

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Judah from the 2nd to the 1st century BC

In 198BC Antiochus III, ruler of Syria from 223 to 187BC, defeated Ptolemy V of Egypt (203-180BC) at Panias, the northernmost point of Palestine. However, through fear of Rome, he did not follow up the victory by attacking Egypt. In 197BC he made peace with Ptolemy V by promising him his daughter, Cleopatra, in marriage (see Daniel 11:17). This plan failed because his daughter sided with her husband, urging an alliance between Egypt and Rome. Antiochus III established Coele-syria (the region of Syria which included Palestine). Initially the people of Judah welcomed what appeared to be liberation from heavy Egyptian taxation.

Antiochus invaded Greece in 192BC, but was defeated by Rome at Thermopylae. In 190BC the Romans, under Scipio drove Antiochus out of Asia Minor (see Daniel 11:18). The Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire. Antiochus's son, later to rule as Antiochus IV, was taken as a hostage to Rome where he lived in luxury for fourteen years (190-176BC). Rome imposed upon Syria a huge yearly tribute. This created the need for heavy taxation, including taxation of Judah. In 187BC Antiochus III died attempting to sack a temple to help pay his tribute to Rome. He was succeeded by his son, Seleucus IV Philopator (see Daniel 11:20). 2Maccabees 3:1-20 recounts his pillaging of the temple in Jerusalem as part of his attempt to raise money to pay Rome. Seleucus was assassinated in 175 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164BC

The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach)

Yeshua, son of Eleazar, and grandson of Sira (hence the name 'Ben Sira'), was a Jewish teacher, living and working in Jerusalem at the beginning of the second century BC (see Sirach 50:27). He studied the Torah, the Prophets and the other Writings that were the sacred heritage of his people, and he spent his life communicating the fruits of his study to his Jewish students. At a time when Greek culture (Hellenism) was influencing the whole region, including Judah, he wanted his students to appreciate the wisdom of their own traditions. In his teaching he drew on these traditions, especially on the wisdom contained in the Book of Proverbs, and applied it to the changed circumstances at the beginning of the second century BC.

Sirach is a book of 'wisdom', a word that can mean practical skill in some field, including the tact and diplomacy required in social relations. It is used also for a share in the very Wisdom of God – something made possible by God in revealing the Torah to Moses. Ben Sira received all this from the tradition. To this traditional wisdom he added a deep appreciation of the beauty of the temple cult, and the role of the priesthood in the worshipping community.

In extolling and expounding the benefits of wisdom, Ben Sira covers many topics. He assumed that physical death was the end of life, the end of communion with God. He published his work some twenty or so years before the people of Judah suffered intense persecution from Antiochus IV.

It was this persecution that gave birth to the insight that divine justice requires that there be more to human life than what we experience this side of the grave. Communion with God must exist beyond death. Not all embraced this idea, but at least the idea had struck root. It did not occur to Ben Sira.

Ben Sira speaks of the importance of forgiveness (see 28:2-7) but he does not extend this forgiveness to one's enemies, and he remains locked in the prejudices of his contemporaries, especially in relation to the Samaritans (see 50:26). He also assumes that males are superior. There are no women mentioned in his long list of the illustrious ancestors of his people (Sirach 44-49), and his teaching on marriage is only from the male perspective. The fact that he is teaching young males may go part of the way to explain this, but some of his remarks in regard to women are stunningly biased (see, for example, Sirach 25:19).

Ben Sira composed his work, traditionally known as 'Sirach', in Hebrew. Sirach did not become part of the canon of inspired books, which is to say that it was not accepted by the Jewish authorities among the books judged to be inspired by God and presented to the community authoritatively as part of their essential heritage (see Rabbi Akiba in J.Sanhedrin 28a). Formal, authoritative statements explicitly listing certain books as canonical typically arise out of a specific situation in which the community feels threatened by those who challenge its existence or its writings. It appears that it was the Assembly of Rabbis at Jamnia (Javneh) towards the end of the first century AD that responded to the challenge of Christianity and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, by, among other things, defining the canon. Their main criterion seems to have been the age of the scrolls. The only second century book that found its way into the canon was the Book of Daniel, and that seems to be because it does contain some ancient material, and because of its prophetic style. Apart from the Book of Daniel, the most recent books included in the Palestinian canon are the Books of Chronicles composed late in the fourth century or early in the third century BC.

This does not mean that books which were not in the official canon were not read. Sirach is quoted with approval in the Talmud and other rabbinical writings, and there is evidence that at least in Egypt copies were still being made as late as the twelfth century AD. Sirach was composed early in the second century BC. Like other writings of the second or first century BC (for example, Tobit, Judith, the Books of the Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, and some additions to other books) it was not sufficiently ancient to be included in the Palestinian canon. These books were translated into Greek and were included in the Greek Version of the Jewish Scriptures (the Septuagint).

The version of Sirach included in the Septuagint is the Greek translation made by Ben Sira's grandson, who migrated to Egypt in 132BC and published his Greek Version, along with an introductory prologue, some time after 117BC. Since it was part of the Septuagint, it was inherited by the early Christian communities (along with the other Writings mentioned above). In fact Sirach was so popular among the Christians that it was given the Latin title 'Ecclesiasticus' (the Book of the Church).

Because the Jews did not include it in their Bible, for years all trace of the Hebrew text was lost. We were dependent on the Septuagint, the Old Latin (from the fourth century AD), and the Syriac (also from the fourth century). The Old Latin Version of Sirach was included in the Vulgate. This was because Jerome, influenced by the absence of Sirach from the Palestinian canon, did not make a fresh translation. However, in 1896 sections of the Hebrew text of Sirach were discovered in the storeroom for worn and discarded manuscripts in the Cairo synagogue. These were manuscripts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, so, obviously, Jews in Egypt continued to treasure and copy it. Fragments of manuscripts from the first century BC were later discovered in Masada and also in Qumran, with the result that we now have a Hebrew text for about 70% of the book.

There are so many scribal errors in the extant Septuagint versions that scholars are agreed that no text from the Older Testament is more difficult to work with than Sirach. Furthermore, the Greek text that came down through the tradition included a number of later insertions. When verse numbering was introduced in the 16th century AD these additions were included in the numbering. Modern translations work from the Hebrew where it is available, and try to exclude these additions. This accounts for the gaps that occur every now and then in verse numbering.

The Book of Baruch

The Baruch Scroll purports to be written by Baruch, known from the Jeremiah scroll as Jeremiah's secretary (see Jeremiah 36:1-32 and 43:1-7). All the versions we have can be traced back to the Greek Septuagint. The scroll consists of four originally separate compositions. There is no evidence of the book as such ever existing in Hebrew, though it is probable that the text we have is a compilation of separate Greek translations from documents originally composed in Hebrew.

The compiler appears to be part of the circle of learned teachers in Jerusalem, devoted to the study and promotion of the traditions of Israel some time early in the second century BC, prior to the Hasmonaean revolt (168BC). Unlike the Book of Daniel, for example, he does not distinguish between the faithful and the unfaithful. He calls on everyone to acknowledge their sinfulness as a people. He also expects redemption to come, not in the afterlife, but through divine intervention in this world.

After a prose Introduction (Baruch 1:1-14), written by the compiler, there is a prose prayer of communal confession of guilt and repentance (Baruch 1:15 – 3:8). There are some parallels between Baruch 1:15 – 2:19 and Daniel 9:4-19. This is followed by a poem of admonition and exhortation (Baruch 3:9 – 4:4). The third section is a poem of consolation and encouragement (Baruch 4:5 – 5:9). It may be a later addition. There are parallels between Baruch 4:36 – 5:9 and the Psalm of Solomon 11:3-8), composed in the first century BC.

The fourth section, the so-called 'Letter of Jeremiah', has no connection with the rest of the scroll. It purports to be a letter from Jeremiah addressed to those who are about to be taken into exile in Babylon. Its focus is on the dangers of being caught up in idolatry while in exile. It is included as chapter 6 of Baruch in the Vulgate Version.

For much the same reasons as Sirach, Baruch was not included in the Palestinian Canon. However, it was part of the Jewish Greek Version (the Septuagint) and was inherited among the sacred writings by the Christians, though many of the early Christian writers did not include it among the authorised sacred books. Its presence in the Latin Vulgate accounts for its inclusion in the Christian canon.

There exists also a Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch and a Greek Apocalypse of Baruch.

Judah under Antiochus IV (175-164BC)

Things took a turn for the worse in Judah with the accession to the throne of Antiochus IV in 175BC. Daniel refers to him as a 'contemptible person' (Daniel 11:21), and in verses 21-24 writes of Antiochus's usurping the throne and his early rule.

Antiochus IV became more and more aggressive in his determination to wipe out Judaism and turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. Some Jews saw accommodation to Hellenization as the only way to ensure the survival of Judaism. Others saw the advantages of giving away their faith and taking on Greek ways. Others, however, stubbornly resisted every attempt to compromise the practices of their ancient faith.

Antiochus dismissed the high priest Onias III (called the 'prince of the covenant' in Daniel 11:22) in favour of his brother Jason, who bribed the Syrian ruler in exchange for the office and promised to support Hellenization (see 2Maccabees 4:8). This cut right across Jewish tradition in which the high priesthood was hereditary. Among other things, Jason built a gymnasium in Jerusalem for Greek games and encouraged Jews to have surgery to hide circumcision. However, his period as high priest lasted only three years, for in 172BC, Menelaus, a member of the rival Tobiad family from Transjordan, bribed his way to replace Jason as high priest. He set about to establish Jerusalem on the model of a Greek city. He plundered the temple treasury to pay his debts, and had Onias III murdered (see 2Maccabees 4:33-38; Daniel 9:26; 11:22).

The Book of Daniel 11:24-28 writes of Antiochus's first invasion of Egypt in 170BC (compare 1Maccabees 1:16-19). Egypt appealed to Rome for protection, with the result that Egypt became a virtual client state. This situation lasted for almost a century. The two kings of Daniel 11:27 are Antiochus and the boy, Ptolemy Philometor, whom he had taken prisoner. Daniel 11:28 alludes to Antiochus's looting of Jerusalem on his way back from the Egyptian campaign (see 1Maccabees 1:20; compare 2Maccabees 5:5-21).

In 168BC Antiochus invaded Egypt again (see Daniel 11:29-30). In 167BC, Jason led an army into Jerusalem in an unsuccessful attempt to regain control of the high priesthood. On his way from his humiliating retreat from Egypt back to Antioch, Antiochus took out his anger on Jerusalem. Apollonius was put in charge and he waited till the sabbath, knowing that the pious Jews would not take up arms on that day. 2Maccabees 5:23-26 and 1Maccabees 1:29-35 describe the massacre. Antiochus blamed the anti-Hellenizing group of Jews whom he saw as fanatics and issued a decree prohibiting observance of the Torah.

On the 15th Chislev 167BC (December 6; see 1Maccabees 1:54), as part of enforcing his decree, he erected a statue of Zeus in the temple sanctuary. This is the famous “abomination of desolation” mentioned in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) and, in the Newer Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 24:15). Daniel 11:36-39 writes of Antiochus’s blasphemous behaviour. The temple became a place for drunken orgies and debauchery. This set the stage for the uprising recorded in 1Maccabees.

Mattathias, a priest of the Hasmon clan (hence the founder of the ‘Hasmonean dynasty’), led an insurrection against the Syrians. Upon his death in 166BC, his son Judas (166-160), nicknamed the ‘Maccabee’ (‘hammer’), took over leadership of the movement and defeated the Syrian army in three successive guerilla campaigns, finally recapturing Jerusalem. In 164BC on the 25th Chislev (16th December), the temple was re-consecrated and worship restored.

Another strand of resistance to the policies of Antiochus IV is that demonstrated in the Book of Daniel, published at this time. The authors of the Book of Daniel did not approve of the violent methods of the Maccabees, though they do admit that it did provide ‘a little help’ (Daniel 11:34). Their call was for fidelity to the covenant, even at the price of losing one’s life. They saw the suffering as purifying the nation (Daniel 11:35). Victory over the pagan oppressors was to be a work of God not man. YHWH (not Antiochus) is the Lord of history. The stories collected in the Book of Daniel show that it is possible to live under foreign domination, and even to find advancement. This is something that the great prophet Jeremiah advised: ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare’ (Jeremiah 29:7). They must, however, like Daniel, remain faithful to their God and to their Jewish traditions. They must not submit to the demands of Antiochus that they renounce their faith. They broke new ground by insisting that not even death could separate the faithful Jews from their God.

Daniel 11:40-45 gives the authors’ hopes for what would happen in the final days of Antiochus. The fact that Daniel 11 does not mention the eastern campaign of Antiochus IV in 165BC, or his death the following year, or the re-consecration of the temple, points to this, the last of the revelations, being composed in late 165BC or early 164BC when the persecution was still raging. The details of Daniel 11 do not always correspond with what we know from other sources, but they witness to the authors’ faith in God as the Lord of history. In verse 40 the authors mistakenly predict another Egyptian campaign.

The Book of Daniel predicts that Antiochus IV will meet his end in Judah. The ‘beautiful holy mountain’ (Daniel 11:45) is Mount Zion. In fact Antiochus died in Persia, attempting to pillage the temple of Artemis.

The Book of Daniel

The name of the recipient of the revelations contained in this Book is Daniel [*dānîy'el*], meaning 'my judge is 'El', the high god of the Semitic peoples. There is evidence in the legends of the Ancient Near East of a 'Daniel' who is the proverbial wise and righteous man. The prophet Ezekiel witnesses to this. In 14:14, 20 he lists Noah, Daniel and Job as models of righteousness. In 28:3 he writes: 'You are indeed wiser than Daniel; no secret is hidden from you'. The legendary figure of the Book of Daniel draws on this ancient folklore.

The first part of the Book of Daniel is a small anthology of separate stories set in the sixth century BC, in the period of the Babylonian Exile. The text does not fit with what we know of the history of the 6th century exilic period. What is important is that we look at the historical context of the publication of the Book, which was during the reign of the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes who attempted to impose Greek culture on Judah. This is the period of the Maccabees (see 1&2 Maccabees). As John J. Collins writes in his commentary on Daniel in the Hermeneia Series (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993) page 122:

By the end of the nineteenth century, a consensus had developed in favour of the Maccabean date [for the Book of Daniel].

Situating Daniel among the exiles in Babylon is a literary device aimed at those undergoing persecution from Antiochus, to remind them of an earlier period of persecution in which the foreign power (Babylon) was wiped out, and the exiles emerged victorious (returning to rebuild Judah). The Book of Daniel was a timely reminder of God's fidelity to those who remain faithful to the covenant. It is a manifesto encouraging people to be faithful and to trust their God who is the one who controls history. Antiochus will not have the last word any more than did the Babylonian rulers three hundred years earlier. If they remain faithful to the covenant, they, like their forebears in Babylon, will experience redemption.

The complex nature of the Book of Daniel

1. The Book of Daniel opens (1:1 – 2:4) with an Introduction by the author responsible for compiling the Book. It is written in Hebrew, a statement of the author's pride in the traditional and sacred language of his people.
2. This is followed (2:4 - 6:28) by a series of what might best be described as 'court tales' (a ruler has an adviser from a subject people who exhibits greater wisdom than his own advisers and who advances in the ruler's favour). These are composed in Aramaic, the language of Aram (Syria) that was the shared language of the western parts of the Persian Empire, and continued into the Greek period. After examining the Aramaic of these stories, John J. Collins on page 17 of his commentary concludes:

Balance of probability favors a date in the early Hellenistic period for the Aramaic portions of Daniel, although a precise dating on linguistic grounds is impossible.

It is likely that the tales are older, and circulated separately before finding the written form that we find in the Daniel scroll. Those responsible for collecting the stories and including them in the Daniel scroll gave them a special focus that reinforced the message that they wished to convey to their contemporaries. These pious stories have parallels in parts of the Books of Esther, Tobit, and Judith.

3. Some time in the early years of the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, chapter 7 was composed, also in Aramaic, as an appendix to these stories. There are clear connections with the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the first of the stories in chapter 2, and it focuses on the difficulties faced by the Jews under Antiochus. It is in the form of a vision experienced by a Babylonian king. Inspired by God, Daniel interprets the vision as applying to the situation under Antiochus. In this way the author demonstrates that the difficult circumstances experienced by the Jews under Antiochus fall within the overarching providence of the God of the Jews, the Lord of history. No kingdom can stand against God's design. It will be Judaism and God's chosen people who will prevail, not Antiochus or any other foreign oppressor.

4. The rest of the Book (chapters 8-12) is composed by a number of authors reacting to developments during the years of aggressive persecution (167-164). They are composed in Hebrew, to assert the special place of Judaism and of the traditional language of the Jewish people. They carry on from chapter 7, and are characterised as belonging to the literary genre 'apocalypse'. In his commentary page 54 John Collins writes:

The following discussion assumes the definition of the genre "apocalypse" as published and defended in Semeia 14 (1979). An apocalypse is "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involved another, supernatural world". To this may be added that the genre normally serves "to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority".

Some apocalypses involve a journey into another world. Daniel is a historical apocalypse. It focuses on people's present experience in this world. The meaning of their experience is revealed via a symbolic vision. The transcendence of God is acknowledged in that the revelation is mediated through an angel who interprets the vision. This also demonstrates that the meaning is beyond the power of human interpretation. The persecuted Jewish community is to look beyond human decisions, and see what is happening with the eyes of a 'seer' to whom is revealed the spiritual struggle between the supernatural forces of good and evil, with the ultimate victory of God assured. Those who survive will experience God's blessing, but so, too, will those who die a martyr's death. They will be raised by God to enjoy divine communion (and so life) for ever.

The beneficiary of the revelation is a figure from the past who is portrayed as foreseeing the historical events which the anonymous authors are concerned to interpret. This 'foreseeing' is a reminder to the audience that what they are experiencing comes within the over arching providence of God. They have nothing to fear so long as they remain faithful.

While the focus of the book is on the circumstances of the persecution of 167-164, its message transcends any particular historical setting (see the Book of Revelation in the Newer Testament). No human kingdom lasts for ever, and human hope for those faithful to the covenant is not for this world only.

There is no suggestion in Daniel of hostility towards Hellenistic culture as such, though there is opposition to those who are attempting to force Hellenisation on the Jews as well as to those Jews who are ‘abandoning the covenant’ (Daniel 11:30). The key problem is always opposition to the will of God. In the tales (chapter 2-6) the pagan kings learn to respect YHWH. In the visions (chapters 7-12) they are in rebellion against the Most High. The conflict is not cultural; it is religious.

5. Then there is material found in the Greek versions of Daniel, but not in the Hebrew Version. There are two main Greek Versions: the Old Greek, translated towards the end of the second century BC; and the Version associated with the Jewish proselyte, Theodotion, whose aim was to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek that was more faithful to the Hebrew. Theodotion was working about 180AD. However, the Greek translation of Daniel that is associated with his name pre-dates the Newer Testament, and so pre-dates Theodotion. In his commentary on Daniel, John J. Collins page 9 note 78 provides a list of Newer Testament texts dependent on the Theodotion Version.

In the Preface to his Latin Vulgate translation of Daniel, Jerome declares that the Old Greek Version ‘is not read by the Churches of our Lord and Saviour’. The Christian Church opted to use the Theodotion Version.

The Prayer of Azariah and the Hymn of the Three Young Men is inserted in chapter 3, between verses 23 and 24. Though we do not have any extant Semitic versions of this material, today’s scholars are agreed that the number of characteristically Semitic features in the Greek indicate that we are dealing with a Greek translation of a text that was originally composed in either Hebrew or Aramaic (probably Hebrew). It is likely that the Prayer and the Hymn had a separate life in the temple or synagogue worship, before being incorporated into the Daniel scroll. Since there are no indications in the Greek that either the Prayer or the Hymn were translated separately from the rest of the Daniel scroll, it would appear that they were incorporated into the Daniel scroll prior to the Old Greek translation.

An analysis of the content of these inserts will show that they fit well into traditional Jewish piety and enhance the text with their focus on the greatness of God and the faith of the young Jewish exiles. This raises the question: If this material was already part of the Daniel scroll when it was translated into Greek, why was it not included in the text accepted at Jamnia towards the end of the first century AD, with the result that, while the Daniel Scroll is found in the official Hebrew Masoretic Text, the additional material is not? There is nothing in the content that would account for its exclusion: it fits perfectly with normative Jewish theology. The Prayer of Azariah acknowledges God’s action in history in favour of his chosen people. The Prose Narrative introducing the Hymn shows God intervening on behalf of those who faithfully serve him and place their trust in him. The Hymn sings of God the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of the world.

The Rabbis at Jamnia accepted Daniel among the Writings because it was about a prophet who belonged to the exile. Perhaps they left these sections out because they were clearly recent additions, and so not judged to be part of the sacred tradition.

The same can be said of the stories of Bel and the Snake, which is placed after chapter 12 in the Greek 'Theodotion' Version, and Susanna, which is placed before chapter 1. The story of Bel and the Snake ridicule idol-worship (compare Isaiah 44:9-20; Habakkuk 2:18-19; Jeremiah 10:1-16; Psalm 115; Psalm 135). The story of Susanna was probably a secular story into which Daniel was inserted (first mentioned in verse 45). Whereas the story of Bel and the Snake portrays Daniel as remaining faithful into his old age, the story of Susanna portrays him as being wise from his boyhood. Both stories were probably composed in Aramaic. Like the stories in 2:4 – 6:28, these stories originally circulated separately. They were added to the Daniel scroll some time after its publication (c. 160BC) and before the Septuagint translation (c.100BC).

By way of an addendum, we note that fragments of three other stories attached to Daniel and composed in Aramaic were discovered in Qumran. They were never part of the Hebrew Scroll or the Old Greek. Daniel obviously attracted such additions.

In his Introduction to his commentary on the Book of Daniel in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1978) Alexander A. Di Lella writes (page 53):

The principal thrust of the book as a whole was threefold: (1) to remind the Jews that their monotheistic religion is a glorious heritage infinitely superior to paganism with its gross idol worship; (2) to encourage the Jews to remain loyal to that heritage like the outstanding protagonists of the book who were willing to risk their social, economic, and political status and even their lives by steadfastly refusing to compromise their faith; and (3) to show dramatically and imaginatively that the God of Israel comes to the rescue and delivers those who believe in him despite even the severest reverses, including death by martyrdom.

Di Lella has an excellent concluding section to his Introduction (pages 103-110). On page 103 he notes:

One senses that the work was composed in response to some of the pressing questions men and women have always asked themselves, especially in times of adversity: What is the meaning of the human enterprise? What sense can evil or suffering possibly have? If God is all just and all powerful, why does he remain silent and inactive when men, women and children suffer unjustly? What lies in store for people after death? If there is retribution for a person's moral decisions, when and where will it take place? Is there more to human existence than tending to one's needs and attaining a place in the world? If God has spoken to men and women in Israel's history, what does that truth imply for the believer today? In view of the chaotic forces at large in human history, can one seriously affirm that God exists, or, perhaps more pointedly, that God really cares about what happens to people?

Because of the often heroic suffering of so many Jews who determinedly held on to their faith even at the cost of their lives, those responsible for composing the Book of Daniel came to an insight that built on, but went beyond, the traditions they inherited.

They rejected the idea that suffering must be a sign of God's anger and is divine punishment for the sins of the sufferer. Those suffering persecution were often clearly innocent, even heroically so. Their physical death could not possibly mean an end to their communion with God. Since God is necessarily just, life (communion with God) must not be limited to this present existence. To judge the meaning of life they encouraged their contemporaries to look to eternity and the assurance of communion with God on the other side of death.

They had a solid conviction that God controls everything that happens in history. It followed from this that our response should be to accept whatever is happening, even when we cannot comprehend it. It will all work out for the good, for it is within the providence of an all-wise, all-powerful, and all-just God. The kingdom of God is God's achievement, not ours, so they were not in favour of the often violent tactics of the Maccabees. In response to persecution people were to remain completely faithful to their covenant with God. Those who perpetrate evil cannot thwart the will of God, and they will ultimately fail and have to suffer the consequences of their actions. Pious Jews must choose to be faithful, even at the cost of their lives.

In Chapter Five we examined the assumption, found throughout the writings of ancient Israel, that God controls whatever happens in history. In its simplicity this way of thinking carries a certain strength. However, it is not sufficiently subtle to make sense of our experience. Thanks to Jesus we have come to see that God loves – which is not the same as controls. We may, perhaps, be more sympathetic with the position taken up by the Maccabees who judged that force was necessary to defend themselves against unjust oppression.

This having been said, we can learn a lot from the authors of Daniel. In the ultimate analysis their sense was right. However we understand the relationship of divine providence to the just and unjust events of our history, our response is to maintain our trust in God and respond to life with justice and love, in the belief that not even death can separate us from God's love. Di Lella goes on to state:

Men and women of faith are called upon to work mightily for the Kingdom and to respond with conviction and energy to the demands of the Kingdom. Those demands include obedience and constancy to the will of God (Dan 1:8; 3:16-18; 6:11), acknowledgment of God as Source of all life and ultimate meaning (Dan 2:20-23; 3:28 [95] - 33[100]; 4:31-34; 6:27-28), willingness to suffer and even die to preserve one's faith intact (Dan 3:12; 6:11-12), enthusiasm in sharing with others the good news of God's Kingdom (Dan 11:33; 12:3). Living up to these demands and challenges is a sign that a person is destined for God's everlasting Kingdom (Dan 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27).

From Ben Sira 48:20 and 49:6-10, composed a generation before Daniel, it appears that the list of the prophetic scrolls had been fixed. In the Jewish Bible Daniel is included among the Writings (not the Prophets). Appropriately, Daniel is listed after Esther. However in the Greek Septuagint (followed by the Latin Vulgate), Daniel is included among the prophetic scrolls. If Jonah is considered a book of prophecy, there is no fundamental argument against including Daniel (see Matthew 24:15). Its focus, after all, like that of all the prophetic books, is not on history but on YHWH.

The First Book of Maccabees

For the history of Judah in the second century BC, beside the information found in the Book of Daniel and the Books of the Maccabees, we have the Greek historian Polybius in his *The Histories*, and the Jewish writer Josephus in his *The Jewish Wars* 1:1-2 and *Jewish Antiquities* Books 12 and 13.

The First Book of Maccabees was published probably some time in the first decade of the first century BC when Alexander Jannaeus (his Hebrew name was Jonathan) was high priest and king of the Jews. Alexander Jannaeus was a son and successor of John Hyrcanus (high priest and king from 134 to 104), whose father, Simon, was high priest before him (from 143 to 134). Simon succeeded his brother Jonathan (high priest from 152 to 143), and they were both brothers of the famous Judas Maccabaeus ('the hammer') whose brilliance as a military commander set the stage for the Jews achieving independence from their Syrian overlords. So central is Judas to this story that the history came to be called 'The First Book of Maccabees'.

The anonymous historian responsible for First Maccabees sets out to record the history of the Jewish uprising and the achievement of Jewish independence. To appreciate the importance of this independence we have only to remember that Judah had been continuously under foreign rule since 598BC when Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. The First Book of Maccabees covers the period from the accession of Antiochus IV Epiphanes to the throne of Syria in 175BC to the death of the high priest, Simon, in 134BC. The original Hebrew has been lost. We have a Greek translation (see Codex Sinaiticus from the 4th century AD, and Codex Alexandrinus from the fifth century AD).

The rebellion was initiated by a priest, Mattathias, father of Judas, Jonathan and Simon, grandfather of John Hyrcanus and great-grandfather of Alexander Jannaeus. The dynasty he founded is called the 'Hasmonaeans', after Mattathias's grandfather Symeon, 'son of Hasmon'. The uprising occurred some seventy years before the writing of this history. None of the historian's sources is extant, but he would have been able to draw, directly or indirectly, on the Syrian court records for his information regarding Syria, and, for specifically Jewish matters he would have had the records kept by the succession of Hasmonaean rulers and high priests. Like any historian, he has his point of view and he brings to his record his own bias. Those who disagreed with him (and, as we will see, this includes the author of Second Maccabees) would see his work as propaganda to justify the dynastic claims of Alexander Jannaeus (see 1Maccabees 5:62) – claims that many Jews did not accept.

In Chapter Seven we reflected on the requirements of the writing of history in the ancient world. This is of special importance in reading 1Maccabees. Much of it consists in military campaigns. Every military commander in that epoch, Jew and non-Jew alike, offered prayers to their god before going into battle. They also spoke words of encouragement to their troops. In the event of a victory, they repaired to the temple to offer sacrifices and prayers of thanksgiving.

The historian responsible for 1Maccabees offers a selection of prayers (see 1Maccabees 3:46-53; 4:30-33; 7:37-42), speeches (see 1Maccabees 3:17-22; 3:58-60; 4:8-11, 17-18; 5:32), and expressions of thanksgiving (see 1Maccabees 4:24; 5:24). As with other histories of the day, these were composed by the historian himself. They express his 'take' on the significance of the battle.

The Second Book of Maccabees

The author of the Second Book of Maccabees states in the Preface to his work that he is offering a condensed version of a five volume history by Jason of Cyrene (see 2Maccabees 2:23). Jason's history has not survived. Whereas 1Maccabees begins with the reign of Antiochus IV, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164, 2Maccabees takes us back to the previous reign of Antiochus's brother, Seleucus IV (187-175). He goes only as far as 160BC when Judas Maccabaeus is at the height of his power, having defeated the Syrian army led by Nicanor.

The author of 1Maccabees writes in support of the dynastic claims of the Hasmonaeans to rule the Jews as their high priest. Jason of Cyrene acknowledges the providential role played by Judas Maccabaeus, but his focus is on God, who miraculously intervened because of the heroism of the martyrs and because of the blasphemous behaviour of the enemies of the Jews. Judas was God's instrument, and Jason is not in favour of the Hasmonaeans. Not only does he represent an opposing view to that espoused by the author of 1Maccabees, it is possible that he composed his history precisely to counter what he saw as 1Maccabees's propaganda (see Jonathan Goldstein in his commentary on 2Maccabees in the Anchor Bible Series n. 41A, page 82). The author of 2Maccabees made his condensed version to spread Jason's ideas more widely. Jason is perhaps drawing on the memoirs of Onias IV (131-129), who was in exile in Egypt and who was the rightful high priest. He saw the Hasmonaeans as usurpers.

Jason wrote in Greek some time in the 80's BC, and 2Maccabees, also in Greek, followed shortly afterwards. The style of Jason of Cyrene's history is typical of Hellenistic history writing of the time. He has a liking for pious legend. His history is punctuated with divine apparitions, and is teeming with miracles. He sets out to inspire fidelity to the Torah, for it is this (not the military heroics of Judas) that ensures divine blessing and intervention. In this he is close to the author of the Book of Daniel, who was not pleased with the military stand taken by Judas and his brothers. If independence is to be achieved, it will be something done by God and in God's time.

The comments on 1Maccabees as history apply also to 2Maccabees. This is especially important when we come to read the many prayers and speeches that feature in 2Maccabees. The author of these prayers and speeches is Jason of Cyrene who loves to include them wherever possible. There are already plenty in the selection which the author of 2Maccabees chose to condense. The original probably had many more. A feature of the history presented by the author of 2Maccabees is that he is content to offer a chain of events with little concern for chronological sequence.

The version of 2Maccabees that has come down to us has an unexpected feature. The author's condensed version of a section of Jason's history begins in chapter 3. This is preceded by the author's Preface, which begins in 2Maccabees 2:19. Someone thought to attach to 2Maccabees two letters, purportedly written from the Jews in Jerusalem to the Jews in Egypt. The first letter (2Maccabees 1:1-10) is genuine, composed in 124BC (see 2Maccabees 1:10) during the high priesthood of John Hyrcanus (134-104). It implicitly condemns the temple of Leontopolis in Egypt and recommends the observance of the Days of Dedication. The second letter is a forgery by an Egyptian Jew who is opposed to the temple at Leontopolis. It purports to have been composed at the beginning of the rule of Alexander Jannaeus (c.103BC). It stresses the sanctity of the Jerusalem temple and its priesthood and (like 1Maccabees, but unlike 2Maccabees) supports the legitimacy of the Hasmonaean dynasty.

Modelling himself perhaps on the Book of Esther, which offers a historical basis for the festival of Purim, the author appears to have attached 2Maccabees to the letters in order to provide a historical background to support the Festival of Dedication.

Kings of Syria 164-138BC

The rivalry between the families of the two brothers, Seleucus IV and Antiochus IV, is a constant factor throughout the period covered by the Books of the Maccabees.

Antiochus V (164-161) was a son of Antiochus IV. Demetrius I (161-150) was a son of Seleucus IV. Alexander (150-145) claimed to be a brother of Antiochus V.

Demetrius II (145-138) and Antiochus VII (138-129) were brothers; sons of Demetrius I.

Antiochus VI (145-142) was a son of Alexander.

Demetrius II (145-138) and Antiochus VI (145-142) were rivals for the throne.

Trypho (142-138) was not a Seleucid.

The Hasmoneans

Judas (died 160) led the fight for Jewish independence during the reigns of Antiochus IV, his son, Antiochus V, and the first year of his nephew Demetrius I.

Jonathan (died 143) led the Jews during the reigns of Demetrius I, his cousin Alexander, and the first years of the rivalry between Demetrius II and Antiochus VI.

Simon (died 134) led the Jews during the reigns of Demetrius II and his son Antiochus VI, and their rivals, Antiochus VI and Trypho.

John Hyrcanus (134-104), son of Simon, was leader and high priest, like his uncle Jonathan and father Simon. He was the father of Alexander Jannaeus.

Aristobulus (104)

Alexander Jannaeus(103-78)

Salome Alexandra, Alexander Jannaeus's widow (77-67).

Rivalry between her two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus

The Book of Judith

The Book of Judith is a story (see Chapter Seven). Its hero is an observant woman who manages to do what no nation and no other person could do: she humiliates the most powerful army of the apparently invincible tyrant who rules the world and who is determined to crush the Jewish people. The tyrant in the story is the well known Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire who was responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the exile of the last king of Judah and the leading citizens in the early years of the sixth century BC. That the story is not actually about Nebuchadnezzar is made clear by the author, whose fictitious Nebuchadnezzar is said to be ruler of Assyria and to have his capital in Nineveh (see Judith 1:1). The reader is expected to see him as a figure for any nation and ruler who sets out to oppress Judah.

The author features a number of well-known nations. However either his geographical knowledge is faulty or the text as we have it has suffered in transmission (see 2:21-26). In any case we are to look for the meaning of the story, not at the level of historical or geographical fact, but rather in the characterisation, especially, but not only, of the heroine, Judith. Her victory is set in a fictitious town in Samaria. If the Jews can prevail in 'Bethulia' (Judith 4:6), they can prevail anywhere. The author is making the point that if a widow can defeat the general of the largest army in the world, Judaism can defeat the nations that are determined to destroy her, so long as the Jews, like Judith, remain faithful to YHWH and to their traditions. Their situation may appear impossible, and their enemies may appear invincible, but only YHWH is invincible, and YHWH is committed to his people. They must never lose faith or abandon their way of life.

The story is divided into two parts. In the first part we witness the apparently unconquerable power of the military machine that has conquered the world and is determined to crush the Jewish nation. The situation for the Jews is desperate and would appear hopeless. In the second part a woman, Judith, kills the general and saves her people. The author presumes his readers can apply the story to their own situation. The fact that the book has survived is witness to the fact that they were well able to do so. The book is, before anything else, a statement about YHWH their liberating God, and Judith is portrayed as an example of what every Jew is called to be, and how every Jew is called to act, if they want to see the survival and ultimate triumph of Judaism.

The most likely situation for the publication of this book is Judah during the Hasmonaean period, after the success of the Maccabean uprising, after the annexing of Samaria by John Hyrcanus, the ruler and high priest of the Jews (135-104BC) who succeeded his father Simon, brother of the famous Judas Maccabee, and before the sectarianism that divided the Jews during the reign of his son, Alexander Jannaeus (103-78). Like the contemporary Books of the Maccabees it challenges the Jews not to give way to the prevailing Hellenization.

Though the book was composed in Hebrew, no Hebrew text has survived (except later translations into Hebrew from the Latin Vulgate). All we have is a Greek translation. The book never found its way into the Jewish canon of sacred books. This is probably because it was not ancient.

The canon was pretty well established by the third century BC (and formally recognised at Jamnia towards the end of the first century AD). The only book from the second century to make its way into the canon is the book of Daniel, and this because it contains quite ancient material, and is presented as prophecy.

Judah under Roman rule

We have already noted the defeat of the Seleucids by the Roman army under Scipio in 190BC. The Seleucids were driven out of Asia Minor, and the Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire. We have already noted also some of the effects of the heavy indemnity that the Seleucid rulers had to pay Rome. In 148BC Macedonia was established as a Roman province. It was the base for the extension of Roman power into Anatolia. In 63BC Pompey intervened in the civil war between Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. This resulted in Judah being absorbed into the Roman Empire. It was placed under the supervision of the governor of Syria.

The Wisdom of Solomon (The Book of Wisdom)

We do not know the name of the author of The Wisdom of Solomon. He was a Jew living and teaching in Alexandria probably during the Roman period, that is, sometime in the last decades of the first century BC or the early decades of the first century AD. There are many parallels with the writings of his contemporary, Philo (c. 25BC – 45AD), the most famous Jew living in Alexandria at the time

It is evident from his writing that the author of The Wisdom of Solomon was well versed in the Jewish Scriptures, and also in Hellenist religious and philosophical thought. The mood of the Hellenist writings of the period was consciously religious and inclusive, and there was much interchange of ideas between the Middle Platonists, the Epicureans and the Stoics. This would have been very attractive to our author's Jewish students. It provided a challenge to their traditional faith, but also opportunities. Their teacher, the author of the book we are studying, was keen to make as many connections as he could with contemporary Hellenist culture. If Judaism remained locked into the traditional Hebrew way of looking at the world, there was a danger that non-Jews would see Judaism as standing in the way of civilization, human progress, and the unity of mankind to which they aspired. To counteract this our author encouraged his students to engage with Hellenist thought, while recognising its limits and defects, and to value the special contribution their own Jewish traditions could make to the culture. He writes enthusiastically of the temple (Wisdom 9:8), the Torah (Wisdom 18:4), the heroes of Israel (Wisdom 10:1-21), and begins his work by referring to the prophetic ideal of justice (Wisdom 1:1). It is their privileged mission as Jews to offer the world 'the incorruptible light of the Torah'(Wisdom 18:4).

Another feature of life in Alexandria at the time was the mystical cult of the Egyptian goddess, Isis. This, too, had many attractions for a Jew who was keen to find a place in the vibrant world that was Alexandria. This was especially attractive in light of the fact that they did not have a temple in Alexandria and so felt the absence of the cult that was so important to their fellow Jews in Judah.

His Jewish students for whom this work is composed must have been educated in Greek literature, philosophy, rhetoric and science, as well as in their own Jewish traditions. Their teacher is encouraging them to learn from the best of Hellenist philosophy and religion, but he is insisting that God had chosen for them a priceless gift to offer their contemporaries. The key point that our author makes throughout the book is that what was good in Hellenist culture was a gift of divine Wisdom from YHWH, the personal God who chose to reveal himself to the Jews.

The highest expression of divine Wisdom is the Torah, and the Torah is God's corrective to the errors in Hellenist thought, and the means of bringing to perfection its limited insights. Our author's hope is that this will also appeal to the cultured non-Jews in Alexandria who were attracted to Judaism.

He draws on the Biblical traditions of creation, of the presence and action of God in the history of Israel, and in the reflections on divine Wisdom as found especially in the Book of Proverbs and in The Wisdom of Ben Sira. However, while he draws on these traditions he chooses to use the language, not of the Septuagint, but of Hellenist literature and of the Isis cult. The Book of Proverbs contains ancient Hebrew wisdom. Ben Sira, like our author, was a teacher, but he was writing two centuries earlier in Jerusalem and in Hebrew. Our author lived in a very different world and in a very different time, with a very different language and intellectual culture.

He sees the key defect of current Hellenistic thought as its failure to recognise YHWH, the One, Living God, the personal God of Judaism, Creator of all that is. This God is revealed through Wisdom (Wisdom 9:2-6), through his Word (Wisdom 16:2; 18:15-16), especially in the Torah (Wisdom 16:6; 18:4), in nature (Wisdom 13:4-5) and in his wondrous interventions (Wisdom 5:2-5; 18:3). For all their religious earnestness, Hellenist writers saw wisdom as a human achievement. For our author it is a gift from God. The initiative is always from God who wants his creatures to live in intimate communion with him. God created us to enjoy this intimate communion, and offers it as a gift to those who welcome the gift of divine Wisdom, and live accordingly. He speaks of this intimate communion, using the metaphor of sexual intimacy popular in the Isis cult (see Wisdom 6:12-14; 7:28; 8:2-18).

Neither the Book of Proverbs nor the Wisdom of Ben Sira envisaged a life of communion with God after physical death. Under the influence of Hellenist thought, our author embraced the idea of human beings consisting of matter informed by a soul. With physical death the matter corrupts. The soul, however, is immortal. However, here again, he understood our immortality differently. For Plato the soul was innately indestructible. For our author, it is God who graciously offers eternal communion to those who welcome his gift of Wisdom. It is divine Wisdom that takes the initiative (Wisdom 6:13). We are being offered this communion even before we become conscious of its influence (Wisdom 7:12). It is divine Wisdom that is the source of all virtue (Wisdom 8:7). It is only through the gift of Wisdom that we can come to know the will of God and respond to it (Wisdom 9:17).

In Part One (Wisdom 1:1 - 6:21) he focuses on our eternal destiny: communion with God. Divine Wisdom is God's gift drawing us into this communion, which we will enjoy only if we seek the Lord (Wisdom 1:1), by welcoming Wisdom and living accordingly (Wisdom 6:9)

In Part Two (Wisdom 6:22 – 10:21) he offers detailed instructions on what we are to do to obtain God's gift of eternal blessedness. We are to take divine Wisdom as our bride (Wisdom 8:2), and live justly by seeking and obeying Wisdom.

In Part Three (Wisdom 11:1 – 19:22) he invites the reader to reflect on God's providence as seen in the Exodus.

Though Solomon is never mentioned by name in the text, the book is entitled 'The Wisdom of Solomon' in Codex Vaticanus (fourth century AD), Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century AD), Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century AD), and other early manuscripts. The attribution to 'Solomon' is found also in Proverbs (see especially sections 2 and 4), Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. It is a way of claiming authoritative wisdom for the book by linking it to the son of David whom tradition saw as the wisest of men (see Chapter 17 under Proverbs).