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Judas the Maccabee's Dream (2 Macc. 15:11-16) and the Egyptian King's Sickle Sword

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The description of Judas Maccabaeus' final battle with Nicanor in 2 Maccabees 15 juxtaposes a blasphemous Nicanor and a pious Judas, confident that he will be victorious with God's help (2 Macc 15:7-17, 21-4, 26-7). Judas encourages his soldiers not only by referring to God's interventions in earlier battles as exemplified in the Torah and the Prophets (15:9; cf. 15:21-4),¹ but also by reporting a dream (15:11-16).² This dream adds a prophetic act to its presentation of the deceased high priest Onias and the prophet Jeremiah as intercessors for the Jewish people and the Holy City, because Jeremiah extends his right hand and delivers a golden sword to Judas (paradou`nai tw`/ louda rJomfaivan crush`n) with the following comment: "Take this holy sword as a gift from God, and crush the opponents with it" (Labe; th;n aJgivan rJomfaivan dw`ron para; tou` qeou`, di jh|~ qrauvsei~ tou;~ uJpenantivou~, 2 Macc. 15:16, my trans.). Afterwards Judas triumphs over Nicanor and utterly shames him by having his head and right arm cut off. He hangs those from the citadel as an unmistakable public victory sign (15:30, 32-5).

What is the meaning of Jeremiah's prophetic act? First, the interpretation that might seem obvious at first glance, that the act emphasizes that Judas is the Jews' legitimate military leader, installed by God through Jeremiah, can hardly be accurate.

¹ There is an implicit quotation of Isa. 37:36LXX in 2 Macc. 15:22, A. van der Kooij, "The Use of the Greek Bible in II Maccabees", *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 25 (1999), 127-38, p. 133.

² It concerns a so-called dream image appearance, R.K. Gnuse, *Dreams and Dream Reports in the Writings of Josephus: A Tradition-Historical Analysis*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, 255-60.

It is strange that such a legitimation comes at the end of the book and not in chapter 8, which reports Judas' first military actions. The legitimation itself would be truncated, because Jeremiah's symbolic act is not at all elaborated with a focus on Judas' leadership. One would also expect in line with this reading that the narrative would continue with Judas' installation or confirmation as ruler of the Jews, but this is missing in the rest of chapter 15. Second, the act itself seems to be without precedent in Jewish traditions, and, therefore, does not match Judas' own references to earlier deliverances by God drawn from the Torah and the Prophets. God's sword is referred to in Isa. 27:1 about God's punishment of Leviathan and the dragon in the sea,³ but the content of this passage is rather different from 2 Macc. 15. In Isa. 27 it is God who destroys the dragon enemy⁴ and the holy sword is not delivered into the hands of a human person.⁵ Josh. 5:13-5, a passage that briefly reports Joshua's vision before the capture and destruction of Jericho, also corresponds to 2 Macc. 15:11-16 to a certain extent only. It describes a dream appearance to the commander before the victory and also includes a sword, but Joshua sees a human figure, specified as God's army's commander, standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand (wdyb hpwlv wbrjw). This passage is close to 2 Macc. 15, but the central act of the handing over of the sword to the commander is absent.

³ Isa 27:1MT: wbrjb; 27:1LXX: ma/xairan (LXX apparently has only one anonymous dragon as God's opponent). Cf. Isa. 34:5; 66:16; Zech. 13:7; 1 Enoch 90:19, 34; 91:12.

⁴ Van der Kooij, "Use of the Greek Bible", 134-5, argues that the motif of Judas' crushing of his opponents builds on the messianic prophecy of Numb. 24:17b, which shares a future form of qrau/w with 2 Macc. 15:16.

⁵ Cf. Ezek. 30:24-5; Jdt. 9:2; Test. Levi 5:3.

If biblical forerunners of Jeremiah's presentation of the sword to Judas are missing, the motif may derive from an extra-biblical tradition.⁶ In this note I will argue such a tradition existed and circulated in Egypt up to the Maccabean times. Several bi- or tri-lingual documents from Ptolemaic Egypt transmit a tradition, which was well-known in priestly circles from the Ptolemaic period through documents as well as representations on stelae and temple walls. This tradition was part of a cluster of acts that honoured the Ptolemaic king because of his benefactions in the third and second century BCE. It was established by the priests, but perhaps orchestrated by the kings themselves. Priestly assemblies took the decision to honour the king and documented this in decrees that were published on stelae, usually in Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic as well as Greek. The most important of these documents are four priestly decrees from Egypt, which have been transmitted in several versions:

- 1) the Canopus decree of 238 BCE in honour of Ptolemy III Euergetes;

⁶ R. Doran, *Temple Propaganda: The Purpose and Character of 2 Maccabees*, Washington D.C., 1981, 73-5, notes the older parallels of the Marniptah-stele of the Karnak temple, the Israel stele and the Athribis stele, depicting an Egyptian god who gives a sword to the pharaoh. According to the Marniptah stele the god Ptah appears to Marniptah in a dream before his battle against the Libyans and gives him the sword and tells him to banish the fearful heart from him. These parallels belong to the Egyptian sickle sword traditions discussed below. J.A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York: Doubleday, 1983, 499, briefly states that the sword of victory handed by a god to his chosen commander or king is an Egyptian motif, also used by the Ptolemies. O. Keel, "Warum Sammlungen altorientalischer Miniaturkunst an einem Biblischen Institut?", in O. Keel and C. Uehlinger (eds), *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1990, , 9-24, p. 19, briefly suggests (referring to his earlier discussions, see footnotes 56 and 60), that Josh. 5:13-5 and 2 Macc. 15:12-6 are both inspired on the Egyptian iconographical tradition of the handing over of the sickle sword to the pharaoh.

2) the Raphia decree of 217 BCE commemorating Ptolemy IV Philopator's victory at the Battle of Raphia;

3) the Memphis decree of 196 BCE in honour of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, inscribed on the famous Rosetta Stone;

and 4) the Second Philae decree of 185/4 BCE, also in honour of Ptolemy V.⁷

Building on indigenous Egyptian royal ideology concerning the pharaoh, these four priestly decrees focus on the Ptolemaic king's benefactions and honour him especially for his military success as well as his protection and restoration of the Egyptian temples.⁸ All four decrees commemorate the king's military victories, and two have been drawn up after an important battle. The Raphia decree commemorates the Battle at Raphia against the Seleucid king Antiochus III (Demotic version ll. 10-15; 20-1; 23-5), and the Rosetta decree commemorates Ptolemy V's victory over the indigenous rebels from the South in Lycopolis in 196 BCE (e.g. Greek version ll. 19-28).⁹ In

⁷ References: W. Huss, "Die in ptolemäischer Zeit verfassten Synodal-Dekrete der ägyptischen Priester", *ZPE* 88 (1991) 189-208; J.W. van Henten, "The Honorary Decree for Simon the Maccabee (1 Macc 14:25-49) in its Hellenistic Context", in J.J. Collins and G.E. Sterling (eds), *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 116-45, pp. 122-3.

⁸ The king's restoration and improvement of the temples, and confirmation of temple privileges as well as privileges for other subjects are referred to in Canopus decree, Greek version ll. 6-9; Rosetta decree, Greek version ll. 9-20; 28-35; Raphia decree, Demotic version ll. 17-3; 26; Second Philae decree, Hieroglyphic version ll. 5d-8f; Demotic 4e-7b; protection of the temples: Hieroglyphic version l. 10d; Demotic l. 8c. Huss, "Synodal-Dekrete", 103-9, offers a survey of these benefactions.

⁹ References: J.W. van Henten, "Antiochus IV as a Typhonic Figure in Daniel 7", in A.S. van der Woude (ed.), *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings*; Leuven: Peeters, 1993, 223-43, footnotes 65 and 76. The first Philae decree and the Sehel stele from 187 BCE also commemorate the victory at Lycopolis: D.J. Crawford, J. Quaegebeur and W. Clarysse, *Studies on Ptolemaic Memphis*, Leuven: Peeters, 1980: 33-4, n. 1. References to military conflicts in the Second Philae decree:

conventional formulae the kings are also honoured for their restoration of peace and order (Canopus Greek version l. 12; Rosetta decree, Greek version l. 2; cf. Raphia decree, Demotic version l. 26).¹⁰

Important for my discussion of 2 Macc. 15:11-16 is that three of these priestly decrees include a passage that refers to a very specific act of honouring the king. The priests state that statues of the king and the queen will be set up in all Egyptian temples, making the royal family omnipresent in religious locations.¹¹ This specific honour is linked up with the description of a traditional scene that depicts a god or several gods handing over a sickle sword of victory, the so-called *khepesh* sword, to the king (Raphia decree Demotic version l. 34; Rosetta decree Greek version ll. 38-40; Demotic l. 23; Second Philae decree Hieroglyphic version ll. 14c-e; 15ab; Demotic ll. 11f-h; 12e).¹² According to the Rosetta decree Ptolemy V Epiphanes

Hieroglyphic version ll. 4d-5c; 9-12; Demotic ll. 3h-4d; 7-9; cf. Canopus decree, Greek version ll. 9; 12.

¹⁰ Cf. also the *filā/nqrwpa*-decrees of the Ptolemaic kings with lists of their benefactions, G. Hölbl, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches: Politik, Ideologie und religiöse Kultur von Alexander dem Grossen bis zur römischen Eroberung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994, 139.

¹¹ Huss, "Synodal-Dekrete", 105.

¹² Cf. the First Philae decree Hieroglyphic version ll. 9d-f; Demotic ll. 10a-c. For references about the *khepesh* sword, descriptions and a discussion of its functions, see A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*, 7 vols, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1925-1955, III, 270; H. Bonnet, *Die Waffen der Völker des alten Orients*, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1926: 87-9; 93-5; O. Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen im Alten Testament: Ikonographische Studien zu Jos 8, 18-26; Ex 17, 8-13; 2 Kön 13, 14-19 und 1 Kön 22, 11*, Freiburg-Göttingen: Universitätsverlag-Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 51-76 and 171-80; S. Schosske, "Krummschwert", *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* III [1980], 819-22; H.W. Müller, *Der Waffenfund von Balata-Sichem und die Sichelschwerter*, München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie

received a statue in every temple named “Ptolemy, protector of Egypt”, with a statue of the temple’s principle god handing the sickle sword over to him standing next to the king’s statue. The Greek version uses the more general phrase “weapon of victory” (ο{plon nikhtikovn, l. 39; Elephantine copy l. 7) in stead of the *khepesh* sword. The Raphia decree states that a statue of the city god had to be set up on a platform next to the statue of the king who receives the sword of victory (Demotic version l. 34). In some occasions the scene described in these passages (or a variant of it in case of the Raphia decree) is also depicted on the stele with the decree itself. One of the stones with the Raphia decree, from ancient Pithom (Tell el-Maskoutah), represents this scene on the stele: Atum, the principle god of Pithom, accompanied by six local gods, delivers the sickle sword to the king with his right hand.¹³ One of the copies of the Rosetta stele, called the stele of Damanhur or An-Nobairah, combines a scene about Ptolemy V, who stabs an enemy, with the handing over of the sickle sword by a god. According to the Second Philae decree the god Amun delivers a sickle sword of victory to Ptolemy V Epiphanes (Hieroglyphic version ll. 14c-e; 15ab; Demotic ll. 11f-h; 12e), which is highly appropriate in the context of the decree, for it commemorates Ptolemy’s victory over the rebels from the south (above). The title of the statue to be set up for the king is: “Ptolemy, Lord of Victory” (Second Philae decree Hieroglyphic version ll. 13f-14a; Demotic ll. 11c-d).¹⁴ How many and which

der Wissenschaften, 1987; I. Cornelius, “The Iconography of Divine War in the Pre-Islamic Near East: A Survey”, *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 21 (1995), 15-36, pp. 16-7; 19-20 and 22-4.

¹³ H.-J. Thissen, *Studien zum Raphiadekret*, Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1966, 69-70 with Plate 1.

¹⁴ The local god Shu, his sister Tephnut and the ancestors of the king stand before Ptolemy, who stabs a prisoner to death. Shu hands over a sword of victory to the king. E.A.T.W. Budge, *The Rosetta Stone in the British Museum*, London: The Religious Tract Society, 1929, 38-9; Thissen, *Raphiadekret*, 70. The First Philae decree, a modified copy of the Rosetta decree, refers to the images of Ptolemy V as the

gods are giving the sickle sword to the king in these decrees apparently varies, depending on local traditions.

As has been noted already in passing, the depiction of gods handing over a sickle sword to a pharaoh is a traditional scene in Egyptian royal ideology. It is attested in Ancient Egyptian traditions from the New Empire onwards.¹⁵ The scene belongs to the ideology of the triumphant pharaoh and is sometimes combined with another traditional scene showing the pharaoh with a sickle sword in his right hand and keeping a tuft of hair or an outstretched arm of a kneeling captive enemy with his other hand, as it were just before slaughtering the captive person by severing the head from the body.¹⁶ In the Ptolemaic period this scene is depicted on temple reliefs as

God Epiphanes and the [god] of the divine circle, who is giving a sickle sword of victory to Ptolemy (Demotic version ll. 10b-c, Hieroglyphic ll. 9e-f slightly different).

¹⁵ O. Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament am Beispiel der Psalmen*, Zürich-Köln: Benziger Verlag-Neukirchener Verlag, 1972, 270-80; Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 58-76 and 171; 173-80; Müller, *Waffenfund*, 139-45 and 154. Photographs of this scene offers W. Wreszinski, *Atlas zur Altaegyptischen Kulturgeschichte*, IInd series with Index, Leipzig: Hinrich, 1935, 17. One example is Ramses II's stele (1279-1213 B.C.E.) from Beth Shean, J.B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2nd ed.), 1969, no. 321; Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 178 with illustr. 34; O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen*, Freiburg: Herder, 1998, 100-103 with illustr. 112.

¹⁶ Wreszinski, *Atlas*, no. 164a (depicting Ramses II's victory over the Libyans, entrance hall of the temple in Bet el-Wali). For the same scene on scarabees: C. Uehlinger, "Die Sammlung ägyptischer Siegamulette (Skarabäensammlung Fouad S. Matouk)", in: O. Keel and C. Uehlinger (eds), *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1990, 58-86 illustr. 98a-b. The scene is also depicted on scarabees and seals from Ancient Israel (14th-12th Century BCE, Beth Shean, Lakish, Megiddo etc.), Keel, *Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik*, 270-5 with illustr. 400a-c; Keel,

well as steles.¹⁷ In fact, one of the priestly decrees not only commemorates a major victory of the king, but also brings a combination of both traditional Egyptian scenes of royal ideology: the god hands the sword over to the king and the king slaughters a kneeling captive with that sword. The relevant passage of this Second Philae decree states:

And be set up [an image of] the local god in this temple [giving a (royal?) sickle-sword of victory to] the image of the Lord of [victory?] punishing for him a smitten (captive) ... an image of His Majesty (be?) engraved on the stela of (?) this decree [on top of it?]. It is executed slaying an enemy, (while there) is the local (?) god giving to him the royal sickle sword of victory' (Hieroglyphic version ll. 14c-e; 15ab).¹⁸

The Raphia decree combines the handing over of the sickle sword also with the slaughtering of the enemy, but the latter scene has been adapted by the incorporation

Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen, 176 illustr. 29; O. Keel, "Warum Sammlungen altorientalischer Miniaturkunst an einem Biblischen Institut?", in O. Keel and C. Uehlinger (eds), *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1990, 9-24, p. 20; Keel and Uehlinger, *Göttinnen*, 92-3 with illustr. 97a-c; 102-3 with illustr. 114a-b and 134.

¹⁷ Front of pylon of the Edfu Temple, exterior Eastern wall of the Isis Temple at Philae. References: D. Wildung, "Erschlagen der Feinde", *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* II [1977], 14-17, c. 16; Müller, *Waffenfund*, 171. The king may be accompanied by his Ka and a god, the god of the desert or the principle god of the temple concerned, who sometimes hands over a weapon.

¹⁸ Translation W.M. Müller, *The Bilingual Decrees of Philae*; Washington: The Carnegie Institution, 1920, 80-2. The text is lacunose in several places, but its content is quite certain because of the context and parallel phrases elsewhere in both versions of the document.

of Greek motifs. The king rides a horse and pierces his enemy below him with a spear,¹⁹ a forerunner of St. George and the dragon.

2 Macc. 15:12-16 too combines two related motifs, the handing over of a divine sword and the ritual shaming of the defeated enemy leader. Therefore, the Maccabean sword seems to be as much a victory symbol as the sickle sword in the Egyptian documents. 2 Macc. 15:30 reports that Nicanor's head and right arm were cut off, although posthumously. The cutting off of Nicanor's right arm emphasises his divine punishment, because he had stretched out his right hand against the temple when he spoke his terrible oath (2 Macc. 14:33). But the arm is just one element in Nicanor's shameful exposition. Is it just a co-incidence that 2 Maccabees depicts the fates of the triumphant Judas and the defeated Nicanor in a way that is surprisingly similar to the propagandistic depiction of the Ptolemaic king who slaughters a representative of the enemy with the sickle sword? The severing of Nicanor's head and arm is paralleled by 1 Macc. 7:47, but the combination with the symbolic transfer of the sword occurs only in 2 Maccabees. The hypothesis that the handing over of the golden sword²⁰ in 2 Maccabees and perhaps also the posthumous shaming of Nicanor are Jewish adaptations of sickle sword traditions from Ptolemaic royal propaganda

¹⁹ The mounted king and the horse are Greek motifs, Thissen, *Raphiadekret*, 71-3. For the spearing of the enemy see also the Damanhur or An-Nobairah stele (above with footnote 14).

²⁰ Most sickle swords were from bronze or copper, but an early group of closely related swords produced in Byblos (1860?-1730 BCE) and found near Byblos, in Sichem or Abydos (Egypt) have decorations in gold or electrum (gold with silver): electrum inlay on the rib of the blade ending in a lotus flower or uraeus snake, golden ring that connects grip and blade, golden button as well as golden nails with rosettes on the grip. There are a few cases of golden sickle swords from the first millennium BCE, Müller, *Waffenfund*, 120-7 and 170 respectively. I thank Prof. M.S.H.G. Heerma van Voss (Amsterdam) for this reference.

seems to be supported by other correspondences between data in 2 Maccabees with elements from Ptolemaic royal ideology: the monthly celebrations of Antiochus IV's birthday (2 Macc. 6:7) are without any parallel in Seleucid sources, but it was a well-established tradition to celebrate the birthday of Ptolemaic kings every month. A further parallel are the festivals that commemorate Judas' or the Ptolemaic king's victory.²¹ And last but not least there is the medium of the dream, which is another parallel between 2 Macc. 15:11-16 and one of the priestly decrees from Ptolemaic Egypt. Judas' dream is a message from God that he will be victorious. In a similar way the Egyptian gods reveal to Ptolemy IV that he was going to be victorious against Antiochus III, as the Raphia decree states:

(7) Da geschah es, dass die Wohltätigkeit des Königs [Ptolemaios, des Sohnes] (8) des Ptolemaios und die Königin Berenike, der Götter Wohltäter, Sorge trug für die Angelegenheiten der Götter zugleich mit der Fürsorge, die er zu jeder Zeit für ihre Ehre tut, so geschah es, dass [alle] Götter [von Ägypten] mit ihren Göttinnen vor ihm waren, indem sie ihm (9) den Weg wiesen, indem sie ihn schirnten zu der Zeit, da er gegen das Gebiet des Assyriens (Syrien) und das Gebiet des Chorlandes (Phönizien) zog. Sie offenbarten es zu ihm und verkündeten ihm und gaben ihm ein Orakel durch Traum, indem sie sagten, dass er seine Feinde besiegen würde, [und dass sie nicht] (10) von ihm fern sein würden zu irgendeiner Zeit, die er verbringen würde, gegen sein Unheil, (sondern) dass sie bei ihm sein würden als Schutz, um ihn zu bewahren.
(Demotic version ll. 7-10, trans. W. Spiegelberg)

Conclusion

²¹ For both parallels see J.W. van Henten, "Royal Ideology: 1 and 2 Maccabees and Egypt"

(forthcoming).

The dream report in 2 Macc. 15:11-16, part of Judas' encouragement of his soldiers before the final battle against Nicanor, probably incorporates a reworked Egyptian tradition about the sickle sword of victory. There are no biblical traditions that fully cover Jeremiah's prophetic act of handing over a divine sword to Judas. The context in 2 Macc. 15 implies that the sword does not legitimate Judas' leadership, but functions as a symbol of victory. The Ptolemaic priestly decrees repeatedly depict a scene in which a god (or several gods) hands over the sickle victory sword to the king. Sometimes this symbolic act is combined with another traditional scene during which the king executes his opponent with the sickle sword by cutting off his head. Both scenes are strikingly similar to 2 Maccabees' description of the dream report and Nicanor's shameful end in chapter 15. The Egyptian traditions are adapted for a Jewish audience, of course, Jeremiah acts as God's messenger in stead of an Egyptian god, but the correspondence is still so close that it seems rather probable that 2 Maccabees 15 echoes Ptolemaic traditions about the king and the sickle sword. One can only speculate about the trajectory of Jewish adaptations of these traditions, but, if my assumption of their incorporation is justified, we do know about its implication: this would be an indication that 2 Maccabees circulated in the Graeco-Egyptian Diaspora during at least one stage of its transmission process.