***2 Maccabees* and the Origins of Atticism**

**1. Preliminary remarks**

It is a small jewel of educated and refined Greek in the multiform, and not always elegant universe of the *Septuagint*, but also the work of a *geschwätzig*[[1]](#footnote-1) [garrulous, chatty] writer, who loves *lexical variatio* and manifests an unwavering commitment to the values of Judaism, albeit clad in the best Greek prose from the II century B.C.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is how the *Second Book of Maccabees* still comes across today, more than 150 years since Carl W. L. Grimm’s great commentary, published in Leipzig in 1857.

After Grimm’s commentary and Niese’s work, establishing the causes of the Maccabean revolt enjoyed renewed interest in the historiography of the twentieth century, in particular thanks to Arnaldo Momigliano and Elias Bickermann. Momigliano began by highlighting the phenomenon of resistance to denationalisation imposed on the Jews of Judaea within the context of more complex political relations between Ptolemies, Seleucids and various internal currents to Judaism, where the Tobiad dynasty played a dominant role,[[3]](#footnote-3) as powerful local lords established in the area beyond the Jordan already in the III century B.C.

The book *Der Gott der Makkabäer*, however, represents a break. Published in Berlin in 1937, its then forty-year-old author, Elias Bickermann, forcefully maintained that the source of the persecution unleashed by Antiochus IV was internal to the Jewish world.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Apart from these otherwise central historical issues, the text is remarkable within the *corpus* of *Septuagint* also for the original quality of its linguistic form, which was often compared with Polybius's prose, which is coeval with it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Its language is accurate, but not devoid of the most innovative *koiné* forms, which made this σύνταγμα stand out, but also unsuitable for synagogue reading: this eventually caused the Jewish communities to forget about its existence, also because it was written in Greek.

Scholars of the history of Judaism and Christianity, however, have brought new interesting contributions to bear on this work. The commentaries by Christian Habicht (1976), Jonathan Goldstein (1983), Daniel Schwartz (2008) and Robert Doran (2012), on the one hand, revisited problems previously raised by Robert Hanhart’s critical edition (1959, 19762, 20083). Among other things, they bring the question of the language of the text again into the limelight, in various ways: this is important, but not decisive for the purposes of dating the text.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In this chapter, I will focus on three major stylistic aspects, involving phonetics, morphology and lexicon, which can help to determine to what extent a trend towards Atticism, coexisting with some clear *koiné* features, can be detected in *2 Maccabees*.

**2. Some phonetic features**

Possibly more than any others, the phonetic aspect contributes to communicate ​​the book’s grammatical erudition to the reader and to consider it as a product of Atticism.

Another interesting Attic Greek nuance is given by the neologism γλωττοτοµεῖν 'cut the tongue off' (7.4) instead of γλῶσσα (3x), where the New Testament would only employ γλῶσσα 'language' and γλωσσόκοµον ‘crate’. In agreement with *4 Macc*. (10.19, 12.13), the author of the epitome prefers using Attic Greek consonants in a neologism, a more marked choice -it seems to me- than using a common term such as γλῶσσα. His method is even clearer in the use of the comparative ἥττων.

**3. Morphological features**

[[7]](#footnote-7) [PLACEHOLDER 7]

[[8]](#footnote-8) [PLACEHOLDER 8]

As regards verbal morphology, even the ending in -αν, imported from the aorist into to the third person plural of the perfect indicative, instead of -ασι, provides remarkable evidence of a low level *koinè* (καθέστηκαν at 10.21 and πέπρακαν at 14.5), far from any Attic Greek ambitions.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**4. Lexicon**

Among these rare terms or *hapax legomena* in the *Septuagint*, I shall focus on a few examples that I deem useful to clarify our author’s lexical choices, without any pretense of exhaustivity; said terms are at times shared with Polybius, whereas in other cases they are relatively independent choices; and finally, some words are clearly Hellenistic, and even out the book’s scholarly efforts with a persistent component from the *koinè*.

**4.1.**

The first of the analysed terms is ἀλκή 'force' (12.28), which in other books of the *Septuagint* is rare, and is attested in *Dan.* 11.4 and *3 Macc*. 3.18 and 6.12; in Polybius, it is attested only three times (10.41.7, 12.3.5 and in *fr*. 5).

This is a term that evokes an epic-tragic register, as demonstrated by the context within which it occurs: the Jews led by Judas Maccabeus, in the aftermath of the restoration of the Temple and of the institution of the feast of Hanukkah, organize an extensive campaign to recover cities and strategic positions in the region, including the city of Efron. A recurrent motif of this part of the narrative is the invocation to God, who often sends someone to help them.

The last critical edition, edited by Hanhart in 2008, has ὁλκάς ‘aspiration’, ‘propensity’, in this context possibly 'weight', as the Codex Alexandrinus and other smaller codices teach us, and considered *lectio difficilior* by the same Hanhart, Habicht, and Schwartz that accept it as such. The same textual problem is to be found in *Sirach* 29.13.

I believe that this textual choice does not conform to the style of the epitome’s author; moreover, it creates a semantically forced reading of the passage. Robert Doran’s choice seems more convincing: as in Rahlfs’s reading, he prefers ἀλκάς, from ἀλκή 'force', 'courage', whose plural in the sense of 'strengths' is attested in Euripides (*Rhes.* 933), Diodorus Siculus (2.43.1: διὰ τὰς ἀλκὰς καὶ τὴν ἀνδρείαν), Lucian (*Anach.* 35).[[10]](#footnote-10) ἀλκή is the fighter’s [soldier’s] virtue consisting in "faire face au péril".

The overall epic-tragic tone must also be taken into account: the author of *2 Macc*. somehow gives the text a Homeric character also by means of the animal vocabulary used (e.g. in *Il*. 21.573 & following, the panther, even if pierced through by a hunter’s weapon, does not forfeit the ἀλκή, but it rather attacks first or dies).[[11]](#footnote-11)

**4.3.**

A clearer micro-clue evidencing the zeal for Attic Greek comes from another term, one among many: the recovery of the particle γοῦν. The extremely frequent Attic Greek conjunction, with its limiting semantic value of 'at least', or the emphatic one of 'precisely' or that of an added explanation,[[12]](#footnote-12) occurs a handful of times in the *Septuagint (2 Macc.* 5.21, *4 Macc.* 2.2, 2.5, 2.8, 3.6),[[13]](#footnote-13) while in Polybius’s prose there are 19 occurrences. In view of its poor fortunes in later prose despite many archaizing attempts to reintroduce it, the deviation from contemporary language use is evident, as is the desire of attaining Attic literary levels.

As for the Hellenistic forms, I will limit myself here to three examples. The first one is the noun διάληψις (3.32) 'concept', *hapax* in *Septuagint*, but very frequent in the coeval Polybius (56x)*.* Consistent with the primary meaning of διαλαμβάνω, 'take', ‘seize by the middle’,is the still very concrete meaning of the phrase ἐκ διαλήψεως ‘(pierce) tip first’. However, stemming from the use of the verb in the sense of ‘to separate’, ‘to distinguish’(HDT. 1.190.1, Pol. 1.18.4), and then ‘to decide’, soon a parallel development stood out:the meaning of 'distinction', 'concept', 'judgment', already found in Plat. *Leg*. 777a, and mentioned here as one of Polybius’s clear lexical preferences (e.g. 2.50.11 and even more shockingly, in my opinion, 6.56.6, where he introduces the expression περὶ θεῶν διάληψις). But is this an exclusively ‘Polybian’ stylistic choice? In actual fact, it is not: another source is *Aristeas* (160, 234), wherein διάληψις means thinking of divine things, but this word would then be further used in the imperial literature and that of late antiquity, in the *Byzantine Hochsprache*, but significantly not in the *New Testament*.

A second example of a primarily Hellenistic form is the adverb ἀδιαλείπτως.

**5. Final remarks**

In my opinion, the author operates with ease between two, if not three, cultural and stylistic levels, which tend to be insulated one from the other, and thereby creates an original intersection between a high-level *koinè* and a highly expressive low-level one. The low-level *koinè* is the one that is most open to morphological, syntactical and semantic innovations coming from the spoken language, such as the diminutives (the *hapax* χρονίσκος ‘short time’ in 11.1), some verbs compounds with three prepositions (e.g. προεξαποστέλλω 'send first' in 12.21), the scarce use of the optative (3 or 4 times). These innovations were accepted in an unsystematic manner by writers, specifically by Polybius, Diodorus and by other historians of II and the I century B.C. Thus, it is difficult to determine in each case when the natural censorship of spoken language terms would kick in, which were best avoided in written language. This is especially true for the written language that has some literary pretensions (examples are the prefixed κατάκοπος in the meaning of ‘tired’ in 12.36, or the expressive ἐντινάσσω ‘to clash, to butt heads’ in 4.41, 11.11).

The second level is that of the high-level *koinè*, as attested by the wide and at times even stilted lexical variety, as well as by the dismissal of terms deemed too common.

At the grammatical level, even before reaching lexical meaning, a series of features conspire towards the same effect: the preservation of the demonstrative ὅδε (7 times), of the relative ὁποῖος (once in 11.37), the predilection for the relative connector ὅθεν 'where' (7 times), the use of the future participle and the deverbal adjectives in τέος (5 times).

Beyond these attempts to restore a linguistic norm, which we find even more striking because they originate from a Hellenized Jew, however, an important Hellenistic cultural component stands out in the text, and it is the subject of several evaluations in the studies mentioned here.

This culture, with its own autonomy regarding literary contents, also featured a precise repertoire of forms. I am referring to a type of vocabulary that I would describe as intellectualistic, often confined to bureaucratic uses, and consisting of abstract words or definitions belonging originally to philosophy, and specifically to Stoic philosophy (e.g. προκοπή 'progress' in 8.8). *2 Macc.* is the only book of the *Septuagint*, for example, which makes use of that Hellenistic concept of διάληψις 'conception' which Polybius seems not to be able to do without. Verbs such as διασαφέω 'clarify' (7x) and συννοέω ‘reflect (on)’ (3x), or the impersonal construction of συμβαίνω ‘to happen’[[14]](#footnote-14) belong to this register that fatefully swings between an epistolary style and a bureaucratic one. An adjective such as εὐαπάντητος ‘amiable, friendly' (14.9) seems to suffer, instead, from the Stoic categorization of virtues, as well as of its use at the Hellenistic courts.

Within this Hellenistic culture a lot is documented both in *2 Macc.* and Polybius, but there is an interesting part that Polybius seems to refuse *in toto*. For example, a typical Hellenistic form of *koinè* such as εὐστάθεια must have been disliked by Polybius, perhaps for the same reasons that were to determine Phrynichus’s condemnation in the II century A.D. The prose of *Aristeas* and *2 Macc.* demonstrates to be less formal, from this point of view.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Among those terms that are conspicuous for their absence, the case of a term such as εἰρωνεία 'dissimulation' (13.3) is peculiar, as a term linked to theories from the IV century B.C., and taken up again significantly by authors such as Philon, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch, or ἰδέα (3.16), used in *2 Macc*. with the meaning of ‘appearance’. The epitome also presents an original sample of vocabulary drawn from the rhetorical register: examples are verbs such as εἰσκυκλέομαι ‘move further in’ in the prologue (2.4) or δευτερολογέω ‘speak for the second time’ (13.22) in the narrative *corpus*, and a noun such as πρωταγωνιστής 'first row soldier' (9.11) used about Judah, who orders Nicanor's beheading after being victorious on the battlefield.

Different considerations obtain about the nods towards literary culture, a third possible stylistic level identified in the book, which corresponds to the ground on which the author’s multifarious readings emerge.

The nod to Thucydides in the prologue, however, is only one prose tessera in a mosaic that shines especially for the use of poetic terms. Some of these, such as ἀπήμαντος 'unharmed' (12.25), μόρος ‘fate’ (9.28, 13.7), σχέτλιος ‘unfortunate’ (15.5), στυγέω ‘to hate’ (5.8) or the preposition ἄτερ 'without' (12.15), a form such as ἄλγος 'pain' (3.17, which Polybius uses only once in a quote), or a term from the religious sphere such as θέμις 'norm' (6.20, 12.14), seem to point to the author’s reading of Homer and of tragedy. Impressed by the epochal impact of the Maccabees’ rebellion and Judah's and his men’s heroism, the author aspired to reproduce an epic shade specifically, for example through adverbial forms such as λεοντηδόν 'like lions' (11.11), ἀγεληδόν 'in flocks' (3.18, 14.14), or the neologism κρουνηδόν 'as a water source' (14.45).

Religious fervour and a taste for the classification of virtues probably explain the recovery of many nouns with moral content, linked to the sphere of war, which conspire to create the epic aura, and are specific to some parts of the book (which Momigliano compares to that of the *Book of Judges*), as εὐανδρία 'courage' (8.7, 15.17), εὐμένεια 'benevolence' (6.29), εὐτολμία 'boldness' (13.18): abstract and heroic concepts, which are difficult to integrate into the universe of -say- Polybius’s pragmatic historiography, who in fact avoids them, possibly because of personal style.

1. As described by Niese 1900, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The paradox of this text lies precisely in the apparent contradiction between the strongly Jewish content and its literary expression, which clearly revels in its Greek form. Habicht’s lapidary formulation (1979, 185) still works well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Specifically, the two studies published in the early 1930s: Momigliano, 1931 and Momigliano, 1931-1932. The historian would subsequently return to the book, especially to emphasize its celebratory character, similar in this to that of *Esther* and a model for another celebratory book, such as *3 Maccabees*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [NOTES 4 & 6 ARE NOT IN THE ORIGINAL TEXT] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The linguistic peculiarity of *2 Macc.,* compared to the other books of the *Septuagint,* is not a modern discovery. A fifth century A.D. reader such as St. Jerome, sensitive to the quality of the Greek belles-lettres, had already noticed the Greek origin of this text. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [NOTES 4 & 6 ARE NOT IN THE ORIGINAL TEXT] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thumb 1901, 186 pointed out the alternation between forms with and without contraction (τειχέων/πηχῶν), as well as other forms (μετοξύ instead of μεταξύ, ἄμεινα and βέλτια for ἀμείνονα and βελτίονα, the link σσ instead of ττ) as phenomena to explain, even remaining within the scope of a comparison between the individual books of the *Septuaginta* or of the *New Testament*, "im Sinne landschaftlicher Differenzen", which are a possibility, but difficult to define. Helbing declined to give an opinion on ὀρέων and χειλέων, which are common in late Greek: "Warum gerade ὀρέων und χειλέων ganz besonders zur Auflösung neigen, weiß ich nicht anzugeben" Helbing (1907, 41), while Mayser noted: "Auch der Gen. plural ist regelmäßig kontrahiert - mit verschwindenden Ausnahmen" including βλαβέων and κτενέων for κτηνῶν, that "brauchen nicht als Ionismen zu gelten, sondern haben ihr Analogon in anderen Formen vulgären auf - έων" (Mayser 1938, 37). On the other hand Moulton, who also attributed their success to the analogy with the genitives βασιλέων and πόλεων, did identify a Ionian influence in their use. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The first two passages (a, b) refer to Judah’s military campaigns, the siege of Caspis and of Efron, after the temple’s rededication. The third one (c) to the circumstances surrounding the death of Antioch IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is a very common phenomenon in inscriptions from the III century B.C., as evidenced for example from documents from Pergamon (Mandilaras 1972, 13-14) and usage in the LXX (Thackeray 1909, 212). It is known that Sextus Empiricus (*Adv. Gramm*. 213) would have qualified the form of the perfect in -αν as Hellenistic. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In fact, I believe that Consani’s is the most appropriate explanation: he points out the confusion between [a] and [o] among other Semitic traits in the Greek of the *Septuagint*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Moreover, Doran 2012, 233 notes that in previous literature there are frequent references to ἀλκή as the force of animals, which corresponds to a certain taste for imagery drawn from the animal world commonly evidenced in the epitome (just think of the adverbs λεοντηδόν and ἀγεληδόν). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Denniston 1954, 448-459 found only two examples in Homer, another two in Herodotus, whereas it was common in Attic Greek prose, except for Isocrates, who disliked a softer style. With respect to *2 Macc.* 5.21, Schwartz 2008, 263 ascribes to γοῦν the function of a narrative break marking the return to the narrated part of the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On this use in *4 Macc*., see also Breitenstein 1978, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This construction, however, was subsequently avoided by Attic Greek author Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Palm 1955, 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The verb εὐσταθέω ‘to be calm' is a rarity in Old Testament Greek: in addition to the author of *2 Macc*. (12.2, 14.25), it is found in *3* *Macc.* 7.4 and in the Greek translation of the book of *Jeremiah* (30.26). From a diachronic point of view, the oldest compound of the root *sta-* from ἵστημι with the prefix εὐ- is the Homeric adjective (9x) εὐσταθής ‘stable, firm', found in Hippocrates (4x), rare in the Greek of the *Septuagint*, attested only in the *Book of Esther* (3.13) and in *Sirach* (26.18) and absent in Polybius, who never uses that entire semantic family related to the concept of εὐστάθεια. As for the noun, εὐστάθεια is also rare in *Septuagint*: H&R quotes a passage of *2 Macc*. (14.6), two examples from *3 Macc.* (3.26, 6.28), one from *Wis*. 6.24 (βασιλεὺς φρόνιμος εὐστάθεια δήμου) and a passage from the *Book of Esther* (3.13). One can possibly infer a mostly political use, referring to the concept of kingship, also from *Aristeas* 216, 261 (Meecham 1935, 68). The author of *2 Macc*., in fact, introduces the concept of the stability of the kingdom, which is the same on which the priest Alcimus would insist some years later (14.6). This passage was compared by Abel (1949, 459) to that of Aman in the *Book of Esther* 3.13: τὸ μὴ τὴν βασιλείαν εὐσταθείας τυγχάνειν.

    The author of the epitome, or Jason himself, grants his εὐστάθεια with a lexical term which is distinctly not Attic, but rather Ionian (in Hippocrates 2x), which would have long been a reason for the grammarians' censorship. In this sense stern Phrynichus, who condemned the forms εὐστάθεια and εὐσταθής, was only accepting and justifying a criterion of taste that, while not openly reasoned, was -in my opinion- already implemented in Polybius. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)