

Secundum Christum: The Death of Jesus according to Jesus

One of the more intriguing statements in the New Testament occurs in Mark 1:14-15, which reports that after John the baptist was arrested, “Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God,” and quotes him as saying, “Repent and believe in the gospel.” At this point, Jesus had said absolutely nothing about his death, and would not do so until near the end of his ministry in Galilee. This omission challenges the nearly universal belief that the death of Jesus is an essential component of the Christian message. Throughout the centuries, Christians who could agree that “Jesus died to save us” have nevertheless debated how exactly his death accomplished this. Was Jesus a substitute for us or an example? Did he replace us in the doing of good or in the suffering of a penalty? Is he an example of love or sacrifice? Did he overcome the Father’s wrath, the devil’s envy, or the world’s abuse of power? Most research on the subject has centered on explorations of the history of various “atonement theories,” such as those of Anselm of Canterbury¹ or Gustav Aulén;² the following study will instead make a detailed examination of what Jesus himself had to say about what is arguably the most famous execution in human history.

The Anticipation of the Passion in the Synoptic Gospels

Few hints that Jesus might experience an untimely departure are present in the early chapters of the Gospels. The prediction that “days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from” Jesus’ disciples (Mark 2:20; Matt. 9:15; Luke 5:35) could have been fulfilled by a mechanism other than his death, such as an ascension in the manner of Elijah (4 Kgdms. 2:11). The only notice that a plot to kill Jesus was being devised is given in the Pharisees’ reaction to Jesus’ healing on the sabbath of a man with a shriveled hand (Mark 3:6; Matt. 12:14; Luke 6:11).³ It

¹ See “Why God Became Man” in A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham, Eugene R. Fairweather, ed. and trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 100-183. Anselm’s work is the basis for theories which feature Jesus as a substitute.

² Gustav Aulén, Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement (New York: Collier, 1986). Aulén’s work is the basis for theories which feature Jesus as a conqueror of evil forces.

³ The murderous rage of the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:29) in reaction to Jesus’ commendation of Gentiles over Israelites did not obviously provide a basis

was not until after Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ that Jesus predicted his impending execution by an unspecified means, followed by his resurrection from death “after three days”⁴ (Mark 8:31; Matt. 16:21; Luke 9:22). The cause of his death is presented as the hostility of Israelite religious officials (“the elders, high priests, and scribes”); the only obvious purpose for his death is to provide an opportunity for his resurrection. The subsequent admonition, “If someone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow me” (to a general crowd in Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23; to the disciples alone in Matt. 16:24) does not link the disciples’ cross to Jesus’ death, much less provide a theological explanation for the latter.⁵ Even at this late juncture, Jesus’ death and resurrection does not become a major theme of his public preaching.⁶

In the wake of his transfiguration, Jesus reminded Peter, James, and John that “the son of man” would rise from the dead (Mark 9:9; Matt. 17:9) and suffer many things (Mark 9:12-13; Matt. 17:11-12; a similar statement appears at Luke 17:25, in

for ongoing hostility to Jesus elsewhere.

⁴ This motif echoes a cryptic statement by Jesus previously that “the son of man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights” after the likeness of Jonah (Matt. 12:39-40; Luke 11:29-30), which however would not likely have been understood at the time as a prophecy of literal death and resurrection. Much later, Jesus intimated in response to Herod Antipas’ alleged murderous intentions that he would “finish on the third day” (Luke 13:32-34), but in context this refers to his death after a three year ministry rather than to his resurrection after three days in a tomb.

⁵ Jesus made similar statements to the apostles earlier in his ministry (Matt. 10:38) and to large crowds during his journey to Jerusalem (Luke 14:27). For the initial hearers, the only biblical background of these admonitions to “pick up one’s cross” would have been its sole Old Testament reference, in which Esther persuaded the Persian king to command that Haman be crucified (σταυρωθήτω, Esth. 7:9) instead of her relative Mordecai. As a result, the admonition is not, as widely supposed, a directive to endure various sorts of sufferings, but to administer penalties in order to suppress evil, especially in one’s household (Matt. 10:35-37; Luke 14:26).

⁶ The synoptic Gospels contain little support for Martin Kähler’s famous definition of the Gospels as “passion narratives with extended introductions,” in The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ, Carl E. Braaten, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p. 80. Indeed, the Gospels are much more obviously preaching and miracle narratives with extended conclusions.

an eschatological discourse before an unspecified group of disciples). In a second formal passion prediction, he broadened the agency of his arrest to “the hands of men” (Mark 9:31; Matt. 17:22-23; Luke 9:44 mentions only the arrest, not the subsequent death and resurrection). The third and final prediction (Mark 10:33-34; Matt. 20:18-19; Luke 18:31-33), spoken to the Twelve privately just before they entered Jericho, is much more specific both as to the perpetrators of Jesus’ execution (“the high priests and the scribes ... the nations”; Luke replaces the reference to Israel’s leaders with the assertion that “everything which has been written by the prophets about the son of man will be completed”) and the indignities he would face (“they will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him”; Matthew replaces the latter with “crucify him”). As before, the death and resurrection of Jesus is depicted simply as a victory over his various human adversaries, similar to the contest between the prophets of Baal and Elijah (3 Kgdms. 18:20-40).

The Synoptic Substitutionary Prooftext

Just after the final passion prediction, in response to the request by James and John that they receive special places of honor, Jesus uttered a statement which is widely quoted in the service of a very different explanation of his death: “the son of man did not come to be ministered to, but to minister and to give his soul as a redemption instead of many” (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28; omitted by Luke). Several questionable alterations of this sentence have been performed to transform it into a “prooftext” that Jesus in his death replaced other humans in “paying a penalty for sin” to God the Father. First, “to give” (δοῦναι) is read as “to give up,”⁷ or even “to sacrifice.”⁸ Second, “soul” (ψυχή) is changed to “life,”⁹ such that “to give up his life” in effect means “to die on the cross.” Third, “redemption” is

⁷ Roman Catholic film director Mel Gibson, in The Passion of the Christ (2004), rendered Jesus’ statement from the Lucan version of the Last Supper, “This is my body, which is being given on your behalf” (22:19), as “given up for you.”

⁸ Australian Lutheran professor John Kleinig asserted this at the 2020 exegetical symposium of Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Such a claim borders on the absurd; no one renders the most familiar occurrences of this word in the Sermon on the Mount as “Sacrifice for us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11) or “Ask, and it will be sacrificed for you” (7:7).

⁹ The major translations perform this substitution throughout the Bible, due to the fact that the biblical ψυχή includes physical and temporal aspects of life (a corpse, Lev. 21:11; food and clothing, Matt. 6:25), whereas the common English understanding of “soul,” derived from Greek philosophy, excludes the same.

rendered “ransom,”¹⁰ and is interpreted as something paid to a wrathful God the Father as the price of releasing humans from the threat of his judgment, sometimes defended by the contention that the only alternative would be to regard the ransom as a payment to the devil.¹¹ Fourth, the phrase “instead of many” is explained as a reference to Jesus replacing human beings in suffering the wrath of God due to sin.

A literal reading of this text would instead begin by regarding the main clause as a reference to a bestowal rather than a sacrifice.¹² Jesus’ “soul” would then be understood to denote especially that which fulfills his greatest command, “You will love the Lord your God ... from your entire soul” (Mark 12:30, quoting Deut. 6:5). Jesus was thus promising that he would give such a soul to his followers, which would redeem them from every evil which threatened them, including the devil’s accusations, the world’s unbelief, and their own flesh’s weaknesses; the giving of a new soul would then parallel the creation of a clean heart, for which

¹⁰ The rare word λύτρον, which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament and twenty times in the LXX, never implies a reward to a kidnapper, but refers exclusively to a release from various temporal obligations: fines for injuries (those caused by livestock, twice noted in Ex. 21:30; disallowed in cases of murder, Num. 35:31-32), the census tax (Ex. 30:12; see Matt. 17:24), and the purchase price of slaves (Lev. 19:20; 25:51-52), land after the sabbatical year (Lev. 25:24, 26), and tithed goods (Lev. 27:31). A fee was also charged for those firstborn of Israel who exceeded the number of the Levites (Num. 3:46, 48-49, 51; 18:15), with the Levites themselves serving as the redemption for the majority (Num. 3:12, unique to the LXX). Proverbs warns that a husband will accept no redemption from his wife’s lover (6:35), and that a rich man’s wealth will be necessary to redeem him from extortion (13:8). Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would require no redemption to release Israel from its exile (45:13). Jesus gave himself as an ἀντίλυτρον ὑπὲρ πάντων, “a redemption on behalf of many,” employing a cognate unique to 1 Tim. 2:6. The related verb λυτροῦν describes the Lord’s redemption of Israel from Egypt in the Exodus (Ex. 6:6; Deut. 7:8).

¹¹ As in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), p. 380, who ascribed the alternative opinion to Origen.

¹² See Sir. 29:15, where “for he gave his soul on your behalf” (ἔδωκεν γὰρ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ὑπὲρ σοῦ) refers to the offering of collateral to a debtor, and Jer. 51:35 LXX [45:5 MT], where “I will give your soul as a discovery in every place where you proceed” (δώσω τὴν ψυχὴν σου εἰς εὕρεμα ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ, οὗ ἂν βαδίσῃς ἐκεῖ) refers to the Lord’s pledge to advance Baruch’s ministry despite his personal travails.

David prayed (Ps. 50:10 LXX). Jesus offers this new soul “instead of many,” referring not to humanity or Jesus’ disciples as the recipients of the redemption, but to the many religious impostors who come to be ministered to rather than to minister. Such a “soul” was certainly on display when Jesus died, especially when he said, “Father, I commend my spirit into your hands” (Luke 23:46, quoting Ps. 30:5 LXX), but the nature of the redemption thus provided is hardly to be restricted to the cross. The focus is rather on the entire incarnation of Christ, his nature as well as his ideology and lifestyle.

The Reiteration of the Vindication Theme

In addition to the aforementioned healing of a man with a shriveled hand, the only other specific incident in the synoptic Gospels which provided a pretext for Jesus’ execution was his cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:47; only the cleansing, not the resultant plot of “the high priests and the scribes,” is reported in Matt. 21:12-15). The final week of Jesus’ life also provided the occasion for his only commentary on the significance of his death, in the parable of the wicked vineyard workers (Mark 12:1-12; Matt. 21:33-45; Luke 20:9-19). The owner’s desire to “receive from the farmers some of the fruits of the vineyard” (Mark 12:2) by means of his “beloved son” (Mark 12:6) does not support the notion that God the Father sent Jesus into the world to die, for the son’s murder, far from placating the owner’s wrath, in fact engendered it. The summary statement, “The stone which the builders rejected became the base of the corner; this was from the Lord, and it is amazing in our eyes” (Mark 12:10-11; Matt. 21:42; Luke 20:17, quoting Ps. 117:22-23 LXX), re-affirms the message of the passion predictions, that the purpose of Jesus’ death and resurrection was his commendation by God in the face of condemnation by Israel’s religious leaders.

The Synoptic Passion Narrative

The passion narrative (Mark 14-15; Matt. 26-27; Luke 22-23) is notable for being long on historical detail and short on theological commentary. A major exception to this occurs on the way to Gethsemane, when Jesus cited Old Testament texts which describe the immediate effects of his arrest: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Zech. 13:7, quoted in Mark 14:27 and Matt. 26:31) and “He was reckoned with the lawless” (Is. 53:12, quoted in Luke 22:37). A subsequent statement concerning “the Scriptures being fulfilled” (Mark 14:49; Matt. 26:56; omitted by Luke) would assume the cited texts as those which Jesus principally had in mind. The Zechariah passage is the only indication in the synoptic Gospels that Jesus’ suffering served any positive divine purpose.

Its original context states that a sword is allowed to attack the Lord's shepherds in order to "try them by fire as silver is tried" and "attest them as gold is attested" (13:9), thus creating an opportunity to vindicate their service.

The sole reference to Jesus' blood which the synoptic Gospels have in common occurs in connection with the Lord's Supper: "This is my blood of the testament, which is being poured out on behalf of many" (Mark 14:24). Matthew uniquely alters the latter prepositional phrase (περὶ πολλῶν, "concerning many," instead of ὑπὲρ πολλῶν, "on behalf of many") and adds the purpose clause, "resulting in the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). Luke merges Paul's version of the initial phrase, "This cup is the new testament in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:24), with a slight alteration of Mark and Matthew's conclusion, "which is being poured out on your behalf" (22:20), which Paul's version deletes. It is not at all obvious that any of these were intended solely as references to Jesus' death; whereas the "pouring out" of a person's blood is always associated with lethal injury (Gen. 37:22; Is. 59:7), it is nevertheless distinct from the act of killing, as in the pouring out of the blood of sacrificial animals (birds in Lev. 5:8-9, calves in Lev. 9:8-9). In the Lord's Supper texts, the present tense of the participles διδόμενον and ἐκχυννόμενον indicate that the reference is to the distribution of Jesus' body and blood in the Supper rather than to his execution hours later; the removal of tense markers in English translations has enabled the reading, "which will be given and shed on the cross."

Matthew also uniquely includes several quotations in the passion narrative where various characters disassociated themselves from Jesus' blood (Judas, 27:4; the high priests, 27:6; Pilate, 27:24) or mocked it (the crowd that demanded his crucifixion, 27:25). Luke 22:44, missing from many important early manuscripts, asserts that while Jesus was praying in Gethsemane, "his sweat became like drops of blood falling down on the ground." None of these latter texts employ the verb "poured out," and none discuss any salvific benefit of Jesus' blood for believers.

Summary of the Synoptic Passion Portrayal

The death of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels has been shown to be climactic but not absolutely essential to the Christian message. Jesus' death is never discussed apart from his resurrection, and thus confers no benefit as an isolated event. It does not placate or pay a penalty to God the Father, and is rarely acknowledged as being compatible even with God's permissive will. Whereas the "Christus Victor" explanation of the passion attempts to view the cross as a victory, it is in fact the death and resurrection combination which achieved this. As consistently maintained and regularly developed from Old Testament citations, Jesus' death and resurrection enabled God to vindicate Jesus' message and ministry, and in the process to conquer hostile religious leaders and their legalistic theology.

The Anticipation of the Passion in John's Gospel

John's Gospel agrees with the others in presenting Jesus' initial ministry with little reference to his eventual demise. John the baptist's designation of Jesus as "the lamb of God" (1:29, 1:36) is commonly assumed to identify him as one who would die a sacrificial death, based on Isaiah's description of a lamb being sheared (53:7), but the lack of sacrificial language in John points to the more common prophetic use of ἀμνός, "lamb," as a designation for one of God's faithful people ("Israel was maddened like a mad heifer; now the Lord will pasture them like a lamb in a wide place," Hos. 4:16; "My fury was provoked against the shepherds, and I will watch over the lambs," Zech. 10:3). John the baptist is thus simply asserting that Jesus would be one who was consistently guided by the Lord, unlike so many Israelites past and present.¹³

In contrast to the other Gospels, John depicts Jesus cleansing the temple at the beginning of his career. This was the occasion for Jesus' prophecy, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days," a statement of the synoptic vindication theme, whose significance was however not understood by the disciples until after the resurrection (2:22). That Jesus would eventually be "exalted" (ὑψοῦν), first mentioned in his declaration to Nicodemus ("Just as Moses exalted the serpent in the desert, so it is necessary for the son of man to be exalted," 3:14), is subsequently related to his death (" 'when I am exalted out of the earth' ... the sort of death he was about to die," 12:32-33), but not to the exclusion of his ascension ("exalted to the right hand of God," Acts 2:33; see also 5:31).

The first incident which provided a pretext for Jesus' eventual execution, like the first such in the synoptic Gospels, was a healing on the sabbath, in this case of a man at the pool of Bethzatha (5:18, during an unspecified festival). However, another cause for opposing Jesus also appears in this text, which becomes a dominant issue in this Gospel: "he was even saying that God was his own Father, making himself equal to God."¹⁴ A series of similar statements in Jesus' preaching

¹³ The lamb's identity as one "who is taking away the sin of the world" simply refers to his successful removal of sinful behavior and ideology from Israel, as in the succeeding chapters of John. "Take away sin" does not imply paying a penalty or even forgiveness; although many English versions render Nathan's absolution of David (2 Kgdms. 12:13) with a similar phrase, the Greek verb in the latter text is παραβιβάζω, "put aside," whereas John 1:29 employs αἰρέω.

¹⁴ In the synoptic Gospels, the only basis for such an accusation was Jesus' statement at the trial before Caiaphas, "You will see the son of man seated at the right hand of the Power" (Mark 14:62; Matt. 26:64; Luke 22:69, quoting Dan. 7:13).

resulted in ever more persistent demands for his death: “I know him because I am from him; he sent me forth” (7:29, at the Feast of Tabernacles); “before Abraham came into being, I am” (8:59, on the last day of the same feast, preceded by assertions that his potential killers were motivated by rejection of Jesus’ message, 8:37 and 8:40); “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (10:38, at Hanukkah, preceded by the Jews’ verdict, “We are not going to stone you for an excellent act, but for blasphemy, because you, a man, are making yourself God,” 10:33). The final catalyst for Jesus’ arrest was his resurrection of Lazarus, which led to Caiaphas’ judgment that “it is beneficial for you that one man die on behalf of the people, and the entire nation not perish” (11:50), based on his claim that Jesus’ increasing popularity might create conflict with the Roman authorities.

The Johannine Substitutionary Proof-text

A speech just prior to Hanukkah includes the only “proof-text” in this Gospel for the idea that Jesus’ death was substitutionary. Like the synoptic “proof-text” for an alleged payment of a ransom to the Father (“the son of man came ... to give his soul as a redemption instead of many,” Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28), the declaration that the Good Shepherd “lays his soul aside on behalf of the sheep” (10:11, 10:15; see also 15:13) needs to be altered in several places to achieve the required sense. “Soul” (ψυχή) is again changed to “life,” the verb is rendered “lay down,” and the prepositional phrase “on behalf of” is replaced with the ambiguous “for,” construed as “instead of,” resulting in the meaning, “Jesus sacrifices his life (on the cross) as a substitute for the sheep.” A theory of the sheep’s own sinfulness then has to be introduced, even though the text speaks only of faithful sheep who have been sinned against by others (“robbers and thieves,” 10:8).

Whereas τιθέναι (normally “to put,” as of a lamp on a stand, Mark 4:21) is one of the most common verbs in secular as well as biblical Greek, and thus enjoys a considerable range of usage even in John (such as “setting out” the wine at Cana, 2:10, and “laying” Lazarus’ corpse in a tomb, 11:34), there are no clear examples of it ever meaning “to lay down” in the sense of “to sacrifice.”¹⁵ The use of this

¹⁵ The phrase τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν occurs several times in the Old Testament, always in the sense of “placing a soul” in a certain condition, as when Jephthah placed his soul in his own hands when no one else would help him (Jgs. 12:3), when God placed the soul of the psalmist in life (ζωή) during a time of oppression (Ps. 65:9 LXX), and when Jezebel threatened to place Elijah’s soul in the same condition as the souls of the prophets of Baal, that is, to kill him (3 Kgdms. 19:2). By contrast, to lay down one’s life, that is, to put oneself at risk of being killed, is

verb to describe the “laying aside” of Jesus’ garments when he washed his disciples’ feet on Maundy Thursday (13:4) suggests simply a temporary relinquishing of physical and temporal privileges (as in “the son of man has nowhere to recline his head,” Matt. 8:20), including but hardly restricted to his death.¹⁶ Jesus’ intention was to assert his full and continuing communion with weak and deprived believers in order to aid them in all circumstances, unlike those who abandoned them at the first sign of trouble (10:12). No one is forcing him to do this (10:18), much less is he suffering some punishment from God; instead, he is voluntarily renouncing any appearance of a selfish agenda in order to prove himself a faithful shepherd of the sheep, echoing the message of the Zechariah prophecy which Jesus would quote at the time of his arrest (“Attack the shepherds ... I will try them by fire,” 13:7, 9 LXX; 13:7 is cited in Mark 14:27 and Matt. 26:31).

This new theme of Jesus’ death as an act of reconciliation with lowly humans, barely hinted at in the synoptic Gospels (“He was reckoned with the lawless,” Luke 22:37, which does not overtly suggest any benefit for the latter), envisions the fulfillment of the familiar promise, “Even if I walk in the middle of the shadow of death, I will not be afraid of wicked things, for you are with me” (Ps. 22:4a LXX). Crucial to the correct understanding of this theme is the translation of ὑπέρ in the sentence, “I am laying my soul aside ὑπέρ the sheep” (10:15). This admittedly broad preposition, literally “over” (as when Christian leaders watch over their congregations, Heb. 13:17), can mean “for” in the sense of “on behalf of” (as when Christians pray for persecutors, Matt. 5:44, or ministers suffer for the name of Christ, Acts 9:16), “in favor of” (for as opposed to against someone, of a non-apostolic exorcist, Mark 9:40), or “on account of” (fathers and sons not dying for each others’ sins, Deut. 24:16; Paul praying for his “thorn in the flesh,” 2 Cor. 12:7-8), but there are no clear examples of it ever meaning “instead of” in biblical literature.¹⁷ The latter idea is hardly in view in the two preceding

expressed by ἐκρίπτειν τὴν ψυχὴν, literally, “to throw out one’s life” (of Gideon in his campaign against Midian, Jgs. 9:17).

¹⁶ Indeed, the New Testament’s only other use of a similar phrase, ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἔθηκεν (“he laid aside his soul on our behalf,” 1 John 3:16), is parallel to the sharing of “the livelihood (βίος) of the world” with others in need, which does not require death or even an extraordinary sacrifice.

¹⁷ The rendering “on account of” is most likely in the case of “Christ died ὑπὲρ our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:4); Christ didn’t die because he himself sinned, but because others sinned against him. The sins which caused his death, such as envy (Matt. 27:18), are indeed the most common among humans.

occurrences of ὑπέρ in John's Gospel: when John the baptist spoke "on behalf of" Jesus as the latter arrived for baptism (1:30), and when Jesus offered his flesh "on behalf of" the life of the world (6:51). Substitution or replacement is rather indicated by ἀντί, as when Archelaus succeeded his father Herod as king of Judea (Matt. 2:22). The latter preposition is nowhere employed in the New Testament to indicate the relationship between Jesus' suffering and the afflictions of mankind, the sole alleged exception being the previously discussed substitutionary "proof-text" (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28).

The Expansion of the Reconciliation Theme

Following the Hanukkah address, the reconciliation theme is developed in several directions. First, the sheep to whom Jesus committed himself are broadened to include people everywhere, so that Caiaphas' assertion that "it is beneficial that one man die on behalf of the people" (11:50) unintentionally resulted in Jesus dying "so that the scattered children of God might be gathered together as one" (11:52). Jesus himself subsequently implied such a purpose for his death in a conversation with Greek attendees of the final Passover ("unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit," 12:24).¹⁸

Second, the vindication theme developed in the synoptic Gospels is overtly linked to the Johannine reconciliation theme: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. When I am exalted out of the earth, I will attract everyone to myself" (12:31-32). The evangelist declares that this is the definitive explanation of Jesus' death: "He said this to indicate what sort of death he was going to die" (12:33), making this statement as significant for John as the parable of wicked vineyard workers was for the other Gospels. Indeed, "the judgment of this world" is later asserted to be the same as that envisioned by the parable. In Jesus' Maundy Thursday oration, he specifically defined "the world" (15:18-19) as those who possessed the Old Testament Scriptures, employing this term as the antecedent of the "they" who hated Jesus and his disciples (15:20-22, 24-25) as predicted in "their law" (15:25).

Third, the handing of Jesus over to the Romans for execution (18:31-32,

¹⁸ This becomes a dominant theme in Paul's commentaries on Jesus' death, where God and the world are reconciled by Christ's sharing of humanity's condemnation and death (see especially Rom. 5:6-11 and 2 Cor. 5:14-21), and the curse of the law of Moses is nullified by Christ's sharing of that curse (see especially Gal. 3:10-14 and Col. 2:13-14).

reiterating 12:33) universalizes the concept of “the world” to include all manner of oppressive religious, political, economic, and academic institutions, in parallel to the expanded definition of the sheep. The theme of Jesus’ unity with the Father, uniquely emphasized throughout this Gospel, is then connected to that of Jesus’ reconciliation with the sheep, resulting in the sheep entering into the same relationship with God. His death and resurrection will cause Jesus “to move from this world to the Father” (13:1), and since he is already linked to the sheep, the ultimate result is “so that all of them may be one just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us” (17:21).

Summary of the Johannine Passion Portrayal

It cannot be overstressed that John’s view of Jesus’ death, like that of the synoptic Gospels, is far removed from the themes attributed to it by most traditional and modern theology. Once again, it is the combination of Jesus’ death and resurrection, not the death alone, which achieves the promised vindication and reconciliation. God’s wrath is not in view in any discussion; indeed, Jesus’ death is directed not at God, but at God’s people. Jesus’ death is the basis not for the forgiveness of sins, but for liberation from the work of sinners. His resurrection affirms that the power of life and the communion of the Creator of life has entered the lives of those least likely to aspire to such gifts. Since Jesus himself did not thereby acquire any new status, but manifested an eternal reality, so his followers were given no program of developing their own vindication and reconciliation, but rather acquired the faith that such vindication and reconciliation, however temporarily hidden, already exists in full for all men, just as for this man.

Appendix I: The Death of Jesus in the Apostolic Acts

Jesus’ resurrection rather than his death was viewed as central to the definition of his apostles’ initial ministry. Matthias was chosen as Judas Iscariot’s replacement to become “a witness of his resurrection” (1:22), and the first arrest of Peter and John occurred because they were “announcing the resurrection of the dead in connection with Jesus” (4:2; see also 4:33).

Peter’s preaching in the Apostolic Acts is consistent with the synoptic vindication theme, as when he asserted at Pentecost, “God made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36; see also 3:13-15, 5:30-31, and 10:39-42). The same Psalm verse employed by Jesus to explain his death and resurrection in the parable of the wicked vineyard workers (117:22 LXX, quoted in Mark 12:10) was invoked by Peter during his first trial before the high priests (4:11). That Jesus was “handed over in the defined purpose and advance

recognition of God” (Acts 2:23; see also 3:18 and 4:27-28) is to be understood in light of the synoptic quotations of Zechariah 13:7 and Isaiah 53:12, that God allowed Jesus to be killed to enable the vindication of his ministry. Another section of Isaiah 53 became the basis for Philip’s later conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:32-33, quoting Is. 53:7-8), the sole point being to establish Jesus as the “sheep led to slaughter” whose “life was taken away from the earth.” None of this material contains any reference to God’s wrath or Jesus’ supposed placation of same, and the forgiveness of sins, while occasionally mentioned in the early preaching, is linked to baptism (2:38), the ascension (5:31), and faith in Jesus’ name (10:43) rather than the crucifixion.

Paul’s first recorded sermon, delivered in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch during his first missionary journey, proceeded in similar fashion. The death of Jesus was arranged by “those who reside in Jerusalem and their rulers,” who “by their judging fulfilled the voices of the prophets” (13:27) with the assistance of Pilate (13:28). By raising Jesus, God fulfilled “the promise which was made to the fathers” (13:32-33), namely, that God would give his people “the hallowed things of David, the trustworthy things” (13:34, quoting Is. 55:3), including especially “forgiveness of sins, even from everything regarding which you could not be justified in the law of Moses” (13:38),¹⁹ so that “by this person, everyone who believes is being justified” (13:39). It cannot be overemphasized that the forgiveness of sins and justification, which will become central themes of Paul’s later writings, is here based on Jesus being vindicated by his Father in the resurrection, as opposed to his paying of a penalty to his Father on the cross.

Somewhat surprisingly, the sermon at Pisidian Antioch is the last extensive discussion of this subject in the Apostolic Acts. During his second missionary journey, Paul taught in the synagogue at Thessalonica “that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead” (17:3), and concluded his speech at

¹⁹ This understanding of forgiveness as pardon for trespasses against the entirety of Moses’ law rather than merely the moral commands of the Decalogue is confirmed by the letter to the Hebrews which, having defined sins as “the ignorant acts of the people” (9:7; cf. Lev. 4:2 et al.), says in speaking of Jesus, “a death has occurred as a redemption from the transgressions against the first testament” (9:15), “he has become visible once and for all ... for the removal of sin through his sacrifice” (9:26), and “this one offered one sacrifice on account of sins” (10:12). Jesus’ sacrifice is later said to be withdrawn in the presence of willful violations of Decalogue commands (10:26). This distinction is crucial for the correct interpretation of such texts as Colossians 1:14 (“in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”).

Mars' Hill in Athens by saying that "God provided faith to everyone by raising from the dead a man whom he designated" (17:31). Before his final journey to Rome, he defined the theme of his preaching in an address before Festus and Herod Agrippa II as follows: "that the Christ would be subject to suffering, that the first one from the resurrection of the dead would be about to announce light both to the people and to the nations" (26:23). In Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, there is a brief reference to the church being preserved by "the blood of God's own" (20:28), but this phrase, besides being widely disputed as to text and translation, does not obviously focus on Jesus' death any more than the references to Jesus' blood in the Lord's Supper texts of the synoptic Gospels.

Appendix II: The Use of Isaiah 53 in the New Testament

It is widely asserted that Isaiah 53 contains the definitive scriptural explanation of the significance of Jesus' death, but the Gospels provide no support for such a thesis. Mark never quotes from this chapter, and Matthew and John only refer to it in discussions of Jesus' miracles. Isaiah 53:4, "He took our sicknesses and carried away our diseases," is asserted to have been fulfilled by Jesus' numerous exorcisms (Matt. 8:17). Isaiah 53:1, "Lord, who believed our report, and to whom was the arm of the Lord revealed?" is cited in connection with a crowd's rejection of Jesus despite his "signs" (John 12:37-38; see also Rom. 10:16, where this verse is quoted in a discussion of Israel's unbelief). Only Luke employs Isaiah 53 in his version of the passion narrative; just before he concluded the Last Supper and set out for Gethsemane (22:37), Jesus quoted v. 12, "He was reckoned with the lawless," in connection with the disciples' procurement of swords, which prophecy was fulfilled at his arrest (22:49-50).

The only mention of Isaiah 53 in the Apostolic Acts, in Philip's conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:32-33, quoting Is. 53:7-8), was as noted in Appendix I simply a prophecy of Jesus' suffering and death, not an explanation of its significance. A potential allusion to Isaiah 53:9, "nor was deceit found in his mouth," appears in Revelation 14:9, where, "a lie was not found in their (the 144,000 virgins) mouths."

The only other use of this chapter in the New Testament is in 1 Peter 2, the conclusion of which contains references to five verses from Isaiah 53. Peter first notes Jesus' innocence (2:22, quoting 53:9), then excerpts the phrases "he carried our sins" (2:24a, from 53:4a and 53:12b), "you were cured by his bruise" (2:24b, from 53:5b), and "you were wandering like sheep" (2:25a, from 53:6a). As the latter verse makes clear, the references to "sins" in Isaiah and 1 Peter are to the actions of sinful humans directed against Jesus, not the guilt for human sins allegedly being transferred onto Jesus by God the Father.

Ironically, the “prooftext” most frequently cited from Isaiah 53 for the latter notion (“the Lord delivered him up to our sins,” 53:6b LXX) is nowhere quoted in the New Testament. The common translation, “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all,” is based not on the Hebrew or Greek texts, but on the Latin Vulgate.²⁰ The Hebrew verb in question, the Hiphil or causal form of פגע, “to meet” (often in a hostile sense, thus “to fall upon” in order to kill, 1 Kgs. 2:25, and five other times in that chapter) simply indicates that the Lord allowed humans to sin against Jesus, not that the Lord blamed Jesus for all human sins.

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²⁰ “Dominus posuit in eo iniquitatem omnium nostrum,” literally, “The Lord placed on him all our iniquity.”