
VIRTUE AND PHILOSOPHY IN 4 MACCABEES

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ABSTRACT

The first section of this article focuses on the use of the term and theme of ἀρετή in the argument that the Jewish religion can be seen as a most worthy philosophy. The second section shows how 4 Maccabees can be seen as a Jewish version of a philosophical work in the ancient Greco-Roman tradition: it raises the practical question of the noble way of life and shows us inspiring examples of persons who embodied this way by the manner in which they faced their death. The third section explores how a reading of 4 Maccabees can be seen as one of the “spiritual exercises” in the philosophical tradition (Pierre Hadot). The fourth section touches briefly on the issue of the Hellenization of the Jewish religion, of which 4 Maccabees is a strong example.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of 4 Maccabees, most likely from the mid-first century A.D., was also known to Eusebius as “On the Sovereignty of Reason” (Schürer 1986:589). To understand this work, it will be necessary to understand what is meant by “reason”. Furthermore, the introductory line indicates that the specific approach of this book is highly philosophical: “Highly philosophical is the subject I propose to discuss, ...” This raises the question of the kind of philosophy we will encounter in this work. The test of genuine and true philosophy in 4 Maccabees is ultimately not a question of theoretical arguments but of existential effectiveness: true philosophy enables the practitioner to lead a life of virtue instead of a life ruled by the passions. The author is convinced that reason is embodied in the Law of Moses, the true philosophy, and he intends to prove this by evoking the lives of various figures from the history of Israel, who lived noble lives and died noble deaths. The key figures the author focuses on are Eleazar and the mother with her seven sons, who considered faithfulness to the Law of God and of nature more important than their present life.

VIRTUE AND PHILOSOPHY IN 4 MACCABEES

While traditionally the good life was presented in Israel as faithfulness to the law, which leads to general well-being (Psalm 1), 4 Maccabees articulates this faithfulness and well-being in terms of a life of virtue, ἀρετή.

The use of ἀρετή in the sense of virtue appears to be very late among the books of the LXX and is restricted to the Wisdom of Solomon and to 2, 3 and 4 Maccabees.¹ It is striking that the word ἀρετή in the sense of virtue appears 17 times in 4 Maccabees² and four times in 2 Maccabees,³ and once in 3 Maccabees (6:1). It also appears three times in the Wisdom of Solomon⁴ with the same meaning. It is not found in the Pentateuch, the oldest section of the LXX. In the Prophets it occurs only six times but there it is used in the sense of “majesty, excellence Hab 3,3; ... distinction, fame Zech 6,13; ... praises (of God) of Is 42,8” (Lust, Eynikel & Hauspie 2003:81).

In the New Testament it is used only once by Paul, in Philippians 4:8, in a context of moral exhortation and where it is associated with “whatever is worthy of praise”. It occurs once in 1 Peter 2:9 and once in 2 Peter 1:3 in the sense it usually has in the Prophets, that is, as “wonderful divine acts” (Louw & Nida 1989/2:744). In 2 Peter 1:5 it occurs twice as part of a sorites as the second one in a series of eight virtues, beginning with faith and ending up with love. Spicq (1959:354) interprets ἀρετή here as the energy required to shape one’s conduct in accordance with one’s faith. Virtue practiced in this way leads to “knowledge” enabling a person to distinguish between good and evil.

We notice therefore in 4 Maccabees the full emergence of the use of ἀρετή.⁵ In

¹ For a discussion on the date of 4 Maccabees, see the brief overview in de Silva (1998:14–18), who prefers “a date in the first half of the first Century CE” (1998:18).

² 1:2, 8, 10, 30; 2: 10; 7: 22; 9:8, 18, 31; 10:10; 11:2; 12:15; 13:24, 27; 17:12, 17, 23.

³ 6:31; 10:28; 15:12, 17.

⁴ 4:1; 5:13; 8:7.

⁵ Bauernfeind (1964:460) comments on the use of ἀρετή in the LXX as follows, but his theological prejudice is not helpful: “Even more significant, however, is the negative fact that the LXX use is purely tentative and that there is no real place for ἀρετή = virtue in the translation of the OT. For a world in which man constantly saw himself morally responsible before a holy God the Greek concept of virtue could not finally fulfil its apparent promise. Though it was not irreligious, it was far too anthropocentric and this-worldly in orientation. What both the OT and the NT attest is not human achievements or merits but the acts of

fact, it is striking that 4 Maccabees found it a fruitful word and expanded the use of ἀρετή in the sense it was used for Eleazar as found in 2 Macc 6:31,⁶ while omitting other aspects of virtue found in other parts of 2 Maccabees. In 2 Macc 10:28 we have the contrast between “reliance on the Lord with virtue” and “their own ardour (or rage)”; in 15:12 we hear about Onias trained from boyhood in every virtue; in 15:17 virtue is associated with manliness and courage to fight the enemies at close range: “words of Judas, so noble and so effective in arousing virtue (RSV: valor) and awaking manliness in the souls of the young.” Different from 2 Maccabees, virtue in 4 Maccabees is not used in the context of military battles and victories but consistently for the battle against the passions and victory over these. In 4 Macc 17:11–16 we find instead of the image of the battle that of the contest.⁷

The story demonstrating Eleazar’s virtue as faithfulness to the law even in the face of death (2 Macc 6:18–31) is greatly expanded in 4 Macc 5:1–7:23. In a similar way the story of the martyrdom of the seven brothers and their mother, which in 2 Macc 7 is not explicitly presented as an example of virtue, is even more amply elaborated in 4 Maccabees, where it runs from 8:1 to 17:6.⁸ In this narrative, the word “virtue” appears 8 times (9:8, 18, 31; 10:10; 11:2; 12:15; 13:24, 27). Not surprisingly, we find the theme of virtue again in the peroration in 17:12, 17 (only S), 23.

In 4 Maccabees “virtue” functions as part of the argument proving that Judaism deserves to be qualified as a philosophy.⁹ The truth of this philosophy is shown in the fact that the followers of the divine law are able to overcome their passions and so live a life according to the virtues. Such was the aim of a good life for most Hellenistic philosophies. This is the thesis which is proposed in the first part of the book, 1:1–3:18 (de Silva 1998:25). Crucial for the argument of 4 Maccabees is that the only kind of reason which is able to master the passions is the one which is “formed” by the

God.”

⁶ I accept the view that 4 Maccabees is a kind of re-working of scenes from 2 Maccabees (see deSilva 1998:28–30).

⁷ See also the use of the word athlete in 6:10; 17:15, 16.

⁸ “4 Macc 17:7–18:24 forms a peroration to the whole, celebrating the martyrs’ achievements and commending their way of life for the audience’s imitation” (deSilva 1998:25).

⁹ The word group φιλοσοφία, κτλ, occurs in 4 Maccabees and nowhere else in the LXX, except in Daniel 1:20.

Jewish Law. The readers are therefore made witnesses to a contest between two philosophies, the one presented by Antiochus and the other one by the martyrs. Antiochus refuses to recognize the position of Eleazar as a philosophy and challenges him:

the religion of the Jews makes you anything but a philosopher in my eyes” (5:6).

...

Will you not awaken from your foolish philosophy, dispel your futile reasonings, adopt a mind appropriate to your years, philosophize according to the truth of what is beneficial (5:11).

Eleazar replies:

We, O Antiochus, who have been persuaded to govern our lives by the divine law, think that there is no compulsion more powerful than our obedience to the law (5:16). ...

You scoff at our philosophy as though living by it were irrational but it teaches us self-control (σωφροσύνην), so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage (ἀνδρεία), so that we endure any suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice (δικαιοσύνην), so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety (εὐσέβεια), so that with proper reverence we worship the only living God (5:22–24).

The four virtues which Eleazar mentions here are: σωφροσύνη, ἀνδρεία, δικαιοσύνη, εὐσέβεια. While in 1:2 we were told that the fountainhead of all virtues is φρόνησις from which the others follow,¹⁰ here true φρόνησις is identified as thinking and acting according to the Law, εὐσέβεια. In this way, Eleazar prepares his reply to the challenge of Antiochus in verses 8–9 that it is wrong and against nature to spurn the eating of pork, which is an excellent gift from nature. For Eleazar, in fact, it is the Law

¹⁰ deSilva (1998:57) quotes Plutarch (On Moral Virtue 2 [*Moralia* 441A]) who states that Zeno of Citium “defines prudence as justice when it is concerned with what must be rendered to others as their due, as temperance when concerned with what must be chosen or avoided, as fortitude when concerned with what must be endured.”

which provides the correct interpretation of living in harmony with nature, because God is the source of both:¹¹

Therefore do we eat no unclean meat; for believing our Law to be given by God, we know also that the Creator of the world, as a Lawgiver, feels for us according to our nature (5:25).

As part of this contest between the philosophy of Eleazar and that of Antiochus the characterization of the antagonist is worth noting: Antiochus is presented as a very negative character, a tyrant, whose philosophy therefore lacks credibility, while the martyrs are presented as very noble figures, whose lives embody the true philosophy. Antiochus is consistently referred to as the “tyrant”, “a thoroughly negative figure, indeed the most negative in the Greek environment, which prized ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ as the highest political goods” (deSilva 1998:102).¹² The martyrs on the other hand are presented as heroes of virtue, and therefore the words of their divine philosophy are made credible by their deeds (7:9).¹³

In the final part of his reply Eleazar directly challenges Antiochus as a tyrant, who forces people rather than convincing them:

But it is the act of a tyrant that you should compel us not only to

¹¹ According to Redditt (1983:257): “In summary, then, one may say that insofar as *physis* functions as a synonym for *pathos* it is to be controlled by *nomos* through reason (*logismos*), but insofar as *physis* functions as the natural order of things as created by God, *nomos* bears the instructions for living righteously in such a world.”

¹² See deSilva (1998:101–103). “Antiochus’s character is thus portrayed most negatively. The traditional tyrant typology of the Greek and Hellenistic world already undermines his legitimacy as a ruler. The author’s further characterization of him as ‘impious’ (9.31–32; 10.11; 12.11), as a ‘hater of virtue’ (11.4), as ‘bloodthirsty, murderous, and utterly abominable’ (10.17), as ‘unjust’ (11.6) and ‘shameless’ (12.11, 13) confirm that his credibility as a speaker will not stand” (1998:103). Compare with Philo, *Mos.* 2:49–50, where the unreasonable approach of a tyrannical lawgiver is contrasted with the approach of Moses.

¹³ Stephen Moore and Janice Capel Anderson focus on virtue as “masculinity” in terms of the cultural framework of the text: “In 4 Maccabees, absolute control of the physical circumstances of others, epitomized by the Gentile despot, is radically devalued in favor of absolute self-control, epitomized by the Jewish martyrs. The book presents a female, an aged male, and a handful of boys – all representatives of a conquered people – as ironic exemplars of masculinity at the expense of an ostensibly powerful male in the prime of life” (1998:272).

transgress the Law, ... (5:27). ... You may tyrannize the ungodly, but you shall not dominate my religious principles (τῶν δὲ ἐμῶν ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐσεβείας λογισμῶν, either by words or through deeds (5:38).

The divine philosophy amounts to the practice of the Law. This is clearly expressed also in the dramatic climax towards the end of Eleazar's reply:

I will not play false to you, *O law that trained me*,
 nor will I renounce you, *beloved self-control*.
 I will not put you to shame, *philosophical reason* (φιλόσοφε λόγε),
 nor will I reject you, *honored priesthood and knowledge of the law* (5:34–35).

One can see how in this fourfold formulation self-control and philosophical reason are stylistically encompassed by the law. The law directs human reason and is the educator towards self-control, the life of virtue or the upright life, as we also read about the seven brothers:

For trained in the same Law,
 and disciplined (ἐξασκήσαντες) in the same virtues,
 and brought up together in the upright life,
 they loved one another the more abundantly (13:24).

The discussion on the true philosophy climaxes with chapter 7 in a panegyric on Eleazar's martyrdom:

O man in harmony with the law and philosopher of divine life! ... You, father, strengthened our loyalty to the law through your glorious endurance, and you did not abandon the holiness that you praised, but by your deeds you made your words of divine philosophy credible (7:7+9).

A crucial point to be made is that reason is not autonomous; only when reason is guided by the Law is it able to function in a life giving way:

But as many as attend to religion with a whole heart, these alone are able to control the passions of the flesh, since they believe that they, like our

patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, do not die to God, but live to God. What person who lives as a philosopher by the whole rule of philosophy, and trusts in God, and knows that it is blessed to endure any suffering for the sake of virtue, would not be able to overcome the emotions through godliness? For only the wise and courageous are masters of their emotions (7:18–23).

Therefore, the aim of the book is not merely to claim a place for Judaism among the various philosophies of its Hellenistic context, but it claims the highest place. The first word of the book already announces this point by means of a superlative form: φιλοσοφώτατον λόγον. Judaism can be shown to be the only philosophy which is able to empower people to put the teaching into practice. A philosophy which is not able to set people free to achieve this is not a true philosophy.¹⁴ Judaism is capable of this because it is based on the law given by God:

Now when God fashioned human beings, he planted in them emotions and inclinations, but at the same time he enthroned the mind among the senses as a sacred governor over them all. To the mind he gave the law; and one who lives subject to this [law] (καθ' ὃν πολιτευόμενος) will rule a kingdom that is temperate, just, good, and courageous (2:21–23).

The mind needs the Law in order to be ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμὸς (1:1), because the mind has no power over itself and only limited powers over the passions (1:5–6; 2:24–3:1); only the one who submits himself to the God given Law will be able to live a temperate, just, good and courageous life.

The proof of the truth of a philosophy is not based ultimately on the abstract intellectual quality of its arguments but on the concrete effects it produces in the lives of the people who profess to follow it. That is the reason why 4 Maccabees points to the effects of the Law, or reason shaped by that Law, in the lives of a series of people. In chapters 2–3 we are given the examples of Joseph, Moses, Jacob, David; these examples together with the stories of the martyrdom of Eleazar, of the seven brothers

¹⁴ Origen also argues that the truth of the Christian Gospel shows itself in its effect on people: e.g., *Cels.* 1:9; 3:27.

and of their mother are the proof of the truth of this philosophy: “but by your deeds you made your words of divine philosophy credible” (7:9).

THE UNDERSTANDING OF PHILOSOPHY IN 4 MACCABEES AND IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

The quote from 4 Maccabees 7:9 raises the issue of the criteria for a credible philosophy. Clearly for 4 Maccabees the *life* of Eleazar, more than his words, doctrines or theories, provides the proof of credibility. It was a commonly accepted view among modern scholars that such a “religious” understanding of philosophy was a result of the general degeneration of culture and philosophy towards the end of Antiquity, when from the beginning of our era science and philosophy were being inundated by “this torrent of religiosity coming from the East”.¹⁵ Still at present we can sense some uneasiness with the claim of 4 Maccabees that his work should be considered as ‘highly philosophical’ (1:1). David deSilva (1998:51–52) would not agree with Schürer (1986:590) that the author is merely

a ‘dilettante’ who gave his Judaism a mere ‘philosophical veneer’. Rather, he strategically combined elements from a number of philosophical schools (granted not necessarily knowing the original sources of each idea) to form an ethical philosophy useful for promoting rigorous adherence to the Jewish Torah (1986:52).

deSilva is satisfied to recognize this as a popular form of philosophy, as

the so-called ‘philosophical *koine*’, the popular moral philosophy proclaimed by sophists in the streets or shared by all educated people as part of the common cultural heritage of the Hellenized Mediterranean (1998:51).¹⁶

¹⁵ Lot (1968 [1927]:180): “Enfin la science, aussi bien que la philosophie, subit la terrible concurrence de l’esprit mythique qui offre à moindre prix des solutions plus séduisantes des problèmes de la vie et de la mort.”

¹⁶ According to Renehan (1972:238), “If it is granted that Galen and *Fourth Maccabees* used

Be that as it may, but the fundamental question is to understand what was meant by philosophy in the Greco-Roman world. According to deSilva (1998:52): “Many Diaspora Jews presented the Jewish way of life as a philosophy (a term broad enough to include ‘way of life).” For him, however, the question of the good and happy life was one of several concerns and topics on the philosophical agenda, like physics, psychology, politics, metaphysics, etc. However, scholars like Pierre Hadot (1995) have shown how a fruitful discussion of the understanding of philosophy in ancient texts requires a clear sense of the way in which the notion of philosophy has changed over the centuries. What we now generally understand by philosophy is not what readers of the time of 4 Maccabees, whether Gentiles or Jews, understood by it. Hadot concludes that a major shift took place with the rise of Medieval Scholasticism, which in the course of subsequent Western history set off a whole series of further transformations.¹⁷ In Greco-Roman philosophy the central question was the issue of the good life, but not merely as a theoretical discussion but as a practical concern about how to live a good life; the theories about the good life were subordinate to the existential, practical concern, the art of living. In the light of this insight, the remark in 7:9 that Eleazar’s deeds have displayed the credibility of the Jewish way of life as a divine philosophy becomes intelligible. A philosophical theory which does not lead to

this common source [Posidonius], we are now in a position to answer the two questions set forth in the first part of this paper: 1) The author of *Fourth Maccabees* has indeed studied and used formal philosophical literature; 2) His philosophical opinions are not all (if any) derived directly from Plato; he has rather drawn on at least one more recent source.”

¹⁷ “Since its inception, Christianity presented itself as a *philosophia*, insofar as it assimilated into itself the traditional practices of spiritual exercises. We see this occurring in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, and monasticism. With the advent of medieval Scholasticism, however, we find a clear distinction drawn between *philosophia* and *theologia*. Theology became conscious of its autonomy *qua supreme* science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to the rank of a ‘handmaid of theology,’ philosophy’s role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual – and hence purely theoretical – material. When in the modern age, philosophy regained its autonomy, it still retained many features inherited from this medieval conception. In particular, it maintained its purely theoretical character, which even evolved in the direction of a more and more thorough systematization. Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world” (Hadot 1995:107–108).

a philosophical and virtuous life is empty, but in Eleazar's life and death the power and truth of his philosophy are displayed. This enables us also to appreciate the amount of space 4 Maccabees devoted to examples of persons who lived the good life. Displaying the extreme circumstances in which Eleazar, the seven brothers and their mother embodied the *καλοκάγαθία* (1:10; 3:18; 11:22; 13:25; 15:9) was seen as proof of the "truth = power" of their philosophy. The true philosopher is a person who is guided at all times and in all circumstances by reason, and for 4 Maccabees sound reason is in harmony with the Law. That is how Eleazar can be addressed in 7:7 as "O man in harmony with the law and philosopher of divine life!" Reason guided by the Law (ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμός) is shown to be the highest form of philosophy, as claimed in 1:1. Sustained by this devout reason and this education Eleazar was enabled even in the extreme circumstances of his martyrdom to be the master of his passions (ἡγεμών ἐστὶν τῶν παθῶν, 7:16) and so to persevere to the end in living the virtuous life.

No contradiction therefore arises when some persons appear to be dominated by their emotions because of the weakness of their reason. What person who lives as a philosopher by the whole rule of philosophy, and trusts in God, and knows that it is blessed to endure any suffering for the sake of virtue, would not be able to overcome the emotions through godliness? For only the wise and courageous are masters of their emotions. For this is why even the very young, by following a philosophy in accordance with devout reason, have prevailed over the most painful instruments of torture (7:20–8:1).

This text makes it clear that the real issue in this kind of philosophy is about how to live a good life and not merely a theory about it. According to Schürer (1986:567), "Jewish Greek philosophy pursued essentially practical goals in the same way as the Palestinian *hkmh*. Its main content was not logic or physics, but ethics." What is said here about Jewish Greek philosophy can easily be extended to Greek philosophy in general, except that with Hadot (1995:127) one will have to qualify the assertion about ethics, as we "are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a *way of being*, in the strongest sense of the term." The issue is how to overcome the

weakness of reason, which is a lack of φρόνησις: 4 Maccabees shows how this is realized by living according to the Law, trusting in God, and by hope for a life in God (“since they believe that they, like our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, do not die to God, but live to God” (7:19). What is hinted at here is a programme of ‘spiritual exercises’ in order to overcome the weakness of reason.

One of the key arguments developed by Hadot¹⁸ is that Greco-Roman philosophy had developed a programme of “spiritual exercises” (ἄσκησις: compare 4 Macc 13:22; 12:11), and that these “exercises” were taken over by Hellenistic Judaism, by Clement, Origen and the early Eastern monastic tradition, and eventually by the Western monastic tradition. The weakness of reason, as seen in this tradition, is of course not situated merely at the level of logic, but more broadly at the existential level:

The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it (Hadot 1995:83).

Philosophy is meant to bring about the healing of reason so that it may manage or rule the passions in view of a life of virtue. Such management requires “spiritual exercises” to lift oneself up from a merely material and socially honourable level of life to a level of wisdom. Such a distinction between the material/social and the spiritual was not unknown in the Old Testament texts; for instance in texts like 1 Kgs 3:11–14 Solomon is presented as someone who has made such a move in his life:

God said to him, ‘Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other

¹⁸ See Hadot (1995:81–144).

king shall compare with you, all your days. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life’.

This prioritizing and absolutizing of wisdom and righteousness and the corresponding relativizing of material and social blessings, like riches, long life and even honor, is further developed in Wis 8:5–7 by focussing on the cardinal virtues as the desired fruits of wisdom and righteousness:

καὶ εἰ δικαιοσύνην ἀγαπᾷ τις
οἱ πόνοι ταύτης εἰσὶν ἀρεταί
σωφροσύνην γὰρ καὶ φρόνησιν ἐκδιδάσκει
δικαιοσύνην καὶ ἀνδρείαν
ὧν χρησιμώτερον οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ἐν βίῳ ἀνθρώποις (Wis 8:7).¹⁹

This absolute love for wisdom, righteousness, and virtue can reach a dramatic form when one is faced with the choice between abandoning these or death: the biblical tradition remembered stories in which such choices had to be made: rather than abandoning righteousness the three young men prefer the fiery furnace, Daniel prefers the lions’ den (Dan 3 and 6, also recalled in 4 Macc 18:12–13), and Susanna prefers death (Dan 13). In 4 Maccabees these traditions and themes of absolute love for wisdom, as offered by God in the Law, even to the point of death, interacted creatively with the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition of the noble death and the ‘spiritual exercise of “learning how to die” (Hadot 1995:93–101). In the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition Socrates was the most striking example of this and at the time of 4 Maccabees this tradition, was evoked by both Jews and Christians.²⁰ Within this philosophical context the *recalling* of the death of Eleazar and of the seven brothers with their mother could be seen as a deeply philosophical exercise. According to Hadot:

¹⁹ This demand to give priority to the moral and spiritual values over the material blessings is found also in the NT: Matt 6:22.

²⁰ See the article by Sterling (2001b); Winston (2001:21–22) supports the views of earlier interpreters who recognized the figure of Socrates as a model for the presentation of Eleazar.

If it is true that philosophy subjugates the body's will to live to the higher demands of thought, it can rightly be said that philosophy is the training and apprenticeship for death. As Socrates puts it in the *Phaedo*: "it is a fact, Simmias, that those who go about philosophizing correctly are in training for death, and that to them of all men death is least alarming (1995:94).

A passage from the fourth century Neo-Platonist, Sallustius, expresses this in the language of "participation":

If all beings are beings only by virtue of goodness, and if they participate in the Good, then the first must necessarily be a good which transcends being. Here is an eminent proof of this: souls of value despise being for the sake of the Good, whenever they voluntarily place themselves in danger, for their country, their loved ones, or for virtue (quoted in Hadot 1995:94).²¹

4 Maccabees can be seen as a Jewish version of a philosophical work in the ancient Greco-Roman tradition: it raises the practical question of the noble way of life and shows us inspiring examples of persons who embodied this way by the manner in which they faced their death.²² In order to achieve this, the Greco-Roman tradition

²¹ Crossan (2003:40) holds that the interpretation of martyrdom in 4 Maccabees is "not so much the noble death of Socrates as the vicarious atonement of the Suffering Servant (4 Mac 6:28–29)." However, we could understand the vicarious atonement as an element of the noble death.

²² The views of 4 Maccabees on "learning to die" cannot be reduced to that of any of the philosophers of the time. Hadot (1995:93–101) presents us with different varieties. The liberation of the soul from the body in Greco-Roman philosophies cannot be seen as a form of Gnostic rejection of the body. Hadot interprets this separation in a more nuanced way: "We can perhaps get a better idea of this spiritual exercise if we understand it as an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view – linked to the senses and the body – so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and the norm of the Good. Training for death is training to die *to one's individuality and passions*, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity (1995:94-95). This is explained more fully in his reflections on Foucault's use of his work on "spiritual exercises": "One seeks to be one's own master, to possess oneself, and find one's happiness in freedom and inner independence". I concur on all these points. I do think, however, that this movement of interiorization is inseparably

offered a variety of “spiritual exercises” which trained the mind and developed the virtues necessary to be able to embody this way of life.

READING 4 MACCABEES AS A PHILOSOPHICAL “SPIRITUAL EXERCISE”

There is some irony in the fact that 4 Maccabees 17:23–24 points out, as an aside, that Antiochus himself held up the martyrs as an example to stir up his soldiers and that the effect was really striking. The text suggests that if such was the effect on Antiochus’ soldiers, what can the effect not be on the readers of the book, who are challenged to see themselves like the martyrs in a contest over which virtue is the umpire and “the prize for victory ... incorruption in long-lasting life” (17:11–14).

The reading or hearing of this work must be seen as one of the ‘spiritual exercises’ as elaborated by Hadot. Since philosophy is a way of life, human reason needs to be educated and trained to live out the demands of that way of life and appreciate it. These exercises aim not merely to affect the abstract cognitive faculties of the persons but their whole existence. This is the reason why 4 Maccabees is not merely a logical demonstration but combines the rhetorical forms of the encomium and of the protreptic discourse (deSilva 1998:76–126). The encomium as laudatory speech “was an important means of reaffirming assent to the society’s central values” (:77) and the martyrs are clearly put forward as heroes to be admired and emulated. As protreptic discourse this work invites the readers to “deliberate within themselves concerning the commitment they would make” (:100). The readers are challenged by the words of Antiochus, the tyrant, the representative of the competing philosophy: the Jewish way of life is not a philosophy at all (5:7); why should they abstain from the kinds of meat which nature has so kindly made available? (5:8–9); they should abandon their foolish philosophy and opt for a more profitable one (5:11); abandoning their way of life may

linked to another movement, whereby one rises to a higher psychic level, at which one encounters another kind of exteriorization, another relationship with the ‘exterior.’ This is a new way of being-in-the- world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature, and a portion of the universal reason” (1995:211).

open better opportunities like the one offered to the brothers (8:5–10) and again to the youngest brother (12:1–6). Against all these arguments the martyrs respond with their exemplary commitment to virtue until death: 5:16–17; 9:1–2; 12:11–12.

The text is, therefore, designed so as to give direction for the life of the readers as well as to motivate and to empower them to follow that direction. Such readings have their place among a variety of “spiritual exercises”. Hadot (1995:84) orders and summarizes these as follows:

We shall study the following groups in succession: first attention, then meditations and ‘remembrances of good things,’ then the more intellectual exercises: reading, listening, research, and investigation, and finally the more active exercises: self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things.²³

What Kelley, who is also inspired by Hadot, claims for the *Acta Martyrum* also applies to 4 Maccabees:

As I see it, the reading and hearing of martyr acts was a type of spiritual exercise designed to achieve control over the passions of early Christians by shifting their perceptions of bodily suffering. ... As this applies more specifically to the martyr acts, it means that they are not just historical documents that reflect the practice of martyrdom, but texts that worked rhetorically to shape their readers' way of being in the world (2006:734).

In other words, while the narratives of the martyrs may, from a modern point of view, not belong to the category of philosophical writings, they are very much part of the ancient programme of philosophical training. It should be pointed out that the *ἄσκησις* involved in martyrdom is not hostile to the body but involves transcending the body in the sense of not being engrossed in the body²⁴ as well as managing the passions in the

²³ Hadot refers to two passages in Philo, which provide lists of exercises available to the trained mind (ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἀσκητῆς; *Her.* 253; *Leg.* 3:18).

²⁴ The body is vulnerable and can be overpowered by the tyrant, but devout reason cannot be manipulated (5:38; 6:30; 7:13–14).

sense of not being controlled by them.²⁵ The aim of the exercises is the development of freedom to live a life of virtue. True life is the fruit of a life of virtue and is not secured by merely protecting and fostering the life of the body.²⁶

HELLENIZATION AND 4 MACCABEES

When we now speak of Hellenization of Judaism (or of Christianity) we have to bear in mind that this is referring to a whole variety of interactions between the Jewish faith and Hellenistic culture. For instance, the form of Hellenization referred to in 1 Macc 1:11–15 is of a totally different character from the one which 4 Maccabees promotes. However, the approach of 4 Maccabees agrees with a widespread mutual regard, alive in Greek as well as Jewish circles, for the wisdom found in all cultures (Gruen 1998; 2002; 2011). A number of Jewish works, like those of Philo, Wisdom of Solomon, and 4 Maccabees do not seem to approach Hellenistic philosophy as an entirely negative reality; their question is, how to make use of the valuable insights and formulations which can be found scattered in the different philosophies? In fact, they recognized many valuable themes in Greek philosophy and this phenomenon was regularly understood in terms of Greek borrowing from Moses.²⁷ Whatever the explanation for the positive elements in Greek philosophy, either through borrowing or through the effect of the Logos on all cultures, the important point is that there was relatively

²⁵ The passions are not destroyed but managed: “For reason does not overcome its own passions but those opposed to justice, courage and self-control, and it overcomes these not so that it destroys them but so that one does not give way to them” (4 Macc 1:6). “No one of us can eradicate such desire, but reason can provide a way for us not to be enslaved by desire. No one of you can eradicate anger from the soul, but reason can help to deal with anger. No one of us can eradicate malice, but reason can fight at our side so that we are not overcome by malice. For reason is not an uprooter of the passions but their antagonist” (4 Macc 3:1–5).

²⁶ The saying of Jesus about saving one’s life and losing one’s life can be read in this perspective: Matt 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25; Matt 10:39; Luke 17:33. “For the sake of Jesus” corresponds to “for the sake of virtue”.

²⁷ On the Greek admiration for Eastern wisdom and the suspicions or convictions that the Greeks had borrowed from Moses, see Winston in Sterling 2001b:11–12. The same confidence was also taken over by Christians like Origen: Cels. 1:15; *Hom. Jes. Nav.* 7:1&7.

positive, albeit critical, attitude to Greek culture.

The philosophy of Antiochus is presented as deficient judged by Greek standards and as the opposite of the true philosophy represented in 4 Maccabees.²⁸ The latter does not abandon the holy covenant but “translates” or “re-conceptualizes” it in terms of Greek culture. This challenge of translation can be seen from at least two opposing views: according to the one view, translation can be seen as a threat: the Jewish religion should remain within the confines of the original “language” and preserve it from “contamination”; the concern would be to preserve the purity of the faith and to protect it from “syncretism”. According to the opposite view, translation becomes an *opportunity*: the Jewish religion should be exposed to expression in Greek “language” and therefore be exposed to stimulation coming from the new culture.²⁹ What we have then is openness to “enculturation” into the life of faith of the receiving community. As the “translated” or “re-conceptualized” religion enters the new cultural realm it can set in motion a process of interaction and transformation of that cultural realm.

CONCLUSION

This work translates the Jewish Wisdom approach in the form of Greek philosophy and presents itself as a most genuine philosophical discourse. In common with the Hellenistic philosophies its main concern is to provide practical guidance towards the “good life”. Whether the author was more a rhetorician than a philosopher (see Dijkhuizen 2008:61) can be resolved if we understand that the text was meant to be read as one of the philosophical “spiritual exercises” by which the readers are trained not just to understand their views on life but to embody these in their way of life. As a philosophical discourse it takes up the language of the combat of reason against the

²⁸ See Philo (*Post.* 101–102), who also distinguishes different philosophies in the Hellenistic context.

²⁹ “Hellenism raised questions to which these Jewish writers were concerned with providing answers. Boundaries and difference did not create separation, but rather presented opportunities to create universally applicable systems” (Cornthwaite 2013:49).

passions in order to be able to live a virtuous life. However, the meaning of these terms is related to and even filled with elements from the Jewish tradition. A life according to virtue on the one hand and a life under the passions on the other sheds light on the two ways' tradition from the Wisdom writings and vice versa. Reason is understood as "devout reason", trained under the Law, while the Law and Wisdom are identified, as already in Sirach 24. The creator of the universe and the giver of the Law are one and the same and in this way the particular Jewish Law obtains a universal significance (Stone 2011:138). However, the universal is presented in the concrete form of figures from Jewish history: besides Eleazar, the seven brothers and their mother, the exemplary models evoked are taken from Jewish history: Abel, Isaac, Joseph, Phinehas, the three young men in the fiery furnace, Daniel in the lions' den, etc. (18:11–13). Furthermore, the book even ends (in 18:14–19) with a *florilegium* of biblical passages which encourage faithfulness to God and trust in God's care and power to save.

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