Living and Dying for the Law:
The Mother-martyrs of 2 Maccabees

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Abstract

[1] The martyr texts of 2 Maccabees record the deaths of three mothers who sacrificed their lives, along with those of their sons, in order to uphold Jewish law under the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Two of these anonymous women are briefly mentioned as having been sentenced to death for circumcising their sons, while a third is the subject of a lengthy account of martyrdom. This study examines the portrayal of all three women as both mothers and martyrs and demonstrates that these mother-martyrs lived for the Law in the same way as they died for the Law, taking on religious obligations that are traditionally attributed to men.

[2] The second book of the Maccabees (2 Macc) gives an historical account of the conflict between the Seleucid government and the Jewish people, which took place in Judea during the period of 180-161 BCE. Writing some half-century after the events, the anonymous author describes a period of Greek tyranny and persecution of the Jews and the successful war of Jewish liberation that followed. Of particular interest is the interpretation of events offered by the martyrology of 2 Macc 6:7-7:42, which gives details of the Hellenistic reform and the desperate resistance of the Jews at a time when it was forbidden for them to live in accordance with their ancestral law. Those who refused to adopt the Greek way of life were subject to death.

[3] The author of 2 Maccabees emphasises the specific Jewish practices for which Jews are killed. There is mention of two women who circumcise their sons according to the Law and are subsequently tried and executed along with their babies (6:10). Likewise, a group of people who secretly gather to celebrate the Sabbath is sought out and massacred (6:11). Finally, there is a lengthy description of the martyrdom of the elderly sage, Eleazar (6:18-31), and a woman with her seven sons (7:1-42), all of whom refuse to transgress the Jewish dietary laws by eating pork. The account of the persecution is informative, for it gives insight into the practices that were perceived, by both author and audience, as separating Jews from the dominant culture: circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath and the abstention from pork. These three practices were central to Jewish self-definition and their observance was a symbol of their loyalty to the Law. In 2 Maccabees, it was the pious Jews who were steadfast in these observances, living by and ultimately dying for the Law.

[4] Who are these pious Jews who chose to live and die for the Law? Remarkably, the heroes of this historical period are not found in the ranks of the priesthood or among the powerful leaders of Jewish society. They are primarily found among the ostensibly weak in society: the women, children and the aged. The role of women in the forefront of this movement is significant. They
are not portrayed as wives, daughters or daughters-in-law. Neither are they necessarily independent women, for there is no indication that they are widows or prostitutes. These anonymous women are portrayed exclusively as mothers as they take on religious roles: they circumcise their sons, instruct their children in ancestral law and ultimately give up the lives of both their children and themselves for the sake of the Law. In death they become mother-martyrs.

[5] How does the author of 2 Maccabees portray these mother-martyrs? What does this depiction reveal about the role of women during this brief period of history? In this paper, I propose to examine the literary representation of the mother-martyrs in 2 Maccabees. Essential to this inquiry is the assumption that the author’s portrayal of the mother-martyrs is fundamental to his rhetorical agenda. He was not writing as an impartial witness to the events that transpired, but rather he was offering a highly stylised version of the account that was intended to inspire his audience through the use of didactic historiography. Within the framework of this recounting, we can consider what the author and his audience considered plausible and unremarkable in the lives of the mother-martyrs and speculate on how these representations may correspond to the social reality of the time.

1. The Mother-martyrs as Circumcisors of their Sons

[6] For example, two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. They publicly paraded them around the city, with their babies hanging at their breasts, and then hurled them down headlong from the wall (2 Macc 6:10, NRSV).

[7] This brief description is all that the narrator tells his audience about the women who were executed for circumcising their sons. This single verse has rarely, if ever, been categorised as a martyrdom by modern scholars. Yet, in its literary context it shares many characteristics with the longer accounts that have been established as part of the literary genre of martyrdom. According to van Henten, “A martyr is a person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities.” This definition is supplemented by a list of common narrative elements that often form a pattern in martyr texts, most of which can be found in the text of 2 Maccabees 6. First, there is the enactment of a law by the Greek authorities requiring Jews to adopt the Greek way of life. Those who chose not to comply with the law are subject to the death penalty (vv. 8-9). Second, the Jews are put into a position of conflict of loyalty, for in staying faithful to their God and his Law they are in contravention of the Greek law (v. 6). Third, placed in a position of complying with the decree or remaining faithful to their ancestral Law, the two women choose to circumcise their children and face the death penalty (v. 10). Fourth, there is a description of their execution (v. 10).

[8] The difficulty in substantiating the account of the circumcising mothers as a martyr text arises from one apparent departure from the common pattern: the choice to remain faithful to the Law is made before their arrest, rather than during an examination by pagan authorities. The question arises as to whether or not the deaths of these women can be classified as voluntary. In other words, when they circumcised their children did they know for certain that they would be put to death on account of their actions? The parallel text in 4 Maccabees leaves no doubt in the minds of the audience, when it indicates that the women circumcised their children even...
“...though they had known beforehand that they would suffer this...(v. 25). Our text is not nearly as explicit. Nevertheless, the vivid description of the decree and the persecution that precedes the account implies that the two women were aware that their actions would result in their deaths. They are thus “brought in” for trial, examined and then punished for their crime by being publicly paraded through the city and executed. Presumably, the pagan authorities intended the public spectacle to act as a deterrent to others. From the perspective of other Jews, however, the women would have been regarded as heroes who gave their lives and those of their children for the Law. In death, they did indeed become mother-martyrs.

[9] The brevity of the account of the martyrdom of the two mothers raises more questions than it answers. What does the representation of these women reveal about the role of the Jewish mother with respect to her newborn son? Why were the mothers executed, but not the fathers? Did women act as circumcisors? The significance of these questions becomes especially clear when considered against the background of ritual circumcision in its historical and sociological context.

[10] From the emergence of Judaism, circumcision was considered a central ritual for Jewish culture as a whole - the quintessential male rite of passage transmitted from father to son. In Hellenistic Judaism, it became the mark that identified the Jew and distinguished him from his Greek counterpart. As such, it became the subject of a certain amount of controversy. From a gender perspective, circumcision literally marked off the binary opposition between Jewish men and women and was seemingly confined to the ritual realm of men. One notable exception in the literature is the biblical account of Zipporah circumcising her son (Exod 4:24-26). Yet even this image is subject to subsequent revision, as the rabbis attempt to erase any evidence that women were involved in the circumcision of their sons. Accordingly, the rabbis instruct that instead of reading the biblical phrase “Zipporah took a flint” one should read “she caused it to be taken,” indicating that she asked a man to do it for her. In the rabbinic version of the story, Zipporah did not remove her son’s foreskin, since women were never qualified to perform circumcision.

[11] For many a student of rabbinic literature, the apparent disqualification of women from the performance of circumcision affirms the exclusivity of the male-centered ritual from the post-exilic priesthood through to the rabbinic era. Women simply did not circumcise their sons. Yet, if this were the case, why did the rabbis deem it necessary to state unequivocally that women were not qualified in this area? Could it be that much to the chagrin of the rabbis, women were, in fact, taking an active role in the ritual of circumcision? The text of 2 Maccabees seemingly supports this theory, for it was two women - and not two men – who were put to death for circumcising their sons. As such, 2 Macc 6:10 calls into question the accepted rabbinic perspective and substantiates the claim that there was a time in the Second Temple period when women participated in the ritual of circumcision. Women may have been excluded from the rite by virtue of their biology, but that did not mean that as Jewish mothers, they did not have a role in the circumcision of their sons. The nature of that role requires further investigation.

[12] The feminine participle, anēchēsan, is used to denote the mother’s role in the act of circumcising her son in both 2 Macc 6:10 and the parallel text of 4 Macc 4:25. Without a doubt, the use of the word implies that it is the mothers who are held responsible for circumcising their sons, and it is they who suffer the consequences of their actions. It is important, however, to distinguish between taking responsibility for the performance of a ritual and actually performing the ritual oneself. In this regard, the parallel text in 1 Macc 1:60-61 is informative:

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According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers’ necks.

In this account, the women are mentioned first, indicating that they were the ones held responsible for the circumcision of their children. It is evident, however, that they did not perform the circumcisions themselves, as the text specifies that both the families and those who performed the ritual circumcisions were put to death along with the mothers. Here, the use of the masculine participle peritetmēkotas indicates that the procedure was likely performed by a man. Curiously, the fathers are not mentioned. Perhaps they were included as part of the family, or alluded to in the category of “those who circumcised.” It is more likely, however, that if the fathers were considered accountable they would have been explicitly mentioned. In I Maccabees, it is the mothers who assume responsibility for circumcising their sons.

Another text that gives some insight into the practice of circumcision in this period is the Aramaic re-working of the Books of Maccabees, “The Scroll of Antiochus.”

So drastic was the king’s edict that when a man was discovered to have circumcised his son (mats’u ’ish ’asher mal bno), he and his wife were hanged along with the child. A woman gave birth to a son after her husband’s death and had him circumcised (vatamal ’oto) when he was eight days old. With the child in her arms, she went up on top of the wall of Jerusalem and cried out: “We say to you, wicked Bagris, this covenant of our fathers which you intend to destroy shall never cease from us nor from our children’s children.” She cast her son down to the ground and flung herself after him so that they died together. Many Israelites of that period did the same, refusing to renounce the covenant of their fathers.

In this account there are two acts of circumcision. The first case involves a man who circumcises his son. Notably, both parents are held accountable for the circumcision, being put to death along with the child. In the second instance, a widow circumcises her son and then pre-empts her inevitable execution in what the author portrays as a heroic act of murder-suicide. In the Hebrew, the use of the feminine imperfect vav consecutive “vatamal” indicates that it was the mother who took responsibility for the circumcision of her son. This text stands in opposition to the rabbinic view that in the absence of a male relative, it is up to the religious court or the child himself, upon reaching adulthood, to arrange for his circumcision. Here, it is not entirely clear that the woman actually performed the circumcision, since the usage of vatamal can be understood either literally or figuratively. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the absence of a father, the mother acts, upholding the Law even in the face of the death.

Ultimately, the texts in 1 Maccabees and The Scroll of Antiochus can neither confirm nor rule out the possibility that the mothers in 2 Macc 6:20 actually performed the circumcisions. This literature does, however, lend credence to the contention that mothers did take responsibility for circumcising their sons, especially when the fathers were absent or in times of danger. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that, at the very least, the mother-martyrs of 2 Maccabees took sole responsibility for circumcising their sons, upholding the Law and ensuring their sons’ identities as Jews. They fulfilled this religious role in full knowledge of the consequences of their actions: certain death for both themselves and their children. The mother-martyrs lived for the Law, ensuring that their sons lived, albeit briefly, as members of the covenant between God and Israel.
2. The Mother-martyr as Instructor of her Sons

[15] The portrayal of the mother-martyr in 2 Macc 7 is essential to the narrative. She watches, as each of her sons, from the oldest to the youngest, bravely gives his life for the Law. Yet, in spite of the horror of seeing her seven sons perish in a single day, she bears her suffering with “good courage” (eupsychēs) “because of her hope in the Lord” (dia tas epi kurion elpidas). Here, the mother is portrayed as a model of piety, whose trust in God gives her the strength to heroically endure her anguish. Moreover, she is not a passive bystander, but rather she actively encourages them to choose death over transgression of the Law. Her extraordinary bravery is explained in Stoic terms: “…she reinforced her woman’s reasoning” (ton thēlun logosmon) “with a man’s courage” (arsenī thumō, v. 21). Thus the author presents the women’s heroic actions in terms of a philosophical division between the emotional feminine element of the human constitution and the rational masculine element. The mother-martyr is thus portrayed as a woman who possesses masculine virtues.

[16] The mother’s words of encouragement are found in the form of two direct speeches, the first imparted to all of her sons (vv. 22-23), and the second to the youngest son after his brothers have already died (vv. 27-29). The speeches are intended to be didactic and persuasive. As such, they point to the mother’s essential influence over her sons and her role in teaching them to live their lives in accordance with the Law.

[17] The first speech is an instruction to the brothers on the contemporary belief in the doctrines of creatio ex nihilo and resurrection to life. Here, the pairing of creation and resurrection is essential to the mother’s instruction: just as God gave life to them in the same way as he created the universe and all of humankind, he will also restore them to life by a process of recreation. It is on the basis of this analogy between God’s power to create and his ability to recreate that the mother encourages her sons to trust in the Lord and not forsake his laws. They are to die as they have lived - for the sake of the Law - so that in God’s mercy they will be resurrected to life.

[18] That the mother’s speech is intended as a private instruction and exhortation is indicated not only by its content, but also by the manner in which it is communicated. Although others may be present, the mother does not speak publicly. Rather, she is portrayed as speaking privately to her sons “in the language of their ancestors” (v. 21). The brothers are the only ones who can understand the content of the message. All others are excluded by the imposed language barrier.

[19] In the context of 2 Macc 7, there are two other instances in which the author specifies that the speaker is communicating in the ancestral language: prior to the mother’s second speech (v. 27) and before the second son’s response to his torturer’s demand that he eat pork (v. 8). In the latter case, the brevity of the boy’s reply - a single word, “no” - would have required no translation. It may be assumed that with the exception of this one instance, the seven brothers always spoke Greek when addressing the king and his men. Moreover, it is implied that the mother also understood and even spoke Greek, as indicated by her ability to respond when the king insisted that she convince her youngest son to save himself by departing from the Law (vv. 7:25-26).

[20] The choice to use her ancestral language in this specific circumstance is significant when considered in terms of the relationship between language and ethnicity, for the use of language
can build or break down cultural barriers. In this case, the choice of language emphasises the bond between the mother and her sons and the unanimity in their decision to live and die by the Law, while simultaneously distinguishing them from the king and his men and the larger Greek culture that they represent. Interestingly, however, the dichotomy between Jew and Greek with respect to language is not as sharp a distinction as one might expect, for the use of the ancestral language is clearly a matter of choice and not ability. These Jews were, indeed, proficient in their use of Greek. They chose to use their ancestral language in the same way as they chose to obey their ancestral Law.

[21] The mother’s second speech is directed to her youngest son after his brothers have died and is composed of three parts: a plea, an instruction and a command. The instruction reiterates the mother’s belief in the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, thereby providing a basis for the belief in resurrection. The mother’s plea and command heighten the sense of persuasion in a speech that is directed to a child who is perhaps too young to be convinced on the basis of rational argument alone. These two elements appeal to the strength of the bond between mother and son, giving insight into the role of motherhood as perceived by the author and his audience.

[22] When the woman speaks, it as a mother speaking to her son. She begins with an opening plea: “My son have pity on me.” This utterance is laden with theatrical paradox as the author deliberately heightens the pathos in his portrayal of the mother pleading with her only surviving son to show compassion by allowing her to watch him die. Included in her plea is a description of her role as mother: “I carried you (perienenasan) nine months in my womb, and nursed you (thelasasan) for three years, and have reared you (ekthrepsasan) and have brought you up (agagosan) to this point in your life, and have taken care of you (trophophoresasan)” (v. 27). A string of five verbs is used for emphasis in the quintessential maternal argument, which may be summarised as follows: “after all I have done for you, you must do as I say.” Taken together, the five verbs not only underscore the identity of the woman as mother, as intended by the author, but also give valuable insight into what the author and his audience perceived as the role of the contemporary mother.

[23] The verb peripherō (“carried”) refers to the carrying around of children and alludes to the pregnancy of the mother. The very mention of her pregnancy establishes the woman as the mother of the child and confirms her parental authority over him. According to the Law, a child is required to honour his parents (Exod. 20:12). This concept of honour is quite prominent in the Jewish literature of the second century BCE, and is most often equated with respect and obedience. A son is required to obey both his mother and his father. Thus, by virtue of her maternity, the mother-martyr of 2 Macc 7 could expect and even demand the obedience of her son.

[24] The second verb, thelasa (“nursed” or “suckled”), refers to the mother’s care of the child during infancy. She nursed her son for a period of three years, nourishing the child with milk from her own breast. In a time when breast milk was the only source of nourishment available to an infant, it was essential to survival of children that they be nursed. It is not certain to what extent Jewish women of this period nursed their own children or employed wet-nurses for this purpose. Neither is it possible to establish a standard length of time for nursing a child. What is certain is that, in ancient society, breastfeeding was not only a means of providing physical nourishment to the child, it was also a metaphor for imparting knowledge. Most prominent in the Greco-Roman world was the image of the goddess, Isis, as divine mother, imparting life, protection, and saving knowledge to her son Horus through her maternal milk. A similar
metaphor is found in Jewish literature, with Philo’s portrayal of God as nurse and source of Wisdom: “For he is the one who nourishes and nurses wise deeds, words, and thoughts” (*De demigr. Abr. 24:13*).  

[25] The metaphor of a divine being imparting knowledge through breast milk is continuous with the reality of women’s lives, as indicated by literary evidence. Gynecological manuals indicate concern for selecting the right nurse, “who will impart to the child the things necessary for his or her correct upbringing.” Similarly a letter dated from the third to second century BCE offers advice in choosing a temperate wet nurse who will put the child’s welfare first, because nursing is “an important part, foremost and prepotent to the whole of the child’s life.” It is evident that in Greco-Roman world, as in Palestine, the nursing of a child was perceived as a necessary function that contributed to both the physical and moral nourishment of the child. Thus, for the mother in 2 Maccabees 7, the suckling of her son at her breast was both an act of sustaining and instructing the child. Along with his mother’s milk, the boy imbibed his first lessons in the Law. A sense of instruction is inherent in each of the verbs *ekthrepsō* (“rear”), *agō* (“bring up,” “train” or “educate”) and *trophophoreō* (“take care,” “nourish” or “sustain”). The use of these three verbs together emphasises the mother-martyr’s primary role in educating her son. In early Judaism, both parents were responsible for the religious education of their children, but the chief responsibility rested upon the father as the head of the household. In the Hebrew Bible the mother is often mentioned as a teacher, but in most instances her instruction is in conjunction with that of the father. One exception is found in the maternal instruction of Lemuel, king of Massa, in Proverbs 31:1-9, a text that effectively lends credibility to the notion that both spouses shared the responsibility for teaching their children. How this responsibility played out in reality, however, may have varied from one community to another or according to individual circumstances. In the Book of Tobit, for example, the duty to educate children in the Law is considered primarily a male duty (4:5-12), but because his father was dead, it was Tobit’s grandmother who taught him the Law (1:8). Not only did the woman know the Law, she was also quite capable, in the absence of a suitable male relative, of assuming the position of head of the household and taking full responsibility for the instruction of the child.  

[27] In 2 Macc 7 the father is noticeably absent and the mother-martyr assumes full responsibility for the instruction of her sons. Faced with this gap in the text, the author of 4 Maccabees offers additional information, portraying the mother as a widow (18:9) and the dead father as the educator of his sons (18:10-19). Our text, however, does not give these explicit details. Thus, the marital status of the mother and the fate of the father remains the subject of speculation. More certain is the mother’s role as instructor of her children. She teaches all of her sons to conduct themselves appropriately, living in the service of God and his Law, even in the face of death. Moreover, in the case of her youngest son, she is not only the woman who carried and nursed him, imparting his earliest instruction with the milk of her breast; she is also the individual solely responsible for his rearing, training and education from the earliest years.  

[28] After offering a plea that establishes her maternity and role as teacher, the mother-martyr offers her final instruction to her youngest son and then issues a command: “Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers.” Here she relies on her established authority as parent and teacher to exact obedience from the child. In accordance with the Law, he is required to honour his mother by obeying her wishes. The use of the imperative *mé phobēthēs*, “do not fear” evokes yet another dimension to the child’s responsibility towards his mother, as fear is also an aspect of honour. The child is instructed not to fear the king or the civil law that
he represents. Instead, he must fulfil his obligation to fear his mother, in accordance with the ancestral law that she has taught him. And, in case the boy’s choice is not clear, the mother throws in an added exhortation that he “prove worthy of his brothers” by following in their footsteps and accepting death as an alternative to transgression of the Law. Only if he acts virtuously, will he be resurrected along with his brothers and ultimately be reunited with his mother.

[29] The second speech of the mother is presented as an instruction that is enveloped in a complimentary plea and command. Its appeal to the youngest son is on a level that goes beyond rational instruction. The mother establishes her authority over her son as the woman who carried, nursed and raised him to lead a life in the service of God and his Law. In accordance with this Law he must honor her with his obedience and fear. Thus, when she exhorts him to accept martyrdom she is supported by both her authority as parent and the full weight of the Law, in which she instructed him. Central to the narrative is the mother’s role as instructor of her sons. In her lifetime, she trained her children to conduct themselves in accordance with God’s law. In the hour of their death, she continued to instruct her sons on God’s power and mercy, encouraging them to obey God’s law even in the face of death. As they lived for the Law, they also died for the Law so that they would be resurrected to life. When the youngest son dies, the narrator offers a short statement regarding the mother’s fate: “Last of all, the mother died, after her sons.” van Henten observes that compared to the mother’s elaborate statements, the description of her death is very brief.” Indeed, her story is about how she lived for the Law. That she would also die for the Law was always a foregone conclusion.

3. The Mother-martyrs in Rhetoric and History

[30] In 2 Maccabees, the three mother-martyrs are portrayed in terms of their role as mothers. They ensure that their sons live their lives according to the Law by assuming the responsibility for circumcising their children and instructing them to conduct themselves in a fashion that is appropriate for a Jew. Ultimately, they choose to sacrifice their lives and those of their children in the service of God and his Law. In the absence of the fathers, these women are represented as heroes of the Jewish people and the guardians of Jewish Law and tradition for their generation. In the context of 2 Macc 6:7-7:42, the stories of the mother-martyrs and their sons, along with that of the elderly sage, Eleazar, clearly had a didactic function. They were ordinary members of society – mothers, children and the elderly - who were held up to a subsequent generation of Jews as models of steadfast loyalty to God and his Law, even in the face of persecution. No doubt, the portrayal of these martyrs is at least to some extent stylized in accordance with the author’s rhetorical agenda, making it difficult to discern the line between rhetoric and reality in the portrayal of the mother-martyrs. Nevertheless, an examination of these portraits in their literary context may lend further insight into these representations and afford us a glimpse, albeit tentative, into the lives of real mothers in Judea in the second century BCE.

[31] The author of 2 Maccabees has set up an opposition between two segments of society. On the one side are the powerful “Hellenizers,” members of the priestly class and their associates who would bribe, steal and even kill for personal power, as exemplified by Simon, Jason and Menelaus. Their disloyalty to ancestral law is emphasized in their priestly neglect of temple duties (4:14), the contribution towards the sacrifice to Herakles (4:18-20) and the misappropriation of temple funds (4:32-34). On the other side are the pious individuals on the
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periphery of society who continue to live according to Jewish law. In classic Greek rhetorical tradition, he sets up a dichotomy between strong and weak, the sinner and the pious, Greek public ritual and the private and often secret observance of Jewish law. While Jewish men publicly participated in Greek culture and religion, either through coercion or on their own volition, the women and children are associated with the elderly sage, Eleazar, and exemplified as the guardians of the ancestral tradition.

[32] The use of comparison is fundamental to the author’s rhetorical agenda. His perspective, however, is not necessarily anti-Hellenistic, for in terms of language and style 2 Maccabees is written in the tradition of contemporary Hellenistic literature. Neither is his purpose in any way gender related, for although he excludes the fathers from the accounts of the mother-martyrs, he does include other men among the pious: the Sabbath observers and the sage Eleazar. It is in the characterisation of this latter individual that we find clues to the author’s agenda. The emphasis on Eleazar’s advanced age throughout the martyr narrative places him, along with the women and children, as one of the weak in society. In addition, he is described using the word grammaoteon, meaning scribe or teacher. Interestingly, the author of Syriac Maccabees clearly portrays Eleazar, not as a teacher, but as a priest (75). This discrepancy does not go unnoticed by the author of 4 Maccabees who attempts to harmonise the other two accounts by portraying Eleazar as nomikos, a scribe or teacher, who came from a priestly family. That the author of 2 Maccabees exemplifies a teacher and not a priest as the male model of piety fits well with his negative portrayal of the priestly aristocracy and their associates.

[33] In 2 Maccabees, power, corruption and the pursuit of “Greek forms of prestige” (4:15) are associated with the aristocratic class to which the priesthood belongs, whereas the preservation of the ancestral law is attributed to ordinary people. The author portrays a world in which Israel’s representatives to God are straying from the Law and the priestly conception of the hierarchical structure of society does not apply. As such, women are not perceived as “other” by virtue of gender, but judged on their own merits. While the elite of Hellenistic Jewish society forsake the Law in their public pursuit of all things Greek, the perpetuation of Judaism falls on the shoulders of average individuals who continue to preserve Jewish tradition for the next generation. Among them are the elderly scribes and teachers, such as Eleazar, who lived his life dedicated to transmitting the Law to others and died in the hope that his loyalty to the Law would be an inspiration to the young. In much the same way, the mother-martyrs also represent an ordinary group within society who are essential to the propagation of Jewish law. They assume responsibility for the Jewish identity of their sons by ensuring that they are circumcised. Moreover, they speak to their children in the language of their ancestors as they nurse, rear and educate them in accordance with Jewish tradition.

[34] The mother-martyrs of 2 Maccabees are not represented as exceptional women in terms of their roles as mothers. At a time when male family members are absent and the public male members of the priesthood have relinquished their role as the preservers of the tradition, it is only natural that the mothers take on the narrative role of circumcision and instruction of their sons. To be sure, the author’s use of rhetoric elevates these activities to heroic proportions. Yet, it is in the very ordinary portrayal of the mothers that we can assert the continuity between literary representation and the reality of women’s lives, for the portrayal of the mother-martyrs as heroes would only be convincing if it were based on an accurate depiction of their roles as mothers. It is therefore not unreasonable to speculate that Jewish mothers in the second century BCE assumed active responsibility in raising their children to live according to the Law. As they

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lived for the Law, they taught those who came after them to do so, as well. In this regard, the role of the Jewish mother remains unremarkable and unchanged.

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1 2 Macc 2:19-15:39 is generally viewed as an historical work in its own right. The history begins with the reign of Seleucus IV (187-175 BCE) and ends with the defeat of the Seleucid general Nicanor in 161 BCE. See for e.g. Jan Willem van Henten, The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 17-19.
2 2 Maccabees was written in Judea sometime between 124-63 BCE, with the actual date of composition likely being towards the beginning of this period. In 2 Macc 2:23, the author claims that the work is not his own, but rather an epitome of the five-volume account of one Jason of Cyrene. For the purposes of this paper I follow van Henten in considering the historical account in 2 Macc 2:19-15:39 as a unity and the epitomist as its author (Ibid., 20). For discussion on the date and provenance of 2 Maccabees, see Ibid., 50-56.
3 This is a distinct literary unit. See Robin Darling Young, “The ‘Woman with the Soul of Abraham’: Traditions about the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs,” in “Women Like This: ” New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 69.
4 The transition to the martyrlogy occurs in v. 6:6: “No one was allowed to observe the Sabbath or to keep the traditional festivals or even to confess he was a Jew.” Commenting on this verse, Goldstein suggests that although Jews continued to practice Judaism in secret, it was suicidal for a practising Jew to admit he was Jewish (Jonathan A. Goldstein, II Maccabees [AB 41A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983] 276).
5 In Greco-Roman literature, the distinctive character of the Jews is often associated with these three practices. See Peter Schäfer, Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 66-105.
7 Goldstein suggests the possibility that the text of 2 Macc 7 is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Jer 15:1-9, which explicitly refers to the plight of widows: “I have made her widows more numerous than the sand of the seas. I have brought against the mothers of young men a destroyer at noonday…. Forlorn is she who gave birth to seven; she has swooned away; her sun set while it was yet day; she has been put to shame and disappointed.” If he is correct, then it is likely that the audience would have picked up on the allusion to the prophecy and assumed the widowhood of the mother in 2 Macc 7. However, the marital status of the two circumcising mothers in 2 Macc 6:10 still remains unexplained.
8 In her monograph on anonymity in the biblical narrative, Reinhartz argues convincingly that the “principle effect of the absence of a proper name is to focus the reader’s attention on the role designations that flood into the gap that anonymity denotes” (Adele Reinhartz, “Why Ask My Name?” Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative [New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998] 188). On a different level, Rajak interprets the anonymity of these women in terms of their role as martyrs, suggesting that the omission of names depersonalises the Jewish representation of the past and emphasises religious heroism over identity. On this basis, she argues for anonymity as a “primary defining characteristic of Jewish-Greek martyrology in this period” (“Dying for the Law,” 57-58).
10 Kraemer astutely points out that it is not necessary to argue for the historical accuracy of an ancient text when attempting to reconstruct the lives of women. She states: “Whether or not these specific incidents occurred, their recounting … tells us much about what ancient authors and audiences took as plausible, unremarkable and the givens of ordinary social life….” See Ross S. Kraemer, “Jewish Women and Christian Origins: Some Caveats” in
coercion must be reserved for the transgression of negative non-timebound commands, such as the prohibition against eating pork. (BJS 317; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 16-19.

translation in his commentary, but nevertheless translates the same genetic predisposition. On the “circumcising women,” see Meir Bar-Ilan, wife, the specification of the woman merely establishes that the sons were all from the same mother and had the children of one family have a tendency to bleed profusely and die. In a time, when a man could have more than one text, however, does not indicate that the woman actually performed the ritual. Rather, it is concerned that the claim that women circumcised their sons by citing cutting the umbilical cord, nursing and clothing the child, they may have also removed the foreskin. He supports his view of both Jews and Greeks, circumcision was the mark that identified the Jewish man as a Jew.


In Greek culture, the body was revered in its perfection. In this light, circumcision was disapproved of as a form of mutilation (see for e.g. Herodotus, II, 36f). In Hellenistic Judaism the practice became discredited amongst Jews who wanted to participate in the Greek culture around them (1 Macc 1:15; Jub 15:33; A.J. 12.241). They underwent operations to disguise their circumcision (epispasm) and, according to Josephus, exercised naked in the gymnasium (A.J. 12.241). Although failure to circumcise is a clear transgression of the Law, it is not certain that disguising a circumcision is considered a sin (Jonathan Goldstein, “Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism,” in Semites, Iranians, Greeks and Romans: Studies in their Interactions [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] 79, n. 92; cf. Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm: Circumcision in Reverse,” BR [Aug., 1992] 52-57). It is clear, however, that from the point of view of both Jews and Greeks, circumcision was the mark that identified the Jewish man as a Jew.

Hoffman, Covenant of Blood, 22.

Goldstein translates: “Two women were brought to trial…” (II Maccabees, 268). That there was a trial may be verified by the outcome: the women and children were executed. It is likely that the preferred method of executing women in the Greco-Roman world was hurling from a height. In the third century BCE, the Seleucid queen Laodice executed her ladies, Danaë, in this fashion (ibid., 279). Moreover, Epicurean philosophers who were condemned as effeminate were h Surprised: “I want you to do it for me as my legal agent.” See Hoffman, Covenant of Blood, 73.

Goldstein points that in the parallel texts in 1 Macc 1:60-61 and 4 Macc 4:24-25 there is no mention of the number of women. This specification adds a certain amount of authenticity to the account (II Maccabees, 279).

In modern Judaism, it is technically the obligation of the father to perform the circumcision himself. In many forms of the ceremony, the mohel asks the father if he wishes to perform the circumcision, to which he replies, “I want you to do it for me as my legal agent.” See Hoffman, Covenant of Blood, 73.

Against Bar-Ilan, who suggests that in the same way that women traditionally tended to the needs of the newborn, cutting the umbilical cord, nursing and clothing the child, they may have also removed the foreskin. He supports his claim that women circumcised their sons by citing b. Yebam. 64b in which there is a discussion concerning whether or not a woman should circumcise her third son if the first and second had died as a result of the procedure. The text, however, does not indicate that the woman actually performed the ritual. Rather, it is concerned that the children of one family have a tendency to bleed profusely and die. In a time, when a man could have more than one wife, the specification of the woman merely establishes that the sons were all from the same mother and had the same genetic predisposition. On the “circumcising women,” see Meir Bar-Ilan, Some Jewish Women in Antiquity (BJS 317; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 16-19.

The word oikous, translated here as “family,” literally means “houses.” Goldstein acknowledges the literal translation in his commentary, but nevertheless translates oikous as “husbands.” See Goldstein, I Maccabees, 227.

Josephus relies on 1 Maccabees as his source for this period in history. In his account, however, he indicates that the fathers were tortured and crucified for circumcising their sons, while the wives and children were strangled. It is
notable that when the responsibility for circumcision is transferred to the father, the women’s role becomes that of “wife” and not “mother.”

24 According to Bar-Ilan, The Scroll of Antiochus may be dated to some time between the second century BCE and the second century CE (Some Jewish Women, 16-18, esp. n. 36).


26 In circumcising her son, the mother not only upheld the ancestral law but she also saved her son from disaster by establishing his identity as a Jew and ensuring that he would not be barred from eternal life after death. Bar-Ilan, Some Jewish Women, 18.

27 b. Kidd. 29a-b.

28 Against Archer, who asserts that under the exceptional circumstances of the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes, women performed circumcisions (Léonie J. Archer, Her Price is Beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine [JSOTSup 60; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990] 223, n. 3). I do not deny the possibility that women circumcised their children in this period. However, given the rhetorical nature of the text, I do not think that one can assert with any degree of certainty the continuity between this literary representation of women circumcising their sons and real life practice.

29 A similar expression of the mother’s trust in God may found in 4 Macc 17:4.

30 van Henten comments on the similar language used in Philo’s portrayal of Julia Augusta in Legat. 320 and suggests that there is a topos of exceptional women who act like men in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature (The Maccabean Martyrs, 233-4 and nn. 236-7).

31 On the use of the Stoic division between masculine and feminine attributes in 2 Macc 7:21, see Young, “Woman with the Soul,” 71, esp. n. 5. Philo assumes a similar contrast between masculine reasoning and female emotion. See for e.g. Leg. 3.11; cf. 3.49-50.

32 In 4 Maccabees, the author glorifies the mother in masculine terms asserting that she is “more noble than males in endurance, more manly than men in resistance” (15:30; cf. 16:14). Commenting on the author’s insistence on the mother’s superiority in the sphere of male virtue, Rajak contends that “the identity of the heroic martyr is thus preserved as a masculine one” (“Dying for the Law,” 55-56). This tendency to masculinise the female martyr is especially apparent in later Christian martyrology, as is evident in for e.g. Acts of Thecla 40 and the Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas. In 2 Maccabees, however, the male virtues of the mother are not developed, nor are they emphasised. Her role as mother is essential to her identity, as exemplified in her relationship with her youngest son (v. 27).

33 According to Young, the mother’s influence on the boys “must be seen as essential” (“Woman with the Soul,” 70).


35 The phrase tē patriō phōnē literally means “in the paternal language.” The mother’s use of the ancestral language gives a sense that the communication to her sons was of a private nature (Young, “Woman with the Soul,” 70). The identification of the language is subject to dispute. According to Young, it is likely that she spoke Aramaic and not Hebrew (Ibid., 71). van Henten, however, argues quite convincingly that, in 2 Maccabees, references to the ancestral language indicate Hebrew (Jan Willem van Henten, “The Ancestral Language of the Jews,” in Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda [William Horbury, ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999] 65-68).

36 Reference to the use of the ancestral language is also made in 2 Macc 12:37; 15:29.

37 van Henten asserts that the martyrs use Greek when speaking to the king and his people, but speak amongst themselves in the ancestral language (The Maccabean Martyrs, 196).

38 The king did not understand the ancestral language, as indicated in v. 24: “Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone.”

39 The process of Hellenization was not a matter of simple acceptance or rejection. It was a complex process in which a variety of cultural influences were selected, adopted or adapted to varying degrees in different levels of society. On the one hand, the use of the ancestral language indicates the martyrs are part of a people with its own identity (Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity [London: Routledge, 2002] 67, n. 92). On the other hand, their proficiency in Greek may indicate a degree of Hellenization that is not necessarily associated with the abandonment

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40 Young, “Woman with the Soul,” 72.

41 From a literary perspective, the escalation of the mother’s rhetoric balances the added incentive to transgress the Law that the king offers to the child (v. 24). Obeying the Law would bring about a painful death, but obeying the king would be rewarded with wealth and power.

42 Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 314.

43 Goldstein notes the sequence of five verbs and suggests that the text is an expansion on Lam 2:22 that also includes a rare word, *trophophoreō* (“take care”), borrowed from Greek Deut 1:31. He argues that the latter verb was not original and omits it from his own translation (*II Maccabees*, 314-5). Arguing against Goldstein, van Henten asserts that there is no reason to change the text since the fifth verb, although somewhat redundant, fits the context (*The Maccabean Martyrs*, 233, n. 233).

44 Ben Sira establishes parental authority over children: “For the Lord honoured the father above his children, and made firm the authority of the mother over her sons” (3:2). See Warren C. Trenchard, *Ben Sira’s View of Women: A Literary Analysis* (BJS 38; Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1982) 40-43.

45 Tob 4:3-4 discusses the honour a son should give to his mother. In the Book of Jubilees there are several examples of concern for honour: Rebecca exhorts Jacob to honour his father and brother (35:5), Jacob is portrayed as honouring both of his parents (35:12-13), whereas Esau shows them no honour when he treats them poorly (35:9-11).

46 Ilan notes that the artificial nipple and bottle were not used until modern times (Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine: An Inquiry into Image and Status* [Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1996] 119). On the importance of breast milk in the ancient world, see Philo who referred to it as “the happily timed ailment, which flows so gently fostering the tender growth of every creature” (*Virt.* 130; cf. *Spec.* 3.199-200).

47 In Jub. 17.1 there is a reference to the weaning of Isaac, but the age of the child is not mentioned. The Mishna indicates that two years is an appropriate length of time (*m. Git.* 7:6). The Tosefta establishes a minimum time of eighteen months to two years (*t. Nid.* 2:2-2:4). R. Eliber, however, asserts that after twenty-four months, nursing was considered an abominable thing (*b. Ket.* 60a).

48 According to Corrington, the most widespread representation of Isis was as the goddess Isis *lactans*, seated on a throne nursing her son. Representations dating from the eighth century BCE onward have been found throughout the Mediterranean world, where Isis presumably became associated with the Greek nursing deities, the *kourotrophoi* (Corrington, *The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity,* *JTR* 82[4]: 403).

49 In Jewish literature, the personified Wisdom also shares many attributes with Isis, including “bestower of life” (e.g. Prov 8:35; Wis 8.3). See Ibid., 405.

50 Corrington argues convincingly for the association between divine representation and social reality (Ibid., 406).

51 Ibid., 406.


53 A note to the NRSV translation of 2 Maccabees indicates that “taken care of you” may be translated as “bore the burden of your education.”

54 van Henten suggests that the string of five verbs used in the mother’s plea concern five successive stages of growth for sons. To support this contention he cites *Acts* 22:3 with respect to Paul, indicating that the verse offers an example of three stages in a boy’s life: birth, rearing and education (*The Maccabean Martyrs*, 233, n. 233). However, it should be noted that there is significant overlap between the last two categories. Similarly, in our passage the actions of rearing, training and educating do not necessarily reflect successive stages of development, but rather, may be viewed as categories of responsibility of a parent towards a child, all of which involve some form of instruction.

See for e.g. Prov 1:8, 6:20. Corrington suggests that “…the role of the mother as the first instructor of children in Wisdom was one of authority in Israel” (“The Milk of Salvation,” 405).


Writing in first century Alexandria, Philo asserts in general terms that it is the parents’ responsibility to instruct their children from an early age (Spec. 2.228). Yet, in other places he appears to perceive the father as the primary instructor of his child (Spec. 2.29), and the mother as a negative influence in terms of moral and intellectual development (Spec. 4.68). For a discussion on the responsibility of parents to instruct their children, see Adele Reinhartz, “Parents and Children: A Philonic Perspective,” in The Jewish Family in Antiquity (ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 73-74.


The description of the father’s instruction includes the Law and the prophets, psalms, proverbs and the lessons afforded by such biblical characters as Cain and Abel, Joseph, Phineas and Daniel. The emphasis here is not on knowledge, but on training in the proper conduct required to lead a life in the service of God and his Law. On the character of Jewish education in the Second Temple period and the Tannaim, see Nathan Drazin, History of Jewish Education from 515 BCE to 220 CE (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1940) 11-15.

In the Book of Jubilees, Rebecca is similarly portrayed as commanding her son, Jacob (26:9; 35:1, 25).

Crenshaw suggests that the command to honour one’s father and mother is tied to their role in giving instruction to their children (Education in Ancient Israel, 189, n. 3).

Philo indicates that honouring one’s parents includes the following: respect, obedience, fear, courtesy and nurture (Spec. 2.234-5).

van Henten, Martyrdom and Noble Death, p. 70, n. 100. Compare the elaborate praise of the mother in 4 Macc 4:11-16:25.

On the didactic function of the martyr narratives, see van Henten, The Maccabean Martyrs, 122-4. Cf. Nickelsburg who suggests that some elements in 2 Macc 7 may have, at some point, been used to inculcate steadfastness in times of persecution (Resurrection, 95).

Upon the examination of the syntax and style of 2 Maccabees, Doran concludes that the author was well trained in the schools of rhetoric (Robert Doran, Temple Propaganda: The Purpose and Character of 2 Maccabees [CBQMS 12; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981] 46).

I am grateful for the insights of Sigrid Peterson who uses this example, among others, to demonstrate the harmonisation of 2 Maccabees with Syriac Maccabees in the text of 4 Maccabees. Supporting her argument is the contention that in the NT, nomíkos and grammateów are equivalent terms. Sigrid Peterson, “Maccabean Martyrdoms: Versions and Varieties” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the SBL, Toronto, Canada, 24 November 2002).

van Henten indicates that it is unlikely that the author belonged to a priestly group (The Maccabean Martyrs, 55).

In portraying the mother-martyr of 2 Macc 7 as speaking the ancestral language and nursing her own child, the author indicates that she is not from among the aristocratic class.

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