

DRAFT

**Sigrid Peterson, AJS, Boston, Massachusetts
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MARTHA SHAMUNI:

PRESENTING A REDISCOVERED TEXT

OF THE MACCABEAN MARTYRDOMS

I am going to begin with three quotations, none of them from Foucault. The first is a bit of folk wisdom that goes “The best thing to do when an elephant rolls over is to get out of the way.”

The second quotation comes from the popular TV show *e.r.* In a recent episode Cary Weber – the *ER*’s director, said something like “No, you don’t medicate pain. The thing to do is to suck it in and get past it.” In the context of the show where this was said, the audience disagrees, and sees her as unsympathetic.

The Third quotation is from the Fifth Century Greek writer Synesius, disciple of Hypatia. He was an Alexandrian non-Jew and non-Christian, at least at the time he wrote the following, in 404 CE. He is describing a Jew, Aramantus, the captain of a boat on which Synesius has booked passage. A storm comes up on the eve of the Sabbath. At the time of sunset, signaling the sabbath, Aramantus lets go of the tiller, that controls the steering of the ship. Alarmed passengers try to force him to steer the boat, one of them going so far as to draw his sword and threaten to behead Aramantus if he doesn’t start steering the boat. Synesius comments, “But the Maccabean in very deed was

determined to persist in his observances.”

The first two quotations express modern attitudes to authority and to pain. Such attitudes as these place us a great disadvantage in understanding, let alone presenting, the thought world of the Maccabean martyrs. They make it difficult for us to comprehend the stoic endurance of pain for a greater end.

The comment of Synesius, on the other hand, tells us several things. First, that even 100 years after the mother and her seven sons have entered the Christian Calendar of saints, Synesius applies the story of the Maccabean martyrs to a Jew who refuses to violate Jewish law even when threatened with death. The second thing it tells us is that the story is widely known, and not only among Jews and Christians, for Synesius is neither. The third thing we learn is that it is the story of passive resistance to tyranny that Synesius knows, and calls “Maccabean,” not the story of the armed resistance to Antiochus that was led by Judah the Maccabee, that became the Hasmonean Revolution.

The text that I am calling the “Syriac Poem of the Maccabees,” or Syriac Macc for short, is a text about the Maccabeans known to Synesius. These were Eleazar, a priest, and the mother and her seven sons. The mother has not yet acquired the name Xannah—that happens later. In Syriac Macc she is called Shamuni, and elsewhere in Syriac is referred to as Martha Shamuni, which literally means “The Hasmonean Lady,” by a derivation I’ve skipped in the interests of time.

The Syriac Poem of the Maccabees is rhymed poetry, rather than rhymed prose, in the form of a homily. The stanzas of the poem are of no fixed length. The end of each stanza is marked in two ways. First, the rhymed ending changes. This rhymed ending is shown in your handout in the second column.

Second, the last line of the stanza almost always includes a doubled yod, as in Hebrew mss, rather than the tiny yud of Syriac that interrupts a flat-line, like a blip on a heart monitor in the e.r. I don't know the alternative possibilities, here, and so I understand the doubled-yod to indicate the Tetragrammaton. I conjecture that each line containing such a sign is a cue for a standardized liturgical response, in much the way that a piyyut will signal which blessing is to be pronounced by including a key word of the blessing, such as *magen*. The response in the case of these stanza-ending lines in Syriac Macc, I conjecture, would be either a fixed blessing, or a repeated verse from a litany.

Unfortunately, there is little indication of what that response might be.

The Syriac Poem of the Maccabees has no meter, or none that I am clever enough to detect. I *have discovered that there are at least two kinds of rhyme, one which is a fairly simple, monotonous repetition of morphological endings, that is, a grammatical rhyme. The second type of rhyme is an intricate arrangement of assonances involving morphological endings plus a root letter.

Now I'd like to tell you more about the content of Syriac Macc. A part of this content is shared with the Fourth Book of Maccabees, which is available in English in RH Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, in the Apocrypha to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that Oxford UP publishes, and in Charlesworth's *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, or OTP. The shared and unshared portions are outlined in your handout, in columns 3 and 5.

The shared material includes almost all the details of the scenes of torture, and is termed the Central Narrative of Torture, or CNT.

I have abbreviated the handout to omit the repetitive pattern involving sons 2 through 6. At the end of the handout is a list of the material in 4 Macc that

does not appear in Syriac Macc in any form.

Moving on to the story itself, which you can follow on the handout, the Introduction, lines 1-50, moves from the general to the specific, in the following manner. Lines 1-18 constitute an added introduction that mentions the “House of Juda the Maccabai,” and labels Mattityahu “their father the Highpriest.” There is a reference “as Paul told” to stories of ancient heroes, by which Hebrews 11 is meant, although these stories also occur in the Sidrei Avodah piyyutim of Yom Kippur. Lines 19-31 are also introductory, drawing the attention to the feats of endurance of the heroes and heroine of this story. Lines 32-50 introduce the villain, Antiochus, “the rabid dog,” and the hero Eleazar and heroine Shamuni, “the loyal witness, full of hope”.

The Central Narrative of Torture, the CNT, is told in the same sequence found in 4 Macc, both of which differ in details of torture with the same materials found in 2 Macc. In Syriac Macc, the CNT begins in media res, ‘in the middle of things’, at line 51, the departure of Seleucus and accession of Antiochus, “full of evils.”

In lines 51-71 the Syriac Macc version of the history of the Hasmonean Revolution is not to be found in any single one of our other sources, though it can be reconciled with the information we already have. Now lines 72-78 set the scene; Antiochus ascends to a high platform where judges sit, the bhma. From lines 79 through 105 there is a break in the CNT for two speeches, one of Antiochus to Eleazar, and one of Eleazar to Antiochus. This sequence is also found in 4 Maccabees, though the speeches differ. The CNT resumes for lines 106-123, and Eleazar is tortured. Syriac Macc lacks the ruse proposed by those among the torturers who know Eleazar; this is found in differing versions in both 2 Macc and 4 Macc. At the point of death, Eleazar prays aloud, lines 124-

132, and dies.

The CNT resumes, lines 133ff., with the summoning of Martha Shamuni and her seven sons, “surrounding her like a crown,” and with the speech addressed to them by Antiochus Epiphanes (AE), who declares that they must eat food forbidden by the Law, “swine’s flesh and polluted sacrifice.” He promises great rewards for obedience, and demonstrates the extent of punishment for failure to follow his wishes. The sons respond as one, in a speech which outlines the ideology which underlies this piece, the vision of another plane of reality in which punishment and reward undergo reversal. The king orders the eldest to be brought forward and tortured.

At this point, lines 205-211, Martha Shamuni speaks briefly to her son, and the following lines, 206-217, detail his torture. At the point of death, the first son delivers a brief and defiant speech to his torturers, lines 226-230, and his torture is resumed. His endurance of tortures is a message to his brothers, lines 239-247, and at the end he inherits “the kingdom and light and bridal chamber.”

Lines 177-247 narrate events in the sequence also found in 4 Maccabees, except that 4 Macc inserts a standard rhetorical flourish of the sort that begins “they might have replied” something different before both versions give a speech attributed to all the sons. The speeches differ between versions, for the most part; the events and actions are generally the same; the underlying sequence is identical. That is, although 4 Macc and Syriac Macc each insert sections of idiosyncratic material, the sequence and details of tortures is the same in both; and different from 2 Macc.

Breaking the sequence, lines 248 –260 provide a paean to the first son, who is

here called Gaddi, attributing to him yet a third defiant speech.

Lines 547-581 tell the longer story of the seventh son. Here the pattern is varied. In this section, Shamuni speaks to her son twice. Also, the same end-rhyme is used until the final speech of the son, lines 582-597. His words hammer home the ultimate fate of the king. A brief closing group of verses, lines 598-601, returns to a familiar end-rhyme.

The close agreement in sequence between Syriac Macc and 4 Macc ends here. The two recensions continue to have points of contact, but the sequences are more jumbled, and there is a great deal more independent material, including the only speech that 4 Macc gives to the mother—though mentioning all along that she is speaking to each of her sons. This summary of contents that follows, therefore, applies only to the remainder of Syriac Macc. There is a separate summary of the material that is specific to 4 Macc in the last section of the table. Following the last section of common sequence, that treats of the death of the seventh son, SyrMacc once more provides a paean, calling this last son “Jonadab.”

In lines 614-628 we learn of the noble death of Martha Shamuni, followed by a speech addressed to her about her (annual?) commemoration, in lines 629-641, which concludes (639-641). “And about this, your amazing account (is told) in all nations and peoples // And congregations in the Four Corners are founded in your name // And your name is reckoned with those ’ ’ has purified.” This is similar to lines 608 and 609, about the diffusion of the tale of the seventh son.

Next there is a paean to Martha Shamuni, lines 642-661, which quotes her speaking to all her sons in Hebrew, earlier, while they were still alive and

watching Eleazar undergo torture to death. She invokes Abraham and Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed, and promises the "life of the ages." This is followed by a speech addressing "my brothers," recalling the three youths in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3.8-30) and exhorting them to have "the mind which is above passions," and to be without fear.

The poem ends by calling us to admire these men, "every one of them being full of joy," ready to taste death for the Law, and be received by Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom.

It is not difficult to see that there is a highly structural element to Syriac Macc, where narrative events give rise to occasions for speeches, which in turn lead to narrative resumption, in a predictable and repetitive sequence. There is a further structural element consisting of the hymns celebrating the heroes or containing prayers for their mediation. I've already mentioned that SyrMacc as a whole seems to contain a liturgical structure, where a line marking the end of a stanza addresses ' ', probably cue for a liturgical response of some kind.

A further dimension of the text is the presence of two kinds of end rhyme, the grammatical type, and the complex rhymes of the sort one finds in piyyutim.

The comparison with 4 Macc reveals a great deal of shared material comprising the Central Narrative of Torture – the CNT.

As a general rule, the material labeled CNT, together with the speeches indicated by the narrative, are characterized by the simpler grammatical rhyming pattern.

In contrast, as a rule the material in Syriac Macc that is completely unshared with 4 Maccabees is in complex rhyme. The exception to this is the speeches of Shamuni to each son, which I will treat at a later point.

This presence of complex rhyme in the unshared material suggests that there are at least two people involved in bringing Syriac Macc into the form in which we know it. The later form, as we now have the text, seems largely to be the work of someone I call P, for Presenter (or Payyetan). There are minimal references to Christianity in this source; the person knows Acts and the Book of Hebrews in the NT, and the chains of Jewish heroes associated with martyrdom found in each of those books. At this point I don't know whether P's appropriation of these two episodes of the Maccabean martyrs is for the implicit purpose of identifying them with redemption through Jesus, who is called the High Priest in Hebrews 9. The alternative is that P seeks to provide a Jewish response to the Christian idea that Jesus atones, as developed in Hebrew. If this were the case, P would be trying to say that these pious young men, Maccabean descendants of a real High Priest (more or less), a real Mashiach, had done the necessary atoning already. In any case, the explicit, and most of the implicit, references indicating Christian influence are due to P.

This source, P, has incorporated, as the body of the poem, the earlier Syriac work of J. The layer represented by the letter J is a Jew, judging by Tendenz. It is this layer which contains references to the Temple sacrifices. The CNT in Syriac is almost entirely J. This source, J, represents Hell by the localized Jerusalem word "Gehenna," while to P it is Tartarus or Sheol. This same source, J, does not appear to know 4 Macc, whereas P demonstrates such knowledge with lines here and there which depend on 4 Macc.

Each of the Syriac sources, J as well as P, is writing in good, idiomatic Syriac. Each shows some influence of Greek^[1]; this is more the case for P.^[2]

This being so, why is there a shared CNT that shows up in 2 and 4 Macc in

Greek? Was it originally in a Semitic language, even perhaps in Semitic poetry?

One piece of evidence that the CNT is fact was in a Semitic language is the episode where Eleazar is first tortured. He is stripped naked by the torturers. Syriac Macc metaphorically recoils at this act of uncovering his nakedness, while 4 Macc says “he was still adorned with the beauty of his piety.” Second Maccabees omits this action entirely. The Syriac says

Then the judge’s clerk commanded his destruction,
That they strip off the clothes the martyr wore,
And shamefully leave the old man naked.

The point is that in Greek culture there is no shame or punishment in nakedness.

At this point I’ve presented a division of sources in Syriac, J and P, that seems fairly clear cut and orderly. There are two problems with this picture. One is that in a long stretch of J-type , earlier narrative, there may be 2 or 3 lines of P-type complex rhyme. There are several possibilities, including an hypothesized single author who likes to vary the rhyme scheme. Each time we encounter one of these very short shifts in rhyme-type that retains the same end-rhyme, there are several other possibilities that maintain the distinction between sources J and P.

One possibility is that such an occurrence is accidental. That is, J wasn’t consciously trying to avoid rhyming root letters, so sometimes it just happened that 2 successive lines had that kind of complex rhyme. A second possibility is that P wants to exert a redactor’s privilege and comment, expand, or

interpolate. A third possibility is that a third hand was at work.

The converse is more rarely the case, that a P passage will fall out of complex rhyme and appear to use grammatical rhyme for up to six or so lines. When that happens, P can sometimes still be identified because it uses other complex poetic devices. For example, it is only P who uses enjambment. This technique runs counter to the constant rhyming by changing the shape of the line, usually making it longer. Thus verses and lines do not coincide. This is in contrast with J, whose phrases almost always constitute a single line.

The second problem with the picture of the sources for Syr Macc is that the neat separation of them according to genres doesn't hold true for the speeches of Martha Shamuni. She speaks 9 times, in Syriac Macc, as against one speech and one testament, in 4th Macc. Of these 9 Syr Macc speeches, the first and both of the seventh son's speeches are pure J. Three others, sons 5 and 6 and the last speech are wholly P. The remaining three are a mixture of J and P. We can see that the mother is not a speaking role in 4 Macc, with one exception. Now it appears that she has been written into and then out of Syriac Macc, in a kaleidoscope shifting of sources.

However, it is Martha Shamuni who actually speaks words of instruction in the martyr's way. The repetitive message is that, yes, there is pain, but "suck it in" and go on to a great reward.

In the ending (J), this message is undercut by the affirmation of joy, not pain, by the sons themselves, and by the narrator's (J's) statement that these men should be admired.

As we have seen, there are different approaches to the same basic story. The central idea that ties all versions together is the victory over tyranny

<<Arnold Band, Shalom Spiegel and the 9th Chapter of The Last Trial]. That is, by knowing why it is that one dies, one triumphs over death. Hence, the true tyrant is meaningless death, and the expression of defiance of the tyrant must take the form of knowing why it is that one dies, that one's death has meaning. [3]

[1] Doublets, Gk and Syriac.

[2] Enjambed lines, Gk endings, Gk roots for rhymes, Gk pun.

[3] This may be done by a number of literary means, for example, by the composition of speeches, in Greek and Syriac traditions; or by the concatenation of biblical verses in later rabbinic forms of the tale. The basic purpose of each retelling of this tale remains: the features change to conform to the adapter's literary heritage.