THE GREEK PENTATEUCH AND 4 MACCABEES*

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INTRODUCTION

In the third century B.C.E., Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt began work on the production of a Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures. Most of this ‘Old Greek’ Bible is a translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic canon that had been compiled over the course of the previous thousand years by their forebears in Israel and Babylon. A number of religious writings that made their appearance in the Jewish community during the Graeco-Roman period were, however, original Greek compositions that stood outside what came to be known as the canon. They, nonetheless, came to be included in some of the renowned Greek Bible codices like Sinaiticus (fourth century C.E.) and Alexandrinus (fifth century C.E.) as well as in good numbers of less extensive and less-well-known manuscript witnesses. Such is the case with 4 Maccabees.

Probably written sometime before 70 C.E.,¹ 4 Maccabees enjoyed considerable popularity in antiquity, as the more than 70 extant Greek manuscripts and assorted versional treatments attest. In the first verse the

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* I am pleased to be able to contribute this essay to a volume honouring Raija Sollamo, a respected Septuagint scholar and colleague in the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies.

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author introduces the subject of this philosophical discourse, “whether pious reason is absolute master of the passions,” εἰ αὐτοδέσποτός ἐστιν τῶν παθῶν ὁ εὐσεβής λογισμός. The martyrdoms of a Jewish priest named Eleazar and of seven brothers and their mother during Antiochus IV’s reign of terror (cf. 2 Macc 6:18–7:42) exemplify the author’s central thesis. But other traditions from Israel’s storied past are also employed, including not a few drawn from the Pentateuch. In this paper I propose to focus on four passages that illustrate the role that 4 Maccabees plays in the history of the transmission and interpretation of the Pentateuchal traditions to which it refers.

4 Macc 2:21–23 // Gen 1:26–28

In 4 Macc 2:21–23 the author, in the context of a discussion of the creation of human beings, rearticulates the main point that he makes throughout the book.

Now when God fashioned human beings, he planted in them their passions (πάθη) and habits (ἠθη), but at the same time he enthroned the mind (νοῦς) among the senses as a sacred governor (ἱερὸς ἡγεμών) over them all, and to this mind he gave the law. The one who adopts a way of life in accordance with it will rule a kingdom that is temperate (σώφρων), just (δικαία), good (ἀγαθή), and courageous (ἀνδρεία).

This time, however, the author expresses himself in terms of the assertion that the Creator has so fashioned humans as to establish the mind (νοῦς)—which may be regarded as a metonymy for reason—as the governor over the passions (τὰ πάθη) and habits (τὰ ἠθη) that have also been implanted by him.

The idea of God planting the various human passions and emotions, both good and evil, in human beings appears in a variety of Jewish sources during the Graeco-Roman period. In the so-called Rule of the Community at Qumran, one reads the following:

He created humankind to rule (לֹאֵם עַל הָעולָמָה) over the world, appointing for them two spirits in which to walk until the time ordained for His visitations.

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