

Dr. David de Silva, Apocrypha, Lecture 2, A Closer Look: First Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 and 2 Maccabees

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This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 2, A Closer Look: First Esdras, Ben Sira, First and Second Maccabees.

In this and the following several lectures, we'll work together through all of the books of the Apocrypha.

In this series, I'm going to follow an unconventional order rather than the typical order of a printed edition. We'll first focus on those texts that either originate in or take the land of Israel as their primary location in some sense. And then, we'll move to those texts that are focused more on the life of Jews outside of Israel.

In this presentation, we'll start with First Esdras. First, Esdras presents us with an alternative version of events that we would read about in our canonical First Chronicles, 35 to 38, our canonical book of Ezra, and the material in Nehemiah 8. It looks as though some author has taken the material from these older, better-known versions and woven them together by retelling the story. In the version that we have in First Esdras, we begin in the 18th year of the reign of King Josiah.

We move from there through the Babylonian conquest, fast-forwarding it to the decree of Cyrus to allow the exiles from Judah to return to the land. And then we move to the decree of Darius to rebuild, to make good on his intention to rebuild the temple. Then, finally, focus on Ezra's reforms, the reading of the Torah, the establishing of law courts based on the legislation of the Torah, and most movingly, the cleansing of the people through the divorce and repudiation of non-Jewish wives and the children of such unions.

Now, there are some important differences between First Esdras and the canonical story as they unfold in the texts that I've previously mentioned. Most notably, there's a confused sequence of events in First Esdras. The author clearly needed an editor because this kind of jumps off the page at the reader.

We take several steps backward and move forward again over the same ground at one or two points. And this appears to be related to the author's desire to elevate the character Zerubbabel. What is most distinctive about First Esdras vis-a-vis our canonical version of the story is the addition of the contest of the three bodyguards.

This is a kind of a courtly tale, a court tale set in the diaspora that has no parallel in our canonical scriptures. In this story, Darius, the king, is being watched over as he sleeps by his bodyguards, and his bodyguards are bored. So, they propose a contest amongst themselves.

And they don't actually get Darius's permission, but the upshot of the contest is, let's have this contest, and whoever wins, King Darius will give him whatever he asks. A great contest to have while your boss is sleeping. So, the contest involves the best answer to the question: What is the strongest? What is the strongest force in human society? And so, each of the bodyguards slips his answer on a scrap of papyrus under Darius's pillow.

So, imagine his surprise when he wakes up and finds out there's a bunch of fortune cookies under his pillow. The king is then let in on the contest, and he reads the answers. The first bodyguard says the king is the strongest.

And well, okay, flattery will sometimes get you somewhere. And then, the bodyguard expands on why the king is the strongest. And he pulls out the obvious reasons.

Armies move at his command, yada, yada, yada. The second bodyguard proposes that wine is the strongest because it has power even over the king. The third bodyguard first proposes that he cheat; he puts down two answers.

He first proposes that women are the strongest because we've all seen what a certain concubine is able to do with the king and kind of take the crown off his head and slap him on the face playfully and stuff like that. But then he says, really, the strongest thing is truth. Truth is the strongest force in human society.

And by truth, he might also have more of a sense of the divine ordering of the cosmos, which is the strongest force there. Now, at the end of this contest, obviously, the third bodyguard wins; it's revealed that that third bodyguard is Zerubbabel. So, probably, an originally independent story has been brought in, and the winner of that story is identified with Zerubbabel.

And what does he ask of the king? He asks the king to make good on his intention announced earlier in his reign to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and to commission him, Zerubbabel, to go see that it's done. And so, the story now moves forward with Zerubbabel at the head. The confused order of events seems to be the result of intentional reshuffling of the story to make room for this contest, to make room for Zerubbabel at this point, and to elevate him really as the central figure who gets things going.

He completely absorbs the role of Nehemiah, to whom we would attribute much of what Zerubbabel does in this story. It's really not clear why the author has gone to

such lengths, but one proposal has been that since Zerubbabel is in the line of David, this was the author's way of demonstrating that in the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple, even though the monarchy wasn't restored, God's promises to restore the house of David were fulfilled in the elevation of Zerubbabel and in the achievement of this Davidic descendant. What we also notice in the story of First Esdras is a greater focus on the temple, its activity, and its liturgical calendar.

Unlike the biblical counterpart, when you just read this book, you get a sense that the liturgical calendar of festivals of Passover and festivals of booths, both of which appear twice, structure the work and really provide the underlying rhythm to Jewish life and even Jewish history. There's also a greater elevation of the figure of Ezra, who's no longer just a priest but a chief priest, and his reforms and restoration of the Torah are the climax of the present work of First Esdras. The lack of Nehemiah's appearance simply serves to elevate these two characters, Zerubbabel and Ezra, much more fully.

It's likely that this book dates from about the second century B.C. or slightly later. There's a growing consensus among scholars that there was a Hebrew or Aramaic original to it, but now we only have manuscripts in Greek and other translations, and there's no material evidence of a Hebrew or Aramaic original. It appears to have enjoyed a great deal of being valued in the intertestamental period as an alternative telling of a story.

For example, Josephus, who surely knows Ezra and Nehemiah as we know those books, seems to prefer the version in First Esdras as his source, as he's relating this story and his antiquities of the Jews. The most influential verses in First Esdras over time, really, though, have just been the answer of the third bodyguard. Truth conquers all, or the way he puts it later in the same narrative, great is truth and superior to all, have actually been very commonly used mottos throughout the history of Western society.

You can still find colleges that have the Latin versions of these sayings on their crests and on their shields. A driving interest of First Esdras, and this is, of course, shared with the canonical stories as well, but it seems to be elevated here because it's the climax of this story, an emphasis on preserving the holy seed of Israel through marrying only within the house of Israel, a lesson that is driven home for the Israelites in the story by Ezra's command to them to put away their foreign wives and disown the mixed children that had arisen from these unions. One also places great emphasis on genealogy in establishing the boundaries and constituency of Israel.

If the returnees had a damaged genealogy in some way, they couldn't establish their genealogy, and they wouldn't have a place in Israel anymore. And if priests, those who believe themselves to be of priestly or Levitical lineage, could not demonstrate their genealogy, they were barred from priestly or Levitical service. So again, it's a

very ethnically oriented text in terms of reinforcing those boundaries and those defining lines within and around Israel as opposed to the mingling of the holy seed with others.

We'll turn now to a text of a completely different sort, The Wisdom of Ben Sira, which is perhaps the longest book within the Apocrypha and also, I would suggest, the most important in terms of its overall impact on both early Judaism and Christianity. Ben Sira was a sage living in Jerusalem, and he kept a house of instruction. He invited pupils and presumably was paid by the pupils' families, training them in the knowledge of their cultural heritage, but also international wisdom in such a way that they could make their way safely and wisely and advantageously through the world in a wide variety of settings, business, politics, social gatherings, and family.

To understand Ben Sira, it's important to understand what was happening in the decades of his active life. Alexander the Great had extended Greco-Macedonian control over Judea by about 331 BC, I want to say but give or take a few years. In his move around the Mediterranean down into Egypt, obviously the land that we might refer to as Palestine was part of his conquest.

Alexander and then his immediate successors, who were not Alexander's children but his generals, divided his kingdom among themselves and then kept fighting among themselves for just a bigger piece of the world. For the most part, didn't impose foreign ways or culture upon Judea and its residents, but a good percentage of the Judean elite began to notice that it would be advantageous to them to take on more of the dominant culture's traits and even perhaps try to put Jerusalem on the map by making Jerusalem over as an increasingly Greek city. We will talk about this more in connection with 1st and 2nd Maccabees, but simply to say, during Ben Sira's active career, he would have been watching the elites, the families whose children, whose youths he was serving, becoming increasingly drawn to be like the nations, specifically to make themselves more and more Greek in culture, appearance, in name. This is a period in which many Jews left behind kind of their barbaric indigenous names in favor of a Greek name, which is one of the most obvious ways they could present themselves to the dominant culture as one of them.

He would have watched this tendency growing, and he himself was very cautious about that tendency, and on some points, he was vehemently opposed to that tendency. So, as we can see, his voice called for conservatism in an increasingly progressive atmosphere. Ben Sira, of course, taught in Judea around 200 BC, wrote in Hebrew, and in fact, he preserved his own curriculum, or the best moments of his curriculum, for posterity in writing.

The book was later translated into Greek around about 132 BC by his grandson, who took his grandfather's wisdom with him into the Jewish community in Egypt,

probably in Alexandria, and there made it available as best he could in Greek to the Jewish community there. It's largely the Greek version of Ben Sira that forms the basis for many English translations, although about two-thirds of the book, perhaps more by this point, have been recovered in Hebrew manuscripts. For example, a string of about four or five chapters was found in Masada, the Ben Sira scroll from Masada, and sizable chunks of it were found in a storeroom for worn-out manuscripts in a synagogue in Cairo.

So, there is some textual basis, some manuscript basis, I should say, for thinking about the original version of Ben Sira and even examining what the grandson did as he moved from Hebrew to Greek. I will say this is kind of an aside, but the grandson in his prologue to Ben Sira gives us an interesting window into translation itself because in that prologue, he basically apologizes for any distance that he has introduced into the reader's encounter with his grandfather's wisdom, and basically says he has done the best that he could. But the same expression in Greek doesn't have the same power as the original expression in Hebrew.

So, he acknowledges this distance in translation, and he goes on to say, even our sacred books in the Greek translation, which we generally lump together under the term Septuagint, even our sacred books, the Law, the Prophets, and the other writings, don't have the same force when read in Greek as in the original Hebrew. So, early awareness that translation changes, no matter how diligent your efforts, translation changes the text being translated. Ben Sira, returning to the main topic, Ben Sira himself had the agenda of trying to preserve his pupil's dedication to the Torah-observant way of life.

Yes, there was progress to be made; there were things to be learned from the larger world, from the Hellenistic world, from Greek wisdom, and from other streams of wisdom that the uniting of all these lands under one empire made easier to access. But the bottom line is that should not lead us away from obedience to observance of our ancestral way of life. So, for example, in this setting in which a number of elites are thinking that the path to honor is the path of assimilation more and more to the Greek world, Ben Sira teaches his pupils that covenant loyalty is the indispensable mark of the honorable person.

And so we read in Ben Sira chapter 10, whose offspring are worthy of honor? The ones who fear the Lord. Whose offspring are unworthy of honor? The ones who break the commandments. Among family members, their leader is worthy of honor, but those who fear the Lord are worthy of honor in his eyes.

The rich, the eminent, and the poor, their glory is the fear of the Lord. The prince, the judge, and the ruler are honored, but none of them is greater than the one who fears the Lord. So, in this passage, Ben Sira is saying, ultimately, yes, you can gain secular honor by a variety of means.

And we all look up to certain people, those who are rich, those who have achieved positions of prominence in the government or in the judicial system, but the bottom line value, or I should say the basis for honor, is your fidelity to the covenant. Because that is what gives you worth in God's eyes. And God's estimation lasts forever.

And so, he tries to cultivate in his pupils a commitment to regard their own honor as based first and foremost on their conformity with the Torah. And after that, with what they might achieve otherwise in this life. Now, Ben Sira, although he draws a great deal upon the biblical book of Proverbs, in many ways, you could read Ben Sira as a later commentary on Proverbs or as wisdom developed as a reflection or as a result of reflection upon particular Proverbs.

There are many, many parallels. But one thing Ben Sira does that Proverbs does not do is explicitly connect wisdom with the law. And I mean explicitly.

So, for example, in Ben Sira chapter 24, Ben Sira personifies wisdom and lets her tell her story. And her story is that I sought a resting place among all of these, referring to all the various nations of the earth. In whose allotted territory should I make my home? Then, the creator of all things gave me a command.

The one who created me pitched my tent and said, make your dwelling in Jacob. Let Israel receive your inheritance. And so, I was established in Zion.

He made the dearly loved city my resting place and established my authority in Jerusalem. I took root in a glorified people among the people the Lord chose for his inheritance. So, in the opening part of this speech of wisdom, which tells her own story, Ben Sira, despite his own tendency to draw on international wisdom, declares unequivocally that wisdom's home is right here in Jerusalem.

This is the epicenter of wisdom's dwelling by God's own decree. And that is a reflection of God's choice of this nation among, out from, and above all others. And then at the conclusion of this same story of wisdom, Ben Sira adds this concluding comment, talking about lady wisdom as it were, all these things are in the covenant scroll of the most high God, the law that Moses commanded us, the inheritance of the congregations of Jacob.

So, in a way that hitherto would have probably been foreign to the wisdom tradition in Israel, Ben Sira explicitly identifies wisdom, this personified lady, with the Torah, and this scroll is in our possession. So, if you want wisdom, if you want all of wisdom's blessings that he had actually gone on to list earlier in this poem, they're right here. This is the starting place.

This is you dig for them in the law of Moses and in the performance of the law. And this is then a theme that runs throughout his book. So, for example, quite early in the book, he says explicitly, if you want to find wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will supply her to you in vast quantities.

And about a third of the way through the book, we find this saying: all wisdom involves doing the law. So, for Ben Sira, the Torah observant life is the starting point for any wisdom. And if you move away from Torah observance, you have moved away from wisdom.

Now, this is an important and really politically charged message in 200 BC because 25 years later, a high priest is going to say, we're not going to look to the Torah as the constitution of the land anymore. We're going to refound Jerusalem using a constitution modeled after the Athenian constitution. So, Ben Sira is quite the conservative voice saying that as soon as you leave Torah behind, you've left wisdom behind.

One thing that we find in Ben Sira that might surprise us if our primary frame of reference is the New Testament and Paul in particular, Paul, who in Romans basically gives us the impression that you can't keep the law. And that's the problem with the law. It just can't be kept.

If it could be kept, things would be different. But Ben Sira gives us a very different picture. He believes that the law is feasible.

So, we read, and in fact, he gets this right out of Deuteronomy 30. So, we read in Deuteronomy 30, surely this commandment that I'm commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you.

Now, choose life so that you and your descendants will live. Ben Sira reflects this language; it's almost kind of an annotation on Deuteronomy 30, when he writes that it was God who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their own free choice. If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and acting faithfully is a matter of your own choice.

He has put fire and water before you. You can stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Life and death are in front of human beings.

They will be granted whichever they please. So, Ben Sira still has a firm conviction that all that's revealed in Deuteronomy is true. The law is feasible.

It's within our power to keep it. Also, what it promises to the obedient is reliable. Also in Ben Sira, we find him using images from Deuteronomy 27 to 30, 27 to 30,

reflecting on the certain, the assured consequences, both of Torah observance and failure to observe the Torah, namely the promises of blessing for those who do Torah, the promises of curse for those who neglect Torah.

So, we read again in the first chapter of Ben Sira that fear of the Lord will cheer the heart, and it will give gladness, joy, and a long life. Things will go well in the end for those who fear the Lord. They will be blessed at the time of their death.

And again, really more toward the end of the book, if you fear the Lord, you'll lack nothing. If you have it, there's no reason to look for help. Fear of the Lord is like an orchard of blessing, and it covers a person more fully than any glory.

While Ben Sira will admit that Adam, with his transgression, made life difficult for all people, nevertheless, Ben Sira believes that God still works all things out for justice, for the good and for the bad, within the parameters of this life, just as Deuteronomy promised. When good people encounter difficulty, Ben Sira can make sense of it using traditional images, for example, the testing of gold in the furnace. Gold is tested in the fire, and those who are found acceptable by God are tested in the furnace of humiliation.

You who fear the Lord, keep trusting in him, and your reward will not be lost. A final piece in this facet of Ben Sira's agenda, his promotion of Torah observance as the way to honor against what many of the elites are beginning to say, is his hymn in praise of the people of hesed, the people of covenant loyalty, which occupies all of Ben Sira chapters 44 through 49. In this lengthy hymn, Ben Sira rehearses essentially the sacred history of Israel, from Adam to the most recent time.

It actually closes in chapter 50 with a hymn in praise of the most recent high priest, Simon II, Simon the Just. And the point, or I should say the theme, that runs throughout this retelling of the story is that those who kept the law of the Most High achieved honor. To this day, we still honor Abraham, Moses, Aaron, and Phineas for their diligent observance of the commandments and their zeal for the law of the Lord.

But we still execrate to this day the memory of those kings of Israel and Judah, for example, who sold their glory, who gave away their glory because they followed other gods, and who left the commandments of Torah behind, ultimately bringing disaster upon the nation. Now, Ben Sira, obviously, his 51 chapters of material, covers a lot of other important topics as well. And as I've said, these are topics concerned with domestic life, with social life, with political life, with economic ventures, with basically everything a young man needs to know to make his way wisely and advantageously through life.

So, he gives significant attention to care and respect for one's parents, especially as they age, for the careful raising of one's own children, for being deeply invested in education, nurture, and also discipline and watching over children, both sons and daughters. Now, I'll just say as an aside, it's what he has to say about women that gets Ben Sira in the most trouble. Reflecting to a great extent the kind of cultural stereotype of women and also cultural anxieties about women, he urges men to be very careful, both about their wives and especially about their daughters.

In that society, a daughter who was sexually vulnerable to the advances of another man brought dishonor to the household of the father and would make it very difficult for the father to find a suitable husband for the daughter. So, coming out of that context, Ben Sira makes some overstatements about the headstrong daughter and how she's a liability in the household. We can only hope that they were intentionally hyperbolic.

Ben Sira also teaches the importance of honoring one's benefactors and being careful in choosing one's friends, one's benefactors, and one's beneficiaries. And this actually represents perhaps a change in culture from the time of Proverbs because there's a much greater reflection of shall we say kind of Greco-Roman arrangements of friendship and patronage and the ethos there in Ben Sira than I found at least in the book of Proverbs. He even talks about proper etiquette at social functions.

For example, when you go to a symposium, which is also a new development, well that might not be entirely true, but the symposium is well known as a Greek social event, a kind of wine-drinking party with just enough food to help absorb stuff. Ben Sira advises young men to make sure that the first thing you're thinking about from beginning to end is making a good impression. Not about the tasty morsels that are set before you, not about the wine or what have you, but guard yourself, be temperate in all things so that you come off as a polite, respectful, well-bred individual.

He actually also spends a fair amount of time cautioning his pupils in regard to mingling with the great and powerful. On the one hand, that's the way to social advancement. That's the way to economic and political advancement. On the other hand, as Ben Sira puts it, it's also like walking on the straight edge of a sword.

If you trip, you'll cut yourself in half. He urges fairness in economic matters and the treatment of employees. He promotes the value of remaining financially independent rather than making oneself subservient to creditors of one kind or another.

In Ben Sira, we find combined an unshakable commitment to the Jewish way of life, on the one hand, with an openness to the wisdom that could be learned from other nations, which, of course, is part of the legacy of Proverbs and the Jewish wisdom

tradition, the international wisdom tradition taken broadly. On the one hand, he draws extensively from Proverbs and from other texts, like Deuteronomy, from the scriptural heritage of Israel. On the other hand, he speaks about the need of a scribe such as himself, a sage such as himself, to travel throughout foreign lands so that the scribe can test what is good and what's evil among all peoples, gathering what's valuable from the wisdom of other nations for incorporation into his own teaching.

And Ben Sira himself clearly incorporated a great deal of foreign wisdom, foreign common-sense wisdom, into his own teaching. For example, if you were to set his teachings on friendship alongside the elegies of the sixth-century Greek sage Theognis, you'd find a great deal of overlap. And of course, Theognis writing four centuries before, probably a great deal of dependence.

So, Ben Sira has somehow learned this material about how to be a reliable, but also a cautious, careful, judicious friend from Greek wisdom. And if you were to compare Ben Sira's words of caution when dealing with the great and powerful, both the promise of advancement but also destruction, with an Egyptian text known as the Instruction of Phoebus, you'd find again a great number of parallels and the likelihood of the well-traveled sage Ben Sira drawing from the Egyptian text in this regard. But for Ben Sira, wisdom, the life of a scribe, the life of a sage, the life of the academic, is not merely a matter of the head.

It's also a matter of the soul. It's also rooted in one's relationship with God. We find him saying or directing his students explicitly to look to prayer as an essential source of wisdom alongside study and conversation with the wise.

So, for example, he writes in chapter 39 that scribes will commit themselves to rise early to seek the Lord who made them and to pray to the Most High. They will open their mouth in prayer and ask forgiveness for their sins. If the great Lord is willing, they will be filled with a spirit of understanding.

They will pour forth words of wisdom, and they will give thanks to the Lord in prayer. Their reasoning and knowledge will remain on course, and they will ponder God's mysteries. And he writes slightly earlier, above everything else, pray to the Most High so that he may make your path straight in truth.

So, wisdom is not just a result of study, it's the result of the depth of one's relationship with God and what God will reveal to the person. Ben Sira also makes a place for ritual and liturgical action in his instruction. He is very supportive of the temple and what happens in the temple, and he urges and he models in many ways the connection between being a sage and being one who participates wholeheartedly in the liturgical life of the temple.

One telling text in this regard comes from Ben Sira chapter 7, where he takes lines of the Shema, Deuteronomy 6, which is kind of this core text of Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you will love the Lord with your whole heart, soul, mind, strength, and so forth. And he blends that with instructions regarding the temple and its personnel.

So, we read, fear the Lord with your whole being and honor his priests. With all your might, love the one who made you, and don't neglect his ministers. Fear the Lord and honor the priest.

Give the priest his portion just as you were commanded. In that passage, we basically have a recitation of a line from the Shema, followed by the introduction of a kind of counterpart pertinent to respecting the temple and its personnel. So a very close weaving of the two.

We also get from Ben Sira a beautiful picture of the vibrancy and the awe of the rituals that happened in the temple. Ben Sira provides a first-hand account from one for whom this was no empty show; this was no empty ritual but a deeply religious experience, a powerful encounter with the living God. In chapter 50, Ben Sira remembers a temple sacrifice.

Scholars aren't sure whether it's just the daily offering or perhaps even the day of atonement offering under the leadership of Simon II, Simon the Just, a famous high priest. So, he writes, when Simon put on his glorious robe and clothed himself with perfect splendor when he stepped up to the holy altar, he brought glory to the courts of the temple. All Aaron's sons were in their glory, and they held the Lord's offering in their hands in front of the entire assembly of Israel.

When he was finishing his service at the altar, he poured a libation of wine at the base of the altar, a pleasing aroma to the Most High, the King of all. Then Aaron's sons cheered, and all the people put their faces to the ground, bowing down to worship their Lord, the Almighty, the God Most High. The singers, accompanied by harps, sang praises with their voices.

They made a sweet melody with a full-bodied sound. The people of the Lord Most High offered prayers before the Merciful One until the order of the Lord's service was completed. Then Simon came down and raised his hands over the entire assembly of the Israelites to give the Lord's blessing from his lips and to glorify his name.

And they bowed down to worship a second time to receive the blessing from the Most High. That's from Ben Sira chapter 51. And we get a sense there from that that those who participate in the temple cult participated, at least as Ben Sira understood it, from the heart and with their whole body and their whole mind.

On the one hand, Ben Sira could say that moral acts have ritual significance. This is something that he himself would have learned from the Psalms and the prophets. So, he would write in Ben Sira chapter 35, whoever keeps the law gives many offerings.

Whoever obeys the commandments makes a sacrifice of well-being. Whoever repays a kindness offers the finest flower. And whoever does an act of charity makes a sacrifice of praise.

But at the same time, such statements that ascribe ritual significance, I could say, which ascribe to moral actions significance in the sight of God, the same significance that ritual acts might have, also in no way denigrates the importance of ritual acts. There is no lack of value for the sacrificial cult for Ben Sira. We get the sense then from Ben Sira that piety during this period involved a life centered on the Torah, on the good of the neighbor, and on the rights and practices a nurturing connection with God.

These were all part of a whole. What following certain Reformation traditions might separate as civil, moral, and ritual law were all part of a single whole for Ben Sira. No one facet could be neglected, nor could one make up for deficiencies in one area, one alleged area, by performing actions in another.

Torah was one and was to be lived out as such by those who sought honor before the Lord. I turn now to two books, 1st and 2nd Maccabees, which are essentially the historical books to be found within the Apocrypha. As I mentioned in a previous lecture, these books taken together tell the story of Jerusalem and Judea between about 175 and 141 BC, a truly tumultuous period in the intertestamental story.

These two books, 1 and 2 Maccabees, have different origins and slightly different angles on this story. 2nd Maccabees is, in fact, an abridgment of a longer five-volume history of the period by a man named Jason of Cyrene. We know this because the man who made the abridgment explicitly names his source and talks somewhat about his process for taking these five scrolls and boiling them down to one.

It was written in Greek just like the original was written in Greek, although that doesn't really tell us where the abridgment took place. It might well have originated from Jerusalem or Judea, many of whose residents would have been familiar with Greek by this point. The date of 2nd Maccabees could fall anywhere between 160 BC, the year after the story ends in that book, to 63 BC.

Of course, the earliest part of that date or that range is unlikely. Jason of Cyrene might well have written his history very close to the place where the story ends, but the abridger probably came along sometime later. If the letters that preface 2nd Maccabees are genuine letters, we might have the sense that the abridgment was

written sometime prior to 124 BC because one of these letters sends this story, sends this abridgment, or presents itself as sending this abridgment out to diaspora Jews to promote observance of Hanukkah, the feast of dedication, more broadly to get the larger Jewish community to celebrate this feast as a way of acknowledging what God has recently done for God's people and perhaps even to legitimate the dynasty through which that happened.

2nd Maccabees, however, isn't particularly interested in legitimating the dynasty that emerged from the Maccabean revolt, the Hasmonean dynasty. He's in no way anti-Hasmonean, but he's not explicitly pro-Hasmonean, unlike the author of 1st Maccabees. 1st Maccabees is a dynastic history.

It basically tells a story of how a relatively obscure family of priests, Mattathias and his five sons, Judas, Eleazar, John, Jonathan, and Simon, came to found a dynasty that would rule as high priests and eventually kings from, let's say, 141 BC to 63 BC when Rome would intervene. And while it would restore the title of high priesthood to a Hasmonean, would not restore the title of king to this Hasmonean, but rather put secular government in other hands. 1st Maccabees, again, the story ends in 141 BC, so it could plausibly have been written any time thereafter.

It probably would have been written prior to 63 BC because Rome made itself a bit of an enemy at that point when it intervened well beyond what any Jewish leader would have hoped it would have done to settle a dispute, which we'll come to later. It's more likely, however, that 1st Maccabees was written after the end of the reign of John Hyrcanus. So sometime from 104 BC and after.

It was a time at which the shoring up of the dynasty would have been far more important than when it was being led by the son of the last great hero of the Maccabean revolt. The story that these two books tell, and they tell the story differently, and I hesitate in some sense to blend the stories together, but historians do have to do this. These are essentially our only sources for the period.

Josephus himself is highly dependent on 1st Maccabees. The story they tell is of great importance for understanding this period. Events in Judea between 175 and 141 BC.

The two books don't exactly overlap. 2nd Maccabees gives us more of the prequel to the Maccabean revolt. It starts well back at 175 BC.

1st Maccabees is more interested in about 168 BC on. Not so interested in what led up to the revolt as narrating the revolt and its aftermath. Conversely, 2nd Maccabees is done in 161 BC with its story.

But 1st Maccabees wants to tell the whole story, not just the story of Judas, the military hero, and his successful winning back of the temple and defeat of the great

Greco-Syrian general, Nicanor. 1 Maccabees wants to tell the whole story of how each of his surviving brothers contributed to the well-being of Jerusalem and Judea and advanced the nation's cause to the point that the whole people affirmed Simon, the last surviving brother, and his sons as the legitimate rulers of the people in view of all the good that they brought to Judea. Now, the shape of the story takes us into multi-layered conflicts.

First, there is the conflict between two great dynasties that were both successors to Alexander the Great. The dynasty of the Seleucids, whose kings ruled Syria and Babylonia, and the dynasty of the Ptolemies, who ruled Egypt. The land of Palestine right in between was contested land.

On the one hand, Alexander's generals together, as they split up his empire, agreed that Seleucus I would rule Palestine. Ptolemy didn't agree, so he kept Palestine, and his successors kept Palestine. There's this conflict behind the story.

Then there's also the conflict within Jerusalem that I've already alluded to as we spoke about Ben Sira, namely the conflict between conservative Jews who wanted to remain not only Torah-observing themselves but wanted the nation as a whole to continue to be governed by the law of Moses, versus progressive Jews who thought that the nation's best interests would be served through assimilation to some extent. They even disagreed among themselves as to what extent. Hence, there were also conflicts among progressive Jews.

How far do we need to go to really secure the best interests of the nations? So, I've already mentioned that in the aftermath of Alexander's death, his generals divide up his kingdom. And Palestine remained under Ptolemaic rule, the rule of the Greek kings of Egypt, until 198 BC, when Antiochus III was finally able to defeat Ptolemy's armies and win Palestine because Ptolemy gave up winning Palestine for his own kingdom. Antiochus III affirmed the Jews' rights to continue to live by their own law.

So, there wasn't this impetus to suddenly change their way of life coming down from above. But what we do find in this time is strife within Jerusalem, within powerful families of Jerusalem. The family of the Oniads, named after Onias.

This was a high priestly family. And the family of the Tobaiads, named after their ancestor, Tobiah, who is sometimes identified as Tobiah the Ammonite, known from scripture. A family of outsiders to the Jerusalem hierarchy, the Jerusalem priestly rule, but a family that had significant ambitions to become the power brokers of the Jewish people.

And to be honest, they are much more politically savvy than the other family. So as Second Maccabees opens, we have a story in which a Tobaiad, named Simon, plays a role against an Oniad named Onias III, who was the high priest. Simon seeks to

ingratiate himself with the Seleucid monarch, in this case, Seleucus IV, by saying that there are funds in the temple that aren't sacred.

And you, my king, could make a claim to them. Seleucus IV was very happy for money wherever it could appear because his family, his dynasty, had to pay tribute to Rome after a terrible defeat that they suffered in 188 BC. So Seleucus IV sent Heliodorus, probably his minister of finance, to the temple to go in, inspect the funds, and take whatever funds were appropriate for him to seize.

The upshot of this episode is that Heliodorus, something miraculous happens to Heliodorus as he tries to carry out his commission. According to the author of Second Maccabees, angels on horseback beat him up so that he could not encroach upon the sanctity of the temple. The important thing is he went back empty-handed and possibly was involved in the plot then to kill Seleucus IV, making the way for Seleucus's brother, Antiochus IV, to ascend to the throne.

Now, Onias III appears to have been a conservative high priest, like his father, Simon II, the high priest that Ben Sira praised so richly. Onias had a brother whose birth name was Yeshua, but who changed his name to Jason at some point. And that pretty much tells you all you need to know about Onias's brother.

He was progressive. He wanted to reform Jerusalem in the direction of a Greek city with Greek institutions, including a Greek gymnasium, where the youth of the city could be educated at public expense in Greek culture, Greek language, all those arts and skills that would make them players in the international world. Now, it does seem that Jason was interested in the non-religious reform of Jerusalem.

Jason was able to gather a lot of support from the elites of Jerusalem, enough to, and there's no other way to put this, to buy the high priesthood away from his brother. He went to Antiochus IV with his proposal and came back the new high priest. And his brother had to flee into exile.

So, I imagine Passover around that family table was rather tense. And Jason went forward with his reforms and instituted a gymnasium, as I said, the organ for passing on Greek education, Greek culture, including Greek athletics and what have you, to the next generation. And refound Jerusalem on the basis of a Greek constitution, drawing up a new list of senators who would then participate as the council of the new Greek city in Jerusalem. What have you?

He, however, did not last that long. Only three years later, the Tobaid family backed a candidate of their own to advance these reforms and give them more direct play in Jerusalem politics. So we find another priest whose name is Menelaus.

And if you're familiar with the story of Troy at all, you know Menelaus is also a very Greek name. So here is another progressive priest who would probably have changed his own name if his parents hadn't done it for him by naming him as a birth. But Menelaus does something new.

He proceeds to the religious reform of Jerusalem as well. He crosses lines that even Jason wouldn't cross. And it's under Menelaus that the temple in Jerusalem is made a place of worship for all of its residents, not just its Jewish residents.

So, we have the abomination of desolation as both the author of 1 Maccabees and Daniel speak of these events. We're not exactly sure what that entailed, but a likely candidate is the erection of a new altar to foreign deities so that all of the people who lived in Jerusalem, who were equal citizens in Jerusalem, could worship in her place of worship. Well, this is just going too far.

So, we have the outbreak of revolution in Judea from two different fronts. On the one hand, Jason wants his title back. So, Jason gets the support of a man named Hyrcanus, who is the alienated brother in the Tobaiyot family.

It's really quite a soap opera when it comes down to it. Jason returns with an army to oppose Menelaus as soon as Jason hears a rumor that Antiochus IV has died. He wants to take advantage of that interregnum time to reassert himself and, no doubt, negotiate with the next Seleucid ruler to stay there.

But at the same time, the people revolt. They have had enough of these Hellenizing high priests. At the end of that day, both Jason and Menelaus are besieged in the Acre and need Antiochus IV to come to rescue them, which Antiochus does.

What follows is perhaps the first well-documented event of religious persecution in the ancient world. When Antiochus liberates Menelaus, he also, well, first he steals tons of money from the temple because someone's got to pay for the rescue operation that just happened. And that's going to be Menelaus.

But he also outlaws observance of the Torah because he has probably been advised by people like Menelaus, perhaps by Menelaus himself, that at the heart of all of this revolution is the people's attachment to that old barbaric native way of life. And if we could just get rid of that attachment, we could really take Jerusalem and Judea into a glorious future. So, we have stories of brutal martyrdom where Jews show their loyalty to the covenant by refusing to give in to the demand to acquiesce.

And so, mothers are thrown from the wall of Jerusalem because they had circumcised their sons with their infant sons also hung around their necks. Old men are burned to death because they protected copies of the Torah when Menelaus and Antiochus's goons were going around trying to destroy all copies of the law. And we

have in Second Maccabees a very moving story of an old priest named Eleazar and of seven brothers and their mother, all of whom in turn refuse to eat a mouthful of pork, which had probably just been sacrificed to whatever was now erected in the Jerusalem temple, refusing to eat a mouthful of pork as a sign of their capitulation and being tortured to death instead.

After this, the Maccabean Revolt really takes off. And so, the same repression of Judaism in Jerusalem goes out to the hinterlands, goes out to the villages around Jerusalem. When an official of the king arrives in the little village of Modin, he invites the leading elder named Mattathias, a priest there, to be the first to show the way forward and come offer a sacrifice on a makeshift altar to a foreign god.

And Mattathias, of course, refuses. He's a faithful Torah observant, loyal Jew. So some opportunist in the village, whose name has not been preserved, decides he's going to ingratiate himself with the overlords, and he steps forward to be the first to offer sacrifice.

In an act that would later remind the author of First Maccabees of Phineas, Mattathias takes his sword and runs both of them through at one time at the altar. And he thus initiates, with a flourish, what comes to be known as the Maccabean Revolt. He gathers to himself, in the desert, everyone who is loyal for the law and has anything made out of wood or metal to fight with.

And they begin, actually, by attacking apostate Jews, those who are giving in, who are not circumcising their children. He and his men forcibly circumcise the boys, and what have you. And by taking out the poorly staffed Greco-Syrian garrisons all throughout the countryside.

With every successful raid, their numbers grow. And Antiochus continues to send out armies that are just too small to do the job. And so, even though they always face greater numbers, Mattathias and then his sons, because Mattathias dies early in this war, continue to enjoy victory after victory over the Greco-Syrian armies.

Until finally, they win back the temple and are able to cleanse it from whatever it was that Menelaus put there. And to restore the proper rhythm of sacrifices according to the law. The military work continues through the life of Judas and into the career of his brother, Jonathan, his younger brother, Jonathan.

But around about 160 or so, matters begin to change. And Jonathan and his brother, the last surviving brother, Simon, are able to do more through negotiation than they need to do through warfare against the Seleucid armies. Because the Seleucids themselves fall into a time of strife between rival claimants to the throne.

And so, each of these rival claimants tries to get Judea to be an ally in the fight. So, Jonathan is able to play one of the other until he finally wins for himself the title of the high priest and the right to some measure of internal government. The last surviving brother wins the right to have the last garrison of Greco-Syrian soldiers and mercenaries removed from the Acre, the fortress in Jerusalem.

With that, political independence came to Judea for the first time in 400 years. As the author of First Maccabees puts it, the yoke of the Gentiles is removed for a while at least. In our next session, we'll look at the particular thrusts then of both Second Maccabees and First Maccabees.

We've kind of looked at the story the two of them tell together. But each tells a story or part of the story, I should say, in a certain way, because the two authors have somewhat different agendas and reasons for writing. And we'll look at that and continue our march to the Apocrypha in the next lecture.

This is Dr. David deSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 2, A Closer Look: First Esdras, Ben Sira, First and Second Maccabees.