

THE TEMPLE IN 2 MACCABEES – DYNAMICS AND EPISODES¹

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ABSTRACT

Scholars differ among each other about the importance of the Jerusalem temple in 2 Maccabees. Some see the temple as of minor importance while others are of the opinion that the temple takes centre stage in this book. This article concurs with the second view. However, it goes further by also exploring crucial temple dynamics. These temple dynamics are determined by certain pre-set criteria and centre mainly on the relationship between God and the nation. The result is that three different temple episodes can be distinguished. The positive/negative view of each temple episode is determined by this relationship between the nation and God. This opens a new way of exploring 2 Maccabees.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

During the first period of research on 2 Maccabees the focus was mainly concerned with verifying certain historical facts. Good examples of this approach include the work of Moffat (1913), Bickerman (1937), his student Goldstein (1983) and also Dommershausen (1985). The aim of this current research is to compare 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees in order to establish some historical common ground. However, the year 1986 presented a watershed in 2 Maccabean research with the appearance of van Henten's *De Joodse martelaren als grondleggers van een nieuwe orde: een studie uitgaande van 2 en 4 Makkabeeën*. In this book van Henten insisted that narrative critique should be added to historical critique. In this context, van Henten argued that in the narratives of the martyrs, six different elements can be distinguished. As a

¹ This paper was read by Professor Pierre J. Jordaan at his inaugural address as full professor in Greek at the NWU on 31 October 2014.

consequence of the publication of this book (or rather its English translation in 1997), all subsequent commentaries applied some form of narrative critique. The latest commentaries on 2 Maccabees, those of Daniel Schwartz (2008:67-84) and Robert Doran (2012:1-19) bear witness to this fact. Each of them devotes no less than sixteen pages to narrative critique. This shows the current importance attached to at least some narrative approach when interpreting the text of 2 Maccabees.

However, although Schwartz and Doran are in unison about narrative critique they differ on the importance of the temple in 2 Maccabees. For Schwartz (2008:45-48) the temple is not all that important. He favours the notion that the author was a diasporan Jew and that the temple was just one perceptible thing among others, including Mosaic law and the concept of fatherland etc. Schwartz reasons that the Jerusalem temple as sanctuary was not so essential to the author as a diasporan Jew because he knew God could be reached from any place through prayer.

On the other hand, for Doran the temple is of greater consequence. Like Schwartz, he concedes that the author might be a diasporan Jew (2012:13) but with a definite “temple” agenda. Doran even goes so far as to state what he believes is the most prominent goal of the author:

First, the choice of the subgenre of a deity defending his/her temple from attackers and the inauguration of new festivals shows that the author wanted to impress on his audience the high honor in which the God of the Jews was to be held and the need to participate in the festivals inaugurated to commemorate these events.

Thus, the two most recent commentaries on 2 Maccabees have different views on the importance of the temple in this book. Schwartz does not deem the temple to be particularly important while Doran thinks that the temple and the deity defending it is significant in this book.

Personally, I think Doran is correct for various reasons. In spite of Schwartz’s narrative critique he mainly undertakes a verse by verse analysis of the book. He seldom treats more than one verse at a time. His commentary is therefore mostly a historical grammatical endeavour. The fact that he does not necessarily acknowledge

larger narrative units means that he fails to identify the temple in different narrative discourses. Doran, on the other hand, works with larger narrative units and does not fail to see the prominence of the temple.

However, what is still lacking from Doran is that although he recognizes the importance of the deity defending his/her temple he does not give much attention to temple dynamics. Temple dynamics can be addressed by the following questions:

- What is the function of the temple for the author of 2 Maccabees?
- How is the temple repeatedly presented?
- Why is the temple presented differently in different places in 2 Maccabees?
- When does the representation of the temple change from positive to negative?
- Who are the important role players that have an influence on the representation of the temple? Might it be the high priest or priests? Is it the nation? Or is it perhaps ascribed to the deity's arbitrariness?

This brings me to the deity.

- When is the deity satisfied and when is he/she dissatisfied?
- Why does he/she sometimes defend his/her temple and other times not?

These are in short the questions pertaining to temple dynamics.

Another problem that I encounter in commentaries is that although researchers such as van Henten (1997:296) and Doran do acknowledge the importance of the temple in 2 Maccabees, they do not investigate the possibility that there might be different temple episodes. In other words they do not investigate the following issues: 1) the function of the temple in the different narratives; and 2) how these different temple episodes might follow upon each other and provide the "impetus" or "spark" behind the next narrative.

Most worrying is the fact that they fail to acknowledge the simple, typical beginning, middle and end of a narrative. In this regard Nickelsburg (2005:3) in reference to apocryphal literature rightfully states:

I am interested not simply or primarily in ideas or motifs or in contents in some amorphous sense, but in literature that has form and direction: in narrative that has plot with beginning, middle and end (or situation,

complication, and resolution); in other types of literature that use particular forms and rhetorical devices with consistency and purpose. The critic's task is to find these forms and directions and to interpret the text with reference to them.

In short, these are the identified gaps of research and questions I address in this article: First, the degree of temple dynamics in 2 Maccabees, and secondly, the range and scope of temple episodes that might be identified in 2 Maccabees and how they impact upon each other. The book 2 Maccabees seems to present itself in three such temple episodes. These proposed episodes will now be explored in a systematic way.

ANALYSIS

Temple Episode 1

2 Maccabees 3: Heliodorus attempts to rob the temple

2 Maccabees 3 narrates the attempt of Heliodorus to rob the temple of offerings to the widows and orphans as ordered by the Seleucid king (3:7, 13). Onias, the high priest, heard of this attempt and was very upset (3:16). This was also the case with the other priests, the men, women and maidens of Jerusalem. The text describes the behaviour of each of these groups in detail.

- The high priest's appearance changed; anyone who looked at him could sense his deep concern (3:16).
- The other priests in their formal attire flung themselves before the altar (3:15).
- The males participated in public supplication (3:19).
- The women appeared in the street with sackcloth girded under their breasts (3:19).
- The maidens gathered at the doorways and peeked through the windows, some of them were even seen on the walls (3:19).

From the above it is clear that everybody participated in public mourning. According to 2 Maccabees 3:20 the whole city in unison stretched their hands out towards heaven and prayed.

On the day that Heliodorus wanted to enter the temple something unusual

happened. A rider on a horse appeared and Heliodorus was flogged by the horse's hoofs. This is a sign of severe degradation and humiliation according to Doran (2012:86). Furthermore, there also appeared two young men in splendid clothes attacking Heliodorus and whipping him unceasingly (3:25-27). Their attack on Heliodorus was so severe that he was thrown on the ground; further, according to text, Heliodorus feared for his life (3:27-29). When Onias saw that Heliodorus' life was in danger he made a sacrifice for the recovery of the man (3:32). However, yet another extraordinary event occurred. For a second time the two young men appeared and commanded Heliodorus to give thanks to Onias as it was due to his intervention that Heliodorus was still living (3:33). Heliodorus also had to proclaim the majesty of God (3:34). There was thus a complete turnaround in the situation, from panic to calmness, from invasion to victory, from an attempt to defile the temple to the acknowledgement of God's majesty. The typical elements of a narrative were clearly found in chapter three, a situation, complication, and resolution.

So what can be said of God's reaction in these circumstances? He punishes Heliodorus who wanted to invade his holy space. The condition seems to be that the nation worships him in unison.

Chapter 3 of 2 Maccabees is important for understanding the rest of the temple episodes in 2 Maccabees as it provides the matrix of how the Jerusalem community and temple should function:

- The whole nation from high priest, priests, men, women to maidens should be in unison in their worship.
- The priests as temple officials should be sincere in their work.
- The high priest of the temple should be an honest, truthful man able to fulfil the important mediatory role.

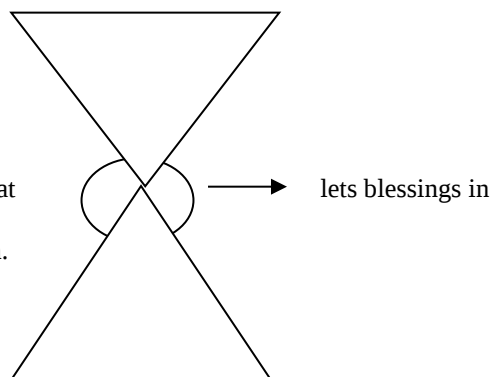
Chapter 3 of 2 Maccabees shows that God is then satisfied with the circumstances. He listens to the nation and defends his temple. This is what Schwartz (2008:184) calls the *status quo ante* in 2 Maccabees 3. The "previous, ideal" circumstances when everything was functioning correctly. This can be represented as follows:

2 Maccabees 3

God,
defends the temple.

Temple is a funnel that

Nation worships him in unison.
God rewards his nation:
high priest, priests
males, females
maidens.



The depiction above shows that the temple is the funnel of God's blessings towards Jerusalem and the nation (high priest, priests, males, females, maidens). It is important to note that the line goes from the bottom to the top. The conduct of the nation determines the reaction of God. In this sense the temple portrays the spiritual climate of the nation. Put in another way: If the one looks at the temple you can also sense the condition of the nation. The argument is then: If the nation has the right conduct, then God rewards them, He defends the temple and punishes the enemy. The temple in 2 Maccabees 3 is the barometer of Gods involvement as well as the nation's commitment. If God is satisfied with the nation like in 2 Maccabees 3 then the temple functions properly for example, the rituals and prayers. The temple in 2 Maccabees 3 thus looks well because the nation looks well. The thesis at the end of Temple Episode 1 is: The temple reflects God's involvement and the nation's commitment. This thesis is to be tested in the rest of the book. Temple Episode 2 will now be examined.

Temple Episode 2

2 Maccabees 4-6: The deterioration of the nation and temple

From 2 Maccabees 4 and further there is a turnaround of the situation in 2 Maccabees 3. On all levels that went well in Temple Episode 1, there is now a change for the worse. First, the Seleucid king died and was replaced by another king namely Antiochus IV Epiphanes (4:7). According to Thacker (1982:117) this king was a

great supporter of Hellenism. The province Judea, where the temple in Jerusalem is, was engulfed by this culture of Hellenism. Various areas are mentioned:

- A Pro-Hellenistic high priest, Jason, was appointed in the place of Onias (4:8). Under the reign of Jason a *gymnasium* (sport field) and *ephebeion* (school) were erected in Jerusalem (4:10). Both these instances were set up to promote Greek culture.
- Furthermore, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were registered as “citizens of Antioch”. Jerusalem’s name was changed to “Antioch at Jerusalem”. In effect this meant that the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, was the patron of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had to pay homage and taxes to its Seleucid master. 2 Maccabees 4:21 records how Antiochus IV Epiphanes visited Jerusalem and was welcomed by Jason.
- The best young Jewish men wore Greek hats (4:13), a sure sign that they embraced Hellenism.
- Under this reign, the priests were not interested in temple duty anymore. They treated temple duty with contempt. When the bell rang they could not get to the *gymnasium* quickly enough (4:15-16).

The author warns in 4:17 that this disrespectful conduct against the laws of God could not be left unpunished. He was already stating the inescapable consequence of such contempt towards the temple. In terms of temple episodes this is a prediction of what is to follow. This creates an expectation with the reader and the listener.

Chapter 4 further records the godless behaviour of the successors of the “good” high priest Onias, his murder (4:35), and also the defilement of the temple and the selling of the holy vessels (4:31). It is clear that the spiritual barometer of the nation in Jerusalem was sinking very low. The commitment of both the nation and priests towards the temple was decreasing. According to the thesis set at the end of Temple Episode 1: “The temple reflects Gods involvement and the nation’s commitment” the temple showed that both the nation’s commitment as well as God’s involvement was sinking. A disaster was imminent.

This disaster is found in 2 Maccabees 5-7. The notorious Seleucid king, Antiochus

IV Epiphanes, thought according to 5:12 that Judea revolted against him. He consequently attacked Jerusalem with a big army. The text mentions that in three days he murdered 83 000 inhabitants (5:14), including boys, children and maidens. Some people were also sold as slaves. The worst is still to follow. The text elaborates on the biggest atrocity – the fact that Antiochus IV Epiphanes according to 2 Maccabees 5:15 κατετόλμησεν εἰς τὸ πάσης τῆς γῆς ἁγιώτατον ἱερὸν εἰσελθεῖν “dared to enter to holiest of all temples on earth”.

However, the author is immediately apologetic in his explanation. In 5:18 he says that God only allowed this briefly due to the many sins of the nation, otherwise the same would have happened to him as what happened to Heliodorus (Temple Episode 1). In other word God has chosen here not to defend his temple and permitted Antiochus IV Epiphanes to defile his temple.

The narrative in Temple Episode 2 continues. The author also says in 5:19: “The Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the place, he chose place for the sake of the nation.” The Greek here clearly shows a literary structure namely a *chiasm*:

ἀλλ’ οὐ (A)διὰ τὸν τόπον (B)τὸ ἔθνος
 ἀλλὰ (B) διὰ τὸ ἔθνος (A) τὸν τόπον ὁ κύριος ἐξελέξατο

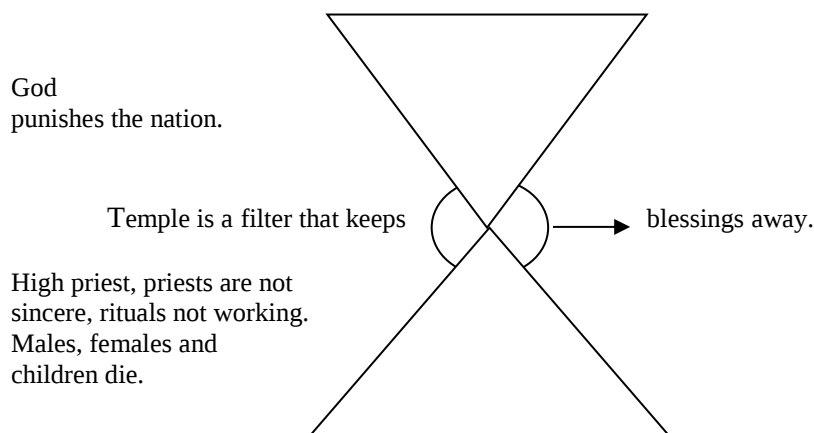
A chiasm is a way of emphasizing an important aspect for the first reader. However clear it may be that the nation is more important than the place, these two cannot be seen separate from each other. With this literary structure the author wants to emphasize the solidarity between the nation and the place. The two are intimately linked to each other. The priority, however, is on the nation that should defend and honour the temple.

The rest of Chapter 5 elaborates on the further murder of the nation and of opportunistic assaults on the nation on the Sabbath. The enemy knew that the Jews would not defend themselves on the Sabbath. In other words, their Sabbath rituals had no effect. They were dreadfully vulnerable.

Temple Episode 2 further narrates these dire circumstances of temple and nation.

The name of the temple changed to the temple of Zeus Olympios (6:1). Temple prostitution was brought in and the altars filled with illegal offerings. The keeping of the Sabbath was forbidden as well as the commemoration of holy days. In the place of all traditional religious rituals new rituals were introduced. In this manner the king's birthday was celebrated and the Jews even had to participate in the feasts for Dionysus and Dionysia (6:1-5). In 2 Maccabees 6 there are further reports of murders. First, the circumcised babies of two women were thrown from the walls. This is followed by the famous stories of the martyrs. In short, these stories concern an aged man named Eleazar who was forced to eat swine. The same was the done with a mother and her seven sons. When they all refused, all of them were savagely tortured and brutally murdered. Temple Episode 2 can be presented as follows:

2 Maccabees 4-7



In this case the temple is depicted as a filter that keeps the blessings away from the nation. This is due to the sin of all the people. The conduct of the priests bears witness that they are not truthful in their work. They are more interested in Hellenism than in temple duty. The temple, measuring the spiritual climate of the nation, shows that they are bankrupt. The lack of commitment by the nation resulted in the lack of God defending the temple. In Temple Episode 1 He rewarded the nation by defending the temple but in Temple Episode 2 He punishes the nation by allowing the enemy to defile the temple and invade Jerusalem. Thus God's satisfaction in Temple Episode 1

now turned to dissatisfaction. The prayers and rituals that worked in Temple Episode 1 are not working in Temple Episode 2. Temple Episode 2 is a low point for nation and temple. The thesis that was set at the end of Temple Episode 1: “The temple reflects Gods involvement and the nation’s commitment” is proven in Temple Episode 2. Temple Episode 3 will now be examined and the thesis tested again.

Temple Episode 3

2 Maccabees 8-15: The restoration of the temple

In chapter 8 a new dispensation starts for the nation and the temple. There is a gradual turn for the better after the low point of Temple Episode 2. Temple Episode 3 starts with the first verses of chapter 8 describing the mobilization of the nation by Judas Maccabee. Although there is a brief mentioning of Judas Maccabee at the end of chapter 5, he now emerges as protagonist. He is the main character in the struggle to restore the temple. A few aspects concerning the temple are noteworthy in this regard. First, as stated in (8:1) this movement came from within the nation. Secondly, part of the prayer of Judas and his compatriots in 8:2 is that God will again show compassion to the sanctuary that has been defiled by the godless. Thirdly, the fighters of Judas Maccabee are called up to think about the cruelty and lawless attack against the holy place while fighting (8:17). Fourthly, Judas Maccabees and the nation started practicing the rituals again like the keeping of the Sabbath and the singing of hymns. They even refused to fight on the Sabbath. This time, however, it works, not as in Temple Episode 2. The result of all these actions by Judas Maccabee seems to be that God is satisfied and starts showing compassion to the nation. In the war between Nicanor and Judas Maccabee, Judas and his army are described as totally invincible (8:36). Temple Episode 3 is, as said, a transition from punishment by God to compassion.

This positive turn of events also records the miserable, scandalous death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. On his way to Jerusalem to punish the Jews his intestines started to pain (9:5), he consequently fell from his chariot, racking every limb of his body. Before he dies he confesses in 9:16 that he plundered the temple and promises

to decorate the temple with the most beautiful gifts and the he himself would become a Jew!

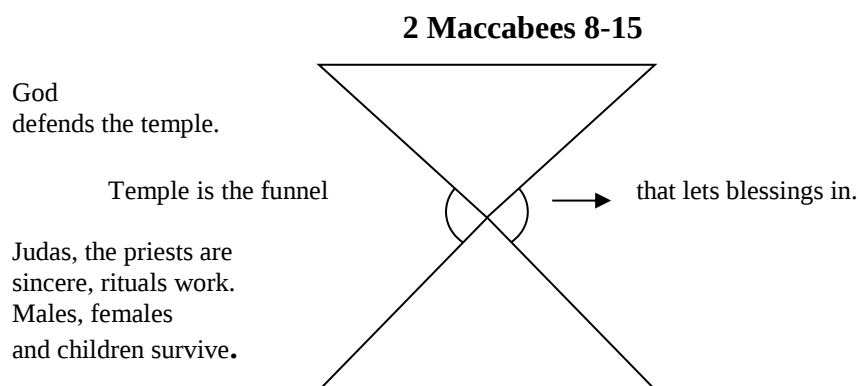
An important element of Temple Episode 3 is the cleansing of the temple in 10:1-8. In these verses it clear that Judas Maccabee takes both Jerusalem and the temple in a violent manner. Judas Maccabee destroys the altars of the “others” in the market place, after which he built a new altar. After this, they fell to the ground and begged God never again to give them over to such barbarism. 2 Maccabees nowhere records the appointment of a new high priest and the general consensus among commentators is that Judas Maccabee himself acted as high priest. In this regard see Schwartz (2008:552).

Temple Episode 3 further describes Judas Maccabee as unconquerable in his wars against the enemy. In 10:29-30 five brilliant horsemen came to his aid against the enemy. In chapter 11 the temple is yet again a matter of contest, this time there is an attempt to take the high priesthood. Lysias, a family member of the Seleucid king, wanted to abuse the temple as source of income by annually selling the high priesthood. Lysias then attacks Judea. The text narrates then how the nation begged God to send a good angel for help. God subsequently sent a horseman who helped them. Verse 13 says that they were invincible due to their alliance with God. He answers their prayers and helps the nation mysteriously. The supernatural helps the natural; the heavenly fights on behalf of the earthly.

The culmination of the struggle of the temple is found in chapters 14 and 15. In 14:31 it is stated that Nicanor, the commander of the army of the Seleucids, walked to the temple and demanded that Judas Maccabeus be delivered to him. The priests answered that they do not know where he is. Then Nicanor held out his hand against the temple and uttered important threats in 14:34, namely that he would level the temple as well as the altar to the ground and built a temple for Dionysos on the place if they do not deliver Judas Maccabeus to him. These threatening words left the priests in a state of worrisome prayerfulness. It also sparked an immediate mobilization. When Judas Maccabeus appeared later (15:12) he told them about a revealing dream that he had. In this dream the faithful high priest Onias (Temple Episode 1) appeared

to him and encouraged them to fight bravely. In the same dream Jeremiah also appeared to him and handed him a sword with the instruction to destroy the enemy. In 15:18 the author states that the fighting men were less concerned about their own wives, children, brothers and family as their first concern was the consecrated temple.

A heavy battle ensued. Eventually Judas Maccabeus won with the help of God (15:27). After the battle the body of Nicanor was recognized on the battlefield (15:29). Judas Maccabeus gave instruction for the head and arm of Nicanor to be cut off. He later called the priests together and showed them the head and the hand which Nicanor held against the house of the Almighty (15:32). Judas also commanded that his blaspheming tongue should also be cut out and fed to the birds (15:33). The book 2 Maccabees ends with verses 34-36 with a hymn to God “who had preserved his place undefiled” and the instruction to commemorate this day as a feast each year. Temple Episode 3 can be depicted virtually as follows:



The temple is here again the funnel that lets blessings in. This is due to the fact that the nation is faithful again. The conduct of the priest testifies to the fact that they take temple duty and the worship of God serious. If the temple shows the spiritual climate of the nation, then they are again solvent. The temple, the barometer of God’s involvement and the nation’s commitment tells a good story. The commitment of the priests and nation led to the defending of the temple by God. In Temple Episode 2 He punished the nation by allowing the temple to be defiled. However, in Temple Episode 3 He blesses the nation by punishing the enemy. The dissatisfaction of God in Temple

Episode 2 changed to satisfaction. The prayers and rituals that did not work in Temple Episode 2, now work in Temple Episode 3. Temple Episode 3 is thus reparation of the demise in Temple Episode 2. Further, the good high priest of Temple Episode 1 reappeared in the dream of Judas Maccabeus in Temple Episode 3. The thesis set at the end of Temple Episode 1 is thus affirmative. The temple is the barometer of God's involvement and the nation's commitment. In the case of 2 Maccabees 8-15 both the nation's commitment as well as God's involvement measure positively. This means that the temple episodes have now gone full circle, from positive (Temple Episode 1) to negative (Temple Episode 2) to again positive (Temple Episode 3).

CONCLUSION

2 Maccabees clearly presents itself in three temple episodes. All of these temple episodes have the narrative sequence of beginning, middle and ending. In all of these temple episodes the nation and its relationship to God stands central. A distinctive dynamic was shown in all temple episodes. Whenever the relationship between the nation and God was good it pleased God and He gave his approval. In these cases the temple acted as a funnel to let through blessings to the nation. On the other hand, whenever the relationship between the nation and God was bad it displeased God and led to his disapproval. In this case the temple acted as a filter to stop blessings. This is a very simple, yet effective way of reading 2 Maccabees. Some refinement needs to be done but this might show a new direction for looking at 2 Maccabees.

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