

Hasmonean Martyrdom: Between Christian and Jewish Tradition

Eastern Christianity includes prayer and a festival honoring the martyrdom of a woman and her seven sons who, in the time of Antiochus IV, refused to eat pork. The Talmud reimagines their story, depicting the woman and her sons as refusing to worship an idol in Roman times. This change reflects the rabbis' tendency to downplay martyrdom in favor of a piety model centered on “dying” through exhaustive Torah study.

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The seven Maccabee brothers are condemned to death by Antiochus IV, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo 1755/56 Fresco Oratorio della

Purità, Udine, Italy. Wikimedia

Shmuni and Her Seven Sons: A Syriac Tradition

Early Christian authors from the eastern church were enamored of the Hasmonean martyrs.^[1] The daily liturgy of the Antiochene Syriac Orthodox Church even incorporated references to them.^[2] In one prayer, the mother of the martyred sons, identified here as Shmuni— a name related to the family name *Hashmonai*—defiantly speaks to the cruel king, boasting of the pride she takes in her sons' deaths:

מִן שִׁבְעָה בְּנֵי נִצְיָחָה	Of the seven of my triumphant sons
אִמְרָה לֵה שְׁמוּנִי לְמַלְכָּה	Says Shmuni to the king –
חַד מִנְהוֹן לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ	I will give away none
נִשְׁמָשׁ קוֹדֵמִיד עֲבֹדוֹתָא	To serve under you.
לְאֱלֹהָא יוֹבָא אֲנָא לְהוֹן	I give them to God.
דְּדִילָה אִיתִיהוֹן עֲבָדָא	They are his servants.
בְּצַפְרָא שְׁמוּנִי מֵהִימְנָתָא	In the morning the faithful Shmuni
פִּיסָא קִרְבְּתִי לְאֱלֹהָא	Presented the following request to God:
אֱלֹהָא עֲבַד לִי דִינָא	God, save me
מִן מַלְכָּא אַנְטִיּוֹכּוֹס	From the king Antiochus.
לְבִנֵי נִכְסֵי אִידָא אִמְרָא	He slaughters my sons as lambs
וְעֵלֵי גּוֹס אִידָא אַרְיָא ^[3]	And pounces on me like a lion. ^[4]

The Syriac Christian Aphrahat (Adiabene c.270–c.345), a leading scholar of the Antiochian church who lived in the Sassanian Persian empire, praised Shmuni and her seven sons. The same is true for his younger contemporary, the exegete Ephrem the Syrian (b. 306, Nisibis–d. 373, Edessa), another leading sage from this community, who wrote a hymn called “On the Sons of Shmuni.”^[5]

A Christian Festival Honoring the Hasmonean Martyrs

By the fourth century, the Cult of Saint Shmuni was active in Antioch, and the annual August 1 feast was added to the calendars of numerous churches in Western and Eastern Orthodox traditions. The Archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–ca. 390), in a homily titled “In Praise of the Maccabees,” explains that Christians celebrate “The Feast of the Hasmoneans” to honor the Judean martyrs—especially the woman and her seven sons (see below) but others as well—because they willingly martyred themselves as an emulation of Jesus’ future crucifixion:

The festival today is indeed in their [the Maccabees’] honor, though not many recognize them because their martyrdom antedates Christ. Yet they deserve universal recognition for their unswerving devotion to the ways of their fathers. Consider what they, whose martyrdom preceded Christ’s passion, would have achieved if they had been persecuted after the time of Christ and were able to emulate his death on our behalf...^[6]

Gregory believed that the Hasmoneans’ willingness to go to their deaths led to acts of perfect sacrifice that could not possibly have taken place without their prophetic knowledge of Christ. Like other biblical figures who willingly sacrificed their lives prior to the death of Christ, the Hasmoneans must have had some knowledge of Christ’s coming, and were willing to die as an emulation of that act.^[7]

Similarly, John Chrysostom (347–407 C.E.), the Bishop of Antioch, famous for his eloquent speeches—his name (Χρυσόστομος) means “Golden Mouth”—delivered a series of homilies that extol the Hasmoneans as righteous men:

For I don't hesitate to count [the mother and her seven sons] with the other martyrs, to the extent that I declare that they are even more brilliant. For they competed at a time when the bronze gates had not yet been shattered, nor the iron bar removed, when sin still ruled and the curse flourished and the Devil's citadel stood and the path of this kind of virtue was as yet untrodden.
[8]

According to Chrysostom, these figures should be treated with the same reverence as martyred saints who lived after Jesus' death. As sin was even more dominant in the time before Jesus, if anything, martyrs from this period are even more impressive.

The Christians who admired Shmuni and her seven sons as well as other martyrs from the Hasmonean period extolled their heroism because they interpreted their willingness to die as an expression of their faith in Christ. This approach is a uniquely Christian reframing of a Jewish martyrdom story that goes back to the 2nd century B.C.E.

Martyrdom Rather than Eating Pork

2 Maccabees^[9] tells two tales of heroic martyrdom at length, both about refusal to eat pork. The first is about the death of a respected elder named Eliezer:

^{2 Macc 6:18} Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being forced to open his mouth to eat pig's flesh. ^{6:19} But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, ^{6:20} spitting it out, as all ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste, even for the natural love of life.

The second story is about the martyrdom of a Jewish mother and her seven sons—the basis for the Shmuni story quoted above:

^{2 Macc 7:1} It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and straps, to partake of unlawful pig's flesh. ^{7:2} One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors."

The king, clearly Antiochus IV in context, is furious and has the boy executed in a gruesome and painful manner, which the author describes in detail:

^{2 Macc 7:3} The king fell into a rage and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. ^{7:4} These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. ^{7:5} When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still

breathing, and to fry him in a pan.

Each of the woman's sons is tortured similarly when he refuses to eat pork at the command of King Antiochus. Once the older six boys are killed, the youngest son is brought before the king and declares that his brothers' deaths, and his own imminent death, derives not from a position of weakness, but from a position of power,^[10] expressing the author's conviction that God is the sole source of the Jews' suffering, and the source of their coming victory. The Jews' willingness to die, moreover, will arouse God's sympathy and will soon prompt God to intervene on the Jews' behalf.^[11]

Dying for a cause was a Greek ideal,^[12] and it is thus not surprising that the Hellenistic 2 Maccabees is sympathetic to this concept. Indeed, the stories of Eliezer and the Woman with Seven Sons were expanded upon in a 1st century C.E. Hellenistic-Jewish philosophical work, written in Greek, referred to as 4 Maccabees.^[13]

Not Pork but Idol Worship

The Talmud too retells the story of the woman and her seven sons, anchoring it in a verse from Psalms:
[14]

תהלים מד:כג Ps 44:23 As for Your sake we are killed all the day long;
כי עֲלֵיךָ הִרְגָנוּ כָּל הַיּוֹם נִחְשָׁבְנוּ
כְּצֹאֵן טְבָחָהּ. we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter.

בבלי גיטין נ: וְרַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר: זֶה אִשָּׁה וְשִׁבְעָה בָנֶיהָ – אֶתְיוּהָ לְקַמָּא לְקַמִּיָּה דְקֵיסָר, אָמְרוּ
Rav Judah said: “This [verse] is about the woman and her seven sons.” They brought the first [son] before Caesar. They said to him: “Worship an idol!”
לֵיהּ: פְּלַח לְעַבֹדָה זָרָה!

The Talmud recasts the story to be in the time of the Romans, with an unnamed Caesar playing the role of the Greek King, and, concomitantly, no mention of Chanukah or Hasmoneans. The violation in the rabbinic version is not eating pork but worshipping an idol, one of three prohibitions a Jew must choose death to avoid (along with murder and incest) according to rabbinic law.^[15] Finally, the Talmud forgoes the gruesome descriptions of boiling flesh and torture in favor of the simple refrain אֶפְקֹדָה וְקָטְלוּהוּ “they took him out and killed him.”

Sex Slavery

Another interpretation of the verse from Psalms—also noted by this same Rav Judah^[16]—tells of Jewish children taken captive by the Roman Empire during the Judean rebellion, who choose death as an alternative to being sold into sexual slavery:

בבלי גיטין נ: מעשה בארבע מאות ילדים וילדות
שנשבו לקלון הרגישו בעצמן למה הן
מתבקשים אמרו אם אנו טובעים בים אנו באין
לחיי העולם הבא

There was an incident involving four hundred boys and girls who were taken as captives for the purpose of sex slavery. These children sensed on their own what they were expected to do, and they said: If we commit suicide and drown in the sea, will we come to eternal life in the World-to-Come?

דרש להן הגדול שבהן (תהלים סח:כג) "אמר
אדני מבשן אשיב אשיב ממצולות ים." "מבשן
אשיב"—מבין שיני אריה. "אשיב ממצולות
ים"—אלו שטובעין בים.

The oldest child among them expounded the verse: "The Lord said, I will bring back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea" (Psalms 68:23). "I will bring back from Bashan," i.e., from between the teeth [*bein shen*] of the lion, and "I will bring them back from the depths of the sea" is referring to those who drown in the sea.

כיון ששמעו ילדות כד קפצו כולן ונפלו לתוך
הים

When the girls heard this, they all leapt and fell into the sea.

נשאו ילדים קל וחומר בעצמן ואמרו מה הללו
שדרךן לכד כד אנו שאין דרכנו לכד על אחת
כמה וכמה אף הם קפצו לתוך הים

The boys then drew an *a fortiori* inference with regard to themselves and said: If these girls, for whom sexual intercourse with men is their natural way, act in such a manner, then we, for whom sexual intercourse with men is not our natural way, should all the more so conduct ourselves likewise. They too leapt into the sea.

The sin the boys were worried about is an example of the rabbinic category of גילוי ערויות, sexual sin, and thus requires martyrdom. The girls, in contrast, are being extra pious, though under the circumstances, the Talmud accepts this as righteous behavior. In other words, these stories show that the rabbis also venerate martyrdom, but only in certain extreme scenarios—idolatry and sex slavery—and tone down the melodramatic graphic depictions in comparison with Hellenistic Jewish sources like 2 and 4 Maccabees.

Martyrdom Is Sacrifice for Torah Observance

Following these two stories, the Talmud drops the martyrdom association entirely and reinterprets the verse as an allegory for the observance of Jewish law.

Circumcision

One interpretation of Psalms connects being killed all the day long with Jews circumcising their newborn sons:

b. Gittin 57b Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: “this [verse] is referring to circumcision, which was given for the eighth day, as the blood of our newborn sons is spilled for the sake of the covenant with God.”

בבלי גיטין נ: רבי יהושע בן לוי אָמַר: "זו מילה שניתנה בשמיני."

Ritual Slaughter

Another interpretation mentions a bizarre situation of experts teaching others proper ritual slaughter by demonstrating the proper use of the knife on themselves:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: “This [verse] was stated in reference to Torah scholars who demonstrate the *halakhot* of slaughter on themselves.”^[17]

רבי שמעון בן לקיש אָמַר: "אלו תלמידי חכמים שמראין הלכות שחיטה בעצמן."

Torah Study

The final interpretation turns from the observance of commandments to the scholar’s act of Torah study, which is described in hyperbolic terms, as if exhausting themselves with constant Torah study were a form of martyrdom:

Rav Nahman bar Isaac says: “This [verse] was stated in reference to Torah scholars who kill themselves over the words of Torah.”

רב נחמן בר יצחק אָמַר אלו תלמידי חכמים שממיתין עצמן על דברי תורה

This is in accordance with the statement of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish. As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: “The words of the Torah endure^[18] only for one who kills himself over them, as it is stated (Num 19:14): “This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent.”

כְּדַרְבֵי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ דְּאָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ: "אִין דְּבַרֵי תוֹרָה מִתְקַיֵּימִין אֲלֵא בְּמִי שְׁמַמִּית עַצְמוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם, שְׁנֹאֲמַר (במדבר יט:יד): 'אֵאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי יָמוּת בְּאֵהָל וְגו'."

This entire set of interpretations, which offer an alternative to the martyrdom stories—circumcision, teaching ritual slaughter in a dangerous way, and exhaustion by constant study—downplays the virtue of literal martyrdom. Nevertheless, the rabbis don’t dismiss its value altogether.

Indeed, the Talmud includes stories set ostensibly in the wake of the Bar Kokhba revolt and the consequent Hadrianic persecutions, in which several rabbis, such as Rabbi Akiva and R. Haninah ben Teradyon, are killed on account of their public teaching of Torah (b. Avodah Zarah 18a).^[19]

Rabbinic skepticism about martyrdom may have been buttressed by their awareness of the Christian traditions, which presented the Hasmoneans as Christian heroes who had prophetic knowledge of Jesus as Lord and Savior of humanity.^[20] Nevertheless, skepticism about the religious value of martyrdom has deeper roots, going back to Hasmonean times.

Fighting on Shabbat Is Better than Passive Martyrdom

The book of 1 Maccabees, originally written in Hebrew by a Judean member of John Hyrcanus' court, speaks of how certain Jews, who had fled from cities and towns to escape persecution, were surrounded by Greek Seleucid troops, who ordered them to surrender or do battle. The ultimatum fell out on Shabbat:

1 Macc 2:32 ...They (=Seleucid army) encamped opposite them (=Judeans) and prepared for battle against them on the sabbath day. 2:33 They said to them, 'Enough of this! Come out and do what the king commands, and you will live.' 2:34 But they said, 'We will not come out, nor will we do what the king commands and so profane the sabbath day.'

The Judeans here refuse to fight on Shabbat, so they are easily slaughtered by the Greek troops:

1 Macc 2:35 Then the enemy quickly attacked them. 2:36 But they did not answer them or hurl a stone at them or block up their hiding-places, 2:37 for they said, 'Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly.' 2:38 So they attacked them on the sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and livestock, to the number of a thousand people.^[21]

While presenting these people as pious, Mattathias and his sons and followers understand the behavior as a religious error, however well meaning:

1 Macc 2:39 When Mattathias and his friends learned of it, they mourned for them deeply. 2:40 And all said to their neighbors: 'If we all do as our kindred have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth.' 2:41 So they made this decision that day: 'Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding-places.'

In the author's view, Judea is saved not only by the piety of those who gave their lives without a struggle, but also by the Hasmoneans who took up arms and fought. The rest of 1 Maccabees details the successive military exploits of Mattathias' sons, ending in the establishment of Simon, and then his son John Hyrcanus, as high priests of an independent Judea. Judah Maccabee and his brothers were heroic because they took matters into their own hands and refused to wait passively for God's intervention.

Megillat Antiochus: An Outlier in Rabbinic Texts

Early rabbinic literature says very little about Chanukah.^[22] Exceptional in this regard is Megillat Antiochus—written in Aramaic by a Jew living in Syria or perhaps Israel, in the mid- to late first millennium C.E.^[23]—which narrates the Hasmonean rebellion and makes use of martyrdom stories. It

speaks of a pious woman who gives up her life, baby in hand, rather than allowing her son to go uncircumcised:

מגילת אנטיוכוס לה ואף אנתתא די ילידת בר
בתר דמית בעלה וגזרתיה לתמניא יומין.
וסליקת על שורא די ירושלם וברה גזירה
בידה: לוי ענת ואמרת לך אמרין בגריס חיבא
אנתון מסברין לבטלא מיננא קימא די גזיר
עמנא קימא דאבהתנא לא פסיק מיננא
ושבתא ירחא ומהילותא מבני בניהון לא
יעידון. ואפלת ברה לארעא ונפלת בתריה
ומיתו תרויהון כחדא וסגיאין מן בני ישראל די
הוו עבדין כן ביומיא האיגון ולא משניין קיים
אבהתהון: [24]

Megillat Antiochus 35 There was also a woman who bore a son after the death of her husband, and she circumcised him when he was eight days old. And she went up on the wall of Jerusalem, bearing her circumcised son.³⁶ And she cried out and said, “To you Bagris, the wicked, be it said ‘You plan to destroy the covenant that has been made with us, the covenant of our forefathers. Sabbath and the new-moon [festivals] and circumcision we will not abandon, neither we nor our children’s children.’” And she cast her son to the ground, and leaped down after him, and both died together. Many of the children of Israel did thus in those days rather than violate the covenant of their fathers.^[25]

The mother’s defiant speech to Bagris, whose name may be a corruption of Antiochus Epiphanes’ commander Bacchides, clarifies that death is preferable to the violation of the Jews’ ancestral laws.^[26] Megillat Antiochus then recounts a story which seems to draw from 1 Maccabees about Jews who refuse to violate the Sabbath by picking up arms. In contrast to 1 Maccabees, however, their refusal is a praiseworthy act of piety:

מגילת אנטיוכוס לוי ביה זמנא אמרין בני ישראל
אלין לאלין איתו ונהך ונשבות במערתא. ולמה
נחלל יומא דשבתא. ואכלי קורציהון קדם
בגריס: לח באדין בגריס חייבא שלח גוברין די
זיינא ויתיבו על פוס מערתא ואמרין להון
יהודאי פוקו לוותנא אכלו מן לחמנא ושתו מן
חמרנא ועובדנא תהוון עבדין: לט ענין בני
ישראל ואמרין אלין לאלין דכירין אנחנא מה
דאתפקדנא על טורא דסיני שיתא יומין תעבדון
עבדתיכון וביומא שביעאה תניחון. כען טב לנא
דנמות במערתא מן דנחלל יומא דשבתא: [27]

Megillat Antiochus 37 Therefore the Israelites said one to the other, “Come let us withdraw into a cave, lest here we be compelled to desecrate the Sabbath.” But their plan was betrayed to Bagris. Then did Bagris, the wicked, send armed men, to camp at the entrance to the cave. And they said, “Jews, come forth to us, eat with us of our bread, and drink with us of our wine, and do even as we do.” And the children of Israel spoke and said one to another, “We all remember what we were commanded upon Mount Sinai; ‘Six days shall you labor, and upon the seventh day, shall you rest.’ It were better to die in this cave than to profane the Sabbath day.”

Megillat Antiochus is an exceptional text in its praise of Hasmonean martyrs.^[28] Other documents that were produced in rabbinic settings limit the retelling of the Hasmonean revolt to a brief description of the war. They explain Chanukah primarily by referencing the miracle of the oil (b. Shabbat 21b) or the story of rebuilding the menorah out of eight spears (*Pesikta Rabbati* §2).^[29] Such traditions do not reveal a dependence upon stories preserved in 1 and 2 Maccabees concerning the voluntary deaths of Jews during the Hasmonean revolt. Megillat Antiochus, however, repurposes such traditions and

portrays these Jews as worthy of admiration.^[30]

“Dying” of Torah not Dying for Torah

The rabbis’ skepticism concerning martyrdom, and their impulse to limit the circumstances in which martyrdom is considered a desirable choice, may explain why Megillat Antiochus, or at least the traditions upon which it was based, remained obscure until the eighth century or so.^[31] For the rabbis, dying for God was theoretically an admirable thing, but in practice, they wished to limit this to the occasional exceptional story, and not encourage their followers to pursue a martyr’s fate. Far better, in their view, was the choice to study Torah and “die” of exhaustion, an image of piety the rabbis could easily get behind.

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Footnotes

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[1] Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 94.

[2] Antioch is a city in southern Turkey, near the border of Syria.

[3] The writing is in Syriac script, but I transcribe here in Aramaic script for the ease of readers.

[4] See Michael Abdala, “[The Cult of Mart Shmuni, a Maccabean Martyr, in the Traditions of the Assyrian Churches of Mesopotamia](#),” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 23.1 (2009): 22–39 [p. 23].

[5] Aphrahat, *On Wars*, 5; Ephrem the Syrian, “On the Sons of Shmuni.”

[6] Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 15: In Praise of the Maccabees,” in *St. Gregory of Nazianus: Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994).

[7] He goes on to explain that pre-Jesus acts of faith were generally influenced by foreknowledge of Jesus’ future sacrifice:

Not one of those who attained perfection before the coming of Christ accomplished his goal without faith in Christ. While this statement is both arcane and even to a certain extent mystic, I for one consider it very persuasive, as do all who love Christ. For although the Logos was later openly proclaimed in his own era, he was made known even before to the pure of mind, as is evident from the large number of persons who achieved honor before his day. Such noble figures, then, are not to be overlooked because they lived before the time of the cross, but should rather be acclaimed for having lived in accordance with the cross...

[8] John Chrysostom, “On Eleazar and the Seven Boys,” 5.

[9] This is an abridged work, written in Greek, and based upon the writings of a Diasporan Jew from Cyrene named Jason. See discussion in Katell Berthelot, “The Maccabean Victory Explained: Between 1 and 2 Maccabees,” *TheTorah* (2022); Daniel R. Schwartz, “Judea versus Judaism: Between 1 and 2 Maccabees,” *TheTorah* (2022).

[10] The speech reads:

2 Macc 7:36 For our brothers, after enduring a brief suffering for everlasting life, have fallen under God’s covenant, but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. 7:37 I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, 7:38 and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.

[11] See Malka Z. Simkovich, “The Faith of the Martyred Mother and her Seven Sons,” *TheTorah* (2015).

[12] See Marty Lockshin, “Chanukah: The Greek Influence of Martyrdom,” *TheTorah* (2017).

[13] See discussion in Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, “2 and 4 Maccabees: Evolving Responses to Hellenism,” *TheTorah* (2017).

[14] It appears in b. Gittin 57b and Lamentations Rabbah §1.

[15] This mandate, known as *yaharog ve’al ya’avor*, is discussed in b. Sanhedrin 74a.

[16] This interpretation actually has three separate attributions:

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל וְאִתִּיקָא רַבִּי אַמִּי Rav Judah says that Samuel says, and some say that it
וְאָמַרִי לֵהּ בְּמַתְנִיתָא תָּנָא was Rabbi Ami who says this, and some say that it was
taught in a *baraita*.

[17] The Talmud then seems to question the piety of this act, by quoting another authority who forbids it:

דְּאָמַר רַבָּא: "כָּל מִיּוֹ לִיחֻזֵי אִינִישׁ בְּנַפְשִׁיהּ בַּר
מִשְׁחִיטָה וְדָבָר אַחֵר." This is as Rava says: “A person may demonstrate
anything using himself to illustrate the act except for
slaughter and another matter (=sexual intercourse).”

[18] This likely means they have a lasting effect or are remembered.

[19] Accounts of these martyrs’ deaths are read in synagogues on Yom Kippur (see [here](#)) and the Fast of the Ninth of Av (see [here](#)), which commemorates the destructions of the Jerusalem Temples.

[20] Early Jewish and early Christian traditions about martyrdom seem to be part of a broader discourse that reflects the deep connections between these two communities. As Daniel Boyarin has shown, both traditions valorize figures who escape martyrdom by using various modes of trickery. In one legend preserved in the Tosefta (Hullin 2:24), Rabbi Eliezer successfully escapes martyrdom after being arrested for heresy. The strands of ambivalence towards martyrdom that are found in rabbinic literature, though, are less apparent in early Christian traditions. According to Candida Moss, most accounts of Christian martyrdom at the hand of

the Romans were invented. Sharing martyrdom stories was a way of empowering and encouraging a community that was not widely respected politically or socially. Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013). Rabbinic traditions about martyrdom were not necessarily invented, but embellished upon older traditions whose historicity is unknown.

[21] Translations from 1 and 2 Maccabees are from NRSV.

[22] A second century document that lists the days on which Jews may not fast, known as Megillat Ta'anit, states that **בכ"ה** ביה יום חנוכה תמניא יומין דלא למספד **למספד**: "On the twenty fifth of the month is Chanukah, eight days on which one does not eulogize." For a discussion of the rabbinic reticence to talk about Chanukah, see Malka Z. Simkovich, **"Uncovering the Truth About Chanukah,"** *The Torah* (2013).

[23] For a brief introduction, see Zeev Safrai, "The Scroll of Antiochus and the Scroll of Fasts," in *The Literature of the Sages*, Part 2, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson, *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum/Fortress press, 2006), 238–241; Aryeh Kasher, "The Historical Background of 'Megillath Antiochus,'" *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 48 (1981): 207–230.

[24] In Hebrew translation (found on Sefaria):

מגילת אנטיוכוס לד וגם אשה אשר ילדה בן אחר-ימות בעלה ותמל אותו לשמונה ימים ותעל על-חומת ירושלים ובנה מהול בידה: לה ותען ותאמר לך אומרים בגרים הרשע אתם חושבים לבטל מאתנו הברית אשר כרת עמנו ברית אבותינו לא-נבטל ממנו שבת ראש-חדש ומילה מבני בנינו לא יוסר: לו ותפל בנה לארץ ותיפול אחריו וימותו שניהם כאחד ורבים מבני ישראל אשר היו עושים כן בימים ההם ולא שנו ברית אבותם:

[25] Trans. Tsvi Hirsch Filipowski at [here](#).

[26] As Aryeh Kasher notes, the Syrian version of 1 and 2 Maccabees refers to Bachides as Bacherius (בכריוס), and Sefer Yosiphon refers to him as Bakirus (בקיורוס). Kasher, "The Historical Background of 'Megillath Antiochus,'" 227.

[27] In Hebrew translation:

מגילת אנטיוכוס לו בזמן ההוא אמרו בני-ישראל אלה לאלה באו וגלדו ונשבות במערה פן נחלל את-יום השבת ויילשינו אותם לפני בגרים: לה אז בגרים הרשע שלח אנשים חלוצים ויבאו וישבו על-פי המערה ויאמרו אליהם יהודים צאו אלינו אכלו מלחמנו ושתו מינינו ומעשינו תהיו עושים: לט ויענו בני ישראל ויאמרו אלה לאלה זוכרים אנתנו אשר צננו יי עליהר סיני ששת ימים תעבד ועשית כל-מלאכתך וביום השביעי תשבות עתה טוב לנו אשר נמות במערה מאשר נחלל את-יום השבת:

[28] Another exception is in *piyyut* (liturgical poetry). See Ophir Münz Manor, **"In Praise of the Hasmoneans: Chanukah Beyond Rabbinic Literature,"** *The Gemara* (2017).

[29] The glosses on Megillat Taanit (25th of Kislev, *ad loc.*) have seven spears.

[30] While the rabbis were also skeptical of martyrdom, they were, perhaps, just as skeptical of militarism, which had led to Judea's destruction in the Great Revolt and then again in the Bar Kochba Revolt. Wary of the toll that clashes with the Roman empire had taken on the population of Judea, the rabbis insisted that, outside

of the three core prohibitions, God wanted Jews to express their religious piety by staying alive.

[31] The earliest citation of Megillat Antiochus is in the early 9th century Babylonian work *Halakhot Gedolot*.



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