

Dr. David deSilva, Apocrypha, Lecture 7, A Closer Look: 4 Maccabees, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, Prayer of Azariah and the Son of Three Young Men

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This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 7, A Closer Look: 4 Maccabees, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, Prayer of Azariah, and the Song of the Three Young Men.

The last major work in the Apocrypha to consider is the book known as 4 Maccabees.

Now, 4 Maccabees isn't so bad a title for this book as 3 Maccabees was for the last one because at least the author takes as his focal point the story of the persecution of the martyrs, known from 2nd Maccabees 6 and 7, and that becomes the narrative focus for what he's going to do in his book. On the other hand, the book was known by better titles in the ancient world. For example, Gregory Nazianzen, a fifth-century Christian author, refers to this book as *On the Supremacy of Reason*, which really comes much closer to the core reason for this book's being.

4 Maccabees is written in the form of a philosophical demonstration of a philosophical thesis, and that thesis is that God-centered reasoning is master over the passions. By passions, the author has in mind a group of human experiences, emotions, urges, and sensations. And at the same time, while it's a philosophical demonstration, at the same time, it's also a eulogy of the achievements of the nine martyrs that are celebrated also in 2nd Maccabees 6 and 7, namely Eleazar, the aged priest who was the first to be martyred in that narrative, the seven brothers who are killed one by one, and finally the mother of the seven brothers.

4th Maccabees is, in my mind, a fascinating document because of its blend of cultures, so to speak. It is written by a Jewish author who is fully committed to the covenant, to the Torah observant way of life, and fully conversant in Greek language, rhetoric, culture, and philosophy. First, the author knows his way around Greek philosophical ethics.

The driving thesis of the book, Reason is the Master of the Passions, is a core philosophical topic in the Greek-speaking world. The idea is that a person can lead a life of virtue if he or she achieves that strength of mind, that strength of the rational faculty, to keep the passions in check, to keep his or her emotions from getting the better of him or her, to keep his or her desires and urges from running away with

him or her. For example, the virtue of courage could be consistently manifested if a person was able consistently to master the feeling of fear or the sensation of pain.

The virtue of justice could be consistently manifested if a person could master his impulses toward greed, toward wanting more than was his own due, or other such vices, other such leanings that would get in the way of doing the just thing towards someone else. So, the author is conversant with this larger conversation, giving it his distinctive twist. He says it's not just reason that is the master of the passions, and it is the godly-minded reason, it is the pious reason, or even God-centered reason, that reason that has been trained by knowledge of God and practice of God's law, that ends up effectively and consistently mastering the passions so that a person can live the life of virtue.

But the author is also aware of the ideal of the sage, the philosopher or wise man, as he is known in Greek literature. The sage who is free, truly free, the sage who is truly king because he is master of himself or herself, and such topics. The author also converses in Greek philosophical discussions of brotherly love and love for offspring.

Many of the topics that we find woven into his tract and his oration, we could also find in the essays by Plutarch, the Greek philosopher and columnist, really on fraternal affection or maternal affection. And perhaps even more surprisingly, this author had to be familiar with Greek drama. When he places a hypothetical lament on the lips of the mother, what the mother might have said after her children were martyred if she had been weak-spirited, the speech that follows comes right off of the Euripidean stage.

Every phrase of it has parallels in the laments that Euripides puts on the lips of Hecuba or Andromache or others of his lamenting mothers in his tragedies. He knows about Greek athletic events. He uses athletic imagery throughout his oration.

And he also appears to have had a strong Greek-based education. But he uses this Greek-based education to interpret the Torah-centered life as the God-given training program by means of which any individual of any temperament can also attain the goal that Greek ethicists prize, namely, mastery over one's desires, emotions, and sensations so that one may choose the path of virtue in any situation, no matter how difficult. The author will prove this fact by showing how nine Torah-trained human beings were able to face the most brutal tortures and the most searing emotional conflicts and overcome them for the sake of virtue.

Now, Fourth Maccabees was written in Greek by a well-educated Jew, probably somewhere in southern Asia Minor, somewhere between southern Asia Minor and Syria. He proposes, at one point, an epitaph for the martyrs. What would be a fitting epitaph for these heroes of virtue? What he proposes has verbal similarities with Jewish epitaphs on real graves known from the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

Proposals for the date of the book vary widely. It could have been written any time between 20 and 100 A.D., and it was clearly written originally for oral delivery. The verbs that the author uses are verbs of speaking and hearing.

Not verbs of writing and reading. And it was probably composed for delivery on a real occasion. He twice refers to the present occasion and invites us to blank, and that occasion might even have been Hanukkah or another such Jewish festival in the community that he was, in some sense, serving.

One of the things that we find in Fourth Maccabees would be articulations of anti-Jewish prejudice but also answers to anti-Jewish prejudice. The book has a strong apologetic function, defending the Jewish way of life against the typical criticisms or charges leveled at it by outsiders. I'm not saying that this apologetic would have worked on outsiders, but it certainly would have worked on insiders to help them work through and deal with, and then be able, therefore, to push aside the prejudice that they faced from outsiders as they continue to pursue the Torah observant life.

For example, in Chapter 5, we find the tyrant Antiochus addressing the aged priest Eleazar, trying to convince him that eating a mouthful of pork would be smarter than dying under torture. Among other things that Antiochus says, he says you don't seem to have a mature understanding of things since you observe the Jewish religion. Why are you disgusted by eating this animal's delicious meat? It is a gift that nature has given to us.

It's stupid not to enjoy pleasant things that aren't shameful, and it's wrong to refuse nature's gifts. So, in that, we have kind of a reflection of what a Gentile might typically say about people committed to the Jewish way of life. I'm trying to make sense of your dietary regulations, and it makes no sense to me because pork, the other white meat, is a gift of nature, and it is wrong of you.

It is an act of injustice against nature to treat this like it's an abomination when nature has given you a very tasty treat here. Plus, it's really good, and it seems senseless to refuse an enjoyable thing that is not an immoral thing. I mean, what possible moral objection could a person have to the pleasure to be gained by eating this meat? The author of Fourth Maccabees sets out to show that obedience to the Torah and reasoning in line with the teachings of Torah about God empower one for virtue better than any training that the Greek world could offer.

Therefore, there's a very good reason to abstain from pork. It's part of this larger program that God has designed to exercise the devout Jew in mastering his or her passions so that by constant practice, by constant exercise, acting in line with virtue becomes second nature, and saying no to the urgings of the passions and desires and

physical sensations becomes automatic. According to the author, the Torah is God's owner's manual for the well-functioning human being.

It is indeed a remarkable gift that God has given. And so, toward the end of his more philosophical prologue, the author writes, when God formed human beings, God planted emotions and character traits inside them. At that time, God also set the mind on the throne in the middle of the senses to function as a holy governor over them all.

God gave the law to the mind. Whoever lives in line with the law will rule over a kingdom that is self-controlled, just, good, and courageous. What we find here is this idea of how the human being is constituted.

God has given us the rational faculty. God has also planted the passions, desires, and those inclinations that can drive us. Both are fine as long as the mind controls the passions and as long as this order is followed, this internal hierarchy is intact.

The author says observing the Torah is God's way of training the mind to do exactly this. And so that the Jewish way of life ends up allowing the Jewish person to enjoy what is the goal of the Greek philosopher. And that is to rule a kingdom, as it were.

This kind of play is based on the idea of the sage as the king because the sage is the ruler of himself or herself. Such a person will rule over a kingdom that possesses every virtue. The author suggests that the ethical fruits of the Torah-driven life prove its value as an ethical philosophy alongside and even beyond any ethical philosophy found in the Greek world.

In his response to Antiochus and his criticisms, the old priest Eleazar says, you scoff at our philosophy as though living by it were irrational. But it teaches us self-control so that we can master all pleasures and desires. And it also trains us in courage so that we endure any suffering willingly.

It instructs us in justice so that in all our dealings, we act impartially. It also teaches us piety so that with proper reverence, we can worship the only living God. So, in defense of the Torah-driven life, the author pulls out its ethical fruits, the cardinal virtues prized in Greek philosophical ethics, justice, courage, temperance, and self-control.

Here, one of them is dropped in favor of piety, which also shows up in Greek ethics. The cardinal virtues prized by Greek ethicists are the fruit of living in line with the Torah. As with other authors in the Apocrypha, this author also affirms that living in line with the Torah is quite feasible.

In chapter 2 early in chapter 2, he writes that not only is reason proven to rule over the frenzied urge of sexual desire, but also over every desire. Thus the law says you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or anything that is your neighbor's. In fact, since the law has told us not to covet, I could prove to you all the more that reason is able to control desires.

Now, I really should have modified that translation because covet isn't the best translation of the Greek version of that command from the Pentateuch. Really, what I should read is that the law says you shall not desire your neighbor's wife or anything that is your neighbor's. Then the author comments, since the law has told us not to desire, I can prove to you that reason masters the desires.

The implication here is that the law commands nothing that is beyond the human's capacity to perform. Now, as the author proceeds, he presents the martyrs of the Hellenization crisis of 167 BC as the extreme and supreme examples that prove the rule that the Torah-trained mind can master any passion. The God-centered person is able to overcome any assault on his or her commitment to virtue, whether that's an assault from within, the assault of fear at the sight of the torture instruments, the assault of love for siblings at the sight of brothers being torn apart, the assault of love for offspring at the sight of one's children being torn apart, or any assault from outside, the actual assault of the instruments of torture upon the flesh of these victims.

The martyrs show that they're able to overcome any assault based on the promise of enjoyment of some good. For example, Antiochus offers the seven brothers his friendship, promises them places of prestige and power in his government, and urges them to enjoy the life that can be theirs if they just embrace the Greek way of life and his patronage. They refuse to give in to vice for the sake of any promise of good as well as any onslaught of pain.

Some of the major topics in the martyrs' reasoning include the debt that they owe to God and the importance of seeking eternal advantage over temporary advantage. These are important topics in reasoning because they will appear again and again in martyrological literature, not only in the Jewish but also in the Christian tradition. These martyrs reflect that God gave us our bodies.

God gave us our life. Therefore, the value of reciprocity, the ethos of reciprocity, means that we should use what God has given us to advance God's interests and not our own. And so, we will use the bodies that God has given us as a bulwark to protect God's honor, to protect the law.

Or the mother would, in fact, be seen to urge her children on to martyrdom on the basis of having received life from God and therefore owing it to God to give that life back to them. Also, both the brothers and the mother are shown thinking about

short-term gain and long-term pain and weighing advantages in that way. In each case, they choose long-term gain, even though it means enjoying short-term pain, and that means living for eternity and for what God will do on the other side of death since everything on this side of death is in the hands of others.

For example, the tyrant Antiochus himself. Now, when we talked about 2 Maccabees a few lectures back, we talked about the author presenting the martyrs as in some way offering representative obedience to God and being willing to allow God to kind of fill up the measure of the punishment of the nation in their own bodies, in the torture to which the tyrant was subjecting them. The author of 4 Maccabees goes several steps further in the direction of interpreting obedience unto death in terms of vicarious atonement.

And so Eleazar, the aged priest, just before he dies, prays to God, God, you know that I could have saved myself. Instead, I am being burned and tortured to death for the sake of your law. Have mercy on your people.

Make our punishment sufficient for their sake. Purify them with my blood and take my life in exchange for theirs. Then, toward the conclusion of 4 Maccabees, the author comments on the significance of the death of the martyrs.

They exchanged their lives for the nation's sin. Divine providence delivered Israel from its former abuse through the blood of these godly people. Their deaths were a sacrifice to find mercy from God.

The word hilasterion, their lives were a propitiation for the sins of the people, actually appears there. So, what we have here is quite an advance in Jewish thought, whereby the sacrifice of atonement isn't an animal in the temple, but that which reconciles God to the people is the willingness of a Jew or a group of Jews to be obedient unto death no matter what pain that means for them. And so, their dying under torment becomes kind of the virtual equivalent, the functional equivalent, of a sacrifice of atonement.

Filling up the measure of the punishment of the people, but also offering to God a life in exchange for other Jews. I dwell on this because similar lines are found in New Testament reflections on the death of Christ. Another parallel development in this regard is where the obedience of the one unto death affects reconciliation between God and the many.

Some of the same language is even used here. Now for the remainder of this session, we're going to look together at some very short books of the Apocrypha, the first of which is the Prayer of Manasseh. The Prayer of Manasseh is a penitential prayer, and it is written as if, and it is titled as if, it is the speech of Manasseh, the most wicked

king of Judah, whose sins against God proved to be the tipping point, the point of no return as far as the curses of the covenant were concerned.

As we read in Second Kings again and again, because of the sins of Manasseh, the people were doomed. There would be no reprieve, even though good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah emerged and bought brief reprieves for the nation. But ultimately, it is the sin of Manasseh that the author of the Deuteronomistic History points as the straw that breaks the covenantal back.

Now, there's a significant difference between the stories of Manasseh in Second Kings and in Second Chronicles. In Second Chronicles, something happens that is unthinkable in Second Kings. Manasseh in prison repents.

And 2 Chronicles even speaks of Manasseh's prayer being available in some other book. Well, of course, that other book is not available to Jews in the late Second Temple period, but this becomes a kind of launching-off point for a pious Jew of the period to compose a heartfelt, beautiful prayer of confession. According to Second Chronicles, I should read this first.

According to 2 Chronicles 33, during his distress, Manasseh made peace with the Lord his God, truly submitting himself to the God of his ancestors. He prayed, and God was moved by his request. God listened to Manasseh's prayer and restored him to his rule in Jerusalem.

Now, the rest of Manasseh's deeds, including his prayer to God and what the seers told him in the name of the Lord, Israel's God, are found in the record of Israel's kings. So here, there's a claim in Second Chronicles that even the unpardonable sin is pardonable. And the author of Prayer of Manasseh now, centuries later, wants to reaffirm that he wants to create a prayer, the point of which is clear.

If God could have mercy on the king whose wickedness made the downfall of Judah inevitable, who indeed is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness? And the Prayer of Manasseh has, in fact, been used, at least in the Christian church, from the 3rd or 4th centuries at least, onward to the present day. And so, I just want to share with you all some excerpts from this prayer to give you the flavor of one of the most beautiful penitential prayers ever written. You, Lord, according to your gentle grace, promised forgiveness to those who are sorry for their sins.

In your great mercy, you allowed sinners to turn from their sins and find salvation. Therefore, Lord, God of those who do what is right, you didn't provide a changed heart and life, you didn't provide repentance for those who do what is right, for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who didn't sin against you, but you provided repentance for me, the sinner. My sins are many, Lord. They are many.

Now, I bow down before you from deep within my heart, begging for your kindness. I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned, and I know the laws I have broken. I'm praying and begging you to forgive me, Lord. Forgive me.

Don't destroy me along with my sins. Don't keep my bad deeds in your memory forever. Don't sentence me to the earth's depths, for you, Lord, are the God of those who repent.

In me, you'll show how kind you are. Although I'm not worthy, you'll save me according to your great mercy. Another short liturgical piece in the Apocrypha is Psalm 151.

Obviously, for those of you familiar with psalms, you know that the book ends with Psalm 150. But there are several other psalms that are sometimes included in psalm scrolls. For example, in Qumran, there are more than 150 psalms in the psalm scroll.

There are four or five other additional hymn texts that, at the very least, were used by the community in their liturgical worship. At the most, they were part of their canonical version of the book of Psalms. Now, Psalm 151, as we have in the Apocrypha, was originally two separate psalms, each one composed to celebrate and reflect upon a significant event in David's life after the pattern of so many canonical psalms.

For example, Psalm 51 is presented as a reflection on the episode of David's adultery with Bathsheba and the aftermath. But you can search the psalms, and you don't find a psalm reflecting on the choice of David above his brothers. You don't find a psalm reflecting on David's defeat of Goliath.

So, what about these major events? Pious Jews in the Second Temple period created more psalms written as if by David from the perspective of that event. So the first of these two psalms, which ends up being the first two-thirds of Psalm 151, focuses on God's choice of David over his taller, older brothers. The second of these two psalms, now just the tail end of Psalm 151, focused on David's defeat of Goliath, who challenged Israel and Israel's God.

Why do you remember these facets of David's life during this period? Well, thinking about the choice of David over his taller, more impressive brothers might reflect the realization that Israel is now smaller and less important than neighboring nations. But God still values its heart that honors God, just like God valued David's heart that honored God. And that was more important than issues of stature and appearance.

Also, it might be that the author of the second psalm here is aware that Israel is once again up against giants. Here, we think of the Seleucid kingdom to the north or the Ptolemaic kingdom to the south, or even later, Rome to the west. But there is

precedent for Israel's success against giants, not by military might, but by God's empowering.

Finally, we return to Daniel's additions for the last two liturgical pieces. These would be the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men. The narrative of Daniel 3, the story of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who refuse to bow down to the idol that Nebuchadnezzar had erected in the plain there of Dura, I think, and were therefore thrown into the fiery furnace with their eyes wide open.

They knew that refusal to bow down and worship an idol would land them there. That story was very popular during this period. It is frequently referred to in other texts, even other texts in the Apocrypha.

For example, 4 Maccabees refers to their story no fewer than three times in the course of its 18 chapters. We also notice that there's a tendency to craft psalms and prayers inspired by significant events in Jewish history. Witness the psalms we just talked about, inspired by events in David's life, or the Prayer of Manasseh, inspired by the story of Manasseh's repentance in 2 Chronicles 33.

So, the story of Daniel 3 becomes a point of inspiration for creating other liturgical pieces, or at the very least, weaving existing liturgical pieces into the narrative of Daniel. Being cast into the furnace of fire would be an obvious occasion for a prayer for deliverance. And this is now supplied by the Prayer of Azariah, which appears just as the three young men are thrown into the furnace.

Not being burnt up by the fiery furnace would be an obvious occasion for a psalm or psalms of praise and deliverance. And that is now supplied in the expanded Daniel 3 by the song of the three young men. It's highly likely that both of these liturgical pieces were composed in Hebrew, somewhere in the land of Palestine, somewhere within the boundaries of Israel.

The ninth verse of the Prayer of Azariah may look back on the Hellenization crisis of 175 to 167 BC, as the author says, you handed us over to our enemies, immoral rebels who hate God's law, and to an unjust king, the most evil one in the whole world. In the Greek version of the psalm, the word for rebels is *apostatai*, hence apostates. What's notable here is, unlike the situation of the historical Azariah, the author of the Prayer of Azariah isn't just looking to the unjust king as the source of the problem but also to apostate Jews as the source of the problem.

And that would have been much more fitting for the period of 175 BC and following, which pretty much establishes that as the earliest possible time for the composition of this particular prayer. The Song of the Three may actually be a much older composition than that. Only the very last verse ties that whole 40 or 50-verse psalm of thanksgiving to the story of the three young men at all.

So, take that out of the equation, and the rest could have been composed at any point from the exile onward. Indeed, it looks like the so-called Song of the Three was originally two psalms of praise because there are two distinct patterns that are followed, one for the first seven or eight verses of the song and another for the vast majority of the song. The Prayer of Azariah, then to look at that first, begins as with the penitential prayers of Baruch by acknowledging that God has acted with fairness and justice.

God has done no more and no less than live up to God's word in Deuteronomy. It is Israel that is to blame for failing God and not the reverse. So Azariah confesses the nation's faithlessness in regards to living by the covenant but holds out the hope of restoration.

In the petition section of the prayer, he urges God to be reconciled with God's penitent people for the sake of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the beloved ancestors of the people. These promises are now in jeopardy. It is noteworthy, by the way, that he's not praying to save us from the fiery furnace.

This is another indication that perhaps this prayer was first composed independently of the narrative and later simply woven in at that point. It is a prayer of national repentance and a prayer for the reversal of the covenant curses as a whole. Azariah urges God to act not only for the sake of the promises but also for the sake of God's reputation among the nations.

God's reputation is bound to the fortunes of the people called by God's name. But he also offers heartfelt sorrow and humility as a kind of spiritual guilt offering, since the means to offer the prescribed sacrifices for sin are not possible for him in his situation. And so, I'll read a few verses from the prayer of Azariah along those lines.

In this time, we have no ruler or prophet or leader, no entirely burnt offering or sacrifice, no special gift or incense, no place to bring gifts to you and find mercy. Accept us pleased with our crushed souls and humble spirits as if we brought entirely burned offerings of rams and bulls as if we brought tens of thousands of fat lambs. May this be the kind of offering we make in your presence today, and may we follow you completely.

So, whether this lack of access to the temple results from being in exile or results from the temple being in the control of apostates, such as was true under Menelaus around about 167 to 164 B.C., the author proposes that heartfelt repentance can have the force of thousands of atonement offerings. As we turn then finally to the hymn of the three young men, again, we find that it falls into two parts, possibly as a result of having originally been two different psalms of praise. The first part follows a common formula.

Blessed are you, Lord God of our ancestors. You are worthy of praise and raised high above all others forever. The second half of that verse is the constant refrain of this first part of the song.

Like the Psalms, the canonical Psalms have that constant refrain, for his mercy endures forever in every verse. And it's only the first half of the verse then that changes. And so, the first part of this hymn celebrates God's rule of the cosmos from God's throne in heaven, surrounded by his angelic court.

Celebrating the fact that God's glory, God's reputation fills the world and God's presence fills his temple. Another interesting indication of the psalm not really coming from the story or being composed with the story primarily in mind because, of course, when Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael are in the furnace, the temple lies in ruins, thanks to Nebuchadnezzar. Now, the second part of the psalm takes on a different form.

Calling upon all the various facets of creation to give honor to their creator. So, for example, the first verse is, all works of the Lord bless the Lord. Sing hymns and lift God high above all others forever.

The second half of that verse becomes the refrain that happens 30-odd times in the course of this song. And it's the first half that changes as we go from this general all works of the Lord bless the Lord to addressing each individual work of the Lord, calling upon them, calling upon each one to bless the Lord. And this part of the psalm follows a very well-structured progression.

In the first six verses, the author calls upon heavenly bodies and heavenly beings to bless the Lord and lift up his name forever. Then in the next ten verses, the author calls upon all the phenomena of the realm of the sky, largely those associated with weather, to bless the Lord and lift up his name high forever. Then in verses 51 to 58, the author calls upon earthly phenomena and animal inhabitants of the earth to bless the Lord and lift up his name on high forever.

And finally, in the concluding eight verses, he calls upon human beings in their various groupings to bless God and give him honor forever. The prayers of the Apocrypha, and we've looked at quite a few now embedded in the various Apocryphal books, but also freestanding, like the Prayer of Manasseh, reveal the impact of the prayers of the Old Testament Scripture on the ongoing worship life and personal prayer life of Jews throughout this period. And they certainly leave us with the impression that the period between the Testaments was also a period of vital prayer, worship, interaction, and piety on the part of God's people.

I'll also simply say that the Song of the Three Young Men and the Prayer of Azariah, like the Prayer of Manasseh, continue to be taken up by the Christian Church, being used from its early centuries to the present day in worship among Catholic and Anglican churches throughout the world. This will conclude our survey of the books of the Apocrypha, and in the lectures that follow, we'll look first at some sketches of the impact of the books of the Apocrypha on the New Testament itself, but also on the early Church through its most formative centuries. And then finally, we'll look at the place of the Apocrypha in canon over the centuries, both in the Jewish and in the Christian communities.

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