

## 4 Maccabees: On the Supremacy of Reason

### Description

# The Fourth Book Of The Maccabees

or

On The Supremacy of Reason

A Comparative Translation

by Trent R. Wilde

*~ To comfort the families of modern martyrs,  
and to strengthen the faith of the martyrs to be. ~*

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### Introduction

This ancient work, known by some as *4 Maccabees*, and by others as *On The Supremacy of Reason*, is a writing unlike any other. Of the plethora of texts which have survived to us from the period of Second Temple Judaism (515 BCE to 70 CE), this discourse is unique in its approach and singular in its aim. It predominantly tells of the experience of the Maccabean martyrs who died for their faith under the tortures of Antiochus Epiphanes. Their story is not related as a mere datum of the past, but is vividly portrayed with all the solemnity and respect due to such an awful scene. The events described are among the most appalling to have ever taken place in the history of this earth, but from amidst the terror shines bright beams of hope and glory.

*Reason* is upheld as the key to the martyrs' victory, and the ruler of every passion. In publishing this translation, it is our hope that the principles and faith for which these martyrs died, might become those by which you live.

### This Translation

Despite the availability of resources which include *4 Maccabees* and related material, the text critical studies of this work are still in their elementary stages. Thus, in order to produce the best possible translation, we have taken a comparative approach in which we have collated modern translations (with their textual notes), modern critical texts, and transcriptions and facsimiles of ancient manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>

We have attempted to make the translation both accurate and readable. In some instances, we have rendered things word for word, and where it has been more suitable to translate per phrase, we have followed that method.

## ***On The Supremacy of Reason***

### *Author Introduces His Purpose*

<sup>1</sup> Being about to demonstrate a word which is especially philosophical<sup>2</sup>, that is, whether devout reason is sovereign over the passions,<sup>3</sup> I counsel you to give heed to the philosophy. <sup>2</sup> For this word is necessary for all who would attain knowledge, and in addition it includes the praise of the highest virtue—I mean, of course, sound reasoning. <sup>3</sup> If, then, it is evident that reason rules over those passions which hinder sound judgment namely, gluttony and lust, <sup>4</sup> it is also clear that it rules over the passions that hinder one from righteousness, such as malice, and those that impede courage, namely anger, fear, and pain. <sup>5</sup> “How then,” some might perhaps ask, “if reason governs the passions, does it not rule over forgetfulness and ignorance?” Their attempt to speak this way is ridiculous! <sup>6</sup> For reason does not rule its own passions, but those that are opposed to righteousness, courage, and soundness of mind; and it is not for the purpose of destroying them, but so that one may not yield to them.

<sup>7</sup> I could prove to you from many and various examples that reason is dominant over the emotions, <sup>8</sup> but I can best demonstrate it from the noble bravery of those who died for the sake of virtue, Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother. <sup>9</sup> For each of these, by disregarding sufferings that bring death, demonstrated that reason rules over the passions. <sup>10</sup> On this anniversary<sup>4</sup> it is fitting for me to praise for their virtues those who, with their mother, died for the sake of noble character and goodness, but I would also call them blessed for the honor in which they are held. <sup>11</sup> All people, even their torturers, admired their courage and perseverance, and they became the cause of the downfall of tyranny over their nation. By their endurance they conquered the tyrant, and thus their homeland was purified through them. <sup>12</sup> I shall have an opportunity to speak of this shortly; but, as my custom is, I will begin by stating my main principle, and then I'll turn to their story, giving glory to the all-wise God.

### *Reason's Sovereignty Over Passion*

<sup>13</sup> Our inquiry, accordingly, is whether reason is sovereign over the passions. <sup>14</sup> Let us evaluate, then, just exactly what reason is and what passion is, how many kinds of passions there are, and whether reason rules over all these. <sup>15</sup> Now, reason is the way of thinking that, with sound logic, prefers above all else the life and word of wisdom. <sup>16</sup> Now wisdom is the knowledge of divine and human matters and the causes of these. <sup>17</sup> This, in turn, is education in the law, by which we reverently learn of divine matters and of human affairs, both to our advantage. <sup>18</sup> Now, the various forms of wisdom are sound judgment, righteousness, courage and self-control.

<sup>19</sup> Sound judgment is supreme over all of these, since by means of it reason rules over the passions. <sup>20</sup> The two most wide-ranging sources of passion are pleasure and pain; and each of these springs up from the psyche.<sup>5</sup> <sup>21</sup> A large retinue of passions attend both pain and pleasure. <sup>22</sup> Thus desire precedes pleasure and delight follows it. <sup>23</sup> Fear precedes pain and sorrow comes after. <sup>24</sup> Anger, as a person will see by reflecting on how this experience has touched him, is a passion which embraces both pleasure and pain. <sup>25</sup> In pleasure there exists even a malicious propensity, since of all the passions, it is most multifaceted. <sup>26</sup> In the psyche it is boastfulness, love of money, thirst for honor, love of contention, and spite. <sup>27</sup> In the body, indiscriminate eating, gluttony, and eating greedily.

<sup>28</sup> Therefore, just as pleasure and pain are, as it were, two branches growing from the body and the psyche, likewise there are many offshoots from these passions, <sup>29</sup> each of which the master cultivator, reason, weeds and prunes and ties up and waters and thoroughly irrigates, and so tames the forest of inclinations and passions. <sup>30</sup> For reason is the guide of the virtues and the absolute master of the passions.

Observe now, first of all, that rational judgment is sovereign over the emotions by virtue of the restraining power of sound reasoning. <sup>31</sup> Sound reasoning, then, is dominance over the desires. <sup>32</sup> Some desires are mental, others are physical, and reason shines out as ruling over both. <sup>33</sup> Otherwise, how is it that when we are attracted toward forbidden foods we abstain from the pleasure to be had from them? Is it not because reason is able to rule over appetites? I certainly think so. <sup>34</sup> Therefore in desiring seafood and fowl and animals and all sorts of foods that are forbidden to us by the law, we abstain because of domination by reason. <sup>35</sup> For the passions of the appetites are restrained, being bent back by the sensible<sup>6</sup> mind, and all the impulses of the body are bridled by reason.

### *The Mind of Reason and Living the Law*

**2** So then, who should be amazed if the desires of the mind for cohabitation with beauty are rendered powerless? <sup>2</sup> It is for this reason, certainly, that the temperate Joseph is praised, because in reason and by thinking he gained mastery over sensuality. <sup>3</sup> For even though he was young and in his sexual prime, by his reason he made of none effect the driving desire of his passions. <sup>4</sup> Not only, therefore, is it clear that reason rules over the frenzied urge of sexual desire, but also over every desire. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the law says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or anything that is your neighbor's." <sup>6</sup> Surely then, since the law has told us not to covet, I should be able to persuade you all the more that reason is able to rule all desires.

Even so it is with the passions that hinder one from righteousness. <sup>7</sup> For how else could it be that one who is habitually a selfish eater, a glutton, or a drunkard could be educated differently, unless reason is manifestly the master over the passions? <sup>8</sup> Therefore, a person, for example, when living by the law, even though he be a lover of money, his way is constrained to lend to the poor without interest and to cancel his debt when the seventh year comes. <sup>9</sup> And if one is greedy, he is brought under the rule of the law through reason so that one neither gleans the harvest nor gathers the last grapes from the vineyard.

Likewise, in all other matters we can perceive that reason rules the passions. <sup>10</sup> For the law prevails even over affection for parents, so that virtue is not abandoned for their sakes. <sup>11</sup> It rules over the affection for one's wife, convicting her for breaking the law. <sup>12</sup> It masters affection for children, so that one chastises them for wickedness. <sup>13</sup> It is also master over beloved friendship, so that one convicts his friends when they act wickedly. <sup>14</sup> Do not consider it surprising that reason, through the law, can prevail even over enmity, so that the fruit trees of the enemy are not cut down, but one preserves the property of his enemies from their destroyers and helps to raise up what has fallen.

<sup>15</sup> It is evident that reason rules even the more violent passions: lust for power, vainglory, boasting, pride, and malice. <sup>16</sup> All these malicious passions the sensible mind rejects, just as it does with anger—for over it too it has mastery. <sup>17</sup> When Moses was angry with Dathan and Abiram, he did nothing against them in anger, but by reason he controlled his anger. <sup>18</sup> For, as I have said, the sensible mind is able to get the better of the passions, to transform some – on the one hand, and to make of none effect others – on the other hand. <sup>19</sup> Otherwise, for what reason did our most wise father Jacob censure the house-holds of Simeon and Levi for cutting the throats of the nation of the Shechemites, saying, "Cursed be their anger"? <sup>20</sup> For if reason could not control anger, he would not have spoken in this way. <sup>21</sup> Now when God fashioned human beings, he planted in them passions and inclinations, <sup>22</sup> but at the same time he enthroned the mind among the senses as the temple<sup>7</sup> governor over them all. <sup>23</sup> And to the mind he gave the law; and the one who lives according to this law will rule a kingdom that is sensible, righteous, good, and courageous.

<sup>24</sup> “How is it then,” one might say, “that if reason is master of the passions, it does not rule forgetfulness and ignorance?”

<sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup> But this argument is entirely ridiculous; for reason is not shown to rule over its own passions, but over those related to the body.<sup>8</sup> <sup>2</sup> For instance, none of us can eradicate desire, but reason is able to ensure that you do not become enslaved to desire. <sup>3</sup> No one of us can eradicate anger from the psyche, but reason is capable of dealing with anger. <sup>4</sup> No one of us can eradicate malice, but reason can fight at our side so that we are not overcome by malice. <sup>5</sup> For reason does not uproot the passions but is their antagonist.

### *King David's Thirst*

<sup>6</sup> This becomes even clearer, in fact, when we consider the story of King David's thirst. <sup>7</sup> David had been fighting the Philistines all day long, and together with the soldiers of his nation had killed many of them. <sup>8</sup> Then, when evening fell, he came quite exhausted and sweating to the royal tent, around which the whole army of our ancestors had encamped. <sup>9</sup> Now all the rest were at supper, <sup>10</sup> but the king was extremely thirsty, and though springs were plentiful there, he could not satisfy his thirst from them. <sup>11</sup> But a certain irrational desire for the water in the enemy's territory tormented and inflamed him, undid and consumed him. <sup>12</sup> When his guards grumbled because of the king's craving, two staunch young soldiers, respecting the king's desire, armed themselves fully, and taking a pitcher scaled the enemy's defenses. <sup>13</sup> Eluding the sentinels at the gates, they went searching throughout the enemy camp <sup>14</sup> and found the spring, and from it boldly brought the king a drink. <sup>15</sup> But David, though he was burning with thirst, considered it an altogether fearful danger to his psyche to drink what he counted as equivalent to blood.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he set reason against desire and poured out the drink as an offering to God. <sup>17</sup> For the sensible mind is able to conquer the compulsions of the passions and quench the flames of frenzied desires; <sup>18</sup> it can overcome the pains of the body, however extreme, and through the nobility of reason utterly throw out all domination by the passions.

### *Onias' Reason – Testament to a King*

<sup>19</sup> And now, at the present season, we are called to review an account – a demonstration of sensible reason.

<sup>20</sup> During a time when our ancestors were experiencing deep peace because of their observance of the law and were achieving prosperity so that even Seleucus Nicanor,<sup>9</sup> king of Asia, had both appropriated money to them for the temple service and recognized their independence — <sup>21</sup> just at that time certain persons attempted a revolution against the public harmony and instigated many and various calamities.

<sup>4</sup> Now there was a certain Simon, a political opponent of the noble and good man, Onias, who at that time held the high priesthood for life. But when, in spite of spreading all sorts of slander, he was unable to harm Onias in the eyes of the nation, he fled the country with the purpose of betraying it. <sup>2</sup> So he came to Apollonius, governor of Syria, Phoenicia, and Cilicia, and said, <sup>3</sup> “I have come here because I am loyal to the king's government, to report that in the treasuries of Jerusalem there are deposited tens of thousands in private funds, which are not the property of the temple but belong to King Seleucus.” <sup>4</sup> When Apollonius learned the details of these things, he praised Simon for his service to the king and went up to Seleucus to inform him of the rich treasure. <sup>5</sup> On receiving authority to deal with this matter, he proceeded quickly to our country accompanied by the accursed Simon and a very strong military force. <sup>6</sup> He said that he had come with the king's authority to seize the private funds in the treasury. <sup>7</sup> The people indignantly protested his words, considering it outrageous that those who had committed deposits to the sacred treasury should be deprived of them, and did all that they could to prevent it. <sup>8</sup> But, Apollonius, uttering threats, went on to the temple. <sup>9</sup> Then the priests, together with women and children in the temple, implored God to defend the holy place that was being so desecrated; <sup>10</sup> and then, while Apollonius was going up with his armed forces to seize the money, angels on horseback with lightning flashing from their weapons appeared from the sky, instilling in them great fear and trembling. <sup>11</sup> Then Apollonius fell down half dead in the courtyard of the temple, which was open to all peoples, and stretched out his hands toward heaven, and with tears begged the Hebrews to pray for him and appease the heavenly host. <sup>12</sup> For he said that he had committed a sin deserving of death,

and that if he were spared he would praise the blessedness of the holy place before all people.<sup>13</sup> Moved by these words, the high priest Onias, although otherwise he would have reluctance to do so, prayed for him so that King Seleucus would not suppose that Apollonius had been overcome by human treachery – not by divine justice.<sup>14</sup> So Apollonius, having been saved beyond all expectations, went away to report to the king what had happened to him.

### *Antiochus' Persecution of the Jews*

<sup>15</sup> When King Seleucus died, his son Antiochus Epiphanes succeeded to the throne, an arrogant and terrible man,<sup>16</sup> who removed Onias from the priesthood and appointed Jason, Onias's brother, as high priest.<sup>17</sup> Jason agreed that if the office were conferred on him he would pay the king three thousand six hundred sixty talents each year.<sup>18</sup> So the king appointed him high priest and ruler of the nation.<sup>19</sup> In total violation of the law, Jason changed the nation's way of life and its form of government<sup>20</sup> so that not only was a gymnasium placed at the very citadel of our native land, but also the temple service was abolished.<sup>21</sup> The divine justice was angered by these acts and caused Antiochus himself to make war on them.<sup>22</sup> For when he was warring against Ptolemy in Egypt, he heard that a rumor of his death had spread and that the people of Jerusalem had rejoiced greatly. He speedily marched against them,<sup>23</sup> and after he had plundered them he issued a decree that if any of them were found observing the ancestral law they should die.<sup>24</sup> And when, by means of his decrees, he had not been able in any way to put an end to the people's respect for the law, but saw that all his threats and penalties were being disregarded<sup>25</sup>—even to the extent that women, because they had circumcised their sons, were thrown headlong from heights along with their infants, though they had known beforehand that they would suffer this—<sup>26</sup> when, I say, his decrees were despised by the people, he himself tried, by means of torture, to compel everyone in the nation to eat defiled foods and to renounce Judaism.

### *The Vain Philosophy of Antiochus vs. The True Philosophy of Eleazar*

**5** The tyrant Antiochus, sitting with his counselors on a certain high place, and with his armed soldiers standing around him,<sup>2</sup> ordered the guards to seize each and every Hebrew and to compel them to eat swine's flesh and food sacrificed to idols.<sup>3</sup> If any were unwilling to eat unclean food, they were to be tortured and put to death.<sup>4</sup> When many persons had been rounded up, one man, Eleazar by name, a leader of the flock, was brought before the king. He was a man of priestly family, learned in the law, advanced in years, and known to many in the tyrant's court for his philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> When Antiochus saw him he said,<sup>6</sup> "Before I begin to torture you, old man, I would advise you to eat the swine's flesh and save yourself.<sup>7</sup> I respect your age and your gray hairs, although to have had them for so long a time and still cling to the religion of the Jews makes you anything but a philosopher in my eyes.<sup>8</sup> Why should you abhor eating the very excellent meat of this animal when nature has so freely bestowed it on us?<sup>9</sup> For surely, it is senseless not to enjoy harmless pleasures, and it is wrong to despise nature's good gifts.<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that it will be greater folly still if, by holding to a useless view concerning the truth, you continue to despise me to your own hurt.<sup>11</sup> Will you not awaken from your foolish philosophy, abandon your futile reasonings, adopt a frame of mind to match your years, and philosophize according to the truth of what is beneficial?<sup>12</sup> Bow to my benevolent advice and have pity on your old age.<sup>13</sup> For consider this: if there is some power watching over this religion of yours, it will excuse you from any transgression committed under compulsion."

<sup>14</sup> When the tyrant had urged him on in this way to eat unlawful meat, Eleazar asked to have a word.<sup>15</sup> When he had received permission to speak, he began to address the people as follows:<sup>16</sup> "We, O Antiochus, who have been persuaded to govern our lives according to the divine law, do not consider any compulsion laid upon us mighty enough to overcome our own willing obedience to the law.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, under no circumstances whatever do we ever deem it right to transgress the law in any respect.<sup>18</sup> Even if, as you suppose, our law were not truly divine and we had wrongly held it to be divine, not even so would it be right for us to invalidate our reputation for holiness.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, do not suppose that it would be a petty sin for us to eat unclean food!<sup>20</sup> To transgress the law in matters either small or great matters is the same,<sup>21</sup> for in either case the law is equally despised.<sup>22</sup> You scoff at our philosophy as though living by it were irrational,<sup>23</sup> but it teaches us sound reasoning, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we willingly endure all suffering;<sup>24</sup> it instructs us in righteousness, so that we act impartially

in all our dealings, and it teaches us holiness, so that with proper reverence we honor only the living God.

<sup>25</sup> “Therefore, we do not eat unclean food. Trusting that the law was established by God, we know that the Creator of the world, in giving us the law, conforms it to our nature. <sup>26</sup> He has permitted us to eat what will be most suitable for us, but he has forbidden us to eat meats that would be contrary to us. <sup>27</sup> It is tyrannical for you to compel us not only to transgress the law, but also to eat in such a way that you may deride us for eating unclean foods, which are most abhorrent to us. <sup>28</sup> But you shall have no such occasion to laugh at my expense, <sup>29</sup> nor will I transgress the sacred oaths of my ancestors concerning the keeping of the law, <sup>30</sup> not even if you gouge out my eyes and burn my entrails. <sup>31</sup> I am not so old and cowardly that my reason should lose its youthful vigor in behalf of holiness. <sup>32</sup> Therefore get your torture wheels ready and stoke the fire all the more vehemently! <sup>33</sup> I do not so pity my old age as to break the law of my fathers on account of myself. <sup>34</sup> I will not play lies with you, O law my teacher, nor will I renounce you, self-control, my friend. <sup>35</sup> I will not put you to shame, philosophy of reason, nor will I disown you, honorable priesthood and knowledge of the law. <sup>36</sup> You, O king, shall not defile the honorable lips of my old age, nor my life of service to the law. <sup>37</sup> My ancestors will receive me<sup>10</sup> as pure, as one who does not fear your violence even to death. <sup>38</sup> You may tyrannize the ungodly, but you shall never gain mastery over me with my holy reason, either by words or through deeds.”

### *The Martyrdom of Eleazar*

**6** When Eleazar had responded in such an eloquent manner to the exhortations of the tyrant, the guards who were standing by dragged him violently to the instruments of torture. <sup>2</sup> First, they stripped off the old man’s clothes, though he remained adorned with the gracefulness of holiness. <sup>3</sup> Then, binding his arms on either side, they scourged him with whips, <sup>4</sup> while right up against him a herald shouted, “Obey the commands of the king!” <sup>5</sup> But the noble and high minded man, like a true Eleazar,<sup>11</sup> absolutely refused to recant as if the torture were nothing more than a dream; <sup>6</sup> and, keeping his eyes raised to heaven, the old man let his flesh be torn by the scourges until his blood flowed freely and his sides were cut into pieces. <sup>7</sup> Although he fell to the ground when his body could no longer endure the pain, yet he kept his reason upright and unswerving. <sup>8</sup> After he had fallen, one of the merciless guards rushed at him, kicking him savagely on his side to make him get up, <sup>9</sup> but he bore the pains and scorned the punishment and endured the tortures. <sup>10</sup> Under a hail of blows, the old man, like a true athlete, prevailed over his torturers; <sup>11</sup> in fact, with his face bathed in sweat, and gasping heavily for breath, even his torturers were amazed by his resilience.

<sup>12</sup> At that point, partly out of pity for his old age, <sup>13</sup> partly out of sympathy from acquaintance with him, and partly out of admiration for his endurance, some of the king’s servants went up to him and said, <sup>14</sup> “Eleazar, why are you so thoughtlessly destroying yourself in this foul way? <sup>15</sup> Let us set before you some cooked food so you can save yourself by pretending to eat swine’s flesh.”

<sup>16</sup> But Eleazar, as if tormented more bitterly by their counsel, cried out: <sup>17</sup> “Never may we, the children of Abraham, think so basely that out of cowardice we feign a role so unbecoming to us! <sup>18</sup> For it would most surely be contrary to reason if, having lived in accordance with truth right up to old age and having maintained in accordance with law the reputation of such a life, we should now change our course <sup>19</sup> and ourselves become a model of ungodliness to the young by setting an example of the eating of unclean food. <sup>20</sup> It would be shameful if we should survive for a little while and during that time be a laughing-stock to all for our cowardice, <sup>21</sup> and be despised by the tyrant as unmanly by not contending even to death for our divine law.

<sup>22</sup> Therefore, O children of Abraham, die nobly for the sake of holiness! <sup>23</sup> And you, guards of the tyrant, why do you delay?”

<sup>24</sup> When they saw that he was so high minded in the face of the afflictions, and so adamant against their offer of mercy, the guards brought him to the fire. <sup>25</sup> There they burned him with maliciously contrived instruments; they threw him down, and they poured a foul-smelling concoction into his nostrils. <sup>26</sup> When his flesh had been burned away to the very bones and he was at the point of expiring, he lifted up his eyes to God and said, <sup>27</sup> “You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in these fiery torments for the sake of the law. <sup>28</sup> Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them. <sup>29</sup> Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs.” <sup>30</sup> After he said this, the holy man died nobly in his

tortures; even in the tortures of death he held his ground, by virtue of reason, for the sake of the law.

<sup>31</sup> Admittedly, then, devout reason is ruler over the passions. <sup>32</sup> If the passions had prevailed over reason, we would have testified to their domination. <sup>33</sup> But now, since reason has conquered the passions, we properly recognize that it has the power to govern. <sup>34</sup> It is only right that we confess reason's dominance when it masters even external agonies. It would be ridiculous to do otherwise. <sup>35</sup> The arguments that I have given as evidence have demonstrated not only that reason rules over pain, but also that it masters pleasures and never does it give in to them.

### *Eulogy Concerning Eleazar*

**7** For like a most skillful pilot, the reason of our father Eleazar steered the ship of holiness over the sea of the passions, <sup>2</sup> and though buffeted by the threats of the tyrant and swamped by the mighty waves of tortures, <sup>3</sup> in no way did he swerve the rudder of holiness, even until he sailed into the haven of victory over death. <sup>4</sup> No city besieged with many ingenious war machines has ever held out as did that most holy man. Although his sacred life was consumed by tortures and racks, he conquered the ones who besieged him with the shield of holy reason. <sup>5</sup> For in setting his mind firm like a jutting cliff, our father Eleazar broke the maddening waves of the passions. <sup>6</sup> O priest, worthy of the priesthood, you neither defiled your sacred teeth nor profaned your stomach, which had room only for reverence and purity, by eating unclean foods. <sup>7</sup> O man in harmony with the law and philosopher of divine life! <sup>8</sup> Such should be those who are administrators of the law, shielding it with their own blood and noble sweat in sufferings even to death. <sup>9</sup> You, father, firmly established our observance of the law through your endurance unto glory, and you did not abandon the holiness that you praised, but by your deeds you made your words of divine philosophy credible. <sup>10</sup> O aged man, mightier than torture; O elder, more vigorous than fire; O supreme king over the passions, Eleazar! <sup>11</sup> For just as our father Aaron, armed with the censer, ran through the multitude of the people and conquered the fiery angel, <sup>12</sup> so the descendant of Aaron, Eleazar, though being consumed by the fire, did not turn from his reason. <sup>13</sup> Most amazing, indeed, though he was an old man, his body no longer tense and firm, his muscles all relaxed, his sinews feeble, he became young again <sup>14</sup> by the Spirit through reason; and by reason like that of Isaac he prevailed over the many-headed torture. <sup>15</sup> O man of blessed age and of holy gray hair and life of lawfulness, whom the faithful seal of death has perfected!

<sup>16</sup> If, therefore, an aged man despised tortures even to death on account of holiness, it cannot be denied that holy reason is ruler over the passions. <sup>17</sup> Some perhaps might say, "Not all have full command of their passions, because not all have insightful reasoning." <sup>18</sup> But as many as turn to holiness with their whole heart, these alone are able to rule the passions of the flesh, <sup>19</sup> since they believe that they, like our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, do not die to God, but live to God. <sup>20</sup> No contradiction therefore arises when some persons appear to be dominated by their passions due to the weakness of their reason. <sup>21</sup> What person who lives as a philosopher by the whole rule of philosophy, and trusts in God, <sup>22</sup> and knows that it is blessed to endure any suffering for the sake of virtue, would not be able to overcome the passions through godliness? <sup>23</sup> For only the wise and courageous are masters of their passions.

### *Seven Brothers Defy the Tyrant*

**8** Yes indeed, even the very young, by following a philosophy in accordance with holy reason, have prevailed over the most painful instruments of torture. <sup>2</sup> For when the tyrant had been so conspicuously defeated in his first attempt, being unable to compel an aged man to eat unclean foods, then commanded, in violent rage, that others of the Hebrew captives be brought, and that any who ate unclean food would be freed after eating, but if any were to refuse, they would be tortured even more cruelly.

<sup>3</sup> When the tyrant had given these orders, seven brothers—handsome, modest, honorable, and gifted in every way—were brought before him along with their aged mother. <sup>4</sup> When the tyrant saw them, grouped about their mother as though a chorus, he was pleased with them. And struck by their appearance and nobility, he smiled at them, and summoned them nearer and said, <sup>5</sup> "Young men, I admire each and every one of you and want to show you favor, and since I have great respect for the beauty of such a large band of brothers, I not only advise you not to display the same madness as that of the old man who has just been tortured, but I also urge you to yield to me and take advantage of my friendship." <sup>6</sup> Just as I am able to punish those who disobey my

orders, so I am able to benefit those who obey me. <sup>7</sup> Believe me, therefore, when I tell you that if you only renounce the ancestral law of your nation you will receive high positions with authority in my affairs. <sup>8</sup> Enjoy your youth by adopting the Greek way of life and by changing your mode of living. <sup>9</sup> But if by disobedience, though, you rouse my anger, you will compel me to use dreadful punishments to destroy each and every one of you by torture. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, take pity on your-selves. For even I, your enemy, feel compassion for your youth and handsomeness. <sup>11</sup> Will you not consider this, that if you disobey, nothing remains for you but to die with torments?"

<sup>12</sup> With these words, he ordered the instruments of torture to be brought forward in order to persuade them out of fear to eat the unclean food. <sup>13</sup> When the guards had placed before them wheels and joint dis-locators, rack and hooks and catapults and caldrons, braziers and thumbscrews and iron claws and wedges and bellows, the tyrant resumed speaking: <sup>14</sup> "Be afraid, young fellows; whatever justice you worship<sup>12</sup> will be merciful to you when you transgress under compulsion."

<sup>15</sup> But when they had heard his inducing words and saw the dreadful machines of torture, not only were they not afraid, but they also held up their views against the tyrant, which were contrary to his, with their own philosophy, and by their right reasoning nullified his tyranny. <sup>16</sup> Let us consider, however, what arguments might have been used if some of them had been fainthearted or cowardly. Would they not have gone on like this? – <sup>17</sup> "We are such stupid wretches if we do not accept such kind treatment and generosity which the king is offering us if we obey him! <sup>18</sup> Why do we take pleasure in vain decisions and venture upon a disobedience that brings death? <sup>19</sup> Men, brothers, should we not fear the instruments of torture and consider the threats of torments, and give up this vain opinion and this arrogance that threatens to destroy us? <sup>20</sup> Let us take pity on our youth and have compassion on our mother's age; <sup>21</sup> and let's take it to heart that if we disobey we are dead! <sup>22</sup> Also, divine justice will excuse us for fearing the king since, after all, we are under compulsion. <sup>23</sup> Why should we banish ourselves from this life of satisfaction and deprive ourselves of this sweet world? <sup>24</sup> Let us not struggle against compulsion or hold to useless ideas in view of the torture rack before us. <sup>25</sup> Not even the law itself would intent-ionally put us to death for fearing these instruments of torture. <sup>26</sup> Why should we be so absorbed in contentiousness or so attracted to fatal endurance, when we can live in peace if we obey the king?"

<sup>27</sup> But the young men, though about to be tortured, uttered no such words nor did they enter-tain such thoughts. <sup>28</sup> For they despised the passions and ruled over pain, <sup>29</sup> so that as soon as the tyrant had ceased counseling them to eat unclean food, they all with one voice together, as from one mind, said:

**9** "Why do you delay, tyrant? For we are ready to die rather than to transgress our ancestral commandments. <sup>2</sup> For we would truly be bringing shame on our ancestors if we do not live in obedience to the law and take Moses as our counselor. <sup>3</sup> Tyrant and counselor of lawlessness, in your hatred for us do not pity us more than we pity ourselves. <sup>4</sup> For we consider this pity of yours, which insures our safety through transgression of the law, to be more grievous than death itself. <sup>5</sup> You seek to terrify us by threatening us with death by torture, as though a short time ago you learned nothing from Eleazar. <sup>6</sup> But if the aged men of the Hebrews, because of their holiness lived righteously while enduring torture, it would only be right that we young men should die in disregard of your coercive tortures, which our elderly instructor also overcame. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, tyrant, put us to the test; and if you take our lives because of our godliness, do not suppose that you can injure us with your torments. <sup>8</sup> For we, through this severe suffering and endurance, shall have the prize of virtue and shall be with God, on whose account we suffer; <sup>9</sup> but you, because of your thirst for our blood, will undergo a time of fiery torment by divine justice."

### *The Torture of the First Brother*

<sup>10</sup> Indignant at the young men's disobedience, the tyrant was even more enraged by their ingratitude. <sup>11</sup> Then, at the word of his command, the guards brought forward the eldest brother, and having torn off his tunic, they bound his hands and arms on each side with leather straps. <sup>12</sup> When they had worn themselves out beating him with scourges, without accomplishing anything, they placed him upon the wheel. <sup>13</sup> When the noble youth was stretched out around this, his limbs were dislocated, <sup>14</sup> and as limb after limb was disjoined he denounced the tyrant, saying, <sup>15</sup> "You most abominable tyrant, enemy of heavenly justice, and savagely minded, you are mangling me in this manner, not because I am a murderer, or as one who acts unrighteously,



but because I shield the divine law.”<sup>16</sup> And when the guards said, “Agree to eat so that you may be released from the tortures,”<sup>17</sup> he replied, “You disgraceful minions! Your wheel is not so powerful as to strangle my reason. Cut my limbs, burn my flesh, and twist my joints;<sup>18</sup> through all these tortures I will convince you that the children of the Hebrews alone are unconquered where virtue is concerned.”<sup>19</sup> When he said these things, they spread fire under him, and while raging it hotter, they tightened the wheel further.<sup>20</sup> The wheel was completely smeared with blood, and the heap of coals was being quenched by the drippings of gore, and pieces of flesh were falling off the axles of the machine.<sup>21</sup> Although the joining ligaments of his bones were already severed, the young man, high minded and worthy of Abraham, did not groan.<sup>22</sup> As if he were being transformed into incorruption by the flames, he nobly endured the torments and said,<sup>23</sup> “Imitate me, brothers; do not leave your post in my trial or renounce our bold brotherhood.<sup>24</sup> Fight the sacred and noble battle for holiness. Thereby the just providence that protected our ancestors might become merciful to our nation and take vengeance upon the accursed tyrant.”<sup>25</sup> When he had said this, the holy young man broke the thread of life.

#### *The Torture of the Second Brother*

<sup>26</sup> While all were marveling at his courageous spirit, the guards brought in the next eldest, and after fitting themselves with sharp-clawed iron hands, they bound him to the torturing machine and catapult.<sup>27</sup> Before torturing him, they inquired if he were willing to eat, and they listened to his noble decision.<sup>28</sup> They then tore at his tendons with the iron hands and ripped off his flesh even from his cheeks; these leopard-like beasts even scrapped the skin off his scalp. But he endured this agony with courage and said,<sup>29</sup> “How sweet is any kind of death for the faith of our ancestors!”<sup>30</sup> To the tyrant he said, “Do you not think, you most savage tyrant, that you are being tortured more than I, as you see the arrogant reasoning of your own tyranny being defeated by our endurance for the sake of our faith?<sup>31</sup> I am sustained in my pain by the joys that come from virtue,<sup>32</sup> but you suffer torture by the threats that come from ungodliness. You will not escape, you most abominable tyrant, the judgments of the divine wrath.”

#### *The Torture of the Third Brother*

**10** When he too had endured a glorious death, the third was led in, and many repeatedly urged him to save himself by tasting the meat.<sup>2</sup> But he shouted, “Do you not know that the same father begot me as well as those who died, and the same mother bore me, and that on the same teachings I was raised?<sup>3</sup> I will not renounce the noble bond of brotherhood.”<sup>5</sup> Being enraged by the man’s boldness, they disjointed his hands and feet with their instruments, and with levers they wrenched his limbs from their sockets,<sup>6</sup> and they twisted his fingers and arms and legs and elbows.<sup>7</sup> And not succeeding in any way to over-whelm him, they discarded their machines and scalped him with their fingernails as the Scythians do.<sup>8</sup> Then they brought him at once to the wheel, and while his vertebrae were being dislocated on it, he saw his own flesh torn all around and drops of blood flowing from his entrails.<sup>9</sup> When on the brink of death, he said,<sup>10</sup> “We, most abominable tyrant, are suffering because of our training in divine virtue,<sup>11</sup> but you, due to your ungodliness and thirst for blood, will undergo inextinguishable torments.”

#### *The Torture of the Fourth Brother*

<sup>12</sup> When he too had died in a manner worthy of his brothers, they dragged in the fourth, saying,<sup>13</sup> “As for you, do not give way to the same insanity as your brothers, but obey the king and save yourself.”<sup>14</sup> But he said to them, “You cannot heat the fire so hot as to make a coward of me.<sup>15</sup> No—by the blessed death of my brothers, by the ever-lasting ruin of the tyrant, and by the glorious life of the righteous, I will not renounce our noble brotherhood.<sup>16</sup> Tyrant, contrive whatever tortures you want that you may learn from them that I am a brother to those who have been tortured already.”<sup>17</sup> When he heard this, the bloodthirsty, murderous, and utterly vile Antiochus gave orders to cut out his tongue.<sup>18</sup> But he said, “Even if you remove my organ of speech, God understands also those who are mute.<sup>19</sup> See, my tongue is hanging out; cut it off, for in spite of this you will not silence our reason.<sup>20</sup> For God we gladly allow the limbs of our body to be mutilated.<sup>21</sup> God will visit you swiftly, for you are cutting out a tongue that has been melodious with divine praises.”

### *The Torture of the Fifth Brother*

**11** When he too died, after being cruelly tortured, the fifth leaped up, saying, <sup>2</sup> “I am not about to ask, tyrant, to be excused from the torture which is for virtue’s sake. <sup>3</sup> I have come of my own accord, so that by murdering me you may become deserving of the humiliation that heavenly justice will deal out to you. <sup>4</sup> Hater of virtue, enemy of humankind, for what act of ours are you destroying us in this way? <sup>5</sup> Is it because we revere the Creator of all things and live according to his virtuous law? <sup>6</sup> But such conduct deserves honor, not torment!”<sup>13</sup>  
<sup>9</sup> While he was saying these things, the guards bound him and dragged him to the catapult; <sup>10</sup> they bound him to it by his knees, and fitting iron clamps on them, they twisted his back around the wedge on the wheel, so that he was completely curled back like a scorpion, and all his limbs were disjoined. <sup>11</sup> In this state, breathing constricted and body compressed, <sup>12</sup> he said, “Tyrant, you are bestowing glorious favors on us against your will, enabling us to demonstrate our constancy to the law through these honorable sufferings.”

### *The Torture of the Sixth Brother*

<sup>13</sup> When he too had died, the sixth, a mere boy, was led in. When the tyrant inquired whether he was willing to eat and be released, he said, <sup>14</sup> “It is true that I am younger in age than my brothers, but I am their equal in mind. <sup>15</sup> Being born and raised in the same way and for the same purpose, we ought likewise to die for the same principles. <sup>16</sup> So if you intend to torture me for not eating defiled foods, then torture me!” <sup>17</sup> When he had said this, they led him to the wheel. <sup>18</sup> He was carefully stretched tight upon it until his back was broken, and they set a fire going beneath him. <sup>19</sup> They heated up sharp cooking spikes and drove them into his back, piercing his ribs so that they burned out his entrails. <sup>20</sup> While being tortured he said, “O contest fit for holiness, in which so many of us brothers have been called! Yet, in the sufferings for godliness we have not been defeated. <sup>21</sup> For holy knowledge, O tyrant, is unconquerable. <sup>22</sup> I also, equipped with nobility, will die with my brothers, <sup>23</sup> and I myself will bring a great avenger upon you, you inventor of tortures and enemy of those who are truly devout. <sup>24</sup> Six of us, though just young men, have destroyed your tyranny. <sup>25</sup> Since you have not been able to persuade us to change our mind or to force us to eat unclean foods, is not this your downfall? <sup>26</sup> Your fire is cold to us, and your catapults painless, and your violence powerless. <sup>27</sup> For it is not the guards of the tyrant but those of the divine law that have been set over us; therefore, unconquered, we hold fast to reason.”

### *The Torture of the Seventh Brother*

**12** When he too had died a blessed death, having been cast into the caldron, the seventh and youngest of all came forward. <sup>2</sup> Moved with pity toward him, in spite of the fact that he had been vehemently reproached by his brothers, the tyrant invited him to come closer and ventured to persuade him, saying, <sup>3</sup> “You see the result of your brothers’ senselessness, for because of their disobedience they died a torturous death. <sup>4</sup> You too, if you do not obey, will be miserably tortured and meet a premature death, <sup>5</sup> but if you obey you will be my friend and will be given charge over my affairs of state.” <sup>6</sup> When he had thus urged him, he sent for the boy’s mother so that he might show pity to her over the loss of so many sons and further to encourage the sole surviving son to submit to the obedience that would save him. <sup>7</sup> But when his mother had exhorted him in the Hebrew tongue, as we shall relate shortly, <sup>8</sup> he said, “Let me loose; let me speak to the king and to all his friends that are with him.” <sup>9</sup> Extremely pleased by the boy’s declaration, they freed him at once. <sup>10</sup> Running to the nearest of the frying pans, <sup>11</sup> he said, “You profane tyrant, most ungodly of all the wicked, since you have received good things and also your kingdom from God, were you not ashamed to murder his servants and torture on the wheel those who practice holiness? <sup>12</sup> In return for this, justice will hold in store for you a more fierce and abiding fire as well as tortures, that, for the whole time, will not let you go. <sup>13</sup> As a man, were you not ashamed to cut out the tongues of men who have feelings like yours and are made of the same elements as you, and to maltreat and torture them in this way – you savage beast? <sup>14</sup> Surely they by dying nobly fulfilled their service to God, but you will wail bitterly for having killed without cause the champions of virtue.” <sup>15</sup> Then, he too, being about to die, said, <sup>16</sup> “I will not desert the testimony of my brothers; <sup>17</sup> but I call on the God of our ancestors to be merciful to our nation. <sup>18</sup> But you, you will be humiliated now in life and also in death.” <sup>19</sup> After he had uttered these things, he flung himself into the frying pans and thereby offered himself up.

### *Reason’s Sovereignty in the Seven*

**13** Now then, since the seven brothers despised sufferings even unto death, everyone must concede that devout reason is sovereign over the passions. <sup>2</sup> For if they had been slaves to their passions and had eaten unclean food, we would say that they had been conquered by these passions. <sup>3</sup> But, in fact, it was not so. Instead, by reason, which is praised by God, they prevailed over their passions. <sup>4</sup> So then, one is not to ignore this chief command of the mind, for it rules over both passions and sufferings. <sup>5</sup> How then can one fail to confess the rulership of sound reason over the passions in these men, seeing that they did not shrink from the agonies of fire? <sup>6</sup> For just as towers jutting out over harbors hold back the threatening waves and make it calm for those who sail into the inner basin, <sup>7</sup> so the seven-towered right reason of the youths, by fortifying the harbor of holiness, conquered the tempest of the passions. <sup>8</sup> For they constituted a holy chorus of godliness as they encouraged one another, saying, <sup>9</sup> “Brothers, let us die like brothers for the sake of the law; let us imitate the three youths in Assyria who despised the same ordeal of the furnace. <sup>10</sup> Let us not be cowardly in the demonstration of true faith.” <sup>11</sup> “Courage, brother!” said one, and another said, “Hold on nobly,” <sup>12</sup> and another reminded them, “Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have willingly been sacrificed for the sake of holiness.” <sup>13</sup> Each one separately and all of them together looking at one another with a cheerful demeanor, aglow with courage, said, “Let us consecrate ourselves to God with all our hearts. He gave us our lives, and let us use our bodies as a bulwark for the law. <sup>14</sup> Let us not fear him who intends to kill us, <sup>15</sup> for great is the struggle of the psyche and the danger of a time of torment which lies before all those who transgress the commandment of God. <sup>16</sup> Therefore let us put on the full armor of self-control, which is divine reason. <sup>17</sup> For if we so die, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will receive us, and all of our ancestors will praise us.”

<sup>18</sup> And to each one of the brothers as they were dragged away, those who were left said, “Do not shame us, brother, or betray the brothers who have died before us.”

<sup>19</sup> You are not ignorant of the affection of family ties which the divine and all-wise providence has allotted through the fathers to their descendants and which was implanted in the mother's womb. <sup>20</sup> There each of the brothers spent the same length of time and was shaped during the same period of time; and growing from the same blood and through the same life, they were brought to the light of day. <sup>21</sup> When they were born after an equal time of gestation, they drank milk from the same fountains. And brotherly-loving souls are nourished by being embraced at the same breast: <sup>22</sup> and they grow from strength to strength by this common nurture and daily companion-ship, as well as in the training imposed by our discipline in the law.

<sup>23</sup> Therefore, when sympathy and brotherly affection had been so established, the brothers were the more sympathetic to one another. <sup>24</sup> Since they had been educated by the same law and trained in the same virtues and brought up in righteousness, they loved one another all the more. <sup>25</sup> A common zeal for nobility strengthened their goodwill toward one another, and their concord, <sup>26</sup> because they could make their brotherly love more fervent with the aid of their faith. <sup>27</sup> But although nature and companionship and virtuous habits had strengthened the bond of brotherhood, those who were left endured for the sake of holiness, while watching their brothers being maltreated and tortured to death.

**14** Moreover, they encouraged them to face the torture, so that they not only despised their agonies, but also mastered the emotions of brotherly love.

<sup>2</sup> O reason, more kingly than kings and freer than the free! <sup>3</sup> O sacred and harmonious concord of the seven brothers on behalf of faith! <sup>4</sup> Not one of the seven youths turned coward or shrank from death, <sup>5</sup> but all of them, as though running on the highway to immortality, hastened on to death by torture. <sup>6</sup> Just as the hands and feet are moved in harmony with the promptings of the mind, so those holy youths, as if impelled by the immortal Spirit of holiness, agreed to go to death for Her sake. <sup>7</sup> O, you seven most holy brothers; and harmonious! For just as the seven days of creation move in choral dance around holiness, <sup>8</sup> so these youths, forming a chorus, encircled the sevenfold fear of tortures and dissolved it. <sup>9</sup> Even now, as we hear of the sufferings of these young men, we ourselves shudder. They, though, not only saw what was happening, not only heard the direct word of threat, but also bore the sufferings patiently, and in agonies of fire at that. <sup>10</sup> What could be more excruciatingly painful than this? For the power of fire is intense and swift, and it consumed their bodies quickly.

#### *On the Mother of the Seven*

<sup>11</sup> Do not consider it amazing that reason had full command over these men in their tortures, since the mind of woman despised even more diverse agonies, <sup>12</sup> for the mother of the seven young men endured under the torments of each one of her children.

<sup>13</sup> Observe how complex is a mother's love for her children, which draws everything toward an emotion felt in her inmost parts. <sup>14</sup> For even unreasoning animals have an affection and love for their offspring as well as humans. <sup>15</sup> For example, among birds, the ones that are tame protect their young by building on the housetops, <sup>16</sup> and others, by building on mountain peaks and in clefts of rocks and in the holes or tops of trees, hatch their nestlings and ward off the intruder. <sup>17</sup> If they are not able to keep the intruder away, they do what they can to help their young by flying in circles around them in the anguish of love, warning them with their own calls. <sup>18</sup> And why is it necessary to demonstrate sympathy for children by the example of unreasoning animals, <sup>19</sup> since even bees at the time for making honeycombs defend themselves against intruders and, as though with an iron dart, sting those who approach their hive and defend it even to the death? <sup>20</sup> But sympathy for her children did not sway the mother of the young men; she was of the same mind as Abraham.

**15** O reason – that was the tyrant over the passions for her sons! O holiness – indeed, it was more desirable to the mother even than her children! <sup>2</sup> Two courses of possibility were open to this mother, that of holiness, and that of preserving her seven sons for a time, as the tyrant had promised. <sup>3</sup> She loved holiness more, the holiness that preserves them for the age of life according to God's word. <sup>4</sup> How can I possibly express the deep love of parents for their children? On the tender nature of the child we impress a wonderful likeness of both shape and psyche, and this is especially so with mothers who are more affectionate in their own feelings

toward their children than are fathers. <sup>5</sup> For, as much as mothers are the weaker vessel and give birth to many, so much more do they love their children. <sup>6</sup> The mother of the seven boys, more than any other mother, loved her children. In seven pregnancies she had implanted in herself tender love toward them, <sup>7</sup> and because of the many pains she suffered with each of them she had sympathy for them; <sup>8</sup> yet because of the fear of God she disdained the temporal safety of her children. <sup>9</sup> Not only so, but also because of the nobility of her children and their eager obedience to the law, she felt a greater tenderness toward them. <sup>10</sup> For they were righteous and self-controlled and brave and very generous, and loved their brothers and their mother, so that they obeyed her even to death in keeping the law.

<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, even though so many factors influenced the mother to suffer with them out of love for her children, in the case of none of them were the various tortures strong enough to pervert her reason. <sup>12</sup> But each child separately and all of them together the mother urged on to death for holiness' sake. <sup>13</sup> O sacred nature and affection of parental love, yearning of parents toward children, nurture and indomitable suffering by mothers! <sup>14</sup> This mother, who saw them tortured and burned one by one, because of holiness did not change her attitude. <sup>15</sup> She watched the flesh of her children being melt away in the fire; she saw their fingers and toes scattered on the ground, and the flesh of their heads right down to the cheeks laid out before her like masks.

<sup>16</sup> O mother, tried now by more bitter pains than even the birth pangs you suffered for them! <sup>17</sup> O woman, who alone gave birth to such complete devotion! <sup>18</sup> When the firstborn breathed his last, it did not turn you aside, nor when the second in his torments looked at you piteously nor when the third expired; <sup>19</sup> nor did you weep when you looked at the eyes of each one in his tortures gazing boldly at the same agonies, and saw in their nostrils the signs of the approach of death. <sup>20</sup> When you saw the flesh of children burned upon the flesh of other children, severed hands upon hands, scalped heads upon heads, and corpses fallen on other corpses, and when you saw the place filled with many spectators of the torturings, you did not shed tears. <sup>21</sup> Neither the melodies of sirens <sup>14</sup> nor the songs of swans attract the attention of their hearers as did the voices of the children in torture calling to their mother. <sup>22</sup> How great and how manifold were the torments the mother then suffered as her sons were tortured on the wheel and with the hot irons! <sup>23</sup> But devout reason, giving her heart a man's courage in the very midst of her passions, strengthened her to transcend the affections of a mother's love for a time.

<sup>24</sup> Although she witnessed the destruction and the endlessly varied torments of her seven children, this mother of a noble character disregarded all these because of faith in God. <sup>25</sup> For in the council chamber of her own heart, as it were, she witnessed mighty advocates—nature, family, parental love, and the torments of her children— <sup>26</sup> this mother held two ballots, one bearing death and the other deliverance for her children. <sup>27</sup> She did not choose the deliverance that would preserve her seven sons for a short time, <sup>28</sup> but as a true daughter of Abraham, God-fearing, she remembered his fortitude.

<sup>29</sup> O mother of the nation, you are a vindicator of the law and a champion of holiness! You carried away the prize of the contest in your heart! <sup>30</sup> You are more noble than men in steadfastness, and more courageous than heroes in endurance! <sup>31</sup> Just as Noah's ark, carrying the world in the universal flood, stoutly endured the waves, <sup>32</sup> so you, O guardian of the law, overwhelmed from every side by the flood of your emotions and the violent winds, the torture of your sons, endured nobly and withstood the wintry storms that assail holiness.

**16** If then, a woman, and an elderly woman at that, endured seeing her children tortured to death, it must be admitted that devout reason is sovereign over the passions. <sup>2</sup> Therefore, I have demonstrated that not only men have ruled over the passions, but also that a woman has despised the fiercest tortures. <sup>3</sup> The lions surrounding Daniel were not so savage, nor was the raging fiery furnace of Mishael so intensely hot, as was the natural motherly love that burned within her as she saw her seven sons so indiscriminately tortured. <sup>4</sup> But, by holy reason, the mother quenched so many and such great passions.

<sup>5</sup> Consider this also: If this woman, being a mother, had been fainthearted, she would have mourned over them and perhaps spoken as follows: <sup>6</sup> "O how wretched am I and many times unhappy! After bearing seven children, I am now the mother of none! <sup>7</sup> How vain were these seven pregnancies, how futile these seven times being ten months <sup>15</sup> with child, how fruitless the nurturing and wretched the nursing! <sup>8</sup> In vain, my sons, I endured these many birth pangs for you, and the more grievous strains of rearing you. <sup>9</sup> Alas for my children,

some unmarried, others married and without offspring. I shall not see your children or have the joy of being called grandmother. <sup>10</sup> Woe is me, for I had many handsome sons, but am now bereft and all alone with my many sorrows! <sup>11</sup> And when I die, I shall have none of my sons to bury me.”

<sup>12</sup> But instead that holy and God-fearing mother did not wail with such a lament for any of them, nor did she dissuade any of them from dying, nor did she grieve as they were dying. <sup>13</sup> On the contrary, as though she had a mind like adamant and were giving rebirth into immortality to the whole number of her sons, she implored them and urged them on to death for the sake of holiness. <sup>14</sup> O mother, soldier of God in the cause of holiness, elder and woman! By such bold steadfastness you have conquered even a tyrant, and in word and deed you have proven yourself stronger than a man. <sup>15</sup> For when you were seized, along with your sons, you stood, and watching Eleazar being tortured, and said to your sons in the Hebrew language, <sup>16</sup> “My sons, noble is the contest to which you are called in order to bear witness for our people. Fight zealously for our ancestral law. <sup>17</sup> For it would be shameful if, while an aged man endures such agonies for the sake of holiness, you young men were to be terrified by tortures. <sup>18</sup> Remember that it is through God that you have had a share in the world and have enjoyed life, <sup>19</sup> and therefore you ought to endure any suffering for the sake of God. <sup>20</sup> For his sake also our father Abraham was zealous to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our nation; and when Isaac saw his father’s hand wielding a knife and descending upon him, he did not cower. <sup>21</sup> Daniel also, the righteous, was thrown to the lions; Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were cast into the fiery furnace and all endured it for the sake of God. <sup>22</sup> You too must have the same faith in God and not be grieved. <sup>23</sup> For it would be unreasonable for you who have knowledge of holiness not to withstand pain.”

<sup>24</sup> By these words the mother of the seven encouraged and persuaded each of her sons to die rather than violate God’s commandment. <sup>25</sup> They knew also that those who die for the sake of God will live to God, as will Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the patriarchs.

<sup>17</sup> Some of the guards said that when she also was about to be seized and put to death she threw herself into the flames so that no one might touch her body.

<sup>2</sup> O mother, who with your seven sons nullified the violence of the tyrant, frustrated his evil designs, and showed the courage of your faith! <sup>3</sup> Nobly set like a roof on the pillars of your sons, you held firm and unswerving against the earthquake of the tortures. <sup>4</sup> Be bold, therefore, O holy-minded mother, firmly maintaining an enduring hope in God. <sup>5</sup> The moon in heaven, with the stars, are established, but not so majestic as you, who, being as a light to your seven star-like sons, guided them to holiness and are firmly set and established with them before God in heaven. <sup>6</sup> For your children were true children of Abraham, our father.

### *The Effect of the Martyrdoms*

<sup>7</sup> If it were possible for us to paint the history of our faith as an artist might, would not those who first behold it shudder as they see the mother of the seven children enduring their varied tortures to death for the sake of holiness? <sup>8</sup> Indeed it would be proper to inscribe on their tomb these words as a reminder to the people of our nation:

<sup>9</sup> “Here lie buried an aged priest and an aged woman and seven sons, because of the violence of the tyrant who wished to destroy the way of life of the Hebrews.

<sup>10</sup> They vindicated their nation, looking to God and enduring torture even to death.”

<sup>11</sup> Truly the contest in which they were engaged was divine, <sup>12</sup> for on that day virtue gave the awards and tested them for their endurance. The prize for victory was incorruption in endless life. <sup>13</sup> Eleazar was the first to enter the contest, the mother of the seven sons entered the competition as well, and the brothers also contended. <sup>14</sup> The tyrant was the antagonist, and the world and the human race were the spectators. <sup>15</sup> Godliness was victor and gave the crown to its own champions. <sup>16</sup> Who did not admire the champions of the divine law? Who were not amazed?

<sup>17</sup> The tyrant himself and his whole council were astonished at their endurance, <sup>18</sup> on account of which they will stand before the divine throne and live the life of the age of blessing. <sup>16</sup> <sup>19</sup> For Moses says, “All the holy

ones are under your hands.”<sup>20</sup> These, then, having consecrated them-selves for the sake of God, are honored, not only with this honor, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not triumph over our nation,<sup>21</sup> the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation.<sup>22</sup> And through the blood of these righteous ones and through the atoning sacrifice of their death, divine providence preserved Israel, which had been shame-fully treated.

<sup>23</sup> For the tyrant Antiochus, when he saw the courage of their virtue and their endurance under the tortures, proclaimed their endurance to be a model for his soldiers,<sup>24</sup> and this made them brave and courageous for infantry battle and siege, and he ravaged and conquered all his enemies.

**18** O offspring of the seed of Abraham, children of Israel, obey this law and exercise holiness in every way,<sup>2</sup> knowing that devout reason is indeed master of all passions, not only of sufferings from within, but also of those from without.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore those who gave over their bodies in suffering for the sake of holiness were not only admired by mortals, but also were deemed worthy to share in a divine inheritance.<sup>4</sup> Because of them the nation gained peace, and by reviving observance of the law in the homeland they ravaged the enemy.<sup>5</sup> The tyrant Antiochus was humiliated in the land and in death was prevented, for when he was unable to compel the people of Jerusalem to adopt a pagan way of life and to forsake their ancestral customs, he left Jerusalem and marched away against the Persians.

#### *The Mother's Address to Her Children*

<sup>6</sup> The mother of seven sons also spoke these righteous words to her children:<sup>7</sup> “I was a pure virgin and did not go outside my father's house; but I guarded the rib from which woman was made.<sup>8</sup> No seducer corrupted me on a desert plain, nor did the destroyer, the deceitful serpent, defile the purity of my virginity.<sup>9</sup> In the time of my maturity I remained with my husband, and when these sons had grown up their father died. A happy man was he, who lived out his life with good children, and did not have the grief of bereavement.<sup>10</sup> While he was still with you, he taught you the law and the prophets.<sup>11</sup> He read to you about Abel slain by Cain, and Isaac who was offered as a burnt offering, and about Joseph in prison.<sup>12</sup> He told you of the zeal of Phinehas, and he taught you about Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael in the fire.<sup>13</sup> He sang the praises of Daniel in the den of the lions and blessed him.<sup>14</sup> He reminded you of the scripture of Isaiah, which says, ‘Even though you go through the fire, the flame shall not consume you.’<sup>15</sup> He sang to you the psalm of David which says, ‘Many are the afflictions of the righteous.’<sup>16</sup> He told you Solomon's proverb, ‘She is a tree of life for those who do Her will.’<sup>17</sup> He affirmed the query of Ezekiel, ‘Shall these dry bones live?’<sup>18</sup> For he did not forget to teach you the song that Moses taught, which says,<sup>19</sup> ‘I kill and I make alive: this is your life and the blessed-ness of your days.’ ”

<sup>20</sup> O bitter was that day, and yet not bitter, when that savage tyrant of the Greeks quenched fire with fire in his cruel caldrons, and in his burning rage brought those seven sons of the daughter of Abraham to the catapult and back again to more tortures,<sup>21</sup> pierced the pupils of their eyes and cut out their tongues, and put them to death with all kinds of tortures.<sup>22</sup> For these crimes the divine justice has pursued and will pursue the one who merits vengeance.<sup>23</sup> But the sons of Abraham, along with their victorious mother, are gathered together unto the place of their fathers, having obtained pure and victorious minds from God,<sup>24</sup> to whom be glory throughout all the ages. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> The modern translations which were taken into consideration are *The New Revised Standard Version*, *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament: English Translation (Brenton)*, *The Lexham English Septuagint*, *The Lexham Greek-English Interlinear Septuagint: H.B. Swete Edition*, and the translation by H. Anderson contained in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2.

The modern critical texts consulted are Henry Barclay Swete's *Old Testament in Greek According to the Septuagint* (including three apparatuses for 4 Maccabees), Rahlfs' *Septuagint*, and *The Fourth Book of Maccabees and Kindred Documents in Syriac* by R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes.

The ancient manuscripts of which we had transcriptions or facsimiles available to us are *Codex Sinaiticus* and the fragments of *The Sahidic Coptic Version of 4 Maccabees* published by Ivan Miroshnikov.

2The word "philosophy" is from Greek *phileō* (φίλεω) meaning "love" and *sophia* (σοφία) meaning "wisdom." The combination of these two words into "philosophy" literally translates "loving wisdom."

3Otherwise translated "emotion" or "feeling."

4Evidently, Hanukkah

5"Psyche" here is a transliteration from the Greek. The word means "inner thoughts" or, perhaps, "the inner manner of thoughts unique to self."

6Or *temperate*

7The nuance of this word has been lost in most translations which render it *sacred*. The word itself is the word for *sanctuary* or *temple*, though it appears here in its adjectival form.

8Or, as some amend the text (see Hadas, *Maccabees*, p. 157): "but those that are opposed to righteousness, courage, and soundness of mind."

9A note occurring at this point in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* translation reads, "Seleucus Nicanor is an egregious error, and V [Codex Venetus] reads, 'Seleucus, descendant of Nicanor.' The king intended here is Seleucus IV Philopator, who was the sixth successor of Seleucus Nicanor and son of Antiochus III the Great and older brother of his own successor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes." (Brackets added)

10Being *received by one's fathers*, or being *gathered to one's fathers* are common Semitic idioms referring to death. See Gen. 15:15; 25:8; Nu. 20:24; 27:13; Acts 13:36. The idea is that when one dies he goes to the same place his predecessors went; namely, the dust (Gen. 3:19; Job 7:21; Ecc. 3:20; 12:7).

11The name Eleazar means "seed of God."

12This is a wordy way of saying "your god" which was common to ancient pagan philosophers.

13Verses 7 and 8 are missing from important manuscripts and are likely not original to the text; they have therefore been omitted.



[14](#)Sirens were 'mythical' women, sometimes daemons, who would lure sailors to wreck their ships on the rocks or to cast themselves into the sea by their inducing songs. See *Oxford American Dictionary*, art. Sirens; *Encyclo-pedia of 7700 Illustrations*, p. 1445 *Ulysees and the Sirens* (6522).

[15](#)A note occurring at this point in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* translation reads, "'Ten months' is a literal rendering of the Gk. *dekam?noi*, a common expression in antiquity for the period of gestation, although the correct number of months was known well enough."

[16](#)Other manuscripts read, "*now* stand before the divine throne..." That said, the manuscript traditions here followed are less subject to interpretations that set this verse at odds with the view of death and resurrection presented not only in the other books of the Maccabees, but also within 4 Maccabees itself (see 18:17-19).