

# **The Apocrypha: TOBIT, JUDITH, 1 & 2 MACCABEES**

## St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

### **The Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books**

The official listing of the books of the Old Testament took over a thousand years to compile. At the end of this period additional books and parts of books were discovered but were deemed non-canonical (non-biblical). However because the Jews respected these otherwise religious books, they hid them away in secret places to decay naturally, and thus avoid having to destroy them intentionally. The collection of these books became known as the Apocrypha (“hidden away”). Since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), of the approximately sixteen books or parts of books that are apocryphal, the Catholic Church accepts seven to be inspired: Tobit, Judith, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom and Baruch, and certain additions to the Books of Jeremiah, Esther and Daniel. While Protestants follow the Jewish canon that excludes them, these seven *deuterocanonical* (“second canon”) books are included in Catholic Bibles.

### **Tobit**

We don’t know who wrote the Book of Tobit, but he may have been a Jew living in Egypt during the Diaspora (period of Babylonian and Assyrian exile) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Given its exact details of geography and chronology, Tobit is best described as a recounting of events that really happened to one family. However we cannot exclude the possibility that some passages of Tobit are fictitious; for the author’s ultimate purpose was to convey spiritual and moral teaching rather than history alone.

Tobit himself was a devout and wealthy Israelite living among the captives deported to Nineveh from the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. A man of exceptional piety and charity, Tobit had buried some of his fellow Jews who had been executed by the king. Soon after this selfless act, Tobit loses nearly everything: his eyesight, his friends, the support of his wife, and his property. Under such severe stress Tobit begs God to allow him to die because life holds no more promise for him.

At around the same time Tobit’s relative, Raguel, is saddened to see his daughter Sarah reproached by her maids. Sarah’s maids mock her because each of her seven husbands died on their successive wedding nights, slain it was believed by the demon, Asmodeus. Like Tobit, Sarah prays for God to end her life. God listens to both Tobit and Sarah and comes to their aid.

Indeed God sends his angel Raphael to accompany and guide Tobit’s son Tobias to Raguel’s house. Along the way the angel saves Tobias from a dangerous fish and suggests Tobias marry Sarah. He also gives him the means to cure his father’s blindness. In fact everything that the angel Raphael predicts happens: Tobias marries Sarah, who is now freed from demonic influence; and Tobit miraculously recovers his sight as Raphael returns with the young married couple to Nineveh.

The story of Tobit teaches that God is Father Who never abandons us; that God is in fact watching over us night and day because He desires only our good. Tobit also shows that angels are the protectors of men.

Furthermore Tobit’s conversation with his son stresses the purity of mind and heart which must inform a marriage (4:12ff). Finally Tobit teaches the importance of love for one’s neighbor, which should lead us to act justly (4:15), to accept the advice of prudent people, and to praise God always, asking Him to keep us on the right road.

### **Judith**

The author of the Book of Judith was likely a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Jew who was among those who returned from Babylon. By then Jerusalem had a sizable population and the Temple had been rebuilt.

Although the Book of Judith is a free-wheeling narrative with a moral tale, it recounts an historical event. And despite the lack of precise chronology—for example, King Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 B.C.) is described as king of Nineveh when Nineveh was known to have been already destroyed in 612—what matters to Judith is the period after the rebuilding of the Temple (4:3-13; 5:18). At that time there were no signs of idolatry (8:18) and the Law was being rigorously observed (12:2-9). Thus Judith was written to get across a message: that faithfulness to Yahweh saves Israel from every danger (8:11-27; 16:1-7).

In the Book of Judith the antagonist is the general, Holofernes, of Persia. Holofernes serves the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar who will eventually conquer Judah and destroy Jerusalem in 586 B.C. When both the Assyrians and the Babylonians do invade, they are seen as instruments of divine judgment upon God's faithless people.

Judith, a name which means "the Jewish woman," symbolizes the Jewish people who stay faithful to God. Judith's plan was to use deception to prevent the attack from Holofernes. Judith removes her widow's garments and clothes herself in finery and jewels. She then makes a show of herself which everyone notices, including the enemy soldiers who are smitten by the sight of her. Predictably, Holofernes invites her into his tent where she plies him with wine and cheese. When he falls asleep in a drunken stupor, Judith cuts off his head. Quickly returning to her camp with the general's head, Israel's army is inspired to continue the fight. Holofernes' forces are quickly dispersed.

Therefore in the spirit of a moral tale Judith is the response of the righteous compared to the response of the wicked: the righteous see beauty and appreciate it; the wicked see beauty and desire to possess it. Holofernes wants to take Judith to bed, and Judith uses this to engineer his downfall. Some would suggest her deception was a "seduction," which is accurate to a point; but nowhere in the story is there indication that she committed sin. It was her beauty that tricked him. Therefore Judith's deception was considered lawful against an aggressor. Indeed by beheading Holofernes without compromising her honor, Judith achieves a double victory—moral and patriotic.

In the heroine Judith, God summons strength from the very weakness of His people. Judith is the instrument of God's justice, for her victory over Holofernes represents the just reward for her trusting prayer and exemplary life of penance.

Finally Scripture scholars believe the Book of Judith was written as a pious reflection on the meaning of the yearly observance of Passover; for it draws its inspiration from the Book of Exodus in which God intervenes to save His Chosen People.

### **1 & 2 Maccabees**

In 323 B.C., Alexander the Great died and his kingdom split into several smaller kingdoms, primarily with the Egyptians in the south and the Greeks in the north. These two powers periodically fought over the land between their kingdoms, that is, Israel. In time the Greeks proved to be the stronger; for they had defeated the Persians of Babylon who earlier had allowed the Jews to return home. Now the Greeks controlled most of the land in and around Macedonia (northern Greece) to the north, Egypt to the south and India in the East.

1 Maccabees is a chronicle of these events. Scholars believe that the author was a Palestinian Jew who was intimately familiar with the events. Whoever the author was, he opposed the Hellenization, that is, the forced adoption of Greek culture and language. Indeed the author admired the Jewish resistance against Hellenization led by Mattathias, his son Judas and his brothers, from the clan of the Hasmoneans.

Even so, by then Greek language, customs, and polytheism (belief in many gods) had become widespread and were beginning to threaten the beliefs of the Jews. Moreover the Jews and their Temple treasury were a target for Greek kings looking to enforce their beliefs and increase their power and wealth. Still, there were some Greek kings who allowed the Jews to worship in peace as long as they paid tribute; but for most of the kings in this period, it was not enough. This was what led to the Maccabean revolt.

In 168 B.C., King Antiochus IV of Syria, after a successful battle with Egypt, entered and plundered Jerusalem. One year later, on December 16, Antiochus erected an altar to Zeus on top of the Temple's main altar and there sacrificed a pig. Following this outrageous desecration of the Temple—"the abomination of desolation"—(Daniel 9:27), Antiochus outlawed the Hebrew Scriptures and ordered the Jews to surrender

their copies to be burned (Dan 11:31). Antiochus banned sabbath observance, all Jewish rituals, feasts, and the rite of circumcision. Everywhere Antiochus set up altars to Greek gods for sacrifices. Then, having declared martial law he converted Jerusalem into a fortress city and announced that from now on all things would be Greek, that is, Hellenized. To this end Antiochus appointed Jason, a Hellenized Jew as high priest to enforce this new Greek way. Jason promptly abolished Jerusalem's system of government by which the Jewish priests ruled the people. In time, for reasons economic and political, many Jews in fact willingly adopted the Greek lifestyle and culture which, not surprisingly, eventually led some to the total abandonment of their Jewish faith.

One day in keeping with this forced Hellenization, Antiochus sent officers and his personal representative to Modin, a small, rural village in northwestern Judea. Modin was the home of an elderly priest, Mattathias, who lived there with his five sons: John, Simon, Judas, Eleazer, and Jonathan. When the king's officers arrived they erected a small, pagan altar and ordered Mattathias to offer sacrifice in full view of all the villagers. Mattathias refused: **"Though all the nations that are under the king's dominion obey him, . . . yet will I, and my sons, and my brethren, walk in the covenant of our fathers"** (1 Maccabees 19-20). However another Jew, fearing violence against the people, volunteered to offer the sacrifice in Mattathias' place. In a rage, Mattathias killed him and destroyed the altar. Mattathias' sons then attacked and killed the king's officers and representative. This was now open rebellion: **"Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: 'Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me'"** (1 Maccabees 2:27)! Mattathias, his sons and a number of followers fled to the mountain wilderness. Others who had been hiding also joined them, instantly forming a guerrilla army. Soon Mattathias and his men began to launch raids against their fellow Jews that had abandoned the faith, tearing down altars and executing anyone who had worshipped pagan gods.

At some point Mattathias got word that his followers were so zealous for the faith that they swore they would rather die at the hands of the king's soldiers than violate the Sabbath by defending themselves (1 Maccabees 2:29-38). In fact, that is what happened. When an estimated one thousand strictly observant Jews, including women and children, were attacked on the Sabbath, they refused to fight and were all killed. After this tragedy, Mattathias decreed that Jews could in fact defend themselves on the Sabbath. Otherwise, he explained, their enemies would always attack on the holy day and God's Chosen People would all perish (1 Maccabees 2:39-41).

After Mattathias' death in 168 B.C., his son Judas continued the war. In the key battle for Lysias, near Emmaus, and with only 10,000 poorly equipped rebels, Judas defeated 60,000 infantrymen and 5,000 cavalry (1 Maccabees 4:30-33). This victory earned Judas the nickname *maccabeus* ("the hammer") because of his success in "hammering" enemy forces into the ground. Judas and his army then marched into Jerusalem, ordered the Temple cleansed and a new altar built in its place. Then **"Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of the dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev"** (1 Maccabees 4:59). This "festival of lights" to commemorate the re-dedication of the altar and the illumination of the Temple is the origin of *Hanukkah*.

After Judas established a limited peace, the Jews suffered local persecution which provoked a new twenty-year period of warfare (12:1-5). After one such battle, Judas and members of his military forces went to collect the bodies of their fallen comrades in the city of Adullam (central Israel), and discovered that the men had under their tunics **"sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear"** (2 Maccabees 12: 40).

**Amulets** were often a charm or piece of jewelry that bore either the images of idols or were tokens consecrated to idols, which were believed to possess certain magical powers of protection. Since the weak were more likely to suffer from evil influences than the strong, it was usually only women and children who wore them. In fact, amulets have a long history in Jewish practice, and their use was accepted even by some ancient rabbis who believed in their power.

Judas and his men took up a collection to be sent to Jerusalem and prayed for the fallen men, that the soldiers might be forgiven this transgression: **“For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin”** (2 Maccabees 12:44-45).

This is the first known statement of the doctrine that a sin offering and prayer make atonement for the sins of the dead, justified by the hope that the dead would rise again. Similarly in 2 Timothy 1:16-18, St. Paul appears to be praying for his recently deceased friend, Onesiphorus: **“May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed; he was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me – may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day – and you well know what services he rendered at Ephesus.”** These Scripture passages form the basis for the Church’s teaching on Purgatory and the worthiness of prayers for the dead.

After Judas’ death, his brother Jonathan succeeded him as commander of the army and high priest. The one who provoked the revolt in the first place, Antiochus IV, contracted a painful wasting disease while on a military campaign and died in agony. Meanwhile within Israel there were Hellenists who refused to give up. Unhappy at the turn of events which returned the “old-fashioned” Jews to power, they repeatedly invited the Greeks to send in more troops. Such battles continued for a generation under leaders from Judas’ clan, the Hasmoneans.

In 141 B.C., the last of Judas’ brothers, Simon, led a delegation to Rome and successfully won official recognition for the Hasmonean dynasty, ushering in a brief period of relative peace and independence (1 Maccabees 14:41). However the successes of the Hasmonean dynasty were soon overshadowed by murderous corruption. There was constant infighting and fratricidal killings among themselves as various groups began to splinter off from the family. Simon himself was assassinated along with his two of his sons by Ptolemy, the governor of Jericho. In a few decades the feast of Hanukkah itself was largely ignored. In fact, it was to resolve infighting between two rival factions that Pompey, the Roman general and statesman, was invited to Jerusalem to mediate the dispute. This eventually led to Rome’s control of Israel (Palestine) and the end of her short-lived independence.

In time the Sadducees and Pharisee emerged from the dissipated Hasmonean dynasty to govern Israel, now under Roman occupation. Still, the people of Israel saw in Hanukkah a message of hope that “new Maccabees” would one day rise and their independence would be restored.



ancient Jewish amulets



Judas Maccabees and his men discover amulets on the bodies of their fallen soldiers.