

For understanding the ‘Youth’ of the Maccabean Martyrs

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Abstract

The Martyrdom of the Maccabees is a Hagiographical piece based on bibliology books. The [Georgian] text of *The Martyrdom* was published by Prof. Ivane Imnaishvili in 1980. Yet, the martyrdom from a literary point of view has not yet attracted a scholarly interest. This article presents one of the key aspects of the piece and attempts to understand the youth of the martyrs.

Keywords: *Maccabees, Maccabean, Non-Canonical, Hagiography, Imagology, Youth, Young.*

The books of the Maccabees are attributed to the group of non-canonical¹ books of the *Old Testament*. A diverse literature has reached us regarding them whether it is bibliology, Hagiography or hymnography. The object of our interest at present is a hagiographical work.

The National Centre of Manuscripts named after Korneli Kekelidze preserves two manuscripts (Sin-62, 10thc.; A-95, 11thc.), which contains the hagiographic work about the seven Macabbean sons and their mother Solomonia. The interrelation between these texts was studied by Prof. Ivane Imnaishvili who concluded that the texts presented in the manuscripts Sin-62 and A-95 should belong to the same edition. Moreover, the

¹ Non-canoncity refers to the absence of the Holy Spirit’s intervention in the process of making the Holy Scriptures.

difference between them is so little that he considers Sin-62 to be the original version of A-95 [Imnaishvili, 1980: 40].

The brief plot summary of *the Macabbean Martyrdom*: The faithless king Antiochus/Anthiochos² requires the Jews to worship idols and eat pork, otherwise he punishes the disobedient ones by tormenting and eventually executing them. The seven faithful brothers³ and their mother stood up to the king through their disobedience. In spite of the King's repeated urges, the brothers expressed their willingness to be tormented⁴, after having announced earlier that they are not concerned with the punishment of this world and they long for the heavenly kingdom.

In the very beginning of the story, the author tells us that he is going to tell us about the king who was defeated by a woman and her sons through the help of God. He compares this fact with the example of the biblical David: "and we saw how God defeats men by the hands of a woman and the king by the minors, so David also was an youngster yet, he saved Israel" [Imnaishvili, 1980: 30].

According to the recalled episode, we can emphasize the meaning of adolescence. It is interesting what distinguishes and what is characteristic to a youngster that enables him to defeat the one who is stronger than him.

The Bible or the book of books has a peculiar answer. According to Matthew the attitude of Jesus to children is thus: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" [Matthew, 18:3-4]. Christ calls his disciples to abandon the way of pride and be humble, obedient, as sincere as children ... in the book of the Evangelist we read immensely important words regarding children: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do" [Matthew, 11:25-26]. According to the Gospel, the savior speaks about the divine wisdom, which is not as clear and obvious to anybody as it is for children.

Thus, according to the Christ's commandment, in order to enter the Kingdom of heaven one has to first "turn into a child", which itself means acquiring the qualities characteristic to children.

² The years of the reign of Antiochus IV 175-163 BC [Batoshvili, 1991, 124].

³ We find the names of the martyrs neither in biblical books, nor in the *Martyrdom*, yet, the calendar of the Orthodox Church lists their names: Abim, Antonine, Guri, Eleazar, Evsevon, Alim, Markele [Calendar of the Georgian Orthodox Church, 1976: 225].

⁴ According to the Church calendar, the Maccabeans were martyred in 166 BC [Calendar of the Georgian Orthodox Church 1976, 225].

First of all, a child perceives the world through unconditional “trusts”. The attempts of analyzing, judging and checking come with age. The younger the person is, the stronger is his/her faith (faith in God as well as in surrounding humans). Faith itself involves obedience, since when a person believes in something (or somebody) he/she trusts and obeys him/her without questioning. The author of *The Martyrdom* also, when he brings an example of biblical David and compares his acts with that of those children’s, considers humility as the primary guide to victory. According to the words of the hagiographer, king David defeated the multitude of warriors without a sword through his faith in God and humility, since the victory is given not to the great army, but to whoever He (the Lord) finds deserving [II Mac. 15:21].

Therefore, it is obvious why the author of *The Martyrdom* brings in a relevant place the example of young yet faithful David defeating the Goliath [I Samuel, 17:45].

The hagiographer brings an example of the fall of Antiochus as an example of pride against humility: “God let him die through the hand of a woman, for he was looking down on the faithful... and when his pride reached God, his kingdom fell by God’s providence” [Imnaishvili, 1980:30].

Saba-Piruz Metreveli rightly notes in his article “Child in the Georgian Hagiography” that “childhood and adolescence are identified with the way to humility, without which nobody enters the kingdom of heaven” [Metreveli, 2004:12]. Therefore, the author of *The Martyrdom* argues that Childhood (considered not in terms of age, but of an inner state) that involves unconditional trust and obedience to God helps people to achieve victory (in both spiritual and physical terms). The hagiographer declares such a state to be the foundation of the victory of the Maccabean martyrs and their mother.

As it has been revealed, the author of the work decided to describe the self-sacrifice of the martyrs and created the example of hagiographical work. According to the peculiarities of this type of writing one of the main requirements for the main character is to have a pre-image a certain role model who he is supposed to imitate in his acts and speech. Every martyr is an imitator of Jesus Christ. Christ not only is their guide to heaven, it is not only that every martyr has to become like Christ himself, but Every martyr intends to turn into Christ. This issue raises a question: who was the object of imitation in the case of the Maccabean martyrs while they tried to defend the law and reject the sacrifice to idols⁵ considering that they lived in 166 BC before Christ was incarnate?

⁵ This word is also used in other pieces of Georgian hagiography such as *The Martyrdom of 9 Brothers in Kola; The Songs of Repentance....* .

More than one biblical and in particular Old Testament characters are listed in the work as an archetypal image of martyrs. Solomonia expects her children to discard the order of King Antiochus: “Remember my children the saints who were before you, remember their countless deeds that let them inhabit the kingdom of heaven...” [Imnaishvili, 1980:31]. As we find out, the pre-Christian martyrs were expected to express the same attitude as the new martyrs did (the expectation was mainly set by the political and religious situation). First of all the martyr ought to believe, and trust to the word of God and besides, if it is necessary, confirm the word of God, which means being physically tortured for the sake of God’s commandment and His Law.

In order to have the Maccabean brothers “inhabit the kingdom of heaven in their unity”, they need to imitate the “earlier saints”. Who are those earlier saints? - three brothers: Ananias, Azarias and Misael, who were put in a furnace, where they got stronger and put suppressed the flame of the fire by giving themselves to God and not listening to the command of the King and God saved them” [Imnaishvili, 1980:31]. Solomonia is not satisfied by the names of the three Babylonian children, she calls her sons to imitate Moses, remember Joseph and resemble Elijah the Thesbites. She does not forget the first created human beings and addresses her 6th son with simple yet profound words: “Be my child, like your brothers since you are like the 6th day, when God created the first human being, Adam”. [Imnaishvili, 1980:36].

The citation confirms that the woman has studied the Law; her words apart from being encouraging, inspiring spiritual bravery and a guiding mother⁶, also depict the image of an amazing preacher and a learned person. She has a certain reason for mentioning the biblical names: she wants each of her sons to share the deeds and characters of those people that will secure their victory.

Part from the fact that the Maccabees had to share the faith and blood of the relative saints in their defense of God’s commandments, Solomonia also has her own role model: She resembles Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac to God and the reason is not her mercilessness or hatred of her children, but it is her love for them and her fervent desire to give them to God as a gift: “as Abraham did not despise his son Isaac and sacrificed him to God, I also want to sacrifice you to the living God. If I hated you I would not put you through this torment the same way as Abraham brought his son to God” [Imnaishvili, 1980:31]. By such an act, the mother, on top of wishing well to her children, also shows a great example of her love for God. Maybe this act of an adult (of both Abraham and Solomonia) is greater than the obedience of the children since considering the natural

⁶ If we follow the inter-textual study of iconography and literary images, Solomonia resembles one of the images of the Mother of God, in particular it is the guiding image of *Theotokos – Odigitria*.

processes such a level of obedience is less expected from an adult. Such a thing is only possible for the people who are children at heart, those who share in the grace of unconditional faith.

While talking about the acts of the martyrs one rather important issue is raised: How possible it is to discuss the sense of devotion in the context of the young Maccabean martyrs?

Among the people listed by the mother as the proposed role models to her children, the most curious is Elijah the Thesbites.⁷ In spite of the fact that the information about this particular saint is quite vast, Solomonia draws attention to one particular aspect. She notes briefly the prophet's deeds and addresses her children: "Remember, my sons, the prophet Elijah the Thesbites who confronted the king and defeated him eventually" [Imnaishvili, 1980:31] (She does not say anything else about him).

It is likely that Solomonia's emphasis on the prophet's contradicting the king must imply to the idea that the Maccabean martyrs are commanded to defeat the godless king through their words first and then the deeds.

We see a doubtless expression of polemics in the Jewish side in the words of the fourth brother. Like the brothers, he also considers the devil to be the father of Antiochus and laughs at him when the latter offers him wealth and friendship: "Listen to me King, your god was not carved skillfully by a carpenter, but you commissioned to make his likeness" [Imnaishvili, 1980:35]. According to what the Maccabean brother said, unlike the idols of the king Antiochus and his companions, the living God is the object of worship for the martyrs. The deity of the pagans is not uncreated, it is carved and not even skillfully. This metaphor expresses not through imagination but through aesthetic expression the truth of Christians – their God is uncreated. The ones who walk the true path, the law of Moses guides: "You shall have no other gods before[a] me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" [ἄδθ. 20:3-4]. Therefore, in agreement with the Law, the only object of worship for the Maccabees is the Lord God and there is no one except Him. It is obvious

⁷ According to the biblical tradition, Elijah stands up in front of the godless king Akab. The king considers him to be a curse and demands him to deny his own faith and worship the main idol Baal like the others do. In order to show the soullessness and idleness of the idol, Elijah asked the population of Israel, the Baal priests under the protection of the wife of Akab, Jezebel to gather on the mount of Karmil. Akab agreed and everyone gathered there. According to the Elijah's proposal they had to bring sacrifices their gods on the alters without making fire. If one of the lambs set on fire by itself, that would have been an evidence that the god of the sacrifice was the true God and the one who sacrificed was the servant of truth. The all day long prayers and begging performed by the priests went in vain – their lambs stayed without a fire. After the prayer of Elijah though the fire appeared not only on the sacrifice but the sacrificial vessel also caught the fire. Subsequently the surprised pagans fell on the ground and worshipped the true God (yet, after a certain time, the king persuaded by the queen started persecuting Elijah again and pursued the path of godlessness [III kings 17;18]).

that this commandment itself excludes the recognition of another god, therefore, it is irrelevant for the Maccabean martyrs to worship an idol (their Law (the same as the word of God) forbade them to depict even “Yahweh” aiming to avoid giving a certain form to God since He is invisible to human beings).

We see a truly Christian attitude in the words of the fourth brother when the king commands “to strip the skin off his head” and cut off his hands and legs, ears and his tongue”. This command incites a sense of gratitude in his heart and he says: “It is good of you because you will cast out a sin from my head and by cutting off my ears I shall not hear your disgraced voice; and by cutting out my tongue I shall not have chance to converse with you” [Imnaishvili, 1980:35]. The young man expresses his gratitude to his torturer, since he draws him away from sin by his ruthless actions. He ends his assertive response with the following words: “Even if you cut off my hands and my legs, you will not separate me from the Lord my God in front of which all the knees bend and every tongue praises him with the voice of chanting” [Imnaishvili, 1980: 35]⁸.

The brothers give variety of answers to the king before the actual martyrdom, yet their message usually is the same: no matter what the king does to them, the Maccabees seeking heavenly crowns and treasures are not going to be defeated by the momentary pain experienced in this world.

Important impression of the brothers is given by their oral responses to the king and their mother. Their speeches reveal their knowledge of the Law and their erudition. Each response is so powerful that the king kills the fifth brother without asking him questions or giving him a chance for a dialogue: “and the king ordered to bring the fifth one and he got scared of making him suffer, so he killed him and added him to the rest of his brethren” [Imnaishvili, 1980:36].

Considering the *Martyrdom*, it is likely that Antiochus not only was disappointed by the firmness and meekness of the children, but he sees them as his verbal opponents; this is confirmed by his decision to cut off the tongue of the sixth brother [Imnaishvili, 1980:36].

It is interesting that every new maneuver of the king is responded by kindness and a miracle. In the view of Antiochus, he can silence the eloquence of a martyr by cutting out his tongue. Yet, to his great misfortune, another disaster arrives upon the ruthless ruler: “and the saint opened his mouth and showed him his tongue. His mouth was bright as if he just had wine. And when the king and his companions saw, he was greatly surprised and frightened. And when his tongue was cut out, he was bleeding terribly, yet,

⁸ Compare with the *Songs of Repentance* by David the Builder – I. Praise; Bible – Isaiah, 45:24; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10-11.

his mouth was shining bright. And the godless king said: I was defeated and fell by the children, how are we to believe from now on in the power of the god we serve? [Imnaishvili, 1980:37] After this the hagiographer explains the next reason of the king's outrage, which follows the response of the fourth brother: "And the King was terrified by the saint and madly infuriated" [Imnaishvili, 1980: 36]. Therefore, the essence of punishment on the side of the Maccabees lies in their exemplary and reasonable responses. Antiochus feels it very well. It is likely that he, disappointed by reality of their irony responds to the eldest brother who is determined to fight "by his own will": "stop wising in front of me, be aware that I have an authority to kill you" [Imnaishvili, 1980:36]. He reminds him with a threatening voice that he has no time and is in no state of displaying his wisdom, but it is better for the Maccabean child to get more sensible. The king gets shamed and disgraced for his threatening words towards the children: "When the king heard it, he filled up with anger and said: I shall cut up your body into pieces" [Imnaishvili, 1980:33]. By no attempt whether verbal or physical violence managed the king defeat and subordinate the Jews. This increased his desire for revenge even to a greater extent so that he made his punishment more severe for every next brother.

This is how the author of *The Martyrdom* describes the state and actions of the king with no spiritual insight and separated from human nature in the moment when he sees a miracle: "The godless king was like a greedy dog never satisfied by eating corpses and drinking blood" [Imnaishvili, 1980:37]. This example of the author's evaluation clarifies his own position as a true Christian who finds such an action unacceptable and he uses the metaphor of a greedy dog in order to emphasize the contrast and present the cruelty of a human being who was initially created in the image and likeness of God.

The Antiochus' desire to save Solomon's seventh son is nothing but his attempt to recover his battered pride and the others' respect towards himself. Exactly this pride makes him call the mother towards repenting her old age and spare at least "one bunch of grapes".

The king's hopes are disappointed again. He failed to fulfil what he intended. The full stop to his defeat was made by the youngest, the seventh Maccabean brother. He called the godless monarch not to delay him in joining the heavenly kingdom. "When the king heard the words of the child, he felt furious for being embarrassed in front of his companions and ordered to cut him" [Imnaishvili, 1980:38].

The Hagiographer does not leave unmentioned the fate of the martyr and notes that "then the godless surrounded him like a gazelle surrounded by dogs and the evil ones dug out his eyes, cut of his ears, hands and legs surround [Imnaishvili, 1980:38].

In the end, the final point to the king's defeat is marked with the way he executes the mother without a word: "when the king acknowledged his own defeat, he ordered the mother to be tormented" [Imnaishvili, 1980:38]. This fact can be discussed as the expression of psychological justice and precision. Apart from the fact that the defeated king does not even wish to get into debates with Solomonia, he also knows that the mother herself will not wish to either survive or consider his offers. The mother, who just a few minutes ago was "standing and saw some of them killed and some of them alive did not change her heart, nor she was terrified, but she rejoiced for inhabiting the Kingdom of heaven together with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because a sword failed to cleave her strong heart" [Imnaishvili, 1980:38].

It should be mentioned that the hagiographer more than once shows the mother's joy. This moment is one of the defining conditions of the composition. She, after the death of almost every child expresses her joy and gratitude to God. The woman compares her children with the seven days of the Genesis and regards each of them as the ones who bring the joy of those days. Solomonia herself is going to retire after the death of the youngest son as God had a rest from his works on the seventh day [Imnaishvili, 1980:38].

Thus ends the act of the martyrdom of the Maccabees that allows the readers follow the storyline of their martyrdom and fills them with compassion. This elevated and tragically beautiful image ends with the highly artistic words of the author who describes Solomonia as the rejoicing mother of seven bridegrooms: "The Maccabean woman rejoiced as if at the wedding of her sons" [Imnaishvili, 1980:38].

Considering all the above mentioned, the Maccabean brothers should not be considered as children by age. This is evidenced by their sensible responses given to the king. From a Christian point of view all is possible for a faithful believer even if he/she is a child. Yet, we might consider the youngest seventh son as relatively small in age. Solomonia was particularly concerned about him and worried that his young age could have led him astray from the heavenly crown that was given to his elder brothers: "when the last son was left, his mother worried for him, encouraged him and prayed to God that he would give him courage to join his brothers and become perfect for she was scared of him getting entrapped in the snares of the evil one" [Imnaishvili, 1980:37]. Solomonia's anxiety is not unreasonable since the youngest child witnessed the death of the six of his brothers. We should not forget that he saw everything with his own eyes and at the time like this it is perfectly possible for the so called vertical line expressing the spiritual line to decrease and human nature to prevail over the divine. In spite of this we still think that

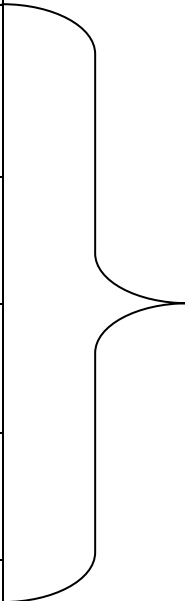
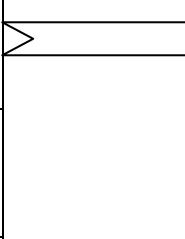
the Maccabean brothers are not children. They can be seen more in terms of adolescent boys.

Together with the facts listed above, it is noteworthy to remember that the lexicographic tradition considers different versions of understanding the word “child”. In the ancient Georgian language the word “*გრძს/ყძს*” (minor) meant a child, an young boy, while according to Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani the word covered the age from 10 to 20. Yet, the letter implies that an young man can also be called “*გრძს/ყძს*” (minor) [Metreveli, 2004:12]. We think that the reference by the word in the discussed story is made precisely to young men.

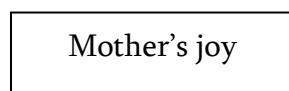
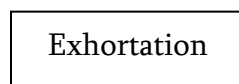
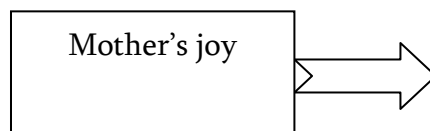
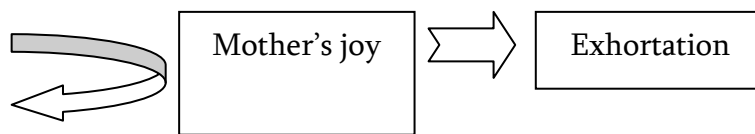
Apart from the ability to responding sensibly, one of the other evidences for the Maccabean martyrs’ not being children by age is the age of their mother. According to the story, Solomonia is an old lady. The *Martyrdom* emphasizes it three times [Imnaishvili, 1980:37,38,32].

Regarding the raised issue another episode attracts our attention in *The Martyrdom*. The king Antiochus starts interrogating the Maccabean brothers with the eldest one after having asked them “which one of them was the eldest, since they all looked of the same age” [Imnaishvili, 1980:32]. What can be meant by the author’s version of “right?” We think the king found it difficult to figure out the age differences between the brothers not only because they all were similarly (filled with divine wisdom) expressive (“right”), but also because they were physically equal while being ready to be martyred. This moment also makes us think that the Maccabean martyrs should not be regarded as youngsters (Each of them must have been at least an year older than the following one, therefore the difference between the eldest and the youngest must have been noticeable especially since the age difference is more obvious in childhood than it is in adulthood). Therefore the mother’s teaching to the youngest son does not mean that he must have been an infant. He was younger than the rest of his brothers but we cannot define his exact age.

It should also be mentioned that Solomonia exhorts not only the youngest son. Repetitions present one of the characteristic features of this work (See Appendix 1). By this we do not mean the order of the brother’s being tortured (Reader/listener knows from the beginning the teleology of *The Martyrdom* (the aim of the hagiographer is to present each martyrdom step by step). Here the storyline develops against the background of Solomonia’s inner state: her emotions are expressed at the execution of each Maccabee. For more evidence we shall provide a chart presenting the composition of the work that considers the order of the brother’s martyrdoms as well as the role of the mother during their martyrdom.

<p>I. Emergence of the king →</p>	<p>The Maccabees appear ←</p>	<p>Mentioning of the perished and the faithful</p>
<p>II. Mother's address to her sons; Exhortation of the 1st son</p>		
<p>III. The author's astonishment</p>		
<p>IV. The king's fear of being defeated</p>		
<p>V. The calling of the 1st son by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		
<p>VI. The calling of the 2nd son by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		
<p>VII. The calling of the 3rd son by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		
<p>VIII. The calling of the 4th son by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		
<p>IX. The author's speech</p>		
<p>X. the martyrdom of the 5th brother without a dialogue</p>		
<p>XI. The calling of the 6th son by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		
<p>XII. The author</p>		
<p>XIII. The defeated king, The calling of the mother by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		
<p>XIV. The calling of the 7th son by the king, dialogue, torture</p>		

XV.	King's order to torture the mother, no dialogue
XVI.	The state of the surrounding people
XVII.	The author's finale



Thus, as a conclusion to the discussion above, the word „ἄρσ“ must mean an young man in horizontal line if the text is considered in the image of a cross, while the vertical meaning in terms of imagology it refers to innocence, unconditional faith, the fullness of obedience. Besides, if we consider it together with the appendix attached, it is obvious that the mother's exhortation and encouragement of her youngest son is not to be explained by the young age of the son. Therefore, we are left with a less chance of discussing the merit of the Maccabean martyrs within the context of the images of the young martyrs.

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