“WHICH IF A MAN DO THEM HE SHALL LIVE BY THEM”:
JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE ON LEV 18:5

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Jewish and Christian interpretations of the second part of Lev 18:5 (אָשֶׁר יִעַשֶּׂה אַתָּם הָאֱלֹהִים וְיִבְרָאוּ, “which if a man do them, he shall live by them”) have been the object of recent scholarly interest. This verse appears two times in Paul’s letters (Rom 10:5 and Gal 3:12). James Dunn considers it as reflecting the core theology of the Judaism Paul knew by cultural upbringing and his Pharisaic education, typified by Sanders as “covenantal nomism.”¹ In Dunn’s analysis, the verse stipulates the religious paradigm of living under the regulatory directions of the Law, a view fiercely rejected by Paul. Dunn’s synthesis has, however, become questioned. Simon Gathercole plausibly argues that the key words “live by them” were understood in Paul’s times not only as referring to covenental life but also as gaining eternal life.² We will argue that Lev 18:5 was also quoted to discuss the issue of whether and how man was able to keep the Law, either with respect to earthly or eternal life. To make this case we concentrate on the first part of the quote. Our aim is to analyse the interpretations in a systemic way by focusing on the ways in which these readings assess “which if a man do them,” in the light of “he shall live by them.” Thus we will argue that first and early second Century CE sources quote Lev 18:5 in discussions on whether and how it is possible to keep the Law.

¹ J.D.G. Dunn, Romans 9–16 (WBC 38b; Dallas TX: Word Books, 1988) 601: “Lev. 18.5 can be regarded as a typical expression of what Israel saw as its obligation and promise under the covenant.”

Early Jewish Texts on Lev 18:5

There is no methodology to discern intentional readings of Lev 18:5 in early Jewish texts. Gathercole pragmatically detects traditions by looking at a sequence of minimally two words from Lev 18:5. Following this method a limited number of texts qualify.3

1. LXX Lev 18:5

The LXX version of Lev 18:5 has two noteworthy aspects. Firstly, it accentuates the point that all laws must be obeyed by man in order to live: “and you shall keep all my orders and all my statutes and you shall do them (καὶ φυλάξεσθε πάντα τὰ προστάγματά μου καὶ πάντα τὰ κρίματά μου καὶ ποιήσετε αὐτά).” Remarkably, Paul does not use the doubly mentioned adverb πάντα (all) which, following the paradigm of Dunn, might have served his rhetoric well.4 Secondly, the LXX translates ‘live’ with a future tense: ἃ ποιήσας ἄνθρωπος ζήσεται ἐν αὐτοῖς. The future reading in LXX Psalms has been analysed as indicating an eschatological interpretation, and in other instances the LXX follows this tendency. Possibly an eschatological perspective is present here as well.5

2. Philo

In De Congressu Eruditionis Gratia 86–87 Philo quotes Lev 18:5 in a version close to the LXX: ὁ ποιήσας αὐτὰ ζήσεται ἐν αὐτοῖς. In a metaphorical manner Philo opposes the life as a youngster in Egypt with an adult’s life in Canaan. The Biblical commandments are interpreted as instructions to abandon customs of people in the Land that concur with human nature and to attain true wisdom and a virtuous life: “Therefore, real true life, above everything else, consists in the judgments and commandments of God, so that the customs and practices of the impious must be death.” Living the Law thus equals reaching a higher state of mind and is tantamount to what the Greeks call the “good life,” including life after death.6 Finally,

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3 Gathercole, “Torah, Life, and Salvation,” 129. We do not discuss texts assessed negatively by Gathercole such as Bar 41, Let. Aris. 127, 1QS 4, texts included though in James Dunn’s discussion of Lev 18:5.