

# Violence Justified: Resistance among the Hasmoneans and Hong Kongers

Dr. V

Horror. Maybe that is too strong. Confusion? Distaste.

That's how I used to think about Judah Maccabee and his brothers' struggle against the Seleucid Empire. That might sound strange coming from someone who has written a book, a commentary, several introductions, and a number of articles on the sources relating to the Hasmonean rebellion. But it is true. I could never wrap my head around how violent their resistance was depicted, how quickly they seemed to shift toward guerrilla warfare without so much as attempting a peaceful resolution. Their tactics, their martial inclinations, their lack of moderation, all felt unrealistic to someone like me, a white liberal male raised in the comforts of Western modernity. It did not ring true as an account of resistance. It looked, instead, like a version of events meant solely to glorify Hasmonean martial efforts. But, mine is a social location where oppression has been more the product of speculation than a lived reality, where the protection of the status quo is paramount in any political activity. It is a position that seeks change, but only incrementally. That framework fell apart when I took an active role in Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests in the summer and autumn of 2019. The experiences I acquired during that time gave me a whole new perspective on the methods of the Maccabees, and more importantly, on the justified use of violence as a form of protest. These experiences helped me to solve a problem I had always had when analyzing 1 and 2 Maccabees and Josephus as authentic accounts of resistance. They led me to understand that, putting aside the precise historicity of these accounts, they depicted an authentic trajectory of a successful rebellion.



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*Fighting Evil Amalek*, 2020. Mixed media (acrylic, charcoal, fabric) on canvas. 40 x 30 x 1.5 in. © 2020 Sharon Feldstein. Courtesy of the artist.

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Over the last decade, I have lived and worked as a professor in Hong Kong. Throughout my time here, I have been a motivated protester when a cause arose that I thought to be worthwhile. So, by June 2019, when the city's residents gathered en masse against a proposed law that would allow for the extradition of political dissidents from Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China, I was eager to join the fray. Like many a good white male liberal, I felt that I could take pride in engaging in peaceful protests on behalf of civil rights. I could imagine myself to be carrying on the legacies of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. But, I remained in a position of privilege, free to pick and choose when to engage in political action, and free to judge those protesters and tactics I thought to be uncivil. Blinded by my own entitlement, I gave myself license to "other" political actors who turned to violence. I was willing to deem violence to be a primitive tool of political messaging, whether it was wielded by contemporary oppressed peoples, or the Hasmoneans.

When I read about their violent resistance, I believed it was more a way to lionize protesters like the Maccabees based on now-outdated patriarchal values than it was a genuine illustration of the escalation of a political movement. In the earliest days of his resistance to the restrictions imposed by the Seleucid emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, Mattathias, along with his family and those

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sympathetic to his cause, takes a nonviolent stance of resistance. They circumcise children in secret, hide away precious scrolls, refuse requests to sacrifice on makeshift altars erected throughout Judea, and eventually hide themselves away in the wilderness. This all occurs before Mattathias and his followers turn toward violent resistance. The ancient sources all depict the Maccabees following this course of action in the face of increasing violence against those who resist the king's enforcers. The descriptions had always been there, and I had recognized them; I had always thought of them as artistic inventions meant to emphasize the necessity of violent action. I had not yet begun to understand the truth of the story that they told until I saw firsthand how quickly violent protest develops from peaceful resistance in the face of an oppressive regime.

When I began protesting in earnest in Hong Kong, I noticed a pattern emerge. Protesters of all ages, from small children to octogenarians, would gather together to reiterate the five demands of the Hong Kong protests. After some time, platoons of police in riot gear, derisively called raptors because of their inhuman appearance and behavior, would muster around the perimeters of these protests warning us. If we did not desist with our illegal gathering, they said, the police would be forced to take action. Because these gatherings were all that we had to collectively express our political will, we persisted in disrupting traffic, economic activities, and the steady drone demanding that we recognize the government's authority. The police would then respond with violence. On several occasions I had tear gas fired in my direction. Once, while at a sit-in with my children, raptors invaded the protest space, forced us against a wall, and nearly trampled my children in the process. This rapid escalation threatened my safety and that of my family. I recalled that in most sources the final scene before the Hasmoneans begin their real campaign of violent resistance involves a group of Jews who had retreated to caves in the wilderness so that they would not be forced to obey the king's ordinances. The king's soldiers follow them. Then, after failing to force their obedience, they proceed to slaughter every last one of them, men, women, and children. In the stories, this shows that all peaceful means of resistance have been expended.

There is nothing left for the Maccabees but to go on the offensive. And that is precisely what they do. I had interpreted this scene before as elevating the manliness of a figure like Mattathias as the first to move toward violence. But I have come to realize that, in addition, this piece of the story narrates a turn to violent action that becomes necessary for a protest subdued by violence to have any chance of success at all. By late July and into the autumn, a group of Hong Kong protesters began to instigate violence on the edges of most public protests. Frontliners performed some of these activities out of frustration with the police and their tactics. But, strategically, they served a vital purpose for the protests. They acted as a first line of defense against the increasing police violence and intimidation against peaceful protesters. Moreover, they amplified the voice of the protesters, which had been ignored for too long.

The ancient depictions of the Maccabees, then, transmit a genuine quality of successful political resistance. These accounts accurately depict the necessary shift from conscientious nonviolence toward proactive aggression if political resistance is going to succeed against a totalitarian regime. Mattathias and his men wage a rebellion that results in securing an autonomous Jewish territory.

Of course, there is a sad epilogue to the story in Hong Kong. The protests continued until the rise of COVID-19 in January 2020. Then, fears of an outbreak in Hong Kong put a stop to most large gatherings. By June 2020, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress unilaterally passed a National Security Law for Hong Kong, which enshrined into the constitution the criminality of all protest activity against the People's Republic of China. This action effectively instituted the extradition law, and made illegal any form of speech against it. I never participated as a frontline protester. But I was thankful for them. I saw that their controversial tactics made my protest matter in a way it never would have without them.

*The author has opted to write under a pseudonym for this essay. Openly identifying himself as a participant in the 2019 Hong Kong protests could lead to fines and incarceration under China's National Security Law. He remains committed to the liberation of Hong Kong.*