

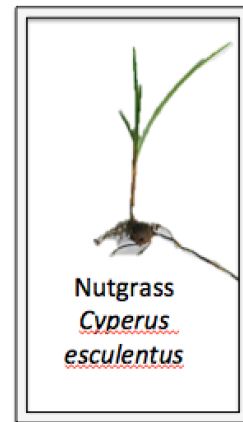
# INTERTESTAMENTAL

## The Roots of the New Testament

### *New Testament Survey – Lesson 1*

I hate Nutgrass. It is an insidious weed that seeks to dominate our garden. The roots are a combination of a hard kernel or nut and very thin, hair-like growths. The nut is generally several inches deep in the soil and it sends out hair-thin roots that each produce a weed, and over time, grow their own nut.

Given time, these horrid plants will take over the world. Try as you might to pull them, generally all you do is sever the slender root, leaving the deep kernel to repopulate your bed almost overnight. To get the weeds for good, you need to dig into the soil several inches and feel around for the nut/kernel. Of course, just one nut left behind in the bed merely postpones your weed nightmare for another day. Nut grass breeds faster than rabbits.



I can think of no better example in the plant world for explaining the importance of considering the time between the close of the Old Testament and the events of the New Testament. Reading the New Testament is like looking at the plant above the surface. Much of what you read best makes sense if the roots are unearthed. These roots often take some digging to get to, and you are never going to realistically get them all. Many of the roots are in the chapters of the Old Testament and surrounding history. Others are found in the time and events that occurred during the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament (the “intertestamental” era).

The last Old Testament book was likely written around 400 BC. We have around 400 years of Jewish and world history to account for if we are to place the New Testament into its proper context. Over the course of our New Testament survey, we will repeatedly dig into this historical soil. In this initial lesson, we concentrate on that time period exploring its significant developments. We will divide this overview into two main categories: historical events and documents of the times. We learn of the historical events both from some of the contemporary documents and also from secular studies that frame the larger world history. Among the writings of the period, we will consider mainly those commonly called the “Apocrypha.” We will also consider those writings more commonly called the Pseudepigrapha.

## HISTORICAL EVENTS

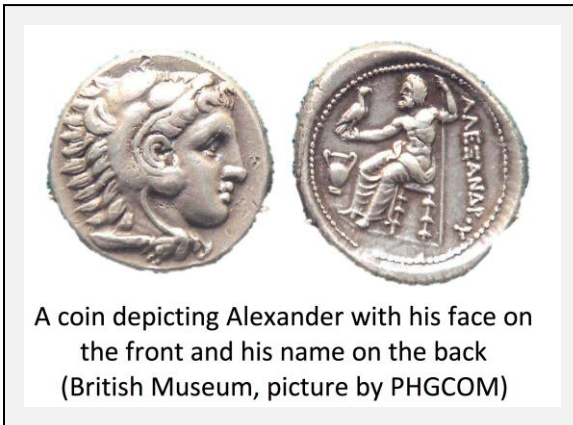
A study of the Old Testament ends around 400BC with the Persian Empire controlling not only Judah, but most of the Asian portion of the Mediterranean world. Stretching from Egypt to India, as far north as Turkey, Persia's rule was dominant in the lives of Jews. There was a strong Jewish population in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, but there were also many Jews living dispersed throughout the empire (this dispersion is called "the diaspora"). The repopulation of Jerusalem comes late in Old Testament studies with approval by the Persian authorities, and strong leadership from the Jew Nehemiah, himself a Persian official. The uniting effect of the Persian Empire, with its ready allowance of worshipping the gods of choice, allowed the Jews in Judah to worship their God YHWH,<sup>1</sup> and allowed Jews in the diaspora to worship YHWH as well. Although the precise origins of the Jewish synagogues as a place of communal worship beyond the temple in Jerusalem are unknown, most scholars are in accord that during this period, the synagogues were becoming important aspects of Jewish practice.

The world became a different place in 336BC with the assassination of Philip II of Macedon (382-336BC). His twenty year old son, Alexander, took the throne and immediately went about consolidating his hold on the throne by quelling potential internal rivalries, and by reasserting the Macedonian hold over now rebelling territories. Quickly resolving those problems, Alexander went on warring campaigns to accomplish territorial expansion his father had failed at. Extending north to the Danube, south into Greece, and east through modern Turkey, Alexander added victory to victory. By the winter of 332-332, Alexander was tromping down the Syrian coast toward Egypt, gobbling up Persian territories as city after city readily surrendered. (The few, like Tyre, that did not, suffered severely).

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars differ over how to write the name of God. In the Old Testament, God's name, as given to Moses, was made of the consonants that, in English, are Y-H-W-H. This is commonly written in contemporary English Bibles by the word "LORD" written in all capital letters with the ORD in a smaller font. Older translations, notably the American Standard Version, used the word "Jehovah" to translate these four letters. The translation of "LORD" derives principally from Judaism's usage of "Lord" (*Adonai*) as a substitute for YHWH when speaking. This unwillingness to speak the Holy Name arose during the intertestamental period, likely out of reverence and a caution against violating the commandment prohibiting taking the Lord's name in vain. By the time Paul was writing, he was using the Greek word for Lord (*kurios*) as a substitute for YHWH, even though the Greek word Lord had no equivalent usage in Greek for a deity. When the Greek word is used, or when the actual Hebrew word for Lord (*Adonai*) is used in reference to God, translators render it "Lord," using upper and lower case letters. We will typically use the Hebrew letters of God's name, but will put them in large and small capitals to honor the English translation LORD.

Alexander was not simply a lucky lad who had a few good days on the battlefield. Alexander was well prepared for his role. At the age of 14, King Philip II hired Aristotle as the tutor for Alexander and other teenage boys of court. A big proponent of education, Philip II also had a group of engineers charged with inventing better weapons and methods of war. These men developed better engines of artillery, rams, siege towers, and better methods of tunneling under walls to weaken them.<sup>2</sup> Alexander took with him, a love and appreciation of both learning and of Hellenic (“Greek”) culture. As Alexander conquered lands, he continued his father’s practice of establishing cities and naming them after himself. Among the twenty-plus cities he self-named, the one most important in this lesson is the coastal city of Alexandria, quickly made the capital of Egypt. Another important change Alexander brought was his relocation of Hellenic people to these various areas of the world. These people brought not only Greek culture, but also the Greek love for learning, writing, and artistic thought.



During this time, the area of mainly Jewish worshippers of YHWH north of Jerusalem, called Samaria after the lead city of Samaria, tried rebelling against Alexander in 332. Alexander not only crushed the rebellion, but he also planted more Macedonians into the local population, contributing even more to the strongly mixed breed of Samaritans that appear in the New Testament as an abhorrence to mainline Jew.<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem, meanwhile, opened

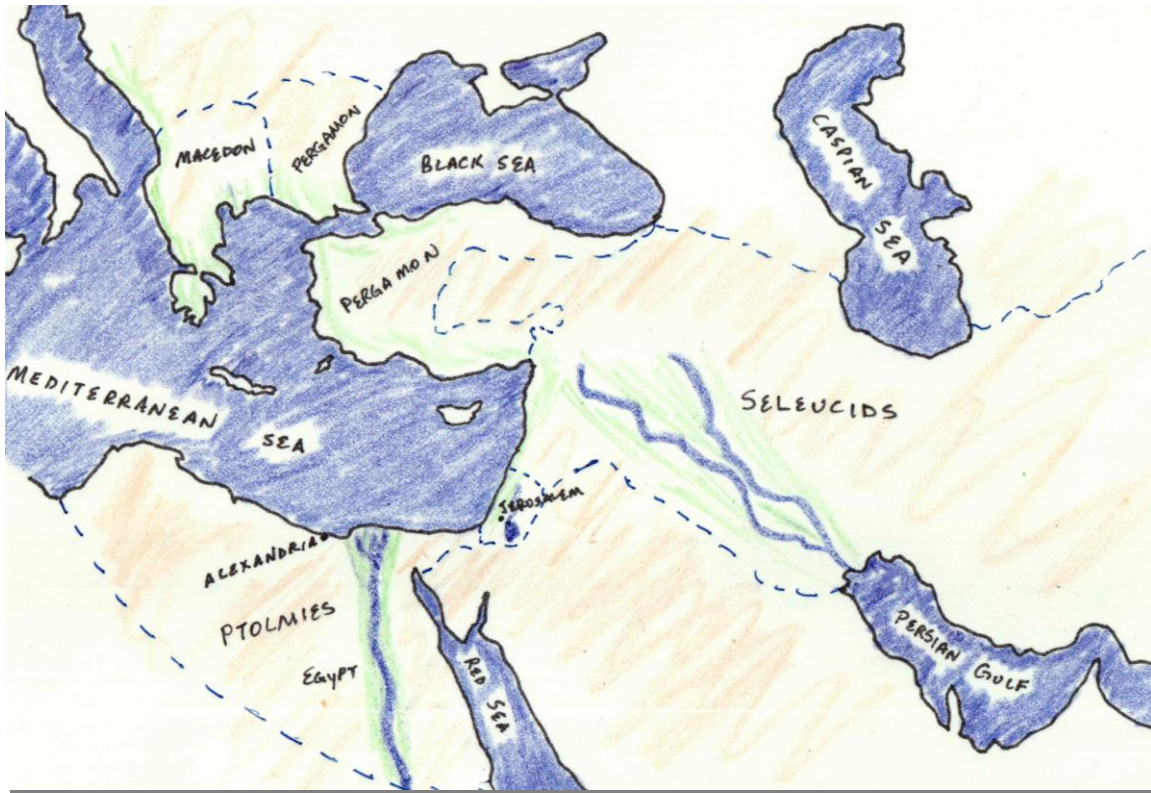
its gates to Alexander, with the High Priest going out to meet Alexander and usher him into Jerusalem and to the temple. As the history was believed at the time of the New Testament, Alexander sacrificed to YHWH at the temple and was then shown the book of Daniel where it was written, that “one of the Greeks would

<sup>2</sup> See generally, Lewis, D. M., *et al.*, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge 1994), 2d Ed., Vol. VI, at 770ff.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to this, there was some bad blood between the Samaritans and the Jews of Jerusalem, likely due to interbreeding that had occurred during the Babylonian captivity. However, we know from letters sent from the Egyptian Jewish community at Elephantine that the Samaritans and Jews were still seen as important sources of YHWH worship. Similarly, Nehemiah 13:28 and other passages indicate the ready intermarrying of the Jews of Samaria and those of Judah, much to the chagrin of Nehemiah. See assessment and references at Bickerman, Elias, “The Historical Foundations of Postbiblical Judaism,” written in 1949, but published as a landmark analysis in multiple publications, including, Stone, Michael, Satran, David, eds., *Emerging Judaism, Studies on the Fourth and Third Centuries B.C.E.*, (Fortress 1989), at 29ff.

destroy the empire of the Persians.” Alexander “believed himself to be the one indicated; and in his joy dismissed the multitude for the time being, but on the following day he summoned them again and told them to ask for any gifts they might desire.” The request was for the Jews in Judah and in the diaspora to be allowed to follow their laws. Alexander granted this request.<sup>4</sup>

Alexander continued his conquests, taking lands all the way to the Himalayas before his early death in 324, just a few weeks before his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday. With no obvious heir, Alexander’s empire broke into wars and skirmishes as various factions tried to assert authority. After forty years of war by the year 301, the land was divided into four regions, ruled by the *Diadochi* (meaning the “successors”).



The regions concerning our studies are two: Egypt and Persian. The Ptolomies ruled the area around Egypt.<sup>5</sup> His line ruled Egypt until the death of Cleopatra in 30BC. The Persian area was named after Alexander’s general Seleucus. Although the size of the kingdom diminished over time, it remained a viable kingdom until

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<sup>4</sup> This history is recounted by the Jewish historian Josephus (37-100AD) who wrote up Jewish history for the benefit of his Roman patrons in 94AD. Quotes from the Loeb translation, Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.338ff (Harvard 1937).

<sup>5</sup> The Ptolemy family formed a dynasty, and are named after Alexander’s friend Ptolemy who took the throne name Ptolemy Soter I.

succumbing to the Romans in 63BC. The Ptolomies and Seleucids battle over the rights to claim the region of Palestine, including Jerusalem. The coasts along Syria and Palestine were important trade routes that opened the Seleucids to the Mediterranean world. The Ptolomies kept Jerusalem a territory until the Seleucid King Antiochus III reclaimed it in 200BC.

Both the Ptolomies and the Seleucids were Greek in their thinking and culture, and they brought and left a strong Greek imprint in their various regions. A part of their approach included exploitation of cities rather than extermination of cities. So the cities and their respective holy places were granted immunity in return for payment of taxes and assurances of allegiance. With this approach, the major regions vied against each other for greater control among the otherwise balanced powers.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, this warring between the regions, and its resultant stalemate, led to the opening for Rome's conquest from the West.

While Greek thought and culture reigned, its influence was felt in many ways. Greek systems of education and its emphasis on schooling led to an increase in literacy. Greek schools were opened around the Mediterranean not only to the transplanted Greeks, but also to the children of the wealthy of all heritages. From age 7-14, the children studied reading, writing, arithmetic, and physical education. From ages 14-18, the education consisted of memorizing important writers as well as in depth study of grammar, geometry and music. Those who continued to study after the age of 18 were taught military strategy as well as ways to propagate Hellenistic culture.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the world saw the institution of Greek banking, an increased demand for Greek goods, and the usage of Greek book and record keeping.

Nowhere was the influence of Greek culture more apparent than Alexandria, the capital of Egypt. In addition to schools, the Ptolemies built great structures for learning. They built a massive lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, just offshore on the island of Pharos. The body of Alexander the Great was embalmed and placed in a glass sarcophagus for viewing in Alexandria. By the 200's BC, Alexandria was the largest city in the world, and it featured the world's largest library. Although scholars are uncertain the size or content, a reasonable estimate of 400,000 volumes is frequently given.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Alexandria also held a large Jewish population. It is not surprising that the Greek intelligentsia, including the ruling authorities, sought to have the Jewish Scriptures and other important writings translated into Greek. This was the birth

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<sup>6</sup> See, Starr, Chester, *A History of the Ancient World*, (Oxford 1965), at 405ff.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, at 415ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, at 416.

of what scholars today call the Septuagint (abbreviated “LXX,” the Roman numerals for “70”<sup>9</sup>). The first Jewish Scriptures translated were the Torah, the five books of Moses generally agreed to have been translated into Greek around 250BC.<sup>10</sup> The remaining Jewish Scriptures followed, and many other Jewish writings were included as well. These Greek translations became important in the Greek speaking Jewish communities throughout the diaspora. Paul, the church’s best-traveled early missionary, used the Septuagint translation almost exclusively in his writings to believers outside Jerusalem. Not only did Greek-speaking Jews know the Septuagint translation, but it was understandable by Greek-speaking Gentiles as well.

Another result of the Greek influence in education and thought was the rise of a class of people who were important as record keepers and scribes. Certainly scribes were in existence before, we have a good record of them in the Old Testament (Ezra, for example), but the role of a scribe as a civil servant and the group of scribes as a guild seems to have taken clearer form during this time of Greek influence. In Judah, these scribes became also the writers of Scripture, as professional experts in copying Torah scrolls.<sup>11</sup>

In this same time period (the mid-200’s BC), another power began to play in the Mediterranean world. The Republic of Rome was expanding its power base and by 201, the Romans had conquered Carthage and had hold of the Western Mediterranean world. It was just a matter of time until the rest of the Mediterranean world fell under its power.

In Judah, other important events were unfolding. During the reign of Ptolemy III (who reigned from 246-222BC), there was considerable discontent between the Jews in Judea and the government of Ptolemy III. The Jews made efforts to move

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<sup>9</sup> The name “Septuagint” comes from the Latin title of the translation: *versio septuaginta interpretum*, which means “version of the seventy interpreters.” This also explains why the abbreviation for the Septuagint is the Roman numeral for 70. Somewhere around 200BC, a letter from “Aristeas to Philocrates” was written containing an account, generally accorded to be legend in many aspects, about the writing of the Septuagint. In the letter, it is explained that the Alexandrian librarian Demetrius of Phalerum persuaded Ptolemy II (309-246 BC) to enrich the library with a set of the Jewish Scriptures. The king sent ambassadors to the High Priest in Jerusalem asking for help. The High Priest sent 72 scholars (representing six from each tribe) to do the work. Supposedly (and this is generally deemed to be part of the legend as opposed to fact) the scholars finished their work in exactly 72 days. For more, see, Wasserstein, Abraham, and Wasserstein, David, *The Legend of the Septuagint, From Classical Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Jobes, Karen, and Silva, Moises, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, (Baker 2000), at 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Keter 1972), Vol. 14, at 1042f.

allegiance to the Seleucid dynasty, which warred with the Ptolomies from 246-241BC. While that war, termed the “Third Syrian War, was won by the Ptolomies, the peace did not last long. A fourth war broke out from 219-217BC, followed by a fifth from 202-195BC. It was during this fifth war that the Seleucid king Antiochus III occupied Judea and made it a part of the Syrian province. Antiochus II was good to the Jews, offering them a good deal of materials for life and worship, in exchange for the Jewish welcome to Antichus III.<sup>12</sup> Inside Jerusalem, there were political struggles over Jewish life as well. Among the issues was the debate over whether Jewish life should “modernize” in the Greek manner or whether it should keep the culture and traditions of the Hebrew fathers and the Hebrew faith.

Upon the death of Antiochus III, his son Seleucus IV reigned until 175BC. Upon his death, his younger brother Antiochus IV took the Seleucid throne, including control over Judah. Antiochus IV added to his name the title “Epiphanes,” which meant “God manifest.” Antiochus IV almost immediately went to war against Egypt, and worked to consolidate his kingdom into the Greek culture he wanted. In Jerusalem, he sacked the reigning high priest Jason (who himself was Antiochus IV’s replacement of the rightful high priest Onias III), placing Menelaus into the office. Jason had already starting Hellenizing Judah, building a Greek gymnasium and instituting other Greek customs, but he was rumored to still have Jewish historical sympathies. While Antiochus IV was in Egypt, rumors swirled that he had died. This caused Jason to gather some forces and re-enter Jerusalem reclaiming his role as leader and High Priest. Antiochus, who was in fact not dead, took note of the rebellion and marched against Jerusalem, sacking it quite readily.

As part of his purging campaign, Antiochus killed 80,000 Jews, massacring young and old, women, children, and infants. He outlawed Sabbath worship as well as Old Testament feasts and observances. Antiochus Epiphanes sought to extinguish Judaism as a belief or way of life, going so far as to set up Greek worship of Zeus in the Temple of Yahweh. People were ordered to worship and sacrifice to Zeus or to face the penalty of death. He ordered all copies of Scripture burned.<sup>13</sup>

The Jews rebelled against Antiochus and his treatment of the people and faith (the “Hasmonean revolt”). With some support by the Romans (who had drawn a line in the sand<sup>14</sup> when Antiochus IV’s actions against Egypt threaten Rome’s grain

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<sup>12</sup> See Josephus at XII.138-53.

<sup>13</sup> For these details and more see 2 Maccabees 1-6.

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars trace this expression to 168BC when the Roman commander Popilius took a stick and drew a line in the sand around Antiochus in Egypt saying, in essence, that Rome would declare war on Antiochus if he stepped across the line without first committing to leave Egypt.

trade), the Jews, led at first by a man named Matthias fought for freedom. Matthias refused to worship the Greek Gods and even killed a Hellenizing Jew who began to sacrifice to the Greek gods in his place. Matthias took his five sons in to the wilderness, staying in hiding until his death in 167BC. After his death, his son Judas Maccabees began guerilla warfare with his troops labeled “Maccabees.” Judas fought hard and had a great deal of success. Ultimately, after the death of Antiochus IV, he forced a treaty that allowed Jews to restore orthodoxy as an accepted practice. After his victory, the temple was rededicated, but there was an inadequate resource of pure oil for burning the menorah longer than a day. The oil was used anyway, and it was said to last miraculously for eight days. This is the basis of the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah.

Two different Jewish power groups are worth noting as arising at this time. Right around 200BC, a party of the wealthier elements of Jewish society formed a ruling society. The wealthy behind the party included priests, merchants, and aristocrats. This group used the name “Sadducees,” which scholars generally accord derived from the name Zadok, the family that Ezekiel entrusted with control of the temple (Ezek. 44:10-15). The members of this party “dominated the Temple worship and its rites.”<sup>15</sup>

Against the Sadducees arose another political party after the reassertion of Judah’s religious rights in the second century BC. Directly resulting from the Hasmonean revolt, around 165-160BC, a political party calling themselves “Pharisees” began. Scholars generally see the name stemming from the root of the Hebrew word *parash*, which means, “to separate.”<sup>16</sup> The Pharisees sought to wrest control of the temple from the Sadducees, an antagonism that raged on until the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The divide between the Sadducees and Pharisees was not simply political. It represented a divide over theology as well. The Sadducees embraced only the Torah as law, while the Pharisees more readily embraced the oral traditions as well. The Sadducees denied the resurrection of the body (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8) and the immortality of the soul.<sup>17</sup>

The Pharisees quickly became the party of most Jewish people, teaching a scrupulous adherence to the Torah. The Jewish encyclopedia gives a thorough review of their concept of God:

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See, Austin, Michael, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to Roman Conquest*, (Cambridge 2006), 2d ed., at 374-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Keter 1972), Vol. 14, at 610.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 13, at 363.

<sup>17</sup> Josephus 18.16.



Pharisees conceived of God as an omnipotent spiritual Being, all-wise, all-just, and all-merciful. They taught that God loved all His creatures and asked man to walk in His ways, to act justly, and to love kindness. Though all-knowing and omnipotent, God endowed man with the power to choose between good and evil.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, even as a Christian, Paul readily identified himself as “a Pharisee, as son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6).

As a general rule, it seems the Pharisees were those Jews who were emphatic about maintaining the elements and rituals of Judaism untouched by any corruption of Greek influence. The Sadducees, on the other hand, came predominantly from the priestly families and enjoyed support from the power structure. The interests of the Sadducees were much more on politics and power than piety and purity.

During this time, the Roman Republic continued to grow in influence and power. By 133, the Romans had mastery over a good bit of the Mediterranean world, even though they assimilated Greek culture just as much as they imposed Roman culture. The Republic was not as bent on instituting Roman rule everywhere they had dominion. Judah thus kept its relative independence until the reign of Pompey interrupted an internal dispute between the Pharisees (led by Hycannus II and supported by Pompey) and the Sadducees (led by Aristobulus II).<sup>19</sup> The time period between 78 and 43BC saw the collapse of the Roman Republic and the rise of Roman dictatorship. The first dictator was Julius Caesar (100-44 BC), giving the modern calendar its month of July. After his death, there was a power struggle until Octavian emerged the victor and assumed the moniker of Caesar Augustus (giving our calendar the month of August). Augustus ruled from 27BC until his death in 14AD.

This brief history brings us to the Gospel times for,

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered (Luke 2:1).

## WRITINGS

With the historical background in place, we now turn to consider Jewish writings that arose during this period. We will divide these into two groups for consideration: the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha.

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<sup>18</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Keter 1972), Vol. 13, at 363-364.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, XIV.4

## Apocrypha

The term “Apocrypha” comes from a Greek word that means “hidden away.” Depending upon who is writing, this term has either a positive or a negative connotation. “Apocrypha” is a positive term for those who approve of the books because the books were “hidden” from common use for being too profound for ordinary people to appreciate. “Apocrypha” is a negative term for those who do not approve of the books who deem the books “hidden” away because they were heretical.

As we use the term in this lesson, we are referencing the books that are part of most Catholic Bibles, but not most Protestant Bibles. The term also has an extended meaning, as there are a number of additional books written in the Bible age that some call “apocryphal.” Some of these books were written before Christ and they carry the term “Pseudepigrapha,” which we discuss briefly below. There are a number of books written after Christ that are sometimes called the “New Testament Apocrypha.” Those are not dealt with in this lesson because neither orthodox Christianity nor Judaism ever considered them part of “Scripture.”

The Old Testament Apocrypha refers to 14 or 15 books<sup>20</sup> that were written between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. The titles of these books in the Revised Standard Version are:

1. The First Book of Esdras,
2. The Second Book of Esdras,
3. Tobit,
4. Judith,
5. The Additions to the Book of Esther,
6. The Wisdom of Solomon,
7. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach,
8. Baruch,
9. The Letter of Jeremiah,
10. The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men,
11. Susanna,
12. Bel and the Dragon,
13. The Prayer of Manasseh,
14. The First Book of the Maccabees, and
15. The Second Book of the Maccabees.

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<sup>20</sup> Many English versions of the Apocrypha combine “The Letter of Jeremiah” into the book “Baruch” as the last chapter of Baruch.

Although the Apocrypha is not regarded as inerrant scripture in most Protestant churches, this does not mean it is without merit or use. There are multiple ways the Apocrypha is recognized as useful. First, the Apocrypha contains useful historical information about the time period between the Old and the New Testaments. Much of the detail given earlier in this lesson comes from the Apocrypha. For example, we better understand the origins of the Pharisees and the Sadducees from reading the Apocrypha. Similarly, we better understand the political interplay of the Jews with the Roman government. The issue of whether it is scriptural to pay taxes to a Pagan Roman Emperor is an issue on which the Apocrypha gives us historical background data to help frame the New Testament debate.

The Apocrypha in an even more specific way helps us understand certain parts of the New Testament. It is clear reading the Apocrypha side by side with the New Testament that Paul was familiar with a good bit of the Apocrypha. Romans echoes a fair amount of thought and language found in the Wisdom of Solomon. A number of Paul's other writings probably show a similar relationship. Likewise, the book of Hebrews and the Epistle of James both have passages that seem to indicate some reflections that grew out of Apocryphal books.

The Apocrypha also helps us see the advent of "letters" as a basis for communicating God's message. The Old Testament books are not letters themselves, and only rarely do they contain a letter. Yet, the New Testament scriptures are heavily weighted with letters and epistles. We see in the Apocrypha this transition of transmitting information about God and his interaction with his people.

Another area where the Apocrypha helps us put the New Testament into focus and historical perspective lies in the doctrinal areas of personal immortality, activity of angels and demons, expectations of a Messianic king, and more. With these ideas in mind, we consider a brief review of each book:

### *The First Book of Esdras*

This is a historical book that largely recounts the historical data already contained in parts of the Old Testament. The events recount much of what is found in I and II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, but with a twist. The historical information of I Esdras is inconsistent and divergent from many of the stories already given in the Old Testament. In addition to the recounting of other Old Testament material, I Esdras also contains a supplemental story of some interest. That story is known as the *Debate of the Three Soldiers*.

In the *Debate*, we find three soldiers passing the time by trying to answer a question of what is the most powerful thing in the world. The first soldier believes wine to be the most powerful. He argues that wine reduces all to the same level. The second soldier argues that the king was most powerful because armies of men would follow the command of the king. Indeed, the king passed laws that all people must obey. The third soldier started by suggesting that women were most powerful. The soldier notes that men spend their lives trying to make money, gain property, and find treasure. Ultimately, however, those men bring these things home to women. Though the third soldier made a compelling point on the women response, he shifts his ultimate opinion, opting instead for “truth” as the most powerful thing in the world. The soldier reasons that truth can never be denied, but manages to hold the world together. The third soldier wins.

I and II Esdras are the two books which Luther failed to include even in his Apocrypha because they contained nothing which Luther did not feel could be more easily found in Aesop’s fables.

### *The Second Book of Esdras*

This book was most likely composed in sections. The core of the book contains apocalyptic visions about the future. These apocalyptic visions come complete with various animal and plant symbols for the events and coming Messiah. In addition to the apocalyptic visions, there is a two-chapter preface that seems to come from the middle of the second century A.D. and recounts certain matters from a Christian perspective. In this part of the book, Ezra sets forth his charge as convicting the Jews of their sin and announcing God’s choice of the Gentiles to become believers and participate in the Savior.

The apocalyptic visions center on the following issues:

- (1) the problem of evil (where an angel Uriel explains that the human mind is too limited to fathom all God is about);
- (2) why unrighteous nations were allowed to judge Israel (the answer being that the process of history is inscrutable, but that there are signs of the coming age where those who are faithful will be rewarded);
- (3) why the Jews had not yet inherited the earth (where Uriel again comes to discuss the number of those to be saved, explaining not only final judgment and the fate of the wicked, but also a 400 year reign of the Messiah before the day of judgment);

- (4) the coming punishment of Israel (with the promised vision of a coming New Jerusalem);
- (5) a vision of a three-headed/twelve-winged eagle that arose from the sea only to be confronted by a lion that terminates the eagle (symbolizing the Messiah who would punish the wicked at the end of the age);
- (6) a vision of a powerful man rising from the sea and destroying his enemies by fire (symbolizing the son of man, his undetermined arising, and his work); and
- (7) an explanation of how Ezra came to dictate the 24 books of the Old Testament along with 70 other spiritual books.

### Tobit

Tobit is a book of what might be called pious fiction. Most likely written around 190 to 170 B.C., the book centers on a fellow named Tobit who lived in Galilee around 721 B.C., before being deported to Nineveh. Tobit was a holy man who sought to follow God and God's commands. Misfortune caused Tobit to go blind and lose his ability to support his family. Tobit quarreled with his wife and prayed for God to release him from his sufferings by taking his life.

Meanwhile, far away, a distant kinswoman of Tobit was also praying for death. This girl, Sarah, had been married seven times, but each husband died before the marriages could be consummated. Rather than kill either one, God sent his angel Raphael (meaning "God heals") to aid the two.

When Tobit believes he is about to die, he gave his son Tobias some last instructions, including the reverse of the Golden Rule: "What you hate, do not do to anyone" (4:15). Tobias was then sent on an errand to the same distant land where Sarah lived. Through the unknown intervention and advice of Raphael, Tobias was given the means to drive away any demon or evil spirit that was molesting someone. As Tobias neared the city of Sarah, word came to Tobias that Tobias was obligated to marry Sarah as the nearest kinsman. Tobias knew of the demise of the previous seven, and Tobias was NOT excited.

The angel Raphael, still in disguise, explained to Tobias a demon was responsible for the killings, and by following Raphael's advice, Tobias could safely drive the demon away. Confident of this advice, Tobias made his proposal and intention to marry known. Sarah's father, who was not an

optimist about the whole affair, dug a grave for Tobias on the night of the wedding. The grave proved useless, however, because Tobias followed Raphael's instructions and the demon fled.

Meanwhile, Tobit and his wife were worried sick that something had happened to their son on his journey. The son's eventual return with a wife was then marked with great happiness. The son then used another potion/prescription of the angel in disguise to cure Tobit's blindness. Tobit and Tobias then find out that this helpful stranger was in fact an angel of God. And, they all lived happily ever after!

We make two matters of note beyond the story line itself. First, in Christian history, this story has formed the basis of a number of different marriage matters. For a long time in the middle ages, couples in an effort to keep piety would wait four nights to consummate their marriages as Tobias and Sarah did. The first three nights were dedicated to prayer. (King Louis IX of France – later canonized as St. Louis – followed the three-night wait for his marriage in 1234). Even the Amish Minister's Manual instructs the preacher of weddings to relate the story of Tobit.

The second matter of note concerns the issues this story tells us about Jewish life in the second century B.C. Piety that centered on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving is underscored throughout the text. The importance of giving an honorable burial to one killed for no good reason is also taught. Also, important in the text is the prevalence of angels and demons interacting in the world in manners and amounts not set forward in any Old Testament book; yet, such demonic and angelic activity is almost taken for granted in the New Testament.

### Judith

While some support the historicity of Judith, most see it as a religious allegory. The history of the book itself has a number of glaring inaccuracies to both Biblical texts and historical texts. The book centers on the cunning and clever acts of a Jewess named Judith who manages to single handedly overthrow the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. Judith dolled herself up and went into the camp of Nebuchadnezzar's General Holofernes soon gaining the general's confidence that Judith can help the General conquer Judea. The General began to entertain lustful thoughts about Judith, which gave her an opportunity to catch the general unaware and behead him. The result of this action caused the enemy to flee in confusion.

The thrust of the book was to edify folks into not submitting to enemies, but to trust in God and his power to rescue.

### Esther

The Apocrypha adds a number of passages to the Esther story to bring in direct elements of prayer, devotion, and faith in God that are otherwise missing from the Hebrew text of Esther.

### The Wisdom of Solomon

This is a wisdom book that claims to be the wisdom of Solomon, although no scholar or church father that studied the book carefully has claimed that Solomon actually wrote it. A considerable amount of the teaching in the book sets out a distinctly Platonic view of life. This view teaches about matter as eternal, the pre-existence of the soul, and the temporary imprisonment of the body in the soul. The book, seems to repudiate the doctrine of Purgatory.

It seems most probable that Paul, among others in the New Testament, had a good awareness of the writings in this book. Some of the ideas and language of Paul echo the words contained in wisdom. A comparison of Romans 1: 20 to Wisdom 13:5-8; 1:21 to 13:1; 1:22 to 12:24; 1:26-31 to 14:24-27 are striking in the similarities (*see also* Rom 9:20-23 compared to Wisdom 12:12; 15:7; and 12:20). Similar apt comparisons can be made between passages in John, Hebrews, James, Ephesians, and Corinthians.

### Ecclislasticus also known as The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach

Like the Wisdom of Solomon, this book falls into the genre of wisdom literature. The author, commonly called Ben Sira (meaning “Son of Sirach”) was evidently a scribe (10:5; 38:24f; 44:4). It seems from reading the text a fair assumption that Ben Sira ran a “school” in Jerusalem where he taught moral and religious precepts to young people. The book was most likely written around 180 B.C. and uses the book of Proverbs as a model of how it presents its material.

### Baruch

This short book is named after Baruch, the secretary to Jeremiah. The short 5-chapter book contains an amalgam of verses largely from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, and Daniel. The book is put together around a confession of sin, prayers for mercy and pardon, a discussion of wisdom, and words of assurance and consolation for the Jewish exiles.

### The Letter of Jeremiah

This book gets placed in various places in the Apocrypha. Some put it by itself, others as a part of Baruch. The original writing appears to have been a pamphlet written to demonstrate the powerlessness of idols and the foolish uselessness in worshipping them.

### The Additions to the Book of Daniel

The Apocrypha has three major additions to the Book of Daniel: (1) The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men; (2) Susanna; and (3) Bel and the Dragon. Generally these stories were incorporated into the text of the Old Testament book of Daniel.

#### (1) Azariah

Azariah was the Hebrew name of Abednego, one of Daniel's three companions who eventually went into the fiery furnace. This passage contains his prayer followed by some details of God's deliverance for the three men. The passage concludes with a prayer of praise from the three.

#### (2) Susanna

Susanna is a short story about the beautiful wife of a prominent Jew. Two of the elders/judges got carried away with lust for Susanna and plotted to molest her. As they attempted to molest Susanna, she was coerced with the threat that refusal on her part would result in the men accusing her of committing adultery with another. Based on their dual testimony, they assured her that she would lose and be stoned. Rather than submit to their lechery, Susanna screamed for help. At her subsequent trial where the elders unjustly accuse her, Susanna loudly protested her innocence until a young Daniel heard her. Daniel stepped in with a brilliant cross-examination of the witnesses causing their story to crumble. Susanna was saved, and the false witnesses were killed.

#### (3) Bel and the Dragon

This insert contains two different tales, one involving Bel and the second a dragon. Bel was the Babylonian cult god also known as Marduk. In this Apocryphal story, Daniel proved that Bel was not all that King Darius thought he was. By showing that Bel was not really eating the nightly sacrifices, Daniel was ultimately permitted to destroy Bel's image and the associated temple. The dragon was another recipient of the king's worship that Daniel destroyed by feeding it a concoction of hair, tar, and fat. The dragon exploded, much to the chagrin of the people. The people insisted that Daniel be thrown



in the lion's den. After spending the better part of a week in the lion's den, Daniel was brought out unharmed.

### The Prayer of Manasseh

This beautiful and heartfelt prayer is set out in the Apocrypha as the prayer of evil and wicked King Manasseh who sought God late in his life living as a captive in Babylon (see 2 Chronicles 33:11ff). The prayer begins with praise to God Almighty who manifests his glory in creation and in the granting of a sinner's repentance. Manasseh then prays with confession for his personal sins with a request for God's forgiveness. The Prayer ends with an appropriate doxology.

### 1 and 2 Maccabees

These are history books that relate much of the intertestamental history discussed earlier in this lesson. 1 Maccabees was most likely written around 134 to 110 B.C. It seems an attempt to chronicle the life of the Jewish people under the Greek period (in much the same manner that Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles set out the Persian period). Most scholars believe the accounts to be reasonably accurate in their historical portrayal of the events covered by the book.

1 Maccabees gives a chronological discourse of the Jews from the struggle under Antiochus Epiphanes in 175 B.C. to the death of Simon Maccabaeus in 134 B.C. Antiochus is vividly shown to be a sadistic, egocentric ruler who sought to impose Greek culture upon everyone in his jurisdiction by any means necessary. As referenced in the historical section of this lesson, the resistance to this imposed idolatry came first from a man named Matthias and his five sons. The history recounts the success at regaining control of Jerusalem, rededicating the defiled Temple, and restoring the sacrificial system.

2 Maccabees is a bit different. Rather than give a near clinical, news reporting, historical picture of the times and events, 2 Maccabees gives a more "National Enquirer" write up of about 15 years leading up to 160 B.C. 2 Maccabees is not in any way a continuation of 1 Maccabees. It seems to derive its title from the fact that it is a SECOND book about the time of the Maccabees. 2 Maccabees emphasized life after death for the righteous (7:36) as well as a restored physical body (7:11ff; 14:26).

### **Pseudepigrapha**

The “Pseudepigrapha” references a group of writings that were written under pseudonyms. “Pseud” comes from the Greek word for “false” and “epigrapha” comes from the Greek for “writing.” None of these books were accorded status as Scripture in the church or Judaism, however, both the Christian community and Judaism, accorded these books a certain measure of interest, if not respect. The New Testament book of Jude, for example, references and quotes from the Pseudepigrapha. This term is used of a number of writings associated with the intertestamental times as well as a number in the New Testament era. We will focus here mostly on those in the intertestamental time, although even these showed signs of later editing well into the Christian era.

It is difficult to determine with finality what books are properly included in this group and what books are not. Because there are more than 65 books grouped into this category, we will not consider each one individually. Instead, we will consider important features about the books relative to our New Testament studies.

### *Why the false names?*

These books were written in a time when the prophets were deemed silent. The significance of the Old Testament canon was a determination of which books held the imprimatur of proven prophetic voice. As the Jews considered which scrolls were accorded the special status of “the word of the LORD,” they were seeking to determine which books were produced by prophetic word and pen. For the books of Moses, one of the prophets, if not the greatest, it was an easy and early decision. The words of Moses were accorded scriptural status before the close of the Old Testament, certainly by the time of the return from exile. Other prophets had their words fulfilled and were “proven true prophets.” The Law of Moses set out God’s instructions for testing whether God had raised up a prophet:

I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’— when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously (Dt. 18:18-22).

This approach brought out not only those books we today consider “prophetic,” but it also distinguished the Biblical histories of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as books of “prophecy.” The third section of Hebrew Scriptures (beyond the Torah or books of Moses and the Prophets) was a collection of general writings

that were selected and deemed prophetic. These books included the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, a group that together are labeled the “Hagiographa,” or the “Writings.” After the close of the Old Testament canon, the Jews experienced a cessation of active prophetic voices. No one “passed the test,” and the Jews considered Scripture closed.

This is suspected to be a principle reason giving birth to the Pseudepigrapha. By assigning the authorship to a person of great antiquity, it was suggesting that the books themselves had greater authority than otherwise. Hence there are books claiming authorship by Enoch (who lived in the age before Noah), and by Adam, Abraham, David, Solomon and more. Importantly, these fooled no one, and while they held public interest as well-written and interesting materials, they were never accorded the status of Scripture. This obviously has implications for scholars who dismiss the authority of Old Testament Scriptures as a collection of fictitious accounts falsely assigned to prophetic voices. Clearly the Jews knew the difference! Even in the Old Testament writings, the books that were treasured and saved as Prophetic Scripture were distinct from the many books used in their compilation (See, for example, The Book of the Wars of YHWH – Num. 21:14; The Book of the Just – Josh. 10:13; the Book of the Acts of Solomon – 1 Kings 11:42; and more).

### *Apocalyptic Literature*

One of the main genres of literature found in the Pseudepigrapha is what scholars term “apocalyptic literature.” This is literature that speaks to the “apocalypse” or ultimate destiny of the world. There are perhaps dozens of these works, depending on how one counts and classifies the material. Likely inspired by the apocalyptic materials in the Old Testament (especially parts of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah), these books typically use angels as messengers, speak of the coming “Son of Man,” of Melchizedek, the battles of angels and demons, cosmic journeys through the heavens, the coming Messiah, and more. The New Testament book of Jude references an apocalyptic work, *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*. These works continued to be edited into the New Testament era and beyond. We might liken them to a genre like the contemporary Left Behind series or Frank Peretti’s books like *This Present Darkness*.

### *Testaments*

Another genre of Pseudepigrapha are books written like “testaments,” or “testimonies” of various people. Of course, these are testimonies falsely ascribed to Old Testament figures, supplementing narratives of the Old Testament with legends and stories that interlace with Biblical accounts. The sons of Jacob are

accorded authorship of *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and there are many others. *The Testament of Job* is actually humorous as it teaches the virtue of enduring hardship. It also contains the experience of Job's three daughters speaking in the ecstatic tongues of angels. ("She spoke ecstatically in the angelic dialect, sending up a hymn to God in accord with the hymnic style of the angels"<sup>21</sup>)

### *Expansion of the Old Testaments and Legends*

These books include the Letter of Aristeas referred to earlier in this lesson as detailing the translation of the Jewish Scriptures into Greek. More of these writings contain a retelling of Biblical stories with extra details and ideas added to the accounts. The *Book of Jubilees*, for example, recounts the history of humanity from Adam to Moses. The book is falsely attributed to Moses, as something God told him while on Sinai. In the book, details are given, like the dating of the deception by Satan came seven years exactly from the time Adam and Eve were in Eden (Jubilees 3:17). Interestingly as an indication that some questions go back far, Jubilees tells where Cain got his wife! According to this fictitious work, he married his sister, Awan! (Jubilees 4:9).

### *Wisdom and Philosophical Literature*

These works take the form of wisdom literature, even as they frequently recount historical matters. Among these writings is one called *The Sentences of the Syriac Menander*. This false attribution to Menander is especially interesting in light of Paul's sermon to the Athenians at Mars Hill. Menander was from Paul's area of Eastern Turkey (ancient northern Syria), and was famous for writing "New Comedy" in Athens around 300BC. Paul accurately quotes Menander in his speech to the Athenians. The author of this Pseudepigraphal work does not! He does, however, frequently use humor in giving wisdom for living:

And if you want to take a wife, make first inquiries about her tongue, and take her only then, for a talkative woman is a hell; and a bad man is a deadly plague! (2:118).

### *Prayers, Psalms, and Odes*

These books include more Psalms of David and Solomon, more songs of Solomon, prayers of Joseph and Jacob, as well as the prayer of the wicked Old Testament King Manasseh. Although the Old Testament does not give us the prayer of

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<sup>21</sup> *Testament of Job* 48:3, translation R. P. Spittler, See, Charlesworth, Charles, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, (Doubleday 1983), Vol. 1.

Manasseh, 2 Chronicles 33 does mention his repentance and references as available in the Chronicles of the Seers (another non-extant, non-prophetic work lost in the ages of history). The prayer is a solid prayer of repentance, confessing sins that “exceeded the number of the sand(s) of the sea.” Manasseh claimed to be “justly afflicted” with no right “to lift up my eyes and look to see the height of heaven.” Yet Manasseh recognized that God was “long-suffering, merciful, and greatly compassionate,” and he appealed to God’s “manifold mercies” and “gentle grace” as he bent “the knees of [his] heart before God” and beseeched “forgiveness.”

## CONCLUSION

Our study of the New Testament promises to be marvelous as we consider the roots of the culture into which Jesus came, ministered, taught, died, was resurrected, and established his church. We will frequently have a chance to look back into these intertestamental times and writings in more detail as we unfold the riches of Scripture in the coming lessons. Unlike the roots of Nutgrass, discussed in the introduction, we are examining roots relevant to the Tree of Life! Come join our journey!

## POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...*the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*” (Rom. 3:2).

Paul knew the Apocryphal writings; that much is clear from reading Romans. Paul knew the writings of Menander; he was able to quote them in his sermon. Yet Paul recognized a distinction for the writings we call the Old Testament. These were “oracles of God.” They were special writings that conveyed the message and revelation of God for humanity. That the Jews were “entrusted” with these writings is a significant point for Paul. The writings were not simply evolving; they were delivered in a way where the Jews had responsibility for discerning their truth and securing the writings for humanity. They were “entrusted with the oracles.” These oracles are worthy of our study and attention. As Paul said in other places, the “law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ” (Gal. 3:24 KJV), and the Scriptures were “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,

for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). There is something very, very special about Scripture, setting it apart from all other writings. Let us commit to spending time and energy to learn why!

2. *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption”* (Gal. 4:4-5).

The timing of history and the timing of the incarnation are not a happy coincidence; they are the perfect timing of God. God is not bound by time, even as he operates within it. Christ’s atonement counted for the sins of those who died before he did. This is why Paul is able to use Abraham as an example of how we are saved by our faith in Christ (Rom. 4). So the timing of Christ was not one that was necessitated by a need to forgive sins on that particular day. Rather the timing of Christ was a perfect convergence of many threads into a single point that met all the Old Testament prophecies, and fit perfectly into the historical fabric that allowed the fullest expansion of the message immediately on the world stage. There were Jewish synagogues where Paul could preach all around the Mediterranean world. There was a peace of the Roman Empire that enabled commerce and easy travel around the Mediterranean; there were Pharisees that could produce the apostle Paul as a prize pupil, ardent for living right before God. All of these elements and more brought forth one from a small village in a backwater country who’s death and resurrection rocked the world and history.

God’s timing is no less perfect today. In the midst of all our crises and problems, where all our worries often seem so intricately laced with issues we can barely pronounce, much less unravel, there is a God of perfect timing, who promises to help us in our struggle, bringing us peace and joy as he teaches us how to face the evils and difficulties of the world in his strength.

3. *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”* (Phil. 4:8).

The New Testament writers, the saints and apostles, read many of the works of those who wrote on Scriptural ideas and themes, sometimes expanding legends, and other times writings prayers of conviction and

significant theological import. We do not often read or study these. Yet our opportunity is even broader. There is a wealth of Christian material available for reading that, while not on the level of Scripture, certainly can inform us and influence us. Just as the New Testament writer Jude quoted and referenced Pseudepigraphal works, we can hear good preachers today often quote or reference some of these marvelous Christian works for the points they make or the inspiration they offer. In an age where we get to watch most any movie on demand, where we are flooded by Internet reading on any subject, let us make a commitment to spend our time as Paul taught, thinking of “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable,” for his thought finishes with the promise that “the God of peace will be with you.” And who can’t use a little more peace?