

PARADOXES OF THE FIRST BOOK OF MACCABEES

IN the Empire of the Seleucids, Judea was a small province of Celesyria, reaching from Jordan to Gezer and from Bethsur to the neighbourhood of Samaria. This small scrap of land, inhabited by a population greatly attached to its national tradition and still more so to its strongly monotheistic religion, was, through the meridarch of Celesyria, in administrative and military dependence on the king who ruled from Antioch and whose garrisons in ever increasing numbers, occupied fortresses all over Judea.

And here we find the first paradox which, however, we shall merely note in passing. For many years, two fortresses, both within the walls of Jerusalem, the Syrian Acra and the Temple fortified by the Maccabees, were at war with each other.

Thus kept in dependence, Judea was at the same time surrounded on all sides by towns in which Hellenistic culture had already taken root and to the population of which the zeal with which the Jews strove to maintain the law of Moses and their paternal customs seemed nothing short of barbarity.¹ In these circumstances the Seleucids must have thought at first that it would be easy to bestow on the barbarous Jews the benefits of Hellenistic culture, together of course with a kind of syncretic religion. They met, however, with resistance, and that was the beginning of the first struggle between two cultures, the scattered details of which struggle form the subject of the two books of Maccabees.

The insurrection, started in 167 B.C., in Modin by Mattathias, father of the Maccabees, Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, was directly caused by religious reforms ordered in the Empire of the Seleucids by King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The revolt spread all over Judea and, in spite of very difficult conditions, lasted for about thirty years. The intensity of the struggle was by no means equal throughout that time. Battles fought with varying success, deportations, the destruction of Jerusalem, the siege and taking of the last stronghold of the insurgents—the Temple of Jerusalem—changed eventually to victory over the chief Syrian commanders, the suppression of pagan altars and the refusal of taxes. Again, the seemingly final repression of the insurrection after the death of Judas and the defeat of Jonathan, changed to the political activity of the latter at the side of Syrian kings (which gained more success for the insurgents than their victories on the battlefield), and eventually to the winning of full independence during the reign of Simon. This final victory, however, had cost tremendous efforts on the part of the Maccabees, their followers, and indeed the whole nation. It was made possible only by the decay of the Empire of the Seleucids,

¹ Tacit. *Hist.* v, 8. Diodor xxxiv, 1 ; xl, 8.

and before it was obtained the nation had much to suffer from its own people as well as from foreigners.

The foreigners were the Syrian soldiers. Besides the regular army taking part in the expeditions against the insurgents, in the course of which the Temple was polluted, Jerusalem burnt and many places plundered, there were forces stationed in fortresses scattered all over Judea,¹ whose task consisted in keeping an eye on a turbulent population. How eager they were in the fulfilment of their duty may be seen from the complaint against the conduct of the garrison of Acra. They attacked the Jews in the town and in the neighbourhood of the Temple, and even polluted the Temple itself. This made most of the inhabitants leave the Holy City, while foreigners came to take their place; and those who, in spite of all the obstacles and dangers, succeeded in reaching the Temple precincts to pray and offer sacrifices—lamented their miserable fate and that of their holy places.² Within twenty years this misfortune had become the lot of the people all over Judea.³

But while this went on the Jews themselves behaved no better to those of their compatriots who accepted the Hellenistic culture or—what was worse—served the Syrians against the insurgents. The latter made penal expeditions in return, murdering them and burning down their homes.⁴ The Syrians replied in the same vein.⁵

Thus, exposed from both sides to endless trials for years on end, the Jews sought comfort in reading the pages of the Bible in which their prophets predicted in bright colours the brilliant future of God's chosen people; and of course they could not refrain from comparing the sad reality with those perspectives, understood in a fully material way.⁶

This is where we find the origin of a great section of Jewish literature called apocalyptic, the beginning of which some think to see in the book of the prophet Daniel. Based on a profound belief that the prophecies would infallibly come true, unknown authors, concealed under the names of persons known from the old Testament, comforted their people, reassuring them with accounts of visions and revelations that all prophecies would be realized in the future.

In the second century B.C., Palestine produced a variety of apocalyptic works by different authors, e.g., the Book of Henoch, the Book of Jubilees, often called the Apocalypse of Moses, and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs.⁷ It is to be noted that apocalyptic books must have found eager readers; besides those mentioned above a dozen or so more appeared later on.

¹ For list of new fortresses see I Macc. ix, 50.

² I Macc. i, 35-40. ³ I Macc. xv, 40-41.

⁴ I Macc. ii, 45-47; iii, 5-6, 8; ix, 61. ⁵ I Macc. vii, 19.

⁶ J.-B. Frey, *Apocalyptique*, *Dict. de la Bible*, Supplement, I, 339.

⁷ J.-B. Frey, *op.cit.* 328.

Still, however favourable the conditions in Palestine were to the rise of apocalyptic literature, however numerous the authors producing this kind of work, however great the demand for it—in that same second century B.C. there appeared in Palestine a book as far removed as possible from all apocalyptic namely, the First Book of Maccabees; and this may be considered as the first paradox of the book. It was not by promises of a future fulfilment of the prophecies that its author tried to comfort his people but, by the recollection of heroic deeds performed in defence of the faith and national traditions, he endeavoured to give them examples of conduct, at the same time saving from oblivion the memory of men whose honour was equal in his eyes to that of the patriarchs of the Book of Genesis.¹

As a good historian he begins his narrative with Alexander the Great, chief author of the Hellenization of the East, and then, passing on to the times of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his successors, he describes, from his often limited and provincial point of view, the struggle between Judea and Syria, particularly in the days of the Maccabees: Judas, Jonathan and Simon.

The details of his account seem to prove that he had personally witnessed many of the events described. If such were not the fact we should expect him to describe all the battles in much the same way. But in fact some of them are treated briefly and in general terms, while others abound in details. To the first class belong the description of the taking of Jerusalem,² the struggles between Judas and Apollonius,³ the struggles against Idumea,⁴ those against the 'children of Baean',⁵ the 'sons of Ammon',⁶ the battles at Bethsur,⁷ etc. To the second class belongs the description of the battle of Bethzacharias.⁸

The last two battles, both belonging to one and the same expedition of King Antiochus V Eupator (not yet of age) and his friend Lysias⁹ against Judas and Judea, are a very good example of how the author describes a battle in which he took part (that of Bethzacharias) and one in which he did not (that of Bethsur). A similar example of how minutely the author describes the fights in which he took part or which he personally witnessed is to be found in the description of the struggle of Judas against the inhabitants of Galaad, who were persecuting his compatriots.¹⁰ Compare this with that of the battles fought at the same time by the

¹ See for instance the account of the last hours of Mattathias (I Macc. ii, 49), based on that of the patriarchs Jacob and David (Gen. xlvii, 29; III Kings ii, 1).

² I Macc. i, 29-32. ³ I Macc. iii, 10-12. ⁴ I Macc. v, 3.

⁵ I Macc. v, 4-5. ⁶ I Macc. v, 6-8. ⁷ I Macc. vi, 31-32.

⁸ I Macc. vi, 33-47.

⁹ The position of kings' friend at the court of the Seleucids was equivalent to that of many councillors, ministers and often generals of the Syrian Army. See E. Bickerman: *Institutions des Séleucides*, Paris 1938, p. 41 ff.

¹⁰ I Macc. v, 24-54.

insurgents' army, headed by Simon, in defence of threatened compatriots living in Galilee.¹ While the first reminds us of novels by its abundance of detail, which the author could hardly have composed if he had not seen them with his own eyes and described them from memory, the other only contains a few general references to the army and the results of the fight.

It may be noted here in passing, that since the author of the First Book of Maccabees took part in some of the insurgents' battles and personally witnessed others, we may be further reassured that his work was written while Simon Maccabaeus still lived or else shortly after his death which took place in 135 B.C.

It is difficult to establish whether the speeches and prayers, quoted by the author literally, are exact records quoted from memory or from documents, or whether the author composed them himself as being the sort of discourse or prayer that would be uttered in the circumstances. The documents, however, actually quoted, and this in a quantity not to be met with in any other Book of the Scriptures, leave no doubt that the author has made use of state archives in which they were deposited. This adds authority to his work in which, moreover, the archives are mentioned.² We see from this that the author's intention was to write history in the fullest sense of the word, and if he drew his materials from genuine documents in state archives, this means he was bent upon writing nothing but truth. That is surely why he indicates in detail the place and time of the events he describes, and it is not his fault if they are hard to trace in other records. He could not have known that some other person would describe anew a part of these events, independently of himself, without having actually witnessed them, and using a method of calculating the years which is hard to harmonize with his own. We speak here of the five volumes of the work of Jason of Cyrene on which the Second Book of Maccabees is based: II Macc. ii, 24.

In order to add beauty to his work the author places here and there among his descriptions some songs, as for instance those in honour of Judas, Simon, etc. ; but in the historical narrative itself we find nothing that is inserted merely for interest.

He refrains from passing judgements about the persons he describes. He does not specify the causes of any, even separate, events. They result from what has been said before, and it is the reader's task to find out their connection. Only when speaking of how his heroes won great victories with an insignificant number of soldiers, does he mention confident prayers unto the Lord for help as their chief weapon. But that the victory was due to God's assistance more than to human effort is left again to the reader's deduction.

¹ I Macc. v, 21-23. ² I Macc. xiv, 49.

As we see, the author's way of writing the First Book of Maccabees proves him to be a good historian. He searched the archives, took part himself in the battles or else observed them personally on the spot. He endeavours to write nothing but truth without any artificial ornaments, and he even leaves room for the divine intervention, unexpected in these cases. In other words he conforms in detail to the rules which Polybius laid down for historians.¹

Nor should we forget—and here we come to the second paradox of the First Book of Maccabees—that Polybius was a Greek, while the author of the First Book of Maccabees was one of those Jews who fought without respite against Greek influences in Judea. For him every concession to Greek culture meant apostasy from the faith and national customs.² His ideal is the minutest practice of the Law of Moses as well as the movement started by Nehemias, later continued by the Pharisees and in his time embodied in the persons of the Maccabean heroes: Judas, Jonathan and Simon.

How could it happen that such a typical Jewish author should have followed the rules set for historians by an author from the enemy's camp? In the First Book of Maccabees we find no evidence that the author was acquainted with the Greek writers, in particular Polybius. But he knew thoroughly the books of the Scriptures, and their influence on him leaves no doubt. Still, whenever Polybius and the author of the First Book of Maccabees describe the same events, they seem to be in full accord.³ This is because both knew the events thoroughly: Polybius, as friend of the Scipios⁴ and one of the Roman companions of the later King Demetrius I Soter⁵; our Jewish author, through personal experience or from archives.

Perhaps we shall not be far from the truth if in trying to explain the above we bring forward two facts. One part of the work of Polybius had already been made accessible to the Roman public in 146 B.C.⁶ On the other hand, as we know, the legation of Simon Maccabaeus was in Rome in 140 B.C. displaying great activity there, including even attempts at proselytism to the Jewish faith.⁷ Supposing then that in

¹ See: H. Peter, *Wahrheit und Kunst, Geschichtsschreibung und Plagiat im Klassischen Altertums*. Leipzig 1911, p. 243 ff, 248. E. Täubler, *Tyche, historische Studien*. Leipzig 1926, p. 89 ff. W. Bauer, *Einführung in das Studium der Geschichte*. Tübingen 1928, p. 283. T. Sinko, *Literatura grecka. II. Literatura hellenistyczna*, cz. I. Krakow, 1947, p. 156 ff, 228 ff, 237 ff.

² About the Hellenists, cf. I Mac. i, 11–15 and II Macc. iii, 6.

³ See J. Knabenbauer, *Commentarius in duos libros Macchabaeorum*. Parisii 1907. H. Bévenot, *Die beiden Makkabäerbücher*, Bonn 1931. A. Bouché-Leclerq, *Histoire des Séleucides*. Paris 1913, pp. 245 ff passim.

⁴ T. Sinko, op.cit. p. 229. ⁵ Polyb. 31, 21, 8 ff. *Athæn.* 440 b.

⁶ T. Sinko, op.cit. p. 215.

⁷ I Macc. xiv, 24; 15, 15 ff. Val. Maximus 1, 3, 2. E. Schürer, *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*. Leipzig 1901, I, 253.

this legation besides Numenius, about whom no details are known, Eupolemos, the legate of Judas Maccabaeus, was also present.¹ Eusebius mentions him as being a writer, quoting at the same time a passage of his works.² There would be no great difficulty in drawing the conclusion that the Jewish legation in Rome could have become acquainted with the rules of history writing, as conceived by Polybius. Thus we can understand why a writer who, without the permission of Simon as high priest could not have got access to state archives (for they were at the same time those of the Temple), composed his work in a way the 'High priest and prince of God's people' Simon recommended; influenced too by records recently brought from Rome, which had already become the capital of the whole known world.

History records that the independence won by Judea in the days of Simon Maccabaeus was very short-lived, and even less complete was the victory of the ideal of Judaism, represented within the country by the Maccabees. The pressure of Hellenism never ceased. Still, this victory preserved Judaism from dying out, and as we see in the time of Jesus Christ, the Pharisees kept it as their rule of conduct, being themselves one of the two most influential Jewish parties. They kept it even when independence was already long lost, and the last Maccabees, like common robbers, were driven away by Herod's army, and smoked out of their last shelter in the caverns of the south side of the Arbeel Valley near the lake of Genesareth.³

Such being the state of things it seems natural that the book, describing the victory of Judaism, should have survived together with it and should have enjoyed in the eyes of the Pharisees at least as much esteem as the other books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Such was not the fact however. In spite of its describing the victory of Judaism, and in spite of it having been written in Hebrew, it was not reckoned by the Jews among their holy books of Scripture. For at that time it was already held that with the Prophet Daniel the Canon of the inspired books of the Scripture was closed. What is worse, apart from the fact that the Hebrew text of the First Book of Maccabees served as basis for the Midrash of Antiochus, read on the day of the Consecration of the Temple (Hanukka),⁴ there is not the slightest mention of that book in the old Jewish literature. As for the Maccabees themselves, who had done so much to strengthen the foundations of Judaism, there is only one short note stating that Mattathias and his sons firmly stood by their faith, and forced the chariots of Antiochus to take flight.⁵

The First Book of Maccabees, never copied from its Hebrew original by the Jews, and neglected by those who embodied in their

¹ I Macc. viii, 17. ² *Praep. Evang.* 30-34.

³ See: G. Dalman, *Orte und Wege Jesu*. Gütersloh 1924, p. 126ff.

⁴ H. Höpfl, *Das erste Makkabäerbuch und die Antiochusrolle*. Biblica 1925, p. 55.

⁵ *Schemoth rabba* 5. See: H. Höpfl, *Das Chanukafest*. Biblica 1922, p. 171.

life the ideal of the Maccabean heroes, disappeared from the stage. Its original text was seen by Origen¹ and even later on by Jerome,² but these are the last traces of the Hebrew text of the First Book of Maccabees.

To avoid any misunderstanding it is necessary to add that one of the Jewish writers, Josephus Flavius, has used the First Book of Maccabees, in the twelfth and thirteenth book of his Jewish *Antiquities*, but only in its Greek text, and it seems that he had never seen the Hebrew. For already in his time he had to struggle with the same difficulties which we meet with even now in reading this work.³

While the Jews and Pharisees covered with the dust of oblivion the book describing the heroic deeds of those who fought against the Hellenists to establish Judaism in Judea, it was saved from annihilation by none other than the Hellenized Jews and the Catholic Church—and that is where the next paradox of the First Book of Maccabees is to be found.

The Hellenized Jews living in Alexandria made a Greek translation of the First Book of Maccabees and included it in the Canon of their Holy Books. For it is a religious book. Though its author describes nothing but historic events, not even once mentioning God's name, still he makes religious thought the foundation of every event he relates. He arranges all his material, even each single event, in such a way as to remind the reader that God used Mattathias' sons and their warriors as instruments for securing the practice of His worship in the Temple, as well as in the private life of the chosen people.⁴ Such is the aim of the author representing the defeat of the Jews as God's anger,⁵ and their victory as His favour.⁶ That is why he quotes the prayers of a small number of Jewish soldiers obtaining a victory over a great number of enemies, while the reader has to guess that it was all done by the Lord's aid. That is also why he arranges the events described so as to make it evident to the reader that though God does not in any miraculous way directly interfere with human efforts⁷ it is He who through Mattathias' sons maintained the little Jewish nation in the true faith, though they had to fight against renegades of their own blood as well as against the whole Empire of the Seleucids which the Jews could never in normal circumstances have resisted.

In our opinion this constant presence of the unnamed God in the background of the story of Judas and his brothers was intended by the author, and if this be really so, then the author of the First Book

¹ In *Celsum* 8, 46 and by Euseb. *Hist.* 6, 25, 2. ² *Prol. Gal.*

³ See: Hölscher, *Joseph.* Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyklopädie* IX, 2, 1934-2000.

⁴ I Macc. xii, 15. ⁵ I Macc. i, 64; iii, 8.

⁶ I Macc. iii, 18; xii, 13; xvi, 3.

⁷ Compare the description of the death of Alkimus in I Macc. ix, 55 and by J. Flavius, *Ant.* 12, 10, 6.

of Maccabees has proved to be a masterly writer of religious history. For without lessening the exactness of his description, or adding to it pious teachings and considerations (as did the author of the summary of the work of Jason of Cyrene), he imitates the other inspired historical books, and at the same time by the method of his narrative he approaches the style of the historical works of the Greek world. Thus he has given us a first-hand historical work, pulsating with faith in God, while this faith fought against the materialistic and sceptical influence of Hellenic culture, supported by the state.

This religious background in the First Book of Maccabees was perceived by the Jews of Alexandria and after them by the Catholic Church, but not by the Pharisees who might have been expected to notice it first. Thus it happened that while the latter completely neglected the Hebrew text of the First Book of Maccabees, the Catholic Church cared for it, copying it in its Greek translation as well as in a Latin one made from the Greek text, and so it has survived till to-day in forty manuscripts, three of which are uncials: the Sinaitic (fourth century), the Alexandrian (fifth century), and the Venetian (eighth century). The fact that a Book so typically Jewish as the First Book of Maccabees, exists till now not in its original Hebrew, but in a Greek and a Latin translation, is unquestionably due to the Catholic Church, not to Jewish scholars.

It was in the Catholic Church that the First Book of Maccabees became the subject of one more paradox. Its Greek text, apart from some polishing by Lucian, was corrected by someone¹ without reference to its original text, but not revised by him who was best fitted for that work, namely St Jerome. That is the reason why the Latin text of the First Book of Maccabees in some places does not fully coincide with the Greek. Moreover, although it is a part of the Vulgate it does not come from the hand of St Jerome. This, however, is a matter which concerns not only the First Book of Maccabees, but also the other deutero-canonical books.

In conclusion it must be stated that if the First Book of Maccabees survived in all its brightness, in spite of its author choosing to write history and not apocalyptic (contrary though this was to the tastes of his contemporaries), in spite of its author, a Jew, describing the struggle of Judaism against Hellenism in accordance with the principles of the Greek writer, Polybius, in spite, finally, of his work being rejected by the Pharisees, if, I say, the book has survived till our own day it is due to the Catholic Church. It has survived indeed only because it is a religious, though at the same time a historical book in the best meaning

¹ D. de Bruyne, *Le texte grec des deux livres des Macchabees*. *Revue Biblique* 1922, 348s. See: L. Bigot, *Livres des Macchabees*. *Dict. de Theologie Catholique* IX, 2, col. 1500.

of the word. The religious spirit and deep faith in God, capable of the greatest sacrifices for His sake, are to be seen in every word. As for the particular events described, they are completed and corroborated by the works of Polybius, Appian, Diodorus of Sicily, Livy and Justin, not to speak of Josephus Flavius and many discovered fragments of Greek literature, as well as coins of kings described in the book. It must be recognized that of the many sources for Jewish history in our possession this one is the most 'reliable',¹ 'a first-rate source'. 'One of the greatest periods of Jewish history has found a great historian'; his work 'deserves to become a part of the Bible'.² It is also till now almost the only first-hand source we know for the history of the Seleucids, furnishing ample and detailed information about the conditions existing in their empire, and using exact terminology in matters concerning the state, its administration, taxes, army, and court, such descriptions being almost all confirmed by Greek authors. This is why the First Book of Maccabees is reckoned among the sources and documents relating to the history of Judea as well as to that of the Empire of the Seleucids. Since, besides all this, its author was present, so to say, at the very establishment of Judaism no wonder that in his book we find at the same time means for understanding the ideas current among the Jews in Palestine at the time of Our Lord.

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THE NEW LATIN TRANSLATION OF THE PSALMS

THE sudden appearance of this translation in 1945 was a most joyful surprise. Many priests who had long used the old psalter and loved it for its venerable antiquity and for many personal links formed in the course of years, must yet have keenly felt its imperfections and often wondered how many centuries were still to elapse before a new translation would be used in the Divine Office. The news that an excellent new translation was actually published seemed almost too good to be true.

For it is an excellent translation, executed not only with scholarship and taste but with an anxious and devoted care which has taken thought for many little needs besides the main purposes of the work. For example several changes, which seem always to be decided improvements, have been made in the way psalms are divided in the Breviary—this is done in Pss 37, 54 and 108 at least. Again the translators have relieved us from the old danger of confusion between *exaltare* and *exultare* by

¹ E. Schürer, *op.cit.* II, 580.

² H. Fuchs, *Makkabäerbücher*, *Judisches Lexicon* III, 1338.