

Justifying the Christian Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs

Michael J Petrin¹

The Maccabean martyrs were Jews killed c. 167 BCE by the Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The first of the martyrs to die was the elderly scribe Eleazar, who was beaten to death for refusing to eat pork. The rest of the martyrs (seven young brothers and their mother) were then killed for the same offense. Interestingly, these martyrs came to be venerated as Christian martyrs during late antiquity, even though they were Jews who died out of loyalty to the Mosaic Law. In this essay, I examine the earliest known justifications for the Christian cult of the Maccabean martyrs, and I argue that these justifications share a fundamentally similar approach: they argue that the Maccabean martyrs are worthy of Christian veneration by establishing continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ. At the same time, however, I explain how the justifications differ, especially with regard to the identity of Christ.

Body

Of the countless Christian martyr cults that arose during late antiquity, there is perhaps none as intriguing as the cult of the Maccabean martyrs, a group comprising seven brothers, their mother, and the aged Eleazar.² The veneration of these martyrs is especially remarkable because they were not professing Christians, but Jews who died more than a century and a half before the birth of Jesus (c. 167 BCE). What is more, the reason for their deaths was that they refused to eat pork, choosing to be killed rather than transgress a prohibition of the Mosaic Law—a prohibition that most late ancient Christians viewed as void.³ Yet Theophilus of Alexandria, writing to Jerome in 404 CE, was still able to claim that “in the churches of Christ throughout the world, [the Maccabean martyrs] are praised and commended as stronger than the punishments inflicted on them and more ardent than the fire with which they were burned.”⁴ Thus, the Christian cult of the Maccabean martyrs must have been at least fairly widespread by the year 404.

There are many questions concerning the Maccabean cult that call for further study.⁵ In this essay, however, I pursue the relatively narrow aim of explicating the earliest known justifications for the cult. This is done

through engagement with three early Christian homilies: Gregory of Nazianzus’ *In Machabaeorum laudem* (preached in 362), John Chrysostom’s *De Eleazaro et septem pueris* (preached in 398 or 399), and Augustine of Hippo’s *In solemnitate martyrum Machabaeorum* (preached sometime between 391 and 430).⁶ On the basis of these texts, all three of which contain explicit justifications for the Christian cult of the Maccabean martyrs, I argue that Gregory, John, and Augustine share a fundamentally similar approach: they argue that the Maccabean martyrs are worthy of Christian veneration by establishing continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ. At the same time, however, I explain how the homilists’ respective justifications differ, especially with regard to the identity of Christ.

Gregory of Nazianzus

Gregory of Nazianzus begins his homily *In Machabaeorum laudem* by acknowledging that although it is the feast day of the Maccabean martyrs, “not many recognize them because their martyrdom antedates Christ” (§1). Thus, it seems that Gregory was aware of a sizeable number of Christians who did not participate in the Maccabean cult. Yet Gregory views the Maccabeans’ martyrdom as “an act not less generous than that of those who later sacrificed themselves for Christ” (§11), and he argues in favor of the Maccabean cult by establishing continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ. Gregory’s unique take on this approach, however, is to emphasize Christ as the Logos, the Divine Reason or Word.⁷

Gregory attempts to establish continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history by claiming that “not one of those who attained perfection before the coming of Christ accomplished his goal without faith in Christ” (§1). He thus incorporates both Old Testament saints and New Testament saints into a continuous historical narrative through the figure of Christ. Gregory explains that this was possible because “although the Logos was later openly proclaimed in his own era, he was made known even before to the pure of mind” (§1). In other words, Christ, as the Logos, was present even in pre-Incarnation history.

Gregory argues that the Logos’ presence in pre-

¹Stanford University

Incarnation history “is evident from the large number of persons who achieved honor before his day” (§1). But what does he mean by this? It is not obvious that the Logos had to be present prior to the Incarnation in order for people of that time to achieve honor. After all, was not Achilles honorable? Was not Ajax?⁸

In order to understand Gregory’s claim, we must take into account his reason for esteeming the Maccabean martyrs: “Such noble figures, then, are not to be overlooked because they lived before the time of the cross, but should rather be acclaimed for having lived in accordance with the cross (κατα τον σταυρον)” (§2). Given that Gregory says this immediately after the claim quoted in the previous paragraph, I suggest that “achieving honor,” as Gregory uses the phrase in this homily, should be understood as equivalent to “living in accordance with the cross.”

If this interpretation is correct, then we find that Gregory’s argument turns not on the fact that the Maccabean martyrs achieved honor in a general sense, but on the particular kind of honor that they achieved, viz., that which comes from living in accordance with the cross. Moreover, Gregory provides evidence that the Maccabean martyrs lived in accordance with the cross by describing them in terms that would have been familiar to his audience from Christian martyrdom literature: e.g., he states that Eleazar “offered himself up to God as a perfect sacrifice” (§3); he says that the mother was “racked by the fear that [her sons] would not suffer” (§4), rather than by the fear that they would; and he describes the seven brothers as having won “the crown of martyrdom” (§9).⁹

In sum, Gregory argues that since the Maccabean martyrs achieved honor by living in accordance with the cross, Christ must have been known to them. And this was possible, even though they lived in pre-Incarnation history, because Christ is the eternal Logos, who has existed from “the beginning.”¹⁰ Gregory thus justifies the veneration of the Maccabeans as Christian martyrs by establishing continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ, the eternal Logos, who revealed himself to all in the Incarnation, but also previously to the “pure of mind” (§1).

John Chrysostom

In John Chrysostom’s homily *De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, we find a more developed justification

for the Christian cult of the Maccabean martyrs. John felt the need to guide his community because some of them had been convinced—“swept along by the Church’s enemies,” as John puts it (§4)—not to venerate the Maccabean martyrs. The reason for this? “They did not shed their blood for Christ but for the Law and the edicts that were in the Law, in that they were killed over pig’s flesh” (§4). In response to this argument, John, like Gregory, attempts to make the Maccabean martyrs worthy of Christian veneration by demonstrating the continuity of pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ. Yet his approach differs from Gregory’s in that he emphasizes Christ’s identity as Legislator, rather than Logos.

John begins his homily with a panegyric to the Maccabean martyrs’ courage. He claims that they are “even more brilliant” than the rest of the Christian martyrs because they were martyred before the Incarnation (§5). The Maccabean martyrs are especially remarkable, according to John, because “even those who were extremely just” (such as Moses and Abraham) feared death before the Incarnation (§5). Yet John does not simply wish to prove that the Maccabean martyrs were admirable in their actions; rather, his goal is to demonstrate “that they received their wounds for Christ’s sake (νπερ Χριστον τα τραύματα ελαβον),” that they were, to put it plainly, Christian martyrs (§6).

John’s basic argument to this end is straightforward. His first premise is that the Maccabean martyrs suffered “because of the Law and the edicts that lie within the Law” (§6). His second premise is that “it was Christ who gave that Law”—i.e., “that Law” for which the Maccabean martyrs died according to the first premise (§6). On the basis of these premises, John reaches the following conclusion: “By suffering for the Law, they displayed all of that boldness for the Lawgiver [who is Christ, according to the second premise]” (§6). John assumes the first premise to be unquestionable, which seems reasonable, since those who disagree with him regarding the Maccabean cult do so precisely because they agree with this first premise. Obviously, then, John’s major task is to prove the second premise: that it was Christ who gave the Law for which the Maccabean martyrs died.

In order to demonstrate that it was Christ who gave the Law, John refers to 1 Cor. 10:4, in which Paul writes that Moses and the Israelites “drank from the spiritual rock that followed. And the rock was Christ”

(§6). John thus demonstrates that he is not alone in identifying Christ as the Lawgiver of the old Covenant, but that he stands upon Scriptural precedent. Yet John recognizes that this argument might not be compelling to all—especially not to Jews—so he instead directs his audience’s attention to the book of the Jewish prophet Jeremiah.¹¹ John is particularly dependent upon Jer. 38:31-2 (LXX): “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, and I shall make a new Covenant with you, one unlike the Covenant which I made with your fathers.” In view of this verse, John asks who gave the new Covenant. He assumes that all will agree “without a doubt” that it was Christ (§7). Thus, since (a) the passage from Jeremiah implies that “the Legislator of both Covenants is one and the same” (§7), and (b) the Legislator of the new Covenant was Christ, John concludes that Christ must have also been the Legislator of the old Covenant.

Of course, one could object that the “new Covenant” of which Jeremiah spoke is different from the “new Covenant” that Christ gave. Yet John anticipates this objection by highlighting three “distinguishing features” of the new Covenant given by Christ: (i) “that it wasn’t given on stone tablets but that it was given on tablets of flesh, our hearts,” which is evidenced by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; (ii) “that the Word raced with ease and lit up everyone’s mind,” which is evidenced by the rapid spread of Christianity; and (iii) “that when the Law was dissolved, no one demanded payment for sins but each received forgiveness for their wrongdoings,” which is evidenced by baptism and the forgiveness that comes through grace (§14). These features, John claims, are consistent with the three key features of the new Covenant described in Jer. 38:33-4.¹²

Thus, John argues that the new Covenant given by Christ is the same as the new Covenant that Jeremiah foretold. And since Jer. 38:31-2 proves that the Legislator of the old Covenant is the same as the Legislator of the new Covenant, John is able to conclude that those “people who were killed for the Law shed their blood for the giver of the Law,” i.e., for Christ (§16). What John does, then, is rely upon Christ’s identity as Legislator in order to demonstrate that Christ was present in pre-Incarnation history and, more importantly, that the Maccabeans should be regarded as Christian martyrs, since they died for Christ.

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine’s homily *In solemnitate martyrum Machabaeorum* offers another well-developed justification for the Christian cult of the Maccabean martyrs. The basic approach of Augustine, as with both of the previously examined homilists, is to establish continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ, so that the Maccabean martyrs may be viewed as worthy of veneration alongside the post-Incarnation Christian martyrs. Augustine’s approach is distinctive, however, in that he emphasizes Christ’s role as the turning point of sacred history.

The sacred history that Augustine is interested in exploring is the history of the relationship between God and his people. As a Christian, Augustine believes that Christians are God’s people. Yet he asserts that we should not suppose “that before there was a Christian people, God had no people” (§1). The people of Abraham were also God’s people, according to Augustine; but they were not God’s people apart from Christ. This would be impossible, for Augustine understands God’s people to be equivalent to Christ’s people. Thus, Augustine claims that the people of Abraham were the people of God precisely because they were the people of Christ: “it wasn’t only after his passion that Christ began to have his people; his too was the people born of Abraham” (§1). Likewise, regarding the Maccabean martyrs, Augustine proclaims that “when you are admiring these martyrs, you shouldn’t think they weren’t Christians. They were Christians; but with their deeds they anticipated the name of Christian that was publicized much later on” (§2).

Augustine recognizes, however, that it might seem strange to identify pre-Incarnation Jews as Christians, especially since “as though it wasn’t Christ they were confessing, they were not being forced by the godless king and persecutor to deny Christ” (§2). Thus, in order to justify his claim that the Maccabean martyrs should be viewed as Christians, he sets forth a principle that unifies pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history: “The Old Testament, you see, is the veiling of the New Testament, and the New Testament is the unveiling of the Old Testament (*Testamentum enim vetus velatio est novi Testamenti, et Testamentum novum revelatio est veteris Testamenti*)” (§3). On the basis of this principle, Augustine argues that the Maccabean martyrs did not openly confess Christ because “the mystery of Christ

was still concealed behind a veil” (§3). Following the teaching of the Apostle Paul on unveiling (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14-6), Augustine understands sacred history to have been fundamentally changed by the Incarnation of Christ. Christ is, according to Augustine, the very turning point of sacred history.

In order to demonstrate the unveiling that was effected in Christ, Augustine highlights Christ’s conscious fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about his Passion, even minor prophecies such as “in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Ps. 69:21). Augustine also notes how, with Christ’s death, “the veil of the Temple was torn away,” an event which demonstrated that “now was the time for everything that was veiled in the Old Testament to be unveiled and revealed in the mystery of the cross” (§4). Thus, Augustine presents a narrative in which all of sacred history is connected to Christ’s Incarnation.

As for why the Maccabean martyrs are properly identified as Christian martyrs, Augustine offers the analogy of “a Very Important Person (potentissimus) traveling along with a troop of attendants, some going in front, others going behind” (§5). According to Augustine, “both those who march ahead are attentive to him and those who follow behind are devoted to him” (§5). In other words, one could bear witness to Christ whether one lived before the Incarnation or after it.

Augustine thus argues that all of sacred history is connected to Christ, who stands at the center of it. Through this narrative of sacred history, Augustine is able to affirm that the Christian martyrs “confessed plainly the same one as the Maccabees at that earlier time confessed in a hidden manner; the former died for Christ unveiled in the Gospel, while the latter died for the name of Christ veiled in the Law” (§5). The Maccabean martyrs, by being devoted to the Law, are an undeniable part of sacred history. Moreover, Augustine can confidently claim that “the Maccabees really are martyrs of Christ” (§6), because through their devotion to the Law they were actually devoted to Christ, who was veiled in the Law.

Conclusion

Thus, we have seen that Augustine’s justification for the cult of the Maccabean martyrs is distinctive because he emphasizes Christ’s identity as the turning point of sacred history. This differs from what we found in the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus and John

Chrysostom, who emphasize Christ’s identity as Logos and Legislator, respectively. Nevertheless, the three homilists share a basic approach: they all attempt to establish continuity between pre-Incarnation and post-Incarnation history through the figure of Christ, so that they may thereby justify the veneration of the Maccabean martyrs as Christian martyrs. These conclusions beg for further investigation into the relationship between the theological justifications of these homilies, on the one hand, and popular devotional practices related to the Maccabean martyrs, on the other. But such an investigation will unfortunately have to wait for another time.

Notes

1. My deepest thanks to Prof. Maud Gleason, without whose advice and enthusiasm this essay would not have been written. Also, I would like to thank Mira Balberg and Prof. Bob Gregg for their helpful suggestions.

2. I use the term “Maccabean martyrs” simply because it is the most recognizable way of referring to the individuals in question. I do not mean to imply that they were part of the Hasmonean family. The term derives from those texts which contain the earliest written accounts of the martyrs, viz., 2 Maccabees (6:18-7:42) and 4 Maccabees (the entire book). J. W. van Henten dates 2 Maccabees to ca. 125 BCE and 4 Maccabees to ca. 100 CE. VAN HENTEN, JW. *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees*. Leiden: Brill, 1997: 4.

3. The Mosaic Law prohibits consumption of pork in Lev. 11:7-8. The Christian abandonment of Mosaic dietary prohibitions was grounded in the teachings of the Apostle Paul: “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s” (1 Cor. 25-26).

4. Theoph. ep. 100.9. In: RUSSELL N, trans. *Theophilus of Alexandria*. London: Routledge, 2007: 150.

5. E.g., scholars disagree as to whether there was a Jewish cult of the Maccabean martyrs prior to the Christian cult. M. Schatkin assumes this to be true, as does R. Wilken. In contrast, L. V. Rutgers considers the possibility of a Jewish cult to be “very remote,” and G. Rouwhorst agrees with him. SCHATKIN M. *The Maccabean Martyrs*. *Vigiliae Christianae* 1974; 28, no.

2: 97-113; WILKEN R. *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983: 88ff; RUTGERS LV. *The Importance of Scripture in the Conflict Between Jews and Christians: The Example of Antioch*. In: Rutgers LV et al., eds. *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World*. Leuven: Peeters, 1998: 287-303; ROUWHORST G. *The Cult of the Seven Maccabean Brothers and their Mother in Christian Tradition*. In Poorthuis M. *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*. Leiden: Brill, 2004: 183-204.

6. A Syriac martyrology that was likely written in the middle of the fourth century—with a terminus ante quem of 412—provides us with probably the earliest reference to the Christian cult of the Maccabean martyrs. See WRIGHT W. *An Ancient Syrian Martyrology*. *Journal of Sacred Literature* 1865; 8, no. 15: 45-56; also, WRIGHT W. *An Ancient Syrian Martyrology [English translation]*. *Journal of Sacred Literature* 1866; 8, no. 16: 423-432. For Gregory of Nazianzus' homily *In Machabaeorum laudem* (hom. 15), I used the translation in VINSON M, trans. *Select Orations. The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 107. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003: 72-84. For John Chrysostom's homily *De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, I used the translation in MAYER W, trans. *The Cult of the Saints*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006: 119-134. For Augustine of Hippo's homily *In solemnitate martyrum Machabaeorum* (serm. 300), I used the translation in HILL E, trans. *Sermons 273-305A: On the Saints. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* 8:3. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994: 276-281. There are two other homilies by John Chrysostom on the Maccabean martyrs (known as *De Maccabeis I* and *De Maccabeis II*), but I did not address them in this essay because they do not provide explicit justifications for the Maccabean cult.

7. Gregory's emphasis upon Christ as the Logos

makes a great deal of sense, for Gregory's source text is 4 Maccabees, a book whose stated purpose is to demonstrate that "devout reason is sovereign over the emotions" (4 Macc. 1:1).

8. This line of questioning is especially relevant if we recognize Gregory's affinity for classical Greek culture, an affinity made obvious by his allusions to Homer's *Iliad* in this very homily. See §4 and §8.

9. This sort of rhetoric can be found throughout Christian martyrdom literature. Cf. the excellent English translations in MUSURILLO H. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

10. Jn. 1:1.

11. As the text being examined was a homily, it is unlikely that there were any Jews in the audience when it was preached. It is possible, however, that there were some among John's congregation who were "Judaizers." This is a term that referred to Christians who engaged in Jewish practices and rites, and it was on account of these people that John preached his infamous series of homilies titled *Against the Jews*. The present homily was preached in Constantinople, while the homilies *Against the Jews* were preached in Antioch; however, it seems likely, given John's effort to make an argument that would be acceptable to Jews, that John also felt threatened by the Jewish presence in his new locale. On John Chrysostom and Judaizers, see WILKEN R. *op. cit.*: 66-94.

12. According to Gregory, the first feature of the new Covenant given by Christ matches up with Jer. 38:33: "I shall place my laws in their mind and engrave them on their heart." The second matches up with the first part of Jer. 38:34: "Everyone, from the smallest to the greatest of them, will know me." And the third matches up with the latter part of Jer. 38:34: "I shall be merciful to their wrongdoings and I shall no longer store in my memory their sins and their lawless ways."



Michael J Petrin is a senior majoring in Philosophy and Religious Studies and minoring in Classics. Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, his interests include early Christianity, mystical theology, and interreligious relations. He is currently in the process of completing an honors thesis on mystical ascent in St. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*. After graduating, Michael will continue his education in the Master of Theological Studies program at the University of Notre Dame.