

The Themes of 1 & 2 Maccabees

Greek Versus Hebrew Ideas

The texts of 1 & 2 Maccabees exhibit numerous themes that are representative of the Jewish-Hellenistic world from which they originated. The first observation that should be made when comparing the ideas conveyed by these documents is that 1 Maccabees was written in Hebrew originally before being translated into Greek, whilst 2 Maccabees was written in Greek to begin with.¹ This is critical to assessing the influence of Greek culture and literary patterns to the ideas presented in both letters and whether they view Hellenistic influence positively or negatively. For example, despite being the more overtly Jewish document of the two, there is no assertion of the incompatibility between Judaism and Hellenism in 1 Maccabees. The actions of Antiochus and the Seleucid imposition upon the traditional rituals are the focus of the author's condemnation (e.g., 1 Macc. 1:10). For 2 Maccabees, the values of Judaism and Hellenistic society are fundamentally incompatible and a strong resistance to Hellenistic behaviour is featured (2 Macc. 6:1-9; 11:24).

This can be most explicitly seen in 2 Maccabees' depiction of the gymnasium that is installed in Jerusalem by the Seleucids as a contradictory practice to the law and using perhaps the earliest example of "Hellenism" to describe the cultural influence of Greek culture upon Judaism (2 Macc. 4:9-14). Himmelfarb observes that the appeals to the law in 2 Maccabees serve "a designation for the Jewish way of life."² Here we find a slight agreement between 1 & 2 Maccabees that the law remains a set of ordinances to be followed (1 Macc. 2:21). However, in 1 Maccabees' depiction of the gymnasium, there are Jews who attempt to

¹ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (3rd edition; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), p. 175; Jerome in his preface to his commentaries on Samuel and Kings informs us of this, as does Origen more than a century prior (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.2). Dongbin Choi observes the internal evidence for 1 Maccabees being originally Hebrew, including the presence of idiomatic Hebrew expressions, transliterations, and sentence structures following Hebrew parataxis instead of traditional Greek syntactical orders (Dongbin Choi, *The Use and Function of Scripture in 1 Maccabees*, Library of Second Temple Studies Vol. 98 (GB: T&T Clark, 2021), p. 34.

² Martha Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees," *Poetics Today* 19/1 (1998), p. 25.

uncircumcise themselves to symbolically erase their Jewish identity (1 Macc. 1:15), yet this episode is completely absent from 2 Maccabees. The omission of this episode in 2 Maccabees would not seem conducive to the anti-Hellenistic themes that it attempts to communicate, with Himmelfarb suggesting that the author did not think that it happened.³ If Himmelfarb is correct, the author of 2 Maccabees likely omitted this episode because the notion of Jews attempting to reverse their circumcision would be unthinkable, and (despite Harrington's observation that it is debatable whether such a practice of removing the marks of circumcision actually took place⁴), the connotations of such sacrilegious imagery would undoubtedly evoke disgust in the author's observant audience, encouraging a heavier dichotomy between traditional Jewish devotion and Hellenistic compromise.

Martyrdom and Divine Favour

We can also see a different structural focus in 2 Maccabees with a heavier emphasis on martyrdom and divine favour. Chapter 6:18-31 details the martyrdom of the elderly Eleazar and the confidence of the brothers that a physical resurrection will come soon for those who die for the law (7:9-11). These narratives of pious observers confronting tyranny and dying for their convictions serves to encourage the reader to stand for their traditions, even under threat of death.⁵ Although such a sentiment would be admired in 1 Maccabees, it is in stark contrast to its episode where a large group of Jews flee into the wilderness to escape the encroaching conflict and elect to observe the Sabbath instead of fighting, resulting in their deaths (1 Macc. 2:29-41). The author places into the mouth of the Maccabees that they *would* fight on the sabbath in order to avoid death and to defend their lives and laws. 1 Maccabees emphasises action even if it contradicts the law whilst 2 Maccabees emphasises observance of the law, even if it results in death.

³ Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism," p. 25.

⁴ Daniel J. Harrington, *First and Second Maccabees*, New Collegeville Commentary Series 12 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), p. 12.

⁵ See Collins, *Introduction*, p. 181.

Furthermore, 2 Maccabees' emphasis on fighting back against Hellenistic influence is contradicted by its nature as a Hellenistic document composed by a Greek-speaking Jew. When Collins observes that "2 Maccabees places much more emphasis on divine assistance,"⁶ a resemblance to Greek epics is uncovered⁷ and reveals that the author places less emphasis on the achievements of men. The death of the martyrs in 2 Maccabees are effective only in that God's intervention is direct (e.g., 2 Macc. 9:3-4, 10:1) and the Maccabee family is not highlighted as the reason for victory against the Selucids⁸ (Mattathias' achievements are never mentioned).

The Role of Scripture

Keeping these observations in mind, we should also look at how 1 and 2 Maccabees appropriate texts in the Hebrew Bible to expand upon their primary themes. For example, in 1 Maccabees 2:26, Mattathias kills another Jew who offered sacrifices to Antiochus, stating that he "burned with zeal for the law, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu." Later in the chapter, Mattathias recounts the notable Israelite leaders in the Hebrew Bible on his deathbed, referring to Abraham, Joseph, and Phinehas, leading all the way to Daniel (2:51-68). The former excerpt shows dependence on Numbers 25:6-15, whilst the latter monologue reveals the author's explicit knowledge of extensive Hebrew Bible material from Genesis to Daniel.

The comparison of Mattathias with Phinehas suggests an authoritative role has been bestowed upon him, one with connotations of a special priestly covenant.⁹ Dongbin Choi further observes that Exodus 34:13-14 and Deuteronomy 7:5, which speak of tearing down idolatrous alters, are also likely to be in the author's mind here, noting that "the whole

⁶ Collins, *Introduction*, p. 182.

⁷ Tropper observes that Eleazar's death is not only in keeping with the theme of self-sacrifice on behalf of ancient covenant, but also with Greek notions explored in dramatizations of events such as the Spartan's last stand at the Battle of Thermopylae (Amram Tropper, "The Battle of Beth Zechariah in Light of a Literary Study of 1 Maccabees 6:32-47," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 88 (2018), pp. 10-11).

⁸ Collins, *Introduction*, p. 182.

⁹ Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism," p. 21.

Deuteronomic chapter plays a crucial role in the theological shaping of the story in 1 Maccabees.”¹⁰ Mattathias’ reference to the patriarchs and prophets, as well as his final words to “pay back the gentiles in full, and obey the commandments of the law” (v. 68), reveal the intertextual dependence of 1 Maccabees on the Hebrew Bible for its primary themes: to revere the law is absolute and to compromise to gentile rule is to essentially reject the authority of the nation’s ancestors. By alluding to Israel’s historical heroes in conjunction with the Maccabees, the author places the revolutionaries on the same level as these figures, thereby portraying them as the inheritors of Israel’s heritage¹¹ and foreshadows their eventual deliverance from danger if they maintain covenant faithfulness.

Analysing 2 Maccabees along the same lines, however, reveals a different focus. There are some notable instances of literary dependence on the Hebrew Bible in 2 Maccabees, in particular the second letter appended to the book’s opening which recounts the events of the captivity (1:10-2:18). The text refers to the records of Nehemiah (2:13) which attempts to link the Maccabean rededication of the temple to the original dedication narrated in the Hebrew Bible.¹² This suggests that 2 Maccabees is very much concerned with exilic themes of captivity and raising awareness of Israel’s vulnerable position to outsider influence. This contrasts with 1 Maccabees whose opening material recounts Alexander the Great and the rise of Antiochus (1:1-2:64). The concept of exile and the fear of another similar event taking place appears to be much more in the forefront of the mind of 2 Maccabees’ author.

Ironically, however, dependence on the Hebrew Bible for 2 Maccabees is far less apparent, with the author preferring to draw upon Hellenistic rhetorical strategies. For example, Borchardt, building upon the work of classicist Markus Dubischar, refers to 2 Maccabees as an “auxiliary text,” an effort by an author to build upon previously written

¹⁰ Choi, *Use and Function*, p. 103.

¹¹ Harrington, *First and Second Maccabees*, p. 7.

¹² Theodore A. Bergren, “Nehemiah in 2 Maccabees 1:10-2:18,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 28/3 (1997), pp. 269-70.

material in forms such as commentaries, epitomes, translations, redactions, etc.¹³ The author of 2 Maccabees is openly dependent upon an earlier work by Jason the Cyrene (2:23). This passage presents what Borchardt sees as the essential elements of a Graeco-Roman preface found in auxiliary writings: (1a) an importance section establishing the relevance or authority of the text that is being appropriated, (1b) a problem section that establishes the issues of the appropriated text, and (2) a solution section where the author presents their work as the necessary answer to these problems. Borchardt sees this rhetorical strategy in 2 Maccabees 2:19-32: vv. 19-23 establish Jason as the author's source, and thereby the one whom they are indebted to for their information; v. 24 observes that Jason's work suffers from a mass of numbers (likely referring to sizes of armies) that makes reading his account a difficult endeavour; and vv. 25-32 outline the laborious task that the author set out to accomplish by abridging Jason's work, even going so far as to use the imagery of a builder constructing and decorating a new building (v. 29).¹⁴

Borchardt concludes that the author of 2 Maccabees sought to preserve the traditions presented in Jason's work, but also recognised that there were flaws his account and thus sought to rectify them. Thus, despite the undoubtedly the Jewish nature of 2 Maccabees, these rhetorical devices indicate an active participation in Hellenistic book culture.¹⁵ In light of the author's anti-Hellenistic perspective, however, 2 Maccabees seems to have ironically absorbed the methods of articulation found in Hellenistic writings. As Martha Himmelfarb observes, "It is at once Jewish in its piety and Greek in its mode of expression."¹⁶

What should also be considered concerning scripture in the Maccabees works is the practice of "Rewritten Bible."¹⁷ For the literate Jews of this period who produced many pseudepigraphal works, there had been a massive awakening for the need to actualise the

¹³ Francis Borchardt, "Reading Aid: 2 Maccabees and the History of Jason of Cyrene Reconsidered," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 47 (2016), p. 81.

¹⁴ Borchardt, "Reading Aid," pp. 82-85.

¹⁵ Borchardt, "Reading Aid," pp. 86-87.

¹⁶ Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism," p. 20.

¹⁷ See Docherty, *The Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, pp. 12-37.

texts that had become considered scriptural: the themes and events of the fledgling Hebrew Bible canon needed to be brought up to date for their contemporary audiences. The Book of Jubilees, for example, bears witness to this practice, actualising the wars in the Hebrew Bible to reflect the author's Maccabean context.¹⁸ It is possible that the negative actualisation of the Edomites/Idumeans in Jubilees is an attempt to justify the hostile relations between them and the Jews during this period.¹⁹

1 Maccabees, by contrast, is less negative towards the "children of Esau" (1 Macc. 5:3, 65; cf. Genesis 34, 37-38), simply mentioning the battles that Judas had enacted against them. Moreover, 2 Maccabees completely lacks any mention of Esau and only refers to the principle patriarchs of Israelite history once in the opening (1:2). Moses, however, receives much more attention in 2 Maccabees, being discussed seven times for the purpose of recounting Israelite history (2:4-11), but also for moral exhortation (1:29; 7:6, 30). Bizarrely, 1 Maccabees fails to mention Moses entirely, suggesting a very selective reworking of the Hebrew Bible on part of both authors.

Ritual Participation

Despite this lack of allusion to Moses, 1 Maccabees seeks to mirror scriptural language in a way that other Second Temple literature does not. The opening of 1 Maccabees speaks of Alexander coming from Kittim (cf. Gen. 10:4; Num. 24:24; 1 Chron. 1:7; Jer. 2:10). It assumes in many ways that its audience is familiar with this mode of thinking, suggesting a non-diaspora audience familiar with mainstream Jewish modes of thought. 2 Maccabees' deliberate reflections of scriptural language are left in the background and the author's intentions are

¹⁸ Other links can be seen between 1 & 2 Maccabees and other Second Temple Literature regarding these themes: Monica Brady lists internal disputes over the law and commandments as a unifying theme in Jubilees 23:19 and 1 Maccabees 2:27, 50; the concern over keeping the law whilst in lands of captivity is shared between 2 Maccabees 2:2-3 and the Epistle of Jeremiah; Qumran documents are also shown to share these parallels between both Maccabean texts (Monica Brady, "Biblical Interpretation in the 'Pseudo-Ezekiel' Fragments (4Q383-391) from Cave Four" in Matthias Henze (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 104.

¹⁹ Susan Docherty, *The Jewish Pseudepigrapha: An Introduction to the Literature of the Second Temple Period* (GB: SPCK, 2014), p. 16.

instead influenced by Greek drama and prose that would be familiar to Jews of the diaspora. The encouragement to continue participating in Jewish ritual piety away from the Jewish institutions found within the city of Jerusalem appears to be a discouragement to participate in Greek festivals.²⁰

The implicit criticism of establishment temple worship is therefore quite apparent in 2 Maccabees. For example, the author fails to mention the ordination of the new high priests (cf. 1 Maccabees 14:17, 16:24). It would not serve the author's purpose to lavish the Maccabees with praise if it is coming from an implicitly anti-Hasmonean perspective, where the mainstream forms of worship are seen as compromised and vulnerable to outside influence. 1 Maccabees, as Collins observes, "depicts the achievements of the [Maccabean] family in utopian terms,"²¹ with an emphasis on the human victory over the Seleucids, presenting the antecedents to the Hasmoneans in an undoubtedly positive light.²²

Conclusion

It is impossible to separate the Maccabean histories from their Hellenistic contexts. The divine appearances, depictions of its heroes, and the portrayal of the wicked as eventually getting what they deserve are all elements of Hellenistic historiography that have found a comfortable home in the Jewish history of 2 Maccabees. As Himmelfarb observes, "Yet even as it campaigns on behalf of Judaism and the ancestral laws, 2 Maccabees exemplifies the transformation of values under the influence of Hellenism."²³ 1 Maccabees, despite its Hebraic influences, is not spared from this cultural stimulus.

²⁰ Malka Zeiger Simkovich, "Greek Influence on the Composition of 2 Maccabees," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 42 (2011), p. 294.

²¹ Collins, *Introduction*, p. 178.

²² Charlesworth notes that 1 Maccabees is pro-Hasmonean in the same fashion that the contemporary Psalms of Solomon are "pro-establishment" (James H. Charlesworth, *The Peshierim and Qumran History: Chaos or Consensus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 65.

²³ Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism," p. 29.

What unites both 1 & 2 Maccabees are two primary elements. First, the role of scripture in promoting either passive martyrdom or active zealotry;²⁴ secondly, their general receptiveness to Hellenistic influence, which had deeply permeated their society by the time of their composition. Like much Second Temple Literature, the Maccabean texts omitted or altered incompatible aspects of Hellenistic culture, but appeared to embrace other elements (particularly with literature) consciously or otherwise.²⁵ How they chose to express these elements given their own divergent religious and political backgrounds are, as we have seen, remarkably different.

²⁴ See the perspective in Jan Assman, "Martyrdom, Violence, and Immortality: The Origins of a Religious Complex" in Gabriela Signori (ed.), *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith: Old Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees in Historical Perspective)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 58.

²⁵ See Choi, *Use and Function*, pp. 75-76.

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