

The Concept of Atoning Death in the New Testament: Pagan or Jewish?

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1. Introduction

The two most important events in the New Testament (hereafter NT) are clearly the death and resurrection of Jesus. From an early period, the death of Jesus took upon itself soteriological meaning in the Church. In what scholars believe to be an early creed in Rom. 4:25, “who [Jesus] was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” we see the both the belief in the death and resurrection of Christ.

It has become common place particularly among rabbinic Jewish scholars to dismiss the idea of the death of Jesus as having salvific significance on the grounds that this notion is utterly “unJewish” and without support in the Old Testament (hereafter OT) or Hebrew Bible.

There has also been criticism among other Jewish scholars that the idea of a human being making atonement for humanity or whose death has redemptive value, is a foreign concept to Judaism. Some charge that this is an example of human sacrifice which they argue would be repugnant to God. While animal sacrifices were and could be legitimately offered to God as seen in the OT, particularly in the book of Leviticus, human sacrifice would certainly be out of the question. Hence, the death of Jesus as a redemptive act is rejected and dismissed as a non-Jewish concept and it is attributed instead to the Greco-Roman pagan world that surrounded the early Christians. But is this really so?

As in the case of the resurrection, so in the case of the Christian understanding of the death of Jesus, this premise of pagan derivation is manifestly false. It should be stated that first century Palestinian Judaism knew nothing of dying and rising gods and the first trace we have of this idea is in the second century, and when it does appear it has reference to the agricultural cycle of vegetation with the seasonal changes of the autumn (death/dormancy of plant life and spring (rejuvenation of plant life). The idea that a human's death can have atoning consequences and merit is an idea that can definitely be found in Judaism.

2. Atonement in Judaism

Indeed, it has been admitted that "Paul's conception of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb [1 Cor.5:7] whose death was expiatory is also *distinctively Jewish*...In all these respects, then, Paul had always remained firmly rooted in Judaism."¹ This notion is also corroborated in various Jewish texts, both non-canonical and canonical. For instance, in the collection of the Pseudepigrapha, there is an interesting statement made in 4 Maccabees 17:20-22,

These [the martyrs] then, having consecrated themselves for the sake of God, are now honored not only with this distinction but also by the fact that through them our enemies did not prevail

¹ Irving M. Zeitlin. *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time*. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 177-178. Emphasis mine.

against our nation, and the tyrant [Antiochus Epiphanes IV] was punished and our land purified, since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sins of our nation. Through the blood of these righteous ones, and through and the propitiation of their death the divine providence rescued Israel, which had been shamefully treated.²

In this text, which relates the heroism of the Jewish martyrs against Antiochus Epiphanes IV, their deaths are spoken of in terms of sacrifice. Terms such as “a ransom” for sins, “through the blood”, and “propitiation” are sacrificial in context. It is interesting that in the NT these terms are also used of Jesus in the context of his death. For instance, his death is spoken of as “a ransom”, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)³, salvation is through his “blood”, “In him we have redemption through his blood,” (Eph.1:7), and the death of Jesus serves as a “propitiation”, “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins;” (1 John 2:2 NASB). The dates usually given to 4 Macc range from 63 BC to AD 70.⁴ It seems that the majority of scholars give it a first century AD date. If so, then the themes in 4 Macc. 17:20-22 are consistent with the NT period. The theological importance of 4 Macc. 17:20-22 in relation to early Christianity’s view of Jesus vicarious death is noteworthy. The idea of vicarious atonement,

² All quotes from the Pseudepigrapha are taken from James H. Charlesworth.ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vols.1-2* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985)

³ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ James H. Charlesworth.ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol.2* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 533.

...does have roots going far back into the Old Testament and our author [of 4 Macc] was certainly no innovator in this matter....the epic struggles of the Jews in the Maccabean wars gave further impetus to reflection not only on the positive value but on the atoning power of suffering and death.⁵

Moreover, the readership audience of 4 Macc. "...would certainly not have regarded the notion of vicarious redemption as a novel doctrine introduced by the author."⁶ Another interesting parallel passage found in the same book is 4 Macc.6:28-29,

“Be merciful to your people and let our punishment be a satisfaction on their behalf.
Make my blood their purification and take my life as a ransom for theirs.”

⁵ Ibid., 539. In the Apocrypha, 2 Macc.7:37ff seems to speak of the same theme but in “a less-developed form.”

⁶ Ibid. Another text in the Pseudepigrapha which makes mention of vicarious atonement/redemption is found in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, particularly within this book, the *Testament of Benjamin* 3:8, “Through you will be fulfilled the heavenly prophecy concerning the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world...the unspotted one...the sinless one will die for impious men...” This text (3:8) however is corrupt in that there is a glaring Christian interpolation evident here. The use of “Lamb of God” is clearly derived from a Johanne source. (John 1:29) The original reading of 3:8 may have contained a reference to vicarious redemption by suffering and death and would have prompted a Christian interpolation by an eager scribe. I merely offer this as only a speculation. Why would 3:8 specifically have an interpolation unless an earlier reading attracted a Christian bias to it in much the same way the *Testimonium Flavianum* did? The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* do contain ten to twelve Christian interpolations, however, scholars hold that in its earliest composition this document was Jewish and dates to the second century BCE., see James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol. I* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 777-778.

In this passage a priest named Eleazer suffers the torment of his captors in refusing to violate the Law of Moses. In this passage the idea of vicarious redemption by suffering is evident again. The importance of blood as the purifying agent and the giving up of one's life as a ransom is clear. These references are so clearly supportive and parallel to the Christian concept of atonement in Jesus that some scholars have been swayed into positing the idea that these statements are in actual fact Christian interpolations! On the contrary they are not interpolations,

But there is no need whatever to suppose passages like 6:28f. and 17:21f. in 4 Maccabees should be regarded as Christian interpolations...the idea that the suffering and death of the righteous atoned vicariously for the sins of others is sufficiently well attested in the apocalyptic literature...to suggest that it was in the air in the intertestamental period.⁷

3. Atonement in the Dead Sea Scrolls

This same theme is also found in the writings of Qumran⁸,

⁷ James H. Charlesworth.ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol.2* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 539.

⁸ The following quotes from Qumran are taken from Geza Vermes. *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 104, 109-110.

“They shall atone for all those in Aaron who have freely pledged themselves to the House of Truth, and for those who join them to live in the community...” (1QS 5:6)

“...[they] shall atone for sin by the practice of justice and by suffering the sorrows of affliction...who shall atone for the Land...” (1QS 8:3ff)

“They shall 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”
(1QS 9:4)

The above references from Qumran are taken from the *Community Rule* document. This document is important in that it detailed instructions for those who were leaders in the Qumran community. They are described as making atonement for others. What is of particular interest is the second reference in which atonement will be made also by suffering “the sorrows of affliction” and practicing “justice”. Thus, the link between atonement and suffering is also made in this text as we saw in 4 Macc.6:28-30; 17:20-22. The subject(s) of atonement in the Qumran passages above are *humans*, not animals as the Mosaic law prescribed. In the third passage, atonement is necessary for “guilty rebellion and for sins of unfaithfulness”. Here the connection is clear. It must be noted that the members of the Qumran community believed to be the Essenes, did not practice animal sacrifices. The only proper place was the Temple in Jerusalem, and the priesthood there was believed to by the Essenes to be illegitimate and corrupt. They hoped for the day when that priesthood would be dissolved by divine judgment and the levitical animal

sacrifices and holocausts would be restored. However, in the interim, they adopted and utilized sacrificial language for themselves and their community members. Thus the statement is made that they were able to fulfil the sacerdotal functions “without the flesh of holocausts and the fat of sacrifice”. In the NT this idea is also adopted, but the sacrificial system, the Temple and priesthood all culminate and end in Jesus. Jesus embodies all of these elements in himself.

4. Atonement in the Old Testament

Heretofore, we have examined some textual witnesses from the Pseudepigrapha and Qumran that attest to the idea of human sacrifice atoning for sin. Is there any such references in the OT? Perhaps the most well known OT text that was used by early Christians to buttress the idea that Jesus’ death was foretold and that it was vicarious is Isaiah 53. Isa.53 is one of four of the ‘Servant Songs’ in Isaiah. (Isa.42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) Isa.53 is appealed to in the NT as being fulfilled in Jesus (eg.Matt 8:17; John 12:38;Acts 8:26-35; 1 Pet.2:22-25). I will italicize the passages that are pertinent to vicarious suffering and death and I supply the verse number for clarity and convenience:

1 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? *2* For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. *3* *He was despised and rejected by*

others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4 Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. 9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. 11 Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

(Isaiah 53:1-12)

This passage of Isa.53 is not only the most famous of all the Servant Songs, it is indeed the most contentious in Jewish-Christian relations. A few remarks would be profitable at this point regarding the servant of Isa.53. The bone of contention concerns the identity of the suffering servant in this passage. According to the NT, the suffering servant is clearly identified as Jesus of Nazareth. However, the most common view that has been proposed is that the servant of Isa.53 is not a messianic figure at all, or the prophet Isaiah as a few scholars have argued, but refers to the nation of Israel collectively suffering amongst the Gentile nations. This proposition is usually taken without question and that is most unfortunate.⁹

The argument that proposes that the nation of Israel is the suffering servant in Isa.53 was a *later* interpretation that found its origin in the Medieval period. What was the view of Isa.53 in the time of Jesus, before his time, and after his time? All the ancient writings, the Mishnah, the Gemara (the Talmud), the Midrashim and others including the Targums all regarded Isa.53 as relating to the Messiah. Thus, in the first century, the time period that is germane to this research, the acceptable interpretation of this passage was that it had reference to the Messiah. The first to

⁹ For instance, Irving Zeitlin states, “For the Jews of Jesus’ time, Isaiah 53 had its original meaning: it referred to the people of Israel, not an individual.” Irving M. Zeitlin. *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time*. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 124. This glaring error reveals that Zeitlin is not aware of the historical interpretation of Isa.53 and that the interpretation of the suffering servant as the nation of Israel was never applied to the text until AD 1050 by Rashi. Thus, Zeitlin’s statement is anachronistic at best.

propose the idea that the suffering servant was the nation of Israel, was the rabbi, Rashi in AD 1050.¹⁰

Every rabbi prior to Rashi, without exception, viewed this passage as describing Messiah.

When Rashi first proposed that this passage spoke of the nation of Israel, he sparked a fierce debate with his contemporaries. The most famous of these was Rambam, perhaps better known as Maimonides. Rambam stated very clearly that Rashi was completely wrong in going contrary to the traditional Jewish viewpoint.¹¹

The fierce opposition by Jewish theologians towards Rashi's proposal is quite revealing. The reasons that led to Rashi's re-interpretation of the suffering servant in Isa.53 was the Christian use of this passage. The change in interpretation came as a result of the intense conflict found in Jewish-Christian polemics. Isa.53 had become the favourite "pet text" on the part of the Christians against their Jewish opponents. The famous second century AD *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* by Justin Martyr is an early example of this polemic. Justin also uses Isa.53 in his polemic (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 13) The Jewish reaction to this polemic was one of reinterpretation. What was once considered a messianic text by ancient Judaism, was later revised because of what appeared to be a Christian over use of the text. In the passage of Isa.53 it is clear that the servant does indeed suffer vicariously.

¹⁰ Arnold Fruchtenbaum. *Messianic Christology*. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1998), 54.

¹¹ Ibid. Fruchtenbaum further provides a full analysis of the various Jewish textual sources on pp.123-128. See also Arnold Fruchtenbaum. *Jesus was a Jew*. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1981), 23-47. For a full and exhaustive treatment on the subject of Isa.53 and its historical interpretations see Adolf Neubauer. *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (New York : Ktav Pub. House, 1969).

Even if one grants that the servant is the nation of Israel as Judaism has done since Rashi, one still has vicarious suffering. “But surely the servant is a *vicarious sufferer*. The texts point inexorably in this direction.”¹²

The idea of suffering is very explicit in Isa.53. There is also the idea of vindication for the servant’s suffering. The servant not only suffers, but in so doing, he bears the sins of the people even though he is rejected and despised. He cannot be identified with Israel because he is clearly distinguished from Israel, hence the use of first person plural pronouns “we”, “our”, “us” for Israel, and the third person masculine singular “he”, “him”, “his” for the servant. The servant is stricken for the transgressions of the people (Isa.53:8). While the nation went astray, God placed their iniquities upon the servant (Isa.53:6). The vicarious role the servant plays is heightened by the use of the conjunction “for”, “But he was wounded *for* our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;...stricken *for* the transgression of my people... When you make his life an offering *for* sin... and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isa.53:5, 8, 10, 12 emphasis mine) What is significant is that while the servant is crushed for the people, it is Yahweh himself who crushes him with pain! (Isa.53:10)

The idea of atonement is clearly evident in Isa.53 in that the language that is employed here is sacrificial language that is used in the OT book of Leviticus. For instance, in Isa.53:4, the word *nasa*, means “bears”. This is the same word used in Lev.16:22 of the scapegoat at *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement who “shall bear

¹² John Scullion. *Isaiah 40-66*. (Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc, 1982), 123. Emphasis mine. There is also the interesting suggestion by C.R. North. *Isaiah 40-55*. (London: SCM Press, 1974), 35., that “...there are hints that his sufferings, although represented as past, actually lie in the future.”

on itself all their iniquities”. Moreover, in Isa.53:10, the word *asham* is used which refers to the guilt offering mentioned in Lev.5:14-6:13. In effect, the servant becomes the guilt offering, an offering for sin.

While the theme of suffering is clearly evident here, there is also the theme of hope and deliverance. Even though the servant suffers such punishment, he will see his offspring and have his days prolonged, he will not be totally forgotten, but will be greatly blessed by God (Isa.53:10-11). To the early Christian community, Isa.53 contained what they believed to be the fulfillment of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

5. Jesus as the Servant Who Makes Atonement

While the theme of the death and resurrection of Jesus is important and fundamental to devotion to Jesus, it is intriguing that even within the Servant Songs there is reference to the exaltation of the servant, a theme that is adapted in the NT in regards to Jesus’ obedience. This exaltation theme is particularly mentioned in the Christ hymn of Phil.2:5-11. There are terms used of the servant that are indeed unique. The servant is spoken of as someone who “shall be exalted”, and “lifted up”, and “shall be very high” (Isa.52:13). These terms however, in their Hebrew original are *only* used of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible (Isa.6:1; 33:10; 57:15). Yet, in Isa.52:13, these very same words are also used of the suffering servant. Of particular interest is the co-relation that Isa.52:13 has with Isa.6:1 and the NT. In the Isa.6:1 passage which contains the commissioning

of the prophet Isaiah, he sees "... the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty".

This is the only place where Isaiah is said to have seen the glory of Yahweh.

In the NT, in John 12:37-41, a number of passages are quoted from Isaiah (John 12:38 with Isa.53:1 and John 12:39-40 with Isa.6:10) in respect to the unbelief of the Jews to Jesus' miraculous signs. After making reference to the latter passage of Isa.6:10, John 12:41 goes on to comment that, "Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him." Whose "glory" did Isaiah see? The nearest antecedent to the personal pronoun "his glory" is "he", ie. Jesus in John 12:37.

Thus, according to the Fourth Gospel, "the Lord...high and lofty" that Isaiah saw, was Jesus himself. As I have already indicated above, the same terms applied only to Yahweh in Isa.6:1, 33:10; 57:15 are also applied to the servant in Isa.52:13.¹³

¹³ Another interesting passage in which divine qualities are used of God alone and yet of another figure is Isa.9:6, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This passage is considered messianic as rabbinic literature attests. What is of interest here is the titles or names that are given to the child/son. These titles are unusual in that they are *only* used of God in the OT, and yet the one exception is this child/son who also bears them. For instance, the term "Wonderful" (*pele*; Heb) with the word "counsel" (*yoeitz*; Heb) and "counsels" is also used of God in Isa.25:1; 28:29 cf. Judg.13:17-18. "Mighty God" (*el-gibbor*; Heb) is used of God in Isa.10:21, "Everlasting Father" (*avi-ad*; Heb) literally, "father of eternity" refers to the source of eternity which the OT identifies as Yahweh in Isa.63:16; Ps.90:2. "Prince of Peace" (*sar-shalom*; Heb). This title can be used of righteous men, but in Isaiah it is only Yahweh who is the source and guarantor of peace as in Isa.26:3, 12.

Thus, the servant is described as unique, sharing in some way with God. No other prophet in the OT is described in these terms, and never the nation of Israel. This picture ties in nicely with the NT. Jesus suffers and dies a vicarious death and is vindicated by resurrection. He is exalted to the very heights by God for his obedience. Whether one takes this servant to be the prophet Isaiah himself, or even as a collective referent as Rashi later did, the one area that the early Christians differed was that they not only accepted this servant as Jesus of Nazareth, but in addition, they made him the centre of their devotion and worship. On this point, there is no parallel in Judaism or any Jewish sect of the first century.

6. Conclusion

The idea of the sacrificial death of Jesus for the sins of others, far from being a derivative from Greco-Roman paganism is very Jewish in its concept, content and origins. Its roots do rest firmly in the OT. In the words of Charlesworth, “Accordingly, when in its confessional formulations early Christianity laid great stress on the saving or redemptive efficacy of the death of Jesus, it was picking up and adapting to its own new faith a doctrine that already enjoyed at least a limited currency in Judaism.”¹⁴

¹⁴ James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol.2* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 539.

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