

## A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST PREFIXED LETTER (1:1–1:10a) IN 2 MACCABEES

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### ABSTRACT

The text of 2 Maccabees has been fruitfully explored throughout the centuries. An aspect which scholars have struggled with is the significance of the two prefixed letters. The discussions on the reason for adding the letters are, however, mainly concerned with the respective authors, vocabulary and main ideas which are present in both the letters and the narrative. This article proposes an alternative approach to the problem. Through applying a rhetorical analysis to the first prefixed letter, the study explicates similarities in the communicative strategies applied in both the letter and the narrative. Both focus on a unified and ideal group who function as ambassadors for a specific purpose, and both employ the elements of threat and response in order to highlight important ideas. This will hopefully provide new insight into the reasons for attaching this letter to such a rhetorically effective narrative.

### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM

An aspect which has stimulated serious investigation is the composition of 2 Maccabees. It is a document consisting of three main components: two letters (1:1–2:18) and a narrative (2:19–15:39) containing a history of the Jewish people and of the temple-state of Jerusalem and Judea.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this specific composition, scholars as recent as Schwartz (2008:519–529), and Doran (2012:1–3) addressed questions such as: Did the same author write

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<sup>1</sup> After the analysis of Elias Bickerman (1933:233–253) there is unity amongst scholars that there were two letters. Prior to Bickerman, the number of letters was widely debated.

the letters and the narrative? Were these letters written with the text of 2 Maccabees 2:19–15:39 in mind? Were the letters modified for the sake of aligning them with the narrative? Does the problem for the connection of the letters and the narrative lie in the second letter, implying that the second letter had been appended to the first? Does the presence of the verb *καταλλάσσω* in the letter (1:5b) and in the narrative (7:33, 8:29) suggest conclusive proof of the one common author or just a purposed connection?

These questions have been discussed for a considerable length of time by many scholars. Despite the diversity, one fact remains: the common view is that the two letters were joined together, but were originally independent works.<sup>2</sup>

These joint and independent works are also prefixed to a narrative. The letters and the narrative have been viewed as linked since late second century C.E. where Clement of Alexandria suggests that the composer of the epitome is the one that is mentioning Aristobulos in the second prefixed letter.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, scholars have been theorising on the reasons for prefixing these letters. The solution that van Henten (1997:57) provides is that the connection lies in the institution of the feast of Hanukkah. Van Henten further states (1997:57) that chs. 3–15 are closely linked to the festal letters at the beginning of the work through the element in 4:7–10:9 and 14:1–15:36 of the institution of a holiday to commemorate the victory of the Jews. Thus, for van Henten, the narrative furthers the letters' explanation for why the feast should be celebrated.

Schwartz also finds the answer, at least to the connection of the first letter, in the justification of the letter's invitation to the celebration of the Feast. For Schwartz, there is a possibility that those who wrote the first letter had access to the book and "both fit their letter to the book and fit the book to their letter" (2008:525). He notes three main points to support this view (2008:525):

- 1) The presence of the rare verb *καταλλάσσω* in both the first letter (1:5) and the narrative (7:33; 8:29);
- 2) the first letter shares the narrative's interest in cultic details; and

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<sup>2</sup> Bickerman (1928:779–797, here 791); Parker (2007:386–402, here 386–389).

<sup>3</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5.14.97.7.; Doran (2012:1).

3) the letter seems to describe the narrative.

These approaches focus mainly on similarity in content between the letters and the narrative. There is, however, another possible aspect of unity: the rhetorical value and communicative strategy of the letters. Coetzer (2014:258–260) has explicated the communicative strategies applied throughout 2 Maccabees. Specifically relevant are the author's aim to (1) present a specific group as ultimate example, and (2) to employ the elements of threat and response to demonstrate the importance of certain concepts. This article will apply a rhetorical analysis to the first prefixed letter in order to search out the communicative strategies applied and which may possibly overlap with those applied in the rest of the narrative. This, in turn, will hopefully introduce a new aspect of unity and further the discussion on the reason for the attachment of the letters.

Various methods have been applied to the text of 2 Maccabees. An overview of key contributions on the letters and narrative of 2 Maccabees shows the need for an additional approach.

Bickerman (1979) aims his book as a preliminary study for a commentary on 1 and 2 Maccabees. His book developed out of a philological interpretation and has a “purely historical” aim in order to understand the sequence of events and make them comprehensible (1979:1). Amongst his foci are the dating of the prefixed letters and the book, the differences of the various traditions, and the original aggressors of the persecutions.

Doran (1981) highlights the author's love for metaphors and wordplay. He focuses on worldview and the confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism. His research shows interest in some rhetorical aspects of the text and accordingly provides an investigation of the goals of the text.

Jonathan A. Goldstein (1983) follows his *doktorvater*, Bickerman, except in the dating of 2 Maccabees. He examines the critical issues raised by 2 Maccabees. He discusses its language and style, its Hellenistic and Jewish inclination, its comparison and relationship to I Maccabees, its use of sacred writings (Torah and Prophets), its historical context, and the role of the miraculous.

Schwartz (2008) highlights 2 Maccabees as a second century B.C.E. Jewish

writing. He accentuates 2 Maccabees as a narration and interpretation of the events that took place in Jerusalem prior to and during the Maccabean revolt (167–160 B.C.E.). He provides an important solution to the intricate discussion on the linkage between the letters and the narrative in arguing that the authors of the first letter took notice of the book and that the second letter is closely linked to the narrative concerning the fire in the Temple (2008:525-527).

Van Henten (1997) discusses the religious, political as well as the philosophical aspects of noble death in 2 and 4 Maccabees. In discussing the narrative, he distinguishes six elements which are key facets in understanding the narrative pattern of 2 Maccabees (1997:295). He argues that the theme of martyrdom is a very important part of the self-image of the Jews as presented by the authors of both works. Eleazar, the anonymous mother with her seven sons and Razis should, therefore, be considered heroes of the Jewish people.

The following table summarises the focus of each key contribution:

**Table 1: Summary of key contributions**

Scholar	Focus
Bickerman	Philological and historical elements
Doran	Stylistic devices and the confrontation between Hellenism and Judaism
Goldstein	Philological elements, influence and context
Schwartz	Dating, authorship and Diasporan influence
Van Henten	Noble death and narrative pattern

It is clear that a study is needed with a greater pragmatic emphasis. A discussion of the communicative strategy of 2 Maccabees will not only explicate certain ideas within the text, but also hopes to clarify the function of these ideas and themes within the whole of 2 Maccabees. An approach which may address these aspects is a rhetorical analysis. The method is outlined below.

## METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to answer the questions presented above and construct a rhetorical analysis, the article will aim to date, stabilise and clarify the first prefixed letter, determine the communicative strategy applied to encourage the reader to adopt certain ideas and determine the function of these ideas.

A logical prerequisite for the stabilising and clarification of the text would be to delimit the first letter. Reasons have to be provided for delimitation. These reasons will be based on content and formal aspects such as vocabulary, thought structure and structural markers.

Subsequently, the delimited text will be stabilised and clarified. A syntactical and semantic analysis will be performed and variance will be demonstrated. Possible text fractures will be illustrated and their function will be specified. Intra- and intertextual references will be highlighted in order to stabilise semantic relations. Regarding text fractures, the following questions are important:

- Why is a certain phrase or word used in such a way?
- Why are certain aspects not mentioned?
- Why are certain aspects subjectively emphasised?

Next, in order to establish the communicative strategy and the purpose of specific ideas, a pragmatic analysis will be applied. First, the communicative strategy will be determined through answering the following questions (a focus on the role of individual characters and specific groups within the text has been added to the existing method for the sake of an improved outcome):

- How does the author project himself in order to generate a contract of trust between himself and the implicit reader?
- How does the author create a contract of trust between individual characters or a specific group within the text and the implicit reader?
- How is the culture, sub-culture and individuality of the author or individuals/specific group within the text implied?
- When, where and how is the communication taking place?
- Who is the intended reader/audience?

Secondly, the sensual and non-sensual dimensions of the real text world (unacceptable epistemic practice) and alternative text world (ideal epistemic practice) will be discussed in terms of their attributes.

Lastly, trans-universal relations will be specified in order to explicate the manner in which the reader is moved from the real text world towards the alternative text world. These elements will now be applied to the first prefixed letter.

## **STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS**

### **Dating**

Alois Cigoi (1868) argued against the predominant Protestant view of that time for a more positive view towards 2 Maccabees. In the third chapter of his study, he discussed the two opening letters (1:1–2:18). Here, he expressed both his view that these letters need to be more thoroughly studied and vindicated and that considering 1:1–2:18 as one letter is unwarranted (Cigoi 1868:46).

Three decades later, Niese (1900) proposed exactly such an unwarranted view. Niese (1900:9–26) argued, first, that 2 Maccabees 1:1–2:18 is a single letter of 125 B.C.E. and, secondly, that this letter and the narrative is one united text. However, this view does not deal with a number of issues. There is a salutation in 1:1 and 1:10. The letters promote Hanukkah whereas the narrative leads up to the day of Nicanor. If the dating of this letter is 125 B.C.E., it is impossible to presume that Judas Maccabaeus is one of the authors (1:10). He died much earlier. The account of Antiochus' death in the letter (1:13–16) is different to that in the narrative in Ch. 9.

Thirty years later, Elias Bickerman (1933) made an indispensable contribution to this issue. In his study, Bickerman argued two main points. First, the letters are independent from the narrative. Secondly, 1:1–2:18 consists of two letters, the first (1:1–10a) dating from 188 S.E. (Seleucid Era). This division into two letters was because of the question Bickerman asked: "Why should one letter have two dates?" Prior to this study, there had been two ways of dealing with this dilemma. Either 1:1–10a consists of two letters, or 1:1–9 is one letter and the second letter begins with its

date in 1:10. Regarding the last mentioned option, Bickerman (1986:2.138) argued that it is impossible for an ancient letter to begin with the date. According to his experience in Hellenistic papyrology he then concluded that 1:1–10a is a single letter dating 188 S.E. that quotes an earlier letter of 169 S.E. This view was soon adopted by scholars as is evident in the past tense translation Abel, Habicht, Goldstein provide for the perfect *γεγράφαμεν* in v. 7. Even a study as recent as Doran (2012:33) concludes, on formal grounds, that “since the letter is quoting a letter from 169 SE, the date must be 188 SE”.

For Schwartz (2008:519–529), there exists another option for making sense of the two dates up to 1:10a. He begins by stating that the letter and the verbs within it cannot be interpreted according to what is usual in Greek letters because the verbs render a Hebrew or Aramaic text (Schwartz 2008:522). Schwartz therefore follows Torrey (1940:147), who translates the verb in v. 7 (*γεγράφαμεν*) in the present tense, “we Jews write to you”. Such a translation of the perfect tense within a letter would of course be warranted as an epistolary perfect (Dempsey 1990:7). Consequently, Schwartz (2008:522) accepts 169 S.E. (1:7) to be the date of the first letter (1:1–10a). What remains is the second date mentioned in 1:10. As a letter of 169 S.E. clearly cannot cite a letter of 188 S.E., an earlier date has to be found. This fact drives Schwartz (2008:522–523) towards the reading of codices 62 and 55 which read 148. He concludes that this is a letter of 169 S.E. that ends with an invitation to celebrate the “Tabernacles of Kislev 148”.

Bickerman and scholars who follow him provide no logical explanation or significance for the attachment of a letter dating 188 S.E. Considering this, and that Schwartz indeed solves this dilemma through a very significant dating of the letter, the reading of 148 S.E. will be followed for 1:10a. The date of the first prefixed letter will be accepted as 169 S.E.

## **Delimitation**

One finds at the beginning of the text of 2 Maccabees two letters (1:1–10a; 1:10b–2:18). These letters are distinguished by their typical Hellenistic openings containing

the addressee, χαίρειν and the writer/sending party.<sup>4</sup> The ending of the first letter is confirmed by both the dating in 1:10a,<sup>5</sup> and the standard salutation of the second letter (1:10b). Therefore, the first letter will be delimited as 1:1–1:10a, and the second letter as 1:10b–18).

## Syntactical and semantic analysis

The two letters have distinct features. The first has a paratactic Semitic style. This is highlighted by the appearance of καί three or four times in most verses, eight in v. 8. The flow of the argument in the first letter seems logical:

- A salutation (v. 1)
- Expressions of good will (vv. 2–5)
- A segue (v. 6) into a section (v. 7–10a) which summarises preceding events up unto the rededication of the Temple and a plea for the celebration of the holiday instituted.

The term Ιουδαῖοι in v. 1 seems to refer to people that originally came from Judea and now found themselves in Egypt or across the known world of the text. Bickerman (1927:223–225) holds that the term refers to the Ptolemaic practice of identifying people that are not citizens by their point of origin. Doran (2012:24), however, demonstrates that the term likely does not refer to point of origin. He translates this term as Jews and not “Judeans”, noting that the point of origin involves more than geography: “geography, ethnicity, and cultural practices – including religious ones – are intimately connected” (Doran, 2012:24). The phrase οἱ ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας (1:1) demonstrates a specific political idea of Jerusalem and the Temple. It implies that the city of Jerusalem has its “country” (χώρα). Schwartz (2008:135) states that “Judaea is the territory that surrounds Jerusalem and is defined by it”. Van Henten

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps there lies some significance in the order of this salutation. Exler (1923:42–44, 65–67) notes the usual order puts the writer first. One finds this usual order in the letters in Chapter 11. The order in these first two letters might demonstrate the writer/writing party’s desire to portray himself/themselves as less important than the recipient. The problem, however, is that these letters cannot be judged by the norm of standard Greek letters.

<sup>5</sup> A more elaborate discussion of this dating will be provided in the next section below, which implies that the first date in v. 7 is merely the date of a quoted letter and that, in this case, the date of the letter should be placed at the ending of the letter.



(1997:191) rightly argues that Judas, despite his annulment of the Greek ways of life, did not object to Jerusalem's political status as a *polis*. There is, however, a fuller extent to the territory that is influenced by Jerusalem. The influence stretches to whichever territory a Jew might find himself in. The Jews in Egypt are vitally connected to the Temple in Jerusalem. This is evident in the addressees of the two letters. The letters further emphasise the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem and political significance of Jerusalem through their attachment to our text. This is a text which seems to stress the fact that the Jewish nation and Judaism cannot function without the Temple in Jerusalem being in its natural and perfect form.

A wish for peace (such as εἰρήνην ἀγαθήν, 1:1) is a prominent facet in most Aramaic letters. This phrase might very well be an allusion to Jeremiah 33:9, "for all the good and all the peace" (Goldstein 1983:140). This phrase will be separated from the initial greeting pattern of letters of petition and placed among the wishes for well-being (Goldstein 1983:141; Doran 2012:25). The phrase will open v. 2 instead of ending v. 1.

In vv. 2–5 one finds definite biblical verbiage (Enermalm-Ogawa 1987:56–58; 135–136). It is paralleled to Jeremiah 32, especially in the light of our note on 1:2. This parallel between Jeremiah 32:26 onwards and vv. 2–5 is evident through the following aspects:

- Both involve a King who has conquered Jerusalem
- Both involve the abomination of the Temple
- Both express the hope that God will be beneficent (ἀγαθοποιῆσαι) to the residents of the city
- Both express the desire that God will give the relevant Jews one heart to fear him.

A significant element surfaces when a comparison is drawn with Jeremiah 32–33. In Jeremiah the desecration of the Temple through Babylonian religious rituals is the result of God's punishment. However, this punishment was caused by Israel's practice of Babylonian religious rituals. Thus, because Israel worships Baal, the Baal-worshippers (Babylonians) will take over Jerusalem. The case in 2 Maccabees is similar. The Seleucid officials who are enforcing Hellenization would later enter and

desecrate the Temple in Jerusalem because of the Jewish faction that was pushing for complete assimilation with the Hellenistic ways.

The choice for translation in 1:4 would be “the commandments” (προστάγμασι). This is based on the Semitic background of this letter. Elsewhere, as in 7:30, 10:8 and 15:3, a suitable translation would be “decree”, acknowledging the contextual emphasis on the contrast between the Laws of God and those of the Hellenistic kings.

Important to our study is the use of καταλλάσσω<sup>6</sup> (1:5). It shows the way in understanding the specific interpretation our text provides of the events taken place. Reconciliation is one of its central motifs (Porter 1994:75–77). Doran (2012:27) links the use of this term to the specific attribute of God as the covenant partner that is “not to be angry with them (the Jews), but is to show mercy and not desert his covenant partners when they are in trouble. This becomes clear through the terminology that follows in 1:5: may He not abandon you in a bad/evil time (μη̄ ὑμᾶς ἐγκαταλίποι ἐν καιρῷ̄ πονηρῷ̄). Stanley Porter (1994:76) highlights the fact that its use in speaking about a relationship with the gods is rare prior to the term’s appearance in 2 Maccabees. Spicq (1982/1:407–411) shows that in the Septuagint, only 2 Maccabees employs this word in its various forms. What is even more important is the fact that this letter specifically, which is prefixed to our text, uses this word. Here, Schwartz’ (2008:138) argument is preferred that the “Judaean readers of the book, who wrote this letter to accompany it, correctly recognised the notion’s centrality, and alluded to it here”.

Regarding the dating in 1:7, as discussed above, it is reasonable to accept that the Jewish (Babylonian) method of reckoning the Seleucid era (from the spring of 311 B.C.E. onwards) is utilised. Therefore the modern dating of 143 B.C.E. makes sense, seeing that Demetrius II ruled from 145 to 139 B.C.E.

There is another facet which presents some problems in v. 7. The phrase ἐν τῇ θλίψει καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀκμῇ τῇ ἐπελθούσῃ ἡμῶν would be translated literally as: “in the (time of) the oppression and the crisis which came upon us”. This would imply that it was a

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<sup>6</sup> Jarvis J. Williams (2013) discusses the interpretation of καταλλάσσω and other verbiage such as ἔλεος (mercy), καθάρσιον (purification) etc. as a means of communicating the atoning deaths of the Maccabean martyrs.

time of crisis and oppression in 169 S.E. Yet, the rest of the verse implies a period twenty years or more prior to the writing – the period between Jason and the rededication of the Temple. Therefore, ἐν is taken to mean “about” as in Deuteronomy 6:7 (Schwartz 2008:140).

The classic denotation of purpose (ἵνα ἄγητε) in v. 9 is similar to that in v. 18. The only difference is that the phrase in v. 9 depends on γεγράφαμεν in v. 7 and not on a verb in the same verse as in v. 18. Consequently, the phrase “we have written you” may be repeated parenthetically in v. 9.

Regarding the dating in 1:10, see the discussion on the dating of the letter above.

### **Proposition and argumentation**

Caution should be applied when investigating the proposition of this letter. The manner in which one should work is different to that of the rest of the text. The letter was written by a different author/s and is independently aimed. The proposition and argumentation when separate is different than when interpreted as one with our text. In this study, these letters are viewed as part of our text. With this in mind, the question is what elements are present in the letters which are also central to our book and therefore the reason for the letters to be included.

Taking this unique place the letters hold within the rest of the text into account, the proposition of the first letter may be formulated as follows:

IF (1:1–10a)

- the Jews in Jerusalem and those in the territory of Judaea are the brothers of the Jews throughout Egypt,
- the Jews in Jerusalem and those in the territory of Judaea wish the best for the Jews throughout Egypt,
- the Jews in Jerusalem and those in the territory of Judaea are praying for Jews throughout Egypt,
- extreme oppression came upon the Jews in Jerusalem and its territory, but the Lord heard them after they besought Him,
- the Jews in Jerusalem offered sacrifices and choice flour and kindled the lamps

and set out the breads;

THEN (1:1–10a)

- the Jews in Egypt should also now celebrate this feast in the month of Kislev in submission to the legitimised group in Jerusalem and since they are unified with the Jews in Jerusalem.

## **PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS**

### **Communicative strategy**

First, the letter emphasises the unity between writer and reader. This is important in an attempt to convince the reader to practice the same rituals and feasts as the writer. The unity amongst the two parties calls for unity in practice. Along with explicating the good wishes the writing party has for the readers, the strategy utilises a logical appeal in achieving the outcome: If the two parties are one, then they should act as one.

Less explicit is the logical appeal of the demonstration of God's protection. God protects those in Jerusalem and hears their prayers. This means that the writing party has authority because they are proved to be sanctioned by God. The fact that God heard their prayers justifies them as well as their action of initiating the feast. The receivers may now confidently follow these Jews in Jerusalem because the Jews in Jerusalem are celebrating this feast in the right relationship with God.

As stated earlier, the presentation of a specific group as ultimate example is a central strategy in 2 Maccabees. Here, in the first letter, the group of Jews in Jerusalem are presented as a unified group, both to their brothers in Jerusalem and to Judas and his companions. The linkage with Judas and the rituals is essential in establishing the legitimacy of this group of Jews in the first letter. Throughout 2 Maccabees, the author legitimises the character of Judas in order to incorporate important ideas. Here, the letter exhibits the same strategy to assert the legitimacy of the celebration of the Festival of Booths.

Furthermore, the strategy of applying threat and response in this letter serves as ideal basis for the rest of the text. Coetzer (2014:257) identifies two major elements in

2 Maccabees 3:1–39 which are echoed in every section of the narrative: (1) a major threat, and (2) a dramatic response. This has the possibility of moving the reader to place an extremely high value on the sanctity of the Temple. The reader experiences “emotions such as suspense, shock, anguish, relief and joy through the course of the narrative as this same Temple is desecrated, taken back, and purified once more” (Coetzer 2014:257).

Here, in the first letter, the blueprint is found for the elements of threat and response that will follow in the narrative. A summary of the extreme oppression and the response (beseeching the Lord) is provided. This teaches the reader the value of the freedom, the desired reaction and the significance of both the rituals and the celebration of the days of Booths.

### **Real and alternative text-world**

The text is dealing with the topographical problems that may arise due to the setting of some Jews in Egypt. They are far from Judaea and detached from the community and ritual lifestyle of the Jews in Jerusalem. This detachment as well as the presence of a temple in Egypt may cause the Jews there to also detach themselves from certain celebrations of feasts and disregard the significance of the temple in Jerusalem. There exists a chance that the Jews in Egypt might not celebrate the feast. For them, the specifics and legitimacy of the purification feast is debatable.

The desired alternative is a setting where there is complete unity between the Jews in Egypt and those in Jerusalem. This unity implies a setting where both parties share the same interest in the relevance of the Temple and the feast and demonstrate this by celebrating the feast.

### **Trans-universal relations**

The text provides a solution through suggesting an alternative setting, where the Jews in Egypt make a choice on the grounds of their bond with the temple and Jews in Jerusalem and the hero Judas as well as God’s assertion of the feast. In this setting, the readers will wholeheartedly be able to join the Jews in Jerusalem and Judaea in their

celebration of the feast.

## CONCLUSION

Applying a rhetorical analysis to the first prefixed letter in 2 Maccabees proved to be fruitful. A more pragmatic focus yielded interesting results on the significance of the inclusion of this letter. The compatibility of content is strengthened by the letter's exhibition of potential communicative strategies. The strategies applied in the letter serve as blueprint for the rest of the narrative. The author/s of the letter applied two strategies which overlap with those identified in the narrative. These are (1) the application of the elements of threat and response, and (2) the focus on a specific, unified group of ideal examples. This, among other aspects, makes the first prefixed letter an ideal addition to the aim of 2 Maccabees. The possible implication is that the reader is moved to place a high value on the freedom of the Jews and the purified state of the Temple. Secondly, the reader is encouraged to view the group in Jerusalem as legitimised, since they are unified with the ideal group of Judas and his followers. Lastly, the reader is urged to adhere to the letter's appeal to mimic the ritualistic behaviour of those in Jerusalem since they are unified through the Jerusalem temple.

Consequently, a rhetorical analysis provides a new and unique contribution to the ongoing discussion on the significance of the addition of the prefixed letters in 2 Maccabees. The letter in 1:1–10a supports the aim of 2 Maccabees, not only in terms of content and theme, but also in terms of the strategy applied in order to move the readers from an unacceptable to an ideal epistemic practice.

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### Early Christian literature and the ancient church

Clement of Alexandria.

*Stromata*

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