

MARTYRDOM AS VICARIOUS ATONEMENT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITS THEOLOGY
FROM ANIMAL SACRIFICE TO HUMAN CRUCIFIXION

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Immediately after the death of Jesus in the first century, his Jewish disciples began to describe this event in terms of an atoning sacrifice for sin.¹ If one were to leap directly from a covenantal understanding of atonement, the claim that innocent, human blood could have been shed to provide atonement for another's sin would have largely been repulsive, having more in common with pagan human sacrifice than the Jewish covenantal system. Yahweh himself repeatedly forbade the offers of intercessors to die on behalf of their nation, and mandated that only the shedding of guilty blood could cleanse the land and reinstate his blessing. Yet this early Christian understanding of atonement was not an anomaly, as the contemporary Jewish document *4 Maccabees* reveals. Embedded within this Hellenistic-flavored composition is the reiterated claim that the martyrdom of nine righteous Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes IV provided atonement for the nation of Israel and enabled its divine preservation. This shows a strand of acceptance by the first century of one human's ability to atone for another's sin, at least on a national level. A change in the Jewish understanding of atonement, therefore, had to have occurred during the interim period known as Second Temple. This paper will demonstrate that the theology of voluntary shedding of righteous human blood as a vicarious means for national atonement developed within the context of Diasporic and Hellenistic Judaism from scriptural "seeds" to the acceptable theology found in *4 Maccabees*, and this provided a framework for the first-century Jewish understanding and acceptance of the death of Jesus as effective atonement for sin.²

¹ E.g., Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the NIV, all apocrypha quotations from the NRSV [Harold W. Attridge, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006)], all pseudepigraphic quotations from R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), and the DSS from Geza Vermes, *Penguin Classics Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

Atonement and Intercession within the Biblical period

A brief survey of atonement within the Old Testament—the sacrificial system, the role of the intercessor, and Isaiah’s suffering Servant—is first needed to ground this discussion. Under the covenant, individual atonement could only be effected by offering sacrifices, primarily animal, to restore the sinner’s relationship to Yahweh and the community.³ The offering itself was viewed as an act of repentance, whether or not the motivation behind it was genuine.⁴ Once a year, animal sacrifices on the Day of Atonement provided cleansing for the sin of the entire nation.⁵ As there was then little conception of an afterlife, the outcome of atonement was continuation under divine blessing in this life; sin not cleansed (and there were certain sins atonement could not cover) caused one to be cut off from the covenantal people of God (e.g., Num 9:13).

While the sacrificial system was the only direct means given in the covenant to provide atonement for sin, there existed from the beginning the role of human intercessors—righteous persons, typically prophets, whose petitions for God’s mercy turned away his wrath and prevented his judgment. There were earlier hints of this in Abraham’s intercession for Sodom, but Moses was the premier example of an intercessor effecting atonement for national sin: “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your

³ Joel B. Green, “Atonement,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol 1, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, gen. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 345. See Lev 17:12: “it is the blood [of an animal] that makes atonement for one’s life.” Payments of money, anointing with oil, and wave and grain offerings could also effect atonement. Sam K. Williams, *Jesus’ Death as Saving Event* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), 107, observes, “The idea that persons *can* substitute for other persons in the sight of Yahweh is most clearly attested in Num. 3:11: God says to Moses that He has taken the Levites in place of the firstborn of the Israelites.”

⁴ There is some scholarly debate about how much genuine repentance was a factor in the sacrificial system. At the least, what was implicitly assumed there becomes explicit later in the prophets and Second Temple period.

⁵ R. Laird Harris, Leviticus, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, Frank E. Gaebelien, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 588-589: “The Day of Atonement was to symbolize for Israel every year the substitutionary atonement God provided for their sins and the total removal of their guilt.” E.g., Lev 16:1-34: The blood of a bull makes atonement for Aaron and his household, the sprinkled blood of a goat cleanses the Most Holy Place, and the scapegoat is released to carry away the sins of the people. “On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you [before the LORD] . . . from all your sins” (Lev 16:30).

sin" (Exod 32:30).⁶ This role was also exhibited by the priest Aaron,⁷ and later continued through the prophetic line, as seen in Jeremiah, Amos, and Ezekiel. Their petitions could effect healing, mercy, and forgiveness, both on an individual and national scale.⁸

But while the intercession of a righteous person could effect atonement for national sin by diverting divine wrath and judgment, that person could not give his life on behalf of another. When Moses begged, "Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" the LORD replied, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Exod 32:32-33).⁹ Later, David's plea to "let your hand fall [instead] upon me and my family" instead of the people went unanswered; however, when he offered a sacrifice "the LORD answered prayer in behalf of the land" (2 Sam 24:17, 25). While the prayers of the righteous were in some circumstances acceptable to appease divine wrath, at no time was innocent human blood, even

⁶ Moses' role as an intercessor for Israel, capable of propitiating the LORD on behalf of their sins, is taken up and elaborated upon in the pseudepigraphal *Testimony (Assumption) of Moses* (1:14; 3:12; 11:11, 17-18; 12:6).

⁷ When the LORD's wrath broke out in a plague, Aaron ran through the assembly with a censer of incense and "made atonement for them" (Num 16:43-50; cf. 8:19). This story is reiterated in *4 Macc* 7:11-12.

⁸ The presence of a righteous person could prevent judgment upon a city (Gen 18:24-33; Jer 5:1), and the prayer of a righteous person or prophet could bring about healing (Num 12:10-13; 1 Kings 13:6), turn aside wrath (Exod 32:14, 30-35; Deut. 9:19-20; Job 42:8-10; Jer 18:20-21), and temper judgment (Amos 7:1-6). Interestingly, the LORD once forbade the prophet Jeremiah from interceding for Israel: "So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you" (Jer 7:16). At times national sin was too extensive for intercession to be accepted by God.

⁹ Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 103, criticizes this substitutionary view and asserts another: "Rather, the alternative is: 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. The only other interpretation that seems possible is that in v. 32 Moses, the intercessor for his people, is bargaining with God, almost daring Him to destroy His servant (cf. Num. 11:15). In a sense Moses confronts Yahweh in a showdown and forces the divine hand—almost. God's response is: the sinners, not you, will I destroy; but not right now (cf. vv. 33-34)! In any case, v. 33 is sufficient rebuttal to the notion that the concept of vicarious expiatory suffering is held by the author(s) of Exodus."

voluntarily given, allowed to provide atonement for another.¹⁰ Canaanite traditions of human sacrifice made such an option not only entirely unacceptable, but deeply repulsive.¹¹

It is within this covenantal framework that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is obscure and deeply puzzling, as it is the only place to be found in the Old Testament where the suffering, even death, of a righteous human is divinely ordained to bring about atonement for another's sin.¹² The language of the sacrificial system is imbedded throughout this passage: the Servant is compared to the sacrificial lamb (53:7), and he was made a "guilt offering" as the iniquity of the nation was laid upon him (53:6, 10). The role of intercessor is also found here: the Servant "made intercession for the transgressors," (53:11-12). But here for the first time are both means for atonement combined in one righteous person, whose vicarious suffering unto death effects atonement (healing and divine pardon) for the sin of the entire nation.¹³

Apart from this cryptic passage, there is no place in the Old Testament for vicarious atonement by an innocent human. How, then, is the leap made to the lauding of the Maccabean

¹⁰ Green, "Atonement," 346: "In God's economy, Israelites were thus to do to their animals what they were not allowed to do to their children or themselves; animal life substitutes for human life, and this had efficacy in the restoration of right relations with God."

¹¹ Martin Hengel and Daniel P. Bailey, "The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., Daniel P. Bailey, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 93: "Child sacrifice was widespread precisely among the West Semites, Canaanites, and Phoenicians and was therefore bitterly rejected in Israel. In ancient Israel, as far it can be recovered from the Old Testament texts, every person dies because of his or her own sin according to the traditional connection between deeds and consequences." Deut 24:16; also cf. Num 35:33: "Atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it."

¹² The LORD's call for Ezekiel to "bear [Israel's] sin" upon himself as prophetic testimony (Ezek 4:4-6) is this is the first example of personal cost and suffering on the part of an intercessor. However, this was simply a visual prophecy—"Ezekiel's bearing of iniquity for the people had absolutely no atoning effect," as judgment upon the nation was not prevented—Hermann Spieckermann, "The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., Daniel P. Bailey, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

¹³ Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 185, however, believes "evidence is lacking that Isaiah 53 was so understood [as expressing vicarious expiatory suffering or death] in the intervening centuries between Second Isaiah and IV Maccabees."

martyrs' shed blood as national atonement as seen in 4 Maccabees? Several answers can be found within the extant writings of the Second Temple period.

Development of the Theology of Atonement in Second Temple Judaism

After the first destruction of the temple and the scattering of Jews among the nations, atonement theology was forced to undergo drastic changes. For the majority of Jews now, the distance from the Jerusalem temple made atonement by the sacrificial system inaccessible and unavailable. Without either the sacrificial system or prophetic intercessors, Diasporan Jews in the Second Temple period sought other means for atonement.

Under the covenantal system, the act of offering a sacrifice demonstrated the repentance needed to obtain atonement. But increasingly the Old Testament writers began to value obedience not necessarily connected to the sacrificial ritual as exhibiting genuine, atoning repentance.¹⁴ The prophet Samuel hinted at this: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22). Yahweh's later diatribes against Israel in the psalms and prophets dealt with his detestation of their sacrifices due to their lack of obedience, genuine worship, and practice of social justice, which were the true sacrifices he preferred (though, of course, alongside the sacrificial system).¹⁵ While most Second Temple writers either affirm or are silent on the validity of the sacrificial system, several others eagerly drew from these portions of scripture and outlined

¹⁴ Robert J. Daly, "The Power of Sacrifice in Ancient Judaism and Christianity," in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4:2 (Summer, 1990): 188: In the post-exilic period, "the locus of the sacrifice's power shifts from the external performance of the ritual to the internal dispositions of the one performing it. . . . The idea gained force that what brought about atonement, reconciliation, and union with God was not the performance of the sacrificial ritual but the fact that the ritual was performed in obedience to the Torah."

¹⁵ For examples see Psalm 50, which calls for "thank offerings," fulfilling vows, and calling on and honoring Yahweh, Psalm 51:16-17: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise," and Isaiah 1, which demands practice of social justice accompany sacrificial rituals.

acts of repentance that could bring about individual atonement alongside, and even apart from, the sacrificial system.¹⁶

Alternatives to Sacrificial Atonement in the Diaspora

The fictional character Tobit, being in Nineveh, is close enough to go “often to Jerusalem for the festivals” to offer required sacrifices (1:6-8). However, he also views almsgiving as an “excellent offering,” one that is able to “[deliver] from death and [keep one] from going into the Darkness” (4:10-11; also 12:9).¹⁷ The sage Ben Sira affirms and reveres practice of the sacrificial system, yet he also warns of its ineffectiveness to atone for the unrepentant unrighteous.¹⁸ The good deeds of the righteous, moreover, are equivalent to offering pleasing sacrifices to the Lord, and as such possess atoning value (Sirach 35:1-5).¹⁹ For him, deeds that especially atone for sin are honoring one’s parents (3:3), almsgiving (3:14-15), forgiveness (28:1-7), fasting (34:31), and

¹⁶ W. O. E. Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha* Oesterley, (London: The Trustees of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1958), 86, notes that apart from the following passages highlighted in Tobit and Ben Sira, “this tendency does not appear further in the books of the Apocrypha, unless it is to be inferred by the silence regarding sacrifices in some of the books.” For the names of these books and passages in I and II Maccabees and II Esdras in which the system is “fully recognized and honoured,” see his list.

¹⁷ George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Tobit,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed., Harold W. Attridge, gen. ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), fn. 4:11: “In a diaspora situation, where Israelites could not engage in sacrificial practices, the atoning value of almsgiving as *an excellent offering* (cf. 12:9; Sir 35.1-2) was especially significant, as it again came to be after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.”

¹⁸ Ben Sira’s affirmations: Sirach 1:1-24; 7:31; 35:1-3, 8-13; his warnings: Sirach 34:21-23 (31:18-19); 35(32):1-5, 14-15. John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1997), 90: “Sirach is quite clear that the problem is not with sacrifice as such but with the abuse of the poor; sacrifice cannot compensate for social injustice.”

¹⁹ Sirach 35:1-5: “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 forsake unrighteousness is an atonement.” Collins, *Jewish Wisdom*, 90: Sira’s point is that “kindness and almsgiving are as effective as sacrifice in pleasing God. . . . a spiritualizing of the cult.” 91: In Sirach, “it is clear that individuals can make atonement, whether by sacrifices or by good works, and can appeal to the mercy of God.”

the event of death (18:22).²⁰ Again, we must remember that since the concept of an afterlife was not yet widespread (indeed, vigorously rebutted by Ben Sira), this atonement has mostly to do with one's status before Yahweh and present deliverance from affliction, poverty, and death. But what we see here is an increasing emphasis upon the efficacy of spiritual sacrifices, as well as the attitudes behind covenantal offerings.²¹

This emphasis upon righteous living later became the sole means for atonement for the sectarian group at Qumran. Since they viewed the Jerusalem temple as irreconcilably polluted, they removed themselves entirely from it and sought to live as the true Israel in the desert.

Membership in their community demanded the practice of

truth and humility in common, and justice and uprightness and charity and modesty in all their ways . . . [circumcising] the foreskin of evil inclination and of stiffness of neck that they may . . . 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.²²

What is interesting is that if the community practiced external acts of righteousness with an internal spirit of repentance (notice the union of these two poles), they would atone not only for

²⁰ Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, 92: "This belief in death being an atonement for sins meets us elsewhere in Jewish literature, e.g. in *Sifre 33a* (a very early *Midrash* on *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*) it is said: 'All who die are reconciled thereby.' It may also be added that in the Jewish liturgy in the service of 'Confession on a deathbed,' it is said: 'O may my death be an atonement for all my sins, iniquities, and transgressions of which I have been guilty against thee.' Ephraim E. Urbach in *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Israel Abrahams, trans. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 431-435, quotes rabbinic writings after the second destruction of the Temple, in which repentance, the Day of Atonement, and death each purge one third of one's sin, and fasting and "acts of lovingkindness" also provided atonement. These concessions, however, were only reinstated after "a sense of despair and the feeling that Israel had been deprived of the possibility of atonement prevailed" (434). Thus, Jewish reaction to both destructions of the Temple are similar, and the latter response takes up and builds on the former.

²¹ Daly, "The Power of Sacrifice," 187-189; his four phases of this "spiritualization of sacrifice" trend within Judaism is enlightening. Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, 85, 90: "no book in the Apocrypha, other than *Ecclesiasticus*, contains definite utterances on the subject [of atonement for sin]. The teaching of Ben-Sira may be briefly summarized thus: Like every orthodox Jew he recognized the atoning efficacy of sacrifices But what is specially noteworthy in Ben-Sira is his emphasis on the right spirit in offering sacrifices and their uselessness if offered otherwise. . . . Sacrifices, if rightly offered, are, according to Ben-Sira, the chief means of atoning for Sin; [though] there are others."

²² *Rule of the Community* [1QS] 5.6 and 9.4-5. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, 90: "In the Qumran Community Rule, righteousness serves as a substitute for the cult."

themselves, but *for the land of Israel*—a theology of vicarious atonement. Of special note are the twelve elders and three priests in 1QS 8.3-4, who, through their knowledge of the Law, works of righteousness, and attitudes of meekness would “atone for sin by the practice of justice and by *suffering the sorrows of affliction*”—a possible allusion to Isaiah 53, and a rare example of the role of suffering in atonement.²³ Here was the hope that a righteous community practicing both acts of obedience and attitudes of repentance could, apart from the sacrificial system, provide atonement for themselves and, by extension, purify the polluted land of Israel.

While we find in these Second Temple documents that right acts and attitudes are possible means for atonement, nothing even hints at vicarious atonement being effected by the blood of righteous humans, as found in *4 Maccabees*. To offer an explanation of the later manifestation of this theology, we must turn outside of Judaism and explore the influence of Hellenistic views on heroic death and the atoning power of martyrdom.

Hellenistic Influences on Vicarious Atonement

Before the Greek conquest, “the glorification or even the superhuman transfiguration of the martyr is completely alien to the Old Testament. It simply does not occur in ancient Israel.”²⁴ This was due to the theistic-centered theology of Israel, in which God alone must receive all honor, and due to the Semitic perspective of death as something to be feared and avoided.²⁵ But in the humanistic culture of Hellenism, heroic warriors who died defending their city or country had

²³ *Rule of the Community* [1QS] 8.3-4 (emphasis mine).

²⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 6-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

been according the highest honor, by both humans and gods, since the time of Homer.²⁶ After the iconic suicide of Socrates, this included philosophers who died for their beliefs, initiating the concept of martyrdom.²⁷ During the Jewish resistance to Hellenism under the Seleucids, this philosophy of martyrdom was, ironically, taken up to honor those who voluntarily died defending the Jewish religion and state.²⁸

Not only was the concept of the heroic martyr adopted from Greek culture, but so was the belief that martyrdom could effect some form of atonement for the nation. The ancient practice of human sacrifice developed into the Greek ritual of *pharmakos*, in which a citizen was selected to be sacrificed (literally or metaphorically) as a scapegoat to purify the city (such as from plague) and ensure its continuing success.²⁹ Greek mythology included numerous figures who voluntarily gave their lives to appease the gods and obtain their favor for others, whether individual, civic, or national.³⁰ The effect of sacrificial, atoning death of humans blended with that of noble death on

²⁶ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 10.

²⁷ Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament: the making of the Christian myth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 80: “The shift from warrior to teacher enhanced the significance of the noble death by turning the person who died nobly into a martyr for a cause. . . . And so it was that martyrdom came to represent the ultimate test of virtue, and obedience unto death the ultimate display of one’s strength of character.”

²⁸ Adela Yarbro Collins, “From Noble Death to Crucified Messiah,” *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 483.

²⁹ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 19; ben Ezra, Daniel Stokl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple to the Fifth Century*, WUNT I:163 (Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 171.

³⁰ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 19-20: “By his voluntary sacrifice, Menoeceus atones for the ancient blood-guilt of Oedipus; the sacrifice of Iphigenia reconciles angry Artemis and opens up the way for the sack of Troy; the sacrifice of Polyxena appeases the spirit of Achilles and thus guarantees the safety of the victors’ return; King Erechtheus is to still the wrath of Poseidon by the sacrifice of a daughter, but instead of one daughter, all three of his daughters [willingly] go to their deaths.” Also, “For the Roman, . . . the victim was conspicuously central and active: the more actively voluntary, the more effective the sacrifice. Sacrifice exalted the victim and rendered him or her divine”—Mark F. Whitters, “Martyrdom as Cultic Death in the Books of Maccabees: Antecedents and Later Developments,” in *Studies in the Greek Bible: Essays in Honor of Francis T. Gignac*, ed. Jeremy Corley and Vincent Skemp, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series* 44 (Washington D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2008), 99.

Second Temple Judaism likely forms the missing link between traditional Jewish texts and the perspective of vicarious atoning martyrdom we find in *4 Maccabees*.

Second Maccabees: The Turning Point

The historical book of 2 Maccabees hints at this humanistic, Hellenistic influence and developing theology of martyrdom, and becomes the primary source for *4 Maccabees*. Stories of noble deaths displaying Greek motifs are to be found throughout the book,³¹ but the martyrdom of the seven sons is our focus here. Their story is situated in the events of 168-165 B.C., in which Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in an attempt to force Hellenism on Palestine, outlawed the practice of Judaism. While some Jews encouraged this change, those who resisted were persecuted. This caused a crisis in regard to atonement:

The temple sacrifices have been discontinued and so there is no way to bring about reconciliation with God, while the cult needs to be re-started in a new way. There is need for some kind of new and alternative atoning process, and the Maccabean martyrs serve as a symbol and mechanism of change.³²

While each son confesses Israel's sin and his hope in the mercy and vindication by God, the defiant words of the final son deserve special notice:

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 an end to the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation* (7:37-38, emphasis mine).

This speech is widely acknowledged as the turning point in this book, as God accepts this prayer and raises up the Maccabees and grants them success, enabling the national reinstatement of

³¹ Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 304: "In the author's portrait of the mother and her sons, the martyrs die bravely after uttering profound truths of theology and cosmology. In this, the author surely again draws upon the Greek narrative tradition of the depiction of the brave death of the philosopher, a tradition which goes back to Plato's dialogues on the trial and death of Socrates." Collins, "From Noble Death to Crucified Messiah": 501, sees this account as "permeated with the values of the noble death."

³² Whittiers, "Martyrdom as Cultic Death," 106.

Judaism.³³ But what exactly about the deaths of the martyrs moved God to act is not as clear.

Their speeches are possibly influenced by Isaiah 53 and certainly grounded on the hope of Deut 32:36-43, in which Yahweh pledges to “avenge the blood of his servants . . . and make atonement for his land and people” at their most acute moment of desperation.³⁴ Though righteous themselves, the martyrs identify with Israel’s sin that caused this persecution (7:18-19, 32, 38).³⁵ Because of their willingness to die on behalf of the covenant—the ultimate demonstration of faithfulness—they hope to appease God’s wrath and unleash his mercy.³⁶

Though scholars agree on the effectiveness of their deaths, they disagree, however, on the extent that atonement can be viewed here. For some, the martyrs’ righteous deaths provide expiatory, vicarious atonement for the sin of the nation; for others, they were simply part of suffering Israel, and the effect of their deaths was solely the inspiration that led to the Maccabean revolt and eventual reinstatement of Judaism.³⁷ Since atonement is not overtly stated here, caution

³³ David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 275; George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 108; Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 317.

³⁴ Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 293. George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 18-20, believes 2 Macc 7 was constructed with Isaiah 53 in mind.

³⁵ deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 275: “God’s chastisement of the nation is collective rather than individual. The righteous consider themselves to suffer justly (although Antiochus IV does not inflict punishment justly) (7:18-19, 32), even though they themselves have not sinned against God as individuals.”

³⁶ Ibid., “The martyr’s obedience unto death is the turning point of 2 Maccabees, the point of reversal: ‘the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy’ as a result of the martyr’s display of covenant loyalty and their appeal to God to have compassion on the nation (7:38; 8:5).”

³⁷ Those seeing atoning/expiatory value: Daniel J. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 138-149; deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 275. Those who see otherwise: Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 315: “The mother and her sons do not *substitute* for the rest of suffering Israel. They are part of suffering Israel and hope that their deaths will mark the turning point prophesied by Moses. . . . There is therefore nothing in our passage of the doctrine of vicarious atonement.” Williams, *Jesus’ Death as Saving Event*, 80-90, views the martyrs as only “*representatives* of all steadfast Jews who suffered torture and death under Antiochus”; their deaths are only effective as motivating examples. David A. deSilva, in “The Noble Contest: Honor, Shame, and the Rhetorical Strategy of 4 Maccabees, JSP 13 (1995): 43, fn. 26, notes that David Seeley (*The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul’s Concept of Salvation* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990], 93-94) argued, “It is in fact the mimetic process which led to the martyrs’ victory over Antiochus: ‘the martyrs becomes the ‘cause of the downfall of tyranny’ precisely because ‘all people’ marvel at their ‘courage and endurance’.” However, this ignores the

must be used in viewing 2 Maccabees from the broad theology of vicarious atonement found in later, especially Christian, times. Yet, enough hints can be found to suggest the author does have some form of national atonement in mind when he describes the martyrs' deaths.³⁸ These hints—that the martyrs' own hope that their deaths would complete Israel's suffering for her sin and appease God's wrath, enabling his rescue of Israel—bear enough elements of the atoning value of martyrdom to inspire elaboration by the later author of *4 Maccabees*.³⁹

Martyrdom as Vicarious Atonement in *4 Maccabees*

The book of *4 Maccabees* was composed in the first century in a highly Hellenistic style, possibly as a funeral oratory celebrating the Maccabean martyrs.⁴⁰ Since the author's explicit thesis is the superiority of "devout reason" based on loyalty to Torah over the passions (a very

interpretation of the atoning value of the martyrs within the book itself—it is on behalf of innocent blood, among other atrocities, that they base their petition to God to show mercy and act (8:2-4).

³⁸ Again, the seventh son acknowledges their role in ending God's wrath upon Israel (7:37-38); after their deaths Judas Maccabeus gathers the faithful to cry out for the Lord to "hearken to the blood that cried out to him" (8:3), immediately after which he meets with success, for "the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy" (8:5). Whitters, "Martyrdom as Cultic Death," 105: "The text does not use the word 'martyr' to describe any of them, yet it is clear that their deaths ultimately benefit their co-religionists. The reader or audience easily interprets their choice to die as self-sacrifice in a cultic sense, too, even though conventional vocabulary is not used."

³⁹ A similar story is found in *Assumption of Moses* 9:6-10:7: In a time of great tribulation, Taxo exhorts his seven sons: "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. And then His kingdom shall appear throughout all His creation." Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80: "The prayer of father and sons suggests that their death had crucial consequences for both Israel and its enemies. . . . The coherence of 9:1-10:10 strongly suggests that Taxo and his sons' death brings about the end of time. Their faithfulness to God's commandments leads to salvation for Israel and eternal punishment for its enemies."

⁴⁰ Paul L. Redditt, "The Concept of *Nomos* in Fourth Maccabees," in *CBQ* 45 (1983): 262-264; David A. deSilva, "The Noble Contest: Honor, Shame, and the Rhetorical Strategy of *4 Maccabees*," in *JSP* 13 (1995): 34: It "belongs to the genre of epideictic, or demonstrative, oratory." Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 174, 186-187: "Its author was a master of the Greek language, with a firm control of its vocabulary and idioms. He uses terms which appear frequently in classical and Hellenistic texts but rarely in the LXX. . . . [He] is also clearly familiar with various popular Platonic and Stoic ideas." 190ff: "In the realm of Greek rhetoric and literature the most highly developed means of honoring the brave dead, while encouraging those who survived them, was the funeral oration," of which *4 Maccabees* has many similarities.

Hellenistic argument with a Jewish twist), his purpose in recounting the martyrs is only to support this thesis.⁴¹ As such, their uncompromised obedience to Torah and steadfast perseverance through ultimate suffering is what provokes his praise and what he desires his audience to emulate.⁴² Since his references to the atoning nature of their sacrifice are secondary and few, care should be taken to avoid extracting more meaning than he intended. But they remain striking, nonetheless.

First, there are a number of significant changes from 2 Maccabees.⁴³ In order to make the martyrs more laudable, the author of *4 Maccabees* elevates the righteousness and innocence of the martyrs by eliminating every identification with Israel's sin from their lips.⁴⁴ This results in their suffering and deaths being wholly vicarious, since they are not suffering for any sin of their own. Second, whether intentionally or due to a faulty memory, Eleazar is here described as a "priest" (5:4), instead of a scribe (2 Macc 6:18)—this highlights the atoning role traditionally carried by priests.⁴⁵ Third, no credit is given to the Hasmoneans for the rescuing of Israel from Antiochus—

⁴¹ Philip R. Davies, "Didactic Stories," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1., D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 130, observes the irony: "Martyrdom, then, is presented here in a guise that Greeks would find familiar. But the Greek character of the 'righteousness' that the book extols and the central identification of reason with Law, are both put to the service of an anti-Hellenistic message, in which Hellenism is presented as the vehicle of religious apostasy. . . . the persistence of *Israel* itself counterbalances the *philosophical* value of martyrdom."

⁴² deSilva, "The Noble Contest," 45-47.

⁴³ Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 166, notes "the question of possible literary dependence on II Maccabees is complex and does not enjoy the honor of scholarly consensus." The two prominent theories are that the author of *4 Maccabees* had access to the now-perished historical work of Jason of Cyrene, from which 2 Maccabees was a condensed version, or 2 Maccabees was the author's sole source, and "all divergences can be adequately explained by the different purpose of the author of IV Maccabees and the different historical circumstances in which he wrote" [Moses Hadas, *The Third and Fourth Book of Maccabees* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 93, quoted in Williams, 166, fn. 1]. While either theory is likely, the majority of differences noted here are likely due to the author's own elaboration and crafting.

⁴⁴ Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 257; Williams, 165. Examples are 2 Macc 7:18: "For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins "against our own God" and 7:22: "For we are suffering because of our own sins." Also of note is the change in the martyrs' hope in bodily resurrection to a more Hellenistic-approved state of immortality.

⁴⁵ This association is made explicit in 7:11-12: "For just as our father Aaron, armed with the censer, ran through the multitude of the people and conquered the fiery angel, so the descendent of Aaron, Eleazar, though being consumed by the fire, remained unmoved in his reason." It is interesting that the conclusion of this sentence does not

the author argues explicitly in 17:20-18:5 that it was instead the atoning and exemplary effect of their deaths.⁴⁶

While these are fairly minor changes, it is the intentional identification of the martyrs with the sacrificial system that make *4 Maccabees* unique. Fire is added to Eleazar's torture, which subliminally identifies him with burnt offerings.⁴⁷ The martyrs are "consecrated for the sake of God" as were the covenantal priests and sacrifices (17:19-20). They are associated several times with Isaac, who was to be sacrificed as a burnt offering (Gen 22:2).⁴⁸ But foremost is the emphasis upon the martyrs' sacrificial blood as providing vicarious atonement for Israel. Moments before death, Eleazar prayed:

You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Be merciful to your people, and *let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs* (6:27-29, emphasis mine).

Here God accepts Eleazar's intercessory petition where Moses was denied. Even more striking is 17:17-22. Because of their martyrdom,

the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated.

match the evidence given to support it—while the author is again attempting to ram home his emphasis on reason, what would be concluded by those of his audience who know the story is rather the atoning role of Aaron. Whitters, "Martyrdom as Cultic Death," 117: "The cultic features of the seven martyrs are easy enough to see and fit into the earlier traditions of self-sacrifice. For one thing, all seven are described as priests."

⁴⁶ Gowan, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 235; Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 171.

⁴⁷ Tobin, Thomas H. "4 Maccabees," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed., Harold W. Attridge, gen. ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 1641, fn 9:22: "The purifying power of fire is a common biblical metaphor, especially in sacrificial contexts (e.g., Lev 1.9, 13; 2.2; 3.5; see also Mal 3.2)." Though most of the tortures are from the rack, it is fire that our author uses to sum up their agony in *4 Macc* 14:9-10 and 15:15.

⁴⁸ *4 Macc* 13:12: "Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion." Tobin (NRSV) and Whitters, 118, fn. 54, list other citations: *4 Macc* 7:14; 14:20; 15:28; 16:20, 25; 17:6; 18:11, 23.

These verses “employ a cluster of cult-related terms.”⁴⁹ “Purification” (καθαρθῆναι) for their land and people also features in 1:11 and 6:29, and possibly alludes to the ashes of the red heifer that provide purification from sin and ceremonial uncleanness in Num 19. A “ransom” (ἀντίψυχον) also in 6:29), meaning “something given in return for sparing one’s life,”⁵⁰ is used in Exod 30:12 for the money to be paid for the life of every Israelite during a census. And “atoning sacrifice” (ἱλαστηρίου) “clearly has cultic overtones, describing the place where the atoning sacrifice of Yom Kippur occurred (e.g., Exod 25:16[17]; Lev 16:2).”⁵¹ The author of *4 Maccabees* appears to be equating the martyrs with the animal sacrifices of the Day of Atonement, as their spilt blood and burned bodies provided atonement and cleansing for defiled Israel and her temple.⁵²

Yet our author is not advocating human sacrifice, for it is not simply their shed blood that provides atonement. What gives their blood atoning value is their enduring, unflinching obedience

⁴⁹ Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*, 2003, 67.

⁵⁰ BDAG 746. It is also used in 1 Eph 21:1; other NT words for “ransom” are λύτρον (Mat 20:28; Mk 10:45) or ἀντιλύτρον (1 Tim 2:6). Green, “Atonement,” 346, notes in Greek literature it “pertains to the ‘price of release’ of a slave or prisoner of war. In the OT, the connection between ‘ransom’ and ‘atonement’ is more straightforward.” As true Israel was essentially a “prisoner of war” under Antiochus, the use here can carry both spiritual and political overtones.

⁵¹ Whitters, “Martyrdom as Cultic Death,” 118: “In the NT it signifies the sacrifice—the death of Jesus (Rom 3:25)—or the place of the atoning sacrifice (Heb 9:5). The precise nature of its cultic function in *4 Macc* 17:22 has been disputed, although there is no dispute that the public cult is central to its meaning.” BDAG 3706: “In Greek-Roman literature that which serves as an instrument for regaining the goodwill of a deity; concr. a ‘means of propitiation or expiation, gift to procure expiation.’” As a means of expiation, “the unique feature relative to Gr-Rom. usage is the initiative taken by God to effect removal of impediments to a relationship with God’s self”; as the place of propitiation, “the LXX uses ἱ. of the lid on the ark of the covenant, ἡψῆς, which was sprinkled with the blood of the sin-offering on the Day of Atonement.” Found also in Exod 25:16ff; Ezek 43:14, 17, 20; Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5.

⁵² On the Day of Atonement, a goat was sacrificed as a sin offering and its blood sprinkled on the atonement cover to “make atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel,” as well as the “Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites” (Lev 16:16-17). The goat was later burned, and this annual atonement cleansed (καθαρίζω) Israel from all her sins (Lev 16:30). *4 Maccabees* follows 2 Maccabees in noting the sin of the Hellenistic Jews who abolished the temple service, violated the law, and brought on divine wrath (*4 Macc* 4:19-21), though he downplays 2 Maccabees’ emphasis on the martyrs’ deaths for sin as he is more concerned about highlighting their reason as enabling them to hold steadfastly to the law despite torture. Davies, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 130: “Whether the word ἱλαστηρίου is used here in a precise, technical sense, as indicating an acknowledged instrument of propitiation, or somewhat more poetically (especially in 6:28-29) to suggest that divine pity on Israel might be provoked by the sight of innocent suffering, is difficult to know.” He prefers the latter alternative.

to the law.⁵³ It was their endurance that conquered the tyrant and purified the land.⁵⁴ And it was their supreme act of obedience to the law that shielded it (7:7-9) and made their sacrifice effective by its reinstatement.⁵⁵ This follows the trends in Second Temple literature to endow acts of obedience with efficacious power. The emphasis upon their exemplary, noble deaths for the sake of reason to achieve eternal glory also exhibits the Hellenistic influences highlighted above.⁵⁶

Though he uses the martyrs primarily for exemplary purposes, our author clearly held the position that their blood provided vicarious atonement on behalf of their nation.⁵⁷ Unlike in biblical times, the God of Israel here fully accepts their petitions and voluntary human sacrifice because of their unshaken fidelity, and is moved to act on their behalf.

Once this thesis is established, it is necessary to temper it, here by taking into account the criticisms of Williams in *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*. Apart from the few verses mentioned above, the martyrs in this version have little concern with providing atonement for their nation—their purpose is to “endure such agonies for the sake of religion” (16:17), to remain faithful to the law (particularly the food laws) to the end and by doing so being an example to fellow Jews

⁵³ Redditt, “The Concept of *Nomos* in Fourth Maccabees,” 373: It is not simply ‘blood’ or ‘a death’ but specifically the obedience shown in the death of the righteous person out of loyalty to God that moves God to accept and deliver God’s people.” Also Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*, 66, and Gowan, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 235: “The concept of vicarious suffering did not become widely accepted in Judaism, as it did in Christianity, so this book adds a relatively unusual positive reason for obedience to the law.”

⁵⁴ *4 Macc* 1:11; see also 7:7-9, 9:24 and 17:10.

⁵⁵ deSilva, *Introduction to the Apocrypha*, 373: “Most intriguing is the linking of a martyr’s absolute obedience with the efficacy of the ransom.” Redditt, “The Concept of *Nomos* in Fourth Maccabees”: 261: “fidelity to the *nomos/philosophia* would result in earthly expiation for his own people (6:27-29; see also 1:11; 17:20-22) and his own heavenly reward (5:37; see also 17:17-19; 18:23).”

⁵⁶ Philip R. Davies, “Didactic Stories,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1., D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 128, 129: It “reflects a good deal of Greek philosophy, both Stoic and Platonic.” The “righteousness” exemplified by them is also “closer to the Stoic ideals of ἀντάρκεια and ἀπαθεία.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 130, cautions: “To speak of 4 Maccabees presenting a doctrine of atonement through martyrdom is not incorrect, but is somewhat exaggerated. For the author, martyrdom is efficacious mainly in other ways.”

(particularly those of author's own audience) and attain immortality.⁵⁸ Atonement here is not individual but national,⁵⁹ and likely less spiritual than political—the effect of their deaths was to bring an end to tyranny by thwarting Antiochus's designs and enabling the reestablishment of the Jewish religion.⁶⁰ This is shown in the author's own summary:

Those who gave over their bodies in suffering for the sake of religion were not only admired by mortals, 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. The tyrant Antiochus was punished. . . . Since in no way whatever was he able to compel the Israelites to become pagans and to abandon their ancestral customs, he left Jerusalem (18:3-5).⁶¹

⁵⁸ Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 167, notes the "sheer frequency" with which terms of "endurance" (ὑπομονή and ὑπομένειν) appear. He lists a minimum of 15 occurrences, not including other equivalent terms. Clearly this is of highest importance to the author of 4 Maccabees. He also lists the places in 4 Maccabees where exemplary effect of their endurance is emphasized (5:33-36; 6:18-21; 7:9; 16:16), and their hope in immortality (7:19; 9:8, 22; 10:15; 13:17; 14:5-6; 15:3; 16:25; 17:5, 12, 18; 18:3, 23). For musings on the situation of the audience of 4 Maccabees, particularly regarding obedience to dietary laws, see Reditt, "The Concept of *Nomos* in Fourth Maccabees," 266.

⁵⁹ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 273: "the most natural meaning of the phrase 'the forgiveness of sins' to a first-century Jew is not in the first instance the remission of *individual* sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins. And, since the exile was the punishment for those sins, the only sure sign that the sins had been forgiven would be the clear and certain liberation from exile."

⁶⁰ See 11:24-25: "We six boys have paralyzed your tyranny. Since you have not been able to persuade us to change our mind or to force us to eat defiling foods, is not this your downfall? . . . For it is not the guards of the tyrant but those of the divine law that are set over us; therefore, unconquered, we hold fast to reason"; also 17:2, 20-22; and especially 18:4-5.

⁶¹ Williams, 176, does not view 4 Maccabees as affirming a "doctrine of expiatory death." For support he lists 1:11, in which conquering the tyrant and purifying the land "refer to the same historical event," and 17:21a, in which Antiochus' departure was not resulting from their blood, but their endurance. For him, the effect of their deaths was entirely exemplary and political: "the deaths were effective and beneficial for the nation in that Antiochus departed. . . . 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. The sin of apostasy is thought of as that which defiles the land. . . . According to the author, the deaths of the martyrs were instrumental in removing that defilement: the army of Antiochus on the one hand, the apostasy of the Jews on the other. Only in this sense can one speak at all about ideas of expiatory death in IV Maccabees, much less about a 'doctrine.' I find it more appropriate by far to speak of 'effective death' in IV Maccabees" (178-179).

Because *4 Maccabees* was likely a commemoration oratory, its sentimental hyperbole could mean the theology of atonement portrayed in this book had less to do with an existing Jewish tradition than with Greek oratory lauding heroic martyrs,⁶² and so was more metaphorical than literal.⁶³

While these points that Williams makes are valid, I believe they do not completely exclude a theology of vicarious atonement from *4 Maccabees*. The parallels with the sacrificial system and the thread of spiritualized atonement in Second Temple literature are too strong to ignore. I conclude that the author did believe, even to a minor extent, that the martyrs' deaths had some sort of expiatory, atoning value for his nation. And to me, the final proof that this was not an anomaly in the first century was the manner in which the earliest Christians understood Jesus' death as providing vicarious atonement for sin.

Jesus' Death as Vicarious Atonement

Within less than twenty years after Jesus' crucifixion, his disciples were expounding fully-developed theologies (plural because of the variety of ways in which they explained it)⁶⁴ of that act as providing universal atonement for sin. His death is explicitly equated with covenantal

⁶² Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, 188ff, notes remarkable parallels between the death of Eleazar and the suicide of Socrates, as well as other Greek literature (especially tragic poets) dealing with heroic deaths.

⁶³ Ibid., 174-175: "The hypothesis of such an occasion best explains the passages of unrestrained rhetorical display where the martyrs are eulogized with metaphors sometimes set on a universal scale. It is from this perspective of barely restrained encomium that one must consider the author's statements regarding the effect of the martyrs' deaths for the benefit of the nation." Thus to move his hearers he heightens "not only the marvelous aspects of their suffering but also the impact of their death." 179: the use of ὄσπερ in 17:21-22 points to the cultic terms being intended "more in a metaphorical sense than as identification indicators. That is, the author may not be saying that the martyrs are sacrificial victims slain or ransoms paid. Rather: in light of the extraordinary faith in which they offer their lives for the sake of the Law, God accepts that supreme offering as He accepts a perfect sacrifice. . . . their deaths become the means through which God works to purify his people and his land." Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 81, also believes "The language of sacrifice [in *4 Maccabees*] is purely metaphorical ("as it were"), just as the stories of their martyrdom are purely legendary."

⁶⁴ C.M. Tuckett, "Atonement in the NT" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 1, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 518: "The variety of different descriptions of the atonement is due in part to the variety of ways in which the human situation itself is described."

animal sacrifice: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29; cf. 1 Pet 1:19).⁶⁵ His blood provides redemption, forgiveness, and purification “from all sin” (Eph 1:7; 1 John 1:7). Jesus, though blameless and innocent of the charges against him, died vicariously for “the ungodly” as a “sacrifice of atonement” for their sin, saving them from God’s wrath (Heb 2:9; 7:27; below).⁶⁶ The righteousness he provides is “apart from the law” and is received “through faith in his blood” (Rom 3:21-25, 5:6-9; cf. 1 Cor 15:3). Here the leap is made fully from animal sacrifice under the covenantal system to the death of one innocent man justifying many in the eyes of God. It is no longer metaphorical, but literal. It is no longer hinted at, but was—and is—the central tenet of Christianity, right from the beginning. And rather being repulsive to first-century Jews, it was fully intelligible, if not acceptable, to them. The stumbling block for most was not that one man could die for many, but that that man could be a crucified peasant from Galilee.

Though I do not believe there is any interdependence, or even influence, between 4 Maccabees and early Christian ideas and writings (though some parallels with Hebrews are striking),⁶⁷ both reflect an understanding of the alternative doctrines of atonement, based on both Jewish and Hellenistic sources, explored above.⁶⁸ Like the Maccabean martyrs, was an innocent

⁶⁵ Tuckett, “Atonement in the NT” 520: the writer of the book of Hebrews in particular “sees Jesus’ death in terms of the great sacrifice of the Jewish Day of Atonement. . . . Jesus is both the priest and the sacrificial victim so that he offers himself. . . . Jesus’ death inaugurates the new covenant, and hence, Jesus’ death is to be seen as a covenant sacrifice.”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 519: “Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are thus ‘vicarious’ in the sense of achieving something for others by taking their place; but it is not ‘substitutionary’ in the sense that Jesus takes the place of human sinners whilst they go free (or elsewhere): human beings are summoned to *join* Jesus”—and excellent, beautiful observation.

⁶⁷ Dating for 4 Maccabees has been placed anywhere from 20 to 135 CE. Most scholars now seem to favor 20-54 CE, based on internal evidence (*4 Macc* 4:2), and I am comfortable with any period before 70. This falls directly alongside most New Testament letters (especially Pauline). But since it was likely composed in Antioch, I think it unlikely that Christian doctrine would have influenced it, especially as it would have been unacceptable to such a staunch adherent to the Law. If there was any flow of influence, it would more likely have been from *4 Macc* to the Christian literature; this is unlikely, though the many similarities with Hebrews could suggest influence there.

⁶⁸ John C. Lyden, “Atonement in Judaism and Christianity: Toward a Rapprochement,” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29:1 (Winter, 1992): 50-51: It is “probable” that the early Christians were familiar with the belief that “the righteous ones who die for their faith not only cleanse themselves from sin but are also able to intercede with

man who was tortured and died a shameful death by foreign oppressors of Israel. Like them, he died voluntarily, nobly, a righteous person who remained obedient and loyal to God to the end.⁶⁹ And like them, his blood provided atonement for sinners, turning away the wrath of God by nullifying the effects of sin. Like them, he was vindicated, and received praise from humans and eternal glory from God. But unlike the Maccabean martyrs, the atonement gained by his blood is spiritual rather than political, and universal rather than national,⁷⁰ because he was more than an innocent, blameless man, and the event of his death was more than an arbitrary event—it was orchestrated by God for the purpose of spiritual, universal atonement. By allowing the theology of atonement to pass from Sinai, away from the Temple, and through Hellenistic philosophy, the death of Jesus could be understood as it was meant to be by both Jews and Greeks. And only when transformed by the empty tomb could it truly be vicarious, effective, *divine* atonement.

God on behalf of all Israel. . . . their lives are a sacrifice for the sins of others. . . . The belief in the atoning power of Jesus' death, then, is not discordant with Judaism, for it evolved out of a Jewish understanding of martyrdom as a form of representative atonement." The canonical gospels also exhibit features of Jewish and Hellenistic martyrologies (Whitters, "Martyrdom as Cultic Death," 112-113).

⁶⁹ Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., "Fourth Maccabees," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 665: "NT reflection on Jesus' death shares with 4 Maccabees an emphasis not on blood itself as atoning but on the blood of a specifically righteous person who remains loyal to God, which moves the Deity to accept and deliver God's people (4 Macc 17:21-22; Heb 10:4-10)." Also deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 373.

⁷⁰ John C. Lyden, "Atonement in Judaism and Christianity: Toward a Rapprochement," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29:1 (Winter, 1992): 51: "two crucial differences . . . separated the early Christian conception of atonement from the ideas of other Jews: it made the death of one individual *the* central act of atonement, and it made this atonement *universal* in scope."

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