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ARE THERE MACCABEAN PSALMS IN THE PSALTER?

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Perhaps one of the most important questions in the matter of dating the Psalter is that of the presence or absence of Maccabean psalms in the collection. Scholars differ widely on the subject of such psalms in the Psalter, some finding a large number, others noting but a handful, while still others declaring the improbability of any such compositions in the Bible. The trend today is clear enough, however. Rowley notes: "At the beginning of the present century it was common to hold that a large number of the psalms was not composed until the Maccabean period. Such a view made the compilation of the Psalter so late that it could hardly be supposed that the Temple choirs of the Chronicler's day could have used this Hymn Book. Today there is a general tendency to find few, if any, Maccabean psalms, but on the contrary a good deal of ancient and pre-exilic material, though it is unlikely that any part of our Psalter was collected in its present form before the return from the exile."¹

W. T. Davison contents himself with the general remark that there were probably such psalms.² Driver proceeds very cautiously in reviewing the opinions of Olshausen and Reuss on this type of psalm, and thinks there would have been more prominent marks of such a period in the diction and style of the psalms.³ J. M. P. Smith cites the four usual

¹H. H. Rowley, *The Re-Discovery of the Old Testament* (Phila., 1946), p. 246.

²"The Psalms," in J. Hastings, ed., *A Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 152, col. 2.

³*An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 388.

ones, Psalms 44, 74, 79, and 83, as Maccabean and takes for granted that the number may be still larger, if the great events of the Maccabean era find expression in psalms at all.⁴ Wellhausen did find more than the four psalms just mentioned. As for Psalm 44:22 (Hebrew 23), his verdict is that the Maccabean period is the only period when this happened.⁵ Psalm 59:7 (Hebrew 8) speaks of Jerusalem during the time of the Maccabean War (167 B.C.). Psalm 61:4, 6 (Hebrew 5, 7) depicts the successes of the Maccabees, and these alone can fit the demands of the passage. The king mentioned is of the Hasmonean dynasty, but is not Aristobulus I (105/4 B.C.), the son of John Hyrcanus I (135-105 B.C.) and brother of Alexander Jannaeus (104-78 B.C.). In Psalm 68:5, 6 (Hebrew 6, 7) the situation is to be compared to I Maccabees 5, and has nothing to do with the deliverance from the land of Babylon. In spite of victories, Wellhausen thinks, such prayers could have been uttered quite properly; a warlike nation could have utilized such a petition. Psalm 74:3 is said to be a prayer for the prophetic testimony which would be uttered by a people like the Jews when being persecuted by the Syrians for the sake of their religion and distinctive national institutions. Note such passages as I Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41; Song of Azariah 15. Other psalms so treated are 75, 79, 101, 110, 113, and 118. Wellhausen, thus, finds a goodly element of Maccabean psalmody in the Psalter.⁶ Cheyne considers the following as psalms of this period: 20, 21, 33, 44, 60, 61, 63, 74, 79, 83, 101, 108, 115-118, 135-138, 145-147 (?), and 148-150. His method is comparable to that of Wellhausen before him in that they both judge from internal evidence almost wholly.⁷

Briggs treats the four psalms that are usually designated as Maccabean, namely, Psalms 44, 74, 79, and 83. He

⁴*The Psalms*, p. 241.

⁵*The Book of Psalms*, p. 183.

⁶*Op. cit.*, pp. 183-209.

⁷*The Origin and Religious Contents of the Psalter*, pp. 112, 116 ff.

does not understand Psalm 44 to be Maccabean, but rather a prayer of the nation during exile. Three reasons have been advanced by the advocates of a Maccabean date for this psalm.⁸ (1) There is the reference to the past history of the nation in verses 2 to 4 (Hebrew 3 to 5). The dispossession of the Canaanites by the people of Israel is spoken of. Briggs rightly claims that such a reference need not be placed in Maccabean times, but was suitable at any time after the event. (2) The stress is laid throughout on faithfulness to God and denial of idolatry. Nothing here demands so late a date as the Maccabean period. (3) In verse 23 (Hebrew 24) the psalmist cries out concerning "our affliction and our oppression," which is said to be unsuitable to a time before Antiochus Epiphanes, 168 B.C. But surely Israel was persecuted of the surrounding nations, whether it was in pre-exilic, exilic, or early post-exilic times. As for Psalm 74, Briggs interprets it also as a prayer of the nation in exile.⁹ Psalm 79 is taken to be an original lament over the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the desecration of the sanctuary, and the decimation of the people. Verses 3 and 12 and parts of verse 10 are said by Briggs to be "characteristically Maccabean."¹⁰ The glosses, again, are the work of a Maccabean editor, adapting the psalm to his own day. The last psalm to be studied under this category is Psalm 83. He finds this to be an urgent invocation of God in Nehemiah's time for deliverance from the conspiracy of the neighboring nations against Israel. After noting that some scholars refer the psalm to the time of I Maccabees 5, he concludes that there is no evidence for such a late date.¹¹ To summarize the position of Briggs, we see that he does not consider the four supposedly unquestioned Maccabean psalms as belonging to that time, although in

⁸C. A. and E. G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* (I.C.C.), Vol. I, pp. 374-376.

⁹*Op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 150, 152. In this case, however, he finds glosses from a Maccabean editor, although he does not make clear upon what basis he discerns such features of the text.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 197, 198.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 217, 219.

two instances he posits a Maccabean redaction, which appears to be at least a partial surrender of his position.

Over against those who find Maccabean psalms or Maccabean elements in the Psalter are scholars, like Bittenwieser, who reject the concept entirely. After surveying briefly the position of Wellhausen and the change that has come since—a shift in which some critics suggest that psalmody may be as old as the religion of Israel he reminds us that these men still maintain the bulk of the Psalter to be a product of post-exilic times down to the Maccabean age. He finds fault with such conclusions, because they are based upon what extraneous sources reveal rather than what the Psalms themselves make plain regarding their history. The Psalms themselves, he feels, refute very definitely the prevailing belief in Maccabean psalms.¹² He denies Gesenius' old basis of judgment in the matter as to whether the final edition of the different collections and the close of the Old Testament canon could be dated as late as the Maccabean period—and declares that the one really vital and even fundamental consideration in the entire discussion of the problem has been completely overlooked or lost sight of. This factor is the fact that, during the second quarter of the third century B.C., Hebrew as a spoken tongue began to decline and finally died out, being gradually replaced by Aramaic.¹³ He presents proof in the matter on the basis of the Hebrew original of the *Wisdom of Ben Sira* and the *Book of Daniel*. He notes that in Ben Sira the language is ill suited to the thought and that, above all, the writing of Hebrew is very faulty. His work abounds in incorrect usages. Schechter has shown that his language is similar to the language found in the Mishna and the Talmud. On what ground are we to account for Ben Sira's inferior Hebrew? It was surely not due to any lack of ability on his part as a writer. He was considered by his contemporaries as a man

¹²M. Bittenwieser, *The Psalms Chronologically Treated with a New Translation* (Chicago, 1938), p. 10.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

of literary ability and attainments, even as the best educated man of his day, according to the statement of his grandson in the Prologue to his Greek translation of the writings of his grandfather. The only possible explanation of the peculiarity noted, Bittenwieser concludes, is that at the time of his writing (that is, between 190 and 170 B.C.) Hebrew was no longer a spoken language but was employed only as the language of the sacred writings. This position he says is confirmed by the peculiar structure of the *Book of Daniel*, that is to say, its combination of both Aramaic and Hebrew. His view holds that the book was written entirely in Aramaic originally (except for the prayer in 9:4-19), and was later translated in part into Hebrew. Therefore, Aramaic was the language of the masses. He contends that the *Book of Daniel* is proof positive that, at the time of the Maccabees, Aramaic was the language spoken by the Hebrew people. His final solution is this the extreme view that half or more of the Psalms are Maccabean is to be ignored; the moderate view that holds to a small number does not do justice to the fact that they are of such high literary quality that their composition can only be placed in a time when Hebrew literature was still at its height and not in a time of decadence ; the position that a few psalms are Maccabean is untenable because the language is idiomatic Hebrew. Thus, not even any of the third group are to be placed so late as the Maccabean era. Bittenwieser faces the question as to why Hebrew of a good quality could not be written after the language: was no longer a spoken one. His answer is that the poems of Jehuda ha-Levi, which are pointed to as a possible refutation of his position, show indeed an unnatural Hebrew for the most part and lack that grand element of spontaneity. Now, whether or not we feel that Bittenwieser has given us deciding criteria for judgment in the case, we must admit that his arguments are worthy of serious consideration. He may not have accounted for all the factors in the discussion, but he has certainly placed us in possession of a feature that we can-

not afford to overlook. To us his reasoning appears particularly cogent, for we have been able to test for ourselves the language of the Psalms or the rest of the Old Testament with that of the Mishna and Talmud, and we feel his arguments are indeed valid.

Oesterley, in his first work on the Psalms,¹⁴ discusses the question of Maccabean psalms but briefly. He shows how the lines are drawn among interpreters between Briggs, Mowinckel, and Kittel, who hold there are a few of them, and Knabenbauer, Hans Schmidt, Koenig, and Herkenne, who reject the idea altogether, and Begrich-Gunkel,¹⁵ who think it is very doubtful and do not assign any of the Psalms to that age. Oesterley's concluding word is that so-called Maccabean psalms are capable of a different interpretation, as shown by Gunkel. He finds it difficult to maintain that any of the Psalms are Maccabean in character.¹⁶ In his second work on the Psalter¹⁷ Oesterley gives a more extended discussion of the problem. He begins with the cautious statement that his considerations will not definitely disprove Maccabean authorship and date for any of the Psalms, but will suggest that such a date is improbable. Psalm 44:17, 18 (Hebrew 18, 19) is said to be true only of Maccabean times, and with reference to the nation (see verses 5 and 9, Hebrew 6 and 10). In view of I Maccabees 1:11-15, how can these words apply to Maccabean times? In the Maccabees account it is distinctly stated that in those days there went out "of Israel apostates." Verse 22 (Hebrew 23) of the same psalm is said to refer to religious persecution causing the Maccabean uprising, but one needs only to read I Maccabees 1:29-63 to catch an altogether different picture of the root of the contention. No one can question that Psalm 44 is speaking of persecution, but there is no indi-

¹⁴*A Fresh Approach to the Psalms*, published in 1937.

¹⁵The hyphenation indicates that the former completed the work of the latter upon the death of the latter.

¹⁶*Op. cit.*, pp. 53, 54.

¹⁷*The Psalms*, in two volumes, which appeared in 1939 and to which we have referred before this.

cation that it was on so large a scale as the Syrian oppression of the Jews in the second century B.C. Furthermore, the Maccabean Wars, except for the initial successes of the Syrians, were a series of victories for the Jews. The Maccabean date seems to be ruled out by these arguments. With reference to Psalm 74, those who hold to the Maccabean date claim that verses 3 to 9 are to be compared with I Maccabees 1:38 and II Maccabees 1:8, where the same event is said to be in view. This is unlikely for several reasons. In verse 3 of the psalm the temple is in "perpetual ruins," and in verse 7 the sanctuary is on fire. Surely there is no agreement here with what is known of the attack on the Temple in the time of the Hasmoneans. The Temple was not in ruins; only the priests' chambers (see I Maccabees 4:38) were pulled down. And in the account of the rededication of the Temple no word is given us that it was rebuilt. Nor was the sanctuary set on fire; only the gates were burned.¹⁸ Most convincing of all the arguments that the account in the Psalms and that in First and Second Maccabees do not refer to the same occurrences is that the chief outrage of the whole desecration, the setting up of an "abomination of desolation" upon the altar, is not hinted at in the psalm. Would such be the case if the Maccabean incidents were being paralleled in Psalm 74?¹⁹ Some expositors tell us that the *mo'adhe 'el* (מוֹעֲדֵי אֵל) "places of assembly or appointed times of God, mentioned in verse 8 refers to synagogues. The American Standard Version so translates it in the text, but gives "places of assembly" as a marginal reading. If the indication is to synagogues, then Maccabean times must be meant, it is claimed. Archaeology has thrown convincing light on this question. In the first place, the synagogues were not called *mo'adhe 'el*, but the word for synagogue, then as now, is *hakkeneseth* (הַכְּנֶסֶת), the same root thought in Hebrew as underlies the Greek words found in the term "synagogue." In the second place,

¹⁸Cf. I Macc. 4:38; II Macc. 1:8; 8:33.

¹⁹W. O. E. Oesterlev, *The Psalms*, Vol. 1, pp. 67, 68.

the eminent Palestinian archaeologist, Sukenik, an authority on synagogues in Palestine and the East, has shown by archaeological evidence that synagogues did not exist in Palestine as early as Maccabean days. Says he, "It is also a matter of dispute whether the first synagogues are to be sought in Palestine or in the lands of the ancient Diaspora. It may be interesting to note in this connexion that whereas there is archaeological evidence of the existence of synagogues in Egypt as early as the third century B.C.E., and in Greece as early as the second century B.C.E., the date of the oldest remains of a synagogue found in Palestine is not earlier than the first century C.E."²⁰ In concluding our discussion of Psalm 74 we note that verse 9 is applied to Maccabean times, because it states that there was no prophet. This is just as applicable to most of the post-exilic period. If this psalm were Maccabean, would it have passed over in silence the fact that the Syrian power was seeking to stamp out in ruthless fashion the religion of Israel? Religion was no secondary issue to any of the psalmists. The silence of the psalmist on this score is inexplicable if it were written in Maccabean times. Note also that this psalm was quoted as a prophecy by the writer of I Maccabees.²¹

We turn briefly to a consideration of Psalm 83, another psalm for which a Maccabean date is advocated. A parallelism is said to exist between verses 3 and 4 (Hebrew 4 and 5) of the psalm and the passage in I Maccabees 5:2. Verses 6 to 8 (Hebrew 7 to 9) in the psalm give the names of the enemies of Israel: Edom, the Ishmaelites, Moab, the Hagarenes, Gebal, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre, and Assyria also. God is besought to make them like the whirling dust and the stubble (verses 13-17, Hebrew 14-18), but no indication is given us that these enemies were all defeated. Conversely, the account in I Maccabees 5:3-68 (especially verses 63 and 64) is a long recital of the victories

²⁰E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (the Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1930), 1934, p. 1.

²¹I Maccabees 7:17.

of Judas Maccabaeus and his followers. With such fundamental difference how can they both speak of the same series of events?

Several additional observations of a general character are adduced by Oesterley²² to show the improbability of any of the psalms being written so late as this period, and we deem these arguments to be particularly pertinent and germane to the problem. First, Hellenizing tendencies do not argue for Maccabean times, because Hellenistic influence were exerted among the Jewish people for some time before this. Second, the mention of Hasidim in some of the psalms and I Maccabees does not prove a decisive factor in the question. The manner of the mention of them in I Maccabees reveals that they had been in existence for some time. Lastly, it is well known that the Maccabean Wars, lasting from the persecution of, Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C. to the rededication of the temple in 164 B.C., were quite favorable to the Jews. Is it reasonable to hold that the despairing character of the "Maccabean" psalms would have been appropriate in the worship of the Temple in the following half a century, a period of successive Jewish triumphs? If these psalms had already been in the Psalter, their continued use along with the penitential and plaintive psalms would be a commonplace of the worship of the Temple, and for the latter psalms no Maccabean date is proposed. Archaeology has taught us to pay attention to what is called *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life, or life situation) of the Old Testament writings. These alleged Maccabean psalms fit poorly with times of great victory and conquest; they should have been of a joyful character considering the glorious character of this period in Jewish history which is commemorated to this day among the Jewish people in the Feast of Dedication. Since the so-called Maccabean psalms speak of the destruction of the temple, of religious persecution, to what can they refer if not to the Maccabean Wars? The question is in point, although difficult to answer. Because

²²*The Psalms*, Vol. I, p. 69 ff.

we have scant sources of information for Jewish history during the fourth and third centuries B.C., Oesterley is of the opinion that the writers of the psalms in question may have had certain historical events before them, the data of which have not come down to us.²³ He suggests one possibility: in 351 B.C. Phoenicia revolted against Artaxerxes III Ochus, the Persian king, an uprising which was not put down for three years. Information from the historians Eusebius and Schiirer shows that all of Syria was involved, and Egypt is also found as an interested participant. The Jews, having sided with the revolt, suffered greatly when the Persians gained the advantage. The Temple in Jerusalem could have fared no better than the temples of Egypt and the other revolting countries. The Persians were known to commit such sacrilege in their wars. Thus, the desecration of the temple in 167 B.C. is not demanded as the background for these psalms. We suggest that the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. cannot be ruled out as a possibility for the background of these psalms.²⁴

Peters, arguing at length from the liturgical character of the closing sections of the Psalter, decides that a date between 280 and 180 B.C. saw the completion of the Psalter. In view of this conclusion he holds that Maccabean psalms are "quite impossible." He finds not one in the entire Psalter, for the collections were closed before that period. He does not deny revisions in the Psalms after their compilation, but he feels this would not be radical nor extensive, in the light of II Maccabees 2:13, 14. His treatment of Psalm 150 is interesting. He notes here that we have the same names for instruments employed from the earliest times, unlike the names used in the *Book of Daniel*. He takes this as a proof against the possibility of Maccabean

²³*The Psalms*, Vol. I, pp. 72, 73.

²⁴True, Psalm 74:9 would appear to militate against this position, but it is susceptible of explanation if we understand the language as that of despair over the complete destruction about them.

²⁵J. P. Peters, *The Psalms as Liturgies*, p. 72.

psalms in the Psalter or of any thoroughgoing revision at so late a date.²⁶

Welch handles the question of the Maccabean psalms in a rather summary way. Says he, "Duhm does not hesitate to carry its final composition into the time of the Maccabees. Others seek a date for a large number of the psalms in the years between the return from exile and the Maccabean rising. The latter period certainly has one great advantage to commend it for such a purpose. Since nothing is known about Israel's inner life then, it is possible to put into those years anything we find it inconvenient to place elsewhere."²⁷

By way of summarization of some of the findings on the subject of Psalter dating, we had occasion to present evidence²⁸ that, as far as dating the Psalms was concerned, the *terminus a quo* is pre-exilic times. This conclusion agrees with the whole history of the Hebrew people and their religious background, the prominence of David in the monarchy and worship of Israel, and with the requirements of the Temple ritual. As to the *terminus ad quem* of Psalter dating, there has been quite a radical change, and for that reason we have dwelt on that phase of the problem. Formerly it was common practice to point out certain psalms as Maccabean in date, and some went to great lengths in the matter, assigning quite a large number to such a late date. One of the chief criteria for such judgment was the mention of a king. Since the bulk of the Psalter was placed in post-exilic times (and wrongly, we believe), even late post-exilic times, there seemed but one propitious time in which to place these psalms that; speak of a king, namely, the Maccabean era when the Jewish people had their own rulers after breaking the yoke of Greco-Syrian oppression. Now, scholars like Gunkel and Mowinckel, on the basis of

²⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 494.

²⁷*The Psalter in Life, Worship, and History*, pp. 96, 97.

²⁸See our article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 104 (Oct.-Dec., 1947), pp. 426-

archaeological evidence, place such psalms in pre-exilic times with quite a good bit of confidence. Furthermore, the arguments for Maccabean dates drawn from internal references have been shown to be susceptible of entirely different interpretations. We conclude that there are no psalms which can be dated so late as the Maccabean age.

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"Where a doubt may reasonably exist as to which of two or more explanations of a word or phrase is the best, the interpreter should place them together before the reader and state his reasons for preferring the one which he has concluded to adopt. If he thinks he can offer something better than what has been proposed before, he should not hesitate to do so. But there are two errors of frequent occurrence in writings of this nature which he should carefully endeavor to avoid. While he manifests his respect for the genius and labors of his predecessors by accrediting as far as practicable each valuable explanation to its original author, he should disdain the cheap triumphs to be gained by elaborately confuting their palpable mistakes. Again, a profound regard for truth, while it incites him to spare no labor in investigating and weighing every particular that may promise to throw additional light on the subject of his researches, should cause him to keep a jealous guard against that natural vanity which prompts many to attach an undue and even exclusive value to their own conjectures, though they may have nothing but their novelty to recommend them. Another rule which the interpreter of the Old Testament in the present state of Biblical criticism should adopt is that, of a close adherence to the Masoretic text. That this text is wholly free from errors no honest and well-informed critic will assert; nevertheless the absurdity of setting up the authority of the Septuagint or any other version in opposition to it as a whole has been too well exposed to be now entertained for a moment." -*Bibliotheca Sacra*, May, 1848.

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