



By Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski.

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Hanukkah traditionally is a time for celebrating the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Seleucid forces occupying Jerusalem and the Temple. While this story is told in many different forms, the foundational text come from the apocryphal book of Second Maccabees. Immediately prior to the stories of Judas Maccabeus's victories are stories of the sufferings of the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the hands of the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes. These stories come to a crescendo with the story of the mother and her seven sons in the seventh chapter of Second Maccabees.

The mother and seven sons are fascinating for several reasons. First, theirs is the first account of martyrdom in the Jewish traditions. This story narrates how these seven sons each refuse in turn to eat pork in violation of Torah. Encouraged by their mother, the sons, from oldest to youngest, quote Torah in defiance of Antiochus before being martyred. Their deaths are represented as a type of atoning sacrifice. Rhetorically, these acts of martyrdom make possible the victories won by Judas Maccabeus that follow in the next chapter of Second Maccabees..

The story of the mother and seven sons serves as a template for martyrdom accounts in rabbinic literature. Their deaths are recounted and retold in tractate Gittin in the Babylonian Talmud and in midrash in Lamentations Rabbah and Pesikta Rabbati. But the influence did not end there. The Maccabean martyrs emerge as important figures in early Christian writing about martyrdom. By the fourth century there was a well-established cult of the Maccabean martyrs in Antioch, with their relics being venerated there. Devotion to these Jewish martyrs spread to North Africa and Roman Christianity, with sermons in praise of them by Augustine of Hippo and Pope Leo the Great. Eventually their relics make their way all the way to Cologne, where their reliquary can still be seen in St. Andrew's church there. Eventually, their cult fades in importance although their feast day of August 1 is still on the calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Why would Christians honor the mother and seven sons? It was an odd choice given that they died for the sake of Torah observance. Christians ultimately came to the conclusion that they died in anticipation of faith in Jesus Christ, following the logic that if he was the Word made flesh, then it was he who was the voice that gave the Law at Sinai. Although from our perspective this is not a satisfactory form of theological reasoning, it does speak to the Christian desire to find continuity between their faith and the story of Israel.

So for me, whenever I think of Hanukkah, I think of these other Maccabean brothers and their heroic witness. I imagine their story gave courage to Judas Maccabeus and his companions to fight for freedom to live as Jews, free from foreign oppression. And I think about how Christians, while having received these stories as part of their own scriptural tradition, must still take care to let this very Jewish story have meaning on its own terms, independent of any Christian reframing. By respecting these stories of Jewish self-determination, we make space for the possibility of further collaborations between Jews and Christians to support the freedom and liberties of others.