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*Seeking the Favor of God, Volume 2: The Development of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*

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The present volume is the second in a planned series of three that came out of the Consultation Group on Penitential Prayer that met between 2003 and 2005 at SBL’s Annual Meetings. The volume opens with a review of research (1–15) by Eileen Schuller, who also provides the Afterword (227–37) in which she revisits the ten individual papers, looks at how they have addressed the objective of the Consultation, and indicates directions for future research. Volume 1 dealt with the origins of penitential prayer within the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, and volume 2 moves to developments. Thus, whereas the focus of the earlier volume was limited to the canonical biblical books up to the Persian Period, the present one moves into the wider area of Second Temple literature, addressing the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In that light, it seems perhaps somewhat odd that two essays in the present volume are dedicated to Dan 9, despite the fact that it is now widely acknowledged that the paradigmatic penitential prayers are formed by Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 1:5–11; 9:6–37; and Dan 9:14–19. The question that comes to mind is therefore: Is Dan 9 thought to be an “origin text,” which would properly belong in volume 1, or does it constitute a development? In any case, the decision to include Daniel in this second volume is indicative of the somewhat ambivalent position of the book of Daniel as a bridge between the Hebrew Bible and the texts from a later period and cultural environment, a fact Eileen Schuller duly notes (228).
The first two papers deal with new methodologies for understanding Dan 9. The first, by Rodney Werline, “Prayer, Politics, and Social Vision in Daniel 9” (17–32), looks at this text through the lens of social-scientific approaches, that is, anthropology, sociology, and ritual, purposefully moving away from the tested literary approaches of form, redaction, tradition, and canonical criticism. Although the latter approaches have been helpful in delineating the form and content of these prayers, they have been less useful in bringing to the fore the dynamic role of these prayers for those who actually participated in their ritual. Werline brings the work of ritual theorists Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Catherine Bell to bear on this text, to show “the prayers as a dynamic element in the actual lives, the lived experience, of people” (19) and reveal power relations within society and identify groups that had been either marginalized or reduced to a state of liminality (using Turner’s term). Daniel 9 is an especially fertile text to test these new theories, as it “displays clearly identifiable attitudes toward history, the people, the rulers, the temple, the cult, and the calendar” (18). The methods chosen by Werline allow him to go beyond the narrative fiction of the prayer and to delve into the reality of the author’s group, a reality that was threatened by the policies of Antiochus IV. The group that is behind Dan 9’s author(s) is that of the *maskilim*. Another important conclusion that Werline derives from the application of the social-scientific approach is that the traditionally recognized dissonance in the prayer between apocalyptic determinism and Deuteronomistic covenantal theology need not be in conflict. “Religious people have the ability to hold to several concepts and practices that may be in tension with one another or even in contradiction with one another.” Thus the *maskilim*’s identity is informed by the apocalyptic tradition, whereas the covenantal traditions place the group within “a broader stream of Jewish tradition and temple practice” (31).

In “Daniel 9: A Penitential Prayer in Apocalyptic Garb” (33-49), Pieter M. Venter subjects this prayer to yet another recent approach, critical spatiality, as developed by Edward W. Soja based on the theories of Henri Lefebvre. This approach applies to social and narrative constructs the trialectic of perceived space or Firstspace, conceived space or Secondspace, and lived space or Thirdspace. This distinction enables the researcher to cull from it the power relations and players in the political field described in that narrative. This is particularly fruitful for apocalyptic and related texts that are strongly informed by such relationships, since they play out not only on earth and in the present but transcend space and time to include the heavenly sphere of the divine habitat as well. An important function of Soja’s trialectic is a refocusing on the spatial aspect within the ontological trialectic that comprises the historical, social, and spatial contexts of society (46). Applying this approach to texts facilitates the highlighting of the sociohistorical contexts of a narrative by focusing on its spatial markers, such as the temple and the city in the case of Dan 9. It is, furthermore, very helpful in unraveling the various strands of
narratives such as Daniel in which historical and narrative time have become so much intertwined.

Michael H. Floyd’s “Penitential Prayer in the Second Temple Period from the Perspective of Baruch” (51–82) is the first of three papers covering the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Some of the points he raises are the likely placing of the prayer in 1 Baruch in a proto-synagogue setting where it may actually have been recited in local assemblies in conjunction with the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem temple (55); the strong focus on the Jeremianic notion of accepting exile and Babylonian overlordship, failure of which acceptance had resulted in the exile in the first place (68); and seeing the radical idea of praying for the welfare of Nebuchadnezzar and his son (1:11) as possibly intercessory prayer (55).

In “The Use of Female Imagery and Lamentation in the Book of Judith: Penitential Prayer or Petition for Obligatory Action?” (83–104), LeAnn Snow Flesher tackles an unusual text, and the answer to the title question leads her to conclude that it is not really a penitential prayer. However, some of the components and historical ambiguities are instructive with regard to the genre. She places it in the context of the canonical lament or complaint psalms. When the people of Judea are threatened by Nebuchadnezzar’s forces because they were not compliant during their exile, the town elders of Bethulia raise what may be called the classical arguments of penitential prayer (88–89)! Judith strongly contests this attitude and responds with a complaint text in which she pleads the people’s innocence to God and enumerates his previous acts of kindness to his chosen people. Flesher specifies the components of both penitential and lament/complaint texts (84), which turn out to fit the elders’ and Judith’s responses respectively. The noticeable contrast between the whimpering elders and valiant Judith almost creates a picture of an un- or antipenitential prayer. This essay demonstrates clearly that the lament genre, which is generally considered an older form, had not gone out of vogue in the Second Temple period.

In “The Form and Settings of the Prayer of Manasseh” (105–26), Judith H. Newman seeks to identify the genre of the Prayer of Manasseh. In order to fit the prayer within the generally corporate or communal aspects of penitential prayer, she broadens the scope from the generally corporate to include the individual aspects of penitential prayer and analyzes the Prayer of Manasseh in light of Ps 51, likewise a pseudepigraphon and individual prayer of penitence (117). A unique aspect of the Prayer of Manasseh that sets it apart from other penitential prayer is the absence in it of any reference to transgenerational sin and punishment (113, 116)—the patriarchs are wholly righteous—a matter that generates questions as to who may have generated this text. Another element that stands out is its superscription ascribing this pseudepigraphic text to Manasseh, king of Judah (118–19). Inquiring as to the identity of the “I” in this prayer (as well as in
various canonical psalms) has also led to important suggestions, such as the possibility that the “I” stands for a group or even for the collective of Israel (119–20). This identification would blur the boundary between specific individual and corporate penitential prayer. Although it would fit within the general parameters set for the genre of penitential prayer, questions as to its possible liturgical setting as well as to the identity of those to whom it refers or those who generated it remain unanswered. In this sense, this “orphan” among the penitential prayers (124) does not contribute significantly to a better understanding of the genre, especially that of institutionalized prayer, and more work is needed (125).

The last set of papers deals with the Dead Sea Scrolls. In “Scriptural Inspiration for Penitential Prayer in the Dead Sea Scrolls” (127–58), Daniel K. Falk asks whether communal penitential prayer as it emerges from the Dead Sea Scrolls served as a substitution for sacrifice or was seen as complementary to the cult. In exploring which scriptural traditions form the basis of these prayers, two “motif clusters” are distinguished. The first is the Deuteronomistic motif of sin-exile-restoration, which is realized by the people’s sincere repentance. Disappointment in the quality of the restoration and the resulting sense of a prolonged exile created the need for a continued and regulated penitential liturgy. This motivation need not be understood as a replacement of sacrifice. The second motif cluster comes from the Priestly and Holiness tradition, and here we find the basis for the cultic context of confession. As is already clear from the earlier innerbiblical developments and immediately beyond, penitential prayer had a clear place within an active temple cult and was strongly aligned with it. Therefore, under conditions when no temple was available, this link was not severed but rather deferred. The Dead Sea Scrolls in particular allow us a peek into this development, albeit a fragmentary one. The prayers found within the Qumran corpus are a unique example of the emerging early liturgy of the Second Temple period, in contrast to all other evidence from the same period that is found in literary texts, the concrete settings of which can only be guessed at. Furthermore, the scrolls represent the earliest case of the “practice of daily communal penitential prayer” (127). Although the atoning function of penitential prayer in conjunction with a fixed periodic recitation makes it seem likely that they were intended as a substitution for sacrifice, this is not necessarily the case (130). Falk also looks at other motifs, especially the confession of sin in relation to sacrifice (132). He first considers the scriptural evidence that forms the basis of the Qumran prayers and then how the scriptural material is used in these prayers. These are the covenantal Deuteronomic sin-exile-restoration cluster (133–34) and the “cultic confession motifs of the Priestly and Holiness tradition (134–36).

Russell C. D. Arnold’s essay, “Repentance and the Qumran Covenant Ceremony” (159–76) explores the extent to which repentance contributed to identity formation for the
Qumran community and especially how it functioned within the community’s covenant ceremony as laid down in the Rule of the Community (1QS). He notes that the penitence ceremony functions as an initiation rite for new members, as well as a yearly reconfirmation for those already inside. There is, thus, little to connect it to the liturgical aspect of penitential prayer that we know from other sources. It connotes, rather, a lifestyle that is essential for participation as a full member of the community. The passage of 1QS 1:16–2:1, which contains an initiation ceremony and a confession (1:24–26), forms the central point of focus in this essay. Since it lacks other elements that are thought to be essential to typical penitential texts, it has been suggested that perhaps this text belongs to a new genre, especially since the sociological context seems to indicate this as well (168). Although it may lie beyond the scope of this essay, it should not go unnoticed that this text displays an almost uncanny resemblance to the traditional confession (Vidduy) of the Yom Kippur service. (In fact, Rodney Werline, too, briefly refers to an association with the Day of Atonement on 221.) The wording of this part of the liturgy is to some extent almost certainly informed by such biblical passages as Ps 106:6; 1 Kgs 8:47; and Dan 9:5, all penitential-style prayers. It is therefore not unlikely that these passages also formed the basis of 1QS 1:24–26. It should then also be asked how the nature of such clearly penitential prayer texts was transformed while at the same time their particular formulation was retained in the new context. The answer is sought in the extremely deterministic disposition of the community according to which, first, penitence would not yield forgiveness and restoration, since all was predetermined anyway. Second, penitence would have become obsolete, since the full members of the community lived a life without sin. The yearly ceremony would then simply be a reconfirmation of this fact. While this may indeed explain a very novel application of penitential texts, questions concerning the timing of the ceremony with respect to Yom Kippur, and the function of the priestly blessing immediately following the confession in light of the deterministic worldview of the community, still remain to be answered. One attempt in this direction may be found in Jože Krašovec’s “Sources of Confession of Sin in 1QS 1:24–26 and CD 20:28–30,” in The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after Their Discovery: Proceedings of the Jerusalem Congress, July 1997 (ed. L. H. Schiffman, E. Tov, and J. C. VanderKam; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society; Israel Museum, 2000), 306–21.

In “The Words of the Luminaries and Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Times” (177–86), Esther G. Chazon focuses on one specific text from Qumran that displays a shift from an occasional (or “habitual,” as Chazon calls it) or fixed annual application of penitential prayer toward a daily penitential liturgy. The graph (179–80) showing how the various elements of penitential prayer are distributed over the prayers to be said over the various days of the week is particularly helpful and could actually be used to chart and assess other penitential prayers as well. In addition to creating a daily liturgy, these prayers are
innovative as well in the way they are made to conform to the mindset of the community, by adding sapiential and instructional elements that are not normally part of the classical penitential prayer.

Bilhah Nitzan explores to what extent the distribution of traditional penitential elements and the inclusion of new ones contribute to an understanding of a sectarian or nonsectarian origin of prayer texts from Qumran in “Traditional and Atypical Motifs in Penitential Prayers from Qumran” (187–208).

In “Reflections on Penitential Prayer: Definition and Form” (209–26), Rodney A. Werline revisits his earlier definition: “penitential prayer is a direct address to God in which an individual or a group, or an individual on behalf of a group confesses sins and petitions for forgiveness as an act of repentance.” He looks here specifically at the prayer texts that were introduced in this volume, expanding the number of penitential prayers that operate at the margin of what was established as the basic genre.

One of the many issues that the essays in this volume demonstrate is the notion that penitential prayer as a strict category (as any “pure form,” for that matter) is hard to pinpoint and is in constant flux. This is why Rodney Werline’s definition works so well as a starting point for the grouping and subgrouping of particular prayer texts and other texts dealing with penitential matters. The psychological need for penitence varies depending on historical and societal contexts, and so do the ways to address it. Therefore, the texts that reflect this need, as well as the necessary acts that go with it, also display a remarkable adaptability to the various conditions that gave rise to them. At the same time, the notion that these texts represent acts of penitence that were in fact practiced gives rise to the need to analyze them beyond their literary form and to move into the realm of anthropology, sociology, ritual, and spatial analysis. This too is eminently addressed in this volume. The examples of penitential prayer discussed by the contributors display the rich and diverse roads that the literary product now captured under the rubric of penitential prayer traveled in Second Temple Judaism.