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# ASPECTS OF THE SUFFERING ENDURED IN THE EPOCH OF THE MACCABEES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF FAITH

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(Received 20 May 2012, revised 11 September 2012)

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## Abstract

After the Jews came under Seleucid Greek rule, Hellenism became their real enemy. Thus, the struggle between Greeks and Hebrews was, in fact, a dispute between two ideas – the Hellenistic culture and the Jewish religion of the prophets. In the end, the Prophets prevailed, but went through many trials and sufferings. Although the influence of Hellenistic culture was considerable, most Jews remained against Hellenism.

The power of the Mosaic Law, which was considered to be of divine origin by the Jews, as well as the firm conviction that the Davidic dynasty would be restored, were the two elements that helped those who were against Hellenism.

Hasmonean kings fought heroically and with great sacrifices. The examples of elder Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother are another form of protest against everything that was foreign to their faith.

After a war with the Seleucids, which lasted for twenty-five years, the impossible was achieved – a New Hebrew kingdom of Judas was built on the sacrifices of martyrs who gave their lives for the Law.

*Keywords:* martyr, suffering, Hellenism, apocalyptic, Torah proscriptions

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## 1. Preliminaries

There are different approaches as concerns the intertestamentary literature of apocalyptic nature or of Essene origin. Some opinions of the theologians in the half of the last century were reinterpreted in the last decades of the same century. This happened because of the publication of the Qumran texts, or simply because of biblical criticism, that makes leaps in interpreting biblical or apocryphal texts.

Unlike the modernist trend that manifests the conviction that people can learn the complete and objective truth about reality, thus gaining certainty in clarity and thought, which is good, postmodernism assumes a totally different task. Postmodernists are convinced that because of our limitation as human beings, because of our microscopic knowledge and of the limitation of our social

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points of reference, knowledge can be, at most, provisory. In the most favorable definitions of postmodernism [1], human knowledge is nothing but a kind of social construction, and that is why it cannot ensure a clear and objective knowledge of the world.

People are encouraged to have a multitude of interpretations and approaches, none of them being necessarily correct or *wrong, true or false*, but all of them are productive, rational, fruitful, reflecting the interaction between the reader and the text. Postmodernists [2] are less interested in establishing the limits between truth and error than in the subtle lines traced by interpretative and unclear possibilities. We also notice such approaches in the interpretation of the political and religious history of the Hebrews in the first and second centuries BC. Some theologians and historians regard the Maccabees as the true liberators of the people from the Hellenist domination, which almost annihilated them; others regard them as profiteers of the moment. What is certain is that the people suffered under both rules: of the Seleucids and of the Maccabees. Here is what a historian writes in this respect: "A political disunion become classical fatally divided the royal Hasmonean dynasty, split brothers, inflaming the father against the son, the people against the ruler. At the bottom of the powder keg was the problem of Hellenism. At the surface, three political parties caused agitation, each of them contributing to the destruction of Jerusalem, to the dispersal of the Jews." [3]

In this context, troubled from a political, cultural, and religious point of view, there emerged a literature that scholars call apocalyptic [4, 5]. The writings that fall into this category appear as some records of certain revelations of God to a chosen person, referring to the world's history and especially to the imminence of the divine intervention that will destroy evil and restore God's kingdom [6].

## **2. The apocalyptic genre – a literary characteristic of the period of the Maccabees**

The apocalyptic is a genre of revelation literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is interceded by a being from the other world (sometimes Messiah) for a human addressee (a known character from the biblical world), opening a transcendent revelation that can be temporal, when it refers to the eschatological salvation, or supernatural, when it involves a different, supernatural world. Its aim is to interpret some circumstances on the earth in the light of the supernatural world and of the future and to influence the reader's understanding and behaviour through divine authority [7].

Therefore, the main component is the representation of two levels of reality, one accessible to human experience, and the other specific to spiritual beings and accessible to knowledge only to the extent in which it is revealed. As such, it has a decisive influence on the events in 'the earthly world' that are nothing but the visible side of some conflicts from 'the other world' [4, p. 6].

Knowing these is very important for the correct understanding of the sense of history and for correct behavior. From a historical point of view, such knowledge is often required by situations equivalent to disorder, in which it is difficult to suppose a communication with the divine world; that is why revelations and their message are attributed to some famous characters from the past.

The apocalyptic did not exist only in Judaism and Christianity, but in the whole ancient world [8].

As to what concerns us, the historical Hebrew period in which this apocalyptic literature appeared was one full of hardships, with political and cultural pressure on the believers faithful to the Law, with reprisals and atrocities from the rulers, especially the Seleucids. If in the first years of the Maccabean revolt the anti-Hellenistic fighters had a strong faith as a result of the suffering endured, later this faith, reaching fanaticism, threatened to turn into a fierce reaction against the Hasmoneans. Suffering was present when the occupiers ruled, as well as when Hebrew people ruled, that is, the Maccabees. If under Judas Maccabee people went to war with great joy and enthusiasm, later all this diminished. The apocalyptic literature appeared in this troubled context, with a great deal of afflictions for the ones faithful to the Law.

### **3. Hellenistic culture – a karaoke culture – offered as lure to the Hebrews**

It is considered that the process of Hellenisation of Alexander the Great was ample. Actually, things did not happen this way. It could be compared to a crinoline: it covered a great surface, but it touched little; the Greeks tried to change the Middle East, adjusting it under the vast bell of this crinoline [3]. A whole series of religious leaders of the Hebrew people urged them to resist the attraction of the *karaoke* Hellenised culture [3].

Although the Greek thinking dominated the Middle East for six hundred years, there were no great literary, scientific or artistic works that were produced from the fusion of the West with the East [3]. The case of the Hebrews was different. They absorbed everything the Greeks offered from an intellectual point of view. They knew the Greek philosophers very well. Philo of Alexandria is well-known for attempting to harmonise Greek philosophy with the Torah of Moses.

The Hellenisation of the Hebrews started in a discreet way. First it affected their language, their customs and traditions, then it infiltrated their conduct and religion. The Hebrews started adopting Greek names and spoke Greek.

Although the influences of Hellenisation were considerable, the majority of the Hebrews remained anti-Hellenistic. Two elements helped the anti-Hellenistic remain united. One had to do with the power of the Mosaic Law and the other was the conviction that the Davidic dynasty would be restored. Gradually, these oppositions led to the formation of an anti-Hellenistic party, whose members came to be known under the name of Hassideans [9]. As more

and more people gathered around them, they ended up playing an important part in the events of the second century B.C.

Attempting a forced Hellenisation, Antiochus IV Epiphanes caused a revolt in the Judean space, with great suffering for the Hebrews and with unexpected results. The custom of the Seleucid kings was that of appointing governors for their subordinated provinces. In the case of the Hebrews, the king appointed the high priest, recommended by the Hebrews themselves. The Hellenised aristocratic Hebrews thought it would be to their advantage to help Antiochus IV in the process of forced Hellenisation of their country. Through schemes and corruption, these pro-Hellenists from Jerusalem convinced the king in Damascus to appoint Jason as high priest. The latter was an important actor in the process of Hellenisation of the country. In twelve months Jason succeeded in doing what the Ptolemaic and Seleucid authorities could not do in 125 years. He opened the gates of the Temple for pagan rituals. The schools in Jerusalem imported the Greek model of various sports, in which the young Hebrews participated almost naked.

Anger and indignation were smolde București,ring. The Hebrews in all strata joined the Hassideans and started the revolt against the Hellenists and against Antiochus IV Epiphanes [10].

#### **4. The persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes**

There were two reasons for dissensions in Jerusalem, and these brought about a great deal of suffering to the Hebrews. The Judeans were divided into two factions: the pro-Hellenists and the Hassidim. The first were encouraged by the successive and rival high priests Jason and Menelaus. The others were supported by the former high priest Onias III, as well as by a part of the population that endured with difficulty the Seleucid impositions in Jerusalem.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164), the younger brother of Seleucus IV (187-175), was hostage in Rome for a certain period of time. After the death of his brother, Antiochus became king of Damascus. The Hebrew writers considered Epiphanes as the model of the persecutor, as an odious villain [11]. Megalomaniac as he was, he had conferred on himself the title of Theos Epiphanes (the god that reveals himself; visible). Christian literature sees in him the figure of Antichrist [12]. Regarding the Judean religion as his implacable enemy, he decided to make it disappear. Under the death penalty, he forbade everything that that religion prescribed, especially circumcision and observing the Sabbath and the feasts; the Torah scrolls were burnt, and keeping them was declared a capital crime [13]. The first Book of the Maccabees (1.44-59) reflects how harsh this reality was for the Hebrews. All Hebrew sacrifices were forbidden. The temple in Jerusalem was used for the cult of Olympian Zeus [13]. They brought unclean animal sacrifices – especially pigs, in order to deeply offend the religious feeling of the devout – they brought courtesans into holy places, and in towns and villages they built pagan altars [11].

What was difficult for Judaism in this period of crisis was the fact that Antiochus was helped in the paganisation measures by some traitor priests, Jason and then Menelaus, who were very zealous and adulatory towards his policy. Despite this suffering, because of some defenders of the Law the people remained faithful and immovable. Refusing to give in, many died as martyrs, whereas others sought deliverance through escape, in exile.

Soon, this passive resistance increased and even aggravated, turning into an open revolt [11].

## **5. The Maccabean war**

The people faithful to the Law were the ones who turned a religious polemic into a revolt against the occupation force. In the town of Modein, situated at the foot of Judas' hills, eight kilometers away from Lida, a Hebrew reformer, who supervised the new official ceremony, was killed by the priest Mattathias, the head of an ancient sacerdotal family. Together with his five sons, Mattathias initiated a guerilla campaign against the Seleucid garrisons and Hebrew supporters. In two years (166-164) Judas Maccabee banished all the Greeks in the region around Jerusalem [13]. The ones who allied with the Maccabees were first of all the Hassidim (1 Maccabees 2.42-48). These had purely religious intentions. All they were interested in was the Law (Torah); they were not after any political advantage [11]. There were also Hebrews that allied with the Maccabees because of political reasons. They considered that it was better, in order to defend the Torah, to get political freedom, to reject Greek domination, and to establish an independent Hebrew state [12].

Forming small groups of rebels, they attacked different citadels, destroying the pagan altars, harassing the apostates, fighting a guerrilla war against the enemy. As a repression, the Seleucid troops sent against the rebels started one of the attacks on a Sabbath day. The Hebrew soldiers, not wanting to desecrate the holy day, did not fight, perishing without the smallest resistance. This is the reason why Mattathias emitted a decree, which acquired the power of a law, making defense compulsory if they were attacked on a Sabbath day.

After the death of Mattathias, the fight was continued by his five sons. The bravest of them was Judas, nicknamed Maccabee [9, p. 318]. A good tactician, he avoided battles face to face, preferring surprise attacks. Thus, he defeated the Syrian armies, which were much more numerous and better equipped. He managed to banish the enemy from Jerusalem, reconquered the Temple, and and rededicated it, instituting the festival of Hanukkah [9, p. 289-299].

A short while after the temple was reconquered, Antiochus IV Epiphanes died, and after a few battles in which every side had victories and defeats, peace was concluded in 163. The Hebrews obtained the right to *"live after their laws, as they did before: for they are therefore displeased and have done all these things, because we abolished their laws"* (1 Maccabees 6.59) [14].

The victory of the Torah over Hellenism was complete and decisive [11, p. 116]. The religious cause for which the Maccabees rose in arms was no longer a question of life and death. However, the devout Hebrews suffered for their faith and for their ideal under the Maccabean rule, too. The fight for political liberation continued for more than twenty years. One after the other, four of the Maccabee brothers lost their lives. In 143 B.C. Simon, the last Maccabee survivor, banished the Syrians from Jerusalem, as it is written in 1 Maccabees 13.41: *“the yoke of the heathen was taken away from Israel”*, and he was declared *“governor and high priest forever”* (1 Maccabees 14.41).

## **6. The political parties – in religious confrontation**

The bad repressive measures of Antiochus IV Epiphanes attracted all the Hebrews of all religious factions and from all social strata to gather under the flag of the Hasmoneans, as a gesture of protest, not so much against Hellenism, but against the denial of religious liberty. Many Hebrews, especially from the aristocratic society, had wanted a certain degree of Hellenisation. After the victory against the Seleucids, there was no longer an ideal to keep these divergent groups united. Lacking external pressure, the internal pressure of the pro-Hellenist Hebrews caused the Hassidim to divide in three new parties: the Essenes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees [3, p. 96]. The community of the Essenes was formed from the nucleus of the former Hassidean party. Denying politics, they withdrew from secular life and dedicated their life to religious contemplation.

The anti-Hellenists from the Hassidean party, who did not agree with the extremist style of life of the Essenes, formed a second party, known under the name of Pharisees.

The pro-Hellenists who had joined the Hassideans only in order to fight their common enemy, formed their own party, that of Sadducees [15]. The Sadducees considered that neither the country nor Judaism would be in danger from the influence of the Hellenistic culture. The Pharisees were against Hellenism, because it represented a foreign culture. They insisted very much on the oral Law and on the tradition of the great masters of the Law.

The conflicts between the two parties started after Simon Maccabee (143-135) was killed by his son-in-law. Simon's son, John Hyrcanus (135-104) (1 Maccabees 16.11-23) was crowned king and anointed high priest [12]. The Pharisees did not agree with this double post of the new leader. They asked Hyrcanus to give up the position of high priest. Driven by anger, Hyrcanus abandoned the Pharisees and joined the Sadducees, adopting also a few Hellenisation measures for his country [3, p. 97]. The ascension to the throne of Aristobulus I (104-103), the son of Hyrcanus, was marked by murders. He was a zealous Sadducee. He killed his mother and a brother, he thrust his other brothers into the dungeon, and he got possession of the throne and the garments of high priest. He was followed by his brother Alexander Yannai (103-76). During his reign, the schism between the Pharisees and the Sadducees reached

its climax. Rabbinic sources recorded the fight between the monarch and the Pharisees, defined as a social, economic, and religious confrontation [15, p. 93]. It ended up in a civil war between the Pharisees and the Sadducees with collateral casualties.

Flavius Josephus recorded a terrible event during the reign of Alexander Yannai. At the end of a civil war, he returned triumphant to Jerusalem, bringing along many of his Pharisees enemies as prisoners. Afterwards “he did one of the most barbarous actions in the world...for as he was feasting with his concubines, in the sight of the entire city, he ordered about eight hundred of them to be crucified; and while they were living, he ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes” [13, p. 174]. In one of the Qumran sources there is a reference to this sadistic episode: “the lion of anger...when he hangs men alive” [14, p. 94].

At the death of Alexander Yannai, the Judean world was divided. Realizing this, the heiress of the throne, Salome Alexandra (76-67) tried to re-establish internal unity by co-opting the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin and through measures that made the oral Law be accepted by the royal justice.

After her death, her two sons, Hyrcanus II (63-40) and Aristobulus II (66-63), were in conflict with one another, causing new suffering to the people. Through the intervention of General Pompey (63), the representative of the Roman Empire, Judea became a client state of Rome [16].

## **7. The theology of suffering and of martyrdom**

The Maccabean crisis affected the equilibrium in Judaic society that had been established and elaborated at the return from the Babylonian exile. It refers to observing the law, and honoring the Temple and the dignity of priests – all these constituting an inseparable unit guaranteeing divine protection. The introduction of foreign morals influenced the cultural integrity, which made the devout Hebrews feel threatened and react, at the risk of punishments and implicitly of suffering [17].

The Maccabean period was marked by the appearance of new theological orientations concerning the context of persecution. Unanticipated political and religious situations raised questions about violence in society, but also about the crystallisation of some reflections on the problem of suffering and martyrdom [18].

### **7.1. The events and their interpretation**

All the data provided by the First and Second Book of the Maccabees, or the Book of Daniel, do not render an exact, clear, and precise situation of the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes of the Hebrews [19]. The First Book of the Maccabees states that the one who had a copy of the Law, or circumcised a newborn, or in general observed the proscriptions of the Torah, was condemned to death (1 Maccabees 1.50, 56-57, 60-63) [20]. The author of the book also adds:

“However, many in Israel were fully resolved and confirmed in themselves not to eat any unclean thing. Why then the rather to die, that they might not be defiled with meats and that they might not profane the holy covenant: so then they died. And there was very great wrath upon Israel.” (1 Maccabees 1.65-67) There is also the example of the devout Hebrews, who, fleeing into the wilderness in order to remain clean from all these flagrant transgressions of the Law, let themselves killed, rather than transgress the Sabbath (1 Maccabees 2.29-38). The biblical account insinuates that they could not escape their persecutors even there, but does not give details of the violence and sufferings endured by the devout people [21].

The Torah, with its concrete regulations, proved to be the most efficacious barrier against foreign influences; it was, naturally, the first one exposed to the attacks of Hellenism. The covenant with the Peoples exposed them to multiple temptations [19, p.71]. If a young Judean had wanted to take part in the habitual activity of the Greek life, *the fathers' customs* would have been too heavy a yoke to bear, which would have obliged him to an isolation difficult to endure. It was also the case with food proscriptions, but also physical exercises in a gymnasium where he would have had to appear almost naked [22]. This was the drama of Israel. Facing a civilisation that intended to unite people, if it wanted to remain faithful to itself, Judaism was a constant pertinacious figure.

The Second Book of the Maccabees mentions in much detail the suffering and martyrdom of Israel, insisting on the torment suffered by Eleazar, by the seven brothers and their mother (2 Maccabees 6.18-7.41). The author of the Second Book of the Maccabees does not hesitate to present the reader with the macabre details of the death of Razis (2 Maccabees 14.37-46).

Except for these two accounts, it is difficult to define the exact nature of the events, just as it is difficult to consider the exact responsibility of the Seleucid Sovereign [12]. However, we must see here the reality of martyrdom, expressed through the exemplary suffering of some of the Judeans of those times. Any death occurring through oppression and martyrdom means suffering. A man who dies represents something from God's image that disappears, for each human being was created in the image of God [23].

The intervention of Antiochus IV in the affairs of the Temple poisoned even more the relations between the Hellenist Judeans and the devout ones. He maintained a climate of violence among the people. The opposition of the Hassidim took the form of revolt and direct political opposition, which made the king intervene in order to protect the Hellenist Judeans, who were favorable to him. The deep breach between the Judeans allows us to observe why the Hellenists were forced to appeal to Greek forces for protection. Thus, we can say that the beginning of the crisis is an ambivalent one, because it has the aspect of a persecution, but also that of a civil war [20, p. 72-73].

This aspect of the fight for the holy Law is highlighted. The Israelites fought for the Torah, united by the battle-cry of Mattathias: “whoever is zealous of the law and maintains the covenant, let him follow me” (1 Maccabees 2.27). The Judeans in the Hellenist party also benefitted from the support of the official

representative of the Temple's priests, that is, high priest Jason and then high priest Alcimus (1 Maccabees 7.5). Never was Judaism in such great danger of being persecuted by foreign dominations, betrayed by the faithful, and, moreover, abandoned by its own priests [24].

The difficulty in reconstituting the events accurately is due to the fact that the texts in 1 and 2 Maccabees do not indicate a minute account of the facts. The existence of parallel accounts in 3 and 4 Maccabees, as well as of the three young men in the burning furnace (Daniel 3.8-23, 24-30) or that of Daniel in the lions' den (Daniel 6.17-25, 14.31-42) indicate that in the second century B.C., starting from historical facts a literary trend developed that produced an apocalyptic literature, in which is suggested what Judeans suffered and how many privations they had to endure in order to preserve their faith [18, p. 251]. The account in 2 Maccabees has a higher purpose, that of offering moral teachings for the successors. In difficult times suffering led to death, only so that people could remain faithful to the Torah.

The fictional framework that lies behind the history of Daniel makes us think that there are imagined schemes, in order to edify the people subject to trials. The purpose is that of transmitting moral teachings to the readers (2 Maccabees 6.12: "Now, I beseech those who read this book that they not be discouraged for these calamities, but they judge those punishments not to be for destruction, but for a chastening of our nation").

Consequently, the accuracy of facts is less important than the moral we can extract from the text [20, p. 73].

## ***7.2. The meaning of martyrdom and suffering***

The word *martyr* is a term borrowed from the Greek juridical vocabulary, and etymologically it means 'witness'; the confession can be of historical, juridical, or religious nature. But in the general usage, the verb makes us think of the testimony of the witness. In the Christian tradition, the name of martyr is applied exclusively to the one who gives the confession of blood. This use is attested in the New Testament (Acts 22.20; Apocalypse 2.13, 6.9, 17.6): the martyr is the one who gives his life out of loyalty to the confession of Christ (Acts 7.56) [25]. It might appear inopportune or inexact to use this term for the victims of the Seleucid power, even though the Fathers of the Church made reference to the seven brothers (2 Maccabees 7.1-42) who suffered, regarding them as the prototype of the Christian martyrs [12]. On the other hand, the holy texts from this period show explicitly that the Judean confessors accepted suffering willingly, and when they were tortured, they remained loyal to their faith.

The pagans understood the acceptance of martyrdom as a form of religious fanaticism, to the extent that exclusive monotheism, contrary to polytheism, was considered a proof of atheism and intolerance. Some Greek authors judged very harshly the observance of the Judaic laws and denounced them as absurd. The most eloquent testimony in this respect is the epical texture

in the fourth book of the Maccabees [26]. Elder Eleazar tries to demonstrate the value and importance of the Law: the Torah is not against reason, as it helps one control passions and accept any punishment: “You scoff at our philosophy as though living by it were irrational, but it teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only real God” (4 Maccabees 5.22-24). The fourth Book of the Maccabees shows the resistance to persecutors and the ‘*observance of the ancient law*’. In the pages of the book, tyranny is confronted and moral strength is praised [26, p. 212].

The seven Judean young men are fighters, who, through patience and suffering, defeated the ones that ‘*afflicted them*’. The power to dominate one’s passions corresponds to the encratism of Greek philosophy and found later in some Christian apocrypha from the second century A.D. [27].

The law is rational, as it is affirmed by the mother of the seven martyred Judean brothers, for whom the Torah is dearer than her own sons (4 Maccabees 15.1). The praise of the mother of the seven brothers is remarkable. She herself describes the power that made her strong when facing tortures: “If, then, a woman, advanced in years and mother of seven sons, endured seeing her children tortured to death, it must be admitted that devout reason is sovereign over the emotions. Thus I have demonstrated not only that men have ruled over the emotions, but also that a woman has despised the fiercest tortures.” (4 Maccabees 16.1-2) [26, p. 213]

Starting from these considerations, we might say that from a Judaic and Christian point of view, martyrdom corresponds to a notion as simple as it is rich. First, one can say that loyalty, imposed up to the acceptance of death, is a test of personal perfection. Eleazar, who is urged *to pretend*, answers his *friends*: “For it becomes not our age, in any way to dissemble, by which many young persons might think that Eleazar, being fourscore years old and ten, were now gone to a strange religion; and so they through my hypocrisy and desire to live a little time and a moment longer, should be deceived by me and I get a stain to my old age and make it abominable” (2 Maccabees 6.24-25) [28].

The argument is a logical one from an intellectual point of view. In a situation of religious persecution only a clear and public reaction allows the attestation of an authentic loyalty to faith.

On the other hand, the martyr plays the part of an intercessor. This conception is not expressed in a systematic manner, but is often implicit. One of the Judean martyr brothers addresses the sovereign, saying: “For we suffer for our sins. And though the living Lord be angry with us a little while for our chastening and correction, yet shall he be at one again with his servants” (2 Maccabees 7.32-33). We must understand that those who suffer martyrdom are those who did not break the Law, therefore, the young man assumes implicitly a collective responsibility, and the direct blame in this case belongs to the Hellenists. The confession corresponds here to a personal decision, but the sins

of others are also taken into consideration for the punishment sent by God [12].

The idea of the Judean missionary appears in the *Sibylline Oracles*. In a language that reminds one of the imprecations of prophet Isaiah, Sybilla compares the glory and grandeur of a unique God to the madness of idolatry, menacing with the fire of hell those who do not repent and do not abandon pagan customs, promising the righteous a place in the *green paradise*, where “they will eat soft bread descended from the skies sowed with stars” [29]. For the times to come, the author declares that Hellenists will admit the stupidity and the sin of idolatry and will join the adoration of the Supreme Divinity [30].

In these intertestamentary writings, there appears the providential meaning of persecution, that of reinforcing those who are faithful to the Torah. The importance of food interdictions, of the Sabbath and the holiness of the Temple, attests that irrespective of how hard life is, of how many pressures the true faithful are subject to, divine protection manifests every time. Consequently, the violence of the reprisals has an explanation susceptible to going beyond traditional moral or, at least, the narrative frame. Here is the answer to these suspicions: “Now, I beseech those who read this book that they not be discouraged for these calamities, but they judge those punishments not to be for destruction, but for a chastening of our nation” (2 Maccabees 6.12). The author comes back and mentions that the persecution is a just punishment because of the transgressions from the law made by the Hellenists. But he does not foresee a catastrophe like that of 587 B.C.; on the contrary, persecution is allowed by God for a purification: “For it is a token of great goodness when wicked doers are not suffered any long time, but at once punished” (2 Maccabees 6.13) [12, p. 46].

There is a punishment pedagogy: “Indeed, it is not as with other nations, whom the Lord patiently refrains from punishing, until they be come to the fullness of their sins, so deals he with us, for fear that, having come to the height of sin, afterwards he should take vengeance of us. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us: and though he punishes with adversity, yet does he never forsake his people.” (2 Maccabees 6.14-15)

The lesson is clear: persecution does not mean abandonment by God, but on the contrary, a special care for His people (2 Maccabees 6.16: “But let this that we have spoken be for a warning to us”).

If at a personal level the righteous suffer blows both in their body and in daily life, the trials to which they are subject serve for the common good. It is not a strictly historical importance, but especially exemplar cases, that are meant to provide moral teaching and encouragement in every stage of life that suffering penetrates.

## **8. Conclusions**

The deportation of the Hebrews into Babylon after the defeats in 598 and 587 B.C. was the cause that raised fundamental questions concerning the Judaic tradition referring to a certain place. On the one hand, the question arises of the organisation of the ancient Judean community in a foreign land, under the rule of

a foreign king and under the temptation of pagan worship, and on the other hand, the consolation of the exiled that need to have explained the disaster they have experienced and what hope there is for the future. Jehovah was not defeated by Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, but He punished the people for their disobedience to the Law and the prophets. The pagan divinities are nothing but man-made idols, whereas Jehovah is the only almighty God, Who guards and protects the faithful people.

The same thing – the confrontation between the ones who remained faithful to Jehovah and the ones who accepted pagan deities – occurred in the second century B.C., in the so-called Maccabean period. The confrontation between Judaism and the values of the Greek culture seems to mark the failure of Ezra's reform. Some prophets did not cease to denounce the mistakes of the people and of its rulers, but after the return from exile they kept in mind the unification through the ancient laws and the separation from the other peoples, so as to avoid the return to 'prostitution'.

The epoch of Antiochus IV Epiphanes marked a radical and irreversible breach with all that had happened up to that moment in the Judean people, which led to the appearance of a new spirituality. The scheme of the Judean life, through which the observance of the commandments and the cultural purity guaranteed the integrity of the people and the divine protection, was broken at a certain moment. The religious crisis engendered by the acceptance of the foreign, Hellenist culture brought a great deal of suffering to the devout Judeans. Thus, the armed insurrection caused by the ambition of a family – that of the Maccabees – brought political independence, but the price paid was not liked by the people. The Hassidean tendency oriented towards an accentuation of the individual morality: the personal observance of the Torah, which justified one in front of God. This was the starting point for the Pharisaic movement. They, the Pharisees, were the ones who emphasised and underlined religious life: the prayer, the synagogue, and the rabbi, in opposition to the Sadducees, who appreciated the priest, the temple, and the sacrifice. On the other hand, the Essenes separated from the undignified priesthood of the Hasmoneans and led an ascetic life for the final fight that would restore the Temple and the righteous in all purity.

The Judeans in the second century B.C. were satisfied with their fate, even in terrible afflictions or in difficult circumstances, being content with little and with the preservation of the ancient faith. They blamed the Greeks and Egyptians for their imprudent life and for their infamous vices. The literature that appeared in this period in the Judean milieu had hopes for the future in which the present, natural, and temporal order of the world made way for a supernatural and eternal world that would come by divine intervention. The idea of a heavenly Messiah, Anointed of God, is connected to this eschatological future, endowed with a divine authority, reigning full of glory in a restored Israel. Man does nothing to hurry this ending. The faithful must often endure and suffer and wait with faith for the miraculous liberation and the reward they deserve.

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