

The Testament of Abraham:

What Is Its Message? How Has It Been (Mis)Used? What Can We Learn?

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Preface

The study and discussion of the literature of Second Temple Judaism has grown popular in recent years. With this increased interest has grown a corresponding number of attempts to dredge through this literature and cull together material that can be employed in current polemics, especially those swirling around the so-called “new perspective on Paul.” Several critics of the new perspective recently have set out to illustrate how some of the literature of Second Temple Judaism betrays not the gracefulness of Ed Sanders’s covenantal nomism¹ but all the telltale signs of “Judaic legalism.”

Both my studies at the University of Durham, as well as my own investment in the current discussions (they’re called “debates” if you don’t approach the dialog with constructive hopes, a vice far too easily adopted) rumbling throughout conservative American Presbyterianism have drawn me into an investigation of this literature. I’ve been a bit reluctant, wondering what the value would be. I tend to think that the proof is in biblical exegesis. Even so, the employment of material from Second Temple Judaism is close at hand, illustrating Paul’s continuity or contrast with other Jewish traditions of his own day.

It is in this light that I would like to discuss a sample of the literature from Second Temple Judaism, the *Testament of Abraham*. While many questions surround this text – some of which probably are unanswerable with any great degree of confidence (e.g., authorship, date of original composition or final form(s), the history of editorial activity) because of the paucity of relevant data – my discussion will neither presuppose, nor be dependent upon, any particular answers to these questions. Nevertheless, readers should know that the *Testament of Abraham* likely was composed sometime between the first century B.C. and the end of the first century A.D. While many scholars prefer a post-70 A.D. dating for the work, I can find nothing in the work compelling such a judgment (e.g., any residue regarding the collapse of the temple in 70 A.D.).

The translation I use is that of E.P. Sanders from *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed., James H. Charlesworth, 1:872-902 (hereafter *OTP*).² Parenthetical remarks within quotations from this translation are original with the translator; comments I add will be encased in brackets. My division of the work into two sections is for heuristic purposes and remains tentative: I have divided the work into two parts wherein the first part pertains to Abraham’s situation on earth (chapters 1-9), prior to his world tour; the second part includes his chariot ride, his witness of the heavenly judgments, and the subsequent events (chapters 10-20). The subheadings are provided merely as an aid to mapping out the plotline of the work.

I offer the following as neither conclusive nor final, but as a preliminary investigation of a particular piece of literature arising from Second Temple Judaism, as well as an investigation into how this work has been misused in the contemporary debate over “the new perspective on Paul.” It should also be noted that while I do engage two specific critics of the new perspective, I did not originally approach the *Testament of Abraham* with this in mind. Rather, from a large

¹ See Sander’s watershed volume, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977).

² Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983.

body of literature I arbitrarily selected a piece that I wanted to understand. It was only *after* my study of the *Testament of Abraham* that I turned to several books on my shelf, books interacting with this body of literature, to see how the authors understood and employed the work. My findings proved enlightening.

The Testament of Abraham: What Is Its Message?

There are two major recensions of the *Testament of Abraham*, commonly known as “A” and “B.” They differ both in terms of narrative chronology and length. Most scholars judge recension A as retaining the more authentic contents and chronology, though B may retain the more original wording.³ Here I am most concerned with the narrative of recension A. For the sake of familiarity with the *Testament of Abraham*, I provide the following (rather lengthy) summary.⁴

Part 1: Reticent Revelations and Righteous Refusals

Michael Commissioned. The *Testament of Abraham* begins with a bit of hagiography wherein Abraham is described as having “lived in quietness, gentleness, and righteousness,” as well as being “very hospitable” (1:1). His hospitality extended to “everyone – rich and poor, kings and rulers, the crippled and the helpless, friends and strangers, neighbors and passersby” (1:2; note that the diversity of stations in life presented here does not extend to moral categories such as “righteous” and “wicked”; later in the narrative we witness Abraham’s aggressive response to “sinners” [10:1-11]). Indeed, Abraham is described as being “pious, entirely holy, righteous, and hospitable” (1:2; also 4:6). “But above all others he is righteous in all goodness, (having been) hospitable and loving until the end of his life” (1:5b). It is in this light that Michael the Archangel is to inform God’s “friend” (1:6; also 2:3, 6; 16:5, 9) of his impending death, thus being granted the opportunity to make a testament for the distribution of his possessions (1:4-7).

Michael’s First Attempt. Michael approaches Abraham in a field near “the oak of Mamre” (2:1) and enjoys Abraham’s characteristically hospitable reception, “just as was his custom to greet and welcome all strangers” (2:2). Even though Michael appears as a soldier, Abraham is notably taken with his beauty and youthfulness (2:5-6; also 4:3). Michael proceeds vaguely to explain from whence he has come (“the great city”) and by whom he was sent (“the great king”) and why he was sent (“to provide for the succession of a true friend of his, for the king summons him”; 2:6). As the two walk together a tree cries out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God who is summoning him to those who love him” (3:3). Abraham’s response is to hide “the mystery, thinking that the Commander-in-chief had not heard the voice of the tree” (3:4).

Though Michael has been commissioned to inform Abraham of his impending death, not only has he been vague thus far, here he fails to take the opportunity to interpret the message voiced by the tree. His reluctance to reveal his identity, purpose and message recurs throughout the first part of the book. Upon their arrival at Abraham’s home two additional witnesses arise: Isaac immediately recognizes Michael as a heavenly being (3:5-6); and Michael’s tears transform into precious stones upon falling into the water basin Abraham is using while washing Michael’s feet (3:11). As with the speaking tree, here we read that Abraham pockets the precious stones

³ Sanders, *OTP*, 872.

⁴ More could be said by way of introduction, but it would be entirely redundant.

and “hid the mystery, keeping it in his heart alone” (3:12; cf., 6:6; Luke 2:19, 51). While Michael continues as a reticent messenger, Abraham continues in his blissfully ignorant repertoire of hospitality.

Michael’s Second Attempt. Abraham then has Isaac deck out the guest room so he and Michael may feast. Just after they enter the prepared room Michael excuses himself through a ruse that he may confer with God, explaining his reluctance to be forthcoming with Abraham.

Then the Commander-in-chief rose up and went outside, as if he needed to urinate; and he ascended into heaven in the twinkling of an eye and stood before God and said to him: “Master, Lord, Let your might know that I cannot announce the mention of death to that righteous man, because I have not seen upon earth a man like him – merciful, hospitable, righteous, truthful, God-fearing, refraining from every evil deed. And so now know, Lord, that I cannot announce the mention of death” (4:5-7).

The dilemma of Michael’s inability to be forthright is resolved when God makes Isaac an additional mouthpiece: “And I shall send my holy spirit upon his son Isaac, and he shall thrust the mention of his death into Isaac’s heart, so that he will see his father’s death in a dream. Then Isaac will relate the vision, you will interpret it, and he himself will come to know his end” (4:8). After waking from the dream, Isaac rushes to the room where Abraham and Michael are sleeping and cries out, “Father Abraham, get up and open (the door) immediately for me, so that I can come in and hang on your neck and kiss you before they take you from me” (5:8). After entering, Isaac clings to Abraham and begins loudly to weep. Abraham follows suit, as does Michael. When Sarah hears the chorus of weeping she rushes into the room, inquiring whether Abraham has heard bad news about Lot, even whether Lot might have died (5:11-13). Michael answers Sarah’s inquiry with a bland recounting of the event. Sarah, on the other hand, “immediately realized that the speaker was an angel of the Lord” (6:1).

Sarah’s Insight. Strangely, though Isaac and Sarah have relatively little contact with Michael, they both recognize his extraterrestrial nature. In stark contrast, Abraham persists in ignorance until Sarah calls him outside the room and implies that he has been a bit dim.

Then Sarah beckoned Abraham to come to the door (and step) outside, and she said to him, “My lord Abraham, do you know who this man is?” Abraham said, “I do not know.” Sarah said, “You must know, my lord, the three heavenly men who stayed as guests in our tent beside the oak of Mamre when you slaughtered the unblemished calf and set a table for them. After the meat had been eaten, the calf got up again and exultantly suckled its mother. Do you not know, my lord Abraham, that they gave us Isaac, the very fruit of my womb, as was promised to us? For this man is one of those three holy men.” Then Abraham said, “O Sarah, you have spoken truly. Glory and blessing from (our) God and Father!” (6:2-6a)

Only now does Abraham put the pieces together, recounting to Sarah how he recognized Michael’s feet, showing Sarah the precious stones that resulted from Michael’s tears. Sarah responds with a wife’s loving embrace, announcing that “a revelation of something is among us, whether it be evil or good” (6:8c).

Isaac's Dream and Michael's Interpretation. Abraham returns and asks Isaac to speak of his dream. Isaac relates a vision of a "light-bearing man" twice descending from heaven, first removing the sun from Isaac (7:4), shortly followed by his return to remove the moon (7:5), taking both into heaven. Isaac pleaded for mercy, that at least the moon might remain; but the heavenly messenger granted only that the rays of each remain (7:6-7). It is at this juncture that Michael finally steps forward and divulges the message with which he was entrusted (though the message has now duplicated to include the announcement of the death of *both* Abraham and Sarah) and identifies himself as Michael the Archangel.⁵

Righteous Abraham's Refusal to Cooperate. At this point we encounter a humorous turn of events. Righteous Abraham responds: "Now I do know that you are an angel of the Lord, and you were sent to take my soul. Nevertheless, I will not by any means follow you, but you do whatever he commands" (7:12). Thus, Michael must do what he must do, though Abraham refuses to be a willing accomplice. This motivates Michael to seek a conference with God for the third time.

Michael's Third Attempt. God hears Michael's complaint and explanation and responds by noting that Michael is to recount a number of blessings that God has bestowed upon Abraham, including leading him into the promised land, blessing him "more than the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven" (note: here the covenant promise regarding prolific offspring has been transmuted into a description of the abundance of Abraham's possessions) and granting Abraham whatever he asks (8:4-7). Then Michael is instructed to ask Abraham why he is resisting the Lord, and why he is so grieved to learn of his impending death, especially given that "all those who (spring) from Adam and Eve die" (8:9). Indeed, neither the prophets nor the fathers escaped death: "all have been gathered by the sickle of Death" (8:9). But righteous Abraham has been granted an exception, for God sent not Death ("I did not ever want any evil to come upon you"; 8:10) but Michael, "for your good comfort" (8:11), with the intention of granting Abraham time to put his house in order and make his testament. The rehearsal of blessings and recounting of exceptional grace lead into a mild rebuke and threat that Michael is to deliver to Abraham (8:12): "And so why did you say to my Commander-in-chief, 'I will not by any means follow you'? Why did you say these things? Do you not know that if I give permission to Death, and he should come to you, then I should see whether you would come or not come?"

Abraham's Final Wish. Once all this is presented to Abraham, his resolve melts away. In a self-deprecating tone he describes himself as "a sinner and your completely worthless servant" (9:3; such language of exaggerated self-deprecation is common within penitential contexts, cf. Ps 51:5), proceeds to acknowledge how he indeed has been favored, concedes that he is not immortal, and makes one final request – a world tour: "While I am yet in this body I wish to see all the inhabited world and all the created things which you established...then, if I depart from life, I shall have no sorrow" (9:6). God grants him this final wish, sending Michael to chauffeur Abraham on a cloud-light chariot.

⁵ We hear nothing further regarding Sarah's impending death in Recension A, but in Recension B we find that while Abraham is away witnessing the judgments and swooping through the earth killing sinners, Sarah dies (12:14-16): "And about the ninth hour Michael returned Abraham to his house. But Sarah, his wife, since she had not seen what had become of Abraham, was consumed with grief and gave up her soul. And after Abraham returned, he found her dead, and he buried her" (OTP 1:901).

Part 2: Unmerciful Judgments and Heavenly Lessons

Merciless Abraham. As Abraham's tour begins he witnesses the numerous rather mundane tasks of farmers, shepherds, travellers; some people are dancing and playing music while others engage in legal trial; other people mourn in death and funeral while still others enjoy nuptial bliss (10:1-3). But the tour turns terrible when Abraham views people engaged in such sins as robbery, intending manslaughter (10:5), sexual immorality (10:8), and breaking and entering (10:10). In righteous indignation Abraham calls forth divine destruction of these sinners: wild beasts consume the first, the earth swallows up the second, and the third are destroyed by fire from heaven. In the wake of Abraham's destructive fling God commands that Michael abort the tour and at once return Abraham to heaven through the first available gate (10:12-15).

And immediately a voice came down from heaven to the Commander-in-chief, speaking thus, "O Michael, Commander-in-chief, command the chariot to stop and turn Abraham away, lest he should see the entire inhabited world. For if he were to see all those who pass their lives in sin, he would destroy everything that exists. For behold, Abraham has not sinned and he has no mercy on sinners.⁶ But I made the world, and I do not want to destroy any one of them; but I delay the death of the sinner until he should convert and live [cf. 2 Pet 3:9]. Now conduct Abraham to the first gate of heaven, so that there he may see the judgments and the recompenses and repent over the souls of the sinners which he destroyed.

This description of Abraham having not sinned is, of course, ironic, especially given the context in which it occurs. Not only has Abraham just unmercifully and prematurely destroyed these sinners, he later repents of this "sinful act" (14:13). At the very least the appellation of sinlessness to Abraham should be read as indicating that Abraham has not sinned *in the ways those he destroyed were sinning*. Thus the appellation is ironic and comparative.

The Two Ways. Upon arriving in heaven Abraham first gazes upon "two ways": "The first way was stra[ight] and narrow and the other broad and spacious," each with corresponding gates (11:2-3). He then sees a man "sitting on a golden throne," alternating between great wailing and hair-pulling when he sees many lead through the broad gate – for "the broad gate is (the gate) of the sinners, which leads to destruction and to eternal punishment" (11:11) – and rejoicing when he sees many entering the straight gate – "because this stra[ight] gate is (the gate) of the righteous, which leads to life, and those who enter through it come into Paradise" (11:10). Abraham inquires about the identity of the man only to find out that he is Adam.⁷ The scene concludes on a pessimistic note regarding human eschatology: "for many are the ones who are destroyed, while few are the ones who are saved. For among seven thousand there is scarcely to be found one saved soul, righteous and undefiled" (11:11d-12).

⁶ Recension B reads, "Then the Lord spoke to Michael, saying, 'Turn Abraham away to his house, and do not let him go round all the creation which I made, because his heart is not moved for sinners, but my heart is moved for sinners, so that they may convert and live and repent of their sins and be saved'" (12:12-13).

⁷ This scene is not one of the heavenly judgments, nor is Adam a judge. Rather this is the foyer leading into the judgments.

Deeds Weighed in a Balance. Next Abraham witnesses the first judgment, one of deeds weighed in a balance. Deeds good and evil are recorded by two angels and the soul is weighed. This is “judgment and recompense” (12:15b). A soul is brought forward, but when the book is opened, “he found its sins and righteous deeds to be equally balanced, and he neither turned it over to the torturers nor (placed it among) those who were being saved, but he set it in the middle” (12:18). Abraham is informed that this judge is Abel, who “sits here to judge the entire creation, examining both righteous and sinners” (13:3a; note the universal scope of this judgment). Then Abraham is informed of the different judgments all humans are to face (13:3b-8):

For God said, “I do not judge you, but every man is judged by man.” On account of this he gave him [Abel] judgment, to judge the world until his [God’s] great and glorious Parousia. And then, righteous Abraham, there will be perfect judgment and recompense, eternal and unalterable, [note: this may imply that the results of the first two judgments may be either temporary or reversible] which no one can question. For every person has sprung from the first-formed, and on account of this they are first judged here by his son [Abel]. And at the second Parousia they will be judged by the twelve tribes of Israel, both every breath and every creature. And, thirdly, they shall be judged by the Master God of all; and then thereafter the fulfillment of that judgment will be near, and fearful will be the sentence and there is none who can release. And thus the judgment and recompense of the world is made through three tribunals. And therefore a matter is not ultimately established by one or two witnesses, but every matter shall be established by three witnesses.

Abraham also learns of the two archangels attending Abel: “the righteous balance-bearer,” Dokieli, and the one who “has authority over fire,” Purouel (13:10-11). Regarding the latter archangel, the one who tests works with fire (13:12-13), “if the fire burns up the work of anyone, immediately the angel of judgment takes him and carries him away to the place of sinners, a most bitter place of punishment.⁸ But if the fire tests the work of anyone and does not touch it, this person is justified and the angel of righteousness takes him and carries him up to be saved in the lot of the righteous.”⁹

Merciful and Repentant Abraham. Abraham’s attention returns to the soul whose good deeds and sins are equally balanced and he finds out that the soul simply must wait here “until the judge of all should come” (14:2; this is a sort of limbo: neither salvation nor punishment). Then Michael reveals to Abraham, “if it could acquire one righteous deed more than (its) sins, it

⁸ Cf., 1 Cor 3:13-15. Is this punishment final or temporary? Is it essentially one or the other? Since some people later are noted to have been punished for a time and then granted life (14:14b-15), this suggests that this judgment is less than ultimate. It is just these sorts of details that are so easily missed by students of this literature.

⁹ One has to wonder about the nature of these judgments. While it is the case that some are punished for a time, and then granted life (14:14b-15), here we read of one being “justified” – in the sense of vindication – and then taken to the abode of the saved. Is the significance of this judgment that those with an abundance of good deeds are ushered directly to salvation, while someone who otherwise has converted, but who lacks the abundance of good deeds, is punished for a time and *then* granted life? These sorts of narrative dynamics make mapping the work’s soteriology difficult, though not impossible.

would enter in to be saved” (14:4).¹⁰ Abraham then implores Michael to join him in praying for the soul. When they arise from their prayer the soul is nowhere to be seen. Then Abraham is informed, “It was saved through your righteous prayer, and behold a light-bearing angel took it and carried it up to Paradise” (14:8). Abraham then praises God’s “boundless mercy” (14:9) and implores Michael again to pray to God “and beg his mercy on behalf of the souls of the sinners whom I previously, being evil-minded, cursed and destroyed... Now I have come to know that I sinned before the Lord our God... let us beseech God with tears that he may forgive me (my) sinful act” (14:11-13). After a time of sustained prayer, God responds (14:14-15),

Abraham, Abraham, I have heeded your voice and your supplication and I forgive you (your) sin; and those whom you think that I destroyed, I have called back, and I have led them into life by my great goodness. For I did punishment them in judgment for a time.¹¹ But those whom I destroy while they are living on the earth, I do not requite in death.¹²

Yet Abraham Still Resists. Immediately after this Abraham is returned to his home that he may put things in order. Sarah, Isaac, and their servants all rejoice at Abraham’s return. But Michael, with a new resolve, quickly reminds Abraham that the end of his life is near and that he should put his house in order. Yet Abraham expresses a rhetoric of suspicion, “Did the Lord say so, or are you saying these things on your own?” (15:8). Even when Michael announces that he indeed has spoken the words of God, recalcitrant Abraham retorts, “I will by no means follow you” (15:10). Thus righteous Abraham still refuses to fulfill his side of the negotiations. A flustered Michael immediately departs to relay the news to God.

Death Be Cloaked. Given that the appeals have failed, God responds with finality. He calls for Death, “the (one of) abominable countenance and merciless look” (16:1; cf. 8:9-10). God still favors Abraham, though, and thus Death “may not terrify him [Abraham]” (16:5).

When Death heard these things he left the presence of the Most High and donned a most radiant robe and made his appearance sunlike and became more comely and beautiful than the sons of men, assuming the form of an archangel, his cheeks flashing with fire; and he went away to Abraham. (16:6; also 16:1)¹³

Death Arrives. Abraham greets Death just as he originally greeted Michael (naturally, since they appear with similar visible attributes), yet Death is a forthright messenger: “Most righteous Abraham, behold, I tell you the truth. I am the bitter cup of death” (16:12). Abraham first responds in dismissive disbelief, only to have Death reiterate his identity. Perhaps expecting

¹⁰ Thus the paradigm is strained for the purpose of the plot. If one’s sins outweigh one’s good deeds, though presumably one otherwise has converted, then one is punished for one’s sins for a time, and then granted life. One the other hand, if one’s good deeds outweigh or outnumber (the metaphor is mixed) one’s bad deeds (and presumably this occurs *only* among those who otherwise have converted), then one is promptly ushered into the place of the saved. But if one’s deeds counterbalance each other, then, regardless of whether one is converted, one remains in a sort of limbo, for a time, until the judge arrives.

¹¹ This description perhaps resonates a purgatorial tone.

¹² Is this the idea that if one is killed prematurely, then one has thus endured (at least part of) the punishment due one’s sins?

¹³ Cf., 1 Cor 11:14, where Satan “masquerades as an angel of light.”

Death to retreat as Michael had, when Abraham finally is convinced that Death has come to take his soul, he responds with his standard and flippant rejection: “I understand what you are saying, but I will by no means follow you” (16:16). Yet Death remains, silent and still, in Abraham’s presence. Abraham departs for his home and Death follows with dark determination (17:1).

Death Uncloaked. Abraham decides to rest on his couch and bids Death to depart. Death insists that he will not depart until he takes Abraham’s spirit (17:3). At this Abraham gets flustered and demands, “By the immortal God I say to you that you must tell me the truth! Are you Death?” Again Death states his identity. Abraham then asks whether or not Death comes to everyone with such a pleasing presentation. Death responds,

No, my lord Abraham; for your righteous deeds and the boundless sea of your hospitality and the greatness of your love for God have become a crown upon my head. In youthful beauty and very quietly and with soft speech I come to the righteous, but to the sinners I come in much decay and ferocity and the greatest bitterness and with a fierce and merciless look. (17:7)

With curiosity Abraham then asks Death to reveal his true nature. Death declines, citing Abraham’s inability to endure it. Yet Abraham presumptuously insists, “I shall be able to behold all your ferocity, on account of the name of the living God, and because the power of my heavenly God is with me” (17:11). Only then does Death pour forth a phantasmagoric series of faces (i.e., scenes or visions of kinds of death): “and, in a word, he showed him great ferocity and unbearable bitterness and every fatal disease as of the odor of death” (17:17). From the impact of the revelations of Death “male and female servants, numbering about seven thousand, died. And righteous Abraham entered the depression of death, so that his spirit failed” (17:18-19).

With a turn in his countenance, Abraham begs Death to cloak himself again. Then he rebukes Death (18:3): “Why did you do this, that you killed all my male and female servants? Was it for the sake of this that God sent you here today?” But Death notes that he was sent for Abraham alone, saying, “had not the right hand of God been with you in that hour, you too would have had to depart from this life” (18:7). Then Abraham implores Death to pray with him for his servants who were killed, “and God sent a spirit of life into the dead, and they were made alive again” (18:11).¹⁴

Abraham Resists to the End. Even now Abraham refuses to follow Death, claiming that Death is there of his own accord, rather than at the command of God (19:4). With a bit more honesty (implying that he knows full well that Death has some at the command of God), Abraham yet again attempts to negotiate the terms for his departure from life: he demands both that Michael be his escort out of life and that Death teach him about the metamorphoses of his faces (19:5-6). Death obliges Abraham, recounting the faces with some explanation of the corresponding deaths that result (19:7-16). Even then Abraham persists with his inquiries, presumably to delay his departure. Death, not swayed by this delay tactic, responds with finality: “Now behold, I have told you everything that you have asked. Now I tell you, most righteous Abraham, set aside every wish and leave off questioning once and for all, and come, follow me

¹⁴ A question arises at this point, whether or not the resuscitation of these servants is comparable to what occurred in the case of the sinners Abraham prematurely killed. On the other hand, that account says they were punished and then “lead into life.” Thus the parallel likely is superficial.

as the God and judge commanded me” (20:3). Abraham asks Death to leave him for a while, that he might rest and recuperate. With this Isaac and Sarah enter the room weeping and embracing Abraham, while his wailing servants encircled his couch.

And Abraham entered the depression of death. And Death said to Abraham, “Come, kiss my right hand, and may cheerfulness and life and strength come to you.” For Death deceived Abraham. And he kissed his hand and immediately his soul cleaved to the hand of Death. And immediately Michael the archangel stood beside him with multitudes of angels, and they bore his precious soul in their hands in divinely woven linen. (20:7b-10)

Thus resistant Abraham’s life finally meets its end (as all the descendents of Adam must) and is ushered into Paradise. The *Testament of Abraham* concludes with an exhortation to imitate Abraham’s hospitality and virtuous behavior “so that we may be worthy of eternal life” (20:15).

The Testament of Abraham: How Has It Been (Mis)used?

Unimaginable by most scholars, regarding their own work, in 1977 E.P. Sanders published a volume that was to set a major agenda in Pauline studies for decades to come. Paul and *Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* presented a significant foundation for what was to become known as “the new perspective on Paul.”¹⁵ Plentiful are the current discussions of the shape(s) of Second Temple Judaism and its comparative relationship to the shape(s) of Paul’s soteriology. Sometimes rather sustained discussions of the literature has taken place,¹⁶ but more often one finds quick references or allusions put to the service of an author’s polemic against the new perspective. Such use is not objectionable in itself; but when references to the literature are read and employed to ends rather foreign to their native intent, then the quality of such references becomes questionable. Here we will witness but a few samples of how the *Testament of Abraham* has been used in arguments against “the new perspective on Paul.”

Simon Gathercole and the Case of the Sinless Abraham?

Though not a centerpiece in his extensive and engaging argument, in his recently published monograph, *Where Is Boasting?: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5*,¹⁷ Simon Gathercole makes quick reference to the *Testament of Abraham* as illustrative of what he terms “the Jewish expository tradition of an Abraham who was justified by his obedience,” a tradition Gathercole sees Paul explicitly rejecting (246): “The Testament of Abraham talks about Abraham’s perfection in all his deeds...”; and citing the *Testament of*

¹⁵ The label itself was first introduced in 1983 by James D.G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65 (1983): 95-122; reprinted in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 183-206, complete with an instructive “Additional Note,” 206-214.

¹⁶ E.g., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1, eds., D.A. Carson, et. al., (Grand Rapids, MI: 2001), though even in this volume there are very few mentions of the *Testament of Abraham*.

¹⁷ Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

Abraham 10:13 in a footnote: “For if he [Abraham] sees all those engaged in sin, he will destroy everything. For behold, Abraham has not sinned and has no mercy upon sinners” (238, n. 66).

To his credit, Gathercole does reference the contrastive verse, 9:3 (238, n. 66), though he provides neither the text itself nor any indication of its counter significance. In this verse Abraham speaks, “I beg you Commander-in-chief of the powers above, since you have thought it altogether worthy of yourself to come to me, *a sinner and your completely worthless servant*, I beseech you now too, Commander-in-chief, to serve me (by delivering) a communication yet once more to the Most High, and to say to him...” (italics added). But this is only one of two passages that question the legitimacy of Gathercole’s appeal to 10:13. The other verses fall in the fourteenth chapter, following Abraham’s unmerciful destruction of the sinners, immediately after his prayer resulted in the salvation of the soul whose deeds were equally balanced. Abraham implores Michael to pray with him again to beg God’s mercy “on behalf of the souls of the sinners whom I previously, *being evil-minded*, cursed and destroyed... Now I have come to know that I sinned before the Lord our God... let us beseech God with tears that he may *foregive me (my) sinful act*” (14:11-13, italics added). After a time of sustained prayer, God responds, “Abraham, Abraham, I have heeded your voice and your supplication and I forgive you (your sin)” (14:14).

Gathercole referenced the *Testament of Abraham* 10:13 in order to suggest that Paul’s argument in Romans 4:1-8 (allegedly describing Abraham as “ungodly”; see the excursus below) is put forth against this Jewish tradition regarding Abraham’s sinlessness, wherein he was justified because of his righteous deeds. But it is evident that *the Testament of Abraham bears no intention to put forth Abraham as sinless* (though it has every intention of putting him forth as righteous).¹⁸ Two factors support my contention. First, the narrative is expressed in the genre of a comic novel (as illustrated in Abraham’s slowness in discerning Michael’s nature, in Abraham’s repeated refusal to die, and in his refusals even extending to his repeated failure to follow through on his side of the bargains he strikes with God). As such, what is to be taken as *literally* informing the religious convictions of any Jewish tradition must be very carefully discerned. Secondly, the narrative tensions betray an Abraham who is other than sinless. Consider how 10:13 is situated:

- Abraham’s self-designation as a sinner (9:3)
- Abraham’s unmerciful killing of sinners (10:5-11)
- Abraham said to have not sinned (10:13)*
- Abraham admits sin and requests forgiveness (14:11-12)
- Abraham receives forgiveness for his sin (14:14)

Strictly speaking, these elements cannot all be retained without suggesting either that the author(s) promotes a strictly incoherent dogmatism regarding Abraham’s alleged sinlessness (though such an option would make Gathercole’s appeal to 10:13 inherently dubious), or that the author(s) intended such an attribution as ironic. It is enlightening to note that the divine attribution of sinlessness to Abraham is presented immediately following his sinful lack of mercy

¹⁸ There is an implicit distinction between “righteous” and “sinless” in both Old and New Testaments, especially given that Jesus’s sinlessness is something emphatically noted above and beyond his being righteous. If these terms were synonymous, then the New Testament authors would not have needed to speak of Jesus as “without sin” but simply as “righteous.”

(10:4-11) and immediately prior to the divine call for his repentance (10:15). In addition, while God refers to Abraham as “sinless,” the intent probably is not to say that Abraham actually has never sinned, but that *as a characteristically righteous man Abraham could not sympathize with the weaknesses of these sinners and thus condemned them in a self-righteous manner*. As such, “Abraham has not sinned” would mean that *he has not sinned in the ways he witnessed while on his tour – viz., robbery, murder, sexual immorality, breaking and entering*. It is possible (though I think it unlikely) that the *Testament of Abraham* is responding against an idealized view of “sinless Abraham.” Therefore, apart from my skepticism of Gathercole’s exegesis of Romans 4:1ff (see below), we may conclude that his reference to the *Testament of Abraham* exhibits a failure to appreciate the ironical nature of the narrative as well as other factors that tell against his appeal to 10:13.

Excursus: Gathercole’s Reading of Romans 4

Simon Gathercole promotes the following understanding of Romans 4:1ff:

Crucial to the Jewish presentation of Abraham is that he was righteous on the basis of his obedience at the time of his justification, and thus the divine declaration is a descriptive judgment. We shall see later that Paul’s reestablishment of the correct sequence shows the condition of Abraham at the point of his justification: he was ungodly rather than faithful, and God’s declaration of justification is emphatically *not* descriptive. (237)

...at the point of his justification, Abraham was an ungodly idolater: he simply believed God’s promise. Genesis 15:6 concerns the justification of the ungodly: God’s declaration of Abraham as righteous was not a descriptive word (*pace* 1 Maccabees) but the creative word of the God who calls “nonentities” into being as “entities.” (243)

Paul is in dialogue with the Jewish expository tradition of an Abraham who was justified by his obedience, and Paul rejects this tradition explicitly, not implicitly, in [Romans] 4:4-5. Since Second Temple Jewish soteriology was frequently described in terms of “reward” or “payment,” Dunn and Wright are wrong to exclude “mirror reading” of 4:4-5 on the grounds that this more traditional interpretation does not cohere with Jewish thought of the time. (246)

Many points of response could be offered. Here I will offer only a selection of them.

First, Gathercole’s reading overlooks the fact that Abraham was already acting in faith in Genesis 12-14 (cf., Heb 11:6), prior to the declaration of righteousness in Genesis 15:6. Additionally, there is no indication either in Genesis 15 or in Romans 4 that Abraham continued in his idolatry up until his alleged conversion of Genesis 15:6. Thus Gathercole’s exegesis seems unnecessarily forced.

Second, if anything, the presentation of Abraham as an unmerciful and sinning in the *Testament of Abraham* may not cohere with Jewish thought of the time. Yet, to Gathercole’s credit, his larger argument notes that within Jewish tradition Abraham’s faithfulness to God’s commands – especially his circumcision and the command to sacrifice Isaac – was *retrojected*

upon the text of Genesis 15:6. Thus this tradition conflated the events of Abraham's life and failed to appreciate the chronology that Paul explicates Romans 4 (cf. Gal 3). Paul's attention to the chronology of the text illustrates that he is a close reader of texts, which leads me again to doubt Gathercole's reading of Romans 4 where he supposes that Paul did not see Abraham as expressing faith prior to Genesis 15:6.

Third, it must be urged that Gathercole's exegesis of Romans 4 – insisting that by “works” in 4:1-8 Paul does not mean to reference *circumcision* but to *human effort* – has bypassed several significant interpretive indicators:

(i) Since Paul has already discussed the value of circumcision (2:25ff; 3:1f), and since he argues that circumcision is neither *sufficient* (for Jews) nor *necessary* (for gentiles) for justification (2:25ff; 4:9-12), 4:1-8 should be read in that light.

(ii) Paul's case against boasting in 3:27ff (cf. 2:17ff) is furthered in 4:1ff, illustrating that Paul is continuing his case against “the works of the law,” with circumcision being the central target.

(iii) The threefold dichotomy of Romans 4 illustrates the same: the dichotomy of “works” and “faith” in 4:1-8 glides into a dichotomy of “circumcision” and “faith” in 4:9-12, which in turn glides into a dichotomy of “law” and “promise/faith” in 4:13ff.

(iv) Finally, the “apart from works” noted in 4:5 corresponds to the “uncircumcised” in 4:9ff in that this deficiency bears not at all on one's justification (which is precisely the point of 2:25ff and 3:27ff as well). Thus, 4:1-8, being sandwiched between 3:27ff and 4:9ff, should be understood as using “work/s” as a shorthand for circumcision, rather than as a polemic against an abstracted concept of human effort or action.

Fourth, one must also notice that, on the face of it, to say that “God justifies the ungodly,” as Paul does, contradicts such Old Testament texts as Exodus 23:7; Proverbs 17:15; and Isaiah 5:23. But this assumes that by “ungodly” here Paul is referring to the morally guilty rather than using this designation as a synonym of “uncircumcised” (i.e., as a reference to gentiles). But it is quite likely that Paul's opponents equated “uncircumcised” with “ungodly.” Therefore, by implication, Abraham, prior to being circumcised, is “ungodly.” Thus Paul's argument can be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*: viz., if righteousness is contingent upon circumcision, then Genesis 15:6 is fraudulent since Abraham was there declared righteous even while he was as yet uncircumcised. Simply put, Paul here is continuing to make room for gentiles *as gentiles* to be justified *without circumcision*. Otherwise, Paul's argument hardly could have held sway with his opponents (or anyone else familiar with the Old Testament), if he were simply to contradict the Old Testament texts that staunchly proclaim that God will not justify the ungodly, especially given that they were foundational to the Old Testament system of justice. Indeed, Paul presupposes that very system of justice, and clearly works from it, in Romans 2 (judgment according to deeds coupled with divine impartiality).

Fifthly, and interestingly enough, Paul's thesis that God credits righteousness apart from works – complete with a quote from Psalm 32, provides us with the negative side of the transaction: God forgiving sin/not counting sins against a person. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that for Paul *crediting righteousness* is virtually synonymous with *not crediting sins*, the latter of which is of the essence of forgiveness (which derives from repentance, as seen both in Ps 32 and Paul's earlier assertion in Rom 2:4 that his interlocutor is in need of repentance). And it is in expressing repentance for sin that one evidences godliness. Thus we read in Psalm 32:6, 10-11, “Therefore, let the godly pray to you while you may be found.... Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trust in him. Rejoice in the

LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” But none of this, Paul argues, hinges godliness on circumcision.

Finally, central to Paul’s argument throughout Romans is just how one is righteous before God. Is it by circumcision? Is it by moral perfection? Neither is the case, according to Paul. Rather, righteousness is credited to the person who expresses “the obedience of faith” (1:5; cf., 15:18; 16:26). And it is in just that kind of faith that one will find a repentant heart, one that seeks forgiveness of sin; and this in contrast to the one who would lay claim against God’s righteous judgment with appeal to covenant privilege or sign (as seems to be the case with those Paul opposes; see, Rom 2:17ff).

Thus I can only conclude that Gathercole not only has wrongly employed the *Testament of Abraham* in the service of his exegesis of Romans 4, but that his overall exegesis of this chapter is unjustified.

Andrew Das and the Case of Compromising Grace

In a recently published monograph, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*,¹⁹ Andrew Das sets forth a developed discussion of the *Testament of Abraham*. In the second chapter of his monograph, “The Compromise or Collapse of Judaism’s Gracious Framework,” he seeks to show that following the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. there was “a shift in focus away from God’s election of Israel as a nation,” as well as “a corresponding increase in emphasis on a judgment according to works” (45). In this regard he discusses *4 Ezra* (45-53), *2 Baruch* (53-58), *3 Baruch* (58-61), *2 Enoch* (61-64), and the *Testament of Abraham* (64-68). Here we concern ourselves only with his discussion of the final work.

After describing the two extant recensions of the *Testament of Abraham*, Das turns to harvest material in support of his thesis, namely that there is discernible and chronological development in Second Temple Judaism that results in an “increase in focus on the strict demands of the law when God’s election of Israel is no longer a factor” (69). Das hones in on the account of the soul who appears before Abel with its good and bad deeds equally balanced (13:9-14). Abraham intercedes for the soul, resulting in the soul’s salvation (14:4ff). Abraham then proceeds to pray for the souls he prematurely killed through his sinful lack of mercy (14:12-15). Das offers some observations: “Here again one finds a judgment according to deeds...deeds being weighed in a balance,” and with this, asserts Das, “the *Testament of Abraham* reveals a Hellenistic Jew’s understanding of what the eschatological judgment will be like and what God as judge will find acceptable for admission into heaven” (67). Das further observes that, “There is nothing in *The Testament of Abraham* about election, covenant, sacrifices, or special privileges for Abraham’s progeny.” Thus he concludes: “The gracious framework of Judaism is clearly compromised. On the other hand, Abraham’s repentance for his sin (14:12-15) does bring about God’s forgiveness” (67).

Das assumes a very restricted taxonomy of what may be evidence of grace. His methodological restriction of discerning grace in this work through “election, covenant, sacrifices, or special privileges for Abraham’s progeny” fails to appreciate the grace that is exhibited in the work. *After all, given that the soul in the balance finally is saved, and that not through his own good deeds, it is difficult to see this not as exhibiting grace.* Thus while certain elements of “the gracious framework” of Judaism may be lacking, this by no means implies that

¹⁹ Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001.

grace itself is lacking. Indeed, there are multiple illustrations of what could be termed *unpredicted grace* found throughout the *Testament of Abraham* (e.g., God's favor of Abraham in spite of his unrepentant resistance; the forgiveness of Abraham's sin of unmercifully and prematurely destroying sinners; God's leading "into life" those Abraham destroyed).

As though *quantity* rather than *quality* was at issue, Das writes, "Abraham is forgiven for a single sinful act, his rash judgment of humanity when viewing the world. Would repentance avail for a multitude of sins? Would one have to repent for each individual sin committed? Does repentance have a special value over against individual righteous or evil acts?" (67). Of course, none of these questions is directly addressed in primary recension of the work; nevertheless, there are some suggestive features. For example, whether or not repentance would "avail for a multitude of sins" is not relayed, though the significance of the triad of conversion ("I delay the death of the sinner until he should convert and live"; 10:14), repentance (Abraham's repentance clearly being the narrative's primary exemplar), and temporary punishment ("For I did punishment them in judgment for a time. But those whom I destroy while they are living on the earth, I do not requite in death"; 14:15) provide a very hopeful combination. In addition, in other recensions we do find sinful deeds being forgiven or atoned for. Recension B 11:9-10, records these relevant words, "And the Lord said to Enoch, 'I shall command you to write the sins of a soul that makes atonement, and it will enter into life. And if the soul has not made atonement and repentant, you will find its sins (already) written, and it will be cast into punishment'" (*OTP* 1:900). Manuscript E hinges atonement on mercy given to others: "If a soul has mercy, you will find its sins atoned for and it will enter into life. But if the soul has not shown mercy, you will find its sins written, and it will be cast into punishment" (*ibid.*, 1:900-901, n. 11 d).

Das then asserts, "Even when Abraham prays for the soul held in the balance, which resulted in the soul's salvation, there is nothing to indicate that this 'merit of the Father' was only for his own elect descendants. On the contrary, Abraham intercedes on behalf of the souls he had prematurely judged in general. The patriarch's merit offers a universal benefit" (67-68). Of course, this unbounded mercy in no way mitigates the resident grace; rather, it increases the scope of the grace beyond the bounds of Israel! Thus Das's complaint is simply odd. Against what is he protesting? The lack of the gracious structures of Judaism or the unexpected and unbounded grace exhibited?

"One may further suspect," Das continues, "that it ['the merit of the fathers'] has value only when souls are hanging in the balance between good and evil deeds, as was the instance in question. If correct, such mercy factors into an equation that is still dominated by the weighing of deeds" (68). This reading is only possible, though there are other considerations Das has not appreciated. For example, following the forgiveness of his sin, Abraham is told, "and those whom you think that I destroyed, I have called back, and I have led them into life by my great goodness. For I did punish them in judgment for a time. But those whom I destroy while they are living on the earth, I do not requite in death" (14:14b-15). Thus there may be temporary punishment for sins, a punishment that results in a soul's entrance into "life." This alone encourages a reading other than the one Das promotes.

In addition, it is questionable whether in the genre of a comedic novel (if that is how this work may be classified) one should take the event of a strict balancing of deeds as a literal soteriological affirmation. Richard Bauckham comments:

In the *Testament of Abraham* (A 12-14; B 9) it is clear that people are assigned according to whether their sins outnumber their righteous deeds. But this crudely

arithmetical notion can hardly be intended literally. We should probably think of a process of just judgment on the overall quality of a person's whole life.²⁰

In a judgment derivative of Bauckham, D.A. Carson concurs:

Yet it is probably going beyond the evidence to see here a simple arithmetical totting up of merits and demerits. Even when the *Testament of Abraham* (A12-14; B9) assigns people according to whether their sins outnumber their righteous deeds, this may not be intended crudely and literally, so much as a way of saying that there is a judgment on the person's whole quality and direction of life.²¹

Indeed, it would be intolerably crude to balance sins and good deeds in an unqualifiedly quantitative manner. Surely stealing a loaf of bread is not as evil as rape. Not all sins in the Old Testament are worthy of the same end (cf., the purging motif throughout Deuteronomy as compared to sins of ignorance in Leviticus). Nor is putting one's life in danger for the well being of an innocent victim of abuse of comparable value to gathering and disposing of someone else's litter. Not all righteous deeds in the Old Testament are of equal value (cf., the righteous deed of Phineas as compared to engaging in ritual observance while unrepentant of sin). There are "weightier matters of the law" (see Matt 23). Even in the New Testament not all sins are unforgivable, nor do all sins lead to death.

Extreme elements, in both comedic and dramatic narratives, provide tensions that both propel the plotline and result in a reader's heightened anticipation of the solution. That this event – where the soul's good and evil deeds are equally counterbalanced – is just such an extreme element is evidenced by the meticulous mathematical precision of the judgment scene – a feature presumably unique (!) amidst other presentations of the judgment of deeds in both non-biblical and biblical texts present in Early Judaism. As Stephen Travis observes that,

it should not be taken to imply an adding up or a weighing of individual deeds so that God may recompense men in strict proportion to their deeds, or so that he may decide their destiny according to whether good or bad deeds are more numerous... In no [other] instance is a mixture of good and bad deeds recorded and men's destiny determined by which are more numerous.²²

Nevertheless, Das feels that the rather crass image of the weighing of deeds good and evil mitigates the image of grace witnessed in the work (e.g., 10:14). He writes, "Yet this mercy consists in God's patience and a delay of death so that the sinner might convert and live (see also; 14:15). In the overall scheme of the document, such conversion would surely bring about righteous deeds that would begin to tip the scales toward salvation. All humanity, whether Jew or Gentile, is judged in the same way, on the basis of a scale that measures the good against the evil

²⁰ D.A. Carson, et. al, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebek/Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 1:154.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1:517.

²² *Christ and the Judgment of God, Divine Retribution in the New Testament* (Foundations for Faith; Basingstoke, England: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1986), 16, as quoted in Kent Yinger, *Judgment According to Deeds* (Cambridge, 2002), 94.

done” (68). Above I noted the many gracious elements in this work, as well as the references to forgiveness and atonement in other manuscript traditions. Why would Das entirely discount the notion of the forgiveness of sins so well-presented in the work as it stands? My suspicion is that he was so embroiled in making his argument such that he was hindered from seeing the unpredictable and non-standard expressions of grace throughout this work.

Yet even Das admits that, “The emphasis in this section is not on a legalistic system...but on righteous Abraham’s own shift from self-righteous condemnation of others to compassionate intercession. Abraham’s compassion thus mirrors God’s own compassion and patient mercy that give people an opportunity to repent and turn their lives around while there is yet time” (68). When combined with what we have already noted regarding the triad of repentance, forgiveness, and conversion, this emphatic shift from self-righteousness to mercy presents a picture quite different than the one suggested by Das. Even Das’s conclusion mutes his own observations of grace in the narrative: “Along with *4 Ezra*, *2 Enoch*, and *2 Baruch*, this apocalyptic literature represents a type of Judaism where God’s justice does not allow for mercy apart from a completely, or at least mostly, righteous life. All of these documents are characterized by a minimizing, or absence, of Israel’s special privileges of election and covenant” (68). Of course, that the very sinners killed by Abraham would be judged for a time and then led “into life by my [God’s] great goodness” (14:15) is a powerful note directly contrary to Das’s (mis)reading of this text.

One final observation must be made. Das seems to have overlooked the chronology of the judgment scenes. Prior to the first judgment we witness the varied responses of Adam regarding the souls entering the broad or narrow gates (11:1-12). What seems to be implied here is that “the righteous” who enter the narrow gate need not endure the other judgments faced by those who enter the broad gate. When we come to the first judgment scene, where deeds good and bad are counterbalanced (12:1-18), we witness only the first of three judgments humans are to face: the first, is a judgment by Abel (13:5); the second is a judgment by the twelve tribes (13:6); and the third and final judgment is by God (13:7). *Only the last judgment is irreversible*, for “there is none who can release” (13:7). Perhaps latent in the text is the dynamic of temporary judgment and punishment, just as we saw in the case of the sinners Abraham destroyed (14:15), with only the final judgment being *final*.

Das’s reading of the text is subtly mistaken. A quick glance through the *Testament of Abraham* would provide one with the very impressions that struck Das, if one were to comb through the text with the criteria he proposed. But upon closer reading, I can only conclude that in seeking to establish his thesis regarding the progression from grace to legal strictness in Second Temple Judaism, Das has misunderstood and inappropriately used the *Testament of Abraham*.

The Testament of Abraham: What Can We Learn?

Permit me to be brief, since this study already has accomplished so much. We may learn several important lessons from this study. To be sure, the interpretation of ancient texts sometimes is difficult and very complex. Mapping their meaning requires much patience. Our approaches to these texts can be troubled by our own preconceptions of, for example, what grace *should* or *could* look like. Indeed, we should be willing to encounter grace even where it may be least expected, and in ways unforeseen. Yet, neither need we embrace all expressions of grace as either canonical or convictional.

Sometimes texts yield small portions that more easily confirm our suspicions (i.e., proof texts), though upon closer reading our suspicions may be disconfirmed. Even scholars are susceptible to the attraction of textual snippets supporting one's case (or one's cause). As such, we cannot simply trust "the experts" in this field. Without doubt, even the experts are invested in various portions of various debates and inevitably read texts with their baggage fully in hand. This is obvious from the fact that such experts are at odds with each other on their reading of such texts.²³

My hope is that the above study will encourage students of Paul's letters and other Second Temple Literature to greater care in the study of such texts, as well as in the employment of them in discussion and debate. There are both virtuous and vicious ways of using these texts. Mere misreadings may not be vicious, though the current culture of conflict and strong-arm politicking within American Presbyterianism discourages virtue. I have tried to avoid harsh deployments of my findings. I am willing to hear from anyone regarding not only my reading of the *Testament of Abraham* but also, and more especially, my reading of Paul's letter to the Romans (kevinjamesbywater@gmail.com).

I suppose one caveat is in order. While I am sympathetic to several offerings by those associated with "the new perspective on Paul," I by no means am in agreement with all (which is downright impossible anyhow, given the degree of disagreement found even among such proponents as Sanders, Dunn and Wright). Nor should this essay be construed as an endorsement of Sanders's reading of Second Temple Literature more generally. I do not feel qualified to make such a judgment at this time. My contentions are much more modest. I close with the salient words of Anthony Thiselton:

Sometimes readers transform texts through ignorance, blindness, or misunderstanding. Sometimes readers either consciously or through processes of self-deception find ways of rendering harmless texts which would otherwise prove to be disturbing and call for change. It is customarily acknowledged that understanding may be difficult in cases where the subject-matter or a text or its genre or code may be distant from the reader's assumptions and expectations and entirely unfamiliar. But texts may be transformed, no less, by habituated patterns of individual or corporate familiarity which rob the text of its power to speak to the reader as 'other'.²⁴

²³ This need not resolve into some postmodern (that grand oxymoronic ideology) doubt that we will ever ascertain the meaning of texts, and even less so that texts have no intentional meaning. But it should contribute to a humble and careful posture of scholarship, one that consciously and willingly participates in dialog with other scholars and non-scholars (as though those categories were non-permeable!).

²⁴ *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 35.