



THE LESSONS OF JESUS

Understanding The Apocrypha

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Jesus explains the books your Bible left out

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How to Use This Book

This book is about the books that are not in your Bible, or not in every Bible. There are twenty-five chapters, in four parts.

Part One is the Apocrypha of the 1611 King James Bible: the fourteen books printed between the Old Testament and the New in the first King James Bible. Most of them are still scripture in Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Part Two is the three extra books kept by the Orthodox churches of the East.

Part Three is two books kept only in the Bible of Ethiopia, which my people were reading in my own time.

Part Four is six of the lost gospels, written about me after I was gone, which no church ever put in its Bible.

You can read straight through, or turn to any book you have heard of and start there.

Here is how each chapter works.

It opens with a box called **At a Glance**. It tells you who wrote the book, when, where it fits, which Bibles keep it, where you hear it in your own Bible, how close it stays to me, and which chapters to read if you only have time for three.

Then comes **Words to Know**, so any unfamiliar word is defined before you meet it.

Then **The Book in Brief**, which tells you what happens in the book, from start to finish. Most people have never read these books. You should know what is in one before you hear what I think of it.

Then the chapter itself, in short sentences and plain words. The big books get long chapters, and the small ones get short ones.

After it there is a box called **Check It Yourself**. It sends you to the book itself, and to your own Bible, so you can see whether I told you the truth.

At the end there is **The Short Version**, the few lines that hold the whole chapter.

Every chapter also has its own free page on **LessonsOfJesus.com**, at the name of its book, such as LessonsOfJesus.com/tobit. The pages add **Go deeper** sections with the longer history, the manuscripts and the arguments behind the chapter.

Two promises before we start.

One. You can check everything. References look like this: (Tobit 4:7). That means the book of Tobit, chapter 4, verse 7. History facts have a small number after them, and the notes at the back of the book tell you where each one comes from.

Two. I will not put words in my own mouth. When I tell you what I think of one of these books, I will measure it by what the gospels remember me saying and doing, and nothing else.

Which translations this book quotes. Quotations of your Bible, and of the books in Parts One and Two, come from the **World English Bible**, a modern translation in the public domain. It includes all of these books. Where it prints God's name as *Yahweh*, this book prints *the LORD*.

1 Enoch and Jubilees are quoted from the translations of **R. H. Charles**, published a little over a hundred years ago. The Gospel of Peter, the Protoevangelium of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas are quoted from the old translations in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. All of these are in the public domain, and they sound old-fashioned because they are. The Gospels of Thomas, Mary and Judas were found in modern times, in the last hundred and thirty years, and their translations belong to the people who made them, so you will find only short quotations from them here. The rest I will tell you in my own words.

BEFORE WE START: THE SHELF WITH NO EDGES

When people ask what books belong in the Bible, they usually imagine that someone, long ago, sat down with a list and decided.

No one did. Not in my time, and not for centuries after.

My people's shelf

In my lifetime, every Jew agreed on the five books of Moses. Nearly everyone agreed on the Prophets. Beyond that, the edges were soft. Jewish teachers were still arguing, long after I died, about whether the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes belonged.¹

And there were many more books than the ones that made it into your Old Testament. Some had been written only a century or two before me, and one in my own lifetime: Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the history of the Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon. Some, like 1 Enoch and Jubilees, were among the most-copied books at Qumran. My people read them, prayed with them, and argued about them. Some they treated as scripture, and some they did not, and different communities drew the line in different places.

The Greek translation of the scriptures used in Egypt and across the Greek-speaking world, which you will hear called the **Septuagint**, carried several of

these books alongside the others. The early Christians read the Greek, and so they inherited those books too.²

In the end, the rabbis who rebuilt Jewish life after Rome destroyed the Temple kept to the Hebrew books. The church kept the Greek ones. That is the first fork in the road.

The church's long argument

For three hundred years after me, there was no official list of Christian scripture at all.

In AD 367, a bishop of Alexandria named Athanasius wrote an Easter letter to his churches listing the books to be read. His New Testament is the first list that matches yours exactly: twenty-seven books. For the Old Testament, his list stayed close to the Hebrew books, though it counted Baruch with Jeremiah. Wisdom, Sirach, Esther, Judith and Tobit, he said, could be read by new believers for instruction, but were not in the canon.³

A few decades later Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, made the same distinction. He translated Tobit and Judith anyway, quickly, and said the church read such books *for the edification of the people*, but not to prove its teaching. Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo in North Africa, disagreed, and the African councils of Hippo and Carthage, in 393 and 397, listed Tobit, Judith, the Maccabees and the books of Solomon as scripture.³

For the next thousand years, the Western church mostly followed Augustine in practice, while its scholars often quoted Jerome.

The Reformation splits the shelf

Then, in the 1500s, the argument became a war.

Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. In his complete Bible of 1534 he took these books out of the Old Testament and printed them in a section of their own, between the Testaments, under the heading **Apocrypha**: *books which are not held equal to the holy scriptures, and yet are useful and good to read*.⁴

The Catholic Church answered at the Council of Trent. On April 8, 1546, the council declared that Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees and the additions to Esther and Daniel are scripture, equal to the rest, and cursed anyone who said otherwise. It left out 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh. Catholics call the books it kept **deuterocanonical**, *of the second canon*.⁴

The Church of England took Jerome's middle road. Its Thirty-Nine Articles say the church reads these books *for example of life and instruction of manners*, but does not use them *to establish any doctrine*. So the 1611 King James Bible printed all fourteen, in their own section between the Testaments. That is Part One of this book.⁵

The stricter Protestants went further. The Westminster Confession of 1646 said these books are *no part of the canon of the Scripture* and no more to be approved than any other human writings. In 1826 the British and Foreign Bible Society decided it would no longer pay to print Bibles that contained them. Within a generation, most English Bibles simply left them out.⁵

That is why, if you grew up Protestant, you may never have seen these books at all, while your great-great-grandparents' King James had them.

The East, and Ethiopia

The Orthodox churches of the East never had a Reformation, and never felt the need to decide so sharply. They kept the Greek Bible as they had always read it, which included a few more books: 3 Maccabees, Psalm 151, and in an appendix, 4 Maccabees. Those are Part Two.

The church of Ethiopia, one of the oldest in the world, kept the widest shelf of all. Its Bible holds more than eighty books, among them 1 Enoch and Jubilees, which were lost everywhere else for more than a thousand years. Those are Part Three.⁶

The gospels that no one kept

Part Four is different. These are not books my people read before me. They are books written about me, after I was gone, in the hundred years or so after the

four gospels in your Bible.

There were many of them. Some were told by communities who believed secret knowledge was the way to God. Some were simply stories, written for people who wanted to know what my mother was like as a girl, or what I was like as a boy. Some made the churches very angry. None was ever put into any Bible. Most were lost, and several were found again only in the last hundred and fifty years, in the sand of Egypt.

The yardstick

So how will I judge books that some of you call scripture and some of you have never heard of?

The same way I would judge anything said in my name. I will hold each one up against what I taught. Not against what the churches later decided, and not against what any one church calls scripture, but against what the gospels remember me saying and doing.

If you have read the other books in this series, you know what I keep coming back to. Here it is, in five lines:

1. **God's kingdom coming on earth**, not only in heaven.
2. **The poor and the outcast first.**
3. **Forgive debts and enemies, and do not strike back.**
4. **Love your neighbor; the stranger counts.**
5. **The greatest serves; no one lords it over anyone.**

At the top of every chapter you will find a line called **How close it stays to me**. It is not a score. It tells you, in a few words, where the book stands near what I taught, and where it walks away.

You will find that the books in this volume are like the books in your Bible. Some of them are beautiful. Some of them are cruel. Most are both. A book being left out of your Bible does not make it worse than the books that were kept, and a book being kept does not make it better than the ones that were left out. You can read them all, and weigh them, the way my people always did.

PART ONE — THE APOCRYPHA OF THE 1611 KING JAMES BIBLE

The fourteen books printed between the Old and New Testaments in the first King James Bible. Most of them are scripture in Catholic and Orthodox churches today, and most Protestants have never read them.

1. 1 Esdras: What Is Strongest

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer, in Greek. Most of the book is a retelling of the end of 2 Chronicles, the book of Ezra and part of Nehemiah. One story in the middle is found nowhere else.

When: Probably the 100s BC, perhaps in Egypt. The historian Josephus followed it closely when he told this part of my people's history at the end of the first century AD.

Where it fits: It runs from King Josiah's Passover in 622 BC, through the fall of Jerusalem and the exile, to the return under the Persian kings and Ezra's reading of the law, about 450 BC.

Which Bibles keep it: The Orthodox churches. Catholic Bibles moved it to an appendix in the 1500s and then dropped it. The 1611 King James printed it among the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Almost all of it is the story of 2 Chronicles 35–36, Ezra and Nehemiah 8, told again. The New Testament never quotes it.

How close it stays to me: Close in putting truth above kings. Far in sending away foreign wives and their children.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Esdras 3, 1 Esdras 4 and 1 Esdras 9.

WORDS TO KNOW

Esdras — the Greek form of the name *Ezra*.

Zerubbabel — a grandson of Jehoiachin, one of the last kings of Judah, who led a group of exiles home from Babylon and began rebuilding the Temple.

Darius — Darius I, king of Persia from 522 to 486 BC, in whose reign the second Temple was finished.

The Septuagint — the Greek translation of my people's scriptures, made in Egypt in the centuries before my birth. Many of the books in this volume were part of it.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The book opens with King Josiah keeping a great Passover in Jerusalem and then dying in battle against the king of Egypt. In chapter 1 the last kings of Judah follow, one after another, until the Babylonians burn the Temple and carry the people away.

In chapter 2 Cyrus of Persia lets the exiles go home and sends back the Temple vessels, and enemies in the land write to a later king to stop the rebuilding.

Chapters 3 and 4 tell a story that is in no other book. Three young bodyguards of King Darius hold a contest to say what is strongest. The first says wine, the second the king, the third women, and then truth above all. The third guard wins, and he turns out to be Zerubbabel. For his prize he asks the king to keep his vow to rebuild Jerusalem.

In chapters 5 to 7 the exiles return with Zerubbabel, list their families, build the altar and lay the Temple's foundation, face opposition, and finish the Temple under Darius.

In chapters 8 and 9 Ezra comes from Babylon with the law. He finds that many men have married foreign women. The people swear to send away those wives and their children, and they do. The book ends with Ezra reading the law aloud to the people in Jerusalem, and the people going home to feast and to send portions to those who have nothing.

Three bodyguards held a contest to name the strongest thing in the world.

The king was asleep. The three young men who guarded him had to stay awake, and they made a game of it. Each would write down one thing he thought was strongest, put it under the king's pillow, and let the king and his three Persian princes judge in the morning.

The first wrote, Wine is the strongest. The second wrote, The king is strongest. The third wrote, Women are strongest: but above all things Truth bears away the victory (1 Esdras 3:10–12).

That story is the reason this book is worth your time. Most of the rest you can read in your own Bible. This one you cannot.

A history told twice

Your Bible tells the end of the kingdom of Judah and the return from exile in three books: the end of 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. 1 Esdras tells the same story again, in Greek, in a slightly different order and with that one story added.¹

It is a muddle in places. Letters to the Persian king Artaxerxes, who reigned after Darius, come before the story about Darius. A scholar would say the book cares more about the story than the calendar, and that is fair.

In my time, this was a well-known book. The Jewish historian Josephus, born a few years after I died, wrote a long history of my people. When he came to the return from exile, he followed 1 Esdras, not your book of Ezra, and he told the contest of the three bodyguards in full.²

Wine, the king, women and truth

Read the speeches. They are funnier and sharper than you might expect from an old book.

The first guard says wine is strongest, because *it makes the mind of the king and of the fatherless child to be all one; of the bondman and of the freeman, of the poor man and of the rich* (1 Esdras 3:19). A drunk king and a drunk orphan are the same man. And when men are drunk, *a little after draw their swords* (1 Esdras 3:22).

The second says the king is strongest, and listen to what he means by strength. *If he bid them make war the one against the other, they do it* (1 Esdras 4:4). *They kill and are slain*, and bring the plunder home to him (1 Esdras 4:5). The farmers, *when they have reaped again that which they had sown, they bring it to the king* (1 Esdras 4:6). *And he is but one man* (1 Esdras 4:7). He eats, drinks and sleeps, and the rest of the world stands guard and pays.

That is an accurate description of a king from someone who stood next to one. It is also the world I was born into, where the harvest of the farmer was carried off to pay the men at the top.

The third guard says women are stronger, because even the king was born of a woman, and a man will gather gold and silver and let it all go for a woman he loves. He tells the court he has seen the king's own concubine take the crown off his head and put it on her own, while the king grinned at her (1 Esdras 4:29–31).

Then he turns to truth.

Great is truth

Wine is unrighteous, the king is unrighteous, women are unrighteous, all the children of men are unrighteous (1 Esdras 4:37). Everything the others named will pass away. *But truth remains, and is strong forever; she lives and conquers forevermore* (1 Esdras 4:38).

And here is the line I want you to notice. *With her there is no accepting of persons or rewards* (1 Esdras 4:39). Truth does not care who you are. It does not take bribes. It does not bow to rank.

When the people heard it, they shouted, *Great is truth, and strong above all things* (1 Esdras 4:41). In Latin that cry became a famous saying, *Magna est veritas, et praevalet*: truth is great, and it prevails.³

Think about who is speaking. A young servant of an empire, standing in front of the most powerful man in the world, tells him to his face that the king is not the strongest thing. Then he asks for his prize: not a gold chain or a seat by the king, but that the king keep his promise to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple that had been burned when Judea was laid waste (1 Esdras 4:43–46).

When the questioners came to trap me over taxes, they began by flattering me: *we know that you are honest, and don't defer to anyone; for you aren't partial to anyone* (Mark 12:14). They meant it as a trick, but it was the same praise the third guard gave truth. Truth does not take sides by rank.

The wives who were sent away

The book ends with something much harder.

Ezra comes from Babylon with the law of Moses and finds that many of the men who returned have married women of the peoples of the land. The men confess: *we have married strange women of the heathen of the land* (1 Esdras 8:92). Ezra tells them to *separate yourselves from the heathen of the land, and from the strange women* (1 Esdras 9:9).

Your book of Ezra tells the same story, and its last verse is unclear about what happened to the children (Ezra 10:44). This book is not unclear at all. *All these had taken strange wives, and they put them away with their children* (1 Esdras 9:36).

Women and children, sent out of their homes for being of the wrong people.

I understand why Ezra feared it. His people were small, poor and surrounded, and he thought they would vanish into the peoples around them. But I cannot put this beside what I taught and call it close. My own line, as Matthew tells it, runs through Ruth, a Moabite woman who said to her Israelite mother-in-law, *your people will be my people, and your God my God* (Ruth 1:16; Matthew 1:5). In the story I told about the judgment of the nations, the King says, *I was a stranger, and you took me in* (Matthew 25:35).

The stranger counts. Her children count.

The day is holy

The book closes better than that, with Ezra reading the law to the people from a wooden platform, from morning until noon, before *both men and women* (1 Esdras 9:41). The people weep when they hear it. And the leaders tell them to stop weeping:

This day is holy to the Lord ... go then, and eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing (1 Esdras 9:50–51).

That is the right ending. The law is heard, and the first thing it produces is a feast, and the second is food carried to the people who have none.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Esdras 3:10–12, then read chapter 4 straight through. Each speech is short.

You will find: wine, the king, women and truth, each argued for in turn, and the line *With her there is no accepting of persons or rewards* (1 Esdras 4:39).

Then read Ezra 10:44 beside 1 Esdras 9:36. See what each says about the children.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-esdras.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **1 Esdras** retells the end of **2 Chronicles**, **Ezra** and part of **Nehemiah** in Greek, and adds one story found **nowhere else**.
- In it, three bodyguards argue whether **wine**, **the king** or **women** is strongest. The winner says **truth** is stronger than all of them.
- **Great is truth**, the people shout, and its Latin form, *Magna est veritas*, became a famous saying.
- The book ends with men **sending away foreign wives and their children**, which is far from what I taught about the stranger.
- Its last scene is the law read aloud, and a feast with portions **sent to those who have nothing**.

2. 2 Esdras: The Man Who Argued With an Angel

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Three writers. The heart of the book, chapters 3 to 14, is by an unknown Jewish writer using Ezra's name. Chapters 1 and 2, and 15 and 16, were added later by Christians.

When: Chapters 3 to 14 about AD 100, thirty years after Rome burned Jerusalem. The Christian chapters in the 100s and 200s. All of it was written after my death.

Where it fits: Set in Babylon thirty years after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. Written thirty years after Rome destroyed the second Temple in AD 70, about that second loss.

Which Bibles keep it: The Ethiopian Bible (chapters 3 to 14 only), and the Slavonic Bible of the Russian Orthodox Church. Catholic Bibles once printed it in an appendix. The 1611 King James printed it among the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Nowhere quoted. Its narrow way to life sounds like the narrow gate in Matthew 7:13–14, and its eagle from the sea is a cousin of the beasts in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.

How close it stays to me: Close in grieving for the lost. Far in giving most of them up.

If you only read three chapters: 2 Esdras 4, 2 Esdras 7 and 2 Esdras 14.

WORDS TO KNOW

4 Ezra — what scholars call chapters 3 to 14, the Jewish book at the heart of 2 Esdras.

Uriel — the angel who answers Ezra's questions. His name means *God is my light*.

Apocalypse — a book that reveals hidden things in visions, usually written to people suffering under an empire.

Babylon — the empire that burned the first Temple. Writers in my time and after used the name as a code word for Rome.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Chapters 1 and 2 are a Christian opening. God, speaking through Ezra, reminds Israel of all he did for them, rejects them for their unfaithfulness, and turns to another people. Ezra sees a great crowd on Mount Zion crowned by the Son of God.

Chapters 3 to 14 are seven visions. In the first three, Ezra, in exile in Babylon, lies on his bed and asks God why his people have been destroyed by a nation no better than they are. The angel Uriel answers him with riddles: no human mind can understand God's ways, the end is coming soon, and the world to come is for few. Ezra keeps pleading for the many who will be lost.

In the fourth vision Ezra meets a woman mourning her only son, comforts her, and then sees her turn into a shining city, the new Zion. In the fifth an eagle with twelve wings and three heads rises from the sea and rules the earth, until a lion from the forest condemns it. In the sixth a man rises from the sea, flies with the clouds, and destroys an army that attacks him with the fire of his mouth. In the seventh, Ezra drinks a cup like fire and, over forty days, dictates ninety-four books to five scribes: twenty-four to be published for everyone, and seventy kept for the wise.

Chapters 15 and 16 are a later Christian ending: prophecies of war, famine and disaster on the nations that persecute God's people, and a call to the faithful to endure.

A man lay awake in Babylon and asked God a question he could not answer.

I saw the desolation of Sion, and the wealth of those who lived at Babylon (2 Esdras 3:2).

That is how the book begins. Not with a vision, but with a man who cannot sleep because the city of God lies in ruins and the city of his enemies is rich.

Then he asks it. *Are the deeds of Babylon better than those of Sion?* (2 Esdras 3:31).

Babylon had burned Jerusalem in 586 BC. But the man who wrote this book was not living then. He was living about thirty years after Rome burned Jerusalem again, in AD 70, and his *Babylon* is Rome. He gave his questions to Ezra because Ezra had lived through a ruin like his own.¹

The Temple I had taught in was gone. This book is one of the first cries that came out of the ashes.

Three writers in one book

What your King James Apocrypha calls 2 Esdras is really three works bound together.

The center, chapters 3 to 14, is a Jewish book. Scholars call it **4 Ezra**. It was written in Hebrew or Aramaic, translated into Greek, and then into Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian and other languages. The original and the Greek are lost.²

Christians added two chapters at the front and two at the back. You can tell the Christian chapters by their voice. The front ones have God casting off Israel and turning to another people, and one line of them is almost word for word from the gospels: *I gathered you together, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings* (2 Esdras 1:30). Compare what Matthew gives me over Jerusalem: *How often I would have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not!* (Matthew 23:37). Someone who knew Matthew wrote that chapter, and used my grief over the city to say God had left my own people behind. That is not what I meant.

Arguing with an angel

The heart of this book is an argument, and Ezra does not win it, but he does not stop.

The angel Uriel answers his first question with a challenge. *Your own things, that are grown up with you, can you not know; how then can your vessel comprehend the way of the Most High?* (2 Esdras 4:10–11). You cannot weigh fire, or measure wind, or bring back a day that is gone. How can you understand God?

Ezra will not be put off. He pushes back on every answer. And the more the angel explains, the more Ezra grieves.

When the angel describes the judgment, with *the pit of torment* on one side and *the paradise of delight* on the other (2 Esdras 7:36), Ezra says what he sees: *the world to come shall bring delight to few, but torments to many* (2 Esdras 7:47).

Then he says something I want you to hear. He wishes the animals luck. *Let the race of men lament and the beasts of the field be glad ... For it is far better with them than with us; for they look not for judgement* (2 Esdras 7:65–66). And to Adam: *O you Adam, what have you done? For though it was you that sinned, the evil is not fallen on you alone, but upon all of us that come of you* (2 Esdras 7:118).

He is a man who cannot bear to be saved if most of the world is lost. He keeps praying for the many. And the angel tells him to stop: *you come far short that you should be able to love my creature more than I* (2 Esdras 8:47).

My people had an old habit of arguing with God for the lost. Abraham did it over Sodom: *Shouldn't the Judge of all the earth do right?* (Genesis 18:25). Moses did it in the wilderness. Ezra does it here. The book itself notices this. Right after the restored passage ends, Ezra asks why, if Abraham prayed for Sodom, no one will be allowed to pray on the last day (2 Esdras 7:106).

Few will be saved

The angel's answer comes down to one sentence. *The Most High has made this world for many, but the world to come for few* (2 Esdras 8:1). And again: *There be many created, but few shall be saved* (2 Esdras 8:3).

To show it, the angel tells Ezra about a city full of good things whose only entrance is a path so narrow that *there could but one man go there at once*, with fire on one side and deep water on the other (2 Esdras 7:7–8).

You will recognize that picture. *Enter in by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction ... How narrow is the gate, and restricted is the way that leads to life! Few are those who find it* (Matthew 7:13–14).

So I said something like it too. But hear what I did with it. When someone asked me straight out, *Lord, are they few who are saved?*, I did not give a number. I said, *Strive to enter in by the narrow door* (Luke 13:23–24). I turned the question from a count of the damned into a call to the person asking.

And I told a story about a shepherd with a hundred sheep, who leaves the ninety-nine and goes *after the one that was lost, until he found it* (Luke 15:4). Ezra's angel tells him not to love the lost more than God does. In my story, God is the one who goes looking for them.

That is where this book and I part. Ezra grieves the lost, and the book's answer is that most of them are lost. My answer was the shepherd on the hillside who does not come home until he finds the one.

The eagle and the man from the sea

The later visions turn from questions to pictures.

An eagle rises from the sea, with twelve wings and three heads, and rules the whole earth. The angel explains it: *The eagle, whom you saw come up from the sea, is the fourth kingdom which appeared in vision to your brother Daniel. But it was not expounded to him, as I now expound it to you* (2 Esdras 12:11–12).

Daniel's fourth beast was the Greek kingdom. This writer says it was really Rome, and that Daniel had not been told. He was doing exactly what preachers have done with Daniel ever since: taking an old prophecy and announcing that it was about his own day. The eagle was Rome's own symbol, carried on its standards. Most scholars read its three heads as the three emperors of one family, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, under whom the book was written.¹

Then a man rises from the sea and *flew with the clouds of heaven* (2 Esdras 13:3), and the army that comes against him is burned up by the fire of his mouth. That is Daniel's *one like a son of man* coming with the clouds, made into a conqueror.

Twenty-four books for everyone

The last vision may be the most important thing in the book for you, because it is about your Bible.

The law has been burned with the Temple, Ezra says, and no one knows God's works any more (2 Esdras 14:21). So God gives him a cup to drink, and for forty days he dictates to five scribes. *So in forty days were written fourscore and fourteen books* (2 Esdras 14:44). Ninety-four.

God tells him what to do with them. *The first that you have written publish openly, and let the worthy and unworthy read it: but keep the seventy last, that you may deliver them to such as be wise among your people* (2 Esdras 14:45–46).

Ninety-four less seventy is twenty-four. That is how my people came to count the books of their scriptures: twenty-four, the same books Protestants count as thirty-nine, by joining some together. This chapter is one of the oldest witnesses to that count.³

And it says something else, at the same moment. Twenty-four books for everyone, and seventy more, secret, for the wise. The man who gave you one of the first counts of the Bible's books believed the Bible was not the whole library.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 Esdras 7:45–48, then 2 Esdras 8:1–3.

You will find: Ezra pleading that the world to come will bring *delight to few, but torments to many*, and the angel answering that *few shall be saved*.

Then read Luke 13:23–24 and Luke 15:4–7. See what I said when someone asked me whether few would be saved.

Then read 2 Esdras 14:44–47 and do the arithmetic.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-esdras.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **2 Esdras** is three works in one. The heart of it, **4 Ezra**, is a **Jewish** book written about **AD 100**, after Rome **burned the Temple**. Christians added the **first two and last two chapters**.
- In it, **Ezra argues with the angel Uriel** about why God let his people be destroyed, and keeps praying for **the many who will be lost**.
- The angel answers that the world to come is **for few**. I used a **narrow gate** too, but I told people to **strive**, and told the story of the **shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep**.
- A page about **praying for the dead** was **cut out** of the Latin, and found again in **1874**.
- Its **Messiah** reigns 400 years and then **dies**, and a Christian copyist wrote **my name** into the verse.
- Its last vision gives one of the oldest witnesses to the **twenty-four books** of my people's scriptures, with **seventy more** kept secret.

3. Tobit: The Man Who Buried the Dead

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer, most likely in Aramaic. The story is told by Tobit himself at first, then by a narrator.

When: Probably the 200s or early 100s BC. Pieces of five copies, four in Aramaic and one in Hebrew, were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Where it fits: Set among the northern tribes carried off to Assyria after 722 BC (2 Kings 17), in Nineveh and in Media. Written centuries later, as a story, not a history.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha, and most later dropped it.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Its rule *what you yourself hate, do to no man* (Tobit 4:15) is the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 turned around. A woman married to seven brothers in turn, a puzzle the Sadducees put to me (Mark 12:20–23), is close to its Sarah. Its *seven holy angels* stand before God in Revelation 8:2.

How close it stays to me: Very close on the poor, the dead and fair wages. Far in giving nothing to sinners.

If you only read three chapters: Tobit 2, Tobit 4 and Tobit 12.

WORDS TO KNOW

Alms — gifts to the poor. In Tobit's Greek the word is *eleēmosynē*, mercy, and the book uses it for everything from coins to bread to a burial.

Raphael — the angel in this book. His name means *God heals*.

Asmodeus — the demon who kills Sarah's husbands.

Nineveh — the capital of the Assyrian empire, which carried off the northern tribes of Israel in 722 BC.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Tobit, a man of the tribe of Naphtali, has been carried off to Nineveh. He tells his own story: how he kept God's law when his tribe did not, how he fed the hungry and clothed the naked, and how he secretly buried the bodies of his people that the king had thrown out. For this he loses everything and has to hide.

In chapter 2, after burying another body, he sleeps outside, and sparrow droppings fall into his eyes and blind him. His wife Anna supports them by weaving. When she brings home a young goat, a bonus from her employers, he accuses her of stealing it, and she throws his good deeds back in his face. In chapter 3, Tobit prays to die.

On the same day, far away in Media, a young woman named Sarah also prays to die. She has been married seven times, and each time the demon Asmodeus killed her husband on the wedding night. God sends the angel Raphael to help them both.

In chapters 4 to 6, Tobit sends his son Tobias on a long journey to collect money he once left with a kinsman, and gives him a long speech of advice first. Tobias hires a guide, who is Raphael in disguise. A dog goes with them. A great fish jumps at Tobias from the river, and Raphael has him keep its heart, liver and gall.

In chapters 7 to 9, Tobias marries Sarah. The smoke of the fish's heart and liver drives the demon away to Egypt, and Tobias survives the night.

In chapters 10 to 12 they come home, the fish's gall cures Tobit's eyes, and Raphael reveals who he is before going back up to God. In chapters 13 and 14 Tobit sings a song of praise for Jerusalem, gives his last advice, and dies old. Tobias and his family leave Nineveh before it falls.

This is the only book in this volume where the hero gets in trouble for burying the poor.

If I saw any of my race dead, and cast forth on the wall of Ninevah, I buried him (Tobit 1:17).

That is Tobit. He is an exile in the capital of the empire that destroyed his country. When the king has people of his tribe killed and their bodies thrown out over the city wall, Tobit goes out at night and buries them. Someone reports him. He has to run. Everything he owns is taken (Tobit 1:18–20).

When he is allowed home, he sits down to a holiday dinner, sends his son out to find a poor man to share it, and his son comes back to say there is a body lying in the market. Tobit gets up from the table without eating, carries the body home, and buries it after dark (Tobit 2:2–8).

I told you that on the last day the question will be whether you fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited the sick and the prisoner (Matthew 25:35–36). Tobit did all of that, and added the one thing no one could ever repay him for. He buried strangers.

A story, not a history

You should know first that Tobit is a story. It does not pretend to be anything else, and the people who first heard it would not have mistaken it for history.

Tobit says that when he was young, his tribe broke away from Jerusalem and sacrificed to the golden calf (Tobit 1:4–5). That happened around 930 BC. He also says he was carried off to Nineveh by the Assyrians, which happened in 722 BC. He would have to have been more than two hundred years old. The book gives him 158.¹

It does not matter. Jonah is a story too, and so is the one I told about a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among robbers. A story can be true about God and people without being true about dates. Tobit is a folk tale, with a helpful angel in disguise, a demon, a magic fish, a faithful dog and a happy ending. It was written to teach, and to delight.

What a father tells his son

Chapter 4 is the heart of the book. Tobit, blind and expecting to die, calls his son and tells him how to live. Read it slowly. It is close to what I taught.

Give alms from your possessions ... Don't turn away your face from any poor man, and the face of God won't be turned away from you (Tobit 4:7).

If you have little, don't be afraid to give alms according to that little (Tobit 4:8). That is the poor widow and her two small coins.

Don't let the wages of any man who works for you wait with you, but give it to him out of hand (Tobit 4:14). Pay the worker the same day. That law is in Moses (Deuteronomy 24:14–15), and Tobit made it part of a father's last words.

Give of your bread to the hungry, and of your garments to those who are naked (Tobit 4:16).

And then the line you already know, in another form. *And what you yourself hate, do to no man* (Tobit 4:15).

The great teacher Hillel, a generation before me, is remembered for saying the same thing, when a man asked him to teach the whole law while standing on one foot: what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole law, the rest is commentary.²

I said it the other way round. *Whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets* (Matthew 7:12). Tobit and Hillel say: do no harm. I said: do the good. It is a step further. But it is a step on the same road, and Tobit was already walking it.

Alms delivers from death

Tobit says one thing twice that churches later built a great deal on. *Alms-giving delivers from death* (Tobit 4:10). And when the angel reveals himself, he says it again: *Alms delivers from death, and it purges away all sin* (Tobit 12:9).

This line is one reason Protestant reformers distrusted the book. They said it taught that you could buy your way out of your sins with money, and in the centuries before them, the church had sold indulgences that many people believed did exactly that.³

But read it in its place. The sentence just before it is *It is better to give alms than to lay up gold* (Tobit 12:8). The book does not mean that a rich man can pay for his sins. It means that mercy to the poor is what God wants, more than prayer alone, more than a full treasury. A poor widow who gives what she has is doing it. A rich man who keeps it is not.

I said nearly the same. *When you make a feast, ask the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind ... because they don't have the resources to repay you* (Luke

14:13–14). The only thing I added was to do it quietly, so that *your left hand does not know what your right hand does* (Matthew 6:3). Tobit buried the dead at night. He knew.

The wife who was right

There is a small scene in chapter 2 that I would not want you to miss.

Tobit is blind. His wife Anna has taken in weaving to keep them alive. One day her employers pay her wages and give her a young goat as well. When it bleats in the house, Tobit accuses her of stealing it and tells her to give it back. She tells him it was a gift. He does not believe her, and says he was *ashamed of her*. And she answers him: *Where are your alms and your righteous deeds? Behold, you and all your works are known* (Tobit 2:14).

She was right, and the book lets her be right. The good man, so careful about strangers, could not trust the woman who was feeding him. It is a small story about a large habit: men who are generous in public and hard at home. The book does not hide its hero's fault.

Where Tobit and I part

Two of Tobit's rules go somewhere I did not.

He tells his son: *take first a wife of the seed of your fathers. Don't take a strange wife, who is not of your father's tribe* (Tobit 4:12). A small people in exile, afraid of disappearing, keeping its families close. I understand it. But my own family line, as Matthew tells it, runs through a Moabite woman named Ruth (Matthew 1:5).

And right after telling his son to feed the hungry, Tobit says: *Pour out your bread on the burial of the just, and give nothing to sinners* (Tobit 4:17).

I ate with sinners. That was the most common complaint made against me. I said the Father makes *his sun to rise on the evil and the good* (Matthew 5:45). If you only feed the people you judge to be good, you will be the one deciding who is good, and you will get it wrong.

The angel who did not eat

Raphael travels with Tobias the whole way, under the name Azarias, and nobody guesses who he is. At the end he tells them: *I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels, which present the prayers of the saints, and go in before the glory of the Holy One* (Tobit 12:15). And something gentle: *All these days I appeared to you. I didn't eat or drink, but you all saw a vision* (Tobit 12:19).

A messenger of God who travels with an ordinary family, carries out a dull errand about money, saves a frightened young man from a fish, gets a young couple safely married, heals an old man's eyes, and then goes home. That is the God of this book. Not distant. Present in the errands.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Tobit 4, the whole chapter.

You will find: alms, fair wages, bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and *what you yourself hate, do to no man* (Tobit 4:15). Then, two verses later, *give nothing to sinners*.

Then read Matthew 7:12 beside Tobit 4:15, and **Tobit 2:11–14**, where the wife is right.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/tobit.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Tobit** is a **folk tale**, with an angel in disguise, a demon, a magic fish and a dog. Pieces of **five copies** were found among the **Dead Sea Scrolls**.
- Its hero **feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and buries the dead** the king threw out, and loses everything for it.
- His advice to his son is **close to what I taught**: alms, **wages paid the same day**, and *what you yourself hate, do to no man*.
- Its line that **alms delivers from death** was later read as buying forgiveness. In its place it means **mercy to the poor matters more than gold**.
- It parts from me in **marrying only your own** and **giving nothing to sinners**.

4. Judith: By the Hand of a Woman

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer, probably in Hebrew. Only Greek, Latin and later versions survive.

When: Probably the late 100s or early 00s BC, in the years after the Maccabees won back the Temple.

Where it fits: It is set in no real time. Its first line makes Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon the king of Assyria in Nineveh, a city destroyed before he took the throne. The book is a story told against the empires.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha, and most later dropped it.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Nowhere quoted. It echoes Jael, who killed an enemy general in her tent (Judges 4–5), and Judith is praised as *blessed ... above all the women upon the earth* (Judith 13:18), as Jael was and as Mary would be (Luke 1:42).

How close it stays to me: Close on the God of the weak and on the welcomed outsider. Far in winning by deceit and the sword.

If you only read three chapters: Judith 8, Judith 9 and Judith 13.

WORDS TO KNOW

Holofernes — the general of Nebuchadnezzar's army in this story.

Bethulia — the town Holofernes besieges. No town of that name is known. It may be a made-up name, perhaps from the Hebrew for *house of God* or for *virgin*.

Achior — a leader of the Ammonites who warns Holofernes not to attack Israel, and later joins Israel.

Judith — her name means *Jewish woman*, or *woman of Judah*.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

In chapters 1 to 3 Nebuchadnezzar, ruling from Nineveh, defeats a king of the Medes and then sends his general Holofernes with a vast army to punish every western nation that refused to help him. City after city surrenders.

In chapters 4 to 7 the Israelites decide to resist. In Holofernes' camp, Achior, the leader of the Ammonites, tells him the history of Israel and warns him that if this people has not sinned against its God, its God will defend it. Holofernes is furious and hands Achior over to the Israelites of Bethulia, a hill town guarding the way to Jerusalem. Then he besieges Bethulia and cuts off its water. After thirty-four days, the people beg their leaders to surrender, and the leaders promise to give in if God does not save them within five days.

In chapters 8 and 9 Judith, a rich, devout widow, rebukes the leaders for putting God on a deadline, and prays.

In chapters 10 to 13 she takes off her widow's clothes, dresses in her finest, and walks with her maid into the enemy camp, where she tells Holofernes she has come to help him. On the fourth night he holds a banquet, drinks himself unconscious, and is left alone with her. She cuts off his head with his own sword, puts it in her food bag, and walks back to Bethulia.

In chapters 14 to 16 Achior believes in the God of Israel and is circumcised. The Assyrians find their general dead and flee, and Israel plunders their camp. Judith leads the women in a song of victory, lives on as a widow to a hundred and five, frees her maid, and dies honored.

This book begins with a mistake so large that the first readers would have laughed.

In the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned over the Assyrians in Nineveh, the great city (Judith 1:1).

Every Jewish child knew who Nebuchadnezzar was. He was the king of Babylon who burned Jerusalem. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a different empire, and it had been destroyed before Nebuchadnezzar ever took the throne.¹

Putting him on the throne of Nineveh is like starting a story with *In the days when Napoleon was emperor of Rome*. It tells you at once that this is not a

history. It is a story about every empire, rolled into one: the Assyrians who took the north, the Babylonians who burned the Temple, and the Greek king who, not long before this book was written, had tried to stamp out my people's religion.

And against all of them, the book sets one widow.

The great king and the little town

The story begins big. The great king sends his general with a hundred and twenty thousand foot soldiers and twelve thousand horsemen. His orders are to make every nation of the west *prepare earth and water*, the old sign of surrender, *because I will go out in my wrath against them, and will cover the whole face of the earth with the feet of my army* (Judith 2:7).

Then the story shrinks to one hill town, Bethulia, with its water cut off. *Their young children were discouraged. The women and the young men fainted for thirst. They fell down in the streets of the city* (Judith 7:22).

The people go to their leaders and beg them to surrender, and the leaders make a bargain with heaven: hold out five more days, and if God has not saved us by then, we give up.

The widow who rebuked the leaders

That is when Judith comes in. She has been a widow for three years and four months, living in a tent on her roof, in sackcloth, fasting every day except the holy days (Judith 8:4–6). She sends for the town's leaders, and they come to her.

She tells them they are wrong. *Now who are you that you have tempted God this day, and stand in the place of God among the children of men?* (Judith 8:12). You cannot understand the heart of a man, she says. *How will you search out God ... and know his mind, and comprehend his purpose?* (Judith 8:14).

You cannot put God on a deadline. That is good teaching, and it is a woman, a widow, alone in her house, who gives it to the men who run the town.

Then she prays, and her prayer has the best line in the book. *For your power stands not in multitude, nor your might in strong men: but you are a God of the*

afflicted. You are a helper of the oppressed, an upholder of the weak, a protector of the forlorn, a savior of those who are without hope (Judith 9:11).

That is my mother's song before I was born. *He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly* (Luke 1:52). It is the God of the poor, and Judith knew him.

Into the enemy camp

Judith takes off her widow's clothes. She bathes, anoints herself, braids her hair, and puts on all her jewelry. The book says plainly that she dressed this way to deceive the eyes of every man who saw her (Judith 10:3–4). She is going to deceive.

She walks out of the town gate with her maid and a bag of her own food, and lets the enemy soldiers capture her. She tells Holofernes she is a Hebrew who has fled her doomed people, and that she will show him the way to victory. *I will declare no lie to my lord this night* (Judith 11:5). Then she lies to him for four days.

On the fourth night he gives a banquet and invites her, meaning to seduce her. *Holofernes took great delight in her, and drank exceeding much wine, more than he had drunk at any time in one day since he was born* (Judith 12:20). His servants leave them alone. He falls asleep, dead drunk.

She came to the rail of the bed, which was at Holofernes' head, and took down his scimitar from there ... She struck twice upon his neck with all her might, and took away his head from him (Judith 13:6–8).

She puts the head in her food bag, walks out of the camp past the guards, as she has done every night to pray, and goes home. At the gate of Bethulia she pulls it out of the bag and says: *The Lord struck him by the hand of a woman* (Judith 13:15).

The Ammonite who joined Israel

There is a second hero in this book, and he is easy to miss.

Achior is a foreigner, a leader of the Ammonites, an old enemy of Israel. In Holofernes' war council he is the only one who tells the truth: if this people has not sinned against its God, *let my lord now pass by, lest their Lord defend them* (Judith 5:21). For that, the general hands him over to the Israelites to die with them.

The Israelites take him in. And when he sees what God has done through Judith, *he believed in God exceedingly, and circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, and was joined to the house of Israel, to this day* (Judith 14:10).

The law of Moses says flatly that *An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the LORD's assembly ... forever* (Deuteronomy 23:3). This book quietly lets one in. An honest outsider, who told the truth at the risk of his life, is welcomed into the people of God.

I told my people the same kind of story, with a Samaritan in it.

A sword in a woman's hand

Read the book's best lines again and you see what it is proud of. *The Lord struck him by the hand of a woman* (Judith 13:15). *The Almighty Lord brought them to nothing by the hand of a woman* (Judith 16:6).

The general who planned to *make my virgins a plunder* (Judith 16:5) is undone by the woman he thought he could take. The army of the great king runs from a town of thirsty children because a widow walked out of its gate. The weak defeat the strong. That is good news, and it is told with joy.

Judith is also rich, and the book knows it. She has servants, gold, cattle and land (Judith 8:7). But at the end of her life she frees her maid, the one who walked into the enemy camp beside her, and gives away her property before she dies (Judith 16:23–24). The maid who carried the bag goes free.

Where Judith and I part

And yet I cannot hand you this book as my teaching.

Judith wins by lying, by seduction and by the sword. Her prayer before she goes calls on the *Lord God of my father Simeon, into whose hand you gave a sword to*

take vengeance on the strangers (Judith 9:2). That is Simeon, who with his brother killed every man in a town to avenge their sister (Genesis 34). She asks God: *Strike by the deceit of my lips* (Judith 9:10).

I understand why my people loved this story. They had been occupied, robbed and killed by one empire after another. A story where the empire's general loses his head to a widow is a story that lets a beaten people breathe.

But when one of my own friends drew a sword to defend me, I told him: *Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword* (Matthew 26:52). I said *don't resist him who is evil* (Matthew 5:39). I did not tell my followers to deceive their enemies. I told them to love them.

Judith shows you the God of the weak. She does not show you how I said the weak should fight.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Judith 1:1, then 2 Kings 25:1.

You will find: Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, made king of Assyria in Nineveh. The book is telling you it is a story.

Then read Judith 9:11 beside Luke 1:51–53, and Judith 14:10 beside Deuteronomy 23:3.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/judith.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Judith** is a **story**, not a history. Its first line makes **Nebuchadnezzar king of Assyria**, a sign to its first readers.
- A **widow** rebukes the town's leaders for **putting God on a deadline**, and prays to the **God of the afflicted** and **the oppressed**.
- She goes into the enemy camp, deceives the general, and **cuts off his head** with his own sword: **the Lord struck him by the hand of a woman**.
- **Achior**, an **Ammonite** whom the law of Moses shut out, tells the truth and is **welcomed into Israel**.
- It is close to me on **the weak and the outsider**. It is far in its **deceit** and its **sword**.

5. The Additions to Esther: Putting God Back In

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Several unknown Jewish writers. They added six passages, about a hundred verses, to the Greek translation of the book of Esther.

When: Probably the 100s BC. A note at the end says the Greek Esther was brought to Egypt in the fourth year of a King Ptolemy and a Queen Cleopatra, most likely 114 or 78 BC.

Where it fits: Set at the Persian court in Susa, in the days of King Ahasuerus, usually identified with Xerxes I (486–465 BC). The story is told in the Hebrew book of Esther, which these passages expand.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles print Esther with the additions. Protestant Bibles print the Hebrew Esther, and moved the additions to the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: The story is your book of Esther. The added passages are never quoted.

How close it stays to me: Close in refusing to bow to a man. Far in hating the stranger's bed and table.

If you only read three chapters: In the translation quoted here, Greek Esther 1, 4 and 5. In most Bibles, chapters 11, 13 and 14 and chapter 15.

WORDS TO KNOW

Purim — the festival that remembers how the Jews of Persia were saved from Haman's plot. Its name comes from *pur*, a lot cast to choose the day.

Haman — the king's chief minister, who plots to destroy every Jew in the empire.

Mordecai — Esther's cousin, who raised her, and who refuses to bow to Haman.

Septuagint — the Greek translation of my people's scriptures, made in Egypt in the centuries before my birth. The additions come from it.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The additions are six passages, set at different points in the story of Esther. In most Bibles they are labeled A to F, or printed together as chapters 10 to 16.

A opens the book. Mordecai, a Jew in the palace at Susa, dreams of two great dragons ready to fight, a day of darkness for a righteous nation, and a little spring that becomes a great river. He also uncovers a plot by two eunuchs to kill the king.

B gives the text of the king's decree, written by Haman, ordering every Jew in the empire to be killed on one day, women and children with them.

C gives two prayers. Mordecai explains that he refused to bow to Haman so as not to put a man's glory above God's. Esther puts on mourning, covers her head with ashes, and begs God for help, saying she hates her royal crown and has never eaten at Haman's table.

D tells how Esther, splendidly dressed but afraid, goes in to the king uninvited. He looks at her in anger and she faints, and God changes the king's heart. He leaps from his throne, holds her, and tells her she will not die.

E gives the text of the king's second decree, which calls Haman a traitor and lets the Jews defend themselves.

F closes the book. Mordecai explains his dream: the river is Esther, the two dragons are he and Haman. A last note says who brought the Greek Esther to Egypt.

Your book of Esther never mentions God. The Greek one cannot stop.

Read the book of Esther in your Bible, all ten chapters, and count how many times God is named. The answer is none. Not once.

Esther fasts, and the Jews fast with her. Mordecai tells her that if she stays silent, help *will come to the Jews from another place* (Esther 4:14), which many readers take as a hint at God. But the word is never said. Except for the Song of Songs, it is the only book of the Hebrew Bible where God is not named, and it is the only one, or almost the only one, of which no piece has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹

Someone found that hard to bear. When the book was translated into Greek, six passages were added, about a hundred verses. In them, Mordecai prays, Esther

prays, God changes the king's heart, and Mordecai ends the book saying, *These things have been done of God* (Greek Esther 10:3). The name of God appears more than fifty times.¹

These additions are what this chapter is about.

Two prayers

The heart of the additions is two prayers, from the night before Esther goes in to the king.

Mordecai explains why he would not bow down to Haman. It was not pride, he says. *For I would gladly have kissed the soles of his feet for the safety of Israel. But I have done this, that I might not set the glory of man above the glory of God* (Greek Esther 4:17).

That is a man who would humble himself to the floor to save his people, but would not worship a man. In my time, the emperors of Rome claimed honors that belonged to God, and my people refused them, and paid for it. When they asked me about the tax to Caesar, I said: *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's* (Mark 12:17). Mordecai drew the same line.

Then Esther prays. She takes off her royal clothes, puts on mourning, and fills her hair with ashes and dung. *O my Lord, you alone are our king: help me who am destitute, and have no helper but you* (Greek Esther 4:17).

A queen, calling herself destitute. She says she hates her crown, *the symbol of my proud station*, and does not wear it when she is alone (Greek Esther 4:17). That is the right way for the powerful to pray.

The queen who fainted

The Hebrew Esther says only that the queen went in, the king held out his golden sceptre, and she was safe. The Greek tells it differently.

She goes in, *blooming in the perfection of her beauty*, with her face cheerful but *her heart was straitened for fear*. The king, covered in gold and jewels, looks up at her in fury, and she faints against her maid (Greek Esther 5:1).

But God changed the spirit of the king (Greek Esther 5:1). He jumps from his throne, takes her in his arms, and tells her: *What is the matter, Esther? I am your brother; be of good cheer, you shall not die.*

In the Hebrew, Esther is brave and clever, and wins by her own wits. In the Greek, she is terrified, and God saves her. The two books are telling you two different things about how deliverance comes. Your Bible has kept the first, and the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles have kept both.

A decree against a people

Addition B gives the text of Haman's decree, in the king's name, ordering the death of every Jew in the empire. Listen to how it describes them.

A certain ill-disposed people is mixed up with all the tribes throughout the world, opposed in their law to every other nation, and continually neglecting the commands of the king (Greek Esther 3:13).

It orders them destroyed *with their wives and children ... without pitying or sparing any*, so that the state may be *well constituted and quiet* (Greek Esther 3:13).

That is the oldest lie told about my people, written down more than two thousand years ago: that they are scattered among everyone, live by their own law, are loyal to no one, and that the country would be peaceful without them. It would be told again and again, in Alexandria and Rome, in the cities of Europe, and in the twentieth century, until a state tried to do exactly what Haman's decree commands. The writer of this addition knew the voice of that lie because he had heard it.²

Where Esther and I part

There is a line in Esther's prayer that I must not pass over.

I abhor the couch of the uncircumcised, and of every stranger, she says, and she is proud that she *has not eaten at the table of Haman* (Greek Esther 4:17).

I understand it. She is a captive queen in a foreign palace, married to a man who could have her killed, keeping herself apart in the only ways left to her. But her

prayer makes a virtue of hating the stranger's bed and refusing the stranger's table, and I made a habit of eating at exactly the tables my own people thought unclean. I ate with tax collectors who worked for Rome. I let a Samaritan be the hero of my story. I said that on the last day the King would say, *I was a stranger, and you took me in* (Matthew 25:35).

And the book ends with the Jews, now allowed to defend themselves, killing *seventy-five thousand of those who hated them* (Esther 9:16). The Greek gives a smaller number, fifteen thousand, and adds prayers and God, but it still ends in slaughter.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: the book of Esther in your own Bible, and search it for the word *God*.

You will find: nothing. Then read Mordecai's prayer and Esther's in the Additions (Greek Esther 4:17, or chapters 13 and 14 in most Bibles).

Then read Haman's decree (Greek Esther 3:13, or chapter 13:1–7) and listen for how often you have heard its words since.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/additions-to-esther.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Hebrew Esther**, the one in your Bible, **never names God**, and it is the one book of the Hebrew Bible most clearly **missing at Qumran**.
- The **Greek Esther** adds **six passages** and names God more than **fifty times**.
- **Mordecai** will not bow to Haman so as **not to set the glory of man above the glory of God**. **Esther** calls herself **destitute** and says she **hates her crown**.
- **Haman's decree** describes my people in the words of the **oldest lie** told about them.
- Its prayer **hates the stranger's bed and table**, and its book still ends in **slaughter**.

6. The Wisdom of Solomon: The Righteous Man They Planned to Kill

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Not Solomon. An unknown Jewish teacher who wrote in fine Greek, almost certainly in Alexandria in Egypt, and spoke in Solomon's voice.

When: Probably between about 50 BC and AD 40, so in the generation before my birth or in my own lifetime.

Where it fits: It speaks as Solomon, the king who asked God for wisdom (1 Kings 3), and retells the Exodus. It was written for Jews living among Greeks in Egypt under Roman rule.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha, and most later dropped it.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Its plot against the righteous man who calls God his father is close to the mockers at my cross (Matthew 27:43). Its Wisdom, *an effulgence from everlasting light*, lies behind Hebrews 1:3 and the Word of John 1. Paul's argument about idols in Romans 1 follows chapters 13 and 14.

How close it stays to me: Close on the poor, the widow and the powerful judged. Far in calling a whole people accursed from birth.

If you only read three chapters: Wisdom 2, Wisdom 3 and Wisdom 7.

WORDS TO KNOW

Wisdom — in this book, more than good sense. It is pictured as a woman who sits beside God's throne, made the world with him, and comes to live in good people. In Greek, *Sophia*.

Alexandria — the great Greek city in Egypt, founded by Alexander the Great, home in my time to the largest Jewish community outside the land of Israel.

Immortality — not dying. This book teaches that the souls of the righteous live on with God.

Hades — the Greek name for the place of the dead.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The book falls into three parts.

Chapters 1 to 5 contrast the righteous and the ungodly. The book opens by telling the rulers of the earth to love justice. In chapter 2 the ungodly speak: life is short and ends in nothing, so let us enjoy ourselves, crush the poor and the widow, and kill the righteous man who shames us by calling God his father. Chapter 3 answers them: the souls of the righteous are in God's hand, and only seem to die. In chapter 5 the ungodly see the righteous man in glory at the judgment and confess they were wrong.

Chapters 6 to 9 are spoken by Solomon. He tells kings to seek wisdom, says he was born like every other human being, describes how he loved wisdom and asked for her, praises her as the breath of God's power and the reflection of eternal light, and prays for her to be sent to him.

Chapters 10 to 19 trace wisdom through history, from Adam to the Exodus. Then the book compares how God punished the Egyptians with how he cared for Israel, and in chapters 13 to 15 mocks the worship of nature and of idols, showing how idol-making began and what evils followed. It ends with the plagues of Egypt and the crossing of the sea, with creation itself fighting for the righteous.

Before I was born, a Jewish teacher in Egypt wrote down how the wicked would plot to kill a righteous man.

Listen to them talk. These are the ungodly in chapter 2, and they are speaking about a man who stands in their way.

He professes to have knowledge of God, And names himself servant of the Lord ... And he vaunts that God is his father (Wisdom 2:13, 16).

Let us see if his words be true, And let us try what shall befall in the ending of his life. For if the righteous man is God's son, he will uphold him, And he will deliver him out of the hand of his adversaries (Wisdom 2:17–18).

With outrage and torture let us put him to the test ... Let us condemn him to a shameful death (Wisdom 2:19–20).

Now read what Matthew says the priests and elders said as they stood at my cross. *He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now, if he wants him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God'* (Matthew 27:43).

You can see why Christians loved this book. It was written before me. It is not about me by name; it is about every righteous man the powerful have found inconvenient. But Matthew, who knew it or knew words like it, heard it at Golgotha.

Solomon did not write it

The book speaks in Solomon's voice. *You did choose me before my kindred to be king of your people ... You gave command to build a sanctuary in your holy mountain* (Wisdom 9:7–8). That is Solomon, the king who built the first Temple.

But Solomon lived nearly a thousand years before this book was written. Its Greek is polished and full of the words of Greek philosophy. Its writer uses the Greek translation of the scriptures, and may never have read them in Hebrew. Almost every scholar places him in Alexandria, among the great Jewish community of Egypt, in the generation before me or in my own.¹

Even the early Christians knew it was not Solomon's. An old list of the books read in the church at Rome, from around the year 200, includes this book among the books of the New Testament, and says it was *written by friends of Solomon in his honor*.²

What the ungodly say

Go back to chapter 2 and listen to the ungodly before they start plotting. Their speech is the most honest thing in the book.

Short and sorrowful is our life ... Because by mere chance were we born, And hereafter we will be as though we had never been (Wisdom 2:1–2). There is nothing after death, so enjoy what you have. *Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and perfumes ... Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they be withered (Wisdom 2:7–8).*

And then, without a pause:

Let us oppress the righteous poor; Let us not spare the widow, Nor reverence the hairs of the old man gray for length of years. But let our strength be to us a law of righteousness; For that which is weak is found to be of no service (Wisdom 2:10–11).

That is the whole creed of the people who have always run the world. Life is short, so take it. The weak are useless. Might makes right. And notice where it leads: from wine and roses straight to the poor, the widow and the old. Pleasure for the few is paid for by the weak.

Then they turn on the righteous man, because *he is of disservice to us, And is contrary to our works (Wisdom 2:12)*. He is bad for business. His life shames theirs. So they decide to kill him.

I knew men like that. They ran the Temple and they governed for Rome. They found me *of disservice*, and they did what this book says they would do.

The souls of the righteous

The book's answer comes in chapter 3, and you may have heard it at a funeral.

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, And no torment will touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died ... But they are in peace (Wisdom 3:1–3).

The ungodly said death is the end. The book says: not for the righteous. They only *seemed* to die. And later, at the judgment, the ungodly will see the

righteous man they killed standing in glory and say, too late, that they were the fools (Wisdom 5:1–5).

This is one of the clearest statements before me that the righteous live on with God. When I answered the Sadducees, who said there was no resurrection, I told them *God is not the God of the dead, but of the living* (Mark 12:27). This book had said something like it already, in Greek, for the Jews of Egypt.

Kings are mortal too

When Solomon begins to speak about himself, the first thing he says is that he is no different from anyone.

I myself also am mortal, like to all ... And I also, when I was born, drew in the common air ... Uttering, like all, for my first voice, the selfsame wail ... For no king had any other first beginning; But all men have one entrance into life, and a like departure (Wisdom 7:1–6).

A king who says he was born crying, like every baby. And he speaks to the rulers of the world like a prophet: *your dominion was given you from the Lord ... Who will search out your works ... For the man of low estate may be pardoned in mercy, But mighty men will be searched out mightily* (Wisdom 6:3, 6).

The greater the power, the harder the judgment. I said the same: *To whomever much is given, of him will much be required* (Luke 12:48).

Wisdom beside the throne

In the middle of the book, Solomon praises Wisdom, and these are some of the most beautiful lines in this volume.

For she is a breath of the power of God, And a clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty ... For she is an effulgence from everlasting light, And an unspotted mirror of the working of God, And an image of his goodness (Wisdom 7:25–26).

She sits by God's throne (Wisdom 9:4). She made all things with him. *And from generation to generation passing into holy souls She makes men friends of God and prophets* (Wisdom 7:27).

Now read how the letter to the Hebrews begins, speaking of me: *His Son is the radiance of his glory, the very image of his substance* (Hebrews 1:3). And how John begins: *In the beginning was the Word ... All things were made through him* (John 1:1, 3).

The first Christians took what this book said about Wisdom and said it about me. I did speak of Wisdom as a person. I said *the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles'* (Luke 11:49). But the great hymns to me as God's eternal Word and radiance are built from books like this one, by people who came after me and reached for the highest language they knew.

Where Wisdom and I part

The book praises God's mercy beautifully. *For you love all things that are, And abhor none of the things which you did make; For never would you have formed anything if you did hate it* (Wisdom 11:24).

But a chapter later, it says the opposite about the peoples who lived in the land before Israel. It accuses them of child sacrifice and cannibalism, and says God destroyed them slowly, *Not being ignorant that their nature by birth was evil, and their wickedness inborn ... For they were a seed accursed from the beginning* (Wisdom 12:10–11).

A whole people, evil by birth, accursed from the beginning. That sentence cannot stand next to the one before it. If God abhors none of the things he made, no people is accursed from birth. And that same kind of sentence, written about other peoples, has been used for two thousand years to justify killing them, including, again and again, my own people.

I told a story in which the hero was a Samaritan, from a people my listeners thought accursed. I would not have written chapter 12.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Wisdom 2:12–20, then Matthew 27:39–43.

You will find: the righteous man who calls God his father, tested with *outrage and torture* to see if God will deliver him, and the mockers at my cross saying, *Let God deliver him now*.

Then read Wisdom 2:10–11, the creed of the ungodly, and **Wisdom 11:24** beside **Wisdom 12:10–11**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/wisdom-of-solomon.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Wisdom** was written in **Greek**, in **Alexandria**, by a Jewish teacher speaking as **Solomon**, in the generation before me or in my lifetime.
- Its **ungodly** say life ends in nothing, so **oppress the poor and the widow** and **kill the righteous man** who calls God his father. Matthew heard that at my cross.
- It answers that **the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God**.
- Its **Wisdom**, the **breath of God's power** and **reflection of eternal light**, is the language the first Christians used for **me**.
- **Paul** borrowed its argument against idols for **Romans 1**.
- It loves all God made, then calls a whole people **accursed from birth**. That is where it leaves me.

7. Sirach: A Teacher Who Had My Name

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: A teacher in Jerusalem. In the Greek he signs himself *Jesus, the son of Sirach Eleazar* (Sirach 50:27). The Hebrew copies call him Simeon, son of Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sira. His grandson translated the book into Greek and wrote a preface to it.

When: Written in Hebrew about 180 BC. Translated in Egypt from 132 BC on.

Where it fits: Written in Jerusalem when the land was ruled by Greek kings, not long after the death of the high priest Simon II, whom the book praises (Sirach 50). It is a generation before the Maccabean revolt.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha, and most later dropped it.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Its rich man who says *now will I eat of my goods* (Sirach 11:19) is close to my rich fool (Luke 12:19). Its forgive-then-be-forgiven (Sirach 28:2) is in the prayer I taught (Matthew 6:12–15). Its teacher who says *Put your neck under the yoke* (Sirach 51:26) is close to *Take my yoke upon you* (Matthew 11:29).

How close it stays to me: Very close on the poor, the worker's wage and forgiving. Far on women and on slaves.

If you only read three chapters: Sirach 4, Sirach 13 and Sirach 34.

WORDS TO KNOW

Ecclesiasticus — the book's old Latin name. It means *the church book*, probably because churches used it so much for teaching.

Ben Sira — Hebrew for *son of Sira*, the name the book goes by among Jews and scholars.

Wisdom literature — books of sayings and reflection about how to live, like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job.

Scribe — in this book, a teacher and student of the law, a man with the time to study.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The book opens with the grandson's preface, explaining that he found his grandfather's book in Egypt and translated it into Greek, and asking pardon for what is lost in translation.

Then come fifty chapters of sayings, poems and advice, much like the book of Proverbs but longer, arranged loosely by subject. Wisdom comes from God and begins with fearing him. A son must honor his parents and care for his old father. Give to the poor and do not make them wait. Be careful with friends, with talk, with debts, with the rich and powerful, with women, with food and wine, with doctors, and with money. Forgive your neighbor if you want to be forgiven. Bring God the sacrifice of justice, not the offerings of stolen goods.

In chapter 24 Wisdom speaks for herself: she came from the mouth of God, looked for a home among all peoples, and was told to settle in Israel, where she became the law of Moses.

In chapters 44 to 50 the teacher praises the famous men of Israel, one after another, from Enoch and Noah through Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets, down to Simon the high priest of his own day, shining as he comes out of the sanctuary.

Chapter 51 is the teacher's own prayer of thanks, and an invitation to the unlearned to come to his house of instruction and take up the yoke of wisdom.

The man who wrote this book had my name.

I have written in this book the instruction of understanding and knowledge, I Jesus, the son of Sirach Eleazar, of Jerusalem (Sirach 50:27).

In my language it is *Yeshua*. It was a common name. The Hebrew copies of this book make him Simeon, the son of a Yeshua, so the name ran in his family either way. A teacher with my name, or his father's, sat in Jerusalem about two hundred years before me and wrote down what he had learned about how to live.¹

He was a teacher of the comfortable classes. He tells his students how to behave at a rich man's dinner, how to deal with officials, how to choose friends. But he had looked hard at how the rich treat the poor, and some of what he wrote about it is as sharp as anything in your Bible.

Do not make the poor wait

Chapter 4 opens like this:

My son, deprive not the poor of his living, And make not the needy eyes to wait long. Make not a hungry soul sorrowful ... And defer not to give to him that is in need ... Turn not away your eye from one that asks of you (Sirach 4:1-5).

Not just *give*. *Do not make them wait*. Do not send them away to come back tomorrow. Anyone who has stood in a line for help knows what this means.

And then: *Be as a father to the fatherless, And instead of a husband to their mother: So will you be as a son of the Most High (Sirach 4:10).*

I said something very close, about enemies: *love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing back; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High (Luke 6:35)*. For this teacher, you become a child of God by caring for orphans and widows. For me, also by loving the people who hate you. It is the same road. I took it further.

Poor men are pasture for the rich

Chapter 13 is about what it is like to be poor among the rich, and it is written by someone who had watched closely.

The rich man does a wrong, and he threatens withal: The poor is wronged, and he will entreat withal (Sirach 13:3). The rich man does wrong and then threatens. The poor man is wronged and then has to apologize.

Wild asses are the prey of lions in the wilderness; So poor men are pasture for the rich (Sirach 13:19).

A rich man speaks, and all keep silence; And what he says they extol to the clouds: A poor man speaks, and they say, Who is this? (Sirach 13:23).

This is not a prophet shouting. This is a quiet teacher telling his students the truth about the world they are going to work in. He does not say the rich are evil. He says the game is rigged, and he wants his students to know it.

The bread of the needy

Then comes the passage that changed a man's life seventeen centuries later.

He that sacrifices of a thing wrongfully gotten, his offering is made in mockery (Sirach 34:18). *As one that kills the son before his father's eyes Is he that brings a sacrifice from the goods of the poor* (Sirach 34:20).

The bread of the needy is the life of the poor: He that depriveth him thereof is a man of blood. As one that slays his neighbor is he that takes away his living; And as a shedder of blood is he that depriveth a hireling of his hire (Sirach 34:21–22).

To withhold a worker's wage is to shed blood. To give God an offering made from what you squeezed out of the poor is like killing a man's son in front of him. There are no stronger words in this book.

I said: *If therefore you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother* (Matthew 5:23–24). And when I sent out my followers, I told them *the laborer is worthy of his wages* (Luke 10:7). This teacher had already said both.

Forgive, and then pray

In chapter 28 the teacher says something you have prayed all your life without knowing he said it first.

Forgive your neighbor the hurt that he has done you; And then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Man cherisheth anger against man; And does he seek healing from the Lord? Upon a man like himself he has no mercy; And does he make supplication for his own sins? (Sirach 28:2–4).

That is the prayer I taught, and what I said after it: *For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses* (Matthew 6:14–15).

I did not invent that either. It was already being taught in Jerusalem. What I did was put it at the center of the one prayer I gave you.

The rich man and his goods

The teacher has a sketch of a man who gets rich by being careful and stingy: *When he says, I have found rest, And now will I eat of my goods; Yet he knows not what time will pass, And he will leave them to others, and die* (Sirach 11:19).

I told the same story with a harvest and barns. My rich man says to himself, *Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years. Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.* And God says, *tonight your soul is required of you* (Luke 12:19–20).

The teacher's advice for what to do with money instead is close to mine. *Lose your money for a brother and a friend; And let it not rust under the stone to be lost* (Sirach 29:10). I said *Don't lay up treasures for yourselves on the earth, where moth and rust consume* (Matthew 6:19).

Come and take the yoke

The book ends with the teacher inviting students to his school.

Draw near to me, you unlearned, And lodge in the house of instruction ... Put your neck under the yoke, And let your soul receive instruction ... Behold with your eyes, How that I laboured but a little, And found for myself much rest (Sirach 51:23–27).

You have heard words like these from me. *Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from*

me ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30).

The teacher invited people to his house of study, to take the yoke of learning. I invited the ones who were too tired and too poor to study, the people carrying burdens, and promised them rest. Same yoke, different people at the door.

Where Sirach and I part

I will not hide the rest of this book from you. It has some of the worst things written about women in any scripture.

Give me ... any wickedness but the wickedness of a woman (Sirach 25:13). *Better is the wickedness of a man than a pleasant-dealing woman* (Sirach 42:14). And the line that would be quoted against women for two thousand years: *From a woman was the beginning of sin; And because of her we all die* (Sirach 25:24).

Many readers take that as blaming Eve for death. Some scholars think the teacher meant a bad wife, in the passage around it, ruining her husband's life. Either way, it is a line about women as the source of sin, and it was used that way.²

And on slaves: *Fodder, a stick, and burdens, for an ass; Bread, and discipline, and work, for a servant ... for an evil servant there are racks and tortures* (Sirach 33:24, 26). A man, set next to a donkey, and the rack for one who displeases.

The teacher who wrote so sharply about how the rich devour the poor could not see the people closest to him, the women of his house and the slaves who served it, as anything but problems to manage. I let women follow me and learn from me. I said the greatest must be the servant of all. That is the distance between us.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Sirach 34:18–22.

You will find: the offering made from the goods of the poor compared to killing a son before his father's eyes, and the man who withholds a worker's wage called *a shedder of blood*.

Then read Sirach 28:2–4 beside Matthew 6:14–15, and Sirach 51:23–27 beside Matthew 11:28–30.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/sirach.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Sirach** was written in Jerusalem about **180 BC** by a teacher who signs himself **Jesus, son of Sirach**, and translated by his **grandson** in Egypt.
- It says **do not make the poor wait, poor men are pasture for the rich**, and withholding a **worker's wage** is **shedding blood**. That passage turned **Las Casas** against the enslavement of the native peoples of the Americas.
- It taught **forgive your neighbor, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray** before I put it in the prayer I taught you.
- Its **yoke** of wisdom and its **rest** sound like mine, offered to a different crowd.
- It says **from a woman was the beginning of sin**, and treats **slaves like donkeys**. That is where it leaves me.
- Its lost **Hebrew** was found in a **Cairo** storeroom in **1896**, and at **Masada** in **1964**.

8. Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah: Gods That Cannot Help the Widow

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Not Baruch, the scribe who wrote down Jeremiah's words, and not Jeremiah. Baruch is at least two or three pieces by unknown writers, joined together. The Letter of Jeremiah is by another unknown writer.

When: Baruch probably in the 100s BC. The Letter perhaps as early as the 300s BC, and in any case before about 100 BC, the date of a Greek fragment of it found at Qumran.

Where it fits: Set in Babylon after Jerusalem burned in 586 BC (2 Kings 25), among the exiles Jeremiah wrote to (Jeremiah 29). Written for Jews living, centuries later, under foreign kings and among foreign gods.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Catholic Bibles and the 1611 King James print the Letter as chapter 6 of Baruch; Orthodox Bibles print it as a separate book. Protestant Bibles moved both to the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Baruch's long confession is close to Daniel's prayer (Daniel 9). Its mountains made low come from Isaiah 40, as in Luke 3:5. The Letter's mockery of idols grows out of Jeremiah 10.

How close it stays to me: Close in praying for the enemy king. Far in hoping to tread on his neck.

If you only read three chapters: Baruch 1, Baruch 3 and Baruch 6 (the Letter of Jeremiah).

WORDS TO KNOW

Baruch — Jeremiah's scribe and friend, the son of Neriah, who wrote Jeremiah's words on a scroll (Jeremiah 36:4).

Exile — the years after 586 BC, when the people of Judah were carried off to Babylon.

Idol — a statue worshipped as a god, or as the home of one.

Confession — in this book, a prayer that names the sins of a whole people and asks God for mercy.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Baruch opens with Baruch, in Babylon, reading his book to the exiled king and the people. They weep, fast and pray, collect money, and send it to Jerusalem with a letter. The letter asks the people there to offer sacrifices, to pray for the life of Nebuchadnezzar and his son so that the exiles may live in peace under them, and to read aloud a confession that follows.

The confession, in chapters 1 to 3, admits that the people of Judah, their kings, priests and prophets have sinned and deserved their ruin, and begs God to remember his name and bring them home.

Chapters 3 and 4 hold a poem about wisdom. Where are the princes and the rich of the nations? Gone to the grave. No one could find wisdom by searching. God found it and gave it to Israel, and it is the book of God's commandments, the law.

Chapters 4 and 5 are poems of comfort. Jerusalem speaks as a widowed mother who has lost her children, and then is told to take heart, take off her mourning, and watch her children come home from east and west.

The Letter of Jeremiah, chapter 6, claims to be a letter Jeremiah sent to the exiles before they left. It warns them that in Babylon they will see gods of silver, gold and wood carried in procession, and must not fear them. Over and over it shows that idols cannot speak, move, protect themselves, judge, or help anyone, and ends each section with the refrain that they are no gods.

A book written in Jeremiah's name tells you how to recognize a false god: it cannot help a widow.

They can save no man from death, neither deliver the weak from the mighty. They can't restore a blind man to his sight, nor deliver any that is in distress. They can show no mercy to the widow, nor do good to the fatherless (Letter of Jeremiah 6:36–38).

That is the test. Not whether a god is made of gold, or whether its temple is grand, or how many people follow it in procession. Whether it delivers the weak from the mighty. Whether it shows mercy to the widow.

I gave sight to the blind. I stopped a funeral to give a widow back her son. When John's disciples asked if I was the one, I told them to look: *the blind receive their sight ... the poor have good news preached to them* (Matthew 11:5). It is the same test, and it is the right one.

This chapter is about two short books that were bound together: **Baruch**, and the **Letter of Jeremiah**.

A letter from the exiles

Baruch opens in Babylon, *in the fifth year* after the city burned (Baruch 1:2). The exiles hear Baruch's book read, weep, and send money back to Jerusalem, with instructions.

One of them may surprise you. *Pray for the life of Nabuchodonosor king of Babylon, and for the life of Baltasar his son* (Baruch 1:11). Pray for the king who burned your Temple, so that *we shall live under the shadow of Nabuchodonosor king of Babylon ... and find favor in their sight* (Baruch 1:12).

That comes from a real letter. Jeremiah wrote to the exiles: *Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace* (Jeremiah 29:7).

I went further. I said *pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). Not only for the peace of the city, so that you can live quietly. For the enemy himself.

Notice one small thing. Baruch calls Belshazzar the son of Nebuchadnezzar. So does the book of Daniel (Daniel 5:2). In fact he was the son of a later king,

Nabonidus. A writer in Baruch's own time would not have made that mistake. A writer centuries later, who knew the story from Daniel, would.¹

We have sinned

The longest part of Baruch is a confession, meant to be read aloud on holy days. *To the Lord our God belongs righteousness, but to us confusion of face ... to our kings, and to our princes, and to our priests, and to our prophets, and to our fathers: for that we have sinned before the Lord* (Baruch 1:15–17).

If it sounds familiar, it is because it follows, almost line by line, the prayer of Daniel in your Bible (Daniel 9:4–19). One borrowed from the other, or both from an older prayer used in worship.¹

I want you to notice whom it names: kings, princes, priests and prophets. Not only the people. The ruin of Jerusalem is laid first at the feet of the men who led it. That is how the prophets always spoke. It is also how I spoke in the Temple.

Where are the princes?

The wisdom poem in chapter 3 asks a question I like.

Where are the princes of the heathen ... and those who hoarded up silver and gold, wherein men trust; and of whose getting there is no end? ... they are vanished and gone down to the grave, and others are come up in their steads (Baruch 3:16–19).

All the people who piled up gold with no end to their getting are gone. Others have taken their place, and they will be gone too.

That is the whole wisdom of the rich fool, said as a question. The answer the poem gives is that wisdom cannot be bought or dug up. God gives it, and he gave it to his people as *the book of the commandments of God* (Baruch 4:1).

Gods with dust in their eyes

Chapter 6, the Letter of Jeremiah, is the funniest thing in this volume. It is a satire. It goes after the gods of Babylon one embarrassing detail at a time.

Their priests bar the temple doors with locks *lest they be carried off by robbers* (Letter of Jeremiah 6:18). A god that has to be locked up so it is not stolen.

When they be set up in the temples their eyes be full of dust through the feet of those who come in (Letter of Jeremiah 6:17). *Upon their bodies and heads alight bats, swallows, and birds; and in like manner the cats also* (Letter of Jeremiah 6:22). *If one falls over, they can't rise up again of themselves* (Letter of Jeremiah 6:27).

The prophet Jeremiah had already mocked idols as *like a palm tree, of turned work that don't speak and must be carried* (Jeremiah 10:5). This letter takes that one verse and runs a whole chapter with it.

Then it gets serious.

The priests who keep the offerings

The letter is not only laughing at statues. It is watching the men who serve them.

Sometimes also the priests convey from their gods gold and silver, and bestow it upon themselves (Letter of Jeremiah 6:10). The priests take the clothes off the gods *and clothe their wives and children withal* (Letter of Jeremiah 6:33). And this: *the things that are sacrificed to them, their priests sell and spend ... but to the poor and to the impotent will they give nothing thereof* (Letter of Jeremiah 6:28).

That is the real target. A temple where the gifts given to God end up in the priests' houses, and nothing reaches the poor.

The writer meant the temples of Babylon. I saw the same thing in the Temple of my own God. I watched a poor widow put in her last two coins, in a Temple run by men who, I said, *devour widows' houses* (Mark 12:40). I turned over the tables of the men who sold the offerings. A temple of any god, including the true one, can become a place where the gifts of the poor feed the priests.

Where Baruch and I part

The poems of comfort at the end of Baruch are beautiful. Jerusalem is told, *Put off, O Jerusalem, the garment of your mourning* (Baruch 5:1), and to watch her children carried home *as on a royal throne*, with every high mountain made low and every valley filled (Baruch 5:6–7). You have heard that in the preaching of John the Baptizer (Luke 3:5).

But in the middle of the comfort is this: *your enemy has persecuted you; but shortly you shall see his destruction, and shall tread upon their necks* (Baruch 4:25).

The same book that told the exiles to pray for the life of Nebuchadnezzar promises them they will stand on his people's necks. I understand both feelings. People who have been dragged from their homes want to see their captors brought low.

But I did not promise my followers they would stand on anyone's neck. I said *whoever humbles himself will be exalted* (Luke 14:11), and I went to my death praying for the men who killed me.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Letter of Jeremiah 6:28 and 6:36–38 (or Baruch 6 in your Bible).

You will find: priests who keep the offerings and give *nothing* to the poor, and gods who *can show no mercy to the widow, nor do good to the fatherless*.

Then read Baruch 1:11–12 beside Jeremiah 29:7 and Matthew 5:44, and Baruch 4:25.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/baruch.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Baruch** is two or three pieces written in **Baruch's name**, probably in the **100s BC**. The **Letter of Jeremiah** is a separate satire, printed as **Baruch 6** in many Bibles.
- Baruch tells the exiles to **pray for the life of the king** who burned their Temple, as Jeremiah told them to **seek the peace of the city**.
- Its confession lays the ruin of Jerusalem first on **kings, princes, priests and prophets**.
- The Letter mocks gods with **dust in their eyes** and **bats on their heads**, and priests who **keep the offerings** and give **nothing to the poor**.
- Its test of a false god is mine: it **cannot help the widow**. Its hope to **tread on the enemy's neck** is not.

9. The Song of the Three: Prayer Inside the Furnace

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown Jewish writers. It is a prayer, a short piece of story, and a long hymn, added to the book of Daniel in its Greek translation.

When: Probably the 100s BC, perhaps from a Hebrew or Aramaic original. The hymn may be older than the rest.

Where it fits: Inside Daniel 3, between verses 23 and 24, while three young Jews of the exile stand in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. Written for a people with no Temple to worship in.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, as part of Daniel 3 (in Catholic Bibles, Daniel 3:24–90). Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha. Anglican prayer books still sing its hymn.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Its *contrite heart* in place of sacrifice is Psalm 51:17. Its hymn calling all creation to praise is Psalm 148, stretched out. It fills the silence in Daniel 3 while the three are in the fire.

How close it stays to me: Close in offering a humble heart instead of sacrifice.

If you only read three chapters: It is one passage of sixty-eight verses. Read verses 1 to 27, then the hymn from verse 35.

WORDS TO KNOW

Azariah — one of the three young men thrown into the furnace. In Daniel he is better known by his Babylonian name, Abednego.

Hananiah and Mishaël — the other two, called Shadrach and Meshach in Babylon.

Contrite — crushed, broken with sorrow for what one has done.

The Benedicite — the hymn in this book, named for its first word in Latin, *Bless*. It is still sung in churches.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The passage begins with the three young men walking about in the fire, praising God.

Azariah stands and prays. He blesses God and admits that his people deserve their punishment, because they sinned and did not keep the law. He asks God not to abandon them, for the sake of his name and of the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His people, he says, have become the least of all nations. They have no king, no prophet, no leader, no sacrifice and no place to offer one. He asks God to accept instead a broken heart and a humble spirit.

Then comes a short piece of story. The king's servants keep feeding the furnace until the flames shoot up forty-nine cubits and burn the Babylonians standing near it. But the angel of the Lord comes down into the furnace, drives the flame out, and makes the middle of it like a cool, damp breeze, so that the fire does not touch the three.

Then all three sing a long hymn. They bless God, and then call on everything that exists to bless him: the heavens, the angels, the waters, sun and moon, stars, rain and dew, winds, fire and heat, cold and ice, nights and days, light and darkness, mountains, plants, seas, whales and fish, birds, wild and tame animals, all people, Israel, priests, servants, the souls of the righteous, the humble, and finally the three young men themselves, because God has saved them from the fire.

Three men stood in a furnace, and one of them said his people had nowhere left to pray.

In Daniel 3, the king of Babylon orders everyone to bow down to a golden statue. Three young Jews refuse. They are bound and thrown into a furnace so hot it kills the soldiers who throw them in (Daniel 3:22–23).

Then, in your Bible, the very next verse is the king jumping up in astonishment: *Didn't we cast three men bound into the middle of the fire?* (Daniel 3:24). He sees four men walking loose in the flames.

What happened in between? Your Bible does not say. The Greek Bible does. In the space between those two verses, it places a prayer, a few lines of story, and one of the great hymns of praise ever written.

No temple, no priest, no place

Azariah prays first. And what he says is the center of this little book.

For we, O Lord, are become less than any nation, and be kept under this day in all the world because of our sins. Neither is there at this time prince, or prophet, or leader, or burned offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, or place to offer before you, and to find mercy (Song of the Three 14–15).

No king. No prophet. No Temple. No altar. Nothing the law requires for meeting God.

Nevertheless in a contrite heart and a humble spirit let us be accepted; like as in the burnt offerings of rams and bullocks, and like as in ten thousands of fat lambs; so let our sacrifice be in your sight this day (Song of the Three 16–17).

Take our broken heart instead. Let that be our sacrifice.

When this was written, there were times when that was literally true. In 167 BC, a Greek king set up a pagan altar in the Temple in Jerusalem and banned the sacrifices. For three years there was no place to offer anything. Many scholars think this prayer, like the book of Daniel itself, was written for people living through that.¹

The words come from a psalm: *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. O God, you will not despise a broken and contrite heart* (Psalm 51:17). But here they are prayed by people who had nothing else to give.

What God wants

I spent my life saying this.

I told the religious men who complained that I ate with sinners: *go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'* (Matthew 9:13). When a scribe told me that loving God and loving your neighbor *is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices*, I told him, *You are not far from God's Kingdom* (Mark 12:33–34).

And to a Samaritan woman, at a well, who asked me where the right place to worship was, her mountain or our Temple, I said: *the hour comes, when neither*

in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father ... the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:21, 23).

Forty years after I died, the Temple was burned and never rebuilt. My people had to learn to live exactly as Azariah prayed in the furnace: with no altar, no sacrifice, only prayer, study and a humble heart. They did. Azariah's prayer was ready for them.

Every creature, bless the Lord

Then all three sing, and they do not stop for forty verses.

O all you works of the Lord, bless you the Lord: praise and exalt him above all forever (Song of the Three 35).

And then, one by one, they call on everything. The heavens and the angels. Sun and moon and stars. Rain and dew, winds, fire and heat, frost and cold, ice and snow, nights and days, light and darkness, lightnings and clouds. The earth, the mountains, everything that grows, the springs and the seas and the rivers. *O you whales, and all that move in the waters, bless you the Lord ... O all you fowls of the air ... O all you beasts and cattle ... O you children of men, bless you the Lord* (Song of the Three 57–60).

Remember where they are standing. They are in a furnace built to kill them, and they call on the fire itself to praise God. Even the thing that was meant to destroy them is part of God's creation, and sings.

Near the end, the hymn comes to the people who count least. *O you that are holy and humble of heart, bless you the Lord* (Song of the Three 65). The last word goes to the humble.

The fourth man

In your Daniel, the king looks into the furnace and sees *four men loose, walking in the middle of the fire ... The appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods* (Daniel 3:25). He does not say who it is.

The Greek fills that in too. *The angel of the Lord came down into the furnace together with Azarias and his fellows ... and made the midst of the furnace as it*

had been a moist whistling wind, so that the fire touched them not at all (Song of the Three 26–27).

Many Christians have read the fourth man as me. I will not claim that. The story says an angel. What I will tell you is that the God of this story does not watch from a distance while the faithful burn. He comes down into the fire and stands in it with them. I would want you to know God that way, whatever name you put on the fourth man.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Daniel 3:23–24 in your Bible.

You will find: the three thrown into the furnace, and then, at once, the king astonished. The Song of the Three fits in the gap.

Then read Song of the Three 14–17 beside Psalm 51:17 and Matthew 9:13.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/song-of-the-three.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **The Song of the Three** is a **prayer** and a **hymn** that the Greek Bible sets **inside Daniel 3**, while three young men stand in the **furnace**.
- **Azariah** prays that his people have **no king, no prophet, no Temple and no sacrifice**, and asks God to accept a **contrite heart** instead.
- That is what I taught: **mercy, not sacrifice**, and worship **in spirit and truth**, not on one mountain.
- Its hymn calls **every creature**, even **fire**, to **bless the Lord**, and ends with **the humble of heart**.
- Under the name **Benedicite**, it is still sung in **Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox** churches.

10. Susanna: The Woman Two Judges Accused

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer. The story was added to the book of Daniel in Greek.

When: Probably the 100s or early 00s BC. Whether it was first written in Hebrew or in Greek has been argued since the 200s AD.

Where it fits: Set among the exiles in Babylon, when Daniel is still a young man. Written as a story about justice in a Jewish community that judged its own members.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, as part of Daniel (in Catholic Bibles, Daniel 13). Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Nowhere quoted. Its law against false witnesses is Deuteronomy 19:18–19. Its woman dragged before the elders, and the men who accused her, are close to the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11).

How close it stays to me: Very close in defending a woman against the powerful men who accused her.

If you only read three chapters: It is one chapter of sixty-four verses. Read it all.

WORDS TO KNOW

Elders — the senior men of the community. In this story two of them also serve as judges.

False witness — lying testimony in court. The law of Moses punished a false witness with the penalty he tried to bring on the accused.

Cross-examination — questioning witnesses separately to see whether their stories agree.

Mastic and holm — two kinds of tree, a small evergreen shrub and an evergreen oak.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

In Babylon lives a rich and respected Jew named Joakim, whose house is where the community's court meets. His wife Susanna is beautiful and devout, raised by her parents in the law of Moses. That year, two elders are appointed as judges. Both see Susanna walking in her husband's garden, and both secretly desire her. One day they discover each other's secret and agree to catch her alone.

When Susanna goes to bathe in the garden and sends her maids away, the two elders rush out of hiding. They tell her to lie with them, or they will testify that they caught her with a young man. Susanna sees that she is trapped either way, refuses, and cries out. The elders shout too, and the household comes running.

The next day the elders bring her to trial before the people. They make her uncover her face, lay their hands on her head, and give their false testimony. Because they are elders and judges, the assembly believes them and condemns her to death. Susanna cries out to God.

As she is led away, God stirs up a young man named Daniel, who shouts that he is innocent of her blood and calls the people back to the court. He has the two elders separated and asks each, in turn, under what tree he saw her with the young man. The first says a mastic tree. The second says a holm oak. Their lie is exposed. The assembly puts the two elders to death by the law of Moses, and Susanna's family praises God. From that day Daniel is honored among the people.

Two judges caught a woman alone and told her to give herself to them, or they would have her killed.

Behold, the garden doors are shut, that no man can see us, and we are in love with you; therefore consent to us, and lie with us. If you will not, we will bear witness against you, that a young man was with you (Susanna 20–21).

That is the whole trap. Two powerful men, with the authority of the court, and a woman alone. If she says yes, she sins. If she says no, they will say she committed adultery, and the law will kill her. Their word against hers, and they are the judges.

She sees it exactly. *I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death to me: and if I do it not, I can't escape your hands. It is better for me to fall into your hands, and not do it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord (Susanna 22–23).*

Then she screams.

Believed because they were elders

The trial the next day is short. The two elders stand up before the whole assembly, lay their hands on her head, and tell their story. There is no one to contradict them.

Then the assembly believed them, as those that were elders of the people and judges: so they condemned her to death (Susanna 41).

That sentence should stop you. They were not believed because of any evidence. They were believed because of who they were. And she was condemned because of who she was not.

The writer knows this is not the first time. When Daniel turns on one of the elders, he says: *Thus have you dealt with the daughters of Israel, and they for fear companied with you: but the daughter of Judah would not abide your wickedness* (Susanna 57). These men had done it before. The other women gave in, out of fear. Susanna was the one who would not.

Powerful men who use their position to force women, women too afraid to speak, and a community that believes the men because they are respected. The story is more than two thousand years old. You know it is not old.

Separate them

Susanna is led out to die. And a young man shouts from the crowd: *I am clear from the blood of this woman* (Susanna 46).

He turns the whole assembly around with one question. *Are you such fools, you sons of Israel, that without examination or knowledge of the truth you have condemned a daughter of Israel?* (Susanna 48).

Then he does the simplest thing in the world. *Put them asunder one far from another, and I will examine them* (Susanna 51). He asks each elder the same question, separately: under what tree did you see them? One says a mastic. The other says a holm oak. Two witnesses who saw the same thing cannot disagree about a tree.

That is the whole of justice in one move. Do not believe the powerful because they are powerful. Ask questions. Check the stories against each other. The law of Moses demanded exactly this. *The judges shall make diligent inquisition* (Deuteronomy 19:18). The assembly had not bothered, because the accusers were judges themselves.

What happened to the judges

The story ends with the people turning on the two elders, and doing *according to the law of Moses ... to them in such sort as they maliciously intended to do to their neighbor: and they put them to death* (Susanna 62).

That is the law: if a witness lies to get someone killed, *you shall do to him as he had thought to do to his brother* (Deuteronomy 19:19). The story treats it as justice, and the innocent blood is saved.

I want you to hold this story next to another one. In some copies of the Gospel of John, though not in the oldest ones, there is a scene in which the religious leaders bring a woman to me, *a woman taken in adultery*, say they *found this woman in adultery, in the very act*, and remind me that Moses commanded such women to be stoned (John 8:3–5).

Notice what is missing in that story: the man. Adultery takes two, and the law of Moses condemns both of them (Deuteronomy 22:22). They brought only her.

I did not cross-examine them about trees. I said, *He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone at her*, and they went away *one by one, beginning from the oldest* (John 8:7, 9). Then I asked her, *Did no one condemn you?* and told her, *Neither do I condemn you* (John 8:10–11).

In Susanna's story, the young man saves the woman and the guilty old men die. In mine, the woman is saved and the old men walk away alive. Both stories put the powerful accusers on trial instead of the woman. Mine leaves no one dead.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Susanna 20–23 and 41.

You will find: the trap, her refusal, and the assembly that believed the elders *as those that were elders of the people and judges*.

Then read John 8:3–11 and notice who is missing from it, and who is left standing.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/susanna.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Susanna** is a story added to **Daniel** in Greek. Catholic Bibles print it as **Daniel 13**.
- Two **elders** who are also **judges** trap a woman alone and threaten to **accuse her of adultery** if she will not lie with them. **She refuses**.
- The assembly **believes them because they are elders**, and condemns her. They had done this to other women, who gave in **for fear**.
- Young **Daniel** has the elders **questioned separately**, and their stories fall apart over **which tree**.
- In my own story of a woman accused before the elders, I put the accusers on trial too, and **no one was put to death**.

11. Bel and the Dragon: The Footprints in the Ashes

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer, or writers. Two short stories about Daniel were added to the end of the book of Daniel in Greek.

When: Probably the 100s BC.

Where it fits: Set in Babylon after the Persian king Cyrus took it in 539 BC, with Daniel at the king's side. Written to mock the gods of the nations for Jews who lived among them.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, as part of Daniel (in Catholic Bibles, Daniel 14). Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Nowhere quoted. Its Daniel in the lions' den is a second telling of Daniel 6. Its dragon that bursts may grow from Jeremiah 51:44, where God says he will *bring out of his mouth that which he has swallowed up*.

How close it stays to me: Close in exposing priests who live off the offerings. Far in feeding enemies, and their families, to death.

If you only read three chapters: It is one chapter of forty-two verses. Read it all.

WORDS TO KNOW

Bel — a title meaning *lord*. In Babylon it meant Marduk, the city's chief god.

Idol — a statue worshipped as a god, or as the home of one.

Habakkuk — a prophet of Judah. A short book of his prophecy is in your Bible.

Firkin — an old measure for liquids, about forty liters.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Bel. Cyrus of Persia has become king of Babylon, and Daniel is his close friend. The Babylonians worship a statue of Bel, and set out for him every day great

quantities of flour, sheep and wine. The king asks Daniel why he does not worship Bel, who plainly eats and drinks. Daniel laughs: the statue is clay inside and bronze outside and has never eaten anything. The seventy priests of Bel propose a test. The food is set out, the temple door is sealed with the king's own seal, and if Bel has not eaten it all by morning, the priests will die; if he has, Daniel will. But Daniel secretly has his servants scatter ashes on the floor. In the night the priests come in through a hidden door under the table, with their wives and children, and eat everything. In the morning the seals are unbroken and the food is gone, and the king praises Bel, until Daniel shows him the footprints in the ashes. The king kills the priests and their families and gives Bel to Daniel, who destroys the statue and the temple.

The dragon. The Babylonians also worship a great living dragon. Daniel kills it without a sword by feeding it cakes of pitch, fat and hair, and it bursts. The people rise up against the king and demand Daniel, and he is thrown into a den of seven starving lions for six days. Far away in Judea, an angel picks up the prophet Habakkuk by the hair, with a bowl of stew he was taking to his reapers, and carries him to Babylon to feed Daniel. On the seventh day the king comes to mourn and finds Daniel alive. He praises the God of Daniel, pulls him out, and throws his enemies to the lions, who devour them at once.

The god ate a great dinner every night, and in the morning there were footprints in the ashes.

Every day the Babylonians set out food for the god Bel: *twelve great measures of fine flour, and forty sheep, and six firkins of wine* (Bel and the Dragon 3). Every morning it was gone.

Thinkest you not that Bel is a living god? the king asks Daniel. *See you not how much he eats and drinks every day?*

Then Daniel laughed (Bel and the Dragon 6–7).

That laugh is the best thing in this little book. Daniel knows exactly where the food goes, and he means to prove it.

A locked room

The priests of Bel, seventy of them, are confident. Let the king set out the food himself, shut the door, and seal it with his own ring. If the food is not eaten by morning, they will die.

They are confident because *under the table they had made a privy entrance, whereby they entered in continually, and consumed those things* (Bel and the Dragon 13).

But before the door is sealed, Daniel has his servants scatter ashes across the floor of the temple, with only the king watching. In the night the priests come in through their secret door *with their wives and children, as they were wont to do, and did eat and drink up all* (Bel and the Dragon 15).

In the morning, the seals are whole. The food is gone. The king shouts, *Great are you, O Bel* (Bel and the Dragon 18). And Daniel laughs again and holds him back at the door. *Behold now the pavement, and mark well whose footsteps are these.*

I see the footsteps of men, women, and children (Bel and the Dragon 19–20).

It is one of the oldest detective stories in the world: a locked room, a test, a trap, and a clue in the dust. And its point is plain. The god does not eat. The priests do.

The god who feeds the priests

That is what the story is about, underneath the comedy. A great temple, a great god, a daily offering that would feed a village, and all of it going into the bellies of the priests and their families through a door under the table.

The Letter of Jeremiah said the same thing about the priests of Babylon: they take the offerings and *to the poor and to the impotent will they give nothing thereof* (Letter of Jeremiah 6:28). This story turns it into a trap and springs it.

It is easy to laugh at the priests of Bel. It is harder to look at your own house. In my day, the Temple of the true God in Jerusalem had its own hidden doors under the table: money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals doing business

in its courts, and, many historians think, a high priest's family grown rich on it. I overturned their tables and said, *My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers!* (Mark 11:17).

Any religion can have a door under the table. Ask where the offerings go. Look for footprints.

The dragon and the lions

The second story is wilder. The Babylonians worship a living dragon, a great serpent, and this one really does eat. Daniel offers to kill it *without sword or staff*. He boils pitch, fat and hair together into cakes and feeds them to it, *so the dragon did eat and burst in sunder* (Bel and the Dragon 26–27).

Now the people are furious. *The king is become a Jew, and he has pulled down Bel, and slain the dragon, and put the priests to the sword* (Bel and the Dragon 28). They demand Daniel, and he goes into a den of seven lions that have been starved so they will eat him.

Then comes my favorite moment. Far away in Judea, the prophet Habakkuk has made stew and is carrying it out to the men harvesting his fields. An angel tells him to take it to Daniel in Babylon. *Lord, I never saw Babylon; neither do I know where the den is* (Bel and the Dragon 35). *So the angel of the Lord took him by the crown, and lifted him up by the hair of his head* and set him down over the lions' den (Bel and the Dragon 36).

O Daniel, Daniel, take the dinner which God has sent you. And Daniel answers, *You have remembered me, O God: neither have you forsaken those who love you* (Bel and the Dragon 37–38).

A prophet carried by his hair across the desert to bring a bowl of stew to a man in a pit. It is a ridiculous picture, and I love it. God remembers the man in the pit, and sends someone with food. I said that on the last day the King will say, *I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat* (Matthew 25:35). Habakkuk would have understood.

Where Bel and I part

The book laughs at false gods and lying priests, and that laughter is good. But read its endings.

When the trick is exposed, *the king killed them*, the priests, *with their wives and children* (Bel and the Dragon 21–22). When Daniel comes out of the den, the king *cast those that were the cause of his destruction into the den: and they were devoured in a moment before his face* (Bel and the Dragon 42). Your own lions' den story in Daniel 6 ends the same way, and adds *their children, and their wives* (Daniel 6:24).

The children in the ashes did not build the secret door. They ate the dinner their fathers brought them.

I did not ask for the money changers to be killed. I overturned their tables. I did not ask God to feed my accusers to the lions. I asked him to forgive them. You can expose a lie without killing the liar's children.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Bel and the Dragon 1–22.

You will find: the daily offering, the sealed door, the ashes, and *the footsteps of men, women, and children*.

Then read Jeremiah 51:44 and see if you can find the dragon in it, and **Mark 11:15–17**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/bel-and-the-dragon.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Bel and the Dragon** is two short stories added to **Daniel** in Greek. Catholic Bibles print them as **Daniel 14**.
- The priests of **Bel** eat the god's offerings every night through a **secret door**, until Daniel **scatters ashes** and shows the king their **footprints**.
- Daniel kills a **dragon** with cakes of **pitch, fat and hair**, is thrown to the **lions**, and is fed by the prophet **Habakkuk**, carried by an angel **by his hair**.
- Its lesson is mine: **ask where the offerings go**. I overturned the tables of a **den of robbers**.
- It ends by killing the **priests' wives and children** and throwing the accusers to the **lions**. That is not mine.

12. The Prayer of Manasseh: The Worst King Asks for Mercy

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer, in the voice of King Manasseh of Judah.

When: Uncertain. Probably between the 200s BC and the first century AD. The oldest surviving copy is in a Christian book of church rules from the 200s.

Where it fits: Manasseh reigned for fifty-five years, from about 697 to 642 BC (2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33). The prayer is set while he is a prisoner in chains in Babylon.

Which Bibles keep it: The Orthodox churches, among the Odes, and they chant it at Great Compline, a late-evening service. Catholic Bibles printed it in an appendix after the Council of Trent. The 1611 King James printed it among the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: 2 Chronicles 33:12–13 and 18–19 says Manasseh prayed in his chains and that his prayer was written down. This is a prayer written to fill that gap.

How close it stays to me: Close in mercy for the worst of sinners. Silent about the people he killed.

If you only read three chapters: It is fifteen verses. Read them all, then 2 Chronicles 33.

WORDS TO KNOW

Manasseh — king of Judah, the son of good King Hezekiah, remembered as the worst king Judah ever had.

Repentance — turning around: admitting what you have done wrong and changing direction.

The Odes — a collection of songs from the Bible sung in Orthodox morning prayer, many of them prayers taken from inside other books.

High places — hilltop shrines for worship outside the Temple, often to other gods.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The prayer begins by praising God as the maker of heaven and earth, who bound the sea and sealed the deep, and before whom all things tremble. His anger against sinners is unbearable, but his mercy is beyond measure, and he has promised repentance and forgiveness to those who sin.

Repentance, the king says, is not for the righteous, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin. It is for sinners like him. His sins are more than the sand of the sea. He is bent double by iron chains and cannot lift his head. He has set up abominations and done what God hates.

So he bends *the knee of his heart*, confesses his sins, and begs God to forgive him and not to destroy him with his sins. God is the God of those who repent, and will show his goodness by saving one so unworthy. The king promises to praise God all the days of his life.

Your Bible tells the story of King Manasseh twice, and the two stories do not end the same way.

The first telling is in 2 Kings. Manasseh became king at twelve and reigned fifty-five years. He rebuilt the shrines his father had torn down, set up altars to other gods in the Temple itself, and burned his own son as an offering. *Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another* (2 Kings 21:16).

In 2 Kings, there is no turning back. He dies a wicked king. And a few chapters later, when Babylon's armies begin to overrun Judah, the book says it happened

for the sins of Manasseh ... and also for the innocent blood that he shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD would not pardon (2 Kings 24:3–4).

The LORD would not pardon. That is the end of the first story.

The second telling

The second telling is in 2 Chronicles, written later. It tells the same terrible reign. But then it adds something.

The king of Assyria's captains took Manasseh in chains, bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. When he was in distress, he begged the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him; and he was entreated by him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom (2 Chronicles 33:11–13).

And it says the prayer was written down: *his prayer to his God ... behold, they are written among the acts of the kings of Israel (2 Chronicles 33:18).*

That record is lost. But someone, long afterward, wrote the prayer this king might have prayed. That is the Prayer of Manasseh.

So your own Bible holds two answers to the question: can the worst man in Judah's history be forgiven? One says no. The other says yes. This little prayer stands on the side of yes.

The knee of my heart

The prayer is short, and every line of it is worth your time.

It begins by admitting how terrible God is to sinners. Then it turns. *You, O Lord, according to your great goodness have promised repentance and forgiveness to those who have sinned against you (Prayer of Manasseh 8).*

And then the line at its heart: *God have not appointed repentance to the just, to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against you; but you have appointed repentance to me that am a sinner (Prayer of Manasseh 8).*

Repentance is not for good people. It is for people like me.

Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Mark 2:17). That is what I said, eating in a tax collector's house, when the religious men complained. Manasseh's prayer had said it before me.

Then the king bows. *I am bowed down with many iron bands, that I can't lift up my head by reason of my sins ... Now therefore I bow the knee of my heart, beseeching you of grace. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned* (Prayer of Manasseh 10–12).

The knee of his heart. He is in chains, and cannot kneel properly, so he kneels on the inside.

I told a story about a tax collector who stood at the back of the Temple, *wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'* and I said he went home right with God (Luke 18:13–14). Manasseh, who could not lift his head, prayed that prayer.

The prodigal king

The prayer ends not with a demand but with a hope. *Forgive me, O Lord, forgive me, and destroy me not with my iniquities ... For you, O Lord, are the God of those who repent; and in me you will show all your goodness: for you will save me, that am unworthy, according to your great mercy* (Prayer of Manasseh 13–14).

In me you will show all your goodness. If God can forgive this man, he can forgive anyone. That is the whole argument.

I told it as a story about a son who wasted everything and came home rehearsing a speech: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son* (Luke 15:21). The father did not let him finish. He called for the best robe.

Where Manasseh and I part

There is something missing from this prayer, and you should see it.

Manasseh *filled Jerusalem from one end to another* with innocent blood (2 Kings 21:16). In fifteen verses of confession, those people are never mentioned. The

prayer is about the king and God. His sins are *above the number of the sands of the sea*, but they have no names and no faces.

When Zacchaeus, a tax collector who had gotten rich working for Rome, decided to turn around, he did not only pray. *Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. If I have wrongfully exacted anything of anyone, I restore four times as much.* And I said, *Today, salvation has come to this house* (Luke 19:8–9).

God forgives the worst of sinners. That is true, and this prayer says it beautifully. But turning around is not only something you do on your knees. It is something you do for the people you hurt.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 Kings 21:16 and 24:3–4, then 2 Chronicles 33:11–13.

You will find: the same king, *the LORD would not pardon* in one book, and *he was entreated by him* in the other.

Then read the Prayer of Manasseh, all fifteen verses, and **Luke 19:8–9**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/prayer-of-manasseh.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **2 Kings** says Manasseh was never forgiven. **2 Chronicles** says he prayed in chains in Babylon and was restored, and that his prayer was **written down**.
- The **Prayer of Manasseh** is a prayer someone later wrote to fill that gap.
- Its heart: repentance is **not for the righteous** but **for me, a sinner**. I said I came **not to call the righteous, but sinners**.
- The king, in chains, **bows the knee of his heart**.
- It never mentions the **innocent people he killed**. Zacchaeus showed what turning around also means: **paying back the people you hurt**.

13. 1 Maccabees: The Hammer and the Holiday

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer in Jerusalem, a supporter of the family it is about. He wrote in Hebrew. Only the Greek translation survives.

When: About 100 BC, in the time of John Hyrcanus or soon after his death in 104 BC.

Where it fits: From Alexander the Great's conquest (333 BC) to the death of Simon in 134 BC, but mostly the forty years from 175 to 134 BC: the Greek king Antiochus IV's war on my people's religion, the revolt led by Judas Maccabeus, and the rule of his brothers.

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha, and most later dropped it.

Where you hear it in your Bible: I was in the Temple for its holiday, the Feast of the Dedication (John 10:22–23). Its *abomination of desolation* (1 Maccabees 1:54) is the one Daniel speaks of, and I spoke of (Mark 13:14).

How close it stays to me: Close in refusing to bow to the empire. Far in trusting the sword, and in trusting Rome.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Maccabees 1, 1 Maccabees 2 and 1 Maccabees 4.

WORDS TO KNOW

Maccabee — the nickname of Judas, the leader of the revolt. It probably means *the hammer*. His whole family came to be called the Maccabees.

Hasmoneans — the family's other name, from an ancestor called Hasmon. It is the name of the kings and high priests who came from them.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes — the Greek king of Syria who, from 167 BC, outlawed the Jewish religion. *Epiphanes* means *god made visible*.

Hanukkah — Hebrew for *dedication*: the eight-day festival that remembers the cleansing of the Temple in 164 BC.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Chapter 1 begins with Alexander the Great, whose empire is divided among his generals. Out of them comes Antiochus Epiphanes. Some Jews in Jerusalem want to live like Greeks, build a gymnasium and hide their circumcision. Antiochus plunders the Temple, and then orders every people in his kingdom to give up its own laws. Sacrifices to the God of Israel are stopped, a pagan altar is set up on the Temple altar, books of the law are burned, and mothers who circumcise their sons are killed with their babies.

In chapter 2 an old priest named Mattathias, in the village of Modein, refuses to sacrifice to the king's gods, kills a Jew who steps up to do it and the king's officer, and flees to the hills with his five sons. A thousand faithful people who refuse to fight on the Sabbath are massacred, and Mattathias's group decides to fight even on the Sabbath. Before he dies, he hands the leadership to his son Judas.

In chapters 3 to 9 Judas, the Maccabee, wins battle after battle against far larger Greek armies, retakes Jerusalem, cleanses the Temple, builds a new altar, and dedicates it with eight days of celebration. He makes a treaty with Rome. He is finally killed in battle.

In chapters 9 to 12 his brother Jonathan leads, playing rival Greek kings against one another, and is made high priest by one of them. He is captured by treachery, and in chapter 13 he is killed.

In chapters 13 to 16 the last brother, Simon, wins full independence. The people decree that he shall be their leader and high priest forever, *until there should arise*

a faithful prophet, and the land has peace. Simon is murdered at a banquet by his son-in-law, and his son John Hyrcanus takes his place.

Two of my brothers were named after the heroes of this book.

When the people of Nazareth turned on me, they listed my family: *the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon* (Mark 6:3).

Judah and Simon. In my time, those were two of the most common names in the land, and for one reason. Judah, or Judas, was the Maccabee, the hammer, who drove the Greek armies out of Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple. Simon was his brother, who made the country free. Families named their sons after them the way people today name their sons after a great general or a president.¹

This book is their story. It is a war story, written by a man who loved them. And it is the story my people told themselves about how to survive an empire.

The king who wanted one people

It begins with a king who had a simple plan. *And king Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that all should be one people, and that each should forsake his own laws* (1 Maccabees 1:41–42).

One empire, one culture, one set of gods. Most of the nations went along. And so did many of my own people, before the king ever forced them. *In those days came there forth out of Israel transgressors of the law, and persuaded many, saying, let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles that are round about us* (1 Maccabees 1:11). They built a Greek gymnasium in Jerusalem, where men exercised naked, and some of them tried to hide their circumcision (1 Maccabees 1:14–15).

Then came the force. Antiochus stripped the Temple of its gold. In December of 167 BC, his men *built an abomination of desolation upon the altar* (1 Maccabees 1:54), a pagan altar on top of the altar of God. They burned the books of the law. *The women that had circumcised their children they put to death according to the commandment. And they hanged their babes about their necks* (1 Maccabees 1:60–61).

And people chose to die rather than eat what the law forbade. *They chose to die, that they might not be defiled with the meats, and that they might not profane the holy covenant: and they died* (1 Maccabees 1:63).

When I spoke, near the end of my life, about *the abomination of desolation ... standing where it ought not* (Mark 13:14), every person listening knew this story. It was the worst thing that had happened to their Temple in living memory of their grandparents' grandparents.

The old priest at Modein

Then the king's officers came to a village called Modein, west of Jerusalem, to make the people sacrifice. They asked the local priest, Mattathias, to go first.

He refused. *If all the nations that are in the house of the king's dominion hearken to him ... yet will I and my sons and my kindred walk in the covenant of our fathers* (1 Maccabees 2:19–20).

Then another Jew stepped forward to sacrifice. *And Mattathias saw it, and his zeal was kindled ... and ran, and killed him upon the altar. And the king's officer, who compelled men to sacrifice, he killed at that time* (1 Maccabees 2:24–25).

That is how the revolt began. Not with a speech, but with an old man killing a neighbor at an altar.

The Sabbath massacre

Then comes the scene in this book that I find hardest to read.

A thousand faithful people went into the wilderness to hide, with their wives, children and animals. The king's soldiers found them and attacked on the Sabbath. The people would not fight on the holy day. They did not even block the entrances to their caves. *Let us die all in our innocence: heaven and earth witness over us, that you put us to death without trial* (1 Maccabees 2:37). And they died, *they and their wives and their children, and their cattle, to the number of a thousand souls* (1 Maccabees 2:38).

Mattathias and his followers mourned them. Then they made a decision. *If we all do as our kindred have done, and fight not against the Gentiles for our lives*

and our ordinances, they will now quickly destroy us ... whoever shall come against us to battle on the Sabbath day, let us fight against him (1 Maccabees 2:40–41).

That is the question at the heart of this book. The thousand in the caves died without lifting a hand. Mattathias decided that if everyone did that, there would soon be no one left to keep the law at all. He chose to fight.

I understand his choice. I want you to see that there was another one, and that this book honors it before it turns away from it.

The hammer

Mattathias died, and his son Judas, called Maccabeus, took command. He was outnumbered in nearly every battle. *It is an easy thing for many to be shut up in the hands of a few ... for victory in battle stands not in the multitude of an army; but strength is from heaven (1 Maccabees 3:18–19).*

He won. Within three years his small army had beaten the king's generals and taken back Jerusalem.

What they found there was terrible. *They saw the sanctuary laid desolate, and the altar profaned, and the gates burned up, and shrubs growing in the courts as in a forest (1 Maccabees 4:38).*

They tore down the defiled altar and built a new one. *On the five and twentieth day of the ninth month, which is the month Chisleu (1 Maccabees 4:52), three years to the day after the first pagan sacrifice on that altar, they offered sacrifice again. And they kept the dedication of the altar eight days ... And Judas and his kindred and the whole congregation of Israel ordained, that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their seasons from year to year by the space of eight days (1 Maccabees 4:56, 59).*

That is Hanukkah.

I was there for the holiday

John's gospel puts me in Jerusalem for it. *It was the Feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in Solomon's porch (John 10:22–23).*

So I kept this festival. I walked in the Temple that Judas had cleansed, in the season when my people remembered the day the empire's altar came down. The people around me asked me there, *If you are the Christ, tell us plainly* (John 10:24). At Hanukkah, with the memory of the Maccabees all around them, they wanted to know if I was the next one.

The friend who became the master

Here is something in this book that should make you uneasy.

When Judas heard of the Romans, he admired them. *They are valiant men ... whoever they will to succour and to make kings, these do they make kings; and whoever they will, do they depose* (1 Maccabees 8:1, 13). The writer praises Rome's senate, where three hundred and twenty men *sat in council, consulting always for the people* (1 Maccabees 8:15). Judas made a treaty with Rome against the Greeks.

The writer did not know what was coming. In 63 BC, a Roman general named Pompey marched into Jerusalem, walked into the Holy of Holies, and kept the country for Rome. Rome made and deposed kings in my land, as this chapter says it does. It made Herod king. It sent Pilate. It nailed me to a cross. And forty years after me, it burned the Temple that Judas had cleansed.

The empire my people invited in as a friend against the last empire became the next master. That has happened to many small nations since. It is worth knowing it happened to mine.

Until a prophet should arise

The book ends in peace. Under Simon, the last brother, the land was free. *The ancient men sat in the streets ... and they sat each man under his vine and his fig tree, and there was none to make them afraid* (1 Maccabees 14:9, 12). That is the old promise of the prophet Micah (Micah 4:4), come true for a while.

And the people decreed *that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until there should arise a faithful prophet* (1 Maccabees 14:41).

Notice that. They gave Simon power *until there should arise a faithful prophet* (1 Maccabees 14:41). Earlier, when Judas cleansed the Temple, they did not know

what to do with the stones of the old altar, so they stored them *until there should come a prophet to give an answer concerning them* (1 Maccabees 4:46). The book knew there had been no true prophet for a long time (1 Maccabees 9:27).

My people were waiting for a prophet. John the Baptizer came out of the wilderness, and then I came. We were the answer some of them had been waiting for, and the Hasmonean high priests were the thing we answered.

Where the Maccabees and I part

Here is what this book does not tell you, because it was written while the family ruled.

The family that won freedom became kings, and the kings became like the kings they had driven out. Simon's grandson, Alexander Jannaeus, ruled as king and high priest at once. When his own people rose against him, the historian Josephus says, he crucified eight hundred of them in Jerusalem, and had their wives and children killed before their eyes while he feasted with his concubines.² The hammer's great-nephew used the Romans' favorite punishment on his own people.

That is what happens when a holy war wins. The men who take power with the sword keep it with the sword.

The Maccabees fought for a kingdom of this world, and won one, for a while. I told Pilate, *My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight* (John 18:36). When one of my friends drew a sword to defend me, I said, *Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword* (Matthew 26:52). And I told my followers that *the kings of the nations lord it over them ... But not so with you* (Luke 22:25–26).

The people who hoped I was another Judas Maccabeus were disappointed in me. I did not come to cleanse the Temple with an army. I did not come to make Simon's family kings again. I came to show a kingdom where no one lords it over anyone, and that is a kingdom no sword can win.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Maccabees 2:29–41.

You will find: a thousand people who would not fight on the Sabbath, killed in their caves, and Mattathias deciding to fight.

Then read John 10:22–24 and 1 Maccabees 4:52–59, and 1 Maccabees 8:1–16 beside what you know of what Rome did next.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-maccabees.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **1 Maccabees** tells how a Greek king, **Antiochus IV**, outlawed my people's religion, and how the family of **Mattathias** led the revolt against him.
- A thousand people who **would not fight on the Sabbath** were killed. Mattathias chose to **fight**.
- **Judas the Hammer** retook Jerusalem and **cleansed the Temple** in **164 BC**. The eight-day feast became **Hanukkah**, and I kept it in the Temple (**John 10:22**). The **oil miracle** is a later story.
- Judas made a treaty with **Rome**, the empire that would later conquer the land, make Herod king and crucify me.
- The family that won freedom became **kings who crucified their own people**. My kingdom is **not of this world**, and its servants do not fight.

14. 2 Maccabees: The Mother and Her Seven Sons

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer who boiled down a five-book history by a man named Jason of Cyrene, in North Africa. He wrote in Greek, and his polished Greek style shows it. Two letters were added at the front.

When: Jason's history probably soon after 160 BC. This shorter version probably in the late 100s BC. The first letter at the front is dated 124 BC.

Where it fits: It covers only about fifteen years, from about 175 to 161 BC: the corruption of the high priesthood, the persecution under Antiochus IV, and the victories of Judas Maccabeus (the same years as 1 Maccabees 1 to 7).

Which Bibles keep it: Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Protestant Bibles moved it to the Apocrypha, and most later dropped it.

Where you hear it in your Bible: The martyrs of chapters 6 and 7 are remembered in Hebrews 11:35: *Others were tortured, not accepting their deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.*

How close it stays to me: Close in martyrs who will not take up the sword. Far in paying silver for the dead.

If you only read three chapters: 2 Maccabees 4, 2 Maccabees 7 and 2 Maccabees 12.

WORDS TO KNOW

Martyr — from the Greek word for *witness*: someone who dies rather than give up what they believe.

Resurrection — the raising of the dead, body and all, by God. This book is one of the clearest early witnesses to it.

High priest — the chief priest of the Temple. In these years, the most powerful Jewish office in the land.

Talent — a very large weight of silver, worth many years of a laborer's wages.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The book opens with two letters from the Jews of Jerusalem to the Jews of Egypt, urging them to keep the new festival of the Temple's purification, and telling stories of how the sacred fire was hidden in the exile and how Jeremiah hid the ark of the covenant. Then the writer explains that he is shortening Jason of Cyrene's five books into one.

In chapter 3 the king's minister Heliodorus comes to seize the Temple treasury, which holds the savings of widows and orphans, and is beaten by a horseman and two young men from heaven. In chapters 4 and 5 the high priesthood is sold. Jason buys it from Antiochus, brings Greek ways into Jerusalem, and is outbid by Menelaus, who has the good former high priest Onias murdered. Antiochus plunders the Temple and massacres the people.

In chapters 6 and 7 the Temple is defiled and the Jewish religion is banned. The writer stops to explain that these sufferings are discipline, not destruction. An old scribe named Eleazar refuses even to pretend to eat pork and is beaten to death. A mother and her seven sons are tortured one after another before the king, and each refuses, the sons promising that God will raise them up, until the mother dies last.

In chapters 8 to 15 Judas Maccabeus fights the king's generals. Antiochus dies in agony, eaten by worms. Judas cleanses the Temple. After a battle, he finds idols on his dead soldiers, takes up a collection, and sends it to Jerusalem for a sacrifice for the sins of the dead. In the last chapters Judas defeats the general Nicanor, who had threatened the Temple, after a dream in which Jeremiah hands him a golden sword. The day of victory becomes a festival.

Seven brothers and their mother were tortured to death, one by one, in front of a king.

The king wanted them to eat pork, to show that they had given up the law of their fathers. One of them answered for all: *What would you ask and learn of us: for we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers* (2 Maccabees 7:2).

They were tortured one after another, each in front of the others and their mother. When the second was dying, he said: *You, miscreant, do release us out of this present life, but the King of the world shall raise up us, who have died for his laws, to an eternal renewal of life* (2 Maccabees 7:9).

The third put out his tongue and held out his hands to be cut off, and said: *From heaven I possess these; and for his laws' sake I condemn these; and from him I hope to receive these back again* (2 Maccabees 7:11).

Their mother watched all seven die in one day, and did not break. She told the youngest, *Don't be afraid of this butcher ... accept your death, that in the mercy of God I may receive you again with your kindred* (2 Maccabees 7:29).

That is the center of this book. It is where my people learned, in blood, to say clearly that God would raise the dead.

A second history of the same war

1 Maccabees tells the same years as a war story, praising the family of Mattathias. This book is different, and its writer tells you how.

He is shortening a much longer history. *These things, I say, which have been declared by Jason of Cyrene in five books, we will assay to abridge in one work* (2 Maccabees 2:23). He wants it to be easy and pleasant to read. At the end he even compares his book to wine mixed with water, which is better than either alone (2 Maccabees 15:39).

His history has angels and visions. When the king's minister comes to rob the Temple treasury, a horse with a rider in golden armor appears and kicks him down, and two shining young men beat him (2 Maccabees 3:25–26). When

Antiochus dies, *out of the body of the impious man worms swarmed* (2 Maccabees 9:9).

And its heroes are not mainly the soldiers. They are the martyrs.

The high priesthood for sale

Before Antiochus banned the religion, the rot started in the Temple itself. This is the part 1 Maccabees leaves out, and 2 Maccabees puts first.

The good high priest Onias had a brother named Jason. When Antiochus came to the throne, Jason went to him and bought his brother's office, *having promised to the king at an audience three hundred and threescore talents of silver* (2 Maccabees 4:8). He paid more to set up a Greek gymnasium in Jerusalem. Soon *the priests had no more any zeal for the services of the altar*, but hurried off to the games (2 Maccabees 4:14).

Three years later, Jason sent a man named Menelaus to carry his payment to the king. Menelaus *got the high priesthood for himself, outbidding Jason by three hundred talents of silver* (2 Maccabees 4:24). Then he had the old high priest, Onias, lured out of sanctuary and murdered (2 Maccabees 4:34).

The highest office of my people's religion was sold twice to the highest bidder, and the second buyer stole from the Temple to pay for it.

In my time, the high priest was no longer bought from a Greek king. He was appointed by Rome, and his family grew rich from the Temple's business. When I overturned the tables in the Temple and called it *a den of robbers* (Matthew 21:13), I was standing in a place with a long memory of men who turned the house of God into a market.

The old man who would not pretend

Before the seven brothers, there is Eleazar, a scribe, ninety years old. The king's men try to force pork into his mouth. He spits it out and walks to the rack.

Some of the officials, old friends of his, take him aside and offer him a way out: bring his own meat, pretend it is pork, and save his life. He refuses. *It becomes not our years to dissemble ... that through this many of the young should suppose*

that Eleazar, the man of fourscore years and ten, had gone over to an alien religion (2 Maccabees 6:24).

He could have lied, and no one would have known but him and the young people watching. He thought of the young people.

They did not fight

Notice what the martyrs of this book do not do. They do not take up the sword. They do not kill anyone. They refuse, and they die.

That is the choice the thousand in the caves made in 1 Maccabees, and that Mattathias turned away from. 2 Maccabees honors the fighters too; Judas wins battle after battle in its pages. But the scenes it lingers on, the ones that would be remembered for two thousand years, are not the battles. They are an old man and a mother and her sons who would not bow and would not strike back.

I went to my death the same way. I did not call down an army. I said, *Don't be afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul* (Matthew 10:28). The mother in this book said the same to her youngest son.

The letter to the Hebrews remembers these martyrs when it lists the heroes of faith: *Others were tortured, not accepting their deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection* (Hebrews 11:35). It is talking about Eleazar and the seven brothers.

The God who raises the dead

The older books of my people say very little about life after death. The dead go down to Sheol, a shadowy place. The clearest promise of resurrection in the Hebrew scriptures comes late, in Daniel 12. This book says it out loud, again and again.

And the mother adds something more. *I beseech you, my child, to lift your eyes to the heaven and the earth ... and thus to recognize that God made them not of things that were* (2 Maccabees 7:28). God made the world from nothing. So he can make your body again from nothing.

When the Sadducees, the party of the wealthy priests, who did not believe in resurrection, tried to trap me with a riddle, I answered them from the books of Moses: *God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all are alive to him* (Luke 20:38). The mother of the seven had already staked her sons' lives on it.

Silver for the dead

Then comes the passage that would split the church fifteen centuries later.

After a battle, Judas's men go to bury their dead, and find, under each dead man's clothes, *consecrated tokens of the idols of Jamnia* (2 Maccabees 12:40). Charms to protect them in battle, from a pagan temple. The men decide that is why these soldiers died.

So Judas *made a collection man by man to the sum of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice for sin* for the dead men (2 Maccabees 12:43). The writer approves: *For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it were superfluous and idle to pray for the dead ... Wherefore he made the atoning sacrifice for those who had died, that they might be released from their sin* (2 Maccabees 12:44–45).

Prayer for the dead, and money sent to the Temple to release them from their sin.

You can see what was later built on that. In the Middle Ages, the church taught that the dead could be helped through a place of cleansing called purgatory, by prayers and by masses said for them, and people paid for those masses. Then they paid for indulgences, papers that promised to shorten the time of the dead in purgatory. The money built churches and bought power. When the Protestant reformers rejected purgatory, they also rejected this book as scripture, partly because this passage was the strongest text the church had for it. The Council of Trent confirmed it as scripture in 1546, and defended purgatory in 1563.¹

Judas's soldiers collected silver out of love for their dead friends. I do not mock that. But a church that turned that love into a business, selling relief for the dead to the living poor, had found its own door under the table.

Where 2 Maccabees and I part

The seven brothers die without striking a blow, and their deaths are the strongest thing in the book. But listen to what some of them say to the king as they die.

Hold you on your way, and behold his sovereign majesty, how it will torture you and your seed (2 Maccabees 7:17). *Think not you that you shall be unpunished* (2 Maccabees 7:19). They die promising the king that God will torture his children.

And the book ends with Judas receiving, in a dream, a golden sword from the prophet Jeremiah: *Take the holy sword, a gift from God, wherewith you shall strike down the adversaries* (2 Maccabees 15:16).

I did not die cursing the men who killed me. The gospel of Luke remembers me praying, *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). And no prophet handed me a golden sword. I told my friend to put his away.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 2 Maccabees 7, the whole chapter.

You will find: seven brothers and their mother, the promise that *the King of the world shall raise up us*, and a mother telling her last son not to be afraid.

Then read Hebrews 11:35, and 2 Maccabees 12:38–45 beside what you know about purgatory and indulgences.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/2-maccabees.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **2 Maccabees** is a shortened version of a lost five-book history by **Jason of Cyrene**, written in Greek. It covers the same war as 1 Maccabees with a different heart.
- It shows the **high priesthood sold** twice to the highest bidder before the persecution began.
- Its heroes are martyrs: old **Eleazar**, who would not even pretend, and a **mother and her seven sons**, who would not strike back. **Hebrews 11:35** remembers them.
- It is one of the clearest early witnesses to **the resurrection of the body**.
- Its **collection of silver for a sacrifice for the dead** became a proof text for **purgatory**, and is one reason Protestants dropped the book.
- Its martyrs die **promising torture** to the king's children, and its hero receives a **holy sword**. I did neither.

PART TWO — THE EXTRA BOOKS OF THE ORTHODOX BIBLES

*Three more books kept by the Greek and other Eastern Orthodox churches,
and almost unknown in the West.*

15. Psalm 151: The Youngest Son

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. It speaks in the voice of David. Its Greek heading says it is *outside the number*, an extra psalm after the hundred and fifty.

When: Before the early first century AD, the date of a longer Hebrew version found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The poem itself may be much older.

Where it fits: David as a boy, around 1000 BC: chosen and anointed while his older brothers were passed over, and his fight with Goliath (1 Samuel 16–17).

Which Bibles keep it: The Greek and Slavonic Orthodox Bibles, the Ethiopian and the Syriac. Catholic and Protestant Bibles do not. It is printed in some modern study Bibles among the Apocrypha.

Where you hear it in your Bible: It retells 1 Samuel 16:1–13 and 17:41–51 in seven verses. The New Testament never quotes it.

How close it stays to me: Close in God choosing the smallest and youngest. Far in its pride over a severed head.

If you only read three chapters: It is seven verses. Read them, then 1 Samuel 16.

WORDS TO KNOW

Psalm — a song, especially one of the hundred and fifty songs in your book of Psalms.

Anoint — to pour oil on someone's head to set them apart for a task, especially to make a king. *Messiah* means *anointed one*.

Lute — a stringed instrument plucked with the fingers. Older Bibles say *harp* or *psaltery*.

The Philistine — Goliath, the giant warrior of the Philistines, Israel's enemies on the coast.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

David speaks. He was small among his brothers and the youngest in his father's house, and looked after his father's sheep. With his hands he made a musical instrument, and with his fingers he tuned a lute. No one could tell God about him, but God himself heard.

God sent his messenger, took him from the sheep, and anointed him. His brothers were handsome and tall, but God did not choose them.

He went out to meet the Philistine, who cursed him by his idols. David drew the giant's own sword, cut off his head, and took away the shame from the children of Israel.

Of all the songs in this volume, this is the shortest, and it is about the youngest child.

I was small among my brothers, and youngest in my father's house. I tended my father's sheep (Psalm 151:1).

That is David speaking, looking back on how he was chosen. Your book of Psalms ends at a hundred and fifty, with everything that has breath praising the LORD. The Greek Bible has one more. Its heading says it is *outside the number*, a psalm David wrote himself, after he fought Goliath.

The brothers who were tall

The story is in your Bible. God sends the prophet Samuel to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem to anoint one of his sons as the next king. Jesse brings out his sons one by one, the oldest first, tall and fine. Samuel looks at the eldest and is sure. God tells him: *Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature ... For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

Seven sons pass, and none is chosen. Samuel asks if there are any more. *There remains yet the youngest. Behold, he is keeping the sheep* (1 Samuel 16:11). Nobody had thought to bring him in.

Psalm 151 tells it in one line. *My brothers were handsome and tall; but the Lord did not take pleasure in them* (Psalm 151:5).

And in another line it says the thing your 1 Samuel only shows. *Who shall tell my Lord? The Lord himself, he himself hears* (Psalm 151:3). No one went to God to put in a word for the shepherd boy. No one thought of him. God heard him anyway.

The least among you

I was born in Bethlehem, in David's town, and I was not the son of anyone important. I spent my life saying what this little psalm says.

When my friends argued about which of them was the greatest, I stood a child in front of them and said, *whoever is least among you all, this one will be great* (Luke 9:48). I said the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to look for the one that wandered off, and that *it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish* (Matthew 18:14).

God does not choose the way families do, or the way kingdoms do, by height and age and looks. He chooses the one nobody brought in from the field.

The giant's own sword

The psalm ends with the fight. *I went out to meet the Philistine, and he cursed me by his idols. But I drew his own sword and beheaded him, and removed reproach from the children of Israel* (Psalm 151:6–7).

1 Samuel tells it the same way. David brought him down with a sling and a stone, *but there was no sword in the hand of David*. So he took the giant's own sword, *killed him, and cut off his head with it* (1 Samuel 17:50–51).

The story has always been loved because the small boy beats the giant. It is a story about the weak defeating the strong, and my people, small and often conquered, told it as their own.

But notice where the psalm chooses to end: on a severed head. It is a war song.

I was called the son of David. People hoped I would be another David, a shepherd boy who would grow up and take the giant's sword to Rome. I went out to meet the empire with no sword at all, not even the enemy's. And I did not take its head. It took my life, and I let it.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 1 Samuel 16:6–13.

You will find: seven tall sons passed over, and the youngest brought in from the sheep.

Then read Psalm 151, all seven verses, and **Luke 9:46–48**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/psalm-151.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Psalm 151** is a short psalm in David's voice, *outside the number* of the hundred and fifty, kept in **Orthodox** and other Eastern Bibles.
- It tells how God chose **the youngest son**, keeping the sheep, over his **handsome and tall** brothers, though **no one told God** about him.
- That is what I taught: **whoever is least among you** will be great.
- A longer **Hebrew** version was found in **Cave 11** at Qumran, so it was a Jewish song before my time.
- It ends on the **giant's severed head**. I met the empire with **no sword**.

16. 3 Maccabees: The Elephants That Turned Around

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer in Egypt, almost certainly Alexandria, who wrote in showy Greek.

When: Probably between about 100 BC and AD 70. Many scholars place it in the decades just before my birth.

Where it fits: Set in 217 BC, in the reign of the Egyptian king Ptolemy IV, after his victory over the Greek king of Syria at Raphia. It has nothing to do with the Maccabees, who came fifty years later.

Which Bibles keep it: The Greek Orthodox and other Eastern Orthodox Bibles. Catholic and Protestant Bibles do not. It was not in the 1611 King James.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Nowhere quoted. Its plot follows Esther: a king turned against the Jews, a plan to destroy them all on one day, a reversal, and a festival.

How close it stays to me: Close in the God who hears a people facing the empire's beasts. Far in killing their own who gave in.

If you only read three chapters: 3 Maccabees 2, 3 Maccabees 5 and 3 Maccabees 6.

WORDS TO KNOW

Ptolemy — the name of the Greek kings who ruled Egypt after Alexander the Great. This one is Ptolemy IV, called Philopator, *father-lover*.

Dionysus — the Greek god of wine and of wild religious rites. The ivy leaf was his sign.

Hippodrome — a stadium for horse and chariot races.

Apostate — someone who has abandoned their faith.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

King Ptolemy IV of Egypt defeats the king of Syria at Raphia, and visits Jerusalem afterward. He insists on entering the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest may enter, once a year. The people beg him not to. The high priest Simon prays, and God shakes the king like a reed and drops him on the pavement, speechless.

The humiliated king returns to Egypt and takes revenge on the Jews there. He orders them registered as common people, branded with the ivy leaf of Dionysus, and stripped of their rights, unless they join his god's rites, in which case they may become full citizens. A few do. Most refuse. In chapters 3 and 4 he orders all the Jews of Egypt rounded up, chained, and brought to Alexandria to be killed. They are crowded into the hippodrome.

In chapter 5 the king orders five hundred elephants drugged with wine and incense, to trample the Jews to death. Twice the plan fails: once the king oversleeps, and once God makes him forget what he ordered. The third time the elephants are driven toward the Jews, and an old priest named Eleazar prays. In chapter 6 God opens heaven, two terrible angels appear, and the elephants turn and trample the king's own soldiers.

The king repents, blames his advisers, sets the Jews free with a feast, and writes a letter in their favor. In chapter 7 the Jews ask permission to punish those of their own people who abandoned the law, and kill more than three hundred of them. They establish a yearly festival and go home in joy.

This book is called Maccabees, but there are no Maccabees in it.

The name was probably given because it was copied with the books of the Maccabees, and is also about my people under persecution by a Greek king. But its story is set fifty years before Judas the Hammer, and in Egypt, not Judea.¹

It is a wild story, full of elephants, drunkenness, a king who keeps oversleeping, and angels. Read it like a story, the way you would read Esther. Underneath the noise, it is about one of the oldest temptations in the world.

The king who wanted in

It begins in Jerusalem. King Ptolemy has won a great battle and comes to see the Temple. He is so impressed that he wants to go into the innermost room, the

Holy of Holies.

They tell him he cannot. *None of the nation, no, nor even the priests in general, but only the supreme high priest of all, and he only once in a year* (3 Maccabees 1:11). He will not listen.

The high priest prays. *Give ear to us who are oppressed by a wicked and profane one, who exults in his confidence and strength* (3 Maccabees 2:2). And God answers. *He scourged the man greatly uplifted with scorn and insolence. Shaking him to and fro as a reed is shaken with the wind, he cast him upon the pavement, powerless* (3 Maccabees 2:21–22).

The great king, who had just beaten an army, is shaken like a reed. I once asked the crowds about John the Baptizer, *What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?* (Matthew 11:7). The kings in soft clothing are the reeds. The prophet was not.

Citizens, if you join

The king goes home angry, and turns on the Jews of Egypt. And the first thing he does is not violence. It is an offer.

He puts up a decree. All Jews are to be registered as common people, without the rights of citizens, and *marked on their persons by the ivy-leaf symbol of Dionysus*. But *if any of them should elect to enter the community of those initiated in the rites, these should have equal rights with the Alexandrians* (3 Maccabees 2:29–30).

That is the real test in this book. Not the elephants. The offer. Give up your God, join the king's religion, and you can be a full citizen of the greatest city in the world. Refuse, and be branded and pushed down.

Some took it. Most did not. And the writer tells you why they were hated: *as they worshipped God, and observed his law, they made certain distinctions, and avoided certain things. Hence some persons held them in odium* (3 Maccabees 3:4). They would not eat everything, would not worship everything, and their neighbors resented them for it.

I know that offer. Every empire makes it. Bow to what the powerful bow to, and you will be one of them. My followers would face it from Rome: offer incense to the emperor, and be left alone. Many would not.

Five hundred elephants

Then comes the violence. The king orders all the Jews of the countryside brought to Alexandria in chains and shut into the hippodrome. He orders the keeper of his elephants to drug *five hundred elephants* with *unmixed wine and handfuls of incense*, to make them mad, and drive them over the Jews (3 Maccabees 5:2).

Twice it fails, and here the book almost becomes a comedy. The first morning the king oversleeps. The second, God makes him forget the whole plan, and he asks his servants what the elephants are for (3 Maccabees 5:27–28). The third time, they go.

An old priest named Eleazar prays for his people, *now being wrongfully destroyed as strangers in a strange land* (3 Maccabees 6:3). *Appear quickly to those of the race of Israel, who are insulted* (3 Maccabees 6:9).

Then the all-glorious, all-powerful, and true God, displayed his holy countenance, and opened the gates of heaven, from which two angels, dreadful of form, came down ... They turned back the animals upon the armed forces which followed them; and the animals trod them down (3 Maccabees 6:18, 21).

The empire's beasts turn around and trample the empire's soldiers.

Strangers in a strange land

What I keep from this book is that prayer of an old man in a stadium: God, look at your people, *strangers in a strange land*.

Every people that has lived as a minority under a foreign king has known what it is to be crowded into a place by the authorities, counted, marked, and made a show for a crowd. Some of my own people would live it again in Europe, in the twentieth century, and no angels came. I will not pretend otherwise.

What the book believes is that God hears that prayer, and that the beasts the powerful let loose can turn on them. I believe that God hears it. I said, *I was a stranger, and you took me in* (Matthew 25:35). I put myself among the strangers in the stadium, not with the king in the stands.

Where 3 Maccabees and I part

The book has one more scene, at the very end, and it is the one I cannot keep.

When the king sets the Jews free, they ask him for one more thing: permission to punish *those of their race who had willingly transgressed the holy god, and the law of God* (3 Maccabees 7:10). The ones who had taken the king's offer, joined the rites of Dionysus, and become citizens. The king agrees. *Then they punished and destroyed with ignominy every polluted Jew that fell in their way; slaying thus, in that day, above three hundred men, and esteeming this destruction of the wicked a season of joy* (3 Maccabees 7:14–15).

Three hundred of their own neighbors, killed for being weak when the pressure came, and the killing called a season of joy.

I had a friend who, when the pressure came, denied three times that he knew me. I did not have him killed. After I rose, I asked him three times whether he loved me, and gave him my sheep to feed. The people who break under the empire's pressure are not your enemies. They are the ones you go and bring home.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 3 Maccabees 2:28–30.

You will find: the king's offer: be branded and lose your rights, or join his god and become a citizen.

Then read 3 Maccabees 6:18–21, the elephants, **and 7:10–15**, what the freed people did next.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/3-maccabees.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **3 Maccabees** has **no Maccabees** in it. It is set in **Egypt** in **217 BC** and is kept in **Orthodox** Bibles.
- A king tries to enter the **Holy of Holies** and is **shaken like a reed**.
- At home he offers the Jews of Egypt **citizenship if they join his god**, and **branding** if they refuse. Most refuse.
- He drives **five hundred drunken elephants** at them in the stadium, and God turns the elephants on his own army.
- The freed people then **kill three hundred of their own** who had given in. I would have gone to bring them home.

17. 4 Maccabees: Reason, Fire and a Ransom

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish teacher who knew Greek philosophy well. Early Christian writers credited it to Josephus, wrongly.

When: Probably in the first century AD, in my own lifetime or a little after. Many scholars date it between about AD 19 and 72.

Where it fits: It retells the deaths of the old man Eleazar, seven brothers and their mother under King Antiochus IV, around 167 BC, from 2 Maccabees 6–7.

Which Bibles keep it: None as full scripture. Greek Orthodox Bibles print it in an appendix. It is in some of the oldest Greek Bibles, such as Codex Sinaiticus.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Its martyrs are almost certainly the ones Hebrews 11:35 means by *others were tortured, not accepting their deliverance*. Its idea of a death as *ransom* for a nation's sin sits behind how my death was explained.

How close it stays to me: Close in refusing to strike back under torture. Far in a God who must be paid in blood, and in its curses.

If you only read three chapters: 4 Maccabees 1, 4 Maccabees 6 and 4 Maccabees 17.

WORDS TO KNOW

Passions — the strong feelings and desires that push a person around: fear, pain, anger, hunger, grief, even love.

Stoic — a school of Greek philosophy that taught a wise person should be ruled by reason, not by feelings or circumstances.

Martyr — from the Greek word for *witness*: someone who dies rather than give up their faith.

Ransom — a price paid to set someone free.

Propitiation — something offered to turn away anger and make a god favorable again.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The writer announces his subject in the first line: *religious reasoning is absolute master of the passions*. Reason trained by God's law can rule fear, desire, anger and pain. In chapters 1–3 he argues it with examples from the law and from the stories of Joseph, Moses and David.

Then he gives his proof. In chapters 4–7 King Antiochus orders the Jews to eat pork and food offered to idols or be tortured. An old priest named Eleazar refuses, argues with the king like a philosopher, and dies under torture, praying that his blood will purify his people.

In chapters 8–12 seven brothers are brought before the king. He offers them friendship and high posts if they eat. One by one they refuse, are tortured to death in terrible detail, and curse the king with God's judgment as they die.

In chapters 13–17 the writer praises their mother above them all. She watched all seven die, encouraged them, and threw herself on the fire before the guards could touch her. In chapters 17–18 he says their deaths were a ransom for the nation's sin, that God saved Israel by their blood, and that they now stand with Abraham, having received *pure and immortal souls*.

This is not a story. It is a lecture, and the bodies in it are the examples.

1 and 2 Maccabees tell history. 3 Maccabees tells a tale. 4 Maccabees makes an argument. Its writer is a philosopher speaking, probably at a memorial for the dead, and his subject is in his first sentence: *religious reasoning is absolute master of the passions* (4 Maccabees 1:1).¹

His proof is the story you met in 2 Maccabees: an old man, seven brothers and their mother, tortured to death by King Antiochus because they would not eat pork. He tells it at three times the length, slowly, with every instrument of torture described. If a mind ruled by God's law could hold firm through that, he says, then reason can rule anything.

Debts cancelled in the seventh year

Before he reaches the tortures, he says something I want you to notice.

He gives examples of how God's law trains a person to rule his own greed. *A man, therefore, who regulates his course by the law, even if he be a lover of money, straightway puts force upon his own disposition; lending to the needy without interest, and cancelling the debt of the incoming Sabbath* (4 Maccabees 2:8). The stingy man does not go back to glean his harvest or his vineyard, but leaves it for the poor. The law even forbids cutting down an enemy's crops in war (4 Maccabees 2:9, 14).

That is the law I grew up with and the one I taught. Lend without interest. Forgive debts. Leave something in the field for the poor. Do not ruin your enemy's fields. I taught my friends to pray *forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors*.

This writer thinks of all of it as self-control: reason mastering greed. I would say it is love mastering fear. But we agree on what the law asks a person to do with money.

What the king offered

The test is set up like the one in 3 Maccabees. Antiochus orders his guards *to seize every one of the Hebrews, and to compel them to taste swine's flesh, and things offered to idols* (4 Maccabees 5:2). Eat, and live. Refuse, and be tortured on the wheel.

He even makes it gentle at first. He smiles at the seven brothers, admires them, and offers them friendship and high positions in his government if they will only eat (4 Maccabees 8:3–7).

They refuse. And here is what I honor in this book above everything else: none of them strikes back. Not one picks up a weapon, not one runs, not one lies. They are not soldiers like Judas the Hammer and his brothers in 1 Maccabees. They stand there, with no power at all, and say no, until they are dead.

That is the kind of strength I taught. When they came to arrest me with swords and clubs, I told my friend to put his sword away. Refusing to bow to the empire and refusing to kill for God can be the same act.

Let my blood be a purification

Then the book says something that would shape how my own death was explained.

As the old priest Eleazar is dying in the fire, he prays: *You know, O God, that when I might have been saved, I am slain for the sake of the law by tortures of fire. Be merciful to your people, and be satisfied with the punishment of me on their account. Let my blood be a purification for them, and take my life in recompense for theirs* (4 Maccabees 6:27–29).

And at the end the writer says of all the martyrs: *they became the ransom to the sin of the nation; and the Divine Providence saved Israel, aforesaid afflicted, by the blood of those pious ones, and the propitiatory death* (4 Maccabees 17:22).

A righteous person suffers. God accepts that suffering as payment for other people's sins, and stops being angry.

You will recognize the idea. It is the way many of my followers came to explain my cross. I did say, *the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45). I gave my life. I knew what it would cost to keep telling the truth about God's kingdom in Jerusalem at Passover, and I did not run.

But notice what Eleazar asks: that God be *satisfied with the punishment* of him. I never said my Father needed to see someone punished before he could forgive. I forgave people before I ever went to the cross. I said to a paralyzed man, *Son, your sins are forgiven you* (Mark 2:5), and the scribes sitting there said in their hearts that I was speaking blasphemy, because only God can forgive sins. Another time, when the Pharisees complained that I ate with sinners, I told them to go and learn what God meant: *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice* (Matthew 9:13).

The father in my story did not wait to be paid. He saw his son far off and ran.

Where 4 Maccabees and I part

I honor these martyrs. But two things in this book I cannot keep.

The first is how it ends its tortures. The brothers die cursing. *The divine vengeance is reserving you for eternal fire and torments, which shall cling to you for all time*, the youngest tells the king (4 Maccabees 12:12). The writer loves these speeches. They are the brothers' last word.

When they nailed me to the wood, my last words for the men doing it were not a curse. *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). I had told my followers, *love your enemies, bless those who curse you ... and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). The brothers did not strike back with their hands. They struck back with eternal fire. I asked for neither.

The second is the mother. The writer praises her above all, because *religious reasoning ... enabled her to forego, for the time, parental love* (4 Maccabees 15:23). She watched seven sons die and urged them on, and he calls that reason's greatest victory: a mother who mastered her love for her children.

I do not think love for your children is a passion to be mastered. My Father is not the God who asks a mother to stop loving her sons. He is the one who, like a mother hen, wants to gather her chicks under her wings. Her courage was real. But the triumph of this book is not what I would have praised.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: 4 Maccabees 6:27–29 and 17:21–22.

You will find: a martyr's blood as *purification* and *ransom* for the nation's sin.

Then read Mark 2:1–12, sins forgiven with no sacrifice, and **Luke 23:34**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/4-maccabees.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **4 Maccabees** is a **lecture**, not a story: *religious reasoning is absolute master of the passions*. It is printed in an **appendix** in Greek Orthodox Bibles.
- Its proof is the martyrdom of **Eleazar, seven brothers and their mother**, retold from 2 Maccabees in long, terrible detail.
- It praises a law that **cancels debts** and **lends without interest**, and martyrs who **refused to strike back**.
- It says their deaths were a **ransom** and **propitiation** for the nation's sin, the idea later used for my cross. I forgave sins **before** I died, and wanted **mercy, not sacrifice**.
- Its martyrs die **cursing** the king. I prayed, **Father, forgive them**.

PART THREE — THE BOOKS ONLY
ETHIOPIA KEPT

*Two books my people were reading in my own lifetime, quoted and echoed
in your New Testament, and then lost everywhere except the Bible of
Ethiopia.*

18. 1 Enoch: Quoted in Your Bible, Left Out of It

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Not Enoch. Several unknown Jewish writers, over about three hundred years, each writing in the name of the man in Genesis who *walked with God*. Their work was gathered into one book of five parts.

When: The oldest parts in the 200s BC. The newest part, the Parables, most likely in the century before I was born or in my own lifetime.

Where it fits: Its story is set before the Flood, in the days of Genesis 5 and 6. It was written in the age of Greek kings and then of Rome, in the same years as Daniel and the books of the Maccabees.

Which Bibles keep it: Only the Bible of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches. Every other church left it out.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Jude quotes it by name as prophecy (Jude 14–15). Its fallen angels, kept in chains and darkness, are in Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4 and 1 Peter 3:19–20. The gospels never show me naming it, but you will hear its pictures in words they give me: the Son of Man *on the throne of his glory* (Matthew 19:28; 25:31), fire *prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matthew 25:41), and woe to the rich (Luke 6:24).

How close it stays to me: Very close on the rich and the powerful. Far in its joy at the punishment of its enemies.

If you only read three chapters: 1 Enoch 6, 1 Enoch 46 and 1 Enoch 94.

WORDS TO KNOW

1 Enoch — the book in this chapter. It is called *1 Enoch* to keep it apart from two later books in Enoch's name, 2 Enoch and 3 Enoch, which are not the same work.

The Watchers — the angels who, in this book, came down from heaven and took human wives.

The giants — the children of the Watchers and those women. Genesis calls them the *Nephilim*.

Son of Man — in my language, *bar enash*, a human being. In Daniel and in this book it also names a heavenly judge who looks like a man.

Sheol — the place of the dead in the Hebrew scriptures. In Greek it is *Hades*.

Ge'ez — the old language of Ethiopia. The only complete copies of this book are in Ge'ez.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The book opens with Enoch's blessing on the righteous and a vision of God coming down to judge the world. Then comes the **Book of the Watchers** (chapters 1 to 36). Two hundred angels swear an oath on Mount Hermon, come down, and take human wives. Their children are giants who devour everything people grow and then devour people. The angels teach magic, weapons, metalwork and makeup. Four archangels bring the cry of the earth to God, who has the angels bound in darkness until the judgment and floods the earth. Enoch is taken on journeys to the ends of the world and is shown the places where the dead wait for judgment.

The **Parables** (chapters 37 to 71) are three long visions of judgment. In them, a heavenly figure called the Son of Man, the Chosen One and the Anointed One sits on a throne of glory and judges the kings and the mighty. At the end, Enoch himself is greeted in heaven.

The **Astronomical Book** (chapters 72 to 82) is a tour of the sun, moon and stars, led by the angel Uriel. It teaches that the true year has 364 days.

The **Book of Dreams** (chapters 83 to 90) has two dreams. In the second, the whole history of Israel, from Adam to the writer's own day, is told as a story of animals: Israel as sheep, the nations as beasts, and seventy shepherds, usually read as angels, who let the sheep be eaten.

The **Letter of Enoch** (chapters 91 to 108) is Enoch's last word to his children. It promises a world remade and pronounces woe after woe on the rich, the powerful and the people who oppress the poor. Near the end comes the strange birth of Noah.

The book of Enoch is quoted in your Bible and left out of it.

About these also Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all" (Jude 14–15).

That is the letter of Jude, in your New Testament. Now here is the book of Enoch, chapter 1:

And behold! He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones / To execute judgement upon all (1 Enoch 1:9).¹

Jude calls it prophecy. Your Bible prints Jude and leaves out the book Jude was quoting. So that you can judge it for yourself, here is what was left out.

Five books under one name

In Genesis, Enoch gets four verses. He lives 365 years, *Enoch walked with God, and he was not found, for God took him* (Genesis 5:24). That is all. A man who did not die is a man with secrets, and in the centuries before my birth, writers began to put those secrets into his mouth.

What you have now as 1 Enoch is five separate works, written by different people across about three hundred years and later bound together.²

The **Astronomical Book** and the **Book of the Watchers** are the oldest. The earliest copies of them date from around 200 BC, so the books themselves are older still. The **Book of Dreams** comes from the 160s BC, the years when the Greek king Antiochus IV was trying to stamp out my people's religion. The **Letter of Enoch** is from the same century.

The **Parables** are the youngest. Most scholars place them in the century before I was born or in my own lifetime. One passage seems to remember the Parthians from the east invading the land, which happened in 40 BC (1 Enoch 56:5–7).³

These were not fringe books. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, the caves near Qumran held pieces of eleven different copies of Enoch in Aramaic, the language I spoke.² That is more copies than of many books that did make it into your Bible.

The angels who came down

Genesis has four strange verses about this. *God's sons saw that men's daughters were beautiful, and they took any that they wanted for themselves as wives* (Genesis 6:2). Their children were *the Nephilim, the mighty men who were of old* (Genesis 6:4). Then, in the very next verse, God sees how great the wickedness on the earth is, and sends the Flood.

The Book of the Watchers tells the whole story that Genesis only points at.

Two hundred angels see the daughters of men and want them. Their leader, Semjaza, is afraid he will be the only one punished, so they all swear an oath together *on the summit of Mount Hermon* (1 Enoch 6:6). They come down. Their children are giants who eat everything people can grow, *And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind* (1 Enoch 7:3–4).

Notice what else the angels bring. One of them, Azazel, *taught men to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and also bracelets, and ornaments, and the beautifying of the eyelids* (1 Enoch 8:1). Weapons and luxury arrive together, from heaven, as a corruption.

The writer is not only telling a story about the distant past. He was living under Greek kings who had come with new weapons, new wealth and new ways, and had taken his country. George Nickelsburg, one of the leading scholars of this book, has argued that the giants who devour everything people grow are a picture of those kings and their armies.⁴

Where your demons come from

Here is the part that matters most for what you were taught.

The giants die. But in this book, their spirits do not. *The giants, who are produced from the spirits and flesh, shall be called evil spirits upon the earth* (1

Enoch 15:8). These spirits *afflict, oppress, destroy, attack, and shall rise up against the children of men* (1 Enoch 15:11–12).

That is an answer to a question my people were asking: where do evil spirits come from? The Hebrew scriptures hardly say. Enoch says they are the ghosts of the giants.

By my time, many of my people believed it, or something close to it. The gospels show me ordering an *unclean spirit* out of a man (Mark 5:8). They never show me explaining where those spirits came from. Enoch is where my people got an explanation.

The fallen angels themselves are not destroyed either. God tells the archangel Raphael, *Bind Azazel hand and foot, and cast him into the darkness* (1 Enoch 10:4). The rest are bound *in the valleys of the earth, till the day of their judgement*, and then *led off to the abyss of fire* (1 Enoch 10:12–13).

Now read three passages from your New Testament.

Jude: *Angels who didn't keep their first domain, but deserted their own dwelling place, he has kept in everlasting bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day* (Jude 6).

2 Peter: *God didn't spare angels when they sinned, but cast them down to Tartarus, and committed them to pits of darkness to be reserved for judgment* (2 Peter 2:4).

1 Peter says I went and *preached to the spirits in prison, who before were disobedient ... in the days of Noah* (1 Peter 3:19–20).

None of those three makes sense from Genesis alone. All three make sense from Enoch. The writers of your New Testament knew this book, and expected their readers to know it.

The name Azazel is in your Bible too, though you may not see it. On the Day of Atonement, one goat was chosen by lot *for Azazel* and sent into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:8–10 in the Hebrew). Some English Bibles, including the King James and the one I quote, translate that as *the scapegoat*.⁵

The rooms of the dead

Enoch is taken to a mountain in the west, with four hollow places inside it. The angel Raphael tells him these were made *that the spirits of the souls of the dead should assemble therein* until the judgment (1 Enoch 22:3–4).

The dead are kept apart. One place, *in which there is the bright spring of water*, is for the righteous. Another is for sinners *when they die and are buried in the earth and judgement has not been executed upon them in their lifetime*, where *their spirits shall be set apart in this great pain* (1 Enoch 22:9–11).

Now read the story the gospels give me about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Both die. The beggar is *carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom*. The rich man is *in Hades, in anguish in this flame*, and asks for a drop of water. Between them, *there is a great gulf fixed* (Luke 16:22–26).

Two places for the dead, set apart, before the final judgment. Bright water on one side, pain on the other. That is Enoch's picture. In my time it was the picture people already had in their heads, and a story works by using the pictures people already have.⁶

The point of my story was not a map of the afterlife. Look at what the rich man is told: *remember that you, in your lifetime, received your good things, and Lazarus, in the same way, bad things* (Luke 16:25). The story is about a man who stepped past a starving beggar at his own gate every day.

Enoch also names a place of judgment: *this accursed valley* below Jerusalem (1 Enoch 27:1–2). That is the valley of Hinnom. In my language, *Gehenna*. When I warned of *the fire of Gehenna* (Matthew 5:22), my listeners knew the valley, and many knew Enoch's picture of it.

The fire, the darkness, the chains and the angels of punishment that later preachers painted into hell came from books like this one, not from the five books of Moses.

The Son of Man on the throne of his glory

The youngest part of the book, the Parables, has a figure in it you will recognize.

And there I saw One who had a head of days, / And His head was white like wool, / And with Him was another being whose countenance had the appearance of a man (1 Enoch 46:1).

The picture comes from Daniel, where *one like a son of man* comes *with the clouds of the sky* to the Ancient of Days and is given an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13–14). The Parables take Daniel's figure and make him the judge of the world. He was *hidden* before the world was made (1 Enoch 48:6). He will *raise up the kings and the mighty from their seats* (1 Enoch 46:4). And the powerful will be terrified *When they see that Son of Man / Sitting on the throne of his glory* (1 Enoch 62:5).

The throne of his glory. Those exact words appear again and again in the Parables. In your New Testament they appear twice, both times in the Gospel of Matthew, both times in my mouth. *When the Son of Man will sit on the throne of his glory* (Matthew 19:28). *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory* (Matthew 25:31).

What does that mean? Scholars disagree, and I will give you both sides honestly.

Most scholars now think the Parables were written before the gospels, perhaps even before I was born. If so, the people around me already had this picture of a heavenly Son of Man who judges kings, and the gospel writers, or I myself, used it. If the Parables are later, then perhaps both drew on Daniel separately.³

Here is what I can tell you plainly. Most of the time, when the gospels give me the words *Son of Man*, I use them the ordinary way, for a human being, for myself in my weakness. *The foxes have holes, and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head* (Matthew 8:20). The heavenly throne is one use. A man with no bed is the other.

And look at who the judge of Matthew 25 actually judges by. He sits on the throne of his glory, and then asks one thing: what did you do for the hungry, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner? Matthew took Enoch's throne and put Isaiah's poor in front of it.

Woe to you who are rich

This is the part of Enoch closest to me, and almost nobody who talks about Enoch talks about it.

The last part of the book, the Letter of Enoch, is a long cry against the rich.

Woe to those who build unrighteousness and oppression / And lay deceit as a foundation (1 Enoch 94:6).

Woe to you, ye rich, for ye have trusted in your riches, / And from your riches shall ye depart, / Because ye have not remembered the Most High in the days of your riches (1 Enoch 94:8).

Woe to you who devour the finest of the wheat, / And drink wine in large bowls, / And tread under foot the lowly with your might (1 Enoch 96:5).

Woe to you who build your houses through the grievous toil of others (1 Enoch 99:13).

Now hear what the gospels give me, on the plain where the poor had come to hear me. *But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation. Woe to you, you who are full now, for you will be hungry* (Luke 6:24–25).

It goes further. Enoch has a rich man talking to himself: *We have become rich with riches and have possessions; / And have acquired everything we have desired, and our granaries are (brim) full.* And the answer comes: *your riches shall not abide / But speedily ascend from you* (1 Enoch 97:8–10).

Here is the story I told about a man whose land produced a great harvest. He said to himself, *I will pull down my barns, build bigger ones, and Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years. Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.* And God said, *You foolish one, tonight your soul is required of you. The things which you have prepared—whose will they be?* (Luke 12:18–20).

The same rich man, the same full barns, the same talk to himself, the same sudden end. A scholar named George Nickelsburg set these passages side by side in 1979 and showed how much the Gospel of Luke shares with the Letter of Enoch.⁷

I did not invent the woe to the rich. It was already in the mouths of the poor of my people, in this book and in the prophets before it. Mary sang it before I was born: *He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the rich away empty* (Luke 1:52–53). Enoch's Son of Man will *raise up the kings and the mighty from their seats* (1 Enoch 46:4).

When churches tell you that my warnings about money were about your attitude to money, set them beside this book. Nobody in my world heard *woe to you who are rich* as a warning about attitude.

Where Enoch and I part

I will not hand you this book as if it were all gold. Here is where it goes somewhere I did not go.

Enoch says of the rich that *your Creator will rejoice at your destruction* (1 Enoch 94:10). The righteous in this book wait for *the day of the judgement of sinners / And for the day of cursing and chastisement* (1 Enoch 102:5). In one passage, a sword is given to the righteous *that a righteous judgement may be executed on the oppressors* (1 Enoch 91:12).

I understand where that comes from. It was written by people who were being robbed and killed, and who had no court on earth to go to. Their longing for justice is real, and God hears it.

But I told people to *love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44). I told a story where the father runs down the road to the son who wasted everything. I did not tell my followers that God would enjoy watching the rich burn. I told the rich to sell what they had and give it to the poor, while there was still time to do it.

Enoch wants the oppressor punished. I want him to stop, and to come home.

And the pictures of fire and torment in this book, which were written by the suffering about their oppressors, were later turned around and used by the powerful to frighten the poor. That is the worst thing that was ever done with Enoch, and it was not the book's fault.

Why your Bible left it out

For the first Christians, Enoch was part of the library. Jude quotes it as prophecy. The *Letter of Barnabas*, which some early churches read aloud, quotes it with the words *as Enoch says*. Around the year 200, the North African writer Tertullian argued that it belonged among the scriptures, because Jude had quoted it.⁸

But most of the church turned against it. In the early 400s, Augustine wrote that the church did not accept the writings under Enoch's name, because no one could be sure they were really his and they had not been handed down with the other scriptures. Jerome reported that many people rejected the letter of Jude itself because it quoted Enoch.⁸ My own people, when they settled their scriptures, did not include it either.

So most churches ended up keeping the letter that quotes the book, and dropping the book. Only the church of Ethiopia, and later the church of Eritrea, kept both, and it is because of them that you can read Enoch at all.

None of that decision was made by me. It was made by people, centuries later, for reasons they wrote down and you can read. The book was holy to many of the people who first followed me. You are allowed to read it.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Jude 14–15, then 1 Enoch 1:9.

You will find: the same prophecy, almost word for word. The book of Enoch is free to read online in the Charles translation.

Then read 1 Enoch 97:8–10 beside Luke 12:16–21. Count what the two rich men have in common.

Then read 1 Enoch 15:8–12. That is where the idea that evil spirits are the ghosts of giants comes from.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/1-enoach.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **1 Enoch** is **five books** in one, written in Enoch's name between about **300 BC** and **my own lifetime**.
- Pieces of **eleven copies** were found among the **Dead Sea Scrolls**. Only **Ethiopia's church** kept the whole book in its Bible.
- **Jude quotes it** as prophecy, and **1 and 2 Peter and Jude** take their fallen angels in chains from it.
- Its **Watchers** and **giants** gave my people an answer to **where evil spirits come from**, and its rooms of the dead shaped the picture of **fire and darkness** later preached as hell.
- Its **Son of Man on the throne of his glory** shares those exact words with Matthew, and one translator changed a verse about him.
- Its **woes to the rich** are the closest thing in it to what I taught. Its **joy at the punishment of enemies** is the farthest.

19. Jubilees: Genesis, Rewritten by an Angel

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: An unknown Jewish writer in Judea, probably a priest, writing in Hebrew. He presents the book as dictated to Moses on Mount Sinai by *the angel of the presence*.

When: About 160–150 BC, a few years after the Maccabean revolt.

Where it fits: It retells Genesis 1 to Exodus 24, from creation to Moses on the mountain, and dates every event in periods of forty-nine years called *jubilees*.

Which Bibles keep it: The Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Bibles, and no others. The Jews of Ethiopia also hold it sacred. It survives complete only in Ge'ez, the old language of Ethiopia.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Never quoted. The idea that Moses received the law through angels, which Stephen mentions in Acts 7:53, was taught in books like this.

How close it stays to me: Close in hoping for a healed earth with no Satan. Far in Sabbath death penalties and walls against the nations.

If you only read three chapters: Jubilees 2, Jubilees 23 and Jubilees 50.

WORDS TO KNOW

Jubilee — in the law of Moses, the fiftieth year, when slaves were freed and land went back to its families. In this book, a period of forty-nine years used to count time.

Heavenly tablets — in Jubilees, the record kept in heaven of God's laws and of everything that will happen.

Mastema — the name this book gives to the chief of the evil spirits, the one your Bible calls Satan. It means *hostility*.

Ge'ez — the ancient language of Ethiopia, still used in the Ethiopian church's worship.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Moses goes up Mount Sinai for forty days. God tells *the angel of the presence* to write out for him the whole history of the world from creation, and the angel dictates it.

The angel retells Genesis day by day, adding detail and dates. The angels were created on the first day. The angels kept the first Sabbath in heaven on the seventh day of creation, and it was given to Israel alone. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Enoch, the flood and Noah all appear, with laws attached to each story. Noah's sons divide the earth. The fallen angels' children become evil spirits, and God lets a tenth of them stay to serve Mastema, their chief.

Abraham burns the house of idols, rejects the stars, and is tested at the sacrifice of Isaac, at Mastema's suggestion. Before he dies he warns Jacob to separate himself from the nations and not eat with them. The story of Jacob and his sons follows, with the punishment of Shechem and a law of death for marrying a daughter to a foreigner.

The angel predicts that Israel will go astray, and then a day when children study the law, lives grow long again, and *there shall be no Satan*. The book ends with the Exodus, the Passover, and strict laws for the Sabbath, under pain of death.

This book is Genesis again, but told by an angel who wants you to know that every law was in force from the beginning.

In your Genesis, Abraham never keeps the Sabbath. No one does until Moses. Noah does not keep feasts on set days. Jacob's sons do not study the law. Jubilees fixes all of that. In this version, the Sabbath was kept by the angels on the seventh day of creation, the patriarchs kept the feasts on the right dates, and the laws Moses received at Sinai were already written in heaven.

The writer lived in the generation after Antiochus tried to wipe out my people's law. He saw Jews who had grown up wanting to be Greek. His answer was to show them that the law was not a late rule from Moses. It was older than the world.

An angel at Moses' ear

The book begins at Sinai. God says to the angel: *Write for Moses from the beginning of creation till My sanctuary has been built among them for all eternity* (Jubilees 1:26). And the angel speaks to Moses: *Write the complete history of the creation, how in six days the Lord God finished all His works* (Jubilees 2:1).

So everything after that is presented as the words of an angel, written down by Moses. It is a claim of great authority for a book written about thirteen hundred years after Moses lived.

You have seen the same thing in Daniel, Enoch and 2 Esdras: a writer puts his words in the mouth of a hero of the past, so that they will be heard. Jubilees goes further. It puts its words in the mouth of an angel, and lays them over Genesis itself.

The Sabbath from the beginning

The heart of this book is the Sabbath.

And He gave us a great sign, the Sabbath day, that we should work six days, but keep Sabbath on the seventh day from all work (Jubilees 2:17). The *us* is the angels. They kept it first. Then God gave it to one people on earth: *he did not sanctify all peoples and nations to keep Sabbath thereon, but Israel alone* (Jubilees 2:31).

And at the end, the book returns to the Sabbath and lists what is forbidden on it: work of any kind, a journey, buying and selling, drawing water you did not prepare the day before, carrying anything out of your tent, lighting a fire, riding an animal, sailing, killing an animal, fishing, *whoever fasts or makes war on the Sabbaths* (Jubilees 50:12). And for every one: *The man who does any of these things on the Sabbath shall die* (Jubilees 50:13).

The law of Moses already said that whoever works on the Sabbath must die (Exodus 35:2). Jubilees adds to the list.

I kept the Sabbath. I went to the synagogue on it. And I was attacked all my life for how I kept it. My friends picked grain to eat as we walked through a field on

the Sabbath, and I was accused. I healed a man's hand on the Sabbath, and they began to plan how to kill me.

I said: *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27). And I asked them: *Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? To save a life, or to kill?* (Mark 3:4). They were silent.

The Sabbath is God's gift of rest. It is the day the slave stops working too. A Sabbath that you must keep or die is not a gift any more.

A jubilee with no freedom in it

The book takes its name from the jubilee, and I want you to notice what it does with the word.

In the law of Moses the jubilee was the fiftieth year. *Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family* (Leviticus 25:10). Slaves went free. Land that had been sold to pay debts went back to the family that had lost it. It was God's law against the rich owning everything forever.

In Jubilees, a jubilee is a unit of forty-nine years for counting the history of the world. The book dates everything by it. Only once, at the very end, does it remember what a jubilee was for: in the fiftieth jubilee a whole people comes out of slavery into its own land. But it never uses the jubilee to free a single slave or cancel a single debt.

When I stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth, I read from the scroll of Isaiah: *to proclaim release to the captives ... to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord* (Luke 4:18–19). That year is the jubilee. I meant it as liberty for real people with real debts. This book turned it into a calendar.

No Satan, and long lives

There is one passage here I love, and it is close to what I preached.

The angel predicts that Israel will go wrong, and suffer. And then: *in those days the children shall begin to study the laws, and to seek the commandments, and to*

return to the path of righteousness (Jubilees 23:26). People's lives will grow long again, close to a thousand years. And there shall be no old man nor one who is not satisfied with his days, for all shall be (as) children and youths (Jubilees 23:28).

And all their days they shall complete and live in peace and in joy, and there shall be no Satan nor any evil destroyer; for all their days shall be days of blessing and healing (Jubilees 23:29).

That is a kingdom on earth. Not souls rescued out of the world, but the world itself healed, with no Satan and every day a day of healing.

I went through the villages of Galilee healing people and driving out evil spirits, and I said that was what it looked like when God's kingdom came near. When the woman bent over for eighteen years stood up straight in the synagogue, I asked: *Ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham whom Satan had bound eighteen long years, be freed from this bondage on the Sabbath day?* (Luke 13:16).

That is the day of healing this book hoped for. I did it on a Sabbath.

Where Jubilees and I part

There is one more thing in this book I must name, because it is the opposite of what I did.

When old Abraham blesses his grandson Jacob, he tells him: *Separate thyself from the nations, and eat not with them: And do not according to their works, and become not their associate; for their works are unclean, and all their ways are a Pollution and an abomination and uncleanness (Jubilees 22:16).*

And later the angel gives Moses a law: *if there is any man who wishes in Israel to give his daughter or his sister to any man who is of the seed of the Gentiles he shall surely die, and they shall stone him with stones ... and they shall burn the woman with fire (Jubilees 30:7).* For this, the angel says, *there is no remission, nor any atonement (Jubilees 30:10).*

Do not eat with them. Kill your daughter if she marries one.

I ate with everyone. The religious men asked my friends, *Why is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?* (Mark 2:16). I sat at table with a Pharisee, and I stayed in the house of Zacchaeus. I healed a Roman officer's servant, and I said of his faith, *many will come from the east and the west, and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matthew 8:11).

Jubilees has Abraham saying of the nations, *eat not with them*. I said the nations would eat with Abraham.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Leviticus 25:10.

You will find: the real jubilee: *liberty throughout the land*, everyone returned to their land and family.

Then read Jubilees 50:6–13, the Sabbath laws, **and Mark 3:1–6**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/jubilees.

THE SHORT VERSION

- **Jubilees** retells **Genesis**, presented as the words of an **angel** to Moses on Sinai. It is in the **Ethiopian** Bible and was found in **Hebrew** at Qumran.
- In it the law, the **Sabbath** and the feasts were kept **from the beginning**, and breaking the Sabbath means **death**. I said *the Sabbath was made for man*.
- It names its book after the **jubilee**, but uses it to **count years**, never to **free** a slave or cancel a debt.
- It hopes for a healed earth where **there shall be no Satan**, and every day is **healing**. That is close to the kingdom I preached.
- It tells Jacob **not to eat with the nations**. I ate with everyone.

PART FOUR — THE LOST GOSPELS

Six books written about me in the century or so after the four gospels in your Bible. No church ever put them in its Bible. Several were found again only in the last hundred and fifty years.

20. The Gospel of Thomas: Sayings Without a Story

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. It opens by calling itself the secret sayings of the living Jesus, written down by *Didymos Judas Thomas*.

When: Debated. Greek copies date from about AD 200. Many scholars place the collection in the early 100s, and some think parts of it are as old as the first gospels.

Where it fits: It is not set anywhere. It is a list of 114 sayings with no story: no birth, no healings, no crucifixion and no rising.

Which Bibles keep it: None. Some early church leaders warned against it by name.

Where you hear it in your Bible: About half of its sayings have close parallels in Matthew, Mark and Luke: the mustard seed, the sower, a lamp under a basket, *give to Caesar*.

How close it stays to me: Close in blessing the poor and lending without return. Far in saving knowledge for the few, and making women male.

If you only read three chapters: It has no chapters. Read sayings 54, 95 and 113, then 114.

WORDS TO KNOW

Saying — a short teaching, proverb or parable passed on by word of mouth. Ancient teachers' students often collected them.

Coptic — the last stage of the Egyptian language, written in Greek letters, used by Egyptian Christians.

Nag Hammadi — a town in Upper Egypt near which a buried jar of thirteen ancient books was found in 1945.

Gnostic — from the Greek word for *knowledge*: a name for early groups who taught that salvation comes through secret knowledge of where the soul came from.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

There is no plot. The book begins: these are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke, and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down. Whoever finds their meaning will not taste death.

Then come 114 sayings, most beginning simply *Jesus said*. Some are short proverbs. Some are parables. Some are answers to his disciples' questions. Many will sound familiar from Matthew, Mark and Luke: blessed are the poor, the mustard seed, the sower, the lost sheep, a prophet is not accepted in his own village, the blind leading the blind. Others appear nowhere else, and some are strange.

Running through the collection are a few themes. The kingdom is not coming at some future day; it is already here, inside you and spread out over the earth, and people do not see it. A person must know himself, where he came from and where he is going. Wealth, business and the world are to be left behind.

The book ends with Peter asking that Mary be sent away, because women are not worthy of life, and Jesus answering that he will make her male.

This is the gospel people have heard of, if they have heard of any of these.

It was found in Egypt in 1945, in a jar, with a dozen other old books. It has been on the cover of magazines and in the title of bestsellers. People who know nothing else outside your Bible have heard that there is a *Gospel of Thomas* with secret sayings of mine.

What is it really? It is a notebook. Someone collected things I was remembered to have said, as students of teachers often did, and wrote them down one after another, with no story around them. Some of what is in it is close to what I said. Some of it I never said. My job in this chapter is to help you tell the difference.

Sayings, and nothing else

Your four gospels tell a story. I am born, I am baptized, I preach and heal, I go to Jerusalem, I am killed, I rise. My sayings are set inside that story, so you know who I said them to and why.

Thomas has none of that. I am never crucified in it. There is no empty tomb. I heal no one. I simply *said*, over and over, 114 times.

Some scholars think this is because it is very early, a collection like the ones that Matthew and Luke used when they wrote their gospels. Others think it is later, and that its makers took sayings out of the four gospels and added their own, and left out the cross on purpose, because they believed I came to give knowledge, not to die.¹

You do not need to settle that to read it well. Read every saying the way you would check a coin: hold it up against what you know of me from the oldest stories, and see if it rings true.

The kingdom spread out on the earth

The deepest thing in Thomas is about the kingdom, and it is half right.

My disciples ask, in Thomas, when the kingdom will come. The answer: it will not come by waiting for it. *The kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it* (Thomas, saying 113). Another saying: *the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you* (Thomas, saying 3).

That is close to me. In Luke, when the Pharisees asked when the kingdom would come, I said: *God's Kingdom doesn't come with observation; neither will they say, 'Look, here!' or, 'Look, there!' for behold, God's Kingdom is within you* (Luke 17:20–21). The word can also mean *among you*. It was already there, in the healings, in the meals with outcasts, in debts forgiven.

But I also said it was coming. I taught my friends to pray for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done *on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10). The kingdom had started, like a mustard seed in the ground, but it was not yet grown. The world still had hungry people in it, and an empire on top of them.

Thomas keeps the first half and drops the second. If the kingdom is already fully here and you only need to *see* it, then nothing needs to change except your eyes. The poor can stay poor. The empire can stay. That is not what I meant.

Blessed are the poor

And yet Thomas also keeps some of my hardest words about money, and keeps them plainly.

Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven (Thomas, saying 54). Not *poor in spirit*, as in Matthew. Just poor, as in Luke: *Blessed are you who are poor, God's Kingdom is yours* (Luke 6:20).

Then this: *If you have money, do not lend it at interest, but give it to one from whom you will not get it back* (Thomas, saying 95). That is the same teaching I gave in Luke: *lend, expecting nothing back* (Luke 6:35). Forgive the debt before you make it.

And Thomas has my story of the great dinner, where the invited guests all make excuses, and the host sends his servant into the streets to bring in whoever is there. In Thomas the guests excuse themselves to settle accounts with merchants who owe them money, to see about a house they have bought, to prepare a friend's wedding, to collect the rent on a farm, and it ends: *Businessmen and merchants will not enter the places of my Father* (Thomas, saying 64). In Luke the host sends instead for *the poor, maimed, blind, and lame* (Luke 14:21).

On money, Thomas sounds like me.

The secret for the few

Thomas begins with a promise: *whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death* (Thomas, saying 1).

Salvation, in this book, comes by understanding: by finding the hidden meaning of the sayings, by knowing where your soul came from. In one saying I take Thomas aside and tell him three secret words, and when the others ask what I said, he will not tell them (Thomas, saying 13). In another, *he who will drink from my mouth will become like me* (Thomas, saying 108).

That is a religion for the few who can solve the riddle.

I did speak in parables, and people did not always understand them. But I did not hide the kingdom from ordinary people so that the clever few could find it.

It was the opposite. *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you hid these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to infants* (Matthew 11:25). And: *there is nothing hidden, except that it should be made known* (Mark 4:22).

The kingdom is not a puzzle you solve to escape death. It is a meal everyone is invited to.

Where Thomas and I part

The last saying in the book is the one you need to see.

Peter says that Mary should leave them, because women are not worthy of life. And I am made to answer that I will lead her and make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit, for *every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven* (Thomas, saying 114).

There are people who try to read this kindly, as a symbol for leaving behind the flesh. Read it plainly, and it says that a woman must stop being a woman to be saved.

Women followed me from Galilee: *Mary who was called Magdalene ... Joanna ... Susanna; and many others; who served them from their possessions* (Luke 8:2–3). They paid for my work. When my men ran away, the women stayed at the cross, and Mary Magdalene was the first to see me risen. When Mary, Martha's sister, sat at my feet like a disciple, listening, I said, *Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her* (Luke 10:42). I did not make her male first.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Luke 6:20 and 6:34–35.

You will find: *Blessed are you who are poor and lend, expecting nothing back.*

Thomas has both, in sayings 54 and 95.

Then read Luke 8:1–3 beside Thomas 114.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/gospel-of-thomas.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Gospel of Thomas** is **114 sayings** with **no story**: no healings, **no crucifixion**, no rising. It was found complete in **Coptic** in **1945** at **Nag Hammadi**, and in Greek scraps from about **AD 200**.
- About **half** its sayings are like ones in your gospels. Some may be early. Some are **not mine**.
- It says **the kingdom is spread out upon the earth**, and people do not see it. True, but it was also still **coming**.
- It keeps **blessed are the poor** and **lend without getting it back**.
- It saves the few who find **secret meanings**, and ends with a woman made **male**. I sent no one away.

21. The Gospel of Peter: A Talking Cross and a Clean Pilate

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. It speaks in the voice of Simon Peter: *I Simon Peter and Andrew my brother.*

When: Probably the middle of the 100s AD. A bishop of Antioch read it, and turned against it, around AD 200.

Where it fits: Only a fragment survives. It begins as Pilate washes his hands at my trial, tells my death, burial and rising, and breaks off mid-sentence a few days later.

Which Bibles keep it: None.

Where you hear it in your Bible: It retells Matthew 27–28, Mark 15–16, Luke 23–24 and John 19–20, with Pilate’s hand-washing, the guards at the tomb and the young man in white.

How close it stays to me: Close in a cross that cannot hold me. Far in blaming my own people, and letting Rome wash its hands.

If you only read three chapters: It is short. Read it all, then Matthew 27:24–25 and 27:62–66.

WORDS TO KNOW

Passion — from the Latin for *suffering*: the story of my last days, trial and death.

Docetism — from the Greek word for *seem*: the teaching that I only seemed to have a body and only seemed to suffer.

Akhmim — a town in Upper Egypt where the only long copy of this gospel was found, in a monk’s grave.

The Lord’s day — the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of my rising.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The fragment opens at my trial. None of the Jews washes his hands, not Herod or his judges, and Pilate gets up and leaves. Herod the king orders me taken away. Joseph, a friend of Pilate and of mine, asks for my body.

The people mock me, dress me in purple, crown me with thorns, beat me and crucify me between two criminals. I keep silent, *as though having no pain*. When one criminal defends me, they order that his legs not be broken, so he will die slowly. Darkness falls at noon. I cry, *My power, my power, thou hast forsaken me*, and am *taken up*. The Temple veil tears, the earth shakes, and the Jewish leaders cry, *Woe for our sins*.

The elders ask Pilate for soldiers to guard the tomb, and seal it with seven seals. On the night before Sunday, the soldiers see two men come down from heaven. Then three come out of the tomb: two whose heads reach the sky, holding up a third whose head goes beyond the heavens, and a cross following them. A voice asks if I have preached to the dead, and the cross answers, *Yea*.

Pilate declares himself innocent and orders the soldiers to keep silent. Mary Magdalene and her friends come to the tomb and find a young man who says I have risen. The disciples go home grieving, and Peter goes back to fishing.

This is the only gospel that tries to show you the moment I came out of the tomb.

Your four gospels do not. They show you an empty tomb, a stone rolled away, a young man or angels in white, frightened women, and then me, appearing to my friends. None of them describes the rising itself. They knew better than to try.

The Gospel of Peter does try. It puts the Roman guards and the Jewish elders at the tomb in the night, and makes them watch. And what they see is a giant, held up by two other giants, with a cross walking out behind them.

Found in a monk's grave

This gospel was lost for more than a thousand years. Early church writers knew its name. Then, in the winter of 1886–87, French archaeologists digging a Christian cemetery at Akhmim, in Upper Egypt, opened the grave of a monk

and found a small book buried with him. It held a piece of the Book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Peter, and this: part of a gospel told in Peter's voice.¹

The copy was made centuries after the gospel was written. It begins in the middle of a sentence, and ends in the middle of a sentence: *I Simon Peter and Andrew my brother took our nets and went to the sea; and there was with us Levi the son of Alphaeus, whom the Lord ...* and then nothing.

As though having no pain

Notice two small things in how this gospel tells my death.

When they crucify me between the two criminals, *he held his peace, as though having no pain* (Gospel of Peter 4:10). And at the end, I do not cry out, as in Mark, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Mark 15:34). I say: *My power, my power, thou hast forsaken me. And when he had said it he was taken up* (Gospel of Peter 5:19).

These may be the kind of lines that worried Serapion. His letter does not say which ones. A Lord who feels no pain, whose *power* leaves him before he dies, and who is *taken up* instead of dying. Some Christians believed that the divine Christ could not suffer, and left the human Jesus on the cross before the end. This gospel at least leaves room for that belief.

It is not true. I felt every nail. I was afraid in the garden, so afraid that I begged my Father to take the cup away. On the cross I cried out the first line of a psalm, *My God, my God*, because I felt abandoned, as every person tortured to death by an empire has felt abandoned. If I had felt no pain, my death would mean nothing to anyone who does.

A talking cross

Then comes the rising.

The soldiers on watch see the heavens open and two men come down in great light. The stone rolls away by itself. Then *they see three men come forth from the tomb, and two of them supporting one, and a cross following them: and of the two the head reached unto the heaven, but the head of him that was led by them overpassed the heavens* (Gospel of Peter 10:39–40).

And they heard a voice from the heavens, saying, Thou hast preached to them that sleep. And a response was heard from the cross, Yea (Gospel of Peter 10:41–42).

It is a wonderful picture, and it is a fantasy. Giants taller than the sky, and a cross that walks and talks. This is what happens when people who were not there want to see what no one saw.

The voice's question does point to a real belief. Many early Christians believed that between my death and my rising I went down to the dead and preached to them, so that even those who died long before me could hear the good news. Your Bible has a hint of it: Christ *went and preached to the spirits in prison* (1 Peter 3:19). The churches called it the harrowing of hell. The Gospel of Peter has the cross itself bear witness to it.

Where Peter and I part

There is something in this gospel that is not a harmless fantasy, and it has done great harm.

Look at who kills me. In your gospels it is the Roman governor Pilate who orders my crucifixion, and Roman soldiers who carry it out. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment for slaves and rebels. The sign over my head was a Roman charge: *THE KING OF THE JEWS* (Mark 15:26). Rome killed me, for threatening Rome's order.

The gospels written after Rome destroyed Jerusalem already began to move the blame. In Matthew, Pilate washes his hands and says, *I am innocent of the blood of this righteous person*, and the crowd answers, *May his blood be on us, and on our children!* (Matthew 27:24–25).

The Gospel of Peter goes further. In its first line, *of the Jews none washed his hands, neither Herod nor any one of his judges* (Gospel of Peter 1:1). Pilate is clean. Herod gives the order and hands me over to the people, and it is the people, the Jews, who mock me, beat me and nail me to the cross. At the end, Pilate says to the elders, *I am pure from the blood of the Son of God: but it was ye who determined this* (Gospel of Peter 11:46). The empire washes its hands, and my own people are left holding the blood.

For centuries after, Christians called the Jews *Christ-killers*, and killed them for it, on Good Friday, in pogroms, and in the end in the gas chambers. This gospel was lost for most of those centuries. But it shows you, in the open, the same move that the gospels in your Bible had begun to make more quietly, and it was those that taught them.

I was a Jew. My mother was a Jew, and every one of my friends. The people who wept for me on the road to the cross were the daughters of Jerusalem. The ones who killed me were the empire and the men who served it. And I prayed even for them: *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34).

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Mark 15:15–20.

You will find: Pilate handing me over, and Roman soldiers mocking and crucifying me.

Then read Gospel of Peter 1:1–2 and 11:45–46, and compare who holds the blood.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/gospel-of-peter.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Gospel of Peter** survives only as a **fragment**, found in **1886–87** in a monk's grave at **Akhmim**, Egypt. A bishop warned against it around **AD 200**.
- It says I hung on the cross *as though having no pain*. I felt **every nail**.
- It is the only gospel that tries to show the **rising** itself: **giants** taller than the sky, and a **talking cross**.
- It turns Matthew's **guards** into eyewitnesses.
- It makes **Pilate clean** and puts my death on **my own people**. **Rome** killed me, and I forgave even Rome.

22. The Gospel of Mary: The Woman Who Taught the Men

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. It is named for Mary Magdalene, who is its central figure, not its author.

When: The 100s AD. Two Greek fragments survive from the 200s.

Where it fits: After my rising. I teach my disciples and leave them, they are afraid, and Mary comforts them and tells them what I showed her in a vision. About half of its pages are lost.

Which Bibles keep it: None.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Mary Magdalene is in all four gospels: healed of *seven demons*, with me in Galilee, at the cross, and the first to see me risen (Luke 8:2; John 20:1–18).

How close it stays to me: Close in a woman sent to teach the men, and no new laws. Far in a soul escaping the world.

If you only read three chapters: It has none, and is only about eight pages. Read it all, then John 20:1–18.

WORDS TO KNOW

Mary Magdalene — Mary from Magdala, a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee. One of the women who followed me and paid for our work.

Apostle — from the Greek for *one who is sent*: someone sent out with a message.

Vision — something seen in the mind or spirit rather than with the eyes.

The powers — in this gospel, forces such as desire, ignorance and wrath that try to stop the soul as it rises.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The surviving text begins partway through a conversation after my rising. I tell the disciples that all things will return to their roots, that there is no sin except what people make, and that sickness comes from what is against nature. I say: peace be with you; do not let anyone lead you astray, saying *look here* or *look there*, for the Son of Man is within you; go and preach the good news of the kingdom; and do not lay down any rule beyond what I appointed, or give a law like the lawgiver. Then I leave.

The disciples are grieved and afraid. If they did not spare him, how will they spare us? Mary stands up, greets them, and tells them not to weep, for my grace will be with them and protect them.

Peter asks her to tell them the words I told her that they have not heard. She tells them of a vision in which I said she was blessed for not wavering at the sight of me. Four pages are missing. When the text returns, Mary is describing the soul rising past four powers, the first lost in the gap and the others called Desire, Ignorance and Wrath, and answering each one until it is free.

Andrew says he does not believe I said these strange things. Peter asks whether I would really speak privately with a woman and prefer her to them. Mary weeps and asks if he thinks she made it up. Levi rebukes Peter for his temper and says that I knew her well and loved her more than them. They go out to preach.

The only gospel named after a woman is about men refusing to listen to her.

It is a short book, and most of it is missing. What remains is a scene you will recognize, if you have ever been a woman in a church. Mary has something to teach. Two of the men do not want to hear it: one because it sounds strange to him, the other because of who she is.

A gospel in a Cairo shop

This book was not found at Nag Hammadi, though people often think so. In 1896 a German scholar named Carl Reinhardt bought an old book in Cairo, written in Coptic in the 400s or 500s. It contained four writings, and the first

was the Gospel of Mary. Its publication was delayed for nearly sixty years, by two world wars and other troubles, and it was finally printed in 1955.¹

Since then two small pieces of it have been found in Greek, both copied in the 200s. So it was being read in Egypt within about a century or two of my life.¹

The book begins on its seventh page. Pages 1 through 6 are lost, and so are 11 through 14. What you can read is about half of it.

No law beyond what I gave

Before I leave in this gospel, I say three things.

I tell them not to be led astray by those who say *look here* or *look there*, for the Son of Man is within you. That is close to what I said in Luke: *God's Kingdom is within you* (Luke 17:21).

I tell them to go and preach the good news of the kingdom.

And then: *Do not lay down any rules beyond what I appointed for you, and do not give a law like the lawgiver lest you be constrained by it* (Gospel of Mary, page 9).²

I would say that to the churches now. I gave my friends very few rules. Love God; love your neighbor; forgive; feed the hungry; do not lord it over anyone. I told them that the rulers of the nations *lord it over them ... But it shall not be so among you, but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant* (Mark 10:42–43).

Within a few generations my followers had laws about who could teach, who could lead, who could speak in church, what women must wear, and who was in and out. Many of them were laid on women. I had said of the religious leaders of my day that they *bind heavy burdens that are grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders* (Matthew 23:4). The churches learned to do it too.

If they did not spare him

Then comes the most human moment in the book.

When I am gone, the disciples weep. They are afraid. How can we go to the nations and preach, they say, if they did not spare him? How will they spare us?²

That is the right fear. They had seen what Rome did to me. They knew what it would do to them.

And it is Mary who stands up. She tells them not to weep or be divided, because my grace will be with them and shelter them. She turns their hearts toward the good, the book says, and they begin to talk about my words.

That is just what the women did in your gospels. When my men ran, the women watched me die. *There were also women watching from afar ... who, when he was in Galilee, followed him and served him* (Mark 15:40–41). The women came to the tomb. The women carried the news. And in Luke, when they told the apostles, *These words seemed to them to be nonsense, and they didn't believe them* (Luke 24:11).

Did he prefer her to us?

Peter asks Mary to tell them the words I said to her that they have not heard. *Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women*, he says (Gospel of Mary, page 10).² So she tells them.

But when she finishes, the men turn on her. Andrew says he does not believe I said it; these are strange ideas. And Peter says: *Did he really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?* (Gospel of Mary, page 17).²

Mary weeps. She asks Peter if he thinks she made it up, or is lying about me.

Then Levi speaks up. *Peter, you have always been hot-tempered*, he says. If I made her worthy, who is Peter to reject her? I knew her very well, and loved her more than them (Gospel of Mary, page 18).²

You saw this scene from the other side at the end of the Gospel of Thomas, where Peter tells Mary to leave because women are not worthy of life. Here Peter makes the same move, and he loses. That tells you that in the 100s my followers were arguing about whether a woman could teach men about me, and that some of them said yes.

In your Bible I first appeared to her. I said to her, *go to my brothers and tell them. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord* (John

20:17–18). The first person I sent with the news of my rising was a woman, to teach the men.

Where Mary and I part

In the four lost pages and the pages after, Mary tells of a vision. It is about the soul rising after death, past four powers that try to hold it: the first lost in the gap, and the others called Desire, Ignorance and Wrath. Each challenges the soul. Each time the soul answers, and passes, until it is free of the world and comes to rest *in silence*.²

That is the book's idea of salvation: the soul getting out.

It was not mine. I did not teach my friends to escape the world. I taught them to pray *Let your Kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10). I fed bodies. I healed bodies. I rose in a body. God's kingdom comes down to the earth, to the hungry and the sick and the poor, not up and away from it.

The Gospel of Mary is right about who should be heard. Mary has something to say, and the men should listen. But what she says, in the end, is a way out of the world, and I came to bring God's kingdom into it.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Luke 24:1–11.

You will find: the women tell the apostles I am risen, and *These words seemed to them to be nonsense*.

Then read John 20:11–18, and ask who I sent first.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/gospel-of-mary.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Gospel of Mary** survives in a **Coptic** book bought in **Cairo** in **1896**, and two Greek scraps from the **200s**. About **half** of it is lost.
- In it I tell my followers to make **no laws beyond what I gave**. I gave very few.
- When the men are afraid, **Mary** comforts them and **teaches** them.
- **Andrew** doubts her, and **Peter** refuses to believe a **woman**. **Levi** rebukes Peter. In your Bible, I sent a woman first to tell the men.
- Its salvation is a **soul escaping the world**. I came to bring the kingdom **on earth**.

23. The Gospel of Judas: The Betrayer as the Hero

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. A Christian group of the 100s who believed that the god of the other churches was a lesser, false god.

When: Before about AD 180, when a bishop in Gaul named it and condemned it. The one surviving copy is in Coptic, from the 200s or 300s.

Where it fits: The days before my last Passover. I talk with my disciples, laugh at them, and reveal secrets to Judas alone, who then hands me over.

Which Bibles keep it: None.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Judas is in all four gospels and Acts: one of the twelve, who handed me over to the chief priests for money (Mark 14:10–11; Matthew 26:14–16; 27:3–5; Acts 1:16–18).

How close it stays to me: Close in its anger at religion that sacrifices people. Far in contempt for my friends, the body and the many.

If you only read three chapters: It has none. Read the scenes of my laughter, the vision of the temple, and the last page.

WORDS TO KNOW

Codex Tchacos — the ancient book that holds the only copy of this gospel, named by its owner, the dealer Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, after her father.

Sethian — a name scholars give to one early group that claimed descent from Seth, Adam's third son, as a holy race.

Saklas — in this gospel, the lesser god who made the world, whose name means *fool*.

Irenaeus — bishop of Lyon in Gaul, who wrote around AD 180 a long attack on teachings he considered false.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

This is the secret account of what I said to Judas Iscariot during a week, three days before I celebrated Passover. I find my disciples giving thanks over bread, and laugh. They are angry. I tell them they are not praising my Father but their own god, and no one among them knows me. Only Judas can stand before me, and he says I come from the immortal realm of Barbelo. I take him aside to tell him the mysteries of the kingdom.

The disciples tell me of a vision of a great temple where twelve priests make offerings at an altar: some sacrifice their own children, some their wives, while calling on my name. I tell them they are the priests, and the offerings are the people they lead astray.

To Judas I reveal how the universe began: the great invisible Spirit, many realms of light and angels, and then the lesser rulers who made this world, Nebro and Saklas, who made Adam and Eve. Only a holy generation will be saved. Judas sees a vision of himself stoned by the other disciples. I tell him he will be cursed by the other generations, but will come to rule over them, and he will exceed them all, for he *will sacrifice the man that clothes me*.

Judas looks up and sees a luminous cloud and enters it. The scribes are watching for me in the guest room. Judas takes their money, and hands me over to them.

Every Christian knows one thing about Judas: he betrayed me. This gospel says he was the only one who understood me.

It made headlines around the world in April 2006, at Easter. A lost gospel, found after seventeen centuries, telling the story from Judas's side, in which I ask him to hand me over. Many people heard only that, and were told the church had been wrong about Judas.

The real book is stranger than that, and darker.

The traitor's gospel

Long before anyone found it, people knew it existed. Around AD 180, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, wrote a long attack on teachings he believed were false. In it he describes a group who honored Cain and the men of Sodom as enemies of the world's maker, and who said that Judas, *knowing the truth as no others did*,

carried out the mystery of the betrayal. *They produce a fictitious history of this kind*, he wrote, *which they style the Gospel of Judas*.¹

So a Gospel of Judas existed before 180. The Coptic copy found in Egypt is probably a translation of that book, or of a later form of it.

I laughed

In this gospel I laugh a great deal. It is not kind laughter.

The first scene: I come upon my disciples sitting together, giving thanks over bread, and I laugh. They ask why I am laughing at their prayer. I tell them they are not doing it because they want to; they are doing it because their god will be praised.² They become angry, and I tell them that none of them knows me.

In this book the disciples worship the wrong god. Their god is the maker of this world, a lesser and foolish power. The true God is far above it, and only a few souls, a *holy generation*, belong to him.

I did not laugh at my friends for giving thanks over bread. I did it with them, on the hillside and at the last supper. *Jesus took bread, and when he had blessed, he broke it, and gave to them* (Mark 14:22). And the God I thanked, the one who made the world and gives bread, was my Father. I called the lilies and the sparrows his. I never taught that the world was made by a fool.

Priests who sacrifice their own children

But then the disciples tell me a dream, and here the book says something I understand.

They saw a great house with an altar, and twelve priests standing at it, and a crowd waiting. The priests were offering sacrifices: some of their own children, some their wives, while others lay with men, or murdered. And all of it they did in my name.²

I tell them: you are those priests. The cattle you saw brought for sacrifice are the many people you lead astray.

The writer was angry at the leaders of the other churches. Some think he was angry most of all at bishops who told ordinary Christians that dying as martyrs

for me was the noblest thing they could do, and sent them into the arenas. Others think he meant the bishops' whole way of teaching. Either way, his charge is that religious leaders were feeding on the people they claimed to serve, and calling it worship.³

I said nearly that, in the Temple. *My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers!* (Mark 11:17). I said the scribes *devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers* (Mark 12:40). Religion that sacrifices people to keep itself going is the oldest kind of idolatry there is.

The difference is that I did not tell my disciples they were the priests in that dream. They were fishermen. The men I was angry at had the Temple, the treasury and Rome behind them.

The man that clothes me

The center of this gospel is one sentence I say to Judas, near the end: *you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me* (Gospel of Judas, page 56).²

In this book my body is not me. It is a garment, a costume the real spirit wears. To kill it is to set the spirit free. So Judas, by handing me over to die, does what the others could not: he takes the costume off.

I did not wear a body like a costume. I was born of a woman. I ate and drank, and was called a glutton and a drunkard for it. I touched a leper with my hand. In the garden I was so afraid of what would happen to that body that my sweat fell like drops of blood. On the third day I rose in it, and asked my friends for something to eat.

The kingdom I preached was for bodies: bread for the hungry, healing for the sick, a roof for the stranger. A gospel that thinks the body is a garment to be thrown away has no reason to feed anyone.

Where Judas and I part

Your four gospels tell the story of Judas plainly, and it is sadder than this gospel.

He went away to the chief priests, that he might deliver him to them. They, when they heard it, were glad, and promised to give him money (Mark 14:10–11). And when he saw that I was condemned, he felt remorse ... saying, 'I have sinned in that I betrayed innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? You see to it.' And he went and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3–5).

Judas was not a hero who understood a secret. He was one of my friends, who sold me to the men who served the empire, and then could not bear what he had done. The priests who paid him did not care.

I washed his feet that last night, with the others. When he came with the soldiers to the garden, I said to him, *Friend, why are you here?* (Matthew 26:50). He was my friend. This gospel makes him the only one worth saving, and the others the servants of a fool. I chose all twelve.

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Matthew 27:3–10.

You will find: Judas's remorse, the thirty pieces of silver thrown back, and the priests' answer: *What is that to us?*

Then read John 13:1–5, the washing of feet, with Judas still at the table.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/gospel-of-judas.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Gospel of Judas** was known to **Irenaeus** around **AD 180**. The only copy, in **Coptic**, was found in Egypt in the **1970s**, rotted for **sixteen years** in a New York bank, and was published in **2006**.
- In it I **laugh** at my disciples for praying over bread to the **wrong god**. I gave thanks over bread with them, on the hillside and at the last supper.
- Its vision of **priests sacrificing their own families** is an angry, fair picture of religion that feeds on people.
- Judas is praised because he *will sacrifice the man that clothes me*. My **body** was not a costume.
- Scholars now argue whether this Judas is a **hero** or a **demon**. In my story he is a **friend** who sold me and could not live with it.

24. The Protoevangelium of James: My Mother's Childhood

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. It closes by claiming to be written by James, my brother, in Jerusalem after the death of Herod.

When: Probably about AD 150. The oldest copy, on papyrus, is from the 200s or 300s.

Where it fits: Before and around my birth: my mother's parents, her own birth and childhood, her marriage to Joseph, and my birth in Bethlehem, to Herod's killing of the children.

Which Bibles keep it: None. But it shaped the Christmas story, the names of my grandparents, and three feasts the old churches still keep.

Where you hear it in your Bible: It fills out Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2, and explains why Mark 6:3 can name my *brothers* and *sisters*.

How close it stays to me: Close in God hearing a woman shamed in the Temple. Far in making my mother's body a test of purity.

If you only read three chapters: Protoevangelium of James 3, Protoevangelium of James 18 and Protoevangelium of James 19–20.

WORDS TO KNOW

Protoevangelium — a Latin-Greek name given in the 1500s, meaning *first gospel*: the story before the gospel story.

Joachim and Anna — the names this book gives to my mother's parents. Your Bible never names them.

Perpetual virginity — the belief that my mother remained a virgin all her life, before, during and after my birth.

Midwife — a woman who helps another give birth.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

Joachim, a rich man, is turned away from offering his gifts in the Temple because he has no children. He goes into the desert to fast for forty days. His wife Anna mourns in her garden, under a laurel, beside a sparrow's nest. An angel comes to each of them: she will conceive. Anna gives birth to Mary and promises her to God.

At three, Mary is taken to live in the Temple, and is fed there by an angel. At twelve the priests decide she must leave before she defiles the sanctuary. They gather the widowers of Israel; a dove flies from Joseph's rod and lands on his head. Joseph, an old man with sons, takes her unwillingly as his ward.

While Joseph is away building, an angel tells Mary she will conceive, and she spins purple for the Temple veil and visits Elizabeth. At sixteen she is pregnant. Joseph grieves, an angel reassures him, and both are tested by the priests with bitter water and found innocent.

Going to Bethlehem for a census, Mary goes into labor on the road, and Joseph finds a cave. As he goes for a midwife, all of nature stands still. A bright cloud covers the cave, and the child appears. A woman named Salome refuses to believe a virgin has given birth until she examines Mary with her hand, and her hand burns as if on fire until she holds the child.

The Magi come. Herod orders the children killed. Elizabeth flees with John into a mountain that opens to hide them, and Herod's soldiers kill John's father, Zacharias, in the Temple.

Every Christmas pageant you have ever seen has a little of this book in it.

The cave in Bethlehem. Joseph as an old man. Mary riding a donkey. The names of my grandparents, Joachim and Anna. None of these is in your Bible. They come from this book, written about a hundred years after my death, and read so widely in the churches of the East that more than a hundred and forty Greek copies of it survive.¹

It is a tender book, full of wonder. It is also a book with a purpose, and the purpose is my mother's purity.

The woman under the laurel

It begins with shame. My grandfather Joachim, as this book calls him, is a rich man who brings double offerings to the Temple. On a great feast day another man stands in front of him and says he has no right to offer first, *because thou hast not made seed in Israel* (Protoevangelium of James 1:2). He has no children. Joachim goes out into the desert and fasts for forty days.

His wife Anna is left alone. She sits under a laurel tree in her garden and sees a sparrow's nest in its branches, and she cries out. *Alas! who begot me? and what womb produced me? because I have become a curse in the presence of the sons of Israel, and I have been reproached, and they have driven me in derision out of the temple of the Lord* (Protoevangelium of James 3:1). Even the birds have young, she says, and the beasts, and the waters, and the earth. Only she is barren.

And, behold, an angel of the Lord stood by, saying: Anna, Anna, the Lord hath heard thy prayer (Protoevangelium of James 4:1).

This is the oldest story in my people's Bible: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah. Luke tells it once more of Elizabeth. A woman shamed for having no child, laughed at, pushed out, and God hears her. The writer knew those stories well, and told one more.

I know who God hears. He hears the ones the Temple drives out.

A girl raised in the Temple

When Mary is three, her parents take her to the Temple to live. She dances on the step of the altar, and *all the house of Israel loved her. ... And Mary was in the temple of the Lord as if she were a dove that dwelt there, and she received food from the hand of an angel* (Protoevangelium of James 7:3–8:1).

It is a lovely picture, and it could never have happened. No girl lived in the Temple of Jerusalem. Women could not go beyond their own court. The writer did not know the Temple, or did not care. He wanted to show my mother as pure from her first years: raised in the holiest place on earth, fed by angels, never touched by the world.²

And then he shows you why she must leave. *When she was twelve years old there was held a council of the priests, saying: ... What then shall we do with her, lest perchance she defile the sanctuary of the Lord?* (Protoevangelium of James 8:2). At twelve she will begin to bleed, as women do. The priests send her away.

In this book even my mother, the purest girl in Israel, becomes unclean at twelve, for being a woman.

An old man with sons

When Mary must leave the Temple, the priests gather the widowers of Israel, each with a rod. From Joseph's rod a dove flies out and lands on his head. And Joseph refuses: *I have children, and I am an old man, and she is a young girl* (Protoevangelium of James 9:2). He is afraid of being laughed at.

This is the book's answer to a question my followers were asking. Mark's gospel names my family: *Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?* (Mark 6:3). If my mother remained a virgin all her life, who were they?

The Protoevangelium answers: Joseph's children from an earlier marriage. Joseph was old. My mother was his ward, more than his wife.

But your gospels never say Joseph had been married before, or that he was old. They simply call them my brothers and sisters. Matthew says Joseph *didn't know her sexually until she had given birth to her firstborn son* (Matthew 1:25). Many churches still hold to the Protoevangelium's answer. You should know that it comes from here, from a book written a century after me, and not from the gospels.

The world stood still

Then comes the most beautiful page in this book, and maybe in all the books in this volume.

Joseph leaves Mary in a cave on the road to Bethlehem and goes to find a midwife. And he tells what he saw. *And I Joseph was walking, and was not walking; and I looked up into the sky, and saw the sky astonished ... and the birds of the air keeping still* (Protoevangelium of James 18:2).

Workers sitting at a meal have their hands in the dish and do not lift them. A shepherd has raised his hand to strike his sheep, and his hand stays in the air. Young goats have their mouths in the river and do not drink. The whole world holds its breath.

And then it moves again, and a child has been born.

No one was there to see it, of course. It is a poem. But it is a true poem in one way: when God comes close, it is in a cave with animals, to a poor girl far from home, while the workers are eating and the shepherds are at their sheep.

Where the Protoevangelium and I part

And so you come to the scene I cannot keep.

The midwife comes out of the cave and tells a woman named Salome that a virgin has given birth. Salome says: *As the Lord my God liveth, unless I thrust in my finger, and search the parts, I will not believe that a virgin has brought forth* (Protoevangelium of James 19:3). She examines my mother with her hand, and cries out that her hand is burning, *dropping off as if burned with fire* (Protoevangelium of James 20:1). She is healed only when she picks up the baby.

My mother has just given birth in a cave, far from home, and the book has a stranger examine her body to prove she is still a virgin.

I understand why the writer did it. People were calling her a whore, and he wanted to prove them wrong. But he answered them on their own ground: as if a woman's worth is the state of her body, and must be proved by inspection.

Once, when I was teaching, a woman in the crowd called out to me: *Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which nursed you!* And I answered: *On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it* (Luke 11:27–28).

My mother is not blessed because of her body. She is blessed because she heard God and said yes. The song Luke gives her is not about purity. It is about the mighty pulled down from their thrones: *He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the rich away empty* (Luke 1:53).

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Mark 6:3 and Matthew 1:25.

You will find: my *brothers* and *sisters* named, and no earlier marriage for Joseph.

Then read Protoevangelium of James 18–20, the still world and Salome's test, and **Luke 11:27–28**.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/protoevangelium-of-james.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Protoevangelium of James** tells my mother's story from before her birth to mine. It was written about **AD 150** and survives in more than **140** Greek copies.
- It gave the churches the names **Joachim and Anna**, the **cave**, the **old Joseph**, and three **feasts**.
- It begins with **Anna**, shamed and **driven out of the Temple**, and God hears her.
- It explains my **brothers and sisters** as **Joseph's sons** by an earlier marriage. Your gospels never say so.
- It defends my mother against slander by having a stranger **examine her body**. I said *blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it*.

25. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: The Boy Who Killed His Playmates

AT A GLANCE

Who wrote it: Unknown. Some copies credit *Thomas the Israelite*. It has nothing to do with the Gospel of Thomas of the sayings.

When: Probably the second half of the 100s AD. A bishop knew one of its stories by about AD 180.

Where it fits: My boyhood in Nazareth, from age five to twelve. It ends with the one story of my boyhood in your Bible: in the Temple at twelve.

Which Bibles keep it: None. But it was copied in Greek, Syriac, Latin, Ethiopic, Georgian, Slavonic and Arabic, and one of its stories is in the Qur'an.

Where you hear it in your Bible: Its last chapter retells Luke 2:41–52. John 2:11 calls Cana *this beginning of his signs*, which leaves no room for its boyhood miracles.

How close it stays to me: Close in a boy who feeds the poor of his village. Far in a child god who kills whoever crosses him.

If you only read three chapters: Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2–5, Infancy Gospel of Thomas 12 and Infancy Gospel of Thomas 14.

WORDS TO KNOW

Infancy gospel — a story of my birth and childhood, written to fill in the years the four gospels leave out.

Sign — a miracle that points to who God is. John's gospel uses this word for my miracles.

Kor — a large measure of grain, about the load of a donkey or more.

Qur'an — the holy book of Islam, which honors me as a prophet and tells some stories of my birth and childhood.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

At five I am playing by a stream on the Sabbath, making pools of water and twelve sparrows out of clay. When Joseph scolds me for breaking the Sabbath, I clap my hands and the sparrows fly away. The son of Annas the scribe drains my pools with a stick, and I curse him and he withers like a tree. A boy runs into my shoulder in the street, and I say he will not go back the way he came, and he falls dead. The neighbors beg Joseph to teach me to bless, not to curse. When they complain, I strike them blind. Joseph pulls my ear.

A teacher named Zacchaeus tries to teach me my letters. I lecture him on the hidden meaning of the letter Alpha until he gives up in shame. Then I heal those I have cursed.

I raise a playmate named Zeno who fell from a roof, so he can say I did not push him. I heal a young man's foot cut by an axe. I carry water home in my cloak. I sow one grain of wheat and harvest a hundred kors, and give it to the poor of the village. I stretch a short board for Joseph.

A second teacher hits me on the head, and I curse him and he falls down. Joseph tells my mother not to let me out of the house, *because those that make him angry die*. A third teacher lets me teach, and I heal the second. I heal my brother James of a viper's bite and raise a dead baby and a dead builder.

At twelve I stay behind in the Temple in Jerusalem, questioning the teachers, and go home and obey my parents.

Your Bible is almost silent about my childhood, and this book shows you why that silence is wise.

Of my boyhood, the four gospels give you one story, from Luke. At twelve I stayed behind in the Temple, asking the teachers questions, and my parents found me after three days. Then: *Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men* (Luke 2:52). That is all.

People wanted more. If I was the Son of God as a man, what was I like as a boy? This book is one answer. It is the oldest surviving story of my childhood, and it is a story of a little boy with the power of God and no wisdom at all.

Twelve sparrows

The first scene is lovely. I am five years old, playing by a stream on the Sabbath. I make little pools and gather the water into them, and I shape *twelve sparrows* out of soft clay (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:2).

A neighbor runs to tell Joseph I am breaking the Sabbath. Joseph comes and scolds me. *And Jesus clapped His hands, and cried out to the sparrows, and said to them: Off you go! And the sparrows flew, and went off crying* (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:4).

That one story is the best-loved in the book. It has the child at play, the Sabbath argument I would have all my life, and the clay coming alive, as Adam did when God breathed into him. It traveled further than any other story of my boyhood.

He is killing our children

Then the book turns, and it never really turns back.

The son of Annas the scribe takes a willow branch and lets the water out of my pools. I am angry. *Behold, even now thou shalt be dried up like a tree, and thou shalt not bring forth either leaves, or root, or fruit. And straightway that boy was quite dried up* (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 3:2–3).

I walk through the village, and a boy runs into me and bumps my shoulder. *And Jesus was angry, and said to him: Thou shalt not go back the way thou camest. And immediately he fell down dead* (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 4:1).

The dead boy's parents come to Joseph: *Since thou hast such a child, it is impossible for thee to live with us in the village; or else teach him to bless, and not to curse: for he is killing our children* (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 4:2). When Joseph speaks to me about it, I say *they shall bear their punishment*, and the people who complained go blind (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 5:1).

Later, a teacher strikes me on the head, and *the child, being in pain, cursed him; and immediately he swooned away, and fell to the ground on his face*. Joseph tells my mother: *Do not let him go outside of the door, because those that make him angry die* (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 14:2–3).

That is the boy in this book. Every word he speaks happens, good or bad, and he speaks in anger.

Where did this man get these things?

Your gospels say it did not happen that way, in two ways.

John's gospel tells of the water turned into wine at a wedding in Cana, when I was a grown man, and says: *This beginning of his signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee* (John 2:11). The beginning. No sparrows before it, no withered boys.

And when I came back to Nazareth as a man and taught in the synagogue, the people who had known me all my life were astonished. *Where did this man get these things? ... Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?* (Mark 6:2–3). If I had struck their children dead and raised others, and stretched boards in my father's shop, they would not have asked where I got my power. They would have known.

I grew up as boys grow up, in a carpenter's house in a small village. I learned my letters. I learned a trade. I *increased in wisdom*. That is the boy your gospels give you, and I would rather you knew him.

Wheat for the whole village

There is one scene in this book that I would keep, and it is short.

At eight years old I go out with Joseph at sowing time. He sows his field, and I sow one grain of wheat. And when I harvest and thresh it, it makes a hundred kors, a huge store of grain, *and calling all the poor of the village to the threshing-floor, He gave them the corn* (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 12:2).

For once the boy in this book does what I did as a man. He sees the hungry of the village and feeds them. It is the loaves and fishes before the loaves and fishes. And it is the only miracle in the book done for the poor.

Where the Infancy Gospel and I part

You know the problem already. The boy in this book kills his playmates for bumping into him. He blinds the neighbors for complaining. He curses his teacher for hitting him. *They shall bear their punishment*.

Even as a grown man, I had a temper. I drove the money changers out of the Temple. I cursed a fig tree. But I never once used God's power to hurt a person. When two of my friends, James and John, wanted to call down fire on a village that would not welcome us, *he turned and rebuked them* (Luke 9:55). Some old copies add: *For the Son of Man didn't come to destroy men's lives, but to save them* (Luke 9:56).

And about children: I did not strike them down. When my friends tried to keep them away from me, I was angry, and said, *Allow the little children to come to me! Don't forbid them, for God's Kingdom belongs to such as these* (Mark 10:14).

The parents in this book said it best: *teach him to bless, and not to curse*. Some people still picture God like this boy, all-powerful and quick to punish anyone who crosses him. I came to show you the opposite. *Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you* (Luke 6:28).

CHECK IT YOURSELF

Look up: Luke 2:41–52.

You will find: the only story of my boyhood in your Bible: questions in the Temple, and growing *in wisdom and stature*.

Then read *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 3–4, and *John* 2:11.

Go deeper: the longer history behind this chapter, and every source it rests on, are free at LessonsOfJesus.com/infancy-gospel-of-thomas.

THE SHORT VERSION

- The **Infancy Gospel of Thomas** tells of my boyhood from **five to twelve**. It dates from the **later 100s**, and its **clay sparrows** reached the **Qur'an**.
- In it I **curse** a boy who drains my pools, **kill** a boy who bumps me, and **blind** the neighbors. *He is killing our children*, they say.
- Your gospels say my first sign was at **Cana**, as a man, and that Nazareth was **astonished** at my power.
- The book's best moment: a boy who grows **one grain** into a harvest and gives it all to **the poor of the village**.
- I **never** used God's power to hurt anyone. I said **let the children come**.

AFTER THE LAST PAGE

You have read through twenty-five books that your Bible either keeps on the edges or does not keep at all.

You will have noticed that they argue with each other, just as the books inside your Bible do. Judith wins by a lie and a sword, and Susanna is saved by a young man's questions. 1 Maccabees praises the Hammer and his army, and 4 Maccabees praises martyrs who never raised a hand. Sirach tells you to keep the sinner at arm's length, and the Prayer of Manasseh tells you God made repentance for sinners. Jubilees tells Jacob not to eat with the nations, and Tobit sends his son across the world with a stranger who turns out to be an angel.

You will also have noticed that the lost gospels are not lost treasure. A few of them keep words of mine that sound true, like *blessed are the poor* in Thomas, or *do not lay down any rules beyond what I appointed* in Mary. But most of them were written to win an argument, about secret knowledge, or my mother's body, or who killed me, and they bent me to win it. The same thing happened, more quietly, in some of the books that were kept.

So here is what I would leave you with.

A book is not true because a council voted it in, and it is not false because a council left it out. Councils were men. They argued, and sometimes they were

right, and sometimes they were frightened, and sometimes they were serving an emperor.

Hold every book up to the same light. Does it lift the poor, or forget them? Does it forgive, or does it curse? Does it welcome the stranger, or build a wall? Does it serve, or does it rule? Does it bring God's kingdom down to the earth, or offer a way to escape it?

I gave you that light already, in the things I said and did. You do not need a council to use it. You need only to read, and weigh, and choose, the way my people always have.

IF THIS BOOK MEANT SOMETHING TO YOU

You have read all twenty-five chapters. Thank you for staying.

Pass it on. This book is free to copy and share, whole or in part. The simplest way is the address: **LessonsOfJesus.com**.

Leave a tip, if you want to. Nothing is owed. The book was given freely, and it stays free whether or not anyone pays for it. If you would like to thank the person who made it, you can leave a tip at **LessonsOfJesus.com/give**.

A tip buys nothing that everyone else does not already have. That is the point.

BACK OF THE BOOK

A Simple Timeline

Most dates before my birth are approximate. *c.* means *about*.

Kings, exile and return

- **c. 1000 BC** — David, king of Israel. The setting of Psalm 151.
- **697–642 BC** — Manasseh, king of Judah. The setting of his prayer.
- **586 BC** — Babylon destroys Jerusalem and the first Temple. The setting of Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah.
- **539 BC** — Cyrus of Persia conquers Babylon. The Jews begin to return. The setting of 1 Esdras.

Under the Greek kings

- **332 BC** — Alexander the Great takes Judea. Greek kings rule for the next two hundred years.
- **c. 300–200 BC** — The oldest parts of 1 Enoch are written. The Greek translation of the Law begins in Alexandria.
- **c. 225–175 BC** — Tobit is written.
- **217 BC** — Ptolemy IV wins at Raphia. The setting of 3 Maccabees.
- **c. 180 BC** — Ben Sira writes his book of wisdom in Jerusalem.
- **167 BC** — Antiochus IV bans the law of Moses and defiles the Temple. The Maccabean revolt begins.
- **164 BC** — Judas Maccabeus retakes and rededicates the Temple: the first Hanukkah.
- **c. 160–150 BC** — Jubilees is written.
- **c. 150–75 BC** — Judith, the additions to Esther and Daniel, 1 and 2 Maccabees and 1 Esdras are written.

- **132 BC** — Ben Sira's grandson begins translating his book into Greek, in Egypt.

Under Rome

- **63 BC** — The Roman general Pompey takes Jerusalem. Rome rules from now on.
- **c. 50 BC–AD 40** — The Wisdom of Solomon is written, in Alexandria.
- **37–4 BC** — Herod the Great rules Judea for Rome.
- **c. 4 BC** — I am born.
- **c. AD 19–72** — 4 Maccabees is probably written.
- **c. AD 30** — Rome crucifies me in Jerusalem.

After the Temple fell

- **AD 70** — Rome destroys Jerusalem and the second Temple.
- **c. AD 100** — 2 Esdras is written.
- **c. AD 100–150** — The Gospel of Thomas is probably collected.
- **c. AD 150** — The Protoevangelium of James and the Gospel of Peter are written. The Gospel of Mary is written in the same century.
- **c. AD 180** — Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, condemns the Gospel of Judas.
- **c. AD 200** — Serapion, bishop of Antioch, warns against the Gospel of Peter.

Who decided

- **AD 367** — Athanasius lists the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.
- **AD 393 and 397** — Councils at Hippo and Carthage include Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach and the Maccabees.
- **AD 405** — Jerome finishes his Latin Bible.
- **1534** — Luther prints these books as a separate *Apocrypha* between the Testaments.
- **1546** — The Council of Trent declares most of them scripture for Catholics.

- **1611** — The King James Bible prints all fourteen of Part One between the Testaments.
- **1646** — The Westminster Confession declares them *no part of the canon*.
- **1826** — The British and Foreign Bible Society stops paying for Bibles that include them.

Found again

- **1886–87** — The Gospel of Peter is found in a monk's grave at Akhmim, Egypt.
- **1896** — The book holding the Gospel of Mary is bought in Cairo.
- **1945** — The Nag Hammadi books, including the Gospel of Thomas, are found in Egypt.
- **1947** — The first Dead Sea Scrolls are found at Qumran, including copies of Tobit, Sirach, 1 Enoch and Jubilees.
- **2006** — The Gospel of Judas is published, about thirty years after it was found.

Who's Who

The chapter numbers tell you where each person appears most.

- **Antiochus IV** — Greek king of Syria who banned the law of Moses in 167 BC. Chapters 13, 14, 17.
- **Athanasius** — bishop of Alexandria who listed the New Testament in AD 367. Before We Start.
- **Augustine** — bishop of Hippo in North Africa, around AD 400, who counted these books as scripture. Before We Start.
- **Baruch** — Jeremiah's secretary, in whose name the book of Baruch was written. Chapter 8.
- **Ben Sira** — Jewish teacher in Jerusalem who wrote the book called Sirach about 180 BC. Chapter 7.
- **R. H. Charles** — English scholar whose translations of 1 Enoch and Jubilees are quoted in this book. Chapters 18, 19.
- **Daniel** — the wise Jew at the Babylonian court, hero of Susanna and Bel and the Dragon. The Song of the Three is set inside his book. Chapters 9–11.
- **Eleazar** — an old man martyred under Antiochus in 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees, and an old priest who prays in 3 Maccabees. Chapters 14, 16, 17.
- **Enoch** — the man in Genesis who *walked with God*, in whose name 1 Enoch was written. Chapter 18.
- **Ezra** — priest and scribe who brought the law back from Babylon. Chapters 1, 2.
- **Herod the Great** — king of Judea for Rome when I was born. Chapter 24.
- **Holofernes** — the Assyrian general whose head Judith cuts off. Chapter 4.
- **Irenaeus** — bishop of Lyon around AD 180, who wrote against the Gospel of Judas and other books. Chapters 23, 25.

- **Jerome** — translator of the Latin Bible, who said these books were for instruction, not doctrine. Before We Start.
- **Joachim and Anna** — the names the Protoevangelium gives to my mother's parents. Chapter 24.
- **Josephus** — Jewish historian of the first century AD. Chapters 1, 13, 16, 17.
- **Judas Iscariot** — the friend who handed me over. Chapter 23.
- **Judas Maccabeus** — *the Hammer*, who led the revolt against Antiochus. Chapters 13, 14.
- **Judith** — the widow of Bethulia who kills Holofernes. Chapter 4.
- **Martin Luther** — German reformer who moved these books into a section of their own in 1534. Before We Start.
- **Manasseh** — the worst king of Judah, given a prayer of repentance. Chapter 12.
- **Mary Magdalene** — my follower, the first to see me risen, who teaches the men in the Gospel of Mary. Chapters 21, 22.
- **Mastema** — the chief of the evil spirits in Jubilees. Chapter 19.
- **Mattathias** — the old priest who began the Maccabean revolt. Chapter 13.
- **Ptolemy IV** — Greek king of Egypt who drives the elephants at the Jews in 3 Maccabees. Chapter 16.
- **Raphael** — the angel who travels with Tobias. Chapter 3.
- **Salome** — the woman in the Protoevangelium who doubts my mother. Chapter 24.
- **Serapion** — bishop of Antioch who warned against the Gospel of Peter. Chapter 21.
- **Susanna** — the woman falsely accused by two elders. Chapter 10.
- **Thomas** — one of the twelve, whose name was put on the Gospel of Thomas. A *Thomas the Israelite* is named in some copies of the Infancy Gospel. Chapters 20, 25.
- **Tobit and Tobias** — the blind father and his son. Chapter 3.

- **Uriel** — the angel who answers Ezra in 2 Esdras and guides Enoch. Chapters 2, 18.
- **Zerubbabel** — the young guard who wins the contest of wisdom and leads the people home. Chapter 1.

Notes

The Bible references are in the text itself. These notes give the sources for the history, and the details behind anything that is debated. Tap a note number in the text to come here, and tap ↩ to go back.

BEFORE WE START: THE SHELF WITH NO EDGES

1. Mishnah Yadayim 3:5, compiled about AD 200. ↩
2. On the Greek Bible and the additional books, see Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). The great Greek Bibles of the 300s and 400s, Codex Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, do not agree exactly on which additional books they contain. ↩
3. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39 (AD 367). Jerome, preface to the books of Solomon (the Vulgate *Prologue to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*), and the *Prologus Galeatus*. The Council of Hippo (393) and the Third Council of Carthage (397); see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007). ↩
4. Luther's heading in the 1534 Wittenberg Bible. Council of Trent, Session 4, *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures* (April 8, 1546). The term *deuterocanonical* was introduced by Sixtus of Siena in 1566. ↩
5. Thirty-Nine Articles, Article 6 (1563, final form 1571). Westminster Confession of Faith 1.3 (1646). On the British and Foreign Bible Society's decision of 1826, see Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957). ↩
6. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church counts its Bible as eighty-one books, though the exact contents of the list vary between the *narrower* and *broad*er canons. ↩

1. 1 ESDRAS

1. 1 Esdras 1 parallels 2 Chronicles 35–36; 1 Esdras 2:1–15 parallels Ezra 1; 2:16–30 parallels Ezra 4:7–24; 1 Esdras 5:7–9:36 parallels Ezra 2–10; 1 Esdras 9:37–55 parallels Nehemiah 7:73–8:12. The contest of the three bodyguards (1 Esdras 3:1–5:6) has no parallel in the Hebrew Bible. On date and setting, see Zipora Talshir, *1 Esdras: From Origin to Translation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999). ↩
2. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.1–158, which follows 1 Esdras and retells the contest at 11.33–63. Josephus was born in AD 37 or 38 and finished the *Antiquities* in 93–94. ↩
3. The Latin Vulgate of 3 Esdras 4:41 reads *magna est veritas et praeualet*. ↩

2. 2 ESDRAS

1. The setting “in the thirtieth year after the ruin of the city” (2 Esdras 3:1) mirrors the thirty years after 586 BC and points to about AD 100. The three heads of the eagle (chapters 11–12) are usually identified with the Flavian emperors Vespasian (69–79), Titus (79–81) and Domitian (81–96). See

Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), and Bruce M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983). ↵

2. 4 Ezra survives in Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian and a Coptic fragment, all apparently translated from a lost Greek version, itself translated from a lost Hebrew or Aramaic original. Chapters 1–2 are often called 5 Ezra and chapters 15–16 6 Ezra; they survive in Latin, with a small Greek fragment of 15:57–59 (P.Oxy. 1010), and both are usually taken to be Christian. Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, introduction. ↵
3. 2 Esdras 14:44–46. The count of twenty-four books for the Hebrew scriptures is also found in the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 14b–15a. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.38–41 (about AD 95), counts twenty-two. ↵

3. TOBIT

1. Tobit 1:4–5 places the division of the kingdom (about 930 BC) in Tobit’s youth; Tobit 1:2 and 1:10 place his exile in the Assyrian deportation (722 BC or shortly before). Tobit 14:11 gives his age at death as 158 in the text quoted here; other versions differ. On the book’s genre and date, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Tobit* (Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003). ↵
2. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a. ↵
3. Tobit 4:10 and 12:9 were cited in Catholic teaching on satisfaction for sin; Protestant writers objected to them. On the reception of Tobit in the Reformation, see Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, introduction. ↵

4. JUDITH

1. Nineveh fell to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC; Nebuchadnezzar II reigned in Babylon from 605 to 562 BC. On the book’s deliberate historical confusion, see Carey A. Moore, *Judith* (Anchor Bible 40; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), introduction. ↵

5. THE ADDITIONS TO ESTHER

1. The Hebrew Esther contains no mention of God. Fragments of every other book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther (and, by some counts, Nehemiah, often counted with Ezra) have been identified among the Dead Sea Scrolls. On the additions and their use of the divine name, see Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (Anchor Bible 44; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977). The colophon (Addition F 11, at the end of Greek Esther 10:3 in the text quoted here) dates the Greek Esther to “the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra,” usually taken as 114 BC (Ptolemy IX) or 78–77 BC (Ptolemy XII). ↵
2. Additions B and E, the two royal decrees, are written in polished Greek and were probably composed in Greek; Additions A, C, D and F may go back to a Hebrew or Aramaic original. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*. ↵

6. THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

1. On the date (most often placed between about 50 BC and AD 40) and the Alexandrian setting, see David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (Anchor Bible 43; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), introduction. ↵

2. The Muratorian Fragment, a Latin list of New Testament books usually dated to the late second century, lines 69–71, which names “the Wisdom written by friends of Solomon in his honor” among the books accepted by the church. ↩

7. SIRACH

1. The Greek of Sirach 50:27 gives “Jesus son of Sirach Eleazar of Jerusalem.” The Hebrew manuscript B from the Cairo Genizah gives “Simeon son of Yeshua son of Eleazar son of Sira” (50:27 and 51:30). The grandson’s Prologue dates his arrival in Egypt to the thirty-eighth year of King Euergetes, Ptolemy VIII, that is, 132 BC. See Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (Anchor Bible 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), introduction. ↩
2. On the two readings of Sirach 25:24, see John R. Levison, “Is Eve to Blame? A Contextual Analysis of Sirach 25:24,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985), who argues that the verse refers to the evil wife of the surrounding passage. ↩

8. BARUCH AND THE LETTER OF JEREMIAH

1. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon (556–539 BC), who left him in charge of the city; Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC. Compare Baruch 1:15–2:19 with Daniel 9:4–19. See Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (Anchor Bible 44; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), on Baruch. ↩

9. THE SONG OF THE THREE

1. On the date and on verse 15 as a reflection of the suspension of the Temple sacrifices under Antiochus IV (167–164 BC; 1 Maccabees 1:44–59), see Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (Anchor Bible 44; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), on the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men. ↩

10. SUSANNA

11. BEL AND THE DRAGON

12. THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH

13. 1 MACCABEES

1. On the popularity of the names Simon and Judah in first-century Judea, see Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, part 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), where Simon is the most common male name and Judah among the most common. ↩
2. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.380, and *Jewish War* 1.97, on Alexander Jannaeus (ruled 103–76 BC) crucifying eight hundred of his opponents. ↩

14. 2 MACCABEES

1. Council of Trent, Session 4, Decree on the Canonical Scriptures (1546), and Session 25, Decree on Purgatory (1563). On the use of 2 Maccabees 12 in the Reformation debates, see Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, commentary on 12:38–45. ↩

15. PSALM 151

16. 3 MACCABEES

1. On the title, date, setting and relation to Esther, see Hugh Anderson, “3 Maccabees,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), and Sara Raup Johnson, *Historical Fictions and Hellenistic Jewish Identity: Third Maccabees in Its Cultural Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). The battle of Raphia was fought in 217 BC. ↵

17. 4 MACCABEES

1. On the book’s form, Stoic language and purpose, see Hugh Anderson, “4 Maccabees,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), and David A. deSilva, *4 Maccabees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). The date of AD 19–72 is often argued from 4 Maccabees 4:2, which places Syria, Phoenicia and Cilicia under one governor, an arrangement of those years. ↵

18. 1 ENOCH

1. 1 Enoch 1:9 survives in Ge’ez, in Greek (in the Akhmim codex) and in part in Aramaic, in the Qumran manuscript 4Q204. Quotations of 1 Enoch in this chapter are from R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch* (London: SPCK, 1917), which is in the public domain. Bible quotations are from the World English Bible. ↵
2. On the five parts and their dates, see George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), and Michael A. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch* (Oxford, 1978). Fragments of eleven Aramaic manuscripts of 1 Enoch were found in Qumran Cave 4: seven containing parts of the Book of the Watchers, the Book of Dreams and the Letter of Enoch, and four of the Astronomical Book (4Q201–202, 4Q204–212; 4Q203 is the separate Book of Giants). The oldest, 4Q208, an astronomical text, dates from about 200 BC or earlier. No fragment of the Parables (chapters 37–71) has been found at Qumran. J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford, 1976). ↵
3. On the date of the Parables, see the essays in Gabriele Boccaccini, ed., *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), where most contributors place them before AD 70, between the late first century BC and the early first century AD. Milik’s proposal of a Christian date in the third century AD has been widely rejected. The reference to the Parthians and Medes in 56:5–7 is usually connected with the Parthian invasion of Judea in 40 BC. ↵
4. See George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), on the Watchers story as a reflection of the wars of Alexander’s successors. ↵
5. Leviticus 16:8, 10, 26: Hebrew *la’aza’zel*, “for Azazel.” In the Aramaic fragments of 1 Enoch the angel is called Asael; in the later Greek and Ge’ez copies the name has merged with Azazel. ↵
6. On the parallels between 1 Enoch 22 and Luke 16:19–31, see Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). ↵
7. George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Riches, the Rich, and God’s Judgment in 1 Enoch 92–105 and the Gospel According to Luke,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979). ↵

8. Letter of Barnabas 4:3 (“as Enoch says”). Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* 1.3. Augustine, *City of God* 15.23. Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 4. ↵

19. JUBILEES

20. THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

1. For the debate over the date and character of Thomas, see Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), and Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1993). The quotations of Thomas in this chapter follow the translation of Thomas O. Lambdin in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). ↵

21. THE GOSPEL OF PETER

1. The Akhmim codex (Cairo, Egyptian Museum, P.Cair. 10759), found in 1886–87 and published by Urbain Bouriant in 1892. See Paul Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Quotations of the Gospel of Peter follow the translation of J. Armitage Robinson in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9 (1896), with the standard chapter and verse numbers. ↵

22. THE GOSPEL OF MARY

1. The Berlin Codex (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502), purchased in Cairo in 1896 and published by Walter Till in 1955. The Greek fragments are P.Oxy. 3525 and P.Rylands 463. See Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003). ↵
2. Gospel of Mary, Berlin Codex pages 7–19. Short quotations follow the translation of George W. MacRae and R. McL. Wilson in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). ↵

23. THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

1. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.31.1, quoted from the translation in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1. ↵
2. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006); pages 33–34 (laughter at the thanksgiving), 38–40 (the vision of the temple), 56 (*the man that clothes me*). Short quotations follow this translation. ↵
3. On the polemic against other churches and their leaders, see Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007). ↵

24. THE PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

1. On the date, manuscripts and influence, see Lily C. Vuong, *The Protevangelium of James* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), and J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). The oldest copy is Papyrus Bodmer 5. Quotations follow the translation of Alexander Walker in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8 (1886), with the standard chapter and verse numbers. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*; the *Decretum Gelasianum* 5. ↵
2. On the book’s unfamiliarity with Temple practice and its concern with Mary’s purity, see Vuong, *The Protevangelium of James*, and her *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*

(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). ↵

25. THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS

*Some Bibles keep these books. Some leave them out.
Some no church ever kept.*

This is how he reads them.

Twenty-five short chapters, in the first person: the Apocrypha of the King James Bible, the extra books of the Orthodox, 1 Enoch and Jubilees, and six lost gospels. What each one says, who wrote it, which Bibles keep it, and how close it stays to what he taught.

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Who decided Protestants should stop printing these books?

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