



THEOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM

MESSIANISM AND THE NOBLE DEATH IN ROMAN MILITARY TRADITION

JONATHAN NUMADA, PH.D.



THE NOBLE DEATH

- Inspired by the Death of Socrates
- Viewed as vicarious and efficacious
- Viewed as assuaging the Wrath of the gods or God.

LIVY, *HISTORY OF ROME* (LATIN)

Decius: Prays a prayer devoting his death to the benefit of the Roman Empire. He then charges enemy lines.

“[Decius] appeared as something awful and superhuman, **as though sent from heaven to expiate and appease all the anger of the gods** and **to avert destruction** from his people and bring it on their enemies.”

Livy, *History of Rome*, 8.9.4-9

LIVY, *HISTORY OF ROME* (LATIN)

Decius the Younger

Decius shouted to his men and asked them whither they were fleeing, what hope they had in flight; he tried to stop those who were retreating and recall the scattered units. Finding himself unable, do what he would, to check the demoralisation, he invoked the name of his father, P. Decius, and cried: "**Why do I any longer delay the destined fate of my family? This is the privilege granted to our house that we should be an expiatory sacrifice to avert dangers from the State.** Now will I offer the legions of the enemy together with myself as a sacrifice to Tellus and the Dii Manes.

Livy, *History of Rome*, 10.28



THE NOBLE DEATH IN JEWISH MARTYRDOM TRADITIONS



THE MACCABEAN MARTYRS

³² For we are suffering because of our own sins. ³³ And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, [God] will again be **reconciled** (**καταλλαγῆσεται**) with his own servants.

37 I, like my brothers, **give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors** (τῶν πατρίων νόμων), appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation ... 38 and **through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty** that has justly fallen on our whole nation.“

2 Maccabees 7:32-38 NRSV

Date of Composition:

- 135 to 60's BC

Cultural Background:

- Greek-language recounting of the Hasmonean Revolt of 167 to 160 BC in a Hebrew-Language original (1 Maccabees).

Purpose:

- A goal is to show how perseverance in face of persecution is the epitome of virtue.

THE MACCABEAN MARTYRS

²⁷ "You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments **for the sake of** the law.

²⁸ Be merciful to your people, and **let our punishment suffice for them**.

²⁹ Make **my blood their purification** (καθάρσιον αὐτῶν ποιήσον τὸ ἐμὸν αἷμα), and take my life in exchange for theirs" (ἀντίψυχον).

4 Maccabees 6:27-29 NRSV

Date of Composition

- Unknown, but likely contemporary to Paul

Cultural Background

- Educated Hellenistic Judaism; Possibly Christian

Purpose

- Provide a philosophical synthesis of Greco-Roman and Jewish ideas of virtue

MARTYRDOM TRADITIONS IN PAUL

²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, **through the redemption (τῆς ἀπολυτρόσεως)** that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a **sacrifice of atonement (ἱλαστήριον)** by his blood, effective through faith.

Romans 3:24-25 NRSV

¹⁰ For if *while we were enemies*, we were **reconciled (κατηλλάγημεν)** to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been **reconciled (καταλλαγέντες)**, will we be saved by his life.

Romans 5:10 NRSV



THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM



THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM

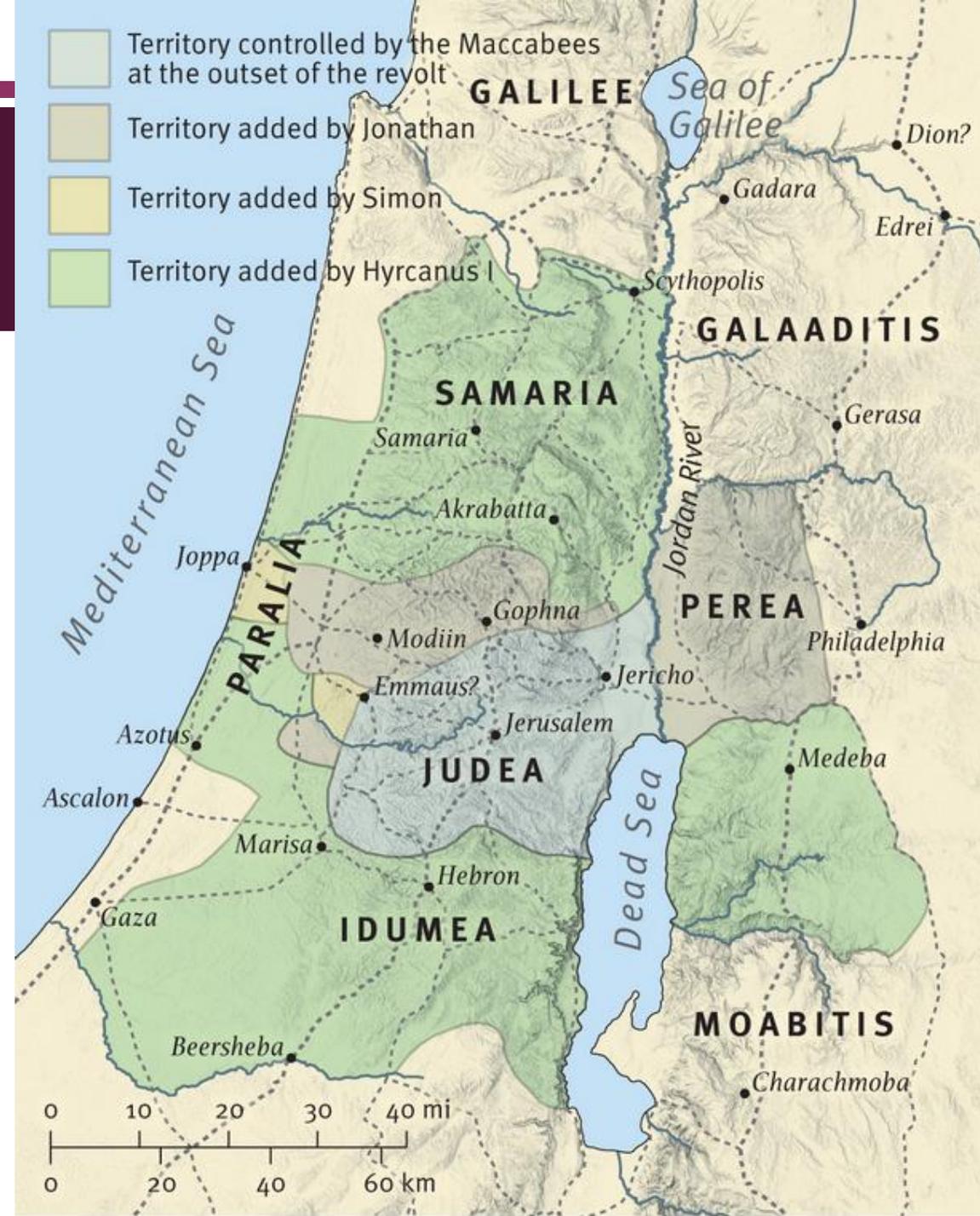
- Maccabean Revolt (167 BC – 160 BCE)
 - Citizens of Antioch → Betrayal of Jerusalem
 - Citizens of Antioch → Betrayal of Judea
- Plundering of the Temple
 - 1 Macc 1:20-23
 - 2 Macc 3:13-23



THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM

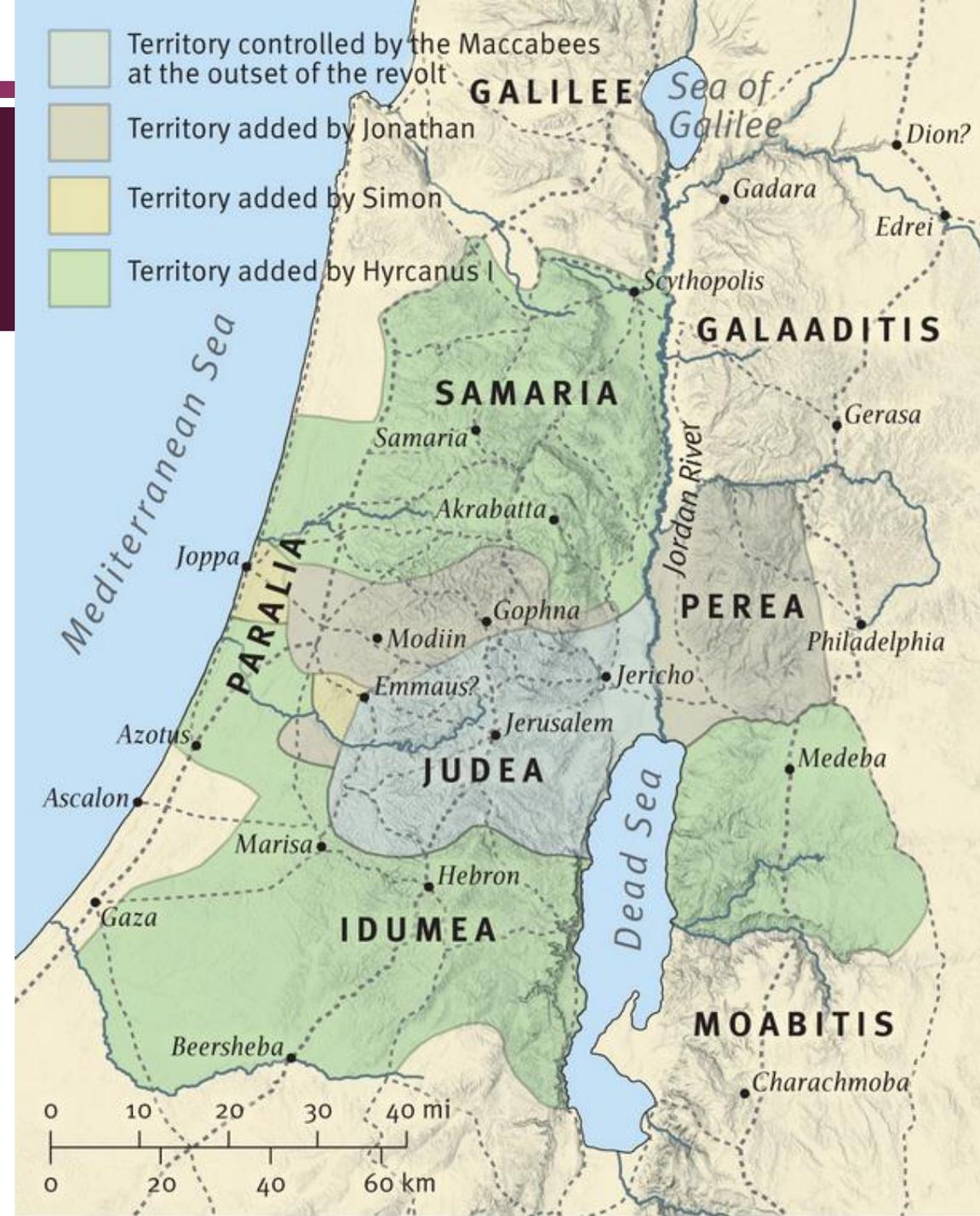
Maccabean Revolt: Birth of the Zealots

- 1 Macc 2:26, 54—Phinehas' zeal (Num 25:7-13)
- Zeal and a tradition of War
 - Judea's neighbors
 - Rome
 - The Jewish War → 70 CE
 - Kitos War → 115-117 CE
 - Bar Kochba Revolt → 132-135 CE



THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM

- Inspiration and Dissatisfaction with Hasmoneans
- Hasmoneans → not Davidic
 - Limited restoration under Non-Davidic rulers
 - Legitimated by analogies to David, but not Davidic claims
- Assumption that Messiah would be like but superior to Maccabean warriors



THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM

Dreams for David

- David's covenant eternal (2 Sam 7:16, 29)
- Oft-mentioned in Prophetic literature
- Frustration with the Temple → Priestly Messiah
- Frustration with never-ending foreign domination → Military Messiah

... but My lovingkindness shall not depart from [David], as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you (David).

Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; *your throne shall be established forever.*

(2 Sam. 7:15-16)

THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM

1 Enoch

- Apocalyptic book
- Textually corrupt
 - Re-written and edited multiple times
 - A retelling of Genesis
 - Book of Life
 - Final Judgment
 - Heavenly Armies
- Promise of a Return of the “Son of Man from the Heavens”
 - Jude 14-15
 - *Zeitgeist* of the New Testament

1 Enoch’s “Greatest Hits”

for their names shall be blotted out of the book of life ... and in the fire shall they burn; for there is no earth there.

(1 Enoch 108:3)

May they be blotted out of the book of life And may they not be recorded with the righteous.

(Psalm 69:28 NASB)

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

(Revelation 20:15 NASB)

1 Enoch's Greatest Hits: Reboot

THE EMERGENCE OF MESSIANISM

1 Enoch

- Apocalyptic book
- Textually corrupt
 - Re-written and edited multiple times
 - A retelling of Genesis
 - Book of Life
 - Final Judgment
 - Heavenly Armies
- Promise of a Return of the “Son of Man from the Heavens”
 - Jude 14-15
 - *Zeitgeist* of the New Testament

¹⁴ *It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones,*

¹⁵ to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."

(Jude 14 and 15)

And behold! He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones *To execute judgement upon all, and to destroy all the ungodly: And to convict all flesh of all the works of their ungodliness which they have ungodly committed, and of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.*

(1 Enoch 1:9)

CONCLUSION

1. Ideas of a satisfactory, atoning, appeasing death were already latent in Greco-Roman Culture
2. People would have understood Jesus's Sacrificial Death as a Ransom for Sin be Noble and Plausible
3. Most of the Conceptual Vocabulary regarding Jesus's Second Coming was Present in Jewish Literature, Theology, and Eschatological Expectation
4. Jewish Pseudepigraphal Works made Jesus's Teachings about Himself (Mark 13) Comprehensible to Members of Greco-Roman and Jewish Culture