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Mastering Death through Reason: The Mother of 4 Maccabees as an Archetype of the Christian Woman Philosopher in Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine[1]

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Abstract: In the tradition of ancient philosophy, fearlessness before death served as the ultimate criterion of a true philosopher – an ideal paradigmatically personified by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*. This paper examines how the same archetype was appropriated and transformed in early Christian literature through the figures of Macrina the Younger, as portrayed by Gregory of Nyssa in the *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* and *De anima et resurrectione*, and Monica, as depicted by Augustine in the *Confessiones* and *De ordine*. Both women are presented as true philosophers who surpass even the Greek ideal in their mastery of the passions and their serene readiness for death. The paper argues that the striking parallels between these two portraits are not coincidental but derive from a common literary and theological source: the figure of the mother of the seven sons in 4 Maccabees, whose fearless endurance of her children's martyrdom, governed by pious reason, provided the archetype for the Christian woman philosopher. By tracing this genealogy—from the Platonic ideal of *meletē thanatou*, to the Stoic-Jewish martyrological tradition, to the patristic portraits of Macrina and Monica—the paper demonstrates how the Church Fathers employed female figures to show that the uppermost philosophical ideal could be realized more fully through Christian faith and the hope of resurrection than through pagan learning alone.

Keywords: fear of death; philosophy as a preparation for death; Macrina the Younger; Monica; Gregory of Nyssa; Augustine; 4 Maccabees; woman philosopher; martyrdom; reason and passions; patristic literature

What is philosophy and what does it mean to be a philosopher, and most of all how might one determine whether someone leads a philosophical life and is truly the one who bears the name? The most important answer to those questions in the tradition of Greek philosophy was given by Plato, who in his dialogues described the character of Socrates as the true

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philosopher. Socrates, as depicted in the dialogues, became the archetype of the true philosopher not only because of what he taught, but mainly because he was the one who was ready to die for his philosophy. As I will demonstrate in this paper, from the time of Socrates onward, death had become the ultimate test for a true philosopher, and this archetype was present not only in pagan philosophy but can also be found in Christian literature. Although there were many Christian writings employing this archetype, I would like to point to two particularly clear examples, namely St Gregory of Nyssa, who writes in this manner about his sister Macrina, and St Augustine, who draws a portrait of his mother, Monica. In both cases, these women are not only ready to die at any moment, but show no fear of death and no grief over the deaths of their relatives. I would like to argue that this lack of fear is the ultimate litmus test for a way of life that is both truly philosophical and truly Christian. Moreover, I intend to demonstrate that the striking similarities between the portraits of Macrina and Monica are not coincidental, but stem from a common literary and theological background – namely, the figure of the mother from 4 Maccabees. The mother of the seven sons, who watches her children die under torture yet remains steadfast, mastering her passions through pious reason, appears to have provided the archetype upon which both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine modelled their portrayals of female philosophers. By tracing this genealogy from the Platonic ideal of the dying philosopher, to the Stoic-Jewish martyrological tradition of 4 Maccabees, to the Christian portraits of Macrina and Monica, this paper aims to show how the early Church Fathers appropriated and transformed the ancient philosophical ideal of fearlessness before death, demonstrating that it could be realized most fully not by learned men but by Christian women sustained by the hope of resurrection.

1. Macrina – fighting passions with arguments

Gregory of Nyssa writes the *On the Soul and Resurrection* in the form of a dialogue, which is in itself an evocation of the philosophical genre. The similarities between Gregory's work and dialogues, especially *Phaedo* and *Symposium*, have been noted and discussed by many scholars. Macrina is not only presented as a new Socrates, but also seems similar to the priestess Diotima, who in *Symposium* teaches Socrates about the true meaning of love[3]. L. Karfikova notices that Gregory's

[3] E.A. Clark, *Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women: Social History, and the 'Linguistic turn'*, JECS 6/3 (1998) p. 424; L. Karfiková, *Gregory of Nyssa,*

dialogue is in its content and structure closer to *Phaedo* than to *Symposium,* since the main topic of the former is not "to face an approaching death by means of arguments"[4]. Although the similarities are less immediately apparent, there is also a strong resemblance of the role played by both women for the men who dialogue with them. They assume the role of teachers of true philosophy.

Macrina is in many places portrayed by Gregory as a true philosopher. The most telling is the portrait which Gregory draws in *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*. The way of monastic life of his sister is repeatedly described as philosophical. She not only reached "a high goal of philosophy" (τὸ ὕψος τῆς φιλοσοφίας) herself[5], but also was a potent teacher who could uplift her pupils to the same level. She accomplished this in the case of her brother Peter[6], but also in the case of her mother and the entire monastic community of which she was a leader[7]. But this highest level of philosophy can be gained and tested only in the face of death, as is evident in the case of Macrina's mother Emelia. When a brother of Macrina and Gregory died in an accident, their mother was emotionally devastated. In Macrina's case, however, the loss of her "most beloved brother" is the occasion on which her great virtue (τῆς μεγάλης Μακρίνης ἡ ἀρετή) becomes evident[8]. She was able to act like a true philosopher by "setting reason against the passion" (τῷ πάθει τὸν λογισμὸν ἀντιστήσασα)[9]. Her attitude was so firm that she was able not only to comfort her mother, but like a teacher of philosophy she trained her soul in fortitude (μητρὸς ψυχὴν πρὸς ἀνδρείαν παιδοτριβήσασα)[10], and "lifted her up with her own arguments" (τῆς φύσεως συνεπῆρε τοῖς ἰδίοις λογισμοῖς)[11]. Emelia was thus also able to rise beyond her own natural impulses by means of

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Witness of Macrina's Life and Death, "Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis, Theologica Olomucensia" 14 (2013) p. 17-18.

[4] Karfiková, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 18.

[5] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 11, GNO 8/1, 381, 28, tr. M. Przyszychowska, in: *Macrina the Younger as Substitute for Eustathius the Philosopher/ Eustathius of Sebastea. Establishing Peter at the See of Sebastea*, Warsaw 2022, p. 274.

[6] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 12, GNO 8/1, 383, 20-25.

[7] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 11, GNO 8/1, 381, 15-20.

[8] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 10, GNO 8/1, 380, 17.

[9] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 10, GNO 8/1, 380, 18, tr. M. Przyszychowska, p. 272.

[10] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 10, GNO 8/1, 380, 22.

[11] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 10, GNO 8/1, 381, 8-9; tr. M. Przyszychowska, p. 273.

arguments (λογισμοῖς)[12]. Eventually Emelia can maintain a philosophical attitude towards her own death departing in peace, blessing her children (Gregory and Macrina) and giving instructions regarding her own burial.

Another example of a unique attitude to death, which can be observed in Macrina's character, is her reaction to the death of her fiancé. After he had died, she refused to remarry because she was convinced that he was not dead but had rather gone on a long journey[13]. And because of her firm hope in the resurrection, she did not regard herself as a widow. Her hope was not only a simple hope of being reunited with him at the day of the resurrection. In her deceased groom, she ultimately recognized Christ himself and seeing Christ in him and considering him alive was a means of honouring her fiancé[14]. Similarly, after the death of her brother Basil of Caesarea she "remained like an undefeated athlete, in no way overcome by the onslaught of misfortunes"[15]. Finally, on her deathbed, she was able to remain calm and fear nothing, sustained by a firm belief in the resurrection. Therefore, the experience of death and the response to it was central for *Vita Macrinae*[16].

Eventually, the ultimate test of virtue and philosophy comes with Macrina facing not only the death of relatives, but her own. In the *Dialogue on the soul and resurrection*, Macrina is portrayed as a well-educated philosopher. She continually engages with pagan philosophy and demonstrates the superiority of Christian doctrine grounded in Holy Scripture[17]. Gregory states that the occasion for the dialogue was the death of their brother, Basil the Great, and Macrina herself being mortally ill. On her deathbed, Macrina once again assumes the role of a consoler, comforting Gregory, who is terrified by the death of his brother and the imminent

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[12] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 10, GNO 8/1, 381, 1-2.

[13] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 5, GNO 8/1, 375, 17-21.

[14] W.E. Helleman, *Cappadocian Macrina as Lady Wisdom, in: Papers presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999. Cappadocian Writers. Other Greek Writers,* ed. M.F. Wiles – E.J. Yarnold, StPatr 37, Leuven 2001, p. 94-95.

[15] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* 14, GNO 8/1, 386, 20-21, tr. M. Przyszychowska, p. 280.

[16] Helleman, *Cappadocian Macrina as Lady Wisdom, p. 87, 92-94.*

[17] Catherine P. Roth shows how Gregory of Nyssa shows the superiority of the Christian understanding of ultimate happiness (*Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue On the Soul and Resurrection,* VigCh 46 (1992) p. 24-27). Susan Wesel points out that he uses the very form of the dialogue to show how Christianity surpass the Greek model (*Memory and Individuality in Gregory of Nyssa's De anima et resurrectione*, JECS 18 (2010) p. 378).

death of his sister. The entire dialogue refers and elaborates on what we have seen in *Vita Macrinae*. She confronts Gregory's grief with the power of argumentation, and, as she had done in the case of her groom, Macrina tries to convince him "that we should not grieve concerning those who are asleep" (τὸ μὴ δεῖν ἐπὶ τῶν κεκοιμημένων λυπεῖσθαι·)[18]. In this instance, however, Gregory shows that arguments alone are not sufficient to dispel his fears and therefore Macrina passes to the teaching of Holy Scripture and finally, when even this proves insufficient, she begins to play the role of a mystagogue teaching the mysteries of resurrection. At the end of the dialogue the roles appear to reverse, and Macrina says that Gregory's argumentation, conducted according to the art of rhetoric, can be destructive to the doctrine of resurrection. But the arguments can be effective only for those "who have not adequately investigated the mystery of truth" (τῆς ἀληθείας μυστήριον παθεῖν)[19]. Nevertheless, Macrina is once again presented as a true philosopher, who like Socrates in *Phaedo*[20] can face the approaching death by means of arguments, being completely immune to grief and sorrow.

2. Monica – a true philosopher and teacher

In the Latin world, we find a similar example of a woman who is a philosopher and who teaches men true philosophy, while herself serving as a model of ascetic life and complete freedom from the fear of death. That is how St Augustine describes his mother, Monica.

In the *Confessions,* Monica is the one who is always ready to comfort others in the face of death. She consoles the sailors and passengers of the ship during her sea voyage to visit her son[21]. But the ultimate test of philosophy is the attitude towards the philosopher's own imminent death. As Therese Fuhrer observes, it is well documented that the scene was staged in the manner of the Platonic *Phaedo* and Monica is portrayed as "a Christian counterpart to Plotinus and Socrates"[22]. Shortly before

[18] Gregorius Nyssenus, *De anima et resurrectione*, GNO 3/3, 2, 7, tr. C. Roth, in: St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Soul and the Resurrection*, Crestwood 1993, p. 27.

[19] Gregorius Nyssenus, *De anima et resurrectione*, GNO 3/3, 111, 19-20, tr. C. Roth, p. 113.

[20] Karfiková, *Gregory of Nyssa, Witness of Macrina's Life and Death*, p. 17-18.

[21] Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessiones* VI 1, 8-11, CCL 27, p. 73.

[22] T. Fuhrer, *Wife, Mother, Philosopher: On the Symbolic Function of Augustine's Monnica*, in: *Maternal Conceptions in Classical Literature and Philosophy*, ed. A. Sharrock – A. Keith, Toronto 2020, p. 232.

her death, she engages in a dialogue with Augustine about the afterlife and the beautiful nature of the things that await the believers in heaven. During that conversation, they both arrive at the conclusion that nothing in this world is worthy of comparison with the happiness of the life of the saints[23]. Before her death, Monica spoke to the friends gathered at Ostia:

> […] about the contempt for this life and the value of death-and, when they were amazed at the strong-mindedness of the woman (which Thou hadst given her) and when they asked whether she had no fear of leaving her body so far away from her own city, she replied: "Nothing is far from God, and there should be no fear that He will not know from whence to resurrect me at the end of time"[24].

On account of her calmness in the face of death that Augustine witnessed in his mother, he regrets that he himself was unable to overcome his own grief. He recounts that he sought comfort and tried to contain the feelings that had risen within him and to hold back his tears. Although he managed to refrain from weeping during the funeral, he was filled with grief and sorrow and after the ceremony he prayed with all his heart to God for the healing of his sorrow[25]. But finally, the tears were unstoppable, and Augustine confesses that he felt guilty for weeping over his mother for a fraction of an hour. These tears, however, were transformed into a kind of spiritual weeping, caused not by grief but by recognition of the many dangers that lie before one who wishes to live the life of a saint[26].

It is clear that Augustine cannot face fear and grief as his mother did. There is yet another passage in the early dialogues, in which he presents himself as inferior to his mother, who serves as an exemplar of the philosopher. This passage is significant, since Monica's fearlessness in the face of death is presented as the paramount criterion of true philosophy. During the dialogue, Monica suddenly enters and inquires about the status

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[23] Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessiones* IX 10, 14-19, CCL 27, p. 147.

[24] Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessiones* IX 11, 31-37, CCL 27, p. 149: "Audivi etiam postea, quod iam, cum Ostiis essemus, cum quibusdam amicis meis materna fiducia colloquebatur quodam die de contemptu vitae huius et bono mortis, ubi ipse non aderam, illisque stupentibus virtutem feminae (quoniam tu dederas ei) quaerentibusque, utrum non formidaret tam longe a sua civitate corpus relinquere: «Nihil, inquit, longe est Deo, neque timendum est, ne ille non agnoscat in fine saeculi, unde me resuscitet»," tr. V.J. Bourke, in: St Augustine, *Confessions*, Washington 1953, p. 225.

[25] Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessiones* IX 12, 25-66, CCL 27, p. 150-152.

[26] Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessiones* IX 12, 74-13, 5, CCL 27, p. 152.

of the discussion. When Augustine orders that her question be recorded, Monica protests, saying that a question posed by a woman should not be included in the book[27]. By doing this Augustine introduces his mother as a participant in the written version of the dialogue, and from now on she plays an active role[28]. Replying to Monica's objection, Augustine delivers a lengthy speech praising her as a true philosopher. He begins by observing that not gender but true worth, virtue, and intellectual excellence should be the sole criterion for including or excluding someone's opinion. Augustine also adduces examples of both wealthy and humble individuals who could certainly be counted as philosophers, and states that: "For there were among the ancients women who philosophized, and your philosophy is much more pleasing to me"[29]. Augustine then proceeds to explain what it is about his mother's philosophy that pleases him. First, one should be aware that philosophy, which is the love of wisdom, is not always "true philosophy". That is why there are "philosophers of this world" (philosophos huius mundi)[30], who do not possess a true love of wisdom; but this does not mean that every philosopher and every philosophy must be rejected. Monica herself is the one who truly loves wisdom, and Augustine says:

> But when indeed you love it [wisdom] much more than you love me (and I know how much you love me), and when you have advanced so far into it that already you aren't frightened either by the dread of accidental harm or death itself (which is extremely difficult for the most learned men, as all confess it to be the supreme citadel of philosophy), shall I not gladly dedicate myself to you even as your disciple?[31]

With a typically maternal attitude, Monica answers that Augustine has never lied so much in all his life[32], and by this response, she reveals

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[27] Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ordine* I 11, 1-6, CCL 29, p. 105.

[28] Fuhrer, *Wife, Mother*, Philosopher, p. 230.

[29] Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ordine* I 11, 33-35, CCL 29, p. 105: "Nam et feminae sunt apud veteres philosophatae et philosophia tua mihi plurimum placet", tr. M.P. Foley, in: *St Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues, On Order*, v. 3, Yale 2020, p. 45.

[30] Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ordine* I 11, 43, CCL 29, p. 106.

[31] Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ordine* I 11, 53-58, CCL 29, p. 105: "Nunc vero cum eam multo plus quam meipsum diligas, et noverim quantum me diligas, cumque in ea tantum profeceris, ut iam nec cuiusvis incommodi fortuiti nec ipsius mortis, quod viris doctissimis difficillimum est, horrore terrearis, quam summam philosophiae arcem omnes esse confitentur, egone me non libenter tibi etiam discipulum dabo?", tr. Foley, p. 46.

[32] Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ordine* I 11, 59-60, CCL 29, p. 106.

her virtue of humility. Monica then is presented as a true philosopher, who achieved *summum philosophiae arcem*, and the confirmation of this achievement is, once again, her freedom from any terror of setbacks or death. Such a philosophical disposition was achieved not through the study of philosophical treatises but rather through Holy Scripture, resulting in a life that is both truly Christian and truly philosophical. Monica, then, is not merely one who resembles Socrates and other great philosophers; she surpasses them because she loves true Wisdom, who is Christ himself. Therefore, the attitude toward death constitutes the key element and ultimate test of true Christian philosophy. As Therese Fuhrer convincingly argues, the figure of Monica plays a symbolic function: she is presented in the early dialogues and in the *Confessions* not only as a biological mother, but also as a spiritual one – a true philosopher and teacher[33]. In my view, the emphasis on fearlessness toward death as the key element of the philosophical life strengthens this argumentation further. We can also observe the same elements that were previously discussed in the case of Macrina. References to *Phaedo*, dialoguing at the deathbed, teaching and reassuring relatives and achieving the supreme citadel of philosophy recall the high level of philosophy achieved by Macrina and her mother. Monica also plays a role for Augustine analogous to that of Macrina for Gregory. Augustine, as we have seen in the *Confessions* was not entirely free from grief and the terror of death; therefore, he must be taught by and follow the example of his mother. He even confesses that he would gladly become her disciple in attaining the innermost citadel of philosophy.

3. The figure of the mother from 4 Maccabees

As we can see, these two geographically and chronologically remote examples are similar to such an extent that it can hardly be a coincidence. The question therefore arises whether we can identify a distinct archetype of a Christian woman philosopher, and whence such a notion might have originated. As I noted at the outset, when we consider the true philosophy that is tested in a confrontation with death, the obvious reference is Socrates. The prison scene from *Phaedo*, in which Socrates, facing death, teaches his students, was certainly one of the most potent archetypes of true philosophy. Socrates is the one who does not fear death, and he teaches his acolytes why there is no fear in him and why he is sure about what will happen to his soul afterwards. He is also asked to reassure

[33] Fuhrer, *Wife, Mother, Philosopher*, p. 235.

his interlocutors that they should not fear death[34]. The way to overcome the fear of death is the way of leading a philosophical life – the way of philosophy – which at its core is the cultivation or meditation of death (εἴη μελέτη θανάτου)[35]. A philosopher is one who wants to achieve a firm belief that his fate after death will be better than in this world[36]. All of these passages confirm that the absence of the fear of death is the ultimate indicator of true philosophy. A philosopher who leads a philosophical life can be recognized by his or her attitude towards death.

However, there is yet another source of inspiration, closer to Christianity, that corresponds to this understanding of attaining a truly philosophical attitude toward death. In the Septuagint, there is a book, 4 Maccabees, which presents the martyrdom of Eleazar and the seven sons with their mother, known from 2 Maccabees (6:18-7:42), but depicted in Stoic fashion[37]. The very beginning of the book shows that the martyrdom is about fighting passions with reason:

> Since I am about to discuss an eminently philosophical subject – whether pious reason is absolute master of passions (αὐτοδέσποτός ἐστιν τῶν παθῶν ὁ εὐσεβὴς λογισμός) – I would duly advise you to attend diligently to the philosophy here set forth (4 Macc 1:1).

Eleazar, the seven sons, and their mother are presented throughout the book as a stellar example of virtue and true philosophy. They "in despising sufferings to the point of death, showed that reason has full control over the passions (περικρατεῖ τῶν παθῶν ὁ λογισμός)" (4Macc 1:9). True philosophy is thus tested by the proper attitude toward torture and death, demonstrating how reason can control even the greatest fear.

Among all the figures presented, the mother appears to be the one of the greatest virtue. The author of 4 Maccabees develops at length the theme of her use of reason to educate her sons and to prepare them to suffer

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[34] Plato, *Phaedo* 77e, 3.

[35] Plato, *Phaedo* 81a, 1-2.

[36] Plato, *Phaedo* 95c,1-d, *5*.

[37] For the Greek influences in 4 Maccabees see: R. Renehan, *The Greek Philosophic Background of Fourth Maccabees*, "Rheinisches Museum für Philologie" 115 (1972) p. 223-238; D.A. DeSilva, *The Perfection of 'Love for Offspring': Greek Representations of Maternal Affection and the Achievement of the Heroine of 4 Maccabees*, NTS 52/2 (2006) p. 251-268; H.J. Klauck, *Brotherly Love in Plutarch and in 4 Maccabees*, in: *Greeks, Romans, Christians: essays in honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. D.L. Balch – E. Ferguson – W.A. Meeks, Minneapolis 1990, p. 144-156.

for the sake of the law (4Macc 14:11-17:6)[38]. She is favorably compared to Abraham, because she chose obedience to God over preserving her own children, just as Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac (4Macc 14:20–15:3, 6–10). Reflecting on her endurance in watching each of her sons being tortured to death, the author writes that "devout reason, giving her heart a man's courage in the very midst of her emotions, strengthened her to disregard, for the time, her parental love" (4Macc 15:23). By using her divinely given reason to control her emotions, she demonstrates the central thesis of the book:

> If then, the woman aged and mother of seven boys, endured seeing the tortures of her children unto death, by common acknowledgement pious reason is absolute ruler of the passions. Thus I have demonstrated that not only men overcame their passions, but also a woman disdained the great tortures (4Macc 16:1).

She is, in the author's culminating description, "the mother of the nation, vindicator of the law and champion of religion" (4Macc 15:29). She was a true philosopher not only in witnessing the death of her sons and ultimately facing her own, but her virtue was also clearly manifest in her absence of mourning and lament (4Macc 16:12-13).

Although the figure of the Maccabean mother seems very close to Macrina and Monica in her attitude toward death, it seems that neither Gregory of Nyssa nor Augustine cites 4 Maccabees verbatim. Therefore, one might ask whether it can properly be invoked as a common source for their respective portraits. The objection can be answered by showing how common the archetype from 4 Maccabees was in their cultural milieu. In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, although he himself did not compose a homily on the Maccabean martyrs, the figure of the mother and the philosophical reading of her endurance were thoroughly familiar in the Cappadocian milieu in which he wrote. Gregory of Nazianzus dedicated his fifteenth *Oratio* to the Maccabean martyrs, and the book that supplies his account is, by his own admission, 4 Maccabees, whose central thesis – that "pious reason masters the passions" – he reproduces almost programmatically. John Chrysostom likewise devoted three

[38] For a sustained reading of the philosophical and rhetorical construction of the mother in 4 Maccabees 14:11-17:6, including her comparison to Abraham, her "masculinization" through the exercise of reason, and her role as "vindicator of the law and champion of religion" (4Macc 15:29), see D. Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, New York 2009, p. 20-21.

homilies to Eleazar, the mother, and her sons, in which the mother becomes the focus of his exhortation to virtue: he urges his audience to "tame their bodily passions through a rational disciplining of a mind oriented to Christ", and concludes that all Christians – fathers and mothers, men and women, virgins and ascetics – ought to imitate her. As Raphaëlle Ziadé has shown in detail, these texts together attest to a vivid late-fourth-century reception of 4 Maccabees in the Greek-speaking East, transposing the Hellenistic-Jewish martyrology into Christian liturgical and rhetorical use[39]. It is precisely this reception that supplies the immediate horizon within which Gregory of Nyssa shaped the *Vita Macrinae* and the *De anima et resurrectione.*

The situation in the Latin West was structurally similar. 4 Maccabees was not included by Jerome in the Vulgate and never achieved the broad circulation it enjoyed in the East. Nevertheless, its central themes reached Latin readers through one important channel of particular relevance for Augustine – Ambrose's *De Jacob et vita beata*. As David A. DeSilva has demonstrated, Ambrose opens De Jacob with what amounts to a free paraphrase of 4 Maccabees 1:1–3:18 and goes on to draw on the book throughout the work, taking over its taxonomy of the passions, its nautical imagery, its laudatory peroration on the mother, and the comparison of the family to celestial bodies[40]. Importantly, Ambrose does not transmit 4 Maccabees unchanged. As Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski has shown, Ambrose Christianizes its central argument through a Pauline lens (Romans 3 and 7), so that the mastery of the passions is now ascribed not to the Law, but to the grace of Christ[41]. By the time the 4 Maccabees archetype reaches Augustine, it has already been recast in this Christian key.

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[39] R. Ziadé, *Les martyrs Maccabées: de l'histoire juive au culte chrétien. Les homélies de Grégoire de Nazianze et de Jean Chrysostome*, Leiden 2006. Gregory of Nazianzus refers to 4 Maccabees explicitly in *Oratio* 15, 2, presenting the book as one which "advances the view that reason is dominant over the emotions". The three Chrysostomic homilies discussed by Ziadé are *De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, *Homiliae in sanctos Maccabaeos et matrem eorum* I, and *Homiliae in sanctos Maccabaeos* II (PG 50). On Chrysostom's deployment of the mother as a universal model for the Christian household, see Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, p. 66-69.

[40] D.A. DeSilva, *Ambrose's Use of 4 Maccabees in "De Jacob et Vita Beata": Some Correctives*, JECS 22/2 (2014) p. 289-291.

[41] Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, p. 37-40. For a partial qualification of Joslyn-Siemiatkoski's reading regarding the question of how far Ambrose "erases" the Jewish identity of the Maccabean martyrs, see DeSilva, *Ambrose's Use of 4 Maccabees in "De Jacob et Vita Beata"*, p. 292-293.

Augustine himself, for his part, treats the Maccabean martyrs in twenty--two distinct texts, as Catherine Brown Tkacz has catalogued: he devotes three sermons (300–302) to their feast, refers to the *mater Machabaeorum* in at least ten passages, and develops over some thirty years a sustained theological reflection contrasting their fate with that of the three Hebrew youths in the furnace[42]. His explicit scriptural reference, as in the case of Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, is to the canonical *libri Maccabaeorum*, that is, 1 and 2 Maccabees, rather than to 4 Maccabees. However, the figure of the mother who watches the death of her sons without yielding, and who is presented as a paradigm of virtue, reaches him already saturated with the philosophical reading of her endurance that 4 Maccabees had first elaborated.

Therefore the argument advanced here does not presuppose direct textual dependence on 4 Maccabees in either Gregory of Nyssa or Augustine. This is a topic for much broader linguistic study which must search for traces of 4 Maccabees among the references to accounts of martyrdom from 2 Maccabees. Rather, it identifies 4 Maccabees as the source of an archetype which by the late fourth century had been thoroughly absorbed into the Christian rhetorical imagination of both East and West.

Joslyn-Siemiatkoski has shown that the mother of the Maccabees did not function only as a remote scriptural reference in late antique Christian literature. John Chrysostom holds her up as the universal model for the Christian household, instructing mothers to imitate the strength of the woman, and the love of her children[43]. Valerianus of Cemele, preaching in Latin in the fifth century, describes her as "an example of outstanding virtue" and as "the teacher of so many brave men by encouraging them towards heavenly glory"[44]. In Rome, the figure of Felicitas with her seven martyred sons – celebrated in sermons by Peter Chrysologus and Pope Gregory I – emerges as a Christian re-incarnation of the Maccabean mother, possessing the same "masculine virtues" and exhorting her children to the same fearless death[45]. Macrina and Monica are best understood

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[42] C.B. Tkacz, *The Seven Maccabees, the Three Hebrews and a Newly Discovered Sermon of St Augustine (Mayence 50)*, REAug 41 (1995) p. 61-62.

[43] Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, p. 67.

[44] Valerianus Cemeliensis, *Homilia* 18, *De Maccabaeis* 2, PL 52, 747C, tr. G.E. Ganss, *Saint Peter Chrysologus, Selected Sermons and Saint Valerian, Homilies*, New York 1953, p. 417. See discussion in Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, p. 69-70.

[45] On Felicitas and her seven sons as a Christian reception of the Maccabean mother, with the relevant texts of Peter Chrysologus and Pope Gregory I, see Joslyn--Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, p. 70-77.

within this broader pattern: not as isolated literary creations of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, but as further instances of a culturally pervasive Christian re-figuration of the mother of 4 Maccabees as a teaching philosopher whose mastery of the passions through reason and lack of fear facing death became a model for Christian life.

Scholars have also discussed extensively how 4 Maccabees served as a model for martyrs, who in early Christianity became exemplars of how reason can govern the passions[46]. These figures were depicted in the Acts of Martyrs which, as Elizabeth Clark underlines, cannot be treated simply as documentary records, because they were not written as factual accounts of what transpired during the martyrdoms. They must be treated as *literature, because martyrdom itself is less important than the lesson that can be drawn from the events*[47]. As Nicole Kelley argues, their purpose was to shape the reader through means of rhetoric, and the principal goal was once again to train Christians in the proper attitude toward death, which can be attained by mastering the passions through argumentation. She goes even further, proposing that *acta martyrum* contained the Christian equivalent of what Pierre Hadot calls "philosophical exercises", and that their main goal is to shape the proper attitude toward death[48]. She identifies in the texts specific exercises already known from the Stoic practice. Here, however, in the Christian context, we can observe an element that was absent from pagan philosophical writings. Although the philosophers from the time of the *Phaedo* already spoke of eternal life, and Socrates was an example of being certain of an afterlife, the Christian version now puts forward the resurrection of the dead as the final argument demonstrating the victory over death.

4. Conclusion

It appears, then, that 4 Maccabees – and specifically the mother of the seven sons – provides the archetype that shaped both Macrina and Monica as symbolic figures of the woman philosopher. Maccabean mother also serves as a bridge between Platonic ideal and its final Christian transformation. As we have seen in the case of Macrina, her principal

[46] N. Kelley, *Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises*, ChH 74/4 (2006) p. 737.

[47] E.A. Clark, *Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History*, ChH 70/3 (2001) p. 424.

[48] Kelley, *Philosophy as Training for Death*, p. 735.

characteristic is the taming of the passions through reason and argumentation. Monica is similar by the very fact of being a mother and teacher. Both women are portrayed as perpetually prepared for whatever setbacks and harm life may bring. We have also observed the gradual escalation of tension – from consoling others and remaining immune to grief caused by the deaths of relatives, to the ultimate test of rising above fear in the face of imminent death.

In this regard, Macrina and Monica do not stand alone. They participate in a broader and remarkably consistent late antique Christian phenomenon, in which the mother of 4 Maccabees is repeatedly re-figured as a teaching philosopher and exemplar of Christian virtue. Macrina and Monica serve as models of true martyrdom in a post-persecution age, facing death with a firm belief in the resurrection and a blessed afterlife. It appears that after the era of persecution had ended, the shaping of figures like Macrina and Monica in this manner served the same purpose that had been previously fulfilled by the *Acta martyrum*. The aim was to instill in the reader a true belief in the resurrection and afterlife, and thereby to enable the reader, through the means of rhetoric, to face his own end. Nevertheless, there is something more in the way Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo shaped this archetype. As we have seen, there was also an attempt to show that the ideal of the Christian woman not only meets the criteria of being a philosopher but surpasses them. The ideal of the dying Socrates was now so accessible that it could be realized by an uneducated woman, who thereby becomes someone greater even than the greatest Greek philosophers. Therefore, the goal was probably not only to strengthen the belief in the resurrection among Christians, but also to demonstrate to pagans that the highest Greek standard of philosophy could now be fulfilled in a Christian way.

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