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A New Perspective on the Kinship between Jews and Spartans: The Issue of Ancestral Territory

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The kinship between Jews and Spartans mentioned in 1 and 2 Maccabees has provoked scholarly curiosity and debate for at least two centuries.¹ While most studies have focused on the question of the Judeo-Spartan correspondence's historicity, in this paper I reflect on the reasons that led some Jews to embrace the idea of such a close connection with Sparta, and suggest that there may be yet another aspect of this issue that deserves scrutiny. I will first delve into the implications of the references to kinship with the Spartans in 1 and 2 Maccabees, drawing a distinction between the question of the authenticity of the letters and that of the historical reality of the Judeo-Spartan relationship. I shall then consider a few reasons that made it possible for Jews, even among conservative Judean circles, to perceive themselves as close to the Spartans, to the point of acknowledging them as kin. Finally, I will suggest an additional explanation for the Judean Spartophilia, which has not received attention so far and pertains to the Spartans' and the Jews' respective relationships to their ancestral territory.

It is a great pleasure to dedicate this study to Professor Daniel Schwartz. I was fortunate enough to attend one of his courses as a visiting research student at the Hebrew University while working towards my Ph.D., and I have learned immensely from both his teaching and his writings.

1. Spartophilia in Hellenistic Judea

Let us first take a brief look at what the books of Maccabees tell us about the Judeo-Spartan kinship, or *syngeneia*. The word *syngeneia* itself is found only in 2 Maccabees, in a passage that narrates Jason's failed attempt to seize power in Jerusalem and his subsequent decision to flee from Judea. After having wandered in various places, he is said to have "set sail to the Spartans, hoping to find shelter by virtue of the kinship" (ὡς διὰ τὴν συγγένειαν τευξόμενος

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¹ See Bremmer, "Spartans and Jews," n. 3. See also Stern, *Hasmonaean Judaea*, 63–70, with bibliography in n. 1.

σκέπη, 2 Macc 5:9).² In the rest of the book, the issue of the relationship between the Judeans and the Spartans is never mentioned again. It is the First Book of Maccabees, written independently from the Second, that sheds light on this mysterious allusion. According to 1 Maccabees 12, the Judean high priest Onias had received a letter from Areus, the king of Sparta (probably Areus I), stating that Judeans and Spartans were “brothers” (*adelphoi*) because they had a common ancestor in Abraham.³ The Hasmonean high priest Jonathan quotes this letter in one that he sends to the Spartans in ca. 144/43 BCE, in order to renew the alliance (*symmachia*) and the friendship (*philia*) with them (1 Macc 12:8), or the brotherhood (*adelphotēs*) and the friendship (*philia*) (1 Macc 12:10). In verse 17, Jonathan mentions “the letters from us concerning the renewal and our brotherhood (τὰς παρ’ ἡμῶν ἐπιστολάς περὶ τῆς ἀνανεώσεως καὶ τῆς ἀδελφότητος ἡμῶν),” which could be a reference to his own letter meant to renew the alliance and the friendship, and to Areus’ letter concerning the brotherhood, but could also simply refer to “the renewal of our brotherhood”—meaning: the renewal of the alliance.⁴ Finally, after Jonathan’s death and Simon’s accession to the high priesthood, the Judeans receive the Spartans’ response to Jonathan’s letter, a response that celebrates the Judeans’ glory and honor (meaning their restored independence under Simon) and confirms the renewal of the friendship (1 Macc 14:20–23, especially 22). In the Spartans’ missive, nothing is said of the alliance or the brotherhood (two terms that seemed to be synonymous in Jonathan’s letter).

As stated above, previous discussions of the Judeo-Spartan kinship have generally focused on the historicity of this diplomatic exchange and the authenticity of the letters. More than twenty years ago, Erich Gruen argued forcefully that this kinship was a Jewish invention and the documents quoted in 1 Maccabees are literary forgeries.⁵ Among the main arguments against the authenticity of the letters are their odd formulas and biblicalizing style (especially in 1 Macc 12) and the fact that it is highly improbable that a Spartan king would have presented Abraham as the ancestor of the Spartans.⁶ While Gruen’s conclusion has been widely accepted

² Translation by Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 247, slightly modified to emphasize the use of the definite article ἡ.

³ 1 Macc 12:21: “It has been found in a document concerning the Spartans and the Jews that they are brothers (*adelphoi*) and that they are of the stock (*genos*) of Abraham.”

⁴ See Abel, *Les Livres des Maccabées*, 223, n. 17. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.169.

⁵ Gruen, “The Purported Jewish-Spartan Affiliation”; see also Gruen, “Kinship Relations,” 104–5, and *Rethinking the Other*, 306: “Whatever the validity of the diplomatic communication, the genealogical link between these two nations is transparent fiction.”

⁶ See already Cardauns, “Juden und Spartaner,” 318; Orrieux, “La ‘parenté,’” 179; Curty, “A propos de la συγγένεια,” 248; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 311.

among scholars, Ory Amitay has recently challenged it.⁷ He posits that the reference in 1 Macc 12:11 to prayers and sacrifices offered by the Judeans for the Spartans' sake cannot be a fictitious claim, arguing that Judean readers could easily check the reality of such sacrifices. In addition, Amitay points to “the richness of detail contained in the short notice in Jonathan’s letter, the necessity of publicity for the letters to achieve their intended propagandistic role, and the ease with which the allegedly false information could have been exposed as an invention.”⁸ He also recalls the connection between Jason and Sparta in 2 Macc 5:9, the philo-Spartan atmosphere at Herod’s court in the first century BCE, illustrated by the warm welcome given to the Spartan Eurycles “because of his fatherland” (Josephus, *B.J.* 1.515), and the references in rabbinic literature to a rabbi named Ben-Lakonia.⁹ In the end, Amitay concludes that there must have been a special connection between Judea and Sparta and that the whole exchange of letters is probably authentic. He suggests that Areus I may have been attempting to recruit Judean mercenaries, as his ally Ptolemy II had done, and thus devised — with the help of a Jewish adviser — a *syngeneia* that would appeal to Jews; hence the biblicalizing style and the reference to Abraham.¹⁰

As most commentators have noted, in the Hellenistic world putting forward a mythical *syngeneia* going back to a very ancient ancestor was a common way to forge new diplomatic ties or to strengthen existing ones.¹¹ However, the fact that outside Jewish writings we do not know of a single example of *syngeneia* that is not based on a Greek ancestor weakens Amitay’s argument. In addition, the reference in 1 Macc 12:11 to prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the Spartans need not be taken as literally as he takes it. Prayers and sacrifices on behalf of ruling authorities are well attested in Jewish sources, and it is indeed possible that they would also have been offered on behalf of peoples considered friends and allies of the Judeans.¹² Yet no Spartan envoy would have been able to check what was happening in the Jerusalem temple — nor, for that matter, would most of the Jews living in the Hasmonean period. The formulation in 1 Macc 12 is best interpreted as a conventional expression of goodwill and friendly disposition, which may or may not have had a concrete application in reality. In a similar vein,

⁷ Amitay, “The Correspondence.”

⁸ Amitay, “The Correspondence,” 92.

⁹ According to Josephus, Herod made gifts to Sparta (*J.W.* 1.425), welcomed the Spartan dynast Eurycles (another client-king of Augustus) at his court, and became friends with him. On Eurycles, see Cartledge and Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta*, 89–94. On Ben-Lakonia, see Amitay, “Some Ioudaio-Lakonian Rabbis.”

¹⁰ The suggestion that Areus wanted to hire Judean mercenaries was already made by Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 457; Orrieux, “La ‘parenté,’” 171, 174; Cartledge 1989, 36–37. See now Amitay, “The Correspondence,” 96–98.

¹¹ See, e.g., Curty, “A propos de la συγγένεια” and *Les parentés légendaires*, 242–63; Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 253–76.

¹² See the list of examples in Amitay, “The Correspondence,” 87. *Pace* Bremmer, “Spartans and Jews,” 54, who deems it “unthinkable that the Jews would remember the Spartans in their sacrifices and festivals.”

Amitay's argument that Judeans could easily check the accuracy of the documents quoted in 1 Maccabees, and thus expose the inauthenticity of the letters, seems dubious to me. This idea sounds quite modern, or at least influenced by Roman archival practices. Passages such as 1 Macc 14:44–45 suggest that Simon took great care to establish his power as securely as possible, and this must have involved control over the archives. Interestingly enough, as Amitay himself notes, the *antigrapha* of the Spartan correspondence, in contrast to others referred to in 1 Maccabees, “lack a specific mention of bronze or stone as means of recording, nor do they specify any public display in Judea.”¹³ In my opinion, while the nature of the Judeo-Spartan relationship remains a matter of debate, and the existence of a diplomatic correspondence of some sort cannot be excluded, the letters found in 1 Maccabees were either invented or thoroughly reworked (rather than merely translated into Hebrew) for propagandistic purposes, in order to enhance the Hasmoneans' legitimacy in a way that was culturally appropriate to their Judean audience (as the *syngeneia* going back to Abraham, in particular, shows).¹⁴

It would be mistaken, however, to infer from the inauthenticity of the letters that there was no relationship at all between Judeans and Spartans.¹⁵ In 2 Maccabees 5, the way that the author refers to Jason's attempt to receive hospitality in Sparta “because of the kinship” implies that such a kinship, no matter how fictitious, was considered a well-known fact in his time, and it must have reflected a connection of some sort.¹⁶ According to Daniel Schwartz, this book dates from between 161/60 and 143/42 BCE, long before 1 Maccabees was composed.¹⁷ Moreover, the reference to Jason and the claim that he relied on such a kinship to find shelter in Sparta point to an ancient link, perhaps originating in the context of the third century BCE, as suggested by Amitay.¹⁸ In any case, the development of a Judeo-Spartan relationship and the idea of a Judeo-Spartan kinship predate the time of Jonathan and Simon.

On the whole, 2 Maccabees displays a good knowledge of Greek language and culture. Its author's awareness of the phenomenon of *syngeneiai* between cities and peoples, so widespread in the Hellenistic world, is thus not surprising, nor is the fact that he uses the right word for it.¹⁹ What must be emphasized, however, is the fact that the author of 2 Maccabees implicitly

¹³ Amitay, “The Correspondence,” 84.

¹⁴ According to Bremmer, “Spartans and Jews,” 58, Jan Nelis shows in his commentary on 1 Maccabees that in chapter 12, the author revised an already existing letter. Unfortunately, I was unable to access Nelis' work.

¹⁵ See already Cardauns, “Juden und Spartaner,” 321.

¹⁶ Orrieux, “La ‘parenté,’” 181; Stern, *Hasmonaean Judaea*, 64; Bremmer, “Spartans and Jews,” 52.

¹⁷ Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 11–15; on the dating of 1 Maccabees (end of the second century BCE), see Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?*, 68–71.

¹⁸ Amitay, “The Correspondence,” 96–98.

¹⁹ In *Ant.* 12.226 (Josephus' rewriting of Onias' letter) Josephus uses the term *oikeiotēs* (as noted by Bremmer, “Spartans and Jews,” 53), yet in *Ant.* 13.169 (Josephus' rewriting of Jonathan's letter) he speaks of a *syngeneia*.

contrasts the Judeo-Spartan *syngeneia* that Jason allegedly tried to use to his own advantage with the true *syngeneia* that unites the people of Israel and should have prevented Jason from slaughtering his compatriots.²⁰ Jason is guilty of having substituted an artificial kinship for a genuine one, or at least of having failed to differentiate between them and to rank them properly.²¹ In short, the author of 2 Maccabees did not view the alleged Judeo-Spartan *syngeneia* with favor, and he clearly did not invent it.

The implications of 2 Macc 5:9 are thus manifold. First, the kinship with the Spartans was devised during the period that *preceded* the Maccabean crisis, among the Judean elites of Jerusalem who were open to the Hellenistic world, probably out of admiration for the Spartans and possibly also as a consequence of the development of a real diplomatic relationship between the two peoples in a Ptolemaic context. That there was a “Spartophile” climate in Judea is also shown by the fact that some Judean priests — at least Jason’s successor as high priest — were called Menelaus, like the great Spartan king in the *Iliad*.²²

Second, as Arnaldo Momigliano already emphasized, “The family link between the Jews and the Spartans was not invented by the Hasmonians ... but it fell to the lot of the Hasmonians to exploit this legend for political respectability.”²³ It seems that the Hasmonians were not necessarily opposed to all the innovations that arose from the so-called Hellenized Judean circles. As a matter of fact, at least from Jonathan onward, the Hasmonians understood the rules and language of political and diplomatic relationships in the Hellenistic world very well.²⁴ The epistolary exchange with Sparta in 1 Maccabees, a work originally composed in Hebrew, probably served to enhance the status of Jonathan and Simon in the eyes of a Jewish audience, first and foremost in Judea but possibly also in the diaspora (since the book was later translated into Greek). On the one hand, Jonathan and Simon appear as the continuators of a policy that started under the high priest Onias, as if the high priestly line had not been interrupted. (That readers of 1 Maccabees could identify the Onias mentioned in Areus’ letter with Onias III is shown by Josephus’ rewriting of the episode in *Ant.* 12.225.) On the other hand, this diplomatic correspondence helps to depict Jonathan and Simon as capable political leaders who knew how to handle international relationships. It is not by chance that the Spartans are always referred to

²⁰ Compare 2 Macc 5:6 and 9. See Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 256.

²¹ This point is all the more significant as the author of 2 Maccabees does not see the world through a radical Jew/non-Jew divide but rather acknowledges that some Greeks, or some non-Jews more broadly, share common values with the Jews, while some Jews are wicked. See Schwartz, “The Other in 1 and 2 Maccabees,” 32–33.

²² Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, 139; Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 77; Bremmer, “Spartans and Jews,” 50.

²³ Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, 113.

²⁴ For another example, linked to the conflict between Simon and Antiochus VII (1 Macc 15), see Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?*, 161–85. See also the cautious conclusion of Nisula, “Time Has Passed,” 219.

in passages that also mention the Romans, whose alliance with the Judeans and their Hasmonean leaders is used repeatedly by the author of 1 Maccabees to enhance the legitimacy of John Hyrcanus' ancestors.²⁵ After the defeat of the Achaean League in 146 BCE, Sparta belonged to the pro-Roman camp and was treated rather well by Rome.²⁶ It thus made all the more sense to revive the old "friendship" with the Spartans, even though the benefit expected from such an initiative probably belonged to the realm of internal image and policy rather than to that of exterior political relationships.²⁷ In any case, the diplomatic correspondence quoted in 1 Maccabees would not have conferred legitimacy on the Hasmoneans if the Judeans' relation to the Spartans was a complete invention. What kind of political benefit would the Hasmoneans have drawn from emphasizing a diplomatic relationship that had no existence and did not appeal to contemporary Jews? We have here another argument in favor of the historicity of a Judeo-Spartan connection of some sort.

A third implication of the allusion to Judeo-Spartan kinship in 2 Macc 5:9 is that the Judeans who concocted it had absorbed at least some aspects of the diplomatic and cultural language of the Hellenistic world. Admittedly, the invention of a kinship through Abraham rather than through a Greek mythological figure means that these Jews integrated the Spartans into their own genealogies and worldview, and not the reverse. They were thus both imitating and reversing the Greek cultural paradigm.²⁸ Yet this device simultaneously shows that some of the Judean elites perceived certain Greeks as particularly close to them. Even if we accept the existence of a diplomatic relationship of some sort between Judea and Sparta, the question remains why some Jews found the notion of a *syngeneia* with the Spartans appealing.²⁹

2. Similarities between Spartans and Jews

Several scholars — most prominent among them Louis Feldman and Erich Gruen — have drawn attention to the numerous similarities or analogies that could be perceived to exist between Jews and Spartans.³⁰ Hecataeus of Abdera's description of the Mosaic *politeia*, written at the beginning of the third century BCE and "quoted" in Diodorus 40.3, seems to indicate that a Greek writer could view Jewish *mores* through a Spartan prism.³¹ However, in Greco-Roman

²⁵ See, e.g., Orrieux, "La 'parenté,'" 186; Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 78; Seeman, *Rome and Judea*, 143–50. This is also noted by Amitay, "The Correspondence," 85.

²⁶ Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 78. See also section 2 of this article.

²⁷ See Katzoff, "Jonathan and Late Sparta," 487–89; Rappaport, *The First Book of Maccabees*, 287.

²⁸ Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 305–6.

²⁹ As correctly noted by Bremmer, "Spartans and Jews," 57.

³⁰ Feldman, "Reading between the Lines," 253–61; Gruen, "The Purported Jewish-Spartan Affiliation," 260–64.

³¹ See Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, 84; Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 260–61; Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 73–74; Berthelot, *Philanthrōpia judaica*, 91–94; Bremmer, "Spartans and Jews," 48–50 (who argues that the implicit

literature as a whole, there is no other testimony of such a “Spartan interpretation” of Judaism. A different way to understand the passage attributed to Hecataeus has been put forward by Daniel Schwartz, who argues that the excursus on the Jews in Diodorus 40.3 goes back to a Jewish author of the Hasmonean period.³² If Schwartz is right, this text documents a Jewish attempt to depict Jews in a Spartan light and thus further attests a Jewish sense of cultural proximity to Spartans. At the end of the first century CE, Josephus explicitly compared Jews to Spartans, yet in his case the purpose was clearly to highlight the Jews’ superiority to the Greeks and to defend Jews against accusations of misanthropy; moreover, the contrast between the Spartans and the Jews was meant to suggest a proximity between the latter and the Romans.³³ As a consequence, *Against Apion* does not illustrate a sense of proximity between Jews and Spartans, as some documents dating to the Hellenistic period do.

What were the Spartan characteristics that Jews could find appealing? Gruen states that “Jews could borrow some of the aura of the Spartan mystique and set themselves in the pattern of a people renowned for authority, stability, self-sacrifice, and adherence to law (even if the reputation no longer matched reality in the Hellenistic period).”³⁴ One could add courage, manliness, military prowess, discipline, and simplicity.³⁵ One of the most appealing characteristics for the Jews probably was the Spartans’ faithfulness to their ancestral laws, established by the famous Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus and said to have been inspired by Apollo himself.³⁶ This characteristic went hand in hand with the Spartans’ readiness to die for their city and fatherland, and both features have close parallels in Josephus’ description of the Jews as brave, faithful to their laws, and ready to die for them, as well as in 1 and 2 Maccabees’ accounts of Judean resistance to Antiochus IV’s policy. Although it is true that Sparta’s traditional laws tended to fall into disuse during the Hellenistic era, this period also witnessed the reform of Agis IV, followed by a similar yet different series of measures issued by Cleomenes III. Only with Sparta’s forced incorporation into the Achaean League at the beginning of the second century BCE did its constitution lose most of its force. However, after the Achaean defeat by Rome in 146 BCE, the Romans at least partly restored the Spartans’

comparison between the Jews and the Spartans goes back to Hecataeus’ Jewish informants — i.e., it was a deliberate Jewish strategy to explain why they avoided mixing with foreigners).

³² Schwartz, “Diodorus Siculus 40.3,” esp. 197.

³³ See *C. Ap.* 2.225–235, 255–261; Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia judaica*, 361–66; Barclay, *Against Apion*, 301–4, 316–18; Mason, “Essenes and Lurking Spartans,” esp. 234, 236–37, 241.

³⁴ Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 306.

³⁵ On Sparta as a model of austerity, self-discipline, and martial prowess, see Farney, *Ethnic Identity*, 201–3. On discipline, see, e.g., Plutarch, *Lyc.* 24.4. On this idealized image of Sparta, see Ollier, *Le Mirage spartiate*, esp. 128.

³⁶ On faithfulness to the laws and readiness to die to preserve Spartan *mores* and values, see in particular Philo, *Prob.* 114. On Apollo as the source of inspiration for Lycurgus’ legislation, see Herodotus, *Histories* 1.65.

ancestral constitution, including the *agōgē* — the traditional, harsh Spartan upbringing.³⁷ In 144 BCE, Jonathan could not ignore the outcome of this war. The restoration of the Spartans' ancestral constitution under Roman patronage, even if it was not complete, may have played a role in his decision to revive the connections with both Rome and Sparta and to renew the alliances and friendships with them, for the restoration of the Judean ancestral laws and way of life originally lay at the core of the Maccabean struggle against the Seleucids.

Moreover, the fact that the Spartans resisted the Macedonians and fought repeatedly to maintain their independence from all Greek and foreign powers may have spoken to the hearts of Judean patriots. The reference to Areus in the exchange of letters found in 1 Maccabees may have to do with Areus I's leading role in two anti-Macedonian coalitions in the third century BCE (even though these attempts at shaking Macedonian power ultimately failed).³⁸ This point and the preceding one — the Spartans' faithfulness to their traditional laws and educational system — may explain why Sparta appealed not just to Hellenized Jews looking for ways to be more intimately related to the Greek world but also to conservative and patriotic members of the Judean elite.³⁹ In this respect, it is worth remembering that in the second century BCE, Cato the Elder, who was hostile to the growing influence of Greek culture in Rome, was nevertheless ready to accept the idea that Romans had Spartan origins through the Sabines and that the latter's reputation for austerity and moral virtue had to be credited in part to this Spartan heritage.⁴⁰

I suggest that in addition to the motives listed here, the Spartans' concern for their lost territories, which expressed itself repeatedly in military campaigns and political negotiations during the third and early second century BCE,⁴¹ may also shed light on the Judean interest in

³⁷ See Cartledge and Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta*, 77, 82. On the abrogation of the laws and customs of Lycurgus by the Achaean League in 189/8 BCE, see Livy 38.34.3; Katzoff, "Jonathan and Late Sparta," 488. Katzoff suggests that, through the example of Sparta, Jonathan may have tried to show Jewish Hellenizers that it was possible to belong to the community of Hellenic states despite having a non-Hellenic educational system (488–89).

³⁸ Cartledge and Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta*, 28–29, 32–33; Gruen, "The Purported Jewish-Spartan Affiliation," 261–62. Opposition to Macedonian power continued after Areus' reign.

³⁹ The *Book of Jubilees* shows that fervent patriots who abhorred foreign influences could nevertheless be well versed in some aspects of Greek culture, such as geography and cartography; see Hölscher, *Drei Erdkarten*, 57–73; Alexander, "Notes on the 'Imago Mundi'"; for further bibliography, see Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?*, 190 n. 375. I think that there is a growing scholarly consensus that there was no necessary antagonism between faithfulness to Judean traditions and openness to Hellenistic culture.

⁴⁰ Cato F2.22 (Beck and Walter), quoted by Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 248. See also Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 86–87.

⁴¹ Especially as far as the territory of Messenia was concerned. Irad Malkin notes that "after it was lost in 371, the recovery of Messenia remained a burning Spartan ambition. The proximity of the two countries served as a constant reminder of Messenia's past subjugation. Spartan border disputes with Messenia, including the emergence of a pretense to Spartan origins by Messenian Thouria, are evident even in the early Roman empire" (*Myth and Territory*, 35). See also Cartledge and Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta*, 78–79.

the Spartans, all the more so since the founding myths justifying the rights of Sparta and Israel over their respective lands display striking analogies.

3. Spartan and Jewish Narratives Concerning their Rights over their Respective Lands

During the archaic and classical periods, the Spartans claimed the right to rule over different parts of the Peloponnese because their kings (belonging to the two royal lines that ruled Sparta jointly, the Eurypontids and the Agiads) were descendants of the Herakleidai, which means that their genealogy went back to Heracles himself.⁴² This claim was based on the myth of the “Return of the Herakleidai,” echoed in fragments of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (seventh century BCE), but also in Herodotus, Thucydides, Euripides, Diodorus, Pausanias, and (Pseudo-)Apollodorus.⁴³ According to Tyrtaeus, Zeus allotted certain territories in the Peloponnese — most notably Argos, Sparta, and Messenia — to Heracles and his descendants.⁴⁴ In addition, some accounts of the myth report that Heracles fought on behalf of the Spartan king Tyndareus and reinstalled him as the legitimate ruler after his brother treacherously stripped him of the throne. Because Tyndareus’ sons Castor and Polydeuces, his heirs, had “vanished from among men” (according to the testimony of Isocrates, *Archidamos* 18), he later gave his kingdom to Heracles, who thus became the legitimate master of Sparta. Heracles, however, did not himself rule but rather asked Tyndareus “to guard it [the country] for his [Heracles’] descendants” (Diodorus 4.33.5).

Subsequently, Hera’s opposition and support of Eurystheus, the king of Argos, deprived Heracles’ descendants of the kingdom that Zeus had granted to their ancestor. The Herakleidai defeated Eurystheus and tried to reconquer the Peloponnese, but in vain. They ended up finding refuge in the land of the Dorians. It was only after correctly interpreting Apollo’s oracle concerning the timing of the war that the Herakleidai finally seized the territory that belonged to them by inheritance, with the help of their Dorian allies. The conquest was led by three brothers, Temenos, Cresphontes, and Aristodemus (who was killed but continued to be represented by his two sons). The author known as (Pseudo-)Apollodorus writes that

when they had made themselves masters of Peloponnese, they set up three altars of Paternal Zeus, and sacrificed upon them, and cast lots for the cities. So the first drawing was for Argos, the second

⁴² Malkin, *Myth and Territory*, 15–45. The importance of this genealogy endured until the Roman period. Cartledge and Spawforth thus note that “Nabis [r. 207–192 BCE] drew attention to his connection with the Eurypontids’ ultimate progenitor Heracles by having him depicted heroically nude on his coinage” (*Hellenistic and Roman Sparta*, 62).

⁴³ For a close study of the different literary sources, see Vanschoonwinkel, *L’Égée et la Méditerranée orientale*, 331–66; idem, “Des Héraclides.”

⁴⁴ On the claim that Zeus gave Sparta to the Herakleidai, see Tyrtaios, frag. 1a, in Prato, *Tyrtaeus*, 23.

for Lacedaemon, and the third for Messene. And they brought a pitcher of water, and resolved that each should cast in a lot. Now Temenos and the two sons of Aristodemos, Procles and Eurysthenes, threw stones. But Cresphontes, wishing to have Messene allotted to him, threw in a clod of earth. As the clod was dissolved in the water, it could not be but that the other two lots should turn up. The lot of Temenos having been drawn first, and that of the sons of Aristodemos second, Cresphontes got Messene.⁴⁵

In connection with this story, Martin P. Nilson notes that

the myth which relates that the second of the Herakleidai, Cresphontes, through unfair dealing in the allotting of the conquered country, obtained the best piece, Messenia, for himself, while Aristodamus had to be content with Laconia, is an attempt to create a justification for the Spartan conquest of Messenia.⁴⁶

The Messenians were said to have murdered Cresphontes and to have sent away his sons. Hence, the notion that the Spartan kings were descendants of the Herakleidai made it possible for Sparta to claim Messenia. More generally speaking, as Irad Malkin has shown, the myth was used to justify the Dorian settlement in the Peloponnese and the Spartan domination of this area.⁴⁷ In the ancient world, stories about origins were often manipulated or even created to legitimate later conquests and the rule of one people or city over another.⁴⁸ Spartans looked at themselves as a colony (*apoikia*) of the Dorians⁴⁹ and therefore as newcomers to the Peloponnese, but the myth enabled them to claim an original right of property over territories like Messenia.

The myth of the “Return of the Herakleidai” displays several similarities with the history of Israel told in the corpus that runs from Genesis to Joshua.⁵⁰ In both cases, there is no autochthonous link with the soil (unlike the case of Athens) but rather a clear depiction of both the people and their ancestor(s) as newcomers to the land. Also in both cases, a god (Zeus, YHWH) grants a land (the Dorian Peloponnese in the Greek myth, the Land of Canaan in the Bible) to a hero or a founding father (Heracles, Abraham) who does not, however, take possession of it.⁵¹ His descendants perform the conquest at the time appointed by the god, several generations after their ancestor’s death and after at least one unsuccessful attempt (the

⁴⁵ (Pseudo-)Apollodorus, *Library* 2.8.4, trans. James G. Frazer, LCL, 289–91. See also Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2.18.7, with some variants.

⁴⁶ Nilson, *A History of Greek Religion*, 238.

⁴⁷ Malkin, *Myth and Territory*, 15–45.

⁴⁸ See Ma, *Antiochos III*, 32–33: “Other examples, mostly in the epigraphical documentation, bring out the legitimizing role of allusion to the past, to the point that *πάτριος χώρα* is often used for territory which was precisely contested between two states.”

⁴⁹ See Pindar, *Isthm.* 7.12–15.

⁵⁰ For a general comparison of Greek stories about a *ktisis* with the biblical narrative dealing with the period from the patriarchs to the settlement in the Land, see Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land*, esp. 40–41.

⁵¹ On this aspect of the Greek myth, see Malkin, *Myth and Territory*, 23. This is especially true in the case of Heracles. Abraham lived in Canaan but did not own the land as a whole.

first Dorian invasion of the Peloponnese in the myth of the Herakleidai; the first attempt to conquer Canaan in Numbers 14:40–45). They then distribute the conquered territories among themselves by casting lots (among Temenos, Cresphontes, and Aristodemos in the Greek myth; among the tribes corresponding to the sons of Jacob in the Bible).⁵² In both cases, the inheritance due to one of the brothers (or one of the tribes) is actually given to his two sons (the sons of Aristodemos on the one hand; the sons of Joseph on the other). These similarities are quite striking and could have impressed the Judeans who were familiar with the stories of the patriarchs and the conquest of Canaan.

Moreover, an additional common feature of the two founding narratives appears in Jewish rewritings of Genesis dating to the second century BCE, such as the *Book of Jubilees* and the *Genesis Apocryphon*. The *Book of Jubilees* modifies the biblical story of the distribution of the lands among the three sons of Noah, arguing that Canaan fell to the lot of Shem. This rewriting clearly implies that the Land was meant to belong to Israel in particular, among all of Shem's descendants. The *Book of Jubilees* therefore conveys a double justification for Israel's right to the Land: on the one hand, the right of inheritance, a right going back to the beginnings of human history, to the generation of the Flood; on the other hand, the explicit gift of God to Abraham and his descendants.⁵³ Similarly, according to the myth of the Herakleidai, the Spartans had a right of property over their territory both through a right of inheritance going back to Heracles and through Zeus' explicit gift.⁵⁴

Finally, despite the late dating of rabbinic sources, I will mention that the idea that the original inhabitants of Sparta were charged with guarding it until the return of Heracles' descendants (Diodorus 4.33.5) finds a parallel in *Sifra*, the halakhic midrash on Leviticus.⁵⁵ The latter argues that the Canaanites had been left in the country as guardians of the Land until the coming of Israel, Abraham's legitimate heirs.⁵⁶ Although *Sifra*'s final redaction is dated to the third century CE, it remains theoretically possible that it echoes an older tradition going back to the Hellenistic period.

In highlighting these ideological similarities, I do not mean to suggest that the Spartan myth influenced the biblical narrative or Jewish discourse on Israel's relationship to the Land. I am not arguing here for any kind of influence (in one direction or the other) but rather pointing to

⁵² Not all the tribes received their territory through lot casting. Those who settled in Transjordan received their lands from Moses (Numbers 32).

⁵³ See *Jubilees* 8.10–19, 10.28–34; Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?*, 185–203.

⁵⁴ See Malkin, *Myth and Territory*, 33–34.

⁵⁵ According to Malkin, the Spartans used the argument that the locals were supposed to guard the place until the coming of Heracles' descendants in other territorial disputes, as in Sicily (*Myth and Territory*, 23).

⁵⁶ See *Sifra*, Qedoshim 11 [5.2]; ed. Weiss, 93 c.

a partly similar *Weltanschauung*. The common features listed here help explain why some Jews, even — or perhaps especially — among Judean “nationalist” circles, could feel a deep affinity with Sparta.

I end with a few thoughts on the way in which the ancestors of the Spartans may have been associated with Abraham, a topic on which 1 and 2 Maccabees do not provide information. Numerous scholars have paid attention in this context to the testimony of an otherwise unknown writer named Cleodemus Malchus, quoted by Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* 1.239–241.⁵⁷ According to Cleodemus, Heracles married the daughter of one of the sons that Abraham had with Qeturah (Gen 25:1–4). It would be sensible to suppose that the Judeans who invented the kinship between the Spartans and the Jews devised a similar connection between Abraham and Heracles, the heroic ancestor of the Herakleidai and of Sparta’s two royal houses.⁵⁸ Moreover, this would shed light on 2 Maccabees 4:18–20, which reports that Jason sent envoys to the quadrennial games at Tyre (which were given in honor of Heracles/Melqart) with three hundred silver drachmas for a sacrifice to Heracles.⁵⁹ As Claude Orrieux emphasizes, if the Judeans had not demonstrated a connection of some kind with the Hellenistic world, they would not have been allowed to participate in these games.⁶⁰ That this connection involved Heracles would make sense, given the nature of the festival. Finally, because the author of 1 Maccabees implicitly associates the Judeo-Spartan correspondence with embassies to Rome in both chapters 12 and 14, it is worth recalling that Heracles was a popular figure in Rome too, where he was even considered the ancestor of some patrician families.⁶¹ That the kinship between Jews and Spartans mentioned in 1 and 2 Maccabees was based on a tradition connecting Abraham’s offspring with Heracles, as in Cleodemus’ account, cannot be definitely proved, but it would be very logical indeed.

⁵⁷ See Cardauns, “Juden und Spartaner,” 322–23; Orrieux, “La ‘parenté,’” 185; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 142–43; Gruen, “The Purported Jewish-Spartan Affiliation,” 262; Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 76; Bremmer, “Spartans and Jews,” 58–59; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 303–4; Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 128–29. For a detailed discussion of this passage, see Holladay, *Fragments*, 245–59.

⁵⁸ See Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 76.

⁵⁹ That these envoys did not follow his orders and used the money for other purposes, out of religious concern, does not disprove that the sacrifice was possible in Jason’s mind, or in the minds of others.

⁶⁰ Orrieux, “La ‘parenté,’” 181.

⁶¹ The Fabii in particular. See Plutarch, *Fab.* 1; Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, 19; Gersht, “Heracles’ *virtus*,” 212–13. In addition, a Spartan genealogy (without a connection to Heracles) was assigned to the Sabines (as we have seen) and other groups that became Roman later on; see Strabo, *Geogr.* 5.4.12; Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, 113; Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men*, 86–87; Farney, *Ethnic Identity*, 102–4; idem, “Romans and Italians,” 448.

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