THE ROLE OF “SCRIPTURE”
IN THE LAST WORDS OF MATTATHIAS (1 MACC 2:49-70)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Famous Last Words

Dürer, Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, Kant—this sequence of names may serve as examples to represent the identity of German culture. Persons stand for programs, and names proffer identity—that is an old thing. If one recounts great personalities of the past, one not only remembers stories of some people’s lives, but activates the issues of what they stand for: one admonishes the current generation or calls the old ideals to the fore. With a real person of history at hand, one can visualize and promote important contents with much efficacy. The veneration of the Saints is just another example of this fact.

Exactly this insight we find in the so-called “Last Words” or testament of Mattathias in 1 Macc 2:49-70. In the second century BC the priest Mattathias refused to sacrifice to the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes and thus provoked the revolt of the Jews against Seleucid supremacy. Only one year later, Mattathias died, and he passed the leadership of the Maccabaeans movement to his son Judas Maccabaeus. The First Book of the Maccabees (hereafter: 1 Macc) uses this event to articulate the program of the Maccabean movement in the mouth of Mattathias:¹ his Last Words condense the ideology of the Maccabees and promote it in accordance with Scripture.

Josephus transmits quite different: “Last Words” of Mattathias (AJ XII 279-84): Mattathias encourages his sons to preserve the customs of their country (ἔθη τὰ πάτρια) and their ancient form of government (τὴν ἀρχαίαν πολιτείαν), which are in danger of being overturned. According to Josephus,

Mattathias does not mention Biblical examples and the Torah (νόμος in the singular), but he speaks about the laws (plural), which the sons shall be ready to die for (see 1 Macc 2:50). Then “the deity” (τὸ θείον) will greatly value their virtue, restore to them what they have lost, and return to them that freedom which will permit them to live quietly and enjoy their own customs. Mattathias also talks about immortality which they will receive in remembrance of actions they have done. They shall pursue these things. Above all, Mattathias calls his sons to agree with one another (ὁμονοεῖν).

Simon and Maccabaeus (Judas) are highlighted and installed as spiritual father (Simon) and general of the army (Judas), respectively, due to their excellence and virtue (see 1 Macc 2:65-66). Analogous to 1 Macc 2:49-70 the farewell speech of Mattathias in Josephus’ account is not a historical document, but an occasion to articulate a political message. Josephus no longer promotes the long forgotten Hasmonaeans (as 1 Macc does), but uses the farewell speech for his own agenda: freedom for the Jews in unity, leading a life according to their own customs and laws. To achieve this aim, Josephus does not mention a blessing for the sons (1 Macc 2:69), but rather an intercession addressed to God that the deity might help his sons in the battle and recover for the people their former constitution

τὸν θεὸν εὐδόμενος σύμωνον αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι καὶ τῷ λαῷ τὴν ἱδίαν ἀνασώκαι πάλιν τοῦ βίου συνήθειαν.

Method

It is clearly the intention of the authors of 1 Macc 2:49-70 to allude to the holy traditions of the “fathers” (unfortunately, only men are mentioned). However, it remains obscure what the authors exactly had in mind and how they had access to these traditions. Therefore I do not want to construct further hypotheses about the origin of the text. What we have at hand is the text of 1 Maccabees as a deuterocanonical writing within the Christian Bible of the Old and New Testament. Within this canonical framework, we not only find relations between 1 Macc 2:49-70 and very old traditions, but also associations with actual texts. The following reading is centered on the text and proceeds along these intertextual relationships and analogies. Thus the proposed texts are woven into the Last Words of Mattathias.\textsuperscript{2} By activating

\textsuperscript{2} This approach differs completely from the note by G.O. Neuhaus, Studien zu den poetischen Stücken im 1. Makkabäerbuch (FzB 12, Würzburg: Echter 1974) 168: the fathers are not separated from their historical context (“herausgelöst aus ihrem geschichtlichen Kontext,” as Neuhaus puts it; see also W. Dommershausen, 1 Makkabäer. 2 Makkabäer [NEB, Würzburg: Echter 1985] 26, and S. von Dobbeler, Die Bücher 1/2 Makkabäer [NSKAT 11, Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1997] 64). The approach of this study reads the names and allusions as a kind of summons to enter or introduce the “historical context” (more precisely: the Biblical-literary context) of the “fathers” into the situation of 1 Macc 2.