Lusting for Death:

Unconscious Fantasies in An Ancient Jewish Martyrdom Text

Abstract

We examine the story of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons from Second Maccabees 7:1-42, a Greek text from the First Century BCE. The story recounts the sons' refusal to eat pork, their torture at the hands of the king, the king's attempts to recruit the mother, her admonition to the sons that they should better die, and finally their deaths (all in one day). The mother and sons gain eternal life (merger) through their submission to the violent human king, an earthly father figure. Unlike animal sacrifice, which completely excluded women, the willingness to sacrifice one's life via martyrdom gives women an odd sense of agency. The mother plays a major role, but it is the role of giving away "motherhood" while instantiating the idealized object of the divine father. Martyrdom fulfills the same unconscious role as animal sacrifice, displacing the human mother in favor of a divine father, and in this case, a father who offers eternal life.

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By the measure of scholarly acceptance, Freud failed in *Moses and Monotheism* to diagnose the cause of the widespread guilt suffered by individuals in modern society. Most reviewers were not convinced by his attempt to study a society as one might study an obsessional neurotic. Scholars rejected both the historicity of the ancient killing of the primordial father, which caused the guilt and the imputed mechanism by which the societal guilt was passed down from generation to generation.

This failure of Freud, however, does not mean that it is impossible to pose psychological questions at the level of a society. Instead, as Robert Paul has recently pointed out, psychoanalysts now look as much for "how the mind works" as for specific childhood events (Paul, 1996). Analysis now focuses more on how unconscious fantasies live on in each person and unwittingly shape his or her life. It is possible to ask how the "societal mind" works without reconstructing a specific historical event in the hoary past of a society. As Paul explains,

> If we approach the interpretation of Western culture in light of this somewhat different strategy, we see that we should be seeking to discover what persistent unconscious fantasy, or as it would be constituted in social life, what persistent myth inherited from the past, continues to determine aspects of our thought and action in ways of which we might not be fully aware (Paul, 1996, p. 220).

The unconscious fantasies I want to explore relate to the emergence of martyrdom traditions in Judaism and Christianity. The profound appeal of martyrdom haunts current news headlines, reminding us that traditions of self-sacrificial death have held mesmerizing power over individuals for centuries. Despite their historical importance, martyrdom traditions have received scant attention from analytic researchers. One of the few studies is Byman (1974).

Within the confines of this paper it will only be possible to look at one example, the earliest extant Jewish martyrdom story, and begin to look for the unconscious fantasies that help us understand the power of these traditions. We will look specifically at the story of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons from Second Maccabees 7:1-42, a text composed in Greek.[1] While not part of Jewish Scripture, and placed in the Apocrypha by Protestants, Second Maccabees was included in the Septuagint and in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bibles to this day. The text, which tells of the successful Jewish revolt against King Antiochus (175-165 BCE), was probably written by someone in the circles of the Hasmoneans [Maccabees] who ruled Judaea after the defeat of the Greeks. Although the exact date is subject to debate, the text dates from at least

fifty years after the events described and perhaps more than a century (van Henten, 1997, pp. 50-56).

In basic outline, Chapter Seven recounts the arrest of the mother and sons, the sons' torture, the king's attempt to recruit the mother, her admonition to the sons that they should better die and finally their deaths (all in one day). The nameless mother exhorts her seven sons to submit to torture rather than disown their religious traditions and obey Antiochus' order to eat pork. The chapter ends with a brief reference to the mother's death without explaining exactly how she died and the final phrase "let this be enough about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures". The deaths of the mother and sons, along with a short recounting of the martyrdom of an elderly man in the chapter before (6:18-31), mark a turning point in Second Maccabees: the Jews then take up arms and ultimately defeat the foreign king and his soldiers.

We begin our investigation by noting two small puzzles, seemingly unimportant, both of which confront the reader. Why, we ask, is the mother nameless and why does the martyred family not include a father? These small puzzles cannot expect a traditional historical solution, since the entire family story is simply a trope used to tell the story of persecution. Second Maccabees was written as propaganda to support the Hasmonean court, downplaying the civil war aspects of the conflict and emphasizing the struggle against the foreign king. These missing details are like the seams of a dream, which point towards important hidden conflicts. Far from being minor, these two details are closely connected to the central unconscious fantasies of the story.

The unconscious fantasies of interest in this paper focus on two sets of wishes. The first set involves the desire to replace the birthing power of human mothers with a

"rebirth" from a divine father. While this theme can be found in many religious texts, we will see that the family martyr story is a particularly rich explication since the martyred mother gives her explicit acceptance of this displacement.

The second cluster of wishes is also common to many religious texts, namely, the desire to regress and merge with the mother in eternal bliss. This wish co-exists with a counter wish to be saved simultaneously by the divine father from a basic "dread of woman", to use Karen Horney's classic phrase (Horney, 1967). Here again the gruesome sacrificial deaths of the mother and her sons, their spectacular deaths, encode these fantasies in a particularly powerful manner.

Both sets of wishes are enacted in the story by the transformational power of violence. The self-sacrifice of the mother instantiates the idealized object of the divine father. The mother and sons gain eternal life (merger) though their submission to the violent human king. Then the seemingly unlimited power of the human king is made to look savage but ridiculous in relation to the ultimate power of the divine king.

Part 1: The Historical Context for the Rise of Martyrdom

The stories of martyrs and their fatal stands against earthly authorities first emerged in Judaism in the last centuries BCE and shaped the interpretation of Jesus' death in early Christianity. The willingness to sacrifice one's life was intrinsically related to the ancient but increasingly rejected traditions of animal sacrifice inherited from Israelite religion. While early martyrdom texts were composed before the final end of animal sacrifices due to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, widespread rejection and critique of animal sacrifices had already occurred in numerous Jewish circles: that is, both Jews and

Christians rejected animal sacrifice and articulated diverse substitutes for these ancient traditions, including the traditions of the self-sacrifice of human martyrs.

Martyrdom would never have emerged without the promise of an afterlife, which became a common trope once the idea of resurrection of the dead appeared in early Jewish texts in the second century BCE. The single reference to any form of personal afterlife or resurrection found in the Hebrew Scriptures is in Daniel 11:2. References are plentiful in post-Biblical Jewish texts from the first century BCE and on. The dividing line between the ancient Israelite religion of animal sacrifice and the newer religions of Judaism and Christianity was irrevocably crossed with the clear articulation of a promised personal afterlife gained through an atoning and redemptive death at the hands of an earthly king. The martyrdom traditions themselves were multifaceted, reflecting the rich variety of ideas encoded in the earlier animal sacrifices as well as multiple layers of interpretations from the Greco-Roman cultural context in which the Jewish and Christian understandings of martyrdom developed.

The search for the unconscious fantasies, which will explain our puzzles, begins with conscious fantasies. Whatever the intent of the Greek and Roman legal systems of torture, the martyrdom texts make clear that the Jews had their own lens for viewing the events. While the persecution may look to be the work of the human ruler Antiochus, it is in fact the work of the deity. Second Maccabees explains, “For we are suffering because of our own sins” (7:32). The Jews chose to die in hopes that their violent deaths would “bring an end to the wrath of the Almighty that had justly fallen on our whole nation” (7:38). The punishment was deserved due to their poor behavior; in particular, the

behavior of some Jewish leaders (non-Hasmoneans) was considered too pro-Greek (6:16, 7:33, and 7:38).

The efficacy of the martyrs' suffering and deaths is made salient by the turn of events in the chapters after the tortures; the Jews gain their own nation, and their success is based on a reconciliation between the people and their deity brought about by the martyrs' deaths (8:29). Fourth Maccabees, a later expansion of the family martyr story, also points to a "training" aspect of the suffering (4Macc 10:10). This longer version of the story articulates even more directly the atoning value of the deaths (4Macc 17:20-22).[2]

The atoning value of human death is most familiar from Christian uses of the model for interpreting Jesus' death.[3] One point is clear: self-sacrifice was interpreted internal to the Jewish community as part of the repertory of rituals for dealing with sin and atoning for guilt such as fasting, intercessory prayer and in particular animal sacrifice. The role and purpose of animal sacrifice in ancient Israelite religion was multifaceted, and probably changed over time as well.[4]

The practice of animal sacrifice, as Nancy Jay (1992) so elegantly showed us, is the exclusive domain of men. With animal sacrifice we appear to have found a rare moment of cross-cultural agreement among widely diverse cultures: only men should and can carry out animal sacrifices. Jay cleverly interpreted this exclusivity in the Israelite traditions, where the god demands the first-born of all animals including sons, as a male attempt to "re-birth" sons. All fertility, but especially the eldest son, belongs to the deity who can then, via the human father, accept a substitute and thus save the son. The father who sets up a substitute sacrifice for his son is symbolically giving him back his life.

The animal sacrifice system, viewed from this angle, was one of many means of reinforcing patriarchy. For example, women were given no role in the priesthood that performed the sacrifices. Priestly genealogies simply list the fathers, as if males generated offspring by themselves (Genesis 10). So too the fathers, by first putting their sons on the altar and then taking them off again, make the offspring theirs and not the mothers'. Mothers are excluded from the sacrificial rites, as the mother's brothers are from the sacrificial meal, a sure sign of an attempt to downplay any matrilineal tendencies. In addition to the explicit meaning of sacrifice, such as atoning for a sin, an unconscious meaning of animal sacrifice comes from male birth envy. Alan Dundes' insightful essay (1984) tells of the creation myths of so many religious traditions, including the ancient Israelites, where people are created out of dirt by a male god. Childbirth is taken away from the human female and given to the male god.

Our brief consideration of possible unconscious meanings of animal sacrifice is simply meant to remind us of some of the ways in which female generative power was structured via the cult. We are only interested in animal sacrifices to the extent that the cult thereby expressed primitive hostility to women, particularly around an attempt to take childbirth away from women.

If we return now to the martyrdom stories, the willingness of individuals to die rather than submit to the king and betray their deity was interpreted through pre-existing meanings of animal sacrifice. The willingness to die for a greater good was seen as a self-sacrifice, which encoded all the meanings of animal sacrifice.

Offering a human as a sacrifice can be thought of as a perversion of animal sacrifice, as noted by Albert Henrichs (1980) in relation to the Greek stories of human

sacrifices. The Greeks were riveted by stories such as the supposed sacrifice of two Persians before the battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. These stories followed a careful pattern: in times of great crisis a high-ranked person might offer his own life as something of great value, in effect sacralizing himself as an animal was made sacred before a sacrifice, in a desperate attempt to persuade the gods to grant some reward such as protection of the person's homeland or military victory. Atreus' serving of Thyestes' children to their father in a stew is a similar perversion of the meal prepared from an animal sacrifice.

In this model, the standard offering, an animal, must be replaced by something of greater value. This concept of self-sacralization points to the upping of the ante when humans replace animals: for the author of Second Maccabees the sins of the Jews were too great for the familiar animal sacrifice. So too, for the later rabbis composing a martyr story was a means of establishing their own special sacral power.

While scholars have often tried to argue that Judaism and Christianity were advances over other religions due to their rejection of human sacrifice, this claim is anachronistic (Delaney, 1998). The *standard* sacrifice in the period of the Israelite religion was an animal. Martyrdom turns the tables in that actual human blood is spilt, both for Jews and Christians.

Part 2: Solving the Puzzles

We can now solve the first puzzle: why the mother does not have a name. The mother needs no name since she stands for all mothers, indeed for motherhood in the abstract. Her role is to encourage and exhort her sons to make a choice that might fly in the face of a mother's wishes: not to try to preserve the life she gave them. The brutal death of the martyr-sons signals acceptance by the human mother of the divine father and his role.

In order to understand this we must look at the female agency in the text in some detail. With the shift from animal sacrifice to self-sacrifice, women gain an odd sense of agency. Excluded from the animal sacrifice cult, they do find a place in the cult of martyrs. If they cannot kill and sacrifice an animal, they can be killed for a greater good. If we look back at the self-sacrifice of women in earlier Greek dramas, we find some similarities, that is, we find that it is in tragedy that a woman's death is described in the same way as a man's (Loraux, 1987, p. 4). The violent deaths of Polyxena, sacrificed by Neoptolemus to appease the ghost of Achilles, and Iphigenia, sacrificed to Artemis to help the Greeks against Troy, in some ways prefigure the death of the martyr mother. As Loraux explains "it was in this violence that a woman mastered her death, a death that was not simply the end of an exemplary life as a spouse" (1987, p. 3).

So too in the Maccabean story a woman gains some autonomy; she takes on a tyrant successfully. The anonymous mother and the Greek tragic heroines assert themselves by "taking over the sacrifice imposed on them and turning it into their own death, a death that is fully their own" (1987, p. 46).

The gender slippage is so great that the women in martyrdom texts are often referred to as men (see Castelli, 1986, 1991; Darling, 1991; Hall, 1993; Meyer, 1985; Miles, 1989; Moore & Anderson, 1998). Yet, while she may be gendered as male, the martyr mother's agency ultimately is turned against her. The mother gives away her own life in her act of self-sacrifice and she also gives away her role as mother. Despite the brevity of the story in Second Maccabees, several verses are used to address directly the issue of the mother's role in birthing. The mother states, "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It is not I who gave birth you life and breath, nor I who set in

order the elements within each of you (7:24).” Here the mother is made to state explicitly that she does not really understand how she came to be involved in birth in the first place.

Even more important, birth from the human mother is contrasted in the text with a much more important “birth” which the text promises. As a reward for their suffering, for their willingness to give up on the life given to them via their mother, the sons will be granted eternal life.

Later Rabbinic and early Christian texts repeatedly contrast the first birth into this world via a human mother with a second re-birth into the world to come/eternal life. Human mothers bring people into this world with all its suffering and pain. The deity, assisted by male religious figures (rabbis, priests), brings people into the world to come where there is no death and suffering.

The promise of an afterlife influences the entire story. The story of a mother losing her seven sons and her own life could be a tragedy. But, unlike the tragic death of the Greek heroines, the death of the martyrs is a triumph over death via the rebirth into the afterlife offered by the divine father. While Maccabees is not a comedy, the final joke is on the evil king Antiochus. His attempts to kill do not work, since the martyrs will live again; he is the only one who will die since the martyrs will be re-born into an afterlife.

This is no random mother who gives up her sons. The text explicitly sets up the anonymous mother as the ideal mother, stating, “No mother ever loved her children more than the mother of the seven boys” (14:12). The ideal mother gives up her sons to the violent torture exactly because she loves them so much and wants them to live forever.

It is true that all of these unconscious fantasies could, theoretically, have been articulated via a story about a mother who had a name. But the function she fulfills in the

story is not that of a specific mother confronted with a specific family problem; she represents “motherhood” in the abstract or the idealized mother. The puzzle of her namelessness has led us to see these roles more clearly. So, too, she has only sons, always of greater value than daughters, and more than one son to increase the tension and highlight the special role of the beloved youngest son. (While fathers favor the eldest sons, mothers are routinely presented as favoring the youngest.)

Given the belief in an afterlife, the torture becomes a perversion of the birth process. According to Second Maccabees, the second birth is gruesome. The sons are torn apart limb by limb and the reader is told of the smell of their flesh as it is “cooked” by those torturing the sons. Perhaps we see here a male fantasy that sees childbirth as a form of dismemberment.

But what of the missing father, the second puzzle? The father’s role is split between two characters, both of whom are a sort of “father” and each of whom fulfills a distinct role. The human father is replaced by a divine father, whose role we began to expound already, and by the evil king Antiochus. Starting with the second part, the foreign king Antiochus attempts to intervene in the mother-son dyad and manipulate it for his own purposes. The personal appearance of the king at the torture scene is one point that shows the fantasy elements of the text. Antiochus was in Antioch during the period of the persecutions and therefore did not personally oversee the torture of this family nor any other family in Judaea (van Henten, p. 77). He pleads with the mother in hopes that in her desire to protect her son she will convince him to follow the king’s orders. The king “urged her to advise the youth to save himself” (7:35). Instead the mother urges him to “accept death so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again along with your

brothers" (7:29). Their reunion is promised despite the explicit attempt of the king to come between the mother and her sons. The human king-father is foiled, this text posits, since the sons give up their mother in order to reunite with her under better circumstances, that is, for ever. The text demonstrates that even a Jewish *woman* can outdo a non-Jewish king.

We see here a specific version of afterlife fantasies, this time cast in terms of an eternal merger with the mother away from the father. We see the wish for eternal life conceived of as a return to the mother, a merger with the maternal figure. The father does not interfere with the fantasized pairing of the child and mother; they are able to fend off his intrusion by clinging to the advice of the mother. The human-king-father cannot come between mother and child, no matter what he does he is proven ineffectual in his desire to interfere.

In his classic article "On Dying Together", Jones (1996) posits that death can be thought of as a return to the womb. This wish to return can be acted out via suicide, which is in effect what the sons, and then the mother, are doing. Jones quotes from Isidor Sadger, who highlights the "infant's desire to defy the father and escape with mother to some distant place where he cannot disturb their mutual relation" (Jones, 1996, p. 14). It would have been possible for a religious authority to simply direct the sons to eat the pork in order to live, a stance which the rabbis advocated in many situations of duress. The mother, however, does not opt to break the food taboo in order to preserve a life.

The mother's reasoning is made very clear. In this story submitting to torture achieves a very special wish; just like suicides who think that they can kill themselves and live, so too these Jews can kill themselves and not die. The person committing

suicide thinks he can kill himself and not die but instead live forever with his object of desire (Menninger, 1996, p. 33). The mother emphasizes that the only path to eternal life is exactly via suicide, surrendering to the god's will.

We can see this reversal again in the shifted agency of the mother. One of the primary roles of women in their family lives is to mourn the dead, a theme found, with different nuances, in numerous Greco-Roman, Biblical and Jewish texts.[5] The mother in this story appears unusually active for a female as she outwits the king. She does not, however, become enraged about the torture of her sons; she surrenders to the divine father's wish to have the sons punished. In general the aggression in the story is disguised, as it is in suicides. That is, the human king is presented as the main aggressor, though his aggressive actions are shown to be fruitless. The emphasis on his aggression disguises the central role of the divine father as aggressor. Two of the three components of suicide as outlined by Menninger (1996), the wish to be killed and wish to die, are enacted by the sons. The third component, the wish to kill, is falsely put at the doorstep of the human king, who is ultimately a mere puppet of the divine king. Combining their actions we see enacted in the text the fantasy of overcoming the painful limitation of individual human existence by means of violence, expressed in the lofty language of a mother's wish to be eternally reunited with her children.

At the same time Second Maccabees reassures the reader that the divine father is never far off; his presence is established by the constant references to him in the dialogue. The divine father's unseen presence dominates the discourse as it will dominate the mother-child dyad in the world-to-come.

Chasseguet-Smirgel emphasizes the tremendous fear both genders have of being a helpless infant confronted by the "omnipotent maternal imago" (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1976, p. 280). The "primary helplessness" of the infant is imprinted in every psyche even as it is left behind with the child's growing independence. She reminds us,

> The need to detach oneself from the primal omnipotent mother by denying her faculties, her organs and her specifically feminine features, and be investing in the father, seems to be a need which both sexes share (1976, p. 282).

Bruno Bettelheim (1954) pointed out the importance of the power of the pre-Oedipal mother and the role of ambivalent identification with her and her birthing powers as possible explanations for initiation rites.[6] So too in martyrdom stories the human mother is subordinated to the divine father, a much greater power than even a human father. If every suicide contains a wish for rescue (Jensen & Petty, 1996), in this text the rescuer is a father who is himself beyond any and all danger but who will only rescue those willing to die for him.

All types of love are bound up with violence in this text. Each death of a martyr, like each suicide, is "in one act a murder and a propitiation, both of which are eroticized" (Menninger, 1996, p. 32). In later martyrdom texts the link between sexuality and violence, which was only implicit in Second Maccabees, comes to the fore in an explicit manner, for example, the erotic descriptions of the torture and death of Perpetua in the Christian martyrdom text *Passions of Perpetua.*

Conclusions

We began our investigation by noting the failure of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* to convince readers; his reconstruction of an ancient murder by a primal horde was labeled a fantasy. Oddly enough, this judgment was used to dismiss the entire work without considering if his analysis were convincing if it were of a myth and not an historical occurrence. Recently Robert Paul freed Freud's analysis from having to bear a kind of weight it could not sustain. Paul pointed out to all Freud's readers that it is a story about what is *supposed* to have happened, a myth that "is capable of providing an authoritative foundation for the continual construction, maintenance, and reproduction of an ongoing social order" (Paul, 1996, p. 10)

So too Second Maccabees, far from being a simple report of an historical event, is a vehicle for establishing foundational myths for Judaism and Christianity built on conscious and unconscious fantasies. All of the problems the Jews have can be traced back their leaders' rejection of the divine father's will/law. They have turned their back on the divine father and thus deserve their punishments. Order is established by submission to the law by Jew, non-Jew, male and female. The divine father's eternal watchful presence is dramatically enacted in the story. The human king and the human mother are both subordinated to the divine law, one unwillingly and one willingly.

As ancient animal sacrifice traditions came to an end, it was no longer possible to displace the birthing power of women via those rituals. The need for a violent displacement of female birthing power is then played out in this new form of sacrifice, where again blood rites replace the mother with a birthing father. Martyrdom fulfills the

same unconscious role as animal sacrifice, also constructing a new motherless descent pattern.

The reader is able, at the end of the story, to hold on to many contradictions. He, and perhaps to a lesser degree she, can hold onto the promise of merging with his mother for eternity while being protected at the same time by the divine law. He can be reassured that the divine father will rescue him from a helpless dependence on a maternal imago and imagine that his divine father will birth him into an eternal life better than the birth given him by his mother.

The fantasies encoded in martyrdom are the central fantasies found in many texts from early Judaism and Christianity. Martyrdom is best understood not as an aberrant phenomenon in Judaism and Christianity but as a more spectacular version of articulating core fantasies from the Late Antique period. The meanings that martyrdom developed in the Jewish and Christian communities went far beyond the simple reporting of events of persecution, gruesome as they were. The meaning and not the fact of martyrdom led to a "lusting for death" among Christians, as stated by the church father Ignatius (*Epistle to Romans* 7.2). We read about Christians seeking martyrdom who were sent home by Roman officials (de Ste. Croix, 1963, pp. 23-24 especially). The valorization of the martyr, its "great exaltation" (Baron, 1952, p. I.230) is a symptom passed on from the ancient to the modern society.

In analytic circles the stories of the martyrs have been neglected, or over-simplified as examples of sadomasochism or giving up of something of value in exchange for something else (Andresen, 1984).[7] Such analysis fails to note the unconscious power of the martyrdom stories, power that still appeals to people today.

This particular type of “lusting for death” satisfies so many contradictory hopes we can expect it to break forth into action until such time as the myths themselves change.

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[1] For a recent bibliography see (van Henten, 1997).

[2] For more on the different nuances of Second Maccabees and Fourth Maccabees see (van Henten, 1997, pp. 125-186).

[3] This paper will not enter into the protracted debate whether martyrdom was a Christian or Jewish interpretation. While Second Maccabees pre-dates Christian martyr texts, the explication of this model probably happened simultaneously in circles which were ultimately claimed as formative by both religions.

[4] For a concise overview of the theories of sacrifice found in Hebrew Scriptures and in modern scholarship as well see (Anderson, 1991). These include the notion of a gift to the gods, control over evil forces (demons, death), atoning for sins and communion with the gods.

[5] In Judges 12 a young anonymous woman is sacrificed by her father to fulfill his vow. Before she is killed she goes out to the wilderness with her female companions to mourn her virginity, simultaneously fulfilling the roles of dead victim and mourner for the dead victim.

[6] His theories, which have not received the attention they deserve, offer an alternative explanation of circumcision from Freud's analysis (Paul, 1998). Circumcision is then not primarily a substitute for castration, but instead endows men with generative capacities. As with many initiation rituals, it makes them more like women.

[7] The sadomasochistic aspects of the text are beyond the scope of this paper, which attempts to draw attention to other themes. They are definitely there however. Clothed as a simple historical "report", the text juxtaposes high theological claims and sado-masochistic actions. The story is "a blending of the sacred and the anathema, the sublime and the horrible and disgusting, the spiritual and the animal-like which only in their combination explain fascination" (Stein, 1998, p. 260). The reader is

encouraged to displace this fascination onto someone else, such as the king who ordered the torture.