

APOCRYPHA THE DISPUTED BOOKS



The Greek translations of the Jewish Scriptures, known as the Septuagint (abbreviated as LXX), includes some writings which were not retained in the official Hebrew canon when it was closed sometime around 90 CE. These samples from the extensive body of Jewish literature written from 300 BCE to 100 CE have come to be called “apocryphal” (which means “hidden”) or “deuterocanonical” (which means “secondary”).

Although not all lists agree, these are the books most often counted in the Apocrypha:

<i>1 & 2 Esdras</i>	<i>Prayer of Azariah</i>
<i>Tobit</i>	<i>& the Song of the Three Jews</i>
<i>Judith</i>	<i>Susana & Bel and the Dragon</i>
<i>Additions to Esther</i>	<i>Prayer of Manasseh</i>
<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>	<i>1 & 2 Maccabees</i>
<i>Ecclesiasticus, or Wisdom</i>	<i>(3 & 4 Maccabees)</i>
<i>of Jesus ben Sirach</i>	<i>(Psalm 151)</i>
<i>Baruch & the Letter of Jeremiah</i>	

HISTORY OF THE CANON

Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the separation of the Jewish and Christian communities, the rabbis defined the limits of the canonical Hebrew Scriptures and largely repudiated the Septuagint. The Christian church, however, continued to use the Septuagint in its worship and missionary work.

During succeeding centuries Christian copies of the Old Testament included the apocryphal writings, which were scattered among the other books, and largely considered them canonical. On the other hand, there were some who carefully noted the distinction between the accepted Hebrew Scriptures and those which could only be found in the Septuagint.

St. Jerome, who translated the Latin Vulgate Bible around 400 CE, was the first to label the extra books as “apocryphal.” In his German Bible of 1534 Martin Luther gathered these books together and included them between the Old and the New Testaments. This practice has been followed in most translations of the Bible intended for Protestant use. It was not until 1828 that English Bibles regularly omitted the Apocrypha.

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

The apocryphal books represent a variety of literary styles. The narrative works include historiography, historical fiction and an apocalypse. The discursive works include wisdom writings, exhortations, and prayers. Noticeably absent are any legal or prophetic works.

The tone of the apocryphal books reflects a time when the Jewish people did not enjoy independence but were experiencing alienation or even persecution. These later Jewish writings also reflect the impact of Hellenistic culture, which saturated the eastern Mediterranean territories following the exploits of Alexander the Great.

HISTORICAL VALUE

Jewish life from the third century BCE through the second century CE contained a variety of traditions and developments. This was the formative period out of which Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity both grew. The apocryphal books witness to the religious ferment of this period and provide the background and perspective necessary for a clearer appreciation of both synagogue and church.

During this time the Diaspora outside Judea assumed greater influence in the shaping of rabbinic thought, just as the Gentile mission of the church eventually set the agenda for Christianity. This perspective “outside of the homeland” found some of its earliest and clearest expression in the books that were eventually consigned to the apocrypha.

CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE

Among Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches today, most of the apocryphal books are still considered canonical. Among Protestant churches, which do not accept them as canonical, opinions on the Apocrypha range from outright rejection to a high degree of appreciation of their religious and ethical value. The apocryphal books provide valuable insights into late Jewish religion and history and also reflect the thought world out of which much of the Christian scriptures derive.

They are of continuing interest for modern readers if for no other reason than that they illustrate the varied texture of biblical documents. The writings are not all of the same sort, nor do they merely imitate earlier forms. Older themes are reworked and expanded in ways that suggest how we might use ancient traditions to inform current issues.

CANONICAL ?

What do you think?

Do the apocryphal writings deserve to be considered as “Word of God,” or “the Holy Scriptures”?

Or not?

1 & 2 ESDRAS

HOMEcomings, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE



1 & 2 Esdras are related by the name of their chief character, not as consecutive stories. They are also designated as 3 & 4 Esdras when the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah are listed as 1 & 2 Esdras.

1 ESDRAS: HISTORY WARMED OVER

1 Esdras was originally written in Greek, sometime between 160 and 50 BCE, probably for the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt. Most of it has parallels in 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. The popular Greek story of the Three Bodyguards is its chief addition from another source. The book begins abruptly and ends in mid-sentence; once it may have been part of a larger work. The story of the Jewish people begins with Josiah's Passover in 621 BCE before the Exile, and continues until after the Return to about 444 BCE.

However, its omissions, internal inconsistencies and contradictions with other sources suggest that its compiler was not chiefly interested in preserving history. Rather, the purpose of the book was to encourage the worship of God, especially at the temple, to accent the holiness demanded by the Law, and to glorify Ezra not just as a "scribe" but also as a "high priest."

ALCOHOLISM

One guard argued that wine is the strongest force in the world.

Why do alcoholic beverages still control people?

Do we give them too much influence in our society?

How should we treat people who suffer from the disease of alcoholism?

What are some of the values of "Twelve Step" programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous?

2 ESDRAS: APOCALYPTIC VISIONS

The seven apocalyptic visions which make up the main part of 2 Esdras were written in Aramaic or Hebrew, probably in Palestine, around 96 CE during the reign of Roman emperor Domitian. Its author used traditional Jewish ideas, perhaps even some written sources, to compose this almost poetic work.

By emphasizing the inability of human minds to understand God's eternal mercies, 2 Esdras tries to move its readers from distress to consolation. Their ultimate hopes were to be based on otherworldly victories which would ensure their eschatological blessings.

Later Christian authors writing in Greek added an introduction (also known as 5 Esdras) around 150 CE and an appendix (6 Esdras) around 270 CE. Today 2 Esdras survives only in a Latin version of a Greek translation. The apocalypses purport to be the visions of Ezra after the Fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Actually they were written as a reaction to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE by the Romans. The author asked how God could permit his chosen people to suffer at the hands of the ungodly.

ENCOURAGING PROPAGANDA

Although 1 & 2 Esdras are quite different kinds of literature, they share an interest in centering their teachings on a famous person, the scribe-priest-prophet Ezra, who had become a symbol of God's determination to reunite his scattered people.

Both 1 Esdras' historiography and 2 Esdras' eschatology envision the restoration of God's people to their rightful home. Both the rewriting of past Jewish history and the apocalyptic visions of the future End Time were calculated to encourage people during disturbing times.

Modern readers need to determine whether such an approach is effective today, and if so under what circumstances. Can or should we rewrite our nation's history to accommodate changing values? Is there any point in pinning our present hopes on extravagant visions of the future?

In any event, the appeal of a "homecoming" continues to be a powerful motivator, especially for oppressed and alienated populations.

1 ESDRAS

- A. *Events Leading to the Exile* (cf. 2 Chr. 35:1-36:21)
 - 1. *King Josiah* (1:1-34)
 - 2. *The Last Kings of Judah* (1:36-58)
- B. *The Decree of King Cyrus* (2:1-15, 16-30; cf. Ezra 1:1-11, 4:7-24)
- C. *The Return under King Darius*
 - 1. *The Tale of the Three Bodyguards* (3:1-4:63)
 - 2. *The Returning Caravan* (5:1-43; Ezra 2:1-67)
 - 3. *First Attempts to Rebuild the Temple* (5:44-73; Ezra 2:68-4:5)
 - 4. *Further Rebuilding Attempts* (6:1-7:15; Ezra 5:1-6:22)
- D. *The Return of Ezra under King Artaxerxes* (cf. Ezra 7:1-10:44)
 - 1. *Introduction and Commission of Ezra* (8:1-24)
 - 2. *Ezra's Return to the Temple* (8:25-67)
 - 3. *Ezra's Shame over the Mixed Marriages* (8:68-90)
 - 4. *The Repentance and Assembly of the Men* (8:91-9:36)
 - 5. *The Reading of the Law* (9:37-55; Neh. 7:73-8:12)

2 ESDRAS

- A. *Fifth Esdras: Anti-Jewish Introduction of Ezra*
 - 1. *Prophetic Indictment of God's People* (1:4-2:9)
 - 2. *Promise of Redemption for a New People* (2:10-48)
- B. *Ezra's Apocalyptic Visions*
 - 1. *Salathiel and Uriel: the Fate of Israel* (3:1-5:20)
 - 2. *More Questions: the Creator's Times* (5:21-6:34)
 - 3. *Further Questions: the Righteous and the Wicked* (6:35-9:25)
 - 4. *The Mourning Woman: Ultimate Consolation* (9:26-10:59)
 - 5. *The Eagle: World History* (11:1-12:39)
 - 6. *The Man from the Sea: Messianic Victory* (13:1-58)
 - 7. *Epilogue: the Legend of Ezra the Scribe* (14:1-48)

DRUG ABUSE

The weird pictures and visions in apocalyptic writings remind some people of drug-induced hallucinations.

Is it a good idea to prohibit all recreational use of drugs?

Should we distinguish between milder drugs such as marijuana, and the highly addictive ones such as heroine and cocaine?

Or should all such drugs be legalized so society can concentrate more on treatment and less on expensive law enforcement?



SINCERE PRAYER

Tobit is full of examples of how God answers the prayers of good people.

In real life does God really answer the prayers of believers so favorably?

What is the purpose of praying? Does prayer change anything?

How should people pray?

Why should we pray?

TOBIT GOOD BOY DOES GOOD

The book of Tobit is a skillfully written short story which includes numerous prayers and conversations which teach religious morals. It includes allusions not only to the earlier Jewish scriptures but also to such extra-biblical sources as the Wisdom of Ahikar and the Fable of the Grateful Dead, as well as elements of Persian mythology.

Although the story is set in 8th century Nineveh, its fictional character is plain from its historical and cultural discrepancies: Tiglathpilesar II, not Shalmaneser, captured Naphtali in 734 BCE; Greek months and coins are mentioned; the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile and the return are all in the past.

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- A. *In Nineveh: Pious but blinded Tobit and his wife Anna send their son Tobias to reclaim a debt (1:1-5:20)*
—includes Tobit's Prayer (3:1-6)
Sarah's Prayer (3:11-15)
and Tobit's Advice (4:3-21)
- B. *In Ecbatana: Accompanied by the angel Raphael, Tobias marries Sarah, the widowed virgin daughter of Raguel and Edna (6:1-11:1)*
—includes Tobias' Prayer (8:4-8)
and Raguel's Prayer (8:15-17)
- C. *Back in Nineveh: Tobit's blindness is cured and Raphael's identity is revealed; then everyone lives piously and happily to old age (11:1-14:14)*
—includes Raphael's Advice (12:6-15)
Tobit's Song of Praise (13:1-16/18)
and Tobit's Final Advice (14:3-11)
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THE REWARDS OF PIETY

Tobit is anonymous and was probably written in Aramaic or Hebrew somewhere in Mesopotamia. However, it has survived chiefly in two Greek versions, which has suggested to some that it originated in Alexandria, Egypt. Although the longer Greek text seems to be more original, most English translations are based on the shorter text.

The book reflects a time around 200-170 BCE, before the Maccabean revolt. It assumes such common orthodox beliefs as the providence of God, the existence of angels, and life after death. It reinforces those beliefs and encourages the practice of piety especially in these areas: *worship*, including temple offerings, prayer and kosher foods; *family obligations*, including respect for parents and spouses; and *charity*, including alms for the poor and burial of the dead.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Modern readers can still appreciate the story's charm and good humor. Whether as men and women today we can still adopt the attitude that divine providence makes everything work out to the good, even for a suffering people, may be debatable.

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JUDITH

A LOVELY LIBERATING LADY



The book of Judith is a novella or short story which includes extensive speeches and prayers which teach religious lessons. It may be based on a folk tale which remembered an actual occasion when Israel was saved by a woman's heroism.

But several historical impossibilities in the book point to its fictional character: Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian king, not an Assyrian, and he lived after Nineveh was destroyed, not before. Furthermore, his campaigns led to the destruction of the First Temple; they did not threaten the Second Temple.

Judith was originally written in Hebrew, probably around 150-125 BCE during the period of the Maccabean successes, but it has survived only in Greek and other translations.

WOMEN CLERGY

Religious groups have not always welcomed female leaders.

Is it appropriate for women to serve as clergy today?

What distinctive talents might women pastors and rabbis bring to their ministries?

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- A. *Nebuchadnezzar sends Holofernes and the Assyrian army to subdue the nations which did not join his previous campaign (1:1-2:13)*
— includes *Nebuchadnezzar's speech to Holofernes (2:4-13)*
- B. *Part One*
- The disobedient vassal nations all surrender to Holofernes (2:14-3:10)*
 - The Jews in Judah-Jerusalem close the mountain passes and pray their temple will be spared (4:1-15) (5:1-6:13)*
 - Holofernes determines to advance against the Jews /*
— includes *Achior's Speech to Holofernes (5:5-21)*
— and *Holofernes' Reply (6:2-9) (6:14-21)*
 - Achior reports the enemy's plans to the people of Bethulia /*
 - Holofernes' army besieges Bethulia & captures its water supply *
 - After a month without water, the people of Bethulia are ready (7:1-18) to surrender (7:19-32)*
- C. *Part Two*
- Judith is introduced (8:1-8) (8:9-10:8)*
 - She offers a plan to defeat the enemy and save the people /*
— includes *Judith's Speech to the Elders (8:11-27)*
— and *her Prayer to God (9:1-14) (10:9-13:10)*
 - Judith is "captured" by Holofernes, and chops off his head!*
— includes *Judith's Speech to Holofernes (11:5-19)*
 - The enemy is routed and Israelites celebrate their victory (13:10-\)*
— includes *Judith's Hymn of Thanksgiving (16:2-17) 16:20)*
 - Judith lives a long happy life (16:21-25)*
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REALISTIC FICTION

The way Judith conflates biblical events and condenses history gives it the quality of a parable, centered on the motifs of power and fear, themes which appeal to basic human emotions of self-preservation and religious nationalism.

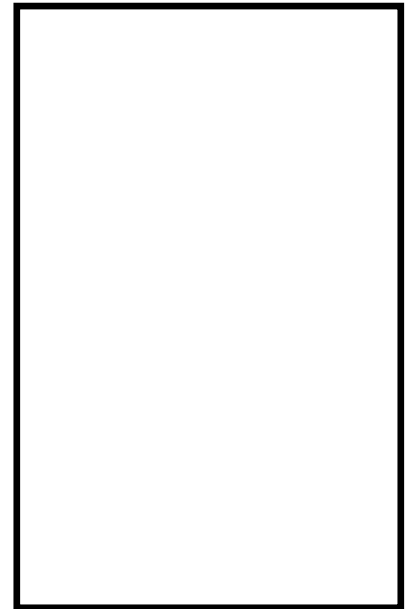
Its original purpose was to encourage resourcefulness on the part of the Jews and to encourage them to remain faithful to God by practicing devout piety, legal and ceremonial strictness, and moral purity of the kind that was later taught by the Pharisees. Its central teaching equates patriotism and religion and affirms that loyalty to God will result in divine protection.

Although fictional, the narrative contains highly realistic passages—such as the descriptions of Judith’s toilet, her kosher foods, and the geography around her town—details which give it plausibility. There are no supernatural occurrences or miracles, nothing out of the realm of possibility. Thus readers can easily identify with the story.

FEMINIST OVERTONES

Although Judith’s character is static, she is not uninteresting. She is pictured as courageous and clever, and she uses her beauty and sexuality to overcome her opponent. Modern readers will need to determine whether this is a chauvinistic deceit or a wise case of matching one’s strength against an enemy’s weakness.

The ancient author obviously meant for the heroine to be a positive example. In any event, the story of Judith has continuing appeal, whether read as a war story, as a suspense tale, or as a religious didactic narrative. However, the truth of its central point, namely, that personal piety results in divine protection, is the sort of idea we must continue to debate.



WISDOM OF SOLOMON MORE GOOD ADVICE



A typical product of late Jewish wisdom literature, the Wisdom of Solomon uses midrashic interpretations to expand upon traditional themes in the Hebrew scriptures, including the history of Israel from the Creation to the Conquest.

But these ideas are developed to the point where Wisdom is personified and the emphasis is put on personal immortality rather than on practical advice. Such developments show the influence of Greek thought, especially the philosophic schools of the Platonists and Stoics.

The book is not a collection of proverbs. Rather, it is a *protreptic*, that is, an appeal to follow a philosophical way of life. This literary form plus other rhetorical devices and a technical vocabulary are evidence of its Hellenistic orientation.

Its literary quality is uneven. The first nine chapters are more carefully written and tend to follow the style of the Septuagint. The last ten are marred by digressions. They often degenerate into bombastic platitudes, and the book ends abruptly without a satisfying conclusion.

OTHER RELIGIONS

Wisdom's polemic against idolatry clearly belittles all other religions. Is this valid today?

Are the traditions of Judaism and Christianity the only "true" religions?

Or do Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Tao, Shinto, Muslim and native religions have valuable insights to offer?

If so, what are they?
If not, why not?

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- A. *Poetical Section: "The Righteous vs. the Irreligious"*
1. *A Call for Righteousness and Wisdom (1:1-15)*
 2. *The Inevitable Death of the Irreligious (1:16-2:24)*
 3. *The Eternal Reward of the Righteous (3:1-5:23)*
 4. *Another Call for the Pursuit of Wisdom (6:1-11)*
- B. *Mixed Section: "The Pursuit of Wisdom"*
1. *Solomon's (?) Admonition to Obtain Wisdom (6:12-25)*
 2. *His Love and Quest for Wisdom (7:1-8:21)*
 3. *His Prayer for Wisdom (9:1-18)*
- C. *Prose Section: "Wisdom and Righteousness in History"*
1. *How Wisdom Helped the Ancestors (10:1-11:4)*
 2. *The Purpose of Divine Punishment (11:5-12:27)*
 3. *The Foolishness of Idolatry (13:1-15:19)*
 4. *How God Treats His People and Their Enemies (16:1-19:22)*
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AN APPEAL TO WISDOM

Wisdom was written in Greek by an orthodox Jew who had studied philosophy, most likely in Alexandria, Egypt, around 100 BCE or even after the beginning of Roman rule in 30 BCE, perhaps as late as 40 CE during Caligula's reign.

Greek philosophy and Hebrew religion are combined to appeal to several types of people: Pious but persecuted Jews could have been encouraged to remain faithful by the promise of an eternal reward. Apostate Jews could have been urged to return by this demonstration that Greek thought can support the religion of their birth. And Gentiles might have been converted by this demonstration of the folly of idolatry.

THE WORSHIP OF KNOWLEDGE

As modern readers we can compare today's veneration of "scientific knowledge" with the ancient veneration of "wisdom," and then we can argue whether this is a healthy or helpful development. Both the ancient wise men and modern scientists base their conclusions on what can be observed and verified by human experience.

We may still debate whether such scientific knowledge is the highest wisdom, because science cannot easily deal with ethical and aesthetic matters.



SIRACH STILL MORE GOOD ADVICE



The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, was written by the man named in the title. He appears to have been a wise man and scribe who taught young men at an academy in Jerusalem around 180 BCE, just prior to the Maccabean revolt.

Ben Sirach's writings were taken to Egypt by his grandson and there translated into Greek around 132 BCE. Although the book is known chiefly from the Septuagint, most of its original Hebrew text has since been recovered.

TRADITIONAL PIETY AND MORALITY

Sirach is a collection of practical advice written largely in verse form interspersed with devotional passages. The material is only loosely arranged and gives the appearance of being lecture notes which were compiled without any overall plan. In the first two sections, which originally may have been published separately, each subsection begins with a prayer or a poem praising wisdom.

Although the topics which are treated—chiefly matters of family, social, and religious behavior—show the influence of popular Greek thought, the author commends traditional Jewish piety and morality. His blending of conventional wisdom and Torah traditions is of the kind that was later developed by the Sadducees.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE

Ancient wisdom not only dealt with broad topics such as truth and loyalty, but also focused on the more practical aspects of social etiquette.

How important are good manners for us today?

Are such customs too limiting or chauvinistic?

How do they help us interact more comfortably within an overpopulated impersonal society?

Is there anything particularly religious or godly about etiquette?

Greek Translator's Prologue

A. *First Section*

1. *Positive advice for prudent living (1:1-20; 1:22-4:10)*
2. *Warnings against imprudent living (4:11-19; 4:20-6:17)*
3. *Warnings against social misconduct (6:18-31; 6:32-14:19)*
4. *Advice on living a godly life (14:20-15:8; 15:9-19:17)*
5. *Pictures of wise and foolish men (19:20-30; 20:1-23:27)*

B. *Second Section*

1. *Comments on family and friends (24:1-22, 23-24; 25:1-32:13)*
2. *Encouragement for justice (32:14-33:3; 33:4-35:20)*
3. *Advice on close companions (36:1-17; 36:18-38:23)*
4. *Summary evaluations of life (38:24-39:11; 39:12-42:14)*

C. *Third Section*

1. *Hymn praising God's creation (42:15-43:33)*
2. *Hymn praising "the Fathers of Old" (44:1-49:16)*
3. *Eulogy for Simon the High Priest (50:1-21)*
4. *Conclusion (50:22-24, 25-29)*

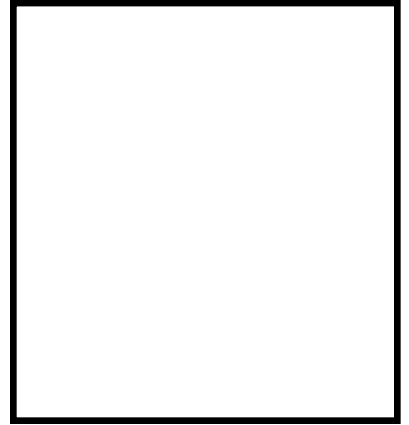
D. *Appendices*

1. *Psalm of thanksgiving (51:1-12)*
 2. *Autobiographical poem for recruiting students (51:13-30)*
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A PUBLIC ADMINISTER'S MANUAL

Sirach reflects a time in which the Jewish social order was highly polarized between rich and poor, powerful and weak, male and female, pious and nonobservant, Jew and Greek. The author writes from the viewpoint of one who serves in some area of public administration.

Modern readers will get the impression that ben Sirach was distrustful of the private business sector. Yet his contention that the real measure of character is not wealth but frugality, hard work, compassion for the poor, honesty and independence still rings true today. We who live in a success-oriented society can find Sirach's regard for humanitarian ideals refreshing and encouraging.



BARAUCH AND THE LETTER OF JEREMIAH ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE CITY



Although attributed to the prophet Jeremiah and his disciple Baruch (who ministered in Jerusalem before and after the city's destruction in 586 BCE), the actual authors of these two books are not known. They were written well after 300 BCE, perhaps as late as 100 BCE -100 CE. Both exist now only in Greek and other translations, but they may have been based on Hebrew or Aramaic originals.

A. *The Book of Baruch*

1. *Introduction (1:1-2)*
2. *A Letter from the Exiles to Jerusalem... (1:3-9, 10-14)*
3. *...with a confession (1:15-2:10)*
4. *...and prayer for the Lord's mercy (2:11-3:8; cf. Dan. 9)*
5. *Poem on "the fountain of Wisdom" (3:9-4:4; cf. Job 28-29)*
6. *Songs of encouragement (4:5-5:9; cf. Ps. Sol. 11)*

B. *The Letter of Jeremiah (6:1-73 in some editions)*

1. *Introduction (6:1)*
2. *Sermon on the foolishness of idolatry (6:2-73;
cf. Jer. 10:1-16, Is. 49:9-20)*

REFUGEES

The fiction of writing a letter from exiles to their homeland is a reminder that today millions of people live as refugees away from their homes.

What are the economic and political factors which force people to leave their homes?

Is there a difference between "refugees" and "exiles"?

How can native residents help refugees prosper in the land of their exile?

BARUCH'S CALL FOR PRUDENCE

The style and contents of Baruch suggest that it was composed of at least three separately authored works which were compiled by a later editor. The first half is a prose writing; the second half is made up of two poetic sections. Its use in the synagogues of upper Syria shows that it was meant to encourage Jewish communities in the Diaspora to remain faithful in their worship of the Lord God and to be prudent in their behavior.

JEREMIAH'S ANTI-IDOL SARCASM

The dozen rather loosely connected paragraphs in the Letter of Jeremiah all ridicule the worship of idols like the Babylonian god Bel or Marduk, and they describe the funeral-like worship of Tammuz, the god of vegetation. This suggests that it originated in the eastern Diaspora. However, its warning not to be attracted to alien cults would have been especially appropriate during the late Greek period, even after 100 CE.

CONTEMPORARY IMPACT

Modern readers have little need for obvious jeremiads against idolatry. Any continuing application must be made by analogy. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort to explore how modern totems and pressures to conform to society's norms continue to shape people's actions. Are ridicule and satire effective means for helping people evaluate their priorities? And if so, what are the positive values which we should inculcate?

The apocryphal letters of Baruch and Jeremiah are examples of one way ancient authors tried to cope with cultural threats to their faith.

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VILLAINS

Every age has villains who seem to embody the worst evils imaginable.

Whom do we characterize as villains today?

Why do we seem to need to identify such enemies?

What does this say about us?

Is anyone ever so completely evil there can be no hope of redemption?

PRAYER OF MANASSEH THE PRAYER OF AN EVIL PERSON

According to 2 Chronicles 33:10-20 (contrary to 2 Kings 21:1-9), Manasseh, the king of Judah, was captured by the Babylonians. While in exile he repented of his evil ways and prayed for forgiveness. God answered his prayer and enabled him to return to Jerusalem, where he undertook many religious reforms. The apocryphal Prayer of Manasseh purports to be the king's prayer.

vv 1-7a | Invocation to God Almighty
vv 7b-12 | Confession of Sins
vv 13-14 | Prayer for Forgiveness
v 15 | Vow of Praise

A BRIEF ORDER FOR CONFESSION

Although not originally part of the Septuagint, the Prayer of Manasseh is found among the Canticles or Odes which are appended to the book of Psalms in many Greek manuscripts. In some versions it is placed after 2 Chronicles. The content of the prayer is typical of late post-exilic Judaism and may date from approximately 100 BCE to 100 CE. It was likely written in Greek somewhere in the Diaspora.

The prayer is a personal lament, similar in form to a traditional psalm of repentance. As such it is a good example of genuine piety and devotion. As modern readers we can still use it with few if any changes in our own personal devotional life.

PSALM 151 ONE MORE SONG

In some copies of the Septuagint an extra psalm is appended to the Psalter. It purports to be a song of David, told in the first person, celebrating his appointment to become the anointed king of Israel (vv. 1-5) and his victory over Goliath (vv. 6-7; see 1 Sam 16-17).

The Greek version is a shortened form of two more original Hebrew poems which have been recovered from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The psalm plays upon the traditional picture of David as a shepherd-poet-warrior-king.

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SUPER HEROES

The Maccabees are pictured as super heroes who surmounted overwhelming odds to liberate their people.

Who are today's heroes?

What are some of the qualities people admire in contemporary society?

1 & 2 MACCABEES THE HAMMER STRIKES AGAIN

The Syrian Greek Seleucid rulers, who gained control of Palestine from the Egyptian Greek Ptolemies in 198 BCE, tried to force the Jews into adopting Greek cultural and religious practices. Antiochus IV Epiphanes (who ruled from 175 to 163 BCE) was especially determined to force them to abandon their traditional religion.

1 & 2 Maccabees tell how Mattathias and his sons Judas (who led the movement from 166 to 160 BCE), Jonathan (160-142 BCE) and Simon (142-134 BCE) led a revolt against the Seleucids and established an independent Jewish state under the Hasmonian kings and priests.

Centuries before, the people of Israel had been challenged by the alien religions of the East, especially the fertility cults of the Canaanites and the Phoenicians. The Maccabean conflict chronicles a similar challenge, this time in the guise of Greek culture from the West. Ironically, the Maccabean authors used sophisticated Hellenistic literary forms to combat Greek influence.

CHRONICLES OF THE WARS

1 Maccabees was first written in Hebrew but now exists only in a Greek translation. It appears to have originated sometime during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE), probably around 100, and exalted the Hasmonian dynasty. Its high regard for the Law of Moses and the worship at the temple in Jerusalem suggests that its outlook was compatible with the teachings of the later Sadducees.

The book is a comparatively straightforward historical account, mostly of military engagements. The sources on which it is based may include the following:

- letters and official documents,
- a Seleucid chronicle,
- a biography of Judas,
- a Mattathias tradition,
- the chronicles of the high priests,
- and some poetic sources.

1 MACCABEES

- A. *Antiochus' Oppression and Mattathias' Revolt (1:1-2:70)*
 - B. *The Wars under Judas Maccabee*
 - 1. *leading to the Rededication of the Temple (3:1-4:61)*
 - 2. *leading to the Death of Judas (5:1-9:22)*
 - C. *The Wars under Jonathan*
 - 1. *leading to the Security of Jerusalem (9:23-10:66)*
 - 2. *leading to the Death of Jonathan (10:67-12:53)*
 - D. *The Wars under Simon the High Priest*
 - 1. *leading to Independence for the Nation (13:1-14:15)*
 - 2. *leading to the Death of Simon (14:16-16:24)*
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A MORE EMOTIONAL TELLING

2 Maccabees was written in literary Greek, perhaps in Alexandria, Egypt, sometime during the 1st century BCE. Its emphasis on personal piety and worship, coupled with explicit mention of such doctrines as divine providence, divine retribution, and the resurrection of the dead, mark it as a product of the school of the Hasidim, who were the forerunners of the Pharisees.

The author of 2 Maccabees abridged the five-volume work of Jason of Cyrene and supplemented it with other letters, documents, and narrative material. (The summary passages marked with an asterisk in the following outline correspond to the endings of each of Jason's five books, which are otherwise unknown today.)

Religious and miraculous elements have been amplified in this book, and some of the events are not recorded in their proper chronological order. These factors suggest that 2 Maccabees is not so much a history as a theological defense of Hasidic principles based largely on the agendas outlined in Deuteronomy 28-30 and Judges 2:11-23.

It has the style of a "pathetic history" insofar as the descriptions of the deaths of the righteous martyrs and the evil kings are designed to evoke the reader's feelings of compassion and contempt.

2 MACCABEES

Two Prefixed Letters (1:1-9, 1:10-2:18)

The Epitomizer's Prologue (2:19-32)

- A. *Blessing: Jerusalem during Onais' Priesthood (3:1-40*)*
- B. *Sin: Hellenization under Jason and Menelaus (4:1-5:10)*
- C. *Punishment: Antiochus' Reprisals (5:11-6:17)*
- D. *Turning Point: The Death of the Martyrs (6:18-7:42*)*
- E. *Judgement and Salvation: The Victory of Judas*
 - 1. *the Revolt of Judas Maccabee (8:1-10:9*)*
 - 2. *the Campaign against Eupator (10:10-13:26*)*
 - 3. *the Victory over Nicanor (14:1-15:36*)*

The Epitomizer's Epilogue (15:37-39)

CULTURE VS. CONVICTION

Modern readers can still enjoy the story of the struggle of an oppressed minority which overcomes nearly insurmountable odds to gain victory and independence. The rededication of the temple on the 25th of Chislev in 165 BCE is celebrated annually in the joyous Feast of Hanukkah during December.

Today we may well want to explore the many ways our culture impacts our religious celebrations, and vice versa. Deeply held religious traditions can be re-shaped or even lost under the pressures of contemporary social forces.

THE PRICE OF MARTYRDOM

History has always honored martyrs who were willing to die for a noble cause.

Others have objected that one can always do more good alive than dead.

Who are today's martyrs?

Are there any values that are now worth dying for?