

## **The rhetorical purpose of the battle between protagonist and antagonist in 2 Maccabees 9**

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### **Abstract**

The main theme in 2 Maccabees seems to be the use and abuse of “power”. The very striking battle for power, as presented in 2 Maccabees 9, is the focus of this article. The research questions are: Who are the protagonist and the antagonist in 2 Maccabees 9? How does this chapter describe these characters? What is the nature of the struggle between the protagonist and antagonist? What is/are the rhetorical function(s) of the struggle in 2 Maccabees 9? What is the rhetorical purpose of 2 Maccabees 9? As 2 Maccabees is a narrative, written in a world where rhetoric played an important role in communication, the text is interpreted with the help of rhetorical criticism and narrative criticism. Attention will be given to specifically the text’s description of the antagonist and protagonist and the rhetorical function(s) of these descriptions will be interpreted. As the use and abuse of power play such an important role in the description of these characters, the phenomenon of power will be interpreted by using definitions and discussions by sociologists and psychologists where relevant. It is concluded that the text of 2 Maccabees 9 aims at moving the reader from an attitude of doubt and distrust in God, because of the bad things that happened, to an attitude of trust and obedience in God, who is just and powerful. God is presented as the supernatural power, with the implicit warning that no human being can ever affect this power. It is a message of hope for the victims of power abuse. It is a piece of advice and a warning to be spiritually intelligent and to hold on to the almighty power of God, with the promise that God will always be there, listen to the prayers of believers and act in love towards them. It is also a warning to never oppose God. The reader is persuaded in 2 Maccabees, especially in Chapter 9, of the advantages of a spiritual intelligence. It clearly demonstrates that no abuse of power by humankind, can ever limit the power of God.

### **Keywords**

*Protagonist, antagonist, power battle, 2 Maccabees*

## Introduction

Nicklas (2007:101) agrees with Habicht (1976) that 2 Maccabees is about the Jewish struggle to survive against an enemy who wants to destroy the Jewish identity, an identity bound to the Temple as a pure and holy place, to a life according to the instructions of the Torah, and to the covenant with the righteous God. Orlin<sup>1</sup> (2018) says that “the main theme” of 1 and 2 Maccabees is “power”. It is all about a struggle among men to obtain, maintain or increase power. Not only is it a struggle, however, between men, but it also implies a struggle between mankind and God.

According to Coetzer (2018:1), one of the most striking power struggles in the text of 2 Maccabees, is between the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the God of the Jews. I particularly chose to interpret this power struggle in 2 Maccabees 9 to see how the characters of the protagonist and antagonist in this struggle are characterized through the text in order to understand the rhetorical function of the struggle. To my advantage, Coetzer has already focussed on this struggle in 2 Maccabees 9 through a syntactical, semantic and pragmatic analysis of the text. Coetzer has shown *inter alia* that the text emphasises the supernatural in order to explicate the involvement of the God of the Jews. The rhetorical function of this text is according to him, “to move the reader and/or hearer to adopt the view that the God of the Jews protects the Jerusalem temple, deals swiftly with the sins of the Jews and personally avenges his people”.

The purpose of this study is to build on these findings by interpreting the rhetorical function of 2 Maccabees 9 after an interpretation of the protagonist and antagonist in the struggle. The research questions in this article are:

- Who are the protagonist and the antagonist in 2 Maccabees 9?
- How does this chapter describe these characters?
- What is the nature of the struggle between the protagonist and antagonist?
- What is/are the rhetorical function(s) of the struggle in 2 Maccabees 9?

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- What is the rhetorical purpose of 2 Maccabees 9?

As 2 Maccabees is a narrative, written in a world where rhetoric played an important role in communication, it seems fair to interpret the text with the help of rhetorical criticism and narrative criticism. Attention will be given to specifically the text's description of the antagonist and protagonist and the rhetorical function(s) of these descriptions will be interpreted. As the use and abuse of power play such an important role in the description of these characters, the phenomenon of power will be interpreted by using definitions and discussions by sociologists and psychologists where relevant.

Before the text of 2 Maccabees 9 is interpreted, it is important to first give some background by indicating where chapter 9 fits into the structure of the narrative of 2 Maccabees and by showing on the events presented in the chapters before chapter 9.

## Background of 2 Maccabees

Historically, the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees speak about the Maccabees, Jewish leaders who led a rebellion of the Jews against the Seleucid Dynasty from 175 B.C. to 134 B.C. (Lumpkin 2019:9). It was written in Koine Greek, most likely around 100–150 B.C. (see Doran, 2012:14–15 for a discussion on the different opinions in this regard). I compiled the following outline for 2 Maccabees from a discussion by Harrington (1988:36–39):

First letter	1:1–9
Second letter	1:10–2:18
Author's preface	2:19–32
First attack on Jerusalem temple under Seleucus IV when Heliodorus tried to plunder temple treasury	3:1–40
Second attack on Jerusalem temple under Antiochus IV Epiphanes	4:1–10:9
Third attack on Jerusalem temple under Antiochus V	10:10–15:36
Author's conclusion	15:37–39

For a detailed structure of the narrative between the prologue or preface in 2:19–32 and the epilogue or conclusion in 15:37–39, Doran (2012:12–13) gives a structure, which follows the reign of the four kings:

- Events under Seleucus IV (3:1–4:6)
- Events under Antiochus IV (4:7–10:8)
- Events under Antiochus V (10:9–13:26)
- Events under Demetrius I (14:1–15:37).

2 Maccabees 9, the focus point in this article, falls in the narrative where Antiochus IV reigned, during the second attack on the Jerusalem temple. It is important to keep in mind that in the second century B.C., Judea existed between the Egyptian Ptolemaic Kingdom and the Syrian Seleucid Empire, kingdoms formed after the death of Alexander the Great. Judea fell under the control of the Seleucids in approximately 200 B.C. During this time, the Seleucids promoted Hellenism (Ferguson, 1987:13) and many Jews began to adopt a Greek lifestyle and culture, most probably in order to gain economic and political influence.

During the first attack on the Jerusalem temple, Seleucus IV (187–175 B.C.) sent Heliodorus to confiscate the temple treasury (2 Maccabees 3:7–8). In 3:15–21 we read that the people really panicked, and they begged their God to intervene. God did intervene in a miraculous and supernatural way: a rider and two men appeared to defend the temple and almost killed Heliodorus (2 Maccabees 3:22–30).

Antiochus IV Epiphanes became the ruler of the Seleucid Empire in 175 B.C. He was inconsiderate of the views of the religious, traditional Jews in Israel (Ferguson, 1987:323). Antiochus subsequently attacked Jerusalem, pillaged the temple (2 Maccabees 5:1–6:9), and killed, captured or tortured many (2 Maccabees 5:12–14; 7:1–41). He banned traditional Jewish religious practice, outlawing Jewish sacrifices, Sabbaths, feasts, and circumcision (2 Maccabees 6:6). He established altars to Greek gods upon which “unclean” animals were sacrificed. He desecrated the Jewish temple (2 Maccabees 5:15–16; 6:1–5). Possession of Jewish Scriptures became a capital offence.

Antiochus sent two generals, Nicanor and Gorgias, to wipe out the Jewish nation (2 Maccabees 8:9–12). This powerful army came against Judas and his army in the town of Emmaus. He prayed to God for strength

and deliverance and they won a huge victory over the Seleucid army (2 Maccabees 8:16–26). Subsequently, the Maccabees marched into Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and resumed traditional Jewish religious practices (2 Maccabees 8:27) with the “Almighty as their ally” (2 Maccabees 8:24).

With regard to genre, this pericope of 2 Maccabees 9 offers us both a narrative (9:1–18, 28–29) and a letter (9:19–27). The narrative reminds us of the pattern of divine war (Doran, 2012:198), where a holy representative of the Jews, in this case their god, deals with the perpetrator – to enlighten readers of the power of God and the foolishness of trying to attack Him (Coetzer 2018:5–6).

A new scene and setting are introduced in 2 Maccabees 9:1 with “about that time”. Through this phrase, Coetzer (2018:2) says the author links the events of the current pericope with the preceding events. In 10:1 the author once again jumps to another scene with Judas. Chapter 9 is thus a proper pericope with its own setting.

This pericope will be interpreted with the following outline or structure in mind:

- The introduction to the narrative 9:1–3
- The reaction of Antiochus IV Epiphanes 9:4
- The battle 9:5–10
- Reaction of Antiochus 9:11–17
- Conversion of Antiochus 9:18–29.

Before the battle is interpreted, the characters of the protagonist and antagonist are interpreted as important role players in the battle.

## Who are the protagonists and antagonists in 2 Maccabees?

In narratives we always have two main characters: the protagonist<sup>2</sup> and the antagonist,<sup>3</sup> and these two are vital to the typical formula of a plot. As conflict is a basic element of any plot. The antagonist (the opponent) opposes the protagonist (the leading character), and thus the conflict ensues. The protagonist struggles against the antagonist, taking the plot to a climax. Later, the conflict is resolved with the defeat or the downfall of the antagonist.

In 2 Maccabees, the Jews – either as a group or as individuals – are the protagonists, not necessarily as heroes, but definitely as central characters. They are the key ingredients in the development of the story and the story revolves around them. They are mostly also presented as the fair and virtuous characters, always supporting the moral good. As the central elements, the story revolves around them and the story is constructed in such a way that their story attracts the readers emotionally – the audience is invited to relate to the joys, fears, and hopes of the Jews in the story. The story is also presented from the perspective of the protagonists, the Jews.

In opposition to the Jews, we see the antagonists in the story of 2 Maccabees, being different Seleucids in leadership positions. In Chapter 9 of 2 Maccabees, the antagonist is Antiochus IV Epiphanes. One has to realize that many of the views embodied in the narrative are expressed through the characters in the narrative and that these characters thus serve as the narrator's mouthpiece (see Bar-Efrat 1984:47) and by studying the shaping of these characters through the narrative, it can help one to understand the rhetorical function of the narrative. In the next section the depiction of the characters of the protagonist (the Jews) and the antagonist (Antiochus IV Epiphanes) in 2 Maccabees 9 will be the focus.

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2 In Ancient Greek drama the πρωταγωνιστής (protagonistes) was the character who played the first part as the leading character of a story, making the key decisions, See Liddell & Scott (1996:3370) and Storey & Allan (2014:132).

3 In Ancient Greek drama the ἀνταγωνιστής (antagonistēs) was the opponent of the protagonist, providing obstacles and creating conflicts. See Liddell & Scott (1996:454) and Storey & Allan (2014:206).

## The depiction of the characters in 2 Maccabees 9

The characters in a narrative are vehicles and instruments of the narrator in order to influence the readers in a particular way. Jannidis (2009:23) says they are devices in the communication of meaning. Bar-Efrat (1984:47) says the characters' personalities and histories attract the readers' attention and arouse emotional involvement. For a text thus to influence the reader in such a way to persuade him/her to adopt particular value e.g., the depiction of the characters can play an important role.

Although I consider the two main characters in the struggle in 2 Maccabees 9, the protagonist and antagonist, namely the Jews and Antiochus IV Epiphanes, to have existed in the past in real life, it should be emphasized that they are discussed here only as they are presented in the narrative. At some points I may refer to their characters as depicted in other literature or other chapters of 2 Maccabees, however, the focus will be their presentation in this narrative of 2 Maccabees 9.

Bar-Efrat (1984:48–86) explains that characters can be moulded by either shaping them directly through a description of the outward appearance, emotions, personality and morals, or by shaping them indirectly through a presentation of their actions and speech.

### The moulding of the protagonists, the Jews

In the first 8 chapters of 2 Maccabees, the believing Jews are presented to be spiritually intelligent people, acknowledging the power of God in their lives. In chapter 7, for example, a Jewish mother and her seven sons were forced by the king to eat swine flesh and they were tormented. The one son, however, said that they were ready to die rather than to transgress the laws of their fathers (2 Maccabees 7:1). The other sons reacted in the same way and all of them were tortured and finally killed (2 Maccabees 7:3–19). The mother had her hope in God (2 Maccabees 7:20) and was willing to offer her body and life for the laws of their fathers (2 Maccabees 7:37). We read in 2 Maccabees 8:2 how the Jews gathered to ask God's help. They fought for their religion and declared in 8:18: "Our confidence is in the Almighty God."

In chapter 9, the moulding of the character of the Jews is indirectly presented. The actions of the Jews are mentioned in 9:2 – the moment Antiochus IV Epiphanes entered their city and attempted to rob the temple, the Jews fought back and made him flee. From this mentioning, the Jews are characterized to be people who were willing to protect themselves and their religion. Because of the spiritual intelligence<sup>4</sup> of the Jews, they acknowledged the supernatural power of their God, and hung on to the security of this God and served Him with dedication. In the end their antagonist was surprised by their God.

When the author presents the protagonist in such a way, the rhetorical persuasion strategy of *logos*<sup>5</sup> is used. By indirectly moulding the character of the Jews, showing their reaction to the actions of Antiochus IV, the author persuades the readers through logical reasoning that the Jews are spiritually intelligent people. The persuasion strategy of *pathos*<sup>6</sup> is, however, also used as the author attempts to affect the emotions of the readers in order to make them feel sorry for the Jews and to accept the Jews as the protagonist in the story. In the same time, the author makes use of the persuasion strategy of *ethos*,<sup>7</sup> as the reader is persuaded of the value system of the author. By not judging the reactions of the Jews, the author presents himself to be as spiritual intelligent as the Jews and thus convinces the reader of the credibility of the author.

### **The moulding of the antagonist, Antiochus IV Epiphanes before and during the battle**

2 Maccabees 9 presents Antiochus IV Epiphanes as being “arrogant” at three occasions:

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- 4 Spiritual intelligence implies that one recognizes the existence of a god – a higher power. See the discussion of Cornelius (2014:593) of “spiritual intelligence.
  - 5 *Logos* is a logical appeal and it is used to communicate facts that support the arguments of the speaker. See Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica* 1.2.6.
  - 6 *Pathos* is an appeal to the audience’s emotions. By using this persuasion strategy, the reader is emotionally affected to show sympathy or empathy or disgust. See Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica* 1.2.5.
  - 7 *Ethos* is an appeal to the audience to accept the authority or credibility of the author. See Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica* 1.2.4.



- In 9:4 we are told that out of anger, he decided to revenge him on the Jews and it is said that he spoke arrogantly (ὕπερηφάνως<sup>8</sup>) when he declared that he would make Jerusalem a common burying place of Jews.
- In 9:7 one reads that after he was struck by God with an incurable disease, Antiochus did not stop his insolence, but was filled with even more arrogance, breathing fire in his rage against the Jews (ἔτι δὲ καὶ τῆς ὑπερηφανίας<sup>9</sup> ἐπεπλήρωτο, πῦρ πνέων τοῖς θυμοῖς ἐπὶ τοῖς Ἰουδαίους).
- In 9:8 it is said that Antiochus thought in his superhuman arrogance that he could command the waves of the sea and had imagined that he could weigh the mountains in balance. He thought he was able to command the sea and weigh the mountains in balance because he was so “arrogant beyond the condition of man” (διὰ τὴν ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἀλαζονείαν<sup>10</sup>).

These are direct statements about his personality and can be seen as an element of judgement, voiced by the narrator.<sup>11</sup> This trait of Antiochus is repeated three times as it is important in the development of the plot of the narrative and for the struggle to follow. There is another direct shaping of the protagonist’s character to be seen when Antiochus is called a “murderer” and “blasphemer” (ἀνδροφόνος καὶ βλάσφημος) in 9:28. These two words are the narrator’s evaluation of the character of Antiochus. In 9:4 another evaluation from the side of the narrator is voiced. It is said that Antiochus was “swelling with anger” (ἐπαρθεις δὲ τῷ θυμῷ), a direct shaping of Antiochus’ mood whenever things did not go his way.

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8 Nida & Louw (1988:765) (paragraph 88.214) explains that this word pertains to being “ostentatiously proud, arrogant, haughty, contemptuous”. According to Liddell & Scott (1996:3996) it means “arrogantly”.

9 Nida & Louw (1988:765) (paragraph 88.213) explains that this word pertains to being in a “state of ostentatious pride of arrogance, bordering on insolence”. According to Liddell & Scott (1996:3996) it means “arrogance”.

10 Nida & Louw (1988:765) (paragraph 88.219) explains that this word pertains to a “state of pride or arrogance, but with the implication of complete lack of basis for such an attitude”. Liddell & Scott (1996:263) give the following meaning possibilities: “false pretense” or “imposture”.

11 See Bar-Efrat (1984:53) for a discussion of direct statements.

An indirect way of moulding a character, is to present his/her actions or words. By this presentation, the narrator reveals something about the character. Bar-Efrat (1984:64) says a person's nature is revealed by his actions and actions are the implementations of character. One's inner nature is thus embodied in external behaviour. This is how the narrator presents the character of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in action:

- 2 Maccabees 9:2 says that Antiochus IV Epiphanes had entered the city called Persepolis and attempted to rob the temples and control the city. As he was defeated by the inhabitants of the city, he had to flee. And what was his emotional reaction? He retreated in disorder – he came with dishonour out of the area.
- In 9:4 Antiochus instructed his charioteer to drive without stopping until he completed the journey.
- In 9:7 Antiochus gave orders to speed up the journey of the charioteer.

These actions are the building blocks for the battle to follow. narrator also presents the words of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in order to mould him indirectly. The character of the antagonist is reflected in his words in 9:4, when he said: “When I get there, I will make Jerusalem a cemetery of Judeans.” (εἶπε· πολυάνδριον Ἰουδαίων Ἱεροσόλυμα ποιήσω παραγενόμενος ἐκεῖ). These words bring to light Antiochus' mood of anger, his mental trait of being a beast, and it confirms his arrogance!<sup>12</sup>

Lehrer (2010) says it is not strange for people climbing the social ladder to end up “morphing into a very different kind of beast”. When one reads the direct characterization of Antiochus and when one interprets the given actions and words, one cannot but think Antiochus was a beast! This happens because the author uses the persuasion strategy of *pathos*. By painting such a bad picture of Antiochus IV, the author persuades the reader to get emotionally involved and disapprove of the actions of this antagonist.

Keltner (2017) says that when you give people power, they basically start acting like fools, acting selfishly, impulsively, and aggressively. Tcherikover (1961:176–177) confirms one's idea of the “beast” when he says that

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12 Read Bar-Efrat (1984:64) for his discussion of “words” as a way to indirectly mould a character.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes lacked political tact and did not understand how to behave as befitted a king. Tcherikover based his argument on historian Polybius' report (*History* XXVI, 10, XXXI, 3–4) of how Antiochus IV would sometimes act crazy, pouring a jar full of perfumed ointment over the heads of the bathers at a public bath and enjoying the sight of the people rolling on the slippery floor, or dancing with actors on the stage during a festival. He was irritable and nervous, full of profound inner contradictions, ever striving to do something extraordinary to astound the world. That is why he was mocked by humourists who called him Epimanes ("mad") instead of Epiphanes ("the god manifest").

From this discussion it is clear that Antiochus is presented in 2 Maccabees 9 as a character who abused his power as king and acknowledged only himself as a superpower. As self-appointed superpower he could gain and maintain power and control over the Jews, his victims, in order to subject them to psychological, physical, sexual, or financial abuse whenever he wanted to. Nothing could stop him – or so it seemed! Schwartz (2008:357) confirms that Antiochus' ultimate sin was his equating himself with God. It is clear that Antiochus had no spiritual intelligence as he did not acknowledge the superpower of God in his life, but arrogantly claimed all power.

### **An interpretation of the struggle between protagonist and antagonist in 2 Maccabees 9**

The author introduces the battle in 9:5–10 with some background information on the antagonist in this story: Antiochus returns from the regions around Persis after a failed attempt at a temple robbery in Persepolis in an attempt to oppress the city (9:1). He tried to abuse his power once again! The fact that he has to flee for his life, is, however, not the end of his problems. On his return, he received the news that his men, Nicanor and Timotheus, were also defeated by the Jews. This information is already enough for the reader to choose sides in the struggle and to help them understand Antiochus' reaction to follow. Coetzer (2018:2) says this introduction reinforces the antagonism of the reader towards the king.

Enraged by the two events mentioned, and motivated by his taken freedom to abuse power, Antiochus reacts with a vicious, violent plan. He thinks that the Jews, who only protected themselves, have wronged him. As a leader with authority and power, he abuses that power and orders his charioteer to drive on without a break to Jerusalem and he plans to make of Jerusalem a communal burial ground for Jews. The antagonist plans to destroy the protagonists.

One should not miss, however, the sentence “the judgement of heaven rode with him”. Coetzer (2018:1) says this phrase creates tension and anticipation through noting that all this happens while the judgement from heaven travelled with him. I would even add that the inclusion of this phrase is a warning to the readers about such actions of power abuse. Coetzer (2018:1) says this sentence leads the reader into the official battle between Antiochus and God. One can even say that it is a way of introducing the other power in this struggle. God is introduced here in the warning as the power behind the protagonist, the Jews.

Then we are told about the battle in 9:5–10:

<sup>5</sup>But the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him with an incurable and invisible blow. As soon as he stopped speaking, he was seized with a pain in his bowels for which there was no relief, and with sharp internal tortures – <sup>6</sup>and that very justly, for he had tortured the bowels of others with many and strange inflictions. <sup>7</sup>Yet he did not in any way stop his insolence but was even more filled with arrogance, breathing fire in his rage against the Judeans and giving orders to speed up the journey. And so, it came about that he fell out of his chariot as it was rushing along, and that, through the grievous fall, all the limbs of the body were racked. <sup>8</sup>Thus he, who only a little while before had thought in his superhuman arrogance that he could command the waves of the sea and had imagined that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance, was brought down to earth and carried in a litter, making the power of God manifest to all, <sup>9</sup>so that worms broke out of the unbeliever’s eyes, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away, and because of his stench the whole army felt revulsion at the decay.

<sup>10</sup>Because of the unbearable oppressiveness of the stench no one was able to carry the man who a little while before had thought that he could touch the stars of heaven.

This battle or struggle can by no means be attributed to natural circumstances, says Coetzer (2018:2). Coetzer views it as a “theomachy” – a struggle between a supernatural entity and an earthly ruler. The narrator immediately mentions the power force behind the battle in 9:5 when he says, *the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him*. The events witness an orchestration – a struggle between an earthly ruler and a supernatural entity. Is God actively present in the struggle? Not as a speaker, not as an opponent in flesh, but He is present as a result of the Jews’ faith in Him. The narrator acknowledges His hand in the events and therefore says in 9:5 that the Lord “struck him”. The narrator tells his readers that the Jews had a supernatural force behind them because of their faith and that this God stayed true to them and that He can see everything (9:5).

The author of 2 Maccabees makes God present in this struggle as the result of the true spiritual intelligence of the protagonists. The Jews suffered under the Seleucid rulers, but in all circumstances, they trusted their God, and begged for Him to intervene. God’s hand is seen in the antagonist’s humiliation, when Antiochus is struck by disease and intense pain.

The author wants to persuade his readers to actively pull God into the battle when he describes Antiochus’ afflictions, with the words “the Lord struck him”. He further persuades the readers of God’s power when he adds that the Lord can see all things. This is also a warning to the readers. The warning goes further when the author says in verse 8 that Antiochus witnessed the power of God just when he thought he could command the waves of the sea, be proud above the condition of man, and weigh the heights of the mountains in a balance. The power of God caused Antiochus to be “cast down to the ground”, and this is yet another warning to the readers not ever to abuse power and consider oneself to be the superpower.

### **An interpretation of the character of the protagonist after the battle**

After the battle, the narrator directly voices his opinion on the changes in the antagonist when he says in 9:11 that Antiochus was broken in spirit and lost most of his arrogance and came to his senses and in 9:18 that he lost all hope for himself. One must not, however, miss the reason for this change,

mentioned once again: “under the divine scourge”. The power of God can break the power of an arrogant self-ruled human being.

The narrator indirectly moulds the character of the antagonist by mentioning his words after he suffered immensely: he said two things:

- It is right to be subject to God, and that a mortal man should not think haughtily.
- That the holy city which he was hurrying to level to the ground and to make a cemetery, he was now declaring to be free,<sup>15</sup> and the Judeans whom he had not considered worthy even of a grave but had planned to throw out with their children for the wild animals and for the birds to eat, he would make all of them, equal to citizens of Athens,<sup>16</sup> and the holy shrine which he has previously plundered, he would adorn with the finest offering, and all the holy vessels he would give back many times over, and the expenses incurred for the sacrifices he would provide from his own revenues,<sup>17</sup> and in addition to all this he also would become a Judean and would visit every inhabited place to proclaim the power of God.

From the reference to his words, the narrator’s comments on the antagonist in 9:11 are confirmed – Antiochus IV Epiphanes seems to have lost his arrogance indeed. What we find here in the character of the antagonist is a complete *metanoia* – forced by a disease and suffering, he changes his way of thinking about the world, about life, about his place in the world, about a being beyond himself.

Bar-Efrat (1984:85) says that characters’ personalities are revealed by their reactions to judgement. Some accept it and confess their sins; others might fight back. In this text the battle between the God of the Jews and Antiochus IV Epiphanes is a judgement of God on him. In 9:11–12 the antagonist is presented as coming to his senses, admonished by the scourge of God (9:11). He is humbled and converted. Coetzer (2018:3) says the cruel tyrant is forced to his knees by the God of the Jews and he confesses that it is not good to be godlike minded (9:12), and he has a sudden change of heart. What we thus see is a development of character in the antagonist. We see an inner change, transgression and repentance. This leader has gained a spiritual intelligence – an intelligence he saw in the Jews – and he admits that mankind cannot equal himself to God. Antiochus experienced the

wrath of the God of the Jews, and he realises that here is no bigger power than God. He is finally willing to acknowledge a supernatural power! He realises that not even his abuse of power could limit God's power.

Antiochus, all of a sudden, is willing to make four promises to the protagonists. He makes commitments:

- the city will be free (9:14);
- the Jews will be equal with the Athenians (9:15);
- he will adorn the temple with gifts that he will refund out of revenues (9:16); and
- he undertakes to become a Jew himself, proclaiming the power of God in every region (9:17).

2 Maccabees 9 aims at persuading the reader that Antiochus was converted and was willing to believe in God and become a member of the Jewish religion (see Cohen, 1999:92–93, 129–130, 151). Coetzer (2018:4) says that Antiochus restored the honour of the Jews. The reader of this text might wonder whether this was a genuine inner change or only a result of a cold calculation<sup>13</sup> aimed solely at improving his circumstances. The narrator does not mention this kind of falseness. I think this whole presentation of Antiochus' conversion was meant to persuade the reader of repentance after the struggle with God. By including this in the narrative, the narrator gives the reader hope that peace will return to Jerusalem (see Coetzer, 2018) and that God can indeed change situations. I think this conversion of Antiochus is the narrator's use of the rhetorical strategy of pathos.<sup>14</sup> He aims at affecting the emotions of the readers by implicitly warning them to be spiritually intelligent – to acknowledge God and not to try to challenge Him. That is why it is said that 2 Maccabees has theological implications: it proclaims God as a supernatural power, and it warns the readers of the consequences of challenging or undervaluing God.

The character of the antagonist is also indirectly moulded through the letter written by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In 9:18 the author states the reason for the letter to follow: the judgement of God was still on him.

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13 See Bar-Efrat, 1984:85.

14 See Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica* 1.2. 5,8.

That is why Antiochus decided to write a letter to the Jews, and the author explicitly mentions it was a letter of supplication. In verse 21, Antiochus says he was taken by a grievous disease. Nicklas (2007:107) considers this to be irony as his suffering was not only an annoying illness, but a form of a divine punishment which corresponded to the pains of his victims. One can consider this to be a perfect example of the “measure for measure” principle as referred to by Ego (2007:141). The crimes committed by Antiochus, correspond to the punishment he received. Antiochus was still on his knees before the protagonists and their God. Note, however, that Antiochus did not address God, but chose to make amendments with the protagonists, the Jews.

It is important at this point to study the *structure of this letter*. In the *letter-opening*, faithful to the principles of ancient letter writing, the author includes the author, reader, form of greeting and a health wish<sup>15</sup>. I agree with Coetzer (2018) in saying that the order of author and readers are switched around (9:19) to show Antiochus’ humbleness in this letter. It also makes sense when one considers the letter type spelled out in 9:18, namely that it is a letter of supplication. That is perhaps also the reason why the ancient epistolary papyri form of greeting is here expanded from “greetings” to “much health and welfare and happiness” (9:19). Ironically, the author is wishing his readers the exact things he took away from them as antagonist: health, welfare and happiness! What is also striking is that the normal health wish in ancient papyri letters, is here expanded to a combination of a health wish (“if you and your children are well, and if all matters go with you to your mind” in 9:20) and a typical thanksgiving to be found in Jewish and early Christian letters<sup>16</sup> (“we give very great thanks: in 9:20). This is a typical example of the use of the persuasion strategies of both ethos and pathos.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, this letter-opening persuades the readers of the humble and honest character of the author namely Antiochus (ethos). On the other hand, this letter opening persuades the readers that the author really cares about them, their contentment, their health, their wealth and

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15 See Stowers, 1986:27–31.

16 See Stowers, 1986:41–48.

17 See Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica* 1.2.4–5.



overall happiness (pathos). Goldstein (1983:359) says the author tries to gain the sympathy of the readers.

In the *letter-body* in 9:21–27, Antiochus introduces his argument in 9:21–22 by explaining his situation:

- that he is still very infirm and sick (9:21);
- that he is still remembering them (9:21);
- that he planned to do something good for them (9:21); and
- that he still has hope to escape the sickness (9:22).

Then he proceeds with the middle of the letter-body by touching on the real issue, namely his succession if he dies. In 9:23 he explains that his father also appointed his successor and that he wants them to know who his successor will be when he dies (9:24). In 9:25 he then makes the announcement that his son, Antiochus, will succeed him.

In 9:26–27 we find the closing of the letter-body with his final requests: he begs them, remembering previous favours, to be faithful to him and his son (9:26) and motivates this request by saying that he trusts his son to behave with moderation and humanity (9:27).

What does this letter reflect about Antiochus? He gave up all power! The arrogant murderer and blasphemer who got angry every time he experienced opposition agreed to give up! He finally acknowledged the power of a supernatural being who fought him in a battle of terrible disease.

This narrative clearly communicates that the antagonist lost his power because a supernatural power stepped forward because of the spiritual intelligence of the protagonists. This narrative aims at giving the readers hope, proclaiming that there is advantage in spiritual intelligence and warning that no power use or abuse of mankind can destroy the power of this supernatural being. A final question is, how the character of this God is proclaimed in the text.

## **The characterisation of the God of the protagonist**

One might see God as the main protagonist in the battle, however, I would rather see God as the power behind the Jews as protagonist. 2 Maccabees

9:4 gives a warning about the judgement of heaven. The narrator directly moulds the character of God in 9:5 when he says this God is *all-seeing*! When the narrator tells the story of how Antiochus was struck by a terrible disease, he makes it clear that this was an action of God. He indirectly shows God to be in complete control and he voices his opinion in 9:8 that this complete suffering of Antiochus manifested God's power and in 9:18 that this judgment of God was just. In 9:13 the narrator expresses another opinion about God's involvement in Antiochus' disease when he says God no longer had mercy on him. Indirectly he shapes and presents God to be a superpower who will not tolerate such abuse of power.

## Conclusion

Coetzer (2018) says the author aims with the pericope of Chapter 9 at moving the reader from an attitude of doubt and distrust in God, because of the bad things that happened, to an attitude of trust and obedience in the God who is just and powerful. When one reads 2 Maccabees 6:12, this is exactly what comes out: the author says he exhorts those reading not to be depressed because of the misfortunes, but to consider the punishments to be not for the destruction, but for the training of their race. Doran (2012:150) reminds us that this motif of "God is training, disciplining and educating the people" is also found in Deuteronomy 8:5: "Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child, so the Lord your God will discipline you". This motif is also repeated in 7:35 where the sixth son of a woman said to the king "you have not yet escaped the judgement of the all-powerful God!". This young Jewish man declared in 7:37 that he called upon God to deal with him by means of afflictions and whippings, so that he would acknowledge that God alone was God!

God's righteousness, which is the exact opposite of Antiochus' unrighteousness (see Ego, 2007:149), is emphasised. 2 Maccabees proclaims God as the supernatural power, with the implicit warning that no human being can ever affect this power. It is a message of hope for the victims of power abuse. It is a piece of advice and a warning to be spiritually intelligent and to hold on to the almighty power of God, with the promise that God will always be there, listen to the prayers of believers, and act in love towards them. It is also a warning never to oppose God.

The reader is persuaded in 2 Maccabees, especially in Chapter 9, of the advantages of a spiritual intelligence. It clearly demonstrates that no abuse of power by mankind, can ever limit the power of God.

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