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Judea versus Judaism: Between 1 and 2 Maccabees

Ancient tensions between Judaism and the Jewish state can be seen by comparing 1 Maccabees, a book that serves the interest of the Hasmonean dynasty, and 2 Maccabees, a work of the diaspora whose focus is on Judaism.

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Chanukah Lamp, by Frederick J. Kormis, London, England, 1950. The Jewish Museum

The story of the Hasmonean (or “Maccabean”) revolt is preserved in 1 and 2 Maccabees—two very different works, in style, content, and values.[1] To state the most obvious differences:

1 Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew (but preserved only in a Greek translation), and it tells the story of the entire revolt, beginning with Mattathias, and on through his sons Judah, Jonathan, Simon, and ending with the rise of the dynasty under Simon’s son, John Hyrcanus. It covers the period of roughly 175–134 B.C.E. 2 Maccabees, in contrast, was originally written in Greek, and it covers only the first part of that period, from 175–161 B.C.E., following the story only in the days of Judah Maccabee.

Sadducees versus Pharisees? Geiger’s Thesis

Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), one of the founders of Reform Judaism and a central figure in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the scientific study of Judaism), suggested in 1857 that each of the two books of Maccabees stems from a different branch of Second Temple Judaism.[2] In his view, 1 Maccabees is a Sadducean work, and 2 Maccabees is a Pharisaic response to it.

This is part of Geiger’s overall thesis that the Sadducees of the latter half of the Second Temple period—as described in the writings of Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinic literature—were a continuation of the Zadokite high priests, who were prominent of the first half of that period, in the absence of Jewish sovereignty. (Geiger assumes, as most scholars still do, that the name “Sadducees,” צדוקים, derives from “Zadokites.”[3]) Geiger argued that the Pharisees, who arose in the last three centuries of the Second Temple period and competed with the Sadducees, were not part of the priestly class.[4] After the destruction of the Temple this group eventually developed into Rabbinic Judaism.

Much can be said in support of Geiger’s characterization of the two works.

Pro-Hasmonean or Not

First, 1 Maccabees, written during the days of John Hyrcanus, the son of Simon the Maccabee, is a dynastic history that recounts the Hasmoneans’ rise to power and argues that their revolt and consequent rule were justified. As the Hasmoneans were high priests, it makes sense to associate them with the Sadducees. Indeed, as reported by Josephus (*Ant.* 13.295–296), John Hyrcanus made an alliance with the Sadducees. This alliance led to the conflict with the Pharisees and their supporters in the days of his son, Alexander Jannaeus—a bloody civil war with tens of thousands of casualties (Josephus, *Ant*. 13.372–376).

2 Maccabees, in contrast, is not interested in the Hasmonean dynasty. Judah Maccabee, the successful leader of the war against the Seleucids, is a hero of 2 Maccabees, but not a word is said about his father Mattathias or the Hasmonean dynasty that Judah’s brother Simon will found. In fact, the two short references to Simon (2 Macc 10:20; 14:17) portray him as a something of a bumbler. It is not clear whether that was meant as criticism of his dynasty (as Geiger and others have thought) or only reflected lack of concern with it, perhaps even lack of knowledge of it, but one way or another, the book is not a dynastic history.

Theological differences

A well-known theological divide between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was the belief in resurrection: the Pharisees believed in it, and the Sadducees did not.[5] This divide is reflected in the two books.

In 2 Maccabees, Judah raises money to bring sacrifices on behalf of dead soldiers to ensure their future resurrection and the author approves quite emphatically:

2 Macc 12:43 After making a collection for each man, totaling around 2000 silver drachmas, he sent it to Jerusalem for the bringing of a sin-offering – doing very properly and honorably in taking account of resurrection, 12:44 for had he not expected that the fallen would be resurrected, it would have been pointless and silly to pray for the dead – 12:45 and having in view the most beautiful reward that awaits those who lie down in piety – a holy and pious notion. Therefore he did atonement for the dead, in order that they be released from the sin.[6]

In contrast, 1 Maccabees makes no reference at all to belief in resurrection.

The role of prayer in the two books also differs: in 2 Maccabees, prayer is ubiquitous, whereas it is mostly absent in 1 Maccabees.[7] Prayer competed with sacrifice as a mode of worship, and did not need priests to mediate it. It thus makes sense that it would be a key feature of the Pharisaic 2 Maccabees, while the Sadducean 1 Maccabees would not emphasize it.

Points such as these, about the books’ differential attitudes toward the Hasmoneans, resurrection, and prayer, support Geiger’s characterization of the books.

Difficulties with Geiger’s Thesis

Nevertheless, Geiger’s thesis did not win much support. Neither work explicitly mentions Zadokites, Sadducees, or Pharisees, and that imposes quite a heavy burden of proof upon anyone who would claim that they are, respectively, Sadducean and Pharisaic tracts. Furthermore, there is no evidence that 2 Maccabees is responding to 1 Maccabees; indeed, it might be earlier than 1 Maccabees.

Most significantly, 2 Maccabees, as the book’s preface explains, (2:23), is an abbreviation of a work by a Jew named Jason living in Cyrene (Libya), and we have no evidence for Pharisees and Sadducees outside of Palestine. As for 2 Maccabees’ failure to relate to the Hasmonean dynasty, that might derive merely from it being composed before that dynasty became established.

Reformulating Geiger’s Theory

Despite these objections to the specific formulation of this theory, Geiger’s observation of significant differences between 1 and 2 Maccabees is still valid and deserves further explanation, along with some modification.

1 Maccabees has a Judean orientation, and is meant to serve the interests of a Hasmonean dynasty that ruled Judea. In contrast, 2 Maccabees is a diasporic work, and is interested in “Judaism,” a word that is absent from 1 Maccabees but appears several times in 2 Maccabees (2:21; 8:1; 14:38). Thus, the contrast between 1 and 2 Maccabees is better formulated as between a Judean work and a Judaic work: one oriented around a state and one oriented around a religion.

Indeed, Geiger’s hypothesis about a Sadducean work versus a Pharisaic one can be tweaked and rephrased, on the basis of the recognition that Sadducean values are basically Judean values, while Pharisaic ones, wherever they are found, are essentially, diasporic—Judaic, not Judean.[8]

With this in mind, we can approach the differences between these two books anew:

a. Judean vs. Diasporic

1 Maccabees is clearly of Judean origin: The book’s orientation is around the ruling dynasty of Judea, it relates to Judean geography in a detailed way that bespeaks familiarity, and the book’s original language was Hebrew.

As for 2 Maccabees: most scholars hold that it originated in the diaspora, as may be inferred from such points as the fact that Jason of Cyrene wrote the text that 2 Maccabees abridges, that the work has a positive attitude toward Gentile rule and Gentiles in general, that it expresses little interest in and knowledge of Judean geography, and that it is written in good Hellenistic Greek.

b.The Sadducees Were a Priestly Party

As Geiger observed, the Sadducees were oriented around the high priesthood. The New Testament’s Acts of the Apostles takes this as a given, when it describes the reaction of the priests (*kohanim*) to Peter’s gathering a large group of followers:

Acts 5:17 Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy… (NRSV)[9]

The same assumption is at the core of the Talmudic story (b.*Yoma* 19b) in which a high priest explains the reason that he followed a Pharisaic practice אף על פי שצדוקין אנו “Even though we are Sadducees…”

Priests are defined by their *descent* (from Aaron), and they alone were allowed to serve in the Temple. Thus, Sadducean Judaism thrived in Jerusalem, where the Temple stood. In the diaspora, however, Jews preferred to view God as the “God of Heaven,” as present and accessible even outside the land of Israel.

The tension between God being in the Temple and God dwelling in heaven is laid out in a humorous anecdote narrating the conversation between the Seleucid king[10] and his general Heliodorus, who had just been vanquished by a miraculous intervention when he tried to rob the Jerusalem Temple:

2 Macc 3:37 When the king asked Heliodorus, “Who would be the most appropriate person to send some other time to Jerusalem?” he said: 3:38 “If you have some enemy or conspirator against the state, send him thither, and you’ll get him back flogged, if he survives at all; for around that place there is truly some power of God. 3:39 For He, though He has His residence in heaven, watches over and aids that place and with blows destroys those who come there to do evil.”

Here God watches over the Temple, but lives in heaven, where he can see everywhere in the world, including the diaspora.

c. Pharisees Were Largely Diasporic

The leaders of the Pharisees were sages—later they develop into “rabbis”—who were endowed with their standing not by their pedigree but by their learning and/or charisma. They were not connected to the Jerusalem Temple, and functioned wherever their followers established houses of study or synagogues.

Diaspora Jews, quite naturally, tended to concentrate on the importance of people rather than the place, something that 2 Maccabees even states stridently:

2 Macc 5:19 But God did not choose the people on account of the Place; rather, He chose the Place on account of the people.

Thus the Pharisees, who lived in Judea, shared this basic value with diasporic Judaism.

d. Attitude towards Gentiles

Diaspora Jews were used to rubbing shoulders with Gentiles. That easily leads—in hospitable contexts, such as those of the Hellenistic world—to an undercutting of the Jew vs. non-Jew distinction. Thus, 2 Maccabees frequently emphasizes the goodwill of the Jews’ neighbors (e.g., 4:35–36, 49; 12:30–31).

This explains an important difference in how each book perceives Antiochus IV Epiphanes. For 2 Maccabees, he was an exception to the rule, for Gentile kings, even Antiochus’ brother, were, as a rule, beneficent to the Jews. Indeed, before an internal squabble between competitors for the high priesthood involved the Seleucid king in a negative way, Judea was living in an ideal state underwritten by Gentile kings:

2 Macc 3:1 The Holy City being inhabited in complete peace and the laws being observed optimally due to the high priest Onias’ piety and hatred of evil, 3:2 it happened that the kings themselves used to honor the Place and aggrandize the Temple with the most outstanding gifts, 3:3 just as King Seleucus of Asia used to supply out of his own revenues all the expenses incurred for the sacrificial offices.[11]

In contrast, for 1 Maccabees, the wicked Antiochus was a typical Greek king. Seleucid kings are all wicked and perfidious, and (1 Macc 1:9) “multiplied evils on the earth.”[12] Antiochus may have been an extreme case, but, according to 1 Maccabees, he was no exception. Any ascription of goodwill to Syrian kings or to the Judeans’ neighbors would undermine the Hasmonean dynasty. Indeed, 1 Maccabees often refers quite sweepingly to “the Gentiles around us” as murderous and hostile (5:1, 10, 38, 57; 12:13, 53).

e. Wicked Greeks or Sinful Jews?

For 1 Maccabees, Judeans suffer because the wicked Greek kings and the Judeans’ nasty neighbors persecute them, and they are rescued by the valiant efforts of military heroes, the Hasmoneans.

For 2 Maccabees, in contrast, Jews suffer because their sins cause God “to hide His face” (as it is put in Deut 31:17 and 32:20, paraphrased in 2 Macc 5:17[13]), i.e., to suspend his providence. They are rescued through the death of Jewish martyrs, which serves as an atonement (chs. 6–7), and so God’s “wrath turns into mercy,” allowing Judah Maccabee to be victorious:

2 Macc 8:5 As soon as Maccabaeus got his corps together, he could not be withstood by the Gentiles, the Lord’s anger having turned into mercy.[14]

f. Martyrdom

For the diasporic 2 Maccabees, whose expected readers—like Christians in the Roman empire—could not contemplate military resistance if ever oppressed, martyrdom, in the hope that it would move God to intervene, is the best they could do and, indeed, it is effective: 2 Macc 8:5, which was just quoted, is the turning-point of the entire story.[15]

For 1 Maccabees, in contrast, martyrs, who are killed due to their adherence to Jewish religion, accomplish nothing; they are part of the problem, not the solution, and are, however it is phrased, no more than pious fools.[16]

g. A State-Oriented Book

1 Maccabees never mentions “Lord” or “God,” and although it does refer to God a few times as “heaven,” that is mostly limited to the first few chapters.[17] As noted, it makes little reference to prayer, and never mentions sin and atonement, angels, heavenly apparitions, or miracles. 1 Maccabees further takes the trouble to note, more than once, that prophecy has ceased (4:46; 9:27).

For 1 Maccabees, that is, especially after the first few chapters, God has nothing to do with what happens on earth. The Hasmoneans were high priests, but that was only a governmental position.[18] Jonathan’s rise to the high-priesthood, for example, is important insofar as it allows him to build up his army:

1 Macc 10:21 So Jonathan donned the holy vestment in the seventh month of the 160th year, on the festival of Tabernacles, and he assembled troops and prepared numerous weapons.[19]

h. Chance or Providence?

Finally, 1 Maccabees repeatedly attributes events and their outcomes to blind chance (Greek: *kairos*); you win some and you lose some (9:10; 12:1; 15:33–34). This goes hand in hand with 1 Maccabees’ failure to ascribe to sin and atonement any role in explaining the ups and downs of its story. This is quite different from 2 Maccabees’ insistence on divine providence, but is a necessary part of a tract meant to support the political state of Judea.

No one in a Judean state, with a Judean army, could subscribe to the assertion of 2 Maccabees that the Jewish soldiers who die in battle must be guilty of a sin, for otherwise God might be suspected of injustice (2 Macc 12:40–41). That can be said only by someone living in the diaspora interested in inculcating belief in divine providence, who had no need to worry that his son might one day have to fight in a Judean army.

Ancient Tensions between Judaism and the Judean State

The comparison of these two books leads us to contemplate tensions between Judaism and a Jewish state. 1 Maccabees provides us with a glimpse of the values of the dynasty that rebelled, was victorious, and managed to rule Judea for close to eighty years, from the end of Seleucid rule in 142 B.C.E. (1 Macc 13:41) until the Roman conquest in 63 B.C.E. That dynasty, as we know from Josephus, came into conflict with opposing religious groups, led by the Pharisees—a conflict that eventually degenerated into a bloody civil war that helped pave the way for the Roman conquest.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provide some scraps of evidence for the motivations and values of those who opposed the Hasmoneans,[20] but 2 Maccabees provides a substantial statement of a religious view opposed to the Hasmoneans. True, it does not oppose the Hasmoneans directly; it was probably written too early for that, and also is written from a diasporic point of view. Nonetheless, these two books show an early tension between an orientation around Judaism and an orientation around a Jewish state, a tension that continues today as well.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/judea-versus-judaism-between-1-and-2-maccabees)

1. That is, these are not two parts of the same work (like 1 and 2 Samuel, for example), nor are they part of a series. They are independent works, both quite substantial (16 and 15 chapters, respectively). Neither work was preserved by Jews, but they can easily be found in any Catholic Bible or Protestant Apocrypha, including in online translations. As for the nomenclature, note that although “Maccabee” was, originally, the nickname of only one member of the Hasmonean clan, Judas (see 1 Macc 2:4), in popular usage it is common to use it, as does the title of 1 Maccabees, of the entire clan and dynasty.
2. Abraham Geiger, *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel in ihrer Abhängigkeit von der innern Entwickelung des Judenthums*[*The Original Text and Translations of the Bible in Their Dependence upon the Inner Development of Judaism*] (Breslau: Hainauer, 1857), 200–230. The first 230 pages of the work are a historical survey of the history of the Hebrew Bible in the Second Temple period; it is divided between Part I, on the history of the Bible between the return from Babylonia in the sixth century B.C.E., and Part II, on the history of the Bible between the Maccabees, in the second century B.C.E., and the days of Rabbi Akiba in the second century C.E. Although one of the foremost achievements of the early years of modern Jewish studies, Geiger’s *Urschrift* was never translated into English.
3. Geiger’s main thesis is expressed clearly by the titles of the opening chapter of the book’s first two parts, which are really a sequential whole: Part I opens with a chapter on “Die Zadokiden,” the Zadokite clan (*b’nei Zadok*) of high priests that was prominent in Judea in the post-exilic era, while Part II opens with a chapter on “Sadducäer und Pharisäer,” Sadducees and Pharisees.
4. Given human nature, and given Geiger’s own central role in the lively and often acerbic inner-Jewish disputes of the mid-nineteenth century, it is not surprising that he tended to view the Pharisees as not only non-priestly but also *anti*-priestly.
5. See esp. Josephus, *Ant*. 18.16, Luke 20:27, and Acts 23:6, also *m. Sanhedrin* 10:1. Editor’s note: See also discussion in Devorah Dimant, [“The Valley of Dry Bones and the Resurrection of the Dead,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-valley-of-dry-bones-and-the-resurrection-of-the-dead) *TheTorah* (2018).
6. All translations from 2 Maccabees are my own. See also in the story of the mother and her seven sons (7:22–23). Editor’s note: For a discussion of this story’s ideology, including the belief in resurrection, see Malka Z. Simkovich, [“The Faith of the Martyred Mother and her Seven Sons,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-faith-of-the-martyred-mother-and-her-seven-sons) *TheTorah* (2015).
7. The first four chapters are somewhat exceptional in this regard. This may be because the story of the rededication of the Temple, which appears in this section of the book, may have derived from a separate source.
8. Distinguishing between what makes something Judean versus what makes it Judaic, and how this relates to the Sadducee/Pharisee divide, is a complicated topic. With the help of predecessors and colleagues, I have done some of that in my *Judeans and Jews: Four Faces of Dichotomy in Ancient Jewish History* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2014) and my commentaries 2 Maccabees (De Gruyter, 2008) and *1 Maccabees* (soon to be published by Yale University Press).

Acts 5:17 Ἀναστὰς δὲ ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς καὶ πάντες οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ, ἡ οὖσα αἵρεσις τῶν Σαδδουκαίων, ἐπλήσθησαν ζήλου

1. The king is unnamed in the story, though in context, it is referring to Seleucus IV Philopator (187–175 B.C.E.).
2. See also 2 Maccabees 5:16, which refers to how Antiochus IV took from the Temple “the votive offerings which had been given by other kings for the aggrandizement, honor and respect of the Place.”
3. See also, on their perfidiousness, 1 Maccabees 6:62; 7:10; 10:46; 15:27.
4. For the sin-and-atonement scheme of Moses’s Song in Deut 32 as the basic scaffolding of 2 Maccabees, see my *2 Maccabees* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 20–22.
5. Note especially the author’s explicit lectures to his readers at 4:16–17; 5:17–20, and 6:12–17.
6. Note J. W. Van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabee*s (Leiden: Brill, 1997). 4 Maccabees is a later work based on 2 Maccabees. Editor’s note: See also, Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, [“2 and 4 Maccabees: Evolving Responses to Hellenism,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/2-and-4-maccabees-evolving-responses-to-hellenism) *TheTorah* (2018); Martin Lockshin, [“Chanukah: The Greek Influence of Martyrdom,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/chanukah-the-greek-influence-of-martyrdom) *TheTorah* (2017).
7. See especially 1 Maccabees 2:29–41 and 7:11–18.
8. As noted above, the reclamation of the Temple story in this section, which also includes references to prayer, may stem from a separate source.
9. As has been observed, “the priestly office did not correspond well to what the family really did; that was probably recognized by the author of 1 Maccabees himself. . . of high priesthood one notices [in 1 Maccabees, DRS] nothing but the title.” Diego Arenhoevel, *Die Theokratie nach dem 1. und 2. Makkabäerbuch* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag. 1967), 45–46.
10. Similarly, note the ingenuous report at 16:11–12 that “Ptolemy son of Aboubos had been appointed governor of the plain of Jericho and had much silver and gold, for he was the son-in-law of the high priest.”
11. See Hanan Eshel, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2008).