

Why Aren't the Books of the Maccabees in the Tanach??

Part 2: Books 3 and 4

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3 Maccabees - a different story, set in Egypt

Probably written in the 1st century CE

Structure (7 chapters)

- The Egyptian king, Ptolemy IV, wishes to enter the Jerusalem Temple but is struck down; he vows vengeance on the Jews (1:1-2: 24)
- The king persecutes the Jews of Egypt and tries to destroy them (2:24-4:16)
- God foils all the king's plans, and in the end the king changes his mind (4:17-end)

3 Maccabees 4: 1-11

In every place, then, where this decree arrived, a feast at public expense was arranged for the Gentiles with shouts and gladness, for the inveterate enmity which had long ago been in their minds was now made evident and outspoken. But among the Jews there was incessant mourning, lamentation, and tearful cries; everywhere their hearts were burning, and they groaned because of the unexpected destruction that had suddenly been decreed for them. What district or city, or what habitable place at all, or what streets were not filled with mourning and wailing for them? For with such a harsh and ruthless spirit were they being sent off, all together, by the generals in the several cities, that at the sight of their unusual punishments, even some of their enemies, perceiving the common object of pity before their eyes, reflected upon the uncertainty of life and shed tears at the most miserable expulsion of these people. For a multitude of grey-headed old men, sluggish and bent with age, was being led away, forced to march at a swift pace by the violence with which they were driven in such a shameful manner. And young women who had just entered the bridal chamber to share married life exchanged joy for wailing, their myrrh-perfumed hair sprinkled with ashes, and were carried away unveiled, all together raising a lament instead of a wedding song, as they were torn by the harsh treatment of the heathen. In bonds and in public view they were violently dragged along as far as the place of embarkation. Their husbands, in the prime of youth, their necks encircled with ropes instead of garlands, spent the remaining days of their marriage festival in lamentations instead of good cheer and youthful revelry, seeing death immediately before them. They were brought on board like wild animals, driven under the constraint of iron bonds; some were fastened by the neck to the benches of the boats, others had their feet secured by unbreakable fetters, and in addition they were confined under a solid deck, so that with their eyes in total darkness, they should undergo treatment befitting traitors during the whole voyage. When these men had been brought to the place called Schedia, and the voyage was concluded as the king had decreed, he commanded that they should be enclosed in the hippodrome which had been built with a monstrous perimeter wall in front of the city, and which was well suited to make them an obvious spectacle to all coming back into the city and to those from the city going out into the country, so that they could neither communicate with the king's forces nor in any way claim to be inside the circuit of the city.

3 Maccabees 6: 16-22

Just as Eleazar was ending his prayer, the king arrived at the hippodrome with the beasts and all the arrogance of his forces. And when the Jews observed this they raised great cries to heaven so that even the nearby valleys resounded with them and brought an uncontrollable terror upon the army. Then the most glorious, almighty, and true God revealed his holy face and opened the heavenly gates, from which two glorious angels of fearful aspect descended, visible to all but the Jews. They opposed the forces of the enemy and filled them with confusion and terror, binding them with immovable shackles. Even the king began to shudder bodily, and he forgot his sullen insolence. The beasts turned back upon the armed forces following them and began trampling and destroying them. Then the king's anger was turned to pity and tears because of the things that he had devised beforehand.

4 Maccabees - a philosophical tract

Probably written in the mid-1st century CE

Structure (18 chapters)

- Prologue: reason can control the emotions (1:1-1:12)
- Examples from Tanakh (1:13-3:19)
- Examples from 'contemporary' history, including the Hasmonaean revolt (3 20-17:24)
- An exhortation to all Jews to follow their example (18)

4 Maccabees, 1: 1-12 (translation: NRSV)

The subject that I am about to discuss is most philosophical, that is, whether devout reason is sovereign over the emotions. So it is right for me to advise you to pay earnest attention to philosophy. For the subject is essential to everyone who is seeking knowledge, and in addition it includes the praise of the highest virtue—I mean, of course, rational judgment. If, then, it is evident that reason rules over those emotions that hinder self-control, namely, gluttony and lust, it is also clear that it masters the emotions that hinder one from justice, such as malice, and those that stand in the way of courage, namely anger, fear, and pain. Some might perhaps ask, 'If reason rules the emotions, why is it not sovereign over forgetfulness and ignorance?' Their attempt at argument is ridiculous! For reason does not rule its own emotions, but those that are opposed to justice, courage, and self-control; and it is not for the purpose of destroying them, but so that one may not give way to them.

I could prove to you from many and various examples that reason is dominant over the emotions, but I can demonstrate it best from the noble bravery of those who died for the sake of virtue, Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother. All of these, by despising sufferings that bring death, demonstrated that reason controls the emotions.

On this anniversary it is fitting for me to praise for their virtues those who, with their mother, died for the sake of nobility and goodness, but I would also call them blessed for the honour in which they are held. For all people, even their torturers, marvelled at their courage and endurance, and they became the cause of the downfall of tyranny over their nation. By their endurance they conquered the tyrant, and thus their native land was purified through them. I shall shortly have an opportunity to speak of this; but, as my custom is, I shall begin by stating my main principle, and then I shall turn to their story, giving glory to the all-wise God.

4 Maccabees 2: 17-23

When Moses was angry with Dathan and Abiram, he did nothing against them in anger, but controlled his anger by reason. For, as I have said, the temperate mind is able to get the better of the emotions, to correct some, and to render others powerless. Why else did Jacob, our most wise father, censure the households of Simeon and Levi for their irrational slaughter of the entire tribe of the Shechemites, saying, ‘Cursed be their anger’? For if reason could not control anger, he would not have spoken thus. Now when God fashioned human beings, he planted in them emotions and inclinations, but at the same time he enthroned the mind among the senses as a sacred governor over them all. To the mind he gave the law; and one who lives subject to this will rule a kingdom that is temperate, just, good, and courageous.

4 Maccabees 6: 26-29 (NRSV)

When he was now burned to his very bones and about to expire, he lifted up his eyes to God and said, ‘You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs.’

4 Maccabees 16: 16 and 17: 15-16

‘My sons, noble is the contest to which you are called to bear witness for the nation. Fight zealously for our ancestral law’ Reverence for God was victor and gave the crown to its own athletes. Who did not admire the athletes of the divine legislation?

New Testament, 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27 (translation: RSV)

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable [one].

To canonize or not to canonize?? Relevant factors ...

- Date of composition
- Language
- ‘Holiness’ factor
- ‘Star quality’ factor
- Politics and theology

Tosefta, *Yadayim* 2: 13

... The books of Ben Sira and all the books written from then onwards do not make the hands impure.

Midrash *Kohelet Rabba* 12: 12

Anyone who brings into his house more than 24 books [of Scripture], such as the Book of Ben Sira, brings chaos into his home.