

Martyrdom in 2 Maccabees 7: A Theological Response to Imperial Violence

Timothy Ross Davies
Jews, Christians and Romans:
From Maccabees to Masada (HPRS6910)
March 2026

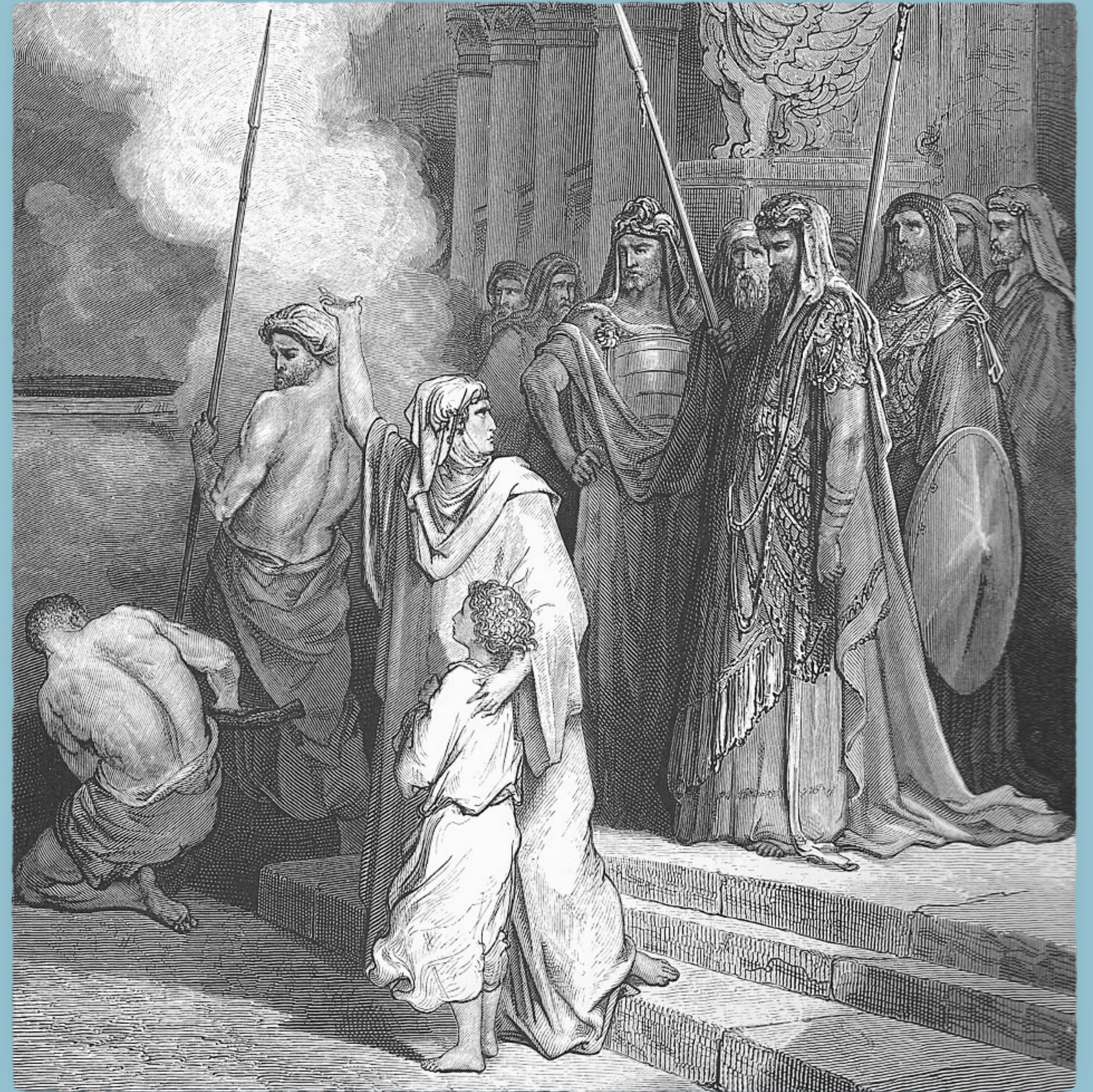


Fig. 1 – Doré, *The Courage of a Mother* (1866)

Martyrdom in 2 Maccabees 7

A Theological Interpretation of Persecution

Covenantal:

Suffering becomes **fidelity to the Law**

Cultural-Conceptual:

Articulated through **Greek literary forms** within a
Hellenistic setting

Theological-Eschatological:

Interpreted through **resurrection hope**

{

In persecuting the Jews,
Antiochus thought he
was punishing rebellion.
At the root of the rebellion
Antiochus saw the Torah;
thus, to obey the Torah
was an act of rebellion.

}

Antiochus IV (175–164 BCE)

Imperial Enforcement of Religious Conformity

- **Forced violation** of the Law
- Covenantal **practices prohibited**
(Sabbath, circumcision, sacrifice)
- Dietary **obedience criminalised**
- Violence as **political and symbolic domination**
- Imperial authority to **override covenantal identity**

[

[T]here can be no doubt about the main claim, that **Antiochus issued and enforced decrees against the practice of Judaism.**

]

2 Maccabees 7

Covenant Fidelity Under Persecution

- **Seven brothers and their mother executed** for fidelity to the Law (7:1–41)
- **Refusal to violate dietary law under coercion** (7:1–2, 7–8)
- **Speeches interpret suffering through covenant theology** (7:6, 9, 11, 14, 16, 18–19, 23, 29–33)
- **Martyrdom becomes testimony before God and king, and interpretation of faithful suffering for Israel** (7:6, 9, 14, 17–19, 30–38)

“

[Y]ou dismiss us from
this present life, but
the King of the universe
will raise us up
to an everlasting
renewal of life,
because we have died
for his laws.

”

Torah Obedience

The Law as Non-Negotiable Identity

- **Obedience to the Torah** takes precedence over life itself
- **Covenantal identity** is constituted through fidelity to the Law
- Martyrdom becomes a **public enactment of covenantal identity**
- Suffering is interpreted as **testimony rather than defeat**

“

**I will not obey
the king's command,
but I obey the command
of the law** that was given
to our ancestors
through Moses.

”

Resurrection Hope

Vindication Beyond Imperial Power

- **Resurrection guarantees divine vindication** beyond execution
- **Bodily restoration affirms covenantal continuity** with creation
- **Justice is redirected** from empire to God
- **Martyrdom becomes participation** in eschatological hope

“

One cannot but choose
to die at the hands of mortals
and **to cherish the hope**
God gives of being raised
again by him.
But for you there will be
no resurrection to life!

”

Maternal Authority

Creation Theology as the Basis of Resurrection

- The mother interprets **martyrdom** through **appeal to God as Creator** (7:22–23)
- **Life and breath belong to God** rather than to Antiochus the king
- Resurrection hope is **grounded in creation theology**
- Maternal speech presents **divine restoration** as **overcoming imperial violence**

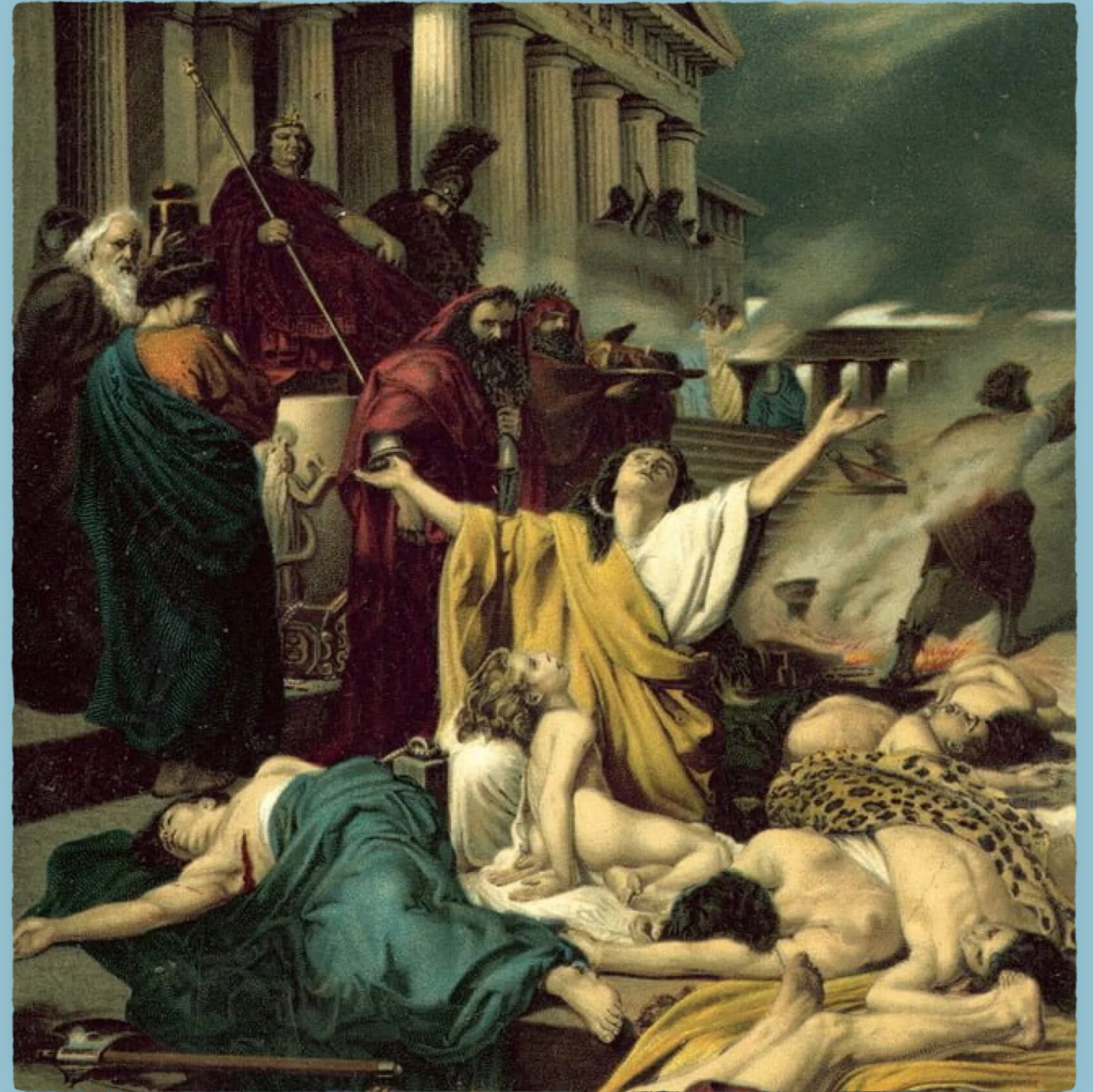


Fig. 2 – Ciseri, *The Martyrdom of the Seven Maccabees* (1857–1863)

Collective Restoration

Martyrdom within the Renewal of Israel

- Suffering is interpreted as **temporary punishment for Israel's sins** (7:18, 32–33)
- Martyrdom expresses hope for **God's reconciliation with His people** (7:33)
- The brothers' deaths are linked to **mercy shown to the nation** (7:37–38)
- Martyrdom participates in the **future restoration of Israel** (7:33, 37–38)

“

I, like my brothers, **give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation . . . and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.**

”

Scholarship and Interpretation

How Scholars Read 2 Maccabees 7

Goldstein:

Obedience to the Torah appears as **rebellion to Antiochus IV**.³

Schwartz:

Martyrdom is presented as an example sustaining **fidelity to ancestral Law under persecution**.⁴

Honigman (following Nickelsburg):

Martyr narratives form the theological turning point in a **sequence of sin, punishment, repentance, and restoration**.⁵

Himmelfarb:

The martyrs' deaths are linked to **Judah's victory and Israel's deliverance**.⁶

{

**Israel was comfortable
with the idea of resurrection
by the time of the exile...**

}

Significance

Why 2 Maccabees 7 Matters

- Martyrdom becomes **covenantal witness**
- Resurrection hope **reframes persecution** within divine justice
- The martyrs' deaths are linked to the ending of divine wrath preceding **Israel's restoration**
- 2 Maccabees 7 marks a decisive development in Jewish theology of **faithful suffering**



Fig. 3 – Biccino, *Saint Felicity and Her Seven Martyred Sons* (1466)

Figures

Fig. 1: Gustave Doré, *The Courage of a Mother* [Wood engraving] (1866) https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:150.The_Courage_of_a_Mother.jpg&oldid=1025665789 [accessed 20 March 2026].

Fig. 2: Antonio Ciseri, *The Martyrdom of the Seven Maccabees* [Oil on Canvas] (1857–1863) <https://thevcs.org/holy-maccabean-martyrs#suffering-high-poetry> [accessed 23 March 2026].

Fig. 3: Neri di Bicci, *Saint Felicity and Her Seven Martyred Sons* [Tempera on panel] (1466) <https://thevcs.org/holy-maccabean-martyrs> [accessed 31 March 2026].

References

- ¹ Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), p. 292.
- ² Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (CEJL; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p. 273.
- ³ Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, p. 292.
- ⁴ Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, p. 273.
- ⁵ Sylvie Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), p. 78.
- ⁶ Martha Himmelfarb, 'Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees', *Poetics Today*, 19.1 (Spring, 1998), 19-40 (p. 31) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773110>.
- ⁷ Stephen L. Cooke, 'Apocalyptic Prophecy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. by John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 19–35 (p. 28).

Bibliography

Cooke, Stephen L., 'Apocalyptic Prophecy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. by John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 19–35

Goldstein, Jonathan A., *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983)

Himmelfarb, Martha, 'Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees', *Poetics Today*, 19.1 (Spring, 1998), 19-40 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773110>

Honigman, Sylvie, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014)

Schwartz, Daniel R., *2 Maccabees* (CEJL; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008)