends of the king, and you and your sons will be glorified with silver and gold and much compensation.”

Mattathias responds with a speech exclaiming how he and his family will keep the covenant (vv. 19–22), but then a different Judean agrees to participate in the sacrifice:

^{1 Macc 2:23} And as he finished speaking these words, a Judean man came within sight of all to sacrifice on the altar in Modein in accordance with the ordinance of the king.

This apostasy moves Mattathias to violence:

^{2:24} And Mattathias saw this, and he became zealous, and his kidneys became stirred up. And his anger arose in judgment. And running, he slaughtered him on the altar ^{2:25} and killed the agent of the king, who was forcing them to sacrifice at that time, and tore down the altar. ^{2:26} And he became zealous in the law as Phinehas had done against Zambri (=Zimri) son of Salom (=Salu).

The author of 1 Maccabees explicitly draws the parallel between Mattathias and Phinehas, who kills an Israelite man who was lying with a Midianite woman near the Tabernacle (Num 25:7–8). The significance here goes beyond just the parallel actions of these two men. As a result of his zeal, YHWH offers Phinehas the priesthood:

1 Maccabees also narrates at great length the Hasmoneans' military exploits against the Seleucid troops, emphasizing the former's bravery and heroism. The emphasis on fighting the Judeans' enemies appears already in chapter 2 of the book, when Mattathias exhorts his children to "offer their lives for the ancestral covenant" (2:50)—not as martyrs, but as warriors who will avenge their people (2:66–67) and retaliate against the Gentiles (2:68).

Mattathias' exhortation is in response to the counterexample of some observant Jews who had refused to fight on a Sabbath and had then been massacred by the Seleucid army (2:29–41). Even though these Jews are described as just and pious, their choice is implicitly criticized, and they do not constitute a model to be imitated.^[7] Faithfulness to the Torah here appears subordinated to effectiveness and success at war.

2 Maccabees: Martyrdom

In contrast to 1 Maccabees' martial spirit, the author of 2 Maccabees (a work composed in Greek around 150 B.C.E.^[8]) promotes an ideology of resistance based on martyrdom.^[9] According to Jan Willem van Henten, professor of religion in the University of Amsterdam,

A martyr text tells us about a specific kind of violent death, death by torture. A martyr text describes how a certain person, who is in an extremely hostile situation, prefers a violent death to compliance with a decree or demand of the (usually) Gentile authorities.^[10]

Chapters 6–7 of 2 Maccabees are replete with such martyrdom stories.^[11]

Like 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees tells the story of how the Seleucids forced Judeans to violate their religious norms:

^{2 Macc 6:7} Under bitter duress they were dragged off to eat the entrails of sacrifices on the king's monthly birthdays, and when the festival of Dionysus came around they were forced, crowned with ivy, to make processions for Dionysus. ^{6:8} At Ptolemy's suggestion a decree was issued, calling upon the neighboring Greek cities to adopt the same practice concerning the Jews and have them eat the entrails of sacrifices, ^{6:9} and to cut down those who did not prefer to go over to Greek ways...^[12]

At this point, instead of introducing Mattathias and his rebellion, we hear stories of martyrdom:

^{2 Macc 6:9} ... And one could really see the suffering coming on. ^{6:10} For two women who had circumcised their sons were hauled up (for punishment): they hung their babies from their breasts and then, after parading them publicly around the city, flung them down from the wall.

In a longer anecdote, 2 Maccabees tells the story of Eleazar, an old man who refuses to eat pork or even

to *pretend* to be eating the flesh of the (pagan) sacrificial meal (6:18–31), and is consequently tortured to death by the king's officers. Finally, the martyrdom section culminates in the story of the abominable tortures inflicted upon seven brothers and their unnamed mother who similarly refuse to comply with the king's orders and remain steadfast until death (7:1–42).^[13]

In contrast, 1 Maccabees only refers in passing to those who chose to die rather than to infringe the dietary laws:

1 Macc 1:62 But many in Israel remained strong and fortified themselves not to eat common things.
1:63 And they preferred to die so as not to be contaminated by food and not to defile the holy covenant, and they died. 1:64 And there was a very great wrath upon Israel.^[14]

In 1 Maccabees, the martyrs are pious and unfortunate, but they are not the heroes of the story, and it is not on their account that the Maccabean rebels win the war.

The Maccabean Revolt Begins with Fleeing

2 Maccabees never mentions the story of Mattathias killing the Judean who participated in the pagan offering. Instead, our first introduction to the Maccabean revolt is when Judah flees instead of fighting. The incident begins when Antiochus decides to attack Jerusalem on Shabbat:

2 Macc 5:24 And he sent the Mysarch Apollonius with an army of 22,000 men, ordering him to cut down all the adults and to sell all the women and youth. 5:25 Upon arrival in Jerusalem he pretended to be peaceful, holding back until the holy Sabbath day. Then, catching the Jews while they were abstaining from labor, he instructed the men under his command to muster for parade: 5:26 he then skewered all those who came out to watch the show, and rushing with his armed men into the city they laid low great multitudes.

In the wake of this attack, we are first introduced to Judah Maccabee:

2 Macc 5:27 But Judas, also known as Maccabaeus, around whom a group of ten or so had gathered,^[15] fled to the mountains and, along with his men, lived there in animal-like fashion, for food limiting themselves to grass so as to avoid defilement (i.e., to avoid the consumption of impure food).

This first description of Judah does not correspond at all to the warlike portrait found in 1 Maccabees, where Judah immediately participates in the military expeditions launched by his father and is designated by the latter as the commander of the army because he is best equipped to lead the war (1 Macc 2:66).

According to 2 Maccabees, Judah's first act is to run away. He does not fight back on Shabbat.

Moreover, during his time of hiding, he is mainly concerned with purity issues and keeping kosher, that

is, with keeping the Law and avoiding meat sacrificed to idols, just like the martyrs.^[16] Faithfulness to the Law and the desire not to be defiled by impure food characterize them both.

Fighting on Shabbat

2 Maccabees expresses no disagreement with the choice to avoid fighting on Shabbat:

^{2 Macc 6:11} Others, who had come together in nearby caves in order to celebrate the seventh day secretly, were—after having been informed upon to Philip—burned together, in consequence of their scrupulous refusal to defend themselves due to their respect for the most august day.

If anything, the text supports their decision by insisting that these sufferings were a God-sent ordeal meant to “discipline” Israel in order to prevent greater chastisements in the future (2 Macc 6:12–17).^[17]

Two further observations show that 2 Maccabees considers the decision to die rather than to fight on the Sabbath to be correct. First, Judah is never depicted as fighting on a Sabbath. Second, when the Seleucid general Nicanor attempts to kill Judah on a Sabbath, some Judeans who had been forced to accompany him in his campaign against Judah warn him that he should not desecrate the divinely ordained holy day, which would amount to a “savage” and “barbarian” behavior:

^{2 Macc 15:1} Nicanor, upon receiving notice that Judas’ men were in the vicinity of Samaria, determined to attack them in complete security on the day of rest. ^{15:2} When those Jews who had been forced to come along with him said, “You should not at all be so wildly and barbarically destructive; rather, give honor to the day which has been most honored with sanctity by Him who oversees all,” ^{15:3} the thrice-accursed man inquired, “Is there a ruler in heaven who decreed the celebration of the Sabbath day?”

When they answer yes, Nicanor claims that he rules the earth and will do the king’s business (v. 4). Nevertheless, he fails to harm Judah (v. 5). The text does not mention any fighting, suggesting to the reader that this deliverance is miraculous. Here again, we see a strong contrast with 1 Maccabees, which, as we saw, is critical of those who refuse to fight on Shabbat.

Judah’s Power: A Consequence of the Martyrs Atonement

At the very beginning of chapter 8, which chronicles Judah’s rebellion, the author clarifies the connection between the martyrs and the rebels: Judah and his companions ask God to have mercy on the people,

^{2 Macc 8:2} And they called upon the Lord: To look down upon the people oppressed by all, and to have pity upon the Sanctuary, which had been profaned by impious men, ^{8:3} and to be merciful also to the city which was being destroyed and about to be leveled to the ground, and to listen to the blood which was calling out to Him, ^{8:4} and also to remember the lawless destruction of

innocent infants and the blasphemies which had been committed against His name – and (so) to act out of hatred for evil.

God responds immediately:

^{2 Macc 8:5} As soon as Maccabaeus got his corps together he could not be withstood by the Gentiles, the Lord's anger having turned into mercy.

Whereas in 1 Maccabees, God's wrath against the Judeans is appeased through the Maccabees' eradication of the ungodly among the people, in 2 Maccabees it is the blood and the sufferings of the martyrs—especially that of innocent children—that play an expiatory and propitiatory role and make Judah's victories against Israel's enemies possible.^[18] This evolution is foretold in 2 Maccabees 7, in the prayer of the seventh brother, who declares:

^{2 Macc 7:37} “As for me, just as my brothers I give up both body and soul for the ancestral laws, calling upon God that He speedily become merciful to the people; and that you, after afflictions and scourging, will therefore admit that He alone is God; ^{7:38} and that, with me and my brothers, shall be stayed the anger of the All-Ruler which was justly loosed against our entire nation.”

It is not the violent “purification” of the people at the hands of Mattathias and his sons that expiates the Judeans' sins and plays a propitiatory role, but the death of the martyrs. Judah's military victories and the liberation of the people are presented as consequences of the martyrs' decisive sacrifice of their lives. Logically enough, the warriors are said to share their plunder with the victims of torture, the widows and orphans (2 Macc 8:30).

Judah's Military Prowess

2 Maccabees does praise Judah's military leadership and successes in battle. Chapter 8 mentions that “the fame of his manly valor (*euandria*) spread everywhere” (8:7). Other passages narrate his exploits in detail, as in chapter 13, when he wins a battle near Modein:

^{2 Macc 13:15} Assigning his men the motto “God's victory,” with his best selected youths he made a night-attack upon the royal courtyard, (that is) the encampment, and killed about 2000 men, also skewering the first of the elephants together with him who was in the house. ^{13:16} In the end they filled the encampment with fear and tumult and then, having been successful, they broke away.

Yet in 2 Maccabees, the ultimate cause of Judah's victories is God, whose interventions are explicitly mentioned—in contrast to 1 Maccabees, which barely evokes God at all. The account of the battle at Modin thus begins with “petitioning the merciful Lord with wailing and fasts and prostration for three days without letup” (13:12), and ends by explaining that all happened “by virtue of the Lord's sheltering which had come to his aid” (13:17).

Similar language is hardly found in 1 Maccabees.^[19] Neither do we find in 1 Maccabees references to angels, visions, dreams, and miracles, whereas these abound in 2 Maccabees.^[20] Even though 2 Maccabees acknowledges the bravery of Judah and his companions, the work aims to emphasize the supernatural and miraculous dimension of the war, to show that God has not forsaken His people.

In short, while 2 Maccabees certainly does not oppose Judah's military struggle to the "fight" of the martyrs—both being necessary for the people's liberation—it nevertheless establishes a hierarchy in which martyrdom plays the leading role, and the success of the military is directly attributed to divine support.^[21]

Biblical Inspiration

Both 1 and 2 Maccabees are inspired by the book of Deuteronomy, but each sees different passages of that book as key.

Laws of War—In order to justify the Maccabees' fight against the ungodly, 1 Maccabees alludes to the law prescribing slaughter of individuals or cities that have forsaken God's covenant to follow a false prophet (Deut 13).^[22] In 1 Maccabees 3:56, Judah implements Deuteronomy's laws of war by allowing men who had recently planted vineyards, built houses or become betrothed to women to avoid army service (Deut 20:5–8). 1 Maccabees 5, a chapter that describes Judah's campaigns in Transjordan, contains echoes of the laws of war against cities located outside of Canaan (Deut 20:10–15).^[23]

God's Discipline—2 Maccabees uses different passages in Deuteronomy as its basis. Both Deuteronomy 8:5 ("Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you") and the song of Moses (*Haazinu*, Deut 32) play a central role in the book. The latter inspires the "sin-punishment-reconciliation theme" that runs through the whole work.^[24]

These different uses of Deuteronomy fit the respective ideological orientations of the two books and further reveal the gap between them.

Between a Court Historian and a Diaspora Jew

The ideologies of resistance found in 1 and 2 Maccabees share common features; both value and foster commitment to the Torah, heroism, and the ability to sacrifice one's life for the common good. Yet the ideology of armed struggle differs from that of martyrdom in prescribing active fighting against both foreign enemies and "enemies from within," namely Hellenizing Jews, and traitors who collaborate with the Seleucids.

Both 1 and 2 Maccabees condemn certain Jews as impious and wicked, yet the ideology of martyrdom is deprived of the dimension of "zeal" that underlies the ideology of armed struggle. The ideology of armed struggle commands to kill, whereas the ideology of martyrdom involves being killed. In the

name of Torah, some Jews legitimize the use of violence, including against fellow Jews, whereas others emphasize the ability to endure violence.^[25]

The emphasis on bravery, combat, and the fight against “impious Judeans” in 1 Maccabees is certainly connected to the author’s project: As a court historian who supported the Hasmonean dynasty, he attempted to glorify Mattathias and his descendants and to justify the latter’s rule, including the eradication of their Jewish political opponents, who were labeled as “impious” and “wicked.”

In contrast, most scholars suggest that the emphasis on martyrdom and divine interventions in 2 Maccabees is related to the Diasporic context of the author, for in the Diaspora, Jews experienced political weakness and had often no other choice but to look for God as their refuge.^[26]

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Footnotes

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[1] Editor’s note: For the development of this tradition, see Malka Z. Simkovich, “[Uncovering the Truth about Chanukah](#),” *TheTorah* (2013); Shai Secunda, “[The Development of the Chanukah Oil Miracle in Context of Zoroastrian Fire Veneration](#),” *TheGemara* (2016).

[2] Editor’s note: For another discussion of the differences between these works, see Daniel R. Schwartz, “[Judea versus Judaism: Between 1 and 2 Maccabees](#),” *TheTorah* (2021).

[3] Translations of 1 Maccabees are from NETS with slight adjustments.

[4] Editor’s note: For more on the political aspect of the book, defending Hasmonean power, see Eric Orlin, “[Chanukah and the Politics Behind the Maccabean Revolt](#),” *TheTorah* (2018).

[5] The Greek here (καὶ ἀπέστρεψεν ὄργην ἀπὸ Ἰσραηλ) does not match the LXX translation of the phrase in Numbers (κατέπαυσεν τὸν θυμὸν μου ἀπὸ υἱῶν Ἰσραηλ). Nevertheless, the phrase in 1 Maccabees is likely a translation of the same Hebrew phrase as Numbers, rendered differently by different translators.

[6] This follows the law against an Israelite individual or city (עיר הנדחת) that goes along with a false prophet or god (Deut 13).

[7] Editor’s note: For some discussion of the debate about whether it was legitimate to fight on Shabbat, see Nadav Sharon, “[An Ancient Precedent for the Yom Kippur War?](#)” *TheTorah* (2017).

[8] See Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 11–15.

[9] For more on this, see Marty Lockshin, “Chanukah: The Greek Influence of Martyrdom,” *The Torah* (2017); Lindsey Taylor-Guthertz,

[10] “Martyrion and Martyrdom: Some Remarks about Noble Death in Josephus,” in Folker Siegert and Jürgen U. Kalms (eds.), *Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium Brüssel 1998 (MJSt 4)* (Münster: Lit, 1999), 130; id., *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People. A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 7.

[11] Editor’s note: See also discussion in Lindsey Taylor-Guthertz, “2 and 4 Maccabees: Evolving Responses to Hellenism,” *The Torah* (2018).

[12] Translations of 2 Maccabees come from Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*.

[13] Editor’s note: For discussion on how this story developed, see Malka Z. Simkovich, “The Faith of the Martyred Mother and her Seven Sons,” *The Torah* (2015).

[14] Through its final allusion to (God’s) wrath, this passage concurs with 2 Maccabees’ statement that the persecution should be understood as God’s chastisement of Israel. The next chapter, however, makes clear that the resolution of the tension will come from the actions undertaken by Mattathias and his sons; Judah in particular is the one who, by fighting the ungodly, turns (God’s) wrath away from Israel (3:8). The martyrs’ role in propitiating God vanishes.

[15] David Flusser (*Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988] 518, n. 16) argued that this verse is the earliest datable evidence for the “minyan,” Jewish prayer quorum of ten men. See also Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 267.

[16] This reference to Judah’ dietary regime is in line with 2 Maccabees’ general trend to focus on the dietary laws and to see them as the cornerstone of faithfulness to Judaism.

[17] The nations, however, are not punished immediately because God waits until their crimes have reached the stage that makes forgiveness impossible. See Daniel R. Schwartz, “Divine Punishment in Second Maccabees: Vengeance, Abandonment or Loving Discipline?,” in Ulrike Mittmann-Richert *et al.* (eds.), *Der Mensch vor Gott. Forschungen zum Menschenbild in Bibel, antikem Judentum und Koran. Festschrift für Hermann Lichtenberger* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 109–116.

[18] As already noted by Elias Bickerman: “The turn in the events is brought by the blood of the martyrs” (*The God of the Maccabees: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt* [Leiden: Brill, 1979], 22). 2 Maccabees is the first Jewish text that really attributes value to the sufferings and death of some Jews for the sake of the whole people.

[19] One exception is 1 Macc 3:19, 22.

[20] See 2 Macc 3:24–28 (angels strike Heliodorus in the Jerusalem temple); 10:29–30 (five heavenly horsemen surround Judah); 11:8 (apparition of a heavenly horseman in white clothes); 15:12–16 (a vision of Jeremiah and Onias in Judah’s dream). See also Daniel R. Schwartz, “Judea versus Judaism: Between 1 and 2 Maccabees” *The Torah* (2021).

[21] 1 Maccabees uses the word *gennaiōs* (“nobly”) exclusively in connection with Judah and his soldiers and

“how they were ready to live or die nobly (or: bravely)” at war (4:35). In 2 Maccabees, Judah is also described as *gennaios* (12:42), and so is his fight (8:16, 13:14, 15:17). Yet the supreme examples of noble death are Eleazar (who gives a “noble example” when he suffers martyrdom, 6:28, 31) and the seven brothers with their mother (7:5, 11, 21).

[22] In particular, 1 Macc 1:11 paraphrases Deut 13:14.

[23] See Katell Berthelot, “Judah Maccabeus’s Wars Against Judaea’s Neighbours in 1 Maccabees 5: A Reassessment of the Evidence,” *Electrum* 21 (2014): 73–85.

[24] Daniel R. Schwartz, “Something Biblical about 2 Maccabees,” in Michael E. Stone and Esther G. Chazon, eds., *Biblical Perspectives: Early Use and Interpretation of the Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 223–232 [p. 228].

[25] William R. Farmer, in *Maccabees, Zealots and Josephus: An Inquiry into Jewish Nationalism in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), distinguishes between “the willingness to fight and kill for the Torah” (60–65), “the willingness to suffer and die for the Torah” (65–68) and “religious self-destruction” (69–70), which corresponds to suicide committed in order not to fall into the enemy’s hands (as in the case of Razis in 2 Macc 14:41–46).

[26] On 2 Maccabees as a Diasporic work, see Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 45–51; Robert M. Doran, *2 Maccabees: A Critical Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 16–17; Eyal Regev, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archaeology, Identity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 84–89.



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