



*Sacrifice, Death, and  
Atonement in Second  
Temple Judaism*

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## **The Parting of the Gods**

Paul and the Redefinition of Judaism

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This selection from the beginning of Chapter 8 of *The Parting of the Gods* looks at Second Temple Jewish beliefs regarding atonement through sacrifice, as well as passages from the Fourth Book of Maccabees that seem to ascribe atoning significance to the deaths of those who gave up their lives out of faithfulness to the Mosaic law in the context of persecution.

## CHAPTER 8

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# REDEFINING THE BASIS FOR GOD'S FORGIVENESS

Because in Second Temple Jewish thought not even the righteous could live entirely without sin, it was necessary for all of God's people continually to acknowledge their sinfulness, repent of it, and ask God for forgiveness. The basis upon which they were thought to attain that forgiveness was their renewed commitment to living in accordance with God's will as he had made it known through the Torah. At the same time, the Torah prescribed sacrificial rites through which those who had sinned might manifest their repentance and seek God's forgiveness.

According to many reconstructions of Second Temple Jewish thought, it was believed that under normal circumstances atonement for sins was always necessary in order to obtain God's forgiveness. While atonement could be made through the sacrifices for sin prescribed by God in the Mosaic law, the sufferings and death of a righteous person could also atone for the sins of others. These beliefs supposedly led Jesus' earliest followers to interpret his death as sacrificial and to claim that his sufferings, death, and blood had made atonement for the sins of human beings collectively. It is widely accepted that this interpretation of Jesus' death is found in numerous passages from Paul's epistles, which affirm that Jesus died for others and for their sins, thereby redeeming them from those sins and reconciling them to God.<sup>1</sup>

When we take a close look at the relevant texts from antiquity, however, it soon becomes evident that many of the ideas upon which the traditional interpretations of those texts are based are in reality foreign to them and have mistakenly been read back into them. Rather than ascribing some type of atoning power or effect to suffering, death, and sacrifice, those texts reflect the common Jewish idea that suffering, death, and sacrifice are

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1. See Rom 3:24-25; 4:24-25; 5:6-11; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13.

salvific and obtain God's acceptance and forgiveness only when they are the consequence or expression of a firm and sincere commitment to doing God's will and seeking to bring others to do the same.

## ATONEMENT AND FORGIVENESS IN SECOND TEMPLE JEWISH THOUGHT

While many passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish literature allude to the sacrificial rites prescribed in the Torah through which the people of Israel were to seek forgiveness and atonement, nowhere do those writings offer any explanation as to how those rites were believed to work. Nevertheless, rather than asking whether the authors of those writings did in fact believe that those sacrificial rites worked in some way, Jewish and Christian scholars have assumed that those who composed and read those writings had a fairly clear understanding of what is often called the *modus operandi*, "mechanics," or "mechanism" of sacrifice, but for some reason never explained what that understanding was.<sup>2</sup> This assumption has led them to overlook much of what those writings do say regarding the meaning and purpose of the sacrificial worship that they describe.

Several passages from the same writings are also thought to relate atonement or the forgiveness of sins to the suffering and death of the righteous. The most important of these passages is generally considered to be Isaiah 53, which we have already examined in Chapter 3 of this study. Two others are found in the book of 4 Maccabees, which uses sacrificial language to speak of the sufferings and death of certain Jews at the hands of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes.<sup>3</sup> Numerous scholars have also argued that Hellenistic and Roman writings of the Second Temple period reflect an understanding of vicarious death that influenced the thought of Jews such as Jesus' first followers either directly or indirectly.

### *The Meaning and Purpose of Sacrifices for Sin in Ancient Hebrew and Jewish Thought*

Despite the many problems associated with it, among Christians the most common view of the manner in which the sacrifices for sin offered by Jews

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2. On the use of terminology such as this to refer to Hebrew and Jewish sacrifice, see Jacob Milgrom, "The *Modus Operandi* of the *Ḥāṭṭā* ʾ: A Rejoinder," *JBL* 109 (1990): 111-17; Christian Eberhart, "Opfer, Sühne und Stellvertretung im Alten Testament," in »... mein Blut für Euch«: *Theologische Perspektiven zum Verständnis des Todes Jesu heute*, ed. Michael Hüttenhoff, Wolfgang Kraus, and Karlo Meyer, BTS 38 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 40-55 (46-48); Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, AcBib 19 (Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 190; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 218-19.

3. See 4 Macc 6:27-29; 17:20-22.

in antiquity were believed to make atonement for sin has been that which is based on the notion of penal substitution. While there are several variations of this view, the central idea is that the animals that were sacrificed to God endured in the place of those who offered them the suffering or death to which the offerers were subject on account of their sins, thereby freeing them from having to endure the penalty or consequences of their sins themselves.<sup>4</sup> Generally, it is claimed that when those who offered up an animal as a sacrifice for sin laid their hands upon the animal prior to the sacrifice, they were transferring to it their sins or guilt. The blood of the slaughtered animal was subsequently sprinkled or poured out before God to demonstrate that the necessary penalty had been inflicted upon it in the place of the guilty.<sup>5</sup> In this way, God's wrath at the sin committed was propitiated.<sup>6</sup> The ritual with the goat for Azazel prescribed for the Day of Atonement in Lev 16:20-22 is interpreted in the same basic manner. By laying his hands on the goat as he confessed the sins of the people, the high priest transferred those sins to the goat. When the goat was then led out to the desert to die, it took with it the sins that had been laid upon it.<sup>7</sup> Supposedly, in this way, atonement was made for those sins, which were borne away by the goat.

These interpretations of the sacrificial rites for sin prescribed in the Mosaic law raise numerous problems. They suggest that God had established the sacrificial system primarily so that his sinful people might be delivered from the punishments they deserved on account of their sins. In reality, such an idea is foreign to biblical thought. In the Torah, those who were subject to some type of punishment on account of their wrongdoing, including the death penalty, are never given the option of presenting a sacrifice in order to be spared that punishment. Nor were those who had sinned but failed to present a sacrifice for sin regarded as being subject to the death penalty due to that failure. In Hebrew and Jewish thought, God was always free to chastise or forgive sins whenever he saw fit in accordance with his

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4. See, for example, Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 62; Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions*, HBM 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 169-74; Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 85-95, 131.

5. So, for example, Leon Morris: "what is ritually presented to God is the evidence that a death has taken place in accordance with his judgment upon sin" (*The Cross in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 219).

6. According to Jarvis J. Williams, for example, behind the sacrificial rites prescribed in Leviticus is the idea that "bloody sacrifice actually satisfied God's wrath" (*Maccabean Martyr Traditions in Paul's Theology of Atonement: Did Martyr Theology Shape Paul's Conception of Jesus' Death?* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010], 39-40).

7. So, for example, Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 243-46.

purposes, independently of whether or not any sacrifices were offered to him. Numerous passages from the Hebrew Scriptures speak of God forgiving people their sins without receiving any sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> The sacrificial system was therefore not regarded as a means for being spared divine punishment or penalties for one's sins. Nor do the prescriptions regarding sin offerings in the Torah ever speak of those offerings propitiating God's wrath.

According to Lev 5:11-13, those who were poor could offer up to God a measure of flour rather than an animal victim when making a sacrifice for sin. Those who did so were hardly thought to be inflicting on the flour the punishment that their sins deserved. In addition, if atonement could be made through a flour offering, then sacrificial death or blood was not necessary to make atonement for sins. Equally foreign to the prescriptions regarding sacrifice in the Torah is the notion that sin or guilt was transferred to the sacrificial animals to be presented to God. There is nothing in Leviticus 16 to suggest that the rite with the goat for Azazel was anything more than a symbolic act. Furthermore, the goat was not offered up as a sacrifice. Most of the sacrificial offerings presented to God, in fact, were not sacrifices for sin and thus did not have the objective of seeking forgiveness from God or making atonement.

More importantly, however, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period repeatedly insist that no sacrifice is pleasing or acceptable to God unless it is offered up with a pure heart and a sincere commitment to practicing the justice and righteousness that God commands in his law.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other gods in antiquity, the God of Israel did not need sacrifices or depend on them in any way and thus was not interested in simply receiving meat, fat, or other parts of the animal from those who offered sacrifice. Sacrifices for sin were acceptable to God only if they were offered up in a spirit of sincere and heartfelt repentance. It was universally acknowledged that those who had sinned deliberately and had no intention of repenting and living in obedience to God could not make

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8. Gane, for example, notes that in the Hebrew Scriptures, "YHWH was able to forgive people apart from the sanctuary cult before it began to function (e.g., Exod 34:6, 7) and while it was in operation (e.g., 2 Sam 12:13; 2 Chr 33:12-13; cf. 30:18-19)" (*Cult and Character*, 316). Among the passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish literature that speak of God forgiving sins without exacting punishment on people or receiving sacrificial offerings, see Num 11:1-2; 2 Chron 32:24-26; Prov 16:6; Isa 27:9; Dan 4:27; Jonah 3:8-10; Sir 3:3; 35:1-10; 48:10; Tob 12:9; Bar 2:7-14; Pss. Sol. 3:9; Sib. Or. 4:215; 1QS 3.7-10; 9.4-6.

9. See, for example, Ps 40:6-8; 50:7-18, 23; 51:16-19; Hos 8:11-13; Mic 6:6-8; Jdt 16:16; Sir 7:9-10; 35:1-9, 14-15; 2 En. 45:3; Philo, *Moses* 2.106-8; *Spec. Laws* 1.67-70, 171, 196-97, 203, 257-60, 269-86, 293; 2.35, 42; *QG* 1.61; 2.52; *Unchangeable* 8-9. On this point and what follows, see especially David A. Brondos, *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought*, vol. 1: *Background* (Mexico City: Theological Community of Mexico, 2018), 125-201.

atonement and receive forgiveness for their sins by offering up the sacrifices for sin commanded by God, no matter how costly or lavish those sacrifices were.<sup>10</sup> In fact, sacrifices for sin that were not offered up with a repentant heart were thought to provoke God to wrath, since they could only be seen as an attempt to bribe God or manipulate him in order to obtain his forgiveness and blessings.<sup>11</sup> In passages such as Isa 1:11-17, Jer 7:1-15, and Amos 5:21-25, God is presented as refusing to accept the sacrifices of his people and even despising their sacrifices when they persistently practiced injustice and oppression.

For this reason, it is contrary to ancient Hebrew and Jewish thought to maintain that sacrifices were thought to “work” by virtue of some type of *modus operandi*. The only thing that could obtain God’s forgiveness, make atonement, or put away God’s wrath at sins was a renewed commitment to living in conformity with God’s will. Where that commitment was not present, no sacrifice could please God or obtain his favor and forgiveness. Conversely, those who were truly repentant of their sins and approached God with a sincere heart and a renewed dedication to doing his will were always thought to be acceptable to God and attain his forgiveness, independently of whether or not they offered up a sacrifice for sin.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, it was expected that they do so if they were able, but only as an expression of the sincerity of their repentance and their commitment to obeying what God had commanded.

In Jewish thought, therefore, God had not established sacrifice as a means by which people might obtain forgiveness and make atonement for their sins simply by carrying out certain rites that would produce some salvific effect in and of themselves when accompanied by faith and repentance. Nor had God commanded the offering of sacrifice to satisfy a need on his part to receive some type of payment or inflict some type of penalty upon sinners, as if his holiness, justice, or righteousness prevented him from forgiving sins without such a payment or penalty.<sup>13</sup> The obstacle to God’s forgiveness was thought to lie *not in God* but *in human beings themselves*, that is, in their refusal and failure to live in conformity with God’s good will. What God sought in his holiness, justice, and righteousness was not that some type of penalty be inflicted on sin, as if this might set things right and solve the

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10. On this point, see Jacob Milgrom, “Atonement in the OT,” *IDBSup* 78-82 (79-81).

11. See, for example, 1 Sam 15:22-23; Prov 15:8; 21:27; Jer 11:14-15; 14:10-12; Mal 1:7-14; 2:13-15; Sir 34:23-24; 2 En. 46:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 6.147-48.

12. See, for example, Philo, *Moses* 2.108; *Spec. Laws* 1.271-72; Josephus, *Ant.* 6.149.

13. Such an idea is commonly defended on the basis of the notion that “the holiness of God cannot coexist with what is unholy, what is impure or ‘unclean’” (Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology*, JSOTSup 305 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 79).

problem of sin, but that his people return to him in obedience, righteousness, and love when they had sinned. Because only God could determine if such obedience, righteousness, and love were present in the hearts of those who approached him asking for forgiveness, sacrifices in themselves had no power to effect atonement. God had not placed himself under the obligation to forgive sins when sacrifices for sin were offered, since in each case it was necessary for him to determine whether those who offered such sacrifices were truly repentant and sufficiently committed to doing his will.

Many biblical scholars, of course, have proposed other understandings of the way in which sacrifices for sin were believed to make atonement for sins in ancient Jewish thought.<sup>14</sup> While it is neither possible nor necessary to review all of those proposals here, the same general observations would apply to them as well. Ultimately, what was thought to atone for sins was not the offering of sacrifice itself but the spirit of repentance and the renewed commitment to living in accordance with God's will that those who offered sacrifices for sin manifested by means of their sacrificial offerings. This rules out the possibility that some type of mechanics or *modus operandi* was thought to be involved, since even when sacrifices were offered to God with the proper spirit and inner disposition, neither sacrificial blood nor death in themselves were thought to effect some change in God, the status of those who offered them, or the places and objects involved in the rites.

Rather than seeing sacrifices for sin as something that God had prescribed because he was unable to forgive sins or accept sinners without such sacrifices, there is clear evidence that Jews in antiquity believed that God had prescribed sacrifice in order to promote the attitudes and conduct he desired to see in them for their own good. As we have seen in Chapter 2, such was thought to be the purpose of sacrifice in general. In the case of sacrifices for sin, by prescribing such sacrifices, God brought his people to examine and reflect upon their conduct, acknowledge their wrongdoing, and commit themselves anew to living in accordance with his commandments, *not for his sake*, but *for theirs*. The offering of sacrifice thus contributed to their well-being by promoting among them the way of life that was in their own best interest and leading them to leave behind the destructive attitudes and conduct that God had prohibited out of love for them.

Sacrifices for sin were therefore thought to take away sin by virtue of the change that they helped bring about in the hearts and lives of God's people. In addition to promoting repentance and the way of life God desired to see in them for their own good, those sacrifices served as means by which his people could manifest in visible and tangible ways their desire to be forgiven by God and their renewed commitment to living in the way he

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14. See Brondos, *Jesus' Death*, 1:130-36, 172-85.



had commanded out of love for them. The sacrificial rites enabled them to reflect on the seriousness of their sins, to offer God a gift as a concrete and palpable expression of what was in their heart, and to be reassured that the God who had prescribed those rites for their benefit received them favorably whenever they approached him with a contrite spirit and a pure heart, offering themselves up to him by means of their sacrificial gifts.

It is also important to stress once more that sacrifices were first and foremost *embodied prayers*.<sup>15</sup> They were means by which people conveyed concretely the earnestness and sincerity of their petitions before God. Sacrifices for sin were therefore petitions that God forgive and accept once more those who presented them or those on whose behalf they were offered, looking favorably on their renewed commitment to live in accordance with his will. While offerings for sin might be thought to put away God's wrath, this was not because those offerings themselves were thought to placate him but rather because they served as means by which his people manifested the type of spirit and commitment to God's will that God desired and demanded of all for their own good. The sincere intention to return to a life of loving obedience to God was the only thing that could ever please and appease God when one had fallen into sin.

### *Vicarious Suffering and Death*

Many scholars have claimed to find in various Jewish writings from antiquity the idea that the sacrificial suffering and death of a righteous person could make atonement for the sins of others. Chief among these writings is 4 Maccabees, which describes the tortures inflicted on the Jewish priest Eleazar, seven Jewish brothers, and their mother at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes in an effort to bring the Jews in his reign to abandon their laws and adopt Hellenistic customs.<sup>16</sup> Rather than transgressing the Jewish law, all of these figures remain faithful in the midst of those tortures and ultimately suffer a violent death as a result of their refusal to submit to Antiochus's tyranny.

What is often overlooked by interpreters of 4 Maccabees is the purpose that the author ascribes to the afflictions of which the book speaks.<sup>17</sup> Those afflictions are not merely retribution for the people's sins. In fact, the only sin mentioned at the beginning of the book is that of the Jewish high priest Jason, who is said to have aroused God's anger by altering the customs

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15. See Brondos, *Jesus' Death*, 1:145-55.

16. On the background and date of 4 Maccabees, see Jan Willem van Henten, "Datierung und Herkunft des Vierten Makkabäerbuches," in *Tradition and Re-Interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honour of Jürgen C. H. Lebram*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten et al., StPB 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 136-49; David A. deSilva, *4 Maccabees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 11-32.

17. On what follows, see Brondos, *Jesus' Death*, 1:241-56.

and way of life of the Jewish people and abolishing the sacrificial worship offered to God at the Jerusalem temple.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, because the book repeatedly states that the perseverance of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother in the midst of their sufferings strengthened the people's obedience to the law, it presupposes that the people needed to be brought into greater conformity with God's will as he had made it known in the law. This is what these figures are said to have accomplished through their perseverance unto death. The author praises Eleazar by telling him: "You, father, strengthened our loyalty to the law through your glorious endurance" (4 Macc 7:9). In the final chapter, the author once again points to the willingness of Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother to give up their lives for the sake of the law so as to affirm: "Because of them the nation achieved peace, and by renewing observance of the law in the homeland, they ravaged the enemy" (18:4; cf. 6:18-22; 16:14-25).<sup>19</sup>

These passages make it clear that, in the thought of the author of 4 Maccabees, God had allowed Antiochus to inflict such suffering on the figures he mentions in order to strengthen the people's resolve to observe the law. The author's argument is that their perseverance inspired other Jews to be willing to resist Antiochus as well since it demonstrated their unshakable faith in the law's goodness and gave witness that it was better to die than to abandon the law. Clearly, it was this perseverance, faith, and witness that pleased God and led him eventually to deliver Israel from Antiochus's tyranny. Such an idea is stated explicitly in 4 Macc 9:23-24, where one of the brothers says: "Imitate me, brothers; do not abandon your post in my struggle or renounce the courage that is ours as brothers! Fight the sacred and noble battle for our godly way of life, through which the righteous providence of our ancestors will become merciful to our nation and take vengeance on the accursed tyrant!" According to these verses, what brings God to be merciful to his people and deliver them from Antiochus is the willingness of the brothers to remain steadfast in their struggle against Antiochus by refusing to give in to his demand that they abandon their observance of the law. The sufferings and death of those whom Antiochus had tortured and killed would hardly have been pleasing to God. Rather than appeasing his wrath, such deaths would have aroused his anger even more, though that anger would have been directed at Antiochus rather than at the figures whom he tortured and put to death.

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18. On this point, see Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees*, JSJSup 57 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 185.

19. Because of this, while in one sense it can be said that the author of the book "hardly pays attention to the notion of disciplinary suffering," as van Henten does (*Maccabean Martyrs*, 140), in another sense the people's suffering undoubtedly has the purpose of bringing about in them a greater obedience to the law.

These ideas must be kept in mind when considering the two passages in which the author speaks of the deaths of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother as vicarious. In 4 Macc 6:27-29, he ascribes to Eleazar the following words: “You know, O God, that rather than choosing to be saved from burning torments, I have elected to die for the sake of the law. Show mercy to your people by letting our suffering on their behalf suffice. Make my blood their purification and receive my life in exchange for theirs (*antipsychon autōn labe tēn emēn psychēn*).” In effect, what Eleazar is asking God here is that what he and others have suffered “suffice,” not in the sense of satisfying God’s justice or exhausting God’s wrath, but in the sense of demonstrating to God that his purposes among the people had been accomplished so that he might put an end to Antiochus’s tyranny in the land. Eleazar’s perseverance not only served as sufficient evidence of the willingness of God’s people to obey his law but would also inspire in others the same type of unbending obedience.<sup>20</sup> If that was the case, it was now pointless for God to allow Antiochus to continue to inflict suffering and torture on those who remained firm in their obedience to the law. Of course, because God alone could determine if what he had done was sufficient to bring about the obedience he desired to see in his people, Eleazar does not make any type of demand upon God but simply places himself in submission to God’s will and phrases his desire as a petition, leaving it up to God to respond as he sees fit. Thus Eleazar and others are viewed as suffering on behalf of the people, not in the sense that their suffering in itself led God to put away his wrath or satisfied his justice, but in the sense that their faithfulness to the law in the midst of that suffering strengthened the obedience of others to the law for their own good.<sup>21</sup> Only this could appease God and satisfy his justice.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, when Eleazar asks God to make his blood the purification of others, he is not asking that by virtue of his death God declare all the Jews in the land to be pure and free of sin. Eleazar was not praying that God accept his righteousness in the stead of others, nor would God have responded favorably to such a petition, since what God wanted was that *all*

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20. In this regard, David Seeley writes: “By inspiring others to re-enact their resistance they create an implacable barrier to Antiochus’s efforts, sending him finally on his way” (*The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul’s Concept of Salvation*, JSNTSup 28 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1990], 93).

21. The idea that the law is good is especially stressed in 4 Macc 5:22-26, where the author argues that the law teaches and promotes things such as self-control, courage, endurance, justice, and what is most suitable for their lives. It is therefore an expression of God’s compassion toward his people.

22. As Sam K. Williams notes, “the most significant aspect of the martyrs’ endurance unto death is the author’s assertions concerning the *effects* of that endurance” (*Jesus’ Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept*, HDR 2 [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975], 167).

of his people practice righteousness for their own good, not that a single individual do so in the place of others. The purification of the people that Eleazar sought should also not be seen as merely forensic, as if Eleazar were asking God simply to *accept* others as pure without their *becoming* so. This is clear from the way in which the author uses the language of purification both at the beginning of the book and at its end. In the book's introduction, the author says of the figures who remained faithful in the midst of tortures and death: "For when they had won the admiration of all the people, including even their torturers, for their courage and endurance, they became the cause of the downfall of tyranny over the nation, conquering the tyrant through their endurance. In that way, their native land was purified through them" (4 Macc 1:11). Near the end of the book, the author says of the same figures: "These, therefore, having consecrated themselves for the sake of God, have been honored not only with this honor but also in that, because of them, our nation was not overcome by its enemies, but the tyrant was punished and the native land was purified" (17:20-21).

In both of these passages, the purification of which the author speaks involves the reestablishment throughout the land of the observance of the law together with the virtues it promotes (1:7-19; 17:8-24).<sup>23</sup> Of course, the land was also purified from the presence of the people's enemies, yet the author makes it clear that God drove Antiochus and his army out of the land on account of the endurance of those who persevered in their obedience to the law. Eleazar's petition that God make his blood the purification of others, therefore, should be understood in the sense that he is asking God that his willingness to suffer and die a cruel death for the sake of the law not be in vain, but instead bring God to put an end to Antiochus's persecution and drive him out of the land so that its inhabitants might be able to live in peace, practicing faithfully what God had commanded in his law now that their obedience had been demonstrated and strengthened.<sup>24</sup>

Eleazar's petition that God receive his life in exchange for that of the people or as their *antipsychon* should be understood on the basis of these same ideas. In the mind of the book's author, what interested God was not

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23. Brian J. Tabb rightly points out that the author of 4 Maccabees "employs the cultic terms *purification* (καθάρσιος) and *purify* (καθαρίζω) to indicate the reversal of Israel's moral and ceremonial uncleanness" (*Suffering in Ancient Worldview: Luke, Seneca, and 4 Maccabees in Dialogue*, LNTS 569 [London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017], 111).

24. Sam Williams rightly stresses that 4 Maccabees sees Antiochus's departure from the land as "a result of the martyrs' *endurance* (not their spilled blood)" (*Jesus' Death*, 176). It should also be stressed, however, that when the author of the book refers to the blood of Eleazar in 6:29, he has in mind his endurance unto death rather than the shedding of Eleazar's blood per se, since it is Eleazar's endurance that leads to the purification of which the author speaks.

the taking of the life of Eleazar as retribution for the people's sins, as if God merely sought to exact punishment and satisfy his wrath by inflicting death on Eleazar as the people's substitute. Rather, what God sought was that the people be strengthened in their obedience to the law. Because it was for that purpose alone that he had subjected them to suffering, nothing but the accomplishment of that purpose could have brought him to put an end to that suffering. Thus Eleazar is said to present his life to God asking that in return or in exchange for his life—or rather, strictly speaking, in response to his faithfulness unto death to God's good commandments—, God spare his fellow Jews any more cruel sufferings and agonizing deaths such as the one that he is enduring. His hope is that God will react to his willingness to give up his life for the law by putting an end to the people's afflictions at the hands of Antiochus so that their lives may be spared from his tyranny. The reason why God will react in that way is not that he has satisfied his wrath and justice by taking Eleazar's life but rather that Eleazar's death will be sufficient for God's objectives among the people to be accomplished. Eleazar asks God, therefore, that in response to his willingness to give up his life, God intervene to put an end to the afflictions he had imposed on his people in order to chastise and correct them. Only in that sense is there any type of exchange.

The same ideas are behind the observations that the author makes in 4 Macc 17:22. After affirming that Antiochus was overcome and the land was purified by means of those who gave up their lives out of obedience to the law (17:20-21), the author continues: "It was as if they had given up their lives in exchange for the sin of the nation (*hōsper antipsychon gegonotatēs tou ethnous hamartias*). And by virtue of the blood of these pious persons and the propitiation (*hilastērion*) that they made in their death, the divine providence rescued Israel from what it had been suffering previously" (4 Macc 17:20-22). In this passage, which is extremely difficult to translate into English, the author once again refers to those who endured suffering on account of their faithfulness to God's law as an *antipsychon*. This term is often translated as "ransom," yet such a translation supposes that their lives constituted a payment made *to* someone—in this case God—in order to free others. Nothing in the passage or the book in general, however, suggests that God was demanding the lives of those tortured and killed as payment for the liberation of the people, in exchange for the people's lives, or as punishment for their sins. What satisfied God was not the deaths of those who remained faithful to his law but rather the renewed obedience that would exist in the land as a result of the faithfulness of those who had died for the law once Antiochus had been driven out.

The author's idea, therefore, is that those who gave up their lives for the sake of the law obtained in exchange (*anti-*) for their faithfulness and perseverance the deliverance of the people from the plight that they were

suffering on account of their sin. Once again, however, what concerned God was not that the people's sin receive its due punishment but that they be strengthened and renewed in their commitment to obeying his law. Only this could satisfy him. In other words, what those who gave up their lives for the law obtained from God for the people in exchange for their lives was not the forgiveness of the people's sins per se, but the deliverance of the people from the plight to which God had subjected them in an attempt to bring them to put away their sins. And what led God to deliver them from that plight was not the death or blood of those who died, but the renewed commitment to his will that the death or blood of those who died made possible among the people. What God is interested in receiving from Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother was not their life, death, or blood, but rather their unbending faithfulness to the law, since that faithfulness would bring others to be faithful to the law in the same way for their own good.<sup>25</sup>

Interpreters have debated whether the word *hilastērion* in the final verse of this passage should be translated as "expiation" or "propitiation."<sup>26</sup> If the first of these translations is preferred, the idea is that, through their perseverance in remaining faithful to the law, those who gave up their lives cleansed or purified their people from their sinfulness so that God might deliver them from the suffering to which he had subjected them in an effort to strengthen them in their obedience to his law. If God came to *accept* them as clean or pure, it was because the willingness of their fellow Jews to give up their lives for the law served to demonstrate that the people were indeed committed to living in the type of purity God desired to see in all and would help to bring about in the people that same pure way of life. If *hilastērion* is instead understood in the sense of propitiation, then what must be seen as having appeased God's wrath at the people's sins was not the blood or death of Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother per se, but their faithfulness to the law even to the point of being willing to suffer and endure a violent and bloody death for it. The *hilastērion* that put away God's wrath and led to the purification of the people was not their *death* but their *faithfulness unto death*.

Perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate that it was not the sufferings and death of the figures who endured torture at the hands of Antiochus that made atonement for the people's sins or brought God to forgive them is to consider whether God would have delivered the people from the suffering

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25. This point is rightly stressed by Francis Watson, who notes that the book's argument does not revolve around the suffering of the Jewish people or atonement for sin, but the strengthening of the people's obedience to the law ("Constructing an Antithesis: Pauline and Other Jewish Perspectives on Divine and Human Agency," in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, ed. John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole [London: T & T Clark, 2006], 99-116 [108-15]).

26. On this discussion, see Sam Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 39-46.

that he had brought upon them through Antiochus if those figures had not remained faithful to the law all the way to their death. If all that concerned God was that the people's sins be punished, then it would not have mattered to God if Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother had transgressed the law in the midst of their tortures, because even if they had, God's demand that the people's sins receive their due punishment would still have been satisfied by their torments and death. Such is clearly not the thought of the author of 4 Maccabees. Similarly, even if Eleazar, the mother, and her sons had remained steadfast and faithful to the law all the way to their death, their death would not have attained God's forgiveness for the people if the people themselves had refused to turn away from their sin and had instead persisted in disobeying God and his law. It is therefore a grave misrepresentation of Jewish thought to affirm on the basis of these passages, as Howard Marshall does, that "when people fall into sin and apostasy they arouse the wrath of Yahweh. He proceeds to punish them, and on the completion of the punishment his anger is satisfied and he is reconciled to the people."<sup>27</sup> If that were the case, then simply inflicting death on people as punishment for their sins would put away God's wrath and satisfy his justice, independently of whether or not any of them came to live in the way God commanded and desired for their own good. Like a pagan deity, God would simply be venting his wrath for his own sake rather than attempting to bring about a change in his people by chastising them.

Neither of these passages from 4 Maccabees, then, provides any basis for the claim that in ancient Jewish thought suffering and death could atone for sins or put away God's wrath.<sup>28</sup> In ancient Hebrew and Jewish thought, reconciliation is never brought about by punishment alone, since by definition only those who live in a way that makes peace possible can be reconciled to God and one another. Suffering and death only appeased God's wrath and obtained his forgiveness when they served as means by which people were brought to return to God in obedience and righteousness, yet even then it was that obedience and righteousness rather than the suffering or death of anyone that pleased God and brought him to grant his forgiveness. Similarly, only a renewed commitment to live in conformity with God's will could atone for sins.

A number of Greco-Roman sources with which many Jews in antiquity would have been acquainted also allude to vicarious suffering and death.<sup>29</sup>

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27. I. Howard Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd*, ed. Robert A. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 121.

28. For a discussion of other passages from ancient Jewish sources that speak of vicarious death, see Brondos, *Jesus' Death*, 1:231-40, 256-77.

29. For references, see especially Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 6-28; van Henten,

In some cases, what is actually vicarious and benefits others is what we have just seen in 4 Maccabees: the willingness of someone to suffer and die in order to bring others to value and adhere to certain principles, values, or laws that are in accordance with what is good, right, and just. The example *par excellence* of this type of death is that of Socrates, who took his own life not only for the purposes just mentioned but also to avoid any kind of violent uprising in his defense that might result in the death of many.<sup>30</sup> This kind of death, of course, did not atone for anyone's sins. In other cases, those sources speak of persons sacrificing their lives for others or suffering and dying for them in the context of a battle or struggle against an oppressive enemy. Once again, such sacrificial sufferings and deaths had nothing to do with atonement for sins, but were simply aimed at obtaining victory over the enemy and liberating the oppressed from their oppressors.

There are numerous examples in ancient Greco-Roman literature, however, of persons offering up their lives to certain gods in the place of others in order to fulfill some demand being made by those gods, obtain their favor, or appease their wrath at something that the people had done or failed to do. As we have seen previously, however, Israel's God was believed to be fundamentally different from those gods. In Jewish thought, the only thing that could please God was that the people practice goodness, justice, and mercy, caring especially for the oppressed and those in need. In contrast, the gods of the nations desired and demanded sacrificial offerings for their own sake and at times even demanded the life of human beings to satisfy their selfish impulses and whims. Unlike Israel's God, they often took pleasure in seeing human beings suffer and die, and therefore at times the death of one individual as a substitute for others was acceptable to them. In those cases, what interested them was simply receiving a human life or human blood, independently of whose life or blood it might be. Furthermore, what angered and offended those gods was not injustice and oppression but the failure of human beings to give them what they wanted or needed for their own sake. Such gods were very different from Israel's God, not merely because nothing but the practice of what was good, right, and compassionate could satisfy and appease him, but also because he abhorred and prohibited the sacrifice of human life and took no pleasure whatsoever in the suffering and death of any human being, including those who were sinners (Ezek 18:23, 32).

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*Maccabean Martyrs*, 145-46, 156-59, 213-24, 245-50; Henk S. Versnel, "Making Sense of Jesus' Death: The Pagan Contribution," in *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament*, ed. Jörg Frey and Jens Schröter, WUNT 181 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 213-94 (227-53). On what follows, see Brondos, *Jesus' Death*, 1:226-31.

30. On the ways in which Jesus' death and that of Socrates may have been compared to each other among Jesus' earliest followers, see Greg Sterling, "Mors Philosophi: The Death of Jesus in Luke," *HTR* 94 (2001): 383-402.