

W 1. Journal Study Questions

Instructions: Choose one of the following texts to read and answer the questions asked. Each offers insight into the world of the 2nd Temple period, though none is considered part of the canon (the Catholic Bible identifies these as deuterocanonical = 2nd canon or additional canonical writings). Their value is that we see real people of faith trying to make sense of their struggles, just like we do when confronting crises that rock our very foundations. Notice that the setting of the exile is still fresh in the mind of the writer, much like 9/11 is still fresh in the minds of those who experience it.

Option 2: The writer of this delightful little story expresses Jewish attitudes toward God and the gods of the nations. It is considered the first detective story ever written and reminds me of the popular stories of Sherlock Holmes. Once again, the setting recalls the trauma of exile but puts a positive spin on God's care for the Jews during this time. The story involves Daniel and his keen wisdom over the gods of Babylon and their priestly representatives.

Bel and the Dragon (Apocrypha)

Questions:

1. **What surprised or delighted you most about these little stories? Did you have any concerns about what you read or how the author expressed himself?** I thought the reading was straight forward and easy to follow. I thought there was something familiar about the story, then I remembered that we have children's books about Bel and the Dragon. Maybe it's not the same source. My only question is that the account of why Daniel was thrown into the Lion's den is slightly different than what we read in the bible. Perhaps the biblical account is just shortened. What I thought was really great, was the attitude of Daniel that the writer conveyed. He was not threatened by the King and certainly not by their dumb idols made of clay!
2. **What beliefs about God and the nations' gods do you think would have been encouraging to Jews living under the rule of the Gentiles? Why?** These Gods were of no comparison to the God of the Israelites. They were lifeless, dumb idols that had no power in comparison to Yaweh. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the Almighty who demonstrated His love and care for them. Perhaps living in this culture that worshipped idols of stone and clay, would have given the Jews confidence because their God, was alive and powerful, demonstrating His favor and goodness to them over and over. They had experienced God in so many ways.
3. **What can we learn about this time from the themes or ideas presented in these little stories?** The Jews faced a pagan culture which was not enlightened. They had no real authority and believed in superstition, fables and sorceries. They were threatened by thinking that was different from theirs. It seemed easy for Daniel to challenge their claims to the authenticity of their idol gods. Daniel knew that his God, the God of The Jews was faithful and would show up on his behalf.
4. **Do you think any of these sentiments would be encouraging to people today as they struggle with the uncertainties of our day?** They could not perceive the God of the Jews, just as the people of our day who do not know Jesus cannot perceive the Kingdom of God, nor the message of the gospel without the grace of God opening the eyes of their understanding. We should be confident that we because we have an even better covenant, founded on even better promises, we can face the darkness of our world knowing that we have the victory. If God showed up for the Jews under the old covenant, how much more has He given His Holy Spirit freely to all who believe. We have confidence before God because of the victory that Jesus accomplished for us through the cross.

W 2. Journal Study Questions

Instructions: The following text was written during the nearly 100 years of Jewish independence from Gentile rule, and while it is not a part of the Protestant bibles, it does occur in the Catholic Apocrypha. There is a simple explanation for these differences: (1) Protestants adopted the Hebrew canon of the Scriptures whereas (2) Catholics adopted the Greek canon that resulted from the translation of the Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint). The LXX (= Septuagint) included several popular writings from the period when the Greek translations were made. You could say that these additional writings were considered inspiring for Diaspora communities struggling to remain faithful while surrounded by pagans. They are considered helpful, but not necessarily canonical.

Our 2nd Temple Document Reading: The writer of 2 Maccabees is a 2nd Temple Jew living under the Hasmonean rule. He is reflecting on how the Jews gained their freedom during a time of cruelty and oppression by Antiochus Epiphanes. In some ways, the author is trying to justify the Hasmoneans as God's faithful servants, though some Jewish groups would have argued they were corrupt. What all Jews could agree with is the faithfulness of those who were willing to risk death to remain loyal to YHWH. This is a story of martyrs that took place during the first religious war in history, the Maccabean Revolt.

2 Maccabees

Letter to the Jewish Diaspora Community in Egypt

Questions:

1. What did you learn about this challenging period of history that you did not know before?

I did not realize just how much the Jews suffered under their captors rule. I did not realize that the scriptures in Heb 11 were recounting these martyrs. I can't imagine the wickedness that would do such things.

2. What did you learn about martyrdom? About God? About sin?

They faced tremendous challenges as they choose faithfulness to God over the strong desire to live. Most of us are only vaguely familiar with the sufferings of Christ prior to the crucifixion. God allows this because it gives others hope and the sacrifice is never in vain. Sin in the unredeemed man is unconscionable.

3. What was the attitude of this writer toward the Greek?

He seemed to make it clear that God has the last word and He will punish evil in the end.

4. How has your understanding of the Jews living before the time of Jesus changed?

Their loyalty, faith and bravery is remarkable and more than inspiring. Although, it was hard to read of the cruelty enacted upon them. I was grieved by the evil that men could do such things to those who did nothing except refuse to defile themselves and disobey God. These martyrs had such great faith in God and were unwilling to compromise.

5. What does this background add to your understanding of the teaching given by the author of Hebrews? Why do you think he included these well-known stories about the Jewish martyrs from this time?

This background definitely sheds more light to what is written by the author of Hebrews. He includes the sufferings of men and women who had one thing in common, their faith toward God. He uses these accounts to strengthen the faith of those he has written to, and for those to come. He is giving hope to the church because persecution and suffering are part of being a follower of Christ. He says they obtained a good testimony through faith. It helps us to examine ourselves in light of those who have gone before us.

Week 3: Spiritual Learning Journal

Read Matthew 2 below from a more literal translation, laid out in a narrative format.

Questions to Consider:

1. Explain what seems to be Matthew's play on the title "king of the Jews" found in chapter 2 from what you learned from this week's lesson.

This was the title also given to Herod by the Romans. Matthew is referencing the messiah as the true King of the Jews in contrast to King Herod. This is what the prophet foretold in Micah 5.

2. Choose two other background issues that help clarify Matthew's message. What did you learn that you had never seen before? In what way has your understanding of this chapter been stretched or deepened by knowing more about these two issues?

I would say that each of the other background issues help clarify Matthew's message about the true King of the Jews. The Magi who were aware of the signs in the heavens would signify the birth of a King. The gold - gifts for a King, signifying power and wealth, the Frankincense, a perfume for royalty and the Myrrh foreshadowing the messiah's death. The reference to Bethlehem points to the Davidic monarchy, and also where Samuel anointed David as King.

Matthew is showing that Jesus is the Messiah as foretold in the scriptures, and signs in the heavens.