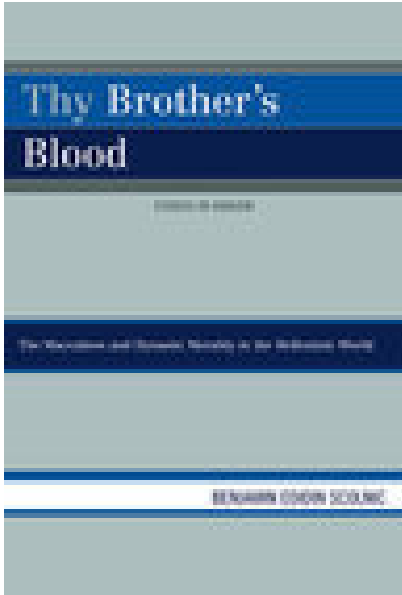


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Scolnic, Benjamin Edidin

Thy Brother's Blood: The Maccabees and Dynastic Morality in the Hellenistic World

Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008. Pp. viii + 203. Paper. \$30.00. ISBN 0761839127.

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The subject of this book is stated to be the “morality of kinship,” and the aim is to see “how strong familial bonds and flexibility in succession created and perpetuated dynasties” and how national disasters “were the consequences of broken fraternal bonds” (1). Specifically, it seeks to “provide a historical and moral context for the fall of one Judaeon dynasty, the Zadokite priestly line, and for the rise and fall of the Hasmonaean dynasty” (1). When one reads this and some other passages, especially Dr. Scolnic’s conclusion, one would assume that he had written a book whose concern was ultimately morality or ethics, perhaps even pop psychology. If readers will put these statements aside for the moment, however, they will find a fair amount of material of direct relevance for Maccabean history.

The first part of the book addresses itself to the question of “fraternal bonds.” Chapter 1 is on fraternal relationships in mythic accounts, including Cain and Abel, the gods Zeus and Poseidon, and the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. It is hard to understand what such fictional accounts are supposed to demonstrate or why they are discussed. Chapter 2 is on the Attalids of Pergamum, and chapter 3 on the Antigonid dynasty of Macedonia. The purpose of this section seems specifically to provide the basis for creating a comparison for the Hasmonaean examples found in chapters 4–5. Chapter 4 is devoted to

Jason and the fall of the “Zadokite” priesthood; chapter 5 is on the Hasmonean Mattathias and his sons, Aristobulus I and his brothers, and the interactions between Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II.

The discussion of Jason’s “Hellenistic reform” in chapter 4 raises a number of interesting issues. Scolnic makes some dubious statements, such as that those “pious Jews” taking up arms in 2 Macc 4:39–50 were setting out to “kill fellow Jews who have become citizens” (96). The text does not say any such thing; on the contrary, those “pious Jews” seem in context themselves to be members of Jason’s citizen body and those they kill are the followers of Menelaus, who they think are selling off temple vessels. But Scolnic does recognize that there was no opposition to Jason’s setting up of a gymnasium (103). Also, he argues that Jason was “not such a Hellenizer after all” (120), though his long treatment of names (123–39) has some inadequacies (see Grabbe, *History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period* [London: T&T Clark, 2008], 2:144–46).

Those attempting to reconstruct the events preceding the Maccabean revolt have tended to give precedence to 2 Maccabees because it is the most detailed source. Scolnic quite rightly brings in not only 1 Maccabees (1:10–64) but also the account in Josephus’s *Antiquities* (12.5.1 §§237–241). He also discusses 2 Macc 1:1–10, which is often overlooked. For some strange reason, though, he does not examine Josephus’s *War* (1.Pref.7 §§19; 1.1.1–2 §§31–35). In my own earlier reconstruction, I followed mainly 2 Maccabees as well, though bringing in Dan 11:28–30 and 1 Macc 1 (*Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 277–85). But I noted that Josephus’s accounts might have important information if properly analyzed, although I admitted I did not quite know what to make of Josephus at that time (281). I had resolved to look at these accounts more carefully at a future time and shall do so in volume 3 of my *Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*.

Thus, Scolnic was quite right to ask about these other accounts. Yet even though he notes that Josephus probably had a source and discusses the different versions, in the end Scolnic chooses mainly the account in 2 Maccabees without actually explaining the other accounts. This is a shame, but this happens a number of times in this book: the author raises an interesting question, explores it for a while, then abandons it for what seems to be an arbitrary decision—usually one that goes with the consensus. Another example of where this happens is with the reason for Jonathan Maccabee (instead of his brother Simon) succeeding Judas: the issue is discussed at some length, in the context of the question of how many brothers there actually were (147–54, 160–64), but then the matter is abandoned as “unanswerable” (164). If it is unanswerable, however, why spend so much space on the question? In the end, readers are left frustrated and wondering why the author has strung them along with this lengthy discussion.

In keeping with his theme of the value of fraternal cooperation rather than conflict, Scolnic examines the contest between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. He is no doubt right about the damage that this did to the Jewish nation generally, but his moralizing—almost homilizing—goes well beyond what is his logical conclusion (182–93). He says that the brothers’ conflict caused the Romans to end the Hasmonean dynasty and state. He seems to accept that the Romans would have established their control over the region in any case, but “Pompey would have been perfectly willing to create two new client kingdoms in Syria and Judaea” (192). He goes on to speculate that, if “the Judaeian state had not fallen, if it would have continued as a Roman vassal-state or a quasi-independent kingdom ... the entire context, background and foreground, of the birth and career and death of Jesus and the rise of early Christianity would have been completely different” (193). Judea was of course turned into a Roman province for a time, but Scolnic seems to have forgotten that eventually the state rose again—under Hyrcanus II and Antipater—and became a full “client kingdom” under the rule of Herod the Great. Thus, at the time of Jesus’ birth, Judea was a Roman vassal-state and a quasi-independent kingdom, just as Scolnic pines for! It is hard to know how things would have developed if Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II had not fought, but the Romans would have taken over, regardless, and the Jews would most likely have rebelled at some point. In the long run, would things have been much different?

From a technical point of view, the book is poorly presented, and there is a general impression of carelessness. Many of the items in the footnotes are not in the bibliography, and several items cited only by name are not further clarified, either in the footnotes or the main bibliography; for example, Gauthier 1989 (98 n. 21) is presumably Philippe Gauthier, *Nouvelles Inscriptions de Sardes 2: Documents royaux du temps d’Antiochos III: Décret de Sardes en l’honneur d’Héliodôros* (Archeological Exploration of Sardis; Hautes études gréco-romain 15; Geneva: Droz, 1989). Is “Hyldahl, 199” (119 n. 89) meant to be Niels Hyldahl, “The Maccabean Rebellion and the Question of ‘Hellenization,’ ” in *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom* (ed. Per Bilde, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Lise Hannestad, and Jan Zahle; Aarhus University Press, 1991), 188–203? In both the footnotes and the bibliography, the English translation of Hengel’s *Judaism and Hellenism* is said to be published in “Eugene, Oregon: 1947”; it should be London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974. Hengel’s *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians* is given as “Stuttgart 1976”; it should be Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1980. On page 130 the footnote numbers suddenly start over again in the middle of a chapter, without any apparent explanation.

In sum, Scolnic has written a strange book. The main topic investigated and the answers given seem banal. Yet within the book are some interesting discussions about the Maccabean period. He also has a way of raising intriguing questions, although he then

often leaves the reader frustrated by abandoning the question with comments to the effect that it is unanswerable. In the end, however, he has made me think about a number of issues that I might have overlooked.