

**“O WOMAN, WHO ALONE GAVE BIRTH TO SUCH  
COMPLETE DEVOTION!” SOME REMARKS ON  
THE *MATERFAMILIAS* AND OTHER WOMEN  
OF 1-4 MACCABEES**

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**ABSTRACT**

The four books of the Maccabees narrate an understated account of the performativity of the women who, along with their husbands, faced increasing threats with the rise of Hellenism. This article examines the role and impact of women in these writings, focusing respectively on the four books of the Maccabees. Much attention is given to the function of the *materfamilias*. In 1 Maccabees, the image of Jerusalem as the typos for the suffering mother is presented, with the purity of her body, the temple, violated and restored by the Maccabees. The images of the suffering mothers in 2 and 3 Maccabees are examined, which provides a Diaspora perspective on the problem of Hellenization. Finally, the interpretation of the martyr-mother of 2 Maccabees 7 in 4 Maccabees is discussed, followed by a synthesis of the results which concludes the study.

**INTRODUCTION**

In his absorbing study of moral life in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II, Tzvetan Todorov highlights the means by which Jews survived the horrid circumstances of camps such as Auschwitz.<sup>1</sup> One remarkable aspect of the book which stood out was the courage of women during those times. Accounts of women who gave their newborn to nurses to euthanize, and basic gestures of care and the preservation of the dignity and identity of victims by

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<sup>1</sup> This remarkable study, entitled *Facing the extreme: moral life in the concentration camps* (1999), takes the reader through the day-to-day events of prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps. It sketches both the victims and their Nazi antagonists in explicit terms. The attention given to the actions of brave women in this study cannot be underemphasized, and therefore provides a creative tool for dialogue in the current investigation regarding the women of 1-4 Maccabees.

women astound on the one hand, and on the other hand trouble the reader. After reading this wonderful yet disturbing account, the present author was moved to look at the women of the four books of the Maccabees who suffered under similar or even worse circumstances.

This investigation will therefore examine the four books of the Maccabees respectively and ask how the *materfamilias* and other women reacted to the many threats posed by Hellenization. Much attention is given to the image of the suffering mother. These ancient writings are often read in the context of war and strife, with most research focusing on the actions of the men who fought. These books, however, narrate an understated account of the performativity of the women who, along with their husbands, fathers and sons, faced increasing threats with the rise of Hellenism. Although there are significant differences with regard to style and genre of the books, the conclusion will attempt to draw a synthesis of the results.

## THE WOMEN OF 1-4 MACCABEES

The question posed may provide many valuable insights into the culture of Judaism during the time of the Maccabean revolt (and even before, as in the case of 3 Maccabees). Notwithstanding the above, the genres of the four books range from historical to sapiential and therefore special care needs to be taken when discussing the literary content, function and style of each. These differences may favour this examination, as a very broad literary field of the Septuagint (LXX) is covered, adding to the task of clearly illustrating the role of women during those turbulent times.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tcherikover (1999:196) reminds us that the Jewish identity was under threat even before the reforms of Antiochus IV: “The introduction of the Syrian cults onto the Temple mount had lent a religious odour to the rising. The Jewish faith was faced, not *after* Antiochus’ decree, but *before* it, with the alternative of renouncing its existence or

## JERUSALEM AS THE LEADING LADY IN 1 MACCABEES

First Maccabees recounts the history of the Jewish reaction against the successors of Alexander the Great, approximately 167 BCE. In particular, the exploits of Antiochus IV are highlighted. Antiochus was responsible for numerous reforms which aided in the process of direct and forceful hellenization. In essence, 1 Maccabees tells the tale of how the bravery of Mattathias and his five sons delivered Israel to political independence and therefore preserved the Jewish way of life (Bartlett 1998:11-23). With regard to the influence of 1 Maccabees on ancient Jewish identity, DeSilva (2002:244) states: “The ideology of 1 Maccabees was to shape Jewish nationalism and political messianic hopes through the next three centuries”.

Having said this, when one surveys the chapters of 1 Maccabees one does not find many references to women. At first glance, 1 Maccabees rather emphasizes the action of the Jewish patriarchy, personified especially in Mattathias, Judas and Simon. Where are the women of 1 Maccabees?

There are a few references to women in 1 Maccabees that does call for some attention, and if one looks slightly closer, the references few as they may be, are quite significant. Most occur in the opening chapter of the book. Antiochus invades Jerusalem (1:20-29) with a large force, having the author exclaim (1 Macc1:25-28):

καὶ ἐγένετο πένθος μέγα ἐπὶ Ἰσραὴλ ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ αὐτῶν. καὶ ἐστέναξαν ἄρχοντες καὶ πρεσβύτεροι παρθένοι καὶ νεανίσκοι ἡσθένησαν, καὶ τὸ κάλλος τῶν γυναικῶν ἠλλοιώθη. πᾶς νυμφίος ἀνέλαβεν Θρῆνον, καὶ καθημένη ἐν παστῶ ἐπένηται. καὶ ἐσείσθη ἡ γῆ ἐπὶ τοὺς κατοικοῦντας αὐτήν, καὶ πᾶς ὁ οἶκος Ἰακωβ ἐνεδύσατο αἰσχύνην.

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fighting for its life [his italics]”. This study takes cognisance of this fact and does not assume the threat only started with Antiochus’ reforms. It certainly reached detrimental proportions during these times.

And there was great mourning in all of Israel's places. And the rulers and elders groaned, young women and men became distraught, and the beauty of the women faded. Every bridegroom took up lament and she who was waiting in the bridal chamber was mourning. And the land shook for its inhabitants, and all the house of Jacob was clothed with shame.<sup>3</sup>

When reading these verses, one immediately reminisces of texts such as Jeremiah 31:15 and others where a great mourning has befallen Israel. Moreover, Goldstein (1976:I:220-221) convincingly states that Lamentations 5 was taken as a prophecy of the persecutions of Antiochus IV, and later relates it to the account in 2 Maccabees 7:1-42 of the martyr-mother and her seven sons (cf. Goldstein 1976:I:220; 1983:II:291-297). From Goldstein's remarks, as well as those of Oegema (2000:245-264), the literary connection between 1 Maccabees 1, 2 Maccabees 7 and Lamentations 5 cannot be denied. Furthermore, the author is probably attempting to state that the scope and intensity of this invasion is equal to that of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions. All demographic groups in Israel fall victim to the invasion. The leaders and the elders, but also the young women and men, bridegrooms and brides are in mourning. Israel (and eventually Jerusalem) is depicted nearly as a woman who has been raped and ashamed (πᾶς ὁ οἶκος ἰακωβ ἐνεδύσατο ἀισχύνην). Jerusalem is violated in her most holy and sacred places (1 Macc 1:21-24). Whereas Jerusalem's honour laid in her temple and sanctuary, she is now dishonoured by the Gentile invaders and clothed with shame and mourning.

The temple symbolizes the body of Jerusalem, which should be kept sacred and pure, as the physical body of a woman. The sacking of the temple may be

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<sup>3</sup> All Greek citations are from Rahlfs' *Septuaginta*, recently revised by Hanhart (2006). English translations are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

read as the defilement of the body of Jerusalem. The sociologist Mary Douglas (1966:115) has proven that the body may be understood as a model for any bounded system (cf. DeSilva 2000a:262). This also seems true for the temple of Jerusalem. An elaboration of this image is found in 1 Maccabees 1:38-40:

καὶ ἔφυγον οἱ κάτοικοι Ἱερουσαλημ δι' αὐτούς, καὶ ἐγένετο κατοικία ἀλλοτρίων· καὶ ἐγένετο ἀλλοτρία τοῖς γενήμασιν αὐτῆς, καὶ τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς ἐγκατέλιπον αὐτήν. τὸ ἅγιασμα αὐτῆς ἠρημώθη ὡς ἔρημος, αἱ ἑορταὶ αὐτῆς ἐστράφησαν εἰς πένθος, τὰ σάββατα αὐτῆς εἰς ὀνειδισμόν ἢ τιμὴ αὐτῆς εἰς ἐξουδένωσιν. κατὰ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῆς ἐπληθύνθη ἡ ἀτιμία αὐτῆς, καὶ τὸ ὕψος αὐτῆς ἐστράφη εἰς πένθος.

Because of them [the invaders] the residents of Jerusalem fled; she became a dwelling place of strangers. She became alienated from her offspring, and her children forsook her. Her sanctuary became desolate as a desert; her feasts were turned into mourning; her Sabbaths into a reproach, her honour into contempt. Her dishonour now grew as great as her glory; her exaltation was turned into mourning.

The language suggests that the defilement of the sanctuary symbolizes the rape of Jerusalem's body, filling it with dishonour (ἡ ἀτιμία) and leaving it desolate (ἠρημώθη ὡς ἔρημος) and, like raped women, alienated (ἐγένετο ἀλλοτρία). The replacement of glory (ἡ δόξα) with dishonour (ἡ ἀτιμία) also supports this hypothesis (cf. Klawans 2005:55-57).

Furthermore, the author of 1 Maccabees relates the sad state of Jerusalem in terms of the experience of her daughters. Her virgins have become despondent and the beauty of the women has faded. The woman waiting in the bridal chamber is mourning and not joyful as she should be. Constantly the author states that the honour of Jerusalem has turned into shame. The defilement of the

temple directly relates to this and once again, the account in 2 Maccabees 7 comes to mind. This motif is also quite visible in Lamentations 5, which is strikingly similar in language, rhetoric and metaphor (cf. Lam. 5:11-16). The restoration of the temple carries the price of the blood of many martyrs.

In terms of biblical cultural anthropology, the distress caused by the violation and abolition of purity rites cannot be underestimated. Neusner (1973:21-36) has illustrated that the very base of ancient Judaistic culture was its structuring of reality around purity and impurity. The temple was the base of the purity cult, and ordered the nation's symbolic world, especially in the light of their relationship with God (cf. DeSilva 2000a:250-255; Klawans 2005:145-160). Primarily, the Jewish national identity was in jeopardy. This identity is epitomized in the circumcision. In 1 Maccabees 1:60-61, it states that women who attempted to circumcise their sons were executed and their infants were hung around their necks. Such a public display of violence against Jewish nationality would by no means have been superfluous in those times. This attack of identity, which Todorov (1999:158) calls depersonalization, is found in 1 Maccabees 1:41-42, in which the king states that all peoples should give up their customs and become one. It follows directly after Jerusalem is mourned.

The narrative function of 1 Maccabees 1 now becomes quite prevalent. The author is not merely supplying the background in terms of time and space, and the course of events just before the revolt, but setting Jerusalem up as a main character in the narrative. In 1 Maccabees, Jerusalem is the proverbial "damsel in distress", soon to be rescued and restored to honour by Mattathias and his sons. The image of Jerusalem becomes an important hermeneutical key in understanding the martyr-accounts in 1 and 2 Maccabees. Jerusalem as the suffering and dishonoured mother becomes a *typos* for the other martyrs who chose to die rather than forsake their honour and purity. Jerusalem, in 1 Maccabees may be read as the archetypical *materfamilias* whose honour and purity must be guarded.

This depiction of Jerusalem serves a second purpose in that it adds to the honour and valour of the protagonists of the revolt. Before Mattathias kills the man who was about to bring a sacrifice to an idol, the author has Mattathias exclaim (1 Macc 2:8-11):

ἐγένετο ὁ ναὸς αὐτῆς ὡς ἀνὴρ ἄδοξος, τὰ σκεύη τῆς δόξης αὐτῆς αἰχμάλωτα ἀπήχθη, ἀπεκτάνθη τὰ νήπια αὐτῆς ἐν ταῖς πλατείαις αὐτῆς, οἱ νεανίσκοι αὐτῆς ἐν ρομφαίᾳ ἐχθροῦ. ποῖον ἔθνος οὐκ ἐκληρονόμησεν βασιλεία καὶ οὐκ ἐκράτησεν τῶν σκύλων αὐτῆς; πᾶς ὁ κόσμος αὐτῆς ἀφηρέθη, ἀντὶ ἐλευθέρως ἐγένετο εἰς δούλην.

Her temple has become like a husband without glory;<sup>4</sup> her glorious vessels have been carried into captivity. Her infants have been killed in her streets, her youths by the sword of the enemy. What nation has not inherited her palaces and has not seized her spoils? All her adornment has been taken away; no longer free, she has become a slave.

Once again, the theme of the defeated Jerusalem is given, and serves as a trigger for Mattathias' rage. The previous purity-rhetoric is now supplemented by the rhetoric of kinship.<sup>5</sup> The link between purity and kinship in Jewish culture is undeniable (DeSilva 2000a:256-258 Klawans 2005:145-150). The temple is again the epitome of the honour of Jerusalem, but now stands as an ashamed

<sup>4</sup> The RSV translates ἄδοξος as "without honour", although a more appropriate translation would be "without glory". Although one is inclined to view honour and glory as near synonyms, DeSilva (2000a:23-42; 2000b:84-90) argues that glory should rather be seen as the physical manifestation of honour. This is also more appropriate since the honour of Jerusalem is physically resembled, as the citation has it, in her sanctuary (τὸ ἅγίασμα) and vessels (τὰ σκεύη).

<sup>5</sup> The purity-rhetoric is not replaced, but is ever present and supplemented by the language of honour and shame. The overall rhetoric is intensified with the language of kinship. It illustrates that these cultural values cannot be separated, but are delicately intertwined and that one is always to be understood in the light of the other.

husband. Occupying a central place in postexilic Jewish culture, marriage vouchsafed the purity of the family (Hayes 2004:30-41; Malina 2001:150-154). The defilement of Jerusalem shattered this security. Moreover, her children has been killed and her adornment taken away. The repetition of themes from 1 Maccabees 1:25-28 serves as a bridge between the introduction of the book and its central contents. A new theme, which is slavery, is also introduced in this section. Bereft of honour and accompanying glory, Jerusalem has become a slave to the Gentiles, and must be freed by Mattathias. This theme is carried throughout the narrative. Before the great battle in 1 Maccabees 3:43-45, Judas prays and recalls the state of Jerusalem – she is desolate and without children, alienated and has no joy. A very interesting account is constructed by the author in 1 Maccabees 6:9-13, in which the distressed Antiochus himself remembers the evils he has done in Jerusalem which are the cause of his troubles.

In conclusion, it is clear that although 1 Maccabees does not have many direct references to women and their response against Hellenization, it does provide the reader with a hermeneutical key to understanding the narrative of 1 Maccabees and even aids in interpreting 2 Maccabees, particularly the martyrdom accounts. This hermeneutical key has two important attributes, namely the centrality of purity and the value of kinship in securing the national identity. More specifically, the image drawn from 1 Maccabees is that Jewish women were in fact responsible for safeguarding this national identity. Jerusalem is sketched as the archetype of the suffering *materfamilias* who is dishonoured, her purity threatened and alienated from her kin. This becomes a recurring theme in all four books. Many continued to circumcise their sons and uphold purity codes, even if it meant death. The public execution of women and their infants only spurred the revolution and reaffirmed national identity. The seven pyramids built by Simon (1 Macc 13:26-30), notably of his father, mother and brothers, act in the same way as a memorial of the nucleus of the nation – the family who is loyal to the Law of Moses. The honourable status of the



family is restored by their diligence in defending their purity before God. Their performativity, particularly in the action of circumcision, was the physical resemblance of the identity Antiochus IV sought to destroy.

## **THE DEVOTION OF THE MARTYR-MOTHERS IN 2 MACCABEES**

Second Maccabees is still part of the genre of historiography, but differs from 1 Maccabees in a few respects. DeSilva (2002:266) states: “Second Maccabees gives far more attention to the role of the Jewish high priests and aristocracy in the promotion of hellenization and its threat to the culture of Judaism...” It is interesting to note that Geiger (1910:30-52) proposed the theory that 1 Maccabees presents the history from the perspective of Sadduceeism and 2 Maccabees that of Phariseeism. Although Geiger has presented scholarship with much standard material, this particular theory needs to be viewed under scrutiny. The main thrust of his argument is the notion of fighting on the Sabbath, but Efron (1987:17-20) has convincingly argued against Geiger’s dichotomy. Saldarini (1988:252-254) is also reluctant to force such a view on the books. In the light of this, the postulation of Efron (1987:16) seems more convincing: “[T]he second book (II Maccabees) represents an obvious product of the Hellenistic Jewish Diaspora...characteristic of the style and a certain type of Greek historiography”.

Why are these remarks important for this study? The important account of the martyr-mother in 2 Maccabees 7:1-42 needs to be read in the light of the tradition in 2 Maccabees. If DeSilva (2002:266) is correct in stating that 2 Maccabees does not “seek to legitimate a dynasty but rather to demonstrate the legitimacy of Deuteronomy’s philosophy of history”, that is, to promote Jewish cultural values with the temple as focal point, the martyr accounts need to be interpreted within the wider framework of temple propaganda, as Doran (1981:53) has argued. In turn, all of this functions from the viewpoint of the

Jewish Diaspora, with even a greater emphasis on purity, since the threat may have even been greater according to the experience of the dispersed individuals. Furthermore, this may also serve as a point of continuation between 1 and 2 Maccabees, since it has been stated that the temple symbolized the honour of Jerusalem, which Mattathias and Judas sought to restore.

The main section of concern in 2 Maccabees is then the narrative of the martyr-mother in 7:1-42. However, even before this, the author of 2 Maccabees, as with the first book, also recalls the capture, enslavement and execution of many women and children (2 Macc 3:19-21; 5:13, 24). Second Maccabees 6 illustrates the terrible state of the temple. It is now known as the sanctuary of Zeus, and is defiled by many Gentiles, who performed sexual intercourse within its space. It is no longer the Temple of Yahweh, but the Sanctuary of Zeus, implying the conquest of Zeus over Yahweh and the abhorrent and desperate state of the nation (cf. Hayes 2002:53-59). The issue of circumcision surfaces in this instance again (2 Macc 6:10):

δύο γὰρ γυναῖκες ἀνήχθησαν περιτετηκηῦται τὰ τέκνα·  
τούτων δὲ ἐκ τῶν μαστῶν κρεμάσαντες τὰ βρέφη καὶ  
δημοσίᾳ περιαγαγόντες αὐτῆς τὴν πόλιν κατὰ τοῦ τείχους  
ἐκρήμνισαν.

For two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. These women they publicly paraded about the city, with their infants hung at their breasts, then hurled them down from the wall.

Goldstein (1983:II:279) does establish a link between this instance of women being martyred and the account in 1 Maccabees 1:60-61. There are some differences, as this states that the women had their children hung at their breasts. It is difficult to imagine how this could be done, and being hung around the neck does seem to make more sense even in this instance. The method of

execution is also different, as they are thrown off the city walls. This tells us that the executions were typically public (thus with a political function) and done in Jerusalem. The number of the women here is also specified as being two. It is interesting to note that the author explains the persecution as discipline (πρὸς παιδείαν) in 2 Maccabees 6:12. He clearly delineates his theological agenda (2 Macc 6:12):

Παρακαλῶ οὖν τοὺς ἐντυγχάνοντας τῆδε τῇ βίβλῳ μὴ  
 συστέλλεσθαι διὰ τὰς συμφοράς, λογίζεσθαι δὲ τὰς  
 τιμωρίας μὴ πρὸς ὄλεθρον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς παιδείαν τοῦ γένους  
 ἡμῶν εἶναι

Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people.

The nation was not to abandon its purity codes and submit to the shame imposed by the Gentiles. This purgation or education may be linked to the argument in 2 Maccabees 3, that God is the defender of His people only if they are holy and pure (cf. Doran 1981:55; Klawans 2004:43-49).

The account of the martyr-mother is the final in a series of four martyrdom accounts. Firstly, there is the account of the women who circumcised their children (2 Macc 6:10); secondly, the deaths of those who attempted to celebrate the Sabbath in secret (2 Macc 6:11). The third and fourth accounts are more detailed, respectively, the death of Eleazar (2 Macc 6:18-30) and the martyr-mother (2 Macc 7:1-42). After these narratives, the victories of Judas are described, with special emphasis on the restoration of the temple.

The chronicle of the mother and her sons fulfill an important place in the argument of 2 Maccabees. It stands out as a *testimonium* to the faithfulness of the Jewish people. Doran (1981:55) has mentioned that the theme of discipline has a crucial function in the martyrdom narratives, and this one under

examination is by no means an exception. Second Maccabees 7:33 has the seventh son utter the words that God is chastising them. The mother is lauded as the greatest martyr, since she looked upon the evil torture of all her sons. She is described as being caring and noble, but by no means short of courage. This mother becomes the epitome and ideal form of the *materfamilias*. Almost in a priestly fashion, she sacrificed her sons and also her own life rather than be defiled and dishonoured before God. One could draw various parallels between the mother and Eleazar in the previous account. Todorov (1999:48-49) in turn places due emphasis on the memory left by the martyrs. The fourth book of Maccabees provides a detailed interpretation of this account, which will be discussed later.

It is in this account that the point of DeSilva (2002:266) becomes relevant. The main point the author is attempting to justify is the significance and continuation of the purity codes, which become manifestations of the obedience of the people of God. It is important to see the role of women in this instance – they were not physically fighting in the revolt, but rather continued to support Jewish identity through their performativity, especially in martyrdom. Within the Christian tradition, it has been shown that the growth of the church in its nascent stages was a direct result of the martyrdom of the early Christians. Martyrdom was considered a privilege and blessing (Ramsey 1985:122-135). In this event of the martyr-mother, especially in the words to her last son, the theme is also prevalent. In both the first and especially the second books of Maccabees, women occupy a central position in the martyrdoms. The literary function of 2 Maccabees 7:1-42 becomes prevalent in the next chapters. The Jewish revolutionaries gain their victories and, most importantly, the temple is restored. The devotion of the martyrs in the preceding chapters with regard to purity codes illustrate as stated that God protects His people when they remain holy and unblemished. The persecutions become disciplinary tests of devotion.

In conclusion, the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons, as well as

the other female martyrs fit in with the purpose of the author of 2 Maccabees; that is to affirm the validity and credibility within the temple cult and purity codes, even from the viewpoint of the Diaspora communities. The fact that God brings the victory and restores the temple attests to this. In 2 Maccabees Jerusalem is not a main character as in 1 Maccabees, but rather the individuals, especially the women, who need to remain holy and separated, reinforcing Jewish identity in a time of threat. She is the perfect *materfamilias*. A final remark is that there is a development in the tradition of the body in which the purity codes function. It has been established that in 1 Maccabees the temple symbolized the body-system in which purity codes function. In 2 Maccabees, the temple does not occupy this position. Rather, the system shifts from the temple to the community of the faithful, that is, the families. One would obviously expect such a shift within the background of the Diaspora. The purity of the families becomes the crux (the women martyrs who circumcised their children, those communities who celebrated the Sabbath in secret, Eleazar the leader of a community and the mother and her sons). The temple is only restored when the community-bodies are pure. The communities of believers, consisting of families loyal to Mosaic Law, form in fact the body of purity<sup>6</sup>. The holy and sanctified community does not exist for the sake of the temple, but the temple exists for the sake of the holy and sanctified community. This may be the “lesson” God wants to teach the communities according to the author of 2 Maccabees. Temple-propaganda characterizes 2 Maccabees, but it is corrective propaganda. Possibly, the author is attempting to illustrate the problem that the nation became accustomed to having the temple as security of the purity cult. The temple, however, is only sensible when the communities and families are devoted to sanctification.

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<sup>6</sup> This concept is already highly developed in the early Christian, particularly Pauline, tradition.

### **THIRD MACCABEES AND THE SUFFERING MOTHERS IN THE DIASPORA**

The third book of the Maccabees is in fact somewhat of a misnomer, since it concerns not the issues of the Maccabean revolt, but the events fifty years earlier in Ptolemaic Egypt (DeSilva 2002:306). Some ancient book lists refer to the title *Ptolemaica*. Johnson (2004:129) appropriately uses the appellation “historical fiction” when referring to the genre of 3 Maccabees. Its primary concern is the persecution of the Jews in Alexandria under Ptolemy IV Philopator. Its significance for this study is that it provides, along with 2 Maccabees, some insight to the experience of the Jews in the Diaspora, not directly in Palestine. The author of 3 Maccabees is a well educated writer, schooled in rhetoric (Croy 2005:13-27). He often uses appeals to emotion, that is *pathos*, as well as many other rhetorical techniques to convince his audience of a certain argument, thus holding many similarities with the *Letter of Aristeas* (DeSilva 2002:305-308).

A brief synopsis of 3 Maccabees is provided. After Ptolemy defeats Antiochus III in 217 BCE at Raphia, he visited Jerusalem but was prevented from entering the temple, causing Ptolemy to despise the Jews. In Alexandria he gathered all the Jews in the hippodrome in order to execute them. But according to Egyptian law, all the names of those to be executed needed to be written down, which became an impossible feat. After attempting to kill the Jews in various other ways, such as being crushed by elephants, and being unsuccessful therein, Ptolemy was converted and showed favour to the Jews. Hayes (2002:48-52) elaborates on the event of Ptolemy not being able to enter as a clear reflection of conflict between Jews and Gentiles with regard to purity codes.

One can immediately understand why 3 Maccabees is classified as historical romance. This section of the study will investigate how the author of 3 Maccabees incorporates women in the *pathos* of his argument.

After Ptolemy is prevented from entering the temple and quite infuriated, the author states (3 Macc 1:18-20):

ἅι τε κατάκλειστοι παρθένοι ἐν θαλάμοις σὺν ταῖς τεκούσαις ἐξώρμησαν καὶ ἀπέδωκαν κόνει τὰς κόμας πασάμεναι γόου τε καὶ στεναγμῶν ἐνεπίμπλων τὰς πλατείας. αἱ δὲ καὶ προσαρτίως ἔσταλμένοι τοὺς πρὸς ἀπάντησιν διατεταγμένους παστούς καὶ τὴν ἀρμόζουσαν αἰδῶ παραλείπουσαι δρόμον ἄτακτον ἐν τῇ πόλει συνίσταντο. τὰ δὲ νεογνὰ τῶν τέκνων αἱ πρὸς τούτοις μητέρες καὶ τιθηνοὶ παραλείπουσαι ἄλλως καὶ ἄλλως, αἱ μὲν κατ' οἴκους, αἱ δὲ κατὰ τὰς ἀγυιάς, ἀνεπιστρέπτως εἰς τὸ πανυπέρτατον ἱερὸν ἠθροίζοντο.

The virgins who had been enclosed in their chambers rushed out with their mothers, sprinkled their hair with dust, and filled the streets with groans and lamentations. Those women who had recently been arrayed for marriage abandoned the bridal chambers prepared for wedded union, and, neglecting proper modesty, in a disorderly rush flocked together in the city. Mothers and nurses abandoned even newborn children here and there, some in houses and some in the streets, and without a backward look they crowded together at the most high temple.

The author strikingly relates to the effect on the women of the population. This is occurring even before the actual intended mass-execution. The author uses the reactions of the women to illustrate the terrible capabilities of Ptolemy. Fear of the king is so great that women resort to the most extreme instances to see the event. The motif of the mourning bride has been prevalent in the first and second books of Maccabees, and is also found in this case. She is not mourning as such, but the actions of the king gain priority over her wedding. The king

even gains priority over the mother-child relationship. By this, the author delineates the most intense social pressure and anxiety. He prepares the reader for worse things yet to come.

During the assembly at the hippodrome, the author uses most graphic details to once again demonstrate the madness and evil of Ptolemy – his description especially centers around the suffering of the women. It is necessary to provide the entire pericope in order to elucidate this point (3 Macc 5:48-51):

ὥς δὲ τῶν ἐλεφάντων ἐξιόντων περὶ πύλην καὶ τῆς συνεπομένης ἐνόπλου δυνάμεως τῆς τε τοῦ πλήθους πορείας κονιορτὸν ἰδόντες καὶ βαρυμῆ θόρυβον ἀκούσαντες οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ὑστάτην βίου ῥοπήν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνην δόξαντες εἶναι τὸ τέλος τῆς ἀθλιωτάτης προσδοκίας εἰς οἶκτον καὶ γόους τραπέντες κατεφίλου ἀλλήλους περιπλεκόμενοι τοῖς συγγενέσιν ἐπὶ τοὺς τραχήλους ἐπιπίπτοντες, γονεῖς πασὶν καὶ μητέρες νεάνισιν, ἕτεροι δὲ νεογνὰ πρὸς μαστοὺς ἔχουσαι βρέφη τελευτάϊον ἔλκοντα γάλα. οὐ μὴν δὲ ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν γεγενημένας ἀντιλήμψεις ἐξ οὐρανοῦ συνίδοντες πρηνεῖς ὁμοθυμαδὸν ῥίψαντες ἑαυτοὺς καὶ τὰ νήπια χωρίσαντες τῶν μαστῶν ἀνεβόησαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ σφόδρα τὸν τῆς ἀπάσης δυνάμεως δυνάστην ἰκετεύοντες οἰκτῖραι μετὰ ἐπιφανείας αὐτοὺς ἤδη πρὸς πύλαις ἄδου καθεστῶτας.

And when the Jews saw the dust raised by the elephants going out at the gate and by the following armed forces, as well as by the trampling of the crowd, and heard the loud and tumultuous noise, they thought that this was their last moment of life, the end of their most miserable suspense, and giving way to lamentation and groans they kissed each other, embracing relatives and falling into



one another's arms – parents and children, mothers and daughters, and others with babies at their breasts who were drawing their last milk. Not only this, but when they considered the help which they had received before from heaven they prostrated themselves with one accord on the ground, removing the babies from their breasts, and cried out in a very loud voice, imploring the Ruler over every power to manifest himself and be merciful to them, as they stood now at the gates of death.

This section exemplifies two important aspects. Firstly, the agony and terror of the event is illuminated – there is no mercy from Ptolemy, even towards the children. Rather, they are to be executed while feeding from the breasts of their mothers. Secondly, the devotion of the women is highlighted in that they lay down their children and started praying to the true Ruler. They are obedient not to Ptolemy, but to God who will deliver them. The motif of the suffering and lamenting mother with her children also finds resonance in this instance.

In conclusion, it is unfortunate to witness the extreme anti-Gentile polemic incorporated by the images used by the author. The Jewish women in Alexandria suffer in the same manner as those in Palestine. The image of the suffering mother and her children are also present in this account. It functions in more or less the same manner as Jerusalem in 1 Maccabees. In 1 Maccabees, Jerusalem is used to complement the valour and honour of individuals like Mattathias and Judas. In 3 Maccabees however, the suffering *materfamilias* image functions as a shaming-device against Ptolemy, and also illustrates the devotion of the suffering mothers to God.

#### **FOURTH MACCABEES AND THE DEVOUT REASON OF THE MARTYR-MOTHER**

The fourth book of the Maccabees forms a philosophical treatise emphasizing

the role of reason (φρονήσις) above emotions or passions (πάθος). It is still, however, concerned with the crisis of hellenization the Jews were experiencing. Its main focus is a discussion of the martyr-mother of 2 Maccabees 7 and her sons, how their rational devotion to the Torah superceded their natural emotions (cf. DeSilva 2006a:46-67; Klauck 1989:650-659).

He states that the mother experienced the worst agony of all, since she had to watch her sons perish (4 Macc 14:11-12). That which is striking to the author of 4 Maccabees is the fact that the mother went against all her natural impulses. Nature teaches that mothers must protect and keep their young safe, but the martyr-mother did not even let natural emotion override her devout reason (4 Macc 14:14-20). In typical patriarchal fashion, the actions of the mother become more apparent since they are considered the “weaker sex” (ἄσθενόψυχοι, 4 Macc 15:5), with less courage than men (Moore & Anderson 1998:252). The greatest devotion of the *materfamilias*, however, is her sacrifice. DeSilva (2006b:251-253) places much emphasis on the concept that she chose her devotion to God above her devotion to her children. This is the essential reason the author is accentuating – reason based on the study and devotion of the Torah, not natural reason. The devotion displayed by the mother and her sons testify to the fact that they are the true seed of Abraham (Young 1991:67-69). The tradition of the suffering mother is highly developed in 4 Maccabees with a Hellenistic philosophical interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

The author continues to use typically masculine images to describe the mother; images frequently used in Hellenistic philosophy (Moore & Anderson 1998:252-254). He repeats the astonishment that a woman was capable of such virtue (4 Macc 16:1-5). She is called a soldier of God (4 Macc 16:14).

The final chapter of 4 Maccabees aims to explain this virtue of the

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<sup>7</sup> This study will not attempt to identify possible philosophical traditions in the text. This is done quite well by Moore and Anderson (1998:252-259) and DeSilva (2006b:251-268).

*materfamilias* in terms of the patriarchal system on the one hand, and Hellenistic philosophy on the other. The author gives some interesting background information stating (4 Macc 18:7-10):

ὅτι Ἐγὼ ἐγενήθην παρθένος ἀγὴν οὐδὲ ὑπερέβην πατρικὸν οἶκον, ἐφύλασσον δὲ τὴν ὠκοδομημένην πλευράν. οὐδὲ ἔφθειρέν με λυμεῶν ἔρημίας φθορεὺς ἐν πεδίῳ, οὐδὲ ἔλυμνατό μου τὰ ἀγνὰ τῆς παρθενίας λυμεῶν ἀπάτης ὄφιδος. ἔμεινα δὲ χρόνον ἀκμῆς σὺν ἀνδρί. τούτων δὲ ἐνηλίκων γενομένων ἐτελεύτησεν ὁ πατὴρ αὐτῶν, μακάριος μὲν ἐκεῖνος, τὸν γὰρ τῆς εὐτεκνίας βίον ἐπιζήσας τὸν τῆς ἀτεκνίας οὐκ ὠδυνήθη καιρόν. ὅς ἐδίδασκεν ὑμᾶς ἔτι ὢν σὺν ὑμῖν τὸν νόμον καὶ τοὺς προφῆτας.

I was a pure virgin and did not go outside my father's house; but I guarded the rib from which woman was made. No seducer corrupted me on a desert plain, nor did the destroyer, the deceitful serpent, defile the purity of my virginity. In the time of my maturity I remained with my husband, and when these sons had grown up their father died. A happy man was he, who lived out his life with good children, and did not have the grief of bereavement. While he was still with you, he taught you the law and the prophets.

The chastity of the mother is lauded, but only in the light of the teachings of the father. The devout reason of the mother and her sons are the direct result of the teachings of the father from the Torah. The argument of 4 Maccabees, namely that of devout reason over emotions, is essentially a masculine based premise. The patriarchal system gives the actions of the mother even more honour, since she would be more susceptible to submit to natural inhibitions. The final citation above affirms her chastity and also her social status as being

uncorrupted. This high-status indicator is kept even when her seven sons are martyred before her. Not only does she hold out against natural motherly impulses, but she actively goes against nature by encouraging the final son to sacrifice his life. In this, she becomes the epitome of the perfect *materfamilias* and even holds priestly characteristics. She holds fast to the preservation of Jewish identity in the face of hellenization.

The early Christian tradition especially focused on this exemplary chastity of the martyr-mother. Jerome especially incorporates it to encourage virginity and courage among young women (*Letter 7.2*). Jerome also affirms the importance of reason above emotions from the history of the Maccabees, possibly alluding to 4 Maccabees, but also with direct reference to Josephus and Cicero.

Augustine curiously calls the sons of the mother “Maccabees”, which points to their zeal and sacrifice. The teaching of the martyr-mother, Augustine continues, is the same teaching Jesus gave to his disciples (*Sermons on the New Testament 50.2*). The mother also features continually in Augustine’s virtue discourse (*On the Soul 1.23*).<sup>8</sup>

To conclude this section, it is seen that the author of 4 Maccabees provides a Hellenistic philosophical interpretation of 2 Maccabees 7. The courage and honour of the mother is praised, but only within the confines of patriarchal society. Her reason based on the Torah gained priority over her natural instincts.

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<sup>8</sup> One could speculate that the popularity of 4 Maccabees in the early Christian tradition may be due to two aspects. Firstly, its emphasis on female piety, devotion and purity and, secondly, the notion that here already, in the tradition of Judaism, the concept of quasi-expiatory human sacrifice is introduced in the guise of martyrdom. The OT does not contain any such events (only animal sacrifice), however the author of 4 Maccabees already associates the martyr-mother account with the account of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac and also various accounts in Daniel (4 Macc 16:20-24). A question which needs more examination is to what extent 4 Maccabees influenced the Jewish worldview and prepared it for the concept of expiatory human sacrifices as in the Jesus event and early Christianity.

The adoption of the martyr-mother account into early Christian teaching seems to have been sifted through this interpretation of the event by the author of 4 Maccabees. Nevertheless, the devotion of the mother in safeguarding the Jewish identity, particularly epitomized in the reason based on the Torah, gains a prominent place in the writing.

## CONCLUSION

Articulating a synthesis between the four books of the Maccabees with regard to the role of women is no easy task. Each book differs very much from the next, be it in historical or theological perspective, or even genre and style. However, it has been seen that one prevalent theme in all four books is that of the relationship between the pressures of hellenization and, particularly, the image of the suffering *materfamilias* especially highlighted in the purity- and kinship-rhetoric, with numerous instances of honour- and shame-language being incorporated.

It is introduced in 1 Maccabees not as a physical person, but as Jerusalem, who is a mother alienated from her children. The sacking of the temple symbolizes the violation of the purity of the mother's body. She is lamenting, naked, ashamed and enslaved. But this image serves to complement the image of the main protagonists in the book, namely Mattathias and his sons. They come to save and free their suffering mother by means of revolution. This device serves in promoting the Hasmonean dynasty whose love and devotion to Jerusalem is concurrently expressed. Furthermore, Jerusalem becomes the *typos* for the suffering *materfamilias* who must protect her purity at all times.

Second Maccabees also emphasizes the purity codes of Israel. God will only save His people if they remain pure. This devotion is demonstrated in the numerous martyr accounts in the book, mainly those mothers who were

executed, and more importantly, the account of 2 Maccabees 7. Only after this devotion is tested does God intervene and save His people and restores the temple. A shift in the purity tradition is present. Narrating from a Diaspora perspective, the author reminds his ancient readers that the true body of purity is not the temple, but the communities and families who are faithful to Mosaic Law. The temple is defiled but the people remain pure, therefore validating and justifying the existence of the temple. This shift may be linked to the NT, in which there is also a move away from the physical temple to the fictive kinship structures of the ἐκκλησία, faithful to Christ. The possible correlation between this shift, and ideologies present with the Christians in the NT, or even the Essenes and Therapeutai, remains a question for a different study.

The author of 3 Maccabees uses the image of the suffering *materfamilias* as a shaming device against Ptolemy. Even in this writing, they leave their children and pray to God, who is their true Ruler. Their devotion to God is greater than their devotion to their children, which is a motif already present in 2 Maccabees' martyr-mother accounts.

In 4 Maccabees a Hellenistic philosophical interpretation of 2 Maccabees 7 is provided. This interpretation is clothed in a moral treatise on the importance of reason over natural emotions. The martyr-mother is lauded since she did not submit to her natural motherly instinct of preserving her young, but willingly sacrificed them. This interpretation and most of the others mentioned above are still products of a patriarchal society, giving prevalence over the figure of the *paterfamilias* rather than the *materfamilias*.

To conclude, one needs to state that despite the patriarchal context of these accounts examined, one remarkable fact still surfaces – the maintenance and preservation of Jewish identity during hellenization is found not so much within formal proceedings, revolution or even the temple cult. National identity is expressed within the household in which the *materfamilias* plays an important role. The household must remain loyal to the Law of Moses and remain pure

and separated. The *materfamilias* is therefore the figure who keeps order in the symbolic world of Judaism during those times, who need to remain holy before God for their survival. This role is even more significant since most of the fathers may have been absent or even killed. Women and mothers in particular, reacted against hellenization by adhering to the purity codes of Israel, even if it meant death to them and their children. Their performativity as martyrs had very much the same intensity as men like Mattathias or Judas who fought in the revolution. Remarkable is the fact that although Hellenism may have appeared favourable to some women, these mentioned remained faithful to their identity and legacy. Todorov's (1999:49) credo is appropriate in this instance, which resounds from the halls of Antiochus IV to the camps of Auschwitz: "For the saint, God alone is an end and thus is to be chosen over any particular human beings, to their detriment if need be".

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