AOSIS

The making of the people in 2 Maccabees 3 in the Heliodorus scene

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The view of the deity and the people in 2 Maccabees seems to be a dynamic rather than a stagnant relationship. On the one hand, the deity sometimes punishes his people through the enemy. However, in other instances, he defends them against the same enemy. In this sequence of events, the 'Heliodorus scene' in 2 Maccabees 3 is quite unique. A protagonist and his helpers (a man on a horse and two youths) as well as an antagonist and his helpers (Heliodorus and his bodyguard) can be shown. Minor, seemingly insignificant players – the 'widows and orphans' – are also found. Doran states that mentioning them in this scene is possibly a rhetorical ploy and refers to LXX Psalms 67:6 (Ps 68:5) as possible background. However, Doran, unfortunately, does not investigate LXX Psalms 67 further. Upon closer inquiry, this text might show an interesting context for the Heliodorus scene and the making of the people. It demonstrates how 'the people' should conduct themselves, the role of the sanctuary, and if one can expect the deity to get involved.

Contribution: This is a new contribution as the relationship between LXX Psalms 67 and 2 Maccabees 3 has never been looked at in this way.

Keywords: orphans and widows; temple; Jerusalem; Onias; horseman and youths; Heliodorus.

Introduction

The so-called Heliodorus scene in 2 Maccabees 3 has been the focus of study by various scholars from different angles. The fascination with this chapter might lie in the very nature of the narrative. The story entails a heinous crime committed against the most vulnerable in society, namely 'widows and orphans'. The transgressor in this case is Heliodorus in service of the Seleucid Empire. The place where this atrocity takes place is in the temple of the Almighty in Jerusalem. One can feel the tension building up as the narrative unfolds. The entire population of Jerusalem is emotionally charged and praying for deliverance on the day of this offence. The question is as follows: Will there be some supernatural intervention? This happens as God intervenes by means of an epiphany. He sends a horseman as well as two youths to protect his sanctuary. Consequently, Heliodorus is struck down and almost died. The faithful high priest, Onias must now mediate by making a sacrifice to save Heliodorus' life, after which Heliodorus returns home with gratitude and respect towards Jerusalem, the temple and its deity.

Attempts to interpret the people in 2 Maccabees 3

As stated above, there is no lack of attempts to explain the intricacies and complexities of this chapter. The following list gives a brief overview:

- Bickerman (2011:446–447) argues that the horseman and youth scene stems from two different sources.
- Bickerman (2011:464), Gruen (2002:176) and Tcherikover (1982:419), although they acknowledge some rhetorical embellishments, see the visit of Heliodorus to the temple as a historical fact.
- Dommershausen (1985:117) views it as '*eine Wunderlegende aus vormakkabäisher Zeit*'.
- Schwartz (2008:185) has the same notion as Dommerhausen: he calls it a 'floating legend' aimed to show an idyllic '*status quo ante*' against which the whole of 2 Maccabees should be read.
- Jordaan (2020:301–306) demonstrates that the research on 2 Maccabees shifted to narrative critique to investigate its text, as is clear in Doran (2012), Schwartz (2008) and Van Henten (1997).

However, questions specifically pertaining to 'the making of a people' bring an interesting new angle to 2 Maccabees. Some earlier commentaries like Moffat (1913) say nothing about the people. Bickerman (1937, English translation 1979) presents a turning point in examining the people in 2

Maccabees. He sees the source of conflict not as an external one, but as internal strife between a reformed group, polytheistic and pro-Seleucid, and an orthodox monotheistic group of Jews in Jerusalem (Bickerman 2011b:1125). The strife according to Bickerman was mainly a religious one. Tcherikover (1982:155–157, 165, 191–193) adds an economic flavour to this infighting. He argues that the group of pro-Seleucid Hellenising Jews benefited financially at the cost of disenfranchised, poor, rural Jews. The latter group could not sell their goods at the Jerusalem temple, which was an economic hub. The faithful would normally buy sheep, cattle and doves for their offerings from them. This could no longer happen because the concessions for selling at the temple were given to other people by a Seleucid-minded high priest (Jordaan 2020:298–299). Naturally, this was fertile ground for a revolution. The strife between these two religious groups would percolate down to the general population. The sympathy of the people would not lie with the derogatory priesthood who deprived them of the opportunity to do business. This did not only result in dissatisfaction among the people, but also led to poverty and social imbalances (also see Doran 2012:79 in this regard). People like 'widows and orphans' were affected very badly because they were among the most vulnerable in society. Concerning the people in 2 Maccabees 3, Bickerman and Tcherikover were among the first scholars to address certain issues of 'the people' in the narrative. After them, commentary on 'the people' has been sporadic.

The problem

Comment on 'the people' in 2 Maccabees 3 is treated mostly in coincidental ways. A good example of this is Doran (2012:82) who interprets the utilisation of the term χηρῶν τε καὶ ὀρφανῶν ['of widows and orphans'] as a possible rhetorical ploy. However, he does not actually say why he considers this a 'rhetorical ploy' and what the purpose for such a stratagem could have been. Doran vaguely refers to LXX Psalm 67:6 (68:5) as a possible intertext where the phrase 'widows and orphans' is also found.

I consequently wrote an article (Jordaan 2019) showing that the expression χηρῶν τε καὶ ὀρφανῶν ['widows and orphans'] with LXX Psalm 67:6 as background for 2 Maccabees 3:10 signifies that God is going to act on their behalf. However, I did not do justice to the possibility of interpreting LXX Psalm 67 as a whole as possible background to 2 Maccabees 3. In fact, this is one of the reasons for writing this article. I think that much more of LXX Psalm 67 could be used as intertextual material for defining the people in 2 Maccabees 3.

In another publication about the people in 2 Maccabees 3 (Jordaan 2016), I argue that the author depicts the population of Jerusalem at large as suffering and how God alleviates their suffering. This article also does not consider different intertextual possibilities and how these might shed light on 2 Maccabees 3. Worst of all, this article does not address the importance of the people suffering in relation to the temple. Therefore, considering the gaps in my own research as well

as those of others, this article is an attempt to give a slightly more comprehensive view of 'the people' in 2 Maccabees 3. I wish to accomplish this by addressing the following aspects:

- Firstly, what is the theological framework that was used to explain the dilemma of conflict encountered in 2 Maccabees? Obviously, both groups could not be backed by the author of 2 Maccabees 3. Which theological system, therefore, does he use to underpin 2 Maccabees 3? This would obviously make his group more acceptable.
- Secondly, a few questions are in order because the temple seems to play an important role in 2 Maccabees 3: The value of the temple as physical building by commentators like Nickelsburg (2005) Doran (2012) seems to make place for a more symbolic view of the temple by amongst others Schwartz (2008:2005). Together with this the dynamic between the people and the temple albeit, physical or symbolical, needs to be scrutinized.
- Thirdly, what value could the complete LXX Psalm 67 as an intertext add to the understanding of the people of 2 Maccabees 3 and not only LXX Psalm 67:6? Commentators usually opt for a minimalistic use of an intertext because it is safer when only direct terms are considered However, one may ask whether such a minimalistic approach is efficient when attempting to comprehend 2 Maccabees 3, or is there more to be said? My reading of the text differs from a minimalistic approach.
- Lastly, a conclusion will be made concerning the people in 2 Maccabees 3.

The theological framework of 2 Maccabees

Bickerman (2011b:1055) describes the theology of 2 Maccabees as 'divine pragmatism'. It is quite a one-dimensional, cyclical view of events, underpinned by the Deuteronomistic theology as will be discussed below:

- the people sin – they do not repent – God punishes them through their enemies
- the people sin – they turn back to God – God punishes the enemy and restores the people
- the people obey God – God bestows his grace upon them if they obey him.

The author makes it clear to the people (2 Macc 6:16) that persecution is meant to discipline them; therefore, they should see the hand of God in times of trial and stay true to their calling.

Other commentators like Nickelsburg (2005:106) and De Silva (2012:43–45) state that the theology is based on the Deuteronomistic scheme. De Silva (2012:44) states the following in this respect:

> Deuteronomy – and thus the larger body of laws, beginning in Exodus, that constitutes Israel's covenant obligations – closes with several chapters outlining the consequences of keeping or failing these covenant obligations. Obeying God 'by carefully keeping all his commandments that I am giving you right now' will result in God's exalting Israel 'high above all nations on

earth' (Dt 28:1). (p. 44) The blessings included within this exaltation concern the fertility of the land and of its inhabitants, the security of the people in urban and rural areas, protection against any enemies who attempt to attack, and honor in the sight of all the neighboring peoples (28:2–14). Disregard for these commandments, however, will bring curses upon the nation: barrenness of land and people, vulnerability to foreign attack and natural plague, and decimation of the population (28:15–46). In particular, God would bring 'a distant nation … a stern nation that doesn't go easy on the very old or show pity to the very young' to besiege Israel's cities until Israel's inhabitants are taken captive as slaves and scattered 'among every nation'. (28:49–50, 64)

However, after these curses are inflicted as punishment upon the disobedient nation, if the people 'return to the LORD your God, obeying his voice, in line with all I'm commanding you right now – you and your children – with all your mind and with all your being, [then] the LORD your God will restore you as you were before and will have compassion on you, gathering you up from all the peoples where the LORD your God scattered you' (Dt 30:2–3). God will gather the exiles, restore their homeland, and make the people numerous and prosperous once again. God will help them to keep the covenant, and visit all these curses upon Israel's enemies. (30:4–7)

This is the basic framework the author of 2 Maccabees employs to interpret the rise and the fall of Judah and Israel as well as the basis for hope and recovery. They must just return wholeheartedly to the covenant, and God will again bestow the benefits of the covenant upon them.

What we have here is indeed pragmatism, with the covenant as the overarching theological framework. In this covenantal transaction between God and humans, God expects unconditional loyalty. Judah will bear the consequences if they deviate from these conditions. God's people can thus be in one of two positions:

• within covenantal grace, or
• without covenantal grace.

At this point in our discussion, it is important to have a look at the status of the people of Jerusalem according to this scheme.

The people of Jerusalem

The people in 2 Maccabees 3 are painted as unwavering in their loyalty towards God. This is true of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 2 Maccabees' narrator employs different narrative techniques to enhance the impact of his story (Van Henten 2017:85–106). One of these techniques is rhythm, which Van Henten (2017) describes as follows:

Particularly noteworthy in the book's story is the device of slowing down the pace of the story. The narrator sometimes applies it in several steps, *but he always moves on to the narration of one event in detail.* (p. 98, [author's own emphasis])

What concerns us here is the detail in the portrayal of the events in the temple and the city due to Heliodorus' defiling actions. 2 Maccabees 3 contains three scenes that reveal the utter anguish of the Jews over what was happening: (1) the priests' behaviour in the temple (3:15), (2) Onias' anguished appearance (3:16–17), and (3) the behaviour of other inhabitants of Jerusalem (3:18–21).

Firstly, the actions of the priests are described in 2 Maccabees 3:15a & b: *οἱ δὲ ἱερεῖς πρὸ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἐν ταῖς ἱερατικαῖς στολαῖς ῥίψαντες ἑαυτοὺς ἐπεκαλοῦντο εἰς οὐρανὸν τὸν περὶ παρακαταθήκης νομοθετήσαντα τοῖς παρακαταθεμένοις ταῦτα σῶα διαφυλάξαι* [The priests fell down in their priestly attire before the burnt offering altar and tore their clothes and called to heaven to him] (author's own translation). This is not the usual or a required liturgical action of the priests but now they are exhibiting their humbleness and dependence on heaven for an outcome. The narrator creates a highly dramatic picture in striking detail.

Secondly, the passion in the drama deepens even further when the narrator depicts the high priest Onias' appearance vividly. Onias is deeply troubled because of the imminent threat against the temple. The text graphically describes Onias' demeanour (3:16–17):

¹⁶ ἦν δὲ ὁρῶντα τὴν τοῦ ἀρχιερέως ἰδέαν τιτρώσκεσθαι τὴν διάνοιαν ἡ γὰρ ὄψις καὶ τὸ τῆς χρόας παρηλλαγμένον ἐνέφαινεν τὴν κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀγωνίαν ¹⁷ περιεκέχυτο γὰρ περὶ τὸν ἄνδρα δέος τι καὶ φρικασμὸς σώματος δι᾽ ὧν πρόδηλον ἐγίνετο τοῖς θεωροῦσιν τὸ κατὰ καρδίαν ἐνεστὸς ἄλγος [¹⁶ Whoever looked the high priest in the face, could from his appearance sense his woundedness and his changed colour denoted his troubled soul. ¹⁷ The worry that came over the man was so great that his whole body trembled and the pain in his heart became clear to everyone who looked at him] (author's own translation).

The religious leader in Jerusalem sets the pace of commitment to all. So great was his bodily suffering that everyone could observe it.

However, this not where the spectacle by the faithfull stops. The third scene shifts the focus from the agony in the temple to the public sphere when the actions of the other citizens in Jerusalem are mentioned (3:18–21). Worship had now become a public spectacle. The nation rushed from their houses in solidarity with the high priest and the other priests (3:15–17). In this regard, verse 18 states that groups of people came from the houses and worshipped publicly because of the contemptuous behaviour of Heliodorus in the temple: *διὰ τὸ μέλλειν εἰς καταφρόνησιν ἔρχεσθαι τὸν τόπον* [Due to the disrespect that was to come to the place]. A couple of unconventional acts are depicted here: (1) the women wearing sackcloth under their breasts is 'unconventional in a Jewish context, because in the Hebrew Bible males usually put on sackcloth in situations of mourning' (Van Henten 2017:99); and (2) the virgins who were usually locked away came from their houses, some on the walls of the city, others peeping through the windows to pray to heaven. Verse 20 clearly states, *πᾶσαι δὲ προτείνουσαι τὰς χεῖρας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἐποιοῦντο τὴν λιτανείαν* [they all held their hands out towards heaven in prayer].

This is not the nation's everyday manner of worship. Van Henten (2017:99) says in this regard: 'These scenes invoke a dramatic picture for the readers and use the body of those involved as a medium to express the drama'. The whole nation, from the high priest to each household, is claiming the public spaces of Jerusalem for places of prayer. They are extending the normal boundaries of worship, namely the houses and temple, showing their support in the public sphere. The purpose of this is clear. It is to influence the Jewish deity to become involved in the dire circumstances they are facing. Heliodorus must be stopped. He cannot take what belongs to the poor, that is, the widows and orphans.

To return to the theological standing of the people: all the people of Jerusalem are committed to the cause. They are even exceeding their religious boundaries in worship. The people, women, and virgins are publicly exhibiting their faith. The expectation is that God should bestow his covenantal grace upon them, as they are humble and sincere in their faith. Under these circumstances, one can expect God to reciprocate positively.

This brings me to the third issue I wish to discuss, namely the role of the temple.

The role of the temple in 2 Maccabees 3

The secondary literature, as already said, portrays different views on the importance of the temple in 2 Maccabees. Schwartz (2008:45–48) sees the temple as only symbolical for the diasporan Jews. Doran (2012:89–89), on the other hand, maintains that the issue is about the importance of the physical temple in Jerusalem. However, this is not important for my discussion about the temple. What seems to be more important is the relationship dynamics of the temple and the people.

In a 2015 publication (Jordaan 2015:352–365), I argue that 2 Maccabees contains three temple episodes, namely 2 Maccabees 3, 4–7 and 8–15. Each episode is governed by various aspects of the temple, namely the attitude of the high priest, the sanctity of the temple and the commitment of the people. I also argue in a subsequent publication that the temple in 2 Maccabees is a barometer of God's involvement with his chosen as well as of the people's commitment (Jordaan 2020:308–310).

Temple episode 1 (2 Macc 3) paints a positive picture of the high priest and the people, and subsequently guarantees God's blessings for the people. This happens when the godless invader is attacked and struck down. So, the image of the temple is important for the people in 2 Maccabees 3. The episode shows that in this instance the high priest and people were correct in their worshipping of God because God responds in a positive manner. He even bestows his grace upon an evil person like Heliodorus after Onias

made a sacrifice for this purpose. Thus, the temple is symbolically speaking a barometer of the religious climate of the people. Their worship makes the temple to be either functional or dysfunctional. The issue at stake here is not the temple as a building but rather the people's sincere worship. If their faith is pure then God will respond in a positive manner. This is what happens in 2 Maccabees 3, which is also the view of Ego (2017) who formulates this as follows:

> *So wird deutlich, dass der Autor des 2. Makkabäerbuches also eine differenzierte Haltung gegenüber dem Tempel einnimmt, da dieser zum einer Ort der göttlichen Einwohnung ist, seine Bedeutung aber zum anderen relativiert wird, dass letzendlich nicht der Tempel, sondern das Volk Objekt der göttlichen Erwählung list.* [So, it becomes clear that the author of the 2 Maccabees book takes a differentiated view of the temple because on the one hand it is the location of divine inhabitance but on the other hand the significance is relativised. Ultimately not the temple but the nation is the object of godly election] (p.112, author's own translation).

Ego (2017:120) emphasises in her conclusion that by combining exilic and post-exilic material, the author of 2 Maccabees stresses that God does not live in the temple itself but inhabits the heavenly realm.

The last aspect I wish to address concerning the people relates to the intertextual intersection between LXX Psalm 67 and 2 Maccabees 3.

LXX Psalm 67 as an intertext for 2 Maccabees 3

As stated earlier, the exact words – 'widows and orphans' – in LXX Psalm 67:6 are used in 2 Maccabees 3:10. It was also argued that this points to the fact that God will get involved. However, upon closer investigation, it transpired that other ideas from LXX Psalm 67 might also have been used in creating the narrative of 2 Maccabees 3. This begs the question of why the author would have used only one idea from LXX Psalm 67 when there is much more to be said. The theory of intertextuality provides an interesting perspective in this regard.

Scholars working with intertextualities indicate that every text created by an author (e.g. 2 Maccabees 3) is not only a new text but is a confluence or intersection of other texts (Beal 1992, 2000; Culler 2001; Fewell 2001; Kristeva 1980; Moi 1986). This means that texts form part of wider contexts, whether economic, political, religious, gender, social, or convergences of different socio-cultural domains. Although scholars differ about specific aspects related to intertextuality, it is not in the purview of this article to discuss these differences (for valuable contributions, see ed. Plett 1991a).

Kristeva is widely acknowledged for coining the term *intertextuality* (Orr 2008:20–21; Plett 1991b:3; Worton & Still 1991:1–44). Kristeva (1980:66) argues that a text can be scrutinised much like a mosaic. A mosaic displays a variety of colours, materials, designs and sizes whereas a text may

present the intersection of a plethora of ideologies, allusions to art, historical and/or mythological features, and much more. Worton and Still (1991) propose the following as a possible understanding of intertextuality:

> The theory of intertextuality insists that a text (for the moment to be understood in the narrower sense) cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system. (p. 1)

It is argued further that authors of texts are readers of other texts which entails that the creation of texts is permeated by the ideas and material that authors bring to it (Worton & Still 1991:1–2). For the purposes of this article, the following description by Beal (2000) is significant:

> Intertextuality is a theory that conceives of every text as a set of relations between texts, an intersection of texts that are themselves intersections of other texts, and so on. Every text is a locus of intersections, overlaps, and collisions between other texts. (p. 128)

Beal's view relates to this article in the sense that the intertextual allusion in the Heliodorus scene forms part of a larger ideology in Jewish literature, namely that of the relationship between God and his people, *specifically God's protection of widows and orphans against abuse* (Dt 24:17, 19–21). The broader ambiance or frame of reference, which serves as an intertextual ideology, is the Deuteronomistic scheme used in 2 Maccabees as discussed earlier. It is quite possible that narratives about this existed within Jewish communities and were used to maintain and challenge existing discourses (Nolte & Jordaan 2011).

An author would just select what they need when creating a new text. Every text is a transformation and reinterpretation of another text. It also covers allusions to other texts, ideologies, theologies and mythologies. With this background in mind, I thought it worthwhile to look for further ideas that might have been taken from LXX Psalm 67. These ideas seem to resonate with 2 Maccabees 3.

However, before attempting to show certain influences, I return to the Deuteronomistic history and how certain aspects thereof were applied in literature during the Second Temple period. After Israel was divided into two kingdoms – Israel in the north and Judah in the south – the Jerusalem temple lost its significance. With the devastating effect of the destruction of the temple in 587 BCE and the subsequent exile in Babylon, Judah was forced to rethink its temple ideology or 'monotemplism' (Zsengellér 2007:182) which is the idea that religious communities choose only one place for worshipping its deity. God could not be restricted in Jerusalem. As stated above, the temple in Jerusalem was mainly of symbolic importance in literature. This was only natural after the division into the northern and southern kingdoms. There were temples built in various places and Jerusalem was not the only recognised sanctuary (Zsengellér 2007:181–187). Together with this, the content of God's presence changed. He did reveal himself in the

TABLE 1: Schematic overview of the Heliodorus scene.

LXX Psalm 67	2 Maccabees 3
Epiphany	Epiphany
Law: agents, Moses	Application of law: people of Jerusalem
Place: Sinai	Place: Jerusalem
Statement: God lives in the temple and protects widows and orphans	Action: God really protects widows and orphans in his temple
Number: tens of thousands	Number: horseman and two youths
Purpose: defend temple	Purpose: defend temple
Appearance: brilliance (earthquakes and water)	Appearance: brilliance (horseman and youths)
Result: building of nation	Result: defence of temple
Effect: praise	Effect: respect for temple

past at Sinai to deliver the tablets of the law to Moses but now his epiphanies were quite different. The divine presence after Sinai and the division into the northern and southern kingdoms could manifest in various ways. This could either be a glorious presence positively speaking, or a negative manifestation by means of thunder and terrifying strokes by the deity. However, God is never personally involved in a direct way, but indirectly and mysteriously through agents.

Now, let us return to LXX Psalms 67 and the possible making of the people in 2 Maccabees 3. There seems to be various points of resemblance as well as reinterpretation. The following can be said:

Both LXX Psalms 67 and 2 Maccabees 3 refer to widows and orphans and are about the epiphany of God. LXX Psalms 67:9, 18 refer to the Sinai epiphany of God. Verse 18 is of particular importance because it states that God arrives from Sinai at the sanctuary in a war chariot. This idea is also found in 2 Maccabees 3. However, in this case he wages war in his sanctuary against those who threaten the widows and orphans, not with an army of tens of thousands but only three people: two youths and a horseman. They appear and fight against the enemy on his behalf. This seems like a reinterpretation of LXX Psalms 67 which seems to set a possible background for what happens in 2 Maccabees 3:24–30. This approach also seems to be on par with the Deuteronomistic history. Table 1 represents a schematic overview of the Heliodorus scene:

Conclusion

The theme of the making of a people in 2 Maccabees 3 does not seem to be randomly selected but carefully planned and set up by the author. Answering the research questions at the beginning, the following can be said:

- The author uses the context of the happenings around the temple in Jerusalem selectively. He does not deem the temple as more important than the people and their conduct.
- He employs the possible robbing of the temple funds of widows and orphans as the impetus to fire up readers' emotions against the people who think differently. Widows and orphans were the poorest of the poor and

the most vulnerable inhabitants of Jerusalem. They must have been the people who suffered the most. People who steal from them are despicable. In this regard, LXX Psalm 67 is used in more ways that are given credit by the commentators. God acts severely against those who maltreat widows and orphans.

- Bickerman may be correct when saying that this fighting was among the Jews themselves. Tcherikover is also correct by adding an economic flavour to this.

- The author of 2 Maccabees responds to this challenge by creating people that was either acceptable or unacceptable. The acceptable group is those who are within covenantal grace according to the Deuteronomistic scheme. They are Onias, the priests and the population of Jerusalem. According to the Deuteronomistic scheme of reward and punishment, these people will be helped by God in these circumstances. God will deliver them. God will act in a supernatural, mysterious way which he indeed does. So, the author wishes to say: follow their example, because when the people truly worship him, God will help them as he will help widows and orphans.

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