

Introduction to the Apocrypha – 2 Maccabees
Session Three – Martyrs



Martyrdom of the Maccabees

Oil on Canvas by Antonio Ciseri, 1852 – 63 in the Church of Saint Felicità, Florence

Types of Literature in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books;
A Theological Reflection;
Martyred Mother with Seven Sons;
The Second Book of Maccabees (5:1 – 7:42)

Types of Literature in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

Historical Fiction

Tobit (*Diaspora*)

Judith (*Judah*)

Susanna (*Diaspora*)

Bel and the Dragon (*Diaspora*)

3 Maccabees (*concerns suffering of Jewish people in Egypt under Ptolemaic rulers –
half century before the rise of the Maccabees*)

Additions to Esther

Devotional Writings

Prayer of Manasseh (*hymnic lament*)
The Prayer of Azariah (*psalm – liturgical in form*)
The Song of the Three Jews (*psalm – liturgical in form*)
Psalm 151 (*psalm*)

Letters

Letter of Jeremiah (*perhaps a model for New Testament compilers*)

Apocalyptic

2 Esdras (*uses metaphoric language, symbolic numbers and angelic messengers who reveal hidden information*)

Wisdom literature (Didactic)

The Wisdom of Solomon – (*Greek literary style – probably from Alexandria, Egypt*)

The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach (Sirach or Ecclesiasticus) –

(originally written in Hebrew. Similar in style to Proverbs)

4 Maccabees (*Greek philosophical treatise addressed to Jews on the supremacy of reason over the passions of the body and soul.*)

Baruch (*Mixture of kinds. May have been originally written in Hebrew*)

Histories

1 Esdras (*summarizes 2 Chronicles 35 – 36 and Ezra and Nehemiah*)

1 Maccabees (*Seleucid persecution and rebellion and rise of Maccabees*) 2 Maccabees
(*“Pathetic history” used to stimulate emotions of readers*)

– from the New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha – New Revised Standard Version

A Theological Reflection

In 2 Maccabees 6:12 – 17 the author interrupts his catalogue of martyrdoms to offer a theological interpretation of the sufferings being endured by Jews. He regards them as a divine discipline for the people and insists that God never abandons his people. Rather, they are God’s way of correcting his people promptly, so that they will not persist in their sins and fall more deeply into even greater sins. While God allows other nations too reach the full measure of sinfulness and will punish them severely then, it is a sign of God’s care and mercy to punish his people right away, thus saving them from greater sins. In this way it is possible to find God’s loving kindness and mercy even in the midst of the terrible sufferings of the people of God.

– Daniel J. Harrington (First and Second Maccabees, New Collegeville Bible Commentary, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2012)

Martyred Mother with Seven Sons

The book of 2 Maccabees tells the story of a family of seven sons and an unnamed mother who sacrifice their lives in the name of religious freedom. King Antiochus IV of the Seleucid empire outlaws observance of Jewish holidays and worship. When the family is arrested for breaking these laws, they are tortured by the King who attempts to feed them swine flesh. The mother, who acts with a woman's reasoning and a man's courage, encourages her sons to refuse to obey the King and all choose martyrdom. The death of the family is the culmination of a martyrology that lasts from 2 Macc 6:37–38; 8:3–5.

According to 2 Maccabees, in the second century B.C.E. the Seleucid king Antiochus IV outlaws temple worship, observance of Sabbaths and holy days, circumcision, and the keeping of Torah, and rules that the Jews who will not adopt Greek customs are to die (2 Macc 6:9). The martyrology in 2 Macc 6:7–7:42 (the first of its kind in the Bible) lists stories of those who choose death over apostasy. The last martyr is the unnamed mother who dies after witnessing each of her seven sons cruelly tortured. Her family story appears here in 7:1–42 and in a considerably expanded version in 4 Maccabees. Exactly where the martyrdoms in 2 Maccabees take place is debated. No scene other than Jerusalem and Judea is ever established in the narrative, yet Antioch is a possible setting for chap. 7 since the king seems so thoroughly on his own turf.

The 2 Maccabees 7 version of the martyr family story opens with the arrest of the seven brothers and their mother, who are beaten in an effort to force them to eat swine's flesh (prohibited by Lev 11:7 – 8). The first six sons each defy the king and are cruelly tortured. The six brothers' exchanges with Antiochus IV, the king (7:2–19), build a coherent argument, which is arranged chiasmatically (three elements and their reverse): (A) Jewish refusal of the king's command results in suffering and death; (B) Jewish hope in eternal life is born of serving *the King*; (C) Jewish belief in bodily resurrection makes mortal life meaningless; (C') for the gentile king there will be no resurrection to life; (B') for this mortal king and his descendants there is no hope; (A') the king's "fight against God" (7:19) will not go unpunished. God, not the gentile king, is in charge of the happenings.

Attention then turns to the mother (7:20–23), "especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory" (7:20). Because her hope was in the Lord, she had encouraged each of her sons, in Aramaic or Hebrew, to persevere. "Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage" (7:21). Addressing these sons—not Antiochus—she claims not to comprehend how life came to them in her womb, even as she expresses confidence in the Creator, who "will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws" (7:23). What mother, beholding the brutal deaths of six sons, could speak such words?

Antiochus interprets her words, which he cannot understand since they are not in his language, as reproach, and so appeals to her seventh and youngest son that he will make him rich and will befriend him if he will but turn away from the ways of his ancestors (7:24). When the youngest will not listen, Antiochus calls the mother and urges her to persuade her son (7:25). The mother leans close to her remaining child and, speaking only to him, urges him to take pity on her and accept death (7:27–29).

Three matters in her words merit notice: (1) the mother speaks only to her family members, never the king; (2) the mother remarks in passing that she had nursed her son for three years; (3) God creates out of nothing, which may reflect the philosophical argument *creatio ex nihilo*, or more likely, with 7:11, 22–23, belief that life comes from the Creator of the world.

While his mother was still speaking, her youngest says to the king, “What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king’s command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses” (7:30). Repeating much of what his brothers said as they faced their deaths, the seventh brother claims that the king will not go unpunished, that suffering is discipline for human sinfulness, and that reconciliation with God is at hand (7:31–36). Antiochus falls into a rage and treats the youngest brother worse than the others (7:39). “So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord” (7:40).

“Last of all, the mother died, after her sons” (7:41). With only this brief statement the mother’s death is recorded.

Antiochus’s brutal efforts are completely ineffective. Death has lost its power in the face of obedience to the laws of the ancestors and belief in God’s mercy and resurrection of the dead. Resurrection cancels fears of earthly death for faithful Jews. Which sins merit martyrdom is a question left unanswered. Vengeance and vindication belong to God alone—not the earthly king, Antiochus.

2 Maccabees, like 4 Maccabees, shows that *eusebes logismos*, “reason adhering to the law,” triumphs over human emotions (see 4 Macc 1:16–19). Those who might be expected to be weak show themselves strong in holding fast to the teachings of the Torah.

Ironically, the king is the only one in the story who loses control. The author’s claim that the mother bore the deaths of her sons with good courage because of her hope in the Lord and the reinforcement of “her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage” (7:20–21) reflects the Greek cultural norm, mediated through Hellenism, that courage and control are distinctively masculine virtues. Thus praise comes for being like a man. This mother, unlike her counterpart in Jeremiah 15:5–9 did not swoon, nor is she disgraced by her children or her own actions. She is mother of a martyr family that was unified in facing death, with no husband or father offering protection. The unexplained absence of her husband makes her a virtual widow.

Courage such as hers and that of her sons won God's mercy and made possible the victories of Judas Maccabeus.

The martyrology, set in Judea and Jerusalem, that stretches from 2 Macc 6:37–38; 8:3–5, beginning with the deaths of the circumcising mothers and climaxing with the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons, now comes to an end. Antiochus and his ideology do not win the day. Two Jewish women, Sabbath observers assembled in caves, an old man (Eleazar), seven brothers, and a single mother have shown conclusively that God disciplines the faithful, but never withdraws mercy.

- *Toni Craven (from Jewish Women's Archive)*

Second Maccabees – Chapters Five, Six and Seven

Chapter 5

¹ About this time Antiochus made his second invasion of Egypt.² And it happened that, for almost forty days, there appeared over all the city golden-clad cavalry charging through the air, in companies fully armed with lances and drawn swords—³ troops of cavalry drawn up, attacks and counterattacks made on this side and on that, brandishing of shields, massing of spears, hurling of missiles, the flash of golden trappings, and armor of all kinds.⁴ Therefore everyone prayed that the apparition might prove to have been a good omen.

⁵ When a false rumor arose that Antiochus was dead, Jason took no fewer than a thousand men and suddenly made an assault on the city. When the troops on the wall had been forced back and at last the city was being taken, Menelaus took refuge in the citadel.⁶ But Jason kept relentlessly slaughtering his compatriots, not realizing that success at the cost of one's kindred is the greatest misfortune but imagining that he was setting up trophies of victory over enemies and not over compatriots.⁷ He did not, however, gain control of the government; in the end, he got only disgrace from his conspiracy and fled again into the country of the Ammonites.⁸ Finally, he met a miserable end. Accused before Aretas the ruler of the Arabs, fleeing from city to city, pursued by everyone, hated as a rebel against the laws, and abhorred as the executioner of his country and his compatriots, he was cast ashore in Egypt.⁹ There he who had driven many from their own country into exile died in exile, having embarked to go to the Spartans in hope of finding protection because of their kinship.¹⁰ He who had cast out many to lie unburied had no one to mourn for him; he had no funeral of any sort and no place in the tomb of his ancestors.

¹¹ When news of what had happened reached the king, he took it to mean that Judea was in revolt. So, raging inwardly, he left Egypt and took the city by storm.¹² He commanded his soldiers to cut down relentlessly everyone they met and to kill those who went into their houses.¹³ Then there was massacre of young and old, destruction of boys, women, and children, and slaughter of young girls and

infants. ¹⁴ Within the total of three days eighty thousand were destroyed, forty thousand in hand-to-hand fighting, and as many were sold into slavery as were killed.

¹⁵ Not content with this, Antiochus dared to enter the most holy temple in all the world, guided by Menelaus, who had become a traitor both to the laws and to his country. ¹⁶ He took the holy vessels with his polluted hands and swept away with profane hands the votive offerings that other kings had made to enhance the glory and honor of the place. ¹⁷ Antiochus was elated in spirit and did not perceive that the Lord was angered for a little while because of the sins of those who lived in the city and that this was the reason he was disregarding the holy place. ¹⁸ But if it had not happened that they were involved in many sins, this man would have been flogged and turned back from his rash act as soon as he came forward, just as Heliodorus had been, whom King Seleucus sent to inspect the treasury. ¹⁹ But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place but the place for the sake of the nation. ²⁰ Therefore the place itself shared in the misfortunes that befell the nation and afterward participated in its benefits, and what was forsaken in the wrath of the Almighty was restored again in all its glory when the great Lord became reconciled.

²¹ So Antiochus carried off eighteen hundred talents from the temple and hurried away to Antioch, thinking in his arrogance that he could sail on the land and walk on the sea, because his mind was elated. ²² He left governors to oppress the people: at Jerusalem, Philip, by birth a Phrygian and in character more barbarous than the man who appointed him; ²³ and at Gerizim, Andronicus; and besides these Menelaus, who lorded it over his compatriots worse than the others did. In his malice toward the Jewish citizens, ²⁴ Antiochus sent Apollonius, the captain of the Mysians, with an army of twenty-two thousand and commanded him to kill all the grown men and to sell the women and boys as slaves. ²⁵ When this man arrived in Jerusalem, he pretended to be peaceably disposed and waited until the holy Sabbath day; then, finding the Jews not at work, he ordered his troops to parade under arms. ²⁶ He put to the sword all those who came out to see them, then rushed into the city with his armed warriors and killed great numbers of people.

²⁷ But Judas Maccabeus, with about nine others, got away to the wilderness and kept himself and his companions alive in the mountains as wild animals do; they continued to live on what grew wild, so that they might not share in the defilement.

Chapter 6

¹ Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their ancestors and no longer to live by the laws of God, ² also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and to call it the temple of Olympian Zeus and to call the one in Gerizim Zeus-the-Friend-of-Strangers, as the people who live in that place are known.

³ Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. ⁴ For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the nations, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. ⁵ The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws. ⁶ People could neither keep the Sabbath nor observe the festivals of their ancestors nor so much as confess themselves to be Jews.

⁷ On the monthly celebration of the king's birthday, the Jews were taken, under bitter constraint, to partake of the sacrifices, and when a festival of Dionysus was celebrated, they were compelled to wear wreaths of ivy and to walk in the procession in honor of Dionysus. ⁸ At the suggestion of the people of Ptolemais, a decree was issued to the neighboring Greek cities that they should adopt the same policy toward the Jews and make them partake of the sacrifices ⁹ and should kill those who did not choose to change over to Greek customs. One could see, therefore, the misery that had come upon them. ¹⁰ For example, two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. They publicly paraded them around the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then hurled them down headlong from the wall. ¹¹ Others who had assembled in the caves nearby in order to observe the seventh day secretly were betrayed to Philip and were all burned together, because their piety kept them from defending themselves, in view of their regard for that most holy day.

¹² Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. ¹³ In fact, it is a sign of great kindness not to let the impious alone for long but to punish them immediately. ¹⁴ For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins, but he does not deal in this way with us, ¹⁵ in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. ¹⁶ Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people. ¹⁷ Let what we have said serve as a reminder; we must go on briefly with the story.

¹⁸ Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being forced to open his mouth to eat pig's flesh. ¹⁹ But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, ²⁰ spitting it out as all ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste, even for the natural love of life.

²¹ Those who were in charge of that unlawful sacrifice took the man aside because of their long acquaintance with him and privately urged him to bring meat of his own providing, proper for him to use, and to pretend that he was eating the flesh of the sacrificial meal that had been commanded by the king, ²² so that by doing this he might be saved from death and be treated kindly on account of his old friendship with them. ²³ But making a high resolve, worthy of his years and the dignity of his

old age and the gray hairs that he had reached with distinction and his excellent life even from childhood, and moreover according to the holy God-given law, he declared himself quickly, telling them to send him to Hades.

²⁴ “Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life,” he said, “for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to a foreign way of life, ²⁵ and through my pretense, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. ²⁶ Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals, yet whether I live or die I will not escape the hands of the Almighty.²⁷ Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age ²⁸ and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws.”

When he had said this, he was dragged at once to the rack.²⁹ Those who a little before had acted toward him with goodwill now changed to ill will, because the words he had uttered were in their opinion sheer madness. ³⁰ When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned aloud and said: “It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him.”

³¹ So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation.

Chapter 7

¹ It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and straps, to partake of unlawful pig's flesh. ² One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, “What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.”

³ The king fell into a rage and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. ⁴ These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. ⁵ When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, ⁶ “The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, ‘And he will have compassion on his servants.’ ”

⁷ After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair and asked him, “Will you

eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" ⁸ He replied in the language of his ancestors and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. ⁹ And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to a renewal of everlasting life, because we have died for his laws."

¹⁰ After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands ¹¹ and said nobly, "I got these from heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." ¹² As a result, the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

¹³ After he, too, had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. ¹⁴ When he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"

¹⁵ Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. ¹⁶ But he looked at the king and said, "Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. ¹⁷ Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!"

¹⁸ After him they brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, "Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account because of our sins against our own God. ¹⁹ But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!"

²⁰ The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. ²¹ She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage and said to them, ²² "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. ²³ Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, in his mercy gives life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

²⁴ Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his ancestors and that he would take him for his Friend and entrust him with public affairs. ²⁵ Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the

youth to save himself. ²⁶ After much urging on his part, she undertook to persuade her son. ²⁷ But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native language as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: "My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb and nursed you for three years and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life and have taken care of you. ²⁸ I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being.²⁹ Do not fear this butcher but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers."

³⁰ While she was still speaking, the young man said, "What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses. ³¹ But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. ³² For we are suffering because of our own sins. ³³ And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. ³⁴ But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all mortals, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. ³⁵ You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. ³⁶ For our brothers, after enduring a brief suffering for everlasting life, have fallen under God's covenant, but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. ³⁷ I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, ³⁸ and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation."

³⁹ The king fell into a rage and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. ⁴⁰ So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord.

⁴¹ Last of all, the mother died, after her sons.

⁴² Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures.

The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version – Fully Revised Fourth Edition, Michael D. Coogan, Editor, John R. Bartlett, Contributor, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2010

First and Second Maccabees by Daniel J. Harrington, New Collegeville Bible Commentary, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2012

The First and Second Books of the Maccabees, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible, by John R. Bartlett, Cambridge at the University Press, New York, Cambridge, UK, 1973