

A LITTLE HELP OR A GREAT HELP? JESUS AND HIS TIME AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF 1, 2 MACCABEES AND DANIEL

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Abstract

This article states that 1 and 2 Maccabees, along with the book of Daniel, forms a triangle that defines the Jewish positions for at least two centuries. The books of the Maccabees both stand in the tradition of Holy War. Contrary to 2 Maccabees, the author of 1 Maccabees distances himself more and more from this theology moving in the direction of power politics. Daniel is an explicitly apocalyptic book: human resistance can offer only a little help, whereas the greater help is to be expected from God. We encounter this spiritual heritage in Jesus' message and deeds. The value of apocalypticism for our time is the warning of this theology against all efforts to realize the Heilstaat (the Kingdom of God; the 'ideal society'). The political task of Christians is less pretentious but all the more fruitful: to protect the rechtsstaat (the constitutional state that respects human rights).

Keywords: Holy War, 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees, Daniel, Rechtsstaat, Heilstaat

In this contribution I will describe the background of Jesus' words and deeds concerning the use of religion-inspired violence. I will not focus on these words and deeds themselves – hundreds of theologians have done so before me – but I will analyse the struggle of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers according to the First and Second Book of Maccabees. In addition I will briefly investigate the relationship of these two books to the canonical book of Daniel. It will be shown that the points of this triangle determine the field in which the groups and sects of Jesus' time, including Jesus himself, can be positioned.

Maccabeans and Hasmoneans

A concise overview of the Maccabean history may be helpful. From 175 BCE onwards the Hellenising party in Jerusalem, with support of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes, tried to assimilate the people of Israel to the Seleucid Empire and to the Hellenistic culture of the Middle East. In Judea resistance was strong, especially concerning the boundary markers of Judaism: circumcision, Sabbath and kashrut. The law-abiding Jews refused to obey the king and resisted in several ways. Judas, the son of the priest Mattathias temporarily succeeded in defeating the enemy and so made the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem possible (164 BCE). Although the military situation changed often, his brothers Jonathan and Simon gained a relative independence from the Syrian king. Simon's offspring succeeded in establishing the Hasmonean kingdom which in its heyday was a real power factor till Pompeius conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

The Theology of Holy War

In 1 and 2 Maccabees the theology of holy war is to be found. Motives of this theology are: the superior numbers and power of the enemy, his arrogance against the God of Israel and his weak warriors, Israel's cry for help to God, including prayer, fasting and conversion, the call of a charismatic leader, the dread of the Lord, the blinding of the enemy, Israel's victory, many casualties in the enemy's camp, few or no deaths in Israel's army, much booty, jubilation about the triumph, strengthening of Israel's faith and, finally, the enemy's recognition of the power of Israel's God. And so the story is circular for it began with the antagonist's arrogance.

Of course, this scheme is a construction, that can be still elaborated, but which can be observed nowhere as such in the biblical and para-biblical writings. In its most detailed form we come across this framework in the book of Judith. In a less complete form it is to be found in the biblical stories of the Judges, of David and Goliath and in the early narratives of King David. The rule of thumb of holy war is to be found in the confession of Jonathan, David's friend: "... nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam 14:6¹). In the prophetic books characteristics of holy war also emerge and we can find their traces even in the last book of the New Testament.

The Theology of 2 Maccabees

The peculiarity of 2 Maccabees is that the book is anti-Hellenistic in its ideological and military struggle against king Antiochus of Syria, but nevertheless uses the literary style and theological motives of Hellenism. E.g. in ch. 3 the Syrian chancellor Heliodor, who enters the sanctuary to rob the temple treasury, is beaten down by heavenly powers and then, half-dead, recognizes the authority of Israel's God. Such stories, called aretalogies (from *aretai*, glorious deeds, miracles, virtues) are to be found repeatedly in the Greek and Hellenistic historiography, e.g. in Herodotus.² The question therefore is whether 2 Maccabees offers a biblical holy war story or is more in line with the Hellenistic writers that testify to the supernatural powers of their Gods. Now, these alternatives of a Jewish or a Hellenistic background do not form absolute contrasts as Martin Hengel has shown.³ So I think that, despite the Hellenistic motives and concepts, there is reason to draw a connection between the biblical tradition of holy war and the theology of 2 Maccabees. The motif of arrogance against the God of Israel is decisive here. This motif, that a specific God is challenged, is absent in Herodotus and the other Greek and Hellenistic writers. In Antiquity the reason to attack a temple is normally the enormous treasure that is believed to be stored there.

2 Maccabees describes the weakness of the Judean army under Judas against the power of the Syrian king. Therefore it lists the numbers of hostile soldiers, infantry, cavalry, chariots and even elephants (11:2-4; 12:20; 13:2 etc.). The reader is led to expect that Judas' army can impossibly defeat this enemy and is then all the more surprised when he really does (8:24; 10:30-31 etc.).

The theology of the writer is that numbers are totally inconsequential. What matters is the help of Israel's God. This is the only factor that is really relevant. When God helps,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of the Bible and the Apocrypha are from the NRSV.

² *Histories* 8.34-39.

³ *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols; London, 1991), *passim*.

Judas and his men will be victorious. In explaining this item the author refers to the biblical histories of Joshua (Josh 6//2 Macc 12:15), of King Hezekiah and the angel who destroyed the Assyrian army (Is 37:36//2 Macc 8:19; 15:22) etc.

But this faithful attitude implies a difficulty. It is striking that the author of 2 Maccabees ends his story with the death of the Syrian general Nicanor. He is defeated and beheaded, completely in line with the scheme of holy war (cf. Goliath and Holofernes). The narrative ends with the statement: "This, then, is how matters turned out with Nicanor, and from that time the city has been in the possession of the Hebrews. So I will here end my story" (15:37). Historically this is incorrect. The city was captured again by the Syrians. Read 1 Maccabees. As a theologian the author distorts historical reality to uphold his dogma of the unconditional help of God. It is notable, too, that the author does not refer to the death of Judas Maccabeus. It does not fit in his theological framework, for, according to this, a warrior helped by God is victorious.

The Theology of 1 Maccabees

The theological profile of 2 Maccabees will become clearer when we compare this book with its counterpart 1 Maccabees.⁴ This book describes a longer range of Israel's history: from the revolt of Judas' father Mattathias till the reign of king John Hyrcan, the Son of Simon, Judas' brother. Possibly, the author was the chronographer of the Maccabees and Hasmoneans and definitely was their propagandist. He partly tells the same story as 2 Maccabees, but from another theological point of view.

He, too, begins his book with the theology of holy war. Mattathias and his sons struggle against an almost almighty enemy and their only help is from God. In the beginning of the book much attention is given to prayer and testimony of God's help. In 3:18-19 we read: "It is easy for many to be hemmed in by few, for in the sight of Heaven there is no difference between saving by many or by few. It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but strength comes from Heaven". It is the 'basic principle' of holy war that reminds us of 1 Sam. 14:6. But in the course of the author's account the emphasis changes. The numbers of the Maccabean forces increase. Judas, and after his death Jonathan, Simon and John Hyrcan succeed in building up a professional army that is a military factor of importance.⁵ There is even cavalry in the Judean army (16:4, 7), up till then the prerogative of the Syrians.

Whereas the number of Judean troops increases, the number of prayers decreases. There is a striking correspondence between these two factors in the book. Under Judas there is frequent prayer for help, under Jonathan only twice (9:46; 11:71), under Simon and John Hyrcan prayer doesn't play a role at all. Probably for this reason the writer of Deuteronomy says that a king is not allowed to possess many horses, many wives, and much gold and silver (17:16-17). It makes him independent of God. The same development is manifest in the narrative of David. In the beginning holy war themes are clearly present, later on, when professionalism replaces charisma, they are less and less apparent.

⁴ The books 1 and 2 Maccabees were written by different authors, with a different style and a different theology. 1 Maccabees can be dated to the period of the reign of John Hyrcan I (134-104 BCE) and 2 Maccabees some years earlier.

⁵ For a historical analysis of the size of the military powers, see B Bar-Kochva, *Judas Maccabaeus: The Jewish Struggle Against the Seleucids* (Cambridge, 1989) 29-67. In his opinion "the Jewish forces did not always oppose the enemy as the few against the many, and after the purification of the Temple they had adequate weapons at their disposal" (407).

I think that the account of 1 Maccabees mirrors history. Growing stronger, the Maccabees became Hasmoneans, real kings, resembling the Syrian Kings that they had fought against (cf Orwell's *Animal Farm*). The theocratic ideal of the beginning had undergone a secularisation in which *Realpolitik* was the dominating factor. One of the differences with 2 Maccabees is that 1 Maccabees tells us about victories *and* defeats of the Israelite army. The author's belief in God's help is not so absolute, or rather, dogmatic, that he must distort historical reality to tell his story.

The Theology of Daniel

There is still another attitude to be dealt with. In the book of Daniel we find the same historical situation, and we can determine it even more precisely: many scholars state that the book was written just before the dedication of the temple in 164 BCE by Judas, in one of the darkest hours of Israel's history.

What is the theological approach of this author? He is deeply rooted in the apocalyptic stream of thought. The pressure is on, the enemy is as wicked as he is powerful and God's people can only do one thing: cry out, pray, hope. Deliverance has to come from God and his heavenly angels. Already in 2:34 this has been made clear: "a stone was cut out, not by human hands" and destroyed the powerful image. Daniel 11:34 critically reacts to what is called here "a little help" that does not really help "the wise among the people" (v. 33, cf v. 35). It is added: "many shall join them insincerely" (11:34). We may suppose that this criticism stems from pietistic-apocalyptic sources and is directed against the military and political moves of Judas Maccabeus. Probably there is a relation to the Hasideans 1 and 2 Maccabees is speaking of.⁶ According to the writer of Daniel, the greater help must be expected from God. He will intervene and at the critical moment annihilate the oppressing and ungodly enemy and save his own people. He will send his archangel Michael to his threatened people (10:13, 21; 12:1). The godly and the wicked people will be judged and be allocated their definitive destination (12:2-3). That will be the end of history and the realisation of God's Kingdom.

A Theological Triangle

Daniel J Harrington accurately characterizes the scope of the three books Daniel, 2 Maccabees en 1 Maccabees with respectively: 'God's Kingdom', 'God's Temple' and 'God's Dynasty'.⁷ The book of Daniel offers apocalyptic theology in optima forma: ultimately human helpers will disappoint the victims of tyranny. Only God and his heavenly assistants will triumph over the dark and evil powers.

On the other side of the theological spectrum stands 1 Maccabees with its praise for the military strength of Judas and his brothers. Apocalypticism is absent here. There are no superhuman helpers and no celestial interveners, only Judas and his army with the guidance of the Scriptures and the blessing of God. Even the last aspect is fading away in the second part of the book.

The writer of 2 Maccabees takes up a position between 1 Maccabees and Daniel. He is not an apocalyptic theologian, but with the author of Daniel he shares the stress on the decisive outcome of God's assistance and of heavenly intervention. However, differently

⁶ See 1 Macc 2:42; 7:13; 2 Macc 14:6.

⁷ DJ Harrington, *The Maccabean Revolt: Anatomy of a Biblical Revolution* (Wilmington, Delaware, USA, 1988) 7.

from Daniel, he sees God's intervention already at work in this dispensation. The architecture of his book expresses that the martyrdom of the confessors is essential for Judas' victory. Not before the martyrs are slaughtered, is Judas able to defeat the enemies.⁸ This triangle of theological standpoints determines the field of Judaism in the next centuries, including the position of Jesus and his followers.

The Second Century BCE, more than the First Century BCE, is the formative period of the Judaism of Jesus' time. We must be careful to establish connections between groups in Maccabean times and groups in Jesus' time, but some tradition lines are clear. The Pharisees can be linked up with the author of 2 Maccabees in which time this faction emerges. The Zealots and proto-Zealots⁹ were congenial with 1 Maccabees, and, in a sense, the Sadducees were, too. The Sadducees accepted the *status quo* of the Roman Empire as the best constellation for the time being to maintain their power and wealth and therefore were willing to collaborate with the enemy. The sect of Qumran even goes straight back to the protest against the Hasmonean politics about the mid-Second Century BCE.

In which Tradition did Jesus stand?

Of which heritage was Jesus the heir in historical respect? I think he stood in an apocalyptic tradition. American, more precisely, Californian scholars have denied this, but that goes against all evidence.¹⁰ The book of Daniel has had an enormous influence on the New Testament and on Jesus as well.¹¹ In his words, deeds and attitude (let us avoid the term doctrine) the apocalyptic expectation of God's Kingdom and of heavenly intervention in the end time is apparent.

I would suggest this hypothesis. In Jesus' time there was an awareness of the Maccabean struggle. According to John 10:22, "the festival of the Dedication" is celebrated in the First Century AD. In the Synoptic Gospels the terminology of Daniel offers the idiomatic means to describe what is meant to happen in the time of the evangelists (e.g. "the abomination that causes desolation"; Dan11:31//Mark 13:14 NIV). If it is true that the factions of Jesus' time originate in the Maccabean and Hasmonean period then we can expect that they kept alive this remembrance that upholds their *raison d'être*. My tentative conclusion is: Jesus wanted to avoid the corruption of power that had become manifest under the Hasmoneans and show that the Kingdom of God would come in quite another way. In doing so, he could adapt the apocalyptic Messiah/Son of Man tradition to be found in Danielic and Enochitic literature. Here, the expected Saviour descends from God, from his heavenly world, and defeats his enemies without the use of conventional weapons, but only uses the Word.

⁸ NB Judas' victory in ch. 8 follows the martyrdom of the seven brothers in ch. 7 whereas the definite defeat of Nicanor (ch.15) follows the dead of Razis (14:37-46).

⁹ It might be inappropriate to speak of Zealots before the First Jewish Revolt in AD 66. M Hengel pleaded in favour of the Zealots as a resistance movement with its own theology/ideology already in Jesus' time (*The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 AD* [Edinburgh, 1989; from German 1976²] *passim*), but recent research is more reticent in this respect: possibly insurgents were less ideologically stamped and centrally headed than is suggested in Hengel's view.

¹⁰ Cf Theissen's and Merz' criticism that the local colour of the non-eschatological Jesus seems to be more Californian than Galilean (G Theissen and A Merz, *Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch* [Göttingen, 1996] 29).

¹¹ Here, I fully agree with E Käsemann who referred to apocalypticism as "the mother of Christian theology" ("Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik" in: *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* [Göttingen, 1964⁴-1965²] 2.105-131, spec. 130). It is true that there are different degrees of apocalypticism in the New Testament, but even in the very practical letter of James we find the words: "The Judge is standing at the doors!" (5:9).

Apocalypticism now!

One can ask whether an apocalyptic approach that has not proven true up till now (the Kingdom of God did not really come) can be fruitful after two millennia. I think it can. I will limit myself to a few remarks only to clarify this statement.

- Firstly, I concede that Jesus was wrong about the term in which the Kingdom of God would be realized,¹² as were Paul and the other first Christians. But should not we prefer to be wrong in love and hope over being right in scepticism?
- Secondly, in this context, the modern distinction between the *rechtsstaat* and the *heilstaat* is of utmost importance. In the German and the Dutch languages these terms have been coined, pointing to the provisional, earthly, constitutional state with human rights for individuals and minorities, with an independent administration of justice on the one hand (the *rechtsstaat*), and the eschatological Kingdom of God on the other hand (the *heilstaat*). I think it is very dangerous to try to realise the Kingdom of God or 'ideal society'. History has taught us that this may result in the Holocaust or the Gulag Archipelago. According to Jesus, the realization of the *heilstaat*, the Kingdom of God, does not fall within our ability to bring about, nor is our project, but God's. This insight could have prevented millions of victims in the past, victims of the Christian and Muslim theocracy, but also victims of the Hitler-, Stalin- and Mao-regimes. These religious and secular efforts to establish 'ideal society' are terribly dangerous, and the Gospels, and especially Jesus, warn against it. The option of the *rechtsstaat* is less pretentious, but ultimately offers more: "... so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim 2:2).
- Thirdly, what about the *rechtsstaat* in biblical perspective? Does apocalypticism not exclude engagement with political and social life? It is in line with biblical apocalypticism to stress the provisional character of the *rechtsstaat*. We don't hear much about it in the Gospel. There are no records of Jesus' thoughts on this topic. Probably, it was beyond his mind. In this context Paul and the other New Testament writers are more useful. In a sense the *rechtsstaat* is an item for Paul. I think of Romans 13: "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad" (v. 3). Here, in a nutshell, an outline of the *rechtsstaat* is given.¹³

¹² Cf Mark 9:1: "1 And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power'". Some scholars have tried to explain these words in another way so that they refer to the resurrection or the coming of Spirit (Pentecost), but I think that this is a rather idiosyncratic exegesis. The process of learning Hebrews 5:8 speaks of might be a fruitful approach for this theological problem. In our image of Jesus the Gospel of John is still dominant, and that offers us the image of an all-knowing Jesus who from the beginning knows the path that leads to the cross and the resurrection. The Jesus of the Synoptics is more tentative, hesitating and uncertain. For example, think among other things of Jesus in Gethsemane and his prayers and questions (Mark 14:36).

¹³ Romans 13 is not a license for dictators. Imperial power is founded here, but at the same time put into perspective and limited. That fully agrees with the later Rabbinic interpretation and acceptance of foreign authorities. We can even find it in a document contemporaneous with Paul such as Wisdom of Solomon 6:3-5:

For your dominion was given you from the Lord,
and your sovereignty from the Most High;

he will search out your works and inquire into your plans.

⁴ Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly,
or keep the law,

or walk according to the purpose of God,

⁵ he will come upon you terribly and swiftly,

because severe judgment falls on those in high places.

- Fourthly, the New Testament reticence towards any human realisation of the *heilstaat* means that here the Old Testament 'project' of theocracy is not continued. In the Old Testament there is the quest for God's good life in the Promised Land. The laws are given to be heartily obeyed and, if not, to be enforced in public life. But theocracy remains a torso, an *Unvollendete*, an unfinished project. In the New Testament it is clear that the real theocracy is eschatological, a God-given reality. In the community of the Messiah Jesus the political and military dimension of the Old Testament theocracy has vanished. Jesus says to his disciples: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them" (Mark 6:11). The only weapon of his followers is the word of the gospel.
- Fifthly, this point deserves an elaboration with respect to our current political and religious situation. In this respect the given background in the books of the Maccabees might be helpful. We can contrast the New Testament missionary attitude ("If ... they refuse to hear you ... shake off the dust that is on your feet") to the Maccabean spirit. In 1 Maccabees 2:44-48 is written about Mattathias, Judas' father, and his warriors:

They organized an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and renegades in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety. ⁴⁵And Mattathias and his friends went around and tore down the altars; ⁴⁶they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel. ⁴⁷They hunted down the arrogant, and the work prospered in their hands. ⁴⁸They rescued the law out of the hands of the Gentiles and kings, and they never let the sinner gain the upper hand.

This is theocracy in *optima forma*. We can compare it with the Muslims who demand obedience to the laws of the shariah, willing or unwilling. In public life people have to obey the laws of Allah. The difference is that in the Old Testament these laws are limited to Israel whereas the Muslim theocracy is a worldwide ideal and task for every Muslim. These themes and the questions they evoke must not be absent on the agenda of interfaith dialogue.

- Sixthly, ultimately, apocalyptic theology is a theology of hope. When all chance of salvation has gone, there is God with his possibilities. I think this message, to be found in the book Daniel and the life of Jesus, is the most important contribution of the church to our world.