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Self-Portrayal as a ‘Fence around Torah’

An Ethical Critique of Eleazar’s Martyrdom in 2 Maccabees 6:18-31

Stefan M. Attard

Introduction and General Background of the Text

2 Maccabees 6:18-31 concerns persecution related to dietary laws and its main protagonist is an elderly scribe called Eleazar. The problem of persecution appears before 2 Macc 6, but the beginning of this chapter furnishes the precise framework in which the enemies of the Jews were operating (2 Macc 6:1-2a). This reference to the various kinds of flagrant profanities committed by the Greeks and tortures to which Jews were subjected if they refused to follow Greek customs introduces 2 Maccabees 6–7. From 6:18 onwards, the focus is on pagan ritual meals and how Jews were forced to participate in such unlawful sacrifices and to eat pork meat which was forbidden by Torah¹.

Prior to these accounts, vv. 12-17 constitute a redactional note wherein the author offers an explanation of the unfolding events². This parenthetical interjection deals with theodicy and interprets persecution as an anticipated form of suffering which Jews must bear. This suffering is not punishment for sin, as is the case with other nations, but discipline before sin reaches its full measure (v. 15). Though this theological position falls short of outrightly claiming that God’s people were without sin, it surely militates in favour of their innocence, particularly their resolve to abide by divine law in the Jewish tradition.

In the entire Old Testament, it is only in 2 Macc that the scriptures are referred to collectively as “the holy book” (τὴν ἱερὰν βίβλον, 8:23). By then, the

¹ Lev 11:7-8 and Deut 14:8, as well as Isa 65:4; 66:17; see DORAN, *2 Maccabees*, 152, on issues related to swine flesh and pig offerings.

² The redactor took the story of Eleazar from the five volumes of Jason of Cyrene; SCHOENBERG, *Maccabees*, 9-10: “It is difficult to determine whether the religious teaching and purpose of 2 Maccabees is also that of Jason of Cyrene, or whether such observations as 6:12-17; 12:43b-45 are added by the epitomist, thus reflecting his particular intent.”

Pentateuch and the Prophets were already identifiable corpuses such that Torah-consciousness was likely at its highest³. 2 Macc makes several references to the Law, employing different nominal or adjectival forms: νόμος (law); πρόσταγμα (ordinance, command); νομοθεσία (legislation); νομίμως (adv. lawfully); and their antonyms παράνομος and ἀθέμιτος (unlawful)⁴. In the initial salutations, an opening of the heart to God's Law and his ordinances is listed as one of the wishes that the author expresses (1:4). That the various mores mentioned, particularly dietary customs referred to in 6:18 and 7:1, are directly related to God's divine law and shaped by it can be inferred from the numerous references to it: 6:1.5.21.23.28; 7:2.9.11.23.30.37. It becomes evident that the religious and cultural mores of the Jews to which the narratives refer are embedded in divine law.

Within the larger scheme of the book, Eleazar's account belongs in the narrative concerning the onslaught on the Temple and the faithful that appear at the centre of the book⁵:

- I. Letter to the Jews in Egypt (1:1–2:18)
- II. Author's Preface (2:19-32)
- III. Heliodorus' Attempt to Profane the Temple (3:1-40)
- IV. *Profanation and Persecution* (4:1–7:42)
- V. Victories of Judas and Purification of the Temple (8:1–10:8)
- VI. Renewed Persecution (10:9–15:36)
- VII. Epilogue (15:37-39)

2 Maccabees 6–7 is a parallel narrative to 1 Macc 1:41-64, where king Antiochus is seen persecuting the Jews⁶. The former is an amplified narrative that further explains the latter, where it had been said that any scrolls of the Law

³ The majority of the texts of the Pentateuch and the Prophets seem to reflect an early period due to the presence of Archaic Biblical Hebrew, Classical Biblical Hebrew, and Transitional Biblical Hebrew; see Appendix I in HENDEL – JOOSTEN, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?*, 127-133. After perusing several documents, TREBOLLE BARRERA, *Origins*, 132-133, concludes that a tripartite structure of the scriptures already existed at the beginning of the 2nd cent. BCE, that is roughly before the accounts recounted in 1–2 Maccabees.

⁴ Among the pedagogical aims that can be gleaned from the book, SIMKOVICH, *Greek Influence*, 294-295, mentions the thirty-three references that are made to divine law as being one of them. One may also include the term ἔθος which, in 11:25 refers to a way of life in accordance with Jewish customs.

⁵ The Catholic Study Bible, 585.

⁶ See SCHOENBERG, *Maccabees*, 12.

were burnt and those possessing them put to death (1:56)⁷. Hence, the historical context can be compared to the later despicable events surrounding the persecution endured by Christians who, as a result, had to muster all the skills needed in order to preserve the sacred scriptures⁸. Concerning the importance of the already existent New Testament canon, E. Ferguson states: “Little attention has been paid to the factor of persecution in the history of the canon, but William R. Farmer has called attention to how suitable the New Testament canon was for strengthening Christians facing martyrdom”⁹. Eleazar’s martyrdom centuries earlier was an identical situation where persecution was courageously endured despite the destruction of already recognized canonical texts. This article seeks to gauge the relationship between the depiction of Eleazar’s martyrdom and the importance of Torah. Of particular interest here is the effect such accounts of persecution could have had on augmenting the way Torah was guarded by the faithful. It will be argued that this account of the destruction of a faithful individual through persecution – with due attention given to his impeccable moral character – was a means by which Torah itself was preserved from destruction, hence serving the same purpose as the later custom of creating laws that would function as a fence that safeguards Torah.

1 Analysis of the Text Proper

The structure of the text under investigation can be divided as follows:

- | | | |
|-----------|------------|---|
| a | v. 18 | Description of Eleazar and of the problem he faced. |
| b | vv. 19-20 | Eleazar’s noble reaction based on honour in relation to what is unlawful. |
| c | vv. 21-22 | <i>A way out</i> offered him concerning what was “prescribed by the king”. |
| b’ | v. 23 | Eleazar’s decision based on dignity in relation to what was “established by God”. |
| c’ | vv. 24-28a | Eleazar’s declaration against pretence based on how he would be viewed |

⁷ The narrative of Eleazar’s martyrdom is amplified further in 4 Macc 1:8; 5:1–7:25.

⁸ FERGUSON, Factors, 317, cites Eusebius who described how the sacred books were burnt at the imperial order.

⁹ FERGUSON, Factors, 316-317.

- by the young, his awareness of ultimate judgement (that is, *no way out*), and the venerable and holy laws.
- d** vv. 28b-30 His death is described, including his final words.
- e** v. 31 Narrator's remark about his nobility and virtue.

Eleazar's qualification as scribe (*γραμματεὺς*, v. 1) highlights his teaching role¹⁰. His behaviour in the story that unfolds will determine how suitably or otherwise he fits this role. He is described as being "already advanced in years" (v. 18), and mention is made of "the dignity of his great age and the well-earned distinction of his grey hairs" (v. 23) as well as his "old age" (v. 25). His behaviour contrasts sharply with that of a minor protagonist who appears at the beginning of the chapter, namely the *elderly* Athenian officer who enforces the king's command to violate Jewish laws¹¹. That Eleazar enjoyed good standing in the community is made further evident from the way he was treated by his eventual persecutors who offered him what seemed to them a justifiable means of escape. Their intention was to prevent him from dying (v. 22), rather than to set him as an example to be emulated by deceived fellow believers.

Two extant Coptic documents are "The Martyrs of the Jews Who Lived Under Antiochus the King", which is part of a Coptic document called the Crosby-Schøyen codex ms 193, and ms C of the Bibliothèque nationale Copte 135. They correspond to 2 Macc 5:27–7:41 and 5:27–7:21 respectively, though the latter may have included up to v. 41¹². The very fact that these texts existed as a separate tractate within a document and as a separate scroll respectively suggests that the genre of martyrdom played a somewhat significant role in early Judaism. Because ms 193 is not a formal translation of the Septuagint, there is some possibility that it points to a different Greek tradition, in which case variant readings would be particularly interesting. This is being pointed out because ms 193 has a slight but not insignificant conflation concerning the beauty of Eleazar's form. The text adds a reference to his height as follows:

¹⁰ Several New Testament texts point to the teaching role of scribes, e.g. Matt 2:4; 13:52; 23:2.34; Mark 1:22; Luke 5:21; 1 Cor 1:20.

¹¹ The noun *γέροντα* in v. 1 is a predication of Ἀθηναῖον with which it accords in its accusative case. NJB reads *γέροντα* as a proper noun: "Gerontes the Athenian". Here, we partly follow the NRSV interpretation which reads the Greek term as an adjectival noun: "an Athenian senator", though the notion of old age should be retained. See 4 Macc 8:2; 16:17; Sir 25:2 for an identical reading (i.e. "aged man").

¹² See MELTZER – BETHGE, *The Jewish Martyrs*, 83.

Eleazar was one of <the> great sages (γραμματεὺς), a man who waxed great in his age, *who was tall* (ἄλλος), who was beautiful in his form of his face...¹³

Tallness of stature is added in order to enhance his gravitas and to grace his demeanour. In another context related to food that was not permissible, Daniel and his friends refused to eat food from the king's table and this led them to look fairer in their appearance and stouter in their bodily form (see καλός and the comparative of ἀγαθός in Dan 1:15)¹⁴. In both accounts, obedience to Torah is shown to bear on one's physical appearance¹⁵. Moreover, in v. 23 Eleazar's reasoning and decision to obey the Law are described with the adjective ἀστεῖος which, when used of bodily appearance, points to aspects of beauty, charm and gracefulness¹⁶. The appeal mentioned concerning Eleazar's physical appearance is now ascribed even to his thoughts. In 4 Macc 8:4, the beauty (κάλλος) of the young Jewish men is acknowledged by Antiochus himself who admired them whilst wanting to dissuade them from imitating the old scribe.

Given the propagandistic intentions of the book in favour of divine legislation, a curious feature of 2 Macc 6:18-31 is the imbalance between the references to Eleazar and the ones to the Law. Table 1 below lists the lexemes which are used to describe both and they are shown in the order in which they appear in the account so as to express how they relate to each other in the narrative itself.

¹³ MELTZER – BETHGE, *The Jewish Martyrs*, 99. Italics added. ἄλλος = altus, sublimis: PARTHEY, *Vocabularium*, 248.

¹⁴ See SCHOENBERG, *Maccabees*, 4-5, for the links between 1–2 Macc and Daniel.

¹⁵ Also see 1 Macc 1:26 which states that the women's beauty (κάλλος) faded due to Antiochus' onslaught on the city by which he forced merciless restrictions with regard to faithfulness to the Law.

¹⁶ LIDDEL – SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 260.

Table 1: Lexemes describing Eleazar and the Law¹⁷

Eleazar	Divine Law
v. 18 πρωτεύω (to be the first) ¹⁸	
v. 18 καλός (handsome)	
v. 19 εὐκλεια (good repute)	
v. 19 αὐθαιρέτως (voluntarily)	
v. 20 ὑπομένω (persevere)	
v. 23 ἀστείος (noble [decision])	
v. 23 ἄξιος (worthy)	
v. 23 ὑπεροχή (prominence)	
v. 23 ἐπιφανής (distinction) ¹⁹	
v. 23 καλός (good)	
	v. 23 ἅγιος (holy)
	v. 23 θεόκτιστος (established by God)
v. 24 ἄξιος (worthy)	
v. 25 μύσος (defilement) and κηλὶς (dishonour) shunned	
v. 27 ἀνδρείως (bravely)	
v. 27 ἄξιος (worthy)	
v. 28 γενναῖος 2× (suitable to one's nobility by birth)	
v. 28 προθύμως (willingly)	
	v. 28 σεμνός (venerable)
	v. 28 ἅγιος (holy)
v. 31 γενναιότης (nobility)	
v. 31 ἀρετή (moral excellence)	

As can be seen from the above table, the reader's attention is guided towards the very person of Eleazar. Though the ultimate purpose of the text is to

¹⁷ The most conspicuous of these are mentioned in this Table, though the text has other expressions which portray the scribe in a positive light, e.g. his *quick* (ταχέως, v. 23) declaration that would lead to his *good death* (ἀπευθανατίζω, v. 28), which he went to *immediately* (εὐθέως, v. 28) whilst *gladly* (ἡδέως, v. 30) enduring pain.

¹⁸ His being one of the scribes in a high position probably refers to his rank, but a nuance of dignity cannot be excluded. See LIDDEL – SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1544.

¹⁹ In v. 27 we find the related verb φαίνω which the author has a penchant for using with the meaning "to appear". However, given its close proximity to ἐπιφανής, its other meaning, namely "to shine", cannot be excluded.

uphold the holiness of the divine laws, for which one should be willing to lay down one's life irrespective of the cost, only three different adjectives are employed to describe them. Of these, the positive quality of θεόκτιστος ("established by God", v. 23) is only augmented because of its contrast to the phrase "prescribed by the king" in the preceding verse. As shown in the structure given, the core of the text is v. 23 and vv. 24-28a. In both cases, the Law is mentioned as though in passing, nearly as an afterthought, being heavily outweighed by references to Eleazar's noble character which precede it. However, this mention is important, for it is, in the last analysis, the reason why the text was written in the first place. Hence, though the general focus is on the persona of the elderly scribe, this is all subservient to the higher value attached to the Law itself. The same is true of v. 30 where his final words express the reason why he faced martyrdom, namely his fear of the Lord (διὰ τὸν αὐτοῦ φόβον). The underlying reference to Torah cannot be missed, given the relation between fearing God and keeping his commandments in texts such as Deut 31:12-13; Sirach 1:26-27; 19:20; and Qoh 12:13²⁰.

Hellenistic authors, among others, furnish us with numerous lists of virtues and vices. The Hebrew Bible generally lacks such lists, but later Jewish literature shows a marked tendency to include them²¹. Among these, 4 Macc 1:18-19 is particular for the fact that it identifies the most important quality: "And the forms of wisdom are prudence, and justice, and manliness, and temperance. The leading one of these is prudence; by whose means, indeed, it is that reasoning bears rule over the passions"²². Though prudence heads the list, one cannot hold that the first to be mentioned is always the leading virtue. In fact, 2 Macc 6:23 states "and above all according to (μᾶλλον δὲ... ἀκολούθως) the holy God-given law." In my opinion, though 2 Macc 6 does not exhibit a typical virtue list as such, v. 23 does pile up the factors that led to Eleazar's hard-earned esteem, concluding with a consideration of divine law. Interestingly, within a different context, 2 Enoch 9:1 has a list of virtues that includes enduring suffering and making right judgements, finally ending with one's faultless life vis-à-vis the Lord. It is as though the last aspect to be mentioned crowns all the previously mentioned personal qualities and puts them in perspective.

²⁰ Also see Ezra 10:3. See MURPHY, *The Tree of Life*, 55-56, 78-79.

²¹ A long list of references can be found in FITZGERALD, *Virtue/Vice Lists*, 857-858.

²² Also see Wisdom 8:7 for a similar list.

At the end of the text, as at the beginning, the narrator's remarks make no mention whatsoever of the Law, but squarely highlight the scribe's outstanding qualities, namely his nobility and his virtues.

This was how he died, leaving his death as an example of nobility and a record of virtue (or moral excellence) not only for the young but for the greater part of the nation. (2 Macc 6:31)

The figurative 'parting from' the ways of the Law (see *μεταβαίνω*, v. 1) which was enforced on all was boldly overcome by Eleazar's approaching (*προσάγω*, v. 19) the rack and rushing towards it (*ἔρχομαι*, v. 28). Schiffman points out that despite differing witnesses for v. 28, "he went" (to the rack) must be chosen over and against "he was dragged"²³. Not only, as Schiffman correctly states, is the latter found in a few texts, but it is also noteworthy that those texts are later ones in relation to the older LXX witnesses which bear the word *ἦλθεν* ("he went"). The verb *ειλκετο* ("was dragged") is found in two Greek mss, and various Latin and Syriac witnesses²⁴. The rendering "he went" stresses Eleazar's heroism, whilst "he was dragged" focuses on the ferocity of the persecution, and the latter is only found in significantly later translations. It stands to reason that the earlier texts more faithfully reflect the author's original intention to emphasize Eleazar's courage and willingness to give up his life for his beliefs. Rather than succumbing to external pressure, he made a clear ethical choice in favour of Torah.

2 Tamar and Eleazar – Torah and Ethical Considerations

To further explore the significance of Eleazar's actions, it will be helpful to turn our attention to another account that displays striking similarities to 2 Macc 6:18-31, namely Gen 38 which recounts Tamar's enticement of Judah. This comparative analysis is pertinent on several counts. Firstly, this is perhaps the only other biblical text that merges deception directly with the observance of

²³ See SCHIFFMAN, Commentaries, 906.

²⁴ The Greek mss are V (*Codex Venetus*; 9th cent.) and 55 (10th cent.); the Latin is represented notably by LA^{LV} (Lyon; 9th cent.) [Latin renditions are *trahebatur*, or *ducebatur*, or *(de)ductus est*]; and Syriac (2nd millennium). Armenian versions follow *ἦλθεν*; see HANHART, *Maccabaeorum liber II*.

some specific Torah legislation that impacts the protagonists directly²⁵. Another text in which both aspects feature is the account of the two elderly judges and Susanna, where Daniel overcomes the deceit of the former in order to save the latter (see Dan 13). However, this case is different to those of Eleazar and Tamar for Daniel himself is not involved in using trickery. Rather, he seeks to expose it. Indeed, this is a question of justice, that is of saving innocent blood, rather than an occasion of saving one's face or reputation²⁶.

Another reason for comparing these two texts is that both have to do with some form of recognition, this being at the heart of the employment of deception²⁷. Tamar conceals her identity such that Judah would be unable to recognise her. She banks on this "mis-take", as Adelman rightly calls it, for her plot to succeed. She actually has to cover her face with a veil in order to conceal her identity. In similar fashion, Eleazar is asked to veil the true nature of the meat he was encouraged to eat, leading others to mistake one meat for another. The difference is that Judah's lack of recognition led to his fulfilling of his obligations vis-à-vis the levirate law, whereas the fellow Jews' lack of recognition of the meat eaten by Eleazar would have led them to breaking the Law. Hence, in Tamar's case deception is used as a means to reach her goal, whilst Eleazar must reach his own goal by shunning deception²⁸. The former considers the suppression of moral concerns surrounding inappropriate sexual relations as acceptable when weighed in the scales against saving the family name, not unlike Abraham who

²⁵ To be sure, Genesis is replete with stories revolving around deception; see REYBURN – MCG FRY, *Handbook*, 871. Among several instances, one could also mention the serpent's deceptive words in Gen 3:1.4-5 by which it tried to derail Eve from God's word and his will. As regards deception in human relations, Rebekah contrives a plan to craftily lead Isaac to grant the blessing of the firstborn to Judah rather than to Esau (Gen 27:1-33; see Deut 21:15-17 which speaks of the inheritance rights of the firstborn). However, the purpose of this story and the others in Genesis is not, strictly speaking, about the obligation to observe any specific Torah law, unlike the case with Tamar and Eleazar.

²⁶ Nonetheless, here too, one finds related issues of honour and esteem: Susannah was "acquitted of anything dishonourable" (v. 63) and "Daniel's reputation stood high with the people" (v. 64).

²⁷ See ADELMAN, *Seduction*, 3, 6.

²⁸ The Hebrew sound word pair שכר (drunkenness) and שקר (deceit) are related in Micah, Isaiah and Habakkuk and in the Dead Sea Scrolls period which overlaps with the time covered by 2 Maccabees; see BAUTCH, *In Vino Veritas?*, 555-556. The hedonistic nature of drunkenness tallies with the notion of gluttony which the author of 4 Maccabees seeks to show to be contrary to Eleazar's character.

had relations with Hagar in the face of Sarah's infertility. Eleazar, however, acts by a different ethic since the trickery he could resort to would benefit him alone, adding only a few more years to the long life he had already lived.

Of note is also the aspect of future generations which are at the heart of both accounts. To be sure, this theme appears prior to both accounts. Judah beholds the blood-stained robe of his beloved son Joseph, believing him to be dead (Gen 37:31-35), whilst the faithful mothers have their circumcised babies hung at their breasts before being thrown down to their death (2 Macc 6:10). As for Gen 38, this deals with the deception by which a woman seeks to secure her right for levirate marriage, or better still, for offspring issuing from such an arrangement (see Deut 25:5-10). Given the sociological structure of ancient Israel, Tamar's being sent back to her father's house (Gen 38:11) necessarily implied a life devoid of childbearing²⁹. Her seeing that she had not been given to Judah's youngest son, Shelah, did not merely imply frustration at being abandoned or forgotten, but at having been deprived of the right to have progeny for the sake of her first husband. Her plot betrays her desire to achieve this goal, since the illicit sexual relations she engaged in would lead to conception only, but not to marriage. Tamar used trickery in order to safeguard her own interests on the strength of the Law. Though she realised that "she had not been given to him [Shelah] as his wife" (Gen 38:14), she acted deceptively because it was the only way she could secure the preservation of her husband's name through the birth of offspring from his bloodline.

Had Tamar's intention been to obtain a husband, she would have tried her luck loitering around Shelah, Judah's son, and not Judah himself (who was himself responsible for giving Tamar to Shelah; see v. 14). In fact, no marriage ensued between Judah and Tamar, and whilst she disappeared into oblivion, her sons Perez and Zerah grew into two tribes (see Num 26:20). The plot she contrived ensured that her husband would have children who, forming part of the family, would receive his rightful share of the material inheritance. "The heroine of this story is a Canaanite woman who bravely triumphs in upholding the obligation of a dead husband's brothers to provide descendants for their brother and to assure the dead brother's share in the family inheritance (see verse 8)"³⁰.

²⁹ NIDITCH, *The Wronged Woman Righted*, 145, describes this sociological context succinctly as follows: "Simply stated, the young woman is allowed only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father's home or she is a faithful, child-producing wife in her husband's or husband's family's home."

³⁰ REYBURN – MCG FRY, *Handbook*, 871.

In Eleazar's case, what is being passed down is not material wealth but, rather, a sense of belonging to the family of faith for whom Torah is the greatest gift and inheritance imaginable.

The use of trickery must be seen within the larger framework of the theological intentions of Genesis and 2 Maccabees respectively. The former is often caught up in the personal issues of the patriarchal families which had to do with the preservation or usurpation of rights in a long narrative that was directly linked to the promises made to Abraham concerning his future lineage. The reader is, therefore, led along a plot that steers them through the highs and lows of the human counterpart to the divine, covenantal blessing. At the other extreme end of these founding stories, 2 Maccabees is concerned with the preservation of religious fidelity within a context of persecution against the Judaic family of faith. Hence, both books are concerned about future generations, but in different ways. Genesis is concerned about aetiological matters in order to ascertain the prosperity of an important family line, hence it focuses on flesh and blood relations and their propensity to create descendants for Abraham. 2 Maccabees, on the other hand, was composed in a time of persecution wherein the perpetuity that was at stake was that of the divine law rather than that of human lineage. Though offspring or the young are at the centre of both plots, the intention of safeguarding Torah as such varies in both and is guided by different intentions. The dynamics and the underlying goals of deception are judged and employed differently by Eleazar and Tamar. And though their personal fates differed, Torah won the day.

Concerning Lot's daughters, Tamar, and Ruth, Adelman makes the following point: "each woman engages in an audacious act of seduction for the sake of continuity, subverting the norms of patriarchal society even as she wheedles her way in. The women's heroism, then, is of a particularly feminine hue: It engages in the face-off between the strictures of law and the force impelling life on"³¹. Eleazar's account is strikingly similar, despite obvious differences. Leaving aside any possible patriarchal agenda (due to the central role the brothers' mother has in the subsequent chapter), he too acts boldly for the sake of continuity, not by subverting divine laws but by defying those of the emperor, using such action as a springboard to propel himself and, consequently, to exalt Torah together with him. In the last analysis, Tamar did not choose the course of action described in order to defend Torah as such. Rather, she made

³¹ ADELMAN, *Seduction*, 1.

use of a legal right she had in order to guarantee continuity. That she thereby wished to be formally recognised by Judah's family as a member of his own clan for the fact that she contributed to the furtherance of the family line cannot be excluded. This, indeed, would ultimately safeguard her own survival³². By her behaviour she still laid her life on the line as the sexual intercourse she engaged in was tantamount to adultery given the fact that she was promised to Judah's son Shelah³³. But hers was a calculated risk. Conversely, the old scribe knowingly sealed his fate by forfeiting a discreet manoeuvre that could have saved his life, since this would compromise the very survival of his name and of Torah.

Tamar's daring actions were guided by her rightful claim to justice, but Eleazar's brave stance was inspired by his resolve to protect Torah at the cost of unjustly losing his life³⁴. Tamar had employed the opposite tactics to those of the scribe. By pretending to be a prostitute, she acted dishonourably and hence demeaned herself. On the contrary, Eleazar was a hero not only for dying the death of a martyr, but most especially for the choices he made. Beyond the strict observance of Torah, what takes centre stage is the importance of giving witness to it, that is to the validity of upholding it at all costs. However, whilst in Tamar's case ethical norms are suppressed for her to reach her goal, in 2 Maccabees 6 respectable ethical concerns override the mere, formal adherence to Torah, since its survival depends on a tradition of faithfulness that here can only be guaranteed by making the right ethical choice, which must be seen to be made. All this goes to show the uniqueness of the narrative of Eleazar's martyrdom in relation to the preservation of Torah, which preservation cost him his life even though a form of deceit could have spared the pious, elderly scribe. Hence, a comparison of these similar albeit different accounts goes to show that it is the account of

³² NIDITCH, *The Wronged Woman Righted*, 145: "In terms of long-range security in the social structure, it is more important for a woman to become her children's mother than her husband's wife."

³³ See ADELMAN, *Seduction*, 5. One of Adelman's main points in this article is how Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth pushed the limits of the law in order to ensure the continuity of the race "the line of law itself shifts as a result of the life force these biblical women urge forward" (p. 2). On the other hand, the account of 2 Macc 6 adopts a strict approach that goes by the book and does not admit of the slightest departure from the law.

³⁴ As for Tamar, the means chosen for her rehabilitation as seen as positive because she had been wronged; see NIDITCH, *The Wronged Woman Righted*, 148.

Eleazar that safely steers away from deception, thereby precluding the possibility of tarnishing the scribe's faultless character.

3 The Criteria of Honour, Shame and Moral Character

Advances made in the social and cultural anthropology of the Bible and the Greek world have contributed to building a better picture of the dynamics of self-appreciation in the context of human relations³⁵. The notions of honour and shame were deeply-seated in the Israelite social matrix,³⁶ and the text under investigation revolves around these concepts.

Honor is a public claim to worth or value and a public acknowledgment of that claim. Positive shame is a concern for maintaining and protecting one's worth, value, reputation. Negative shame is the loss of one's honor.³⁷

In this regard, 2 Macc 6:18-31 exhibits a gradual build-up, beginning with the natural beauty of Eleazar, then moving on to the notion of preserving one's honour (v. 23), and finally to that of avoiding scandal to others and disgrace to oneself (v. 25). Unlike Tamar who disguises her identity with a veil (Gen 38:14), the beautiful countenance of Eleazar prepares the reader for the dignity and aplomb with which he would face his persecutors³⁸.

Eleazar was guided both by the ethical observance of Torah and also by questions related to personal honour and shame. What concerns him is not, strictly speaking, the hypocrisy involved in secretly procuring kosher meat for himself. This seems to be subordinate to his self-portrayal³⁹. A different nuance can be perceived in Eleazar's martyrdom in 4 Maccabees (1:8; 5:1–7:25) which reflects the platonic tension between reason and feelings, clearly militating in

³⁵ See CROOK, Honor, 591-611; FISHER, *Hybris*; CAIRNS, *Aidōs*; AVRAHAMI, שׁוֹב in the Psalms, 295-313; WU, *Honor*.

³⁶ On the pervasiveness of deceit in various cultures, as well as its relation to self-esteem motives, see DEPAULO, review of *By the Grace of Guile*, 387-389.

³⁷ PILCH, *Honor and Shame*. [Accessed 14-01-2020].

³⁸ REYBURN – MCG FRY, *Handbook*, 878, note that Tamar's wearing of a veil is meant to conceal her identity, but it could also reflect the custom of religious prostitutes to do so in a Canaanite culture.

³⁹ Analysing another late text, though one of a very different context, WEEKS, 'Fear God', 102 states the following concerning Qohelet's exhortation not to delay in fulfilling a vow made to God (Qoh 5:3): "the basis of his advice lies in a direct appeal to self-interest, not to obligation under the Law".

favour of the former. In fact, the very intention of the author is laid out plainly at the beginning of the book in 4 Macc 1:1.3⁴⁰. In 2 Maccabees it is the concepts of honour and shame that are central, whereas in 4 Maccabees it is the ethical norms related to rationally upheld virtues that protect the observance of the Law⁴¹.

In 4 Maccabees, though the author sings the praises of Eleazar's honourable character, the text operates in a framework that is only present sparingly in 2 Maccabees. Eating pork is equated to gluttony and other such contemptible vices. Here, we therefore have an added layer of meaning. Not only is obedience to the Law demanded by religious faithfulness, but it is also an imperative dictated by ethical norms. Adhering to the precepts of the Law is presented as a noble philosophical and rational stance that must be adopted because it is conducive to such norms as temperance, manliness, justice, the love of reason, and self-mastery (see 4 Macc 5:15-38). The old man's eulogy of the Law in these terms thus equates it with the highest philosophical goods. In fact, immediately after speaking of his death, the author adds: "now that reason has conquered the emotions, we properly attribute to it the power to govern." (6:33)

The old scribe's moral stature is further emphasized in 4 Macc 6:16 which describes his emotional reaction to the offer of a life-saving deceptive act: "And Eleazar, as though the advice more painfully tortured him..." In light of the Deuteronomic injunction to express the sapiential and righteous character of the Torah (Deut 4:6-8), the martyrdom of the elderly scribe not only boosts his reputation of being righteous, but it also has a strong multiplier effect, instilling this quality in the young men who would walk in his footsteps⁴². Here too, the vehicle employed to safeguard Torah is a concern for one's dignity: "For it would be shameful if, while an aged man endures such agonies for the sake of religion, you young men were to be terrified by tortures." (4 Macc 16:17)

Defending the heroic behaviour of Jews, Josephus contrasted their selfless respect towards their sacred books to that of the Greeks towards their own:

... it comes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them. ...to endure racks and deaths of all

⁴⁰ See HARRINGTON, *The Old Testament Apocrypha*, 202, 207-208.

⁴¹ Jesus' statement that it is better to tie a millstone and be thrown into the sea than to give scandal is made in relation to the veracity of God's word rather than to the poor image of oneself reflected in scandalous behaviour: Matt 18:6; Mk 9:42; Luke 17:1-2.

⁴² Eleazar's effectiveness in being a role model for the young is expressed in 4 Macc 8:1 where the young are said to have "prevailed over even harsher instruments of torture".

kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them; whereas there are none at all among the Greeks who would undergo the least harm on that account...⁴³

Elsewhere, Josephus comments on the events surrounding 2 Macc 6:1–7:42, noting that many Jews had acquiesced to the king’s orders with the exception of those protagonists who defied the king:

... but the best men, and those of the noblest souls, did not regard him, but did pay a greater respect to the customs of their country than concern as to the punishment which he threatened to the disobedient; on which account they every day underwent great miseries and bitter torments...⁴⁴

The bold words of Eleazar as well as those of the mother and her seven sons found in 2 and 4 Maccabees were framed within the context of God’s education of his people⁴⁵. These personages were mouthpieces at God’s service by which he conveyed clear messages. Following the role of the prophets and the sages, the “speaking” martyrs constituted the last category of educators in what turned out to be Israel’s final effort to uphold emblematic figures who sought to get the faithful on the straight and narrow⁴⁶. As witnessed in the contexts of Jeremiah and the Isaian servant who lived in times of oppression, great interest was shown in *both* the words and the actions of such individuals.

Yet, was Eleazar simply trying to save face, or was this pure love for Torah? Or was it both? The repeated mention of his old age (vv. 18.23.25) indicates that a change in direction at this point in his life would render all he strove for simply meaningless. Here, the fear of shame is construed as a brake-setter that prevented immoral action. In line with the strong insistence on Eleazar’s noble character, “the holy legislation established by God himself” features in v. 23 not primarily in order to acknowledge its greatness, but rather

⁴³ Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.42-44.

⁴⁴ Josephus, *Ant.* 12.255.

⁴⁵ See HARRINGTON, *The Old Testament Apocrypha*, 210. GRÜNINGER, *Reception* [Accessed 14-04-2020], 3, distinguishes between two ethical perspectives in 2 Macc, namely the one of education and discipline up till chapter 7, and the one of self-defence and resistance from chapter 8 onwards; also see SCHIFFMAN, *Commentaries*, 906.

⁴⁶ The value attributed to the words allegedly spoken by these martyrs must have increased over time as witnessed by the expansion of the events surrounding their martyrdom in 4 Maccabees. In this regard, HARRINGTON, *The Old Testament Apocrypha*, 208, speaks of the “emotional dialogues... and defiant speeches” of the protagonists.

to affirm the elderly man's personal worthiness in relation to it. In fact, it is a continuation of the exaltation of this scribe who is said to have been faultless from childhood.

4 A Fence around Torah

Eleazar's martyrdom doubtlessly acts as a witness to Torah and conveys a strong message about its prerogative of inviolability. Guarding one's dignity and one's acclaimed moral status is presented as a most suitable vehicle that would ensure the protection of the Law. Unlike the later rabbinic forms of the mechanism of forming a fence around Torah, which entailed creating other concrete laws (usually of prohibition) that would safeguard the core divine laws, preserving one's prestige entails a positive disposition that not only protects Torah, but also has an immediate advantageous bearing on the believers themselves. In an article in which Riecker lays out the fourfold mandate of Israel (rather than speaking of its "mission"), the author lists "Israel as mediator of knowledge of God" as one of these four aspects⁴⁷. Riecker limits himself to what the Hebrew Bible itself says about this, however we must also take into consideration the external historical forces that led the Hebrew Bible to attain its shape. It seems reasonable to hold that the martyrdom accounts in general, but that of Eleazar in particular, were devices employed not merely to boost the image of individual personages, but by so doing, to safeguard the continued transmission of Torah and related customs. Riecker identifies Deut 4:6-8 as foundational in this regard in that "these verses point to the fundamental significance of the ethical behavior of Yhwh's people, so that Yhwh can attract the other nations through his people"⁴⁸.

The quality of being a conceptual fence around Torah can be seen by the fact that, from a synchronic perspective, Eleazar's account forms a suitable prelude to the immediately succeeding account of the martyrdom of the seven brothers (7:1-41). The presence of their mother favours the attribution of a relatively young age to these men. Eleazar's death had indeed been judged by the author as having been valuable to the young (6:31). Nonetheless, there is

⁴⁷ RIECKER, *Missions*, 327.

⁴⁸ BORCHARDT, *What Do You Do?*, 17, is in agreement with Dries De Crom who sees the precise description of the translators and the knowledge attributed to them "as part of an ethical argument contributing to the impression of a high quality translation."

a palpable difference between the two accounts. Whereas that of the seven men has several references to resurrection and to the reward of life that is granted to the faithful, Eleazar's primary concern seems to gravitate towards his self-image as well as the fear of divine punishment (see v. 26).

Conversely, the story of Daniel's refusal to eat royal food (Dan 1:8-17), where he and his companions fared better than their companions after consuming vegetables and water, has overlapping qualities with that of Eleazar though it functions with a different logic. In Daniel's case, the notion of martyrdom is altogether missing, but abiding by a Torah-regulated diet is shown to result both in physical wellbeing and also in great skill and intelligence. However, these are simply the fruits of such obedience. Hence, though such a story is conducive to encouraging obedience to the Law, the one of Eleazar has a stronger impact through the mechanism of self-preservation that it instigates. Daniel's complying with the king's commands would have possibly resulted in a performance that was comparable to that of the rest, but Eleazar's obedience to the king's orders would have led him to lose his hard-earned kudos altogether.

Eleazar's story is probably the only one in which adherence to the Law *per se* could have easily been safeguarded had he simply pretended not to be breaking it. If this were not merely a decision taken to defend one's own honour, then it had enormous implications concerning obedience to Torah. The narrator's creation of a possibility to circumvent the breaking of the Law has the effect of dismantling a purely legalistic understanding of it. Better still, it underscores a fundamental truth, namely that the dictates of the Law do not pertain merely to the realm of the senses, that is to what can be perceived, but functions on a higher level of truth.

In the course of the centuries, as the teachings of Torah were being explicated, the rabbis taught that only feigning to be breaking the Law, as would have been the case had Eleazar accepted the secretly prepared kosher food, already constitutes a deviation from it. In interpreting this story, Schiffman speaks of the rabbinic concept of *mar'it 'ayin*, which means "appearance to the eye"⁴⁹. He argues that this is in agreement with Eleazar who "judged even this

⁴⁹ See SCHIFFMAN, Commentaries, 906. Regarding *mar'it 'ayin*, see Minchas Shlomo, 2-3:53 and Talmud Keritut, 21. Despite my contention that the concept of *mar'it 'ayin* here functions differently to what Schiffman suggests, it is curious that in speaking of the location where Tamar played the prostitute, namely the entrance to Enaim (פתח עינים),

[ruse] a violation of the Jewish law⁵⁰. However, this interpretation may not be correct on three counts. First, both in the description given by the author (v. 23) and in the speech reported (vv. 24-28) greatest weight is given to the scribe's self-esteem. Second, it is not immediately noticeable that the text signals a distinction between one's *appearing* to be breaking the Law and one's *actually* breaking it. The expression *μᾶλλον δὲ... ἀκολούθως* ("and above all according to" 6:23) cannot be said to indicate unequivocally that pretence was forbidden by the Law – the point of the matter is plainly that it is unlawful to eat pork. As a matter of fact, his own description of such a trick is not construed in terms of the Law, but rather in relation to one's self-portrayal⁵¹:

"Pretence", he said, "does not befit our time of life; many young people would suppose that Eleazar at the age of ninety had conformed to the foreigners' way of life and ... I should only bring defilement and disgrace on my old age". (6:24-25)

Third, though the rabbis used the notion of *mar'it 'ayin* to forbid permissible actions that seemed to violate Torah precisely because others could wrongly conclude that such actions were in fact permissible (and hence be led astray), this is not the intention of the account in question. Eleazar's fear is not that the young would wrongly assume that eating non-kosher food is permissible, but rather that they would make the wrong conclusion about his idealised persona. The long and short of the story is not that, if Eleazar ate the secretly prepared kosher meat, others would possibly have followed suit in ignorance, but that his standing in the community's consciousness would have been dealt a hard blow. This, in fact, is the opposite of the reasoning behind *mar'it 'ayin* where its employment must be purely to safeguard Torah, rather than to wrongly judge a person who would have seemed to be breaking Torah⁵². The narrative is construed in such a way as to present the dealing of such a blow to Eleazar's stature as being the main preoccupation of our protagonist. It is only in avoiding such a blow dealt to his hero that the author sought to safeguard Torah from being

ADELMAN, *Seduction*, 6 states: "*petah 'enayim*, which can also be read as "the opening of the eyes," is fraught with irony, for this is the place where sight is veiled."

⁵⁰ SCHIFFMAN, *Commentaries*, 906.

⁵¹ However, the Greek term for pretence (which implies deceit) in our text is expressed by the verb *ὑποκρίνομαι* (2 Macc 6:21.24), and this is contrasted to the Law in Sirach 32:15 and 33:2.

⁵² See b. Šabb. 64b:16 and b. Šebu. 30.

written off. The power of the behaviour adopted by Eleazar was such that he hoped it would lead others to imitate him in making a good death (see 6:28). Here too, the focus is on the person who, in dying for the Law, would prove himself or herself worthy of such a great cause.

Concluding Remarks

The account analysed is not merely at the service of historiography, but it is strongly parenetic and didactic. The text points to Eleazar's self-image and a preoccupation with the preservation of his honour, serving the narrator's purpose of highlighting the ultimate value of Torah. Hence, Eleazar's concern about himself and the impression others will have of him turn out to be the means by which a higher reality is affirmed. The author skilfully and intricately bound the value of Torah together with Eleazar's kudos such that the latter became a direct gauge of the former. The greatness and holiness of Torah is emphasized by aggrandizing the personal tragedy that would befall the scribe if he devalued it by a wrong choice.

Though the narrative operates on the belief that deception is evil, the real vehicle that is used to protect the Torah-shaped mores is actually the portrayal of Eleazar's valour and heroism. Eleazar was able to leave "an example of nobility and a record of virtue" (v. 31). The text imparts the image of a Law-abiding person who would not compromise with evil. This is achieved by putting the man himself in the limelight in the entire narrative, including its final verse. For indeed, the nobility and virtue ascribed to Eleazar are purely human, non-religious qualities, but here these derive their existence only in relation to Torah. The deceptive trick offered would have spared Eleazar, but it would have consequentially damaged both his reputation and Torah too. Hence, the account functions as a fence around Torah that bears moral rather than legal force. Guarding one's dignity and one's acclaimed moral status is a vehicle that would ensure the protection of Torah. The text does not qualify this behaviour as being less respectable than dying for Torah for the sake of Torah. In the final analysis, Eleazar's self-immolation is not construed as being less generous than that of the seven young men. Truth be told, they too reasoned in terms of ultimate personal gain, though theirs employed a *Jenseits* perspective.

The foregoing analysis has focused specifically on an idealised prosopography within a narrative of martyrdom that contributed to the preservation of Torah. This study could lead to building a clearer picture of all

the possible techniques that may have been employed to prevent the breaking of Torah apart from such portrayals of valour and the creation of subsidiary laws that bolstered and protected Torah. It would, therefore, be interesting to see how other techniques were used for the same purpose, for instance the ostracization of those who recanted, rewards or honours given to those who upheld Torah (e.g. social status or the assignment of important leadership roles), and the association of wisdom with obedience to Torah, to mention just three possibilities. In the end, all such techniques would have contributed to ensuring the survival and propagation of Torah, which is doubtlessly why the text in question was composed.

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Summary

2 Maccabees 6:18-31 recounts the martyrdom of the scribe Eleazar who refused to eat pork from ritually sacrificed swine. Given the late composition of this text concerning dietary laws, Torah and other customs were already firmly established. Yet, the martyrdom accounts recounted in 2 Macc seem to betray as many authorial intentions as the accounts recounted. What is surprising is that Eleazar's rightful resistance does not seem to be guided primarily by pure ethical concerns where deception per se is shunned, but rather by a twofold concern for self-preservation, namely vis-à-vis both men and God.

This text will be related to what is probably the only other biblical text that merges deception with the observance of Torah, namely Tamar's enticement of Judah (Gen 38) by which she seeks to secure her right for levirate marriage, or better still, for offspring issuing from such an arrangement. It will be argued that, though offspring or the young are at the centre of both plots, the intention of safeguarding Torah as such varies in both and is guided by different intentions. Moreover, the dynamics of deception too will be studied, noting that it is judged and employed differently by Eleazar and Tamar. And though their fates differed, Torah won the day. However, the use of deception must be seen within the larger framework of the theological intentions of Genesis and 2 Maccabees respectively.

Advances made in the social and cultural anthropology of the Bible and the Greek world have contributed to building a better picture of the dynamics of self-appreciation in the context of human relations. Insofar as Eleazar was careful not to forgo his hard-gained kudos and feared facing the judgement of God, this account functions as a kind of fence around Torah, without implying the creation of new laws and customs as the rabbinic term does. Guarding one's dignity and one's acclaimed moral status becomes a vehicle that would ensure the protection of Torah-inspired mores.

Keywords: self-portrayal, deception, moral character, moral status, fence around the Torah.


Zhrnutie

Druhá kniha Machabejcov (6,18-31) ozpráva o mučeníctve zákonníka Eleazara, ktorý odmietol jesť bravčové mäso z rituálne obetovaných zvierat. Predpisy o jedle, Tóra a iné zvyky vzhľadom na neskoré datovanie textu už boli pevne ustanovené. Avšak mučeníctvo vyrozprávané v 2Mak prezrádza toľko autorských zámerov, koľko je vyrozprávaných príbehov. Prekvapujúce je, že Eleazarov oprávnený vzdor sa nezdá byť prvotne motivovaný čisto etickými obavami nedopustiť sa zrady *per se*, ale skôr dvojakou obavou o sebazáchovu, konkrétne vis-à-vis človek a Boh.

Tento článok je venovaný pravdepodobne jedinému biblickému textu, ktorý spája zradu s dodržiavaním Tóry, konkrétne Tamarino zlákanie Júdu (Gn 38), ktorým sa pokúsila zaistiť si právo na levirátne manželstvo alebo skôr na potomstvo vyplývajúce z takého zväzku. V článku tvrdíme, že napriek tomu, že potomstvo alebo mládež sú v centre oboch príbehov, zámer dodržania Tóry je odlišný a tiež má odlišné motívy. Študovaná je tiež dynamika zrady i to, že je vnímaná a uplatňovaná inak Eleazarom a inak Tamarou. Hoci sú ich osudy rôzne, nakoniec u oboch zaváži Tóra. Použitie zrady však musí byť posudzované v širšom rámci teologických zámerov v Gen a 2Mak.

Pokrok v sociálnej a kultúrnej antropológii v Biblii a gréckom svete prispeli k budovaniu lepšieho obrazu dynamiky sebaúcty v kontexte ľudských vzťahov. Nakoľko bol Eleazar opatrný, aby nezabudol na svoj ťažko získaný kudos, a obával sa Božieho súdu, natoľko je tento príbeh istým druhom ochranného plotu okolo Tóry bez implikácie nových zákonov a zvykov, ako to robí uvedený rabínsky termín. Stráženie si vlastnej úcty a uznávaného morálneho statusu sa stáva prostriedkom, ktorý by mohol zabezpečiť ochranu Tórou inšpirovaných mravov.

Kľúčové slová: sebaпредstavenie, zrada, morálny charakter, morálny status, ochranný plot okolo Tóry.

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