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The Influence of Hellenism on the Literary Style of 1 and 2 Maccabees

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Dimitra Fellman

Ms. Keldorf

Western Civilization 101

7 Nov. 2016

EQ: To what extent were the authors of *1* and *2 Maccabees* and the people portrayed in these books influenced by Hellenism in the late 2nd century BCE?

The Influence of Hellenism on the Literary Style of *1* and *2 Maccabees*

It is impossible to understand Jewish identity without delving into the history of diasporas and persecution surrounding their history. Beginning with the Babylonian Captivity and the destruction of the first temple, the Jewish people were dispersed across Europe, Asia and Northern Africa, ruled by vast empires and kings by the likes of The Persian Empire and Alexander the Great, and have historically been a minority. The Diaspora of the Hellenistic Age was no different. The Jewish people of Egypt were ruled by the Ptolemaic Empire, while Jews from Greece to India lived under the Seleucid Kingdom. Within the confinements of a Greek society, there were a number who conformed, but an equal number who resisted the ideological changes inherent to assimilation. Even when the Jews voluntarily integrated, some rulers viewed them as a threat and persecuted them; one of these rulers was Antiochus IV of the Seleucid kingdom. His persecution of the Jews led to the Maccabean Revolt, which was described in *1* and *2 Maccabees*. The authors of these books address the ideological struggle between two cultures, and Jewish persecution in the 2nd century BCE. In spite of outward opposition to the adaptation of Hellenism, the books *1 Maccabees* and *2 Maccabees* reveal that their authors were influenced by Hellenistic descriptive language and styles of writing.

The history of the Jewish people in Hellenistic Greece is mostly peaceful, but in some areas, conflict and war arose. The death of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, and the resulting division of his empire, placed Judaea under Ptolemaic rule, and eventually within the Seleucid Kingdom and the rule of Antiochus III in 200 BCE. Antiochus III permitted religious freedom and the Jews lived peacefully. In 174 BCE, this peace weakened when Antiochus IV forcibly removed the high priest, Onias III, in favor of the more Hellenistic minded Joshua. Then, in 172 BCE, Antiochus IV removed Joshua in favor of another priest (“Revolt of the Maccabees” 644). Contemporaneously, Antiochus IV established a gymnasium opposite the Temple, passed laws forbidding Jewish worship, and used the Temple for Roman worship and sacrifice (Stavroulakis 14). Many Jews living within the Seleucid kingdom were angered by the blatant disregard for their most sacred office and the religious oppression. The tension between these Jews and Antiochus IV came to a head in 167 BCE, manifesting in the Maccabean revolt. The revolt was led by Mattathias, a member of the Temple priesthood, and his sons. In the months following the emergence of war, Mattathias lost his life, leaving one of his sons, Judah Maccabee, in command. Judah and the Maccabees succeeded in reclaiming Judaea, including the Temple in Jerusalem, between 167 and 142 BCE. In the aftermath of this revolt, Judaea, now independent of Hellenistic rule, came under the rule of Simon, a brother of Judah, who established the Hasmonean kingdom with himself as its king (“Revolt of the Maccabees” 645).

This historical time in Jewish history, which is commemorated in the story of Hanukkah, has been described by many, including the authors of *1* and *2 Maccabees*. There are five books that use the title Maccabees, 1-5 sequentially. It is only books 1 and 2 that delve into the Maccabean revolt. *1 Maccabees* recounts the history of the Jewish people under the rule of

Antiochus IV beginning in 175 BCE to the death of Simon in 135 BCE. An unknown author wrote the book as propaganda, sometime within two to twenty years of Simon's death, to support the Hasmonean kingdom and its rulers. For the author of *2 Maccabees*, the rule of Simon over the Hasmonean kingdom is not important, and the book focuses on the rule of Antiochus IV and the Maccabean revolt from 175-160 BCE. The book (whose author remains unidentified) was written in Greek around 125 BCE and directed towards the Jews of the Hellenistic diaspora (Abrahams, et al. 239-244). These texts — one promoting a Jewish kingdom, the other promoting Judaism in a Hellenistic age — perpetuated negative associations towards the influence of Hellenism.

The Greek society surrounding and ruling over the Jewish people held distinct styles of literature, language and linguistic constructs that, in part, composed Hellenistic culture. One particular literary aspect is the Greek drama. Sir Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, one of the greatest authorities on ancient Greek theater, defines Greek dramatic styles as including, “an utterance, an accompanying gesture, and movement across the stage,” (Simkovich 304) as well as large and quick movement such as prostrating, laying flat with the head facing downwards, during moments of great fervor and zeal (Simkovich 304). Additionally, Greek historical writings incorporated motifs related to Greek theatrical dramas, such as sorrow and exaggeration (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees” 29), termed “tragic history,” whose roots extend back to Greece in the 5th century BCE (Doran 84). Another theme common in Greek historical texts is the reversal of fortunes. In *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his observation of Greek literature and drama, states that the reversal of fortune should be “a probable consequence of the preceding events; for what occurs because of preceding events is far different from what occurs early after

preceding events” (Williams 117). Over exaggeration and the reversal of fortunes were common aspects of Greek storytelling, which also included specific words and constructs of the Greek language.

A preliminary understanding of the language used in *1* and *2 Maccabees* is important for analyzing the texts’ Hellenistic elements. The Greek language in the 2nd century BCE contained terms that connoted specific characteristics of a particular person or society. In Greek, the word *nomoi* was a term that specifically depicted the laws of a society. It described a political body, as opposed to the laws of a cultural community. Another Greek term, *kalokagathia*, described a significant aspect of one’s character. The term, meaning “beautiful and good,” described gentlemen who possessed a ‘perfect character,’ learned during their upbringing. According to Martha Himmelfarb, a specialist in ancient Judaism from the rise of the second temple, the term is “quintessentially Greek; there is no comparable biblical expression” (Himmelfarb “2 Maccabees” 35). The term *kalokagathia* is not the only Greek-derived phrase that has a precise connotation.

The term *gennaios*, meaning noble, can be found in the works of the Hellenistic historian Polybius in *The Histories*, and an analysis of this text reveals that to the Greeks of the 2nd century, *gennaios* was associated with “a courage of a masculine kind” (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees” 35). In conjunction with the idea of nobleness is the Greek word *doxa*, meaning glory. This term is central to Greek writings and is frequently attributed to men who come by power and fame through military conquest and battle (Himmelfarb, “1 Maccabees” 88). Both of these terms allude to a specific type of person who was ‘ideal’ in Hellenistic society.

An aspect of 2nd century Hellenistic life was the giving of gifts. The term for one who

gave these gifts was a benefactor, and their deeds were termed *euergetism*. According to Gregg Gardner, a professor at The University of British Columbia specializing in early Jewish studies, “This informal institution [*euergetism*] was ubiquitous throughout the Greek-speaking world from the fifth century BCE onwards and was defined by a remarkably consistent set of features” (328). These features were defined as follows: The benefactor would gift a city with supplies, entertainment or services, and in return would be presented a gift, statues, governmental positions, or a decree placed in a public location. While the most common form of *euergetism* was defined by tangible donations, other types of *euergetism* could also include the protection and function of a city (Gardner 328). This form of charity was a unique aspect of Hellenistic culture and a construct common to everyday life.

The author of *2 Maccabees* reveals his adaptation of Hellenistic writing through the use of Greek dramatic styles commonly found in Greek tragedies. The author utilizes this Greek dramatic style in a passage describing the Maccabees’ preparation for battle, describing how the men,

Falling upon the steps before the altar, they implored him [G-d] to be gracious to them and to be an enemy to their enemies and an adversary to their adversaries, as the law declares. And rising from their prayer they took up their arms and advanced a considerable distance from the city; and when they came near the enemy they halted (Simkovich 305)

This passage directly follows the pattern of a remark in conjunction with an action and movement. The men descended the altar while asking G-d for assistance, and then completed a long land journey to reach their enemy. Additionally, this passage describes the Greek dramatic

style of prostrating, as the men “fall upon the steps,” a very dramatic action coinciding with their passionate prayer dedicated to their cause (Simkovich 305). In describing a sacred moment of prayer with G-d in the manner of a Greek tragedy, the author of *2 Maccabees* adopts a Greek style of writing for his own use.

The adaptation of Greek dramatic writing styles in *1 Maccabees* also reflects the dramatic sorrow found in Greek historical texts. Himmelfarb notes how,

The melodramatic style, evident in the accounts of the torture and deaths of martyrs or the death of Antiochus, the concern to show the decline and fall of the wicked as recompense for their overweening ambition and their persecution of the righteous, and the narrator’s comments on the events he describes are all characteristic of contemporary Hellenistic history writing” (Himmelfarb “2 Maccabees” 29)

A clear portrayal of this Greek dramatic style arrives in chapter 9 of *1 Maccabees*, and the death of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV. In his final days, the king is described as laying “there for many days, because the deep disappointment continuously gripped him” (Williams 113), and thinking, “I am perishing of bitter disappointment” (Williams 114). These descriptions of the king on his deathbed not only underscore his pain, but place extra emphasis on the sorrows he is experiencing through the use of the words ‘deep’ and ‘bitter’ to embellish his disappointment, (Williams 114). The prolonging of Antiochus IV’s sorrow goes hand in hand with the dramatic styles of Greek historical texts.

It is not only on his deathbed that Antiochus IV has great sorrow placed upon him. Throughout his campaign to quash the Jewish rebellion, he experiences sorrow in the form of the

Greek theme reversals of fortune. During battle with Ptolemy (the Hellenistic ruler of Egypt), Antiochus IV experiences great victory. When he faces battle again against Judaea's forces, he experiences a commensurate loss. In both passages, the loser is described as having "turned and fled before him" (Williams 117). The uniform phrasing of the passages reflects the role reversal Antiochus IV experiences, from victor to defeated. Antiochus IV also experiences reversal when he learns about a gold and silver-filled temple. He cannot attack the temple and obtain its riches because the people living there discovered his plans. This is not only a reversal for Antiochus IV (because things didn't turn out the way he expected them to) but for the reader as well. The reader, in previous chapters, learns that the king successfully ransacked cities in Egypt and Jerusalem, and therefore would expect the same to occur this time, but it doesn't (Williams 116).

During his rule, Antiochus IV persecuted the Jewish people by forbidding them to practice their religion and turning their temple into a house of worship to Greek gods and sacrifice (Stavroulakis 14). In his last days, *1 Maccabees* quotes Antiochus IV recalling: "I sent to destroy the inhabitants of Judaea without good reason. I know that it is because of this that these misfortunes have come upon me" (Williams 115). Noting that Himmelfarb's definition of tragic history incorporates, "recompense for their overwhelming ambition and their persecution of righteousness," (Himmelfarb "2 Maccabees" 29) which aligns with Aristotle's observations of reversal, it is clear to see how Antiochus IV's unrighteous persecution of the Jewish people and his resulting defeat at the hands of the Maccabees is reflective of Greek tragic history. The inclusion of Antiochus IV's sufferings throughout his narrative introduces the Greek dramatic theme of 'dramatic history' as an integral part of the Hanukkah story in *1 Maccabees*.

Another aspect of Hellenistic writing demonstrated in *2 Maccabees* is the author's use of

language in describing Jewish life. The author uses the Greek word *nomoi*, the formal way to describe the laws of a society, specifically when referring to the Hebrew Bible. By using *nomoi*, the plural, as opposed to the singular, *nomos*, the author of *2 Maccabees* is portraying the Hebrew Bible as a political set of laws governing the Jewish people, which is not how it has been traditionally viewed. It is important to note that the author does not use the singular, *nomos*, which would imply that the Hebrew Bible served as the spiritual entity of the Jewish people. The use of this language reveals that the author of *2 Maccabees* views, or at least interprets, Judaea as a Greek-like *polis*, or city-state, with the Hebrew Bible as its set of laws (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees” 30). The author, in viewing Jewish society through the lens of a Greek idea, the *polis*, reveals that he was influenced by and adapted Greek language constructs in his writing.

The language used throughout *2 Maccabees* to describe characters is solely Greek and heavily emphasized. One term used by the author of *2 Maccabees* to depict characters’ actions that traces its origins to Greek is *gennaios*, meaning noble. There are many characters that are given this noble trait. In *2 Maccabees*, Eleazer faces torture and death, and the author of *2 Maccabees* goes on to describe him as an “example of nobility for the whole people” (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees” 33). The author also describes a mother captured with her sons as, “filled with a noble spirit” because she, “fire[s] her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage” (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees” 33). Then there is Raziz, a martyr who “nobly ran up the wall, and manfully threw himself down into the crowd” (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees” 33). Before going into battle, Judah tell his men “to fight nobly,” and the men react, swearing to “attack nobly.” The repeated usage of the term *gennaios* to describe a character’s bravery when in duress or facing opposition highlights the author’s intention to use this word (Himmelfarb, “2 Maccabees”

35). By intentionally associating the characters' bravery with the Greek term *gennaios*, the author shows that he saw these characters through a Greek lens.

Kalokagathia is another Greek expression used to describe characters such as Eleazer and Onias III. *2 Maccabees* describes Onias III as *kalokagathia* due to the modesty and gentleness he possesses as a result of the way he was raised from an early age. Two other figures, Jeremiah and Eleazer, are also portrayed as *kalokagathia*. The author of *2 Maccabees* emphasizes their proper upbringing and the prominence of their perfect lifestyle from their youth to their old age, especially the refined character and dignity they maintain in their old age. In these three descriptions, the author uses this fundamental Greek term to describe his characters, adapting Greek language. Yet, the author omits traditional Greek aspects of perfection, such as the body and sexual aspects of Greek education, that in Greek society created a 'perfect character,' in favor of traits that were attributed to living a proper Jewish life in accordance to the Torah (Himmelfarb, "2 Maccabees" 35-36). In this way, the author not only borrows Greek language, but transforms specific words and recontextualizes them for Jewish use.

1 Maccabees also emphasises and embraces Greek terms, such as *doxa* — meaning glory — when describing its characters. When Judah is immersed in battle, he says to his men, "If our time has come, let us die bravely for our brethren and leave no cause to question our honor" (Himmelfarb "1 Maccabee" 86). Himmelfarb notes that the author of *1 Maccabees* presents Judah as being more concerned about procuring honor than following through with the will of G-d (Himmelfarb "1 Maccabees" 86). Himmelfarb also observes how an excerpt from a poem depicts the importance of honor and glory in Simon's achievements. The poem states that, "He sought the good of his nation, his rule pleasing to them, as was the honor shown him, all his

days” (Himmelfarb, “1 Maccabees” 86). By using the word *doxa* in the narrative, the author seems more concerned about presenting their savior with honors than praising their G-d for gifting them victory. This distinction and portrayal of the importance of honor is quintessentially Greek, and abandons the Jewish view that “Glory belongs to the lord” (Himmelfarb “1 Maccabees” 88). By discarding this Jewish value and adopting the Greek value of *doxa*, the author of *1 Maccabees* not only integrates Greek language into the text but reflects the influence of Greek values in the words he chooses.

Finally, *1* and *2 Maccabees* presents Jewish rulers and leaders as benefactors participating in the informal system of *euergetism*. One of the earliest examples of a Jewish leader presented as a benefactor is high priest Onias III. In *2 Maccabees*, Onias III receives high praise from the author, who claims that Onias kept Jerusalem safe through his devotion to G-d and his willingness to always consider the safety of the Jewish people above all else (Collins 77). In *2 Maccabees* Onias III is directly described as “the benefactor of the city, the guardian of his fellow countrymen and zealot for the laws” (Collins 77). In being described specifically as a benefactor, the line connecting this character with the Greek phrase is clearly drawn. Gregg Gardner, a specialist in early Jewish studies at Princeton University, suggests that the usage of the term “benefactor” is intentional and that the author intended to depict Onias III in this manner (30). Onias III is also defined as a benefactor due to his role as “administrator of the city market,” demonstrated by his administration of the money within the temple treasury, and by his service as the regional intermediary between these funds and their distribution to the Seleucid King. His role as the “administrator of the city market,” made Onias III a benefactor as it helped support life within that city (Gardner 331). By depicting him as an administrator and benefactor

to his city, the author of *2 Maccabees* adapts a Greek construct and applies it to a Jewish leader.

Another Jewish leader presented as a benefactor is Simon in *1 Maccabees*. Jan Willem Henton, a specialist in early Jewish epigraphy, describes the mode in which Simon's honors parallel Hellenistic benefactors. These honors include protection against enemies of the Jews, the disposal of gentiles, protecting Judaea from attack by strengthening defenses, and ushering in peace (Henton 266). In addition to protection, Simon provides money and creates prosperity for the Jews when he returns from war. In return, a decree for Simon is placed in a central part of the Temple (Henton 268), and he is rewarded with the highest position within Jewish society at the time, that of high priest of the Jerusalem temple, and is named military commander (Gardner 341- 42). Simon's contributions to his people are presented as 'benefactions,' and his resulting praise as the 'reward' (Gardner 337). His praise, and honor in return, are directly reflective of a Greek 'benefactor.' Yet, the author of *1 Maccabees*, in including Simon's protection of the Temple and Jewish law, and the omittance of honors such as statues (which broke the second Jewish commandment prohibiting the worship of idols) are reflective of how the author transformed this Greek phrase and applied it to a Jewish leader (Gardner 336).

The authors of *1* and *2 Maccabees* were clearly influenced by Hellenistic styles of writing and literature, as shown by their adaptation of these trope. This fact is interesting, considering that the anti-Hellenistic nature of both books leads the authors to spew anti-gentile rhetoric and portray Hellenism as a negative influence on the Jewish people. This contrast is significant because it reflects the broad reach of Hellenism among the Jewish community in the 2nd century BCE, despite opposition, and is also reflective of the far reach that Hellenism had over the cultures it enveloped. It additionally reveals how easily scholars of the time, who were objective

specialists in their field, could be subconsciously influenced to tell history through a different lens. Most importantly, though, the contrast between the authors' direct opinions and unconscious action while writing sheds light on human nature, and the inherent desire to fit in.

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