

Medical Substitutionary Atonement in the *Odes of Solomon*

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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.*’²

‘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.’³

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.⁴ 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.’⁵

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

¹ 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>.

² 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.

³ Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm; Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

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

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162

human sinfulness, death, and the devil.⁶ 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.

The Odes of Solomon

Historical Context and Significance

The *Odes of Solomon* are a collection of the earliest known Christian book of hymns and psalms, called *odes*. Many scholars believe the Odes date from before 100 AD, and not later than the mid 2nd century.⁷ The authors were probably Jewish Christians because the originals are in Aramaic; the Odes are clearly influenced stylistically by Hebrew biblical poetic style and bears resemblance to other Jewish poetic writings.⁸ This collection of 42 odes bears the name *Odes of Solomon* because that is the name used in references to it in other ancient writings; the name probably connects Jesus to ‘Solomon,’ the royal Son of David. The many parallels with the Gospel of John are striking: Their references to ‘the Word’ and ‘living water’; the many references to the Holy Spirit; salvation consists in knowing and loving God; and the saving significance of the incarnation; etc.

The Odes were well known in the early church. James H. Charlesworth comments on the attestation to the *Odes of Solomon*:

‘The 11th ode was found among the Bodmer Papyri in a 3d-century Gk manuscript (no.11). Five were

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

⁷ The full collection has been reconstructed from manuscripts in the British Museum, John Rylands Library, and Bibliothèque Bodmer. James H. Charlesworth (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v.6, p.114) writes: ‘The date of the *Odes* has caused considerable interest. H. J. Drijvers contends that they are as late as the 3d century. L. Abramowski places them in the latter half of the 2d century. B. McNeil argued that they are contemporaneous with 4 *Ezra*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Polycarp, and Valentinus (ca.100 C.E.). Most scholars date them sometime around the middle of the 2d century, but if they are heavily influenced by Jewish apocalyptic thought and especially the ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls, a date long after 100 is unlikely. H. Chadwick, Emerton, Charlesworth, and many other scholars, are convinced that they must not be labeled ‘gnostic,’ and therefore should not be dated to the late 2d or 3d century.’

⁸ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 1: The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964), p.244 writes, ‘It may perhaps be added that the Qumran Psalms, in which there is the same personal emphasis, and the same transition from the Teacher of Righteousness to the Community, confirms the Jewish Christian, and perhaps the Essene Christian, origin of the Odes.’

translated into Coptic in the 4th century and used to illustrate the *Pistis Sophia* (*Odes Sol.* 1, 5, 6, 22, and 25). Also in the 4th century *Ode* 19 was quoted by Lactantius (*Div. Inst.* 4.12.3). In the 10th century a scribe copied the *Odes* in Syriac, but only *Odes Sol.* 17:7 – 42:20 are preserved (British Museum ms. Add. 14538). In the 15th century another scribe copied them into Syriac, but again the beginning is lost (John Rylands Library Cod. Syr.9 contains only *Odes Sol.* 3.1b – 42:20).⁹

In his 2009 translation of the *Odes*, Charlesworth says, ‘Specialists on the *Odes* now agree that the collection was completed in the early second century, and most likely before 125 CE.’¹⁰ As to location, Charlesworth suggests, ‘The parallels with the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Gospel of John, and links with Ignatius of Antioch support the hypothesis that the *Odes* may have been composed in or near Antioch or somewhere in western Syria.’¹¹ This remarkable early date and Jewish Christian authorship give the *Odes* an important weight.

Ode 17

Three of the odes are worth mentioning here for their references to the means of Jesus’ atonement: Odes 17, 15, and 11. Here is the full text of Ode 17:

- ¹ Then I was crowned by my God,
And my crown was living.
- ² And I was justified by my Lord,
For my salvation is incorruptible.
- ³ I have been freed from vanities,
And am not condemned.
- ⁴ My chains were cut off by His hands,
I received the face and likeness of a new person,
And I walked in Him and was saved.
- ⁵ And the thought of truth led me,
And I went after it and wandered not.
- ⁶ And all who saw me were amazed,
And I seemed to them like a stranger.
- ⁷ And He who knew and exalted me,
Is the Most High in all His perfection.
- ⁸ And He glorified me by His kindness,
And raised my understanding to the height of truth.
- ⁹ And from there He gave me the way of His steps,
And I opened the doors which were closed.
- ¹⁰ And I shattered the bars of iron,
For my own shackles had grown hot and melted before me.
- ¹¹ And nothing appeared closed to me,
Because I was the opening of everything.
- ¹² And I went towards all my bound ones in order to loose them;
That I might not leave anyone bound or binding.
- ¹³ And I gave my knowledge generously,
And my resurrection through my love.
- ¹⁴ And I sowed my fruits in hearts,
And transformed them through myself.
- ¹⁵ Then they received my blessing and lived,
And they were gathered to me and were saved;
- ¹⁶ Because they became my members,

⁹ Charlesworth, p.114

¹⁰ James H. Charlesworth, *The Earliest Christian Hymnbook: The Odes of Solomon* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2009), p.xxii

¹¹ *Ibid* p.xxiii; on p.xxv, Charlesworth suggests a more specific Jewish-Christian authorship: ‘My own research suggests that the Odist may not have been a Qumranite, but he seems to have been influenced by the Essenes and conceivably once had been an Essene; that is, before he believed in Jesus’ Messiahship, he may have originally been a member of one of the numerous Essene communities that were located on the fringes of towns or cities in the Holy Land (as Philo and Josephus reported).’

And I was their Head.
 17 Glory to You, our Head,
 O Lord Messiah. Hallelujah. (*Odes of Solomon* 17:1 – 17)

Ode 17 is one of the odes which use the startling convention of speaking from the first person as Jesus himself (Odes 8, 10, 15, and 42 do this, and possibly 9 as well). The ode refers to the disciples' failure to recognize the identity of the resurrected Jesus (Lk.24:13 – 34; 24:37; Jn.20:11 – 16; 21:12) in v.6, even down to the 'amazement' with which the disciples responded to him, and even offered an explanation in v.4. Ode 17 speaks of Jesus loosening the bindings of the 'bound ones' (v.12). I take this as referring to the corruption of sin in human nature in human beings. For how is Jesus portrayed as doing this?

In the very next poetic line, Jesus shares his 'resurrection' – that is, his new humanity – with these 'bound ones': 'I gave my knowledge generously and my *resurrection* through my love' (v.13). As Jesus shares his new humanity with his followers, he plants new life and transformation in them: 'And I *sowed my fruits* in hearts, and *transformed* them through myself' (v.14). The phrase 'through myself' is remarkable because the new life and transformation come, not through a psychological rationale of debt-forgiveness as in penal substitution, but through sharing in the ontological personhood of Jesus, by his Spirit. This anticipates the later Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations of salvation: Jesus united human nature with divine nature in his one person, and then shares himself by the Spirit. Jesus, in and *through himself*, redeemed human being and reconciled human nature with God, and what Jesus worked out *in himself* the Spirit works out *in us*. Reception of this 'blessing' results in 'life' in the Johannine sense: 'Then they received my blessing and lived, and they were gathered to me and were saved' (v.15).

Mention of 'justification' in 17:2 draws our interest and confirms the medical substitution atonement theology standing behind it. The word in its cognate forms appears only four times in the Odes: 17:2; 25:12, 29:5; 31:5. In two of those occurrences, the odist speaks of being 'justified': 'I was justified by his kindness' (25:12); 'He justified me by His grace' (29:5). The basis and rationale for this proclamation does not appear to be on the surface of this liturgical material, arguably. However, Ode 17:2 and Ode 31:5 refer to Jesus himself as being 'justified': 'His face was justified / Because thus His Holy Father had given to him' (31:5). I am fairly certain that the question of whether the speaker in Ode 17:2 is the Christian or Christ himself¹² can be set aside for my purpose here. The strong Johannine 'union with Christ' theology running through the Odes and linking the Christian with Christ suffices for why we are able to say that the justification of the Christian happens *within* the justification of Christ, and because of it.

Lutheran and Reformed theologians typically argue that the believer is 'justified' because of one or both of the following. Christ died to absorb the divine retributive justice that God would have poured out on her or him; this is understood as God imputing sin onto Christ for our sakes, at his cross. This is paired with an imputation in the opposite direction: God imputes onto us the merits of Christ's lived, human righteousness. 'Justification' is thus considered to involve a legal double imputation. What is remarkable about the *Odes* is that Ode 17 and Ode 31 speak of the Messiah Christ Jesus himself being 'justified.' In fact, as far as Ode 17 and 31 are concerned, Jesus was 'justified' per se at his *resurrection*.

In Ode 31, the odist begins by declaring how 'chasms vanished before the Lord,' and 'darkness dissipated before his appearance' (v.1), along with 'error' and 'contempt' (v.2). The 'truth of the Lord' (v.2) was declared by Jesus himself, when he 'opened his mouth,' 'recited a new chant' (v.3), 'lifted his voice,' and 'offered to Him' his disciples (v.4). This refers to Jesus' resurrection and ascension. In connection with that movement into resurrection life, Ode 31 says that 'his face was justified, because thus His Holy Father had given to him' (v.5). The focus on 'his face' recalls Moses at the top of Mount Sinai with shining face, and Jesus at the top of Mount Tabor with a similarly transfigured face. The response called for is, among other things, to 'take unto you immortal life' (v.6 – 7), which certainly indicates that Jesus' resurrection is in view. Then, some reflections are offered by Jesus in the first person about the bitter experience of the cross (v.8 – 12). The Ode closes with Jesus declaring that his purpose in dying and rising was to 'redeem my nation and instruct it' (v.12b), which recalls the 'truth' he spoke in v.1 – 4.

¹² The difficulty with trying to make a strong delineation between the Christian and Christ in Ode 17 and other Odes is discerning where one places the break. For example, Daniélou, p.244 asserts, 'In Ode XVII the baptised first celebrates his deliverance from vanity, and the new birth which has followed. Then Christ begins to speak: 'I opened doors that were closed and I brake in pieces the bars of iron.' But v.6 might aptly describe Jesus' resurrection appearance, where he amazed others, and seemed to them like a stranger. Once we consider v.6 to be part of Christ's experience, and in his voice, why not assign v.4 – 5 to him also? And if v.4 – 5, then why not v.1 – 3?'

This teaching ministry of Jesus after his death and resurrection is prominent because all together, this speaking and acting constitutes the fulfillment of ‘the promises to the patriarchs, to whom I was promised for the salvation of their offspring’ (v.13). In Ode 31, Jesus is justified by God the Father in connection with his faithful life, death, and resurrection. But if ‘justification’ can be reduced to a ‘moment,’ per se, then the connective tissue theologically is to the resurrection most immediately.

Ode 17 unquestionably ties ‘justification’ to resurrection as well. The speaker is ‘crowned by my God’ with a crown that ‘was living’ (v.1). The ‘justification’ connected to this crowning involves an experience of ‘salvation’ that ‘is incorruptible’ (v.2), which refers to resurrection. The odist celebrates new freedom (v.3), and even a new appearance (v.4 – 6), which sounds remarkably like the resurrection appearances of Jesus when he was not recognized by his closest disciples. And so on.

If ‘justification’ is grounded in resurrection, then it arguably does not sit on top of an exchange between God the Father and Christ Jesus in which some punitive, retributive transaction occurred between them. Something else is at work – something not *between* divine persons, but *within* the person of the God-man, Jesus Christ. I explore that something else as we examine Odes 15 and 11.

Ode 15

Here is a portion of Ode 15, which also uses the first person perspective of Jesus:

- ^{15:5} The thought of knowledge I have acquired,
And have enjoyed delight fully through Him.
⁶ I repudiated the way of error,
And went towards Him and received salvation from Him abundantly.
⁷ And according to His generosity He gave to me,
And according to His excellent beauty He made me.
⁸ I put on immortality through His name,
And took off corruption by His grace.
⁹ Death has been destroyed before my face,
And Sheol has been vanquished by my word.
¹⁰ And eternal life has arisen in the Lord’s land,
And it has been declared to His faithful ones,
And has been given without limit to all that trust in Him. (*Odes of Solomon* 15:5 – 10)

Ode 15 appears to speak of Jesus’ earthly life as he repudiated ‘the way of error’ (v.6) in his struggle against sin in his flesh. The ‘salvation’ he received ‘from Him [i.e. God the Father] abundantly’ certainly include *physical* salvation from death. For the contrast between ‘immortality’ and ‘corruption’ in v.8 along with the references to ‘Death’ and ‘Sheol’ in v.9 stress the physical deliverance from death that Jesus experienced. But it also might be a *spiritual-moral* salvation from sinful actions as well, which is suggested by the Odist repudiating ‘the way of error’ and enjoying ‘delight through Him.’ And of course the ‘eternal life’ ‘given without limit to all that trust in Him’ (v.10) is not just *physical*, but *spiritual-moral* as well. In any case, in biblical thought, physical death follows spiritual-moral death (e.g. Rom.5:12 – 21). The former is an expression of the latter, because death is what relational alienation from God, as the source of life for all things, entails.

Thus, Ode 15 attests to a very early Christian understanding of Jesus’ human nature, and what he accomplished for that human nature: Jesus’ personal decisions to align his life and human nature (‘I repudiated the way of error’ in v.6) with the Father serves as the basis for his resurrected ‘new humanity.’ And this ‘eternal life’ – life centered and expressed physically, morally, and spiritually in Jesus’ own resurrection body – ‘has been given without limit to all that trust in Him’ (v.10). The fact that these two songs are expressions of worship in liturgical settings makes this all the more significant for historical purposes.

Ode 11

The last Ode I will consider, Ode 11, uses the Pauline language of spiritual circumcision, and raises important questions:

- ^{11:1} My heart was pruned and its flower appeared, then grace sprang up in it,
And my heart produced fruits for the Lord.
² For the Most High circumcised me by His Holy Spirit,
Then He uncovered my inward being towards Him,
And filled me with His love.
³ And His circumcising became my salvation,
And I ran in the Way, in His peace, in the way of truth. (*Odes of Solomon* 11:1 – 3)

Ode 11 describes salvation in Christ as a fundamental heart transformation. From a theological standpoint, this is the outcome of the transformation of human nature in Christ. The language of circumcision of the heart follows the usage by Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul (and interestingly, not John) regarding heart transformation (once again attesting to the permeability of the Christian community to the writings of all the apostles). God would circumcise hearts when he renewed His covenant with Israel following the exile. Moses anticipated this in Dt.30:6, and Jeremiah in Jer.31:31 – 34. Then Paul in Romans 2:28 – 29 says that circumcision of the heart is ultimately what constitutes the true Israel of God (cf. Philippians 3:3, ‘we are the true circumcision’). Hence this Ode is firmly anchored in biblical language of Israel’s heart-level renewal when people participate by faith in the circumcision of *the flesh of Christ* (Rom.8:3; Col.2:11).

This Ode is also written from Jesus’ first person perspective. Again, this is a familiar device in other Odes (8, 9?, 10, 15, 17, 28?, 36?, 42). This is not to claim that Jesus personally composed these Odes, only that early Syriac-speaking or Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians felt comfortable enough to compose these songs and use them in a liturgical setting. This is probably because of the stylistic form of the canonical Psalms being written in the first person from the voice of David and Solomon. The reason I argue that Ode 11 is Jesus’ first person perspective is that only for him, as opposed to the believer, has there been an ‘end’ (v.4), presumably referring to his death on the cross. Henceforth, the Ode seems to refer to an experience of bodily resurrection by the Holy Spirit (v.5 – 9) and ascension to the heavenly throne in a new Eden (v.10 – 16).

- ⁴ From the beginning until the end I received His knowledge.
⁵ And I was established upon the rock of truth, where He had set me.
⁶ And speaking waters touched my lips from the fountain of the Lord generously.
⁷ And so I drank and became intoxicated, from the living water that does not die.
⁸ And my intoxication did not cause ignorance,
But I abandoned vanity,
⁹ And turned toward the Most High, my God,
And was enriched by His favors.
¹⁰ And I rejected the folly cast upon the earth,
And stripped it off and cast it from me.
¹¹ And the Lord renewed me with His garment,
And possessed me by His light.
¹² And from above He gave me immortal rest,
And I became like the land that blossoms and rejoices in its fruits.
¹³ And the Lord is like the sun upon the face of the land.
¹⁴ My eyes were enlightened,
And my face received the dew;
¹⁵ And my breath was refreshed by the pleasant fragrance of the Lord.
¹⁶ And He took me to His Paradise,
Wherein is the wealth of the Lord’s pleasure.
I beheld blooming and fruit-bearing trees,
And self-grown was their crown.
Their branches were sprouting and their fruits were shining.
From an immortal land were their roots.
And a river of gladness was irrigating them,
And round about them in the land of eternal life.

- ¹⁷ Then I worshipped the Lord because of His magnificence.
¹⁸ And I said, 'Blessed, O Lord, are they who are planted in Your land,
 And who have a place in Your Paradise;
¹⁹ And who grow in the growth of Your trees,
 And have passed from darkness into light.
²⁰ Behold, all Your laborers are fair, they who work good works,
 And turn from wickedness to your pleasantness.
²¹ For the pungent odor of the trees is changed in Your land,
²² And everything becomes a remnant of Yourself.
 Blessed are the workers of Your waters,
 And eternal memorials of Your faithful servants.
²³ Indeed, there is much room in Your Paradise.
 And there is nothing in it which is barren,
 But everything is filled with fruit.
²⁴ Glory be to You, O God,
 The delight of Paradise for ever. Hallelujah.' (*Odes of Solomon* 11:4 – 24)

Who else, after all, could be said to have glimpsed the heavenly reality that awaits God's people, if not Jesus himself? If I am correct about Ode 11 being in Jesus' first person perspective, then we must revisit v.1 – 3 as referring not only to salvation in and through Christ for the believer, but the salvation of Jesus Christ himself from the corruption of sin, and death! We would then read Ode 11 as Jesus' experience of the Spirit cutting away *in himself* sin's corruption from the originally good human nature God designed for Adamic humanity.

- ^{11:1} My heart was pruned and its flower appeared, then grace sprang up in it,
 And my heart produced fruits for the Lord.
² For the Most High circumcised me by His Holy Spirit,
 Then He uncovered my inward being towards Him,
 And filled me with His love.
³ And His circumcising became my salvation,
 And I ran in the Way, in His peace, in the way of truth. (*Odes of Solomon* 11:1 – 3)

Whether we can decide this question about Ode 11 is not exactly the point, however. The point that matters here is whether such a possibility is anchored in Scripture, and Ode 11 raises that question. I strongly believe that Scripture provides the underlying material for this possibility.

Israel could not 'circumcise their own hearts', as the prophets had called for. Moses had called for it (Dt.10:16), but in the end said that God Himself would have to circumcise the hearts of Israel on the other side of exile (Dt.26:4; 30:6). Jeremiah had called for it (Jer.4:4), but, like Moses, said that God Himself would have to change the heart on the other side of exile, in the new covenant (Jer.31:31 – 34). Ezekiel had his own idiom for it, and like Moses and Jeremiah, and again foresaw God performing a heart-level change on the other side of Israel's exile, in the new covenant, when the Spirit was poured out (Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 37:14). Hence, circumcision of heart came to either denote or connote the restoration from exile, and in either case should be viewed as inseparable from it.

Paul explained Israel's experience through his own personal autobiography. He said that the tenth commandment condemning coveting, jealousy, lust, and greed condemned him ever since he was mature enough to understand it (Rom.7:14 – 25). Significantly, the tenth commandment had no corresponding punishment, indicating that Anselmian 'honor,' or Calvinist 'holiness' and 'justice,' or whatever attribute is usually positioned against God's love in a satisfaction-driven atonement theory, cannot actually be considered a symmetrical attribute to God's love, but only a particular expression of God's love and must be rethought through as a derivation of it. The tenth commandment recalled the primal sin of Adam and Eve. Not *pride* per se, which only comes into the human mind to justify the desire after the fact, but *jealousy* moved Adam and Eve to usurp from God the defining of good and evil, and internalize that power into themselves. *Jealousy* moved Cain to murder Abel. Hence, as Paul experientially discovered, jealousy of every kind was triggered by his mature awareness of the tenth commandment. This is what it meant for Paul to be 'under the law' (Rom.7:1 – 13; cf. 2:12; 3:19; 6:14 – 15; Gal.4:4) and have sin imputed to one's self (Rom.5:13). The Sinai Law was supposed to be God's holy partner to Israel to help them condemn sin in their own flesh. But 'what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God

did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh [of Jesus Christ]' (Rom.8:3). That is, Jesus was the only Israelite who was able to 'condemn sin' fully and totally within himself by never allowing himself to covet, to be jealous, to lust, to be greedy. He is the one true Israelite who is 'the circumcised one' (Rom.2:28 – 29) because he is 'the resurrected one' (Rom.4:25).

Hence, Jesus had to recapitulate Israel's temptation in their fallen human flesh, not just Adam's temptation in his pre-fall condition. Matthew's Gospel in particular presents Jesus as the representative of Israel, and in fact as him *being* Israel, who did in himself what Israel did not and could not do. Jesus, like Israel, went to Egypt and came back into the land. Jesus, like Israel, was pursued by a genocidal foreign ruler. Jesus, like Israel went through the waters of the Red Sea in a kind of baptism (1 Cor.10:2), went through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River. Jesus, like Israel wandered the wilderness for forty years, wandered through the wilderness for forty days. Jesus, like Israel, pondered the words of Deuteronomy while in the wilderness, as shown by the fact that all three quotes of Scripture during Jesus' temptation were from Deuteronomy. Jesus, like Israel, came to a mountain and received the covenantal law. God gave that law to help Israel 'circumcise their hearts' (Dt.10:16). But unlike Israel, who failed to do so, Jesus successfully resisted temptation – all of it, not just the outward action but all the way at the source, at the level of his identity as 'Son of God.' Unlike Israel, Jesus on the mountain both received into his own human flesh (i.e. demonstrated that he was already doing so) the law of God all the way onto the 'tablet of his heart' as Jeremiah saw as constituting the human person in the new covenant (Jer.31:31 – 34). At every point in his own life, Jesus succeeded where Israel failed, because Jesus succeeded on behalf of Israel, because Israel could only ultimately fail. Finally, Jesus, like Israel, went through the exilic experience – suffering pain, humiliation, and death at the hands of the Gentiles. And first among all Israel, and actually *as Israel*, Jesus emerged in his resurrection on the other side of exile.

Because 'circumcision of heart' had become the inner meaning behind Israel being restored from exile (Dt.30:6), and because Jesus himself was Israel and was restored from exile in his resurrection, then it follows quite logically and of necessity that he is the one who was 'circumcised of heart.' We can look at Jesus from the vantage point of his humanity, specifically his Jewish humanity. If Jesus entered into the place of Israel, then he recapitulated not only Israel's early journey, he completed Israel's appointed task which Israel could not do: he circumcised his heart with the assistance of the law (Dt.10:16). As man, he cut off the unclean aspect of his human nature; he put it to death. He fulfilled Israel's side of the covenant to God.

But we can also look at Jesus from the vantage point of *God's* covenant faithfulness to Israel. If Jesus entered into the place of Israel, the divine one who carried Israel's humanity upon his shoulders, then and only then did God actually do what He said He would: circumcise the heart of Israel (Dt.30:6, cf. 29:4). That is, the Word of God inscribed His law on a human heart. That simultaneously means that God was faithful to the covenant to produce a humanity that is restored from exile and resurrected into the intended life of the garden paradise (Dt.30:1 – 6). Ode 11, especially with this Christological interpretation, fits perfectly into that understanding. And if Jesus, in himself, circumcised something away from himself at his death (Rom.6:6), then Jesus must have taken on *fallen* humanity, not an already perfected or pre-fall humanity. The fulfillment of God's long covenant with Israel logically requires Jesus' full identification with Israel's fallen condition.

The Significance of the Odes of Solomon

The early church developed its understanding of the atonement through a variety of means, including written prayers, songs, and symbols, and not only sermons and written treatises. Hence, I believe the significance of the *Odes of Solomon* for the purposes of understanding the atonement theology of the earliest Christians has been unfortunately overlooked. Yet a cursory glance at their major Johannine themes, including the idea that the *incarnation through resurrection* of Jesus constitutes the salvation of humanity, reveals their emphasis on medical substitution. What we find in them is theology put into liturgy, for use by worshiping congregations. And the widespread use and appreciation of these *Odes* is also significant. Here, we begin to see how deeply and how far the medical substitution theory saturated the life of the early church. We find nothing in this realm that resembles penal substitution.

The *Odes* are especially important because they give us the earliest glimpse into Syriac-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Christianity. This branch of the church is typically neglected by those who focus only on the Greek and

Latin Christian writings. Yet numerically, they were surely greater in numbers than their Greek-speaking brethren for some centuries, and certainly far more numerically significant than their Latin-speaking counterparts. Not only do they reflect a more Semitic mindset, in general, they probably reflect at least some influence of the Jewish Christians who fled Jerusalem after 70 AD, which is deeply significant. The *Odes* lay a helpful foundation for understanding the magnificent hymnist and poetic theologian Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century, and the fifty homilies attributed to Macarius in the fifth. In both those exemplars of Syriac-speaking Christianity, we hear their proclamation of medical substitutionary atonement.

I conclude by quoting Ode 7, which contains an elegant, poetic statement of what can be discerned as medical substitutionary atonement:

- ² My joy is the Lord
 And my course is towards Him;
 This way of mine is beautiful.
- ³ For there is a Helper for me, the Lord.
 He has generously shown Himself to me in His simplicity,
 Because His kindness has diminished His grandeur.
- ⁴ He became like me, that I might receive Him.
 In form He was considered like me, that I might put Him on.
- ⁵ And I trembled not when I saw Him.
 Because He was gracious to me.
- ⁶ Like my nature He became, that I might understand Him.
 And like my form, that I might not turn away from Him. (*Odes of Solomon* 7:2–6)