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Education by Example: A Motif in Joseph and Maccabee Literature of the Second Temple Period

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Lawrence E. Frizzell

Introduction

In Jewish tradition the five books of Moses hold the place of honor in Israel's sacred writings as the *Torah* or "instruction" of God. Some people, even in ancient times, seemed to emphasize the legislative teachings or commandments, so the Greek translators chose the word "*Nomos*" or "Law" to render *Torah*. Indeed, laws provide the practical norms whereby people guide their lives and teach their offspring. However, in most cultures legislation has its complement in inspiring narratives. Heroes and heroines of times long past are presented as worthy of imitation. They exemplify the ideal that offers a synthesis about the meaning of life. Jews recognize that commandments offer a basis for *halakhah*, the way to go in life, which is completed by *haggadah*, a set of narratives presenting insights regarding imitation of God in the ambiguities of human life.

My study of edifying narratives will be divided into two parts: 1.) developments of the Joseph narrative from the Book of Genesis and 2.) the accounts of martyrdom in the Second and Fourth Books of Maccabees.

I. Joseph the Patriarch

In the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, the story of Joseph contains a number of profound lessons, couched within a drama that has inspired writers from the Second Temple period down to Thomas Mann.

Family jealousies are shown in the rivalry between spouses of Jacob and a reaction to the favoritism shown toward Joseph, the lad whose

dreams provoked his half-brothers to threats of violence and a quick sale which reduced him to slavery in Egypt. Although God seemed to be silent, Joseph's faith and moral sensitivity were rewarded. He tested and then forgave his brothers: "The evil you planned to do against me has, by God's design, been turned to good that he might bring about, as indeed he has, the deliverance of a numerous people" (*Gen.* 50:20; see 45:5-8).

1. Joseph and Asenath¹

The book of Genesis records with tantalizing brevity that the Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife named Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On (41:45). They had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (41:50-52).

Jewish readers during the Second Temple period would wonder about the example set by the patriarch. Did he marry a Gentile? The novel about Joseph and Asenath (dated the period between 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.) resolves this problem by telling of her dramatic conversion.

The author portrays Joseph, now Pharaoh's favored servant, not only as a wise and righteous young man, but also as one who observes even the dietary laws of the Torah. When the Pharaoh's chosen representative Joseph meets the 18 year old Asenath, her father suggests that she treat him like a brother. As she goes up to kiss Joseph, he stops her: "It is not fitting for a man who worships God ...to kiss a strange woman who will bless with her mouth dead and dumb idols..." (8:5). Then, noticing her distress, Joseph asks God to bless her, to renew her spirit and number her among his people. This example of stern adherence to principles followed by a gesture of mercy was the beginning of her conversion. Not only does she reject the idolatry of her father, but she becomes a "city of refuge" for all converts to Judaism.

Pharaoh's son loves Asenath, but the Pharaoh wants to arrange marriage with a foreign princess. The jealous prince planned to kill Joseph so that he can marry Asenath. Simeon and Levi reject his offer of riches for murdering Joseph by explaining: "We are men who worship God and it does not befit us to repay evil for evil" (23:9). He then lies to the four sons of Leah's and Rachel's handmaidens: "I

heard Joseph your brother saying to Pharaoh my father... 'Children of my father's maid-servants are Dan and Gad, Naphtali and Asher, and they are not my brothers. I will wait for my father's death and I will blot them out from the earth...'" (24:8-9).

Their ambush of Asenath's chariot is foiled by Benjamin. The wicked brothers beg Asenath for mercy and she saves them from the wrath of Simeon and Levi. She exhorts them: "Do not do evil for evil to your neighbor. To the Lord will you give (the right) to punish the insult done by them" (28:14).

Thus Asenath shows that she has learned the lesson of forgiveness from Joseph at a more profound level than the sons of Jacob, who are beneficiaries of Joseph's kindness.

The Testament of Joseph²

On his death bed the patriarch Jacob calls his sons around him for a final message. This begins a tradition followed by Moses (*Deut.* 33), Tobit (4:2-21) and others. During the Second Temple period (perhaps in the second century B.C.E.) literature purporting to be the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs appears. Each develops an exhortation to virtue around the strengths or failings of the sons of Jacob.

The Testament of Joseph begins with a poetic review of the tragedies and triumphs of his life (1:2-7).

The Book of Genesis tells how Joseph is sold to an Egyptian officer in Pharaoh's service. This man's wife tries to tempt him to commit adultery. When he spurns her advances, she frames him and he is imprisoned.

The Testament of Joseph focuses on this temptation and expands the account of the woman's wiles. The temptations continue for seven years and take a variety of forms: threats and enticements followed by a request for instruction in God's Word (4:1-8).

She later says that she would kill her husband, so that Joseph could marry her, but Joseph threatens to reveal the crime. Next she spikes food with drugs, but God warns Joseph against them. She threatens suicide unless Joseph would acquiesce. He prays and replies: "Why, wretched woman, are you troubled and disturbed, blinded by sin?

Remember that if you kill yourself, Astheta, your husband's concubine, who is jealous of you, will beat your children..." (7:5).

Then the author refers to the story, recorded in Genesis 39:6-23, that she snatches his garment and claims that he had tried to rape her. A brief account of Joseph's imprisonment tells of his intense prayer. Joseph concludes this narrative by exhorting his listeners:

"So you see, my children, how great are the things that patience and prayer with fasting accomplish. If you, too, pursue self-control and purity with patience and prayer with fasting in humility of heart, the Lord will dwell among you, because He loves self-control" (10:1-2).

The virtues presented for imitation are patience in afflictions and purity. Self-control that is exercised in fasting, accompanied by constant prayer provide the two-fold basis for Joseph's rejection of temptation. The Jewish man during the Second Temple period, especially if he lived in the Diaspora, might find either attraction or enticement among foreign women. This was a great concern of Jewish teachers from the time of Ezra in the fourth century B.C.E. and onwards.

The second part of this Testament reflects on Joseph's virtue of piety and fraternal love. When he is sold by his brothers to the Ishmaelite traders, the youth claims to be a slave of their household so that he would not disgrace them (11:3). After recounting further details of his sufferings, Joseph concludes:

"So you see, my children, how many things I endured in order not to bring my brothers to disgrace. You, therefore, must love one another and in patient endurance conceal one another's failings. God is delighted by harmony among brothers and by the intention of a kind heart that takes pleasure in goodness" (17:1-3).

The Testament goes on to speak of Joseph's love and care of his brothers and their families, even after the death of the patriarch Jacob. "I did not exalt myself above them arrogantly because of my worldly position of glory, but I was among them as one of the least" (17:8).

This leads to another exhortation: "If you live in accord with the Lord's commands, God will exalt you with good things forever. And if anyone wishes to do you harm, you should pray for him, along with doing good, and you will be rescued by the Lord from every evil" (18:1-2).

The Testament of Benjamin continues the reflection on Joseph. "Now, my children, love the Lord God of heaven and earth; keep his commandments; *Pattern your life after the good and pious man Joseph...* Fear the Lord and love your neighbor. Even if the spirits of Beliar seek to derange you with all sorts of wicked oppression, they will not dominate you, any more than they dominated Joseph, my brother. How many men wanted to destroy him, yet God looked out for him!... Joseph also urged our father to pray for his brothers, that the Lord would not hold them accountable for their sin which they so wickedly committed against him" (3:1-6).

A number of times in these documents the ways in which Joseph forgives his older brothers is stressed. Forgiveness, that most difficult of virtues, is an aspect of love, and should reflect the divine forgiveness that is needed by all. The challenge to imitate God is presented in many ways throughout the Torah. "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2) is a direct command. Elsewhere the example of God is placed before the people of Israel, especially through the experience of Moses the second time he ascended Mount Sinai. The sacred Name revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14) is interpreted to mean the God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness...*forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...*" (Exod. 34:6-7). The story of Joseph presents this pattern of forgiveness in the drama of human existence.

II. The Martyrs during the Persecution of Antiochus IV

The drama of Israelite and Jewish history includes many periods of excruciating tests followed by vindication. One of these is celebrated each year in late November or December, the feast of Hanukkah. In an effort to unify the Seleucid empire, the emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes tried to impose the benefits of the Greek culture upon minorities within his domain. He reasoned that these peoples should speak Greek, enjoy a Greek education and worship in the Greek manner. He placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple of Jerusalem and demanded that Jews show allegiance first, by refraining from their own religious practices (such as circumcision) and secondly, by offer-

ing sacrifice to Greek deities. This demand was unacceptable to many Jews on both counts.

The Hasmonean family of Mattathias and his five sons led the revolt which was eventually successful. The Temple was restored to proper worship in the winter of 164 B.C.E.

The motif of teaching by example occurs in the Second and Fourth Books of Maccabees. Here spiritual resistance to persecution is given pride of place over the physical prowess and military genius of Judas Maccabeus and his followers.

The author of 2 Maccabees calls his work a condensation of a five-volume history by Jason of Cyrene (2:23). The work is structured after the Deuteronomic theology of history which divides Israel's story into a pattern of five stages:³

1. A time of divine blessing, during which the people are at peace (3:1-40).
2. A sin which introduces alienation and chaos into Israel (4:1-5:10).
3. Punishment by God, often using a foreign power as an instrument (5:11-6:17).
4. A turning point which involves divine forgiveness and Israel's conversion (6:18-8:4).
5. Judgment against Israel's enemies and salvation for the repentant people (8:5-15:36).

Thus, Second Maccabees shows that the Jews in the Land enjoyed peace during the reign of the good high priest, Onias. The great sin came when the usurpers of priestly leadership, Jason and then Menelaus, accepted Antiochus' program of Hellenization. After this, Antiochus sacked the Temple, which was understood as God's punishment for the priestly sin. The turning point in the drama was the death of martyrs, whose witness to God's commandments constituted vicarious atonement for the people's sins. Only then did Judas Maccabees begin the military revolt, that brought liberation for the Jewish people (8:3-4).

The author's theological interpretation is explicit just before he presents the witness of Eleazar and the mother with her seven sons. ... "These punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people... (The Lord) never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people" (6:12-17).

The first martyr is a ninety year old scribe named Eleazar. He is forced to submit to those carrying out Antiochus' orders. Greeks sacrificed pigs and the test of obedience was to eat this meat. Eleazar spat out the unclean flesh and went willingly to the rack of torture. The men offer to free him so that later he could bring his own meat and merely pretend to share in the sacrificial meal. He rejects simulation, "lest many of the young should suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year has gone over to an alien religion...for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they should be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age" (2 Macc. 6:24-25).

Eleazar first considers the onus which his age and role as teacher place upon him. Personal or selfish concerns should never take precedence over one's duty to the community and especially to the younger generation.

He continues by contrasting fear of men and awe before God. "For even if for the present I should avoid the punishment of men, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty" (6:26). All that happens through good or evil use of free will comes under divine scrutiny and judgment. The persecutors should recall this as well.

Finally, Eleazar declares that his death will "leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws" (6:27). Courage should be contagious, so his proof of fidelity under duress will uplift others facing the same or similar ordeals. Eleazar died with a profession of faith and acceptance (6:30). The author concludes the narrative with the remark that his death was "an example of nobility and a precedent of valor to be remembered not only by the young but by the multitudes of his nation" (6:31).

2 Maccabees chapter 7 narrates the trials and execution of a woman and her seven sons.⁴ There is no allusion to the witness of Eleazar in this account. From the testimony of these martyrs there is

great emphasis on their faith in the resurrection of the body. The second brother addresses King Antiochus: "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (7:9).

As in the Book of Daniel, this faith responds to the dilemma of persecution. The Torah was given so that the people could *live* by keeping its ordinances (Lev. 18:5). Here those faithful to God's law *die* while apostates are rewarded by the King. The prophets and Psalmists of ancient Israel insisted that life is defined as communion with the living God; this life, they reasoned, cannot be interrupted even by the death of one's body. By the Second Temple period, some Jews in the Holy Land professed faith in the resurrection, while those in the Greek-speaking countries stressed immortality of the soul. In both cases they emphasized that a righteous life is essential to a meaningful doctrine of immortality and resurrection. This point is expressed by the fourth brother. "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to *life*!" (7:14). Because God will judge everyone according to his or her deeds, the king is told: "Do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!" (7:19, see 7:34-38).

The first evidence of the great influence of these "Acts of the Martyrs" comes in the first century C.E. when a long discourse is dedicated to Eleazar, here designated as a priest, and the woman with seven sons. It has been called the Fourth Book of Maccabees, but is a philosophical rather than historical document.⁵ The author wants to prove that reason should control human passions and foster the four cardinal virtues, prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice (1:2-7, 18; 5:23). "By far the best example I could furnish is the heroism of those who died for virtue's sake, namely Eleazar and the seven brothers with their mother" (1:8). Throughout this work the link between Eleazar and the others is clear, whereas Second Maccabees presents two distinct episodes.

The speeches placed on Eleazar's lips are eloquent expressions of Jewish piety (5:14-38). The speech concerning good example (6:16-23) does not add any new points to that of Second Maccabees.

The dialogue of the brothers with the King points to the conduct of Eleazar. "You seek to terrify us with your threat of death by torture as if you had learned nothing from Eleazar but a short while ago. But if, for the sake of their religion and enduring through torments, old men of the Hebrews have remained faithful to the end, it is even more appropriate that we who are young should die in disregard of the tortures you impose on us, the very tortures our aged teacher triumphed over..." (9:5-6).

Thus Eleazar's fidelity has borne fruit, and this challenge to imitate him extends to the younger generation. In this account the first brother does not lose his tongue to the torturers. He cries out: "Imitate me, my brothers; do not become deserters in my trial nor forswear our brotherhood in nobility..." (9:23).

The surviving brothers "formed a holy choir of piety as they encouraged each other with the words: 'Let us die like brothers all, brothers, for the sake of the Law. Let us follow the example of the three youths in Assyria, who despised the same trial by ordeal in the furnace'" (13:9, see 16:3).

The author repeats the teaching of Second Maccabees (8:3) that the consecration of these martyrs led to the defeat of Israel's enemies and the purification of the Land, "since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation..." (4 Macc. 17:21-22).

We are still too close to the tragic events of the Nazi period in Europe to discern the full implications of those acts of martyrdom for the Jewish people and the Land of Israel today; however, both the example and prayers of the patriarchs and the martyrs resonate down through the centuries.

Notes

1. See the translation by C. Burchard in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) volume II pp. 177-247. Quotations are from this version.
2. See the translation of H.C. Kee in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (1983) volume I pp. 819-828. Quotations are from this version.
Studies on the Testament of Joseph, ed. George W.E. Nickelsburg, Jr., (Scholars Press, 1975) includes the essay of Walter Harrelson, "Patient love in the Testament of Joseph," pp. 27-35. The most complete investigation is by Harm W. Hollander, *Joseph as an Ethical Model in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981).
3. George W.E. Nickelsburg, Jr., *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) p. 118.
The most complete commentary is Jonathan Goldstein's *II Maccabees* (Anchor Bible). Garden City: Doubleday, 1983. The Revised Standard Version of the Apocrypha is used for quotations.
4. See Robert Doran, "The martyr: A synoptic view of the mother and her seven sons," *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms* ed. John J. Collins and George W.E. Nickelsburg (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1980) for talmudic and midrashic developments of this story. The reflections of the Alexandrian Jewish scholar have been studied by Thomas H. Tobin, "Tradition and interpretation in Philo's portrait of the Patriarch Joseph," *Seminar Papers: Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting 1986* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) pp. 271-277.
5. The translation of H. Anderson in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* volume II pp. 531-564 is used here.