

# Dr. David deSilva, Apocrypha: Witness Between the Testament, Session 2, A Closer Look 1 Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## 1. Abstract of deSilva, Apocrypha, Session 2, 1 Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees, [Biblicalelearning.org](https://www.biblicalelearning.org), BeL

Dr. DeSilva's lecture explores several books of the Apocrypha, specifically First Esdras, Ben Sira, and First and Second Maccabees. He begins with First Esdras, noting it offers an alternative version of events found in canonical texts like Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, with a particular emphasis on the figures of Zerubbabel and Ezra. The lecture transitions to Ben Sira, highlighting its importance as a wisdom text that blends Jewish tradition with Hellenistic influences, focusing on Torah observance amidst cultural shifts. Finally, the lecture introduces First and Second Maccabees, explaining their differing perspectives on the tumultuous period of Jewish history between 175 and 141 BC, including conflicts between Jewish factions and Seleucid rule, which led to the Maccabean revolt. The lecture sets the stage for a more detailed examination of these books and their respective authors' agendas.

## 2. 17 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. deSilva, Apocrypha, Session 2 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the [Biblicalelearning.org](https://www.biblicalelearning.org) [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → NT Introduction → Apocrypha).



**deSilva\_Apocrypha\_  
Session02.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: deSilva, Apocrypha, Session 2, 1 Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from Dr. deSilva's lecture on First Esdras, Ben Sira (Wisdom of Sirach), and 1st and 2nd Maccabees:

#### **Briefing Document: Apocrypha Lecture 2 - First Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees**

**Source:** Excerpts from "deSilva\_Apocrypha\_EN\_Lecture02.pdf" by Dr. David de Silva and Ted Hildebrandt (© 2024)

**Overview:** This lecture provides an introduction to and analysis of First Esdras, Ben Sira (Wisdom of Sirach), and First and Second Maccabees, three books found within the Apocrypha. The lecture explores their historical context, key themes, and theological significance.

#### **I. First Esdras**

- **Content and Relation to Canonical Texts:** First Esdras presents an alternative version of events found in 1 Chronicles 35-36, Ezra, and Nehemiah 8. It retells the story of Josiah's reign, the Babylonian conquest, Cyrus's decree allowing the return of exiles, Darius's decree to rebuild the temple, Ezra's reforms, and the cleansing of the people through divorce of non-Jewish wives. "First Esdras presents us with an alternative version of events that we would read about in our canonical First Chronicles, 35 to 38, our canonical book of Ezra, and the material in Nehemiah 8."
- **Key Differences:**
- **Confused Sequence of Events:** The narrative jumps back and forth, indicating a need for editorial refinement. "Most notably, there's a confused sequence of events in First Esdras. The author clearly needed an editor because this kind of jumps off the page at the reader."
- **Elevation of Zerubbabel:** The author seems to intentionally reshuffle the story to highlight Zerubbabel's role, even absorbing Nehemiah's functions. One theory is that this elevation serves to demonstrate the fulfillment of God's promises to the house of David, even without a restored monarchy. "The confused order of events seems to be the result of intentional reshuffling of the story to make room for this

contest, to make room for Zerubbabel at this point, and to elevate him really as the central figure who gets things going."

- **Contest of the Three Bodyguards:** This courtly tale, unique to First Esdras, involves a contest among Darius's bodyguards to determine "What is the strongest force in human society?". Zerubbabel wins by declaring truth the strongest. This tale serves to commission Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple.
- **Focus on Temple and Liturgy:** First Esdras places greater emphasis on the temple, its activities, and the liturgical calendar (festivals of Passover and Booths). Ezra is elevated to the role of chief priest. "What we also notice in the story of First Esdras is a greater focus on the temple, its activity, and its liturgical calendar."
- **Dating and Influence:** Likely dates to the second century B.C. There's a consensus that it was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, but only Greek manuscripts remain today. Josephus seemed to prefer First Esdras over Ezra and Nehemiah. The saying "Truth conquers all" is derived from this book.
- **Emphasis on Ethnic Purity:** First Esdras stresses the importance of preserving the "holy seed of Israel" through endogamy (marrying within the community) and genealogical purity. Those who can't prove lineage are excluded. "A driving interest of First Esdras, and this is, of course, shared with the canonical stories as well, but it seems to be elevated here because it's the climax of this story, an emphasis on preserving the holy seed of Israel through marrying only within the house of Israel..."

## II. The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach)

- **Author and Context:** Ben Sira was a sage in Jerusalem around 200 BC who ran a school. He was writing at a time of increasing Hellenistic influence, with some Jewish elites embracing Greek culture.
- **Conservative Voice:** Ben Sira advocates for conservatism, emphasizing the importance of Torah observance in an increasingly "progressive atmosphere." "So, as we can see, his voice called for conservatism in an increasingly progressive atmosphere."
- **Translation:** Ben Sira wrote in Hebrew, and his grandson translated the work into Greek around 132 BC. The grandson acknowledges the inherent distance introduced by translation. "But the same expression in Greek doesn't have the same power as the original expression in Hebrew."

- **Covenant Loyalty and Honor:** Ben Sira teaches that covenant loyalty is the most important mark of an honorable person, even above secular achievements. True honor comes from fidelity to the Torah and worth in God's eyes. "Ben Sira teaches his pupils that covenant loyalty is the indispensable mark of the honorable person."
- **Wisdom and the Law:** Unlike Proverbs, Ben Sira explicitly connects wisdom with the Law (Torah). He personifies wisdom and declares that its home is in Jerusalem, with the Torah. "All these things are in the covenant scroll of the most high God, the law that Moses commanded us, the inheritance of the congregations of Jacob." Keeping the commandments is the key to finding wisdom.
- **Feasibility of the Law:** Ben Sira believes the law is feasible to keep, echoing Deuteronomy 30. "If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and acting faithfully is a matter of your own choice." He highlights the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, just as Deuteronomy promises.
- **Hymn to the People of Heshed:** Ben Sira includes a lengthy hymn (chapters 44-49) praising those who kept the law, including figures like Abraham, Moses, and Aaron, contrasting them with the kings who abandoned the Torah.
- **Practical Wisdom:** Ben Sira also addresses a wide range of practical topics, including family life, social interactions, political life, and economic ventures.
- **Caution Regarding Women:** Ben Sira's views on women reflect cultural stereotypes and anxieties, urging men to be careful about their wives and daughters.
- **Greco-Roman Influence:** The book reveals the influence of Greco-Roman culture in its discussions of friendship, patronage, and etiquette at social gatherings.
- **Wisdom and Spirituality:** Ben Sira emphasizes that wisdom is not merely intellectual but also rooted in one's relationship with God. He advocates for prayer as an essential source of wisdom. "Above everything else, pray to the Most High so that he may make your path straight in truth."
- **Temple and Liturgy:** Ben Sira supports the temple and its rituals, viewing them as a powerful encounter with the living God. He emphasizes the integration of moral acts, the Torah, and the temple. "Fear the Lord with your whole being and honor his priests. With all your might, love the one who made you, and don't neglect his ministers."

- **Piety as a Holistic Life:** Ben Sira sees piety as a life centered on the Torah, neighborly love, and a nurturing connection with God.

### III. 1 and 2 Maccabees

- **Historical Context:** These books tell the story of Jerusalem and Judea between 175 and 141 BC, a turbulent period.
- **Different Origins and Perspectives:** **2 Maccabees:** An abridgment of a five-volume history by Jason of Cyrene. It was written in Greek and possibly intended to promote the observance of Hanukkah among diaspora Jews. It is less focused on legitimizing the Hasmonean dynasty. "2nd Maccabees is, in fact, an abridgment of a longer five-volume history of the period by a man named Jason of Cyrene."
- **1 Maccabees:** A dynastic history that tells the story of Mattathias and his sons, who founded the Hasmonean dynasty. It is pro-Hasmonean and was likely written after the reign of John Hyrcanus.
- **Conflict Layers:** **Seleucid vs. Ptolemaic Dynasties:** Palestine was a contested land between these two successor kingdoms to Alexander the Great.
- **Conservative vs. Progressive Jews:** Conflict within Jerusalem between those who wanted to uphold Torah law and those who favored assimilation to Greek culture.
- **Key Events Leading to the Maccabean Revolt:** **Strife within Jerusalem:** Rivalry between the Oniad and Tobaiad families.
- **Heliodorus Episode:** Seleucus IV sends Heliodorus to seize funds from the temple but is miraculously prevented.
- **Jason's Reforms:** Jason (Onias's brother) buys the high priesthood and institutes Greek reforms, including a gymnasium and a new constitution. "And Jason went forward with his reforms and instituted a gymnasium... And refound Jerusalem on the basis of a Greek constitution..."
- **Menelaus's Religious Reforms:** Menelaus (backed by the Tobaiads) institutes religious reforms, including making the temple a place of worship for all residents (the "abomination of desolation").
- **Outbreak of Revolution:** Jason attempts to regain his title, and the people revolt against the Hellenizing high priests.
- **Antiochus's Persecution:** Antiochus outlaws observance of the Torah, leading to brutal martyrdom of Jews. "So, we have stories of brutal martyrdom where Jews

show their loyalty to the covenant by refusing to give in to the demand to acquiesce."

- **The Maccabean Revolt: Mattathias's Act:** Mattathias kills a Jew offering sacrifice to a foreign god, initiating the revolt.
- **Guerrilla Warfare:** Mattathias and his sons lead successful raids against Greco-Syrian garrisons.
- **Retaking the Temple:** The Maccabees cleanse the temple and restore proper sacrifices.
- **Political Independence:** Jonathan and Simon negotiate political independence for Judea, and the yoke of the Gentiles is removed for a time.

#### **IV. Next Steps:**

The next lecture will delve deeper into the specific agendas and perspectives of the authors of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

## 4. Study Guide: deSilva, Apocrypha, Session 2, 1 Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees

### Apocrypha: First Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees Study Guide

#### I. Quiz

Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the most distinctive addition in First Esdras compared to the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah?
2. According to First Esdras, who absorbs the role typically attributed to Nehemiah? What might be the reason for this shift?
3. What is Ben Sira's stance on assimilation to Greek culture?
4. How does Ben Sira explicitly connect wisdom with the Law (Torah)?
5. According to Ben Sira, what is the starting point for any wisdom?
6. How does Ben Sira view the feasibility of keeping the law (Torah)?
7. What is the central theme that runs throughout Ben Sira's lengthy hymn in praise of the people of *hesed*?
8. What are the approximate date ranges for when 1st and 2nd Maccabees may have been written?
9. What are the key differences in focus between 1st and 2nd Maccabees?
10. Briefly describe the circumstances that led to the Maccabean Revolt.

#### Quiz Answer Key

1. The most distinctive addition in First Esdras is the contest of the three bodyguards. This courtly tale, set in the diaspora, features a contest to determine the strongest force in human society, with Zerubbabel ultimately winning and asking Darius to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.
2. In First Esdras, Zerubbabel absorbs the role typically attributed to Nehemiah. This might be because the author intended to elevate Zerubbabel, who is in the line of David, suggesting that God's promises to restore the house of David were fulfilled through him.

3. Ben Sira was cautious about assimilation to Greek culture and vehemently opposed to it on some points. He called for conservatism in an increasingly progressive atmosphere, emphasizing covenant loyalty as the indispensable mark of an honorable person.
4. Ben Sira explicitly connects wisdom with the Torah by personifying wisdom and declaring that her home is in Jerusalem, reflecting God's choice of Israel. He equates wisdom with the covenant scroll of God and says that those seeking wisdom should dig for it in the law of Moses.
5. According to Ben Sira, the Torah-observant life is the starting point for any wisdom. He believes that moving away from Torah observance means moving away from wisdom.
6. Ben Sira believes that keeping the law is feasible, drawing from Deuteronomy 30 to emphasize that the commandments are not too hard and that humans have the free choice to keep them. He believes what Deuteronomy promises to the obedient is reliable.
7. The central theme of Ben Sira's hymn is that those who kept the law of the Most High achieved honor. He recounts the sacred history of Israel, highlighting figures like Abraham, Moses, and Aaron for their diligent observance and condemning kings who abandoned the commandments.
8. 1st Maccabees was likely written sometime between 104 BC (after the reign of John Hyrcanus) and 63 BC (when Rome intervened). 2nd Maccabees could fall anywhere between 160 BC (the year after the story ends in that book) to 63 BC.
9. 1st Maccabees is a dynastic history, focusing on the Maccabean revolt and its aftermath, emphasizing the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty. 2nd Maccabees focuses more on the events leading up to the revolt and ends its narrative earlier, not explicitly supporting or opposing the Hasmonean dynasty.
10. The Maccabean Revolt began in response to religious persecution by Antiochus IV, who outlawed observance of the Torah and desecrated the temple. Mattathias, a priest, initiated the revolt by killing a Jew who was about to offer sacrifice to a foreign god and a Greco-Syrian official, sparking a rebellion against the Seleucid Empire.



## II. Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast the portrayals of Zerubbabel in First Esdras and the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. What might the differences suggest about the author's purpose in First Esdras?
2. Discuss Ben Sira's perspective on the relationship between wisdom and the law. How does his view compare to other wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, particularly Proverbs?
3. Analyze Ben Sira's teachings on ethics and morality, considering both his emphasis on Torah observance and his incorporation of international wisdom traditions. How does he balance these two influences?
4. Examine the historical and political contexts surrounding the composition of 1st and 2nd Maccabees. How do these contexts shape the authors' perspectives and agendas?
5. Discuss the significance of the Maccabean Revolt in Jewish history and its portrayal in 1st and 2nd Maccabees. What were the long-term consequences of the revolt, and how did it shape Jewish identity?

### III. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Apocrypha:** Books included in the Septuagint and Vulgate but excluded from the Jewish and Protestant biblical canons.
- **First Esdras:** An alternative version of events from the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and parts of Chronicles.
- **Zerubbabel:** A key figure in First Esdras, elevated to a central role in rebuilding the temple.
- **Ben Sira (Sirach):** A sage living in Jerusalem around 200 BC, known for his wisdom teachings.
- **Hellenization:** The adoption of Greek culture, language, and customs.
- **Torah:** The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Law of Moses.
- **Hesed:** Hebrew term referring to covenant loyalty, loving-kindness, and steadfast love.
- **1st Maccabees:** A historical book focusing on the Maccabean revolt and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty.
- **2nd Maccabees:** A historical book providing a prequel to the Maccabean revolt and ending with the defeat of Nicanor.
- **Maccabean Revolt:** A Jewish rebellion led by the Maccabee family against the Seleucid Empire.
- **Hasmonean Dynasty:** The Jewish dynasty founded by the Maccabees that ruled Judea from 141 BC to 63 BC.
- **Seleucids:** The Greek dynasty that ruled Syria and Babylonia after the death of Alexander the Great.
- **Ptolemies:** The Greek dynasty that ruled Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great.
- **Gymnasium:** A Greek institution for education and physical training.
- **Abomination of Desolation:** The desecration of the Jerusalem temple by Antiochus IV, possibly through the erection of a new altar to foreign deities.

## **5. FAQs on deSilva, Apocrypha, Session 2, 1 Esdras, Ben Sira, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)**

### **Frequently Asked Questions on 1 Esdras, Ben Sira, and 1 & 2 Maccabees**

#### **What is 1 Esdras and how does it relate to the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah?**

1 Esdras is an alternative version of events found in the canonical books of 1 Chronicles 35-38, Ezra, and Nehemiah 8. It retells the story of the return from Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. However, it presents a confused sequence of events and elevates the role of Zerubbabel, even absorbing some of the roles attributed to Nehemiah in the canonical books. The story includes a unique element: a contest among three bodyguards to determine what is the strongest force, with Zerubbabel's answer of "truth" ultimately winning and leading to his commission to rebuild the temple. 1 Esdras also emphasizes the liturgical calendar and elevates Ezra to a chief priest.

#### **What is the significance of the "contest of the three bodyguards" in 1 Esdras?**

The "contest of the three bodyguards" is a unique addition in 1 Esdras not found in the canonical books. It involves three bodyguards of King Darius proposing answers to the question: "What is the strongest force in human society?" The first suggests the king, the second suggests wine, and the third, Zerubbabel, suggests women and ultimately truth. Zerubbabel's answer of truth wins the contest, leading to him being granted his wish: to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. This element elevates Zerubbabel to a central figure and demonstrates the power of truth. The saying "Great is truth and superior to all" became an influential motto in Western society.

#### **Who was Ben Sira, and what were the main themes of his teachings?**

Ben Sira was a sage living in Jerusalem around 200 BC who ran a house of instruction. He taught young men about their cultural heritage and international wisdom to navigate various aspects of life. His teachings emphasized covenant loyalty and Torah observance in a time of increasing Hellenization among the Judean elite. He explicitly connected wisdom with the law, stating that the Torah-observant life is the starting point for true wisdom. Ben Sira also addresses practical matters such as domestic life, social conduct, economic ventures, and etiquette, while maintaining a deep commitment to the Jewish way of life and the importance of prayer and the temple.

### **How does Ben Sira's view of the Law differ from the perspective found in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's writings?**

Ben Sira believed that keeping the Law was feasible and within human power, reflecting the teachings of Deuteronomy. He emphasized the importance of free choice in obeying the commandments and the assured blessings for those who observe the Torah. This contrasts with the perspective found in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's writings, which suggests that the Law cannot be kept and that salvation comes through faith rather than adherence to the Law.

### **What are 1 and 2 Maccabees, and what historical period do they cover?**

1 and 2 Maccabees are historical books within the Apocrypha that tell the story of Jerusalem and Judea between approximately 175 and 141 BC, a tumultuous period marked by the Maccabean Revolt. 2 Maccabees is an abridgment of a longer history by Jason of Cyrene and focuses more on the events leading up to the revolt, ending around 161 BC. 1 Maccabees is a dynastic history that narrates the revolt and its aftermath, emphasizing the contributions of the Maccabean brothers and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty, ending around 141 BC.

### **What were the main causes of the Maccabean Revolt?**

The Maccabean Revolt was primarily caused by the religious persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who outlawed observance of the Torah and desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. This was fueled by internal conflict within Jerusalem between conservative Jews who wanted to maintain Torah observance and progressive Jews who advocated for Hellenization. The appointment of Hellenizing high priests like Jason and Menelaus, who implemented Greek reforms and desecrated the temple, further exacerbated the situation, leading to widespread revolt against Seleucid rule and apostate Jews.

### **What role did Mattathias and his sons play in the Maccabean Revolt?**

Mattathias, a priest from the village of Modin, initiated the Maccabean Revolt by killing a Jewish opportunist who was about to offer a sacrifice to a foreign god and a Seleucid official. He gathered loyal Jews and began attacking apostate Jews and Greco-Syrian garrisons. After Mattathias's death, his sons, particularly Judas, continued the military campaign, winning significant victories against the Seleucid armies and eventually cleansing the temple. His other sons, Jonathan and Simon, also played crucial roles in securing political independence for Judea, with Simon ultimately establishing the Hasmonean dynasty.

**What were the differing agendas and perspectives of the authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees?**

The author of 2 Maccabees, who abridged Jason of Cyrene's work, aimed to promote observance of Hanukkah and acknowledge God's recent actions for the Jewish people. While not explicitly anti-Hasmonean, 2 Maccabees does not particularly focus on legitimizing the Hasmonean dynasty. Conversely, the author of 1 Maccabees had a clear dynastic agenda, seeking to legitimize the Hasmonean dynasty by highlighting the contributions of each Maccabean brother in advancing the nation's cause and securing political independence for Judea.