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THEOLOGY AND MARTYRDOM IN THE BOOKS OF MACCABEES

– DOCTORATE THESIS–
SUMMARY

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Summary

The theological depth of martyrdom has impressed humanity since the beginning of time; it stimulated the spiritual sensitivity of the Fathers of the Church and it was intensely debated by theologians of all denominations. Martyrdom is the supreme choice that renders people completely free from themselves, free from all forms of self-centredness, the ultimate proof of complete love the creature may show its Creator.

Both the pre-Christian and the Christian martyrs have always been perceived as the golden-standards of steadfastness in faith. Regardless if they died for the Law given to Moses or for the Gospel brought by Christ, they can all be considered 'the wounded friends of the Bride-groom, the ears of wheat cut by kings and stored by God in the storehouses of His Kingdom' as Paul Evdokimov put it.

The author of the Second Book of the Maccabees is the first to record an episode of martyrdom in Judaism, one that would later become the paradigm of Christians martyrial deaths.

Even though the Books of the Maccabees were not included in the Hebrew Bible, they have always been highly valued by both the Jewish and the Christian traditions. The first chapter of the present work touches on the fact that they are being listed among the Anagignoskomena, comprising an overview of how the biblical canon came to be established, from details on the Samaritan Pentateuch to the canon of the Ethiopian Church which includes 81 sacred writings.

As the main source for more than a century of Israelite history, the Books of the Maccabees have been regarded as a significant reference point in Judaism. Revered and valued in the Jewish diaspora, they were included in the Septuagint alongside the other Scriptures. Later on, the Fathers of the Christian Church would also appreciate these books and use them as a source of inspiration for their preaching. What's more, it should be noted that some of the ancient lists containing the biblical canon set them among the canonical books, which is a clear indication that they held a very important place in the spirituality of the early Christian Church.

My thesis has eight chapters preceded by an introduction that outlines the isagogic elements and how the Books of the Maccabees were perceived in Judaism and in the Christian Church. The paper analyses the historical context that triggered the harsh oppression of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Judaism was not spared the Hellenistic influence that permeated the whole of the

Orient. Hellenism was brought to Israel by the Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers and caused the vast moral degradation criticised by the author of 2 Maccabees.

The events recorded seem to suggest more than a process of forced Hellenization: the Seleucid persecution occurred on the background of a frustrating historical context, was initiated by a controversial person in a region faced with a difficult economic situation, inhabited by morally compromised Jews, in other words, a whole host of aspects that determined the dramatic events that unfolded.

Most of the scholars believe that what happened during the Hasmonean dynasty was recorded in 2 and 4 Maccabees as the first instance of Jewish martyrology. These books contain all the elements pertaining to the definition of martyrdom:

- Publicly declaring one's fidelity to God and the Torah, braving the official order to abandon this faith;
- Nurturing a belief that this act fulfils a religious mandate (death is the only acceptable alternative to apostasy);
- The martyr's complete responsibility to God and the Torah;
- The ordeals fulfil a higher purpose, namely the salvation of Israel;
- Death.

The Jewish people were ruled by the Seleucids around 204-198 B.C.; beginning with 175 B.C. the Seleucid Empire was ruled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In order to understand the cause of the savage persecution of the Jews which began in 167 B.C. the present paper dedicates a case study to the analysis of the personality of the aforementioned king.

Two of the chapters were structured according to the ideas of Jan Willem van Henten, who had analysed the events in terms of an armed and a spiritual resistance. The scholars were able to identify two of currents of thought: the first one was the ideology that began with Phineas (Numbers 25,7-13), continued with the Hasmonean family and inspired the Bar Kochba revolt, then the Zealots, the Sicarii, as well as other armed resistance movements opposing the Roman oppression.

The second current can be identified in the attitude displayed by Daniel and the three young men, by the martyrs who died during the time of the Maccabees, by Eleazar and by the mother of the seven brothers, all the way to Rabbi Aquila. This current argues that the Jews are a martyr people, an idea found in the writings of Hellenistic Judaism.

The armed resistance I analyse in the third chapter was shaped by the Hasmoneans, especially by Judah Maccabee. The personality of the great hero is not only associated with numerous victories, but also with significant moments when the Jewish cult was restored. Antiochus Epiphanes's act of outlawing the Jewish cult was unprecedented in the Seleucid policy towards their conquered peoples. This insolence caused the Jews to mount a consequential revolt in 166 B.C.

By freeing Jerusalem, Judah Maccabee initiated the purification and rededication of the Temple. Josephus Flavius writes that this happened on 25 Kislev 164 B.C., on the very day in which three years prior the Temple had been defiled by Antiochus, when he set up a statue of Zeus in it and sacrificed a sow on the altar. The purification of the Temple was a significant moment for Judaism, one whose reverberations are still felt in the yearly religious practice of the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah. The Talmud notes that the custom of lighting candles is meant to publicly remember the sacred fire of the Temple. Josephus Flavius believed that the lights symbolised the freedom gained by the Jews.

Judah Maccabee strove to bring about his people's religious and moral regeneration. Beside his efforts on the battle field, his sacrifice and prayers for the dead (2Mac 12,43-46) are the most eloquent proof that the Jews observed the cult of the dead in old-testament times. The exegesis of this fragment indicates that they also believed in the ultimate resurrection of the dead, a belief I have analysed at the end my paper, and it also shows how Judaism assimilated the act of praying for the deceased. Bossuet quotes the Jewish practice of reciting the Kaddish, a hymn read in the synagogue by the children of the deceased for 11 months, as a basis for the Christian prayers for the dead.

The fierce spiritual resistance against Hellenization was marked by martyrdom. During the Seleucid persecution, the prerequisites of being put to death were observing Shabbat, performing circumcision, and keeping Kosher. Those who refused to renounce these fundamental practices of Judaism were met with the rage of the persecutors. Chapter 4 of my research analyses the martyrial deaths of Elder Eleazar, the seven brothers and their mother. The interpreters of the Maccabees' text believe that the stance they took has been vital in the way the events unfolded, because the martyrs played an expiatory role: by their sacrifice they took the sins of the people upon themselves and thus they changed the outcome of the war with the Seleucids. The extraordinary capacity to fight for an ideal, the unwavering faith that vehemently rejects any

form of compromise were all commendable virtues. The Book of 4 Maccabees develops the account of the martyrdom in 2 Maccabees 7 in a philosophical discourse aimed at proving that human reason is superior to human emotion.

Eleazar chooses to be a brave example in his death of faithful observance of the revered and holy Laws. Likewise, the seven brothers and their mother refuse to eat pork, to sacrifice to the idols, and each accept to be sacrificed one by one. This fidelity to law made manifest in keeping the Kosher dietary regulations is analysed at the end of chapter 4. This episode has been a source of inspiration for the saints of the Church, such as St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. John Chrysostom.

The end of chapter 4 is focused on the theological depth of martyrdom. Fr. Stăniloae wrote that ‘we enter in God’s presence only in a state of sacrifice’; these words capture a fundamental truth, namely that the only suitable way to answer divine love is with self-sacrifice. Scholars who specialize in the history of religions unanimously agree that the essence of sacrifice is the gift offered to God in a cultic setting. The same consensus states that the sacrifice is always identified with the person bringing it, and that is precisely why the sacrifice, as an authentic gift, is first and foremost self-offering, personal sacrifice. In this respect, martyrdom is the consummate form of sacrifice. Offering God *your-self* rather than *something of yours* is a sublime proof of love and sacrifice. Fr. Constantin Galeriu asserted that the sacrifice is a revelation of the truth hidden in the core of our being and of the imperative force of self-offering. An authentic self-sacrifice is possible only to the extent to which you identify yourself completely with the Truth you sacrifice yourself for. Otherwise the sacrifice loses all meaning and becomes an improbable gesture, meant to fail.

The Maccabee martyrs lived the truth of their faith authentically and thus created a genuine theology. The speeches they gave before their deaths and the special moments of lucidity and integrity were used by the author of the book as a basis for his development of important ideas. I distilled three fundamental topics: *creation*, *providence*, and *resurrection*, which I analysed in their historic evolution, from the way in which the Judaic exegetes addressed these topics to their theological interpretation in the writings of the Fathers of the Christian Church.

Special attention is given to the exegesis of 2 Mac. 7, 28, a fragment considered by the vast majority of scholars as the *locus classicus* of the theology of *creatio ex nihilo*. The Septuagint concentrates this concept in the word ‘*οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων*’ broadly meaning ‘from things that have not

existed' or 'from what has not existed'. The Greek word and the two translations allow for both two synonymous and distinct readings simultaneously. The verse is understood to support the idea of the creation out of nothing. However, there are those who object to this and who see in this word a simple expression of the fact that God created something out of a raw, indefinite matter. The word, pregnant with philosophical meaning, was meant to give a Jewish answer to the creationist concepts of Antiquity, while at the same time, asserting God's almightiness and His capacity to be *Creator ex nihilo*.

The most prevalent conception in the antique Israel and its neighbouring cultures was that God's first action was to organize chaos. The act of creation was less about bringing matter into existence than it was about organizing the pre-existing chaos in the shapes of a world that could contain and support life. The text in 2 Mac. 7, 28 corrects this understanding and offers a new insight into the act of creation. My analysis provides an overview of the evolution of this topic in the first centuries of the Christian era, starting with the Shepherd of Hermas and St. Justin Martyr, to St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great.

The in-depth analysis of this topic is performed by the additional analysis of the term *κτίστης*, i.e. 'creator'. It must be mentioned that the noun *κτίστης* is found only 8 times in the Septuagint, three of the instances are found in 2 Maccabees 1, 24; 7, 23 and 13, 14, and each time it refers to God.

The meaning of the noun *κτίστης* is associated with the royal ideology of the Hellenistic period when, after the rule of Alexander the Great, the new royal dynasties fashioned themselves as founders and benefactors. Military victories were followed by feasts in their honour, by donations or the building/rebuilding of cities, all meant to legitimise the new rulers. If a king built or renamed a city, then he became that city's founder – *κτίστης*.

When referring to God the text says He is omnipotent, a Creator '*ex nihilo*' of the entire existence, of life itself, a doctrine that would later be perfected in the first centuries of the Christian era, with the help of the Fathers of the Church.

Another theological aspect analysed is the one of the 'divine providence' – *πρόνοια*. Whereas in 1 Maccabees this topic is hinted at in the syntagma 'heavenly help' (1 Mac. 12, 15; 9, 46; 16, 3), the second Book of the Maccabees is filled with an abundance of references to providence. The text recounts exceptional moments in which a providential intervention is apparent, and it also alludes to divine help when explaining or interpreting certain events. The very war of the

Maccabees illustrates God's caring for His people: Judah Maccabee sets time apart to pray before each battle. Paradoxically, the martyrs sense God's care for them in their hour of death and in the foreshadowed eternity that awaits them. The Third Book of the Maccabees also lays special emphasis on divine providence: at the height of the persecution the author of the book firmly says that 'this was an act of the invincible providence of Him who was aiding the Jews from heaven' (3 Mac. 4, 21).

In order to expand on the idea of *πρόνοια* I have written an exegesis of the text in 2 Maccabees 3, which records the miraculous event of the Temple's treasury being spared, alongside an analysis of the phrase *Κύριος παντοκράτωρ*, which indicates by its very presence in the text the theological understanding of the matter. This latter term employed in the Septuagint translates the Hebrew phrase *Yahweh Sabaoth*, and sometimes *Shaddai or El Shaddai*, another name of God.

The noun *κράτος* means 'might, power' or 'dominion', but if the modern word 'power' suggests compulsion or coercion, the Greek term reflects a sort of calm and intelligent control. Together with the adjective *πᾶς / πᾶν* or *παντός, παντόκρατωρ* means 'ruler of all', 'all-powerful', but not in the sense of a secular ruler, rather in the sense used by Apostle Paul in Colossians 1, 17: 'in Him all things consist'. It is thus clear that *παντόκρατωρ* captures both nuances: 'omnipotent' and 'ruler'.

For Philo of Alexandria, providence is a natural action, clearly connected with the divine Person. Yahweh is 'the great archon', the pilot steering the whole universe ('De ConfusioneLinguarum', 33), with a care that knows no bounds ('De AllegoriisLegum', 1,13).

The analysis of martyrdom compelled me to address another very important topic in chapter 7: *resurrection*. Once the first people disobeyed God, they were destined to suffer degradation and death; people from all cultures and all religions developed a faith in an existence beyond the boundaries of the empirical world. The resurrection gives a meaning to the whole creation and especially to human life.

The mother of the Maccabee martyrs voices her hope in the resurrection of the dead, invoking the divine compassion and mercy. For her Yahweh, the primordial source of life, has the power to bring back to life those who have died for their faith. The speech of the second brother introduces the concept of 'resurrection to an everlasting life' (2 Mac. 7, 9), whereas the fourth brother says that for the sinners 'there will be no resurrection to life' (2 Mac. 7, 14), or in other

words, ‘a resurrection to eternal death’. With these two utterances the dying martyrs outline a beautiful theology of hope. They share an *extreme* belief in resurrection, hoping that they will recover their lost limbs and destroyed bodies. The author believes in the resurrection of the whole of creation, a teaching that was appropriated by Christianity and supplemented with the idea of the final judgement of human kind. Divine justice requires that judgement be passed on the human as a whole, so that those who have served righteousness could enjoy glory and beatitude, as body and soul. By the same token, those who served wickedness and indulged in the delusion of sin, will also receive their punishment, as body and soul.

This doctrine was strongly supported by the Pharisees of the first century, who imposed the belief in the resurrection that will take place at the end of the world. This teaching is substantiated by the divine omnipotence, but it is transmitted only through supernatural revelation, not naturally. The Jews are favoured. The doctrine is found in the second blessing of Amidah, as well as among the 13 faith principles of Maimonides, who clearly states ‘I believe the dead will be raised again in the Messianic Era’.

Nevertheless, even with all the revelations miraculously received by the Jews, the doctrine of the resurrection was not embraced by the whole Jewish world. We know the stance the Sadducees took: since it is something beyond reason, it cannot be fully understood. However, the resurrection is not a phenomenon that goes against reason; it may not be discovered by nature, but it is not contrary to nature either. The resurrection is perfectly suited to God’s perfection, and it is justified by His omnipotence.

The end of chapter 7 illustrates the special value the human body has, as the vessel destined to be raised from the dead, both in Judaism and Christianity. The body’s intrinsic value brings new meaning to martyrdom. The martyrdom the Jewish people suffered during the Maccabean times was not restricted to a mere loss of life: it involved maiming. The mutilation that preceded death exemplified the lack of decency and respect for the holiness of life displayed by the persecutors.

It is interesting to note that in Hebrew there is no word to denote a body separated from its soul. When referring to the physical human nature the terms ‘flesh’ or ‘living body’ are used, for instance in Gen. 2, 7 or Is. 40, 6. Despite a dichotomic structure, the human manifests a perfect unity of being. According to Josephus Flavius the human being does not have a body and does not have a soul: the human is simultaneously both body and soul.

The respectful attitude towards the human body cultivated in Judaism and illustrated by man's duties to his own body (such as ritualic baths or caring for the dead) sets the martyrdom endured by the seven brothers against an even more dramatic backdrop. Blinded by rage, the oppressor is not contented to simply kill the seven brothers, he must also have them subjected to tortures that abolish the very dignity of their bodies. Cutting off the tongue silences the witness brought by the young men. Flaying the skin of their heads could be equated with a destruction of their faces, of their images. The human face reflects the depths of the human soul and weaves a connection both with God and with the other people. Cutting the hands and legs annulled the man as a vertical being capable of raising his hands in prayer. Michel Foucault demonstrated that torture may become a macabre form of displaying a sort of '*thesaurus anatomicus*', whereby the organs of the human body are emphasised only to be mutilated and deformed.

The heroism of the seven Maccabean brothers has been praised by the Christian Church and remembered every year on the 1st of August; what's more, their example has been held in great esteem by the Christian theology written during times of persecution. The fact that the Christian Church appropriated these pre-Christian martyrs is based on the fact that their deaths became paradigmatic for the Christian martyrs. The final chapter of my paper is dedicated to this aspect: their martyrdom speaks about faith and about bearing witness to this faith at all costs. The Christian martyrs wanted the same thing; they could renounce anything, but were unable to recant their faith. The martyrdom of the Maccabees speaks about hope: the hope that God's justice will prevail, that they will be resurrected and their bodies restored. It also speaks about God's love: a love stronger than death. The Christian martyrs would walk unto their deaths with the same hope and the same love in their hearts. The connection between the two groups of martyrs resides in the fact that they form a type-antitype binomial.

The existence of a cult of the seven Maccabean brothers in Antioch is attested by several sources from the first millennium C.E. and this tradition was known to the Fathers of the Church. Blessed Augustine of Hippo confirms the existence of a basilica dedicated to them in Antioch, and St. John Chrysostom wrote several homilies in their honour, stating that their relics are kept in a church near the city. St. Gregory of Nazianzus notes that around 360 C.E. in Cappadocia there was a festival commemorating the Maccabees.

There is no doubt that prince Constantin Brâncoveanu knew of their massacre; he would relive the scenario of their martyrdom himself, together with his sons and his councillor Ianache, dying

for the Gospel of Lord Jesus Christ. The two episodes, set side by side, share overwhelming similarities. Almost 1900 years apart, the same steadfastness and fidelity to one's faith made a martyr of the Romanian prince for whom the Christian faith was more important than life itself. Pained at the sight of his children being put to death, he remained lucid and encouraged them: they may lose their lives, but they must not lose their faith. His words, just like the words of the mother of the Maccabean martyrs, mark the moment of grace and a revelation for young Matei, who found the strength to face his death. The fact that the martyrdom of the Brâncoveanu family members follows the pattern outlined in 2 Mac. 7 is further substantiated by the references to this biblical episode in the memorial service written for them.

In chapter 8 I have also mentioned St. Davis Komnenos the martyr, who was murdered by the Ottomans in Constantinople together with three of his sons and one nephew on the 1st of November 1463. The 'Anonymous Synaxarion' gives details of their demise and draws striking parallels between the martyrial deaths of the Maccabees, the Brâncoveanus and the Komnenos. In July 2013, after a proposal made by His Eminence Metropolitan Paul of Drama, David Komnenos, the last Emperor of Trebizond, Basil, George, Manouel (his sons) and Alexios (his nephew), were declared Saints by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate through an official Act of canonization. Their memory is celebrated on the 1st of November, the date of their martyrdom. Their deaths illustrate once more the paradigmatic function of the biblical martyrdom analysed in the present research paper.

Regardless of when they live, martyrs prove that the divine grace is at work. They bravely bear witness to how much God loves us and to the eternal joy they feel strengthening them before their deaths.

In my paper I attempted to underline the admirable way in which the revelation of the Old Testament culminated in the last words of the tortured young men and of their mother. The historical and theological aspects analysed in this thesis outlined the context in which Christ our Saviour was born and defined what Apostle Paul called '*the fullness of the time*' (Gal. 4, 4).