

JUDEAN HEROES AND DIASPORIC HEROES: ON JOSEPHUS'S VERSION OF 1 MACCABEES 1–2

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Abstract

Although Josephus's narrative of the Maccabean Revolt in *Antiquities* 12–13 follows 1 Maccabees closely, it deviates from it often in accordance with Josephus's own circumstances and preferences, writing in Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem rather than in Jerusalem when it was the capital of the Hasmonean state. This study focuses on Ant. 12.255–277 and points to Josephus's changes in wording and structure that allow him to transform Jewish martyrs from foils whose deaths show that the Hasmoneans' militant response to persecution is preferable to theirs and created the Jewish state, as they are in 1 Macc 1–2, into noble heroes of the Jewish religion. This corresponds to Josephus's growing tendency to underscore devotion to Jewish law rather than the values relevant to Jewish statehood.

Keywords: Josephus, 1 Maccabees, martyrs, sabbath, Samaritans.

As scholars have always known, and as is amply demonstrated by Joseph Sievers's *Synopsis*,¹ Josephus's account of Hasmonean history in *Ant.* 12–13, down to the days of Simon, follows 1 Macc 1–13. It also appears to be clear that he followed the Greek version, not the lost Hebrew version.²

Following, however, need not be slavish. Josephus had his own agendas, and he did not share the main agenda of 1 Maccabees. Namely, that book was meant to promote the Hasmonean dynasty in general, and the Simonide branch that eventually took over, in particular (see esp. ch. 14 and the book's final verse), and to justify their claims to rule.³ But that dynasty, and the state it ruled, was defeated by Rome a century and

¹ Sievers 2001.

² See Grimm 1853, xxviii; Bar-Kochva 1992, 115–117.

³ See, in general, Schwartz 2022a.

a half before Josephus wrote his *Antiquities*, and Josephus had no interest in hyping a dead horse. Note, for example, the fact that although otherwise he summarizes the Modein story in 1 Macc 2 in great detail (*Ant.* 12.268–283) he omits the implicit and explicit references to Phinehas in vv. 24, 26, and 54—references that are meant, in light of Numbers 25:11–13, to support the Hasmoneans’ claim to the high priesthood. Similarly, he summarizes 1 Macc 5:59–65 in detail at *Ant.* 12.351–353 but simply skips its programmatic bottom line, at 1 Macc 5:62, that explains that some of Judas’s officers were defeated in battle because “they were not of the seed of those men, to whom it had been given that the salvation of Israel (would be) through their hand.” Indeed, Josephus’s account in *Antiquities* of the last generations of the Hasmoneans, from the cruelty of Aristobulus I (who starved his mother to death in prison—13.302) and Alexander Jannaeus (who crucified his Jewish opponents, slaughtering their families before their eyes—13.380) to Salome Alexandra’s incompetence (13.430–431) and finally to her sons’ incessant feuding, which Josephus blames for the Roman takeover (14.77, 491), was far from positive.⁴ To some extent this picture of the last several Hasmoneans reflects the change in Josephus’s main source from 1 Maccabees (which ends some sixty years before the Roman takeover) to Nicolaus of Damascus, who had every interest in making the Hasmoneans look bad so as to make Herod look good.⁵ But Josephus too had his own agendas, which allowed him give up certain elements and emphases in 1 Maccabees, just as they brought him to add to its story or otherwise change it in order to tailor it to his needs.

True, historians who follow written sources are almost always bound to retain elements of them even when they do not serve their own agendas. Nevertheless, given the fact that the easiest thing for the historian to do is simply to copy the source, deviations, even of nuances, are all the more significant.

A number of scholars have addressed Josephus’s deviations from 1 Maccabees, noting especially a few motifs that Josephus played up in consonance with his own interests and needs.⁶ These include, especially, his emphasis on the importance of Jewish law and on his heroes’ willingness to die for it. These emphases correspond to his emphases elsewhere in *Antiquities*, whenever Jews clash with the ruling power, such as, for example, in their confrontations with Pompey, with Herod, with Pontius Pilate, and with Gaius Caligula: in each of those cases too, the point of the story, for Josephus, is the Jews’ refusal to violate their laws, and he emphasizes their noble willingness to die rather than do that (see *Ant.* 14.67; 17.152, 158–159; 18.59, 270–271). That theme is less prominent in his earlier work, *War*, but is very prominent in his later work, *Against Apion*; see especially 2.218–219. Evidently, it bespeaks Josephus’s situation as a Jew in the post-Destruction and diasporic world, in which, in the absence of land and Temple, all the Jews had, to identify themselves, was their law.⁷

⁴ For Josephus on the later Hasmoneans, see Fuks 1990. Fuks argues that Josephus’s account of the latter Hasmoneans is more positive in *Antiquities* than in his *War*. Everything is relative.

⁵ For Josephus’s dependence on Nicolaus for his history of the last six decades of the Hasmonean state, see Stern 1974, 230–231; Fuks 1990; Bar-Kochva 2010, 401–409.

⁶ See Drüner 1896, 35–50; Gafni 1989; Feldman 1994; Tuval 2013, 194–201; Nodet 2015.

⁷ See Schwartz 2014, 48–61. The centrality of Jewish law for *Antiquities* is the main theme of Tuval’s long chapter of which the section on 1 Maccabees, cited in n. 6, is a part.

Rewriting the Hasmoneans' story that way required a good bit of work on Josephus's part, because the point of 1 Maccabees is to justify the rule of the Hasmoneans by showing how they had successfully fought and defeated the Seleucids and their supporters. This dynastic history, that is, praises its heroes for their willingness to *fight*—something that Josephus avoids in his accounts of the conflicts with Pompey, Herod, Pilate, and Gaius Caligula. In all of those cases, Josephus portrays his heroes as willing to *die*; in none of the cases do they fight, and in the case of Caligula they even explicitly reject the notion of fighting (“Would you, then, go to war against Caesar?!”), saying “In no way will we fight, but we will die before we violate the laws” (18.271).⁸ 1 Maccabees, in contrast, portrays its heroes as willing to be soldiers, and as being quite good at that—and, as we shall see, it uses the martyrs as foils, whose efforts and suffering only illustrated the problem rather than solving it. To turn the book to his purposes, Josephus therefore took care—especially in speeches, in which historians enjoyed the greatest degree of freedom (Thucydides 1.22.1!)—to move the accent from the Hasmoneans' willingness to fight, and die if needed, to their willingness to die, and that—for the law.

Thus, for a simple example, Mattathias's lament about the troubles in Jerusalem, which goes on for seven verses (1 Macc 2:7–13), focuses on Jerusalem and the Temple and makes no mention at all of the law, concludes with “what good is life for us anymore?” In context, that is only an expression of despair, as, for example, at Genesis 25:22 or 27:46. Josephus, in contrast, in his brief summary of the lament at 12.267, leaves out most of the detail but—although his survey of the calamities, in § 267a, mentions the city, the Temple, and the people, but not the law—concludes the speech with “and he said it was better to die for the ancestral⁹ laws than to live so dishonorably.”

Similarly, note that Judas's pre-battle speech at 1 Macc 3:58–60 refers only to the need to fight in order to defend the nation and the Temple, both of which are mentioned twice. Josephus, in contrast, replaces this short speech with one that, although longer (*Ant.* 12.302–304), never mentions the Temple; instead, it focuses on the struggle for “liberty,” which Josephus defines: “liberty which is loved for its own sake by all men, but to you most of all happens to be desirable because it gives you the right to worship the Deity” (302–303) and “it lies in your power [...] to recover this liberty and regain a happy and blessed life—by this he meant a life in accordance with the laws and customs of their fathers” (303). Josephus has Judas conclude his speech, accordingly, with a peroration that calls upon his men to be prepared to fight, and if necessary die gloriously, “for such precious causes as liberty, country, laws, and piety” (304). The emphasis on “liberty” is characteristic of Josephus¹⁰ and, *inter alia*, was meant to compare his

⁸ Cf. Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 229–242 for another Diaspora Jew's version of the same exchange, in which the Jews declare that they will not fight Petronius but would prefer to be killed rather than assent to the desecration of their Temple—in which case their deaths would demonstrate their loyalty both to the emperor and to their sacred laws (236).

⁹ Note that Whiston and Marcus (Loeb Classical Library) translate *πάτριοι νόμοι* as “their country's laws,” here and elsewhere. I prefer the more literal translation. See esp. Schröder 1996, and my discussion of this point in my review of Schröder's study in Schwartz 1998, 251–252.

¹⁰ “One might almost say that liberty is the leitmotif of the history of the Jewish people as Josephus sees it” in *Antiquities* (Feldman 1998, 148).

Jewish heroes with Roman heroes,¹¹ just as his emphasis on “law” too will have resonated well in Rome. Taken together with ignoring the Temple, however, and with the equating of “liberty” with the ability to live according to the ancestral precepts of Judaism, the emphasis on “law” and “piety” may easily be understood as reflecting the needs of a Jewish writer who lives in a place and time in which there is no longer any Temple, nor is an independent state a real option—but martyrdom is still a real option. Josephus evidently desired to impress upon Jews the obligation to observe Jewish law and to encourage the requisite willingness to die rather than violate it. At the same time, moreover, his account was meant to impress Romans with just how important the observance of Jewish law was for Jews, in the hope that their right to observe it would not be restricted.¹²

In the present brief presentation, I will focus on some details in Josephus’s rendition of 1 Macc 1–2 that show just how important it was for him to revise 1 Maccabees’ pro-Hasmonean presentation in favor of one that served his own needs and values.

1. 1 Macc 1 ends with a few verses that report that Jews who insisted upon observing Jewish dietary laws and upon circumcising their children were executed, and the chapter ends, in vv. 63–64, with a dismal summary: “They undertook to die, so as not to be defiled by foods and not to desecrate the holy covenant—and they died. And there was a very great wrath upon Israel.” In other words, things were very bad.¹³ Immediately thereafter, ch. 2 begins by introducing Mattathias and his sons, and the story goes on to report that he killed the Syrian officers who came to his village, and then, together with his sons and others, took to the hills and started a rebellion. That is, the move from 1 Macc 1 to 1 Macc 2 pivots on the contrast between those pious people described at the end of ch. 1, who in their devotion to the Jewish religion allowed themselves to be killed, which did nothing to improve the situation and only showed how bad it was, on the one hand, and Hasmonean rebels, on the other hand, who chose a course that would lead to the foundation of a Jewish state. The martyrs of ch. 1, while not condemned, function as foils for the book’s heroes, who chose a different path.

In Josephus’s *Antiquities*, however, the story of the martyrs ends at 12.256 and the story of Mattathias begins only eight paragraphs later, at 12.264. In between, in 257–264, Josephus has a long story about the spineless and despicable Samaritans, who appealed to Antiochus to be exempted from the decrees against Judaism, arguing that they were not Jews. Josephus condemns the Samaritans as opportunists who claim to be Jews when that is useful and deny it when that is more congenial to their interests; they do so in this case, and Josephus claims that this is indeed usual for them.¹⁴ Only at 265, after

¹¹ Note, especially, the centrality of “liberty” as the motto of the noble conspirators in *Ant.* 19 (43, 46, 54, 79, 100, 167, etc.).

¹² For the intended readership of *Antiquities* being mostly Gentile (see e.g. 1.5, 9, and 10–17 and 20.262), but including Jews as well, as is apparently stated at 4.197, see Troiani 1986, 343–353. In general, see also Mason 1998, 64–103; Höffken 2007.

¹³ “Wrath” (ὀργή) here, means “terrible situation” and probably represents *qesef*—evidently an allusion to the Phinehas story in Num 25 (vv. 4, 11), to which the author alludes explicitly in his account of Mattathias (1 Macc 2:24–26). That is, just as Phinehas, Mattathias solved a terrible problem and, therefore, his progeny, just as Phinehas’ (Num 25:13; Ben Sira 45:24), was entitled to the high priesthood.

¹⁴ As he again already claimed, quite prominently, in the concluding lines of two earlier books (*Ant.* 9.291 and 11.341).

this Samaritan story, does Josephus revert to 1 Maccabees and, based on its ch. 2, introduce Mattathias. Whatever the source of the Samaritan story, and whatever its truth,¹⁵ the result is that instead of the martyrs being foils for the Hasmoneans, the Samaritans are portrayed as foils for both the martyrs before them and the Hasmoneans after them; martyrs and Hasmoneans are both noble, as opposed to the spineless Samaritans. Josephus's arrangement of his materials has eliminated a pro-Hasmonean critique of those who chose to be martyrs.

2. In 1 Macc 2, immediately after reporting that Mattathias and his men took to the hills (εἰς τὰ ὄρη), “leaving behind all that they had in the city” (v. 28), the author reports that others too fled, but to the wilderness (εἰς τὴν ἔρημον), “they and their sons and their wives and their livestock” (v. 29). That is, while the former were valiant men preparing for war, the latter simply wanted to sit things out; to make sure we do not miss the contrast, the women, children, and livestock are all mentioned again, in v. 38, at the end of this story (on which see below).

Josephus, however, right after mentioning Mattathias's flight with his men to the hills, reports at 12.272 that “many others did the same thing (τὸ δ' αὐτό), fleeing with their children and wives to the wilderness [...]” That is, Josephus characterizes what the fugitives did as “the same” as what Mattathias and his sons did; what is important for him is that they all refused to obey the Seleucid decrees against Judaism, and so he ignores, here, the difference between the particular courses that they chose (flight vs. rebellion).

Josephus's statement, that the rebels and the fugitives all did the same thing, is bolstered by his treatment of two further details that differentiate between them in 1 Maccabees: (a) he omits, in his renditions of 1 Macc 2:30, 38 (*Ant.* 12.272, 275), the references to the livestock, and (b) while according to 1 Macc 2:28–29 Mattathias and his sons fled to the *hills* but the fugitives fled to the *wilderness*, Josephus has both groups go to the wilderness (εἰς τὴν ἔρημον – 271, 272).

3. 1 Maccabees 2 reports (at vv. 31, 36, 41) that fugitives took up residence in “hiding-places” (κρυφοί), a rare word¹⁶ that might reflect *maḥboim* or *mistarim* in the Hebrew original. That is, they wanted to hide, which again contrasts them, as the author desires, with the Hasmoneans, who went out to fight. Probably we should imagine the refugees' hiding-places were caves; where else could they hide in the wilderness? But the author evidently preferred to chose a word that spells out the *purpose* for which they were sought; three times, he refers to them as “hiding places.”¹⁷

¹⁵ See Pummer 2009, 161–178. On 2 Macc 6:2, which is apparently related to Josephus's story, see Schwartz 2008, 537–540.

¹⁶ See LSJ, s.v. κρυφός, where only 1 Maccabees is cited for the sense “lurking place” (in the next note I will take issue with “lurking-place” and defend “hiding-place”). The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* lists no other pre-Christian occurrence.

¹⁷ Indeed, that is the only translation of κρυφός offered in Muraoka 2009, 416. True, the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft's dictionary of the Septuagint (Lust – Eynikel – Hauspie 2003, 357) offers not only “hiding place” but also “lurking place.” In current English, the latter conveys a threatening note: those who “lurk” may be expected to pounce and attack when they can. It seems that that translation is due to the influence of LSJ (see the preceding note). However, it would be wrong to import that threatening note into our text's references to κρυφοί, or even, it seems, into the LSJ's definition of them. Rather, the issue is within the

Josephus, however, terms them “caves” (σπήλαια: *Ant.* 12.272, 274, 275) thus eliminating or attenuating the implication of passive hiding. True, a “cave” can be a place to which one flees simply to avoid danger; so, for example, at *Ant.* 5.61 and *Ag. Ap.* 1.292. But it can also be a place in which bandits take only temporary refuge, or “lurk,” between sorties and attacks on unsuspecting wayfarers or others. Note, for example, *Ant.* 14.415, 421–422; 15.346. Thus, just as by ignoring the livestock, here too Josephus has suppressed a point that distinguished between the pious martyrs and the Hasmoneans, to the detriment (in the eyes of the author of 1 Maccabees) of the former.

4. 1 Macc 2:29–38 tells the story of how the fugitives were located and attacked by the Syrian army, and since this happened on a Sabbath they refused to defend themselves. Instead, they insisted on preserving their “innocence,” whereupon they were all killed by the Syrians, together with their wives, children, and livestock. The reason they give is the sanctity of the sabbath; not a word is said about Jewish law as such. And a few verses later we hear that they were wrong to do what they did, for “Mattathias and his companions” decide to defend themselves if attacked on the sabbath.

Josephus, in contrast, explains at 274 that “it is a legal requirement for us to rest on that day” (ἀργεῖν γὰρ ἡμῖν ἐν αὐτῇ νομίμὸν ἐστίν). Here Josephus not only inserts the law, as in other cases we have seen in the first part of this paper. Rather, by explaining the point in his authorial voice (rather than that of those he described, who lived centuries before his time), using the first-person plural and the present tense, he also ensures that readers will understand that this is still a current norm for the Jews, one for which they are willing to die.¹⁸

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In sum, since states have armies while diasporic communities do not, there is a chasm between the state-oriented perspective of 1 Maccabees and Josephus’s diasporic perspective in *Antiquities*.¹⁹ 1 Maccabees lionizes those who fight—and die, if need be—for a state; Josephus lionizes those who are willing to die rather than violate the laws of their religion. 1 Maccabees, indeed, holds up martyrs as models of the wrong way;²⁰

history of the English language: in the 1930s, when Webster’s was listing the first meaning of “lurk” as to “lie hidden, as in ambush,” with “to escape notice” only as the second option, the *Oxford English Dictionary* was still offering “to hide oneself” first and “to lie in ambush” only in the second place. See *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (3rd ed., London 1931), 587, and *Oxford English Dictionary*, VI (Oxford 1933), 510. In the meantime, British English has caught up with American English, and gone even further: in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (ed. by Judy Pearsall, Oxford 1998), which appeared a few years before the Bibelgesellschaft’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, the *only* option given for “lurk” (at p. 1101 is “be or remain hidden so as to wait in ambush for someone or something.”) Hence it should not be accepted as a translation of κρυφός.

¹⁸ Cf. 14.63, 65, where Josephus does the same in a similar case, in the days of Pompey.

¹⁹ The same contrast can already be seen between 1 Maccabees and a more or less contemporary diasporic work, 2 Maccabees, in which martyrs’ noble deaths, in chs. 6–7, are the very pivot of the story (8:5!). See van Henten 1997; Schwartz 2022b, 259–261.

²⁰ Apart from the two passages studied in this paper (the moves from the end of ch. 1 to the beginning of ch. 2, and from, in ch. 2, the death of Sabbath-observers in their caves to Mattathias’s decision not

for Josephus, martyrs are models of the right way, and he eliminates elements of 1 Maccabees' story, already in chs. 1–2, that portray them as the opposite. In this short study of Josephus's version of the first two chapters of 1 Maccabees I have pointed to several ways, crass or subtle, in which Josephus tailored his source's story to fit his own circumstances and needs rather than those for which it was originally meant. This is only as should be expected.

ABBREVIATIONS

LSJ – H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. St. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., Oxford 1992 (reprint of 9th ed. of 1940, with 1968 Supplement).

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to follow their example), see also 1 Macc 7:10–18, which contrasts smart and open-eyed rebels to naïve pious fools. Note that while 1 Macc 7:12–13 characterizes these fools as religious people, using such terms as "scribes" and "pious" (or: Hasidim), Josephus (*Ant.* 12.395) contents himself with "some of the people," thus eliminating the implication that pious people are naïve fools.

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