



# APOCRYPHA: TOBIT, JUDITH, 1 & 2 MACCABEES



## The Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books

The official listing of the books of the Old Testament took over a thousand years to compile, during which time some books were not included in the final Hebrew Bible. The books left out were respected but relegated to the *apocryphal* (“hidden away”). That is, in ancient times the Jews would place religious books of uncertain authenticity in hidden places for them to decay naturally, and thus avoid having to burn what would otherwise *appear* to be sacred writings.

Of the approximately sixteen books or parts of books that are apocryphal, the Catholic Church considers seven to be inspired: Tobit, Judith, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom, Baruch, Lamentations of Jeremiah, and certain additions to the Books of Esther and Daniel. Since 1546 the Church has affirmed the legitimacy of these seven *deuterocanonical* (“second canon”) books and includes them 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 the book’s geographical detail and historical chronology, scholars judge that the Book of Tobit describes an episode of something that really happened to one family. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that some passages of Tobit are fictitious; for the author’s purpose was to convey spiritual and moral teaching rather than a 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 properties. 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 a relative, Raguel, is saddened to see his own daughter Sarah reproached by her maids 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 sends his angel Raphael to accompany and guide Tobit’s son Tobias to the house of Raguel. 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 is also an historical event. And despite the lack of a precise chronology of events—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 General Holofernes of Persia. Holofernes serves the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar who will eventually conquer Judah and destroy Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Both the Assyrians and the Babylonians invade Israel from the north. With these invasions the Assyrians and Babylonians become instruments of divine judgment upon God's faithless people.

Judith, whose name means "the Jewish woman," symbolizes the Jewish people who stay faithful to God. Judith's plan was to prevent the attack from Holofernes by deception. Judith removes her widow's garments and dresses in fine clothes and jewels. She then makes a show of herself, which everyone notices—including the enemy soldiers who are smitten by the sight of her. 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 the general's desire 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 with her honor still intact, Judith achieves a moral and patriotic victory.

In 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. As such it draws its inspiration from the Exodus narrative that portrays the special intervention of God for the preservation of His Chosen People.

## **1 & 2 Maccabees**

In 323 B.C, Alexander the Great died and his kingdom split into several smaller kingdoms, but primarily with the Egyptians in the south and the Greeks in the north. These two powers periodically fought over the land between their kingdoms, which would be Israel. In time the Greeks proved to be the stronger, for earlier they had defeated the Persians of Babylon who had allowed the Jews to return home. Now the Greeks controlled most of the land between 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 which unfolded. Whoever the author was, he opposed the Hellenization, that is, the forced adoption of Greek culture and language. In fact, the author admired the Jewish revolutionaries led by Mattathias, his son Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, from the clan of the Hasmoneans.

At that time the 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 themselves and their Temple treasury were a target for Greek kings looking to enforce their beliefs and increase

their power and wealth. During this period some Greek kings allowed the Jews to worship in peace as long as they paid tribute; but for others, this 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, Antiochus outlawed the Hebrew Scriptures and ordered the Jews to surrender their copies to be burned (Daniel 11:31). Antiochus further banned all Jewish rituals, sacrifices, Sabbaths, feasts, and the rite of circumcision. Everywhere Antiochus set up altars to Greek gods for sacrifice. 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. Over the following years, 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 the man. 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 and 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 who had abandoned the faith, tearing down altars and executing any Jew who 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 in self-defense (1 Maccabees 2:29-38). In fact, that is what happened. When an estimated 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 certainly 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 20 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*. Judas' brother, Jonathan, who would later succeed Judas as commander of the army, became the new high priest.

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 a charm or piece of jewelry that either bore the images of idols or were consecrated to idols. They were believed to possess certain magical powers of protection. Since the weak were more likely to suffer from evil influences and demons than the strong, it was usually only women and children who wore such means of protection. Amulets have a long history in Jewish practice, and their use was accepted by the ancient rabbis who appeared also to believe in their power.

Judas and his men prayed for the fallen and took up a collection to be sent to Jerusalem, that they may 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 a dead person, his 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 prayers for the dead.

A year after the Maccabees’ triumph at the Temple, the Jews retained a measure of autonomy. Such peace was further ensured when Antiochus IV contracted a painful wasting disease while on a military campaign and died in agony.

Still, Hellenists within Israel refused to give up their fight. 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’ own clan, the Hasmoneans. Eventually with the death of Judas’ brother, Simon, the last son of Mattathias, the Maccabean Revolt came to an end in 134 B.C.

In fact the victories of the Hasmonean clan were soon overshadowed by corruption. There was constant infighting and even fratricidal killings as various groups began to splinter off from them. In a few decades the feast of Hanukkah itself came to be largely ignored. In fact, it was to resolve infighting between two rival factions for high priest that Pompey (Roman general and statesman) was invited to Jerusalem to settle the dispute, which led to the Roman conquest of Palestine and the destruction of the successors to the Hasmoneans, the Hasidim.

In time the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots emerged from the remnants of these families and inherited much of the religious power vacuum left by the Hasmoneans. Then, with Rome in power, the people saw in Hanukkah a message of hope that “new Maccabees” would one day rise and independence would finally be restored.