

3 Maccabees as a monomyth

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The story of the hero, as a rite of passage, is often seen as a narratological quest, which because of the work of Campbell is now referred to as the monomyth. The basic pattern of all monomyths is an account of how a hero commences a journey, encounters a major crisis and then returns back home transformed in some way. Most importantly, this transformation not only advantages the hero but also significantly benefits the community that he or she originally hails from. Regardless of the authority concerned, the basic structure of a monomyth is tripartite, embracing the hero's journey in three phases: departure, initiation and return. A surface reading of 3 Maccabees (cf. Charles 1913:155–173; Amir 1972:660–661) gives the impression that if one views the Jewish people as a single entity, one can infer that they too appear to play a role similar to the character of the hero in a typical monomyth or the rite of passage (initiation). This article attempts to examine this possibility in more detail. The author concludes that the narrative in 3 Maccabees, which deals with the transformation of the Jewish population in Egypt, largely conforms to the monomyth archetype but with some intriguing subtle differences.

Keywords: 3 Maccabees; monomyth; Judaism; hero myth; initiation rite.

Introduction

It is well known that in both narratology and comparative mythology, the story of the hero or the rite of passage may be viewed as a narratological quest, mission or journey. Because of the work of Campbell (2004:passim), this type of narrative is now referred to as 'monomyth'. The basic pattern of all monomyths is an account of how a hero commences a journey or *travail*, encounters a major crisis (which he or she overcomes) and then returns back home transformed in some way. Most importantly, this transformation not only advantages the hero but also significantly benefits the community that he or she originally belongs to.

Various theorists have attempted to describe the various stages that comprise the typical monomyth structure in diverse ways. However, the main point is that they all see similar configurations that can be mostly cross-referenced. For the purposes of this article, I will primarily dwell on Campbell's (2004) model. However, readers should realise that other scholars, including Van Gennep (1960:passim), Leeming (1981:passim), Cousineau (2001:passim) and Vogler (2007:passim), all offer similar explanations that emphasise and/or describe the monomyth concept—although in slightly different ways.

As an example, a brief review of Van Gennep's (1960) work is useful. With the insights of Hockey (2002:212), a known weakness with the work of Van Gennep concerns the fact that his theories are concerned predominantly with an 'engaged ethnographic approach' to then extant societies. However, the importance of his findings fully supports the key aspects of Campbell's insights – although as generalisations. In brief, Van Gennep seeks to reveal the underlying structural correspondence between a wide diversity of rites of passage. Hockey (2002) explains:

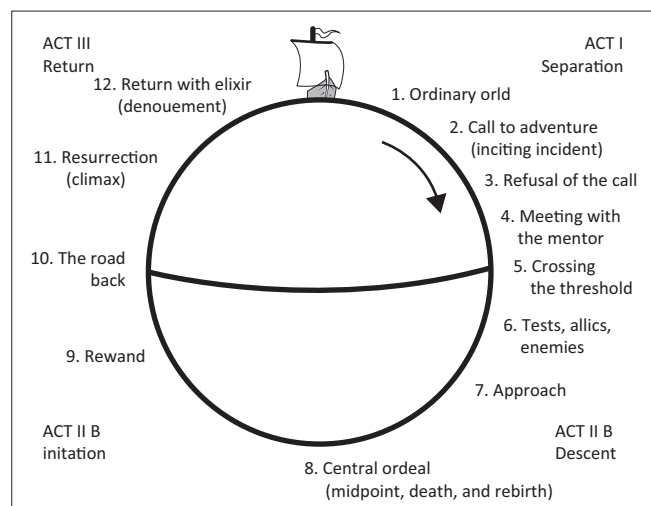
Crucially, Van Gennep searched the ethnography of ritual for similarities of form rather than content, cutting a swathe through the work of early ethnologists who had been beleaguered by descriptions of the ceremonial or ritual practices, images and objects which accompany social changes. (p. 212)

Regardless, like Campbell and others, Van Gennep (1960:3) confirmed that, typically, rites of passage or initiation can be best represented by a tripartite structure comprising (1) departure (separation) from 'normal' society; (2) an intermittent, transformative period (and/or decent) after crossing a 'threshold'; and (3) an ultimate 'return' or re-entry into a new social position within the original society.

Note: The collection entitled 'Eben Scheffler Festschrift', sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).

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Source: Vogler, C., 2007, *The writers journey: Mythic structure for writers*, Michael Wise Productions, Studio City, CA

FIGURE 1: Diagram illustrating the key features of the hero's journey.

Campbell has considered as many as 17 stages to the monomyth. However, not all hero stories necessarily contain all of these stages overtly. Some may even be implied. These stages do not even have to occur in a strictly laid-out order. Nonetheless, Campbell groups the various mythemes into three 'acts' or modes of actions that also predict Van Gennep's tripartite structure. These latter 'acts' or 'modes' always occur systematically, namely:

1. the hero's departure or separation
2. the hero's initiation, transformation and/or descent
3. the hero's return.

Thus, in general, all monomyths share the following basic structure.

Departure mode

The hero lives in his or her ordinary home world and receives a call to commence some mission, embark on a journey or have an adventure. Sometimes the hero is reluctant to go on the journey and needs to be encouraged by a mentor. The mentor gives the hero something important to assist him or her on his quest.

Initiation, transformation or descent mode

In this stage, the hero enters some unknown or extraordinary world (different from his or her home world environment). This might involve passing tests or facing trials and/or temptations of some kind. Regardless of the odds, the hero finally reaches what is often referred to as a 'cave/cavern', (Campbell 2004:7, 73, 93, 162, 171, 180–181, 195–196, 245, 248 n. 18, 281, 299–33, 346 & 353) or what Campbell calls the 'belly of the whale' (Campbell 2004:34, 49, 83–88). These metaphors refer to the human unconscious. Campbell (2004) explains:

The unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, and deluding images up into the mind – whether in dream, broad daylight, or insanity; for the human kingdom, beneath the floor of the comparatively neat little dwelling that we call our consciousness, goes down into unsuspected Aladdin caves. (p. 7)

In short, the unconscious is viewed as a fabulous underground cavern, the underworld and/or some ultimate test. This central crisis to his or 'journey' (or initiation rite) requires the hero to overcome or vanquish some major obstacle or adversary. This act of supreme attainment, at the apogee of the narrative, results in the hero being transformed by some form of apotheosis. The hero may also obtain some great prize, treasure or elixir, etc.

Return mode

In this stage, the hero must return to his or her normal (ordinary) home world with the prize. However, this is never made easy; the hero may be unwilling or unable to return, may be pursued by protectors of the extraordinary world, may be rescued and/or forced to return by virtue of an agency from the normal world. In returning, the hero must again cross the threshold between the ordinary and extraordinary worlds. In so doing, he or she brings into the ordinary world the 'treasure' that he or she has now obtained. Indeed, the hero is himself or herself a transformed being – one who has gained both power and wisdom and who may now share these benefits with his or her former community who still inhabit the ordinary world. Campbell (2004), the master of mythology, explains his theory as follows:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. Prometheus ascended to the heavens, stole fire from the gods, and descended. Jason sailed through the Clashing Rocks into a sea of marvels, circumvented the dragon that guarded the Golden fleece, and returned with the fleece and the power to wrest his rightful throne from a usurper. Aeneas went down into the underworld, crossed the dreadful river of the dead, threw a sop to the three-headed watchdog Cerberus, and conversed, at last, with the shade of his dead father. All things were unfolded to him: the destiny of souls, the destiny of Rome, which he was about to found, 'and in what wise he might avoid or endure every burden'. He returned through the ivory gate to his work in the world. (pp. 28–29)

The problem: 3 Maccabees as a monomyth?

When one reads 3 Maccabees, it becomes apparent that the author may have been following the basic tenets of, *inter alia*, a typical monomyth. Indeed, in the narrative, the entire Jewish population of Ptolemaic Egypt, collectively, seems to fulfil the role of the sole hero – one who is forced to leave his or her home and undertake a journey of initiation. The basic story is well known: The king of Egypt (Ptolemy IV Philopater [221–204 BCE]) attempts to enter the inner sanctuary of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and is severely punished by the Jewish deity for his conceit. As a consequence, the recently humiliated Philopater fosters a deep hatred for all things that are Jewish. Filled with hubris, he returns to Egypt and

proceeds to take out his anger on the entire Jewish population of not only Alexandria but the whole of Egypt. It is made clear that, generally speaking, the non-Jewish Egyptians also do not have much regard for the Jews – many dislike them. Accordingly, Philopater easily gains the general support of the non-Jewish Alexandrians as he attempts to annihilate the entire Jewish population of Egypt. He destroys their homes, shackles their limbs and herds them into a hippodrome for forced registration and ultimate execution. Subsequently, he makes several attempts to have the Jews trampled to death by intoxicated and enraged elephants. Ultimately, the Jewish deity intervenes; the Jews are saved and, most importantly, not only re-admitted into the Egyptian society but also treated as both a superior and beloved sector of the Egyptian population. A surface reading gives the impression that if one views the Jewish people as a single entity, one can find that they seem to play a role similar to the hero in a typical monomyth or rite of passage (initiation). This article attempts to examine this possibility in more detail.

Methodology

The narrative in 3 Maccabees will be selectively examined in the light of Campbell's tripartite model of departure, initiation and return. This will be done in order to determine:

1. how closely the book of 3 Maccabees conforms to, *inter alia*, Campbell's model of the hero's journey
2. how an understanding of Campbell's monomyth structure greatly assists in obtaining a complete understanding of the author's intended message.

I will also defer to the efficacy of an interpretivist and/or constructivist episteme. Here, I accept that societies construct their own independent realities and further that they are capable of projecting these perceived realities onto other societies.

Departure (separation)

The ordinary world

Initially, the point of departure is Alexandria,¹ where we are told, *inter alia*, that the Jews are largely disliked. Having been physically punished by the Jewish deity (3 Macc 2:21–22) for attempting to access the sanctuary of the Holy Temple (3 Macc 1:10), Ptolemy Philopater develops a keen hatred for the Jews. His hubris and wickedness are amplified by the advice of the bad company that he keeps (3 Macc 2:25–26). As a consequence, Philopater 'magnanimously' (3 Macc 2:27–31) offers the Jews full citizenship in exchange of their rejection of both their deity and their Jewish traditions. This action sets the scene for the characteristics of the Jewish community's home environment where their friends and family are located. In effect, the monomyth narrative really begins at this point so that the subsequent separation becomes more apparent. For clarity, the 'ordinary world' of the collective Alexandrian Jews is one where the following seven realities are experienced:

1. Jews worshipped their own deity and adhered to his law (3 Macc 3:4).

¹3 Maccabees 3:1 indicates that subsequently ALL Egyptian Jews were to be rounded up.

2. The Jews were exclusive in their worship of their own deity (3 Macc 3:7).
3. Jews maintained 'a feeling of unwavering loyalty to the kings' but this was secondary to the loyalty to their deity (3 Macc 3:3–4).
4. Jews ate their own food and refused to partake in the food of the Alexandrians (3 Macc 3:7a).
5. Jews were unsociable, refusing to associate with the king or his troops (3 Macc 3:7b).
6. Some Alexandrian non-Jews were sympathetic to the Jewish plight (3 Macc 3:8b–10).
7. Most Alexandrian non-Jews were happy that the Jews were being oppressed (3 Macc 4:1).

Call to adventure

Campbell (2004) points out that in a monomyth a 'herald' serves as an indicator in a crisis situation to serve as the 'call to adventure'. He explains (Campbell 2004):

The herald's summons may be to live, as in the present instance, or, at a later moment of the biography, to die. It may sound the call to some high historical undertaking. Or it may mark the dawn of religious illumination. As apprehended by the mystic, it marks what has been termed 'the awakening of the self'. (p. 47)

Philopater's inscription on the pillar at the tower-porch (3 Macc 2:27–29) serves as the first 'herald' in the 3 Maccabees narrative. In accordance with Campbell's (2004:54) description of this stage of the hero's journey, the Jews view their 'present system of ideals, virtues, goals, and advantages [as though they] were to be fixed and made secure'. It is true that some of the Jews chose to apostatise and eschewed their God and culture in exchange for the 'ivy-leaf symbol of Dionysus' (3 Macc 2:29 and 33). However, others simply paid money that they might be overlooked by the authorities and allowed to continue (unmolested) as Jews (3 Macc 2:32).

When Philopater realised what was happening, he produced the second 'herald' – his stronger worded letter to his commanders and soldiers (3 Macc 2:11–30) – where he demanded that ALL Jews are now rounded up and vilified and will ultimately (3 Macc 3:25) receive a 'cruel and ignominious death'. Collectively, the Jews are now forced to leave their homes.

Refusal of the call

On acknowledgment of the first 'herald' (with the exception of the apostates), those who paid money to preserve their lifestyles have in effect refused the call to abandon their Jewish culture. This refusal may be seen as an unwillingness to abandon what seems to be in the best interests of an individual's survival. Here, the individual, by refusing the call, attempts to preserve the status quo, naively believing that the current routine of (possibly unappreciated) principles and ideals will somehow endure, remaining fixed and permanent. Campbell (2004) explains this situation well:

Often in actual life, and not infrequently in the myths and popular tales, we encounter the dull case of the call unanswered;

for it is always possible to turn the ear to other interests. Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or 'culture,' the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless –even though, like King Minos, he may through titanic effort succeed in building an empire of renown. Whatever house he builds, it will be a house of death: a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide from him his Minotaur. All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration. (p. 54)

One important weapon that the Jews possess collectively at this stage (remembering that a mentor often gives the hero something important to assist in his or her quest) is faith in the power of prayer to their deity.

Crossing the threshold In the belly of the whale

Here, the 'hero' of the narrative (i.e. the entire population of Egyptian Jews) is forced to venture into an unknown world which not only breaks with tradition but also subjects them (as the archetypal 'hero') to vulnerability and real danger. Apart from those that had apostatised (3 Macc 4:2–3), all Jews are now forced to leave their homes and are placed in shackles, maltreated and transported to another 'world'. In some cases, they are forced to travel vast distances by ship. Regardless of this, all Egyptian Jews ultimately end up at the hippodrome outside Schedia (3 Macc 4:5–11) – technically a suburb of Alexandria.

After crossing the threshold, the Egyptian Jew's previous world is destroyed – ultimately all Jews in Egypt had their homes burnt (3 Macc 4:2–3). In keeping with the tenets of the hero myth, the Jews move into a world of 'darkness' (the belly of the whale) and will not leave until they collectively are ready to return. Here, the hippodrome may be viewed as representing the 'belly of the whale' – a province of regeneration and renewal. Campbell (2004) sees this as the realm of the unconscious:

The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died. (p. 83)

The road of trials

Campbell (2004) describes the process once the hero has entered the 'belly of the whale':

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage. (p. 89)

In 3 Maccabees, the Jews, like the hero of the monomyth, are now subjected to a series of tests or ordeals on the 'road

of trials'. According to Campbell (2004:89–100) and as exemplified in 3 Maccabees 4:14–5:51, there are several things that the hero must experience whilst in the 'belly of the whale'. Outwardly, the hero may even appear to be powerless and defenceless at this stage, but simultaneously he begins to experience personal growth (Campbell 2004:83–88). In the case of the Jews, the only weapon that they possess and the one that will ultimately save them are their constant prayers to their deity. Indeed, as already intimated, their prayers and their total faith in their deity could be viewed as the special things that the persecuted Jews take with them on their journey. What is also emphasised by this version of the monomyth is that *all* the Alexandrian non-Jews are encouraged by Philopater to clearly observe and witness the collective trials and tribulations that the Jews (as heroes) must endure in their process of initiation (cf. 3 Macc 4:11b). Indeed, the specific employment of the hippodrome ensures that the Jews will be kept physically apart from the entire Alexandrian population whilst simultaneously allowing their tribulations to be viewed publicly as a spectacle.

The first trial

3 Maccabees 4:14–21 informs the reader of the nature of the first miraculous ordeal: the Jews are subjected to 40 days of registration whilst held captive in the hippodrome. Eventually, the task proves too great for Philopater's men and the paper and pens give out. 3 Maccabees 4:21 specifically credits the Jewish deity as the cause of this miraculous delivery.

The second trial

3 Maccabees 5:1–19 relates how Philopater commands Hermon, the elephant keeper, to intoxicate and drug 500 elephants. The intention here is that these enraged animals should be let loose into the hippodrome and allowed to crush all the Jews to death. After the Jews pray for deliverance, their deity causes an inebriated Philopater to fall asleep after a night of heavy drinking. Accordingly, he is unable to give the command to release the intoxicated elephants into the hippodrome and the Jews survive, unscathed.

The third trial

3 Maccabees 5:20–35 recounts a similar tale. Philopater again commands Hermon to intoxicate and drug his elephants in preparation for the execution of the Jews. Consequently, the threatened Jews pray to their deity for succour. Philopater again awakes after a night of heavy drinking but now suffering from amnesia and confusion. Again, he is unable to give the command to release the drugged elephants into the hippodrome, and subsequently the Jews, yet again, are saved.

The fourth trial

3 Maccabees 5:36–51 deals with Philopater's third attempt to prepare his elephants as vehicles for execution. Here he goes somewhat further by promising to not only exterminate all the Jews in the hippodrome but also to invade Judaea, destroying its cities as well as the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

3 Maccabees 6:1–15 witnesses the elderly priest Eleazar praying earnestly on behalf of the Jewish people, reminding his deity, *inter alia*, of his great deeds in the past as well as appealing for his divine mercy. 3 Maccabees 6:16–21 describes the great miracle wherein the Jewish deity sends two angels to turn back the intoxicated elephants, which, being confused and terrified, trample Philopater's own soldiers to death.

Supernatural aid

In three cases the Jews prayed for their deity to come to their aid. In all four trials the Jewish deity is depicted as coming to their assistance. In the last trial, an old man (Eleazar) (3 Macc 6:1–15) exhorts his deity on behalf of the captive Jews. Campbell (2004:66) posits that supernatural aid represents the forces of the unconscious at the hero's side. Similarly, in 3 Maccabees, the Jewish deity is effectively presented as being synonymous with the Jewish unconscious. The act of prayer is an attempt to commune with this aspect of the human psyche. As with a strong feature of Campbell's monomyth, the agency of this particular prayer is an old man (Eleazar). Indeed, Campbell (2004) explains that:

For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass. (p. 63)

Apotheosis Transformation

According to Campbell (2004:139), '[I]like the Buddha himself, this godlike being is a pattern of the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance'. In brief, at a certain stage of the monomyth there is an apotheosis when the previous terrors suddenly subside. Here, at last, the hero suddenly appreciates why it has been necessary to be on this tedious journey in the first place. Even though the actual journey or initiation process is not fully complete, the hero now, free from fear, fully grasps what is required before it is possible to 'return' home.

3 Maccabees 6:22–28 deals with Philopater's sudden reversal of roles and his change of heart. At the moment of apotheosis, he immediately transforms from being the arrogant, violent, drunken oppressor (antagonist) of all things that are Jewish into the saviour (protagonist) of the Egyptian Jews. Immediately, the Jews are equally aware of this apotheosis. In 3 Maccabees 6:29, they realise for the first time that they are no longer in danger and further they may now return to their homes. Accordingly, they express their thanks to God as their 'Holy Saviour'.

The ultimate boon and return

Campbell (2004:182) explains that in a typical monomyth, the hero 'wins the blessing of the goddess or the god' and then is unequivocally ratified to return to his or her 'home world' albeit in a transformed way – often 'supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron'. Philopater stresses (cf. 3 Macc 6:25–28) that the Jews are no longer hated members of

the Egyptian population. They are now transformed as acknowledged 'sons of the almighty living God of heaven'.

Rescue from without

Campbell (2004:192) mentions that typically, in a hero myth, the hero needs outside assistance to make the return to his/her 'home world'. In 3 Maccabees, there exists an irony in that the chief antagonist of the narrative (Philopater) is himself transformed into the chief protagonist – one who suddenly acts as a benevolent, outside agency at a critical stage of the tale. In 3 Maccabees 6:30–37 we learn that thanks to the actions of Philopater the Jews are treated like returning heroes. The non-Jewish Alexandrians are filled with shame for their previous hatred and wickedness. Philopater purchases wine and sustenance sufficient for seven days of celebratory feasting. As a consequence, wailing and moaning are replaced with dancing and feasting. Jew and non-Jew feast and drink together as loyal Alexandrians.

Master of two worlds

As implied by Campbell (2004:205) the returning hero had previously descended (consciously) into the realm of the unconscious (i.e. represented by the hippodrome and the Jewish deity in 3 Macc) and accordingly had assimilated the tenets of this unconscious experience into his consciousness. In 3 Maccabees 6:35–37 the now transcendent Jews are filled with joy, dancing and feasting and glorify their deity with their thanksgiving and psalms. Here it is stressed that they do not consume wine in order to get drunk but rather to enhance their appreciation of their deity's saving grace.

Freedom to live

Finally, 3 Maccabees informs the reader (3 Macc 7:14–15) that Ptolemy gave his approval for the Jews who had successfully gone through the 'rites of passage' to kill 300 apostates (i.e. those Jews who originally denied their deity and traditions in order to save their lives. Campbell (2004:221) explains that in the monomyth, the hero reconciles the fact the every creature lives on the death of another. The hero realises that it was only through the 'death' of his or her former self that a new life is possible to appreciate. He states that when the new life surfaces, 'one may invent a false, finally unjustified, image of oneself as an exceptional phenomenon in the world, not guilty as others are, but justified in one's inevitable sinning because one represents the good'. In short, those Jewish apostates; those who did not descend into the realm of unconsciousness – do not enjoy the prize of living in a transcendent state. They denied their deity and accordingly they are now denied life itself.

Conclusion

When reviewing the key aspects of the 3 Maccabees' narrative, it becomes apparent that the entire tale fits very comfortably into a typical monomyth tripartite structure. What also becomes very evident is the fact that the Jewish people's transformation whilst in the 'decent' phase has

important didactic content. Whilst living in the 'ordinary' world, the Alexandrian Jews saw themselves as living distinctly from their non-Jewish neighbours. Indeed, this separateness (i.e. as akin to holiness) was largely misunderstood by most non-Jewish Alexandrians and even viewed as a form of disloyalty to the ruling regime. In addition, although, generally speaking, the Jews are portrayed as God-fearing and righteous people, they themselves do not seem to have fully appreciated their privileged status or connection to their God-head at a very fundamental level.

Only after their ordeal, do the Jews assimilate the consciousness of their deity. In this regard, they have now witnessed, at first-hand, the power of prayer. Simultaneously, both Philopater and the entire population of non-Jews also experience a transformation, in that they ultimately see the Jews as being fully justified in their separateness (holiness).

Most importantly, all Alexandrians (Jew and non-Jew alike) are allowed to socialise as a community and share in the festivities organised by their king. In brief, the Jews are now perceived as being co-equal and loyal Alexandrians as well as having the divine right to adhere to their religious dietary laws.

It is here that the one key dissimilarity between 3 Maccabees and a typical monomyth becomes noticeable. Normally, the returning, renovated hero also transforms his or her former community. However, in 3 Maccabees, although this indeed happens, the chief antagonist in the tale (the very source of tribulation) also undergoes a metamorphosis and ultimately becomes the chief protagonist (the very source of reprieve). In addition, the non-Jewish communities – those that never undertook the hero's journey – also experience their own unique transformation.

The journey of the Jews may ultimately be seen to be as much a physical passage as it was an emotional and spiritual voyage of discovery. In brief, 3 Maccabees is a narrative of an expedition, leading to self-knowledge and final acceptance of the Jews and their deity by not only Ptolemy Philopater but also the non-Jews of Alexandria.

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The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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