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The Apologetics of Faith. The Attitude of the Maccabees towards Hellenism

Viorel-Cristian POPA

Viorel-Cristian POPA
University of Oradea
Email: vios77@yahoo.com

Abstract

Our study is an incursion into the period of Hellenization of the Jews, presenting the Seleucid persecutions and the fight of the Maccabees to defend the faith, to restore the cult and to obtain Judaic independence. The first part present the early introduction of Hellenism among the Jews under the rule of Alexander the Great, during which the process was peacefully, and Alexander's attitude towards the Jews during his passage through Judea (Jerusalem). The second part present the attempts to impose Hellenism forcefully, during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid, and his harsh provisions against the Jews who refused Hellenization. The third part present the Maccabean struggle for the defense of Judaic monotheism, the restoration of the sacred worship and of the Jewish independence. Finally, there will be an update in the sense that the attitude of Maccabees should be an example for modern Christians.

Keywords:

Hellenization, Maccabean, confession, martyrdom, defense of faith

I. Introduction

Amongst the cultures that the Greeks influenced during their great expansion one can identify the Jewish culture. This influence is called *Hellenism*. Hence, this term defines the Greek cultural, religious, social, political and economic influences that were exercised upon Europe and Near East, starting especially with the 4th century.

Regarding the Hellenic influence upon the Jewish, we must remark the fact that until the second half of the 4th century BC, the life of the Jewish state developed according to the paths assigned by the scribes, peaceful and with few notable events. The inhabitants of Judaea followed impersonally the fights between Persians and Egyptians, which took place, temporarily, at the border of the country, without participating in any manner. This situation lasted until 332 BC when Alexander the Great¹, king of Macedonia (336-323 BC) united under his command the entire Asia Minor, Phoenicia and Syria, thus founding a huge empire. Hence, all over that territory a new cultural current started to spread, known under the name of *Hellenism*, which will also penetrate into the Jewish community. From now on Judaea will no longer stand passive, as it did under the Persian domination, but it will become more and more involved into the general political events of the time². The main historical event that marked the political life of the Jewish, after the fall of the Persian Empire, was the Greek-Macedonian expansion and its domination in the Ancient Orient.

¹ Alexander of Macedonia was highly educated. He was taught with the Iliad by Homer, under the careful eye of Aristotle, and thus he had a profound admiration for the Hellenistic ideals and traditions. Merrill C. TENNEY, *Privire de ansamblu asupra Noului Testament*, BEE Internațional, Cluj-Napoca, 1998, p. 13. In 334 BC the courageous Macedonian crossed Hellespont and into Asia Minor and defeated the Persians in the battle from Granicus, then Issus, which brought the entire Asia Minor under his rule. Max I. DIMONT, *Evreii, Dumnezeu și istoria*, Editura Hasefer, București, 1997, p. 87; Andrei OTETEA, *Istoria lumii în date*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, București, 1992, p. 29. After he crushed Syria and Egypt, he then directed towards East and defeated the Persian army for good at Arbela. In a quick succession of victories, he occupied Babylon and the capitals of Persia, Susa and Persepolis. M. TENNEY, *Privire de ansamblu...*, p. 13. Besides the thought of conquering and creating a huge empire, Alexander's purpose was to spread the Greek language and civilization into all the territories that he conquered. Alexander PAT, *Enciclopedia Bibliei*, Editura Logos, Cluj-Napoca, 1996, p. 298.

² Athanase NEOIȚĂ, *Istoria religiei Vechiului Testament*, Editura Sophia, București, 2006, p. 159.

II. Alexander the Great and Judaea

The Hellenization of the Orient was considerably accelerated by the campaigns of Alexander the Great³. The young king of Macedonia unfolded a Panhellenic expedition in 336 BC in order to free the Greeks from Asia Minor. This action led unexpectedly to the fall of the Persian Empire. The Jewish glided under Greek authority.

The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius describes the visit of Alexander the Great to Jerusalem, during his march to Egypt, in 332 BC. The high priest was trembling with fear and concern regarding the manner in which he had to receive the Macedonians⁴. He advised the people to bring sacrifices to God and to pray for their salvation from dangers. In a dream, God tells the high priest to receive Alexander with the gates of the city decorated and wide open. The people were to wear white clothes and he himself was to wear the traditional clothes for feasts. Taking God's advice, the next day, when the Macedonian was close to the city, he went out of the fortress to greet him. Dressed in clothes completely different from what he had seen at other people, the high priest stood before his people dressed in white. The Phoenicians and Chaldeans that accompanied the king were convinced that they will be allowed to despoil the city and kill the high priest. Their expectations were disappointed.

“When he saw from afar the multitude of white clothes, the clergy in white tunicae of expensive linen and the High Priest, who wore a cloak in the colour of flag, decorated with gold, wearing on his head the golden tiara, where the name of the Lord was engraved, Alexander advanced alone, venerated the divine name and firstly saluted the High Priest. After all the Judeans in one voice welcomed Alexander and surrounded him, the kings of Syria and the other officers remained in mute amazement, thinking that their sovereign had completely lost his mind. Parmenion was the only one who went to ask him how could he who was venerated by the entire world, venerate the High Priest”⁵.

³ M. TENNEY, *Privire de ansamblu...*, 13.

⁴ Not long before he had refused Alexander's request to bow before him and join him against Darius the Persian, based on the fact that he had vowed the latter that he will never raise his arms against him. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichități iudaice II, Cărțile XI-XX*, Editura Hasefer, București, 2003, pp. 51-53.

⁵ Alfred HĂRLĂOANU, *Istoria Universală a poporului evreu*, Editura Zarkony, București, 1992, p. 205.

Alexander's answer became famous:

“It is not him that I venerated, but God, Who dressed him with his supreme priestly clothing. Him, wearing the same clothes, I saw in one of my dreams I had when I was in Dios, in Macedonia, and I was already thinking of a method to subdue Asia, the Lord being the one who advised me not to linger, but to start my way trustfully. He Himslef will walk before my armies and will entrust me the kingdom of Persians. Since I have never met someone with a similar clothing, as soon as I saw him, I remembered that dream and its prophecy. Now I am convinced that I started this expedition on a divine commandment, that I will defeat Darius, crushing the Persian power and that I will achieve all my plans!”⁶.

After this answer, together with the High Priest, Alexander entered Jerusalem, went to the temple and, on the indication of the High Priest, he sacrificed to the Lord. This is how the great Macedonian considered appropriate to respect an old religion and a glorious culture⁷. Alexander confirms to the Jewish the right to live according to their ancestral laws, and a tax exemption every seven years⁸. The High Priest showed Alexander the prophetic book of Daniel in which it is mentioned the fact that a Greek will crush the power of the Persians⁹. It is the moment when Alexander identifies himself with that Greek.

Besides the ambition to found a great Greek empire, the Macedonian wanted very badly to spread the Greek culture all over the world, to Hellenize the provinces conquered. His subjects would speak Greek and would act like Greeks. The indoctrination method was simple, but effective. Here force was out of the question. In order for the Greek culture

⁶ A. HĂRLĂOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 205.

⁷ As a sign of appreciation and gratitude for the tolerance towards the Jewish, it was decided that the name Alexander become part of the Jewish list of names. A. HĂRLĂOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 205.

⁸ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichitățile iudaice II*, p. 54; In order to win the Orient for the Greek civilization, Alexander the Great manifested his respect for the customs and the cult of the peoples he conquered, avoiding any oppressive measures. A. HĂRLĂOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 205.

⁹ Josephus Flavius refers here to Nebuchadnezzar's dream, presented by Prophet Daniel in his book (Daniel 18, 21), *Antichitățile iudaice II*, p. 55.

to become a way of life in the conquered territories, Alexander encouraged the companions, the dignitaries and the soldiers to marry Oriental women and to have lots of children, and he offered his own example to this respect¹⁰. He also started to teach Greek to 30 thousand Persians¹¹.

In 323, when he was only 32, ill because of malaria, Alexander the Macedonian died in Babylon, without having designated a successor. He managed to Hellenize most of the Orient, but the Orient also Orientalized him to a certain extent¹².

After the death of Alexander, the huge empire that he created entered a civil war through its Diadochi or its generals, each of whom claimed supremacy. After having tearing each other for almost forty years (323-281 BC), the generals divided the empire between them. The Biblical study and the approach of our theme is interested in the Ptolemaic Egypt and in the Seleucid Syria. The Seleucid from Syria and the Ptolemaic from Egypt fought each other for almost 150 years and these wars and rivalries have kept Judaea in the position of a bumper or between hammer and anvil. The Sharon plain, on the coast of the Mediterranean was a corridor through which the armies of these two powers passed. The changing fate of the battle put Judaea sometimes under the rule of the Ptolemaic dynasty and sometimes under the domination of the Seleucids¹³. Prophet Daniel refers to this situation in his book. In a prophetic manner, Daniel describes in detail the constant war between these two powers: "The king of the South¹⁴ will become strong, but one of his commanders¹⁵ will become even stronger than he and will rule his own kingdom with great power" (Daniel 11, 5).

Judaea conquered by Alexander the Great was included in the province Hollow Syria or Coele-Syria. In 333 BC, Ptolemy defeats Antigonus¹⁶ and adds the South of Syria or Coele-Syria, which means also Judaea, to Egypt.

¹⁰ Adelina PIATKOWSKI, *O istorie a Greciei antice*, Editura Albatros, București, 1988, pp. 318-319; Paul LAWRENCE, *Atlas de istorie biblică*, Editura Cartea Cărții, Oradea, 2007; M. I. DIMONT, *Evreii...*, p. 87.

¹¹ M. TENNEY, *Privire de ansamblu...*, p. 14.

¹² P. LAWRENCE, *Atlas de istorie biblică*, p. 119; A. PIATKOWSKI, *O istorie a Greciei antice*, pp. 318-319.

¹³ M. TENNEY, *Privire de ansamblu...*, p. 14; P. LAWRENCE, *Atlas de istorie biblică*, p. 119; A. HĂRLĂOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 210.

¹⁴ Ptolemy I Soter (the Savior) of Egypt, founder of the dynasty of Lagids.

¹⁵ Seleucus I Nicator (the Winner) of Syria, founder of the Syrian dynasty of Seleucids.

¹⁶ One of the officers of Alexander the Great, who received Asia when the Empire was divided. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichități iudaice II*, p. 61.

III. A real phenomenon of secularization. The Ptolemaic and Seleucid attempts to Hellenize the Jewish

Ptolemy I had a favourable attitude towards the Jewish. The fundamental nature of the Jewish community remained unchanged. In the Ptolemaic epoch, the High Priest of the Jewish concentrated in his person both the political and spiritual authority¹⁷. He not only had to deal with the administrative difficulties and the spiritual matters, but he also had to resist the offensive of the Hellenic culture, that had penetrated into the country. The jobs were no longer occupied by competence but they were bought by the potentates of the time¹⁸.

The spread of the Jewish into the diaspora, gave them the opportunity to come into contact with the Greek life. Impressed by the wonderful aspect of the Greek art, they were drawn naturally by the new understanding of life that was offered to them. Still ignoring the Greek philosophy, the Jewish admired with growing enthusiasm the way of the Greek life, they imitated it and, passionate, like all the other Orientals, they came to love it to self-abandonment. From the Judean gardens and vineyards one could hear songs and hymns dedicated to Bacchus. This opened a serious breach into Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of Judaism¹⁹. This Hellenistic infiltration was slow and gradual, but continuous, so that in the very first half of the 2nd century BC it gained a serious party amongst the Jewish, whilst in Alexandria it lent to the Judaism there a completely different aspect from the one traditional in the Holy Land.

Contrary to the diplomatic actions of Hellenization carried on by Alexander the Great and the moderate ones belonging to the Ptolemaics, the Seleucids, especially through Antioch IV Epiphanes, moved on to a forced Hellenization of the Jewish. Judaea passed from an Egyptian rule under the Syrian one. In 203 BC, Antioch III the Great, defeating the Egyptians, the pro-Antioch determined Judaea to submit willingly. This party of the Hellenists, whose members belonged to the rich Jewish, proved to be very filthy: they give up to the Jewish faith and tradition and adopt the Greek customs and lifestyle in order to obtain the trust of

¹⁷ Raymond E. BROWN, S. S. Joseph A. FITZMEYER, S. J. Roland E. MURPHY, *Introducere și comentariu la Sfânta Scriptură*, vol. I, traducere și editare în limba română de Dumitru Groșan, Editura Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu-Lăpuș, 2005, p. 427.

¹⁸ Moșe MAUR, *Istoria Israelului*, Editura Aion, Oradea, 2000, p. 82.

¹⁹ A. NĒGOIȚĂ, *Istoria religiei...*, p. 160.

the Syrian government. A gymnasium was built south from Akra fortress after a Greek model. The priests left the altars to take part to the athletic contests. A high priest, Jason, sent three hundred drachms for the feasts presented in the honor of Hercules from Tyr. The noblemen thought that the time has come when everybody must be Graecized. An interesting part was the changing of names. Joshua becomes Jason, Eliachim becomes Alchinus, and Menahem becomes Menelaus²⁰. As a reaction against the Hellenists the party of Hasidics was formed. Although it is hard to believe, even the clergy had representatives in both parties. Onias, the High Priest, took the part of Hasidism, while his brother Joshua, who had taken a Greek name that of Jason, was the leader of the Jewish Hellenists.

After Antioch III the Great and Seleucus IV, who put heavy taxes on the Jewish²¹, Antioch IV Epiphanes came to throne. The Greeks gave him the nickname Epiphanes (God Manifest). Others named him Epimanes (The Man One), and the Jewish called him Harasha (the wicked) for they suffered a lot because of him. This extravagant tyrant, who had passed from stoics to Epicureanism, from a distinguished attitude to a vulgar cynicism, deserved his nickname resulted from a word game. Under the pretext that he unified the states that were part of his kingdom, he threw himself with all his power over the Palestinian nest. The faithful Jewish considered him the human that tears apart, the wicked man in purple, the ruthless²². He initiated and issued laws that were meant to abolish the Jewish religion and culture.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes wanted to Hellenize the Jewish from Judaea by force, which agitated the spirits. The masses opposed the reforms proposed and introduced by the noblemen. Those who were assimilated, and who wanted to impose their point of view, called Antioch to bring peace into the country. He responded positively to their request, he chased away the High Priest Onias III and placed his brother instead, Joshua, who immediately took a Greek name and became Jason Antiochenes. In supererogation he even gave the name Antioch to Jerusalem, which caused a violent crisis. The High Priest Jason was a key character in the process of Hellenization of the Jewish. Everything that the Ptolemaic and Seleucid authorities did not succeed to do in over 125 years, Jason did in twelve

²⁰ A. NEGOIȚĂ, *Istoria religiei...*, p. 161.

²¹ A. HĂRLĂOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 212.

²² Daniel ROPS, *Histoire Sainte, le peuple de la Bible*, Paris, 1943, p. 323.

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months. The gates of the Temple were open for pagan rituals; the Jewish priests, dressed in Greek clothes, officiated Hellenic rituals, and in the yard of the Temple there were real spectacles to which Jewish young men participated naked, practicing Greek sports²³.

Since he was stopped by the Romans to attack Egypt, Antiochus directed himself furiously towards Jerusalem, towards the Temple to be precise, the heart of Jahwism. In 168 he entered the Holy of Holies and took the thesaurus that was here, the chandeliers and the golden altar. Thousands of pious Jewish were killed. The walls surrounding Jerusalem were demolished.

Josephus Flavius presents in detail the atrocities committed by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his soldiers in Jerusalem. To rob the money and all the other gifts that adorned the sanctuary, the Seleucid king even betrayed the agreement signed with his supporters.

“So he left the temple bare, and took away the golden candlesticks, and the golden altar [of incense], and table [of shew-bread], and the altar [of burnt-offering]; and did not abstain from even the veils, which were made of fine linen and scarlet. He also emptied it of its secret treasures, and left nothing at all remaining; and by this means cast the Jews into great lamentation, for he forbade them to offer those daily sacrifices which they used to offer to God, according to the law. And when he had pillaged the whole city, some of the inhabitants he slew, and some he carried captive, together with their wives and children He also burnt down the finest buildings; and when he had overthrown the city walls, he built a citadel in the lower part of the city.... And when the king had built an idol altar upon God’s altar, he slew swine upon it, and so offered a sacrifice neither according to the law, nor the Jewish religious worship in that country. He also compelled them to forsake the worship which they paid their own God, and to adore those whom he took to be gods; and made them build temples, and raise idol altars in every city and village, and offer swine upon them every day. He also commanded them not to circumcise their sons, and threatened to punish any that

²³ M.I. DIMONT, *Evreii...*, pp. 91-92.

should be found to have transgressed his injunction. He also appointed overseers, who should compel them to do what he commanded”²⁴.

Those who did not obey found their death in terrifying tortures. They were racked almost to death and then they were crucified. The tortures to which the Jewish were subjected were horrendous. Two women who dared to secretly circumcise their babies were punished severely. The babies were hanged by the breasts of their mothers and they were thus walked through the city, and then they were thrown from the wall of the city and they died. Those who hid in caves to celebrate Sabbath were burned alive. They did not defend since it was the Holy day of Sabbath²⁵ (II Maccabees 6,10-11). Those who had sacred writings or scrolls containing the law were executed as villains and the writings were burned²⁶. During these cruel acts, many of the Jewish gave up, either willingly or out of fear. The diabolical tyrant wanted to deracinate the Jewish culture and faith in order to eradicate all the differences between the Greek and the Jewish.

Close to the Temple an impressive fortress was built, which dominated the temple and was named Akra. This fortress was guarded by a powerful Macedonian garrison. Many of the Jewish villains who had caused a lot of sufferance to their fellows became part of this garrison²⁷.

An unconceivable event for the Jewish happened on the 15th of December 167 when in the temple of Yahweh was set up that “abomination” prophesized by Daniel, meaning the statue of Zeus from Olympus, built undoubtedly with the features of Antiochus himself. The cruel king then proceeded to forbid the readings from Torah, the celebration of Sabbath, the circumcision of babies. Thus he manifested the most typical religious persecution, the first one of those known in history²⁸. The Jewish people were steaming with fury. The opposition did not take long to appear, spiritless at first, manifested especially through individual resistance. In order not to violate the Law some found at the bottom of their hearts the

²⁴ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichităȃi iudaice II*, p. 92

²⁵ This is the moment when Jude the Maccabee decides that in case of a foreign attack, the Jewish should defend themselves even on Sabbath.

²⁶ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichităȃi iudaice II*, p. 93

²⁷ A. NEGOIȂ, *Istoria religiei...*, 161; FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichităȃi iudaice II*, p. 93.

²⁸ A. NEGOIȂ, *Istoria religiei*, p. 162.

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old patriarchal ideal and took refuge in isolated places with their flocks. These were called Hasidim, meaning pious²⁹.

IV. Confessing the faith through martyrdom

Some of the Jewish who were deeply-rooted into the monotheistic faith of their parents suffered persecution with the price of their lives. They confessed with courage and through death they became martyrs. This is the case of the old and venerable Eleazar (90 years old; 2 Maccabees 6,24), who didn't want to betray the law of his parents and received a martyrly death. He was forced to eat pork meat, which was considered unclean by the Mosaic legislation, but he spit it out. He was invited to the stratagem of the substitution of pork meat with the one he cooked at home, so that through his example, those who had seen him eat "pork meat" followed him and apostatize. He was very appreciated by the society. He refused this stratagem. He preferred to lose his terrestrial life to win the eternal life of the soul. He did not want to dishonor his age and offer the people a negative example. Eleazar wanted his death to be an example for the young men so that they die a manly death "for the righteous and holy laws" (2 Maccabees 6,18-31). In his hour of death, the old Eleazar said: "The Lord possesses all holy knowledge. He knows I could have escaped these terrible sufferings and death, yet he also knows that I gladly suffer these things, because I fear him" (2 Maccabees 6,30)³⁰. We meet here the proverbial words in terms of confessing the faith and the martyrdom from any time and any place.

Eleazar's martyrdom from the Old Testament is compared with that of Saint Stephen for Christ:

"We have Eleazar, who was the first of the pre-Christian martyrs, just as Stephen was the first in the Christian era, a priest and an elder, hoary of hair, hoary in wisdom. In an earlier day he had prayed and sacrificed on behalf of his people, but now, in an

²⁹ D. ROPS, *Histoire Sainte...*, p. 324.

³⁰ The faithful who reads the discourse of old Eleazar cannot help but observe elements of identity between this discourse for the defending of faith and that of the Saint Voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu, spoken before the martyrdom of his family in Constantinople.

auspicious prelude to martyrdom, he offered himself up to God as a perfect sacrifice, a cleansing of all his people”³¹.

The old Eleazar was killed but he left not only to young men but also to the entire nation a relevant example of virtue and powerful faith.

Another episode of powerful faith, even more moving than the first one, presents a family of seven brothers³² and their admirable mother³³. They were forced to sacrifice to the idols and eat pork, but they refused so they were killed in the most dreadful tortures (2 Maccabees 7,1-42)³⁴. They followed the example of old Eleazar: “On another occasion a Jewish mother and her seven sons were arrested. The king was having them beaten to force them to eat pork. Then one of the young men said: “What do you hope to gain by doing this? We would rather die than abandon the traditions of our ancestors” (2 Maccabees 7,1-2). For disobeying the royal commands, the tortures applied to the seven brothers surpassed all imagination. Their tongues were cut, their scalps were skinned, their arms and legs were cut and in the end they were thrown into boiling water or fried in giant pans. They resisted courageously to all these tortures, having as example priest Eleazar:

³¹ Saint GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Select Orations*, translated by Martha Vinson, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2003, p. 73. For more details about the homilies of St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. John Chrysostom on the Maccabees, see: Pr. lect. univ. dr. Adrian MURG, “Martiriul - chip al luptei duhovnicești, în Omiliile despre Macabei ale Sfinților Grigorie de Nazianz și Ioan Hrisostom”, in: Pr. prof. univ. dr. Dumitru Megheșan, Pr. prof. univ. dr. Marius Țepelea, Pr. lect. univ. dr. Viorel Cristian Popa et alii (coord), *Mărturisire și martiriu ca asumare a vieții în Hristos la Sfinții Brâncoveni. Simpozion național – Oradea 05-06 mai 2014*, Editura Universității din Oradea, Oradea, 2014, pp. 114-129.

³² The Eastern Church celebrates these martyrs on the 1st of August under the name of St. 7 Brothers Maccabees. They must not be identified with the Maccabees, the sons of priest Mattathias, who chased away the Syrians and obtained the liberty of cult and then the independence of Judaea.

³³ The book 2 Maccabees does not present the name of the mother of the seven brothers, it only mentions that she had given birth to seven boys. In the Judaic tradition she occurs with the name Hannah or Miriam, the daughter of Tanhum. The old Greek writings identify her with Solomoni, and the Syrian tradition names her Martha. Lynn COHICK, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic Press, Michigan, 2009, p. 141. The father of the Maccabees brothers is mentioned in 4 Maccabees (18,9-19), a text which can be found only in the Bible from Bucharest, that of Șerban Cantacuzino (1688). In the contemporary editions of the Holy Scripture this book is not included.

³⁴ Regarding the powerful faith and the martyrdom of the seven brothers the episode resembles greatly the one of the martyrdom of Saint Martyrs Brâncoveni.

“He was a model and an exhortation to them both by his words and by his silent example; and he offered up also the seven young men, the fruit of his own guidance, as a *living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*, one more splendid and more pure than any ritual observance of the law”³⁵.

In her proverbial faith, the grieving mother did not give in, but she encouraged her sons and determined them to remain faithful to God: “And their wonderful mother is worthy of mentioning for in one day she saw her seven sons perish, and she endured with a humble heart, for the faith she had in the Lord. And she comforted each of them with her motherly words, for she was very courageous and raised her womanly thinking with a manly heart, and she said to them: “I do not know how your life began in my womb, she would say, I was not the one who gave you life and breath and put together each part of your body. It was God who did it, God who created the universe, the human race, and all that exists. He is merciful and He will give you back life and breath again, because you love His laws more than you love yourself” (2 Maccabees 7,20-23). Saint John Chrysostom³⁶ and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus eulogize the mother of the seven Jewish brothers. Saint Gregory said:

“The mother of the Maccabees consecrated her whole brood to God, showing herself without peer among mothers and priests because of the willingness for slaughter that the victims, these eager sacrifices and spiritual holocausts, displayed. She bared her breasts and reminded them of the nurture they had given and pointed to her grizzled head and, instead of pleading with them, cited her advanced years. She sought not to save them but to hasten their martyrdom. In her mind the danger lay not in death but in delay. Nothing made her bend or flinch or lose courage, not the joint-dislocators dangled before them, not the torture-wheels being brought up, not the racks, not the catapults, not the sharp iron claws, not the honing of swords, not the seething

³⁵ Saint GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Select Orations*, p. 73.

³⁶ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cateheze maritale. Omilii la căsătorie*, traducere de Pr. Marcel Hanches, Editura Oastea Domnului, Sibiu, 2004, p. 35.

cauldrons, not the fanning of the flames, not the tyrant's threats, not the crowd, not the impatience of the guard, not the sight of her family, not the dismembering of limbs, not the shredding of flesh, not the gushing torrents of blood, not the ravaging of young life, not the horrors at hand, not the pains to come; and the drawn out ordeal, which others in similar straits find hardest to bear, was for her the easiest thing of all: she gloried in the sight³⁷.

As in the case of the martyrdom of Brâncoveanu family when there was an attempt to blackmail the youngest of the brothers to abdicate from his faith, so in the case of the martyrdom of the seven brothers, Antiochus adopted the same tactic. He tried to determine the youngest of the brothers, the seventh, to abandon the faith of his parents. To this respect, Antiochus appealed to the sensitivity of the boy's mother, without being aware of the fact that her sensitivity was fundamentally linked to her faith in the Lord of life, and not to the earthly ephemeral life. Then, this venerable woman, empowered from above, had passed serenely and courageously over the ordeal of her first six sons. That is why her message for her last son who was still alive was extremely impressive: "Don't be afraid of this butcher. Give up your life willingly and prove yourself worthy of your brothers, so that by God's mercy I may receive you back with them at the resurrection" (2 Maccabees 7,29). The certainty that through death we come to life, fortified the young man. His words are to be taken into consideration regarding martyrdom from all times and places: "King Antiochus, what are you waiting for? I refuse to obey your orders. I only obey the commands in the Law which Moses gave to our ancestors. You have thought up all kinds of cruel things to do to our people, but you won't escape the punishment that God has in store for you.... There is no way for you to escape punishment at the hands of the almighty and all-seeing God. My brothers suffered briefly because of our faithfulness to God's covenant, but now they have entered eternal life. But you will fall under God's judgment and be punished as you deserve for your arrogance. I now give up my body and my life for the laws of our ancestors, just as my brothers did. But I also beg God to show mercy to his people quickly and to torture you until you are forced to acknowledge that he alone is God.

³⁷ Saint GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Select Orations*, pp. 74-75.

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May my brothers and I be the last to suffer the anger of Almighty God, which he has justly brought upon our entire nation” (2 Maccabees 7,30-38). For the words of ridicule addressed to Antiochus, the biblical text tells us that one of the brothers was tortured more cruelly than his brothers (2 Maccabees 7,39).

The martyrdom of the mother of the seven Maccabee brothers, which followed, is not presented in detail as that of her children. We are only told that “last of all, the mother was put to death” (2 Maccabees 7,41). It is possible that she suffered the same tortures as her sons, but the biblical author only mentions that “I have said enough about the Jews being tortured and being forced to eat the intestines of sacrificial animals” (2 Maccabees 7,42). Regarding the attitude of the Maccabees’ mother, Saint John Chrysostom sees the work of grace. The sufferance of this mother is considered to be greater than the martyrdom of her sons. Her soul burned for faith more than her sons did in ordeal³⁸. An apologetic model, this mother was “the heart of a man in a woman’s body!”³⁹

The book 4 Maccabees suggests the idea of suicidal in the case of the mother of the martyr brothers⁴⁰: “She threw herself into the fire before anyone could touch her body” (4 Maccabees 17,1). Even though the Law of the Old Testament does not accept suicide under no circumstance or form, and martyrdom as an act of faith was not approved by the Jewish tradition (Leviticus 18,5), however, to a certain extent, the customs of the land, deeply rooted into the people’s conscience, allowed suicide in the form of martyrdom, confessing the faith through death⁴¹. In this situation,

³⁸ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omilia I la Sfinții Macabei și la Maica lor*, trad. Dumitru Fecioru, in vol. ”Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, Predici la sărbători împărătești și cuvântări de laudă la sfinți”, Editura Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, pp. 415, 422.

³⁹ SAINT GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Select Orations*, p. 74. In their homilies on the Maccabees, St. Gregory and St. John highlight the transfiguration of the saint experiencing martyrdom. Thus, the mother of the seven brothers is no longer a woman, but a man; no longer old, but young. Femininity, old age and motherhood - usually disadvantages in a fight - are transfigured to the point of becoming even the opposite: manhood, youth and denial, or rather sublimation of maternal love. A. MURG, “Martiriul...”, p. 129.

⁴⁰ JAN BREMMER, MARCO FORMISANO, *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, pp. 122-126.

⁴¹ Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg (sec. XIII), in Gittin 57b at Daniel JOSLYN-SIEMIATKOSKI, *The Mother and Seven Sons in Late Antique and Medieval Ashkenazi Judaism: Narrative Transformations and Communal Identity*, in ”Dying for the Faith,

Hannah, the mother of the seven Maccabee brothers, represents the image of martyrdom, who, without abdicating from her faith when facing death, she confesses her faith through death. The mother and her sons expressed the faith into the life gained through death. The young man who were sacrificed expressed their faith into the resurrection to eternal life and foretold Antiochus his resurrection to punishment (2 Maccabees 7,9.14).

Sufferance is seen with the role of forgiveness of sins and obtaining liberty: "...we are suffering what we deserve because we have sinned against our God. That's why all these terrible things are happening to us... May my brothers and I be the last to suffer the anger of Almighty God, which he has justly brought upon our entire nation" (2 Maccabees 7,18.38). The sacrifice of the Maccabee brothers and those who were with them, from their nation, is the fundament of the victory of the insignificant Maccabee army upon the numerous armies led by Antiochus IV Epiphanes from 165 BC⁴².

For their faith proven through martyrdom, the Orthodox Church celebrates the Maccabee brothers, together with Eleazar and with their mother, every year on the 1st of August. They are mentioned by their names: "In this day we celebrate Saints seven Martyrs Maccabees, Abim, Antonius, Gurias, Eleazar, Eusebonus, Alimus and Marcellus, their mother Solomonina and their teacher Eleazar"⁴³. In their kontakion, they are named "pillars of the wisdom of God" and "great martyrs before martyrs".

V. Recovering the Jewish dignity

Priest Mattathias from the Hasmonean dynasty and his five sons rose against Antiochus IV Epiphanes and against the pro-Hellenists. Many Jewish and members of Hasidim gathered around Mattathias. They started several guerilla fights, which were an advantage for the Jews and made them more courageous. They attacked on the field under the command of the third son

Killing for the Faith: Old Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective", Brill Publishers, Leiden, 2012, p. 144.

⁴² Jan WILLE, Millem Van HENTEN, *The Maccabean Martyrs As Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees*, Brill Publishers, Leiden, 1997, pp. 17-21.

⁴³ *Proloagele*, Vol. II, August, diortosite și îmbunătățite Arhim. Pr. dr. Benedict Ghiuș, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 1991, pp. 946-947.

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of Mattathias, under Judah, who was nicknamed Maccabi (Hammer) and from here the name of the Maccabee Dynasty.

Judah Maccabee secured a complete victory and, took advantage of the internal difficulties of Syria⁴⁴ to reorganize on the natural way the religious life of the Jews. In December 164 BC, he purifies the temple from the abomination that had been done by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and starts to officiate again the traditional Judaic cult⁴⁵. Thus he obtains the independence of the Judaic cult.

However, from a political point of view, things were not completely solved. Syrians together with their Hellenized partisans from Judaea, wanted to return to the dispositions of Antiochus, and the group of the faithful Jews wanted to erase them for good. The fight started again. Judah the Maccabee was killed in the battle and the lead was taken by his brother Jonathan, and then by Simon, who secures a complete victory, which was also supported by the fights for succession for the Syrian throne. Through a plebiscite, held in September 140 BC, the Jewish nation offered Simon the highest civil and religious power of the state, proclaiming him prince and High Priest, in eternity, until a true prophet appears (1 Maccabees 14, 41)⁴⁶. And thus the political independence of the Judaic state was achieved. After Simon's death, the last Maccabee, the state was ruled by his son, John Hyrcanus (134-108) who is the first to start the Hasmonean Dynasty. Because of the fights for succession for the throne of Judaea, the candidates ask the Romans for help. Pompey, the famous Roman general, who was then in Syria, comes to put order into things, which is when Judaea falls under the rule of Rome. In 37 BC, the Romans enthroned Herod Idumaeon

⁴⁴ In 167 BC, on his way to Persia, Antiochus IV Epiphanes died and left the throne to his under-aged son Antiochus V Eupator, under the regency of Phillip. But Antiochus had previously named a regent in the person of Lysias. Thus, there were two candidates for the administration of the state affairs. Because of the rivalries between these two there were numerous disorders, which were used by the Jews to consolidate their military position in Judaea. A. HÄRLÄOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 214.

⁴⁵ A. HÄRLÄOANU, *Istoria Universală...*, p. 213.

⁴⁶ Simon received those dignities for the merits that his family had achieved in rising the nation. However, he was not proclaimed king of Israel, because this title belonged only to a descendant from the house of David, and the Maccabee family did not have this kind of ancestry. Indeed, it seems that this is what the people had in mind through the phrase: "until a true prophet appears". The prophet by excellence would be Messiah and that is why the civil and religious power was entrusted to the Maccabees only until His appearance. Also the succession of the high priest is not respected, which from a hereditary point of view should have followed the line of Aaron and his sons.

as king of Judaea, whom they had appointed from 40 BC, and whom the history calls “the Great”. He was indeed great in crime⁴⁷. This was the beginning of a new rule over Judaea.

VI. Final remarks

Instead of conclusions, I take the liberty to ask the following question: Does the martyrdom of the Maccabees represent a model of confession and apology of faith nowadays? Is it necessary to defend faith today? If yes, how and from whom do we need to defend it? I also try to offer a humble answer with a series of considerations on this delicate subject. First of all, I think that we need to defend our faith; the challenges are various. I also believe that nowadays the way which is required to defend the true faith is its public confession and the confession through acts. We must all become confessors, clergy and faithful. We must proceed so that the truth becomes light for us and we never let it be engulfed by darkness. That is why I consider that only the confession from the pulpit is not enough. It is necessary a Christian mission within community; “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few”. We need a focused effort: hierarchy and community together. The Maccabees, who have proven their faith in martyrdom, were not part of the sacramental hierarchy of their nation. From this perspective, the example of the Maccabees is recommended over ages.

Today, confessing and confession do not necessarily require martyrdom, but for the confession of the true Christian faith at the beginning of the 3rd millennium I think it is necessary to have a concentrated effort of the clergy to re-catechize our faithful. We need long-term programs organized by the Church with all the categories of faithful, especially with the young. If the contemporary Christian doesn't know his faith, he has nothing to confess and he cannot offer the confession of his own faith through deeds. This type of Christian will easily give in in times of trial, he will easily accept all the exotic doctrines that penetrate the world and he will never be capable to defend his faith, because he doesn't know it.

To confess the faith, martyrdom can be an ongoing action, interiorized in the life of the Christians, through the death against sins or against the

⁴⁷ A. NEGOIȚĂ, *Istoria religiei...*, pp. 164-165.

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old man. Such martyrdom is in the power of all Christians⁴⁸. Martyrs live everywhere; spiritually prepared they confess through their conscience, ready to take their cross and follow Christ, even at the expense of their lives⁴⁹. To this respect, it is good to remember the martyrdom of the Maccabees especially to the extent to which they are always times of trouble for Christians, having them as models of fight and confession that belong to the martyrs⁵⁰.

Even today, in some regions of the world, Christians are persecuted and killed for confessing their faith (Syria, Pakistan and other regions of the Orient). In other parts of the world, even though persecutions are not bloody, there are unsuspected hidden or obvious ways to harass Christians, such as the attempts to implement among Christians a series of unchristian doctrines and practices, that belong to sects, alternative religions or new religious movements⁵¹ (Islam, Buddhism, Yoga, Hinduism, Movement for the spiritual integration into absolute – MISA, Scientology and other). Our Christians receive them willingly because they are insufficiently anchored in the values of the true Christian faith.

We receive as good everything we are offered or imposed from outside. Even if they are anti-Christian, the foreign laws are “wonderful” because they refer to human rights, to the rights of the child, to animal protection and they also defend them although this legislation is not based on healthy Christian principles. Based on these “rights”, homosexuality, lesbianism and other ideas such as these are shouted on the street and presented as virtues, values or normal things! What is going on with Christianity on the Old Continent that was once defended with so many sacrifices?! The life of our Christians resembles more and more with that of the Jewish from the time of the Maccabees who after abandoning the faith of their ancestors and the healthy Jewish tradition, allowed themselves to be assimilated by customs and faiths that were stranger to the Mosaic Law.

⁴⁸ This type of martyrdom is practiced especially by monks. That is why in the life of the Church, monachism was named “black martyrdom”. Saint GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Select Orations*, p. 73.

⁴⁹ ORIGEN, *Scrieri alese, Partea întâi*, în col. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 6, trad. Pr. D Bodogae, EIBMBOR, 1981, p. 155.

⁵⁰ Saint GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Select Orations*, p. 75.

⁵¹ To clarify the terms of *sects, new religious movements, alternative religions* see Constantin-Julian DAMIAN, *Convertirea în contextul noilor mișcări religioase*, Editura Astra Museum, Sibiu, 2014, pp. 41-44.

Another malady of the 21st century, which needs to be eradicated, is the religious indifferentism which, in my humble opinion, is more harmful and more dangerous for the Church than atheism. Homo religiosus is always transforming into homo seculus and it seems that he tends to prefer more and more this label. The contemporary man has become cosmopolite. He considers himself the master of the whole world; the earth is the house of man exclusively, and God, “if He exists”, will have to give up any control upon human life and thinking. In this way, secularization becomes synonymous with atheism. The supporters of secularization have excluded God from the world and try to dissolve His Church⁵². The eradication or at least the strong diminution of the religious indifferentism requires a considerable effort from the part of the Church.

We are facing some delicate situations for the defense of faith; to this respect, the pastoral tact will give the measure of the effectiveness of our efforts. We must take into account the example of Saint Apostle Paul in Athens who, aiming to draw the benevolence of the Athenians, he comes to confess Christ in the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17). In each Orthodox Christian who is not active, who doesn't know the essential elements of his faith, one may find an entire “Athenian pantheon” that has to be drained and then the land must be prepared for the seed that will bear the fruits of faith. All these new religious movements or alternative religions try to fill the void left by the historical Christianity. Unfortunately, their actions present a great attraction on the “spiritual market”⁵³.

If the Church does not put at the top of its priorities the re-catechization of its own faithful, after 50 years of communist darkness and after almost three decades of experiences on an eternal transition of “democratic” origin, and we don't do the Christian gesture to confess publicly of our faith and support it with acts, it means we are not the Christians we are supposed to be and we don't deserve the noble name of followers of Christ. From this perspective, we need worthy examples. And the Maccabees are a necessary example, since, for their faith they passed through the fire of martyrdom, as are the others who have fought at the expense of their life to defend their faith and national dignity.

⁵² Ieromonah Teofan MADA, *HOMO SECULUS. Antropologia filosofică a religiei*, Editura Agnos, Sibiu, 2008, p. 193.

⁵³ C. DAMIAN, *Convertirea în contextul noilor mișcări religioase*, p. 41.