

## Medical Substitutionary Atonement in Melito of Sardis

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### Introduction: Who is the Heir of the Ancients?

‘When we ask what the precise nature of this vicarious activity of Christ was, we find Nicene theologians regularly falling back upon familiar biblical and liturgical terms like ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation to describe it, but always with a deep sense of awe before the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the blood of Christ. They used these terms, however...to refer, to not any external transaction between God and mankind carried out by Christ, but to what took place *within the union of divine and human natures in the incarnate Son of God.*’<sup>2</sup>

‘Atonement thus occurs for the Fathers through the dynamic of the incarnation itself, not by way of some extrinsic theory, i.e., satisfaction, penal substitution, and so on. Why, one wonders, did theology subsequently fail to reflect this? I am not sure. Part of the reason, I suspect, lies in how the incarnation came to be largely understood. With focus on the miracle of God becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus, the saving significance of the rest of Jesus’ life was overshadowed. With focus returned, so to speak, on the Cross, the climactic end of Jesus’ life, the impression *de facto* was that the real meaning of God’s identification lay at the beginning and at the end, not in the entire range of Jesus’ life.’<sup>3</sup>

Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, the authors of the recent book *Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, claim that penal substitutionary theory stretches back to the earliest fathers of the church.<sup>4</sup> Of these early theologians, they impressively cite Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165), Eusebius of Caesarea (275 – 339), Hilary of Poitiers (c.300 – 368), Athanasius (c.297 – 373), Gregory ‘the Theologian’ of Nazianzus (c.330 – 390), Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397), John Chrysostom (c.350 – 407), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444), Gelasius of Cyzicus (fifth century), Gregory the Great (c.540 – 604). They then proceed to quote Thomas Aquinas (c.1225 – 1274), John Calvin (1509 – 64), and then others from the Reformed tradition. My focus here involves correcting their misunderstanding about the early theologians. They express some nervousness about whether penal substitution is historically attested in early church history, and their reason for hoping it can be vindicated:

‘The question of historical pedigree has acquired a further significance in recent years, for increasing numbers of people are suggesting penal substitution is a novel doctrine, invented around the time of the Reformation by a church that was (it is alleged) drifting ever further from the biblical faith of the early church Fathers. This is a serious challenge. To put the matter bluntly, we ought to be worried if what we believe to be a foundational biblical truth remained entirely undiscovered from the days of the apostles right up until the middle of the sixteenth century. At the very least, such a discovery would undermine the idea that penal substitution is clearly taught in the Bible. On the other hand, it would be immensely reassuring to find that our understanding of the Bible has indeed been the consensus of Christian orthodoxy for almost two millennia.’<sup>5</sup>

But scholarly opinion weighs against these authors. Most theologians and historians of the early church believe that the early church was united in upholding the broad Christus Victor theory for over a millennium. The varied language of Jesus as a healer, ransom, deliverer, and conqueror was used to denote Jesus being victorious over

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally, and still is, part of my lengthier paper exploring patristic atonement teaching, *Penal Substitution vs. Medical-Ontological Substitution: A Historical Comparison*. That paper can be found online on the website of The Anástasis Center for Christian Education and Ministry, on this page: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-patristic>.

<sup>2</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1983), p.168. I am indebted to this work, especially p.161 – 168, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), for the citations in this section.

<sup>3</sup> Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; [http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch\\_sacrifice191106.htm](http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm); Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

<sup>4</sup> Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.14

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162

human sinfulness, death, and the devil.<sup>6</sup> Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was victorious on our behalf and for our salvation. I am calling this view ‘ontological substitution,’ or ‘medical substitution,’ although Eastern Orthodox theologian Stephen Freeman prefers ‘therapeutic substitution,’ and Reformed theologian T.F. Torrance calls it ‘total substitution.’ It was only Anselm of Canterbury who first articulated an atonement theory that positioned Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of ‘an attribute’ of God. In Anselm’s theory, Jesus satisfied God’s *honor*, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a ‘treasury of merit’ others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus. However, Anselm paved the way for John Calvin and others to position Jesus as satisfying God’s *retributive justice*, which became a broader category that was extended across people and across time, and which was understood in such a way that Jesus exhausted God’s wrath at one time, upholding God’s retributive justice on their behalf. Unlike Anselm’s theology where Jesus satisfied God’s honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin’s theology positioned Jesus against God’s justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.

In this essay, I will shed light on why I believe these three authors misunderstand the theological thought of the earliest Christian theologians, especially those at the Council of Nicaea. They were not advocates of the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Instead, they held what I am calling ‘medical substitution,’ which is an aspect – and in my opinion, the *foundation* – of the *christus victor* understanding. This position is the view that Jesus had to physically assume fallen human nature, unite it to his divine nature, overcome temptation throughout his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, and defeat the corruption within his human nature at his death, in order to raise his human nature new, cleansed, and healed, so he could ascend to the Father as humanity’s representative and share the Spirit of his new humanity with all who believe. That rather long-winded sentence can be boiled down to the saying that was popular with Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others: ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ God must assume to Himself what He intends to heal. Hence if God intends to heal the entire human being, He must assume the entire human being in Christ. My comparison of the two theological doctrines and their significance can be found in separate essays. This particular essay focuses on the atonement theology of the early church fathers.

## Melito of Sardis (died 180 AD)

### *Historical Context and Significance*

Melito was the Christian bishop of Sardis in western Anatolia, in modern day Turkey, near the city of Smyrna. He was a trusted authority within the early Christian community on matters of theology. Eusebius of Caesarea named Melito alongside Irenaeus as the two writers who had impeccable Christology: ‘Who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito which proclaim Christ as God and Man?’<sup>7</sup> Just as Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach overlook Irenaeus at great detriment to their own personal knowledge, so they also overlook Melito of Sardis.

Melito was a prolific writer, according to Eusebius and Jerome, who recorded lists of his writings. For example, he wrote a letter to Emperor Marcus Aurelius around 161 AD asking him to not overlook the Christians who were being plundered by lawless mobs. However, only fragments of his writings survive, with one exception: the homily called *On the Passover* (*Peri Pascha*) found in the Bodmer Papyri. Like the *Odes of Solomon*, Melito’s *On the Passover* is stylistically similar to the language of the Gospel of John.

### *Melito’s On the Passover*

*On the Passover* begins with an introduction (1 – 10) and an explanation of the Jewish Passover (11 – 33). Melito then says that the Jewish Passover celebration is a ‘prefiguration’ of the salvation and truth that are found in Christ (34 – 45). Melito then goes back further to explain the creation and fall of humanity. What happened that God had to heal it?

Indeed, he [Adam] left his children an inheritance – not of chastity but of unchastity, not of immortality but of corruptibility, not of honor but of dishonor, not of freedom but of slavery, not of sovereignty but of

<sup>6</sup> Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998, originally published 1930), chs.1 – 5

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75

tyranny, not of life but of death, not of salvation but of destruction. Extraordinary and terrifying indeed was the destruction of men upon the earth. For the following things happened to them: They were carried off as slaves by sin, the tyrant, and were led away into the regions of desire where they were totally engulfed by insatiable sensual pleasures—by adultery, by unchastity, by debauchery, by inordinate desires, by avarice, by murders, by bloodshed, by the tyranny of wickedness, by the tyranny of lawlessness.<sup>8</sup>

Melito states his belief that Adam left his children ‘an inheritance’ and then proceeds to describe what that inheritance is. His list of contrasts is notable. They are moral and ontological conditions: unchastity, corruptibility (meaning at the very least, susceptibility to death, if not also moral decline), dishonor, slavery, tyranny, death, destruction. He then notes the degradation of human beings in the phrase, ‘the destruction of men upon the earth.’ As evidence, he returns to conditions that are moral and about our very being (ontology). Probably thinking of the passages in Scripture where desires become warped by human self-chosen alienation from God (e.g. Romans 1:21 – 32; Ephesians 4:17 – 19), Melito describes ‘desires... sensual pleasures... and inordinate desires.’

Melito’s idea of the inheritance from Adam reflects the Eastern Orthodox idea of ‘ancestral sin.’ There is a corruption internal to the human being that is being passed down from generation to generation. Melito does not describe the Western notion of ‘original sin’ developed by Augustine. Original sin is the idea that the moral *guilt* of Adam is inherited by all his descendants. In that framework, each descendant of Adam and Eve shares the moral culpability for the fall because they were ‘present’ in the loins of Adam and Eve; it was as if each human being committed the treasonous act of the fall. The Eastern Orthodox tradition, by contrast, believes that guilt is only personal, and not suprapersonal so as to be inherited from our ancestors. Interestingly enough, Augustine believed that the stain of original sin was washed away by the waters of baptism. Luther and Calvin, however, attributed the removal of such guilt away from the sacrament of baptism and onto Jesus at his death. These matters deserve a much fuller discussion that I cannot do here. Significantly, Melito, writing at least two hundred years before Augustine, does not have inherited *guilt* in view, for Adam’s personal life did not devolve into adultery, debauchery, murders, and bloodshed, as far as we know from the text of Genesis. Rather, Melito is viewing the development of humanity as a race, each generation and each person being distinct and perhaps becoming morally and spiritually worse than the previous. Regardless, once Melito identifies the problem as a corruption of human nature, he has set the stage. Melito then argues that God in Jesus Christ solves that problem.

Melito portrays sin as a ‘hostile and greedy counselor’ (48), a slavemaster and tyrant who led humans into regions of evil desires and sensual pleasures (49). Consistent with that introduction of sin as a cruel Pharaoh of sorts, Melito also personifies sin as a villain who exults over humanity’s fall, preparing the way for his hungry accomplice, death:

‘Because of these things sin exulted, which, because it was death’s collaborator, entered first into the souls of men, and prepared as food for him the bodies of the dead. In every soul sin left its mark, and those in whom it placed its mark were destined to die. Therefore, all flesh fell under the power of sin, and every body under the dominion of death, for every soul was driven out from its house of flesh. Indeed, that which had been taken from the earth was dissolved again into earth, and that which had been given from God was locked up in Hades. And that beautiful ordered arrangement was dissolved, when the beautiful body was separated (from the soul). Yes, man was divided up into parts by death. Yes, an extraordinary misfortune and captivity enveloped him: he was dragged away captive under the shadow of death, and the image of the Father remained there desolate. For this reason, therefore, the mystery of the passover has been completed *in the body of the Lord.*’<sup>9</sup>

Significant to this exploration is Melito’s language of sin as leaving a mark on every soul, and exerting power within all human flesh, and salvation and deliverance from those powers occurring ‘*in the body of the Lord.*’ Like Irenaeus, Melito sees the main problem of sin as not primarily one’s legal status before God, but ontological, having to do with humanity’s very being. ‘The image of the Father,’ he says, referring to the image of God in which humanity was made, was defaced. God’s remedy to this was to renew the image of God *in the body of the Lord.* God foreshadowed this by the Jewish Passover. In the Passover and Exodus, God delivered His people out of the bondage of Egyptian slavery. As the Israelites took the uncorrupted blood of the Passover lamb and applied it to the doorway, entering into new life by passing through blood, something deeper occurs in and through Jesus Christ.

<sup>8</sup> Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 49 – 50

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 54 – 56

God delivered human nature *in the body of the Lord* out of the bondage to the corruption of sin and the resultant death. Jesus entered into new life through his own blood. All those who follow after him, through his blood and in his body, share in his new life.

Melito is clear that Jesus is none other than the God who made Himself known to Israel in a preliminary way, prior to making His character known fully in Jesus of Nazareth. As the apostle Paul did in 1 Corinthians 10:1 – 13, Melito sees the preincarnate Jesus as none other than YHWH present with Israel in Egypt as both the Passover lamb and the angel who took the lives of the Egyptian firstborn into his own care: ‘Pay close attention also to the one who was sacrificed as a sheep in the land of Egypt, to the one who smote Egypt and who saved Israel by his blood’ (60; cf. 84 – 85). Once again, Melito asserts that none other than God was in Christ: ‘The one who hung the earth in space, is himself hanged; the one who fixed the heavens in place, is himself impaled; the one who firmly fixed all things, is himself firmly fixed to the tree. The Lord is insulted, God has been murdered, the King of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel.’ (96)

But Melito goes further. He notes how YHWH identified Himself with key human figures in biblical history: ‘This one is the passover [lamb] of our salvation. This is the one who patiently endured many things in many people: This is the one who was murdered in Abel, and bound as a sacrifice in Isaac, and exiled in Jacob, and sold in Joseph, and exposed in Moses, and sacrificed in the lamb, and hunted down in David, and dishonored in the prophets.’ (69) Hence Melito sees Christological development in the Old Testament relating to God’s identification of Himself with human covenant partners. Ultimately God brings that development to a climax in Jesus when He permanently and irrevocably takes human nature to Himself. The one man Jesus has become God’s human dwelling place (44 – 45). In Christ, God redeemed human nature, to offer it back to us:

‘But he arose from the dead and mounted up to the heights of heaven. When the Lord had *clothed himself with humanity*, and had suffered for the sake of the sufferer, and had been bound for the sake of the imprisoned, and had been judged for the sake of the condemned, and buried for the sake of the one who was buried, he rose up from the dead, and cried aloud with this voice: Who is he who contends with me? Let him stand in opposition to me. I set the condemned man free; I gave the dead man life; I raised up the one who had been entombed. Who is my opponent? I, he says, am the Christ. I am the one who destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trampled Hades under foot, and bound the strong one, and carried off man to the heights of heaven, I, he says, am the Christ. Therefore, come, all families of men, you who have been befouled with sins, and receive forgiveness for your sins. I am your forgiveness, I am the passover of your salvation, I am the lamb which was sacrificed for you, I am your ransom, I am your light, I am your savior, I am your resurrection, I am your king...’<sup>10</sup>

Theologian T.F. Torrance observes of Melito’s theology of atonement, ‘There is no suggestion in the *Peri Pascha* that the atonement is something done by God outside of Christ as if in some external relation to the Incarnation or in addition to it, but as something done within the ontological depths of the Incarnation, for the assumption of the flesh by God in Jesus Christ is itself a redemptive act and of the very essence of God’s saving work. This takes place, not just in some impersonal physical way, but in an intensely personal and intimate way within the incarnate Lord and his coexistence with us in our fallen suffering condition as sinners. Incarnation is thus intrinsically atoning, and atonement is essentially Incarnational, for the saving act and the divine-human being of the Savior are inseparable. As Savior, Christ embodies the act and the fact of our salvation in his own Person. This is made very clear by Melito in a series of ‘I am’ statements put into the mouth of Christ who personally and directly identifies himself in his vicarious death and resurrection with divine salvation and stands forth as our divine Vindicator in the face of all accusation and judgment.’<sup>11</sup> Melito of Sardis says that in Christ is a new humanity, healed and cleansed of the corruption of sin inherited from Adam. Christ reconciled human nature to God in his own person and in his own body. That is the nature of the atonement to Melito of Sardis: not penal substitution, but medical substitution.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid 100 – 103, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.83 – 84

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.83 – 84