

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term II.2

### Opening Comments

As we saw last week, when Israelites thought of death, they thought not of extinction, but of descent to Sheol, a place of darkness and chaos where darkness is like light, and there they would be gathered to their ancestors. This is why Jacob wants to die of his grief, so that he can join his beloved son Joseph in Sheol. However, as we noted last time, those in Sheol lose all contact with the living (though Samuel is brought back from Sheol briefly to tell Saul that God has become his enemy), and more importantly they lose all contact with God. Hence we are to use this life to praise God, thank God, love God, declare God's faithfulness, and teach God's commandments to our children, as it says in the Shema. It should be noted, however, that there are passages of Scripture which indicate that our lives end in the grave, with no reference to Sheol as a further destination.

**Psalm 90:**<sup>3</sup> You turn us back to dust,  
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'

**Psalm 49:**<sup>10</sup> When we look at the wise, they die;  
fool and dolt perish together  
and leave their wealth to others.

<sup>11</sup> Their graves are their homes for ever,  
their dwelling-places to all generations,  
though they named lands their own.

<sup>12</sup> Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;  
they are like the animals that perish.

This is especially the case in a famous passage from Ecclesiastes:

**Ecclesiastes 3:**<sup>19</sup> For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup>All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

This understanding of death is brought to mind every year in many Christian traditions, when it is recited during Ash Wednesday services, as ashes are placed on each person's forehead. We are being reminded that we are dust, and to dust we shall return, without any thought even of going to Sheol.

We turn tonight to the dramatic emergence of the expectation that our lives do not end in the dust of the grave, or in Sheol, but rather if we die in obedience to God's Law as taught by Moses, we can hope to be raised to life again after we die. The narratives in which this hope emerges are found in the books 1 and 2 Maccabees, which were written between 100 and 60 BCE. The only existing copies of these books are in Greek, though it has long been thought that 1 Maccabees is a translation of the original Hebrew text.

When the Rabbis formed the authoritative canon of Scripture in the opening centuries of the common era, they only approved books that were written in Hebrew, and so 1 and 2 Maccabees were not included, along with many other books from that era that are found only in Greek. The churches that emerge from the Reformation follow the Rabbinic canon, though they order the books differently. In those traditions, these writings are of questionable authority, and so they are called The Apocrypha. The early church, beginning with the New Testament, took the Greek translation of Scripture created around 250 BCE in Alexandria as being authoritative, and this included texts translated from Hebrew as well texts originally written in Greek. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches follow the practice of the early church, and so in their Bibles 1 and 2 Maccabees are canonical.

The events in 1 and 2 Maccabees take place after Alexander the Great dies, and gives his empire to be split up by his officers, since he had no children. Alexander was Macedonian, but he spread Greek language and culture throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, since his empire extended all the way to north India. This is why Jews in Egypt during this time would translate their Scriptures into Greek. The rise of Greek culture created a crisis within Israelite life at the time, since there were Jews who willingly adopted Greek culture and manners, and so departed from the observance of the laws of Moses. We see this at the very beginning of 1 Maccabees:

<sup>11</sup> In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, “Let us go and make a covenant with the nations around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us.” <sup>12</sup> This proposal pleased them, <sup>13</sup> and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the nations. <sup>14</sup> So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the customs of the nations, <sup>15</sup> and made foreskins for themselves, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the nations and sold themselves to do evil.

The word for translated as “renegades” means “workers of lawlessness,” namely those who abandon the Torah of God. The situation becomes much more dire under the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who rules out of Syria. He came to Jerusalem several times to plunder and defile the Temple, and he was supported by the Jews who had adopted Greek customs. Antiochus then went on to try to eradicate all of the distinctiveness of the Israelite people, so that they would fit in harmoniously with the rest of the Hellenized world. According to 1 Maccabees:

<sup>41</sup> Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people <sup>42</sup> and that all should give up their particular customs. All the nations accepted the command of the king. <sup>43</sup> Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the Sabbath. <sup>44</sup> And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, <sup>45</sup> to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane Sabbaths and festivals, <sup>46</sup> to defile the sanctuary and the holy ones, <sup>47</sup> to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals, <sup>48</sup> and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane <sup>49</sup> so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. <sup>50</sup> He added, “And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.”

Notice that according to this account, those who join the king in abandoning the law of Moses and the sanctity of the Temple are no longer seen to belong to Israel. Rather, “they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had.” Moreover, they collaborated with the Seleucids in having their observant Jewish neighbors put to death. “<sup>62</sup> But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. <sup>63</sup> They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant, and they did die. <sup>64</sup> Very great wrath came upon Israel.”

The reading from 2 Maccabees, which was likely written a bit later than 1 Maccabees, highlights the faithful deaths of those who chose not to abandon the laws of Moses.

<sup>10</sup> For example, two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. They publicly paraded them around the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then hurled them down headlong from the wall. <sup>11</sup> Others who had assembled in the caves nearby in order to observe the seventh day secretly were betrayed to Philip and were all burned together, because their piety kept them from defending themselves, in view of their regard for that most holy day.

At the center of these deaths are the stories of the elderly scribe Eleazar, and the anonymous mother with her seven sons. And we can see a transition to the way death is understood in Israel at this time by looking at these two accounts. To begin with Eleazar, he is told that he must eat pork that has been sacrificed to the gods in order to save his life. Those who were enforcing this edict knew him, and they allowed him to bring his own meat to eat in order to appear to cooperate with the edict, and thereby save his life. Eleazar rejected this offer, choosing death with honor rather than life with disgrace. “<sup>23</sup> But making a high resolve, worthy of his years and the dignity of his old age and the gray hairs that he had reached with distinction and his excellent life even from childhood, and moreover according to the holy God-given law, he declared himself quickly, telling them to send him to Hades.” The word “Hades” is a translation of Sheol, and does not at all refer to what came to be called Hell. It is quite significant that Eleazar was willing to die voluntarily for the sake of the law that he taught his whole life even though his only expectation is for Sheol, for to do otherwise would discredit everything he had done to that point, especially in relation to the youth. In a speech that echoes the apology of Socrates before he voluntarily drank the hemlock in Athens, Eleazar says:

<sup>24</sup> “Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life, for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to a foreign way of life, <sup>25</sup> and through my pretense, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. <sup>26</sup> Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals, yet whether I live or die I will not escape the hands of the Almighty. <sup>27</sup> Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age <sup>28</sup> and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws.”

The author goes on to commend the impact that such a noble death had on all of Israel, and not only on the young. <sup>31</sup> So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation.”

When we come to the mother and her seven sons, we come to a very different understanding of the hope one should have when confronting such a death. Initially, the sons sound like Eleazar. Their spokesman says to the king, “What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.” This enrages the king, and he has his soldiers cut out his tongue, scalp him, and cut off his hands and his feet, before the eyes of his mother and his six brothers. He is then fried alive in a heated caldron. As this is happening, “the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly,” reminding each other that God is watching and will still have compassion. However, when we come to the second son, we see the emergence of a theme never heard before in Israel, not even in the speech of Eleazar. After they tortured him like his brother, he spoke his last words to the king: “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to a renewal of everlasting life, because we have died for his laws.” It is very important to note the condition that must be present in order to have hope in being raised up to a renewal of everlasting life, and that is to die for the sake of God’s laws, God’s Torah as taught by Moses. We hear this echoed in the testimony made by the third son before they scalp him, cut out his tongue, and cut off his hands and feet: “I got these from heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again.” This hope leads him to regard his sufferings as nothing.

What of those who are putting the sons to death? The fourth son addresses this issue: “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!” It seems that there is only hope of resurrection for those who willingly die for God’s laws. Those who kill them will not be raised at all, but will instead be punished in this life, as is clear from the testimony of the next two sons. The fifth one tells the king, “Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. <sup>17</sup> Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!” The sixth son echoes this threat: “Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account because of our sins against our own God. <sup>19</sup> But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!”

Lying behind the astonishing courage and faithfulness of the sons is their mother, who is the theologian and teacher of the family. We learn that she has been teaching them all along in Hebrew so that they would remain faithful as they confronted such a horrifying death. She roots her hope of resurrection in the nature of the mercy of God their Creator.

Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage and said to them, <sup>22</sup> “I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. <sup>23</sup> Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, in his mercy

gives life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.”

We see her apply this insight to the seventh and youngest son, with the additional insight that if God created all things from what did not exist, then God can clearly restore the dead to life:

“My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb and nursed you for three years and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life and have taken care of you. <sup>28</sup> I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. <sup>29</sup> Do not fear this butcher but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers.”