



Collective Violence and Memory in the Ancient Mediterranean

Edited by

Sonja Ammann, Helge Bezold, Stephen Germany
and Julia Rhyder

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Hellenizing Hanukkah: The Commemoration of Military Victory in the Books of the Maccabees

Julia Rhyder

Abstract

Early Jewish writings are replete with narratives of warfare and collective violence. Yet relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to how these accounts of violence affected the way Jews structured their festal calendar. This essay examines the festivals described in 1 and 2 Maccabees that serve to commemorate the most impressive military victories of the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE—namely, Hanukkah, Nicanor’s Day, and Simon’s Day. Paying attention to the similarities and differences between the festal texts of 1 and 2 Maccabees, I argue that the two books employ a common commemorative strategy to foster a positive collective memory of the violence of the Maccabean revolt that could both legitimize the founding figures of the Hasmonean dynasty and compete with the commemorative cultures of other Hellenistic communities. This evidence of commemorative creativity and cultural adaptation by the authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees sheds valuable light on how the memorialization of violence in the ancient Mediterranean was shaped not simply by the ideologies and institutions of discrete societies but also by their intersections and cross-cultural borrowings.

Keywords

festivals – 1 Maccabees – 2 Maccabees – military victory – commemoration – Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean

Military victory is a key theme of 1 and 2 Maccabees.¹ Written in the mid-to-late second century, these works of Jewish historiography recount how a

¹ The research presented here forms part of the Swiss National Science Foundation project “Transforming Memories of Collective Violence in the Hebrew Bible” (project number 181219). It was presented in modified form at the webinar “Historical Narratives and Memorializa-

small band of Jewish insurgents overcame incredible odds and pressures, from within and outside, to overthrow Seleucid hegemony in Judea. The two books retell the events of the rebellion in distinctive ways and may have been written in different geographical contexts; while 1 Maccabees is widely agreed to be a work of dynastic history that was written in the Hasmonean court in Jerusalem, 2 Maccabees is often considered a diasporic work that was composed in Ptolemaic Egypt.² Despite their differences, both 1 and 2 Maccabees evince a remarkable point of similarity: they share a mutual interest in promoting the new festivals allegedly instigated by Judas Maccabaeus and his band of rebels—the so-called Maccabees—to mark the dates of particularly noteworthy victories. These include the eight-day festival beginning on Chislev 25 to celebrate Hanukkah, which commemorates the rededication of the Jerusalem temple after Judas and his army defeated the Seleucid forces in battle, and a festival established on Adar 13 to commemorate the Jewish victory over the Seleucid general Nicanor. First Maccabees also describes an annual celebration on Iyyar 23 to celebrate when Judas's brother Simon Thassi captured the *acra*, a garrison in a fortified area in Jerusalem.

Despite the considerable scholarly interest that these festivals have received, few studies have explored what they might reveal about the commemorative strategies of the authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees and how these strategies might compare to strategies for memorializing and celebrating victories in other eastern Mediterranean societies. This essay fills this gap by exploring how the authors of the books of the Maccabees appropriated and transformed Hellenistic commemorative patterns in fashioning new festivals to celebrate the Maccabean revolt. Paying attention to the similarities and differences between the festal texts of 1 and 2 Maccabees, I argue that the two books employ a common commemorative strategy that uses annual festivals to foster a positive collective memory of the violence of the Maccabean revolt both to legitimize the founding figures of the Hasmonean dynasty and to compete with the commemorative cultures of other Hellenistic communities. This evidence of commemorative creativity and cultural adaptation by the authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees, as we shall see, sheds valuable light on how the memorialization of violence in

tion of Collective Violence" hosted by the University of Basel on November 5, 2020. I wish to thank all the participants in the webinar for their valuable feedback, which helped improve the piece for publication. I am also grateful to Angela Roskop Erisman for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own, and all dates are BCE.

2 See, e.g., Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 45–55 and Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 15–17. For the alternative view that 2 Maccabees was written in Judea, see, e.g., van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 50 and Honigman, *Tales*, 2.

the ancient Mediterranean was shaped not simply by the ideologies and institutions of discrete societies but also by their intersections and cross-cultural borrowings.

1 Festivals Commemorating Violent Victories in the Books of the Maccabees

1.1 *First Maccabees*

First Maccabees begins with a brief history of the Seleucid dynasty before recounting the events that took place in Judea from the reign of Antiochus IV to the ascension of Simon's son John Hyrcanus as high priest and leader of Judea. The initial chapters of the book allege that, after a gymnasium was established in Jerusalem in 168, Antiochus IV twice plundered the Jerusalem temple before issuing a decree demanding that local communities throughout the Seleucid kingdom give up their traditional customs. This decree is said to have wrought massive disruptions to the Jerusalem temple cult and to have ultimately caused a rebellion to erupt in Judea in 167, in which Jewish insurgents led by Judas Maccabaeus launched a series of successful guerrilla war campaigns against the Seleucid forces. By 164 Judas had succeeded in capturing the Jerusalem temple, which he set about purifying from the effects of its profanation by the Seleucids and their Jewish co-conspirators (see 1 Macc 4:36–58). First Maccabees 4:59 describes how the date of the rededication of the temple (Chislev 25) was designated by Judas, his brothers, and the “assembly of Israel” (ἐκκλησία Ἰσραηλ) as the first day of an eight-day festival that should be observed by the Jews every year.³

The rededication festival—best known by its Hebrew name, “Hanukkah”—celebrated not only the cultic agency of the Maccabees in restoring the temple to working order but also the violent battles against the Seleucids that made the rededication possible.⁴ First Maccabees 4:36 presents the rededication as the direct result of the withdrawal of the Seleucid general Lysias from Judea after his clash with Judas at Beth Zur. After Lysias withdrew to Antiochus, Judas is

3 The historicity of these events is a matter of considerable debate; see, e.g., Collins, “Temple or Taxes?”; Habicht, “Seleucids,” 324–387; Kosmin, *Time*; Ma, “Re-Examining”; Honigman, *Tales*; Schwartz, *1 Maccabees*, 51–58. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, resolving the question of the historicity of 1 Macc 1 is less important than understanding how the authors of that book preserve a particular memory of Antiochus IV's reign and the Maccabean rebellion that could serve to legitimize the Hasmonean dynasty.

4 On this aspect of Hanukkah, see further Rhyder, “Festivals and Violence,” 66–70.

said to have declared, “Look! Our enemies have been crushed! Let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate [it]” (Ἴδού συνετριβήσαν οἱ ἐχθροὶ ἡμῶν, ἀναβῶμεν καθαρῖσαι τὰ ἅγια καὶ ἐγκαινῖσαι). To further reinforce this link between military victory and temple rededication, the author of 1 Maccabees claims that the same agents who defeated Lysias on the battlefield went on to carry out the temple restoration. First Maccabees 4:37–38 states that Judas led “the entire army” (ἡ παρεμβολὴ πᾶσα) up to the temple mount and, seeing it desolate, set to work in restoring it. Then, to shield the temple from hostile forces during the eight-day restoration, he sent members of his armed forces to the *acra* to fight “until he cleansed the sanctuary” (ἕως καθαρῖση τὰ ἅγια, 1 Macc 4:41). Once the rededication was completed, Judas immediately commanded the army to fortify Mount Zion, thus strongly affirming the role of military force in assuring the survival of the rededicated temple (1 Macc 4:60–61).⁵ Finally, Hanukkah’s victorious character is reinforced by the date on which it is to be held. According to 1 Macc 4:52–54, Chislew 25 marks not only the day on which Judas and his troops restored the temple to working order but also the anniversary of Antiochus’s violent persecution and desecration of the temple four years earlier. The rededication celebration therefore reminds the community of the poetic justice of Judas’s victory against the Seleucids insofar as it reversed the Jews’ fortunes from religious repression at the hands of Antiochus to the glorious restoration of their temple and sacrificial cult.⁶

In addition to the Hanukkah festival, 1 Maccabees also describes an annual celebration to mark the date of Judas’s victory against the Seleucid general Nicanor in 161. According to 1 Macc 7:26, Antiochus IV’s nephew Demetrius I, who ascended the throne after his uncle’s death, sent Nicanor to Judea with a large army to suppress the Maccabean revolt and destroy the Jewish people. After an initial battle with Judas and his army at Caphar-salama, Nicanor is said to have traveled to Mount Zion where he confronted the Jerusalem priesthood and threatened to burn down the temple (1 Macc 7:33–35). Then, on Adar 13, Nicanor returned to face Judas and his forces but died almost the moment he met them on the battlefield. The general was then gruesomely dismembered by ordinary Jews who came out from the surrounding villages to rout the remaining Seleucid forces (1 Macc 7:39–47). Overjoyed at the death of the general who had so viciously threatened both the community and its temple, the Jewish “people” (λαὸς) collectively decided to mark the date of this victory—the thirteenth of Adar—as a day of annual rejoicing (1 Macc 7:48–49). The festival on

⁵ See further Tilly, *1 Makkabäer*, 136.

⁶ As noted, e.g., by Eckhardt, *Ethnos und Herrschaft*, 107.

this date thus effectively commemorated the successful collaboration between Judas, his forces, and the Jewish community writ large in violently humiliating their Seleucid enemies.

The final festival described in 1 Maccabees marks the date when Simon Thassi successfully besieged and captured the *acra* from the remaining Seleucid forces in Jerusalem in 141. This military victory came almost immediately after Simon, in a major diplomatic achievement, successfully petitioned Demetrius II for freedom from Seleucid taxation—an event signaling that Judea was recognized as a semiautonomous civic community within the Hellenistic sphere.⁷ Indeed, according to 1 Macc 13:42, the Jews began to refer to that year as “the first year of Simon the great high priest and commander (στρατηγού) and leader of the Jews.” Simon’s ability to follow this diplomatic achievement with the military victory of ridding Jerusalem of the last Seleucid stronghold demonstrated his power, as the Jews’ στρατηγός, to ensure not only their fiscal independence but also their military autonomy from Seleucid rule. To celebrate Simon’s victory, which saw “a great enemy crushed and [taken] out from Israel” (συνετριβη ἐχθρὸς μέγας ἐξ Ἰσραηλ, 1 Macc 13:51), the Jews joyfully processed through the *acra* with palms and musical instruments, and Simon declared the twenty-third of Iyyar an annual festival day.

1.2 *Second Maccabees*

Second Maccabees evinces a similar focus to 1 Maccabees on festivals celebrating major Maccabean victories against the Seleucids. According to 2 Macc 2:18, the book of 2 Maccabees is the result of an epitomator’s attempt to condense five volumes written by a certain Jason of Cyrene into a succinct account of the Maccabean rebellion. The resulting epitome has a much shorter timeframe than 1 Maccabees, focusing only on the events in Judea from the time of the high priest Onias III until just before the death of Judas. This reduced focus means that 2 Maccabees does not mention the festival established by Simon in 141 but speaks only of the festivals established during Judas’s military campaigns of 167–161—namely, Hanukkah and Nicanor’s Day.

Both of these festivals celebrate the violent demise of individuals who threatened the Jewish people and their temple. In the case of Hanukkah, 2 Macc 8 tells how Judas’s impressive military victories against the Seleucid official Nicanor (2 Macc 8:8–29) and the commanders Timothy and Bacchides (2 Macc 8:30–36) created the conditions for the Maccabees to capture and purify the Jerusalem temple.⁸ Crucially, however, the temple rededication does not imme-

7 On this, see further Gruen, “When Is a Revolt Not a Revolt?,” 25–26.

8 While the official mentioned in 2 Macc 8:8–29 shares a name with the character mentioned

diately follow Judas's defeat of these two Seleucid aggressors but comes after a lengthy description of the fate of Antiochus IV after he heard the embarrassing news that his generals got trounced (2 Macc 9:1–29). Antiochus himself had just suffered a disappointing defeat in the city of Persepolis and, outraged at the news of Judas's victories in Judea, decided to travel to Jerusalem to personally quash the rising Maccabean rebellion. His plan was thwarted, however, when he was struck down with a gruesome illness on the journey by Yhwh, resulting in a most undignified and gory death. The temple rededication follows abruptly after the announcement, in 2 Macc 9:28–29, that Antiochus IV's mangled corpse was transported by a certain Seleucid named Philip to Syria. It then concludes with the resumptive statement “So thus was the manner of the death of Antiochus, the one called Epiphanes” (καὶ τὰ μὲν τῆς Ἀντιόχου τοῦ προσαγορευθέντος Ἐπιφανοῦς τελευτῆς οὕτως εἶχεν, 2 Macc 10:9).

Scholars have long puzzled over the placement of the rededication account at this point in the narrative. The story of temple rededication and festal innovation appears to interrupt the story of Antiochus's grisly demise. Observe how the description in 2 Macc 9:28–29 of Antiochus's death and the transportation of his body would seem to flow naturally to the summary notice in 10:9 had it not been interrupted by the long description of the temple rededication in 10:1–8.

Ὁ μὲν οὖν ἀνδροφόνος καὶ βλάσφημος τὰ χεῖριστα παθῶν, ὡς ἑτέρους διέθηκεν, ἐπὶ ξένης ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν οἰκτίστῳ μὶ ῥῳ κατέστρεψε τὸν βίον. παρεκομίζετο δὲ τὸ σῶμα Φίλιππος ὁ σύντροφος αὐτοῦ, ὃς καὶ διευλαβηθεὶς τὸν υἱὸν Ἀντιόχου πρὸς Πτολεμαῖον τὸν Φιλομήτορα εἰς Αἴγυπτον διεκομίσθη. Μακαβαῖος δὲ καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ τοῦ κυρίου προάγοντος αὐτοὺς τὸ μὲν ἱερὸν ἐκομίσαντο καὶ τὴν πόλιν ... ἐδογμάτισαν δὲ μετὰ κοινου προστάγματος καὶ ψηφίσματος παντὶ τῷ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνει κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ἄγειν τὰς ἡμέρας. καὶ τὰ μὲν τῆς Ἀντιόχου τοῦ προσαγορευθέντος Ἐπιφανοῦς τελευτῆς οὕτως εἶχεν.

Thus the murderer and the blasphemer, after having suffered the terrible pains he had ordained for others, had the very lamentable destiny of ending his life in a foreign land, near the mountains. And Philip, his close

in 2 Macc 14–15 (namely, Nicanor), it is unclear whether this is purely coincidental, owing to the popularity of the name “Nicanor,” or the same figure appears twice in the narrative of 2 Maccabees. Nicanor does not die in 2 Macc 8:8–29 but is forced to flee (see 2 Macc 8:24), so it is possible that the same character reappears in 2 Macc 14. This reading, however, is somewhat difficult to reconcile with 2 Macc 14:18, which speaks of Nicanor as though he had never met Judas but had only heard of his ἀνδραγαθία (“valor”) as a warrior secondhand.

companion, was carrying the body back; and then, fearful of Antiochus' son, took himself across to Egypt, to Ptolemy Philometor. Now Maccabeus and those with him, the lord leading them, recovered the sanctuary and the city ... And they decreed with a public command and a vote that the entire Jewish nation should observe every year these days [of rededication]. So thus was the manner of the death of Antiochus, the one called Epiphanes.

To explain the interruptive character of 2Macc 10:1–8, commentators have often proposed that the temple rededication account was originally located at a different point in the narrative of 2Maccabees but was shifted to its current position in the death account of Antiochus IV for reasons that remain unclear.⁹ Daniel Schwartz, by contrast, has argued that the entire rededication account is a late addition to 2Maccabees.¹⁰ Yet both of these proposed solutions are arguably unnecessary to understand the placement of the rededication account in 2Macc 10:1–8. While this placement may seem somewhat awkward at first, it arguably forms part of a larger structural device that positions both Hanukkah and Nicanor's Day as commemorating the violent death of major Seleucid enemies. The account of the downfall of Nicanor in 2Macc 15 shares with 2Macc 9:1–10:9 a common emphasis on recounting the gruesome humiliation of a major foreign aggressor, first with crushing defeats on the battlefield (2Macc 15:15–27; cf. 2Macc 9:1–3) and then with the violent destruction of the enemy's body (2Macc 15:30–35; cf. 2Macc 9:5–12, 28–29). The enemy's embarrassing demise is then followed in 2Macc 15:36 by a collective decision to instigate a new festival to celebrate the Jews' victory, which, as Jonathan Trotter has insightfully observed, is worded using very similar terminology to 2Macc 10:8.¹¹ The festal decision is then immediately followed by a declaration that Nicanor met his fate (2Macc 15:37) that is similar to 2Macc 10:9.

2Macc 10:8–9

ἔδογμάτισαν δὲ μετὰ κοινοῦ προστάγματος καὶ ψηφίσματος παντὶ τῷ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνει κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ἄγειν τὰςδε τὰς ἡμέρας. καὶ τὰ μὲν τῆς Ἀντιόχου τοῦ προσαγορευθέντος Ἐπιφανοῦς τελευτῆς οὕτως εἶχεν.

9 See, e.g., Bartlett, *First and Second Books of the Maccabees*, 293–296 and Habicht, *2. Makkabäerbuch*, 249–250.

10 Schwartz, *2Maccabees*, 8–10, 371–379.

11 Trotter, “2Maccabees 10:1–8,” 120–122.

And they decreed with a public command and a vote that the entire Jewish nation should observe every year these days. So thus was the manner of the death of Antiochus, the one called Epiphanes.

2 Macc 15:36–37a

ἔδογμάτισαν δὲ πάντες μετὰ κοινοῦ ψηφίσματος μηδαμῶς ἑάσαι ἀπαρασήμαντον τήνδε τὴν ἡμέραν, ἔχειν δὲ ἐπίσημον τὴν τρισκαιδεκάτην τοῦ δωδεκάτου μηνὸς Ἀδαρ λέγεται τῇ Συριακῇ φωνῇ πρὸ μιᾶς ἡμέρας τῆς Μαρδοχαϊκῆς ἡμέρας. Τῶν οὖν κατὰ Νικάνορα χωρησάντων οὕτως καὶ ἀπ’ ἐκείνων τῶν καιρῶν κρατηθείσης τῆς πόλεως ὑπὸ τῶν Εβραίων.

And they all decreed, with a public command, not to allow this day to go unobserved, but rather to keep as notable the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is called “Adar” in the Syrian language, the day before Mordechai’s Day. Such was the way the affairs concerning Nicanor turned out (...).

These parallels between the two festal descriptions of 2 Macc 10:8–9 and 2 Macc 15:36–37a suggest that the placement of the rededication account in the context of Antiochus IV’s death report is far from a haphazard afterthought. It attests to the epitomator’s concern to position Hanukkah and Nicanor’s Day as serving *complementary roles* in commemorating the Jews’ triumphs over especially detestable Seleucids who presented similar existential threats to the Jewish community and its temple.

Like 1 Maccabees, then, festivals served a crucial function in 2 Maccabees—namely, commemorating the key victories of the Maccabean rebellion and the critical role that Judas played in protecting both the community and its sanctuary from violent attack. With their emphasis on rituals of rejoicing, such as palm waving, musical processions, and thanksgiving sacrifices, the festivals encouraged collective pride in the Maccabees’ triumphs against the Seleucids during the revolt and in their ability to reclaim control over their most important institution, the Jerusalem temple. The communal decision to honor these festival days each year therefore ensures the intergenerational transmission of this positive memory of the outcomes of the guerrilla warfare waged by the Maccabees against the Seleucid kingdom.

An important difference with 1 Maccabees, however, is the inclusion of two letters, appended to the beginning of 2 Maccabees, which were allegedly written by the authorities in Jerusalem to the Jews living in Egypt, encouraging them to observe the festival of dedication (2 Macc 1:1–2:18).¹² Written in the year

¹² Most scholars agree that these letters should be classed as additions to an extant book that

124, the first letter begins with an opening salutation (1:1), followed by a series of stylized expressions of good will (1:2–5) and a short summary of the events in Jerusalem that surrounded the rededication of the temple (1:7–8).¹³ It then concludes by briefly compelling the Jews in Egypt to join in celebrating the festival of rededication (1:9).¹⁴ The second letter is much longer and presents more complex interpretive challenges. To begin with, the letter claims to have been written by “those in Jerusalem and those in Judea and the senate and Judas” (οἱ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις καὶ οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ καὶ ἡ γερουσία καὶ Ἰουδας, 2 Macc 1:10). This reference to Judas is sometimes taken to indicate that the letter was written immediately after the temple rededication in 164 or 163.¹⁵ Yet the letter’s depiction of Judea as an independent civic community, governed by a γερουσία and seemingly living in peace, makes a mid-second-century date unlikely.¹⁶ Instead, a date sometime after the diplomatic achievements of Simon, perhaps during the time of John Hyrcanus (reigned 134–104) or Alexander Jannaeus (reigned 103–76), seems more probable. In this case, the reference to Judas in the letter’s opening might have been a strategy for heightening its prestige, thereby strengthening the force of its call for the Jews to keep the days of Hanukkah each year.

Both documents attached to the beginning of 2 Maccabees provide valuable evidence that attempts were made to use the book to promote at least one of

originally began with the epitomator’s preface at 2 Macc 2:19. For this observation, see, e.g., Bickerman, “Jewish Festal Letter.”

- 13 In the majority of the manuscript traditions, the letter concludes in 2 Macc 1:9 by referring to its date as ἔτους ἑκατοστοῦ ὀγδοηκοστοῦ καὶ ὀγδοῦ, “the 188th year” of the Seleucid era. Codices 62 and 55, however, read 148—that is, the year of the temple dedication (cf. 1 Macc 4:52)—in which case the date at the end of the letter would not refer to when the letter was sent but to the year when the festival was established (i.e., 164 BCE). While this reading is preferred by Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 143–144, the year 188 is far better attested in the manuscript tradition. In addition, the idea that the letter concludes with the date on which it was sent (i.e., 124 BCE) is consistent with Greek and Aramaic letter-writing practices, in which the date of the letter, if supplied, was typically given at the end; on this, see further Goldstein, *2 Maccabees*, 152.
- 14 The letter does not mention the rededication festival explicitly; rather, it cryptically calls on the Jews in Egypt to keep τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς σκηνοπηγίας τοῦ Χασελευ μηνός, “the days of booths in the month of Chisleu” (2 Macc 1:9). The reference to Chisleu is inconsistent with the dating of Booths (Sukkot), which was held in the month of Tishri. Eckhardt, *Ethnos und Herrschaft*, 103–104 therefore suggests that the letter’s authors did have the rededication festival in mind here but refer to it by the name of the nearest festival with a distinct title (namely, σκηνοπηγία, “Booths”) because Hanukkah had not yet received its own festal name.
- 15 See, e.g., Wacholder, “Letter” and, more tentatively, Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 144.
- 16 As argued convincingly by Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 62–63.

the Maccabean festivals among Jews living in Ptolemaic Egypt in the late second century. This, in turn, suggests that there was a concern among the elites in Jerusalem to ensure that Jews in diverse locales coordinated their year so that all joined in remembering the major military achievement of the rebellion against the Seleucids—namely, the capture and rededication of the Jerusalem temple. To be sure, the letters themselves provide only very brief summaries of the violence of the revolt and are far less militaristic in tone than the narratives that follow in 2 Maccabees. Nevertheless, the fact that they are attached to the book of 2 Maccabees, which repeatedly emphasizes the military and cultic agency of Judas and his forces in protecting the temple, suggests that the letters' authors considered the Hanukkah festival to be closely bonded with the story of the Maccabean rebellion and thus to serve as an annual reminder of the Jews' triumphs against the Seleucids.

2 The Maccabean Festivals in Their Hellenistic Context

Central to all the festivals mentioned in 1 and 2 Maccabees is their shared focus on celebrating Jewish victories against foreigners who attacked the city or temple of Jerusalem. How might we explain this shared festal interest across the two books? I argue that the authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees were influenced by broader developments in the festal culture of the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean of which Judea was an integrated part. Jews were not alone in taking a keen interest in commemorating military victories in the Hellenistic age. Epigraphic and historiographical sources attest to an explosion of festivals celebrating noteworthy battles, the downfall of tyrants, or the liberation of cities from foreign garrisons in the Hellenistic world.¹⁷ Such festivals typically commemorated the military accomplishments of cities, leagues, and kings against foreign enemies, which they celebrated with public processions and thanksgiving sacrifices to the gods, accompanied by prayers and hymns and followed by a banquet. Athletic, dramatic, and musical “contests” (ἀγῶνες) also frequently featured as part of the festivities.¹⁸ For example, the *Soteria* instigated in Priene in Asia Minor, mentioned in a decree issued by the city at the turn of the third century, was a two-day festival that commemorated the city's victory over Hieron, a tyrant who seized control of the city in 300 and

17 Chaniotis, *War*, 227–233.

18 For a detailed list of commemorative festivals established in the Hellenistic era, see Chaniotis, “Sich selbst feiern?,” 164–168.

was banished with his troops three years later.¹⁹ A further *Soteria* festival at Delphi was reconfigured by the Aetolian league in 246 to commemorate the Greek battle against the Galatian invasion some thirty years prior, but now with a new emphasis on the Aetolians' alleged heroics in securing the victory.²⁰

This culture of commemoration was not only fueled by the ubiquity of war in the Hellenistic era, especially in its initial turbulent decades; it also spoke to the growing importance of festivals for legitimizing political leaders, especially the various Hellenistic kings.²¹ As the leaders of young dynasties who regularly faced threats from rivals, Hellenistic monarchs often had little beyond their military prowess to justify their reigns and maintain their grip on their sprawling kingdoms. Festivals recalling their most impressive victories enabled Hellenistic kings to remind local communities of the benefits their reigns brought to the region and thereby to solicit their continued allegiance. For instance, the *Nicephoria* at Pergamon was founded in the 220s by the Pergamene king Attalos I in honor of the deity Athena Nicephoros, "the bringer of victory," after his triumph over the Galatians in Asia Minor.²² It was later expanded by Attalos's son, Eumenes II, who transformed the *Nicephoria* into crowned games to commemorate his "great successes" (ἐπιτευγμάτων μεγάλων, *RC* 50, line 3) over either the Galatians or Prusias of Bithynia.²³

While Hellenistic kings often took the initiative in establishing festivals to celebrate their military achievements, however, many of the festivals commemorating royal victories were established by local communities, without necessarily receiving instructions from the monarch to institute such honors. One such festival is mentioned in a decree issued by the Athenian council in 304/303 announcing the military triumph of the Macedonian king Demetrius I during one of the wars of the Diadochi, which institutes an annual celebration as a "memorial" (ὑπόμνημα, *SEG* 30.69 line 23) to the king's military triumph. Another noteworthy example comes from a Babylonian astronomical diary from 169/168 that mentions a procession organized by the imperial citizens of Babylonia to celebrate Antiochus IV's triumphs in Egypt during the Sixth Syrian War.²⁴ Staging such festivals provided Hellenistic communities with an

19 *SEG* 35 1142. See further Robert, "Hellenica."

20 *IG* II² 680 and Nachtergaele, *Les galates*, nos. 21–25. On the Aetolians' use of the festival to promote their interests, see Champion, "Soteria."

21 On the Hellenistic culture of war, see Chaniotis, *War*.

22 Polyb. 4, 49, 3.

23 *SIG* 629, 630 and *RC* 49, 50. See further Jones, "Diodoros Paspáros."

24 Hunger and Sachs, *Diaries*, 70–71 no. 168 A 14–15. See further Gera and Horowitz, "Antiochus IV," 242–243 and Clancier, "Antiochos IV," 358–359.

important means of negotiating their relationships with monarchs. The festivals enabled communities to compete in displaying their dynastic loyalty, while also leveraging further benefactions from the monarch whose victories were being celebrated. They also served as an important arena in which cities and leagues could reflect on the possible benefits of the resurgence of monarchy in their region, often after centuries without a ruling king. In the words of John Ma, they promoted “an agreed-upon version of the recent past” that could “reinststate social harmony and *polis* cohesion after the potentially divisive adhesion of a new power.”²⁵ They therefore formed an important mechanism by which communities could make sense of the ongoing violence of the wars waged between Hellenistic kings in their region.

Beyond these functions, commemorative festivals provided an important mechanism by which Hellenistic communities could construct a sense of their own shared history and local identity. They encouraged cities and leagues to recall the military achievements of their members who participated in major military conflicts, as well as to promote their glorious pasts across a cosmopolitan festal network. Many of the commemorative festivals established in the Hellenistic period were “Panhellenic,” insofar as they were intended to be celebrated not only by the community or monarch that established them but also by other cities, leagues, and kings who were invited to participate in the festivities.²⁶ Festal letters were sent throughout the Hellenistic world to “proclaim” (ἐπαγγέλλω) the celebration, often with the expectation that those communities who agreed to send a festal “embassy” (θεωρία) would also recognize the “inviolability” (ἀσυλία) of the sanctuaries with which the festivals were associated.²⁷ Commemorative festivals were thus an important means of enhancing the prestige of local sanctuaries across the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean, while also enabling host cities to build a base of support within the broader region.

This comparative evidence offers new possibilities for assessing why 1 and 2 Maccabees show a heightened concern to ensure that the military victories of the Maccabean revolt were commemorated with annual festivals. It suggests that Jewish authors may have appropriated and transformed means of memorializing violence known from elsewhere in the Hellenistic world in order to express their own military and political agency within the Hellenistic sphere. Of course, we should be careful not to overstrain the comparisons between the Maccabean festivals and the celebrations staged by other Mediterranean

25 Ma, *Antiochos III*, 226.

26 On Panhellenic festivals in the Hellenistic period, see Parker, “New ‘Panhellenic’ Festivals.”

27 See further Rigsby, *Asylia*.

communities in the Hellenistic era. None of the festivals established in 1 and 2 Maccabees is identical with those described in the epigraphic and historiographical sources from other Hellenistic contexts. Nonetheless, it is still possible to identify a shared preoccupation with linking festal practice with war commemoration that suggests a convergence of concerns across these diverse sources.

To begin with, the festivals described in 1 and 2 Maccabees, like other Hellenistic commemorative anniversaries, foster a collective memory that justifies the violence wielded by community leaders against foreign enemies. The Maccabean festivals encourage the Jews to join as a collective in recalling how the military agency of the Maccabees was essential in protecting the community and its temple from foreign attack during the time of Seleucid hegemony in Judea. The rededication festival and Nicanor's Day focus on the critical early years of the rebellion, during which Judas Maccabaeus is construed as a particularly heroic figure, while Simon's Day champions the Maccabees' continued use of military force long after the initial revolt to maintain lasting freedom in Judea. Together, the three festivals provide sophisticated mnemonic legitimation to the Maccabean claim that their violent use of military arms to seize the temple institution and the mantle of leadership in Judea was legitimate.

Second, the Maccabean festivals also served to elevate in the collective memory military victories that were foundational to establishing a new royal dynasty in the Hellenistic sphere. The Hasmonean monarchs claimed from the original Maccabean brothers direct descent, as well as the right to continue their military legacy as kings with control over a local army.²⁸ Like other Hellenistic festivals that commemorated royal victories, the Maccabean festivals encouraged the community to reflect each year on the most impressive victories of the new local dynasty and the collective benefits that accrued from these. Indeed, the narrative focus of both books on the *communal* nature of the festal decisions, in which not only Judas and his brothers but also the Jewish assembly and broader community agreed to establish the new celebrations, underscores the importance of local elites rallying to support the Hasmoneans and to collectively reminisce about their military achievements against the Seleucids. One of the letters in 2 Maccabees even makes an explicit link between the rededication festival and the revival of the Judean monarchy. Second Maccabees 2:17 states that the Jews in Egypt should keep the festal days out of gratitude that

28 On the history of the Hasmoneans and their dynastic claims, see, e.g., Regev, *Hasmoneans* and the essays in Berlin and Kosmin, *Middle Maccabees*.

the divinity has restored “the kingship and the priesthood and the consecration” (τὸ βασιλείον καὶ τὸ ἱεράτευμα καὶ τὸν ἁγιασμόν) in Judea.

Third, 2 Macc 1:1–2:18 may also reveal an attempt by the Jerusalem authorities to adapt the Hellenistic practice of sending festal correspondence in order to heighten the prestige of the Jerusalem temple, as well as the leaders who claimed to control it. As Jan Willem van Henten and Robert Doran have insightfully observed, the letters of 2 Macc 1:1–2:18 are broadly similar to the correspondence known from other Hellenistic Mediterranean communities that invites neighbors to celebrate the divine deliverance of a given temple against foreign attack.²⁹ The letters of 2 Maccabees differ from other Hellenistic festal letters insofar as they are addressed to a Jewish community living in Egypt rather than to neighboring non-Jews. Nonetheless, they arguably reveal a common strategy of the Jerusalem authorities and other Hellenistic communities that involved using a festival marking the deliverance of the temple from foreign attack to increase its prestige abroad, and thereby to cement its claim to deference and sponsorship. The decision to attach the letters to the story of the Maccabees’ use of military force to reclaim the temple is also revealing; it suggests that the Jerusalem authorities responsible for the letters sought to encourage the Jews in Egypt not only to give thanks for the divine deliverance of the temple but also to celebrate the day on which the founders of the Hasmonean dynasty violently assumed control of its cult. By agreeing to keep the days of Hanukkah, then, the Jews in Egypt would effectively agree to recognize the legitimacy of the new temple leadership of the Hasmonean royal high priests.

The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees therefore provide valuable evidence of how Jews creatively engaged with Hellenistic festal patterns to legitimate the young Hasmonean dynasty and promote the reconfigured Jerusalem temple cult abroad. The purpose of the festivals in 1 and 2 Maccabees is not to commemorate the past with historical accuracy, even if their accounts of the Maccabean rebellion undeniably contain historical information. Rather, it is to *construct* and *promote* a particular memory of the Maccabean revolt that harnessed Hellenistic cultural patterns to articulate the Jews’ own sociopolitical aspirations, to establish new means of celebrating their successes against foreign aggressors, and to position the Hasmonean dynasty as legitimate in both its use of military force and its control over the temple. This engagement with Hellenistic festal patterns is consistent with the broader evidence that the Jews were active participants in the Hellenistic world who were skilled in adapting and transforming Hellenistic cultural influences to assert their own sociopo-

29 van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 244–250 and Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 33–35.

litical agency. While earlier scholarship stressed the alleged incompatibility of “Judaism” and “Hellenism,” and thus the relative seclusion of Judea from Hellenistic influence, there is now a growing consensus that the Jews were no more isolated from Hellenistic civilization than any other population in the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean.³⁰ They were active participants in the Hellenistic sphere who harnessed the trends of their Hellenistic environment to advance their local interests. The creativity of the Jews in reconfiguring Hellenistic cultural patterns is further confirmed by the sophisticated borrowings that we have observed in the Maccabean festivals, which reveal the Jews’ ease in adapting Hellenistic festal trends to promote a local history of military glory and affirm the power of their new dynastic leaders.

3 Conclusion

This essay has examined the sophisticated commemorative strategies that inform the festal texts of 1 and 2 Maccabees and has positioned these within their Hellenistic context. The battles narrated in 1 and 2 Maccabees represent triumphs against a Hellenistic Empire (namely, the Seleucid kingdom), but the manner in which they are commemorated in annual festivals is far from devoid of that very Hellenistic influence. The books’ focus on festivals commemorating Jewish victories is consistent with a larger cultural pattern within the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean whereby new festivals were created to champion the military achievements of cities, leagues, and kings against foreign enemies.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to verify empirically the extent to which the festal texts of 1 and 2 Maccabees may have affected the way the Maccabean rebellion and Hasmonean dynasty were, in fact, perceived by Jews or other groups in the Hellenistic period.³¹ The lack of surviving evidence means that

30 Among many other studies to make this argument, see the recent studies by Satlow, “Beyond Influence” and Gruen, *Constructs*.

31 The earliest evidence of the impact of the commemorative festivals of 1 and 2 Maccabees on festal attitudes is arguably Megillat Ta’anit, an Aramaic document that dates between 40 and 70 CE (with a medieval commentary written in Hebrew) and lists days on which it is forbidden to fast throughout the year. Eight days of Hanukkah are mentioned in line 15, while ניקנור, “Nicanor” is mentioned in line 32 as being observed on the 13th of Adar, and the 23rd of Iyyar is mentioned in line 7 as the day when “the men of the *acra* left Jerusalem.” On this document, see further Noam, “Megillat Taanit.” Beyond Megillat Ta’anit, John 10:22 refers to τὰ ἐγκαίνια, “the dedication” as an established festival in Jerusalem but makes no mention of Nicanor’s Day or Simon’s Day. Hanukkah and Nicanor’s Day are both men-

we have needed to focus primarily on the festal discourse that is elaborated in 1 and 2 Maccabees, with an awareness that the descriptions of festal practices in these books might have stood at considerable distance from how festivals were actually practiced by ancient Jews. Yet a comparative analysis of festal discourse does not require that the descriptions of festal practices in the books of the Maccabees mirrored the way festivals were precisely celebrated. It does, however, sensitize us to the strategies employed by the authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees to promote particular festal practices as relevant, even mandatory, for Jews in the Hellenistic period; to their possible ideological motivations; and to the power structures they sought to legitimize. The discursive drive is clearly to promote the most impressive victories of the Maccabean rebellion in order to position the rebels as wielding military force for the collective good and as serving as the rightful defenders of the Jerusalem temple.

The books of the Maccabees therefore attest to Jewish creativity in adapting the commemorative patterns of the broader Hellenistic environment in order to champion their own violent pasts, to affirm the sociopolitical agency of their local dynastic leaders, and to elevate the status of their temple abroad. In turn, the Maccabean festivals provide a valuable case study of the many benefits that come from a comparative approach to the study of how violence is memorialized in the ancient Mediterranean. Ancient communities did not develop commemorative practices in a state of isolation. A comparative approach to the study of violence in antiquity, as this essay has hoped to show, opens exciting possibilities for understanding the new transcultural forms that were produced within the contact zone of ancient societies, as diverse groups reacted to common challenges and interacted in an interdependent process of exchange and competition.

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This book reveals how violent pasts were constructed by ancient Mediterranean societies, the ideologies they served, and the socio-political processes and institutions they facilitated. Combining case studies from Anatolia, Egypt, Greece, Israel/ Judah, and Rome, it moves beyond essentialist dichotomies such as “victors” and “vanquished” to offer a new paradigm for studying representations of past violence across diverse media, from funerary texts to literary works, chronicles, monumental reliefs, and other material artefacts such as ruins. It thus paves the way for a new comparative approach to the study of collective violence in the ancient world.

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