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Counting half-shekels – Redeeming souls? in 2 Maccabees 12:38–45

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This article deals with a highly debated text, namely 2 Maccabees 12, specifically the problematic verses (38–45) which contain a theology that is distinctly non-Jewish in import. Indeed, most recent scholars concerned with this passage do not seem to be unanimous apropos the best interpretation of the events that are described, resulting in a range of different opinions concerning, *inter alia*, the afterlife, purgatory and/or doctrinal disputes between Pharisees and Sadducees. By means of an interpretivist or constructivist epistemology, the authors advocate that normally, traditional Judaism emphasises personal, individual responsibility and accountability, whereas in this text God is portrayed as requiring material, financial payment for wrongdoing and not individual תשובה [teshuvah]. This is in contradistinction to, *inter alia*, Exodus 30:11–16 and theologically Jewish 'transgression' has clearly metamorphosed into Christian 'sin'. In addition, Judas Maccabeus seems to have retained a half-shekel methodology (employed for Jewish men of military age – soldiers) whilst emphasising the 'atonement for your lives' from Exodus 30:11–16 in a more literalistic, materialistic, non-Jewish sense whilst de-emphasising the real need to maintain the Temple as well as the proper, traditional rules of תשובה.

Introduction

As George Nickelsburg (2005:108–111) states, the book of 2 Maccabees 'muddies the waters and breaks the stereotypes'. According to him, there are various reasons for this: one is a seeming hypocritical situation, namely, that in order to counter what the author of 2 Maccabees sees as the grave sin of Hellenisation, he still employs Hellenistic rhetoric.

This author, according to Nickelsburg, also expounds on the idea of bodily resurrection, which is perhaps more a Semitic rather than a Greek notion. Both these examples prove that this author embraced a particular pragmatic policy. As Jordaan (2017:192) explains: 'If you can't beat them, use their tactics against them'. This also seems to be the case if we look specifically at 2 Maccabees 38–45. Here, briefly, the narrative informs the reader of the following:

There is a military engagement between Gorgias and Judas Maccabeus. The text emphasises that as a consequence, 'a few' Jewish soldiers fell (παραταξαμένους δὲ συνέβη πεσεῖν ὀλίγους τῶν Ιουδαίων). Upon closer investigation, Judas and his surviving men discovered that concealed within the clothing of each of the corpses of his fallen men was an idol dedicated to one of the deities of Jamnia (τοὺς χιτῶνας ἱερώματα τῶν ἀπὸ Ιαμνείας εἰδώλων ἀφ᾽ ὧν). Obviously, this was strictly forbidden by Jewish law (ὁ νόμος ἀπείργει τοὺς Ιουδαίους).

In 2 Maccabees 12:41, Judas's reaction is significant. Firstly, he and his remaining men immediately thanked the Lord for revealing the unseen things (τὰ κεκρυμμένα φανερὰ ποιοῦντος). Secondly, in 2 Maccabees 12:42–43, Judas took up a collection of 2000 drachmas of silver and sent it to Jerusalem as a sin offering for the fallen. The author then elaborates on the reason for this action by Judas Maccabeus in 2 Maccabees 12:44: 'If he [*Judas Maccabeus*] had not hoped that those who had fallen to stand up again, it would be superfluous and foolish to pray for the deceased' (εἰ μὴ γὰρ τοὺς προπεπτωκότας ἀναστῆναι προσεδόκα περισσὸν καὶ ληρῶδες ὑπὲρ νεκρῶν εὔχεσθαι). This narrative is peculiar on various levels:

- More than a century ago, Moffatt (1913:150) acknowledged the novelty not only of the idea of sacrifice for the dead, as they are going to be resurrected, but also the possibility that the writer would 'not unnaturally' encounter objections to it. He, however, does not endeavour to explain where this comes from. He did not, for instance, refer to the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons and their subsequent reward of an afterlife.
- Bickerman (1937) and Tchericover (1982) do not say anything about this chapter at all.

- Dommershausen, on the other hand, is very elaborate on what is actually happening here. He links this up with the martyrs in 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 and elaborates extensively on the sin offering, or '*Sündopfer*'. A sin offering, Dommershausen states, had the purpose of repairing a broken relationship with God. Dommershausen, however, brings another aspect into contention here, namely purgatory, which he calls in German the '*Zwischenzuständ*'. This is a special 'in-between state' in the afterlife for persons who still needed to be cleansed of unforgiven sins committed in life (*kurz vor ihrem Tod*). Here is a text that supports the notion that the dead, through sacrifice and prayer, may be cleansed of their iniquity. It is clear where Dommershausen (1985:165) is coming from. He clearly wants to cover all the bases. This is the next step in case of a 'not so noble death', contrary to the other Jewish martyrs who had a noble death.
- Van Henten (1976:181) also talks about a posthumous recreation. He, however, is much more careful when interpreting this text and refrains from making unproven statements. Van Henten also links this event to the martyrs of 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 and their vindication after this. He sees the fallen soldiers as a group waiting for resurrection. He, contrary to Dommershausen, is much more careful on 'when' this vindication will take place. He does not see it directly after death but states that it is rather at the end of time. Van Henten also does not say much about the prayer and offerings as the very means to deliver those who have died.
- Schwartz (2008:443–444) like Van Henten treads carefully here. He follows a more logical explanation of the events, but not without adding a unique flavour to it, namely, possible infighting between the Pharisees and Sadducees on the resurrection. We know that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, whilst the Sadducees did not. Schwartz (2008:418) also postulates that 2 Maccabees might be pharisaic in its approach. The reason for the death of the soldiers is simple – they were sinners. Each of them individually must have deserved death. However, he states that atonement for each of them was still possible and desirable if we look at the martyrs of chapter 7. He, like Van Henten, is cautious to elaborate too much on the time and even place and for that matter the state of the resurrection. In conclusion, Schwartz states that the author merely wants to state that there is some life after death.
- Doran (2012:245–249) has an interesting take on these events. He focusses mainly on the actions and attitude of Judas Maccabeus. According to Doran, Judas is the champion of the Jewish community. Judas had the best interest of the Jews at heart, whether it was in life or death. Judas would give them a good burial and even atonement for them if there was still a debt to settle.

In summary, the most recent scholars concerned with this passage do not seem to be unanimous apropos the best interpretation of events. Thus, we have, *inter alia*, a range of different opinions:

- There is a lack of certainty concerning the afterlife.
- There is some relationship to the concept of purgatory.
- A vindictive deity transforms into a more approachable entity.
- This passage highlights a possible argument between Pharisees and Sadducees on the afterlife.

This article attempts to clarify this seeming impasse by employing the following methodology.

Methodology

It is proposed to take a more interpretivist or constructivist approach rather than a naïve positivistic one. It is acknowledged that all deliberation will be taking place within a linguistic paradigm that posits that knowledge is mediated solely through language (thinking), and consequently, it is not possible to ever objectively know what we assume to be reality. Therefore, an interpretivist or constructivist epistemology is clearly favoured.

It is also accepted that a particular scholar's constructed reality will impinge on his or her interpretation of the best-argued evidence.

It can be safely argued that knowledge is constructed by researchers or theorists by virtue of a number of applicable methods. Although it is certainly not refuted that information can be obtained by direct sense experience of the world (linguistic mediation), the important point is that we can never really know the source of that perception (the assumed external reality). Rather, we constantly formulate (construct) an understanding of the world within which we live by thinking – a process that is always mediated linguistically. In this latter regard, certain views of the post-structuralist philosopher Derrida (1997) are invaluable in grasping the point that language (in all its manifestations) cannot embody inviolable universal truth and is itself a flawed medium.

Unfortunately, language as 'text', regardless of its form (i.e. oral, scribal, audial, olfactorial, etc.), is the only medium we have, which points to meaning always being imperfectly mediated. Again, because all interpretation can only take place within a particular 'text' (i.e. context), it is never possible to return to the 'source' or the 'origin' deferred or referred to by the 'text'. In the same way, the intentions of an author or an artist are, in the final analysis, quite irrelevant when interpreting, say, a particular written text or work of art, because the reader or spectator, armed with his or her own constructed realities, only has the written or visual text to arrive at a particular (albeit shifting or provisional) point of view.

This approach neither accepts the maladroit conclusion that in the final analysis 'anything goes' nor does it advocate nihilism. Undeniably, the complete opposite is implied. Any judicious deconstruction of a text implies a rigorous and critical analysis with an amplified awareness of the pitfalls of naïve relativism.

Thus, we have attempted to analyse this text and its claimed import from a more accurate and contextual perspective. Firstly, we recognise that the import of the text does not seem to be in accordance with the mainstream Judaism or normal Jewish practice, especially as this pertains to תשובה (*teshuvah*). Secondly, there is a theological discrepancy when it comes to the divine forgiveness of a major iniquity like idolatry. Thirdly, because of normal Jewish traditions that would have been in place at the time this text was written and/or redacted; a census is also possibly being alluded to here, rather than a simple collection of monies for the sin-offering.

Accordingly, we will refer to the LXX,[1] MT and relevant rabbinical literature[2] in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the following pertinent issues:

- the Jewish counting taboo
- the role and value of the half-shekel
- the importance of תשובה as a traditional Jewish practice
- idolatry as a major iniquity
- the Christian concept of sin
- a critical review of 2 Maccabees 12:38–45.

The Jewish counting taboo

It is well known that even modern, contemporary Jews, especially the Orthodox, give great credence to what they consider a divine prohibition against counting fellow Jews. The customary authorities for this blanket prohibition are threefold:

Firstly, in Exodus 30:11–16, Moses is commanded to count the Children of Israel by collecting a half-shekel from each person:

> 11The Lord said to Moses, 12'When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. 13Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. 14Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the Lord's offering. 15The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives. 16You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, so as to make atonement for your lives'.

This passage spells out that the consequence of physical counting is general pestilence. As an aside, based on a parallel text in Numbers 1:1–4,[3] it is clear that this census excluded all women, regardless of age, and all men below 20 years of age. It also excluded men who were unable to fight, and depending on the source that would normally mean men who were older than (depending on the source) either 40 or 60 years of age.[4]

Secondly, the Mishna in *Yoma* 22a describes the process employed to ascertain which priest will be granted the right to perform the mitzvah of separating the ash from the altar in the בית המקדש (*Beit haMikdash*). The passage explains that if there are too many candidates, they decided the victor by means of a race to the top of the altar. If there was a tie, the administrator would count the priests by counting their fingers. The Gemara (*Yoma* 22b) informs the reader that this practice of counting fingers and not individuals is in accordance with the teaching of R' Yitzchak.[5]

Lastly, the Gemara (*Yoma* 22b) cites the judgement of R' Elazar that counting the Jewish nation contravenes a negative mitzvah: 'The Number of the Children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted'. On this passage, Rav Nachman Bar Yitzchak writes that here two negative commandments are thwarted, namely, the passage speaks about a number that can be neither *measured* nor *counted*.

Obviously, there are many notable texts that mention counting but avoid any mention of the supposed divine proscription. For example, 1 Chronicles 27:1–15 alludes to counting when it mentions that each tribe of Israel possessed a division of exactly 24 000 men. However, a little later in 1 Chronicles 27:23, we are informed that David did not count men below 20 years of age, for the Lord had promised to make Israel as many as the stars of heaven. This seems to suggest that although he was allowed to count men of military age, he was not allowed to count *all* the Jews as this action would technically cross the line and cause pestilence. The very next verse (1 Chr 27:24) seems to confirm this suspicion as the text warns us that:

> Joab the son of Zeruiah began to count, but did not finish. Yet wrath came upon Israel for this, and the number was not entered in the chronicles of King David.

Another example where pestilence is not directly mentioned is Numbers 4:2. Here, the reader is informed about God's commandment to Moses: 'Take a census of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, by their clans and their fathers' houses'. Again, Numbers 4:22 has God commanding Moses: 'Take a census of the sons of Gershon also, by their fathers' houses and by their clans'. No mention is made here of a counting taboo or plague as a consequence of counting the Jewish nation.

1.That is, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus.

2.Babylonian Talmud.

3.[1]The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, [2]'Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head. [3]From 20 years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company.

4.For reference to 60 years as the maximum military age, cf. Rabbi Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno, Numbers 1:45.

5.As R' Yitzchak taught, it is forbidden to count the children of Israel through a head count, even for the purpose of a mitzvah. For it is written (1 Sm 11:8), in reference to the count that Shaul Hamelech made of his soldiers, 'He counted them through the pottery shards'.

An interesting example comes from Numbers 14:29 which states: 'your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me'. Here, death only occurs to counted individuals who have 'grumbled' against God.

Finally, one should consider 1 Samuel 11:8 which states: 'When he mustered them at Bezek, the people of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand'. Here, there is not even an allusion to pestilence or a counting taboo.

However, other biblical texts seem to better confirm this 'negative' commandment and the threat of pestilence for non-compliance. Most notably 2 Samuel 24:1–4[6] where David, in response to a command from an angry God, orders a reluctant Joab to number both Israel and Judah. Nevertheless, this text contains a conundrum because nowhere does it explain *why* God is angry with Israel and given that the later Talmud gives various reasons why Jews should not physically count other Jews, one can only speculate as to why God *commanded* David to physically count the Jewish nation. Of course, in a strange employment of reverse logic, the Talmud (TB *Yoma* 22b) also explains that it was because David numbered the Jews that God was angry. Again, this makes no sense at two different levels:

- God seemingly became angry *before* David counted the Jewish nation (predestination?).
- God is seemingly angry at Israel (and *not* David!). Yet, Israel was not, in fact, responsible for the census!

Indeed, one could rightly argue here that God himself forces David to sin. On this very issue, Bakon (2013:53) points out that in I Chronicles 21:1, the theological difficulty of God inciting David to sin is toned down when it states that 'Satan arose against David and incited David to number Israel'.

Regardless, we are still left with the problem that in one version of the census account, it is God acting as an instigator and in another it is 'Satan' (as the seeming personification of the evil one?) who leads David's hand astray. In either account, this census seems to have been ultimately regarded by the Jewish sages as *the* event that informed David's grievous sin. According to I Chronicles 21:14, David is indirectly punished by a plague that wipes out 70 000 of his people. Here, God is shown as being an indecisive agency: Despite the fact, he is happy to strike down tens of thousands of innocent Jews with pestilence, when, in addition, he is about to destroy Jerusalem, he suddenly relents from the 'calamity'.

6.[1]Again, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, number Israel and Judah'. [2]So, the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, 'Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people'. [3]But Joab said to the king, 'May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?'

Bakon (2013:53) also correctly questions why David should deserve such condemnation from God when Saul happily took a census of the population on two separate occasions (1 Sm 11:8; 15:4) and none of the people were affected. Regardless, assuming that Saul legitimately got around the counting taboo, the Jewish sages provide the student with additional reasons why one should not count the children of Israel.

In HB Hosea 2:1,[7] we read 'And the number of children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which shall neither be measured nor counted'. As already noted, this interpretation is supported by *Yoma* 22b. In addition, the Talmud (TB *Bava Metzia* 42a) teaches us that blessing is not found 'in something that has been weighed, nor in something that has been measured, nor in something that has been counted, only in something that is hidden from the eyes'.

Another key feature of the census mentioned in Exodus 30:11–16 is that the final total of the men can only be arrived at by counting up the half-shekels. Here, the money raised also seems to be the price for atonement of sin. Here, the lives of the individuals who give a half-shekel are guaranteed if atonement is made. However, most pointedly, no clarity is available apropos the atonement status of the women and those men who were not required to give half-shekels. For example, does the atonement paid by the fighting men cover their wives and children too? Regardless, Exodus 38:25–26 confirms the results of the half-shekel collection:

> The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and 1,775 shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary:[25]
> a beka a head (that is, half a shekel, by the shekel of the sanctuary), for everyone who was listed in the records, from twenty years old and upward, for 603,550 men.[26]

Again, the figure of 603 550 men (cf. Ex 38:26) is confirmed in Numbers 1:46: 'all those listed were 603,550'. This total is again repeated in Numbers 2:32: 'All those listed in the camps by their companies were 603,550'.

As can be seen, there are biblical examples that both approve and disapprove the counting. However, based on the evidence contained in the rabbinical literature, it is now an accepted Jewish tradition that physical counting is indeed disallowed. Furthermore, when a census is needed, a somewhat convoluted method must be found that does not contradict the letter of the proscription, even if it clearly flies in the face of the spirit of said interdiction. Here, the employment of the half-shekel methodology has both biblical and rabbinical approvals. The next section looks at both the role of the approved methodology for obtaining a census and the likely value of the half-shekel.

7.LXX Hoseah 1:10: 'Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered'.

The role and value of the half-shekel

This information proves useful for any attempt to correlate a substantiated weight of silver per Jewish man of military age. In Exodus 29:13, we are told that a half-shekel weighed exactly 20 gerahs. A total of 1775 shekels equals exactly 3500 fighting men; thus, 100 talents must be meant to equal 600 050 men of military age. If reliable, then 100 talents of silver are equal to 300 025 shekels or 1 talent = 3000.25 shekels. Depending on the source, one ancient shekel of silver is calculated to have weighed between 10.52[8] and 11.34 g (Tenney 1976). If accurate, then the total amount of silver raised by the Exodus census would have been 301 800 shekels or 3422.412 kg (just under three and a half metric tonnes!). This equates to slightly more than some 543 200 Greek drachmas.

We also know that this payment of the half-shekel to the Temple continued as a custom. Here, the Biblical shekel was deemed to be equivalent to the Sela (mentioned in the Mishna). It is worth two shekels of the Mishna. According to Maimonides, the Biblical silver half-shekel was equal to the weight of 192 grains of barley. Because there was some apprehension that the weight of the shekel of the Mishna (*Shekelim* 1f.) was slightly less than the requisite weight, it was subsequently stipulated that in addition to the half-shekel, an individual, on reaching 20 years of age, must also pay a small coin called the χόλλῦβος. A person who gave willingly was exempt from paying the χόλλῦβος. What this tells us is that it was accepted Jewish tradition, right up until the destruction of the Temple, for Jewish men who had reached military age to supply a half-shekel to the Temple as the price of their atonement.

Thus, traditionally, a half-shekel is clearly the approved value assigned to any man who is of military age. However, this payment is not meant literally for 'atonement' but rather as a form of taxation that meets the needs for the general upkeep of the Temple.

Towards defining 'mainstream' Judaism

2 Maccabees proffers a revolutionary theology – one that radically differs from what was normally considered to be 'mainstream'. Obviously, it is well-nigh impossible to speak about an ancient religious and cultural practice like Judaism by employing generalisations. Regardless, for the sake of expediency, we will try as far as possible to refer to what we consider to be the key tenets of 'mainstream' Judaism or, if you prefer, the 'golden thread' that runs through the entire history of Judaism.

Judaism itself has taken many twists and turns in its long history and if one focuses on only one particular historical practice, one can be easily misled. For example, Jews at various times have believed in more than one god, angels, demons, superstitious practices, reincarnation, and so on, but not one of these attributes accurately describes 'mainstream' Judaism.

If one considers such concepts as 'afterlife' and such notions as 'heavenly reward' or 'divine punishment', it soon becomes clear that the Jews have quite varied and often very personal opinions on these kinds of issues – exactly as was the case in antiquity and exactly as was the case with anyone living in, say, Judaea some 2000 years ago.

However, the source for all interpretation, especially from a more fundamentalist or literalist Jewish perspective, remains the written *Torah*. This is an important issue when trying to make sense of what constitutes 'mainstream' Judaism. Most, if not all, religious Jews would claim the *Torah* as being the very foundation of their religion. Without its import, everything else simply falls apart:

Torah [Law]

Nevi'im [Prophets]

Ketuvim [Writings]

Structure of the Hebrew Bible (Tanach)

It would also be fair to state at the outset that without the *Torah* [Christian Pentateuch] Judaism could never have existed. These first five books of the so-called 'Old Testament' have consistently been the focus of the entire faith.

For the purposes of argument, we will only try to understand the *Torah* from a very fundamentalist and literalist perspective – an approach that assumes that everything written in the *Torah* is God-given and not open to debate. Incidentally, this is a point of view that would have been largely supported by the Sadducees. Considering that the Sadducees are often touted as being slavish adherents to the written law, a brief review of the *Torah*'s stance on afterlife and resurrection is most illuminating. Indeed, if the Sadducees adhered it to the total exclusion of all other texts (including the oral tradition), then it goes a long way to explain their attitude as well as the fundamental tenets of 'mainstream' Judaism. It also possibly explains why the Sadducees were so disliked by those Jews who placed such great stock in such notions as heavenly reward.

Indeed, in the written law, no mention can be found of some paradisiacal state after death. Instead, death is presented as final and absolute. Even when the *Torah* makes a direct reference to death, the context is always the 'here and now' and is clearly earth-bound. A good example is found in Genesis 37: 35 when Jacob reacts to hearing of Joseph's supposed death:

> All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him.

8.See 'Weights in the Bible', in *Jewish Virtual Library*.

The *Torah* only emphasises immediate, concrete, physical rewards and punishments in this world rather than abstract, future, other worldly ones. See, for example, Deuteronomy 11:13–15:

> And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full.

In a similar vein, worldly reward for good behaviour is emphasised in Leviticus 26:3–9:

> If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you.

Leviticus 26:14–20 goes on to stress that failure to conform to God's commandments will result in a range of earth-bound punishments, including, *inter alia*, visitation by panic, seeds that are sown in vain and land that does not yield.

It is true that certain transgressions are punished by the guilty party being 'cut off from his people' (see, e.g., Gn 17:14; Ex 31:14). This punishment is referred to as *kareit* [literally, 'cutting off,' but usually translated as 'spiritual excision'].

However, when it comes to literal death, the *Torah* often speaks (metaphorically?) of several noteworthy people being 'gathered to their people'. One good example is Genesis 25:8 where we are told that:

> Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.

Other examples include Genesis 25:17 (Ishmael), 35:29 (Isaac) and 49:33 (Jacob) and Deuteronomy 32:50 (Moses and Aaron). This 'gathering' is described as a separate event from the physical death of the body or the burial of the deceased. In all these examples, it is clear that any assumed 'divine promise' of existence after death remains, at best, an unqualified, personal interpretation. Indeed, if one is honest, these texts strongly imply that death is both inevitable and quite final. Furthermore, no human consciousness (e.g. breathing or mourning) is possible after one has died.

Only the non-*Torah* books of the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and *Writings* (*Ketuvim*) (cf. Dn 12:2; Neh 9:5) speak more clearly about life after death and some notion of post-mortem existence.

The *Torah* also makes it quite clear that death is a punishment in itself. This is presumably because it results in permanent loss of human experience. This hardly supports a belief in any concept of an afterlife or physical, bodily resurrection of any kind.

It seems that it was not until c.100 BCE that, *inter alia*, the Pharisees began to increasingly adhere to the notion of a spiritual life after death. The Pharisees, who were the forerunners of Rabbinical Judaism, taught that when the *Torah* spoke of reward for following God's ways, the reward would be forthcoming in an afterlife or *Olam Ha–Ba*, as they called it. The earliest mention of this concept is to be found in Enoch 71:15. Again, in Isaiah 26:19, we read:

> Thy dead shall live, my dead bodies shall stand up.

As already alluded to, only the non-*Torah* books of the *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* make more direct references to an afterlife, but as these are not part of the divine revelation as found in the *Torah*, we should accept that the Sadducees (for one) might well have rejected any attempt to force that interpretation by veiled inferences. Even here, the non-*Torah,* biblical references to a supposed state after death or 'sheol' are not that transparent. References are often made, which could equally be a metaphor for the grave or pit. Indeed, when the concept of 'sheol' is actually described, it is equated to a place where the dead abide *without* consciousness, a place of maggots and decay, a pit, the realm of the dead, a place where the uncircumcised lie and even a place of silence. It is never described as a location where there is any reward, life, light, hope or joy. At best it could be interpreted as a possible stage of non-existence after death but certainly not some notion of paradisiacal afterlife. In this realm, there is no possibility of action or consciousness. For example, Psalm 115:17 emphasises that:

> The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence.

Of course, for those who idealistically seek some form of extension of the 'here and now' in some future, post-mortem state of consciousness, there are many texts that are open to that interpretation. However, nothing specifically appears in the *Torah* that can in any way be considered a plainly stated divine promise of an afterlife.

One needs the much later, rabbinical *Talmud* to find discussions apropos the experiences of people who made an otherworldly journey. Also, classic Jewish works such as *Maavar Yabok* also describe the process of entering the higher world of life as a reflection of the soul's experiences whilst within the body.

So, in our example of a literalist Jewish interpretation of the *Torah* (and indeed other texts from the remainder

of the Tanach), there exists no 'hard' biblical evidence for any beliefs in the following:

1. paradisiacal reward in an afterlife
2. resurrection of the body
3. angels
4. demons.

Evil is also not mentioned, certainly not as some supernatural force that opposes the goodness of God. Sometimes, metaphorical terms are used to show that someone has turned away from God's light. In such cases, an individual might be referred to as being 'wicked', 'evil' or even possessed by an 'evil spirit'[9] but there is still no reference to a source of absolute evil. In mainstream Judaism, people are not *made* to turn away from God, rather, they choose themselves to ignore God because of their free will. Apart from a belief in divine predestination, based on the *Torah* alone, only the following notions are possible for a literalist, fundamentalist Jew:

1. The uniqueness of God.
2. The goodness of God.
3. Only God is responsible for creation and all events in the known world (there are no other supernatural agencies other than God).
4. God created humankind with a pure soul.
5. Everyone is able to be forgiven of their transgressions through genuine *teshuvah*.

Lastly, if dedicated solely to the *Torah*, it is likely that a Jew would believe that God cares about a person's conduct whilst alive. To better understand more literal atonement (from a 'mainstream' Jewish perspective) for actual transgression, one will need to appreciate the traditional role and practice of תשובה:

תשובה as a traditional Jewish practice

Traditionally, Jews do not speak about 'sin' in the Christian sense of the word. Rather, they refer to, *inter alia*, עבירה (*averah*) from the root עבר *avar* [to pass over]. Thus, a transgression is seen as an act of countermanding God's divine will. To obviate the situation, a Jew needs to repent and sincerely 'turn back' to God by means of תשובה. The Talmud (*Nedarim* 39b) teaches that repentance (תשובה was one of seven things created before the world. Jewish tradition maintains that תשובה[10] is a process, viz. the transgressor must complete the following steps:

- recognise his iniquity
- experience genuine regret
- abrogate any injury he has wrought
- placate God and/or the person wounded by his infraction
- undertake never to perpetrate the transgression again.

In the case of the dead idolaters, of 2 Maccabees 12:40 not one of these traditional, prescribed, Jewish prerequisites could have been fulfilled.

This will be seen to be even more problematic when one considers the serious theological nature of idolatry itself.

Idolatry as a major iniquity

Furthermore, idolatry was a very serious transgression. In this regard, Judaism traditionally highlights the four *great* iniquities:

- adultery (e.g. Gn 20:9),[11] punishable by death (e.g. Lv 20:10; Dt 22:22)
- various sexual offences, punishable by being cut off from the people (e.g. Lv 18:1–30)
- idolatry (e.g. Lv 26:1),[12] punishable by, *inter alia*, panic, wasting disease, fever that consumes the eyes and makes the heartache, seed that will be sewn in vain and eaten by one's enemies, and so on (e.g. Lv 26:16–23)
- murder, punishable by death (e.g. Nm 35:16–19).

The seriousness of the great iniquities is underscored in the Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 74a):

> For all the transgressions in the Torah, if a person is told, 'Transgress and you will not be killed,' they should transgress and not be killed, *except* for idol worship, sexual relations and bloodshed. [*authors' own italics*]

Before critically reviewing 2 Maccabees 12, it will assist greatly in reviewing briefly some critical aspects of both Catholic and more general Christian dogma as this pertains to the Christian notion of sin.

The Christian concept of sin

If we forget about the problematic concept of 'original sin' as first suggested by Irenaeus in his controversy with the dualistic Gnostics (c.180 CE),[13] according to Schaff (1887), a definition proffered by St. Augustine of Hippo, sin is:

> any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law. And the eternal law is the divine order or will of God, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the breach of it. (p. 283)

Apart from 'original sin', the Catholic church distinguishes between venial sin and mortal sin. The former does not cut off the sinner from God's grace, as the sinner has not rejected God. However, venial sins injure the relationship between the sinner and God, and therefore the sinner must be

9. One good example of this metaphoric use of the concept of 'evil' and 'evil spirit' can be gleaned from reading 1 Samuel 16:14 'Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him'. Jews do not literally believe that an all-loving God sends evil spirits to torment people.

10. 'The Holy One, Blessed be He, was asked, "What should be the punishment for the sinner?" He answered, "Let the sinner repent and he will find atonement." This is the meaning of the verse "Thus You show the sinner the way" – "You show the sinner how to repent"' (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Ps 25).

11. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, 'What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done'.

12. 'You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the Lord your God'.

13. *Adversus Haereses*.

reconciled to God, either through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation or receiving the Eucharist (after proper contrition has been fulfilled). Mortal sins cannot be forgiven by repentance or contrition alone. Furthermore, both mortal and venial sins have a dual nature of punishment. They incur both guilt for the sin, yielding eternal punishment, and temporal punishment for the sin. According to Catholic dogma, reconciliation is purely an act of God's mercy, through the physical death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ:

> Let us fix our eyes on Christ's blood and understand how precious it is to his Father, for, poured out for our salvation it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance'.[14]

However, the same catechism[15] also states: 'Penance requires . . . the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction'.[16] This actually contradicts the logic of the concept of purgatory of which we are informed:

> 'This teaching [*of Purgatory*] is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore Judas [*Maccabeus*] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin"' [*2 Mac 12:46*]. From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.[17]

The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead. So here is a technical loophole that a dead person, irrespective of their conduct in life, may yet survive to see heaven as he or she passes through the final purifying flame of purgatory at the end of time. This seems to be more in accordance with 2 Maccabees 12:44–46.

With the forgoing background information clearly in mind, it will now be possible to critically review the more pertinent text in 2 Maccabees 12.

A critical review of 2 Maccabees 12:32–46

2 Maccabees 12:32–46 tells us the following:

> [32] After the feast called Pentecost, they hastened against Gorgias, the governor of Idumea.[33] And he came out with three thousand infantry and four hundred cavalry. [34] When they joined battle, it happened that a few of the Jews fell. [38] Then Judas assembled his army and went to the city of Adullam. As the seventh day was coming on, they purified themselves according to the custom, and they kept the sabbath there. [39] On the next day, as by that time it had become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kinsmen in the sepulchres of their fathers. [40] Then under the tunic of every one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. [41] So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden[42]; and they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. [43]He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. [44] For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead.[45] But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. [46]Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.

Here, we are told that Judas raised 2000 drachmas of silver. The text makes it very clear that this money raised was for the atonement of the dead Jewish soldiers (i.e. the idolaters). The price of atonement for the idolatrous Jews was 2000 drachmas, which is the equivalent of some 12 600 g of silver. If he made use of the half-shekel formula, 2000 drachmas equates to something between about 1111.1111 and 1197.7186 shekels of silver.[18] If in any way accurate, it means the number of dead idolaters must have been somewhere between 2222 and 2395 men. The only problem here is that we do not know exactly how many of Judas' men were still alive after the various engagements against Gorgias. We only know that Gorgias had 3400 men immediately before combat. If we refer back to 2 Maccabees 8:21–22, we are told that Judas Maccabeus commenced engagements by first dividing his army of 6000 men into four parts. The leadership of each division (1500 men) being assigned to him and his three brothers.[19] For the rest of the book, no mention is ever made regarding the size of the Jewish force. All we are given are what are surely highly exaggerated figures of the various enemies' losses as they are successively defeated by Judas's forces. For example, in 2 Maccabees 10:16–17, we are informed that in the battle against the Idumeans, the Jews 'killed no fewer than twenty thousand'. Again, in 2 Maccabees 10:22, Judas slays another 20 000 in two castles. Also, when Judas fights against Timotheus, the reader is informed (cf. 2 Mac 10:31) that (albeit with divine assistance) the Jews manage to kill 20 500 soldiers and 600 horsemen. The most extreme hyperbole occurs in 2 Maccabees 12:20:

> And Maccabeus ranged his army by bands, and set them over the bands, and went against Timotheus, who had about him an hundred and twenty thousand men of foot, and two thousand and five hundred horsemen.

14.II Interior Penance [online] Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P4A.HTM

15.III The Final Purification, or Purgatory [online] Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P2N.HTM

16.VII The Acts of the Penitent [Online] Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4D.HTM

17.III The Final Purification, or Purgatory [online] Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P2N.HTM

18.If the price of atonement was based on traditional norms, then one might want to *assume* that Judas extracted a half-shekel of silver from each of his surviving men.

19.[21] Thus, when he had made them bold with these words, and ready to die for the law and the country, he divided his army into four parts.
[22] And joined with himself his own brethren, leaders of each band, to wit Simon, and Joseph, and Jonathan, giving each one 1500 men.

TABLE 1: In this table, we compare the import of Exodus 30:11–16 with 2 Maccabees 12:38–45.

Exodus sets the traditional Jewish rule for a census, because counting is a taboo and leads to plague (death) (Ex 30:11–12)	Not mentioned
Census employed to get around the counting taboo (Ex 30:13).	Not referred to as a 'census' but the traditional Jewish counting taboo is assumed to be respected (cf. 1 Sm 11:8; 15:4; I Chr 21:1; TB *Yoma* 22b; TB *Bava Metzia* 42a).
Explicit propitiation for the living.	Explicit propitiation for the living and the dead.
Money is directly linked to atonement (Ex 30:15).	Money is directly linked to atonement (2 Mac 12:43–45).
N/A	The living pray for the dead (2 Mac 12:42).
Only *men* of fighting age to pay the half-shekel (Ex 30:13–14).	Money collected on behalf of dead soldiers (*fighting men*) (2 Mac 12:43).
Only *men* to pay exactly half-shekel (i.e. *equal amounts* to be paid regardless of personal wealth or social status) (Ex 30:15).	The text implies that the money collected for the dead idolaters would be equal for each dead man (2 Mac 12:43).
The infinitive of the verb ἐξιλάσκομαι, that is, 'to atone' is employed (Ex 30:16).	The noun ἐξιλασμὸς 'atonement' is employed (2 Mac 12:45).
All monies collected to be paid to the sanctuary (Tabernacle) (Ex 30:16).	All monies collected to be paid to the sanctuary (Temple) (2 Mac 12:43).
Money collected in units of silver half-shekels – total money collected in silver. Because the money was collected in half-shekel amounts, it was now possible to work out the size of the male population (over the age of 20 years) without counting the men directly.	Money collected with unnamed silver coins – total money collected in silver (calculated in Greek drachms) (2 Mac 12:43). Assuming that the counting taboo still held for Judas Maccabeus, the amount of silver collected (2000 drachms) would also indicate the number of slain fighting men.
Not applicable.	Seventh day purification (2 Mac 12:38).
No prayer mentioned.	Prayer of atonement for the dead (2 Mac 12:42).
The people give the Lord's offering to make atonement for their lives (Ex 30:16).	Exhortation to keep away from sin (2 Mac 12:42).
Silver was an atonement for lives.	Silver was for a sin offering (2 Mac 12:43).

However, based on the assumption that Judas was compliant with the traditional Jewish counting taboo, we can calculate that between 2222 and 2395 Jewish idolaters died in the last engagement. Each of these men required atonement despite the fact that (as the text strongly implies) they had already died as a result of their idolatry.

A comparison between Exodus 30:11–16 and 2 Maccabees 12:38–45 reveals the following:

1. Both texts emphasise propitiation.
2. 2 Maccabees 12:38–45 uses the noun ἐξιλασμὸς 'appeasement', whilst Exodus 30:15 employs the infinitive of the verb ἐξιλάσκομαι, that is, 'to appease'.
3. Both texts state that in order to get this appeasement, an amount is to be paid to the sanctuary, be it the temple or the tabernacle.
4. Exodus sets the tradition for a census, whilst 2 Maccabees merely applies this rule in a certain way.

Although atonement remains the leitmotif of both texts, in stark contrast to, *inter alia*, Exodus 30:11–16, 2 Maccabees 12:43–46 no longer requires individual remorse and sincere תשובה but seemingly a financial settlement for iniquities committed. God is in effect, demanding atonement not on behalf of the nation of Israel but on behalf of those individuals who died whilst in a state of iniquity. This is akin to a more Christian-based theology. Indeed, 2 Maccabees 12:43–46 should be considered to be proto-Christian in nature and God has dramatically changed his theological stance.

Conclusion

Normally, traditional Judaism emphasises personal, individual responsibility and accountability. Jews are born with a pure soul and when they move away from God, they can always return (תשובה) to a pure state. There is no original sin, no fallen state, and forgiveness is always at hand.

Although Exodus 30:11–16 mentions the half-shekel for the LORD's offering to make 'atonement for your lives', it also spells out that the money will be employed specifically for the 'service of the tent of meeting' (Tabernacle, Sanctuary or Temple). The emphasis is not on purchasing forgiveness or atonement.

Although Exodus 30:11–16 speaks about 'atonement for your lives', the half-shekel was only payable by Jewish men of military age. Women and men of non-military age were obviously atoned without giving a half-shekel.

As a consequence of this priestly demand for payment of the half-shekel into the Temple fund (the priests wrote Ex 30:11–16), all Jewish men (c. 500 BCE – 70 CE) when they reached the age of 20 years gave a half-shekel to the Temple in Jerusalem. This money was for the upkeep of the Temple. Also, remember that no actual transgression needed to have taken place to justify the payment of the half-shekel. Only reaching the age of 20 (military age).

Allied to the previous point, this proves a common Jewish understanding that a half-shekel was always paid to the Temple by a Jewish man of military age.

We believe that here is a good case to suppose that Judas Maccabeus made use of the half shekel unit when collecting the silver.

Idolatry was one of the three major forms of iniquity: murder, idolatry and various sexual transgressions, including incest, adultery, bestiality, homosexuality, and so on. All are punishable by death, excommunication or divine retribution.

2 Maccabees obviously employs a Hellenistic-based rhetoric and theology that is distinctly non-Jewish whilst borrowing more liberally from Jewish tradition, because the transgression of idolatry is easily overcome by mere monetary means and no תשובה process.

Thus, Judas must have retained the half-shekel methodology (assumption) (employed for Jewish men of military age – soldiers) whilst emphasising the 'atonement for your lives' from Exodus 30:11–16 in a more literalistic, materialistic, non-Jewish sense whilst underplaying or de-emphasising the real need to upkeep the Temple as well as the proper, traditional rules of תשובה.

The theme of atonement obviously reoccurs here as it does in the Exodus census. However, the major difference here is that the living are now atoning for those who have already died; and further, the dead went to their graves with evidence of disloyalty to their deity – specifically idolatry. In short, these individuals had not themselves atoned for their iniquity but by the actions of the surviving soldiers, their souls were now supposedly at peace.

Theologically, there is a dramatic shift here. Personal Jewish responsibility and accountability has been replaced by a new concept. Firstly, even though the issue of a census is not directly mentioned, given that each soldier was surely expected to give the same amount and that quantity of silver was linked to atonement, the half-shekel tradition would not be out of order in this case. The linking of the 2000 drachmas of silver to the estimated number of surviving troops also seems to support a half-shekel per person scenario.

God now needs material, financial payment for wrongdoing and not individual accountability. This is in contradistinction to, *inter alia*, Exodus 30:11–16, and theologically Jewish 'transgression' has clearly metamorphosed into Christian 'sin'.

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P.J.J. was responsible for an overview of previous research and a critical review of 2 Maccabees 12:38–45. N.P.L.A. contributed towards the following topics: methodology, the Jewish counting taboo, the role and value of the half-shekel, the importance of תשובה as a traditional Jewish practice, idolatry as a major iniquity and the Christian concept of sin.

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