

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE AND MEANS OF ATONEMENT IN JEWISH LITERATURE OF THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

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I. INTRODUCTION

The New Perspective (NP) has offered some positive and, hopefully, enduring contributions to the study of Paul. E. P. Sanders and those influenced by his work have raised compelling arguments in defense of a “pattern of religion” in Second Temple Judaism which celebrated divine grace in the election of Israel and in which God mercifully provided means of atonement for his people’s failure to satisfy the demands of the covenant.

Sanders’s stated intention in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was to destroy the view held and propagated by Weber, Bousset, and Billerbeck that first-century Judaism was based upon legalistic works-righteousness. While he admitted that the older view was held by the majority of New Testament scholars, he argued that the view “is based upon a massive perversion and misunderstanding of the material.”¹ Sanders argued that the essence of ancient Judaism is covenantal nomism. He initially defined covenantal nomism thusly:

Covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.²

¹E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 59.

²*Ibid.*, 75.

Sanders clearly stated that the required response to the covenant was man's obedience to its commandments. Sanders later clarified that the obedience required by the covenant was merely intended but not actual obedience. Consequently, as long as the Israelite did not renounce God's right to command, he need not fear an eschatological judgment in which God would closely scrutinize his individual deeds. Such a judgment would not occur.³

Sanders admitted that many texts seem to affirm a view in which salvation was dependent on personal acts of righteousness. However, Sanders remained convinced that first-century Judaism was soteriologically consistent and thus insisted that statements seeming to imply that salvation was accomplished by human effort must somehow be reconciled with other statements emphasizing divine grace and mercy. Sanders's attempt to find a single pattern of religion in first-century Judaism sometimes led him to downplay the vast differences between various sects and theological perspectives within Judaism.⁴

Although one must affirm that Sanders discovered *a* pattern of religion in Second Temple Judaism, Sanders was incautious to claim that he had discovered *the* pattern. NT scholars are increasingly aware that Second Temple Judaism was not theologically uniform. Precision demands that one speak of Second Temple Judaisms (pl.) rather than assume all Jews of the period shared a single soteriological system.

Sanders appealed to three important evidences to argue that covenantal nomism was not legalistic but was dominated by an emphasis on divine grace. First, God established his covenant with the Jews due to his own gracious election. Second, God required only the intention to obey his law rather than actual obedience, and Israelites need not fear a strict judgment that would evaluate individual deeds. Third, God provided means of atonement for failure to obey.⁵ This article will demonstrate that several of these evidences are less convincing than they initially appear. It will briefly summarize my previous research related to Sanders's claim that God judges persons based merely on their intention to obey the law rather than actual deeds. It will then examine evidence from Second Temple Judaism which casts doubt on Sanders's assertion that availability of atonement precluded Judaism from focusing more on human righteousness than divine grace as the basis for salvation.

³See especially Sanders, *Paul*, 234.

⁴See Jacob Neusner, *Mishnah, Midrash, Siddur* (vol. 1 of *The Study of Ancient Judaism*; New York: Ktav, 1981) 21–22. Neusner's cautions against the application of a harmonizing approach to the study of rabbinic literature apply equally well to the study of Second Temple literature.

⁵Sanders, *Paul*, 75.

II. ACTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AS THE BASIS FOR JUDGMENT IN SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

I have elsewhere challenged Sanders's second line of evidence, his dismissal of a requirement of actual obedience in Second Temple Judaism, through a careful analysis of what is perhaps the most systematic statement of soteriology in the Mishnah, *m. 'Abot* 3:16. Rabbi Akiba taught that the "world is judged according to righteousness but all is according to the majority of works that be good or evil." Although Sanders dismissed the text from consideration in his composition of a pattern of religion by claiming that the text is "enigmatic," a parable that immediately follows the statement makes its meaning quite clear. The parable describes God as a great shopkeeper who carefully records moral debits in his ledger. The shopkeeper will eventually send out his collectors to exact payment from the debtors, whether they like it or not, based on the record of their debts. The parable concludes: "the judgment is a judgment of truth and all is ready for the banquet." The conclusion demonstrates that eschatological judgment is the focus of the parable and confirms that the parable illustrates the judgment according to the majority of works described by Akiba.

Akiba thus taught that one's eternal fate was determined by the preponderance of one's deeds. If an individual did more bad than good, he could expect punishment in the afterlife. If an individual did more good than bad, he could expect reward. The concept of judging according to the majority of deeds is affirmed in other statements of the Tannaim such as *m. Qidd.* 1:10, *m. 'Abot* 4:22, and the interpretations of these Mishnaic references in the Tosefta and by later Amoraic rabbis confirm Akiba's view was shared by others.⁶ Through a carefully crafted paradoxical statement, Akiba contrasted this judgment according to the majority of deeds with a judgment according to divine righteousness, implying that he recognized that God's unmitigated holiness demanded total perfection rather than a mere majority of good deeds. This more extreme standard of eschatological judgment was affirmed by Gamaliel II in *b. Sanh.* 81a. The great rabbi wept as he read Ezek 18:5–9 because he interpreted the text to demand total and perfect obedience of which he was incapable.

Although Sanders appealed at length to *Jubilees* to confirm that covenantal nomism was the pattern of religion for first-century Judaism, even *Jubilees* frequently refers to great ledgers like that of Akiba's parable to describe the basis for final judgment. Sanders appealed to *Jub.* 30:22 and 36:10 to argue that the "heavenly tablets" are the Books of Life and Destruction rather than a ledger of deeds. Actually the heavenly tablets have a variety of functions through *Jubilees*. In *Jub.* 6:17 and 16:29–30, the tablets appear to be records of God's laws; however, at least in *Jub.* 39:6 the heavenly tablets appear to be ledgers of deeds. The text explains that Joseph

⁶See Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) 32–33.

refrained from committing adultery with Potiphar's wife because Jacob had taught the words of Abraham, that those who committed adultery would receive a judgment of death in heaven before the Most High and that "the sin is written (on high) concerning him in the heavenly books always before the Lord." Sanders, despite the evidence of *Jub.* 5:13; 28:6; 30:19; 39:6, referred to two passages which refer to the Books of Life and Destruction *and* the heavenly tablets and mistakenly concluded they are the same. *Jubilees* confirms that God kept a careful record of the deeds of Israelites in preparation for just eternal judgment.⁷ Several recent scholars, such as Andrew Das, Seyoon Kim, and Stephen Westerholm, have regarded the above evidence as seriously undermining the portrait of Jewish soteriology affirmed by the NP.⁸

III. THE MEANS OF ATONEMENT IN SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

A close examination of several Jewish texts from the Second Temple period also suggests that Sanders's third line of evidence for Judaism's dependence upon divine grace for salvation needs a fresh appraisal. Does availability of atonement preclude Second Temple Judaism from a lapse into legalistic works-righteousness? Sanders is correct that atonement was available for Israelites who transgressed the covenant (*Jub.* 5:17–19 and *m. Yoma*). However, an exploration of the theme of atonement that allows for the possibility of distinct views within Judaism and avoids Sanders's extensive harmonization of different writers and documents suggests that some Jews increasingly relied upon acts of righteousness to provide atonement for sin. If this is so, the possibility of atonement does not necessarily preclude segments of Second Temple Judaism from relying on works-righteousness for salvation. Thus, I wish to briefly examine three documents from the Second Temple period that contain texts concerning the means of atonement for sin: Tobit, Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach), and the *Community Rule* from Qumran. I will then examine texts related to atonement in the Mishnah.

⁷*Jub.* 5:12–19 is important for understanding the author's view of final judgment. He makes it clear that Gentiles were judged on the basis of deeds but Israelites could have sin forgiven and transgression pardoned "once a year," i.e. the Day of Atonement. The author then explains that before the flood, God treated both Gentile and Jew impartially. God showed partiality only to Noah for the sake of his sons and because Noah was righteous in all his ways and did not transgress a single commandment.

⁸Das, *Paul*, 32–36; Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 146–52. See also Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 343.

IV. ATONEMENT IN JUDAISM OF THE DIASPORA

Jews of the Diaspora faced a dilemma in regard to the atoning rituals of the Temple cultus. When the law was given, Israel was a nation occupying a relatively small geographical region in which access to the temple, though perhaps inconvenient, was at least possible. However, as Jews were scattered throughout the ancient world, pilgrimage to Jerusalem to present sin offerings, guilt offerings or to participate in the Day of Atonement ritual became infeasible. Consequently, many Diaspora Jews tended to spiritualize the means of atonement and substituted various acts of righteousness for the atoning rituals.

The Book of Tobit was written by a Jew of the Diaspora probably between 250 and 175 BC.⁹ The book emphasizes the so-called “Pillars of Judaism,” prayer, fasting, and particularly, almsgiving.¹⁰ Several references suggest that the author viewed these acts of righteousness as effecting atonement for sin. The introduction to the book explains that while Tobit lived in upper Galilee, he alone of his entire family “went often to Jerusalem for the festivals, as it is prescribed by all Israel by an everlasting decree.” However, when his captivity in Assyria precluded hurrying off to Jerusalem with his offerings, he began to view acts of almsgiving as a substitute. Acts of charity and righteous deeds were seen as a necessary and temporary replacement for temple ritual. DeSilva writes:

[Tobit] observed the tithe laws meticulously, setting apart a first tithe for the priests and Levites, a second to spend in Jerusalem at the festivals, and a third to give away to the poor in Jerusalem (1:6–8). Once removed from the land of Israel, however, Tobit no longer could observe these aspects of Torah, and so he moved his emphasis doubly to almsgiving and acts of charity as “excellent offerings” (4:11).¹¹

Tob 4:9–11 shows that the author not only viewed charitable gifts as a replacement for tithes, but as a substitute for atoning sacrifices as well:

Almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the darkness. Indeed, almsgiving, for all who practice it, is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High.

⁹David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 68–69; Bruce Metzger, *Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957) 38–39; Larry Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002) 67.

¹⁰On the prominence of almsgiving in Tobit, see C. A. Moore, *Tobit, AB 40A* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1996) 176–77. Moore notes that more references to almsgiving appear in Tobit than in any other OT book.

¹¹DeSilva, *Apocrypha*, 77.

One might argue that the description of almsgiving as an “excellent offering in the presence of the Most High” merely means that almsgiving is an act of worship or perhaps an expression of gratitude to God like the thank offering of the OT.¹² Several offerings of the Temple cultus were voluntary rather than obligatory. Such offerings were intended to express devotion rather than secure expiation.¹³ Perhaps the description of the offering as excellent or pleasing “in the presence of the Most High” no more requires that such almsgiving atone for sin than Paul’s description of the Philippian gift as a “pleasing odor” and “acceptable to God” implies that Paul attached atoning significance to that monetary gift (Phil 4:18). However, in Tobit, the proximity of the description of almsgiving as an offering to the affirmation that almsgiving “delivers from death” seems to indicate that the author of Tobit viewed the offering as effecting some type of expiation.¹⁴

Death in Tobit may refer to mere physical death and not to eternal punishment. Many commentators insist that the author did not entertain the concept of an afterlife.¹⁵ Several texts initially seem to hint that the author anticipated a blessed and eternal existence for faithful Israelites. Tob 14:15 says that Tobias “blessed the Lord God forever and ever.” This may be hyperbole or it may express the author’s belief in some form of immortality. Statements such as “the blessed will bless the holy name forever and ever” (Tob 13:17) and “they will go to Jerusalem and live in safety forever in the land of Abraham” (Tob 14:7) may be corporate promises to Israel that make no reference to the eternal existence of the individual. However, Tob 14:7 refers specifically to the faithful Israelites who are gathered in a restored temple. The use of the plural individualistic Israelites rather than the corporate Israel seems to imply an eternal destiny for individuals. Perhaps the most significant text in this regard is Tob 13:2, 5 “He leads down to Hades in the lowest regions of the earth, and he brings up from the great abyss.” Many scholars have seen this text as affirming belief in an afterlife or resurrection.¹⁶

N. T. Wright has pointed out, however, that Tob 13:2, 5 are an echo of Deut 32:39 and 30:3 and that the text may be a prediction of the eagerly awaited return from exile. Consequently, Wright suggests that the author of Tobit affirmed a position like that of the Sadducees which did not anticipate

¹²On the thank offering, see Lev 7:12–13, 15; 22:29; Ps. 56:12–13; 107:22; 116:17; Jer 33:11.

¹³For a good introduction to the various sacrificial offerings of the OT, see *ABD* 5:877–81.

¹⁴Moore, *Tobit*, 168, compared *Suk.* 49b which states: “Better is the act of one who gives alms than all the sacrifices.”

¹⁵*Pace* G. T. Montague, *The Books of Ruth and Tobit: With a Commentary* (New York: Paulist, 1973) 33.

¹⁶Moore, *Tobit*, 278, dismisses other possible references to an afterlife in Tobit. However, after a discussion of the meaning of the term “abyss” in *1 En.* 10:13 and 18:21, in which the “abyss” refers to the place of torment for sinners and fallen angels, Moore admits “some scholars may now be less certain than before that in Tobit (or, at least in this hymn) there is no indication of belief in an afterlife.” Compare p. 168.

a significant future life.¹⁷ When Tob 14:10 states that Nadab “went into eternal darkness” as a consequence of his sin, this seems to refer to his hiding underground as described in the *Tale of Ahikar* since the preceding verse says, “Was he not, while still alive, brought down into the earth?”¹⁸ Furthermore, when Tobias is stricken with blindness, he cries, “I cannot see the light of heaven, but I lie in the darkness like the dead who no longer see the light” (Tob 5:10). Thus the author of the book may have affirmed an eschatology similar to that of the Sadducees in which death brought an end to an individual's existence.¹⁹ Tob 12:9 says “those who give alms will enjoy a full life.” A blessed temporal existence may be the full extent of divine reward in the view of the author of Tobit. The data is insufficient to lead modern interpreters to a definite conclusion on the matter. However, questions regarding the eschatology of the book do not directly impact the soteriology of the book.

At the very least, Tobit portrays physical death as a punishment for sin which may be escaped through almsgiving. Tob 14:10–11 explains:

Because he gave alms, Ahikar escaped the fatal trap that Nadab set for him, but Nadab fell into it himself and was destroyed. So now, my children, see what almsgiving accomplishes, and what injustice does—it brings death!

This statement is not merely incidental. It forms the conclusion of the book and states the moral of the story, repeating the focus on almsgiving which characterized the introduction to the work. The significance of almsgiving is highlighted even more clearly in Tob 12:8–10:

¹⁷N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 139.

¹⁸The quotations of Tobit are from the NRSV which generally follows Codex β . Codices A and B refer merely to “the darkness” (τὸ σκότος) rather than “eternal darkness” (τὸ σκότος τοῦ αἰῶνος). The majority of Tobit scholars favor GII, represented primarily by Sinaiticus, as the earliest available recension of the Greek text. The discovery and publication of the Qumran texts of Tobit has vindicated the preference for GII against scholars such as Paul Deselaers and Heinrich Gross. See Moore, *Tobit*, 53–60; A. A. Di Lella, “The Deuteronomistic Background of the Farewell Discourse in Tob 14:13–11,” *CBQ* (1979): 380, n. 2; J. A. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic and Hebrew Fragments of Tobit from Cave 4,” *CBQ* 57 (1995): 671–72; and Fitzmyer, “Tobit,” in *Qumran Cave 4*, vol. 19 of *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 1–76, esp. 1–4. Fitzmyer, *Qumran Cave 4* (2) notes that “Both the Aramaic and Hebrew form of the Tobit story found at Qumran agree in general with the long recension of the book found in the fourth-century Greek text of codex Sinaiticus.” One's choice of recensions may significantly impact understanding of the eschatology of the book. All of the possible references to eternality discussed above appear in Sinaiticus but not Alexandrinus nor Vaticanus. If the adjective “eternal” is original (and that is questionable), the author probably saw Nadab's underground hiding place as foreshadowing his tomb and thus the prelude to the fate of the dead described in Tob 5:10. For a comparison of the various texts, see Vincent T. M. Skemp, *The Vulgate of Tobit Compared with Other Ancient Witnesses* (SBLDS 180; Atlanta: SBL, 1999) 444–45.

¹⁹So also Moore, *Tobit*, 185.

Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies.

Prayer and fasting were means of expressing contrition for sin and seeking gracious forgiveness. However, Tobit identifies almsgiving as a superior means of atonement. Tobit affirms sacrificial giving in the strongest sense of the term since this act of righteousness saves from death and purges away sin. In the words of Larry Helyer, it has “redemptive efficacy.”²⁰ In GII, the preferred Greek recension of Tobit, the act which purges away sin is expressed by usage of the verb ἀποκαθαίρει. The verb means *to cleanse* and was used to describe the act of smelting metals or of purging the body with emetics.²¹ The verb appears only four times in the Septuagint (Tob 12:9; Prov 15:27; Job 7:9; 9:30) and none of the occurrences refers to atonement. Consequently, the verb may speak of mere moral purification rather than an act of atonement. The reference to almsgiving saving from death in the immediate context, however, suggests that the cleansing refers to a removal of guilt and punishment rather than mere moral transformation. Moore defended the veracity of the verse against older commentators who objected that the verse contradicted the soteriology of the Hebrew Bible by insisting that the verse is a merely a proverb, rather than a precise literal theological affirmation.²² However, recognition of the verse as a proverb does not blunt its force as a soteriological statement. The proverb summarizes the theme of the book which is applied quite literally to Tobit’s experience.

The Vulgate added, “[Almsgiving] enables (one) to find everlasting life.”²³ Unfortunately, no text of the verse was discovered among the fragments from Qumran. However, other versions speak of a full life on earth rather than eternal life. Apparently, Jerome either superimposed Christian eschatology on the text or found such in his Aramaic *Vorlage*.²⁴ Several commentators argue here also that death refers to mere physical death rather than eternal damnation. Again, the question of the book’s eschatology does not directly affect its soteriology. Moore noted:

²⁰Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature*, 67. Since Sanders focused on Palestinian Judaism, he gave no attention to Tobit except to mention that Tob 4:15 offered a parallel to Hillel’s version of the Golden Rule. See Sanders, 113. *Suk.* 49b states, “Greater is the act of one who gives alms than all the sacrifices.” This suggests that after the close of the Second Temple period, others also espoused the replacement of temple sacrifices with charitable gifts.

²¹H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, “ἀποκαθαίρω,” *LSJ*, 200.

²²Moore, *Tobit*, 270.

²³Some manuscripts add “*misericordiam et . . .*” before *vitam* to the Vulgate’s “*et faciet invenire vitam aeternam.*”

²⁴Skemp, *Vulgate of Tobit*, 366.

Consistent with the book's Deuteronomistic perspective, any rewards for being or doing good must be given in this life. Therefore, it is dying, rather than death, that creates problems in Tobit; that is, it is Tobit's and Sarah's "quality of life," not their nonexistence after death, that poses the problems.²⁵

Whatever his eschatology, Tobit affirms a soteriology in which individuals can evade divine punishment for sin in this life through good works, particularly almsgiving.

In his essay on the soteriology of didactic stories in Second Temple Judaism, Philip Davies overlooked the significance of almsgiving in Tobit and the several explicit references to atonement. As he dealt with the question, "How are Tobit and Tobiah reconciled to God?" Davies argued that Tobit illustrates the abandonment of "a purely natural and mechanical theory of retribution."²⁶ However, Davies acknowledged that acts of piety performed by the individual Israelite were the means of the salvation of the nation and the key to the individual's relationship with God and blessing from God:

More significant, however, is the corporate aspect. It is as an Israelite, as a Jew that the heroes behave righteously and it is the survival and restoration of the Jewish people that ultimately matters. The problem of the individual righteous sufferer masks, as it does in Daniel, the fate of the chosen people. Ultimately their survival, that of their home and their cult, are the goals of individual piety, just as they are ultimately the parameters by which individuals are related to God and through which they are blessed.²⁷

Even if quality of life in the present existence and a comfortable and dignified death are all that is sought through salvation, almsgiving remains the means of that salvation. Whatever the ultimate promise of salvation might have been for the author of Tobit, righteous deeds were clearly the basis and prerequisite for it.

V. ATONEMENT IN PALESTINIAN JUDAISM

Wisdom of Ben Sira shows that the tendency to replace atoning rituals with acts of personal righteousness was not limited to the Judaism of the Diaspora. Yeshua ben Sira was a scribe who lived in Jerusalem during the high priesthood of Simon II and wrote between 196 and 175 BC.²⁸ Ben Sira

²⁵Moore, *Tobit*, 33.

²⁶Philip R. Davies, "Didactic Stories," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (vol. 1 of *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*; eds. D. A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 113.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 113.

²⁸DeSilva, *Apocrypha*, 158.

warned that the atoning rituals of the Temple were not efficacious for the ungodly: “The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly, nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins” (Sir 34:23). The preceding and following verses indicate that God rejects sacrifices that worshippers acquired by thievery or extortion of the poor, but v. 23 shows that the ungodly character and behavior of the one seeking atonement guarantees rejection of the sacrifice as well.

Later, Ben Sira equated doing Torah with sacrifices of various kinds. Sir 35:1–3 states:

The one who keeps the law makes many offerings; one who heeds the commandments makes an offering of well-being. The one who returns a kindness offers choice flour, and one who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering. To keep from wickedness is pleasing to the Lord and to forsake unrighteousness is an atonement.²⁹

In this case, the word for atonement, ἑξιλασμός, is unambiguous. The word occurs sixteen times in the Septuagint and refers to the atonement secured by the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:27, 28), the atonement accomplished in the Most Holy Place (1 Chr 28:11), and the atoning sacrifice offered by Judas in behalf of the dead in order to prepare his slain warriors for resurrection (2 Macc 12:45).³⁰ The word consistently refers to the atonement achieved through ritual acts of sacrifice. In Sirach, however, acts of righteousness have essentially replaced ritual acts as the means of atonement. R. A. F. MacKenzie wrote:

In 35:1–15 Ben Sira dwells on the positive aspect of morality and social justice as the necessary foundation and presupposition for acceptable sacrificial worship. First the law, the commandments, kindness, alms, avoiding wickedness and unrighteousness are the equivalent of the various liturgical offerings. The latter aptly symbolize those works of charity but they cannot substitute for them. In vv. 4–7 the just man’s offerings are praised—because backed by his just deeds.³¹

The comments of John G. Snaith are even more to the point:

²⁹Ibid., 155, notes “A large amount of his instruction is given over to promoting Jewish piety as an essential component of the life of the wise person (37:7–15; 39:5–8). In these sections his debt to the Hebrew prophets is unmistakable, as he teaches on acceptable sacrifices, the importance of doing Torah (which is equated with sacrificial offerings), and social justice (7:29–31; 34:21–35:26).” See also the comments in Donald E. Gowan, “Wisdom,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 220.

³⁰See also Exod 30:10; 1 Esd 9:20; Wis 18:21; Sir 5:5; 16:11; 17:29; 18:12, 20; 35:3; Ezek 7:25; 43:23 and 45:19.

³¹R. A. F. MacKenzie, *Sirach* (vol. 19 of *Old Testament Message*; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983) 134.

Having condemned insincere sacrifices, Ben Sira now commends sacrifices as part of fulfilling the law. “Keeping the law” is an effective and more reliable substitute for sacrifices (verse 1), but sacrifices should be performed “because they are commanded” (verse 5). The law takes precedence over ritualistic ceremony for Ben Sira as shown in his description of Israel’s response to God in 17:10–14 where he lays stress on the law and morality without mentioning ritualistic sacrifice.³²

He later explained soteriology in Sirach:

To make atonement, that is, to restore the relationship with God broken by sin, lies in decisive renunciation of wrongdoing rather than in a liturgical act.³³

Ben Sira did command Jews to continue to offer sacrifices, but only as an act of obedience to God’s law (Sir 35:6). Keeping the commandments, doing acts of kindness, giving alms, and living righteously supplanted sacrifice as a means of expiation.

Ben Sira repeatedly described various acts of righteousness as atoning sacrifices. Sir 3:14 says, “For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against your sins.” The verb *will be credited* (προσανοικοδομέω) is probably more economic than cultic. The verse seems to teach some form of compensatory righteousness in which righteous deeds make up for sinful ones. However, Sir 3:30 utilizes the imagery of ritual sacrifice—“As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin.” Alexander DiLella aptly commented that this verse expresses “in gnomic form what Tob 14:10–11 states in narrative form.”³⁴ Snaith correctly noted that the statement of Ben Sira significantly increased the importance attached to almsgiving in OT texts like Deut 15:7–8 and Amos 2:6–7 by viewing generosity to the poor as a means of atonement.³⁵

Of the nine occurrences of the verb *atone* in Sirach, four refer to righteous deeds as the means of atonement (3:3, 30; 20:28; 45:23) with God or human rulers and four refer to the impossibility of atonement for the wicked or unforgiving (5:6; 16:7; 28:5; 34:1). The remaining occurrence refers to Aaron’s priestly role (45:16). An important key to the theology of the book appears in Sirach’s discussion of the transfer of the priesthood from Aaron to Phinehas (Sir 45:23–26). Ben Sira described Aaron as a teacher of the law (Sir 45:17) but he especially emphasized his role of providing atonement through temple sacrifices (Sir 45:15–16, 20–21). However, Sirach makes no overt reference to the cultic activity of the Phinehas priesthood. Phinehas secured atonement for his people through the zealous act described

³²John G. Snaith, *Ecclesiasticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 170.

³³*Ibid.*, 171.

³⁴Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander DiLella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987) 156.

³⁵Snaith, *Ecclesiasticus*, 25.

in Num 25:6–13 and Ps 106:28–31. Phinehas’s righteous deed stopped the plague among Israel (Num 25:8) and “made atonement for the Israelites” (Num 25:13). In response, God granted the priesthood to Phinehas and his posterity forever. Ben Sira seems to have seen the priesthood of Phinehas as one that called Israel to righteous deeds more than providing atonement through cultic ritual. Zeal for righteousness and urging the avoidance of pagan influences thus assumed greater importance for priests and Israelites than temple sacrifice. Sirach’s discussion of Phinehas closes with the following prayer: “And now bless the Lord who has crowned you with glory. May the Lord grant you wisdom of mind to judge his people with justice, so that their prosperity may not vanish and that their glory may endure through all their generations” (Sir 45:26). The focus on the priest’s role of judging with justice in order to preserve God’s blessing on his people seems to reiterate the earlier emphasis on the importance of righteous deeds above sacrifice.

Sanders admitted that Ben Sira regarded honoring one’s father and giving alms as good deeds which atone for sin.³⁶ However, he dismissed the idea that these good deeds replaced temple sacrifice as the means of atonement in Sirach:

The precise significance attached by the author to the sacrificial system for obtaining atonement is difficult to estimate. Aaron, he says, was chosen “to offer sacrifice to the Lord . . . to make atonement for the people” (45.16). It seems likely that Ben Sirach accepted the efficacy of the Temple sacrifices for atonement. There are several passages which mention the Temple service with obvious appreciation (50.11–21, a description of Simon the High Priest; 7.29–31, an admonition to honour the priests and present sacrifices).³⁷

Sanders failed to note, however, that Ben Sira ascribed atoning efficacy to sacrifices only in connection with the cultic activity of Aaron. After Phinehas and his accomplishment of atonement through a righteous deed, Ben Sira consistently attributes the accomplishment of atonement to righteous deeds. Although positive descriptions of the offerings of Simon do appear, Ben Sira lauds them merely as “a pleasing odor” and as securing a blessing, but he stops short of mentioning any atoning value. Although Sir 7:27–31 does show “obvious appreciation” for temple service, it is more precise to say that the text is an admonition to honor priests *by* presenting sacrifices than to honor the priests *and* present sacrifices. By offering sacrifice, the worshipper fulfilled his responsibility to care for God’s ministers and to give the priest his commanded portion. Consequently, when Ben Sira shows his approval of the temple sacrifices, meeting the needs of

³⁶Sanders, *Paul*, 338.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 339.

the priests and fulfilling the obligations of the law seem to be in view rather than pursuit of atonement.

Sanders noted Büchler's observation that Ben Sira never mentions a private offering such as the sin or guilt offering nor does he refer to the Day of Atonement ritual explicitly. However, Sanders replied:

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from his neglect of private sacrifices of atonement and the Day of Atonement that Ben Sirach would have denied their efficacy. They are commanded in the Bible, and he respects the Law too much to deny what it commands.³⁸

Sanders was correct to acknowledge Ben Sira's respect for the law and to recognize that Ben Sira's affirmation of sacrifice was motivated by the Biblical commands. This, however, is not equivalent to an affirmation of the atoning efficacy of such sacrifices. The obligations to fulfill the law and to provide for the needs of the priests are Ben Sira's primary motives for encouraging sacrifice. The fact that Ben Sira urged his readers to give alms because such is a means of atonement but encourages sacrifice on completely different grounds suggests that Ben Sira associated atonement with righteous deeds rather than ritual activity or, perhaps, in addition to ritual activity.

Donald Gowan's study of Sirach has led him to different conclusions. He suggested that "the remedies for sin offered by Ben Sira are completely traditional" and that "people are judged according to their works (16:12b), but that is no more a strict works-salvation scheme in Sirach than in the Old Testament (18:13-14)."³⁹ Gowan later stated: "The need for repentance and forgiveness is also dealt with in Sirach, and this shows that the author does not operate with a strictly merit-based theology."⁴⁰ However, references to forgiveness in Sirach do not necessarily preclude his acceptance of a merit-based theology. Since Sirach abounds with statements in which atonement for failing to keep the law is made by compensatory acts of righteousness and in which righteous acts supercede and replace temple sacrifices, the possibility of atonement does not guarantee an emphasis on grace that precludes works-righteousness.⁴¹

³⁸Ibid. See also A. Büchler, "Ben Sira's Conception of Sin and Atonement," *JQR* 14 (1923): 61-66, 74-78.

³⁹Donald E. Gowan, "Wisdom," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (vol. 1 of *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*; eds. D. A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 219.

⁴⁰Ibid., 238.

⁴¹Sanders, *Paul*, 420, noted that Ben Sirach was an exception to the pattern of religion that consistently appeared elsewhere in Second Temple Jewish literature. He argued that Sirach "could treat the fate of the righteous and the wicked in this world by use of the general doctrine of retribution" because Sirach "had no conception of punishment and reward in the world to come." Several texts suggest that Sirach denied, or at least doubted, the existence of the afterlife (Sir 17:28; 22:11-12; 30:17). However, since others within Second Temple Judaism like the Sadducees shared Sirach's eschatological position, one should not consider idiosyncratic his views as to how individuals find favor with God. Later readers of Sirach's wisdom may well

VI. ATONEMENT AT QUMRAN

This substitution of acts of righteousness for temple atonement rituals appears in the Qumran documents. Although the replacement of sacrifice with righteous deeds in the Judaism of the Diaspora was at least partially inspired by the distance from the temple, the problem with atoning rituals for the sectarians was not geographical but theological. The Qumran sectarians dismissed the atonement rituals on several grounds, especially Jerusalem's unqualified priesthood and use of an improper ritual calendar.⁴² Vermes explained:

While some Essenes, notwithstanding their vow of total fidelity to the Law of Moses, rejected the validity of the Sanctuary and refused to participate (temporarily) in its rites (cf. Philo, *Omnis probus* 75; Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII, 19), they evaded the theological dilemma in which this stand might have placed them by contending that until the rededication of the Temple, the only true worship of God was to be offered in their establishment. The Council of the Community was to be the "Most Holy Dwelling for Aaron" where, "without the flesh of holocausts and the fat of sacrifice," a "sweet fragrance" was to be sent up to God, and where prayer was to serve "as an acceptable fragrance of righteousness" (1QS VIII, 8–9; IX, 4–5).⁴³

The Qumran documents clearly state that the atoning rituals of the temple have no efficacy, at least for those who refuse to enter the covenant community.

He shall not be reckoned among the perfect; he shall neither be purified by atonement, nor cleansed by purifying waters, nor sanctified by seas and rivers, nor washed clean with any ablution. Unclean, unclean shall he be. (1QS 2.26–3.5)

have embraced his soteriological system despite their rejection of his eschatological views. Sanders himself describes Sirach's view of God settling man's moral account on the day of his death "optimistic but—as it now appears—naïve legalism," 335. He also admits that "The precise significance attached by the author to the sacrificial system for obtaining atonement is difficult to estimate," 338. He notes that Ben Sira never mentions a private offering of atonement nor the Day of Atonement. He acknowledges that "Among good deeds, two are singled out which atone for transgression. They are honouring one's father and giving alms," 338. He suggested that Sirach "presupposes regular observance of the entire Temple cultus" and that his concern was to denounce abuses of the system and the assumption that atoning sacrifices were "efficacious automatically," 339. Still he honestly acknowledged, "it is clear that the main thing is avoiding transgression and doing what is right," 441.

⁴²See Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Alan Lane, 1997) 78–80.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 82.

Adopting the now familiar spiritualization of temple ritual, the sectarians came to view covenant obedience as the means of atonement. 1QS 3.6–10 states:

He shall be cleansed from all his sins by the spirit of holiness uniting him to His truth, and his iniquity shall be expiated by the spirit of uprightness and humility. And when his flesh is sprinkled with purifying water and sanctified by cleansing water, it shall be made clean by the humble submission of his soul to all the precepts of God. Let him then order his steps to walk perfectly in all the ways commanded by God concerning the times appointed for him, straying neither to the right nor to the left and transgressing none of His words, and he shall be accepted by virtue of a pleasing atonement before God and it shall be to him a Covenant of the everlasting Community.

The standard of conduct necessary to effect atonement was a radical one. The cleansing of the flesh required submission to all the precepts of God and a pleasing atonement before God resulted from walking perfectly in all the ways commanded by God. The *Community Rule* describes the function and role of the Council of the Community and office of priests thusly:

They shall preserve the faith in the Law with steadfastness and meekness and shall atone for sin by the practice of justice and by suffering the sorrows of affliction. They shall walk with all men according to the standards of truth and the rule of the time. (1QS VIII, 1–4)

Perhaps most importantly, guidelines for covenant membership concluded:

When these become members of the Community in Israel according to all these rules, they shall establish the spirit of holiness according to everlasting truth. They shall atone for guilty rebellion and for sins of unfaithfulness, that they may obtain loving-kindness for the Land without the flesh of holocausts and the fat of sacrifice. And prayer rightly offered shall be as an acceptable fragrance of righteousness, and perfection of way as a delectable free-will offering. (1QS IX, 5)

Readers should be aware that the translation by Vermes quoted above is subject to challenge. The word which Vermes translated *without* in the phrase “without the flesh of holocausts and the fat of sacrifice” is the preposition *mem*. The preposition could be translated *without*, *more than*, or even *by*. The latter translation of the preposition, suggested by Carmignac and Milik, significantly affects the meaning of the text and its soteriological

implications.⁴⁴ Sanders refrained from making a decision on this question but the conclusion that he drew from the text suggests that he, along with most other scholars, affirmed Vermes's translation. Sanders stated:

The point is that the means of atonement are at hand to the community, and that the present inability to make sacrifices at the Temple is no hindrance. As is the case in Rabbinic Judaism, good deeds do not atone because they offset or compensate for transgressions in a book-keeping way; rather they atone as substitutes for the sacrifices specified in the Bible.⁴⁵

Apparently the Qumran sectarians rejected the atoning sacrifices of the Temple cultus and, at least temporarily, substituted prayer and acts of righteousness as the means of atonement.⁴⁶ Despite Sanders's protests, however, such a soteriology seems quite unlike the pattern of religion that supposedly pervaded Palestinian Judaism and seems very similar to the concept of works-righteousness that Paul combated.⁴⁷

Sanders's own examination of 1QS seems to confirm this. He concluded:

To summarize: the community, with the good deeds and pious prayers of its members, and especially those of the most pious and righteous men, constituted a substitute for the Temple sacrifices (1QS 8.3f.). As such, the community itself atoned for the sins of its members (1QS 5.6; perhaps also 9.4), but more particularly for the defilement of the Land, to preserve it for future occupation and use (1QS 8.6, 10; 9.4; 1QSa 1.3).

That good deeds substitute for sacrifices as acts of atonement is seen further when one considers the use of the noun *kippurim*, "[acts of] atonement." The one who walks perfectly in the ways commanded by God, transgressing not a single commandment, procures pardon from God "through pleasing acts of atonement" (*kippurim*, 1QS 3.10f.). On the other hand, the man who prefers to follow the stubbornness of his heart rather than to submit to the commandments of the covenant will not be purified by lustrations; for him there are no acts of atonement (1QS 2.26–3.4). As we have repeatedly noted, those who do not join and

⁴⁴See the discussion in Sanders, *Paul*, 300.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 300.

⁴⁶The sectarians may have expected the reinstatement of the sacrificial system in a future temple. For a similar opinion, see Sanders, *Paul*, 194.

⁴⁷Mark A. Seifrid, "Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 437, suggested that the motif of acts of righteousness replacing temple sacrifice was borrowed by the sectarians from Ezekiel since "texts in Ezekiel . . . speak of the possibility of forgiveness by means of righteous deeds." However, Seifrid mentioned only Ezek 20:41 as an example. The text refers to Yahweh accepting the people as a "soothing aroma" rather than accepting righteous deeds in place of a sacrifice.

submit to the covenant find no forgiveness. The same point is made in 1QH 15.24: there is no atoning indemnity (*kopher*) for works of wickedness. Obedience is the condition *sine qua non* of salvation.⁴⁸

Despite this, Sanders later concluded: “The general pattern of religion which we found earlier in rabbinic literature is also present in Qumran” and explained, “For most transgressions within the covenant, *means of atonement were available*.”⁴⁹ He overlooked that, from a Pauline perspective, mere availability of atonement did not necessarily preclude a pattern of religion from being inconsistent with salvation by divine grace. The means of atonement was equally crucial to Paul. If obedience is the condition *sine qua non* of salvation and if acts of obedience provide the means of atonement for previous failures to obey in the Qumran sect, the pattern of religion at Qumran is not only significantly different from covenantal nomism as Sanders defined it, but reeks of the very works-righteousness that Paul challenged in his epistles.

In his excellent essay, “1QS and Salvation at Qumran,” Markus Bockmuehl argued that it is appropriate to focus a study of the soteriology of the Qumran community on the *Community Rule* since the *Rule* is the “constitutional text that most clearly and explicitly sets out the sect’s distinctive beliefs and religious understanding.”⁵⁰ His study led him to conclude that atonement for sin was “possible only to repentant members of the sect, since its sacrificial locus comes to be situated very specifically in the worship and praxis of the *yahad*.”⁵¹ After an enlightening discussion of the textual history of the *Community Rule*, Bockmuehl suggested:

If the direction of my redactional analysis is correct, we may have in Qumran a developing example of the sort of exclusivistic preoccupation with “works of the law” against which Paul of Tarsus subsequently reacts in his letters to Gentile Christians.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Jews of the Diaspora with no access to the temple and sectarian Jews who had temporarily abandoned the temple sought atonement for sin through personal acts of righteousness rather than temple sacrifice. Motifs in Sirach suggest that even a leading scribe of Jerusalem, approximately 250 years

⁴⁸ Sanders, *Paul*, 304.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁵⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, “1QS and Salvation at Qumran,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 386. Bockmuehl added, “[The Community Rule’s] great importance for the sectarians is evident from the fact that no fewer than twelve copies have come to light at Qumran, more than of any other non-biblical text except *Jubilees*.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 414.

before the destruction of the temple, substituted acts of righteousness for the atoning rituals of the temple. Consequently, Sanders's appeal to the means of atonement as precluding Judaism from degenerating into various forms of legalistic works-righteousness falls short of convincing. When atonement for failure to observe the law is accomplished by compensatory acts of obedience to the law, works-righteousness, at least to some degree, seems unavoidable.