

Suffering bodies in 2 Maccabees 3

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This article aims to analyse the role that bodies play in different narratives implied in 2 Maccabees 3. In order to do this, a possible dominant narrative was constructed in which the motif of suffering bodies is shown. In the same way, a challenging narrative wherein the alleviation of suffering bodies is portrayed is also revealed. Furthermore the dynamics behind these two narratives, e.g. when the Jewish deity was willing to relieve this suffering, is also investigated. It was found that the Jewish deity responds positively when his high priest and his nation are in unison apropos their worship, and are willing to counter foreign invaders of the temple and their ideologies. To come to this conclusion the narrative therapeutic approach, as used by Epston and White, was applied to 2 Maccabees 3. This approach to interpretation is quite unique.

Problem statement

At first glance, the narrative of 2 Maccabees 3 seems to be just another story with a sad beginning and a good ending. Doran (2012:89–90) sees it merely as a narrative that wants to state how the Jewish deity defended his temple. Dommershausen (1985:117) and Schwartz (2008:185) on the other hand, give more prominence to the narrative. They suggest that it denotes the idyllic status quo ante meaning – a previous state of affairs. This means a previous dispensation when everything was running smooth in Jerusalem. Schwartz then goes somewhat further by positing that the real story of chapter 3 should be read against this status quo ante. This is the primary point of focus for this article: The (re)construction of the *ideal* story by using certain preset narrative criteria. The uniqueness of this article hinges on its approach to the narratives. This approach will be explained in the next section and will be applied in the last section.

One does not have long to read before one realises that there is more to 2 Maccabees 3 than meets the eye. For instance a number of questions arise:

- What are the roles of the different characters, i.e. the deity, the high priest (Onias), priests, the nation, Heliodorus, Simon the adversary, and especially the heavenly beings like the horse and rider and the two young men?
- Together with the first question, how does the author describe the bodies of these different characters? Are they visibly suffering or non-suffering? Are they earth-bound or heaven-bound? From which realm or space do they originate?
- Is there a certain dynamic behind these characters? Do they energise or inhibit the narrative?
- Why and how does the Jewish deity in chapter 3 choose to defend his temple, in contrast with another temple episode in 2 Maccabees 4–7, where according to Jordaan (2015:357–361), the deity chose *not* to protect his temple?

These are among some of the peculiarities that call for a clearer interpretation. With Schwartz (2008:185) the vantage point of the text of 2 Maccabees 3 as being a 'floating legend' and Tcherikover (1982:390) a 'rhetorical embellishment' is taken, and also that the author of 2 Maccabees borrowed purposefully from everywhere in order to fabricate a narrative. In short, this means that 2 Maccabees 3 cannot be seen as historically sound; it is a fabrication with more inaccuracies than accuracies.

History shows that many different approaches have been used to determine the meaning of 2 Maccabees 3, such as a grammatical-historical analysis by Moffat (2004:132–154), an historical-critical approach by Goldstein (1983), a comparative literary approach by Van Henten (1997), and a thematic approach, viz. 'suffering' by Harrington (1999:8). There is even an approach focusing on conflict, namely the religious struggle between the Jews themselves according to Bickerman (1979:90). The importance of all the above-mentioned approaches cannot be done away with. However, as with any approach, they all have their limitations. This article allows for a diachronic method in that it reconstructs the historical setting by using certain predetermined criteria.

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In contrast to the above approaches, it works explicitly with what may be perceived as two colliding narratives. It shows how the author of 2 Maccabees 3 might have used certain events from the *past* to create a brand new narrative. The distinctiveness of this article is in its approach that it combines certain results of varying text analyses that were used separately previously. These are results such as an identified ideological background, which according to Doran (2012:89) is a deity defending his or her temple from foreign elements; the role of the body, rarely explored in 2 Maccabees until now, with the exception perhaps of Jordaan (2016:718–729); and the movement between two identified colliding narratives.

Although it may sound like it, the narrative therapeutic approach is not from an *all out* psychological angle. Psychological approaches, especially if they work with psychoanalysis or psychodynamics, seem to be speculative, and according to Efthimiadis-Keith (2004:78–79), to defy rules of logic. However, the narrative therapeutic approach, as used in various publications by Jordaan (2006:1–24; 2008:114–128; 2009:335–360)¹ would rather seek to work on a literary level with preset narrative criteria, against speculative psychoanalytical and psychodynamical criteria. Furthermore, it must be stated that a narrative therapeutic reading does not exist in a vacuum. The research findings of scholarly predecessors are taken into account. Such research is incorporated, establishing the most likely background of 2 Maccabees 3. Taking this background into consideration, a narrative therapeutic analysis is undertaken by applying certain criteria to the text. These criteria are discussed in the next section ('Methodological framework'). Lastly, the results of this analysis are demonstrated in the sections, 'The stories of characters in 2 Maccabees 3' and 'The dominant and alternative narratives'. It presents a different picture from that of work previously undertaken because a different set of analytical tools has been used.

Methodological framework

None of the commentaries consulted viewed 2 Maccabees 3 in terms of a master narrative and a challenging narrative. These concepts and their place within the narrative therapeutic framework as used by Epston and White (1990) are further discussed. *Master narrative* and *Challenging narrative* are terms that are typical of the Narrative Therapy coined by Epston and White in their ground-breaking work, *Narrative means to therapeutic ends* (1990).

Relevant terms applicable to narrative therapy

Story

A story is told to make sense of an entity's history. In 2 Maccabees 3 a story is told to make sense of a nation's history. This means experiences and events are organised in such a way that they help people to make sense of the world around them (Epston & White 1990:10). There are various stories

¹The method used in all these articles is exactly the same although the texts differ.

in 2 Maccabees 3. Onias, Heliodorus, the deity, the nation and the heavenly beings all have different stories to tell.

Resistance

The story sometimes seems to get disorganised as resistance is encountered. This resistance usually erupts as another story (dominant narrative) is forced upon an entity's history and a problem-saturated story is formed in this way. This problem-saturated story needs to be rewritten in a way that would once again restore sense to an entity or nation's history (Epston & White 1990:11). Resistance in 2 Maccabees 3 emerged when Heliodorus contemplated entering the temple and attempted to rob the temple of money allocated to the widows and orphans. The resultant act of temple defilement would serve as the catalyst for all subsequent action.

Dominant narrative

The dominant narrative presents an accepted story of a community, or entity or nation's life. It has power as it is accepted as *truth* and *objective reality*. This narrative is usually handed down from generation to generation and is largely unquestioned (Epston & White 1990:20–22). Dominant narratives are ideologically immersed. They can, however, usually be summed up in simple one-liners such as: 'Superior Hellenism cannot be challenged' or 'Antiochus IV Epiphanus is the true revelation of God'. This dominant narrative needs to be addressed by another narrative, i.e. the alternative narrative.

Alternative narrative

The moment the dominant narrative is challenged, an alternative narrative arises. The latter questions the power and knowledge of the former (Epston & White 1990:20–22). In this specific context, (2 Macc 3) the alternative narrative is created to restore sense to a nation's history.

Body

The human body usually constitutes the place where discrimination takes place. In the context of this particular story, the body of a Jew or a woman might be regarded as inferior and *docile*. Such a body should become a conscript to, and be submissive to the views of the dominant narrative. On the other hand, the body of a Seleucid like Heliodorus might be regarded as mighty and superior. The view of the body is just a matter of what the 'objective reality' states (Epston & White 1990:21). Objective reality would here be the prevalent view on the Jews' inferior bodies and couldn't be argued with. This means that if one can understand how a community views a body, one also understands much about how the body functions within a community.

Therapy

This is the re-establishment of personal agency from the oppression of external problems and the dominant stories of larger systems (Corey 2005:396). Therapy happens when the dominant narrative is effectively challenged by an alternative narrative. If the dominant narrative is not challenged and dealt with, there can, however, be no therapy.

Problem

Narrative therapy does not see a person as a problem, but a problem as a problem (Epston & White 1990:40). This means that Heliodorus' presence in 2 Maccabees 3 per se is not a difficulty, but the fact that he wanted to pillage the temple on behalf of the Seleucid king is a real challenge. Problems would therefore mainly lie in larger entities. For example oil is benign by itself but in the presence of chlorine produces a dangerous fiery explosion. The Jewish nation in 2 Maccabees 3 is basically good if left to its own devices; however, the nation placed within the context of a degrading Hellenistic culture is an explosive combination. If you remove the problem (degrading Hellenism) the nation would again function normally. Therefore it might well be stated here that 'problems always hunt in pairs'.

Externalising of the problem

In order to address a problem it should first be externalised, that is placed outside an entity. This was tried in the above section, 'Problem'. This is called externalisation of the problem. As soon as the problem is externalised, it can be addressed (Epston & White 1990:43).

Unique outcome

A unique outcome of a story is generated by looking at ways similar problems were dealt with in the past. These outcomes of the past provide the impetus and way to handle problems in the present and future (Epston & White 1990:55–56).

A storied therapy

We thus have a storied therapy. This began with a story that had gone wrong due to a certain dominant narrative. Another *challenging* narrative emerged. A problem was identified and externalised. These problems are usually related to the bodies of certain people being inferior and others being superior. A new story was then compiled based upon unique outcomes in the past.

A narrative therapeutic reading of ancient texts tends to bring out interesting dynamics within the text. This should especially be the case in narrative biblical texts (or even extra-biblical texts) as there is almost always a story to be told of some 'dominant narrative' that needs to be corrected by a 'challenging narrative'. The term *body*, as used in narrative therapy, reflects the ideological setting of the text. This, together with the way in which problems are defined, as being outside an entity, brings out the distance between an entity and a problem as discussed in the section, 'Problem'. In terms of narrative, it makes it easier to deal with. Unique outcomes tell us how similar problems were dealt with in the past and point to the direction that it should be dealt with in the present. The blending of all these elements together adds up to a narrative therapeutic reading of the text. 2 Maccabees 3 will hereafter be examined accordingly as follow:

- The reconstruction of the stories behind names – i.e. what certain ancient Jewish readers probably knew about the characters.

- Analysis of these stories in terms of the dominant as well as the challenging narratives.
- The externalising of a certain problem.
- The formulation of unique outcomes.
- The description of a storied therapy.
- The writing down of a conclusion.

The stories of characters in 2 Maccabees 3

As already stated, the characters in 2 Maccabees 3 and their stories will now be depicted. The importance of characters telling their own stories in the narrative therapeutic approach must be stressed. However, one must accept the problematic situation surrounding the ancient Greek narrative where the narrator is often the voice to speak not only for the Jews but presumably for the other characters too. So, what one has here is not the character's words but the *narrator* speaking through those characters. This means that one has to construct the stories and characters from what the narrator tells.

The faithful priest Onias

Onias is the first name in 2 Maccabees 3 that attracts attention (3:1).² An overall positive picture is painted of him. He is a εὐσέβειά τε καὶ μισοπονηρία ('pious and evil hating') priest presiding in Jerusalem. However, it quickly surfaces that there was infighting in the temple management over the ἀγορανομίας ('market management') between Onias and another priest called Simon (3:5). This market in Jerusalem was a flourishing business and brought in large sums of money not just to the city but to the temple too (Tcherikover 1982:155). Naturally, different families would try to lay their hands on the money. Onias handled this conflict with Simon well. However, Simon, not being able to get the upper hand over Onias, mentioned the temple treasury to Seleucids who subsequently sent Heliodorus to rob the temple of the accumulated treasury funds (3:8). In this clash between the Seleucids and Onias, Onias takes the more passive, suffering role. His concern and answer to Heliodorus in 3:10 is ... παρακαταθήκας εἶναι χηρῶν τε καὶ ὀρφανῶν. [... the money is designated to the widows and orphans]. It is clear from the text that these words of Onias made no impression on Heliodorus as he just continued in his quest of robbing the temple. The docile body of the high priest Onias was expected subscribed to the view of Heliodorus. Onias is portrayed as having a suffering body due to this immovable stance of Heliodorus. The text vividly describes how Heliodorus' demeanour changed. Verses 16 and 17 state:

¹⁶ ἦν δὲ ὁρῶντα τὴν τοῦ ἀρχιερέως ἰδέαν τιτρώσκεσθαι τὴν διάνοιαν ἣ γὰρ ὄψις καὶ τὸ τῆς χροῆς παρηλλαγμένον ἐνέφαιεν τὴν κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀγωνίαν ¹⁷περικέχυτο γὰρ περὶ τὸν ἄνδρα δέος τι καὶ φρικασμὸς σώματος δι' ὃν πρόδηλον ἐγένετο τοῖς θεωροῦσιν τὸ κατὰ καρδίαν ἐνεστὸς ἄλγος

[¹⁶Whoever looked the high priest in the face, could from his appearance sense his woundedness and his changed colour denoted his troubled soul. ¹⁷The worry that came over the man was so great

2. References with only the chapter and verse number are referring to 2 Maccabees.

that his whole body trembled and the pain in his heart became clear to everyone who looked at him). ([author's own translation])

Clearly, Onias initially emerges as the underdog in this contest between himself and Simon. Suffering physically, he is also the champion of those who are currently suffering and will subsequently suffer even more, namely the widows and orphans. Interestingly enough the nation, as will be discussed later, also followed the example of Onias. He had no earthly power to combat the mighty Heliodorus and the Seleucid dynasty. Onias, nevertheless stands his ground. He does not mingle or even negotiate with the Seleucids, unlike Simon who started the trouble. However, what transpires is that Onias in some miraculous way is helped by the deity. Various commentators comment on this, e.g. Doran (2012:89–90) and Gruen (2002:177) who recognise this defense by the patron-deity of the city. This is a common literary model or *topos* from ancient times, viz. the deity takes action and protects his sacred shrine from those who would violate it. This is exactly the case here. Both Doran and Gruen refer to 2 Chronicles 32:1–22 as evidence for this recurring theme in Jewish literature, whereby a divine messenger or angel of God comes to the defense of Jerusalem. In this case (2 Macc 3) the good priest Onias is the vital link between the Jewish deity and his holy shrine. Whenever he sacrifices, even if it is for the life of a villain like Heliodorus, it is effective (3:32). Onias is also recognised by the angelic beings as the true reason why Heliodorus is still alive, therefore Heliodorus should thank Onias (3:33). In summary it may be said that Onias is depicted as a true and faithful priest. He represents the real interests of the Jewish nation and the holy temple. When he operates in accordance with his deity's principles, suffering bodies (like his own) are transformed into conquering bodies. And naturally vice versa, if his deity is provoked, then conquering bodies are transformed into suffering bodies. Onias sets a prime example of how a high priest should behave and operate. He is immovable in his faith and conviction. He has access to his deity and therefore the ability to transform his environment both bodily and spatially.

Heliodorus the unnamed king's sidekick

Heliodorus is tipped off by the apostate priest Simon concerning the existence of enormous temple riches (3:6). Heliodorus is depicted as a calculating villain. 2 Maccabees 3:8b states: εὐθέως δὲ ὁ Ἡλιόδωρος ἐποιεῖτο τὴν πορείαν τῇ μὲν ἐμφάσει ὡς τὰς κατὰ Κοίλην Συρίαν [Heliodorus immediately undertook a trip under the pretense of going to Coele-Syria]. The real purpose of his trip was, however, to pillage the temple in Jerusalem of its vast riches. Heliodorus is a representative of a wider threatening group and ideological system. They are painted in a bad light. Members belonging to this group are Heliodorus, the unnamed king (3:7) and Simon the apostate priest (3:3). They are only interested in money for their own gain (3:6) and not at all concerned about widows and orphans 3:10 and 12). Heliodorus has the sanction of the Seleucid king and he does not want to listen to negotiate and seems unstoppable (3:13). Various things can be said about this group. They have no regard for the temple

and its sanctity (3:12), the officials such as Onias, the other priests and even the Jewish population in Jerusalem at large (3:15–20). Verse 23 states simply ὁ δὲ Ἡλιόδωρος τὸ διεγνωσμένον ἐπετέλει [But Heliodorus determined to complete]. This wicked consortium (consisting of inter alia Heliodorus, the Seleucid king and Simon the apostate priest), emerge as superior to the other Jews in Jerusalem with an ideology of superiority and *naturally* superior bodies. As the holy space of Jerusalem, the temple and their deity is threatened, the Jewish inhabitants should simply concede to this bigger, superior threat. A natural consequence of all of this is that Onias and his group begin to suffer bodily. Looking from the outside, the outcome of these circumstances seems clear. Onias, the holy temple, its deity and Jerusalem will not win this battle. At this stage the aforementioned wicked consortium are clearly tipped to ultimately become the outright winners. They are arrogant and look down on the *inferior* Jewish nation; they cause severe bodily harm to those whom they regard as small and insignificant. In this context it is the widows and orphans in particular and the Jews in general. Indeed, the latter simply do not have the means to counter this menace.

But then the unthinkable happens: the whole narrative is turned around as the Jewish deity intervenes to defend his holy space and his people. In an epiphany, a horse and horseman appear (ᾧ φθῆ γάρ τις ἵππος αὐτοῖς φοβερὸν ἔχων τὸν ἐπιβάτην – 3:25a) which charge Heliodorus. Two other young men also appear (ἕτεροι δὲ δύο προσεφάνησαν αὐτῷ νεανῖαι – 3:26a) who whipped Heliodorus continually. This resulted in Heliodorus being cast down to the floor in darkness (σκότει – 3:27) and almost dying. Heliodorus' extreme agony is described in vivid terms (3:29): ὁ μὲν διὰ τὴν θεῖαν ἐνέργειαν ἄφωνος καὶ πάσης ἐστερημένος ἐλπίδος καὶ σωτηρίας ἔρριπτο [And he by the work of God now without voice and deprived of hope and salvation lying down]. Even more peculiarities were to follow. A few of Heliodorus' men asked Onias to pray for Heliodorus in order that God might save his life (3:31). This Onias did, whereupon the two young men (3:26) appeared again and said that Heliodorus should be thankful towards Onias. Furthermore, Heliodorus should proclaim the greatness of God (3:33–35).

What one has here is a complete turnaround of the situation. After the epiphany, the bodily arrogance of Heliodorus is transformed into a lowly suffering body. The blasphemous Heliodorus has been transformed into a person thanking the Jewish God.

The nation as collective

The suffering *nation* consists of various groups. Their almost ritualistic mourning is described vividly. Doran (2012:84) also remarks correctly 'Throughout the unity of the city against Heliodorus is emphasized ...'. The following groups are mentioned:

- Firstly, the priests as described in 2 Maccabees 3:15ab: οἱ δὲ ἱερεῖς πρὸ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἐν ταῖς ἱερατικαῖς στολαῖς ῥίγαντες ἑαυτοὺς ἐπεκαλοῦντο εἰς οὐρανὸν τὸν περὶ παρακαταθήκης

νομοθετήσαντα τοῖς παρακαταθεμένοις ταῦτα σῶα διαφυλάττειν ('The priests fell down in their priestly attire before the burnt offering altar and tore their clothes and called to heaven to him'). This is not the usual or a required liturgical action of the priests. However, what the priests do here is to inscribe a sacred space with their bodies. They are in actual fact reclaiming their deity's threatened space with their bodies (De Bruyn 2013:636–637).

- Secondly, the action of the nation as a whole is mentioned in verses 18 to 21. Worship had now become a public spectacle of the suffering. The public sphere is entered by the nation in solidarity with what was seen at the high priest and the other priests (3:15–17). Verse 18 states that groups of people came from the houses and worshipped publicly because of the contempt that was to come to the place (διὰ τὸ μέλλειν εἰς καταφρόνησιν ἔρχεσθαι τὸν τόπον). The women entered the public domain in mourning clothes (3:19) and states that the virgins who were usually locked away, came from their houses, some on the walls of the city, others peeping through the windows. Verse 20 again clearly states that πᾶσαι δὲ προτείνουσαι τὰς χεῖρας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἐποιούντο τὴν λιτανείαν [they all held their hands out toward heaven in prayer]. The extending of the hands towards heaven is in a way more than just prayer, it is reaching out in order to cross two spatial domains: from the threatened space below, *earth*, to the space above, *heaven*. This is not the nation's everyday manner of worship. The nation by their actions is claiming the public worship space of Jerusalem. They are extending the normal boundaries of worship, namely the houses and temple, and are now showing their suffering in the public sphere. The purpose of this is clear. It is to influence the Jewish deity to get involved in the dire circumstances they are facing.

The named deity and unnamed heavenly people

The name of the Jewish deity is only mentioned in various verses by the Greek names κύριος and θεός. He is not unnamed like the king in 2 Maccabees 7 and 8, but his heavenly beings are unnamed. Dommershausen (1985:155) remarks that they are unnamed so that they might not be addressed or even thanked. They have heavenly bodies and with the horseman are commissioned to defend the holy place. The named God operates from the heaven (οὐρανός) above (3:34) but also has his own earthly place (ἐαυτοῦ τόπον – 3:30), which he is willing to defend.

Although the deity's living and operating space is mentioned, nothing is said about his body. The bodies of his accomplices, however, are shining and non-suffering. This deity signified his operation through an appearance (epiphany) to start his work. This means there was a manifestation signifying the presence of the deity. The epiphany in 2 Maccabees is supernatural and by no means unimpressive. People are struck with lameness and shock (ἐκλύσιν καὶ δειλίαν τραπήναι – 3:24). The heavenly beings in the epiphany are not intimidated like the suffering bodies of the high priest, priests and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. On the contrary, they strike the body of the transgressor, Heliiodorus. The ultimate purpose of this

epiphany is to defend the deity's holy space and alleviate the suffering bodies of his righteous people. The epiphany also causes a suffering body. Heliiodorus almost dies after being beaten by the heavenly men. In short, after the epiphany the narrative is turned around.

The other characters

There are a few other characters in 2 Maccabees 3 who play minor roles in the narrative, like the spectators mentioned in verse 17 and Hyrcanus, mentioned in verse 11. These characters are not unimportant but not relevant for the sake of this article. They do not energise or inhibit the narrative as discussed in the section, 'Problem statement'. The construction of the different narratives referred to in the section, 'A storied therapy', will hence proceed.

The dominant and alternative narratives

As stated above, a dominant narrative, also known as the problem-saturated story, will now be constructed. This story usually represents a specific ideology and the submission of docile bodies. A challenging or alternative narrative will also be constructed. It represents how the dominant narrative was challenged and eventually defeated.

The dominant narrative

The author of 2 Maccabees 3 acknowledges a time of turmoil within the Jewish society. The temple, Jerusalem and in general the traditional way of worship were under threat. This is the 'real story' that Daniel Schwartz refers to in 'Problem statement'. This turmoil was due to infighting within the religious leadership in Jerusalem. A difference concerning the spending of temple funds is mentioned. This, however, was just the spark that ignited the fire, as the actual division runs much deeper. In this fight the protagonist is Onias, the high priest, while the antagonist is the priest Simon. Onias is painted by the author as acceptable. Simon is described as a traitor who mingles with the Seleucids and is not really concerned about the temple and people like widows and orphans. Basically the story of 2 Maccabees 3 is a story of two ways: the way of Onias and the way of Simon. However, the consequences of following either of these two ways are even more significant. Following the way of Simon leads to the defilement of the holy space, thereby alienating the Jewish deity, the abuse of people like widows and orphans and causing severe bodily suffering to all the people of Jerusalem. This is the dominant narrative that centres on the attitude of the high priest and his commitment towards the temple, the nation and Jerusalem. A negative, contemptuous priest brings about defilement of the temple, detachment of the Jewish deity and ultimately the suffering of the people.

The alternative narrative

The alternative narrative comes into play when the way of Onias is followed. Onias is really concerned with the wellbeing

of the temple, Jerusalem and the Jewish nation as a whole. He is not interested in mixing with the Seleucids and can depend on the support of the nation. When a priest of such calibre is in charge of the temple, prayers and rituals, the Jewish deity responds in an extraordinary way even when a hostile foe like the unnamed king and his sidekick, Heliodorus, is faced. The king and Heliodorus indeed have powerful bodies and the ability to cause immeasurable suffering to the Jewish nation. Heliodorus and his consortium expect the Jewish nation to follow their ideas blindly. However, they do not take into consideration the deity of the Jewish nation. He takes note of the suffering of the Jewish nation and then acts in a supernatural fashion. He acted in history to defend Jerusalem and the nation miraculously by means of an angel. There is no reason why He would not do it again, the only condition being that the high priest and whole nation must honour and worship him in the correct way. If this is the case, no enemy will be able to defeat them. The epiphany of the horseman and two heavenly beings demonstrate this. God will defend the temple and Jerusalem. The nation should thus follow the example of Onias. Doing so will not alienate the Jewish deity and guarantee the safety of the temple and Jerusalem and further the non-suffering of the nation. The reader should be moved by the text from a passive, indifferent state, to the questioning of the status quo and move to the better status quo ante (when Onias was priest). This was when the Jewish deity was willing to defend his temple, Jerusalem and alleviate suffering bodies. This narrative is subtle and open-ended. It invites the reader to complete it and to draw conclusions from it.

Externalising the problem

There was infighting in the temple between the high priest and other priests over the allocation of funds. This caused the priest Simon to mingle with the Seleucids and resulted in defilement of the temple. Naturally this caused great turmoil in Jerusalem and distress to the faithful. Their holy space was threatened and this led to suffering. Externalising the problem might be suggested as 'the curse of mixing with Seleucids' or 'the regulating of Jewish bodies in an oppressive way'. Both of these are acceptable but each has a different emphasis. The first one focuses on the problem and the second one on the consequence of the problem. The second one, 'the regulating of Jewish bodies in an oppressive way', will be chosen as it is more relevant in a narrative setting.

Unique outcomes

The unique outcome for 'the regulating of Jewish bodies in an oppressive way' had to be dealt with in a creative way. The story of how God delivered Jerusalem in 2 Chronicles 32:1–22 provides guidelines. In both 2 Maccabees 3 and 2 Chronicles 32:1–22 Jerusalem was threatened by a much stronger force. In both there are prayers said and in both instances the invader had to return to countries without being successful. This also concurs with the patron deity scheme of the Græco-Roman literature that defends his or her city by supernatural means. This *topos* thus provided the impetus for writing 2 Maccabees 3.

A storied therapy

The problem-saturated story is one of infighting within the ranks of the priests in Jerusalem over monetary matters. Simon's party turned towards the Seleucids for assistance. The Seleucids decided to take the money of the temple and in the process attempted to defile the temple in Jerusalem. This caused disturbance within the nation in Jerusalem. Everybody suffers consequently. This is the dominant narrative that needed to be challenged. The whole nation in 2 Maccabees 3 took the initiative of praying to God in their hour of need. God responded by means of an epiphany. A horseman and two heavenly men appear in his temple and severely beat Heliodorus. He has to return home empty handed, thank the priest Onias and bear witness to the fact that God actually defends Jerusalem. This is exactly what happened in 2 Maccabees 3. There was a turnaround from a suffering Jerusalem, the 'problem-saturated story', to a 'solution-saturated story' – a triumphant, jubilant Jerusalem. The storied therapy lies in the fact that the suffering of bodies was alleviated and a new narrative was created.

Conclusion

The narrative therapeutic reading of 2 Maccabees 3 posed exciting possibilities. Colliding narratives, the dominant and alternative, were pointed out. It was shown on the one hand how there were suffering bodies in oppressive circumstances and on the other hand, how this was challenged and turned around. Unique outcomes from the past were identified. Problems that had emerged were externalised. It was clearly shown that sometimes a problem is only a problem because it is created within a society. A society – even if they are insignificant – may rise above it. In the end we can say that therapy has taken place. There was movement from a problem-saturated story to a solution-saturated story. No other consulted commentary on 2 Maccabees 3 worked quite in the same way. The uniqueness of this article, however, lies in the fact that it focuses on the bodies of the people of Jerusalem: their suffering that the threat brought and the deity intervened to alleviate this bodily suffering. This focus on the bodies is still largely unexplored in research on 2 Maccabees.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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