PART ONE

HELLENISTIC JUDAISM
DISRESPECTING DIONYSUS: 3 MACCABEES
AS NARRATIVE SATIRE OF THE GOD OF WINE

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1989 I began coursework for a Ph.D. in Religion (New Testament/Early Christianity) at Emory University. One of my first seminars was “Hellenistic Judaism” under the tutelage of Professor Carl R. Holladay. I had grown up in a theologically conservative Christian congregation in which Bible studies were standard fare and Scripture memorization was regarded as a virtuous and salutary practice. I attended a college and seminary in the same tradition and thereby added critical study methods to my pietistic appreciation of the Bible. But my relatively strong background in biblical content betrayed its Protestant bias by way of a glaring omission: I was woefully ignorant of the apocryphal writings. So Professor Holladay had the challenging task of introducing me both to the basic content and themes of the Apocrypha (along with many other Jewish writings of the era) as well as the broad historical context, critical interpretive issues, and the relevance of this literature to the study of early Christianity.

Indeed, it turned out to be quite relevant to my developing area of expertise. My dissertation included a fairly extensive section tracing certain themes through Hellenistic Jewish literature. More surprising was an opportunity which came along a few years after I completed the degree: the chance to write a brief commentary on the little known book of 3 Maccabees for the Brill Septuagint Commentary Series. I welcomed this opportunity, confident that my commentary, once completed, would (by default) be the premier, full scale commentary on 3 Maccabees in English (or any other language for that matter). In the process of researching and writing on 3 Maccabees, I developed two simple criteria for all future project selections in the area of commentary writing. I would choose only ancient texts that were (1) short, and (2) obscure, thus insuring that the project would generally be manageable in scope, and that the entirety of the scholarly literature would fit in a large shoebox.