

Dr. David deSilva, Apocrypha, Lecture 5, A Closer Look: Tobit, Susanna, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Bel and the Dragon

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This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 5, A Closer Look: Tobit, Susanna, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Bel and the Dragon.

With the book of Tobit, we begin to look at texts from the Apocrypha, whose focus is more on the life of Jews in the Diaspora.

Tobit, like Judith, is an edifying tale, a work of historical fiction, and it was probably composed in either Aramaic or Hebrew, probably in Palestine, perhaps the Eastern Diaspora. Several manuscripts of Tobit were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. We know it was being read in Israel proper prior to about 100 BC.

And so, 100 BC or so would be the latest date of its composition. But many scholars think it was composed even prior to the events of 175 and following those tumultuous years that we revisited when we talked about 1st and 2nd Maccabees. There are no reflections of any of that in this text.

Tobit, like Judith, is just another wonderful story, part of whose aim must simply have been to entertain with a great yarn. The story of Tobit opens in the land of Israel, in fact, in the Northern Kingdom. And we meet Tobit briefly as a devoutly Torah observant Israelite from the Northern Kingdom who, despite the tendencies of the kingdom, nevertheless went to Jerusalem, to the temple there to worship, just like the law prescribes, and who faithfully engaged in acts of almsgiving and other acts of charity.

However, despite his faithfulness, he shares in the fate of the Northern Kingdom when Assyria invades and takes so many of the members of the Northern Kingdom captive. And so, he finds himself in Nineveh. And there in Nineveh also, he remains faithful to God's law, not eating the food of the Gentiles, caring for the needy among his people, and bearing the corpses of executed Jews.

This last act of piety, bearing the corpses of executed Jews, is what gets him into trouble over there. These Jews have been executed by the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, who is the arch-villain of the story of the sack of the Northern Kingdom. So, Sennacherib confiscates Tobit's property and sends him and his family into exile.

After Sennacherib is assassinated, Tobit is able to return to Nineveh, to his property, to his former life, and he returns to his normal act of piety toward the dead. One

night, however, while he was sleeping in his courtyard, bird droppings fell into his eyes and blinded him. And thereafter, he becomes dependent upon his wife, Anna, for income, and he finds it difficult to live with the increasing disgrace of the same.

And so, we find him eventually praying to God to let him die and end his shame. At this point, the author cuts to another scene, to some of Tobit's relatives, who are having difficulty in Ecbatana, where Sarah, the daughter of Raguel and Edna, has had seven husbands without consummating any of the marriages because there's a demon named Asmodeus who's jealous for her. And so every time Sarah goes into her wedding chamber on her bridal night, Asmodeus kills the husband.

After the seventh of these husbands dies, she gets into a dispute with her maidservant, and her maidservant taunts her as being the one who kills her husbands. And so, at this point, Sarah, being affronted by one of her own servants, prays to God either to be delivered or to die, so as not to be subjected to further scorn. At this point, the author intervenes to comment, thus introducing a spoiler, that the prayers of both Tobit and Sarah have ascended before God and that the angel Raphael was dispatched by God to heal both.

We go back to Tobit in Nineveh. Having prayed for death, he expects God to answer his prayer, and so he sets his affairs in order. He tells his young son Tobias about a deposit of ten talents of silver that belonged to the family, that had been left in trust with a man named Gabael in Media.

He gives Tobias some ethical instructions for life and tells him to find a companion for this hazardous trip ahead as he goes off to recover the money, and thus save his family from poverty and continue to take care of his mother, whom Tobit expects to survive him. Tobias goes out to the marketplace and returns with a man named Azariah, who, in fact, the author tells us is the angel Raphael disguised as a man, and Tobit approves Azariah as a companion. So, Tobias and Azariah set off, and on the first night of their journey, they set up camp by the river Tigris. As Tobias is washing his feet after the day's travel, a large fish jumps out of the river and tries to bite him.

Azariah instructs him to grab hold of the fish and to drag him to the shore, and he instructs Tobias to take the fish's liver and heart, and his gallbladder because, Azariah tells him, the fish's liver and heart can be used to exorcise a demon, and the fish's gall can be used to cure blindness. Hmm, I wonder how all this is going to turn out in the end. Along the way, Azariah persuades Tobias to make a detour on the journey and to go to the home of Tobias's relative, Raguel, and to marry Sarah.

Tobias knows her story and expresses reluctance to be number eight in this line, but Azariah assures him that all things will work out well, that God has this in hand, and so the couple are married and survive the wedding night, thanks to Azariah's instructions. Say a prayer, burn the fish's liver and heart, and the demon flees to the

far reaches of Egypt, where, over the night, Azariah, as the angel Raphael, binds the demon and takes care of that problem. During the 14-day wedding feast that follows the successful marriage night, Azariah completes the mission to go on to Media and to retrieve the ten talents of silver, and finally, the angel, the couple, and the ten talents of silver make it safely back to Nineveh, to Tobit, and Anna, who are overjoyed to have their son returning alive, and married to someone from within their tribe.

As soon as he gets home, Tobias smears the gall from the fish's gallbladder onto his father's eyes, and the white films that had blinded his father come off, and he's able to see again. Then the angel reveals himself privately to Tobit, and Tobias, as, in fact, Raphael, one of the seven leading angels who stand in God's presence. He instructs them to continue to give God glory and to continue to bear witness to God's deliverance.

At the end of the book, Tobit speaks prophetically about God's future deliverance of God's scattered people and dies after giving Tobit final ethical instructions. Now, the story of Tobit is valuable for many things, but one of the things that it really helps us with is to have a window into Second Temple Jewish ethics, both in the ways in which we find these characters living and also in the explicit ethical instructions that Tobit gives his son Tobias on two occasions. In Deuteronomy, charity toward the needy Israelites is explicitly recommended and, in fact, ordered.

You must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land. And this is probably the most centrally important ethical practice that the book of Tobit recommends. While still in Israel, the author tells us that Tobit diligently set aside a second tithe for distribution to, quote, the orphans and widows and to Gentiles who had joined Israel and thus left their families and their networks of support behind.

While in exile, Tobit continued to support his relatives and other Israelites in exile as they had need, sharing his table with the poor. He buried the exposed bodies of Israelites who had been murdered or executed and simply flung them outside the wall of Nineveh. In the first speech, in which Tobit gives instructions to his son, four or five whole verses are given to promote almsgiving.

And so, we'll read together from verse seven and following. To everyone who practices righteousness, make donations based on what you have. And don't let your eye begrudge what you've given.

Don't turn your face away from any poor person, and God's face will never turn away from you. Give aid, my child, according to what you have. If you have a lot, make a donation out of your If you have only a little, don't be afraid to make a donation in proportion.

In this way, you will store up a valuable treasure for a time of need. Giving assistance to the poor rescues a person from death and keeps a person from going down into the darkness. For everyone who does it, donating money to the needy is a good gift in the sight of the Most High.

Now, in giving these instructions, Tobit, of course, reflects the command of Deuteronomy. Also, the promise of Proverbs 19 says that those who are gracious to the poor lend to the Lord, and the Lord will fully repay them. But Tobit kind of magnifies the virtue of almsgiving and the sense that giving to those in need really is the most intelligent investment that a person can make now, in the present, against an uncertain future.

The angel Raphael, in his speech to Tobit and Tobias, will even more promote this idea that what you lay up with the poor person is, in fact, laying up a treasure for yourself against the future because of the way God views positively the act of giving alms. So, the angel will say it is better to give alms than to lay up gold, for almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies.

Indeed, it turns out that it's Tobit's own works of kindness toward those in need that brought him to the notice of God's court in the first place. Raphael reveals that it's because of Tobit's almsgiving that when Tobit's prayer ascended to heaven, God took notice of it and decided to dispatch Raphael to help. It resulted in Tobit's testing, the period of his blindness, and God's decision to bring healing to his whole family and to his line by providing Tobias with a suitable bride in Sarah.

Now, this would be another one of those passages that get the Apocrypha in trouble in the time of the Protestant Reformation because it does seem to promote the idea that by giving alms by works of charity, you can store up merit for the future for yourself with God and thus be repaid by God at some future point. In Tobit's defense, I would say, however, that as we'll see in a later lecture, even Jesus takes up this idea that giving away possessions to those who are currently in need is the best way to lay up a treasure for yourself in heaven because this is precisely the kind of love for a neighbor that God values. One of the other values that the book of Tobit promotes is the value of endogamy, of marrying within one's race, one's ethnic group, even within one's tribe, or even closer within one's clan.

And so, in the instructions that Tobit gives to his son Tobias in the fourth chapter of the book, after talking about the virtue of almsgiving, Tobit talks about the importance of endogamy. He writes, One thing that's especially striking here is that Tobit, the author of Tobit, speaks of marrying outside of the Jewish ethnos as a kind of fornication, which is quite striking. It's marriage, but on the other hand, it's sexual perversion of a kind because what's really important is to keep the line of Israel pure.

In the book of Tobit, we also find an early statement of the golden rule, which has also been called the silver rule, because it's only stated negatively. Tobit tells his son, what you hate, do not do to anyone. Throughout the story, we also find an affirmation of Deuteronomy's understanding of history from beginning to end.

The characters and even the plot of the book lay out the affirmation of the truth that obedience to the covenant results in blessing, both for the individual Jew and his family now and for the nation as a whole, while disobedience to the covenant results in curse. The author is forthright that Israel goes into exile in Assyria because of the rampant violations of the covenant throughout the northern kingdom, even though Tobit himself did not participate. In Tobit, we also find a witness to the growth of interest in angels and demons.

The world of Tobit is unlike, to a great extent, the world of the Old Testament, where angels might appear now and again in unassuming guise, but now they're players alongside every man in the story. An angel walks alongside Tobias and helps the family. A demon, Asmodeus, plagues another part of the same family.

And so we have a story world in which we expect these intermediate spirit beings, both serving God and not serving God, to be active in human life. We get a window into this development of angelology in particular, different orders of angels, ordinary angels, and also the seven angels that stand in God's presence, of which Raphael is one. And a sense of these angels as ongoing intermediaries between human beings and God.

It's the angels who bring the prayers to God's notice. It's the angels who are dispatched to fulfill the petitions as God decides. Also, in the Book of Tobit, worthy of note is an instance of prayer, the prayer that Tobias prays on his wedding night.

If you expect a demon to kill you, it's a good time for prayer. And this prayer has had a lasting impact on Christian liturgy in many churches. It might show up as an Old Testament reading at a wedding.

And there we find this. Blessed are you, God of our ancestors, and blessed is your name for all generations. May the heavens and all your creation bless you forever.

You created Adam, and you created Eve, his wife, to help and support him. And from the two of them has come the human race. You said it isn't good for the man to be alone.

Let's make him a helper like himself. I'm not taking this sister of mine now out of lust but with honest integrity. Grant that she and I will be shown mercy and grow old together.

Now, the form of this prayer gives us a paradigm for prayer that persists notably in both Jewish and Christian practice over the centuries. The very first line is actually a common liturgical expression from intertestamental psalms or hymns and even the psalms themselves. But after that opening, we find attention given to God's purposes as the framing device, if you will, for the prayer.

And these divine purposes are named, and these are the purposes that are implicitly jeopardized if the prayer is not answered. Namely, God's purposes for a man and a woman, specifically for this man, who's in more danger than this woman, Tobias and Sarah. Tobias affirms that their purposes in marrying are, in fact, aligned with God's purposes for the same.

It's only after this and on this basis that Tobias makes his request, namely that they will survive the night and live to fulfill God's purposes in creation and in the institution of marriage with one another. This model, in a way, praying according to God's will in a way that would continue to be evident in Christian liturgy. Prayer after prayer, collect after collect, developed in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches, take exactly this pattern.

Some declaration about God's character, God's purposes, and God's actions as the basis for and frame for the petition that follows. The petitioner considers God's requests first, sorry, God's purposes first, requesting only what aligns with those purposes. Finally, I want to draw attention to Tobit's eschatology.

In the 13th and 14th chapters of this book, Tobit, the aged Tobit, just before he dies, gives voice to predictions about what God will yet do for God's people in the future. And so, we read from verse 13: Bear witness to him, Israelites, in the presence of the nations, because he has scattered you among them. He will punish you for your unjust acts, but he will also show all of you mercy and gather you together out from all the nations among which you have been scattered.

When you turn to him with all your heart and with all your being to act sincerely before him, then he will turn to you and never hide his face from you again. One common thread in eschatological statements from this period is the hope that God would indeed reverse diaspora. He would gather together the people from wherever they have been scattered for whatever reason back into the land that God had originally given them, promised to their forebearers to be theirs forever.

Of course, we also note within the framework of Deuteronomy that when you repent, when you do again the deeds of the covenant, this glorious future will come to pass. Now, what's also noteworthy about the eschatology of Tobit is that the author holds out hope for Gentiles in this glorious future. Quite unlike what we witnessed in 2nd Esdras, for example, where the nations are as spit in God's sight.

But here there's hope, a hope that's, of course, born of prophetic texts, notably some texts in Isaiah, that the nations will come to the light of the knowledge of God in the future. So, in Tobit 13, we read, a bright light will shine forth into the farthest corners of the earth. Many nations will come to you from afar, and inhabitants from all the ends of the earth will come to your holy name.

They will bear gifts in their hands for the king of heaven. Then, in the final chapter, all the nations of the whole earth will turn and genuinely revere God. They will all leave behind their idols that have deceived them and led them into error.

They will praise the eternal God in righteousness. And so, here in the intertestamental period, we have another clear statement of that prophetic hope that would also drive other Jews like Paul in his mission to fulfill these predictions. This fulfillment of Israel's hope for the other nations around them.

When we turn to the additions to Daniel, we turn to really what we're turning to is simply a fatter version of Daniel. When Daniel was translated into Greek, it was translated into an expanded edition that included two additional stories. The stories of Susanna that will now occupy us and of Bel and the dragon, to which we will return shortly.

And expanded by the addition of two lengthy and beautiful liturgical pieces. A prayer of penitence, known as the prayer of Azariah, and a psalm of thanksgiving and deliverance, known as the song of the three young men. For now, let's simply consider the first of these extra scenes, shall we say, in the Greek version of Daniel.

The story of Susanna. Susanna might well have started as an independent story about an unnamed wise person who only comes to be identified with Daniel as the story is brought into the orbit of the sage Daniel. And into that cycle of stories, six of which are familiar to us from reading the canonical book of Daniel.

It is focused on life within the Jewish community in the Eastern Diaspora, just like the book of Tobit was. Highlighting some problems with the Deuteronomistic rule that the testimony of two witnesses is enough to confirm a fact. And the potential for the abuse of authority and trust within the Diaspora Jewish community.

The story is briefly told and in the house of Hilkiyah, the Jewish community in Diaspora met. The judges of the community would do their work there, hearing cases and regulating the life of the Diaspora Jewish community.

Incidentally, bearing witness to at least some areas in which Diaspora Jews exercised a great deal of self-governance within the host society. Well, Hilkiyah had a lovely wife

named Susanna. And two of the judges who would meet in Hilkiah's house began to take a liking to Susanna.

And as the author says, they turned their eyes away from the fear of heaven. And as soon as they do that, they become prey to the evil inclination within them. So, one day, after the morning business is done, all the people go home.

These two judges make their way back to Hilkiah's house. And they meet each other outside the house. And they're both at a loss for how to explain their reappearance here.

So, they finally confess to each other what they're really doing. And they find themselves to be allies in the desire to enjoy Susanna sexually. So, they go into the garden of Hilkiah's house.

And they wait for Susanna to take her daily bath. And when she does, and her attendants are dismissed, they jump out upon her and demand that she lie with them. And they threaten her.

They said, if you don't, we're judges. We will say that we found you here with some young man about to commit an evil deed. And we'll say that he escaped, but we caught hold of you.

So, you will come to a bad end unless you give in to us. And Susanna, being a virtuous woman with an absolute commitment to God, says it is better for her to fall into the hands of God. So, she refuses to break God's law because of their threat.

Well, as it happens, it turns out, just like the elders threaten, they call for help. Servants rush in, and they denounce Susanna as having just been on the verge of committing adultery with some nameless, faceless young man. It moves to trial.

And these two judges bear witness against Susanna. And the verdict of the other judges, of course, based on the reputation of the first two judges, condemned her to death. As she's being led off to execution, we meet the hero of the story.

A young man jumps up and says, I will have no part in the shedding of innocent blood. The narrator tells us that this is Daniel, the young man. And Daniel says, let me examine these witnesses and find out or expose the lie that they've told about this innocent woman.

So, he separates the two judges and asks the one, under which tree did you see this couple allegedly about to commit adultery? And the judge says, under a yew tree. And Daniel says, you evildoer, God will hew you in two for this lie. The pun actually wasn't in English in the original.

He questions the second judge and asks him, under what tree did you find these two about to commit the deed? And he says, under a pine tree. And Daniel says something witty about how God will judge him for his lie. And so, he exposes, before all the assembly, by cross-examination, the lie of these two witnesses who have been in collusion against Susanna, and she is saved.

Daniel is celebrated as a great, wise man. Now this story, which probably isn't any longer in the text than I just made it in my summary, presents Susanna as a kind of martyr figure. Choosing loyalty to God rather than disobedience that brings temporary safety.

And so, it falls into that pattern of courtly stories, where somebody is endangered because of his or her commitment to virtue, but God delivers that person in the end. It's also a reflection, again, on the significant right of self-governance that some Jewish communities, at least, enjoyed in diaspora settings, as well as the use of the Torah as a civil and criminal law code. The law in Deuteronomy 22:22 reads, If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, as well as the woman.

So, you shall purge the evil from Israel. This story is written as if that is, in fact, a stipulation, a regulation, that is regularly enforced in fact. And it also reflects the law in Deuteronomy regarding a denunciation posed against an Israelite.

It says in Deuteronomy 19 the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So shall you purge the evil from your midst.

And Daniel, in fact, is the one who comes forward and shows how to make a thorough inquiry so as to detect false witnesses. The story also reflects Exodus 23, verse 7. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. And this is precisely what motivates Daniel to jump up at just the right moment and save the day.

We'll return to some of the other additions to Daniel that are found in the Greek version of Daniel. But first, I want to look at the book of Baruch, another book that focuses on the plight of Israel in exile. Baruch is often regarded critically by readers as little more than a pastiche of Old Testament texts, a very unoriginal book.

But I would suggest that its genius lies in that very fact. Within five short chapters, a wide variety of traditional materials are meaningfully brought together to deal with the fact of foreign domination in the land and existence as a scattered people throughout the lands of the Gentiles. The book is structured after Deuteronomy's

own understanding of history and its recipe for restoration, namely repentance and a return to covenant loyalty and observance.

It begins with a lengthy liturgy being prescribed by Baruch for the folks back home, a prayer of confession on behalf of the people as a whole, and a request for God's help. The middle part of Baruch moves into a completely different vein. Suddenly we find a wisdom poem, a wisdom text, such as might have been at home in Ben Sira, about returning to Torah, the fount of wisdom.

And then finally, in the third portion of the book, a prophetic section, which is highly reminiscent of some very particular texts in the book of Isaiah, the promise of restoration for Jerusalem and the promise of gathering back her children from the lands in which they've been scattered, addressed to Zion in mourning. So, while on the one hand, it is highly derivative of the scriptures, it's a creative compendium of material from the whole of the Jewish scriptural heritage to address a situation of exile and foreign domination. It may be a work that grew over time or is a composite work.

There's clearly a Hebrew original for chapters 1:1 through 3:8, which is the liturgical portion, the prayers of confession and repentance that are prescribed both for the Jews remaining in the land and for the scattered Jews. But it might be that the second half was composed in Greek as a kind of extension of that first part. The Greek is likely the original language for 4:5 through 5:8. And there's some uncertainty about the wisdom poem that intervenes.

The date of the work is also pretty much a mystery. One of the notable emphases of the Book of Baruch is its doctrine of the law of the Torah. And actually, it's very similar to what we found in the wisdom of Ben Sira in this regard.

Torah is not a burden. Torah is not a heavy yoke to bear. Torah is rather a manifestation of God's favor, God's grace.

We read in that wisdom poem, for example, that God discovered the whole way to knowledge and gave her to his servant Jacob and to Israel, whom he loved. Afterward, she appeared on earth and lived with humankind. She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever.

All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die. Happy are we, O Israel, for we know what is pleasing to God. So again, as in Ben Sira, we have this evidence of this development where the figure of wisdom is now identified quite specifically with the book of the commandments of God.

The Torah scroll is now the incarnation of wisdom. And Israel is lucky, not burdened, but privileged to know the way to please God and thus experience God's blessing.

There's also a kind of pastoral insight that comes out in the first portion of Baruch that's worthy of our attention.

And that is the fact that in the midst of suffering punishment, we come to a point where we acknowledge the correctness of our situation. The starting point for restoration, for reversal, is to acknowledge, as the author of these prayers acknowledges, that the Lord our God is in the right. But there is open shame on us today and on the people of Judah, on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and on our kings, our rulers, our priests, our prophets, and our ancestors, because we have sinned before the Lord.

And in the second prayer of repentance in the same document, the Lord our God is in the right, but there is open shame on us today and our ancestors this very day. So, what we find in these really beautiful liturgical prayers of penitence is the starting point of the acknowledgment of God's justice and the owning of sin on behalf of those who have fallen into these curses announced in Deuteronomy. The letter of Jeremiah is a text that is frequently associated with Baruch.

In fact, in the King James Version, and here's another tidbit for despisers of the Apocrypha, the King James Version was published with the Apocrypha in 1611 and continued to be printed as such without interruption at least through 1631. So, all you King James Version-only people, remember that. The letter of Jeremiah is often presented as a sixth chapter of Baruch, but in all likelihood, it was originally an independent composition.

It comes from the Diaspora. Its original language is still a matter of some dispute, but its purpose is straightforward. The author wants to, in the form of writing a letter to them as if from Jeremiah, preparing them for exile, the real author wants to diffuse the attraction and the awe that surrounds Gentile religion.

He wants to diffuse the power of seeing a majority of the people around you, the majority of your neighbors, engaged in such religion. Writers of texts like this understood social pressure in what might seem an advanced way. If the majority is doing it, maybe it's right.

Maybe my commitments to a minority way of life, a minority belief, a minority practice, maybe that is wrong, small-minded. Maybe I should change. Well, these Jewish authors wanted to guard against that eventuality wherever Jews would suddenly find themselves in the minority culture.

And so, we read passages like this from the opening of Letter of Jeremiah. In Babylon, you will see gods of silver, gold, and wood paraded on the Babylonians' shoulders. These gods inspire awe among the people.

Be careful that you don't become like the Gentiles, allowing fear of these gods to grip you, especially when you see large crowds of people walking in front of and behind them, worshipping them. But say to yourself, Lord, we want to worship you. The author takes attention away from the evident religious devotion of the Gentile peoples around the Jewish community and places it on the idols themselves as the document proceeds.

That is to say, the author engages in a kind of reduction to the absurd of Gentile religion by focusing on the statue, by focusing on the idol as the thing itself that's being worshipped. And so, he will talk about them as lifeless pieces of metal, stone, and wood that these idiots around you, these Gentiles, think might be able to help you, think is a divine being. So all of the pomp and circumstance of Gentile religion might, therefore, be more easily dismissed.

So, as we read through this tirade, this rant against idolatry, we find a number of affirmations in this vein. Idols are just lifeless pieces of metal, stone, or wood. Idols are carried in procession because they can't move on their own.

If an idol falls over, it can't help itself. It can't stand up on its own. If a temple catches fire, the priests escape, but the idol is burnt up just like a beam in the roof.

An idol can't stop a thief from stripping the gold veneer off its exterior. So, Gentiles are, therefore, stupid to pray for help from helpless things. And the constant refrain is, why should anyone think about these as gods or address them as such? And a second refrain: clearly, they're not gods, so don't revere them.

So, Letter of Jeremiah is just one more text among many, and we actually have several good precedents for this in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Isaiah, I want to say 44, but I could be off. Jeremiah 10, texts like this already are using much of the same rhetoric, and the Letter of Jeremiah is basically a brief homily expanding on those seeds of thoughts in the prophetic texts.

It's one of many such texts in the Apocrypha, and one could find books outside the Apocrypha that also move in this vein, that try to insulate Jews against the religion of the majority culture, Gentile religious practices. The Letter of Jeremiah is straightforward. I want to say discourse, but tirade is really right, and rant is really right. But narratives and stories also serve precisely the same function.

And here we come again to another of the additions to Daniel, the story of Bel and the dragon, or as some more modern translations like the Common English Bible have it, Bel and the snake. Because the same word in Greek, drakon, could refer to snakes in the grass or the more fanciful dragons. This book is like the Book of Susanna, like the story of Susanna, another kind of detective story.

How do we find out the truth of what's going on? And it's really a pair of tales that are composed to go together. They refer to, the second one refers to the first one, and the climax of the whole story is built on the sequence of these two tales. Two tales ridiculing Gentile religious practice.

The first story, the story of Bel, pictures the Persian king leading Daniel to the temple of Bel and saying, is not Bel, a great god? Look at this magnificent temple. Look in there and tell me that Bel is not a great god. The king presents evidence that Bel is a living god.

The fact is that every day, the priests lay out the offerings before Bel, and the next morning, the food is always gone. Bel is truly a living god, feasting upon the sacrifices that we offer him day after day. And Daniel actually laughs in the story and says, King, don't be deceived, but give me leave, and I'll show you what's really happening here.

So, Daniel, receiving leave from the king, goes into the temple, and without anyone else knowing, he spreads ash all over the floor. Then he closes the temple doors and seals it with the king's seal, and says, let's come back in the morning. In the morning, the king and Daniel and probably their whole entourage come back, open the gates, and the food is gone.

And the king falls on his knees and says, Oh, great Bel, you are indeed a god to be worshipped. And Daniel says, look at the floor. And on the floor, all around the altar, they see footprints.

The footprints of men, the slightly smaller footprints of women, the little bitty footprints of children. And they follow the footprints to a secret door in the temple. And they go through the door and come out in the priest's chambers.

And the king is incensed that he's been deceived all these years, that the priests pretend that Bel eats the food, but they really come out and snack on it every night themselves. So, he orders them to be killed, and the temple of Bel is destroyed. The story obviously ridicules Gentile religion and suggests that Gentiles are lulled into believing that their gods are real gods by the trickery of their priests, who make a living off the gullibility of the Gentile people.

Now, the second story is very similar. At some point in the future, the king takes Daniel to another sacred shrine. This time, a large snake or dragon or whatever sort of animal of your imagination you prefer to have there is worshipped.

And the king says, truly, Daniel, you cannot deny that this is a living god because we all see it moving and doing what snakes do. And Daniel, of course, admits that it's living. But not a god.

And he says, king, give me leave, and I'll kill that god of yours. So, Daniel concocts these little hairballs, basically, made out of fat hair and pitch. And he has them fed to this snake or dragon.

And shortly thereafter, the dragon's belly swells up and bursts. And so, Daniel has exposed yet another false god. Now, just a side note: the worship of animals was rare in the ancient world, but it is known in Egypt.

That has led several people to suggest that the story of Belle and the Dragon actually originated there, even though it's set in ancient Persia. In Egypt, crocodiles, ibises, and falcons, for example, could be regarded as manifestations of deity. But again, we have a story that essentially argues its case by reducing to the absurd the practice of Gentile worship.

The end of the story, of course, is that the people have had enough and want Daniel killed because he has ruined the gods and made a Jew out of the king. So, he finds himself yet again in the lion's den, but he is miraculously delivered, and the king is overjoyed. Stories like this might help insulate other Jews from the attraction of Gentile religious practices and claims, but they did so by admittedly creating a straw man argument.

Gentiles did not understand that they were worshiping the statue in the temple or the sacred animal itself. The statue or the animal was merely a physical representation of the invisible deity with whom they sought to interact. Plato, for example, admitted freely that while the idols in the temple are lifeless, the living gods behind feel well-disposed and favorable toward the worshipers.

Nevertheless, it's clear that, for the most part, Jews didn't need to go that far to debunk Gentile religion. But when we turn to another text, The Wisdom of Solomon, among other things, we'll find slightly more sophisticated explanations of Gentile religion that might begin to match more the reality of how Gentiles themselves would have to admit their religion got started.