

3 Maccabees

Between the Old Testament and New Testament, there were a number of books written which did not make the Bible, for a variety of reasons. Some of those books are listed in the Belgic Confession as being useful for us to help us better understand our Bible, but they are not to be considered as having the same value or authority as the Bible. One of the books not listed is the book of 3 Maccabees, one of 4 books written during the time of the Maccabees family, a family which sought to overthrow the Greek armies which were oppressing the Jewish people. Some of the stories told in these books could well have historical origins, but it is unlikely that the story told in 3 Maccabees does.

The story goes like this: in Alexandria, Egypt, there was a large population of Jews who were well respected by the community. Unfortunately, after feeling offended by them, the king had taken a strong dislike toward the Jews, and he sought to round them up, imprison them in a stadium and have them killed. He was unsuccessful in rounding up all the Jews because, according to his scribes, there were many of them that there was not enough paper and ink to write down all their names. Nonetheless, the king decided to proceed with the execution of the Jews he had managed to capture, and he proposed to do so in a very strange manner. In his possession he had 500 elephants, and he told the keeper of the elephants to drug them so that they would become maddened and uncontrollable. The king proposed that in the morning, after feeding the elephants drugs all night that these elephants be released into the stadium where he had imprisoned the Jews. The people of the city would be able to watch the slaughter from the stands.

The Jews, well aware that their lives were soon to end, cried out to God, praying that he hears their prayer and deliver them. They appealed to God's promises to protect his people as he had done with Daniel in the lion's den and Jonah in the belly of the fish. They knew that God could deliver them, and they asked him to act again in a powerful way.

As morning dawned, and the people gathered to watch the elephants let loose in the stadium, the king did not appear. Apparently, he had been drinking the night before, and his attendants did not dare to awaken him. Finally, when it was too late, he woke up, and he decided that he would proceed with his terrible plan on the next morning. That night he had a big party again, and when he woke, he was confused. He had forgotten his plan, and it took him a while to be brought back to his senses. Again, the slaughter was delayed. Finally, on the third morning, he woke in time, and he went to the stadium to watch the elephants rampage over the defenseless Jews. When he arrived, however, as the story tells it, he saw the Jews pleading to their God with many tears, and he had a change in heart. He decided to back down on his plan and instead threw a huge week-long party for the Jews he had intended to kill. At the end of the party, the Jews were allowed to return home to their lives. It is stated that they continued to hold a celebration every year, remembering their deliverance, a celebration that would have been local in Alexandria and which took place sometime in May.

This is a rather fantastical story, and there is no evidence that anything like this happened. Nevertheless, it is true that the Jews in the Greek empire were persecuted severely from time to time, and they sought

God's help. They believed firmly that God could deliver them, and they cried out to him for reprieve. Usually, in the books of the Maccabees, it was through military action led by the Maccabean family, and stories of heroic conquests and victories are common. However, in this story, the salvation of God's people came in a rather odd way. Helpless in the stadium, there was no one to rescue them, no military leader to rouse them to action and no weapons that they could use. All they could do was cry out to God for help.

And help came, and it came in a very strange way. The king was a drunk, and he loved to party, so God used that. In his drunkenness, the king first passed out on the first night and his mind became clouded on the second. God used the sinfulness of this powerful king to accomplish his purposes. Then, when all seemed lost and the king appeared in the morning to watch the stampeding elephants, God changed the king's heart. He felt remorse for his decision, and instead of killing God's people, he blessed them.

While we recognize this story to be fantastical, and while it does not deserve a place in the Bible, we do get a glimpse of the mindset of the Jews in the years between the testaments, a time when they suffered deeply. While God did use the Maccabees to deliver his people (the story of Hannukah is rooted in the Maccabees), he does not need human intervention to rescue his people. God has the ability to use people and circumstances to answer prayers. God decided to use the drunkenness of a king to answer prayer. Ironically, a story that could have ended in terrible tragedy is darkly comical.

In some ways, this story from Alexandria, Egypt is similar to the story told in the book of Esther. While Esther's story has historical basis, it contains the same theme: God doesn't need powerful people to save his people. He uses whatever means is at hand. Thus, as we recall, the king in the book of Esther grew to dislike his wife, and he sent her away, moving him to seek a new wife. He chose Esther. When the king was ill-advised to destroy the Jewish people, all seemed lost until Esther stepped in and without raising a finger in violence, she convinced the king to spare her and her people. And, as in the story in 3 Maccabees, not only were the Jewish people saved, but they were honoured in an edict by the king.

Perhaps Paul had these stories in mind when, in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that God brought salvation through the one who Greeks saw as being foolish and Jews understood to be rejected. Yet, Jesus, who lifted not a finger to defeat God's enemies, is the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). In fact, it was through the cross and the apparent defeat of Jesus that God won complete victory over the devil and his evil followers.

The book of 3 Maccabees is easily found on the Internet and takes no more than half an hour to read. If you do read it, pay special attention to the prayers, for in them we see a deep trust in the Lord on the part of the Jews, a trust that is not betrayed.

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