NARRATIVE ART IN 1 MACCABEES VI 1-17

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Scholars are paying increasing attention to literary artistry in biblical literature.¹ Thus far, however, 1 Maccabees seems to have been virtually ignored in this regard. How unappreciated 1 Maccabees is as an artistic work can be gathered from a comment made by the author of the Anchor Bible commentary on the book, J.A. Goldstein,² in which he compares 1 Macc. iii 38-iv 25 and 2 Macc. viii 9-36:

Both here [in 1 Maccabees] and in [2 Maccabees] the two commanders, Nicanor and Gorgias, are mentioned. Here, attention is focused on Gorgias; there, on Nicanor. The difference need not reflect a difference in sources but rather a difference in the author’s interests. Here, we can see the hand of the admirer of Hasmonean Judas, who out-generated the wily Gorgias. There, we can see the hand of the literary artist, who organized his narrative in parallel sections around the Feast of Dedication and the Day of Nicanor.

Thus, whereas the author of 2 Maccabees is to be viewed as a literary artist, the author of 1 Maccabees is not.

Contributing to the lack of attention to narrative art in 1 Maccabees is the fact that the book has been seen primarily, and almost exclusively, as only a historical source on the events surrounding the Maccabean revolt and the beginnings of the Hasmonean dynasty. To be sure, literary facets of the book have been treated to some degree. For instance, commentaries on the book do generally offer brief appraisals

¹ Cf. the bibliographies compiled by M.A. Powell, The Bible and Modern Literary Criticism (New York, 1992); and D.F. Watson and A.J. Hauser, Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible (New York, 1994). In a few places in the present study I draw upon wording found in my unpublished book manuscript, The Structure of 1 Maccabees, which is currently under editorial review.
² J.A. Goldstein, I Maccabees (AB 41; Garden City, NY, 1976), p. 258; emphasis added.
of the literary character of 1 Maccabees. Yet the only literary issues to receive extended treatment have been the book’s poetry and its unity. Thus, N. Martola has aptly observed that a “look at the history of the study of [1 Maccabees] shows that literary problems . . . have attracted little interest.”

While I agree that 1 Maccabees is an important historical source, the present study is intended to demonstrate that the book manifests literary artistry as well. To illustrate the activity of narrative art in 1 Maccabees, I will focus on 1 Macc. vi 1-17, which describes the death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. I will perform a literary critical analysis of this material in section II below. As a prelude to this investigation, in the following section I will discuss the context of the passage within 1 Maccabees and examine the treatment of the passage in commentaries on the book.

I

Antiochus IV appears four times in 1 Maccabees. First, he is introduced in i 9-10 as being one of the “sons” of Alexander the Great who “caused many evils on the earth”. Second, in i 16-24, Antiochus initially invades Egypt, capturing and plundering cities, and then turns his attention to Jerusalem. He attacks the city and enters the temple, from which he steals several objects, and in i 29-63 his forces occupy the city and persecute Torah-abiding Jews. Third, in iii 27-37, when he hears about a Jewish uprising against him, Antiochus sends his general, Lysias, to subdue the revolt, while the king himself takes half of his forces to the east. In vi 1-17, we join Antiochus in the east, where

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5 While 1 Maccabees was originally composed in Hebrew, the book survives only in a Greek translation. Since it is commonly accepted that, as J.C. Exum (“Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13”, JBL 99 [1980], p. 44) puts it, “the literary task is to interpret the text as it stands”, I will not attempt to restore the Hebrew wording, and will instead deal with the Greek. For an example of a literary critical analysis of a Greek translation of an original Hebrew book, see T. Craven, Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith (Chico, CA, 1983). Cf. P. Trible, Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 36-38.
6 All translations of 1 Maccabees in this study are taken from, or are based on, the NRSV.