

MACCABEAN MARTYRDOMS: VERSIONS AND VARIETIES

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It is, comparatively speaking, not that hard to track the *Nachleben* of the Maccabean martyrdoms. It is a little more difficult to determine whether we actually have the original text. For discussion, I am designating the much-discussed Chapters 6 and 7 of Second Maccabees, and the entirety of Fourth Maccabees, as joint “index cases,” or original versions.

The martyrs, Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons, are remembered and honored in both Judaism and Christianity. In a number of branches of Christianity they have their own Feast Day, generally on August 1st. In Judaism, they are often remembered with a folk tale about Hannah and her seven sons, told (now) on Hanukkah. The Jews of Kurdistan, however, tell two folk tales about Lael Huza and her seven sons on the little-known fast day Tisha B’Av, in midsummer, as collected by Yona Sabar.ⁱ

Once again, it is comparatively speaking not too hard to track the *Nachleben* of the Maccabean martyrdoms, or to designate the first

Sigrid Peterson, petersig@ccat.sas.upenn.edu 2002 SBL 1 Afterlife cases. What is difficult is to find an organizing principle with which to speak of them in any individual or comparative sense. That is, we have a collection of phenomena. We have a topic to discuss, *Nachleben*, the afterlife of known texts. We lack a critical dimension with which to examine our collection in more than descriptive terms. We could, of course, examine the development of a concept, such as resurrection, for the variations in treatment of the concept by different versions throughout the years—except that not all of the versions even speak of resurrection.

As one approach to the critical consideration of the aftertexts of the Maccabean martyrdoms, Robert Doran has treated four of the versions synoptically. Two we know from the Greek, Second and Fourth Maccabees, and two are early Rabbinic versions. One is from the Tractate Gittin in the Talmud Bavli, the Babylonian Talmud; the second is from *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*. He finds that, in folklore terms, it is the version in *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* that provides a short, core version of the story, making the latest historic version the germ or seed of the others.

Doran's work stands in contrast to the vast literature that compares

the martyrdom account in Second Maccabees only with the account in Fourth Maccabees. Articles in this literature frequently venture an opinion as to whether one or both accounts in Greek—Second Maccabees and Fourth Maccabees—are derived from a much longer history, no longer extant, by Jason of Cyrene. Opinions, and arguments, are divided; the literature is summarized excellently in Jan van Henten's 1996 book *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of Second and Fourth Maccabees*. Van Henten concludes that Second Maccabees is a history in its own right and treats it such, on the basis that we lack any portion of the longer work of Jason of Cyrene (56).

This question, of relationship to an hypothetical historical antecedent, is but one of several points that have been argued over the last 150 years. Other traditional critical questions include provenance, rhetorical style, formal literary construction, and historicity. Historicity fails, however, as a critical dimension for the consideration of the *Nachleben* of a text, as, presumably only the index case of the earliest text can relate to an historic antecedent. Rhetorical style either remains constant, or, in the case of the

Sigrid Peterson, petersig@ccat.sas.upenn.edu 2002 SBL 1 Afterlife Maccabean martyrdoms, varies wildly (and widely), so much so that it becomes a descriptive term, rather than a dimension for meaningful comparison and contrast.

These questions, of provenance, rhetorical style, formal literary qualities, and historicity, become matters of description, labels, rather than matters of critical inquiry, as we approach the proliferation of versions shown on your handout and seek to make some sense of them.

For a general conceptual dimension that serves the purpose of critical discussion of texts in the afterlife of the Maccabean martyrdoms, I have in mind the technical phrase “degrees of freedom,” adopted and adapted from statistics, as a dimension for critical examination of these texts. Of course, to use the phrase for this purpose is to misuse the statistical term, or to use it in a way unrelated to its meaning in statistics. What I hope to indicate is the variations in the literary freedom taken throughout the afterlife of the Maccabean martyrdoms. The resulting knowledge stems from comparison among several texts, against the index, or initial, text. In the use of comparisons among the texts, assessing literary degrees of

freedom is similar to synoptic treatment of texts.

In the interests of time, I will (hope to) discuss only five versions of the Maccabean martyrdoms beyond the initial pair, Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, and four Syriac versions.

Regarding literary degrees of freedom as the dimension of strict versus loose dependence on a prior text, known—or unknown but hypothesized—we have one example of close dependence. Origen's (ca. 185–254 C.E.) *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, essentially copies the embedded accounts of the martyrdom of Eleazar and the seven sons of one mother from Second Maccabees, adding a few phrases of Christian clarifications. Origen had a sense of Second Maccabees as scripture, as he concludes his account of the martyrdoms of Eleazar and of the seven sons of one mother with these words: “I think it extremely useful for what lies ahead to tell the story I have summarized from Scripture” (*Origen*, ET by Rowan A. Greer, 59).

Origen's shows a comparative lack of any degrees of freedom in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*.

In Syriac, the subset of texts of the Maccabean martyrdoms consists

Sigrid Peterson, petersig@ccat.sas.upenn.edu 2002 SBL 1 Afterlife of four very different texts. We find these texts in a curious nineteenth century book called *The Fourth Book of Maccabees and Kindred Documents*, First Edited on Manuscript Authority by Robert L. Bensly. William E. Barnes edited the volume posthumously, and provided translations to Bensly's edited texts for four of the "kindred documents."ⁱⁱ

All of the "kindred documents" differ from each other and from the Greek versions. Barnes, however, thought that one text paraphrased Fourth Maccabees.

All four texts are in "Syriac Syriac." That is, they are in idiomatic Syriac. One is an anonymous *memra*, a sermon of 678 lines in poetry, rare because it rhymes throughout, and is not as strictly isosyllabic as most Syriac poetry. I have been referring to this piece as Syriac Maccabees for reasons related to my dissertation. Another Syriac text in the Bensly and Barnes volume is an anonymous **discourse** that Barnes (and perhaps Bensly) identified as Jewish with transparent Christianizing. At first this anonymous discourse gives the name Maryam to the mother, but then calls her Shamoni in all that follows,

adding the honorific Martha to Shamoni in the ending. The anonymous discourse is a rhetorical tour-de-force that makes the mother of the seven sons the central character, and omits the scribe/priest Eleazar.

The third of the “kindred documents” consists, in two separate versions, of a sermon of Mar Severus, the sixth century († 538) Bishop of Antioch. Both Severus and the author of the anonymous discourse do not linger on the tortures, possibly a sign that torture is not practiced at the time these works were composed.

The fourth of the Bensly-Barnes texts is a Madrasa (a midrashic poem) by Ephrem, the celebrated fourth century Syriac poet. Barnes noted that every one of these, as well as Fourth Maccabees, refers to itself as an “occasional” piece, a poem, a poetic *memra*, a discourse, or a sermon pronounced on the occasion of a commemoration of the Maccabean martyrs.

The next most similar pair of texts after Exhortation to Martyrdom and Second Maccabees—which we might say share 1 or 2 degrees of freedom—is the long sermonic poem, a *memra*, in Syriac in the Bensly and Barnes collection. It is now (mis)termed Syriac Maccabees, or

Sigrid Peterson, petersig@ccat.sas.upenn.edu 2002 SBL 1 Afterlife SyriacMacc. The close similarity involves the narrative march of tortures of the seven sons, which is almost identical to that of Fourth Maccabees. The dissimilarity involves style, with Syriac Maccabees portraying the central contest between martyr and Antiochus in the style of an epic, while Fourth Maccabees is an epideictic oration. The two versions share the error that terms Antiochus the Fourth as the son of Seleucus the Fourth, instead of his brother. Also, both versions include the martyrdom of Eleazar, together with the seven sons.

The differences are significant, however. In Second Maccabees we read that Eleazar is a *grammateus*, “teacher, scholar, scribe.” In Syriac Maccabees, the term that describes Eleazar is “priest.” Fourth Maccabees describes him as both a priest and a scribe. In addition, the martyrology of Eleazar diverges, between the Greek Second Maccabees and Syriac Macc. It is difficult to discover by comparison with Fourth Maccabees, because all the elements of Syriac Macc’s account of Eleazar’s martyrdom are present in Fourth Maccabees, as are all the harmonized elements of Second Maccabees. To underline this point, Fourth Maccabees knows and harmonizes both the epitome that is Second Maccabees, and the different account that would be the

unknown *Vorlage* of Syriac Maccabees.

The shorter Greek version embedded in Second Maccabees give the mother a speech to all of her sons at the end, when they are dead; Syriac Macc, in contrast, has the mother speak to each son before his torture and death. She exhorts each to death in this world that will claim an instant inheritance of glory in resurrection in the world to come. Fourth Maccabees mentions that the mother is speaking to each son before his trial, but only provides the listener/reader with her speeches at the end, when they are almost all dead, as in Second Maccabees. Thus, once again, Fourth Maccabees harmonizes between the *Vorlage* of Syriac Macc and the short Greek version of Second Maccabees.

Another example of harmonization of Syriac Macc and Second Maccabees applies to the early appearance of Antiochus; in Second Maccabees, Antiochus does not appear at the martyrdom of Eleazar—here there is no court scene or inquisition, with Antiochus on the *bema*, or elevated platform. In the Syriac *memra*, however, the two accounts, that of Eleazar and that of Martha Shamoni and her seven sons, combine into the two martyr interrogations that take place in

Sigrid Peterson, petersig@ccat.sas.upenn.edu 2002 SBL 1 Afterlife front of Antiochus. This unification occurs also in the Greek Fourth Maccabees; both versions take advantage of the unity of place and presence of Antiochus the tyrant. By itself, this unity of setting is not harmonization. When considered in the light of other clear instances of harmonization by the author/redactor of Fourth Maccabees, then the unification of the two stories, that of Eleazar, and that of Martha Shamoni and her seven sons, appears to have been adapted from the same source as that used by the author/redactor of Syriac Maccabees.

Needs an ending beyond “This is enough: let’s discuss.”

[the following ending was inserted on 11/19/2002]

At times we may not be interested in close comparison of outlying texts with the earliest available versions. We may want instead to assess the implications of compared versions within a language and literature, or within particular time periods. Such a comparison would be likely to find two or three pieces each at greater literary degrees of freedom from the earliest available text or texts. In terms of the four Syriac pieces, the three remaining texts vary in the way they deal with the tortures of the martyrs. Two are separated by 200 years;

Ephrem omits Eleazar, alludes to the tortures of the seven sons, and omits details. Severus, 200 years later, retained Eleazar and condensed the account of tortures of the sons to three unnamed sons--in the ET published by Bensly and Barnes. In between the two, the anonymous discourse abbreviates each of the tortures.

This treatment in the Syriac versions calls to mind the rabbinic midrashim in Lamentations Rabbah/Eikha Rabbati, and in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin. In these versions, the tortures are missing, the time is that of the Destruction of the Temple, the tyrant is Caesar, and the speeches are reduced to Biblical verses. It has even been argued that these are not versions of the Maccabean martyrdoms.

However, the intermediate development of texts in Syriac would seem to show that everything is subject to alteration in the retellings, except the constant of the mother and her seven sons. I have heard tell, and not been able to find, a tale from the Northwest of India of seven martyred brothers, unusual because martyrdom is not a usual practice. But the hearsay

omits even the mother, the Syriac Martha Shamoni.

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The freedom to drop components of the story suggests the
interesting question, "How do we know it is still the story of the
Maccabean martyrs?"

We've lost characters--Martha Shamoni (or whatever her name may
be--Hannah or Leil Husa or Salomona are a few) and Eleazar. We have
lost the Central Narrative of Torture. Some versions lack much
reference to resurrection. Others add Stoic polemic in the style of
the Second Sophistic, Norden's Asianic Style. A number of the
versions, whatever the style, warn against worship of idols.

One implication of examination of the versions and varieties of the
Maccabean martyrdoms is that the study of the early Greek versions
can be enhanced by comparison with later versions, either to buttress
an argument, or to contrast later developments with earlier views.

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The following paragraphs have been deleted—my paper is now 10
pages, although I could go to 11 or 12, as I have thirty minutes—
double the pages for the estimated time.

Recently Bowersock (1995) has resurrected Campenhausen's argument from 1936 that the martyrdoms did not exist as part of either Jason's history or his epitomizer's Second Maccabees, but were "dropped in" later. To this argument, though not to Bowersock, van Henten has carefully detailed the literary elements of Second Maccabees, and its martyr accounts, that argue for the martyrdoms being an intrinsic part of Second Maccabees.

The Second and Fourth Books of Maccabees (the Greek versions) exist in Syriac translation in the 7a1 MS, a complete HB/OT MS from the Ambrosian Library in Milan, which serves as the reference text for the Leiden Peshitta, the early Syriac translation of the HB/OT. We find the Syriac translation of the fourth book of Maccabees Antiochus and the martyrs speak in dialogue; Martha Shamoni speaks to her sons, but not to Antiochus. The sons speak to Antiochus, but not to their mother.

i Yona Sabar's two articles on Kurdistani Jewish women's tales. One is in the Aramaic and Aramaeans volume that Michael Sokoloff edited, one is in reprint.

ii That is, four that have been "englished" and collected in the Robert Bensly and William E. Barnes volume *The Fourth Book of Maccabees and Kindred Documents in Syriac*, First Edited on Manuscript Authority by the Late Robert L. Bensly, Additional editing and translation by William E. Barnes. (Shortened to Bensly-Barnes) I would note that the volume provides the Syriac translation of a sermon on the Maccabees by Gregory Nazianzen, not included in this analysis. The sermon is without translation, as Barnes notes they are available in Greek, in PGM. Also included is a second version of the sermon by Mar Severus, although only one is translated.