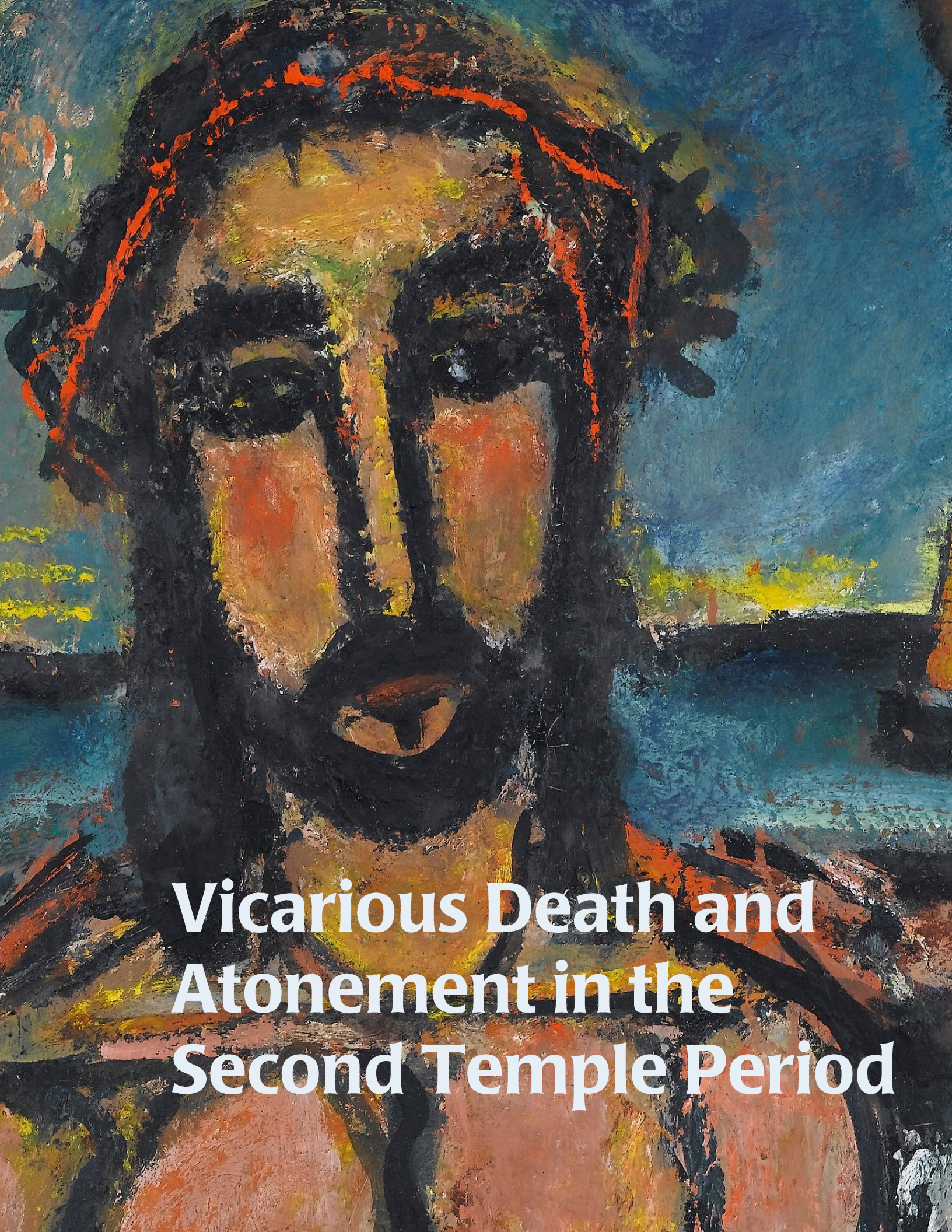

# Vicarious Death and Atonement in the Second Temple Period

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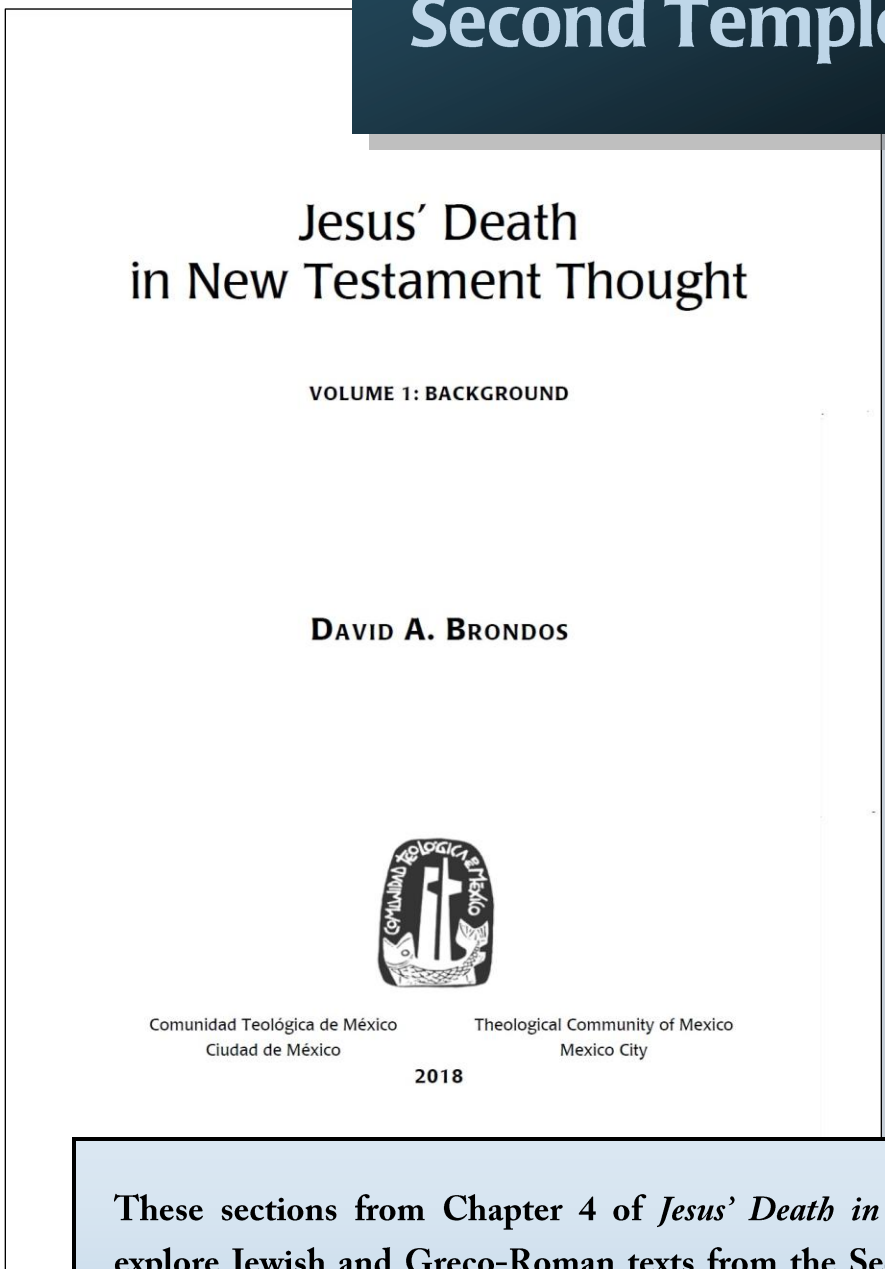


These sections from Chapter 4 of *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought* explore Jewish and Greco-Roman texts from the Second Temple period that speak of one person suffering and dying on behalf of others. Later rabbinic thought on the subject is also discussed, since many scholars would argue that certain beliefs regarding vicarious death found in the rabbinic writings may already have existed in some form among Jews in the first century CE.

## VICARIOUS DEATH AND ATONEMENT ELSEWHERE IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

In important ways, Isaiah 53 is unique in the Hebrew Scriptures. No other passage speaks of people being restored to peace and healing as a result of a particular figure suffering on account of their sins. In this sense, this passage may be considered an "erratic block" in the Hebrew Scripture, as Klaus Koch has affirmed.[39] Nevertheless, Isaiah 53 does not relate the servant's death to the appeasement of YHWH's anger at sin, an idea which is never mentioned in the passage, nor does it explicitly affirm that the servant's death atones for sin. The idea that the death of certain individuals or groups of people may lead YHWH to put aside his anger at sin is found in only a couple of passages from the Hebrew Scriptures.

One of these is the story of Phinehas found in Num. 25:1-15. There YHWH commands that the Israelites who had abandoned him and had instead joined themselves to the Madianites by adopting Baal-Peor as their god be put to death. In response, Phinehas takes a spear and slays Zimri, one of the Israelites who had joined himself to Baal-Peor, together with his Madianite companion. YHWH then tells Moses: "Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say, 'I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites'" (25:11-13). The high regard in which Phinehas and his act of zeal were held in antiquity is evident from the fact that this account is recalled elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures and other second-temple writings.[40]

Proponents of penal substitution views have often pointed to this story as evidence for the idea that death was thought to make atonement for sins. Supposedly, in this case God's strict justice and God's anger at sin demanded that the people's sins be punished with death. Phinehas satisfied God's justice and appeased God's anger by slaying the guilty. Leon Morris, for example, even interprets this narrative in sacrificial terms: "Here the zealous priest by offering up the lives of the evil-doers is thought of as rendering the *kopher* which averts the divine wrath. There can hardly be serious doubt that here we have propitiation in the fullest sense, or that this propitiation is the turning away of wrath by the offering of a *kopher*."[41] According to this interpretation, the death of the guilty Israelites is a payment to God's justice and in itself averts God's wrath.

In reality, there is no basis in the Hebrew text for this type of interpretation. The noun *kopher*, "redemption payment," appears nowhere in the passage.

39. Klaus Koch, "Sühne und Sündenvergebung um die Wende von der exilischen zur nachexilischen Zeit," *EvTh* 26 (1996): 217-39.

40. See Ps. 106:30; 1 Macc. 2:54; 4 Macc. 18:12; Sir. 45:23; Josephus, *Ant*. 4.152-54, 159.

41. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 165.

While the verb *kapar* is used, the idea is that of making atonement or expiation. Strictly speaking, however, it is not the death of the guilty idolater that is regarded as making atonement but the zealous act of Phinehas, which was an expression of his firm commitment to YHWH. In order to understand the passage, it must be read in the context of the overarching narrative of which it forms part. YHWH had brought the Israelites out of Egypt in order to make them his own people. He had given them his law so that there might be justice and equity among them. The Pentateuch and other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures see these events as ultimately having the goal of blessing other nations through Israel; they would be attracted to the worship of YHWH and be able to attain the same justice and *shalom* that Israel was to possess as a result of the Israelite's obedience to God's law.

The people's abandonment of YHWH and attachment to Baal-Peor, however, would make the realization of this plan impossible. According to the logic of the passage, it was necessary to put a stop to what was happening. The actions of Moses as well as the zeal of Phinehas were viewed as fulfilling this objective.

What was thought to have pleased YHWH and appeased his wrath, therefore, was not the death of those who had fallen into idolatry. What YHWH desired was that the people return to him in order to commit themselves to living in accordance with his will. Phinehas's act was meritorious because it served to bring back the remainder of the Israelites to the service of YHWH so that they might once more submit to his law, which was aimed at ensuring justice, equity, and *shalom* for the people. As noted in Chapter 3, the worship of other gods such as Baal-Peor was viewed as resulting in unjust and oppressive practices that undermined and destroyed the people's well-being.

Strictly speaking, therefore, in this passage it is *not the death of the guilty* that makes atonement and appeases God's wrath but *the return of the people to YHWH and his law*. This is what Phinehas's act of zeal helped accomplish. If atonement and the propitiation of God's anger were believed to be brought about merely by the death of the guilty, as if this alone effected justice, then Phinehas's act would have been unnecessary, since YHWH himself could have struck the guilty dead. There are numerous accounts in the Pentateuch in which YHWH does precisely that. For example, when in Genesis 7-9 YHWH uses the flood to destroy the vast majority of sinful human beings, this is not presented as an act aimed at satisfying his justice or appeasing his wrath, as if he simply desired to make sinners pay for their sins. Rather, his goal is that of cleansing the earth of sin so that a fresh start might be made through Noah and his family.[42] The objective of YHWH in that story, as in Numbers 25, is that of establishing a people who will practice justice and righteousness. In ancient Hebrew thought, YHWH was not some type of god like Moloch, whose wrath was appeased by the death of human beings, but rather a God committed to the well-being of the people. Yet because

42. As noted in Chapter 2, this is precisely how Philo interpreted the story of the flood (*Moses* 2.64).

that well-being was seen as depending on obedience to him, in the Hebrew Scriptures YHWH is presented as one who will not tolerate the people abandoning the path of justice he has laid out for them in order to follow other paths by serving other gods.

Josephus, in fact, provides concrete evidence that the story of Phinehas was understood precisely in this fashion in the second-temple period. He writes that Phinehas became "very indignant" when he saw what Zimri the Israelite had done and "determined, before his insolence should become stronger through impunity, to exact the judgment upon him by action, and to prevent the lawlessness from going further if those who started it were not punished" (*Ant.* 4.152). According to Josephus, then, what pleased God and atoned for Israel's sins was that Phinehas's act put a stop to the spread of lawlessness related to the worship of the god Baal-Peor so that the people might instead return to YHWH.

These same ideas must be kept in mind when considering the only other passage from the Hebrew Scriptures in which the possibility of atoning for sin is related to the death of a human being, namely, the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32.[43] As in Numbers 25, here the people abandon YHWH for a false god and as a consequence arouse YHWH's wrath. After relating how Moses came down from the mountain to confront the people, the narrative continues:

> On the next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written." But the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for chastisement, I will chastise them for their sin" (Exod. 32:30-34).

Interestingly, in this passage, the idea that one might die for the sins of others is rejected, as is the idea that such a death might make atonement for sins. As elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, YHWH refuses to accept the

43. In addition to the passages examined in this section, some scholars have pointed to others in the Hebrew Scriptures in which one person or group is said to suffer in the place of another or atone for the sins of others, but a careful examination of these passages indicates that they do not speak of the righteous bearing the sin of others or God's wrath at that sin in the place of the guilty. Dieter Vieweger and Annette Böckler, for example, note that Isa. 43:3b-4 speaks of God taking Egypt as a ransom price for Israel, and claim that this passage influenced the *lutron* saying of Mark 10:45 ("»Ich gebe Ägypten als Lösegeld für dich«: Mk 10,45 und die jüdische Tradition zu Jes 43,3b.4," *ZAW* 108 [1996]: 594-607). Nothing in that passage, however, suggests the innocent being put to death in place of the guilty or making atonement for their sins. Rather, the idea is that God will give up other nations in order to redeem his beloved Israel. Axel von Dobbeler points to the story of Aaron's rod putting away God's wrath at the murmuring of some of the Israelites against Moses and Aaron in Num. 17:6-15 as an example of an act of atonement on behalf of others (*Glaube als Teilhabe: Historische und semantische Grundlagen der paulinischen Theologie und Ekklesiologie des Glaubens*; WUNT 2/22; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987, 77). In this case, however, God puts away his wrath, not because of Moses or Aaron, but because the blossoming of Aaron's rod puts an end to the murmuring of the Israelites involved.

death of the innocent in the place of the guilty.[44] The act of atonement that Moses sought to make consisted, not of offering to give up his life in the place of the life of the many, as if this would have calmed YHWH's wrath, but of *interceding* on behalf of the people, asking God to forgive them. As we noted in Chapter 3, the idea of atonement through intercession is common throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The implicit basis for this intercession is Moses' intention to bring the people back to YHWH in obedience. Only this could satisfy YHWH's justice and appease his wrath. As the people's leader, Moses was thought to have both the responsibility and the moral authority to make this return to YHWH happen.

As Hofius notes, therefore, Moses' offer to give up his life must be seen as an act of solidarity and has nothing to do with the notion of penal substitution: "These words are not to be understood as Moses' offer to surrender his life vicariously in exchange for the life of the people. They are rather his declaration of the deepest solidarity with them: if Yahweh refuses to forgive the guilty, then the innocent one is prepared to suffer the same fate as they."[45] The fact that YHWH offers to leave the people unpunished for the time being—although he says that, at some point later on, they must still be disciplined for what they have done—is due to his hope that under Moses' leadership the Israelites eventually will indeed become the obedient people he desires to see for their own good and the good of others. This is the logic behind the passage. As Sam Williams notes, Moses is not offering himself in the place of the people but laying before God the alternative: "forgive these people and let us live *or* if you will not forgive these people, destroy me with them. By his request to be blotted out of the book of life if the people are not forgiven, Moses expresses his desire to stand with them and to share their fate."[46]

## VICARIOUS DEATH AND ATONEMENT IN ANCIENT GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE

The idea that one person's death could benefit others in some way seems to have been more common among Jews in the period of Greco-Roman rule. Many scholars attribute this to the influence of ideas from the Hellenistic and the Roman literature of the time, where certain figures are said to have given up their lives nobly and heroically in order to save others. Hengel notes that "in ancient Israel there are hardly any examples of dying for Israel, the Law or the sanctuary, which are stressed as heroic actions."[47] Both Hengel and other

44. Discussing this passage and others from the Hebrew Scriptures, Henk S. Versnel rightly notes that the idea of substitution "stands in stark contradiction to other OT texts such as 'a person may die only for his own sins' (Deut 24,16; 2 Kgs 14,6; 2 Chron 25,4), and 'I blot out from my book only those who have sinned against me' (Ex 32,30-33)...." ("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, 215, n10).

45. Hofius, "Fourth Servant Song," 169.

46. Sam K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept* (HDR 2; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 103.

47. Hengel, *Atonement*, 7.

scholars who have explored the subject of vicarious death in antiquity cite a number of passages from ancient Greek and Roman literature that speak of a person offering up his or her life to save others in order to consider whether ideas from these passages might have influenced the interpretations that Jesus' first followers gave to his death.[48] It is not necessary to examine these passages in detail here in order to address the basic logic behind them. Following Hengel's categorization, these passages can be divided into three types.

According to the first of these, one is said to die for one's family, friends, city, or nation in the context of some type of conflict.[49] In this case, the people in need of deliverance or salvation are under attack from some enemy that is seeking to subject or destroy them. By giving up his or her life in the midst of the conflict, the heroic figure secures protection for the other members of his or her family, friends, or fellow citizens, or else gains victory over those who seek them harm.[50] An excellent biblical example of this type of death for others is found in the story of Eleazar, also called Avaran, in 1 Macc. 6:43-46. In the midst of a battle with the forces of King Antiochus, who are attacking the Maccabeans, Eleazar courageously fights his way through the enemy lines, places himself beneath an armored elephant and kills it by stabbing it from below. As a result, however, the dead elephant falls upon him and he is crushed to death. In this context, it is said that "he gave his life to save his people" (v. 44).

Although at times sacrificial language can be used to refer to the way in which one voluntarily gives up one's life in battle for others, strictly speaking, this type of dying for others does not involve any type of atonement for sins. The one who dies is not undergoing any kind of divine punishment for sin or enduring divinely-inflicted suffering and death for others as their substitute. Nor is the heroic figure said to offer up his or her life to God in order to appease God's wrath or obtain divine forgiveness for the people's sins. Undoubtedly, at times the enemy forces may be seen as having been sent by God or the gods to punish the people for some disobedient act they have committed. However, the heroic figure obtains salvation or victory, not by moving God or the gods to cease afflicting the people by means of the hostile forces, but simply by carrying out some action that leads intrinsically to the defeat of those forces.

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48. Ibid., 6-31. See also S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 194-95; 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), 145-51, 157-59, 213-28; Versnel, "Making Sense," 213-25, 245-50; Finlan, *Background*, 194-97.

49. See Hengel, *Atonement*, 6-15. The concept of the *devotio pro principe* mentioned by Versnel, which involved dying on behalf of the emperor, can be considered a variation of this type of vicarious death ("Making Sense," 245-48). For other examples of this idea, see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 145-46, 157-59, 213-25.

50. It is significant, as Jeffrey B. Gibson notes, that in the Greco-Roman literature, "*never* does the one to whom the dying formula is applied die for an adversary or enemy. The death for others, especially the 'noble death,' is always undertaken in an attempt to rescue or defend *one's own*" ("Paul's 'Dying Formula': Prolegomena to an Understanding of its Import and Significance," in *Celebrating Romans: Template for Pauline Theology. Essays in Honor of Robert Jewett*; ed. Sheila E. McGinn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 25).

In a second type of "dying for" formula, a person is said to die for some type of ideal, such as the laws of a city or nation, a creed, certain moral tenets, or some philosophical truth.[51] The classic example of this is the story of Socrates's death as told by Plato, particularly in his *Phaedo*. This story seems to have been widely known and highly influential in antiquity. While the authorities who accuse Socrates of perverting the youth through his teaching and on that basis sentence him to death are officially the representatives of justice, Socrates and others see them as acting *unjustly* in condemning him. Nevertheless, Socrates willingly drinks the mortal poison instead of inciting others to resist those authorities by violent means or attempting to save his life by fleeing or hiding. He can therefore be said to have died "for others" in the sense that his acceptance of death benefited others in various ways. He maintained his convictions rather than compromising them or renouncing them in the face of injustice, thus moving others to adhere to those convictions more firmly. Because those convictions are considered good and just and even worth dying for, his death thus benefits society and encourages others to defend what is right in spite of the cost involved. Also, by accepting death rather than calling on others to rise up to defend him and his cause, he avoided violence and bloodshed and thus acted in favor of others. Hengel also cites the example of Apollonius, the hero of Philostratus's *Vita Apollonii*, who tells his student Damis: "it is an obligation of the law that we should die for freedom and an injunction of nature that we should die for kinsfolk or friends or loved ones.... [I]t is the duty of the wise in a still higher degree to lay down their lives for the tenets they have embraced."[52]

Here again, there is no idea of penal substitution or atonement for the sins of others. The penalty inflicted on Socrates, for example, was unjust. It was not thought that Socrates was dying in the place of others, as if others would have been sentenced to death and executed had not Socrates willingly forfeited his life. Nor was Socrates's death believed to have atoned for the sins of others. To die for some principle or ideal simply involves being faithful to that principle or ideal at the cost of one's life and perhaps seeking to inspire and motivate others to be faithful to the principle or ideal involved as well.

A third type of vicarious, noble death found in ancient Greek and Roman writings involves the offering of life in order to put an end to some type of plague or disaster.[53] In this case, the threat of death is due, not to the aggression of other human beings, but to the gods or divine forces in nature, who have been provoked to wrath due to something human beings have done or failed to do. While the people involved have acted contrary to the will of the gods, it is not necessarily accurate to say that they have "sinned," since in many cases what the gods demand is not related to what is right and just. Instead, the gods may have some type of need or selfish desire that the people have

51. See Hengel, *Atonement*, 15-18.

52. Philostratus the Athenian, *Vita Apollonii* 7.14 (cited in Hengel, *Atonement*, 18).

53. See Hengel, *Atonement*, 19-28. For similar examples, see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs,* 245-50.

refused to satisfy. When the people do not give the gods what they need or want or act in ways that provoke the gods' wrath, the gods respond by inflicting some type of harm on the people through something such as a famine or plague or by sending some enemy against them.

Hengel, for example, cites examples such as that of the king Erechtheus, who sacrifices his daughters to assuage the wrath of Poseidon in Lycurgus's *Oratio in Leoctratem*, as well as the story of the three daughters of Leo, who "were sacrificed during a plague of a famine" in the *Varia Historia* of Aelian.[54] He also mentions the ideas of the *pharmakos*, which constitutes a type of human "scapegoat" offered to the gods to appease them, and the *sphagion* or blood sacrifice that "is offered to the powers of the underworld before great undertakings, battle, taking an oath or sacrificing to the dead."[55] A further example is that of the *devotio*, which was also a kind of "self-sacrifice" in which "a Roman general consigned himself along with the enemy army to the gods of the underworld or to other anonymous deities in order to gain victory for his own army."[56]

In a sense, such deaths can be regarded as sacrificial acts that make atonement by placating the wrath of the gods. As Hengel notes, a "fixed ingredient of almost all these traditions" is that of a "divine demand of an atoning sacrifice to deliver the people, the land or a family...."[57] In many cases, such deaths involve an act of substitution in which the gods spare the lives of the many in exchange for the human life or lives offered to them. The idea of propitiation is also present in that the gods' anger is appeased.

This third type of death for others, however, must be regarded as foreign to the concepts of God, sacrifice, and atonement that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures and other Jewish writings in antiquity. There, human sacrifice is strictly forbidden and is regarded as a great cruelty. As we have noted previously, unlike other gods in antiquity, Israel's God was not thought to have any needs that human beings had to help satisfy. In ancient Hebrew and Jewish thought, what provokes the wrath of YHWH is not some selfish desire or passion but the practice of injustice. Conversely, what appeases that wrath is repentance and a return to him in obedience. If it is not the blood of animals that pleases YHWH and placates his anger at the sins of his people but the practice of justice, compassion, and love, much less could the sacrifices of human blood or human lives please him or put away his wrath. On the contrary, such sacrifices would *provoke* his wrath. Therefore, while in other ancient worldviews this third type of death might be seen as atoning or propitiatory, in the Jewish worldview of Jesus' day this was not the case. In fact, there is nothing in the second-temple Jewish literature that can provide any evidence for the existence of such an understanding of dying for others among Jews of the period.

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54. Hengel, *Atonement*, 19-20, 22.
55. Ibid., 19-20, 24-25.
56. Ibid., 23-24. For a fuller discussion of this idea, see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 146-49, 159.
57. Hengel, *Atonement*, 23.

Simon Gathercole cites as an example of a substitutionary death the story of Alcestis, who endures death in the place of her husband, king Admetus, in Euripides's play *Alcestis*, written around 438 BCE.[58] Gathercole even suggests that Paul may have had this story in mind when he speaks of Christ dying for a good or righteous person in Rom. 5:6-8. According to this play, in response to kindnesses received from Admetus, the god Apollo makes a deal with the Fates, who had power over life and death, so that if Admetus ever fell ill and was at the point of death, the Fates might restore him to health in order to save his life. In exchange for this favor, however, Admetus would have to find someone who was willing to die in his place. When Admetus later becomes ill and the doctors tell him that he will not live much longer, he looks for someone who will volunteer to die for him. When he can find no one to volunteer, Alcestis offers her life in exchange for his, and as a result her soul is led down by death to the underworld. Gathercole notes that the story of Alcestis continued to be popular among people even in the first and second centuries CE, as is evident from a number of inscriptions from that period in which certain women claim to have given up their life to save the life of their husbands. Gathercole also cites other examples of individuals dying in the place of others and on that basis claims that it was stories such as these that Paul had in mind in Rom. 5:6-8.

Like the examples of substitutionary death cited by Hengel, however, in the story of Alcestis, the ones who take her life in exchange for that of Admetus are gods who are demanding that either Admetus or Alcestis die, not because Admetus has sinned and they insist that he suffer death as the consequence of his sin, but simply because they decide that it is time for them to take Admetus's soul to Hades. His death was to be the natural death that all human beings eventually experience. In this story, there is nothing to suggest the idea of Alcestis making atonement for something Admetus has done or propitiating the wrath of the gods at Admetus. Furthermore, in Greek thought, death was generally not regarded as a punishment for human sin. A person who had done something to offend the gods might die a premature or painful death, and such a death perhaps could be viewed as divine punishment for sin. Even if one wishes to argue that Alcestis endured the penalty of death in Admetus's place, she only saved Admetus from dying temporarily, since eventually Admetus would also die, undergoing the punishment to which all human beings are subject. Thus her death for Admetus only delayed his own death, but did not actually save him from death. The same is true of the other examples cited by Gathercole: the one who dies in the place of another is not atoning for the sins of that other person or paying a penalty in that person's place for that person's moral failure or sin.

While the idea of vicarious death is undoubtedly fairly common in ancient Greek and Roman literature, therefore, nowhere do we find the idea that

58. See Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (ASBT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 91-97.

a righteous person could atone for the sins of others by enduring the just punishment that they deserve for their sins in their place. Even in the cases in which a god or the gods wish to punish some human beings in order to placate their anger at something that those human beings have done, their concern is for themselves rather than for the good of human beings. Those who die to save others from death by dying in their stead do so to deliver them from something or someone that cannot be compared or associated with YHWH, the God of Israel who is both loving and just, and thus constantly seeks the good of the human beings he has created by demanding that they live as he has commanded.

## VICARIOUS DEATH AND ATONEMENT IN SECOND-TEMPLE JEWISH LITERATURE AND RABBINIC THOUGHT

Only a few passages from second-temple Jewish literature relate the death of human beings to atonement and reconciliation with God. The most important of these appear in the books of 2 and 4 Maccabees. Both of these books relate the manner in which the Jewish people of Palestine were delivered from the oppressive rule of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes, who sought to replace Jewish beliefs and practices with Hellenistic culture and religion in the second century BCE.

### *Vicarious Suffering and Death in 2 Maccabees*

The Book of 2 Maccabees, composed some time in the mid- to late second century BCE, interprets the oppression and persecution that the Jews were experiencing under Antiochus as divine chastisement for their sins.[59] Chapters 6 and 7 of the book describe the sufferings of the priest Eleazar and seven brothers with their mother, all of whom are imprisoned, tortured, and put to death for refusing to submit to the measures imposed by Antiochus.[60] In the midst of his account of these sufferings, the author ascribes the following words to Eleazar, who is advanced in years:

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59. On the main themes, purpose, and date of 2 Maccabees, as well as the development of the text, see especially Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (CEJL; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 3-37, 518-29; Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 41A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 71-83; M. B. Dagut, "II Maccabees and the Death of Antiochus Epiphanes," *JBL* 72 (1953): 149-57.

60. I will refrain from the use of the term *martyr* to refer to Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother in 2 and 4 Maccabees, despite arguments in favor of its use by scholars such as van Henten (*Maccabean Martyrs*, 6). Although, as van Henten argues, the term can be defined in ways that may seem to make its use appropriate to speak of those tortured and put to death by Antiochus in 2 and 4 Maccabees, it is nevertheless not a term found in the texts themselves and carries with it certain connotations today that may reflect ideas that are foreign to those texts. In particular, despite its etymology, in modern usage the term *martyr* tends to focus attention on the death of those involved rather than their resistance to the authorities persecuting them and the strong convictions behind that resistance that result in their choosing death over submission. It is common today, for example, to speak of children or innocent civilians in areas of armed conflict being "martyred" merely in the sense of being killed as victims of violence or warfare.

> "These punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. In fact, it is a sign of great kindness not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately. For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people" (2 Macc. 6:12-16; cf. 6:26).

The author of 2 Maccabees also attributes to two of the seven brothers the same type of affirmation. They tell Antiochus: "But do not think that God has forsaken our people.... For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God" (7:16, 18). "For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants" (7:32-33; cf. 5:17).

From other passages in the book, it is evident that the "sins" mentioned here consist of abandoning God's law in order to follow the Greek customs and practices being imposed by Antiochus (2 Macc. 4:10-17; 6:1-11; 12:42). When the narrator and the main characters of this section of the book speak of those sins as "ours" (6:15; 7:18, 32), they are referring to the wrongdoing of the people as a whole and not merely to their own personal wrongdoing. However, they also recognize their own sin and therefore are not regarded as sinless or as undeserving of God's attempts to chastise and correct them together with the rest of the people.[61]

In their efforts to break the commitment of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and the mother to observe strictly the Jewish law, Antiochus's soldiers taunt and torment them and threaten them with a cruel death. In spite of this, Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother remain faithful to the law, preferring to die rather than to violate God's commandments. Eleazar in particular notes the impact of his decision on others: if he succumbs to the pressure to violate God's commandments, he will lead others—particularly the youth—to do so as well. If on the contrary, however, he remains faithful in the midst of his torments, he will inspire others to hold fast to the Jewish laws and resist Antiochus's efforts to impose Greek customs. When the soldiers suggest that Eleazar merely pretend to eat forbidden meat while actually eating meat that is kosher so that they can affirm that he gave in to their demands, he refuses to do so because of the example this would give to others:

> "Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life," he said, "for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, 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. Even if

61. This point is recognized by most interpreters of the passage; see, for example, Marinus de Jonge, "Jesus' Death for Others and the Death of the Maccabean Martyrs," in *Text and Testimony: Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A. F. J. Klijn* (ed. T. Baarda et al.; Kampen: Kok, 1988), 148; van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 138.

> 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. Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws" (2 Macc. 6:24-28).

The narration then continues:

> When he had said this, he went at once to the rack. Those who a little before had acted toward him with goodwill now changed to ill will, because the words he had uttered were in their opinion sheer madness. When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned aloud and said: "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him." 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 (2 Macc. 6:28-31).

As the seven brothers and their mother in turn are tortured and put to death, they stress two things. First, they speak of dying for the *law* or *laws* (2 Macc. 6:28; 7:2, 9, 11, 23, 37; cf. 13:14). The meaning of this phrase is obvious: they willingly give up their lives so that others will remain faithful to the Jewish law, recognizing that it is of such great value that nothing should be regarded as more important than observing it—not even one's own life. As the narrative makes clear, the fact that they hold the laws in such high regard that they are willing to suffer torments and die a cruel death rather than abandon those laws inspires others to do the same and follow their example.

A second idea that the dying brothers stress is their hope in the resurrection life. They express confidence that God will raise them some day if they remain faithful to God and God's law. The second brother affirms, for example, "the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (2 Macc. 7:9). The third brother says with regard to his hands: "I got these from heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again" (7:11). Finally, the last brother to be killed tells Antiochus:

> "For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation" (7:36-38; cf. 7:14, 23, 29).

These allusions to the resurrection serve to stress that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, Israel's God is just. While he is temporarily allowing Antiochus to commit acts of extreme cruelty toward God's people, in the end he will restore justice by rewarding the faithful and doing away with the evildoers and the disobedient.

However, the author of 2 Maccabees also sees God as restoring justice in the present world. Immediately after these events, Judas Maccabeus is presented as organizing his army to fight Antiochus. The narration then continues:

> They implored the Lord to look upon the people who were oppressed by all; and to have pity on the temple that had been profaned by the godless; to have mercy on the city that was being destroyed and about to be leveled to the ground; to hearken to the blood that cried out to him; to remember also the lawless destruction of the innocent babies and the blasphemies committed against his name; and to show his hatred of evil. As soon as Maccabeus got his army organized, the Gentiles could not withstand him, for the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy (8:2-5).

The logic underlying this interpretation of the events narrated is not at all difficult to grasp. The fact that many of the Jewish people had abandoned that law had initially provoked Israel's God to wrath. By allowing Antiochus to inflict suffering and death on the people, Israel's God had been attempting to bring his people back to himself and strengthen their commitment to obeying his law (2 Macc. 5:17-18, 20; 7:33, 38; 8:5). Now that this had happened, Israel's God had put away his wrath at his people's sins.

If we recall that in ancient Jewish thought the law or Torah was consistently seen as a blessing given by Israel's God to his people for their own good, then the reasons for his wrath are understandable: because he wants the people to obey the law for their own well-being and happiness, he insists that they observe that law and is moved to wrath when they do not. This implies that the concern of Israel's God is not for *himself* or his own holiness and justice but for *the good of the people*. In fact, this idea is stated explicitly with regard to the temple: the author of 2 Maccabees affirms that "the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation" (5:19). In other words, God's concern was not to save the holy place and punish the people for their sins for his own sake but rather to restore the people to obedience for their own good. Once God had accomplished this objective by chastising the people, he would once again shower them with his blessings. Since it was the Mosaic law that was regarded as having mandated the establishment of the holy place, it would not be unfaithful to the thought of the author of 2 Maccabees to affirm regarding the law the same thing that is said of the temple: "the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the law, but the law for the sake of the nation." For the author, behind God's disciplining of Israel was a concern, not for the law itself, but for the people's well-being, which could be brought about only by their obedience to the law.

This claim is also borne out by the fact that 2 Maccabees sees God's wrath against Israel and his punishment of the people's sins as a sign of *love and compassion*. This is particularly stressed in 6:12-16, already cited above, which affirms that the punishments God had inflicted on the people were a sign of his kindness and mercy. Similarly, in the midst of cruel tortures, the brothers

and mothers insist that God "is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us" (7:6). While elsewhere it is said that God's wrath is turned to mercy by the endurance of those suffering (8:5), in these passages God's wrath is seen as an *expression* of God's mercy and compassion and therefore of his love as well.

According to the author of 2 Maccabees, therefore, God's objective in allowing Antiochus to persecute Israel was to establish a people in the land who would be fully committed to observing the law. The willingness of Eleazar and the brothers and mother to suffer cruel torments and death rather than renounce obedience to the law thus enabled Israel's God to accomplish his objective (see 8:27-29, 36; 10:3-8; 11:24-26, 31; 13:12; 15:7-9). As a result, God is said to have become "reconciled" to the people (5:20; 7:33; 8:29; cf. 1:5; 2:22). In the end, he acts to save the people from their sufferings at the hands of Antiochus (1:11-12; 2:17-22; 10:38; 11:13; 12:11; 13:17; 15:7-8, 21). This reconciliation and salvation, however, are clearly dependent on the people's renewed obedience to the law (2:22; 8:21-29).

Interpreters of 2 Maccabees have often claimed to find in chapters 6, 7, and 8 of the book the idea that the deaths of Eleazar and the seven brothers atone for Israel's sins and turn away God's wrath. At times this is spoken of as the "effect" of their deaths, as if suffering, death, or the shedding of blood in itself made atonement or propitiated God. Jan Willem van Henten, for example, refers to the "effective deaths" of the martyrs in 2 Maccabees and the "redemptive function of suffering," while also claiming that "purification of the fatherland and atonement for the people's sins are two related effects of the martyrs' sacrificial deaths."[62] James Dunn affirms that 2 Macc. 7:37-38 reflects "the belief that the death of one would atone for the sins of others and remove the cause of divine wrath."[63] According to Marinus de Jonge, "the views on martyrdom in 2 and 4 Macccabees are the same. The violent death of exemplary servants of God restores the right relationship between God and his people...."[64] In the same vein, Nickelsburg writes: "According to 2 Macc. 7:37-38 (cf. 8:5) the deaths of the brothers turn God's wrath to forgiveness."[65] Jarvis Williams points especially to the blood of the martyrs as propitiatory, contending that God "received the martyrs' blood as a sufficient payment to end his wrath."[66]

Other interpreters even use the language of penal substitution, claiming that the "martyrs" put away God's wrath at the sins of the people by suffering and dying in their place. After citing several passages from 2 Maccabees 7, for example, N. T. Wright affirms that those passages reflect "the belief that the significance of the martyrs' sufferings has to do with their efficacy in bearing

62. Van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 140, 153.

63. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 266.

64. De Jonge, "Jesus' Death," 150.

65. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism,* 20.

66. Jarvis J. Williams, *Maccabean Martyr Traditions in Paul's Theology of Atonement: Did Martyr Theology Shape Paul's Conception of Jesus' Death?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 52.

the wrath of Israel's god against his sinful people."[67] Scot McKnight understands "the atoning value of these martyrdoms" in terms of "exhausting God's wrath against disobedience...."[68] According to I. Howard Marshall, the logic of 2 Maccabees is 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."[69]

In light of what we have just seen, however, affirmations such as these must be rejected categorically. For the author of 2 Maccabees, *it is not the sufferings and deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother* that make atonement for Israel's sins, effect reconciliation with God, and propitiate God's wrath. Rather, what brings these things about is the manner in which their sufferings and death lead to a renewed obedience among the people. This obedience makes it possible for the conditions necessary for justice and well-being in the land to be fulfilled. As noted above, in the narration of Eleazar's death in 2 Macc. 6:24-31, it is clear that his endurance of the torments imposed on him for his unbending adherence to the law inspires others to remain faithful to Israel's God and his law in the face of persecution. What leads him to refuse to pretend to eat impure food is the effect that this might have on the youth, who would think that he had abandoned his loyalty to the law. The implication is that others are led to turn back to God in repentance and obedience through Eleazar's perseverance and, as we have seen repeatedly elsewhere, *it is this that leads God to put away his wrath at the people's sins*. Undoubtedly, at the time of Eleazar's death, such a return to God had not yet taken place among the people in general. However, Eleazar's faithfulness in the midst of torture demonstrated to God that the change he desired to see in the people was occurring and would continue to occur as a result of the exemplary behavior of Eleazar, together with that of the seven brothers and their mother.[70]

The fact that for the author it was the obedience of the people that led God to put away his wrath rather than the sufferings and death of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother per se is evident as well from the author's affirmation that the sufferings that they and the rest of the people were enduring had the purpose of disciplining or correcting the people. Because that wrath is a sign of God's mercy and compassion for Israel, what God had sought was not to "exhaust" his wrath by pouring it out on someone, but to accomplish

67. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 323.

68. Scot McKnight, *Jesus and his Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 179.

69. 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. See also Eduard Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht: Untersuchungen zur urchristlichen Verkündigen vom Sühnetod Jesu Christi* (FRLANT 64; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 67: "Sie nehmen die Schuld des Volkes als die ihre auf sich und tragen die verdiene Strafe."

70. Van Henten rightly notes that those put to death save others by virtue of the fact that they offer an example to be followed (*Maccabean Martyrs*, 210-12, 222-43; see 2 Macc. 6:28, 31). I would add, however, that for the author of 2 Maccabees, rather than being merely *exemplary*, the courage of those put to death for the law is *contagious* in that it moves others to defend the law at all costs and not give in to the enemy.

his loving purposes through that wrath. Therefore, in the author's mind, God's wrath is not taken away by sufferings and death but rather by the renewed obedience of the people to the law, which God desired for their own good.

The author's allusions to the resurrection of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked serve the same purpose of encouraging greater obedience to God and God's law among the people. The fact that in the midst of horrific sufferings and a violent death, Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother manifest firmly the conviction that God will raise them from the dead and punish their oppressors leads others to be equally convinced of these truths. Thus Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother inspire others to remain faithful to God and the law not only by their example but also by their conviction that God will reward those who persevere in obedience to the law, but will punish those who abandon it.

The deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother can also be seen as providing assurance to God that there was indeed a faithful remnant that was worth preserving and saving, since it would form the basis for the renewal of God's people as a whole. The logic would be similar to that found in the story of Abraham's intercession for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18:16-33. Because the existence of even a small number of righteous people provides hope that they may lead others to come to live righteously as well, God will not utterly destroy the many for the sake of a few. While of course Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother would not live to form part of this righteous remnant themselves, their faithfulness unto death led to the establishment of such a remnant.

The sufferings and deaths of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother are also viewed as bringing Israel's God to intervene to save Israel for another reason. If he is truly committed to establishing justice and well-being for the people in the land, God cannot continue to let the righteous be persecuted and slaughtered while at the same time overlooking the evils committed by Antiochus. Curiously, 2 Maccabees presents Antiochus both as an *instrument* of God, in that God uses him to discipline and chastise the people, and at the same time as one who is fighting *against* God as his *adversary*, committing evils that God will some day punish (7:19, 34-36; 9:18, 28). This means that Antiochus is the *agent* of God's wrath in chastising Israel for its own good as well as the *object* of God's wrath.

Therefore, according to the logic of the author of 2 Maccabees, God's concern for justice in the land moved God initially to afflict Israel when many were responding positively to Antiochus's attempt to extinguish the worship of Israel's God in the land by prohibiting the people from practicing the law. By means of these afflictions, God brought the people to repent of their sins and become obedient to the law once more. However, God's concern for justice also brought God to take action against Antiochus to put an end to the terrible injustices and acts of cruelty that he was committing against those

who sought to be faithful to God's law.[71] This is stressed not only in the words of Eleazar and the brothers but also in 2 Macc. 8:2-4, where the Maccabeans implore God to listen to the spilled blood that cries out and to consider how Antiochus has oppressed the people, profaned the temple, blasphemed against God, and destroyed the innocent, including infants. The sufferings and death imposed on Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother also form part of the same injustices perpetrated by Antiochus. In the thought of the author, God's commitment to justice would not let him simply overlook those injustices without acting against Antiochus to deliver the people from his tyranny.[72]

This does not mean, however, that for the author of 2 Maccabees God's justice obliged God to punish sin and evil for its own sake, as if a merely retributive justice were involved.[73] Rather, for all of the reasons already noted, it is clear that God's objective was to establish peace, justice, and well-being in the land. This means that God's punishment of Antiochus had the same purpose: what God sought was not to make Antiochus pay for his crimes but to rid the land of his oppression. The logic behind the author's thought is therefore not that the suffering and deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother oblige God to act because otherwise God would be proven to be unjust, as if inflicting punishment on Antiochus for his sins would restore justice in itself or satisfy some divine need or demand that sin receive retribution. Rather, the fact that Antiochus's injustices were generating such great suffering made it necessary for God to act against Antiochus in order to establish justice in the land and put an end to the suffering he was inflicting.[74] What makes Israel's God just is not that he *punishes* but that he *saves*.

All of these ideas form the basis for the petitions to God that are presented repeatedly throughout the book (2 Macc. 1:8; 7:37-38; 8:2-4, 14-15,

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71. As Sam Williams observes with regard to 2 Macc. 8:2-4, "God is requested to remember various other acts on the enemy's part which demand vengeance: desecration of the Temple, destruction of the holy city, the murder of infants, the blasphemies against his name. He is beseeched to show his hatred of evil by requiting those who represent and perpetrate that evil" (*Jesus' Death*, 88).

72. Commenting on this passage, David Seeley notes: "Martyrological phenomena like blood which cries out (8.3) and the murder of babies are listed alongside non-martyrological events like oppression, profanation, destruction of property, and blasphemy. This makes it all the less likely that an expiatory effect is attached to the shedding of innocent blood in *2 Macc*. 7. Rather, the totality of evils wrought by Antiochus—of whatever kind—is being held up to God as evidence that his people have suffered enough.... The brothers' deaths are not, therefore, vicarious, expiatory ones. The brothers do not regard their deaths as special, but as of a piece with the sufferings of the whole people.... They ask only that with their deaths, the suffering end. No one will benefit because of their deaths *per se*, but simply because God will have ceased his wrath with the latter. He will consider that the overall punishment and discipline have reached a point of sufficiency" (*The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation*; JSNTSup 28; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990, 88-89).

73. As Sam Williams stresses with regard to Judas Maccabeus's prayer, "There is no suggestion in this prayer that God's wrath has been averted through the death of Eleazar and the seven brothers" (*Jesus' Death*, 88).

74. As Stephen Cummins has observed, the idea behind 2 Macc. 8:2-4 may also be that the suffering of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother not only bring Israel to repentance, but also increase the sins of the tormenters to a point where God must act. The steadfast obedience of those tortured makes it necessary for Antiochus to take even more extreme measures against them. In this way, his atrocities increase to such a point that God can simply no longer stand by idly without intervening (*Paul and the Crucified Christ in Antioch: Maccabean Martyrdom and Galatians 1 and 2*; SNTSMS 114; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 34).

29; 10:25-26; 12:42; 13:10-12; 14:15, 46; 15:21-27). The intercession of the various figures mentioned plays an important role in turning away God's wrath and reconciling him to the people in order that he may save them. Nevertheless, it is not the intercession itself that has this effect or makes atonement, but rather the desires, sentiments, and commitment to God's will of which that intercession is an expression. God saves Israel not simply because the people pray to him but because the renewal brought about by Antiochus's persecution and the resistance of those who suffered has now made it possible for God's purposes to be accomplished among the people. Just as Eleazar and the brothers and mother have been willing to die for the law, so also Judas Maccabeus and those with him are now willing to give their lives in battle to preserve the law (8:21). Their commitment to living as God's people under his law is the implicit basis upon which they make their petitions for deliverance and also constitute the basis upon which God grants those petitions.

To be sure, in some of these passages, those who ask God for deliverance appeal to their sufferings and the injustices being committed against them as a basis for their petition. In 2 Macc. 8:2-4 in particular, the blood of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother is said to cry out to God. Yet what their blood cries out for is not simply vengeance against Antiochus and his forces, as if this were in itself their objective. Rather, the blood of those executed and those who have fallen in the fight against Antiochus cries out for God to put an end to all of the injustices being cruelly committed by Antiochus and his forces so that God's people may once more live in peace and enjoy God's blessings as they live under the law (8:16-18; 12:5-6; cf. 15:24). The Maccabeans seek a restoration of the temple so that the people may serve God there once more for their own well-being and happiness (8:2; 13:10; 14:35-36). In other words, what the blood of the dead and the intercessions of the living cry out for is not *punishment* or *vengeance* per se but *deliverance*. While those who cry out to God want him to destroy those who have practiced evil and oppression, this destruction is not an end in itself but is rather a means to another end, namely, the liberation of God's people from their oppressors and the freedom necessary to live in the land in conformity with God's will for their own well-being and happiness.

Therefore, although in their intercession the Maccabeans recall the blasphemies committed by Antiochus and his army, the profanation of the temple, and the destruction of innocent babies, the idea is not that God will correct these wrongs simply by punishing those who have perpetrated them. Rather, the basis for the petitions for deliverance is that Israel's God is a God who seeks what is right and just and does not tolerate evil and oppression due to his love for those he has created. For this reason, in spite of his efforts to purify the people through suffering, Israel's God must no longer stand by idly and let the perpetrators of such cruelties continue to practice them. While Israel's God has been attempting to establish justice by chastising and disciplining the people for their sins through Antiochus, now that his corrective

purposes have been accomplished, he must now establish justice by destroying Antiochus and his army. In this way, he will "show his hatred of evil" (8:4) and uphold his law.

In light of all of this, it is clear that it is not the deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother that atone for the people's sins, but their submission to God's will in the midst of sufferings and the fact that they bring others to be equally committed to God's will. God puts away his wrath, not because the people have suffered the punishment they deserve, but because the people's response to the chastisement inflicted through Antiochus has made it possible for God to accomplish the loving purposes that led him to inflict that chastisement in the first place.[75] For the same reasons, it is incorrect to affirm that the sufferings and deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother have some salvific "effect." Their deaths do not satisfy God's justice or put God under any type of obligation to forgive sins. God's salvation of Israel is an act of God's free will made in accordance with his sovereign purposes, not the result of the fulfillment of some intrinsic requirement of divine justice that could only be satisfied through the imposition of sufferings and death on those who had sinned or someone serving as their substitute.

Similarly, contrary to what de Jonge affirms, in 2 Maccabees it is not violent death that restores the right relationship between God and his people, but the firm commitment to God's will of which that violent death is the consequence, together with the renewed obedience in others which that commitment brings about. If sufferings and death in general effected atonement or appeased God's wrath, then even unrepentant evildoers like Antiochus would atone for their sins and propitiate God's wrath simply by suffering and dying. However, if one must turn back to God in obedience by repenting in order to be forgiven, then it is repentance that atones for sins and puts an end to God's wrath rather than divine acts of violence. While it might be said that Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother bore God's wrath, this is true only in the sense that they endured the same divine wrath that was directed at the people as a whole: "the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation" (7:38). They did not bear this divine wrath *in the stead* of the people but *together* with them. Undoubtedly, they suffered more than the rest of the people and thus can be said to have experienced that wrath to a greater degree. Yet for the author of 2 Maccabees, all the people collectively experienced that wrath, as 8:2-4 makes clear, and all collectively were later saved from it. Therefore, Israel's God ultimately intervened to save his people from Antiochus, not because he had exhausted his wrath, as if this were the objective of the punishment he inflicted, but because his purposes of establishing a people firmly committed to obeying him had been accomplished.

75. Versnel notes regarding 2 Maccabees: "Nowhere—not even in the *en emoi* phrase [in 7:38]—do we find a trace of an explicitly *intended* causal connection between the martyr's death and the return of God's mercy.... Nor is there any explicit indication of an *effective* causal relationship in that God's mercy indeed has returned *as a result of the death of the martyr*" ("Making Sense," 260).

## *Suffering for the Law in 4 Maccabees*

It seems likely that the author of the book of 4 Maccabees, written probably toward the end of the first century CE,[76] made use of parts of 2 Maccabees in composing his work. In this regard, van Henten comments: "The description of the martyrdoms and their prehistory is probably based upon the information in 2 Maccabees 3:1—10:9. The author of 4 Maccabees has compressed the description of the historical setting of the Maccabean martyrs' deaths and amplified the description of the martyrdoms and the praise of the martyrs."[77] Because of this, many of the basic ideas of 4 Maccabees appear to be essentially the same as those of 2 Maccabees.

Nevertheless, there are also some significant differences between the two works. Above all, the author of 4 Maccabees focuses primarily on the story of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother. In contrast to 2 Maccabees, which dedicates only three chapters (6–8) to these figures, the narrative of their sufferings and death occupies the major part of 4 Maccabees (4 Macc. 5:4—17:18). The author not only presents in greater detail the tortures inflicted on Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother but also expands considerably the dialogue between them and Antiochus and adds commentaries that interpret these occurrences.

Although both works clearly hope to inspire greater obedience to the Jewish law among their readers, the argument of 4 Maccabees centers around the claim that "divine reason is sovereign over the emotions" (1:1; 6:31; 13:1). In dialogue with Hellenistic thought, the book equates reason with the observance of the Jewish law. The story of the faithfulness of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother in the time of persecution under Antiochus is regarded as illustrating the truth that reason can check and overcome the emotions and passions. As Francis Watson notes, the author's purpose is to demonstrate that the law can be observed even in the most adverse of circumstances.[78]

Following a long introduction in which the author extols reason over the emotions and cites biblical figures such as Joseph, Moses, Jacob, and David as examples of this principle, he then turns to the story of the persecution under Antiochus. Antiochus is presented as attempting to impose Greek

76. On the question of the 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. van Henten et al.; SPB 36; Leiden: Brill, 1986), 136-49; Versnel, "Making Sense," 218; Cummins, *Paul*, 77-78. Of course, if 4 Maccabees was written after most of the New Testament texts, in particular Paul's letters, it could not have influenced them directly. If in fact the author of 4 Maccabees based his work in part on 2 Maccabees, however, it could provide evidence of how some Jews, including perhaps some of Jesus' first followers, were interpreting 2 Maccabees. In any case, even if most of the New Testament allusions to Jesus' death predate 4 Maccabees, we cannot rule out the possibility that the ideas found in 4 Maccabees were already common in some Jewish circles earlier in the first century.

77. Van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 296.

78. Francis Watson, "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), 109. On the purpose of 4 Maccabees, its adaptations of 2 Maccabees, and its argument as a whole, see 108-15.

customs and eradicate observance of the Jewish law among the Jewish people through the use of violent means (4:19—5:3; cf. 18:5). In 4 Maccabees, however, it is not the people at large who abandon the law but only the high priest Jason and the leaders. In fact, the common people are presented as remaining law-observant and despising Antiochus's decrees in spite of his threats and punishments (4:24-26). This is true of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother as well, who are never presented as committing or confessing any sins. This would seem to pose problems for the idea that the suffering that they and others endure is due to their sins or those of the people as a whole.[79]

According to the author of 4 Maccabees, Antiochus's aggression against the people was an act of Israel's God in response to the manner in which Jason "changed the nation's way of life and altered its form of government in complete violation of the law" (4:19). The author states: "The divine justice was angered by these acts and caused Antiochus himself to make war on them" (4:21). The purpose of the sufferings that God inflicts on the people through Antiochus is not stated. This would seem to bear out Van Henten's observation: "The author of 4 Maccabees hardly pays attention to the disciplinary aspect of the people's suffering, which is emphasized in 2 Maccabees."[80]

While this disciplinary aspect of suffering is not mentioned explicitly in 4 Maccabees, however, several passages indicate that it is unquestionably assumed. Above all, if it is remembered that, according to a disciplinary understanding of punishment, the objective is to strengthen the people in their obedience to God, then it is clear that this is what the deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother are said to accomplish. After narrating Eleazar's death, the author eulogizes him, saying: "You, father, strengthened our loyalty to the law through your glorious endurance, and you did not abandon the holiness which you praised, but by your deeds you made your words of divine philosophy credible" (7:9). When the oldest brother is being tortured by Antiochus, after indicating that he is suffering because he is defending God's law (9:15), he calls on his brothers to imitate him in fighting on behalf of their faith and customs so that, in that way, "the just Providence of our ancestors may become merciful to our nation and take vengeance on the accursed tyrant" (9:23-24). At the end of the book, referring to those who gave their lives for their faith, the author concludes: "Because of them the nation gained peace, and by reviving observance of the law in the homeland they ravaged the enemy" (18:4). Therefore, if the sufferings and death of those who remained faithful to the law are said to have inspired others to greater obedience to the

79. Although, as Gert J. Steyn notes, the author of 4 Maccabees does not attribute any sin or confession of sin to Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother, this does not necessarily lead to her conclusion that these figures die "without any sin or guilt" ("Soteriological Perspectives in Luke's Gospel," in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*; ed. Jan G. van der Watt; NovTSup 121; Leiden: Brill, 2005, 87). Rather, just as the idea that the people in general had sinned is implied rather than stated explicitly in the book, so also the book clearly seems to imply that those who are put to death share in the sin of Israel rather than dying as innocent victims (see 4 Macc. 17:21).

80. Van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 185.

law and God is presented as the one who sent Antiochus to make war on Israel, the obvious implication is that God sought to discipline and correct the people in order to bring them into greater conformity with his will.

Another indication that these ideas are present in the text is the view of the law's intrinsic goodness that appears there. In chapter 5, referring to the law as a "philosophy," Eleazar tells Antiochus:

> "You scoff at our philosophy as though living by it were irrational, but it teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only real God. Therefore we do not eat defiling food; for since we believe that the law was established by God, we know that in the nature of things the Creator of the world in giving us the law has shown sympathy toward us. He has permitted us to eat what will be most suitable for our lives, but he has forbidden us to eat meats that would be contrary to this" (5:22-26).

Here the Jewish law is unquestionably seen as an expression of God's love for Israel, since it promotes justice and well-being and commands things that lead intrinsically to the people's health and happiness. The clear implication is that God's wrath and the punishment he inflicts on Israel are thus an expression of his concern for Israel's welfare. The idea is that God wants the people to obey the law *for their own sake* and by means of the persecution under Antiochus is seeking to accomplish that objective.

The author of 4 Maccabees repeatedly presents the resistance of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother in terms of a battle or struggle (6:21; 9:15-18, 24; 13:15-16;17:10-12; 18:4; cf. 1:11). Eleazar, the brothers and the mother fight on behalf of the law and virtue by refusing to give in to Antiochus. They consecrate themselves entirely to God and offer up their bodies and souls to shield and protect the law (13:13; 17:19-20; 18:3). As Sam Williams observes, the book's conclusion implies that others did the same. Commenting on 18:5, which affirms that Antiochus was not able "to compel the Israelites to become pagans and to abandon their ancestral customs," Williams notes that the allusion to the people here "indicates the author's full awareness that the nine martyrs of his story were not the only Jews who stood fast when confronted by persecution."[81] God responds to their steadfastness by driving out Antiochus and delivering the people from their oppression at his hands.

In this way, those who gave their lives in faithfulness to the law can be said to have "conquered" Antiochus and his forces (1:11; 7:4; 9:30; 11:20, 27; 16:14). This is to be understood both in the sense that Antiochus was unable to make them renounce their faith and disobey the law, as well as in the sense that, in response to their steadfastness under persecution, God intervened to deliver them from Antiochus's tyranny. The author understands this in terms of God becoming "merciful" to the people once more (6:28; 9:24; 12:17). Of course, those who die under Antiochus's persecution are also viewed as

81. S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 172.

conquering or becoming victorious in the sense that they receive the prize of immortality (7:3; 9:22; 14:5; 16:13; 17:11-18;18:3, 23).

The author of 4 Maccabees follows 2 Maccabees in presenting Antiochus both as the *instrument* of God's wrath and as the *object* of God's wrath. Initially, it is said that God sent Antiochus to make war on Israel because in his justice God had become angry at the sins being committed (4 Macc. 4:21). However, when Antiochus then goes to the extreme of attempting to eradicate the people's obedience to the law altogether and begins to persecute the faithful, such as Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother, he is no longer seen as one who is executing God's will but instead is condemned as an "enemy of heavenly justice" (9:15) and a cruel, accursed tyrant (5:37-38; 6:21-23; 8:1-3; 9:24; 17:17, 21). Instead of being God's instrument to execute his righteous wrath on Israel, Antiochus himself becomes the object of God's wrath (9:24, 11:3; 18:5). For the author, then, the one ultimately causing the death of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother is not God but Antiochus: they die, not because God has punished them but "because of the violence of the tyrant who wished to destroy the way of life of the Hebrews" (17:9). For the author, what Antiochus did was not God's will but something worthy of divine punishment: "For these crimes divine justice pursued and will pursue the accursed tyrant" (18:22).[82]

In 4 Maccabees as in 2 Maccabees, therefore, the faithfulness and endurance of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother moves God to act to save Israel for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, through their faithfulness and endurance they inspire others to remain obedient to the law. In this way, God's justice can be said to have been satisfied, since what God's justice seeks is not to *punish* but to *save* by bringing the people to live in accordance with his will for their own good. Second, precisely because of the justice of Israel's God and his love for the people, he cannot stand by idly when those who are committed to his will suffer unspeakable cruelties at the hands of the wicked. Therefore, the tortures endured by Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother move God to act against Antiochus and his forces. For this reason, the oldest brother tells his siblings that if they continue to fight on behalf of their faith, God will "take vengeance on the accursed tyrant" (9:24). Conversely, the fifth brother tells Antiochus: "by murdering me you will incur punishment from the heavenly justice for even more crimes" (11:3). Nevertheless, this vengeance and punishment do not constitute an end in themselves but have the purpose of delivering Israel from its oppression.

### *Vicarious Death in 4 Maccabees*

The ideas just considered provide the background necessary to understand the two passages from 4 Maccabees that present the sufferings and death of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother as vicarious in nature: 4 Macc. 6:27-30

82. In this case, as Sam Williams observes, similar to what we find in 2 Maccabees, the idea in 4 Maccabees is that of God "withdrawing his protective arm from his people" (*Jesus' Death*, 80).

and 17:20-22. Both of them present problems for translation. The most difficult word to translate is *antipsuchon*, which in general refers to something given in exchange for one's life or soul. This word appears in both of the passages just mentioned. The translation "ransom" is problematic in that it carries certain connotations that are not necessarily to be associated with the notion of an *antipsuchon*, including that of a commercial exchange or a payment made to release a hostage or free a slave. The second passage uses the term *hilastērion*, which has been translated in different ways, including "propitiation," "expiation," "propitiatory," "mercy seat" (of the ark of the covenant), and even "atoning sacrifice."[83] Due to the difficulties involved in translation, therefore, I will simply transliterate both of these terms.

In 4 Macc. 6:27-29, immediately before Eleazar is said to have died "by virtue of reason, for the sake of the law," he is presented as praying: "You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Become merciful to your people, letting our punishment on their behalf suffice. Make my blood their purification and receive my soul (*psuchē*) as their *antipsuchon*." The second passage, 4 Macc. 17:20-22, occurs at the conclusion of the book, where the author writes:

> These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honored, not only with this honor, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become something like an *antipsuchon* for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and the *hilastērion* of their death, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated.[84]

These two passages have been seen as offering the strongest support for the idea that in second-temple Judaism, suffering and death in themselves were believed to make atonement, appease God's wrath, and satisfy God's justice. Eleazar's petition that his punishment "suffice" (6:28) is often taken to infer that the people deserved to endure a certain amount of punishment for their sins and that this was borne by Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother in the place of the rest. Wright, for example, attributes to the author of 4 Maccabees the idea that "their sufferings will have the effect of drawing on to themselves the sufferings of the nation as a whole, so that the nation may somehow escape."[85] The allusions to their blood making purification and the affirmation that their death constitutes a *hilastērion* are understood in the sense that God declares the people forgiven and puts away his wrath at their sins because the innocent deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother have satisfied the demands of his justice. Above all, the use of the word *antipsuchon*

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83. On the use of *hilastērion* in Greco-Roman literature and the Hebrew Scriptures, see especially Stanislas Lyonnet, "The Terminology of Redemption," in *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study* (Lyonnet and Léopold Sabourin; AnBib 48; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1970), 155-63.

84. For our purposes here, it does not matter whether *hilastērion* is understood as an adjective or noun; on this discussion, see S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 38-41.

85. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 583.

in both of these passages is thought to exemplify the principle that the life of one individual can be offered up as a substitute in the place of (*anti-*) the lives of others.[86]

A close examination of these passages on the basis of what we have seen above, however, makes it clear that such interpretations involve reading back into the text ideas that are foreign to them. When Eleazar prays to God, "Become merciful to your people, letting our punishment on their behalf suffice" (*hileos genou tō ethnei sou arkestheis tē hēmetera huper autōn dikē*; 6:28), the "punishment" (*dikē*) he is referring to is clearly the suffering that he and others have endured at the hands of Antiochus. As noted above, the text claims that, by torturing Eleazar, Antiochus is no longer acting as God's instrument to chastise the people but has come to behave as a cruel tyrant (5:27; 6:21-23; 7:2). Therefore, when asking for the punishment to end, Eleazar is referring not to *divine* punishment but to the punishment being inflicted by Antiochus, who has become an "enemy of divine justice" (9:15) rather than its instrument. Of course, even if God is merely allowing Antiochus to inflict torture on Eleazar and others in passive fashion, in some sense this can be seen as being in accordance with God's will, since God does not intervene to put an end to Antiochus's actions.

In whatever manner the punishment of Eleazar and others is understood, it is said to be borne on behalf of others (*huper autōn*) and not in their stead. This should be interpreted in the sense that Eleazar and others were enduring torments in order to defend the law and preserve Israel as a people, strengthening their loyalty to the law (7:8-9). Immediately before Eleazar's petition in 6:28-29, he is presented as stating this concern explicitly:

> "May we, the children of Abraham, never think so basely that out of cowardice we feign a role unbecoming to us! For it would be irrational if we, who have lived in accordance with truth to old age and have maintained in accordance with law the reputation of such a life, should now change our course and become a pattern of impiety to the young, in becoming an example of the eating of defiling food. It would be shameful if we should survive for a little while and during that time be a laughing stock to all for our cowardice, and if we should be despised by the tyrant as unmanly, and not protect our divine law even to death. Therefore, O children of Abraham, die nobly for your faith!" (6:17-22).

The punishments that Eleazar is bearing are therefore "for others" in the sense that he is seeking to remain faithful to God in the midst of persecution so as to influence others to remain faithful and obedient to God's law as well. In that way, they will attain their deliverance. Any idea of substitutionary suffering is therefore absent.

At the same time, of course, Eleazar calls on God to be merciful to the people and to let what he and others are suffering on their behalf "suffice." The idea here is not difficult to grasp: Eleazar is simply asking God to intervene

86. See, for example, Grayston, *Dying We Live*, 257: "The martyr offered himself as an *antipsuchos*, dying not only for the benefit of sinners but in their stead."

so that other faithful Jews are not forced to suffer in the same way that he and others have. There is no hint of any idea that God's justice requires that a certain amount of suffering be inflicted on the sinful people to compensate for their sins.[87] Rather, the sufferings of Eleazar and others can be said to suffice in two senses. First, they are sufficient to demonstrate to God that his purpose of establishing a people that is obedient to him is in fact being accomplished. Eleazar's own steadfastness in the face of persecution is evidence of this and will also inspire others to obedience, thus giving God assurance that the objective he sought will become a reality. Second, Eleazar asks that what he and others have suffered be sufficient in the sense that, because God is just and loving, he can no longer tolerate and overlook the cruel injustices being perpetrated by Antiochus. The tyrant has gone too far and must now be stopped. For that reason, both God's justice and God's mercy should be manifested in putting an end to the suffering that Eleazar and others are enduring.

Eleazar's petition here, therefore, is that God show mercy to the people in the midst of their sufferings by bringing those sufferings to an end. This idea is paralleled in other passages from 4 Maccabees. In 9:24, one of the brothers encourages his siblings to continue resisting so that "the just Providence of our ancestors may become merciful to our nation and take vengeance on the accursed tyrant." Later, when he is about to be put to death, the youngest brother exclaims, "I do not desert the excellent example of my brothers, and I call on the God of our fathers to be merciful to our nation" (12:16-17).[88] What brings God to show mercy by intervening to save the people is not suffering per se, but the suffering of those who have shown themselves to be committed to his will, since his purpose in allowing the suffering to take place is precisely to strengthen that commitment.[89] Once the people manifest that commitment, there is no reason for God to continue allowing them to suffer.

There is nothing in the text, therefore, to support the idea that God's justice required that a certain amount of suffering be inflicted on the people as punishment for their sins and that therefore Eleazar was asking that this punishment be inflicted on him instead. To punish Eleazar as a substitute would have defeated entirely the purpose of the afflictions, since in that case they would not serve to bring the people back to God in repentance and obedience

87. Such an idea is affirmed, for example, by Jarvis Williams, who claims that "Eleazar prayed that God would accept his death and the death of the other martyrs as sufficient payment for the nation's sin...." (*Maccabean Martyr Traditions*, 49).

88. While this is mercy, the idea is not that "divine pity on Israel might be provoked by the sight of innocent suffering" (Philip R. Davies, "Didactic Stories," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Vol. 1: *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*; ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; WUNT 2/140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 130). Mercy must not be confused with pity.

89. See S. Williams, *Jesus' Death,* 183: "When God punishes his people, his purpose is their repentance (cf. e.g., Lev. 26). Evidence of repentance, not degree of suffering, is what propitiates an angry Yahweh. Even when it is said (e.g., Is. 40:2) that Israel has received double punishment for her sins, the prophet does not intimate that he has been 'satisfied.' Nor when he exacts vengeance upon his enemies is there any hint of his being 'filled' or 'satisfied' by their suffering (cf. e.g., Deut. 32)."

to the law. On the contrary, they could continue to sin freely since Eleazar had put away God's wrath at their sin.

The second part of Eleazar's dying petition in 6:28-29, "Make my blood their purification," reflects sacrificial imagery. Eleazar is presented as offering his life up to God sacrificially as a result of his unbroken commitment to obeying God's law. As we have just noted, however, he is doing this not merely for his own sake but for the sake of *others*: he refuses to disobey the law because he would no longer provide a good example for others, inspiring them to obey the law and to resist Antiochus's godless intentions. On the contrary, Eleazar's disobedience and disregard for the law would lead others to disobey. Therefore, just as he has been enduring torments on behalf of others, he now offers up his life sacrificially on behalf of others as well.[90] In essence, he is asking that his sufferings and death not be in vain but that they instead serve to bring about in others the same firm commitment to God's will that he is manifesting so that God might mercifully save the people.

The allusion to "blood" here should not be understood merely in the sense of violent death. It is not Eleazar's death or the spilling of his blood per se that will purify others. Rather, it is his steadfastness and endurance to the point of death. This is what 4 Maccabees repeatedly stresses.[91] In 1:11, the author points to the "courage and endurance" of Eleazar and others as the decisive factor that led to Antiochus's downfall and the purification of the people: "By their endurance they conquered the tyrant, and thus their native land was purified through them." Here it is clear that purification results, not from death itself, but from the perseverance to the point of death of Eleazar and others who shared his same commitment to God's will.

In principle, Eleazar's petition to God that his blood might serve to purify others can be understood in three different ways. First, his request may be that God permit his faithfulness and endurance and the example he has provided to purify others in the sense of inspiring and enabling them to turn away from sin and instead embrace the same type of obedience to the law that he has displayed. Second, because Eleazar's faithfulness to the end also serves as evidence that there is a faithful remnant among God's people composed of those who have recommitted themselves to living according to the law, that faithfulness provides a basis for God to forgive his people and regard them as pure once more. That purified remnant will form the foundation for a renewed Israel, which is what God ultimately desires.

There is also a third sense in which Eleazar's blood may be seen as purifying Israel. His petition is that his endurance to the end will move God to drive Antiochus out of the land so that the impure, impious enemies of God will no longer occupy it. This will make it possible for the Jewish people who

90. Sam Williams rightly stresses that "Eleazar prays that God will *make* his blood their purification, that is, that he will accept it as such" (*Jesus' Death*, 41).

91. See 4 Macc. 5:23; 6:9, 13; 7:9, 22; 9:6-8, 22, 28-30; 11:12; 13:27; 15:30-32; 16:17-21; 17:7-10, 12, 17, 23.

are left there to live righteous, pure lives in accordance with God's law unimpeded.[92] The conclusion of the book uses the imagery of purification in this sense: it is the "homeland" that is "purified" (17:20-21).[93] Once Eleazar has demonstrated that there is indeed a righteous remnant dedicated to serving God obediently, God is moved to rid the land of Antiochus's oppression so that this obedient people may live in peace and purity there. In effect, what Eleazar asks is that God avenge his blood by purifying the land of Antiochus's cruel tyranny. As noted previously, however, this is a cry not for retributive punishment or revenge but for salvation from an oppressor.

Of course, because these three understandings of the people's purification are not mutually exclusive, it is possible that more than one is present in the text. What is *not* present, however, is the idea of penal substitution. Nowhere does the text imply that "Eleazar is imploring God to receive his faithfulness until death as a vicarious atonement on behalf of the sins of the Jewish people."[94] Even if Eleazar's words are understood in the sense that the people are purified of their sin and guilt before God, this is not because God accepts the blood of the innocent in the place of the guilty, but because the repentance and renewed obedience brought about in others by Eleazar's endurance to the point of death leads God to overlook the past sins of the people.[95] If any type of atonement for sins is involved, it is made not by Eleazar but by the people themselves, who are inspired to return to God and his law as a result of Eleazar's faithfulness.[96] As Sam Williams notes, there is thus no basis here for claiming that, in ancient Jewish thought, "*human* blood, especially innocent human blood, could make expiation for the sins of others."

The third part of Eleazar's petition in 6:28-29, "receive my soul (*psuchē*) as their *antipsuchon*," reflects the same logic. To translate this passage, "take my life in exchange for theirs," as the NRSV does, can be misleading. In English, to take someone's life tends to be understood as synonymous with killing someone. The Greek text in no way suggests that God is the one killing Eleazar or threatening to put him to death. It is not as if Eleazar were saying, "Put me to death instead of putting them to death," as a penal substitution interpretation would imply. Eleazar's death is not regarded as a punishment inflicted by God but as a voluntary offering up of his life.

Similarly, the language of "exchange" should not be understood in the sense that Eleazar is negotiating or bartering with God, as if he were offering God his life in exchange for God not taking the lives of the rest of the

92. This purification of the land is twofold in that it involves the removal of the defilement of "the army of Antiochus on the one hand, the apostasy of the Jews on the other" (S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 179).

93. As Sam Williams notes, "The Lord 'purifies the land'—not from sins but from Israel's enemies!" (*Jesus' Death*, 84). The land is also purified from sins, however, in the sense that the people ultimately turn away from their sinful ways as a result of what has taken place.

94. Cummins, *Paul*, 81 (commenting on 4 Macc. 6:28-29).

95. Sam Williams rightly notes, "The 'removal' of the nation's sin is not described as the forgiveness of personal wrongs or as the assuaging of guilt—we hear nothing about the Hellenizers being 'forgiven'—but as the reversal of an overt situation: the *land* was purified" (*Jesus' Death*, 178).

96. S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 186.

people. This would suggest that what God desires or demands is simply that someone die, as if this in itself would satisfy God's justice or atone for the people's sins. Nor is Eleazar offering God his life as a ransom payment, asking God to take his soul in exchange for liberating others. In addition to being extremely problematic theologically, since God would in effect be the one holding the people captive and demanding a ransom payment to set them free, such an interpretation runs contrary to the thought of 4 Maccabees and ancient Jewish beliefs in general.

What Eleazar asks God to take or receive is his *psuchē* or soul. This word appears frequently throughout 4 Maccabees and should often be translated as "mind," "will," or "spirit."[97] This means that Eleazar is not merely offering to die but offering up his own self or being, not only to God but for the sake of the law as well. This is what he affirms at the beginning of his petition: "You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments *for the sake of the law*" (6:27). Throughout his torments, he has committed his life fully to God; and now that he is about to die, he continues to do so, commending his soul to God. All of these ideas are behind his prayer that God take or receive his *psuchē*.

Once again, however, Eleazar's concern is primarily *for others* rather than for himself. As his words reflect, in enduring torments for the sake of the law, he has not tried to save himself, but has instead considered first and foremost the consequences that his actions will have for other Jews, whose loyalty to the law he seeks to confirm and strengthen (7:9). Obviously, if he wants others to remain faithful to the law—particularly those who are young—, it is because he wants them to *live* and *prosper* in the land God has given them. For this to happen, the persecution and destruction that they are enduring under Antiochus must come to an end. If it does not, the nation will be further weakened and decimated and the cause for which he is giving his life will not be accomplished.

The petition "receive my soul as their *antipsuchon*" must therefore be understood on the basis of these ideas. Eleazar is willing to give up his life for the cause of the law and the people, yet at the same time he wants the sacrifice of his life to bear fruit. While he is not attempting to bargain with God, manipulate him, or compel him to act, in effect he is telling God: "I am willing to die, but what I beg and implore of you in return is that you save the people from Antiochus so that they may live free from tyranny in peace, justice, and obedience in the land." In essence, his death is a petition to God that he not die in vain, but that God respond to his death by bringing salvation for those on whose behalf he is enduring tortures and dying.

If understood according to these ideas, there is a sense in which the words attributed to Eleazar in Greek can properly be translated, "Take my life in exchange for theirs," as the NRSV does. According to the thought of 4 Maccabees, God responds to Eleazar's petition by receiving his soul and

97. See, for example, 4 Macc. 3:3; 8:29; 13:15; 14:6; 15:4.

granting what he requested in return, namely, the deliverance of the people from persecution and death at the hands of Antiochus, that is, "their life." However, the life that Eleazar attains for others through his death has to do with existence in the Jewish homeland rather than in a heavenly realm. At the same time, in a sense Eleazar does not forfeit his soul but obtains its immortality. This is the reward or "prize" that he attains together with the brothers and mother (17:11-12). Eleazar's words to God in 6:29, then, could be paraphrased: "Make the blood I am shedding out of faithfulness to your law a means by which your people may be purified from their sinful ways so as to be acceptable to you, and receive favorably the life that I am offering up to you with the petition that in return you allow them to live obediently in peace in their homeland by delivering them from the suffering they are enduring." Obviously, the basis upon which God would grant favorably such a petition would be the renewed obedience to the law that would result from the faithfulness of Eleazar and others to that law in the midst of their suffering.

The word *antipsuchon* is used in a slightly different manner in 17:21, where those who died for the law under Antiochus's persecution are said to have become "something like an *antipsuchon* for the sin of the nation." Here again, it is extremely difficult to translate the author's words into English. The meaning is not that the people's sins demanded some type of punishment or atoning sacrifice in order to enable God to forgive them, as if this requirement had been fulfilled by the deaths of Eleazar, the mother, and her seven sons. Nor do their deaths function as some type of ransom payment made to God in order for God to liberate them.

From the context of the book, the "sin of the nation" clearly refers to the adoption of Greek customs and the abandonment of the Jewish law under Antiochus. In the thought of the author, God had responded to this sin by sending Antiochus upon the people to chastise and correct them so as to bring them back to himself in obedience. For God to inflict this chastisement on a substitute would defeat its purpose entirely, since the objective was not to punish but to discipline and correct the people. If Eleazar's endurance unto death is said to have strengthened the people's loyalty to the law (7:9), then obviously that loyalty was previously not strong enough and needed to be increased. The same idea is present in 18:3-4: "Therefore those who gave over their bodies in suffering for the sake of religion were not only admired by men, but also were deemed worthy to share in a divine inheritance. Because of them the nation gained peace, and by reviving observance of the law in the homeland they ravaged the enemy." According to this passage, observance of the law needed to be revived. This is what those who gave their lives accomplished: in response to this renewed observance of the law, God drove Israel's enemies out and established peace in the land.

Yet while the sin in 17:21 is said to be that of the nation as a whole, those who endured the greatest suffering and torments were a very small group: Eleazar, the mother, and her seven sons (17:13). For this reason, it can be

said that the chastisement aimed at bringing back to obedience the people as a whole fell on this small group. Their courage and endurance moved others to return to God and consequently led God to deliver the people from the oppression of Antiochus. As 4 Maccabees repeatedly stresses, Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother endured these torments willingly, nobly, and courageously. This means that they were not merely killed by Antiochus, but *offered up their lives* to God of their own accord. They "consecrated" themselves for the sake of God and the law (17:20). They did so, however, seeking not merely something for themselves, such as the reward of immortality, but the salvation of their fellow Jews in the present world.

For this reason, the author refers to Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother as "something like an *antipsuchon* for the sin of the nation." The term *antipsuchon* communicates the idea that they gave up their lives or souls for others so that those others might be saved from the sin they were committing as well as divine chastisement for that sin. In a sense, they can be said to have died in the place of others, in that they endured torments and sufferings that others did not and even suffered the chastisement that the people as a whole deserved. Nevertheless, this is not penal substitution, since it was not their sufferings and death per se that led God to save Israel, but the impact that their endurance and commitment to God in suffering and death had on others.

To affirm that Eleazar prays that God might "consider his sufferings as an *antipsuchos*, satisfying divine justice and purifying the nation," as Brian J. Tabb does, implies that God's justice and purification are accomplished merely by inflicting suffering on people, that is, by a purely retributive justice.[98] Once the deserved punishment is inflicted, then justice is satisfied. That this is not the thought of 4 Maccabees is clear from the fact the author affirms that Antiochus is "both punished on earth and is being chastised after his death" for the evils he committed against Israel (18:5; cf. 9:8-9; 11:3; 12:12; 17:20-21; 18:22). If the author believed that punishment itself satisfied divine justice and purified people, then even Antiochus would have atoned for his sins and been purified in God's sight merely by suffering the punishment corresponding to those sins. Obviously, this is contrary to the author's thought. Eleazar is not an *antipsuchon* for Antiochus, since Antiochus is unrepentant and does not seek to live in conformity with God's will. For the same reason, however, Eleazar cannot be an *antipsuchon* on behalf of any of God's people who do not themselves repent and seek to live in conformity with God's will. What satisfies divine justice and purifies the nation is thus not the *punishment* inflicted on the righteous, but *their faithfulness and commitment to God and his law* under such harsh circumstances. Eleazar can be an *antipsuchon* and means of purification only for those who are committed to obeying God's law, yet in that case *it is their own commitment to the law rather than what Eleazar did*

98. Brian J. Tabb, *Suffering in Ancient Worldview: Luke, Seneca, and 4 Maccabees in Dialogue* (LNTS 569; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), 86; cf. 102, 111.

*that ultimately obtains for them divine acceptance and forgiveness*. The affirmation that Eleazar is an *antipsuchon* for the sins of others must therefore be understood in the sense that his faithful obedience unto death serves as a type of pledge, guarantee, or demonstration that the obedience of others will follow upon his own, thus providing God the basis necessary to put an end to his activity of chastising and disciplining the people through Antiochus. Neither Eleazar's obedience nor the punishment he endures are substitutionary, since the people themselves must become obedient, and those who do not do so will eventually face punishment again, whether in this world or the next.

For the author of 4 Maccabees, however, in his death Eleazar is an *antipsuchon* for others in another sense as well. When Eleazar prays to God, "receive (and accept) my soul (*psuchē*) as their *antipsuchon*" (6:28-29), in effect he is asking God to receive favorably the soul he offers up as if it were the soul of the people themselves, offered up to God by them. In this sense he is indeed offering up his soul in their place. This is not because he is suffering the punishment they deserve for their sins as their substitute, however. Rather, the idea is that the rest of the people of God who are faithful to the law as Eleazar is and are even willing to die for the law like him and together with him are not in the same position in which Eleazar finds himself, threatened with death by execution. Furthermore, Eleazar does not want them to die. On the contrary, he wants the people to enjoy peace and wholeness in the land God has given them, experiencing God's blessings as they obey faithfully God's law. His petition, therefore, is that God accept his death, life, or soul in the place of theirs so as not to require that they demonstrate their own faithfulness to God and the law by being asked to die in the way that Eleazar is dying. Instead, at Eleazar's request, God will look upon Eleazar's offering up of his life to God out of faithfulness to the law as if it were the offering up of the lives of the people themselves, who share Eleazar's commitment to the law. On this basis, God will take only the life of Eleazar and deliver the people from Antiochus's tyranny, so that they may continue to offer up their lives to God spiritually and materially without having to forfeit their lives physically, as Eleazar will. None of this has anything whatsoever to do with penal substitution.

The same logic must be understood to lie behind the author's affirmation that Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother became "something like an *antipsuchon* for the sin of our nation" (17:21). In order to put away his wrath at the people's sins and deliver them from the chastisement or disciplining that he had sent upon them in the person of Antiochus, what God demanded was that they return to him in sincere repentance and obedience. In essence, he demanded that his people offer themselves or their lives up to him in order to be committed to doing his will in their everyday life. This was equivalent to presenting themselves to God as a sacrifice for their sins. In the case of Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother, this offering up of one's life to God had taken the form of an extremely painful physical death at the hands

of Antiochus. However, because their deaths had demonstrated to God the strength of the obedience to his law that had now come to exist among his people, he ended the persecution under Antiochus so that the self-offering of the rest of his people did not have to take the form of a cruel and violent death. In this sense, Eleazar, the mother, and her sons died *in the place* of the rest of the people, since they were put to death while the others were not. Strictly speaking, it can be said that the *death* of Eleazar, the mother, and her sons was substitutionary, but *not the offering up of their life*, since in order to be delivered from the chastisement for their sins, the people still had to offer up their own life to God. They no longer had to do so by *dying*, however, thanks to the faithfulness of Eleazar, the mother, and her sons.

When these ideas are understood properly, it becomes evident that it is extremely difficult to translate into English the word *antipsuchon* as it is used in this verse. "Ransom" is inadequate, since Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother are not seen as having made some type of payment with their lives or having given God something in exchange for the liberation of the Jewish people. Their lives can be considered an offering made to God on behalf of others, yet *not in their stead*, since it was not their offering itself that led God to save the people but the renewed obedience that their faithfulness to the law brought about in others. In a sense, it can be said that Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother obtained Israel's salvation in exchange for giving up their lives, that is, at the price of their life. However, it was not the giving of their lives in itself that brought God to save Israel, but the consequences of their act. The final phrase in 17:20-21 could therefore be paraphrased: "because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—all of which was the result of them having given up their lives as a kind of offering to God, seeking and obtaining in return God's forgiveness of the nation's sin."

The same basic logic is behind the affirmation that "through the blood of those devout ones and the *hilastērion* of their death, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated" (17:22). Once again, the term "blood" must be seen as an allusion, not merely to their death, but to their endurance and faithfulness unto death for the sake of the law and to their offering up of their lives to God. In the author's own words, their blood represents "the courage of their virtue and their endurance under the tortures" (17:22-23). What pleased God was therefore their courage and endurance: "They vindicated their nation, looking to God and enduring torture even to death" on behalf of the law (17:10).[99]

A great deal of scholarly discussion has centered upon the term *hilastērion* here, particularly because of its use in Rom. 3:25. Much of this discussion is motivated by a desire to argue either in favor of or against ideas related to

99. As Sam Williams notes, the purification of the land in 4 Macc. 17:21a "cannot be understood except as a reference to Antiochus's departure, which IV Maccabees insists is a result of the martyrs' *endurance* (not their spilled blood)" (*Jesus' Death*, 76).

penal substitution, in particular the notion that God's wrath must be appeased through death. The author of 4 Maccabees clearly sees the sufferings that the Jewish people endured as an expression of God's anger (4 Macc. 4:21). For the author, however, what appeases that anger is not the suffering and death of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother, but the renewed commitment of the people to God's will.

Nevertheless, according to the argument of 4 Maccabees, it can rightly be said that the deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother led Israel's God to put away his wrath at the people's sins in several senses. First, the way in which Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother gave themselves up to death for the law and for others was pleasing to God in that this type of commitment to his will is what Israel's God always desires from his people as a whole. Second, their deaths not only demonstrated the extent to which at least some of the people were committed to God's will but also laid the basis for others to be strengthened in their obedience to the law. While this did not necessarily take place immediately, God could reasonably expect that their deaths would have such an effect on others. Since it had been the lack of obedience to his law that had provoked God's wrath in the first place, once God could expect that such obedience would be restored and could see that it was indeed becoming a reality, his wrath would come to an end. And third, upon seeing such firm obedience in those who gave their lives and on that basis anticipating that such obedience would continue and increase among his people, God's justice and mercy would no longer allow him to stand by passively in the face of the cruelties being committed by Antiochus. Instead, he was compelled to put an end to those cruelties and deliver the people from Antiochus's tyranny. For all of these reasons, the deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother are said to have brought God's wrath to an end. The term *hilastērion* here might therefore be translated as "propitiation" in the sense that their faithfulness to the law to the point of death put away God's wrath, since it demonstrated to God that at least a part of his people were fully committed to obeying the law and led others to observe that law once again. *Hilastērion* might also be translated "expiation" in the sense that the faithfulness to the law of those who died moved others to become faithful as well and therefore to live purified lives; this constituted the basis upon which God declared them pure and was led to purify the land from Antiochus's tyranny.

This does not mean, however, that their deaths should be viewed as an "atoning sacrifice," as translations such as the NRSV affirm.[100] Undoubtedly, the deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother were sacrificial in the sense that they willingly offered their lives up to God, and in so doing sought God's forgiveness and favor both for themselves and others. As we saw in Chapter 3, these ideas are central to ancient Jewish sacrificial thought. The author of 4 Maccabees does not intend to convey the idea that their deaths in themselves made atonement for Israel's sins. While Eleazar, the brothers,

100. On the problem of translating *hilastērion* here, see Finlan, *Background*, 200-205.

and their mother may be described as a *hilastērion* in that they led God to put away his wrath at those sins, strictly speaking, they did not *atone* for those sins. In fact, the language of forgiveness is absent from 4 Maccabees, although the idea of divine forgiveness seems to be present at times in the author's mind. The reason why the author does not relate directly the deaths of Eleazar, the brothers, and their mother to forgiveness is that the idea that sufferings and death in themselves atone for sin is foreign to ancient Jewish thought. What atones for sins is repentance and a renewed commitment to obeying God. The sufferings and death of Eleazar, the brothers, and the mother would be seen as atoning only in the sense that they were an expression of this commitment and served to strengthen others in the same commitment.

### *The Story of Taxo*

One further passage from the second-temple period that speaks of a vicarious death is found in the *Assumption of Moses*, also known as the *Testament of Moses*, a book probably written in the first century CE.[101] After describing the sins of Israel's leaders, the book presents Israel's God as being moved to wrath and stirring up a powerful king who begins to crucify, torture, imprison, and oppress those Jews who seek to remain faithful to the law and practice circumcision (*Ass. Mos.* 7-8). Many Jews are said to succumb to these measures and to be forced into idolatry and blasphemy (*Ass. Mos.* 8).

In the midst of this persecution, a man from the tribe of Levi named Taxo laments the punishment Israel is enduring in the presence of his seven sons and then tells them:

> "Now, therefore, my sons, hear me: for observe and know that neither did the fathers nor their forefathers tempt God, so as to transgress his commands. And you know that this is our strength, and thus we will do. Let us fast for the space of three days and on the fourth let us go into a cave which is in the field, and let us die rather than transgress the commands of the Lord of Lords, the God of our fathers. For if we do this and die, our blood shall be avenged before the Lord" (*Ass. Mos.* 9).

Immediately following this, the book affirms that God's kingdom will appear throughout creation. Satan will be overthrown together with Israel's enemies and Israel will enjoy peace and happiness (*Ass. Mos.* 10).

Although this passage does not speak explicitly of God's wrath being put away following the death of Taxo and his sons, this is clearly implied. On this basis, some scholars have claimed that Taxo's death makes atonement for Israel's sins and has the effect of causing God to intervene to save Israel from its oppression. Michael E. Fuller, for example, claims that "the death of Taxo and his family is presented as an atoning death" that has "redemptive value" in that it moves God to intervene on Israel's behalf; "the death of the righteous

101. On the date and background of the *Assumption of Moses*, see especially Kenneth Atkinson, "Taxo's Martyrdom and the Role of the *Nuntius* in the *Testament of Moses*: Implications for Understanding the Role of Other Intermediary Figures," *JBL* 125 (2006): 453-76; Cummins, *Paul*, 73.

ones may motivate God's intervention."[102] Others speak of the death of Taxo and his sons "triggering" God's intervention, as if there were a mechanical cause-and-effect relation between the two events. Marc Turnage even affirms that their deaths forced God to act: "Taxo, like the widow and her seven sons, anticipated that his death and the death of his sons would be efficacious by forcing God to bring about the day of redemption in order to avenge their blood.... The murder of Taxo and his sons because of their devoted piety to the commandments, like the deaths of the widow's sons recorded in 2 and 4 Maccabees, was expected to have a universal effect, bringing forth God's redemption and vengeance."[103]

Interpretations such as these fail to capture the logic behind the passage. Because of their firm commitment to the law, Taxo and his sons refuse to disobey it in the face of persecution. However, due to the fierce nature of the persecution, they withdraw to a secluded cave after fasting for three days so that they will not be enticed or forced by the enemy to "transgress the commands of the Lord of Lords." They thus choose death over disobedience to the law. Their objective is not to force God to act to save Israel, as if God could be manipulated or put under obligation by their deaths. Rather, Taxo trusts that God will respond to their full commitment to observing the law even to the point of death by redeeming Israel.

According to the logic of the book, then, the reason that God responds to the deaths of Taxo and his sons by bringing about the promised redemption is not that those deaths in themselves satisfy his wrath or justice. This would imply that God merely wished to see someone die as punishment for the sins Israel had committed. Rather, what must be seen as satisfying God is the faithfulness of Taxo and his sons and the total commitment to the law that they demonstrated to the point of death.

Unlike 2 and 4 Maccabees, the *Assumption of Moses* does not affirm explicitly that others were brought into obedience through the willingness of Taxo and his sons to die rather than transgress the law. This seems to be assumed, however. The simple fact that the story appears in the book implies that its purpose is to present Taxo and his sons as examples and thereby bring about greater obedience to the law. The conclusion of the book also indicates that this constituted the author's purpose: "Those, therefore, who do and fulfill the commandments of God shall increase and be prospered; but those who sin and set at naught the commandments shall be without the blessings before mentioned, and they shall be punished with many torments by the nations. But wholly to root out and destroy them is not permitted" (*Ass. Mos.* 12).

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102. Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel's Re-gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts* (BZNW 138; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 156-58. In part Fuller is drawing on an idea reflected in the views of J. Licht, "Taxo, or the Apocalyptic Doctrine of Vengeance," *JJS* 12 (1961): 98.

103. Marc Turnage, "Jesus and Caiaphas: An Intertextual-Literary Evaluation," in *Jesus' Last Week*, Vol. 1 of *Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels* (ed. R. Steven Notley, Marc Turnage, and Brian Becker; JCPS 11; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 160-61.

However, the salvation described in chapter 10 of the book is described in apocalyptic terms and seems to refer to an eschatological redemption similar to what we find in the New Testament and other Jewish writings of the period. This salvation involves the transformation of creation together with the ultimate destruction of evil and of the enemies of God and his people. Although the resurrection of the dead is not mentioned in the book, the redeemed are apparently presented as looking from on high to see their enemies in Gehenna. The implication is thus that the faithful have been saved and are experiencing the life of the new age.

For this reason, the logic behind the account of Taxo and his sons seems to be that their faithfulness to death led God to bring about the eschatological redemption of Israel. In this case, rather than granting Taxo and his sons immortality in the way that 4 Maccabees describes, God establishes definitively the new age of salvation in order that the faithful, such as Taxo and his sons, may participate in it, evidently by being raised from the dead. God's motivation for doing so may be that, because of his justice and mercy, he can no longer permit the righteous to suffer tortures, prison, and death without intervening to save them. While the English translation speaks of God "avenging" the blood of Taxo and his sons, in the thought of the author, God's objective is not to take vengeance on wrongdoers, but to save those who obey the law from their persecutors. The notion that God desires obedience to the law for the sake of the people themselves, rather than for God's own sake, is implied by Taxo's affirmation that the people's "strength" consists precisely in not transgressing the law. This conveys the idea that obedience to the law results intrinsically in the people's well-being and fortitude.

In any case, here as in 2 and 4 Maccabees, the condition upon which God puts away his wrath at the people's sins and intervenes to save Israel is not the death of the righteous per se but their faithfulness and obedience to the law under the most adverse of circumstances. The *Assumption of Moses* never affirms explicitly that Taxo and his sons atoned for Israel's sins or obtained forgiveness for Israel through their death. However, even if this idea is thought to be implicit, what makes atonement and brings forgiveness is not their death per se, but their obedience to God's law, as expressed in their willingness to die rather than to transgress that law. It is therefore misleading to affirm that their death "triggered" God's intervention, forced God to act, or had a "universal effect." The relation between the deaths of Taxo and his sons and the eschatological redemption resulting from those deaths is seen as an *extrinsic* rather than an *intrinsic* one.

### *Atonement through Suffering and Death in Rabbinic Thought*

Outside of the passages from 2 and 4 Maccabees and the *Assumption of Moses* just discussed, there are no other texts from second-temple Jewish literature that might be interpreted as providing support for the idea that sufferings and death could make atonement for sins. This includes the writings of Josephus,

Philo, and the scrolls of Qumran.[104] The idea of atoning for sins through suffering and death does come to prominence, however, in the rabbinic writings. Among the most significant studies discussing this question in detail are those of Adolf Büchler and Eduard Lohse dating from 1928 and 1955 respectively.[105] Although it is unclear to what extent the ideas found in the rabbinic writings date back to New Testament times, many scholars nevertheless consider these writings to be relevant to discussion of the passages in the New Testament that ascribe redemptive value to Jesus' suffering and death. In particular, it is often thought that the rabbinic writings provide evidence that either the righteousness or the punishment of one might substitute for the righteousness or the punishment of others.

Running throughout the rabbinic writings is the idea that faithful Jews can atone for their sins through suffering. Generally, suffering is seen as a means to atone for one's own sins rather than the sins of others. The belief that one can make atonement through suffering is closely tied to the view that God inflicts sufferings in order to chastise and correct sinners and thereby bring them back to him in repentance and obedience. This idea is found frequently in the rabbinic texts. Büchler summarizes the rabbinic teaching thus:

> [A]ll afflictions of man come from God and... not only the sinner but also the righteous is chastised by him. In visiting the latter God's object is to turn him aside from the path of evil into which he has exceptionally strayed, and to prevent him from departing further from his usual right course, and, at the same time, to cleanse him from the sins which he has so far committed. In thus chastising the righteous, God is not harsh, but deals with him gently, as a loving father punishes his son, or his firstborn whom he loves specially and whom he only corrects to lead him back into the right path. As he knows God's purpose in afflicting the righteous, the good man, even when stumbling under the weight of the visitation, should neither say nor think that it was undeserved, as he was free from sin, but he should acknowledge the justice of God in inflicting upon him such chastisements. And even when these are so severe as to bring him down to the ground, he should give further consideration to God's purpose and his possible intentions in his case. Not only should he not murmur against God, but he should also regard

104. Both Lohse (*Märtyrer*, 10-12) and Serge Ruzer (*Mapping the New Testament: Early Christian Writings as a Witness for Jewish Biblical Exegesis*; JCPS 13; Leiden: Brill, 2007, 200), who discuss the subject in detail, recognize that the idea of vicarious death is nowhere to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures or second-temple Jewish literature outside of the passages already considered. Some scholars, however, have claimed to find this idea in other passages. One of these is the story of Razis in 2 Macc. 14:37-46 (see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 210-13). However, while Razis dies for the law by committing suicide rather than allowing himself to be captured and his death may be seen as exemplary, there is nothing in the passage that implies that his death appeased God's wrath or made atonement for his own sins or those of others. Van Henten also finds the idea of noble death in two passages from Philo (*Good Person* 88-91) and Josephus (*J.W.* 7.389-406), yet these passages have nothing to do with atonement for sins or the appeasement of God's wrath. Craig A. Evans also points to Job 42:9, *LAE* 3:1, and *T. Benj.* 3:8 as examples of the death or suffering of one "providing either atonement or benefit for others" (*Mark 8:27—16:20*; WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001, 122), yet these passages speak only of Job's intercession for others, Eve's request to die for the sin she had committed, and the willingness of those without sin to die for the benefit of others who are guilty, but not in their place. There is no reason to read back into these passages the idea that the suffering or death of one person could atone for the sins of others in God's eyes.

105. See Adolf Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (JCP 11; London: Oxford University Press, 1928); Lohse, *Märtyrer*.

> himself happy that he visits him, and bear his sufferings patiently, as such attitude is an expression of man's love of God in truth. He must, moreover, heed the warning given by the afflictions and must not despise them, but evince readiness to repent.[106]

The logic behind the affirmation that in rabbinic thought suffering enables one to atone for one's sins thus coincides with what we have found in the writings of the second-temple period: God does not inflict suffering for its own sake, as if this satisfied divine justice, but in order to bring about a change in the conduct of his people.

According to the rabbis, however, only those who are truly repentant for their sins and are committed to a life of righteousness can atone for their sins through suffering. Because even the righteous sin, they constantly stand in need of repentance, discipline, and correction like everyone else. Consistent throughout the rabbinic writings is the claim that there can be no atonement for those who do not repent. As Büchler notes, "even chastisements inflicted by God do not purge away the sin without repentance."[107] Because suffering in this life is viewed as having a corrective purpose, those who have no intention of turning to God and living in obedience to the law cannot atone for their sins through suffering. For the rabbis, their only fate can be their destruction or perdition. Even if their punishment is thought to be ongoing after their death, those enduring post-mortem punishment in the realm of the dead are not thought to be atoning for their sins, since atonement is no longer possible for them.

In rabbinic thought, when one was suffering, rather than murmuring, protesting to God, or rebelling against him, it was expected that one recognize and confess one's sins and admit that God was just in inflicting the suffering. This reflects conformity to God's will in the passive sense of accepting whatever afflictions God may send, trusting that in his infinite wisdom God is acting for good. Naturally, this conformity with God's will was also to express itself actively in the form of obedience to God's law. In this way, suffering served to strengthen one's commitment to God's will.

Even when one protested or rebelled against God, however, one still might make atonement through one's suffering. Like a person who attempts to domesticate a stubborn and recalcitrant animal such as a donkey or horse, God might use suffering to break the will of one who resists him. Such suffering would only serve to make atonement, however, if in the end one was brought into conformity to God's will.

The notion that faithful Jews make atonement for their sins through death is also found frequently in the rabbinic writings. For the most part, however, those

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106. Büchler, *Studies*, 171. On these points, see also N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1-13 in its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 124-29. In a separate section, Croy compares and contrasts ancient Jewish beliefs regarding suffering and sin with Greek and Roman perspectives on this subject, which are in many ways similar (133-57).

107. See Büchler, *Studies*, 347, who stresses quite strongly the idea that in rabbinic thought, there is no atonement without repentance (see also 344-51).

who die atone only for their own sins, and not for the sins of others.[108] Because those who have died are no longer capable of receiving correction, it might seem that death would be regarded as a retributive punishment for the sins that those who die have committed rather than a means of atonement. In reality, however, the logic behind the idea that one atones for one's sins through death must be understood differently. This idea was closely tied to beliefs regarding the resurrection, the final judgment, and the life to come.[109] In order to participate in the resurrection life, of course, it was necessary to have lived righteously. Once again, this life of righteousness did not involve perfection but rather a sincere desire and intention to act in conformity with God's will and a passive acceptance of anything that God in his sovereignty might ordain. Thus, in accepting one's death from God's hand, one was acting righteously and could hope to be treated by God as righteous at the final judgment.

In the rabbinic writings, those Jews facing death are commended to pray to God, "Make my death an atonement for my sins."[110] By embracing death rather than murmuring or rebelling against God's decree, it was evident that one was submitting to God's will. This petition also represented a confession that one had sinned and stood in need of forgiveness. At the same time, because one was about to die, there was nothing of greater value that one could offer to God than one's life. By subjecting oneself to God's will and placing one's life in God's hands, casting oneself upon God's mercy rather than attempting to manipulate God or convince him to revoke his decree of death, one was behaving in the way God desired. As elsewhere, this is the condition upon which God was thought to grant forgiveness and salvation, whether in this life or the life to come.

From God's perspective, since death marked the end of life, when a person was nearing death there was nothing more that God could do in order to bring that person into greater conformity with his will. No further correction was possible, simply because the time for such correction had passed. Therefore, according to this logic, the only thing left for God to do was to decide whether or not the dying person should be forgiven. All that God could expect from those who were dying was that they confess their sins and ask for forgiveness. As long as they did this with a sincere heart, God would forgive them and declare them fit to enter into the world to come at the final judgment.

Some of the rabbis claimed that even those who were executed for crimes they had committed or were not fully repentant could atone for their sins

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108. See especially Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 38-50; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 172-75; Friedrich Avemarie, "Lebenshingabe und heilschaffender Tod in der rabbinischen Literatur," in *Deutungen des Todes Jesu*, ed. Frey and Schröter, 171-74, who also notes that this idea is in the oldest strands of the rabbinic literature (210).

109. See Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Classical Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: Comparing Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 238-39; Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 42-44.

110. Lohse, *Märtyrer,* 39; C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology, Selected and Arranged with Comments and Introductions* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 241.

through death. This was possible only for those who formed part of Israel and applied particularly to those who had sinned inadvertently or had died a sudden death without having had an opportunity to repent.[111] The logic behind this seems to be that, even though they had not repented before their death, when God looked into their hearts, he saw that they would have repented if they had had the chance. God could also expect that even those who had been able to repent before their death but had not done so might be brought to repentance as a result of what they suffered in their death, and thereby be made fit to participate in the age to come once God had raised them from the dead.

Those who could not make atonement for their sins through suffering and death were those who consciously and deliberately chose to reject God and God's will in life and death. As Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner comment, in rabbinic thought, while all Israel has a share in the life to come, those who "willfully defy God in matters of eternity" and reject the Torah are not considered true members of Israel, even if they were born Jews.[112] The belief that in the age to come the evil inclination or *yetser hara* would be taken away may also have led some to conclude that, through their death, even those who are executed or die unrepentant can atone for their sins. In this case, it may have been thought that those who had lived in sin could still be reformed and renewed after their death so as to become righteous in the next world.[113]

A few passages from the rabbinic texts convey the idea that, under certain conditions, through his or her death a righteous person might atone not only for his or her own sins, but also for the sins of others.[114] This was said especially of the great biblical figures and in some cases the great rabbis as well.[115] These passages usually do not specify, however, which persons receive the forgiveness of their sins by means of the death of the righteous person. While the great figures of Israel's history might be said to have made atonement for all of Israel through their death, other righteous figures such as rabbis might be seen as having made atonement only for a particular group of people, such as those whom they instructed in the law or the members of their own generation in general.[116]

As Friedrich Avemarie notes, it is not possible to integrate into a well-defined system the rabbinic teaching regarding the manner in which righteous Israelites might atone for the sins of others through their death nor

111. See Lohse, *Märtyrer,* 49; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 174.

112. Chilton and Neusner, *Classical Christianity*, 239-40.

113. See Levi A. Olan, *Judaism and Immortality* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1971). Olan notes the rabbinic view that "[a]ll Jews go to heaven because God ever accepts the repentant sinner, and surely every man repents at the time of his death. Even at the gates of hell one may confess and return to God, and God accepts him in loving mercy" (46).

114. The most extensive treatment of this idea is found in Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 78-87.

115. See Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 87; Avemarie, "Lebenshingabe," 191-92; Jacob Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 128.

116. See Avemarie, "Lebenshingabe," 190; Hengel, *Atonement*, 63.

grasp fully the reasoning behind this idea.[117] What we can affirm confidently, however, is that a righteous person who passed away was not thought to have died as a substitute for others. In fact, all individuals would obviously die their own death at some point, and thus were not thought to have been saved from death by the death of another. Rather, the logic of rabbinic thought on this subject seems to have been that God was pleased that the person dying had remained righteous and committed to his will until the very end. That person therefore served as a model for others, particularly those who identified with that person by commemorating and reflecting on his or her life and death or being influenced by his or her teaching and example. What mattered, therefore, was the legacy left behind by the righteous person, since this legacy served to bring others into conformity with God's will.

Thus to say that a righteous person atoned for the sins of others through his or her death involved affirming that, on the basis of the righteousness which that person had demonstrated in life and death, God looked favorably upon those who continued to hold that person and his or her words and deeds in esteem and identified themselves with that person. Those who did so were forgiven and accepted by God because the respect, honor, and reverence they showed for the righteous one who had died would lead them to attempt to live in the same way. Once again, however, through their death the righteous atoned only for those who were repentant and remained committed to living in conformity with God's will. No atonement was possible for the unrepentant.

In the same context, at times the rabbis spoke of God receiving the soul of a righteous person as a pledge or guarantee for others.[118] In this case, the idea seems to have been that God would forego or postpone the chastisements that people deserved for their sins in the present on account of that person. He did so, however, with the expectation that they would seek to follow the example of the righteous person who had died. Of course, if they did not, then they could not expect forgiveness. In a sense, it might be said that God reckoned to others the righteousness of the person who had died, yet he did so only provisionally, expecting that others would come to practice the same type of righteousness as a result of the influence which that person's life had on them. Once again, therefore, what mattered was the influence that the righteous person's life and death had on those who remained in this world.

Lohse points to a number of texts that speak of innocent children atoning for the sins of others through their death, in particular the sins of their parents.[119] This belief seems to derive from the passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that speak of God chastising the sins of the parents in their children. If this was so, then when the children suffered and died, God was in fact chastising their parents, who atoned for their sins not through their own sufferings but

117. Avemarie, "Lebenshingabe," 193.
118. See Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 82-85.
119. Ibid., 92-94.

through those of their children. Not all found this idea acceptable, as even the Hebrew Scriptures show (Ezek. 18:19-20). It must be remembered, however, that God's purpose in punishing was not understood in terms of retribution but correction. According to this logic, therefore, by inflicting suffering or death on children, God sought to move the parents to repentance and obedience and also warned others of the possible consequences of their own sins. Strictly speaking, it was not the death of the children that atoned for the sins of others, but the repentance and correction that was expected to follow as a consequence of those deaths.

In all of these instances, then, strictly speaking, it is not suffering and death that atone for sins, but the repentance and renewed commitment to obedience that suffering and death serve to bring about.[120] In ancient Jewish thought, no amount of suffering and no death could atone for the sins of those who refused to repent sincerely of their sins and recommit themselves to living in accordance with God's will. Furthermore, nothing in the Jewish texts ever suggests that God might accept the righteousness of one person in the place of another or spare those who were guilty of sins from the punishment they deserved by inflicting that punishment on a righteous substitute. Such ideas would imply that God did not care *who* practiced righteousness or endured the punishment deserved by sins, but only that *someone* do so. Conversely, the implication would be that God did not care *who* suffered the punishment for people's sins, but only that *someone* do so. In rewarding righteousness and punishing disobedience, the God of Israel was not responding to *his own* needs or desires but seeking the well-being of his people. Therefore, to impute the righteousness of one to others or inflict punishment on an innocent party in place of the guilty would be seen as counter-productive, since it would promote sin and disobedience rather than the just and righteous behavior God desired to see in all for their own good.

## MERITS, PRAYER, AND ATONEMENT IN ANCIENT HEBREW AND JEWISH THOUGHT

The idea that one can make atonement for one's sins through one's own actions is well-attested in ancient Hebrew and Jewish thought. Among these actions, of course, was the offering of sacrifices to God during the time when the Jerusalem temple existed. However, one could also make atonement through other actions in relation to both God and others. In fact, as noted in Chapter 3, offering a sacrifice was not always sufficient to make atonement for what one had done or failed to do. Certain offenses required some type of payment

120. This observation must also be made with regard to several other passages from the rabbinic literature cited by Craig Evans in support of the idea that death can make atonement (*y. Sanh.* 11.5; *Sipre Deut.* §333 on Deut. 32:43, and *Mek.* on Exod. 12:1 [*Pisha* §1]); see Evans, *Mark 8:27—16:20*, 387. A close examination of these passages indicates that what actually atones or makes expiation is not sufferings and death in themselves, but the way in which those sufferings and deaths are manifestations of obedience or help bring about obedience in others.

or retribution to be made to the temple or to an injured party. One could also atone for one's sins by helping out those in need or performing some type of action that would benefit others. Everett Ferguson, for example, finds in the rabbinic literature seven ways in which one might atone for one's sins: the reading and studying of the law, repentance, prayer, works of charity, fasting, suffering, and attitudes of the heart such as humility, justice, and righteousness.[121] Because such deeds could be regarded as meritorious, it could be said that one's merits might atone for one's own sin or that of others.

The Jewish belief that one could atone for one's sins by one's deeds has traditionally been regarded as extremely problematic by Protestant theologians and biblical scholars. In large part, of course, this is because in Protestant teaching, no one but Christ is able to make atonement for sins. From a Protestant perspective, the claim that one can make atonement and merit divine forgiveness through one's conduct is also unacceptable because it is seen as affirming a doctrine of works-righteousness.

In his 1977 book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, E. P. Sanders demonstrated convincingly that Protestant biblical scholars had wrongly attributed to Jews in antiquity the belief that one could *earn* salvation through one's works.[122] Most biblical scholars today would agree with Sanders on this point. However, as I have argued elsewhere, *earning* forgiveness or salvation is not the same thing as *meriting* forgiveness or salvation.[123] The language of *earning* implies that some type of claim can be laid upon God, as if God had set up a system by which certain works could automatically obtain God's favor and acceptance. In contrast, to affirm that certain actions *merit* a certain response from God conveys a different idea. As we saw in Chapter 2, in Jewish thought, what one merited through one's actions was not God's grace or love, since that was always a given, but a certain *form* which that grace or love might take. In the case of obedience, God's grace and love generally took the form of blessing and acceptance, while in the case of disobedience, the same grace and love took the form of discipline, correction, and chastisement. In both cases, what God ultimately desired was *conformity to his will*, which one manifested by being committed to keeping God's commandments and by accepting whatever might come from God's hand in a spirit of trust and confidence in God. This was what God consistently sought to bring about in his people for their own good and the good of others.

The ancient Jewish belief that one could atone for one's sins and merit divine forgiveness through one's deeds, therefore, did not represent a denial of

121. Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Sacrifice in Early Christianity and its Environment," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt*, Vol. II/23.1 (ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980), 1161-62. Joachim Jeremias also lists other means of atonement mentioned in the rabbinic literature, including indemnification and the high priestly robes (*The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977, 230).

122. See Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 126, 141, 179-82, 205, 320, 420-22.

123. David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 15-16.

God's grace or involve affirming a doctrine of works-righteousness as this doctrine has traditionally been understood in Protestant thought. Whether God responded to obedience with blessing or conversely punished sin in order to correct wrongdoers, God was thought to be acting out of grace, seeking that his people obey his commandments for their own good. In fact, even when God tested the righteous by sending hardships into their life, he was regarded as acting graciously, since such hardships had the objective of strengthening the faith, trust, and obedience of those who endured them. Furthermore, in Jewish thought, it was God alone who brought about a life of righteousness in his people through the covenant relationship he had established with them, the law he had given to instruct them in the way they should live for their own good, and the rewards and punishments he handed out in order to promote obedience to his commandments. Therefore, whatever righteousness one possessed was ultimately a gift from God and the product, not of one's own efforts, but of God's gracious activity.

As we have seen in this chapter and the previous one, in Jewish thought only one thing could truly make atonement for the sins one had committed: a sincere recommitment to living in accordance with God's will. Those who made such a recommitment were able to do so only by virtue of the grace God had shown to Israel as a whole as well as to each individual member of Israel. Of course, if the commitment to doing God's will was sincere, that commitment would inevitably be manifested concretely in acts of kindness and justice toward others. Nevertheless, because perfect obedience was impossible, it was constantly necessary for all to make atonement by recommitting themselves to doing God's will. And because doing God's will was synonymous with keeping the commandments he had given through Moses, those who had sinned would recommit themselves to doing God's will by confessing their sins and, when possible, offering the sacrifices for sin that God had prescribed. However, they would also manifest their recommitment to doing God's will and make atonement for their sins through activities such as those mentioned by the rabbis: repenting, fasting, performing works of charity, and dedicating themselves to prayer and the study of the law. Because these acts served to *renew*, *strengthen*, and *express* their commitment to doing God's will, they served as means through which God's people could atone for their sins. Furthermore, because God was able to look into the hearts of his people, the proper attitude toward God and others could atone for sins. This was because that attitude would inevitably lead one to live in the way God desired and commanded.

Through one's attitudes and actions, therefore, one could make atonement for one's sins and merit divine forgiveness, as long as those attitudes and actions were expressions of a sincere commitment to living in conformity with God's will. Yet because not only those attitudes and actions but also that commitment to God's will were something that God graciously brought about in his people, no one could be said to merit God's grace, which was

always a free gift. This means that divine grace must be distinguished from divine forgiveness. As we saw in Chapter 2, in biblical and Jewish thought, while God's grace was *unconditional*, God's forgiveness was *conditional*. God's grace was thought to take the form of forgiveness only when the sinner's commitment to doing God's will had been restored, renewed, and strengthened. When that did not happen, God's grace took the form of acting to chastise and correct the sinner so as to bring him or her back into conformity with God's will.

This understanding of God's grace also meant that one could not purchase God's favor and forgiveness through gifts or manipulate God in order to obtain what one wanted. Nor could one make claims upon God on the basis of one's behavior. The reason for this was not that one's behavior was always imperfect, since God did not demand perfection. In fact, even if it were possible for one to attain perfection, that perfection would be the result of God's grace, which could never be earned. Rather, to make claims upon God on the basis of one's behavior inevitably involved attempting to impose one's will upon God by demanding that God treat one in a certain way. By definition, such an attitude was contrary to God's will: rather than submitting obediently to God, one would be attempting to subject God to one's own desires and demands. For these reasons, while one could merit salvation or forgiveness through one's attitudes and actions, no one could put God under obligation to grant salvation or forgiveness or earn God's favor through obedience. Even those who outwardly observed the commandments were not really obeying them if they did so in an attempt to manipulate God or earn his favor, since they were not acting out of a pure heart and therefore were not in conformity with God's will.

Because the requirement for forgiveness was a sincere commitment to living according to God's will, at times God might even deny forgiveness to those who expressed remorse for their sins and asked to be forgiven. The reason for this was that one might be motivated to seek forgiveness, not because one was sincerely repentant, but simply because one wished to escape punishment. The story of the death of Antiochus Epiphanes in 2 Macc. 9:5-28 illustrates this idea well. Even though at the end of his life he implored God for forgiveness, he was not forgiven because he sought merely to escape divine punishment rather than to commit himself to doing God's will. To forgive those who sought forgiveness solely out of fear of punishment would not lead them to live in accordance with God's will since, once they had been forgiven, they would turn back to their life of sin and disobedience.

### *Atonement by Prayer*

The notion that one could atone for one's sins through prayer must be understood on the basis of the same ideas. In ancient Jewish thought, not all prayer was atoning. If prayer involved an attempt to manipulate or coerce God or make demands upon him, it was not pleasing to God. If one begged God for

forgiveness but was not truly committed to God's will or acted solely out of fear of punishment, one's prayer did not make atonement for one's sins. Prayer was therefore atoning only when those praying submitted both passively and actively to God's will, confessing their sins and resolving to receive from God's hand whatever God might ordain. If those who prayed with a pure and sincere heart at times reminded God of their obedience to his will and their acts of righteousness and justice as they asked for God's blessings and forgiveness, this was not because they were attempting to manipulate God or make demands upon him on the basis of their behavior. Rather, they were merely pointing to their obedience and actions as evidence of their commitment to doing God's will, since that commitment—which, as we have seen, was itself a gift of God—constituted the basis upon which God might grant them the blessings and forgiveness they sought.

Of course, those who prayed to God might seek forgiveness and blessings not only for themselves but for others as well. This means that those who were righteous might make atonement for the sins of others through their intercession. This idea is found often in the biblical texts and other second-temple Jewish writings.[124] Often this intercession is said to be accompanied by sacrifice, although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, sacrifice itself was understood primarily as a form of intercession and prayer. While the language of atonement is not always used, in the Hebrew Scriptures there are a number of examples of a righteous person interceding on behalf of others and in this way obtaining God's forgiveness for them. Among the most notable of these is the prayer of the high priest on the Day of Atonement and the intercession of Moses in Exodus 32 that we have considered above. There are also instances in the Hebrew Scriptures in which righteous persons intercede for others but do not obtain God's forgiveness for them. Of these, the most well-known is the story of Abraham interceding on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18:16-33. Similarly, even though the high priests interceded on behalf of God's people and accompanied that intercession with a sacrificial offering on the Day of Atonement, if God was convinced that the people were not truly repentant of their sins and were not committed to living according to his will, God would not respond favorably to the high priest's intercession.

In order to grasp the logic behind the idea that the prayer of the righteous individual could make atonement for others, it is important to understand the role of mediators in Jewish thought. The high priests, for example, had the responsibility not only of overseeing the presentation of sacrifices on behalf of the people and interceding for them, but also that of making sure that the people received instruction and reinforcing their obedience to the law. Similarly, Moses had the task of delivering the law to the people

124. For biblical examples of atonement through intercession, see S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 85-86, n35; Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (SJLA 36; Leiden: Brill, 1983), 62; de Jonge, "Jesus' Death," 149.

and providing guidance for them under God's direction, not only so that they might reach the land promised to them, but also so that they might live according to his will.

While mediatorial figures with divine authority such as the high priest and Moses might intercede before God on behalf of those who had sinned and obtain a favorable response from God, the same was not true of any Israelite. A member of God's people who was not in a position of leadership could not expect to obtain divine forgiveness for the guilty people as a whole, even if that person was righteous. The reason for this is that such a person had no authority over God's people. This made it impossible for that person to bring others into conformity with God's will in the way that figures of authority such as Moses and the high priest could. And since the basis upon which God forgave the people's sins was their commitment to living in conformity with his will, those who were not in a position to bring others to assume such a commitment could not obtain divine forgiveness for them through their prayer.

In the case of Moses, for example, God accepted his prayer on behalf of the Israelites because Moses was not only fully committed to obeying God personally but was also committed to bringing the people as a whole into conformity with God's will, in faithfulness to the task God had given him. Therefore, the reason why God heeded Moses' prayer for forgiveness on behalf of the people was that God expected that through Moses his objective of bringing the people into conformity with his will would still be accomplished, in spite of the people's sinfulness. As we have noted above, in the narrative that appears in Exodus 32, even though God forgives the people their sin, he says that they must nevertheless be chastised at a later time. This was because, from God's perspective, they still needed to be disciplined so that they might learn to obey him. Merely overlooking what they had done would be counter-productive, since the people had not yet become truly repentant. What had motivated them to ask Moses to intercede for them was not a true commitment to God's will, but fear of divine punishment. In spite of this, God decided to grant Moses' petition and did not destroy the people. However, the fact that in this instance God had refrained from punishing them did not guarantee that he would continue to act in the same way in the future. When they fell back into sin, God punished them again, as the story of the bronze serpent illustrates (Num. 21:4-9). Similar ideas lie behind the account of Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16. Because God was attempting to bring about an obedient people through Moses and Aaron as his chosen instruments, he punished those who resisted Moses and Aaron, especially because what motivated that resistance was not a sincere desire to serve others in the ways that Moses and Aaron did, but a selfish lust for power over others.

The idea that the high priests atoned for the sins of the people through the sacrifices and prayers they offered up to God on the Day of Atonement reflects the same logic. When the high priest interceded on behalf of the

people on that day, it was expected that both he and the people be sincere in their repentance and their intention to recommit themselves to doing God's will. If God considered that both the high priest and the people were truly repentant, God would grant forgiveness. No matter how repentant and righteous the priest might be, however, those among the people who were not committed to living according to God's will were not believed to obtain divine forgiveness, in spite of the priest's prayer. If the priest was an impious person who was not truly committed to God's will and did not seek to bring others into conformity with that will, God might nevertheless forgive the people if he saw in them a commitment to his will. However, God might also chastise the priest and the people alike, as he is said to do in 4 Macc. 4:15-21. The reason for this was that, even if the people themselves were committed to the law, as long as the impious priest was over them, it was likely that he would use his authority to lead the people into sin rather than into righteousness. Thus God's punishment of the priest would serve the purpose of either correcting him or removing him from power, while God's chastisement of the people would either move them to seek the removal of the sinful high priest or serve as a preventative measure. In the latter case, by punishing the people as a whole, God would bring back to himself those who had strayed under the high priest's influence and at the same time attempt to prevent others from falling away.

In the story of Abraham's prayer for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18:16-33, the reason why God rejects Abraham's petition was that God had no basis upon which to expect that the people of these cities would eventually turn to him in repentance and obedience. Even though Abraham was righteous, because he had no influence over the sinful inhabitants of the two cities and because not even five righteous persons could be found there, it was obvious that the inhabitants would continue in their perverse ways. The lack of even five righteous persons meant that there was no reason for God to expect that anything would change there, since four righteous persons or less could not exert sufficient influence on the majority in order for them to repent and mend their ways. Had God heeded Abraham's petition to spare the inhabitants, their wickedness would probably not only have continued and increased, but it would also have spread further so as to affect the surrounding places as well. Therefore, in spite of Abraham's righteousness, God did not respond favorably to his intercession for others.

Of course, under certain circumstances, righteous persons who were not in leadership roles over God's people might also make intercession to God on behalf of other individuals who had sinned and obtain divine forgiveness and acceptance for them. The reason for this was not that God showed favoritism to the righteous. Rather, it had to do with God's purposes. The fact that a righteous person was interceding for someone else implied that the righteous person was in a certain relationship with the person on whose behalf he or she interceded and could thus seek to bring that person back into conformity with

God's will. At the same time, those who had sinned and asked a righteous person to intercede for them were in effect placing themselves in a certain relationship with that person. Implicit in their request was that they would change their ways and commit themselves to following that person's example. This would provide a basis for God to expect that the one who had sinned would be brought back into conformity with his will. Once again, however, if the sinner did not truly repent but was simply seeking to escape divine punishment, the prayer of the righteous would not attain God's forgiveness for her or him.

### *The Merits of the Fathers*

Closely related to the idea that the prayer of a righteous person could atone for the sin of others or obtain divine forgiveness on their behalf is the rabbinic teaching regarding the *zekut 'abot*, often translated as "merits of the fathers."[125] While this idea is particularly associated with rabbinic thought, as Jacqueline de Roo notes, it is already found in a number of writings from the second-temple period as well.[126] According to this idea, the righteousness of Israel's forefathers could benefit their descendants in some way. The translation of the noun *zekut* into English is problematic, since no exact English equivalent exists. As Sanders notes, *zakah*, of which *zekut* is the plural form, may simply refer to virtue or correct behavior rather than merit: "the consistent translation of *zakah* and its cognates as 'merit' obscures the terminology and seems to imply a thoroughgoing 'doctrine'."[127] As Sanders has argued, it is doubtful that this was understood in terms of some type of "treasure of merits" that could be transferred to those who had insufficient merits of their own. Nevertheless, the righteous deeds of Abraham and the other forefathers were thought to be the basis upon which God had redeemed Israel from Egypt, provided help to his people Israel in various moments, and suspended his punishment of the world. While the *zekut 'abot* might lead God to overlook the sins of his people in the present world, the "merits of the fathers" were not believed to benefit others at the final judgment.[128] The reason for this is clear: in the present world, those who sinned might still be brought into conformity with God's will as a result of their identification with the patriarchs and the obedience to God that had characterized their life. In contrast, once the final judgment arrived, this was no longer possible.

Of all the righteous deeds attributed to Israel's forefathers, none was held in higher regard in antiquity than Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Allusions to this story from Gen. 22:1-19, known as the binding of Isaac or the *Akedah*, appear repeatedly in ancient Jewish literature. As Lohse notes,

125. On this idea, see Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 102-4; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 183-98.

126. Jacqueline C. R. de Roo, "God's Covenant with the Forefathers," in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and de Roo; JSJSup 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 192-97.

127. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 188; see also 90.

128. Ibid., 90-91, 196-97.

the biblical text does not speak of the act of Abraham or Isaac as atoning for others. Nevertheless, many scholars believe that the idea that Abraham or Isaac made atonement for their descendants through their obedience to God's command may go back to Jesus' time and have influenced the way in which his first followers interpreted his death. Florentino García Martínez, for example, argues that "some of the basic elements of the Christian interpretation of the Aqedah were already present in pre-Christian Judaism," and points to passages from the book of *Jubilees* and the Qumran literature in support of his claim.[129] Géza Vermès similarly argues that, while this story was told in many different ways and with different emphases in antiquity, the notion that Isaac's willingness to offer up his life was atoning can be traced back at least to the first century CE.[130] In contrast, J. C. O'Neill writes: "the Jewish teaching that the offering of Isaac was an expiatory and redemptive act for all Israel was not earlier than the 2nd century and arose in response to an Isaac-Jesus typology and the Christian doctrine of atonement."[131] While to some extent the Jewish understandings of the story of the binding of Isaac may have been influenced by the interpretations given to Jesus' death by his first followers, it would appear that we cannot rule out the possibility that they may also have drawn on ideas that already existed in Jewish thought.

Many Christian scholars have drawn parallels between Abraham's willingness to offer up his "only beloved son" Isaac and God's handing over of his only beloved son Jesus to death. Some have even claimed to find the notion of penal substitution in the biblical account. Gordon Wenham, for example, argues that Gen. 22:13 "states that Abraham offered up the lamb 'as a burnt offering *instead of his son*'" and thus "shows an animal suffering vicariously in a man's place." For Wenham, the passage is "paradigmatic and elucidates the OT understanding of sacrifice in general."[132] Here again we find the claim that what makes atonement is death itself.

A close look at both the passage itself and the later Jewish interpretations of that passage, however, demonstrates that there is no basis for such a claim. As Lohse notes, in the Genesis account, no atoning value is ascribed to the act of Abraham or Isaac.[133] The story has nothing to do with sin, guilt, expiation, propitiation, or punishment. The only actual sacrifice that takes place is that of the ram, since Isaac himself is never sacrificed. Furthermore, as Sam Williams observes, in ancient Jewish thought and the original narrative itself, "God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac not in order to expiate his sins but

129. Florentino García Martínez, *Qumranica Minora II: Thematic Studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar; STDJ 64; Leiden: Brill 2007), 143; see 131-43.

130. Géza Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*, 2nd rev. ed. (SPB 4; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 196-98, 204, 217.

131. J. C. O'Neill, "Did Jesus Teach That His Death Would Be Vicarious As Well As Typical?," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G.M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar* (ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13.

132. Gordon J. Wenham, "The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice in the Bible* (ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 80.

133. Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 91.

to manifest his devotion and obedience."[134] Both the Genesis account and the later Jewish interpretations of the passage emphasize the absolute trust in God displayed by Abraham through his willingness to offer up to God that which was most precious to him, namely, the life of Isaac his son.[135] Over time, Jewish interpreters also came to stress the willingness of Isaac to give up his own life, although this idea is absent from the biblical account.[136]

In either case, what came to be seen as atoning was not the near-death of Isaac, and much less the death of the ram, but the commitment to God's will manifested by both Abraham and Isaac. The purpose of God's command that Abraham offer up Isaac was understood to be that of testing Abraham's faith.[137] Given Sarah's advanced age, Abraham could hardly hope that she might give him another son through whom the promises of blessing that God had made to him and his descendants might be fulfilled. God's command to sacrifice Isaac thus forced Abraham to choose whether or not he would trust God fully, even to the point of apparently making it virtually impossible for God to fulfill the promises he had made to Abraham by putting Isaac to death. Most of those who heard or read the story would also have agreed that it was much more difficult to offer up one's only son than to offer up one's own life. Abraham's willingness to obey God's command to sacrifice his son was therefore considered the most perfect expression possible of trust in God and obedience to God's will.

To anyone who read or listened carefully to the story of the binding of Isaac, therefore, it was evident that it was not so much a story about sacrifice as it was a story about absolute obedience to God's will. As a result of Abraham's obedience, God tells Abraham: "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:16-19). Here, in contrast to Gen. 12:1-9, where God's promises to Abraham are unconditional, God's election of Abraham's descendants is said to be a reaction to Abraham's obedience. In other words, according to the story of the binding of Isaac, while God initially had promised to bless Abraham's descendants out of pure grace and not because of anything Abraham had done previously, God reiterated that promise after Abraham had been willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's command. Israel's election was therefore due, not only to an act of grace on God's part, but also to Abraham's merit.

While some might regard these two ideas as mutually contradictory, according to the logic of the Genesis account, this is not the case. From the

134. S. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 105.
135. See Vermès, *Scripture*, 195-97, 212; Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 90-91; de Roo, "God's Covenant," 194-99.
136. See Vermès, *Scripture*, 197-206.
137. Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 90; García Martínez, "Sacrifice," 136-37; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.230-32.

time that God elected Abraham, his intention had been to create an obedient people. Even though the Genesis account does not affirm that before God elected Abraham he looked into his heart and saw that he would be obedient, this seems to be implied. In any case, the logic behind the story of the binding of Isaac is that, if Abraham trusted God fully and was committed to obeying God under any circumstance without questioning him, then God could hope and expect that those who would be born of Abraham's seed and identify with Abraham would be committed to doing the same. On that basis, God is presented as reiterating to Abraham his promise to bless him and his descendants, since through his willingness to offer up Isaac, Abraham had confirmed that he did indeed trust fully in God and had provided a basis for God to expect that all who would later look to him as their father would trust in God in the same way.

According to the logic of the Genesis account, while the blessing and salvation promised to Abraham's descendants can be regarded as something God gave to Abraham personally, it can also be seen as something given to those descendants themselves on account of Abraham. In this sense, those descendants owe their blessings as God's chosen people to their father Abraham and his merits rather than to anything they had done personally. This idea, however, seems to create difficulties when we consider the question of whether or not Abraham's descendants had to *continue* to be obedient to God in order to retain their status as God's chosen people. To affirm that they could sin freely without being concerned about losing that status is obviously problematic in that it goes against the idea that God blesses obedience and punishes disobedience, an idea which is central to the belief system reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures and ancient Jewish writings. Yet to affirm that they needed to remain obedient to God's will in order for God's promises to Abraham to be fulfilled implies that God might at some point revoke those promises and reject Abraham's descendants. Neither alternative would seem to be in accordance with biblical and Jewish thought.

To some extent, this difficulty could be resolved by claiming that, even though Abraham's descendants would be chastised by God for their sins, God would never completely forsake or destroy them, but would ultimately act to bring about the obedience he desired to see in them in order to fulfill his promises. This would mean that, on account of what Abraham had done, in the end God would forgive their sins, though he would still inflict suffering on them in this world in order to chastise and discipline them for those sins. On this basis, they could trust that eventually their sins would be forgiven on account of Abraham and his merits, including especially his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God. This would make Abraham's merits the basis for their forgiveness.

At the same time, those descendants of Abraham who had no desire or intention to obey God's commandments and live according to his will would forfeit their status as members of God's chosen people as long as they

continued in that mindset. Commitment to God's will was therefore also a necessary condition for participation in the blessings God had promised to Abraham's descendants. Such a commitment, however, would by definition mark the lives of all faithful Jews who identified with Abraham and saw him, not only as their forefather, but as the prototype and model of who they were to be and sought to become. Undoubtedly, in their minds, no member of God's people Israel could ever expect to attain the same degree of commitment and obedience to God's will that Abraham had displayed. Nevertheless, by identifying with Abraham, they committed themselves to following his example and living righteously in the way that he had.

These ideas form the background necessary to understand the way in which the merits not only of Abraham but also of the other patriarchs and great figures from Israel's history could be said to atone for the sins of others.[138] To affirm that the merits of the forefathers atoned for the sins of later generations did not mean that one's own obedience was unnecessary and that one could sin freely, trusting in God's forgiveness on account of the promises made to the forefathers. Because one still needed to repent and commit to God's will in order to be forgiven, atonement for sin still depended on one's own actions.

However, one was forgiven not only because of one's own actions but also because of what Abraham and the other forefathers had done. Their total commitment to God's will had led God to establish the covenant with those who identified themselves as Abraham's descendants, including not only those who descended physically from Abraham but also those who looked to him as their forefather only in a spiritual sense. By establishing that covenant on account of the forefathers, God had provided their descendants with a means by which they could attain life, both in this age and the age to come. Through their example and their obedience to the commandments God had given them, the forefathers had also defined what God expected from his people and thereby had made it possible for them to live in accordance with his will so as to obtain his blessings. Chief among the commandments that God had given was the commandment to be circumcised, which dated back to Abraham's day. That commandment, however, stood alongside all of the other commandments of the law that God had given through Moses. By observing these commandments faithfully with a pure heart and making atonement through the prescribed rites whenever they sinned, the people could obtain God's blessings and forgiveness. All of this was the result of the way in which God in his grace had responded to what Abraham and the other forefathers had done; yet what Abraham and the other forefathers had done had itself been a response to God's grace.

Therefore, what made it possible for the members of God's people Israel to attain forgiveness was not only the fact that God had promised to bless them through the patriarchs and other figures from Israel's history but that,

138. On this idea, see de Roo, "Covenant Sacrifice," 198-99; Lohse, *Märtyrer*, 90-91.

through those same figures, God had revealed his will to them and had provided them with examples and commandments to follow. *All* of these things were necessary for the people to be able to make atonement for their sins. When they sinned, they could be confident that God would forgive them. This was not merely because of what the forefathers had done, however, as if God accepted the righteousness of the forefathers in the place of that of his people. Rather, the people could be confident of God's forgiveness because, on account of the righteousness and merits of the forefathers, out of love for his people God had established with them a covenant that made it possible for them to live according to his will and to make atonement for their sins when they fell astray. If God had gone to such great lengths to establish such a covenant with them, when they sinned he could scarcely be expected simply to destroy or abandon them without doing everything in his power to bring them back to him in obedience as his beloved people and receive them with open arms when they returned to him with a repentant heart.

Although the primary emphasis in the story of the binding of Isaac was Abraham's obedience rather than the act of sacrifice per se, the sacrificial ideas found in the story led later Jewish interpreters to relate it to Israel's sacrificial worship. All other sacrifices came to be seen as dependent upon the *Akedah* or binding of Isaac. The logic of this belief was that the *Akedah* served as the ideal model and prototype of what a sacrifice should be. In that way, it not only indicated to the people of Israel how they were to present their own sacrifices, but also provided them with assurance that, when they offered up their sacrifices with the same spirit seen in Abraham and Isaac, God would receive those sacrifices favorably. The story of the *Akedah* thus not only *taught* them how to sacrifice to God but *motivated* them to do so. Therefore, when Jews in the second-temple period offered sacrifices at the temple, they often pleaded that their sacrifice be acceptable to God as that of Abraham and Isaac had been. Of course, as they presented their sacrifices, they were aware that they could never match the purity of soul and conformity with God's will that Abraham and Isaac had displayed. However, by invoking the *Akedah*, they communicated to God their sincere wish that they might attain a level of purity and conformity that would at least come close to that of Abraham and Isaac.[139] In essence, they were identifying themselves with the obedience and total commitment to God's will that Abraham and Isaac had manifested in the story of the binding of Isaac and expressing solidarity with their forefathers. After the temple's destruction, this understanding of sacrifice as the offering of oneself to God in order to conform to God's will grew in importance, since the people could no longer present actual sacrifices at the temple. Therefore, the most they could do was to identify with the way in which Abraham and Isaac had offered up to God what was dearest to them, namely, their own life or the life of the one they most loved.

139. On these points, see especially Vermès, *Scripture*, 206-17; Robert Hayward, "Appendix: The Aqedah," in *Sacrifice* (ed. M. F. C. Bourdillon and Meyer Fortes; London: Academic Press, 1980), 84-87.

Once again, this meant that, while Abraham's descendants were forgiven their sins on account of their own repentance and the sacrificial offerings they presented to God, they were also forgiven on account of what Abraham and Isaac had done. The merits of Abraham and Isaac, however, were not thought to be reckoned or imputed to their descendants or accepted by God in lieu of their own righteousness. The merits of the forefathers atoned for their descendants only in the sense that they provided the basis upon which their descendants might atone for their own sins. They did this by asking God to forgive and accept them on the basis of their identification with what Abraham and Isaac had done and their profound desire and intention to be conformed to the same faith and obedience that Abraham and Isaac had displayed.

* * *

According to what we have seen in this chapter, the literary sources from antiquity that we have at our disposal provide no basis whatsoever for the claim that, in second-temple Jewish thought, suffering and death were thought to atone for sins. Rather, what consistently atoned for sins was repentance and a commitment to living in the way God desired and commanded for the good of all. The suffering and death of the righteous could only contribute to the salvation of others by helping in some way to bring them into conformity with God's will. Nothing could take away the sins of those who were unrepentant or repented solely out of fear of divine punishment: neither sacrifices, suffering, death, prayers, good works, nor the intercessions and meritorious deeds of others.

This means that there is nothing in the Hebrew Scriptures or ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman thought that would have led Jesus' first followers to conclude that, in themselves, his sufferings and death had atoned for the sins of others, much less humanity as a whole. Rather, like other Jews of their day, they would have believed that, in order for them and others to receive the forgiveness of their sins and salvation, it was necessary for them to renounce their sinful ways and commit themselves to living in accordance with God's will. Jesus' sufferings and death would therefore be seen as the consequence of his dedication to the task of bringing about that new way of life in others, yet also would be thought to have played a vital role in his accomplishing that task. Above all, by remaining faithful unto death out of dedication to bringing others into conformity with God's will out of love for them, he had redefined how God's will was to be understood.