

Dr. David deSilva, Apocrypha, Lecture 6, A Closer Look: Wisdom of Solomon, Greek Esther, Third Maccabees.

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This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 6, A Closer Look, Wisdom of Solomon, Greek Esther, 3rd Maccabees.

The Wisdom of Solomon, so-called, is an anonymous work, although chapters 6 through 9 are written as if from the perspective of Solomon.

Solomon, of course, was the patron saint of sages in Israel, so a number of works in the tradition of wisdom and instruction end up being attributed to him, and in the case of this one, written as if by him. But Wisdom of Solomon was composed in Greek, probably in Egypt, and therefore probably in Alexandria, which was home to a huge Jewish diaspora community, perhaps as many as a million Jews at the time of the turn of the era. Some of the things that especially point to an Egyptian origin would be the hostility toward Egyptians in the book that is noted, as well as the condemnation of the worship of animals known as zoolatry alongside idolatry since Egypt really was the dominant place where one might find animals as incarnations of the deity and not just lifeless idols.

It was probably written in the early period of Roman rule, so right around the turn of the era, a few decades BC, a few decades AD, that's disputed. The work falls into three major sections. In the first section, which is chapters 1 through 5, the focus of the discourse is on the persecution of the righteous by the ungodly.

And the eventual intervention of God to vindicate the righteous and punish the ungodly. The second section is then distinctly different. Between chapters 6 and 9, we have a prayer and a kind of discourse on the nature of wisdom, where we now find reminiscences of Solomon's prayer for wisdom, as that's known from the historical books of the canonical scriptures.

Then, beginning in chapter 10 and all the way to the end of the book, the writer takes a third turn. And here, in this third section, the largest section of the whole, he engages in a discourse on God's judgment of idolaters, particularly through a retelling of the biblical story of the plagues that fell upon the Egyptians. Although there are some important excurses in the midst of that retelling of Exodus.

The first section of the book, as I said, looks at the mindset of the ungodly and the tension, the hostility, and the antagonism between the ungodly person and the righteous person. And the author actually enters into a bit of ancient psychology

here as he crafts a picture of the mindset of the ungodly person. How does the person who ends up acting only for his or her own pleasure and interests, and who therefore treats his or her neighbor poorly for the sake of advancing his or her own goals? So, the author gives us this snapshot, as it were, of the inner thinking of the ungodly person.

Such people say short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end and no one has been known to return from Hades. Our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from death because it is sealed up, and no one turns back. Come then, let us enjoy the good things that exist and make use of creation to the fullest as in youth.

Let none of us fail to share in our revelry. Everywhere, let us leave signs of enjoyment because this is our portion. This is our lot.

Let us oppress the righteous poor man. Let us not spare the widow or regard the gray hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless.

So the author paints this picture that if you're living for this life only, you could go seriously astray. If you look ahead to death and see nothing beyond it, you will think that the circumstances, pleasures, and gains that will be had in this life are all that matter. And this will pervert your view of life.

This will pervert your relationships with others, and you will fail to love your neighbor as yourself; rather, you will use your neighbor and abuse your neighbor to further promote your access to life's pleasures and the temporary riches of this world. As this part unfolds, the author shows that the ungodly tend to target the righteous, thinking to disprove, specifically to disprove the faith claims of the righteous by putting the righteous person to a shameful death. The ungodly here may, in fact, be apostate Jews and not gentile individuals because the author suggests that they take action against the righteous person because, quote, he blames us because we have failed to keep the law and condemns us for turning our backs on our upbringing.

We have noted in other texts that there was considerable tension between the progressive Jew who is willing to leave Torah behind in order to assimilate fully with and enjoy the fruits of belonging to the networks of the dominant culture. And we might have another reflection of that dynamic here, where it is really the apostate Jews who put the most pressure on their traditional peers, their conservative, or as they would say, backward peers, whose very lives are reproached to them. The ungodly, the author says, may indeed flourish in this life by following the philosophy of might makes right, gaining wealth at the expense of the vulnerable.

But in the end, God will prove that way of life to be sheer folly. He also shares something of the mindset of the righteous just toward the end of chapter four. Unlike the ungodly who did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls, the righteous person, who is the law-observant person, who walks in the way of his or her training, knows that, quote, God created us for incorruption and made us in the image of his own eternity.

And in light of God's interventions, the results of righteousness and injustice are precisely those that Deuteronomy and the other scriptures would lead one to believe. The righteous may endure loss in this life, but this pales in comparison with the immortal blessings that they will enjoy beyond this life on account of their virtue. In the end, on the other hand, the ungodly will stand before God.

They will see the reward of the righteous person whom they have oppressed, and they will come to confess their stupidity and the wisdom of the Torah-observant human whom they despised. In the course of this opening section of five chapters, the author gives voice to a beautiful expression of the hope of immortality. This also is a passage from the Apocrypha that has exercised quite an impact on the liturgical experience in churches as a text that is frequently read at funerals in many Christian circles.

And so, we read, the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish, they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction. But they are at peace, for though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.

Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good because God tested them and found them worthy of himself. Like gold in the furnace, he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering, he accepted them. A number of the frames of reference that we find in that passage, by means of which the author interprets the trials that the righteous must endure in this life, appear again throughout the New Testament, not suggesting direct dependence on this particular point, but close cultural resonances.

So, the idea that God educates or trains or disciplines the righteous, that it's a kind of divine upbringing through trial and testing, emerges here, as well as the image of proving the worth of the righteous person the way gold's value is tested when it's melted down in the furnace, and any impurities thereby are separated out and show up. In the second section of this text, we find the author's discourse on wisdom and, in part, his recreation of Solomon's prayer for wisdom. In this section, the author calls upon Gentile rulers now, who have received their authority from God, to use their authority to serve God's purposes rather than their own.

He describes wisdom's origins, wisdom's nature, and activity, some of which clearly emerge from dependence on Proverbs 8, where wisdom is known as the co-worker of God in creation, the artisan who is beside God, helping in the process and delighting in God's work, but going beyond that in some important ways. Talking about wisdom herself as the very reflection of God's image, as the effulgence, the brightness, the illumination that comes off of God's glory, and so creates an even more exalted personification of wisdom as an extension of the divinity. Also, thinking about how wisdom is the means by which people, righteous people, are connected with God, made friends of God, and also wisdom's role in sustaining creation, that God's work isn't finished with the end of creating, but continues with the ongoing maintenance and preservation of the order of the cosmos, and wisdom then is God's agent in doing that.

The third section critiques Gentiles for their failure to recognize, worship, and obey the one creator God, largely through the author's reflection on the Canaanites and, in much greater detail, the Egyptians in the Exodus story. The story of the plagues that befell Egypt is retold at length to demonstrate two theses that come out in chapter 11. First, that God blesses God's people with the very things God uses to punish God's enemies, and second, that one is punished by the very things through which one sins.

These two theses keep coming up in these nine chapters as the author considers the various plagues. Now, in the midst of this section, the author engages in several excurses critiquing Gentile religious practice and doing so at a level of greater sophistication than we saw in Letter of Jeremiah or the story of Bel and the Dragon. Of course, the author uses the typical arguments that we found there as well, but he also takes a step further and tries to discredit Gentile religious practice by reconstructing its very human and understandable origins.

In fact, his explanation of Gentile religion very closely resembles Euhemerus's explanation of the rise of the cults around him. Euhemerus was a Greek philosopher talking about the origin of religion. So the author of Wisdom of Solomon tells a story about a grieving father who just can't let go, and so he creates an image of his dead child.

And he talks to his dead child, and he cares for the image of his dead child, and before you know it, he's praying to this image. And he teaches his surviving children the practice, so they continue to converse with their dead brother, uncle, ancestor, and so the author puts it, what began as a father mourning becomes an inviolable religious cult. And he also looks at a political story for the origin of cult, and that is with people living far away from a king, wanting to find some way to flatter and relate to the distant king.

So, he tells a story of a craftsperson who makes a statue of the distant ruler and works it up with all the magic of his art to be a larger-than-life figure, and how the people around him offer honor to this image of the king, thinking to flatter the distant monarch. And before you know it again, you have full-blown rites and sacrifices and hymns of praise being offered to a statue of what is really just a human being. That actually is a rather sensible account of the origins of the ruler cult in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, and no doubt the author has that particular phenomenon in mind, which was big in Egypt and in all of the Eastern Mediterranean, Judea excepted.

Is there hope for Gentiles for this author? The author affirms God in prayer: you love everything that exists; you despise nothing that you have made. The author derives from this fact an explanation for the fact that God didn't just wipe out the Canaanites all at once when the people of the Hebrews were arriving at the threshold of the promised land. Instead, God was judging them little by little to give them an opportunity to change their hearts and minds, an opportunity to repent.

This is, by the way, a very different explanation than we find in Exodus. In Exodus, God doesn't wipe out the Canaanites all at once so that the land doesn't become overrun by wild animals and lie uncultivated for too long and become unmanageable. And all these sensible Israel-centered reasons, the people of Israel-centered reasons for doing it, but here we have a very other ethnic group-centered reason for God's doing this.

Nevertheless, this says more about God than it says about Gentiles because the author goes on to show that he doesn't expect Gentiles to benefit from God's patience. God disciplined the Canaanites little by little, quote, even though God knew full well that they were wicked from their birth, that their natural inclination was to evil, and that they would never change their minds. Similarly, God's warnings would not move the Egyptians to repentance.

Rather, quoting again, a fate they fully deserved drew them on to this inevitable decision and made them forget about all the things that had so recently happened to them. This is just where the author gets to remember the death of the firstborn, the final plague. So God's forbearance toward Gentile nations in the end says more about God's patient and merciful character rather than about any real hope for non-Jewish peoples in this particular author's expectations.

We turn now to the Greek version of the book of Esther. It may come as a bit of a surprise to learn that just like Daniel, Esther also circulated in two forms in the ancient world: a Hebrew form, the one form with which Protestant Christians and Jews are familiar, and a longer Greek form that differed significantly. From the Hebrew version, Greek Esther includes six additional blocks of material.

These are often separated out in older translations of the Apocrypha, as recently though as the RSV. And so, you just find the additions to Daniel in the Apocrypha. But that's both awkward and misleading.

It's awkward because then you don't know where these additions fit into the story. And it's also misleading because the rest of Esther is different in Greek than it is in Hebrew. The Greek version of the story, from beginning to end, has a lot more of God in it.

Prayer, the direct intervention of God in affairs, injunctions to follow God's law, notices that somebody like Mordecai or Esther is, in fact, following God's law, and so forth. So, the whole is a different book. But of course, what is most noticeable is these six additional blocks of material.

The two outermost additions, which are creatively called Additions A and Addition F, the first and sixth, give a framing narrative to the whole of Esther. The first vision, sorry, the first edition, tells about a vision Mordecai, a dream that Mordecai has there in the Persian court. The last addition gives the interpretation of that dream or vision that Mordecai had.

Then, there are two other additions that simply give the full text of the edicts. The edict announced the reasons why the Jews were all about to be killed throughout the empire. And then the edict that rescinds that edict, that former edict.

These are Additions B and E. And then you have two additions kind of at the heart of the story, Additions C and D. Addition C is a prayer, which is itself noteworthy because the Hebrew Esther doesn't have any prayers in it. Doesn't even mention the word prayer, I don't think. But Greek Esther actually gives you the text of Mordecai's prayer, and Esther's prayer is just before the turn of events when the deliverance begins to work for the Jews.

And then the final addition, the fourth edition, Addition D, there in the middle, replaces, I think, just five verses in Hebrew Esther with a much fuller scene in which Esther goes before the king, and God intervenes directly to turn the king's heart towards softness toward his wife and to grant her petition. So, the Greek version of Esther is quite different and much more religious, overtly religious a text than the Hebrew Esther. Now, what do these additions give us? What do they show us that we don't see from Hebrew Esther? Well, one of the additions, the second edition, gives us a window into anti-Judaism in the ancient world.

It explains the origin of the anti-Jewish prejudices much more clearly than Hebrew Esther would. And, of course, reflecting the reality of anti-Jewish prejudice in the Hellenistic period rather than the Persian period. But Haman, in Addition B, is said to have pointed out to us that this is the king's edict against the Jews; Haman pointed

out to us that there is a certain hostile group scattered among all the peoples of the world.

These people are at odds with every nation because of their peculiar laws. They constantly ignore the king's decrees so that the government, although well managed by us, is never secure. We see that this nation stands alone in its constant hostility toward everyone.

They follow a strange manner of life because of their law code, and they don't think well of our actions. They carry out the worst evils so that the kingdom is not at peace. Now, obviously, there's a lot of just simple polemic in this edict, but we do see a few things that would be the genuine sources of anti-Judaism, not least of which is the clear separateness of Jews from other peoples.

You know, Bactrians and Persians and Lycians and Phrygians, you know, just didn't hang out with one another to the exclusion of all other people groups the way Jews did in their communities, the way they organized their lives throughout the diaspora. So, there is something distinctive about the way the Jewish people hold onto and manifest their distinctive identity throughout the diaspora. Many Gentiles look upon this through the lens of what the Greeks called *misoxenia*, hatred of foreigners, hatred of outsiders.

So, from a Jewish point of view, what's happening is we're following the regulations of Torah, perhaps even to the letter. From the outsider's point of view, the Jews are acting out their hatred of non-Jews. So, there's that.

And there's the sense that their way of life, the laws by which they regulate their lives, are simply peculiar. They're different. They nurture a way of life that is unintelligible to us outsiders.

Gentiles cannot make sense of the dietary laws of the Torah, of the right of circumcision. You do what to your what? Or the idea of a Sabbath, this idea that you can just take off one day in seven and do absolutely nothing. These things are incomprehensible in the ancient world.

And so, we get a bit of a window into this here, as well as the kind of exponential prejudice that is then lumped onto the same. We also get pictures of the embodied spirituality of Jews in this period. Esther doesn't just, you know, seek God's help.

She takes off her royal garments and puts on sackcloth, mourning clothes, and funerary clothes. Instead of the finest spices, she smears her head and body with ashes and dung and humbles herself before God before making her petition. So, there's this, you know, as a Protestant in a lifetime of prayer, I have never deliberately changed clothes to pray.

And I've certainly never smeared myself with ashes and dung to humiliate myself. But we have here a different sort of piety in what we do with our bodies. And what we do with our bodies puts our souls in the frame of mind and in the right place to begin this encounter with God.

We also find in one of the editions, edition C, the introduction of attention to ethnic boundaries into the story. Probably, the author of edition C was profoundly disturbed by the fact that Esther, a Jewish woman, was married to and having sex with a Gentile and was eating with the Gentile and his courts and his friends and what have you. Uh, this can't be. This is not what good Jews do.

This cannot be what the heroine of the Feast of Purim did. So, in the Greek version of Esther, she is given to say, I, your servant, didn't dine at Haman's table, nor did I honor the king's banquet or drink wine that had been offered to the gods. So there's this introduction of the idea that Esther kept kosher in the middle of the court of the king, even in the middle.

And she also kept herself from anything that smacked of the idolatry of the Gentile ruler to whom she was married. And better yet, I detest sharing the bed of this uncircumcised king or, indeed, of any foreigners. Now, we can't help the fact that Esther had to marry the king, but she doesn't have to like it.

And so, in this edition, she expresses her abomination for what the author considers to be abomination. The mixing of Jew and Gentile by marriage. This incidentally is an interesting thing to hold against edition B, that edict.

Jews really were interested in this period in maintaining their distinctive practices, their distinctive identities, and their separation from the Gentiles around them. The Greek version of Esther is also much more interested in using the story of Esther to promote awareness of God and to promote the observance of the distinctive practices of Jews, even though those practices arouse prejudice and hostility. This heightening of boundaries between Jews and other nations is seen not, not only in editions B and C that we just looked at but also in the reinterpretation of the lots, the Purim that gave the name to the festival that comes out of the book of Esther.

In the Hebrew version of Esther, the lots are simply, you know, that which was cast to determine the day on which to kill the Jews. But in edition F, a second interpretation is added. As Mordecai considers his dream in which he saw two dragons going forth to battle and a stream issuing out and some other crazy details that escape my mind at the moment, he considers that the interpretation has to do with the two lots that God has cast, one for the Jews and one for the nations.

And the time for the deliverance of God's favored nation came. So, this idea that lot here is destiny, there are two destinies that God has set. And even that itself separates the Gentiles with their destiny from the Jews and their destiny.

We come to a book called Third Maccabees, and I place this here because the dynamics of Third Maccabees are very similar to the dynamics of Greek Esther. In fact, there are even some close verbal parallels at some points, which might suggest that the author of Third Maccabees, among other sources, knew Esther or Greek Esther, more probably Greek Esther, and allowed himself to be partially inspired by what he read there. But Third Maccabees, like Judith, like Tobit, is another work of historical fiction.

It plays out what could happen in the Diaspora, given what did happen in Jerusalem and Judea under Antiochus IV. Just a word about the title. It's called Third Maccabees.

It has nothing to do with the Maccabees. It has nothing to do with First and Second Maccabees' story. And in fact, in the ancient world, it is referred to, and I wish I could remember where, but it's referred to as Ptolemaica.

That's a Greek word, an adjectival word, which means things pertinent to the Ptolemies. So, we're not looking at Jerusalem and its political situation under the Seleucids. We're looking at Diaspora Jews in Egypt and their situation under the Ptolemies.

And there are points of connection. The plot of Third Maccabees very closely parallels the plot of Second Maccabees. But it's just plot parallels.

It's not a continuation of the story. It's not the same story. It's frankly not related to that story at all in any kind of narrative, kind of continuation of the saga sort of way.

It's probably written in Egypt, which is also where it's set. Almost definitely written in Greek. And perhaps it comes from the early period of Augustus' reign.

One of the concerns that emerges in the story is the *laographia*, which is a Greek word meaning the enrollment of the people. Something that in Augustus' period would have clearly separated Greek citizens in Egypt from the indigenous Egyptian population. There was a tremendous difference in status, privileges, and rights between the Greek citizens of Egypt and the indigenous Egyptian population.

And in fact, from Augustus' reign onward, the Jews in Egypt very much wanted to have their status clarified as being Greek citizens of Egypt, rather than being relegated to the status of the indigenous non-Greek Egyptian population. The story,

as it's come down to us, is incomplete. The opening scene or scenes are obviously gone.

It doesn't just begin in the middle of things. It begins in the middle of a sentence. So, it's a defective manuscript.

And therefore, every copy of that manuscript is defeated. As it stands, the story begins at the Battle of Raphia, which is located very far south in Palestine, basically at the border between Israel and Egypt. This was one of several battles in which Antiochus III fought a Ptolemy to get control of Israel.

Darn it all, that was the agreement after Alexander the Great died, and the Ptolemies won't let us have it. So, we're going to take it someday. But Antiochus did not take it at the Battle of Raphia in 218 BC.

It would wait another 20 years for the Battle of Panaeus for him to take Palestine for his own kingdom. Anyway, it begins with Ptolemy's victory at the Battle of Raphia, successfully pushing back Antiochus. After that victory, Ptolemy decides he will take a tour of all the lands of his empire to encourage his people in the aftermath of the invasion of the Seleucid armies.

And this is going great until he comes to Jerusalem. When he comes to Jerusalem, he wants to do there what he's done in every other city. He wants to honor the local sanctuary.

And by honoring the local sanctuary, he expects to go into the local sanctuary. Because he's a bit of an archaeology fan or architecture fan. He likes to go and see the inner workings of things.

He insists that, as the king, he should be able to do so, even if no one else is. But this is where the closest parallel with 2 Maccabees shows up. Just like Heliodorus in 2 Maccabees, Ptolemy is beaten up by unseen hands and returns with his figurative tail between his legs to Egypt, breathing threats against the Jewish population there.

So, after his return to Egypt, he sets about trying to resolve the problem of the Jewish people in the midst of his empire. And from Ptolemy's point of view, what he goes on to do is actually a gift. He is offering the Jews in Alexandria and throughout Egypt a great honor.

Alexandrian citizenship, Greek citizenship, at the price of participating in Alexandrian religion. This also reflects, by the way, the debates, the real-life debates of Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors in Greek cities throughout the first century A.D. Where the Greek citizens say that if you want to be fellow citizens with us, you need to share with your fellow citizens in their religion. They made it quite explicit.

You can't be fellow citizens if you're going to keep dissing our gods. So, Ptolemy makes this offer. But he says if they refuse the offer, they are to be registered.

And there's that reference to the word *laographia*. They are to be registered and reduced to slavery. Only a few hundred Jews accept Ptolemy's offer.

300 out of several million. The rest refuse the offer and they treat as enemies those few hundred Jews who are favorably disposed to the king. This convinces Ptolemy of the Jews' inherent malice.

And so, he decides on another plan. Forget the slavery thing. We're going to round up all the Jews, and we're going to kill them.

In the Hippodrome. So, Jews are brought from throughout all of Egypt to the Hippodrome, the chariot racing stadium outside of Alexandria. And there they await execution by being trampled by war elephants, the ancient equivalent of a tank division.

Three times, these elephants are armored and are stirred up into a frenzy by being given wine spiked with frankincense and other goodies. And three times, God intervenes to foil the king's plan. In the end, angels, again, intervene and scare the elephants into turning around and trampling their keepers and the soldiers who are trying to herd them toward the Jewish captives.

The king sees this, is terribly repentant of what he's done. And he sends the Jews back home with his apologies and with 14 days of feasting along the way, allowing them first to take vengeance upon those who had proven traitors to their own people. The 300 Jews who had accepted Alexandrian citizenship.

In this story, we have another witness, an eloquent witness to Gentile anti-Judaism. For example, early in the story, in the third chapter, Ptolemy, I take that back, the narrator is talking about the prejudice against the Jewish people among some of their neighbors. And so, he writes, while they worshipped God and conducted their lives according to God's law, they kept themselves separate in the matter of foods.

For this reason, they appeared hostile to some people. Even though the Jews' good deeds on behalf of the nation, namely Egypt, were commonly talked about by everyone, those of other races didn't take these into account. Instead, they kept harping on the differences in worship and diet and claimed that the Jewish people were loyal neither to the king nor to the authorities but were hostile and strongly opposed to the royal administration.

And so, they placed significant blame on the Jews. Now again, just like in Addition B of Greek Esther, in this text, we see that the Jewish people's adherence to their particular law ended up getting them in trouble with their neighbors because it emphasized the differences first between Jews and non-Jews. The Jews will always worship one and only one God.

The rest of us will always worship multiple gods, and we will never say to another group, your God doesn't even exist, the way the Jews have said for centuries. And because of their dietary practices, the matter of foods, they keep themselves separate. Another witness to that is the problematic nature of the way Jewish communities formed themselves around their own markets to make sure they were getting meat from the right animals, slaughtered in the right way so they could maintain kashrut, maintain the dietary regulations of their ancestral law.

Incidentally, a marvelous testimony to the genius of the Torah as a social engineering tool. It is perfectly constructed to do exactly what it was meant to do. Keep the Jews holy to the Lord.

Keep them from mingling with and blending into and being dissolved into the nations around them. Now, we also get a witness into a second set of tensions, the tensions within the Jewish community, which we already noted in regard to Wisdom of Solomon, chapters one through five. And so, we read in Third Maccabees two.

Now, some Jews, while pretending to detest the steps to be undertaken for the city's religion, readily surrendered themselves to share in great fame through all the association they would have with the king. What that means is some Jews who became apostates, although they pretended like it was a really big deal and they hated to do it, nevertheless were glad for the opportunity to rise to Alexandrian citizenship. But the honorable majority were strong and didn't depart from their religion.

They bravely tried to save themselves from being registered by resorting to bribes in exchange for their lives. They remained hopeful of obtaining help, and they looked with contempt at those Jews who had deserted them, the apostates. They considered those who gave in to be enemies of the Jewish nation and no longer associated with them or offered them assistance.

So, the fact of apostasy from the Jewish way of life led to the use of shaming techniques within the Jewish community to, as the pious Jews sent the apostate Jews the message that they could, by any means they could, that what you're doing is unacceptable. It's disgraceful in the eyes of God and in our eyes. And we want no part of you as long as you're going to do this.

And then, of course, as I mentioned in the summary, after their deliverance, the Jews, quote, petitioned the king that they might carry out the punishment deserved by those Jews who had voluntarily turned aside from the holy God and God's law. They insisted that those who had broken divine laws for the sake of the belly, to save their own skins, would never be reliable subjects under the king's government either. The king gave them a free hand to utterly destroy those who had violated God's law in every place within his kingdom, making a public example of them.

On that day, they killed more than 300 persons, a day that they also observed as a joyous festival since they had subdued the renegades. So, shaming techniques to the nth degree. Now, the apostate Jews are executed in a way that makes them a public example to the rest of the Jewish community of the disadvantage of disobeying God's law.

As a strange sort of wish-fulfillment ending to this story, that those who leave the covenant behind might fall into the hands of the covenant observant, the Torah observant Jewish community to be appropriately disciplined. Now, on a potentially more uplifting note, Third Maccabees offers us several windows into the prayer of the second temple period. We have two notable prayers in this text.

The first is by Simon, the high priest, in chapter three, and the second is by Eleazar. All the heroes of this story end up named Eleazar. Eleazar, who was resident in Jerusalem, was an old priest who prayed for deliverance in the Hippodrome.

Simon's prayer in chapter three is anchored in the scriptural record of God's judging those people, those groups who act arrogantly toward God's standards, God's people, or God's chosen city. He recalls the story of the giants, that is to say, those unholy hybrid offspring of the AWOL angels and their human female partners, and the examples of Sodom and Pharaoh. On the basis of these historical precedents from the scriptural record, he asks God to intervene once more against the arrogant, namely Ptolemy, and to safeguard the sanctity of the temple.

Historical precedent, what God has done historically for us, emerges also as the basis for prayer yet again in Eleazar's prayer toward the end of the story as he prays on behalf of the whole people for God's deliverance of God's people from extinction when threatened with the war elephants. And he recalls the examples of Pharaoh at the Red Sea, how God delivered the people there. The deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib and the deliverance of the faithful four, Daniel and the three young men, in Babylon from Nebuchadnezzar.

And once again, the basis for the prayer is as you have acted in the past when your people were put at risk by an arrogant foreigner, please act again to intervene in our present distress. So as with the prayer in Tobit and the earlier prayer in the same book, these exemplify praying in line with what can be known about God from the

sacred record, from the sacred scriptures, seeking to guard against expecting God to do something that is out of character for God or out of character in regards to what God has revealed his character and intentions and will to be in the sacred tradition. This pattern once again continues long into Jewish and Christian practice.

See, for example, the cycle of prayers, the collect as they're called in the Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions. The story of Third Maccabees achieves a few other things as well. It affirms the connection between the Egyptian Jewish population and the Jerusalem Jewish population and its temple.

That is to say, the diaspora Jewish community is as connected to the Jewish temple as the Jerusalem Jewish community. Our distance from the temple doesn't mean our distance from sharing in the fate of the sacred place. This is brought out by the fact that Ptolemy gets this itch to begin with to act against the Jews because of what happens to him in the Jerusalem temple.

It also provides an affirmation as the story goes on. And as God does, in fact, deliver Egyptian Jewry in a marvelous manner, it affirms that God hears and God delivers God's people in the diaspora setting just as surely as God does in Jerusalem itself. This might be a story, or a part of the story told in response to criticisms of diaspora Jews launched from Jerusalem.

For example, in one of the letters that now stand prefixed to Second Maccabees, the Jerusalem-based writers of the letter simply assume that the diaspora Jews to whom they're writing are in sin because they're still in exile. And while, yes, exile is the result of the curse, the curse of Deuteronomy, that does not necessarily mean that God is alienated from us. Thank you very much.

And this story retorts back to the story of Second Maccabees, as it were. The fact that God is as close to us as he is, in fact, to you.