

# **Walk Through The Bible**

**St. Barnabas Parish Church**

**Wulff and Baillou Hill Roads**

**Nassau, New Providence,**

**The Bahamas**

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## **Introduction to III Maccabees**

### **Introduction**

III Maccabees is found in most Orthodox Bibles as part of their Deuterocanonical books but it is placed in the Apocrypha of Roman Catholic and Anglican Bibles. The book has nothing to do with the Maccabean revolt against the Greek empire, as described in I and II Maccabees. The story in III Maccabees describes the persecution of the Jews in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopater (222-205 B.C.). The name of the book comes from the similarities of the story of martyrdom of Eleazer and the Maccabean young men in II Maccabees and the mention of Simon the High Priest.

### **Overview of the Book**

The contents of the book are thought to be legendary. According to the book, after Ptolemy's defeat of Antiochus III in 217 B.C. at the battle of Raphia, he visited the temple in Jerusalem but was somehow prevented from entering the Holy of Holies. This led to his hatred of the Jews, and on his return to Alexandria in Egypt, he rounded up the Jewish community in order to put them to death in his hippodrome. However, Egyptian law required that the names of all those who were to be executed must be written down and in the process of doing so, the Egyptians ran out of paper. The Jews once again escape death. Ptolemy then attempted to have the Jews killed by having them crushed by elephants. However, due to God's intervention the Jews are once again delivered. Finally the king is converted and he bestows his favour upon the Jews.

## **About the Author**

The author was an Alexandrian Jew who wrote Greek. The work begins abruptly which may indicate that what we have may only be a segment of a larger work. The events which may have inspired the writing of this story may have come from a story that Josephus, the Jewish Historian, tells us about Ptolemy Physco (146-117 B.C.) who persecuted the Jews who were loyal to Cleopatra II, his political opponent. He gathered the Jews together, had the elephants intoxicated and intended to turn them loose on the people. The elephants however, turned on his own people and foiled the King's plan. The author of III Maccabees has used these events in the composition of his materials for his book with an artificial connection with Jerusalem. This book may have been written long after II Maccabees since it is cited in the text. One thing is clear: God is still in the business of delivering His people.

### **1. III Maccabees 1:1-29 Saved but Still Arrogant!!!**

- a. 1-7 Even as the Ptolemy IV sets out to make war, there is treachery among his own people who are seeking to take away his power. A certain Theodotus tried to assassinate Ptolemy IV, but it is a Jew who saves his life. The king's life is spared but he is determined to strengthen his grip on his empire.
- b. 8-15 When the king arrives at Jerusalem and saw the splendour and the order of the Jerusalem Temple, he wanted to enter the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest could enter but once a year. He believed that the law did not apply to him since he had entered the most sacred temples of other peoples and nations.
- c. 16-29 Not only do the old and the young, the men and the women, the boys and the girls begin praying that the king would not be able to enter the Holy of Holies, but they are willing to take up arms and die to make sure that the Holy Place is not profaned.

### **2. III Maccabees 2:1-33 God is still in Charge!!!**

- a. 1-20 The High Priest Simon humbled himself and prayed to the Lord of all Heaven to deliver them from the act of Ptolemy IV. He recounts all of the saving acts of God, but he also knows that they as a nation have suffered for their sinful past. Despite the power of the king, the High Priest still prays for God to restrain him from defiling the temple.

- b. 21-24 The arrogant king is struck with an illness that prevents him from entering the Holy of Holies. Fearing that he would get worse, his body guards pull him out of the temple area. Despite being struck with illness, Ptolemy refused to repent.
  
- c. 25-30 On his return to Egypt, and under the influence of his drunken friends he intended to do harm to the Jews by publicly disgracing them. He proposed to introduce a tax, to treat them as slaves, put them to death, make them worship the goddess of pleasure, or they could leave the law and their former life behind and become full time citizens of Alexandria.
  
- d. 31-33 As usual, some capitulated immediately; others tried to buy their way out but some refused to give in to the demands of Ptolemy IV. It is obvious that it created tensions among the Jews as a whole.