

“In strength” not “by force”: Re-reading the circumcision of the uncircumcised ἐν ἰσχύι in I Macc 2:46

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Abstract

This article challenges the dominant reading of I Macc 2:46, both that (a) the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι means coercion and that (b) the literary context of I Maccabees understands the circumcising of the uncircumcised in 2:46 as coercive. An analysis of the lexical semantics of ἐν ἰσχύι in ancient Greek literature shows that it never referred to coercion, but primarily referred to the means by which an action was accomplished (“by strength/might/power”). Admittedly, ἐν ἰσχύι can occur in coercive contexts (e.g. Wis 16:16). However, coercion is not a part of the syntagm itself, but arises out of the surrounding literary circumstances. Rather than as one who forces circumcision upon others, the literary context of I Macc 2:46 presents Mattathias as a liberator who reinstates circumcision for those who had been prevented from circumcising their children due to persecution. Josephus, our earliest reception of I Macc 2:46, is a witness to this reading.

Keywords

I Maccabees, coercion, forced circumcision, Hasmoneans, ἰσχύς, Mattathias

Introduction

Among scholars of Second Temple Judaism, it is wholly taken for granted that the circumcising done by Mattathias and his friends in 1 Macc 2:46 was a coercive act:

⁴² τότε συνήχθησαν πρὸς αὐτοὺς συναγωγὴ Ἀσιδαίων, ἰσχυροὶ δυνάμει ἀπὸ Ἰσραὴλ, πᾶς ὁ ἐκουσιαζόμενος τῷ νόμῳ, ⁴³ καὶ πάντες οἱ φυγαδεύοντες ἀπὸ τῶν κακῶν προσετέθησαν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐγένοντο αὐτοῖς εἰς στήριγμα. ⁴⁴ καὶ συνεστήσαντο δύναμιν καὶ ἐπάταξαν ἁμαρτωλοὺς ἐν ὀργῇ αὐτῶν καὶ ἀνδρας ἀνόμους ἐν θυμῷ αὐτῶν, καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ ἔφυγον εἰς τὰ ἔθνη σωθῆναι. ⁴⁵ καὶ ἐκύκλωσεν Ματθαθίας καὶ οἱ φίλοι αὐτοῦ καὶ καθείλον τοὺς βωμοὺς ⁴⁶ καὶ περιέτεμον τὰ παιδάρια τὰ ἀπερίτμητα, ὅσα εὔρον ἐν ὀρίοις Ἰσραὴλ, ἐν ἰσχύι ⁴⁷ καὶ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ὑπερηφανίας, καὶ κατευοδώθη τὸ ἔργον ἐν χειρὶ αὐτῶν, ⁴⁸ καὶ ἀντελάβοντο τοῦ νόμου ἐκ χειρὸς τῶν ἐθνῶν καὶ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ οὐκ ἔδωκαν κέρας τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ. (Rahlfs)

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⁴²At that time a gathering of Hasideans joined together with them [Mattathias and his friends], strong in power, from Israel, every one of them volunteering for the law. ⁴³And all the fugitives from the evils were added to them and became a support for them. ⁴⁴And they assembled a force and struck down sinners in their wrath and lawless men in their anger, and the rest fled to the nations to be saved. ⁴⁵And Mattathias and his friends went around and tore down the altars ⁴⁶and circumcised by force all the uncircumcised boys they found within the borders of Israel. ⁴⁷And they persecuted the children of insolence, and their mission was successful by their hand. ⁴⁸And they reclaimed the law out of the hands of the nations and out of the hands of the kings, and they gave no support to the sinner. (1 Macc 2:42–48, NETS)

This passage marks what is for some the beginning of a number of cases of forced circumcision by Jews in our ancient sources. Numerous times in Josephus, for example, we encounter accounts where non-Jews are under pressure to circumcise (the Idumaeans in *A.J.* 13.257–258; the Itureans in *A.J.* 13.318; possibly those at Pella in *A.J.* 13.397). Both the enforced Idumean and Iturean circumcision are repeated elsewhere (e.g. Ptolemy the Historian; Timagenes by Strabo [Josephus *A.J.* 13.319]).¹ Josephus himself even claims to have stopped the forced circumcision of two non-Jewish nobles (*Vit.* 113; *B.J.* 2.454).

Despite these accounts, there is considerable doubt about whether forced circumcision was ever historically practiced in ancient Judaism, especially in the Hasmonean state.² The “forceful circumcision” in 1 Macc 2:46 is therefore understood as a literary creation, taken by some as explanatory propaganda for the rationale behind the alleged conversion of the Idumaeans through circumcision in the time of John Hyrcanus I (Josephus, *A.J.* 13.357–358).³ The circumcising enacted by Mattathias and his army in 1 Macc 2:46 often stands as a kind of prelude to the later coercive methods of the Hasmoneans.

The case for the forcefulness of Mattathias’s circumcising depends on the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι appended to the end of 1 Macc 2:46. Surprisingly, there has been very little lexical analysis done on whether the phrase ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 actually refers to coercion in the first place. To my knowledge, the only work on this syntagm in relation to 1 Macc 2:46 was done by Roman Wilk well over twenty years ago.⁴ Wilk recognized that

1. For Ptolemy see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*. Edited with Introductions, Translations and Commentary. Volume One: From Herodotus to Plutarch (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), 356. I would like to thank Markus Bockmuehl, Jan Dochhorn, Luke Irwin, Dan York, Mateusz Kusio, Ryan Collman as well as the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this piece.
2. For example, Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Religion, Ethnicity, and ‘Hellenism’ in the Emergence of Jewish Identity in Maccabean Palestine,” in *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom* (Studies in Hellenistic Civilization, 1; eds. Per Bilde, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Lise Hannestad, and Jan Zahle; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1990), 213–16; Steven Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision and the Shifting Role of Gentiles in Hasmonean Ideology,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 39 n. 9; Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 36–38; Katell Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land? The Hasmonean Dynasty Between Biblical Models and Hellenistic Diplomacy* (trans. Margaret Rigaud; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 284–315.
3. Joseph Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters: From Mattathias to the Death of John Hyrcanus I* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 35; Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision,” 58.
4. Roman Wilk, “Forced Circumcision at the Hands of Mattathias [in Hebrew],” *Sinai* 115 (1995): 292–94.

although the term ἰσχύς referred to heroism, strength, and power, interpreters universally understood it as force, as in coercion.⁵ Some have noted Wilk's observation, often in passing and occasionally to refute it.⁶ For the most part, however, Wilk's observation about ἐν ἰσχύι has been ignored.⁷

This article challenges the dominant reading of 1 Macc 2:46, both that the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι means "coercion" and that the literary context of 1 Maccabees understands the circumcising of the uncircumcised in 2:46 as coercive. When one analyses the lexical semantics of the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι in the LXX and in Greek literature up to 200 C.E., one finds that it *never* refers semantically to coercion (by force) but to the means by which an action is done (by strength).⁸ Furthermore, an analysis of the Latin and Syriac versions

5. Wilk, "Forced Circumcision," 292.

6. Weitzman, "Forced Circumcision"; Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (CEJL; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008); Benedikt Eckhardt, *Ethnos und Herrschaft: Politische Figurationen jüdischer Identität von Antiochos III. bis Herodes I* (Studia Judaica, 72; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 317 n. 256; Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, *Judaism Defined: Mattathias and the Destiny of His People* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 155.

7. All modern commentaries assume coercion: Carl L. W. Grimm, *Das erste Buch der Maccabäer* (Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zu den Apokryphen des Alten Testaments, 2; Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1857), 45; Robert H. Charles, *Commentary on the Apocrypha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 74; Solomon Zeitlin and Sidney Tedesche, *The First Book of Maccabees* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 86–87; John C. Dancy, *A Commentary on 1 Maccabees* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 87; John R. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 40; Jonathan A. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 41; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 237; Klaus-Dietrich Schunck, *Historische und legendarische Erzählungen: 1. Makkabäerbuch* (JSHRZ, 1.4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1980), 306; Uriel Rappaport, *The First Book of Maccabees: Introduction, Hebrew Translation, and Commentary* [In Hebrew] (Between Bible and Mishnah; Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2004), 134; Michael Tilly, *1 Makkabäer* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2015), 101–03. For many specialised studies, coercion is merely assumed: William Reuben Farmer, *Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus: An Inquiry into Jewish Nationalism in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 71; Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *Judas Maccabaeus: The Jewish Struggle Against the Seleucids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 138; Joseph Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters: From Mattathias to the Death of John Hyrcanus I* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 35; Adalberto Sisti, "Il valore della circoncisione al tempo dei Maccabei," *Liber Annuus* 42 (1992): 42–43; Weitzman, "Forced Circumcision," 43; Steven Weitzman, "Plotting Antiochus's Persecution," *JBL* 123 (2004): 44; Edward Dąbrowa, *The Hasmoneans and Their State: A Study in History, Ideology, and the Institutions* (Electrum, 16; Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2009), 19; Scolnic, *Judaism Defined*, 154–55; Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (WUNT, 2.295; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 14–15; John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 18; Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?* 81 n. 61.

8. Most scholars argue, based on the mention of John Hyrcanus in 1 Macc 16:23–24, that the book was written (or at least compiled) in the late second, early first century B.C.E. (Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 62–64). Others have opted for an earlier date, around the year 130 B.C.E. Seth Schwartz, "Israel and the Nations Roundabout: 1 Maccabees and the Hasmonean Expansion," *JJS* 42 (1991): 16–38.

of 1 Macc 2:46 reinforces what we find in the lexical semantics of ἐν ἰσχύι. Although ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 1:58 is often rendered with an expression related to strength (e.g. NETS: “using their power”; AOT: “in their might”; LES: “by their strength”; cf. NRSV: “they kept using violence”) and ἐν ἰσχύι in 2:46 is rendered with an expression related to force (as in coercion), I argue that coercion is not intrinsic to the prepositional phrase, which always refers to strength rather than coercion. Admittedly, the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι can occur in coercive contexts (e.g. Wis 16:16; Pss. Sol. 17:36; 1 Macc 1:58), but coercion is not a part of the syntagm itself. Rather, it arises out of the surrounding literary circumstances. Turning to the literary context of 1 Macc 2:46, I find that, instead of an act of force, the text presents Mattathias and his army as liberators of Judea who reinstate faithful covenantal practice in the land to those who had been prevented from circumcising their children due to fear of persecution and death. Finally, I turn to the earliest reception of the passage, where we find that Josephus actually testifies to the absence of coercion in 1 Macc 2:46.

The lexical semantics of ἐν ἰσχύι

In both the LSJ and Brill’s Dictionary of Ancient Greek (Montanari), the entry for ἰσχύς shows two semantic domains. The first commonly refers to strength, might, and power. The second relates to force, violence, or coercion. It is this latter category of occurrences that interests us here. The occasions where ἰσχύς is said to mean “force” can be divided into instances when it occurs on its own and when it occurs in a prepositional phrase. In Thucydides, *P.W.* 3.62.4, we have an instance where a dative form of ἰσχύς refers to the suppression of Athens by the ruling elite.⁹ Elsewhere, when ἰσχύς appears with a preposition and refers to coercion, it only occurs with κατά, πρός, and ὑπό, but not ἐν.¹⁰ Outside of these instances, there is no evidence that demonstrates ἰσχύς implies coercive force.

There may be instances of ἐν ἰσχύι outside of ancient Greek lexicons that can shed further light on whether the phrase in 1 Macc 2:46 should be translated as “force” or “strength,” and how, if at all, coercion arises out of the use of the syntagm. We will examine three sets of data before turning to 1 Macc 2:46: (a) ἐν ἰσχύι in literature outside of the LXX, (b) ἐν ἰσχύι in the LXX, and (c) the only other occasion where ἐν ἰσχύι occurs in 1 Maccabees (1:58). While the following analysis arduously discusses the various instances where ἐν ἰσχύι occurs in ancient Greek literature, the importance of understanding the lexical semantics ἐν ἰσχύι cannot be understated. Consequently, either 1 Macc 2:46 is the only instance in which ἐν ἰσχύι means “coercion,” or interpreters, ignoring its lexical semantics, have unjustifiably imported coercion into the syntagm itself.

Outside of the LXX, there are seven instances before the second century C.E. where ἐν ἰσχύι is extant. With the help of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, we can see that, in each of these instances, ἐν ἰσχύι does not refer to coercion but heroic strength. First, in

9. καὶ οὗτοι ἰδίας δυνάμεις ἐλπίσαντες ἔτι μᾶλλον σχήσειν εἰ τὰ τοῦ Μήδου κρατήσῃ, κατέχοντες ἰσχύι τὸ πλῆθος ἐπηγάγοντο αὐτόν; “And these invited the Medes, restraining by force the multitude, hoping to further their own power should the Medes succeed.”

10. Aeschylus, *Prom.* 212; fr. 281a; Sophocles, *Phil.* 594; Euripides, *Med.* 538; Epicr. 3.10 (a fragment found in Theodor Kock, *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta: Volumen II* (Lipsiae: Aedibus B.G. Teubnerl, 1884), 283.

the thirteenth section of his *Cynegeticus* (*On Hunting*), Xenophon compares treacherous and shallow sophistry with the true philanthropic endeavors of philosophers, whom he calls “the huntsmen” (*Cyn.* 13.11).¹¹ These huntsmen struggle against social and political enemy forces who are ἐν ἰσχύι πολλῇ (“in great strength,” *Cyn.* 13.14). In the second instance, Dionysius of Hallicarnasus (*Ant. rom.* 3.11.6) reports a conversation between the legendary Servius Tullius, the second Etruscan king of Rome, and Mettius Fufetius, ruler of Alba Longa, whereby Tullius soliloquizes that the power of cities lies ἐν ἰσχύι... ὀπλῶν (literally, “in the strength of weapons”). It is evident that coercion is not envisioned here, as Tullius’s point is that the larger the number of citizens a city has, the larger one’s army; therefore, a city’s power depends on population. Similarly, in the third instance of ἐν ἰσχύι, Josephus describes Judas Maccabeus as one who ἐν ἰσχύι τοσαύτη γενόμενον (“became so much greater in strength”), much to the chagrin of Demetrius I (*A.J.* 12.402). The fourth instance of the syntagm occurs in the NT at Luke 10:27, where the author modifies Mark’s allusion to Deut 6:5 (from ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος [Mark 12:30] to ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ἰσχύί σου). Mark has exchanged δύναμις in Deut 6:5 to ἰσχύς, and Luke 10:27 obviously connotes physical strength, not compulsion. In the late first century, the fifth instance of ἐν ἰσχύι occurs in Clement of Rome’s prayer for harmony (1 Clem. 60:1), where he describes God as θαυμαστὸς ἐν ἰσχύϊ καὶ μεγαλοπρεπείᾳ (“wondrous in strength and majesty”). In a sixth instance, the Epistle of Barnabas (Barn. 6:3) notes that the Lord ἐν ἰσχύϊ τέθεικεν τὴν σάρκα αὐτοῦ (“has established his flesh in strength”), an obvious reference to strength and not coercion in its parallelism with a quotation from the Greek of Isa 50:7: ἔθηκε με ὡς στερεὰν πέτραν (“He established me as a solid rock”). Finally, Justin Martyr, in the second century C.E. quotes the Greek of Isa 58:1, Ἀναβόησον ἐν ἰσχύϊ, which translates to בָּרַח קֶרֶא (literally, “call out with the throat!”).¹² The thrust of the imagery in Isaiah is to emphasize the intensity of the declaration the prophet is to make to Israel, not that he is being compelled to do so. In all of these instances, the phrase ἐν ἰσχύι not once refers to any kind of coercive force.

The phrase ἐν ἰσχύι is used to render a number of different Hebrew and Aramaic phrases in the Septuagint. An analysis of how ἐν ἰσχύι was used in Septuagintal texts is useful for our understanding of its meaning in 1 Maccabees, simply because they come from a similar cultural tradition. While the translations of the Septuagint do not uniformly come from a single translator, a broad understanding of the various ways this phrase is rendered gives us the lexical range in which this expression was used, at least among those who generated the translations. We pay particularly close attention to the translation technique used in conversation with the Hebrew and Aramaic versions, and whether the phrase was translated more woodenly (literal) or whether there is exegetical modification.¹³

Most frequently in the LXX, ἐν ἰσχύι straightforwardly translates the prepositional phrase בכח (Exod 15:6, 32:11; Judg 16:30; 1 Sam 2:9; 2 Kgs 17:36; Zech 4:6; Ps 28:4;

11. *Translations of texts are mine unless otherwise noted.*

12. *Dial.* 15.2.

13. cf. the typology delineated by Jan Joosten, “Interpretation and Meaning in the Septuagint Translation,” in *Translation—Interpretation—Meaning* (Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 7; eds. Anneli Aejmelaeus and Päivi Pahta; Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2012).

Job 36:22; 39:21).¹⁴ The translation of the Hebrew כח (“power, strength”) is quite literal, sometimes to a strict degree (e.g. Ps 29:4).

The next most frequent rendering of ἐν ἰσχύι occurs with חיל. In Num 24:18, the translators have somewhat rigidly translated חיל עשה ישראל as *Ἰσραὴλ ἐποίησεν ἐν ἰσχύι*. חיל with עשה often functions adverbially, meaning something like “valiantly” or “bravely” (1 Sam 14:48; Ps 60:14, 108:14, 15; Prov 31:29).¹⁵ In the LXX of Joshua, ἐν ἰσχύι occurs three times (6:2 [6:4 MT], 8:3, 10:7). In each case, the translator uses our phrase to render גבורי החיל (“warriors/heroes of valor”). However, rather than a rigid rendition, the translation of גבורי החיל is much more idiomatic: *δυνατοὺς ὄντας ἐν ἰσχύι* (6:2 [6:4 MT]), *δυνατοὺς ἐν ἰσχύι* (8:3), *πᾶς δυνατὸς ἐν ἰσχύι* (10:7), meaning those “powerful in strength.” In these examples, only strength is understood by ἐν ἰσχύι, not coercion.

Elsewhere in the LXX, ἐν ἰσχύι is only ever used to refer to strength. In Deut 26:8, the phrase ἐν ἰσχύι μεγάλη is translated as ביד חזקה (“with a strong hand”). Mic 5:3 (5:4 MT) in the LXX translates בעז יהוה (“in the strength of Yahweh”) as ἐν ἰσχύι κυρίου. As noted above, Isa 58:1 renders the idiomatic קרא בגרון (“Call with your throat! [i.e. proclaim loudly]”) with a clearer Greek equivalent, ἀναβόησον ἐν ἰσχύι. Finally, the translator of 2 Sam 6:5 uses ἐν ἰσχύι to describe the vigor with which David and the sons of Israel play before the Lord with harmonious instruments.¹⁶

In Daniel, ἐν ἰσχύι translates three different Aramaic phrases in a number of different places. In Dan 4:13 (in both the Theodotion text and the Hexapla) and 4:23 (in the Hexapla only), instead of describing the visionary angel as “holy” (קדיש), the LXX describes it as descending “in strength” (ἐν ἰσχύι).¹⁷ In Dan 4:3 (Hexapla), Nebuchadnezzar describes Babylon as the city he has built “with the strength of my might” (ἐν ἰσχύι κράτους μου, MT: בתקף חסני). Finally, while the text of Dan 11:7 (Hexapla) partially mistranslates the Aramaic, it nevertheless describes the king of the north rising up “in his power and in his strength” (ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτοῦ).¹⁸ It is clear that, among the texts for which we have a corresponding Hebrew or Aramaic version, the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι is uniformly used for strength and the various textual contexts in which it occurs do not imply coercion.

Among extra-canonical Greek texts, it is quite evident that ἐν ἰσχύι always refers to strength and not compulsion. Nebuchadnezzar orders Holofernes in Jdt 2:5 to take men

14. This is also attested in the Septuagintal Odes 1:6 (cf. Exod 15:6) and 3:9 (1 Sam 2:9).

15. The translator of the Psalms translated חיל much more rigidly with δύναμις (Ps 60:14, 108:14, 118:15).

16. There is no corresponding phrase in the MT, leading some interpreters to view בכל עצי as a corruption, and that 6:5 should instead be read with 2 Sam 6:14 and 1 Chr 13:8 (בכל עץ, “with all strength”); for example, Arnold A. Anderson, 2 *Samuel* (WBC, 11; Dallas: Word, 1998), 103. However, it is equally possible that either the MT reading is original (*lectio facilior*, so P. Kyle McCarter Jr, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB, 9; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 163 or that the *Vorlage* underlying the LXX is different than the MT.

17. As to be expected, the Theodotion text of Dan 4:23 reflects much more rigidly the Hebrew MT.

18. The translator of Dan 11:7 has either confused the MT by rendering ויבא אל-החיל ויבא במעוז מלך הצפון with ἦξει ἐπὶ τῇν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτοῦ βασιλεὺς βορρᾶ or is using a different underlying text. I think the former is more likely since it is clear that the author views the “king of the north” to be the subject of both ויבא in each clause, eliding the verb and then rendering במעוז as an adverbial modifier rather than as an indirect object.

πεποιθότας ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτῶν (“convinced of their strength”), who are then contrasted with God, whom Judith proclaims in the hymn of chapter 16 is θαυμαστός ἐν ἰσχύι (“wonderful in strength,” v.13). Sirach writes an admonition to “increase in strength” (πληθύνετε ἐν ἰσχύι) when praising God (Sir 43:30). The corresponding Hebrew of Ben Sira 43:30 shows that the Greek of Sirach reflects the translation of כַּח with ἐν ἰσχύι, which was a common pairing between the MT and the LXX as shown above, “receive strength anew” כַּח לִיפּוֹ כֵּחַ (cf. Isa 40:31).¹⁹ Finally, ἐν ἰσχύι occurs four times in the Psalms of Solomon. In three of these instances, it is apparent that the phrase refers to strength, first of the Lord (ὁ θεὸς μέγας, κραταῖος ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτοῦ τῇ μεγάλῃ, “The Lord is great, powerful in his mighty strength,” Pss. Sol. 2:29), those who call upon him (ὅτι χρηστός ὁ κύριος τοῖς ἐπικαλουμένοις αὐτὸν ἐν ὑπομονῇ ποιῆσαι κατὰ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ τοῖς ὁσίοις αὐτοῦ παρεστάναι διὰ παντὸς ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἰσχύι, “For the Lord is kind to those who call on him with patience, treating his holy ones according to his mercy, placing them forever before him in strength,” Pss. Sol. 2:36), or the son of David who will serve him (καὶ εὐλογία κυρίου μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν ἰσχύι, “and the blessing of the Lord will be with him in strength,” Pss. Sol. 17:38).

There are two instances, however, that appear ambiguous. The first is Wis 16:16 where the ungodly are “beaten by the might of [the Lord’s] arms” (ἐν ἰσχύι βραχίονός σου ἐμαστιγώθησαν). Obviously, this is a coercive act and God is the agent. But the forced beating of the ungodly comes from the wider context of judgment, not from the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι. The prepositional phrase expresses the means by which God beats the ungodly (the might of his arms).

The second instance is Pss. Sol. 17:36, καὶ αὐτὸς καθαρὸς ἀπὸ ἁμαρτίας τοῦ ἄρχειν λαοῦ μεγάλου, ἐλέγξει ἄρχοντας καὶ ἐξῆραι ἁμαρτωλοὺς ἐν ἰσχύι λόγου (“He is pure from sin in order to rule a great people; he will rebuke leaders and drive away sinners ἐν ἰσχύι λόγου”). Like Wis 16:16, it can hardly mean that this son of David will drive away sinners by the coercion of his word. It makes most sense that it is the power of the word that drives away sinners since the author is contrasting strength to weakness; the very next verse, 17:37, says that καὶ οὐκ ἀσθενήσει ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτοῦ (“and he will not be weak in his days”). In the wider context of being “driven away,” there is already implied compulsion and the addition of “by force” would be unnecessarily redundant. Therefore, like Wis 16:16, the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι in Pss. Sol. 17:36 gives the means by which an action is done, but the wider context tells whether or not it is coercive or not. Coercion can only be established by the context in which ἐν ἰσχύι is used, not from the syntagm itself.

The ancient versions we have of 1 Maccabees confirm our reading that what is in view textually is not circumcision “by force” but circumcision “in strength.” Although we do not possess the initial Hebrew text of 1 Maccabees, aside from the Greek versions used to construct critical editions today (primarily from Codex Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, and Nanius-Venetus), we do possess early versions of the text in both Latin and Syriac. The Latin text derives from the Greek, while the Syriac is supposed to have been made from the Lucianic fourth century text.²⁰ Both provide us with information about how ancient interpreters understood the ἐν ἰσχύι of 1 Macc 2:46. The Vulgate and Old Latin (such as found in Codex Sangermanensis A) translate ἐν ἰσχύι as *in fortitudine*. *Fortitudo*

19. Found on Ben Sira Manuscript B XIII^f.

20. Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, 78.

can refer either to physical strength or bravery. Thus, the Latin understands ἐν ἰσχύι as the courage or strength of Mattathias and his friends and not their coercive ability.

The Syriac versions illuminate the semantic slippage that can happen easily when translating 1 Macc 2:46. The Syriac of the Peshitta as found in Codex Ambrosiano translates ἐν ἰσχύι with a stricter rendering in comparison with other recensions: ܡܚܕܐ ܡܚܕܐ (in/with might).²¹ Other versions of the Syriac show Lucianic expansion, rendering it with ܡܚܕܐ ܡܚܕܐ ܡܚܕܐ (in/with strength and might).²² Neither ܡܚܕܐ nor ܡܚܕܐ refers to coercion lexically. Yet, both ܡܚܕܐ and ܡܚܕܐ, like ἰσχύς, can be glossed in English with “force,” and herein lies the polysemous problem at the root of translating 1 Macc 2.46. “Force” in English can easily elide from strength into coercion. Rendering the expression ܡܚܕܐ ܡܚܕܐ as “in/with strength and might” avoids this slippage. From the Syriac, therefore, ἐν ἰσχύι indicates the physical ability of Mattathias and his men. This confirms further that the expression does not reflect coercion in itself.

In summary, the breadth of the evidence from ancient Greek sources and early versional evidence for 1 Maccabees show the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι does not refer to coercion. It certainly can occur in coercive contexts (e.g. Wis 16:16 and Pss. Sol. 17:36), but the lexical semantics of the syntagm do not include compulsion or forced action. There is, thus, no lexical basis for translating ἐν ἰσχύι as “by force.” Rather it should be translated as “in strength,” “in might,” or “in power.”

ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 1:58: strength not coercion

One of the oddities about the translation of ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Maccabees is that the same expression that is found in 1 Macc 2:46 also occurs in 1 Macc 1:58 and yet is translated differently. The verse reads: ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτῶν ἐποιοῦν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ τοῖς εὐρισκομένοις ἐν παντὶ μηνὶ καὶ μηνὶ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν (“and they were using their power on those who were found in Israel month by month in the cities”; NETS). Ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτῶν has been translated idiomatically in a variety of ways but always with a loose reference to strength/might and never explicitly with reference to coercion: KJV (“by their authority”), AOT (“in their might”), NRSV and RSV (“they kept using violence against Israel”), NJB (“they took harsh action”), and NETS (“and they were using their power”). In light of the analysis from the previous section, this is not surprising since ἐν ἰσχύι universally refers to strength.

The syntax of 1:58 is difficult, and many translators have rendered the prepositional phrase as a direct object or elided ἰσχύς into the meaning of the verb ἐποιοῦν. Scribes also found the passage difficult, and in Sinaiticus a corrector (ca) inserted the word οὕτως between ἐποιοῦν and τῷ Ἰσραὴλ.²³ Such a correction is an obvious smoothing of the text, and the more difficult reading is to be preferred. Nevertheless, even though the longer reading appears to be a later addition, it points to the clearest understanding of the

21. The text can be found in Antonio Maria Ceriani, *Translatio syra pescitto Veteris Testamenti ex Codice Ambrosiano* (London: Williams et Norgate, 1876–1883).

22. This is the reading in both Paul A. de Lagarde, *Libri Veteris Testamenti Apocryphi Syriace* (Lipsiae: Brockhaus, 1861) and Brian Walton, *Biblia sacra polyglotta* (London: T. Roycroft, 1654–1657).

23. A feature also found in the Vulgate: *in virtute sua faciebant hæc populo Israël*.

syntax. What Antiochus's men did thus (οὕτως) in all of Israel's cities month after month are the details listed in 1:54–57: they built altars, burned incense in their houses, tore up and burned books of the covenant, and put to death those that approved of the law.²⁴ Certainly, Antiochus's imposition on the people of Israel was by violent compulsion. But the point of describing his army's action as being ἐν ἰσχύι αὐτῶν serves to highlight their power, not whether they restrict the Israelites' agency.

In addition, with coercion so explicit in the context, it is superfluous to express it by also using ἐν ἰσχύι. The text does not present the Jews as welcoming the desolation of the temple or the burning of the law. In addition, the text states that those who approved of the law in the face of the edict were executed (1:57). Furthermore, the third person pronoun makes a coercive reading of ἐν ἰσχύι awkward. It would make little sense for 1:58 to mean that "they did these things to Israel by their force."

Unquestionably, it is the strength of the Seleucids that is the means by which they compel the Jews to forsake their ancestral customs. Here, coercion arises out of the surrounding context itself, not from the syntagm ἐν ἰσχύι. The fact that translators elected to render ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 1:58 with a variation on "strength" shows that coercion comes from the context, not from the syntagm itself (as with Wis 16:16 and Pss. Sol. 17:36). Scholars have treated the translation of ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Maccabees with a double standard. It is inconsistent to render ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 1:58 as though coercion is not a part of the syntagm while treating ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 as though the syntagm itself encodes coercion. In 1 Macc 1:58, it is the context that shows that the Seleucids act coercively, while ἐν ἰσχύι provides the means by which they act. This is a subtle but vital difference that sheds light on the importance of the literary context of 1 Macc 2:46.

ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46: emancipating strength

It may be clear by now that ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 should be translated as "in strength." There is still, however, the question of whether the literary context of the passage intends this strength to be coercive. In this section, I address the major contextual evidence used to argue that coercion is a part of Mattathias and his friends' action in 1 Macc 2:46. I find that forced circumcision has been imposed upon the literary context and that what actually is envisioned textually is emancipating strength.

Interpreters have often ignored the linguistic differences in the way that explicit forced circumcision is expressed among later sources in comparison with the alleged instance in 1 Macc 2:46. In particular, the language of compulsion in these sources seems much less ambiguous. For example, when Ptolemy mentions forced circumcision, it is explicitly made through the use of ἀναγκάζω and not ambiguously through ἐν ἰσχύι as in 1 Macc 2:46.²⁵ Ptolemy's use of ἀναγκάζω echoes that of Paul in Gal 2:3 and 6:12, where the verb is also used with reference to compelling others to be circumcised (e.g. οὗτοι ἀναγκάζουσιν ὑμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι). The verb ἀναγκάζω appears in 1 Macc 2:25 and so one wonders that if the text intends Mattathias's actions in 1 Macc 2:46 to be coercive,

24. Whether Antiochus's edict was manufactured, fictional, or somewhere in between does not affect our reading here. On this, see Weitzman, "Plotting Antiochus's Persecution," 233; Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters*, 20 n. 74.

25. Stern, *Greek and Latin*, 1.356.

why does it not say explicitly that they were compelling people to circumcise rather than through the ambiguous idea that they circumcised “in strength”?

In the immediate context, 1 Macc 2:46 is ambivalent about any coercion Mattathias and his friends may have exerted on those whom they circumcised and much more vocal about their forceful behavior against Seleucids oppressors and pagan cults. Mattathias and his friends “drove out the sons of arrogance” (ἐδίωξαν τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ὑπερηφανίας), which is most likely a reference to gentile oppressors (cf. 1 Macc 1:21, where Antiochus arrogantly enters the sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem).²⁶ Since they are *driving out* gentiles, the destruction of the altars in 2:45 is obviously also coercive. But the text is unclear about whether these things are being done against the will of those whom they circumcise in v.46. 1 Maccabees 2:48a provides a clue. There the text reads that Mattathias and his friends “took hold of the law out of the hands of the nations and kings” (καὶ ἀντελάβοντο τοῦ νόμου ἐκ χειρὸς τῶν ἐθνῶν καὶ τῶν βασιλέων). By tearing down the altars and reinstating circumcision, Mattathias shows his zeal toward the law (2:21, 26, 27, 50, 58, 64, 67, 68), which is of central importance to the portrayal of the Hasmonean family in 1 Maccabees. From a Jewish perspective, the tearing down of altars and the circumcising of youth in 1 Macc 2:46 are portrayed not as an oppressive act but as an act of restoration.

One could argue that the circumcision in 1 Macc 2:46 is coercive because those being circumcised are gentiles. Based on the fifth-century codex Alexandrinus, critical editions of 1 Macc 2:46 (e.g. Rahlfs, Göttingen) read that Mattathias and his army circumcised the boys they found ἐν ὁρίοις Ἰσραὴλ, “in the boundary/borders of Israel.” This suggests that all boys, gentile and/or Jew, were circumcised. For Sinaiticus, Mattathias circumcised the youth found among the “sons of Israel,” not those found “in the borders of Israel” (Sinaiticus reads υἱοῖς rather than ὁριοῖς). Yet, the υἱοῖς reading fits the narrative context much better than ὁριοῖς, since those from the nations are often either driven to flee from the borders (1 Macc 4:14, 22; 5:34; 7:44; 8:18; 10:12; 11:72–73) or killed (1 Macc 2:25; 3:5, 10, 23; 4:4, 15, 34–35; 5:28, 44, 51, 60; 6:42; 7:24, 32, 44, 46; 10:85; 11:74).²⁷ The Sinaiticus reading is very likely correct.²⁸ Therefore, it must be that the text envisions that the uncircumcised sons in Israel were Jews.

If this is the case, then one might object that such Jews did not want their sons to be circumcised, since they had remained uncircumcised until they were παῖδάρια (“little boys”). Why would Jews have kept their children uncircumcised under Seleucid rule only to welcome circumcision by Mattathias? The brutal torture and execution of boys,

26. Francis Borchardt, *The Torah in Maccabees: A Literary Critical Approach to the Text* (DCLS, 19; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 60.

27. Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision,” 46; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 15 n. 26.

28. It is unclear why this difference occurs between Sinaiticus and the tradition represented by Alexandrinus. Specifically, there does not seem to be a sufficient explanation for why one reading arose instead of the other or why a scribe might have changed one to the other. The phrase “sons of Israel” is much more common in 1 Maccabees, and so a scribe in the tradition of Sinaiticus might have changed ὁριοῖς to υἱοῖς as an interpretive gloss. The other possibility is that the *Vorlage* for Sinaiticus at 2:46 may have been different from the Alexandrinus tradition (having בני instead of גבול).

their mothers, their families, and those who circumcised them indicate that it was certainly not safe to practice circumcision (1 Macc 1:60–61).²⁹ Certainly, it is not unreasonable to consider that in the narrative imagination of the story, for there to be Jews still left in the land, Jews would have to stop circumcising their children in order to survive. There is a clear sense in the initial chapters of 1 Maccabees that extraordinary circumstances allowed for extraordinary exceptions. Mattathias himself is not exempt from breaking the law in light of the circumstances. He commits righteous killing (1 Macc 2:24–25), a murder that appears to be sanctioned if not valorized from the perspective of the text. In addition, those with him take an oath that should they be attacked on the Sabbath they will not observe it but fight in order to preserve their lives (1 Macc 2:41). Could not those who did not circumcise their sons argue the same for themselves?³⁰ As Sievers notes, there were more than two options for the Jewish people to choose from, including “compliance under compulsion.”³¹ It is not as though breaking the law was permissible only if one offered up some kind of armed resistance to the oppressors. How were the Jewish mothers expected to take up arms for themselves? Does the narrative expect them to resist and die with their children without breaking the law, while the rebels fight on the Sabbath and live? This seems unlikely.

Without diminishing the importance of circumcision for the Jewish people at this time, it is implausible to think that the narrative excludes Jews who at this critical juncture in Jewish history could value and desire circumcision as a covenantal sign yet, at the same time, neglect it to ensure their survival as Mattathias and his men did with the Sabbath. The difference between those who willingly abandoned their circumcision (1 Macc 1:15) and those who left their sons uncircumcised in 1 Macc 2:46 is that the former chose to willfully undo the marks of the covenant while the latter were forced to neglect it. Epispasm, the restoration of the foreskin, is not conceived of as the same thing as neglecting circumcision upon fear of death. Those apostates are not under duress to remove the marks of their circumcision. They remove circumcision and trade it for a way of life that they believed to be better than the one that God had set out in the Mosaic covenant.

While the circumcision of sons beyond the eighth day was not the ideal (cf. Gen 17:10; Jub. 15:25; Josephus, *A.J.* 1.192; m. Šabb. 19.5), there is precedent in our sources for the delay of circumcision and late circumcision as legitimate in particular circumstances. For example, in Joshua 5, none of those born in the wilderness had yet been circumcised (Josh 5:5, 7), but it was necessary for them to be involved in the Passover. After wandering for forty years in the desert, these sons would have been all types of ages, yet the delay of their circumcision was still viewed as legitimate given the circumstances.

For the rabbis, eighth-day circumcision was expected only “under normal circumstances” (בְּדֶרֶכָּו).³² The prohibition of Jewish laws by the Seleucids classifies as an unusual circumstance in the same way that illness allows a boy to be circumcised beyond

29. There is no evidence that Antiochus’s persecution had stopped as suggested by Scolnic. *Judaism Defined*, 155. See section “An early reader of ἐν ἡμέρῃ in 1 Macc 2:46” below.

30. So also Sisti, “Il valore della circoncisione,” 43.

31. Sievers, *The Hasmoneans and Their Supporters*, 21.

32. m. Šabb. 19.5.

the twelfth day in the Mishnah (m. Šabb. 19.5). The principle seems to be that if the procedure puts the boy's life at risk, then it should not be done.

The rabbis seem also to be aware of Jews who had "extended" themselves during the Bar Kokhba revolt and then were later re-circumcised back into the community (ca. 132–135 C.E.):

המשוך צריך למול. ר' יהודה אומר משוך לא ימול מפני שהוא מסוכן. אמרו הרבה מלו בימי בן כוזבא והיו לו בנים ולא מתו שנאמר המול ימול אפי' מאה פעם. ואומר ואת בריתי הפר לרבות את המשוך.

"The one who has extended [his foreskin] must be circumcised." Rabbi Judah said, "He should not circumcise [again] if he has extended [his foreskin] because it is dangerous." They said, "[Those who had extended their foreskin] were circumcised in the days of Ben Kosiba and they had sons and did not die. For it says, 'circumcising he shall be circumcised' (Gen. 17:13)—even if a hundred times. And it says, 'my covenant has he destroyed' (Gen. 17:14)—to include the one who has extended his foreskin." (t. Šabb. 16.6)

In this discussion, the rabbis argue that a Jew who has removed circumcision needs to be re-circumcised in order to be a part of the community again. As an example, some Jewish men in the days of Ben Kosiba who had extended their foreskins were re-circumcised and continued to live in the Jewish community. I think it likely that the reason for their initial epispasm was due to the revolt itself. Pseudo-Spartianus (Vita Hadr. 14.2) argues that the Jews had started a war because they disobeyed an order from Hadrian not to circumcise. Schäfer argues that circumcision as a cause for the revolt is unlikely, even while admitting that our sources acknowledge a ban on circumcision did come into effect once the revolt had begun.³³ The Jews, whom the Tosefta discusses here, are likely those Jews who covered their circumcision in order to avoid persecution by Hadrian. What is surprising about this discussion between the rabbis is that they actually argue that Genesis 17 makes room for epispasm, including instances where persecution might make circumcision dangerous. The allusion and comment on *המול ימול* in Gen 17:13 signal that even if a man undoes his circumcision a hundred times, he can still be re-circumcised. If he has repaired his foreskin, thus "destroying the covenant" (Gen 17:14), he must rebuild the covenant again by removing the foreskin. Rabbi Judah is hesitant about re-circumcision not because he thinks the circumcision is illegitimate, but because he worries it is just as dangerous as illness and that circumcising men as adults could be deadly. Thus, avoiding or even undoing circumcision in dire circumstances was not unknown in ancient Judaism. In light of this evidence, we should understand those being circumcised in 1 Macc 2:46 as Jews who were willing to be circumcised but were restricted from doing so because of persecution. If there is any coercion in 1 Macc 2:46, it arises in connection with the *restriction* of circumcision by the "sons of arrogance," not its enforcement on uncircumcised boys among the sons of Israel.

If one were to ignore the evidence and still consider the youths as apostates or children of apostates, forcing lawbreakers to adhere to the law is not how 1 Maccabees usually deals with those who have abandoned it. The incident at the pagan altar in

33. Peter Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2003), 150.

Modein where Mattathias strikes down the Judean (2:24–25) is usually taken as the paradigmatic way Mattathias deals with apostates. Is it implausible that in 1 Macc 2:46 he does not simply reproduce the same kind of zeal, imposing circumcision on those who do not want it?

The incident at Modein shows that the Hasmoneans were prepared to use violence, but in 1 Maccabees as a whole, while violence is used against apostates and oppressors, it is not used to force others, whether Jew or Gentile, to observe the Jewish law. In 1 Macc 10:14, Jews who had forsaken the law but remained in the Judean fortress of Beth-zur were not forced to observe the law. Elsewhere, in a skirmish against the Philistines in Ashdod, Judas Maccabeus tears down the altars but does not force any Philistines to observe the law (5:68). Similarly, with the fortress of Gazara, Simon does not kill the people in it but rather makes an agreement with them, cleanses the city of idols, and settles law-abiding men among them (13:43–48).³⁴ Here, Simon's strategy seems to imply law obedience by osmosis rather than coercion. In other places where the Hasmoneans encounter the lawless, they do not force them to observe the commandments; instead, they kill them (2:44; 3:8; 9:69).³⁵

In addition, in the immediate context of 1 Macc 2:46, the behavior of Mattathias and his friends is directly contrasted with the behavior of the Hasideans and the so-called “fugitives from the evil [place]” (οἱ φυγαδεύοντες ἀπὸ τῶν κακῶν) in 1 Macc 2:42–44. There the Hasideans and fugitives form an army in order to strike down “sinners” (ἁμαρτωλοὺς) and “lawless men” (ἄνδρας ἀνόμους), which could be apostate Jews or could also equally be gentiles who were carrying out persecution of Jews.³⁶ 1 Maccabees contrasts the Hasideans, who strike gentiles down “in their wrath” (ἐν ὀργῇ αὐτῶν) and “in their rage” (ἐν θυμῷ αὐτῶν), with Mattathias and his friends, who focus on removing the effects of gentile presence “in strength” (ἐν ἰσχύι), like the gentile cult and the ban on circumcision. Therefore, the incident at Modein should be considered an anomaly that is more interested in showing Mattathias's zeal toward God (and against idolatry) than as a paradigmatic *modus operandi* that involves forcing apostates and gentiles to observe the law.

Although she argues that Mattathias forces uncircumcised children to be circumcised, Berthelot is right to draw attention to the fact that Jews forcefully circumcising Jews is not the same as Jews forcing non-Jews to be circumcised.³⁷ For Weitzman, the author of 1 Maccabees views forced circumcision as the necessary response needed to

34. The opportunity allowed Simon to expand territory in a critical city. Kai Trampedach, “The War of the Hasmoneans,” in *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith: Old-Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective* (ed.) Gabriela Signori; (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 69.

35. Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision,” 46.

36. I am not convinced that the phrase “οἱ λοιποὶ ἔφυγον εἰς τὰ ἔθνη σωθῆναι” (1 Macc 2:44) paired with the fact that the author calls the victims “sinners” and “lawless” explicitly tells us that we are dealing with apostate Jews. It could equally be a group consisting of gentiles and apostates. cf. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 237; Borchardt, *The Torah in Maccabees*, 59.

37. Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?* 303 n. 310.

effectively remove gentiles from Israel.³⁸ If so, this would appear to ancient readers to be a cruel and tyrannical use of Torah observance, since it valorizes the instrumentalization of Jewish bodies for the sake of driving gentiles away. It is true that ancient Jewish texts often criticized those who abandoned circumcision, sometimes condemning them to destruction (e.g. Jub. 15:33–34). But there is no evidence that enforced circumcision upon Jews against their will or the will of their parents was ever valorized in ancient Jewish texts.³⁹

Reducing circumcision to a means of enforcing Jewish–gentile distinctions minimizes the way, narrative-wise, 1 Maccabees orchestrates the Hasmonean’s military deeds as reversals of the Seleucid imposition on the Judean people, specifically those that arise out of Antiochus’s desecration and ban of Jewish customs in 1 Macc 1:47–48. Mattathias and his son Judas spend their time in the first four chapters of 1 Maccabees reversing all of the measures the Seleucids took in order to erode the Jewish way of life. The elimination of burnt offerings, sacrifices, drink offerings, Sabbaths, and festivals (1:45) is overturned by Judas in 4:53–56, with the inauguration of a new temple dedication festival (4:59) and week-long festivities and sacrifices. The defiled sanctuary of the temple (1:46) is later cleansed and rebuilt (4:36–51). The order for the law to be forgotten (1:49) is ignored (3:48, 56). The ban on circumcision (1:48) is revoked and circumcision resumes in Israel (2:46). This pattern of reversal shows that 1 Maccabees imagines Mattathias and his sons as liberating the land and restoring it to its previous state before Antiochus’s prohibitions. The Seleucids throttle law observance, while the Hasmonians *rescue* it (2:48).

That Mattathias and his army should be described as tearing down altars and circumcising “in strength” also coheres with the wider literary motif that contrasts the strength of the nations and the strength of Mattathias and Judas in 1 Maccabees. In numerous places (1:58; 3:15, 27; 4:7, 30; 5:6; 6:6, 41; 8:1; 11:15), the narrative describes the nations and their armies as “strong” or “powerful” (ἰσχύς, ἰσχυρός, κραταίος). These nations are contrasted with the “strength” (ἰσχύς, ἰσχυρός, δύναμαι, ἐνισχύω) of Mattathias’s army (2:42) and especially Judas and his army (2:66, 5:40, 7:25; 10:19; 11:44). Indeed, while the Seleucids ceased law observance ἐν ἰσχύι, Mattathias restores it ἐν ἰσχύι.

Thus, it makes perfect literary sense that ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 refers to the actual strength of Mattathias and his friends who restored covenantal faithfulness in contrast to the might of the Seleucids who use their strength to force Jews to abandon the law. The only difference between 1 Macc 1:58 and 2:46 is that, in the former, the literary context is clear that the Seleucids are acting coercively, whereas in 1 Macc 2:46 circumcision is not coercive but an act that liberates families who avoided circumcision out of fear of persecution. In 1 Macc 2:46, the context provides an emancipatory perspective on the actions of Mattathias and his friends, while ἐν ἰσχύι indicates the means by which they act, namely, their strength. 1 Maccabees 1:58 and 2:46 are contrasting portraits of power, one through oppression and the other through restoration. 1 Maccabees makes clear that

38. Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision,” 58.

39. Weitzman (“Forced Circumcision” 43) interprets 2 Bar. 66:5 as an instance of forced circumcision, but the wider verse suggests a royal policy of making sure the land was law observant throughout the king’s life. An ancient Jewish reader would not view this as coercive but a realignment to God’s commands in the Torah.

once Mattathias and his sons have taken power, they will not let the sinners have it back (1 Macc 2:48, οὐκ ἔδωκαν κέρας τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ).

Rather than portraying Mattathias as a leader who coerces others into law observance, forcing apostate Jews to follow laws they have abandoned, the literary context of 1 Maccabees presents a rather different picture. To be sure, Mattathias is not afraid to use violence, but it is never done in order to force others to observe the Jewish law, including Jews. Both the literary context and the lexical semantics of ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 point away from coercion and toward strength as a means of restoring Torah obedience. This analysis is confirmed by our earliest reception of the passage in Josephus, to which we now turn.

An early reader of ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46

One of the few to engage with Wilk's 1995 article, Benjamin Scolnic is not willing to accept his observation on the phrase ἐν ἰσχύι:

Wilk thinks that the Maccabees only circumcised the group as those who would have circumcised their sons if it were not for fear of punishment, not those who had willingly chosen not to circumcise. This is a mild interpretation of the verse in 1 Maccabees. I cannot agree, because it takes out the whole idea of force. Those who had been afraid would not have needed Mattathias at all; with the persecution over, they would now have readily circumcised their sons.⁴⁰

It is strange that Scolnic cannot agree with Wilk simply because he removes force, as though it is intrinsic to the passage itself. Nevertheless, Scolnic argues that by the time of 1 Macc 2:46, the restrictions on circumcision were no longer in place and Jews were free to resume circumcising sons. But this is not how we have understood the passage above, and this is not how the earliest reader of 1 Macc 2:46, Josephus, understood 1 Macc 2:46–47 in his *Antiquities*.

Josephus reports the events of 1 Macc 2:45–47 fairly consistently with the original text itself. Mattathias tears down the altars and circumcises the uncircumcised (*A.J.* 12.278). However, Josephus provides a clarification about why there were uncircumcised youth in the first place by drawing on the ambiguous identity of the “sons of arrogance” whom Mattathias and his friends pursue in 1 Macc 2.47a (ἐδίωξαν τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ὑπερηφανίας). Josephus renders 1 Macc 2:46–47a as follows: “he [Mattathias] ordered for the children who had not been circumcised to be circumcised, driving out those who had been appointed in order to prevent [their circumcision]” (τῶν τε παίδων τοὺς οὐ περιτετμημένους ἐκέλευσε περιτέμνεσθαι τοὺς ἐπὶ τῷ κωλύειν καθεσταμένους ἐκβαλόν). He understands the “sons of arrogance” in 1 Macc 2:47 to be the reason why there were uncircumcised youths in Israel. Contrary to Scolnic's interpretation of 1 Macc 2:46, Josephus views the restriction on circumcision as still in place and being enforced by these “sons of arrogance.” Also, that there were people present to enforce the ban on circumcision implies that the parents of the uncircumcised in 1 Macc 2:46 wanted their sons to be circumcised but were prevented by these “sons of arrogance.”

40. Scolnic, *Judaism Defined*, 155.

According to Josephus's interpretation, because of Mattathias and his friends, there were no longer officials around to police or prevent the Jewish people from carrying out the circumcising of their sons.

Weitzman argues that Josephus has invented this interpretation "to avoid creating the impression that Mattathias compelled the circumcision itself, a use of force of which Josephus disapproved."⁴¹ Yet, Josephus includes forced circumcision by later Hasmoneans, like John Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. If Josephus is happy to keep forced circumcision in other Hasmonean accounts, it is not clear why he would avoid this attribution to the patriarch of the family, unless it was because that he did not view Mattathias's behavior in 1 Macc 2:46 as coercive. Conversely, if Josephus has removed forced circumcision from 1 Macc 2:46, as suggested by Weitzman, then it does not make sense why he does not also remove it from accounts about Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. And if it is the case, as Cohen argues, that Josephus portrays forced circumcision specifically with "negative overtones," then he should have added such overtones to his account of 1 Macc 2:46 if he understood the act as coercive.⁴² Is he merely being inconsistent?⁴³ It is possible. But the simplest explanation to this problem is that Josephus did not see forced circumcision in 1 Macc 2:46 at all. His account in *A.J.* 12.278 is not so much a concoction as it is his actual interpretation of the passage. Mattathias's act of circumcision is, for Josephus, not an act of coercion but an act of emancipation.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of its lexical semantics, it is no longer tenable to render ἐν ἰσχύι as "by force." Rather it should be translated as "in strength." Thus, 1 Macc 2:45–46 should be translated: "And Mattathias and his friends went around and pulled down the altars, and they circumcised the uncircumcised youths, as many as were found among the sons of Israel, in strength." Though difficult to see at first, the cumulative evidence in the literary context of 1 Maccabees shows that 1 Macc 2:46 has in view Jews who had not yet been circumcised due to fear of persecution, and that Mattathias's actions are not the compulsion or enforcement of circumcision, but the liberation of the persecuted from their oppressors in order for them to practice their Jewish customs without fear. In this analysis, we uphold the ignored findings of Wilk's previous analysis.

There is a circularity that arises when 1 Macc 2:46 is used as proof of forced coercive circumcision in order to affirm compulsion in later material like Josephus, while at the

41. Weitzman, "Forced Circumcision," 45.

42. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Respect for Judaism by Gentiles According to Josephus," *HTR* 80 (1987): 422–23.

43. As suggested by Weitzman, "Forced Circumcision," 43 n. 24. However, there is a major difference between circumcision in Gen 34, 2 Sam 18, and Josephus's accounts of Hyrcanus and Aristobulus: those being circumcised are gentiles. In 1 Macc 2:46, however, it is Jews being circumcised. To a Greco-Roman audience, it may have been confusing to speak about Jews being forced to circumcise, since it was a practice that was stereotypically Jewish. Why would anyone need to *force* Jews to circumcise in the first place? This may have been a reason for Josephus's concoction.

same time these later accounts of forced circumcision are used to inform our understanding of 1 Macc 2:46.⁴⁴ Forced circumcision should be established independently in the literary context of the sources before attempting to corroborate it with external accounts. In the case of 1 Macc 2:46, the retrojection of the historical use of the text as Hasmonean propaganda has overshadowed the need to pay closer philological attention to the lexical semantics of ἐν ἰσχύι and the way the text itself presents this action. It is not that historical constructions of texts do not matter. Instead, whether or not the text presents it as a coercive act (the actual and historically constructed reality notwithstanding), 1 Macc 2:46 should first be assessed based on the language of the text itself. Only then can one make sense of it in the context of other literature and the constructions of history utilized by scholars where circumcision is compelled. In light of this article's analysis, 1 Macc 2:46 should no longer be lumped together with texts that portray apparent forced circumcision.

Future translations of 1 Maccabees, such as in the forthcoming revision of the NRSV, ought to take this evidence into account and correct the mistranslation of ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 that has dominated scholarship, one that has negatively portrayed Mattathias and his men as violent Jewish zealots and colored circumcision in 1 Maccabees as an act of ancient Jewish terrorism, instead of the perspective that the text itself offers: circumcision as an act of covenantal liberation.⁴⁵

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44. Weitzman, "Forced Circumcision," 43, 45.

45. The National Council of Churches, under the direction of Friendship Press, and in partnership with SBL is updating the NRSV translation. See "NRSV Review and Update," <https://friendship-press.org/nrsv-review-update/>.

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