

Who Is the Valiant Woman in the Book of Maccabees

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2 July AD 2015



After the death of Alexander the Great, his generals divided his empire into regional sections. Soon, the holy land of Judaea was controlled by a dynasty of kings known as the Seleucids. There were good kings and bad kings in the Seleucid dynasty. King Antiochus Epiphenes IV was a bad king. At first, he “spoke peaceable words to [the Jews] and they believed him” (1 Maccabees 1:30). But later, the emboldened king marched into Palestine and “murdered many people of Israel.” The tyrant “took captive of the women and children,” looted the holy temple itself, and defiled the sanctuary.

Equality for All

Judaea at the time was comprised of rival socio-political cultures: one was Hellenism, which was the mindset that it was best to assimilate into pagan Greek culture, and the other was Judaism, the determination to hold fast to the beliefs and practices of the Jewish ancestors.

Unfortunately, strangers find it difficult to live in proximity, and the root cause is original sin, which is written in the human heart. People are suspicious of people they don't understand. They make impulsive judgments. They envy one another's things. They gossip about those who seem different. They demonize opposing cliques. Minor character faults come to be seen as aggressions, and things tend to escalate too quickly. The king felt he had to do something.

Antiochus tried an experiment that failed to address the root cause of original sin. He wondered, “could people be forced to get along by a mere edict of government?” Maybe so. He declared that there was to be a unified kingdom. There were to be no differences between people. Just a single way of life. To accomplish this, he decreed that “all Jews should give up their particular customs.” They were forced to consume pork so as not to make their neighbors uneasy, to refrain from circumcising their sons, and to profane the Sabbath.

In other words, all public behavior was to be moderated by force of law. Religious ideas would be consigned to the province of subjectivity. But we all know that dictators can never stop at the prohibition of public behavior. Tyrants lie awake at night seething that people are thinking things that upset them. Thus it came to pass that by order of the king, the Jews were compelled to “forget the Torah and change all of the commandments.”

“Whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die” (1 Maccabees, 1:49-50).

So there was conflict. Several courageous Jews resisted the decrees, and their stories are the subject matter of the books of Maccabees 1 & 2. The two historical books relate the same saga from different perspectives. I must warn you: the stories are told in graphic detail. For example, two women who were caught having their sons circumcised were stripped and paraded around the city with their babies at their breasts. After the humiliating march, the women and children were pushed to their deaths from a high wall (2 Maccabees 6:10). Jewish men and women were accosted on the streets and force fed pork and other forbidden food. Anyone who refused to chew and swallow was tortured and killed. Some Jews fled to the caves to secretly observe the now illegal Sabbath. Those who were discovered were burned alive (2 Maccabees 6:11).

The Mysterious Mother and her Seven Sons

Suddenly in 2 Maccabees chapter 7, there comes a mysterious, bittersweet story of strength and consolation, where the writer describes the fate of seven brothers and their mother, who were taken by the king himself to be tortured and killed after they refused to eat the forbidden swine’s flesh. The vignette begins from the perspective of the sons.

The young men, one by one, told the king defiantly that they would rather die than recant their faith. They spoke in Hebrew, the “language of their ancestors.” The oldest boy was killed first, his tongue cut out, his head scalped, his hands and feet cut off. Then, before his mother’s eyes he is burned slowly to death. The second, third, and all the other brothers followed likewise without cowering. They taunted the king. “With his last breath [the son] exclaimed, ‘Cruel brute, you may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up, since we die for his laws, to live again for ever’” (2 Maccabees 7:9).

Where did this boy get the idea of the resurrection of the body? This is the Old Testament. The Jews did not believe in the resurrection. Something very profound is happening in this chapter. Read on.

The writer then pauses, rewinds, and re-tells the details of the torture, this time from the perspective of the mother. The mother, he notes, “was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory.” This is important.

We learn that it was the mother herself who was the source of each young man’s strength. She gave them words to speak. As each boy was being murdered, she *stood next to him* whispering consolations. She spoke gently in Hebrew, the language of their ancestors:

I do not know how you appeared in my womb; it was not I who endowed you with breath and life, I had not the shaping of your every part.

And hence, the Creator of the world, who made everyone and ordained the origin of all things, will in his mercy give you back breath and life, since for the sake of his laws you have no concern for yourselves.

I implore you, my child, look at the earth and sky and everything in them, and consider how God made them out of what did not exist, and that human beings come into being in the same way.

Do not fear this executioner, but prove yourself worthy of your brothers and accept death, so that I may receive you back with them in the day of mercy.

We are told the king fell into a rage, first because he did not understand the Hebrew being spoken, and second, he because was frustrated at the equanimity of the boys and the boundless confidence of their mother who prayed with each one of them at the hour of their death.

Who is this Valiant Woman?

The valiant woman of 2 Maccabees is a foreshadowing of the Blessed Mother who prays for us at the hour of our death. I use the phrase “valiant woman” to call attention to the history of this venerable phrase in Church history. The phrase *mulier fortis* in the Latin Vulgate comes from the Book of Proverbs 31:10-31 where the writer asks, “Who shall find a valiant woman?” This venerable title has been applied to the Blessed Mother and consequently to the Church ever since the time of the early Church Fathers.

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, for example, “Under the figure of the valiant woman we can see Mary, the mother of divine wisdom, or the Church, the mother of the wise, or the soul, which is where wisdom resides.”

As a figure of the Blessed Mother, what insight can we glean from this valiant woman in Maccabees about religious persecution around the world today? It seems significant to me that this valiant woman spoke in Hebrew. She knows that the faith of our childhood soothes us and gives us courage to withstand difficulty. In the face of mind-boggling change and uncertainty, she wants us to return to the faith of our ancestors. Come back to the Church, she says. Attend Mass, read the Bible. Study your catechism. Go to Confession. Pray the Rosary.

Then, I notice that in comforting her sons, she focused not on minutiae but on the highest, most general truth. She tells us to reflect not on our immediate pains, giving them inordinate focus, but to keep our eyes on the ultimate order of things. The valiant mother didn't condemn Hellenism or the Greeks. She went higher because she knew the patent disorder of Hellenism was just a symptom of a larger disorder, a warped and corrupted view of the world and our place in it. She simply *told the truth* about life and eternity. Today she might ask us to listen to the sounds of nature, to study the wonders of science in the light of faith, from the foot of the Cross. Contemplate the God who brought this out of nothing, and who will return you to his bosom in eternity.

Finally, notice the final words of the valiant mother to her sons. She urges her sons to have courage so that she may see them once again after death "in the day of mercy." This valiant woman, this figure of the Blessed Mother, taught divine mercy in the heart of the Old Testament just as she teaches it today.