

Contributing towards Theologies of the LXX The Use of the Terms θεός and κύριος in 1 and 2 Maccabees

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Abstract: There is an ongoing debate among scholars on whether and to what extent a theology, or theologies, of the LXX is in fact possible. Is it reasonable and fair to speak of an *implicit* LXX theology? Does the LXX merely reproduce theological content within a Greek frame of reference? Is *theologising* not a natural consequence when reproducing texts? These and other questions encouraged me to contribute to the debate by investigating the use of theologically significant terms such as θεός and κύριος in 1 and 2 Maccabees. This investigation will be done by first looking at how these terms were used in 1 and 2 Maccabees respectively. Secondly, these uses will be compared with one another to determine unique characteristics as well as overlaps.

1. Introduction

An investigation into a theology (or theologies) of the Septuagint (hereafter LXX) is as exciting as it is complex. The default position when constructing any theology is to define, describe, and explain the characteristics, epithets, and nature of a particular deity, in this case the Hebrew deity, in predominately positive terms.¹ It is an attempt to construct “What a God is”, “What a God does”, “How a God relates”, etc., as inferred from the literature. It is to track and trace the interaction of a deity with human reality through the history of relevant literature.² This is also my approach; however, my theological endeavours are sceptical, pessimistic, and critical in nature. I would want to ask, “What is a deity not?”, “What can a deity simply not be?” etc. I am interested in determining whether a “traditional” theology has failed and what the potential impact of such a failure might be. My contention is that a reconstruction, or rather a “construction” of a LXX theology (or theologies) cannot escape accounting for, reflecting on,

¹. I agree with Foshay 1992, who remarks that it is inevitable that modernity’s concern with differences, discontinuity, and the novelty of an evolving, unfolding, unfinished (and unfinishable) experience should issue in a progressive sensitivity to and wariness of all positive terms, predications, equations, adequations.

². As Kreuzer 2018, 1 aptly puts it: “Zum einen geht es mir um den genauen Wortlaut und die genaue Gestalt des Textes, und diese kann man nicht haben ohne die Geschichte des Textes. Zum anderen geht es mir um die Inhalte der Texte, die nicht nur theologische, sondern auch kulturgeschichtliche, historische und andere Themen umfassen, die aber doch wegen ihrer theologischen Inhalte und deren bleibender Bedeutung überliefert wurden”. Bloesch 1995, 31 rightly remarks that “theology must do more than simply repeat the mainly figurative language of the biblical narrative”. He says that it should also draw upon the conceptual language of philosophy to illuminate the mystery of the God who revealed himself in biblical history. According to Goldstein 2002, there is a logical connection between the beliefs of the Israelites as a people of an almighty god and the peculiar phenomena of the Jews’ history and literature.

and rebutting the failures of a theology.³ Responding to a so-called failed theology can produce the following results. On the one hand, it can lead to a *silencing* theology, and a theology of silencing is characterised by a failure to explicitly acknowledge a deity; it is a theology that is vague, it generalises, causing the deity to appear inactive, uninvolved, and of little value or relevance. On the other hand, the supposed failures are countered by explicitness, being elaborative, extravagant, using absolutisms, and being descriptive. Hence, my contribution to the “theology(ies) of the LXX venture” is undertaken from the vantage point of a potentially failed theology.

The starting point is the terms *θεός* and *κύριος* in 1 and 2 Maccabees; these terms are theologically significant in that they are Greek terms used to refer specifically to a Hebrew deity. The premise here is that the use of the terms *θεός* and *κύριος* has the potential to reveal a response to a failed theology. These terms, by definition, do not signify a response to a failed theology, but they do signal theological intent. The book of Esther serves as a good example; the explicit references to the Hebrew deity by using the terms *θεός* and *κύριος* are deliberate, and theologically intentional; they reveal a theology of explicitness. In the Hebrew version, the deity is implicitly acting, so one assumes, but the Greek scribes changed that by explicitly making known who is at work (cf. Esth 2:20; 4:8, 14, 6:1, and 13).⁴ These explicit references to the Hebrew deity were made at crucial points in the narrative. These “insertions” are theologically motivated and done deliberately. The additions to the narrative are so theologically unequivocal that they overshadow the core of the narrative in part. This is, in my view, not simply a matter of interpretive intent, but these “insertions” and “additions” are driven by much larger theological challenges, namely accounting for, and responding to, the traditional theologies and their failures in particular.⁵ The *Zeitgeist* of the third century BCE onwards created an ideal opportunity to reflect on and respond to the “traditional” theologies that undergirded Israelite theology. A noteworthy case in point is the theologically critical response by Job and Ecclesiastes to the predictability theology of *Proverbia* (Proverbs). Job to a lesser and Ecclesiastes to a larger degree question, critique, and respond to the failures of the predictability theology (cause and effect) as aptly represented in *Proverbia*. It is therefore not such an outlandish idea that one of the motivations for translating the Hebrew Scriptures into a Greek idiom was to engage the theologies of the Hebrew Scriptures critically, and to scrutinise their so-called successes. Whether this notion is accepted or not does not change the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures were translated, and that theological reflection was inevitable.

The theory offered here is that the theological reflection – hence, a theology of *silencing* and *explicitness* in 1 and 2 Maccabees respectively – suggests that they both reflect in broad

³. It would be a fair inference to connect what I term a failed theology with the notion of negation or negative theology. Negative theology is also known as apophatic theology, a form of theological thinking which attempts to approach God, the Divine, by negation of concepts that might be applied to Him.

⁴. See Nagel 2008 for a detailed reflection on these explicit references.

⁵. One such a failure was the “omnipotence” of a Hebrew deity. The “ability” of the Hebrew deity, YHWH, responsible for the flourishing and thriving of the Hebrew people, the Israelites. The flourishing and thriving included, but were not limited to, having land, producing offspring, having access to goods, and of course to win wars. On all these fronts, the Hebrew people were consistently challenged.

terms on the failure of, among other things, a theology omnipotence. The failure of a Hebrew deity to prove that he is all-powerful, possessing the ability to be more powerful than any other deity – is theologically defined and explained by the notion of a victorious warrior deity.⁶ The theology of the *almighty* is a theology informed by peoples waging war against their enemies and the ability of their deity to defeat the enemy and to be hailed a victorious warrior. An *almighty* deity is a deity who protects his people against the enemy. A deity who fails at war, who is defeated by the enemy, cannot by definition be an *almighty* deity.⁷ The persistent persecution of the Hebrew people and the repeated destruction of the temple and everything they held dear “theologically” had to have an impact on how scribes understood their deity’s role in the life of his people. The text of 1 Maccabees is a product of such a response, a negation by way of a theology of *silencing*, an implicit theology that is anthropologically centred. It produced a theology of *disappointment*, *resentment*, and *pessimism*. The text of 2 Maccabees offers a noticeably different approach; here an explicit, elaborative, descriptive, and explanatory theology is revealed. A theology that is characterised by extravagant claims as a counter-measure for the failed theology of *almightiness*.

Goldstein summarises the tension between the two books as follows:

These two books present sharply different accounts; indeed, we shall find that their authors were bitter opponents. The webs of doctrinal subtleties, of charge and counter charge, which characterize the polemics of monotheistic sects against the rivals they call “heretics” – these webs give rise to some of the most complicated puzzles in the history of literature. So, it is with our two books. First Maccabees and the original of which [Second Maccabees] is an abridgment were written in close succession as propaganda after decades of controversy.

I interpret the propaganda Goldstein refer to as opposing attempts to come to grips with the failure of the Hebrew deity’s ability to defeat the enemy. This study is an attempt to test whether the theory that 1 and 2 Maccabees were responses to the failed theology of an *almighty* deity holds any water.⁸ The theory will be tested by focusing on the theological character of both 1 and 2 Maccabees in general, and how the use, and absence, of the terms θεός and κύριος influenced the theological character of these two books.

⁶. Signori 2012, 1 suggests that defending faith through violence gradually took shape following the decision of Antiochus Epiphanes (174–164 BCE) to suppress Judaism, by profaning the temple and forcing the Jews not to follow the Torah.

⁷. Goldstein 2002, 3 defines a people of an almighty god as “one which believes that a god stronger than all other powers combined is ultimately committed to be their protector, though temporarily the people may suffer adversity”.

⁸. It must be noted that most scholars, and specialists on 1 and 2 Maccabees I might add, will not agree with this theory.