
Posturing the Qumran community as a significant penitential movement within the Second Temple Period (3), Mark A. Jason’s Repentance at Qumran aims to fill a persistent lacunae in Qumran scholarship with this foundational study. From its onset, the introductory-level book posits both the priority and persistence of repentance in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sampling a broad cross-section of sectarian texts from the Qumran corpus, Jason plumbs his sources for attestations of penitential language and themes and proceeds to sketch the contours of an overarching theological framework informed by a particular sectarian interpretation of repentance. The breadth of his literary analysis demonstrates a sense of the persistence of a common conception and expression of penitence across varying genres of texts and periods of community history and social organization. Further, he supplements sectarian Qumran materials with texts derived from Second Temple Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, in order to further contextualize penitence at Qumran within its wider cultural milieu.

Jason opens with the broad questions, “What is religious experience?” and “How does repentance factor into it?” Appealing to William James, he argues for the viability of an individualistic and experiential model of religious experience in early Judaism. This is then applied to the socio-historical contexts of early Judaism in the first century CE and to the social organization at Khirbet Qumran outlined in the community regulations of 1QS (Community Rule). Jason sees continuity between the ‘all-pervasive attitude to repentance’ in Second Temple Literature (34) and that of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This connection is grounded in their parallel attestation and use of the root הוש (to turn/to return) as indicative of repentance, whereby the act of turning is understood as a turn away from evil and a turn towards God. His philological study is well done. Interpreting selections of 1QS concerning the ‘correct inward state’ of the sectarian member (40), Jason argues that repentance at Qumran is enacted through ritualized confessional prayer and cultic acts. Building on contributions from previous scholarship, he understands sectarian repentance as a marriage of inward experience and outward action, whereby rituals serve as the vehicles through which repentance is expressed and dually supply the theological framework by which it is made intelligible.

After underscoring its presence and primacy at Qumran, Jason then proceeds to qualify what is distinctive about the community’s sectarian interpretation of repentance. This considers the particularistic social organization, community regulation and ritual life of the Qumran community, in addition to its literary attestations of eschatological and predeterminist ideology. Jason first addresses how the Hebrew Bible limns repentance and the motivations which underlie it. His exegesis uncovers the interconnection of two penitential promises with future effects, the first forewarning of the destruction of the unrepentant and the second assuring the restoration of the repentant (51). While this understanding of penitence is mutually compatible with Qumran theology, this agreement is complicated by the introduction of the aspect of voluntariness.

Jason’s discussion of the conflict between voluntary and predetermined repentance is nuanced and skillful, as it introduces and reconciles the lingering question how of individual repentance functions within a collectivist social organization. Jason argues that the coupling of inward sincerity and external action
significantly modifies previous biblical manifestations of penitence by involving an additional requirement of constancy. The turn away from evil and towards God now mandates that the individual repentant ‘stay turned toward God.’ He argues that the inward state of the repentant individual was made known to the community through the use of confessional language in cultic acts. Jason’s strongest contribution is the observation that by rendering repentance public it could be made manageable. Drawing evidence from 1QS, Jason carefully makes a convincing case that the community regulated the penitence of its individual members through punitive measures. Through the regulation of the inner lives of its members, the community was able to uphold its core theology and maintain its claim to chosenness.

The work might benefit from a more careful articulation of its methodological considerations. Jason endeavours to harmonize otherwise disparate sectarian texts from the corpus in order to postulate a core theology. This engenders a certain danger of seeing continuity where it might not exist, given the diachronic nature of the scrolls, their complex redaction histories and their often conflicting if not contradictory contents. Further the breadth of his scope of data limits the extent of his analysis with some text only receiving a cursory overview. Overall, Jason provides a steady foundation for future research as to the role of repentance at Qumran. His work serves as a valuable introductory resource for anyone interested in confessional prayer working in Qumran or Early Jewish Studies.

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