

# Reading the Maccabean Literature by the Light of the Stake

## Anabaptist Appropriations in the Reformation Period

### Abstract

Considered authoritative and useful by the sixteenth century Anabaptists, 1 and 2 Maccabees played an important role in scripting the performance of defenseless resistance to their Protestant and Catholic persecutors. In particular, the defenseless resistance of Eleazar and of the woman and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 provided encouragement to sustain Anabaptists who were being tortured and executed in the name of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The performative reenactment of 1 and 2 Maccabees empowered 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptists as attested in the hymnody and martyrologies of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptism.



Antonio Ciseri's *Martyrdom of the Seven Maccabees* (1863)

### Anabaptists and the Apocrypha

Although the Anabaptists are often considered Protestants as representatives of the radical wing of the Reformation, their use and valuation of the Apocrypha had more in common with the mother church than it did with other Protestants. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists varied little in their positive assessment of the Apocrypha.<sup>2</sup> Most of the writings of Anabaptists throughout Europe quote the Apocrypha positively and appreciatively in the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, treating it as authoritative. Modern Anabaptist scholarship has expressed a varying amount of embarrassment about how much the sixteenth-century Anabaptists seemed to depend on the Apocrypha, or, depending on one's perspective, how little discernment they showed in distinguishing its authority from that of the rest of the Bible. For instance, John C. Wenger betrays embarrassment when he says, "Not all Anabaptists ... may have been entirely

<sup>1</sup> Thousands of Anabaptists were executed by Protestants and Catholics in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As Brad S. Gregory puts it, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the "Anabaptists' willingness to die met [the] authorities' willingness to kill; the result was Anabaptist martyrdom" ("Anabaptist Martyrdom: Imperatives, Experience, and Memorization" in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer; Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 469). According to Marilyn Peters, "about one-third of the 930 martyrs listed in the *Martyrs' Mirror* are women" (GAMEO, the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online at <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/W645ME.html#1989>, s.v. Anabaptist Women). See also *Women in Early Austrian Anabaptism: Their Days, Their Stories*, by Linda A. Huebert Hecht; Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The most thorough treatment of the Anabaptists' use of the Apocrypha of which I am aware is that by Jonathan R. Seiling, "Solae (Quae?) Scripturae: Anabaptists and the Apocrypha," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80 (January 2006): 5–34. I want to thank Lydia Nofziger, a graduate student assistant, who helped me with a working bibliography for this essay. I want also to thank Jonathan Seiling and Gerald Mast for constructive and helpful feedback to early drafts of this essay.

clear on the noncanonicity of the Apocryphal books.”<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, Wenger says, “Menno himself was of course not infallible.” To illustrate this point, he adds, “He sometimes quoted from the Apocryphal books as if they were inspired.”<sup>4</sup> In his treatment of “the Bible” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, Walter Klaassen says simply,

One final note. Anabaptists seem to have leaned to the Catholic definition of the biblical canon, for they quoted frequently from the Apocrypha without distinguishing them from the rest of the Scripture as Luther did.<sup>5</sup>

One would think that the Anabaptists’ use of the Apocrypha might warrant further discussion in a consideration of the Anabaptists’ use of the Bible. Klaassen’s short “final note” suggests either his perplexity or his embarrassment about this matter.<sup>6</sup>

To be fair, the record is mixed. Jonathan Seiling in his ground-breaking article on the Anabaptists and the Apocrypha admits of one exception to the broad Anabaptist acceptance of the Apocrypha, known in the trial of Jacques D’Auchy in 1558. Confronted with arguments about Purgatory, based in part on 2 Maccabees 12:43-45, D’Auchy denied that the authority of 2 Maccabees was equal to that of the rest of the Bible on the grounds that it was an apocryphal text. Seiling notes, however, that D’Auchy himself had just previously quoted the Wisdom of Solomon as scripturally authoritative. D’Auchy cites the Wisdom of Solomon elsewhere as well, along with Judith and Sirach.<sup>7</sup> Seiling suggests that D’Auchy rejected the Apocrypha only when it was being used “as a basis for a rule or ordinance—the practice of sayings prayers to the dead.”<sup>8</sup> D’Auchy himself “did not explicitly reject them as a basis for ‘Christian teaching.’”<sup>9</sup> Seiling probably goes too far when he says that “D’Auchy is the sole exception in the written sources of an Anabaptist who denigrates the Apocrypha,”<sup>10</sup> since Adam Pastor represents an-

---

<sup>3</sup> John C. Wenger, *Separated Unto God* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1951), x, cited in Seiling, “Solae (Quae?) Scripturae,” 7.

<sup>4</sup> Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), vii.

<sup>5</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981), 142.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Mast has pointed out in personal correspondence with me that the second article in the Dordrecht Confession on the “fall of man” has a reference 4 Esdras 3:7. He says, “Curiously, this reference is missing in most twentieth century English language versions of the Dordrecht Confession, including in Funk’s minister’s manual, Loewen’s collection of Mennonite confessions, and the recent Stoll translation in the new Amish catechism manual: *In Meiner Jugend*. It is included in the version of Dordrecht found in the English translation of the *Martyrs Mirror* published by Funk, in Koop’s collection of confessions, and in Irvin Horst’s translation of the Dordrecht Confession. When we look at German language versions, it is missing from the 1907 *Christenpflicht* ... and from the 1745 Ephrata edition of *Guldene Äpfel*. However, ... it is present in Gross’s translation of *Guldene Äpfel*, which was made from the 1702 European German edition.” He adds, “A more systematic examination of the absence/presence of the reference 4 Esdras 3:7 in the publishing history of the confession would be helpful.”

<sup>7</sup> See Seiling, “Solae (Quae?) Scripturae,” 8n10.

<sup>8</sup> Seiling, “Solae (Quae?) Scripturae,” 8.

<sup>9</sup> Seiling, “Solae (Quae?) Scripturae,” 8.

<sup>10</sup> Seiling, “Solae (Quae?) Scripturae,” 8. This statement should be qualified by the recognition that one hesitates to count Karlstadt an Anabaptist. Karlstadt did denigrate at least some of the books in the Apocrypha. Others he treated as canonical—as “holy Scripture”—though at a tertiary level. See further on this below. Adam Pastor also represents an exception, since he claims that although it is permissible to quote the Apocrypha, it “has far less value than the canon” (quoted in Alastair Hamilton, *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras [4 Ezra] from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999], 132). Hamilton is apparently quoting Adam Pastor, *Underscheit tussen rechte leer, unde valsche leer*; Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica,

other exception. But Seiling rightly criticizes the article in *Mennonite Encyclopedia* on the Apocrypha, written by Harold S. Bender and Nanne van der Zijpp, for citing D'Auchy's comments as *illustrative* of the Anabaptists' rejection of the equal authority of the Apocrypha, since the preponderance of evidence clearly shows otherwise.

That arguments for the existence of Purgatory often drew on 2 Maccabees 12:38-46 did prove problematic for some Anabaptists—not because they were drawn into debates with Catholics on this point, but because they were drawn into debates with Protestants who objected to their valuing of the Apocrypha. It was because of the potential of 2 Maccabees to support this doctrine that Jakob Würben objected in 1528 to Ludwig Hätzer's plan to translate the Apocrypha into the vernacular, even though Würben appreciated Hätzer's translations otherwise.<sup>11</sup> (Seiling points out that no Anabaptist sources cite 2 Maccabees 12.)<sup>12</sup>

In 1969 Eldon T. Yoder and Monroe D. Hochstetler compiled a 400-page index of *Biblical References in Anabaptist Writings*.<sup>13</sup> Taking into account only a few of the Dutch sources, it references the biblical citations in the writings of Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, and in the *Martyrs' Mirror*.<sup>14</sup> If one takes into account the relative length of the respective parts of the biblical canon, these Dutch Anabaptist sources cite the Apocrypha about two-thirds as often as they cite the rest of the Old Testament, while they cite the New Testament 11 times as often as they do the (39-book Protestant) Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> The great preponderance of citations of the New Testament in comparison to the Old reflects the fact that most of the Anabaptists stood near the one end of the continuity/discontinuity spectrum regarding the value and authority of the Old Testament in its relationship to the New Testament. What is remarkable here is not that the citations of the Apocrypha are fewer than those of the rest of the Old Testament, but that there are as many as there are, given the Apocrypha's status among most Protestants.

Beginning in 1534, editions of Luther's translation contained a note that the apocryphal books "are not to be esteemed like the Holy Scriptures, ... yet [they] are useful and good to read."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, no Bible with the Old Testament that was printed in the vernacular on the European continent prior to 1599 omitted the Apocrypha. Furthermore, the Froschauer Bible of Zürich that was so popular among the Swiss Anabaptists did not separate the Apocrypha into one section, as some of the other Protestant Bibles did. But because the authority of

---

ed. S. Cramer and F. Pijper, 10 vols. (The Hague, 1903-1914), 5:516. See also Alastair Hamilton, "The Apocryphal Apocalypse: 2 Esdras and the Anabaptist Movement," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 68 (1988): 1-16, esp. 13-14. Despite these exceptions, Hamilton says, "Nevertheless, a preference for the apocrypha remains a salient feature of the Anabaptist movement as a whole and was duly remarked upon by Protestant opponents" (*The Apocryphal Apocalypse*, 132).

<sup>11</sup> See "Jakob Würben of Biel: A Thoughtful Admonisher against Ludwig Hätzer and the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46/3 (July 1972): 239-255; see esp. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Seiling, "Solae (Quae?) Scripturae," 22.

<sup>13</sup> This book was published by Pathway Publishers of Aylmer, Ontario, and Lagrange, Indiana.

<sup>14</sup> Menno Simons and Dirk Philips are cited in both English and German editions. The English and German editions differ surprisingly (for both authors) in their citation of Scripture.

<sup>15</sup> Yoder and Hochstetler's references to the Old Testament comprise 90 pages; the Apocrypha, 15; and the New Testament, 294.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985-1993), 3:98. Luther himself valued 1 and 2 Maccabees differently. In his introduction to 2 Maccabees, Luther writes, "Just as it is proper for the first book to be included among the sacred Scriptures, so it is proper that this second book should be thrown out, even though it contains some good things" (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960], 35:353).

the Apocrypha was contested by the magisterial reformers, the Council of Trent found it necessary to reaffirm the authority of *some* of the apocryphal books in 1546.

Jonathan Seiling claims that the Anabaptists' "persistent use" of the Apocrypha was due to three factors, namely:

- (1) certain passages from apocryphal texts provided written authority for the doctrine of free will, a theological issue which distinguished Anabaptists from magisterial reformers; (2) the Apocrypha contained numerous texts that were read for their high "ethical content and value"; and (3) the general differences between the way Anabaptists and magisterial reformers viewed authority of Scripture.

The primary alternative Seiling sees to this is that its use was "an unintentional carryover from the late medieval era."<sup>17</sup> I agree with Seiling on his assessment of the first two points. However, he may underestimate the power of the simple fact that the Apocrypha was included in all of the Bibles that were available to them. The King James Bible of 1611 also included the Apocrypha, even though the Puritans vigorously opposed it. According to Paul D. Wegner, "The Apocrypha continued to be fairly consistently / included [in the King James Version] until about 1826 when, *primarily for financial reasons*, the British and Foreign Bible Society omitted it."<sup>18</sup>

In his delightful book on the reception history of 2 Esdras (4 Ezra), Alastair Hamilton dedicates one 28-page chapter to the Anabaptist reception of 4 Ezra.<sup>19</sup> Along the way, he asks, "What was it that induced so many men in the wide spectrum of Anabaptism to take such a strong interest in the apocrypha in general and to show a particular preference for 2 Esdras?"<sup>20</sup> He notes that Pieter Jansz Twisck, a particularly conservative Old Frisian historian, "appears to have had a particular preference for the books of Sirach and 1 and 2 Maccabees."<sup>21</sup>

Near the end of his article, Jonathan Seiling concludes that

the Anabaptists considered the Apocrypha to be of equal authority as the rest of Scripture. Not only did these writings remain in use for devotional practice, but they also provided support for several doctrinal concerns, most importantly, that of free will. In contrast to the magisterial reformers, who generally held to a newly reformed canon of Scripture and denied that the Apocrypha could be used to support doctrine, the Anabaptists were closer to late medieval Catholic understandings. ... Anabaptists ... used the apocryphal books as scriptural guides to live in faith, obedience and piety.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Seiling, "Solae (Quae?) Scripturae," 9. Certainly George Huntston Williams considers this to be the case: "It is ... understandable that a popular movement such as the Radical Reformation, drawing on several streams of late medieval piety, should continue to make use of the little books of the Apocrypha. This tendency is particularly noteworthy among the Anabaptists of all persuasions." See his discussion of the Anabaptists and the Apocrypha in *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 818–819; the quotation is from p. 819.

<sup>18</sup> *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, by Paul D. Wegner (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 310–311, *emphasis mine*.

<sup>19</sup> *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras (4 Ezra) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, by Alastair Hamilton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). See chap. 5, "The Radical Solution: The Anabaptists," pp. 115–142.

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, *Apocryphal Apocalypse*, 117. Why Hamilton is interested only in the male Anabaptists is not clear to me, especially since we know the stories of hundreds of Anabaptist women who were martyred.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, *Apocryphal Apocalypse*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Seiling, "Solae (Quae?) Scripturae," 30. Seiling's emphasis on Sirach as the important apocryphal book to Anabaptists for "doctrinal concerns" is well-taken. The Maccabean literature was largely unimportant when it comes to "doctrinal concerns." However, the Maccabean literature was far more important than Sirach when it comes to informing and encouraging the performance of defenseless resistance in the face of martyrdom.

How, when, and why the various heirs of the Anabaptist movement eventually let go of the Apocrypha, Seiling does not address in his article. Alastair Hamilton offers some clues about this in his treatment of the reception history of 2 Esdras among the Anabaptists. Despite the extensive appeals to the Apocrypha recorded in *Martyrs Mirror*, “the Mennonite propensity to use the apocrypha diminished perceptively at the end of the seventeenth century.”<sup>23</sup> Why? Hamilton suggests that three factors contributed to the loss of popularity the Apocrypha enjoyed among the Anabaptists.

The most significant of these was the persistent criticisms of the Anabaptist acceptance of the Apocrypha leveled by Protestant interlocutors. Hamilton cites several of these. A second factor was the gradual assimilation of Mennonites, with the result that the Mennonites were beginning to occupy an honorable place in Dutch society.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the Dutch Mennonites presumably no longer were drawn to the distinctive ethical message of the Apocrypha or to the apocalyptic thought reflected in 2 Esdras. A possible third factor is that catechisms and confessions seemed increasingly interested in defining the canon, in forcing a binary understanding of the issue in service to systematization.

In personal correspondence, Seiling has offered two more reasons: (1) the switch from German to English among some Anabaptists groups contributed to the dropping of the Apocrypha, since it was not as regularly included in English; and (2) Bible societies around the world exerted a strong influence toward the elimination of the Apocrypha.

## The Maccabean Literature

### 1 and 2 Maccabees

By my count, there are at least 41 references to 1 and 2 Maccabees in the *Martyrs’ Mirror*.<sup>25</sup> More than half of these are to 2 Maccabees 6 and 7, the chapters that most directly advocate for the performance of active nonviolent resistance<sup>26</sup> to evil—a performance that is expected to result in persecution, suffering, and even death, given the great power imbalances of the time.

Elsewhere I have examined Daniel and 1 and 2 Maccabees as examples of resistance literature from the late Second Temple Period.<sup>27</sup> As such, they share some theological perspectives, while they differ on others as they variously engage in the construction of self-identities as the people of God and the strategies of resistance appropriate to those identity constructions. For instance, they agree that the overt Hellenizing pressure being exerted by Antiochus IV Epi-

---

<sup>23</sup> Hamilton, *Apocryphal Apocalypse*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> This assimilation is chronicled in *From Martyr to Muppy (Mennonite Urban Professionals): A Historical Introduction to Cultural Assimilation Processes of a Religious Minority in the Netherlands: The Mennonites*, ed. Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra, and Piet Visser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> [I need to examine some of these further. I also need to check how and where *Het Offer* cites the Maccabean literature.]

<sup>26</sup> At several points in this essay I refer to “active nonviolent resistance.” This language resonates more among Anabaptists of the last 50 years than it would have in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where *defenselessness* would have been more common. I would maintain, however, that the performance of the Anabaptists in times of persecution was precisely active (rather than passive), nonviolent (rather than violent, for the most part), and resistant (rather than compliant).

<sup>27</sup> “Identity and Resistance: The Varieties of Competing Models in Early Judaism,” in *Qumran Studies: New Approaches, New Questions*, ed. Michael Thomas Davis and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 254–277.

phanes represented a crisis for the true believers of God within Judaism. The answer to this pressure, they urge, is active resistance. Not all Palestinian Jews of the second century shared this perspective. First Maccabees in particular bears witness to the existence of many Jews who denied that Antiochus's Hellenizing program was a crisis at all; rather, it was an opportunity to appreciate and learn from the wider world's wisdom.<sup>28</sup>

Daniel differs from the Maccabees in that it advocates an active *nonviolent* resistance, while the Maccabean books advocate an active resistance that may or may not be violent. When conditions are favorable for violent action, it is clear that they see such action as not only appropriate, but also praiseworthy. In contrast, Daniel's political ethic calls for a nonviolent resistance—a resistance that is nevertheless courageous and active.<sup>29</sup>

In his commentary on Daniel in the Believers Church Bible Commentary, Paul M. Lederach calls attention to the Anabaptists' knowledge and use of the Maccabean literature at several points. He says, "Early Anabaptists knew the books of the Maccabees and were impressed with how the Jews endured persecution and martyrdom in the days of Antiochus IV."<sup>30</sup>

According to Brad S. Gregory, "From its outset, Menno's ministry was marked with a martyrological sensibility, long before [the famous Dutch martyrology] *The Sacrifice unto the Lord* [i.e., *Het Offer des Heerens*] and the song collections of the 1550s and 1560s."<sup>31</sup> In his tract on "True Christian Faith" (1541), Menno Simons cites "the pious and aged Eleazar ... and the God-fearing, / virtuous mother with her seven sons" (2 Macc 6–7) as examples of those who had a healthy respect for the righteous wrath of God and the "need to flee from all unrighteousness."<sup>32</sup> "They considered it preferable to endure for a season the wrath and fury of tyrants than to sin and so provoke the eternal anger and wrath of God."<sup>33</sup> Later, in "Cross of the Saints" (1554), he cites them again as examples of those who willingly bore the cross. This "narrative from the Old Testament" explains

why the venerable, pious, old scribe Eleazar and his worthy, pious wife [*! yes, he actually said that*] with their seven sons were so inhumanly and barbarously treated by the terrible godless wolf of a man, Antiochus, and were tortured, roasted, killed, and murdered.<sup>34</sup>

Other Anabaptists wrote similarly. In March 1541, Wouter van Stoelwijck was burned at the stake after spending more than three years in prison. He had written an anti-Nicodemite treatise entitled, *A Comforting Admonition and Very Pleasant Instruction on the Suffering and Glory of Christians*, in which he condemned the hypocrisy of half-hearted Christians who fled the cross

---

<sup>28</sup> The relationship between Judaism and Hellenism was more complex than what one might infer from these two exaggerated options. See *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* by Lee I. Levine (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> For my argument that the kind of nonviolent resistance valued and advocated by Daniel should be called "active," see pp. 261–268 of the essay cited above. In a similar vein, Gerald Biesecker-Mast says that "the *Martyrs Mirror* does not really provide justification for Mennonite quietism." See "'Bloody Theater' and Christian Discipleship," by Gerald J. Biesecker-Mast, *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 62/4 (October 2001): 1–10; the quotation from p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Paul M. Lederach, *Daniel*; Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1994), 269; see also pp. 145 and 176–177.

<sup>31</sup> "Nachfolge Christi: Anabaptists and Martyrdom," chap. 6 in *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, by Brad S. Gregory (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 197–249; the quotation is from p. 220.

<sup>32</sup> *Complete Writings*, 336.

<sup>33</sup> *Complete Writings*, 337.

<sup>34</sup> *Complete Writings*, 591.



by avoiding persecution. He lifts up Eleazar and the Maccabees as examples of “true saints and servants of God, who would rather suffer death than break God’s commandment.”<sup>35</sup>

### 3 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees

Some of the Bibles published in the vernacular on the European continent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century included 3 Maccabees. Yoder and Hochstetler cite two references in the *Martyrs’ Mirror* to 3 Maccabees—both of them to 2:34.<sup>36</sup> The reference is to standing firm in one’s faithfulness, even in the face of strong opposition, and more particularly, to the importance of separating from those who do not share the commitment to defenseless resistance.

Third Maccabees is cited along with 1 and 2 Maccabees in the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, while 3 Maccabees 1 is cited under the topic “Steadfastness, Confession and Courage of the Faithful” in the “Guide to Holy Scripture,” which was included in most printed editions of the *Biblical Concordance* after 1567.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes one reads that 3 Maccabees has “nothing to do” with 1 and 2 Maccabees, since it treats events that occurred at least a generation earlier, with the Ptolemies providing the source of crisis rather than the Seleucids. But there are also remarkable parallels in terms of a foreign power introducing pressure to compromise one’s religious convictions and practices. More importantly, they share a rhetorical strategy of encouraging faithful resistance. Third Maccabees 1 is important for its advocacy of resistance in the midst of a difference of opinion about whether that resistance should be violent or nonviolent (see esp. 1:23).

This same “Guide” lists 3 Maccabees 6 as evidence of “angels in general,” along with about 50 other Scriptures, including Tobit 5, 10; Judith 13; Baruch 6 [i.e., the Letter of Jeremiah]; and 2 Maccabees 11. In 3 Maccabees 6, two angels respond to the Jews’ cries of anguish just as wild animals were unleashed on them. “Visible to all but the Jews” (3:18), these angels turned the animals back against the attackers, leading the Ptolemaic king to repent and to release the Jews. It seems likely to me that the reference to 3 Maccabees 6 is intended to support the existence of angels, rather than to suggest that Anabaptists might hope for miraculous deliverance from mortal persecution.

Treated as more authoritative by the Eastern churches, than the Western ones,<sup>38</sup> I am not aware of any evidence that suggests that Anabaptists knew about or used 4 Maccabees. It is a bit hard to assess this, however, since 4 Maccabees represents in part an expansion of 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 for a different purpose, and since 4 Maccabees circulated in the Middle Ages as

---

<sup>35</sup> Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 221. See also “Prescribing and Describing Martyrdom: Menno’s *Troestelijke Vermaninge* and *Het Offer Des Heeren*,” by Brad S. Gregory, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71/4 (October 1997): 603–613, esp. pp. 605–606.

<sup>36</sup> Since I cannot find a 3 Macc 2:34, I presume the reference should be to 3 Macc 2:33.

<sup>37</sup> “Bibliographical Introduction,” by Joe A. Springer, in *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss brethren, 1540*, trans. Gilbert Fast and Galen A. Peters, int. by Joe A. Springer, ed. C. Arnold Snyder; Anabaptist Texts in Translation (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2001), xxix.

<sup>38</sup> I hesitate to use words like *canonical* and *noncanonical* here because they so binary. There is precious little conversation in the Anabaptist literature about what is “in” and what is “out” (Karlstadt and Hätzer being potential exceptions). So far as I am aware, the same is true of the Eastern churches, which nevertheless include 4 Maccabees in an appendix rather than in part of the Bible proper. As Jonathan Seiling puts it, “Although leaders within the Radical Reformation debated fiercely over the relationship of the ‘letter and spirit,’ there appears to be a near absence of discussion by Anabaptists regarding which specific Scriptures constituted the biblical canon, or the ‘canon within the canon’” (Seiling, “Solae [Quae?] Scripturae,” 12).

Passio SS. Machabaeorum<sup>39</sup> and/or as a writing of Josephus.<sup>40</sup> Thoroughly Hellenistic in its rhetorical strategy, 4 Maccabees is a “philosophical treatise” on the superiority of reason, understood as the ability to resist and rise above both the threat and reality of physical torture and martyrdom—actively and nonviolently. The irony is that the thought structure and rhetoric of 4 Maccabees is thoroughly Hellenistic, even as it praises active resistance against what was, historically speaking,<sup>41</sup> the theological and practical challenges confronted in the incursion of Hellenism!<sup>42</sup>

## Anabaptist Literature

### The Ausbund

Two of the sources that provide access to the early Anabaptists’ theology and piety with regard to martyrdom are the *Ausbund* and the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer say that “together, books like the *Ausbund*, the *Concordance*, and the *Golden Apples*<sup>43</sup> formed a corpus of Swiss Brethren devotional literature that reinforced a distinctive group identity and theological worldview.”<sup>44</sup>

The *Ausbund* is the oldest Anabaptist hymnal and has been in continuous use for nearly 450 years. It is still being used today by the Amish in worship, for many of whom it remains the *only* hymnal used.<sup>45</sup> The earliest known edition was published in 1564. Several of the authors of its hymns were early Anabaptist martyrs, such as Jörg Blaurock, Felix Manz, and Michael Sattler. The *Ausbund* consists of 16<sup>th</sup>-century hymns gathered around a collection written by prisoners in Passau.<sup>46</sup> Forged in the fires of persecution, many of the songs treat suffering and even martyrdom in some way. Song 4 in the *Ausbund* consists of 15 long verses that tell the stories of the martyrdoms of Eleazar as well as those of the mother and her seven sons from 2 Maccabees 6 and 7.<sup>47</sup> Like the Maccabean accounts themselves, the song tells how their tongues were cut out and their skin was ripped off their heads, and it praises the steadfastness of these faithful

---

<sup>39</sup> We know that Erasmus was familiar with it.

<sup>40</sup> See *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, by Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski (Iceland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), a reception history of the Maccabean literature from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>41</sup> I say “historically speaking” here because 4 Maccabees probably dates from the first half of the first century CE, which represents a two-century remove from the events of the Maccabean rebels in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (see “4 Maccabees,” in *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance*, David A. deSilva (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 352–379; esp. p. 356).

<sup>42</sup> DeSilva emphasizes the thoroughly Hellenistic character of 4 Maccabees, although he does not note the irony.

<sup>43</sup> **Worth a look!**

<sup>44</sup> “Marpeck and the Later Swiss Brethren,” by John D. Roth in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, 347–388; the quotation is from 372.

<sup>45</sup> “Ausbund,” *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites*, by Donald B. Kraybill (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 2010), 20.

<sup>46</sup> “Anabaptist Religious Literature and Hymnody,” by John D. Rempel in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, ed. Roth and Stayer, 389–424; see esp. 401–402.

<sup>47</sup> For an English translation, see “Song 4” in *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1: *History and Translations of Ausbund Hymns* (Millersburg, Oh.: Ohio Amish Library, 1998), 43–50. In reference to this song, Ernest A. Payne complains that the *Ausbund* “shows an unhealthy preoccupation, or even obsession, with the theme of martyrdom, [though] the fault for this lies not with the victims but with the persecutors” (*The Anabaptists of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and Their Influence on the Modern World* [London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1949], 13).



people. For nearly 450 years, Anabaptists have been singing this story, reenacting the Maccabean encouragement to faithful resistance.

Other hymnbooks kept alive the story of the woman and her seven sons from 2 Maccabees 7. For instance, *Die Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder* (the songbook of the Hutterite community) includes songs about more than a dozen biblical women, including the unnamed mother from 2 Maccabees.<sup>48</sup> According to Ethelbert Stauffer,

The story of the ... death of the mother with the seven sons [appears] in the great Hutterite hymnal in rhymed form ... while the great martyrs' list of 1 Maccabees 2:49ff. finds a poetic redaction in Kaspar Braitmichel's hymn, *Merkt auf, herzliche Brüder mein*, with the concluding formula lifted verbatim from the text (1 Macc 2:61, in stanza 10).<sup>49</sup>

## The Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540

Second only to the *Ausbund* for the sheer number of editions published in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*. According to the bibliographical introduction by Joe A. Springer, this concordance was printed for more than 150 years and appeared in at least 14 German-language editions and one Dutch-language edition.<sup>50</sup> This topical concordance is organized by 66 different topics on all sorts of theological and practical issues, from "Fear of God" to "Child Rearing." In many cases the biblical texts are quoted verbatim from one of the German translations circulating;<sup>51</sup> in others, only the references are provided.

The ninth and tenth topics listed are "Persecution" and "Be Not Afraid." In the middle of the section on persecution is a group of references to the Apocrypha. Cited in full are 2 Esdras 16:70-78; Judith 8:21-27; and Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-6. Also mentioned but not cited in full are 1 Maccabees 1-2; 2 Maccabees 6-7; and 3 Maccabees.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the Maccabean literature, Matthew 2, 4, and 8 are mentioned, while Matthew 5:3-12 and 10:16-26 are cited in full. Clearly the biblical stories about the resistance and martyrdom of Eleazar and of the mother and her seven sons were considered important for properly understanding persecution and more importantly, for properly performing defenseless resistance to martyrdom. The fact that these stories were not cited in full does not necessarily suggest that they were not considered as important or as crucial as the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount or in sending out the disciples "as sheep among wolves."<sup>53</sup> Matthew 10:28-31 is cited in full in the section "Be Not Afraid." Also mentioned is 1 Maccabees 2-4. In the section is entitled, "Do Not Depend on the

---

<sup>48</sup> See *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht; *Studies in Women and Religion*, no. 3 (Waterloo, Ont.: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1996), 226.

<sup>49</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," trans. Robert Friedemann, in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19/3 (1945): 179-214; the quotation is from p. 188. This English translation was originally published as "Taufertum und Märtyrertheologie," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 52 (1933): 545-598.

<sup>50</sup> *Biblical Concordance*, xxiii.

<sup>51</sup> According to Joe Springer, the verbatim quotations suggest that the editions of the Bible used for this concordance were primarily Zürich editions from 1524-1531; *Biblical Concordance*, xxvi.

<sup>52</sup> *Biblical Concordance*, 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> According to Joe Springer, "it appears that the verses considered the most significant ones speaking to a topic were copied verbatim; the verses considered less relevant were simply listed by book and chapter references," *Biblical Concordance*, p. x. Two other possibilities worth considering are that: (1) the references to 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees encompass five long chapters, which may have been thought simply too much to cite in full; and (2) the stories about the martyrdom of Eleazar and of the seven sons with their mother may have been so familiar that a mere citation of 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 was considered sufficient.

Great Crowd,” roughly half of the Scriptures cited in full are from the Apocrypha (2 Esdras 8:1-4; Judith 9:11; and Sirach 16:1-11).<sup>54</sup>

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the catechetical and formational impact of this concordance on the Anabaptists was significant. As a guide to the Bible for biblicists, it may be the most important theological production of the 16<sup>th</sup> century for Anabaptists if measured by its practical and catechetical influence. But it was not just a way to order or organize biblical teachings; it was a guide to the performance of Christians under pressure to defend their beliefs and actions—a script for how to converse with others theologically. As Tim Chesterton puts it, “This topical concordance is not a leisurely document for people who want to study erudite theology; it is a Christian survival guide for a persecuted people, and it helped them become a Bible people and a praying people.”<sup>55</sup> In short, it was a guide to the performance of being a Christian.

## The Confessions<sup>56</sup>

According to William Estep, there are more than two thousand references to the canonical Scriptures in the Riedemann Confession of Faith. Of these, some forty-eight are citations of the Apocrypha,<sup>57</sup> though none of them are to the Maccabean literature. The Maccabean literature does not figure prominently in the Anabaptist confessions of faith. This may be because the Maccabean literature was more important for the Anabaptists’ performance of resistance to persecution than it was for structuring their belief systems.

The Frisian “Thirty-Three Articles of 1617,” otherwise known as “Confession of Faith According to God’s Word,”<sup>58</sup> cites, as scriptural warrant, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, 2 Esdras, 2 Maccabees, and 3 Maccabees, along with the 66 books of what became the standard Protestant canon. This confession was drafted by what Karl Koop calls “one of the most conservative Mennonite groups of the early seventeenth century.”<sup>59</sup> Although Koop claims that “the difference in authority between the canonical books of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha is explicitly recognized”<sup>60</sup> in it, the confession itself cites as authoritative “the New Testament” and “the canonical books of the Old Testament,”<sup>61</sup> leaving it up to the reader to know and recognize what is “canonical.”<sup>62</sup>

It is easy to read 3 Maccabees as supportive of a sectarian mentality. It tells the story about how conscientious separation from compromisers can be offensive to those so-called

---

<sup>54</sup> *Biblical Concordance*, 61–62.

<sup>55</sup> “Sabbatical Report #11: Disciples Who Pray and Sing,” by Tim Chesterton, posted on June 5, 2007, accessed at <https://tchesterton.wordpress.com/2007/06/05/sabbatical-report-11-disciples-who-pray-and-sing/> on November 13, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> See also fn. 6 above, regarding the Dordrecht Confession.

<sup>57</sup> W. R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 195.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop; Classics of the Radical Reformation (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2006), 165.

<sup>59</sup> Koop, *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition*, 165.

<sup>60</sup> Karl Koop, *Early Seventeenth Century Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of an Anabaptist Tradition* (Toronto: University of St. Michael’s College, Ph.D. diss., 1999), 153.

<sup>61</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, “A Short Confession of Faith by Hans de Ries,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38/1 (January 1964): 5–19; citation from 17.

<sup>62</sup> The Fourth Session of the Council of Trent explicitly included 1 and 2 Maccabees on 8 Apr 1546, according to *The Council of Trent, The Fourth Session: The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 18. At this same Council, 3 Maccabees was deemed “apocryphal” and thus not canonical. Fourth Maccabees is not mentioned.

compromisers. This word was considered particularly relevant for the Old Frisians who were advocating separation from the new Flemish arrivals seeking refuge in Friesland. The Old Frisians were offended by cultural and theological differences with the Flemish. In response, Hans de Ries and others were counseling broad-minded acceptance and peace—something the Old Frisians rejected as unfaithful compromise, appealing to 3 Maccabees for support.

### The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror<sup>63</sup>

Among the analyses of the *Martyrs' Mirror*, those that pursue its political rhetoric through performance criticism seem the most promising to me.<sup>64</sup> Gerald Biesecker-Mast sees the *Martyrs' Mirror*, which he reminds us is technically entitled the *Bloody Theater*, is well-positioned to call the reader to a “radical Christian discipleship of performance.”<sup>65</sup> This performative discipleship is an exercise in “alterity politics” rather than “identity politics.” It

is characterized by consciousness of audience, attending to the response of the Other to the acts of the disciple, without simply acceding to conventional wisdom or the status quo. ... [It focuses] less on abstract ideals that are unachievable and more on the concrete actions that are called forth by the neighbor.”<sup>66</sup>

Ben Myers focuses on the “resistant performances” of the martyrs whose stories van Braght recounts. But beyond the martyrs’ own resistant performances, Braght’s own “act of collecting and recounting was itself a subversive act that offered the opportunity for Anabaptist martyrs’ performances to unleash their subversive potential.”<sup>67</sup> How this worked in the immediate context of life in the relatively comfortable and tranquil mid- to late 17<sup>th</sup>-century Mennonite existence in Holland, Myers does not say.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, performance studies scholars have an obligation to ensure that certain performances matter—specifically those like van Braght’s *Martyrs Mirror* that “provide agency to the victims of abusive power.”<sup>69</sup>

In the 1659 preface to his large book of martyrs, Thieleman Jansz van Braght names a long string of martyrs whose stories populate the Bible, including Onias, the high priest

---

<sup>63</sup> Although the book later came to be called simply *The Martyrs' Mirror*, the original title in Dutch was *Het Bloedig Tooneel der Doops-Gesinde, en Weereloose Christenen. die/om het getuygenisse Jesu hares Salighmaeckers/geleden hebben/en gedoodt zijn/van Christi tijdt af/tot dese onse laetste tijden toe. Mitsgaders, Een beschrijvinge der H. Doops, ende andere stucken van den Godsdienst, door alle de selve geoeffent. Begrepen in Twee Boecken. Zijnde een vergrootinge van den voorgaenden Martelaers-Spiegel, uyt vele geloofweerdige Chronijcken/Memorien/Getuygenissen/etc.* See GAMEO, the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online at <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M37858ME.html>, s.v. *Martyrs' Mirror*. A better thumbnail designation for the first edition of the work might be *Bloody Theater of the Baptism-Minded and Defenseless Christians* (as Brad S. Gregory has it in “Anabaptist Martyrdom,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, ed. Roth and Stayer, 467–506).

<sup>64</sup> Among those of which I am aware are “‘Bloody Theater’ and Christian Discipleship,” by Gerald J. Biesecker-Mast; *The Purple Crown: The Politics of Martyrdom*, by Tripp York; Polyglossia: Radical Reformation Theologies (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2007); and “The Stage and the Stake: 16<sup>th</sup> Century Anabaptist Martyrdom as Resistance to Violent Spectacle,” by W. Benjamin Myers, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5/3 (September 2009): 1–17.

<sup>65</sup> “‘Bloody Theater’ and Christian Discipleship,” 5.

<sup>66</sup> “‘Bloody Theater’ and Christian Discipleship,” 5.

<sup>67</sup> Myers, “The Stage and the Stake,” 2.

<sup>68</sup> One wonders too how different mid- to late-17<sup>th</sup> century Mennonite life was in the Netherlands in comparison to the “difficult” church situation John D. Roth attempts to address in his article, “The Significance of the Martyr Story for Contemporary Anabaptists,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 37/2 (Spring 1992): 97–106. See especially his section, “The Difficulty of the Topic,” pp. 98–99.

<sup>69</sup> Myers, “The Stage and the Stake,” 16.

(2 Macc 3:1-2; 4:1, 34) and the two women in 2 Maccabees 6:10 who were seized for having circumcised their boy babies and who were hurled to their death along with their babies from the top of the city's walls.<sup>70</sup> He names also those who were discovered in caves, hiding because they wanted to keep the Sabbath, and who were burned to death (2 Macc 6:10). Of course, he names also Eleazar as well as the mother with her seven sons who were tortured and finally killed for refusing to defy the Law of Moses (2 Macc 6:27-31; 7).

This last mentioned class, from Abel to the Maccabees, are the true army of God and the heroes of the old covenant who, for the honor of God and the law of their fathers, did not spare their lives. These the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews has in view when he speaks of the great cloud of witnesses, who, looking through faith for the fulfillment of the promises of God and the coming of the Son of God, in the flesh endured all sufferings, conflicts, and, at least, death, bravely and with an undismayed heart.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, van Braght adds, “the whole volume of holy Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, seems to be almost exclusively, a book of martyrs.”<sup>72</sup>

In this regard it is interesting to recall the suggestion of William R. Farmer in 1982 that persecution actually functioned as an important criterion for the canonizing of the New Testament, which he calls a “martyrs’ canon” of Scripture. In dealing with the influence of Irenaeus on the canonization of the New Testament, he says, “That the reality of Christian martyrdom in the early church and the selection of Christian writings for the New Testament stand in some vital relationship to one another is as certain as anything that can be conjectured on this complex historical question.”<sup>73</sup>

Although the first published edition of the *Martyrs Mirror* dates to 1660, it depends upon and draws from earlier Anabaptist martyrologies, most significantly *Het Offer des Heeren* (Sacrifice of the Lord), which first appeared around 100 years earlier, when Anabaptists were still being martyred in the Netherlands.<sup>74</sup> *Het Offer* itself appeared within a generation of the first Anabaptist martyrdoms in the Netherlands and was inspired by the theology and writings of Menno Simons.<sup>75</sup> By the time van Braght lived and wrote, martyrdom was a distant memory for the Mennonite churches in the Netherlands; van Braght himself wrote from a position of relative comfort and privilege.<sup>76</sup>

Already in 1530 Melchior Hoffman was invoking the example of the Maccabean martyrs in his exposition of the book of Revelation in a way that shows that his readers already knew the story. In his comments on Revelation 14:7a, “Fear God and give him the glory,” he connects

---

<sup>70</sup> Van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror, of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, from the Time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660, Compiled from Various Authentic Chronicles, Memorials, and Testimonies*, by Thieleman J. van Braght, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1949), 13.

<sup>71</sup> Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Jesus and the Gospel: Tradition, Scripture, and Canon*, by William R. Farmer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 221. See also *The Formation of the New Testament Canon: An Ecumenical Approach*, by William R. Farmer; *Theological Inquiries: Studies in Contemporary Biblical and Theological Problems* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983). See esp. pp. 39–41 in the latter. I thank Willard M. Swartley for calling Farmer’s observations to my attention.

<sup>74</sup> For other Anabaptist martyrologies that predate the *Martyrs’ Mirror*, see “A History of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*,” by Gerald Studer, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22 (July 1948): 163–179.

<sup>75</sup> See “Prescribing and Describing Martyrdom,” by Brad S. Gregory.

<sup>76</sup> On this, see Brad S. Gregory, “Anabaptist Martyrdom,” 468. See also “Jan Luyken, the *Martyrs Mirror*, and the Iconography of Suffering,” by Sarah Covington, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85 (July 2011): 441–476.

Revelation with Matthew 10:28-31, where Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body, but who cannot kill the soul.” Fearing God and not fearing those who kill the body is exactly what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did. It is what Daniel himself did, and Susanna.

One also reads in 2 Macc 6[18-31], [that because] the old scribe [Eleazar] did not want to bring offense, nor would he fear Antiochus more than God, he let himself be killed. Similarly, in [2 Macc] 7, there was the mother with seven sons, who let themselves be martyred and tormented unto death with great pains, even though they wanted to carry on in the fear of God, rather than eat pork against God’s Law and command.<sup>77</sup>

Chronicling history was seldom high on the list of motivations for compiling a martyrology. The fact that hymns were included with martyrologies testifies to their persuasive/performative function. That hymns were included in such martyrologies as *Het Offer des Heeren* and that martyrdom was a frequent theme in hymnbooks like the *Ausbund* even blurred the categories somewhat.<sup>78</sup> In any case, martyrology and hymnody walked hand-in-hand in 16<sup>th</sup>- and early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptism, even as the actual production of martyr songs rapidly tailed off in the 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>79</sup> As with the author of 2 Maccabees 7 and the author of 4 Maccabees, van Braght did not shy from narrating the goriest of details in describing the tortures and executions of the faithful. According to Gerald Studer, the *Martyrs Mirror* recounts the burnings of thousands of people—along with “numerous stonings, crucifixions, imprisonments, decapitations, brandings, severed tongues, ears, hands, feet, etc., gouged eyes, rackings, burials alive, suffocations, whippings, and so on,”<sup>80</sup> not to mention drownings.

In his study of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*, C. J. Dyck notes that “from the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Sirach, the Maccabees and Esdras were favorites [among the martyrs who quoted Scripture], especially 2 Esdras with its reference to the fate of the ungodly.”<sup>81</sup>

## The Problem with Either/Or Categories

One of the problems we encounter when considering the influence of the Maccabean literature among the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century is that of the categories themselves. North Americans in the West are used to thinking of “canon” in binary terms: either a book is canonical or it is not; either it is “inspired by God” or it is not. However, the Roman Catholic Church was often successful in avoiding this either/or binary with regard to the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha is “deutero-canonical,” meaning variously at different times either “a second” canon, with the same full authority, or a canon with secondary authority.

Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt did not think in such binary categories.<sup>82</sup> Karlstadt divided the Scriptures into at least three different categories, from the most authoritative to the

---

<sup>77</sup> *Prophezey oder Weissagung uss warer heiliger götlicher Schrift: Von allen Wundern und Zeichen bis zu der Zukunft Christi Jesu unsers Heilands an dem jüngsten Tag und der Welt end*, 1530, fol#A4r, on Rev 14:7a. Translation by Jonathan Seiling.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. the 1570 edition of *Het Offer des Heeren*. See also “A History of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*,” Studer, 167–168.

<sup>79</sup> See “The Anabaptist Martyr Ballad,” by Victor G. Doerksen, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51/1 (January 1977): 5–21; and “The Martyr Songs of the Hutterite Brethren,” by Ursula Lieseberg, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 67/3 (July 1993): 323–336. Cf. also “*Elisabeth’s Manly Courage: Testimonials and Songs of Martyred Anabaptist Women in the Low Countries*,” ed. and trans. Hermina Joldersma and Louis Grijp (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University, 2001).

<sup>80</sup> “A History of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*,” Studer, 171.

<sup>81</sup> “The Suffering Church in Anabaptism,” by C. J. Dyck, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 59/1 (January 1985): 5–23; the quotation is from p. 13.



least. Included in the third category—still Scripture, but at a tertiary level—are 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, the Five Scrolls (i.e., Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations), Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation—and some of the books of the Apocrypha.

The Apocryphal books he divides into two categories: (1) those that remain in the third category of (canonical) Holy Scripture; and (2) those that he said were not worth reading and should be thrown out. In the first of these categories he includes Wisdom, Sirach, Judith, Tobit, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. Among those that are not worth reading and should be banned are 1 and 2 Esdras, Baruch, the Prayer of Manasseh, and the Additions to Daniel. Ludwig Hätzer was offended at Karlstadt's dicing up of the levels of authority of the biblical text in this way and defended specifically the Scriptural authority of the Apocrypha.

## Conclusion

This essay has concentrated on the Anabaptist “use” of the Maccabean literature, apprehended by way of citations in printed documents. But it is no accident that in his celebrated essay, “The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom,” originally published in 1933, Ethelbert Stauffer introduces the discussion with a reference to the events of the Maccabean crisis of the early second century BCE and the examples of Eleazar and of the mother with the seven sons. In Stauffer's perspective, a “theology of martyrdom” lay at the core of Anabaptist theology. It is its “theology of history.” He says that “Balthasar Hubmaier ... coined the most concise formulation of the basic idea of the ‘Theology of Martyrdom’ in his motto, *Die Wahrheit ist untödtlich* [Truth cannot be killed]—the very essence of his *Taufbüchlein* of 1525.”<sup>83</sup>

Robert Friedmann isn't so sure. In response to Stauffer he says,

At this place a word of caution might be appropriate. Although the basic theology of the Anabaptists seems to have centered around this idea of the two aeons (the “City of God” vs. the “City of the Devil”), it would yet be erroneous to assume that the Anabaptists were radical believers in apocalypses, such as adventists or millennialists. Nothing is further from their thought. They almost never speculated about “the end” (with perhaps the exception / of Melchior Hoffman, and to some extent Hans Hut).<sup>84</sup>

Later, in his *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation*, Friedmann is bolder. Again in direct response to Stauffer, Friedmann says,

But is the term ‘theology’ valid for this phenomenon [a church of martyrs]? Was the martyr-mindedness a ‘theological’ aspect or was it not rather a practical one which had its roots in the radicalism of the Anabaptist stand in a world of gross intolerance form which there was next to no escape?<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> In this paragraph and the paragraph that follows, I am depending heavily on the scholarship of Jonathan Seiling in “Solae (Quae?) Scripturae,” 12–22.

<sup>83</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, “The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom,” 184.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Friedmann, “Martyrdom, Theology of,” in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, ed. Harold S. Bender (Scottsdale, Pa.: 1957), 3:519–521; the quotation is from p. 520–521. (Note that Friedmann himself translated Stauffer's article into English for the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.) I suspect that Friedman and Bender's rejection of the importance of apocalyptic thought for 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists was due to their caution about what they considered millennialist extremism in their own day.

<sup>85</sup> *The Theology of Anabaptism*, by Robert Friedmann; Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 15 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973).



By implication, if not explicit claim, Friedmann is saying that the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom was really no theology at all, but rather a pragmatic response to difficult circumstances. While Friedmann may have been right in questioning the term “theology of martyrdom,” Stauffer was right in seeing something essentially eschatological—even apocalyptic—in the Anabaptists’ understanding of how God works in history and in viewing that theology as central to Anabaptist thought. It is what empowered that strange combination of faithful *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness)<sup>86</sup> and active defenseless resistance that characterized the Anabaptist martyr stories.

In conclusion, we might ask whether martyrdom itself really a good thing, a virtue to be sought? Some feminist scholars consider any “theology of martyrdom” essentially an “ideology of death” that occasionally betrays a thinly veiled desire for the death of *women* in particular. Sensitivity on this point is valuable. The scriptural admonitions addressed to slaves and women (e.g., in 1 Peter) to endure unjust and terrifying situations patiently have, in the history of the church, all too easily and commonly been used to justify violence against women and even to glorify suffering, with the result that the submissive victim is held up as a model for women!

Certainly to praise death and suffering for their own sakes is both wrong and dangerous. History has known too many examples of powerful men praising suffering and death in order to keep the powerless in their place and to support the power structures of the status quo. The praise and blessing of martyrdom that we see in 1 and 2 Maccabees and in the *Martyrs’ Mirror* have integrity only if and when the rhetorical force of these stories destabilizes unjust structures of power by giving courage to the powerless. The key to discernment on this matter is recognizing whether the rhetoric at work operates from a position of power or from the underside of history and the underside of power.

Where power dynamics are favorable, it could be argued that creative engagement might well be a better strategy than resistance in an ecumenical or inter-faith environment. But important questions remain: When van Braght introduced into an increasingly stable and comfortable Dutch context a massive volume advocating the performance of faithful nonviolent resistance to persecution, what effect did that have on ecumenical relations with his neighbors? Was the Maccabean literature praising martyrdom written in a similar environment? Is the praise of martyrdom performances a helpful word for people today who enjoy the privileges of wealth, power, and status?

Perhaps in the end we cannot do much better than the final sentence in C. J. Dyck’s article on “The Suffering Church in Anabaptism”: “Reading martyrologies can both strengthen and trouble the human spirit.”<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Stauffer suggests that the attitude of *Gelassenheit* “may be traced far back to the ideals of the chassidic martyrs in the times of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (c. 175 BCE)”; see “The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom,” 212.

<sup>87</sup> P. 23.