

Penal Substitution vs. Medical-Ontological Substitution: A Historical Comparison

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Last modified: October 26, 2018

‘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.*’¹

‘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.’²

Introduction: Who is the Heir of the Ancients?

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.³ 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.’⁴

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 human sinfulness, death, and the devil.⁵ Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was

¹ 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.

² 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

³ Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.14

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.162

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

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 Nicea. They were not advocates of the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Instead, they held what I am calling ‘ontological 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.

Ignatius of Antioch (c.35/50 – 108/117 AD)

Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach claim to be ‘fairly exhaustive up to and including Gregory the Great.’⁶ This assertion is deeply problematic, not only because they neglect very important figures in church history, but also because they do not demonstrate any historical understanding of the life of the early Christians. I will begin with a writer they ignore: Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius is one of the five so-called ‘apostolic fathers,’ those who lived and wrote within one generation of the apostles. Besides Ignatius, this group includes Clement of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd* of Hermas. These latter four writings unfortunately do not provide us with enough material to discern their atonement theology.⁷ Though not apostles themselves, these writers occupy a position of importance historically and theologically. Ignatius has been thought to be either the immediate ‘successor’ (though the precise meaning of that term is debated) of Peter in Antioch, or the successor to Evodius who succeeded Peter. Tradition also suggests that Ignatius and his friend Polycarp, who became bishop of Smyrna, were both disciples of the apostle John. Antioch was the most important Roman city in the eastern part of the Empire. The city was very diverse, and because believers there were drawn from all walks of life and defied previous social categories, they were first called ‘Christians’ at Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Ignatius is also important as an explicit historical link between the apostles to the articulate bishop and theologian Irenaeus, one generation later. Ignatius quotes, though not by name, from: Matthew (and/or Mark, given material

⁶ Ibid, p.163

⁷ Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, or *1 Clement*, compares Jesus’ blood on behalf of others to the penitent prayers of the Ninevites on their own behalf (ch.7), which is not primarily a penal substitution motif, and could be an ontological substitution motif (vicarious repentance), but also a variant on moral exemplar. Clement also refers to the blood of Jesus as the instrument of redemption (ch.12), applies Isaiah 53 to Jesus (ch.16), and says, ‘On account of the Love he bore us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls’ (ch.49). This could be a penal or medical substitution text, and there is not enough data to tell which Ignatius means. Polycarp of Smyrna’s *Epistle to the Philippians* contains only two references to atonement: Jesus is he ‘who for our sins suffered even unto death’ (ch.1); and ‘Let us then continually persevere in our hope, and the earnest of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ, ‘who bore our sins in His own body on the tree,’ [1 Pet.2:24] ‘who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth,’ [1 Pet.2:22] but endured all things for us, that we might live in Him’ (ch.8). Neither quotation, nor their contexts, are determinative in relation to the distinction between penal or ontological substitution.

common to both), Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians.⁸ This is not to say that he was unaware of the material from which he did not quote, but he gives us some indication of the spread of material that would be later consolidated formally as the New Testament; these communities were far from hermetically sealed from each other. In addition, sometime just before or not long after Ignatius' martyrdom, which the Philippians had already heard about,⁹ Polycarp of Smyrna copied all of Ignatius' letters and sent them to Philippi, demonstrating a pattern from apostolic times of Christian communities rapidly disseminating valuable information.¹⁰ This must have been prior to 120 AD. According to church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, Irenaeus was a hearer of Polycarp in Smyrna, and would have known the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, along with everything Polycarp and the Christian community in Smyrna knew.¹¹ So the continuity of teaching from the apostles to the apostolic fathers in the first century and to Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the mid to late second century can be seen.

As bishop of Antioch who refused to bow to Emperor Trajan, Ignatius was charged with sedition and sentenced to die in the Roman Coliseum. His death can be dated to sometime within the reign of Trajan (98 AD to 117 AD), and most historians place the date in the range of 108 – 117 AD. On his long trip to Rome, marching alongside much younger Roman soldiers, he wrote seven letters just before his martyrdom in Rome (between 110 – 117 AD). Six were to various church communities and one was to Polycarp of Smyrna, his fellow bishop and possibly fellow pupil at the feet of the apostle John. These letters are mostly encouragements to them to not plead or intervene on his behalf, as his route would take him through or past these cities in the western part of Asia Minor. In these letters, Ignatius makes some theological reflects on the church, the sacraments, the role of bishops, and the Sabbath. Ignatius' letters demonstrate a brevity and grammar consistent with a man hurriedly and almost breathlessly sending off letters.

We must use some caution with the existing forms of Ignatius' letters. Shorter and longer versions exist. The original seven letter collection was also supplemented by spurious letters assigned to Ignatius' name. Some scholars have argued that the longer versions of the seven authentic letters were enlarged to make the content agreeable to theological concerns of this or that dispute. But other scholars maintain the genuineness of the longer versions of all seven letters.¹² It is quite possible that an early contemporary of Ignatius, such as Polycarp, was responsible for the longer versions.

Ignatius is understood as debating the heresy called Docetism, which denied to Jesus a truly human nature and especially truly human suffering.¹³ Ignatius responds by reasserting the suffering of Jesus as being truly human suffering.¹⁴ To the Smyrnaeans, he also recommends the study of the Hebrew prophets and the reading of the Gospel, 'in which the passion [of Christ] has been revealed to us, and the resurrection has been fully proved.'¹⁵ We note the pastoral concern to be rooted in the expectation in the Hebrew prophets that the Messiah would be truly human, and in the historical account of 'the Gospel' that Jesus was in fact truly human did truly suffer.

In that same section, Ignatius also reminds his audience of the eucharist. The martyr-bishop of Antioch is well-known for calling the bread 'the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father in His loving-kindness raised from the dead.' Ignatius connects the eucharist to the human suffering of Jesus for theological reasons which he provides in his letter to the Ephesians. There, he calls the eucharist 'the medicine of immortality, the antidote against death, but that we should live forever in Jesus Christ.'¹⁶ The longer version of this letter finishes the sentence instead, 'but a cleansing remedy driving away evil, that we should live forever in Jesus Christ.' What undergirded Ignatius' view of the eucharist? The humanity of Jesus, which Ignatius regarded as a 'cure.' This invites the inquiry of what exactly Ignatius believed about the humanity of Jesus.

⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); see Glenn Davis, *The Development of the Canon of the New Testament*, <http://www.ntcanon.org/Ignatius.shtml>.

⁹ Polycarp of Smyrna, *Epistle to the Philippians* 9; if Ignatius was brought through Philippi on his way to Rome, the Philippian church would have personally greeted him

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13; cf. Mt.28:18 – 20; 1 Th.5:27; Col.4:16; Ephesians itself seems to have been a general letter meant for rapid circulation since in the oldest manuscripts, there is a blank addressee in 1:1

¹¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.5

¹² Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), p.134 – 136

¹³ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature: From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics Inc., 6th printing 1992), p.65

¹⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 10 – 11

¹⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 7

¹⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 20

To the Ephesians, Ignatius writes:

'But some most worthless persons are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, and hold opinions contrary to the doctrine of Christ, to their own destruction, and that of those who give credit to them, whom you must avoid as ye would wild beasts. For "the righteous man who avoids them is saved for ever; but the destruction of the ungodly is sudden, and a subject of rejoicing." [Proverbs 10:5; 11:3] For "they are dumb dogs, that cannot bark," [Isaiah 56:10] raving mad, and biting secretly, against whom ye must be on your guard, since they labour under an incurable disease. But our Physician is the only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter of the only-begotten Son. We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For "the Word was made flesh" [John 1:14]. Being incorporeal, He was in the body; being impassible, He was in a passible body; being immortal, He was in a mortal body; being life, He became subject to corruption, that He might free our souls from death and corruption, and heal them, and might restore them to health, when they were diseased with ungodliness and wicked lusts.'¹⁷

The shorter version of this section reads:

'For some are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, whom ye must flee as ye would wild beasts. For they are ravening dogs, who bite secretly, against whom ye must be on your guard, inasmuch as they are men who can scarcely be cured. There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible, even Jesus Christ our Lord.'¹⁸

What interests me here is the identification of human sinfulness and error as a *disease* which needs to be *cured*. The legal-penal framework is not present. The longer version certainly piles up epithets about the men who take the name of Jesus in a manipulative way, deploying the phrase 'incurable disease' to describe their condition. But Ignatius, in both shorter and longer versions, immediately goes on to discuss Jesus in such a way to make clear that he believes Jesus is the cure for the 'disease' of sin. The longer version is quite remarkable for its theological content. It uses the title 'Physician' of both 'God...the Father' and 'the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ.' The union of his immortality and his mortal body resulted in life for humanity. He uses the phrase 'became subject to corruption' in both a physical sense and moral sense, and the evidence for that is twofold: (1) given the sinful errors of the blaspheming men above, their problem is not just that they are physically dying but also morally and spiritually corrupt; and (2) the subsequent phrases identify physical 'death' as distinct from 'corruption,' and 'health' as consisting of reversing 'ungodliness and wicked lusts.' Hence it seems fairly certain that Ignatius' atonement theology can be described as 'ontological substitution' or 'medical substitution.'

The shorter version of this letter sees the substance of Jesus as Physician to be the unique union of 'flesh and spirit; both made and not made.' While the shorter version is much more abbreviated than the longer version on this issue, the same thought is present. It is the union of Jesus' immortality, or divine nature, and his mortal body, which is his human nature, which is itself the healing of the diseased human nature carried by all, especially the blasphemers. The high Christology of Ignatius is present in the shorter version as well: 'God existing in flesh; true life in death.'

Similarly, in the letter(s) to the Trallians, Ignatius deploys medical and healing terminology for Jesus' atonement once again.

'Not that I know there is anything of this kind among you; but I put you on your guard, inasmuch as I love you greatly, and foresee the snares of the devil. Wherefore, clothing yourselves with meekness, be ye renewed in faith, that is the flesh of the Lord, and in love, that is the blood of Jesus Christ. Let no one of

¹⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 7, longer version

¹⁸ Ibid, shorter version. Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Synodis* 47 quotes this passage and discusses its meaning in the context of the Arian disputation about the Son being 'originate' in terms of his humanity from Mary, and 'unoriginate' in terms of his divine relation from the Father. His reference indicates that Ignatius' letters were discussed over two hundred years after they were penned.

you cherish any grudge against his neighbour. Give no occasion to the Gentiles, lest by means of a few foolish men the whole multitude [of those that believe] in God be evil spoken of. For, 'Woe to him by whose vanity my name is blasphemed among any' [Isaiah 52:5].¹⁹

Ignatius connects being 'renewed in faith' to 'the flesh of the Lord.' He connects being renewed 'in love' to 'blood of Jesus Christ.' If he is not referring to the actual eucharistic elements of bread and wine, encouraging his readers to hold fast to the observance itself and its proper ministers, then he is at least using the elements conceptually to denote our participation by the Spirit in Christ, specifically in his humanity. In the previous chapter, Ignatius expresses concern that they 'continue in intimate union with Jesus Christ our Lord, and the bishop, and the enactments of the apostles'²⁰ as contrasted with 'heresy.'²¹ So this participation-in-Christ element in Ignatius is apparent.

Ignatius' further concern is Christian obedience, observable by 'the Gentiles.' For the Antiochian bishop, the truth about Christ leads directly to conduct. As the apostle Paul deployed the quote from Isaiah 52:5 to chastise the Jews of his generation in Romans 2:24, so Ignatius also deploys it. He uses it as a warning rather than a current state of affairs. Which means, therefore, that Ignatius sees the 'flesh and blood' of Jesus as the undoing of 'foolishness,' 'evil,' and 'vanity.' If so, the achievement of Jesus in eliminating such things from his own life, indeed, his own 'flesh and blood,' would logically undergird such a conviction.

The longer version adds some remarkable amplification:

'Now I write these things unto you, not that I know there are any such persons among you; nay, indeed I hope that God will never permit any such report to reach my ears, He 'who spared not His Son for the sake of His holy Church' [Romans 8:32]. But foreseeing the snares of the wicked one, I arm you beforehand by my admonitions, as my beloved and faithful children in Christ, furnishing you with the means of protection [literally, 'making you drink beforehand what will preserve you'] against the deadly disease of unruly men, by which do ye flee from the disease by the good-will of Christ our Lord. Do ye therefore, clothing yourselves with meekness, become the imitators of His sufferings, and of His love, wherewith He loved us when He gave Himself a ransom [Ephesians 2:4; 1 Timothy 2:6] for us, that He might cleanse us by His blood from our old ungodliness, and bestow life on us when we were almost on the point of perishing through the depravity that was in us. Let no one of you, therefore, cherish any grudge against his neighbour. For says our Lord, 'Forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you.' [Matthew 6:14] Give no occasion to the Gentiles, lest 'by means of a few foolish men the word and doctrine [of Christ] be blasphemed.' [1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:5] For says the prophet, as in the person of God, 'Woe to him by whom my name is blasphemed among the Gentiles' [Isaiah 52:5].'²²

Once again, I am less interested in authorship than reception. Clearly these longer versions of Ignatius were valued and read alongside the shorter. This attests to the Christian community hearing in these words – attributed to Ignatius – a declaration of what they already believed.

The identification of sin with a 'disease' of sorts is stronger. Ignatius speaks 'against the deadly disease of unruly men.' He urges his audience to 'flee from the disease.' That same disease was one that Christians once shared. Indeed, 'we were almost on the point of perishing through the depravity that was in us.' The disease is manifested by 'cherish[ing] any grudge against [one's] neighbor,' and lacking forgiveness. Ignatius was probably concerned about these particular manifestations of sin on account of the persecution he and other Christians faced from 'the Gentiles.'

Correspondingly, the identification of Jesus as a physician and a medicine is stronger. Ignatius' 'admonitions' seem to specifically concern the self-giving of the Son and the Father's gift of the Son with the death of Jesus especially in view. His 'admonitions' thereby are 'furnishing you with the means of protection against the deadly disease' of sin. Our participation with Christ leads to being empowered to 'flee from the disease by the good-will of Christ our

¹⁹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 8, shorter version

²⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 7, shorter version

²¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 6, shorter version

²² Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 8, longer version

Lord.’

As Ignatius exhorts his readers to ‘become the imitators of His sufferings, and of His love,’ which includes his death for others, he links ‘ransom’ language to *cleansing*. ‘When He gave Himself a ransom for us, that He might cleanse us by His blood from our old ungodliness, and bestow life on us.’ Whereas other patristic writers link Jesus’ work as our ransom over against the devil’s authority and influence over us, Ignatius understands it differently. For the bishop from Antioch, the ‘ransom’ concerns ridding human nature of ‘the depravity that was in us.’ How is Jesus able to do this?

For Ignatius, this healing required the eternal Word of God to take up a truly human birth and body, which is what he discusses in the next two chapters. Ignatius (in the longer version) says in that context that Jesus ‘clothed himself with a body of like passions with our own.’²³ The Greek word ‘passion’ would become, in later Christian writings, something that was *denied* to God in the sense that God could be influenced to act out of character with Himself, like Zeus and Mars regularly were. This is arguably how the word ‘passion’ is to be understood here.²⁴ Other Christian writers used the word ‘passion’ with reference to non-moral aspects of human existence, like thirst and hunger, and granted those to Jesus. How does the Ignatian seven letter corpus use the word ‘passion’? In every instance but one, the word ‘passion’ is used in reference to Jesus’ suffering and death, as in modern liturgical Christian use: ‘the passion of Christ.’ However, in the one other instance, Ignatius refers to emotions normally grouped in with anger: ‘Be humble in response to their wrath; oppose to their blasphemies your earnest prayers; while they go astray, stand steadfast in the faith. Conquer their harsh temper by gentleness, their *passion* by meekness.’²⁵ This usage is decidedly negative. Thus, for Jesus to have a body of ‘like passions with our own’ does not mean that Ignatius believed Jesus capitulated to those ‘passions.’ But it can be reasonably offered that Ignatius himself, or, those who expanded on the original version of Ignatius’ original (as the case may be), believed that Jesus took on *fallen* humanity. This fits with the language of Jesus becoming ‘subject to corruption’ for our sakes in the longer version to the Ephesians, above. This, again, is medical substitutionary atonement. Jesus did *for us* what we could not do *for ourselves*: heal his human nature, and rid it of sin, by uniting it perfectly with God. He can therefore do *in us* what we cannot do *by ourselves*.

The language and categories of thought of Ignatius move in much the same pattern as the New Testament letter 2 Peter. In that letter, Peter stresses a participatory paradigm of sharing in the life of Christ. He reminds them of the power and promises of Jesus, that ‘you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust’ (2 Pet.1:4). The term ‘corruption’ occurs two more times in connection with false teachers (2 Pet.2:10, 19), who ‘indulge the flesh’ (2 Pet.2:10) and ‘entice by fleshly desires’ (2 Pet.2:18). Like Ignatius’ quotation of a proverb about dogs, Peter quotes rather unflattering proverbs about dogs and pigs to characterize the false teachers (2 Pet.2:22). Although Peter was addressing the specific characteristics of false teachers, he clearly believed that the paradigm of salvation pertained to all in this way: humanity’s fleshly corruption needs ‘purification’ (2 Pet.1:9) and healing by our participation in ‘the divine nature’ in and through Jesus Christ. This Jesus was, as Peter reminds his audience, transfigured in the presence of witnesses (2 Pet.1:17 – 18), to demonstrate the purification of human nature that he perfected in his death and resurrection on our behalf. If Ignatius was influenced by Peter himself, and/or by 1 and 2 Peter, which is certainly possible given the numerous references in the Ignatian corpus to 1 Peter and one plausible reference to 2 Peter,²⁶ then this affinity for language and categories is anchored in a fairly reasonable historical explanation. It also finds a solid theological explanation, as 2 Peter contains the same concern.

Notably, 2 Peter contains statements that penal substitutionary atonement advocates have found difficult to interpret. ‘There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master *who bought them*’ (2 Pet.2:2). ‘The Lord is... patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance’ (2 Pet.3:9). On the face of it, Peter does not seem to uphold the notion of limited atonement, the idea that Jesus died only to save some people, which the penal substitutionary model seems to require in order to avoid a double accounting problem. The problem can be stated this way: Can God pour out His wrath twice – once on Jesus at the cross for ‘all’ and then another time on ‘the unrepentant’ in hell? This double accounting problem is

²³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 10, longer version

²⁴ Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

²⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 10, longer version

²⁶ 2 Pet.3:9 appears to be quoted in Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 11, longer version

what persuades many adherents of penal substitution to also hold (sometimes reluctantly) the companion doctrine of limited (or 'definite') atonement – God must pour out His wrath on the crucified Jesus for 'the elect' and then pours out the remainder of His wrath for 'the non-elect' directly in hell. Yet Peter does not appear to be using a model of atonement where the retributive justice (Calvin) of God is 'satisfied', or a legal-penal one in any sense, as he extends the atonement to the unrepentant false teachers: 'There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them' (2 Pet.2:2). In the legal-penal satisfaction framework, Peter could only be mistaken about extending the atonement of Jesus to false teachers who are refusing and denying him. Hence the phrase, 'the Master who bought them,' raises concerns for penal substitution advocates. Is Peter suggesting that the false teachers' denial of Jesus will have no material consequence for them? Hardly, for he speaks later of 'the destruction of ungodly men' (2 Pet.3:8). Why then does Peter speak of the atonement in an inclusive way?

If, however, Peter is articulating the atonement in a medical-ontological framework, then the problem of accounting for God's wrath vanishes. The word 'bought' – whether its source is the Mediterranean marketplace or the Jewish exodus ransom – will need explanation. In the ontological substitution atonement theology, Jesus 'bought' them in the sense that he paid the price to acquire a cleansed, purified humanity which is fully united with his divine nature, by his entire incarnation, life, death, and resurrection for their sakes. Since he did this for all people, with no limits on his side, he included even the humanity of the false teachers. The logical puzzle pieces are made explicit by Irenaeus, below. If the false teachers hold fast to the corruption in their human nature, Jesus will still call for their surrender and fiery purification. His wrath will be directed to the corruption in them, not at their personhood per se. But their ongoing stubborn resistance to his purifying love will cause their experience of his love to be torment.

Also, Peter does not seem to support the notion of God saving an 'elect few' or making a hidden, divine decree calling only some to salvation, which is also a companion doctrine to penal substitution and limited atonement: 'The Lord is... patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance' (2 Pet.3:9). Ezekiel also offers the same sentiment as Peter: 'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?' (Ezk.18:23) If God limits the scope of the atonement to an elect number, then how can Scripture also speak of God's desire for all to come to repentance?

In the Calvinist tradition, professor of theology at the University of Saumur, Moses Amyraut (1596 – 1664 AD), proposed a hypothetical universal predestination which then narrowed in scope based on God's foreknowledge of people's actual choices. But theologians Friedrich Spanheim (1600 – 1649 AD) at the University of Leiden and Francis Turretin (1623 – 1687 AD) at the Academy of Geneva, vigorously criticized this idea and defended Calvinist orthodoxy, which is, once again, hard to reconcile with this statement about God's desire to save *all*.

In any case, it appears that neither Peter nor Ignatius had qualms about speaking this way. If Jesus substituted himself for Israel and personally defeated sin in his own flesh, even as measured against the tenth commandment which condemned all forms of covetousness, greed, lust, and jealousy (Rom.8:3), then he accomplished what no one else could – neither Israelite under the Sinai law (Rom.7:14 – 25), nor Gentile outside the Sinai covenant (Rom.2:12 – 16; 5:12 – 21). No wonder, then, that Jesus could offer his Spirit – the Spirit of his new humanity united with his divinity – to all, without reservation. This would explain why Ignatius, as a student of the apostles and heir of their teaching, believes that Jesus himself is the medicine available for the very men who are blaspheming him. Church historian Philip Schaff writes of Ignatius' letters, 'The central idea is *the renovation of man* (Eph.20), now under the power of Satan and Death (ib. 3, 19), which are undone in Christ, the risen Savior (Smyrn.3), who 'is our true life,' and endows us with immortality (Smyrn. 4, Magn. 6, Eph. 17).'²⁷ Jesus' new humanity is the 'cure' for our corrupted humanity. It is what the eucharist points to: the 'cleansing remedy to drive away evil.'

Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 – 202 AD)

Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach neither cite nor mention Irenaeus. This omission is quite problematic for their argument because Irenaeus is enormously significant as the first major theologian outside the New Testament. I discuss him extensively following Ignatius and the other 'apostolic fathers' because he brings together theological statements in a coherent way, as the discipline of theology is much like solving a jigsaw puzzle, and it is easy to let Irenaeus speak

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 4* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), p.37 emphasis mine

for himself. Interestingly, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach start with Justin Martyr and call him a theologian, when in fact he was less a systematic theologian like Irenaeus and more of a philosophical apologist answering particular questions put to him both Jew and Greek. Irenaeus is important as a historical witness to the thought of the earliest Christians, in his focus on writing on the atonement,²⁸ and as a source quoted by Athanasius and other orthodox defenders of the faith. And as I argue below, Irenaeus would not consider penal substitution to be correct.

Who was Irenaeus, and what role did he play in the early church? Irenaeus explicitly links the Greek East and the Latin West, although communication and ties between the two spheres were strong until the time of Augustine in the early fifth century. Irenaeus was born in Smyrna in Asia Minor, where he tells us, he learned of Jesus ‘in his youth’ through the impressive figure of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who reportedly had been a disciple of the apostle John.²⁹ Irenaeus continued to address concerns Polycarp did before him.

First, Polycarp had sent his pupil Pothinus as part of a significant Greek-speaking migration into Celtic Gaul to be the first Christian bishop in that region.³⁰ Irenaeus would later go to Lyons and serve as a priest under Pothinus. Church historian Philip Schaff notes, ‘Between Marseilles and Smyrna there seems to have been a brisk trade.’³¹ Christian mission followed. As was true during the New Testament time period (e.g. Rom.15:18 – 24; Col.1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; Rev.2 – 3), Greek-speaking Asia Minor would continue to be the launching point for mission to the Latin West throughout the second century.

Second, Polycarp himself already demonstrates the strong ties between East and West which Irenaeus would inherit. Polycarp visited Rome while his fellow Syrian, Anicetus, was bishop of Rome (155 – 166 AD) to discuss the differences that already existed between the churches of Asia Minor and Rome, especially the date of Easter.³² This fact again reminds us that the Christian communities in the Greek East and Latin West were well aware of each other and their differences; news and material circulated quickly and broadly. Polycarp and Anicetus quickly came to agreement about everything except the dating of Easter. Polycarp maintained the eastern practice of placing Easter on the 14th of Nisan, the day of the Jewish Passover, which usually did not fall on a Sunday. This demonstrated a closer cultural proximity to a Jewish Christianity. Anicetus and the Roman Christians, however, followed the western practice of observing Easter on the first Sunday after the spring equinox. Happily, the two decided to maintain fellowship with each other. This communion and cordiality between Greek East and Latin West was reenacted by Irenaeus later in 190 or 191 AD, when he prevailed upon Victor, then bishop of Rome, to not excommunicate the Greek speaking Christians of Asia Minor for continuing the practice, despite Victor’s wishes and, perhaps, growing ambitions.

Third, on Irenaeus’ testimony, Polycarp’s visit to Rome also won over disciples of the gnostic teachers Marcion and Valentinus. This left quite an impression on Polycarp’s protégé Irenaeus, whose task it was to write the most extensive critique of Gnosticism ever produced. In 177 AD, while Irenaeus was serving under Pothinus, then bishop of Lyons, he was sent by Pothinus from Lyons to Rome. He:

‘had the mortification of finding the Montanist heresy patronized by Eleutherus the Bishop of Rome; and there he met an old friend from the school of Polycarp, who had embraced the Valentinian heresy. We cannot doubt that to this visit we owe the lifelong struggle of Irenaeus against the heresies that now came in, like locusts, to devour the harvests of the Gospel. But let it be noted here, that, so far from being “the mother and mistress” of even the Western Churches, Rome herself is a mission of the Greeks; Southern Gaul is evangelized from Asia Minor, and Lyons checks the heretical tendencies of the Bishop at Rome. Ante-Nicene Christianity, and indeed the Church herself, appears in Greek costume which lasts through the synodical period; and Latin Christianity, when it begins to appear, is African, and not Roman. It is strange that those who have recorded this great historical fact have so little perceived its bearings upon Roman

²⁸ Aulen (1998) says, ‘The idea of Atonement recurs continually in his writings, freshly treated from ever new points of view; his basic idea is in itself thoroughly clear and unmistakable, and also, as we shall see in the next chapter, marks out the track which succeeding generations were to follow.’ (p.17) For an excellent treatment of Irenaeus, please see Aulen ch.2.

²⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.14

³⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1 – 27 is noted by Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), p.834 as an introduction to Irenaeus

³¹ Schaff, p.834

³² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24 (also copied by Nicephorus, 4.39) includes this as Irenaeus’ recollection to Victor, bishop of Rome

pretensions in the Middle Ages and modern times.’³³

Fourth, and very relatedly, Irenaeus follows Polycarp’s awareness of the four authoritative Gospels. The other specific differences discussed by Polycarp of Smyrna and Anicetus of Rome go unnamed, but historians infer that one of those differences was the relation between the Gospel accounts considered authoritative and apostolic. Matthew’s Gospel had won early and widespread acceptance, and the Christians of Asia Minor had by this time developed a preference for John’s Gospel, while the heretic Marcion in Rome held out his own edited version of Luke’s Gospel as the one and only true account.³⁴ Irenaeus is the earliest writer to *explicitly* affirm Matthew, Mark, Luke (in its full version), and John as canonical, demonstrating an awareness of Christian discussions on this matter.³⁵ However, Polycarp, in his one brief but excellent letter to the Philippians, is *implicitly* the first to do so because of his Johannine language.³⁶

At some point prior to his service as a priest in Lyons, Irenaeus left Smyrna and stayed in Rome where he joined the school of Justin Martyr (100 – 165 AD), whom I will consider below. Irenaeus echoes material in Justin,³⁷ but whether Irenaeus learned this from Justin or whether they drew from a common understanding cannot be ascertained. But of the two, Irenaeus had the more extensive training and scholarly temperament. When Irenaeus returned from Rome to Lyons in 178 AD, he discovered that Pothinus had been martyred by Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. He was elected bishop of Lyons. And he wrote in Greek an extremely well-researched critique of Gnosticism, which ranged throughout the Mediterranean, and defense of Christian faith called *Against Heresies* sometime between 175 – 188 AD. At some unknown date, Irenaeus put in writing a guidebook, called the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. As a church leader, he had probably used the contents of this book with Christian converts for many years. Eusebius attests to other works written by Irenaeus, but these are now lost to us. In *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* he quotes from all four Gospels, all the letters of Paul except Philemon, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation; and possibly also James.³⁸ This would leave only Philemon and 3 John not explicitly mentioned.

By acquaintance with Polycarp, and having been nurtured in Christian faith in the community of Polycarp’s town of Smyrna, there can be no doubt, therefore, that Irenaeus would have also been aware of the early shape of the New Testament, the writings of the ‘apostolic fathers’ including Ignatius’ corpus and the letter to the Philippians from his mentor Polycarp, all of Justin Martyr’s writings, and probably others like Tatian the Assyrian (another student of Justin, who unfortunately became heretical), Athenagoras of Athens, and others. His keen interest in the church-wide observances of Easter must have made him aware of the fact that Christians in Palestine (following 70 AD) and Alexandria had shifted to the position of Rome, so he would have been aware of all the major centers of Christian faith, probably including Edessa in the Parthian Empire. He amassed incredible amounts of information about Gnosticism and would surely have been aware of the pseudo-Christian literature that flowed in and out of that movement. Irenaeus sums up the whole of known Christian thought until that point.

³³ Schaff, p.834

³⁴ Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1985)

³⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8; the *Didache* assumes readers know Matthew, and quotes from unique material in Matthew and material common to both Matthew and Luke; Clement of Rome quotes from material common to Matthew, Mark, and Luke; Ignatius of Antioch quotes from Matthew and Luke; the *Shepherd* of Hermas quotes from Matthew explicitly, quotes from material shared by Matthew and Mark, and contains allusions to unique material in Luke.

³⁶ Polycarp quotes from Matthew, Mark, and Luke; allusions to John’s writings, including the Gospel, are present: ‘he that hath love is far from all sin’ (Phil.3; 1 Jn.3:5 – 6); ‘lusts that are in the world’ (Phil.5; 1 Jn.2:16 – 17); ‘for whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist’ (Phil.7; 1 Jn.4:3); ‘the first-born of Satan’ (Phil.7; Jn.8:44; Rev.3:9); ‘that we might live in him’ (Phil.8; Jn.5:25 – 26; 14:19 – 20; 1 Jn.4:9). While Ignatius’ knowledge of John is sometimes conceded, e.g. J.N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943) p.11 – 14, nevertheless Polycarp’s intellectual superiority is acknowledged. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, Vol 1, Section 1: St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp* (1885), p.595 – 97 says, ‘The divergence between the two writers as regards Scriptural quotations is equally remarkable. Though the seven Ignatian letters are many times longer than Polycarp’s Epistle, the quotations in the latter are incomparably more numerous, as well as more precise, than in the former. The obligations to the New Testament are wholly different in character in the two cases. The Ignatian letters do, indeed, show a considerable knowledge of the writings included in our Canon of the New Testament; but this knowledge betrays itself in casual words and phrases, stray metaphors, epigrammatic adaptations, and isolated coincidences of thought ... On the other hand in Polycarp’s Epistle sentence after sentence is frequently made up of passages from the Evangelical and Apostolic writings ... But this divergence forms only part of a broader and still more decisive contrast, affecting the whole style and character of the two writings. The profuseness of quotations in Polycarp’s Epistle arises from a want of originality ... On the other hand the letters of Ignatius have a marked individuality. Of all early Christian writings they are pre-eminent in this respect.’

³⁷ J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1920), p.10 – 44

³⁸ Robinson, p.102; Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)

Gnostic thought flowed out of the Greek philosophical dualism which opposed the world of intangible spirit against the world of physical matter. Gnostics believed that human beings were more fundamentally soul than body. In their ensuing belief system, they held various views of the body as inferior or irrelevant: the body would not be redeemed by God, therefore a person's body was ethically unimportant and/or its desires must be suppressed completely. This dualism stood in contradistinction from the Hebraic-Christian view which said that God in creation made physical things good, even the human body. The Gnostics wanted to deny the supremacy of the God of the Old Testament for His creation of matter; they posited another God higher than the Old Testament God. They denied the relation between the Old Testament and the New for its continuity along these lines. They denied the Incarnation of Jesus into truly a human nature because of their disdain for the human body. And they also denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which completed the incorporation of humanity's physical nature into the very being of God.

Irenaeus understood that the entirety of biblical revelation, salvation, and the trustworthiness of God was at stake. Irenaeus knew that because of God's original commitment to the physical world, God has acted in Christ to redeem not only the souls of people but also their bodies, and furthermore the creation story itself.

First, Irenaeus asserted that God is the creator of all things. The Gnostics, by contrast, wanted to keep God 'unsullied' by the material world, which they regarded as dreadful and impure. They attributed the creation to angelic beings, or intermediaries, who did the work of creation. In response, Irenaeus appears to take the biblical Hebraic language for creation as 'the work of His hands' (e.g. Isa.5:12; Ps.102:25), and He inserts the Son and the Spirit into the phrase as the two 'hands' of God:

'Now man is a mixed organization of soul and flesh, who was formed after the likeness of God, and moulded by His hands, that is, by the Son and Holy Spirit, to whom also He said, 'Let Us make man.' This, then, is the aim of him who envies our life, to render men disbelievers in their own salvation, and blasphemous against God the Creator. For whatsoever all the heretics may have advanced with the utmost solemnity, they come to this at last, that they blaspheme the Creator, and disallow the salvation of God's workmanship, which the flesh truly is...'³⁹

'It was not angels, therefore, who made us, nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make an image of God, nor anyone else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any Power remotely distant from the Father of all things. For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, 'Let Us make man after Our image and likeness;' He taking from Himself the substance of the creatures [formed], and the pattern of things made, and the type of all the adornments in the world.'⁴⁰

Irenaeus is quite well known for this 'two hands' expression. He uses it in other places, always with regards to creation, pointedly including humanity, and often in contrast to the idea that angels were intermediaries in creation.⁴¹ Irenaeus denies that idea, seeing in it a danger of separating God from His creation. Through his clever gloss on the Hebraic anthropomorphic phrase 'work of His hands,' Irenaeus makes the equally biblical assertion that the Word-Son and the Spirit were the means by which God was personally involved with the creation. He does not disdain it. God's involvement in the atonement is anchored and predicated on His involvement as creator.

Second, Irenaeus refers to the 'ancient formation of man.' Irenaeus saw humanity as patterned after the Word-Son of God from the creation. That is, as the Son of God has always been the true image of God through whom the Father is made known (Col.1:15, Heb.1:3), human beings were formed in the image of the eternal Son of God to similarly make God known in the creation (Gen.1:26 – 27). That relation that human beings were intended to have with God external to God but by the Spirit, the Son of God originally and eternally has with the Father within the Godhead by the Spirit. This is why the Son of God inhabited human flesh, to remake the likeness of God in human nature.

³⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4, preface, 4

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 4.20.1

⁴¹ *Ibid* 4.7.4; 4.20.4; 5.1.3; 5.5.1; 5.6.1; 5.28.4; cf.5.18; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 10, 11, 26

‘But who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except the Son of God, after whose image man was created? And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the *ancient production* [of His hands] into His own nature.’⁴²

‘...man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.’⁴³

Irenaeus’ theology of atonement is therefore rooted in the goodness of God’s physical creation of humanity, the creation story itself with humanity’s original mandate to increase in stature and maturity, and behind that, an inner-trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. This last point led Karl Barth to say that the Son of God not only became the ‘second Adam’ in the human man Jesus of Nazareth; he was also the ‘first Adam,’ the pattern by which God made man, the Image of God behind the image of God. But because we have tarnished the image of God within ourselves, and damaged the *relation* between ourselves and God, Jesus came to restore it. So he exhibited the ‘similitude,’ that is, the similarity with us: ‘the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.’ Now, the ‘ancient’ pattern in which God created human beings is affirmed by the Son of God who served as the template for that pattern in the first place. In himself, Jesus has renewed human nature into the image of God (what Eastern Orthodox writers designate as the ‘likeness’ of God), and reconciled human nature to God into the correct relation which God originally intended.

In the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, dated circa 195 AD, meant to summarize Christian teaching for new converts, Irenaeus writes:

‘But man He formed with His own hands [i.e. the Word and the Spirit as the ‘hands of God’], taking from the earth that which was purest and finest, and mingling in measure His own power with the earth. For He traced His own form on the formation, that that which should be seen should be of divine form: for (as) the image of God was man formed and set on the earth. And that he might become living, He breathed on his face the breath of life; that both for the breath and for the formation man should be like unto God. Moreover he was free and self-controlled, being made by God for this end, that he might rule all those things that were upon the earth. And this great created world, prepared by God before the formation of man, was given to man as his place, containing all things within itself.’⁴⁴

In debating the Gnostics with their low view of matter, Irenaeus seems to revel even in the physical earth from which God formed Adam. He does not elevate the interiority of human rationality to be ‘the image of God’ as would Augustine and others who compared the individual’s psychological thought process (thought, word, and will) to the Trinity in what is now known as the ‘psychological model’ of the Trinity. Instead, Irenaeus celebrates the physical form of man as somehow mirroring the divine form, although he does not explain this. In fact, I rather suspect that Irenaeus was thinking of the Hebraic, physical understanding of the oneness of male and female in marriage as being in the image of God, since it is that oneness which is life-bearing and life-giving, as reflected in the grammar of Genesis 1:27 and also the literary concern of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 where God makes all living beings to be life-bearing ‘after its kind.’ Irenaeus seems to be thinking this way, because he happily commingles phrases from Genesis 2 (‘from the earth’; ‘breathed on his face’) and Genesis 1 (‘image of God’; ‘be like unto God’; ‘rule all those things that were upon the earth’) in his explanation of human creation in the *Demonstration*. Hence, I think Irenaeus had a relational (in fact, marital) and physical understanding for what it meant for human beings to be in ‘the image of God.’ To the extent that he set about to answer the question of how an individual human being – and not just a married couple – was in ‘the image of God,’ Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* appealed to the relational

⁴² Ibid 4.33.4

⁴³ Ibid 4.38.3; John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p.50 is an example of a historian who credits Theophilus of Antioch (d.183 – 185 AD), *Letter to Autolycus* 25 with being the first to write that Adam had been *nepios*, ‘a child,’ and needing to properly mature. Irenaeus follows that view in *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11, 14. But it is just as reasonable to suspect that prior to Theophilus, some kind of view of Adam as not being static, but needing to mature in some way, was present in Christian thought.

⁴⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11

identity of the Word-Son as the image of God. Each human being was meant to be in relation to God by the Spirit, in some sense mirroring an internal relation of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. Irenaeus' theological anthropology was relational to its core.⁴⁵ For Irenaeus, there was no individualistic notion of human personhood. This sets Irenaeus up to explain the fall in terms of damaged relationship, and the atonement in terms of restored relationship.

Third, Irenaeus understood human sin as being a corruption within human nature, a defacing of the image and likeness of God in physical and personal form, and a breaking in the relationship between God and man internalized into human flesh and reproduced by the human mind. In a comment on Genesis 3, Irenaeus held that the physical corruption in humanity is an expression of, and perhaps synonymous with, sin in us:

'Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.'⁴⁶

This is a remarkable insight which would be lost upon Tertullian in Latin-speaking Roman North Africa, appears to disappear from the record in the extant writings of Cyprian and Augustine, but is maintained by Methodius, bishop of Olympus, a representative of the Greek-speaking East.⁴⁷ For Irenaeus, Adam and Eve *forced God* to close access to the Tree of Life. God, being love, and having love for Adam and Eve and all the children who would come from them, was confronted by two options. Would God allow the rather likely possibility that human beings would immortalize the corruption of their human nature within themselves? Or would God instead interpose death as an instrument by which this fate could not happen? God chose the latter, because death could be overcome later by resurrection, and human beings could choose to receive into themselves the healing in Christ for their corruption. So death, though tragically unpleasant, was a type of mercy and pity.

This may be surprising for those accustomed to thinking that God imposed death as a retributive punishment in retaliation for sinning, much like sending children to their room as punishment for stealing cookies. In the human case, the punishment is *in its essence* disconnected from the crime. But in the story of the fall, the punishment *is* the crime: Eating from the Tree of Knowledge is taking into one's self the power to define good and evil from within one's own self. It is in its very essence alienation from God, separation from His life, and a wounding of one's very self because it implants into the human being a desire to be a relativistic absolutist – that is, the desire to define good and evil (to be an absolutist) but from within one's own self (to be relativistic) by being the standard and measure of all things, rather than allowing God to define good and evil for us. So human death was an ontological consequence that was *forced upon God*. Moreover, the other consequences of the fall – pain in childbearing and futility in gardening (Gen.3:16 – 19) – were ontological as well. They are not additional punishment or retribution from God. They are simply the outgrowth of Adam and Eve's choice to try to separate themselves from God, the source of life. Human beings are wholly dependent on God for life and the production of more life; we are unable to be bearers of life and caretakers of life without Him. Anything having to do with producing more life would be difficult and frustrating.

Fourth, Jesus' incarnation and bodily resurrection is God's affirmation of His commitment to physical matter in general, human bodies in particular, and the creation story as a whole. After he demonstrates from Scripture that the Word of God himself took human flesh in Jesus,⁴⁸ Irenaeus says that Jesus saves human nature in himself by destroying the sin in himself.

Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately

⁴⁵ For an excellent discussion of Irenaeus' theological anthropology, see Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), ch.1. In particular, Steenberg notes that Irenaeus and Tertullian shared the view that the human soul grows in some sense with the human body, and that the Spirit of God gives life to the soul which mediates life to the body.

⁴⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

⁴⁷ Methodius of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5

⁴⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7

vanquished... But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death's) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it. For sin had no dominion over the spirit, but over man. For it behooved *Him who was to destroy sin*, and redeem man under the power of death, that *He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that *sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: 'God, true are His works.' But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated *in Himself* the ancient formation of man, that *He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.⁴⁹

This is a very significant passage in Irenaeus. In it, he insists that Jesus came to resolve a problem within human nature itself, and offer back to us his renewed humanity. Irenaeus says this in three ways. First, he says here and elsewhere that Jesus took his humanity not from some other substance, like the virgin soil from which Adam was first taken, but from the virgin womb of Mary.⁵⁰ The Word of God did this to partake of the same human nature that we all share, to renew it and save it. He did not start a different type of human being, because that would have been of no help to us! This is why Irenaeus constantly referred to Jesus' person and work as the 'recapitulation' – or the summing up, or literally, the re-heading up – of all humanity. Taking this concept from Paul (Eph.1:10), Irenaeus says that Jesus is the 'second Adam' (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 22; 45 – 49) the one from whom a new life passes into all other human beings.

God was always prepared to heal and redeem human nature, and recover human relational personhood for Himself. That is why, for Irenaeus, Jesus needed to save and redeem his own humanity first, for it was a fallen humanity which he took to himself. In the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus writes:

'Because death reigned over the flesh, it was right that through the flesh it should lose its force and let man go free from its oppression. *So the Word was made flesh, that, through that very flesh which sin had ruled and dominated, it should lose its force and be no longer in us.* And therefore our Lord took that same original formation as (His) entry into flesh, so that He might draw near and contend on behalf of the fathers, and conquer by Adam that which by Adam had stricken us down.'

'And the trespass which came by the tree was undone by the tree of obedience, when, hearkening unto God, the Son of man was nailed to the tree; thereby putting away the knowledge of evil and bringing in and establishing the knowledge of good: now evil it is to disobey God, even as hearkening unto God is good... So then by the obedience wherewith He obeyed even unto death, hanging on the tree, He put away the old disobedience which was wrought in the tree.'

'Thus then He gloriously achieved our redemption, and fulfilled the promise of the fathers, and *abolished the old disobedience.* The Son of God became Son of David and Son of Abraham; perfecting and summing up this in Himself, that He might make us to possess life. The Word of God was made flesh by the dispensation of the Virgin, to abolish death and make man live. For we were imprisoned by sin, being *born in sinfulness* and living under death. But God the Father was very merciful: He sent His creative Word, who in coming to deliver us came to *the very place and spot in which we had lost life, and brake the bonds of our fetters.* And His light appeared and made the darkness of the prison disappear, and hallowed our birth and destroyed death, loosing those same fetters in which we were enchained. And He manifested the resurrection, Himself becoming the first begotten of the dead, and *in Himself raising up man that was fallen*, lifting him up far above the heaven to the right hand of the glory of the Father: even as God

⁴⁹ Ibid 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

⁵⁰ 'Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.10; cf. 3.22.1 – 2)

promised by the prophet, saying: And I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen; that is, *the flesh* that was from David. And his our Lord Jesus Christ truly fulfilled, when He gloriously achieved our redemption, that He might truly raise us up, setting us free unto the Father.⁵¹

The ‘fallen tabernacle of David,’ Jesus has raised up ‘in himself’: i.e. the sinful ‘flesh’ of David which he inherited from Adam and passed down to everyone in his royal line, including Jesus. Jesus, at his death, did not take some kind of retributive punishment saved up by God for man. Instead, he finally set human nature free from ‘the bonds of our fetters’ by ‘in himself raising up man that was fallen.’ Entering into death as a judgment upon his own fallen humanity, says Irenaeus, Jesus brought the exile sequence in Genesis full circle to its reversal. The disobedience by the tree by which Adam and Eve corrupted human nature, Jesus reversed on another tree by his final step of obedience, which consisted of ‘putting away the knowledge of evil,’ where ‘evil’ Irenaeus defines as ‘to disobey God.’ Jesus did away with the last possibility for his human nature to do evil, by dying, and then raising it anew. Redemption, Irenaeus therefore defines, is the setting free of our human nature from our imprisonment to ‘sinfulness,’ the sinfulness into which we were born.

This is the ontological substitution atonement theory. It is a subset of the christus victor category, and arguably its only possible foundation, because it understands Christ as victorious over the internal enemy we face: sin indwelling us. Whereas other facets of the christus victor theory can emphasize the devil, or death, or some enemy external to us, the ontological substitution atonement theory highlights the internal contradiction within our ontological and relational being: we are corrupted (ontology) and alienated and hostile (relational) to God. Those who mischaracterize the patristic atonement theology as merely Jesus paying a ‘ransom’ to the devil are grossly misunderstanding the mind of the early church, and misunderstanding the mechanism by which ‘the flesh’ (as Paul and John used that term in a technical sense to refer to the corruption in our nature) served as the point of influence by which the devil had access to us. The patristic and Nicene theologians were working in ontological and relational categories, and ontological substitution was clearly their atonement theory. Already in Irenaeus we see a fine exposition of it, and this emphasis continued for centuries.

Fifth, Irenaeus also incorporates the Holy Spirit along with the Son into the work of atonement. Interestingly, Irenaeus says that the Holy Spirit needed to become ‘accustomed’ to dwelling in humanity, first in Jesus, to therefore dwell in believers. As the Spirit’s indwelling of believers is part and parcel of the reconciliation and communion Jesus brought about between humanity and God, the interrelation between the Son and the Spirit over the course of Jesus’ life is very significant. Irenaeus takes the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus in the Jordan baptism as a key milestone in becoming accustomed to ministering in and through human nature in principle, through the person of the Son:

‘Wherefore He [the Spirit] did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with Him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ.’⁵²

Scholar Anthony Briggman, in his exceptional work *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, says aptly:

‘Irenaeus believes that the Spirit became accustomed (*adsuesco*) to dwell, rest, and work among human beings as Christ’s Unction. Irenaeus considers the anointing of Jesus to involve not only the Spirit acting on Jesus but also the Spirit as acted upon. He does not say here that the Spirit created an environment within the humanity of Jesus suitable to his presence and work. Instead, he says the Spirit himself had to become accustomed to dwelling, resting, and working in the human environment. The need for the Holy Spirit to become accustomed... entails the presupposition that the Spirit was not prepared to perform and so could not have performed such works prior to the period of accustomization.’⁵³

I believe Briggman goes a bit too far in leaving us with the impression from 3.17.1 alone that Irenaeus ‘does not say

⁵¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 32, 34, 37 – 38

⁵² *Ibid* 3.17.1

⁵³ Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.72

here that the Spirit created an environment within the humanity of Jesus suitable to his presence and work.’ For Irenaeus says immediately afterwards, in the very next chapter, 3.18.7, that the eternal Son of God corrected something within his human nature. He became genuine ‘man, who had sin in himself... to destroy sin... so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death. God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man.’ It seems that the effects on the Spirit and on Jesus’ humanity are reciprocal. On the one hand, the Son, by the power of the Spirit, cleansed his humanity of the corruption of sin through his life, death, and resurrection, and thus accustomed his humanity to the presence of the Spirit. On the other hand, the Son accustomed the Spirit to indwelling humanity, through his incarnation into flesh by the Spirit, reception of the Spirit at the Jordan-event baptism, triumph over sin by the Spirit at his death and resurrection, and eventual communication of the Spirit after his resurrection. But otherwise, I heartedly welcome Briggman’s remarks about Irenaeus’ linkage of the Spirit to the overall work of atonement.

In fact, Irenaeus says that Jesus’ response to the accusations of the enemy is to commend his own human nature to the Holy Spirit to share with believers. Irenaeus creatively deploys the parable of the good Samaritan to refer to the fallen humanity of Jesus. Jesus’ human nature is the man fallen among thieves, restored by the activity of the Son and Spirit:

‘Wherefore we have need of the dew [i.e. Spirit] of God, that we be not consumed by fire, nor be rendered unfruitful, and that where we have an accuser there we may have also an Advocate, the Lord commending to the Holy Spirit His own man [*suum hominem*], who had fallen among thieves, whom He Himself compassionated, and bound up his wounds, giving two royal denaria; so that we, receiving by the Spirit the image and superscription of the Father and the Son, might cause the denarium entrusted to us to be fruitful, counting out the increase to the Lord.’⁵⁴

In this passage, Irenaeus would seem to agree that the healing of human nature in and through Jesus involved, or consisted in, accustoming his humanity to the Spirit. This would suggest that the work of atonement can be stated in terms which refer to the Spirit and the intended intrinsic relation between the Spirit and humanity. This is very different from the penal substitutionary atonement theory, which offers no explanation for the Holy Spirit’s role in the atonement per se, because it only envisions the Son absorbing some punitive divine wrath at his death.

Two last points remain to be considered: Sixth, Irenaeus’ doctrine of hell and, seventh, his doctrine of human free will. Like a jigsaw puzzle, various pieces of theology have to fit with one another in a way that makes sense. These two pieces sit very close to the doctrine of the atonement and must be made to fit. Unfortunately, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not attempt to understand the integrative aspect of theology in this way. If they had, they would see that they were misinterpreting the passages they cull from the patristic writers.

Sixth, let me examine Irenaeus’ definition of hell, which illustrates the patristic teaching that would follow after him. It set the stage for the entire Eastern Orthodox Church, along with some Catholics and Protestants who, like me, are persuaded by the historical pedigree and trinitarian theological reasoning of the early Christians. This definition is very different from that held by penal substitution advocates. For penal substitution adherents, hell is God’s prison system. In it, God keeps those who have rejected Christ in their earthly life, even though they almost certainly can be understood as wanting to get out of hell in eternity. This is simply in keeping with their doctrine of God’s holiness-justice-wrath. If Jesus absorbed a certain amount of God’s wrath on behalf of the elect, to uphold God’s justice, then what remains for the non-elect is the proportion of God’s wrath that did not fall on Christ. This effectively means that God has two main attributes: love (manifested towards the elect as mercy and grace) and wrath (manifested towards the non-elect as retributive justice). When we try to integrate these two divine attributes, it is unclear what we have. Most would simply say that at the core, then, God is simply arbitrary. This is difficult to integrate into the conviction that God is Triune, which means that love is God’s primary attribute.

Irenaeus understood hell in a framework where God’s love was the constant. He said that God is like the sun, with one attribute, not two. Therefore, when it comes to passages involving God ‘causing’ blindness or hardening Pharaoh’s heart, etc., Irenaeus says that we must interpret that without making God arbitrary and dualistic in his fundamental character:

⁵⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.17.3

‘For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.’⁵⁵

‘But God, foreknowing all things, prepared fit habitations for both, kindly conferring that light which they desire on those who seek after the light of incorruption, and resort to it; but for the despisers and mockers who avoid and turn themselves away from this light, and who do, as it were, *blind themselves*, He has prepared darkness suitable to persons who oppose the light, and He has inflicted an appropriate punishment upon those who try to avoid being subject to Him.’⁵⁶

Hell, therefore, is not another attribute or face of God. Like the sun, God has a singular nature – love – and is not reducible to dueling attributes, which would ultimately make Him arbitrary. Hell is, in fact, the love of God: the love of God which is seeking to purify the person who happens to be resisting. But in this case, just as the person with weak or diseased eyes is pained by the light of the sun, so the person with a weakened or diseased nature is pained by the presence of God. Therefore, that person experiences the wrath of God against the corruption in their nature because the wrath of God is simply the love of God trying to burn away the impurity and sin and resistance which they do not want to give up, which they have chosen to identify with for all eternity precisely because they have rejected Jesus, the cleansed, purified, God-soaked new human being.⁵⁷ Other theologians, like fourth century theologian Gregory of Nyssa and the entire Eastern Orthodox communion, who Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach also do not examine, followed Irenaeus in this line of thinking. What explanation these authors might offer as to how the Eastern Orthodox tradition got it so wrong, in their opinion, is a matter on which they have remained silent thus far.

The seventh piece of the theological puzzle that I want to examine is Irenaeus’ understanding of human free will. The most vigorous defenders of penal substitution couple this doctrine with the doctrine of the omni-causal sovereign will of God. Their idea is that God is the immediate cause of everything, both good and evil, both belief and unbelief. He is involved in all secondary causes, like human decision-making, which calls human free will into question and makes God’s character both good and evil. For if God Himself is really the one causing belief and unbelief, good and evil, predestining some for eternal bliss and others for eternal damnation, then God *is* both good and evil. According to penal substitution, human free will is difficult to uphold because logically, if Jesus absorbed a finite amount of God’s wrath on the cross, then God Himself has limited the effects of the atonement to the elect, and has excluded the non-elect from the benefits of the atonement. This is why penal substitution and the omni-causal sovereignty of God go so well together. And this theological system has many defenders, not least the high federal Calvinists who believe in double predestination, and the Dutch Reformed who believe in single predestination.

Various supporters of penal substitution have tried to distance themselves from this straightforward, logical implication by holding onto contradictory assertions here and there – that human free will is still nevertheless real; that God can look ahead in time and see who would accept Jesus; that God is responding to human free choice in the future; etc. – but this can be shown to make one’s systematic theology to be illogical and unclear. For example, why would God keep in hell those who want to get out and be with Him in eternity? Why not extend the scope of His own self-appeasement of His retributive justice (supposedly) to those who reject Him, at some point in time? If Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, why doesn’t God do His own moral will and carry out the very commands He gives to us?

As is clear throughout Irenaeus’ thought, human free will is vital to being made in the image of God. Therefore human free will is not an assertion to be slipped in around discussions of the atonement in order to preserve God’s

⁵⁵ Ibid 4.29.1

⁵⁶ Ibid 4.39.4. Irenaeus, like Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 43 before him, understood God’s foreknowledge as intuitive, not actual, and is caused by man’s choices. Thus, God’s foreknowledge is His understanding of all possible futures, not simply one future. If there are many possible futures, then correspondingly, human free will is real. If there is only one future, it is not.

⁵⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 69 seems to reiterate the same basic thought, but is a difficult passage. He produces a questionable translation and exegesis of Isaiah 53:8, but appears to say that the judgment of Jesus is upon the sinfulness he bore in himself, to bear away from humanity (68). That very ‘judgment is for some unto salvation, and to some unto the torments of perdition... Now those [who crucified him] took away to themselves the judgment... And the judgment is that which by fire will be the destruction of the unbelievers at the end of the world.’

character from the stain of arbitrariness and evil. Rather, human free will finds deep theological ground from the creation in the character of God. Irenaeus notes that God Himself guarantees human freedom:

‘God has always preserved freedom and self-government in man.’⁵⁸

He does not see human beings as individualistic, autonomous agents operating with their own battery packs, as it were. Rather, he sees God as the one who sustains our being and our free will in relation to Him. God’s providential care and grace precede human freedom and cause human choices to be genuinely free and personal. Hence, Irenaeus articulates the same view of relational humanity and freedom upheld by God’s providential care that John Cassian⁵⁹ and John of Damascus⁶⁰ would later teach. Here is a substantial passage from Irenaeus:

‘...God made man a free [agent] from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests (*ad utendum sententia*) of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man, as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves. On the other hand, they who have not obeyed shall, with justice, be not found in possession of the good, and shall receive condign punishment: for God did kindly bestow on them what was good; but they themselves did not diligently keep it, nor deem it something precious, but poured contempt upon His super-eminent goodness. Rejecting therefore the good, and as it were spewing it out, they shall all deservedly incur the just judgment of God, which also the Apostle Paul testifies in his Epistle to the Romans, where he says, ‘But dost thou despise the riches of His goodness, and patience, and long-suffering, being ignorant that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But according to thy hardness and impenitent heart, thou treasurest to thyself wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God.’ ‘But glory and honour,’ he says, ‘to every one that doeth good.’ God therefore has given that which is good, as the apostle tells us in this Epistle, and they who work it shall receive glory and honour, because they have done that which is good when they had it in their power not to do it; but those who do it not shall receive the just judgment of God, because they did not work good when they had it in their power so to do.

‘But if some had been made by nature bad, and others good, these latter would not be deserving of praise for being good, for such were they created; nor would the former be reprehensible, for thus they were made [originally]. But since all men are of the same nature, able both to hold fast and to do what is good; and, on the other hand, having also the power to cast it from them and not to do it – some do justly receive praise even among men who are under the control of good laws (and much more from God), and obtain deserved testimony of their choice of good in general, and of persevering therein; but the others are blamed, and receive a just condemnation, because of their rejection of what is fair and good...’

‘For it is in man’s power to disobey God, and to forfeit what is good... If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things, and to abstain from others? But because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.’⁶¹

⁵⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.15.2

⁵⁹ John Cassian, *Conferences* 13.12, says, ‘It cannot then be doubted that there are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator: but unless these are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection... And therefore the will always remains free in man, and can either neglect or delight in the grace of God. For the Apostle would not have commanded saying: ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ [Philippians 2:13] had he not known that it could be advanced or neglected by us. But that men might not fancy that they had no need of Divine aid for the work of Salvation, he subjoins: ‘For it is God that works in you both to will and to do, of His good pleasure.’ And therefore he warns Timothy and says: ‘Neglect not the grace of God which is in Thee,’ [1 Timothy 4:14] and again: ‘For which cause I exhort thee to stir up the grace of God which is in thee...’ [2 Timothy 1:6]’

⁶⁰ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, book 2, chapter 30, says, ‘‘Bear in mind, too, that virtue is a gift from God implanted in our nature, and that He Himself is the source and cause of all good, and without His co-operation and help we cannot will or do any good thing. But we have it in our power either to abide in virtue and follow God, Who calls us into ways of virtue, or to stray from paths of virtue, which is to dwell in wickedness, and to follow the devil who summons but cannot compel us. For wickedness is nothing else than the withdrawal of goodness, just as darkness is nothing else than the withdrawal of light. While then we abide in the natural state we abide in virtue, but when we deviate from the natural state, that is, from virtue, we come into an unnatural state and dwell in wickedness.’

⁶¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1 – 2, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

Irenaeus' teaching on the soul being the 'location' of human free will may also prove useful in the face of strict materialistic atheists who argue against free will. It is unclear to me whether neuroscience and quantum mechanics alone will decisively leave 'room' for human free will. Irenaeus is a helpful starting place for discussion on this subject. He simply summarizes the wide-ranging terms used in Scripture for different aspects of the human being, and relies on the concept of the incorporeal and immortal soul to ground his teaching on human freedom. In Irenaeus' usage, the soul is the conduit of the divine life of God into the physical body.⁶² We might also find Irenaeus helpful to 'locate' self-consciousness in the soul, perhaps in a manner that is shared with the body and impacts, say, our brain development.

Irenaeus' quotation of Paul from Romans 2 would be worth an expanded discussion, because his logic argues against the popular Calvinist interpretation of the 'potter and clay' passage of Romans 9. Irenaeus says of Romans 9 and the potter-clay analogy:

'If, then, thou art God's workmanship, await the hand of thy Maker which creates everything in due time; in due time as far as thou art concerned, whose creation is being carried out. Offer to Him thy heart in a soft and tractable state, and preserve the form in which the Creator has fashioned thee, having moisture in thyself, lest, by becoming hardened, thou lose the impressions of His fingers. But by preserving the framework thou shalt ascend to that which is perfect, for the moist clay which is in thee is hidden [there] by the workmanship of God. His hand fashioned thy substance; He will cover thee over [too] within and without with pure gold and silver, and He will adorn thee to such a degree, that even 'the King Himself shall have pleasure in thy beauty.' But if thou, being obstinately hardened, dost reject the operation of His skill, and show thyself ungrateful towards Him, because thou wert created a [mere] man, by becoming thus ungrateful to God, thou hast at once lost both His workmanship and life. For creation is an attribute of the goodness of God but to be created is that of human nature. If then, thou shalt deliver up to Him what is thine, that is, faith towards Him and subjection, thou shalt receive His handiwork, and shall be a perfect work of God.'⁶³

In Irenaeus, human free will is connected to why the ontological-medical substitution atonement theory works the way it does. God has worked out a way to purify human beings in a loving way consistent with His own loving nature. God had to personally acquire a human body in the person of His Son and by His Spirit. He had to heal human nature of the sinful corruption that stained it – the true object of His wrath – through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And God offers the new humanity of Jesus back to us by the Spirit in order to purify us. For Irenaeus, the atonement's purpose is to cleanse and purify us of our corruption. Thus does God remain committed to human free will from start to finish because of His love for us and because He will not damage His own image in us by overriding our freedom: 'that the Church may be fashioned after the image of His Son, and that man may finally be brought to maturity at some future time, becoming ripe through such privileges to see and comprehend God.'⁶⁴ I find it very significant that the early Christian writers uniformly believed in human free will for the same reasons Irenaeus did.⁶⁵ Not until Augustine would controversy erupt about it.⁶⁶

In fact, one correction I would make in Irenaeus is when he considers the question, 'Could not God have exhibited man as perfect from beginning?' and answers with, 'It was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.'⁶⁷ And immediately afterwards, he says again, 'God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.'⁶⁸ I believe Irenaeus relies overly much on the analogy of infancy for Adam, using physical

⁶² Ibid 2.33.4; 2.34.4; 5.7.1. Irenaeus even had a spatial conception of the soul: 'Souls themselves possess the figure of the body in which they dwell, for they have been adapted to the vessel in which they exist' (2.19.6). Steenberg, p.39 – 40, notes that Irenaeus agreed with Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 1.5; Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 18, 20 and *Dialogue with Trypho* 5; and Tertullian of Carthage, *DA* 5 – 9, especially 7.1 and 9.4.

⁶³ Ibid 4.39.2, see the whole chapter

⁶⁴ Ibid 4.37.7

⁶⁵ See my collection of citations, *Free Will and God's Grace in the Early Church Fathers*, <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-free-will-in-patristics.pdf>

⁶⁶ Seraphim Rose, *The Place of Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church* (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2017)

⁶⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1

⁶⁸ Ibid 4.38.2.

infancy as an analogy for experiential and spiritual infancy. For the question can still be asked, ‘So if God could have created Adam as ‘an adult,’ with already perfected love for God based on perfect knowledge of God, why did He not do so?’⁶⁹ To this Irenaeus has no answer. This silence is strange, because Irenaeus himself says, ‘With God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.’⁷⁰ If God *could* have done something better *but did not*, what explanation can be offered for that? On this detail, Irenaeus might not be able to uphold his own stated conviction. Others fault Irenaeus for his theodicy, because he allows for an arbitrariness in God which resulted in suffering and evil.

I would have preferred, and I think it would have been even more consistent of him, if Irenaeus had answered, ‘It was not possible for God to do so.’ Irenaeus already had the framework for saying that. If God has a non-coercive love towards humanity, as Irenaeus has already said,⁷¹ and even *is* non-coercive love in God’s own being, as I would say, then He *could not possibly* create Adam and Eve with an already perfected love for Him, for that would not be a love they had personally chosen. Nor could God create them with an already perfect knowledge of Himself, for that would entail them somehow sharing the mind of God directly, and it is doubtful that the finite could comprehend the infinite in such a way. So God had to create them with the desire to receive from Him and an inclination to love Him, but yet at one small step removed from Himself.

If this is so, then God actually *had* to create the tree of life in the garden. He *had* to *invite* without coercion Adam, Eve, and their descendants to participate more deeply in His own divine life in a physically immortal and spiritually ever-increasing mode, which Irenaeus had already deduced of the tree of life, as I quoted earlier.⁷² To an unfallen human being, the tree of life would have had the effect of sealing our will for God and uncorrupted human nature with divine life and the orientation of our personhood as directed outwards towards God, such that we would perfect our ontological freedom as relational creatures designed to depend on God and to constantly ascend intellectually and spiritually towards Him. In other words, under the necessity of authentic love, God *had* to create humanity so they might *freely* choose to *always* choose Him forever. It could not be automatic.

God also *had* to create the tree of knowledge of good and evil to invite us to leave the defining of good and evil with Him, and not take that power into ourselves. The second tree would have given human beings the knowledge of good, as we grew in relationship, love, and goodness. It would have also yielded human beings the knowledge of evil, as we imagined what it might mean to usurp God’s place, or take up a posture to harm or alienate others, and experience the loss of the relationship, love, and goodness that we had gained. Adam experientially knew what being ‘alone’ had been like, after seeing all the animals parade by him in male-female pairs: ‘not good,’ by God’s own assessment (Gen.2:18). Eve could imagine the aloneness even if she had never experienced it personally herself. If unfallen, they had had a child, and felt the joy of parenthood, they could imagine losing that child and the impoverishment of loss. But they did not have to actually abandon, harm, or alienate that child in reality. They could simply imagine reversing their growth in relationship, love, and goodness. In effect, God did design the second tree to produce in us the knowledge of good and evil, but through the experience of growing in goodness and rejecting the evil, while we left its fruit alone, and its power in God’s domain. The one heinous act by which all of God’s loving order and good authority could be rejected was taking the fruit from the tree of knowledge. And that, too, God had to offer as a non-coerced choice. It was bound up in His love for us. Hence, the garden in Genesis was the *only possible world* God could have made for humanity. It flowed from His commitments and His character. This necessity removes all accusations against God of being arbitrary or of taking an unnecessary risk of letting suffering and evil materialize. Irenaeus himself was not far from offering this answer: ‘It was *not even possible* for God to create man perfect from the beginning, because the definition of perfection itself involves an active choice.’ All the elements were actually there in his biblical exposition and theology. Irenaeus’ conviction can be maintained with this understanding: ‘With God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.’⁷³

Shifting gears from the biblical narrative to the language of the creeds and councils of the church leads me to the following technical discussion of personhood, nature, freedom, and love in the cases of both God and humanity. In the case of the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot choose to turn away from each other. Why not?

⁶⁹ Steenberg, p.41, offers an answer which does not fully suffice, nor does he answer the objection I raise here.

⁷⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.21.3

⁷¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.4.3; 4.37; 4.39; 5:37

⁷² *Ibid* 3.23.6

⁷³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.21.3

Because their divine persons are relationally fixed in love towards one another harmoniously.⁷⁴ Their love is unbreakable. Now is that a lack of freedom on God's part? Absolutely not. For this is an aspect of the divine nature and the eternal triune relations. God's constant choices to love flow from His nature. And 'freedom,' describing God's uncoerced choice, must be defined as 'free according to one's nature.' Freedom in theological discourse cannot be defined as 'freedom *from* one's own nature,' as if one's own nature can be rendered moot or considered plastic, which tends to be how postmoderns or technological optimists define it as they seek to 'transcend' the human. God cannot 'transcend' His own nature; that is a logical impossibility. This God who is Triune in His very being always loves, unhindered and unobstructed, because to not love would be a lapse into evil – that would be a betrayal of God's own divine nature, an impossibility for God whose very nature is love.

What about in the case of humanity? This formal language of the great church councils can be deployed to answer Irenaeus' own question in a way better than Irenaeus did. Why could God not create human beings to love Him irrevocably and perfectly from the start? Because to do so would render human beings into static robots and automatons. But that is not possible, both from the standpoint of God's character and from the definition of the human, for the two things are linked. Finite beings in conscious relation with the infinite God of love requires ever-deepening growth and awareness of that growth. What energy provides the movement? Since God is uncoerced by any force outside Himself, human beings whom God made in His own image must be uncoerced from any force outside themselves, including God Himself. But there must be some inner inclination towards God which comes from within: that is our own human nature, desiring union with our Creator. In order for human love to be genuine, human beings would have to choose to love God in an uncoerced manner, *to perfect our natures and our freedom* in an act of love for God to be united with Him. In other words, God *had* to create human beings as human *becomings*, called to be lovingly united with Himself, so that in that union, we could henceforth be ever-deepening as finite creatures experiencing infinite love. For God to do the impossible, and create human nature already fixed from the start, and human personhood as already determined in an orientation of other-love, would mean that human love would not be a true choice. In such a situation, human love would be something less than love. And human beings would be something less than human. If we are ultimately only acted upon, and not actors ourselves, then we would ultimately be indistinct from the rocks and grass of the created universe – a mirror passively reflecting objects, but not the image of God.

So God had to create human beings one very short step removed from having their human nature fixed in loving union with Him, and personhood ('face') fixed in an outward and not self-oriented direction, so they might freely choose to always choose God forever. God might have freely chosen to never create. Nothing was externally coercing God to do so, and contrary to process theologians, God had no internal need to create in order to become more fulfilled or complete as a being. But given that God did choose to create, God's loving, triune nature itself made logically necessary the original conditions of the garden for Adam and Eve. God's character of love required a narrative of human development, of human nature as just one small step away from permanent union with God, of human personhood as just one small step away from a being relationality fixed in facing God and beholding God, and human freedom perfected by love and in love to always love God. And thus, the garden of Eden, the two trees, and the necessity of a personal narrative of development are all *logical necessities resulting from* God's free, spontaneous, and unconditioned choice to create us. If the Son's *eternal*, relational choice to be loved and love the Father in the Spirit *reflects and constitutes* His very nature and personhood, then this impacts how we define human beings. We are also beings who are becoming, where our *temporal*, relational choice to be loved and love God will reflect and constitute our nature and personhood.

I will now evaluate two scholars who disagree with this assessment of Irenaeus' understanding of atonement. The outstanding Australian Patristics scholar Eric Osborn maintains that Irenaeus believed that we inherit the *guilt* of Adam and Eve. If that is true, then some doctrine of penal substitution built on God's retributive justice is not too

⁷⁴ Greek Orthodox theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), p.5 reminds us that the term for *person* is 'a referential reality. The referential character of the term is revealed fundamentally by its primitive use, that is, by its grammatical construction and etymology. The preposition *pros* ("towards") together with the noun *ops* (*opos* in the genitive), which means "eye," "face," "countenance," form the composite word *pros-opon*: I have my face turned towards someone or something; I am opposite someone or something. The word thus functioned initially as a term indicating an immediate reference, a relationship.' It is vital to recall that the Greek term for person (*prosopon*), as well as the Latin term (*persona*), were used in the Greek and Roman theater to indicate the 'masks' or 'faces' that the actors wore. When Christians brought this term into settled formal theological discourse by the time of Nicea (325 AD), the divine 'persons' were understood to be intrinsically and eternally persons-in-relation, 'facing' one another as it were. And we as human persons are always persons-in-relation as well, although our orientation in relationship, and experience of our relationship with God, is shaped by our nature and determined by our choices. See below.

far away. So Osborn's claim bears thorough investigation. Quoting two passages from Irenaeus, Osborn says, 'In the beginning we were led captive in Adam (5.21.1) and *we committed the sin* in the garden against Christ himself (5.17.1). Therefore Irenaeus understands original sin at least in the limited sense of *inherited guilt*.'⁷⁵ In the first of those quotations, Irenaeus says:

'He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam.'

I find it unlikely that Irenaeus meant that we are captives to Adam's *guilt* when he writes, 'captives in Adam.' Most historians and theologians attribute the theory of 'inherited guilt' to Augustine (354 – 430 AD) who by their accounts was the first to teach this.⁷⁶ Augustine's corollary (or motivation?) was to strengthen infant baptism. He held that infants who died prior to baptism went to hell, albeit the least intense gradation of hell, which was envisioned as a shadowy existence without pain but without bliss. By contrast, the Eastern Greek-speaking theologians, exemplified by Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote on this very topic, believed that they had to stay silent when considering the question of infants who died prematurely.⁷⁷ Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher David Bentley Hart faults Augustine for not being conversant enough in Greek, and using a mistranslated Latin copy of Romans 5 to reach conclusions about what the meaning of the phrase 'in Adam.'⁷⁸ It is historically unlikely that Irenaeus made that mistake, or wanted to be read that way, as no one following him understood him to mean that, despite the very wide circulation of *Against Heresies* (see below).

Also, although Irenaeus does not quote Ezekiel 18 explicitly in *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration*, we are on safe ground to assume he knew it and considered it. In a very involved discussion, Ezekiel says that God will *not* attribute the sins of the father to the son as guilt, nor vice versa (Ezk.18:20). Ezekiel's statement refers especially to the new covenant in the Spirit, which Irenaeus understood well, as he quoted Ezekiel quite strategically to make his points.⁷⁹ The significance of this passage is well known, as the doctrine of original sin defined as heritable guilt poses a well-known problem in relation to it. Would God hold the guilt of Adam and Eve against all their descendants, in direct disagreement with Ezekiel 18? Would Irenaeus assert such a thing? I find it doubtful.

Any theory of inherited Adamic guilt must answer the question of how Jesus could be human and yet not guilty at conception of Adam's sin. It must therefore offer a correlate: something special but unwarranted about Mary of Nazareth. Because Osborn projects this problem onto Irenaeus, he seems to feel that he must rescue Irenaeus, too. Correspondingly, Osborn writes in a *footnote*, curiously, 'The purity of Christ and his mother is seen as the great exception within a fallen race.'⁸⁰ Exceptional in what sense? He seems to read Irenaeus' phrase, 'the pure One opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God, and which He Himself made pure'⁸¹ as meaning that Jesus at conception instantly purified his humanity from the fallenness of Adam's flesh, and the womb of his mother, as well as her personhood perhaps (?), from Adamic guilt. But if so, is this really a plausible reading of Irenaeus? Or plausible in general?

Contra Osborn, I maintain that Irenaeus is referring to Mary's *virginal* status, not an *unfallen* status. Another patristics scholar, John Behr, Dean of St. Vladimir's Eastern Orthodox Seminary, points out that in Irenaeus,⁸² Mary serves as a 'recircling' [*recirculationem*] of Eve.⁸³ Given Irenaeus' fondness for pointing out the strategic repetition in the biblical story, he probably means this: the virgin Eve was disobedient while yet unfallen; but the virgin Mary was obedient while still being fallen. Mary retold Eve's story, not from within an unfallen human nature in the

⁷⁵ Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.218 emphasis mine

⁷⁶ Myk Habets and Bobby Grow, *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), ch.11

⁷⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Infants' Early Deaths*; see Habets and Grow, ch.11

⁷⁸ David Bentley Hart, 'Traditio Deformis,' *First Things* (May 2015); <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/05/traditio-deformis>; last accessed June 16, 2015

⁷⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.15.1 quotes Ezk.20:24 with reference to the limitations of the Sinai covenant with regard to the transformation of the human heart. On many occasions, Irenaeus quotes Ezekiel to discuss the new covenant, the new heart, the promised Holy Spirit, and resurrection: Ezk.36:26 in *AH* 3.33.14; Ezk.37 in *AH* 5.15.1 and 5.34.1; Ezk.28:25 – 26 in *AH* 5.34.1; Ezk.11:19 in *Demonstration* 93. Irenaeus is clear about Ezekiel's subject matter.

⁸⁰ Osborn, p.218; footnote 24

⁸¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.33.11

⁸² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4

⁸³ John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.173 – 5

luxury of a garden, but from within the confines of her fallen humanity. She had to battle disbelief as part of her embattled people. This is similar to how Jesus retold Israel's story and Adam's story not from the ease of the garden but from the hard environs of the wilderness, Israel's captivity to the Gentiles, and the cross. The retelling, the *recircling*, is admirable as a victory precisely because our later protagonists had to make their faithful choices, and did so. They proved more faithful than their predecessors who made *unfaithful* choices. What is more, they did so under the harder conditions of the fall, which were in fact *caused* by the former.

Moreover, Irenaeus also saw Mary as a fulfillment of the literary theme running through the Hebrew Scriptures concerning God giving the barren woman fruitfulness (Isa.54:1; Gal.4:27), Isaiah's prophecy in particular. Significantly, barrenness in women was a Hebrew idiom marking life in the condition of the fall, and Irenaeus demonstrates an understanding of this.⁸⁴ This understanding lends weight to the impression that Irenaeus believed that Mary, while making the great and admirable choice to become the mother of the Messiah, was by all accounts *fallen* in her own human nature. It must be admitted by all that viewing Mary as sharing in our common fallen humanity is the most logical position.

And if Mary shared in our fallen humanity, did she not provide the material humanity from which Jesus drew his own humanity? Osborn's otherwise careful handling of Irenaeus logically requires that Jesus struggle against fallen Adamic humanity (e.g. *AH* 3.19.3) to decisively and finally *correct* it in his death and resurrection. By contrast, Behr appropriately names a chapter in his book on Irenaeus, 'Recapitulation: Correction and Perfection.'⁸⁵ Osborn seems to retreat from seeing or stating this point clearly: He says, 'Christ shares our *mortal* nature'⁸⁶ all the while highlighting the theme of *participation* in Irenaeus. But what other humanity was available for Jesus to *participate in*? And how else can we, while fallen, *participate* in the Spirit if Jesus did not already *participate* in our fallen humanity first?

Osborn also believes that Irenaeus believed that all humanity actively sinned against God in Adam, by a second reference to this passage:

'Now this being is the Creator (Demiurgus), who is, in respect of His love, the Father; but in respect of His power, He is Lord; and in respect of His wisdom, our Maker and Fashioner; by transgressing whose commandment we became His enemies. And therefore in the last times the Lord has restored us into friendship through His incarnation, having become 'the Mediator between God and men;' [1 Tim.2:5] propitiating indeed for us the Father against whom we had sinned, and cancelling (consolatus) our disobedience by His own obedience; conferring also upon us the gift of communion with, and subjection to, our Maker. For this reason also He has taught us to say in prayer, 'And forgive us our debts;' [Mt.6:12] since indeed He is our Father, whose debtors we were, having transgressed His commandments. But who is this Being? Is He some unknown one, and a Father who gives no commandment to any one? Or is He the God who is proclaimed in the Scriptures, to whom we were debtors, having transgressed His commandment? Now the commandment was given to man by the Word. For Adam, it is said, 'heard the voice of the Lord God' [Gen.3:8]. Rightly then does His Word say to man, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee' [Mt.9:2; Lk.5:20]. He, the same against whom we had sinned in the beginning, grants forgiveness of sins in the end. But if indeed we had disobeyed the command of any other, while it was a different being who said, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee;' such a one is neither good, nor true, nor just. For how can he be good, who does not give from what belongs to himself? Or how can he be just, who snatches away the goods of another? And in what way can sins be truly remitted, unless that He against whom we have sinned has Himself granted remission 'through the bowels of mercy of our God,' in which 'He has visited us' [Lk.1:78] through His Son?⁸⁷

Irenaeus says God is owed a 'debt' and had to be 'propitiated.' Does this not mean, as Osborn suggests, that a framework of guilt and retribution is in place in Irenaeus' mind? Now it is true that 'by transgressing [God's original] commandment we became His enemies.' But not in the sense that we became guilty parties pleading for mercy, but deserving retributive justice and wrath from a God who pays out retribution in like manner. Rather, we

⁸⁴ Behr, p.173, quoting 1.10.3

⁸⁵ Behr, p.97 – 104

⁸⁶ Osborn, p.259, emphasis mine

⁸⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.17.1

became His enemies by wanting to define good and evil from within ourselves, and by asserting a desire to be our own gods. We became God's enemies, ontologically and relationally, expressed by our own resistance towards Him. This is why Irenaeus adds that Jesus through his incarnation 'conferr[ed] upon us the gift of communion with, and *subjection to*, our Maker.' *Subjection to God* is an inseparable part of the gift of communion that is conferred by Jesus. If this is so, then Irenaeus is not defining the problem of sin legally and penally, as if human beings who are otherwise cooperative with God might survive the divine wrath given our blemished track record. No: He is concerned about how the problem of the bent and weakened will of humanity might be brought back into alignment with God, that we might bear the image and likeness of our Creator once again, rather than resist Him. When Irenaeus speaks of Christ giving us the gift of communion with and *subjection to* our Maker, he is already anticipating in seminal form the insight of Maximus the Confessor about Jesus healing the human will in himself. The Father is 'propitiated' when that which is in us which resists God's commandments is abolished.

Similarly, Irenaeus speaks of God propitiating Himself in an ontological and relational sense: only when the corruption of sin died in Christ with him, when the object proper to God's wrath – the corruption of sin – was destroyed by death, that Christ in love and by his Spirit might share his new humanity with us to gradually displace the corruption of sin in us. The language of debt, both in Scripture and by extension in Irenaeus, is often mistakenly transported into the framework of a Latin satisfaction motif. Whenever Jesus used monetary figures as an analogy, he used it to illustrate the *ridiculousness* of comparing people's sinful actions as if they fell into low and high debt categories (e.g. Mt.18:23 – 35; Lk.7:36 – 50). That is, Jesus used financial debt as a figure for sin whenever his opponents were comparing 'levels of sinful actions,' to show that *human sinful actions measured against legal standards was not the appropriate way to understand our indebtedness to God*. Our debt is measured against the calling to be whole and healed image-bearers: 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick' (Mt.9:12; Lk.5:31). Equally problematic is what this model makes of God. When people take 'debt' as a penal or financial issue before God, this inappropriately turns God into a debt-collector who is concerned about something *external* to the person or *extracted from* the person: God demands a payment from humanity to satisfy either His offended justice (as in Calvin) or honor (as in Anselm). In this model, God desires to collect on the debt; humanity is penniless and unable to render payment for what is required. Hence Jesus steps forward to do what humanity could not: either suffer an infinite punishment (as in Calvin) or render an appropriately full and honoring obedience (as in Anselm).

Irenaeus does not fall into that problem. When he uses the word 'debt' he is actually referring to the responsibility of each human person to undo the damage done to one's self – damage both from Adam and from one's own self. He uses the phrase 'remitting sins,' which means 'putting away sins' or 'delivering/releasing from sins' as it does in Scripture. It is not a change of mind in God, but a change of state in us. And correspondingly, in the same chapter, he links 'remitting sins' to *healing humanity*:

'Therefore, by remitting sins, He did indeed *heal* man, while He also manifested Himself who He was. For if no one can forgive sins but God alone, while the Lord remitted them and *healed* men, it is plain that He was Himself the Word of God made the Son of man, receiving from the Father the power of remission of sins; since He was man, and since He was God, in order that since as man He suffered for us, so as God He might have compassion on us, and forgive us our debts, in which we were made debtors to God our Creator. And therefore David said beforehand, 'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord has not imputed sin' [Ps.32:1 – 2]; pointing out thus that remission of sins which follows upon His advent, by which 'He has destroyed the handwriting' of our debt, and 'fastened it to the cross' [Col.2:14]; so that as by means of a tree we were made debtors to God, [so also] by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our debt.'⁸⁸

Irenaeus produces a fascinating exegesis of Colossians 2:14. Whereas N.T. Wright views the 'handwriting' fastened to the cross as the Sinai Law,⁸⁹ Irenaeus equates it to *the corruption of sin in the human nature of Jesus*. It is not the Sinai covenant which made human beings 'debtors to God.' That happened, rather, 'by means of a tree.' The Sinai covenant was simply the chief means God used to identify and diagnose it. These views ultimately might not be mutually exclusive, as there may have been a poetic elision between the two concepts in Paul's mind, via Jeremiah's depiction of the human heart as a tablet with sin inscribed on it (Jer.17:1 – 10). Jeremiah believed that the human

⁸⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.17.3

⁸⁹ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.110 – 114

heart was so deeply etched with the writing of sin that God would have to personally reinscribe His commandments upon it (Jer.31:31 – 34). Jeremiah drew out from the Pentateuchal narrative the parallelism between the damaged human heart residing in the human being, and the tablets of the law residing in the sanctuary in which God ‘dressed’ like the high priest – like the human being representing Israel’s side of the covenant. The second copy of the tablets (Ex.34:18 – 35) surely carried with them the memory of the first copy being broken by Moses when Israel sinned with the golden calves and broke the covenant as soon as it had started (Ex.32:1 – 29). We owe a debt to God to return our human nature to God whole and intact, which is expressed *both* in our current, fallen human nature, and also by the stone tablets of the Sinai covenant. That is why I detect a legitimate elision of concepts in the minds of Jeremiah and Paul. But the fall preceded the Sinai covenant, of course. And thus, I favor Irenaeus’ exegetical handling of Colossians 2:14.

Irenaeus’ penchant for poetry and sensitivity to the repeated themes of the biblical story shines again. His phrase, ‘As by means of a tree we were made debtors to God,’ means that Adam corrupted human nature by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and inscribed that legacy onto all humanity, creating our obligation to overcome that corruption. The Sinai Law expressed that obligation within the covenant with Israel (Rom.7:7 – 8:4), as Irenaeus is well aware. Irenaeus ascribed very positive value to the law as a ‘servant who escorts a child to school’ (the original meaning of ‘pedagogue’ in Gal.3:24) and guide to Israel, pointing them to the Messiah for healing.⁹⁰ But ‘by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our debt’ means that Jesus finally defeated within himself the corruption inscribed upon our humanity, erased that writing, and reinscribed the torah of God upon the human heart, as Jeremiah expressed in hope (Jer.31:31 – 34). By our spiritual participation with Jesus in his death ‘on the tree’ and in his resurrection as the source of God’s renewed humanity, we participate in the remission of the debt we owe to God. Jesus makes humanity whole and healed, first in himself and then in us by the Spirit. I submit that Osborn’s claim that Irenaeus believed in inherited Adamic guilt is an inappropriate reading.

A second scholar who has taken issue with this reading of Irenaeus comes from another direction. Eastern Orthodox writer Emmanuel Hatzidakis asserts that if Jesus assumed ‘the ancient formation of man’ (Adam), that this implies an *unfallen, uncorrupted* human nature at conception; he therefore claims that Jesus did not inhabit fallen humanity from his conception.⁹¹ This is not significant for my argument against penal substitution, but I think that (a) where one lands on this question has important pastoral ramifications about to what degree we can know Jesus as being sympathetic to our own temptations; (b) reviewing Hatzidakis’ arguments will help us better understand Tertullian, who did hold this belief; and (c) Hatzidakis represents a lively discussion happening within the Eastern Orthodox tradition about the atonement in their own particular terms. He criticizes fellow Eastern Orthodox theologians Kallistos Ware, John Meyendorff, and Vladimir Lossky for holding to the belief in Jesus’ assumption of *fallen* human nature.

Hatzidakis wishes to interpret ‘ancient’ not just as ‘a long time ago,’ but specifically ‘prior to the fall.’ But perhaps Hatzidakis reads too much into Irenaeus at that particular point, and too little out of Irenaeus elsewhere. When Irenaeus speaks of ‘the ancient formation of man,’ what does he mean? He seems to mean the generic category of ‘humanity,’ which includes the basic qualities of being finite, having both a body and soul, being relationally dependent on God, and needing to develop from immaturity to maturity. More importantly, Irenaeus speaks of ‘sin’ as a corruption or disorder within human nature that needed to be dissolved through death rather than immortalized.⁹² Hatzidakis does not comment on Irenaeus’ statement that ‘man, who had sin in himself, showing that he was liable to death,’ which is not referring to sin as ‘poor behavior,’ but as the quality or type of humanity (‘man’) which Jesus assumed, precisely ‘so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death... that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man...’⁹³ So it is difficult to know what he thinks about Irenaeus’ statements. In that passage and many others, Irenaeus stresses Jesus’ death as the moment in which he ‘destroyed’ and ‘kill[ed] sin,’ just as Jesus’ resurrection is the event in which he ‘deprive[d] death of its power, and vivif[ied] man.’

⁹⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.2.8, 4.13.2 for a positive function of the Sinai covenant following Paul’s argument in Romans 7:7 – 8:4: ‘For the law, since it was laid down for those in bondage, used to instruct the soul... But the Word set free the soul, and taught that through it the body should be willingly purified.’

⁹¹ Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p.213 – 215

⁹² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6; 3.18.7

⁹³ *Ibid* 3.18.7

That passage, in combination with Irenaeus' view of Jesus' temptation experience, would seem to be a problem for Hatzidakis' argument. Irenaeus writes: 'He became man in order to undergo temptation... that He might be capable of being tempted, dishonoured, crucified, and of suffering death...' ⁹⁴ Hatzidakis defines Jesus' temptations as belonging to the category of 'innocent passions' like hunger, thirst, and tiredness. He suggests that, just as Adam and Eve were capable of being tempted prior to the fall, so Jesus' humanity was still vulnerable to temptation, though unfallen. Therefore, he argues, Jesus need not have assumed a fallen humanity at conception. He further claims that the Son of God was vulnerable to ordinary bodily limitations by free choices alone, ⁹⁵ rather than his categorical commitment to become bodily human at conception. He quotes approvingly other Christian writers who insist that Jesus must not have gotten physically sick at any time because he was able to miraculously heal others' sicknesses, so for him to acquire a common cold would be a theological embarrassment. But Jesus' wilderness temptation and Gethsemane experiences were not reducible to ordinary bodily desires to live; the satanic appeals to power and ego make more sense if they were designed to trigger something within a fallen human nature. And part of the temptation experience exemplified Jesus' commitment to not use his miraculous power for his own benefit. Turning stones into bread for his own hunger's sake was a temptation to use power for himself alone. I maintain that there is no theological embarrassment in suggesting that Jesus was vulnerable to viruses and bacteria because he was human. If he never used his power for himself, it makes sense that he would be.

Hatzidakis asserts that if Jesus had a fallen human nature that he would be personally guilty of sin. But, to anticipate a further exploration of this issue, certain attributes of human nature are not descriptive of the human person in this way even for us. Corrupted is an attribute of our human nature, properly speaking. Guilt is an attribute of a person who has taken a sinful action. Suffice to say here that Hatzidakis deploys certain assumptions rather than engaging with the text of Irenaeus' work. And in Jesus' case, his personhood and/or divine nature acted upon his human nature in such a way so as to heal it. Paul indicates that he was unable to control his own covetousness (Rom.7:7 – 25), but asserts that Jesus did (Rom.8:3 – 4). But if this action was progressive and not instantaneous, precisely because human nature itself is developmental, and needed to be healed and cleansed in a developmental way, as Irenaeus argues when he offers his recapitulation theory, then the uniting of divinity with humanity, as fire uniting with iron, needed to be a *process unfolding in a human way*.

Irenaeus' reference to Paul's phrase 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' from Romans 8:3 deserves very careful attention. In English, the word 'likeness' can mean 'resemblance' or 'the superficial appearance of.' In some uses, it implies an antithetical relation with the actual substance thereof. However, in Paul, the word 'likeness' cannot possibly mean that. For in Philippians 2:7, he says that Jesus was found 'in human likeness,' and, lest we accuse Paul himself of being a Gnostic, he clearly does not mean 'resemblance only' or 'the superficial appearance of.' Rather, Paul seems to use 'likeness' in the more technical theological sense of 'image and likeness' from Genesis 1:26 – 28. For God to make human beings in His 'likeness' means something akin to humanity 'sharing in the substance and character of' God. That would seem to be confirmed in Genesis 2 when God breathed into Adam to make him a living being (Gen.2:7). So when Paul says in Romans 8:3 that Jesus shared 'in the likeness of sinful flesh,' he was not saying that Jesus was only human by appearance but not in substance, or that Jesus took human flesh but not sinful human flesh. He was saying that Jesus 'shared in the substance and character of' our sinful flesh. Does Irenaeus' usage reflect Paul's understanding?

Irenaeus quotes 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' on two occasions: *Against Heresies* 3.20.2 and 4.2.8. Here is the first quotation and its context:

'Just as the physician is proved by his patients, so is God also revealed through men. And therefore Paul declares, 'For God hath concluded all in unbelief, that He may have mercy upon all;' not saying this in reference to spiritual aeons, but to man, who had been disobedient to God, and being cast off from immortality, then obtained mercy, receiving through the Son of God that adoption which is [accomplished] by Himself. For he who holds, without pride and boasting, the true glory (opinion) regarding created things and the Creator, who is the Almighty God of all, and who has granted existence to all; [such an one,] continuing in His love and subjection, and giving of thanks, shall also receive from Him the greater glory of promotion, looking forward to the time when he shall become like Him who died for him, *for He, too, was made in the likeness of sinful flesh*, to condemn sin, and to cast it, as now a condemned thing, away

⁹⁴ Ibid 3.19.3

⁹⁵ Hatzidakis, p.422

beyond the flesh, but that He might call man forth into His own likeness, assigning him as [His own] imitator to God, and imposing on him His Father's law, in order that he may see God, and granting him power to receive the Father; [being] the Word of God who dwelt in man, and became the Son of man, that He might accustom man to receive God, and God to dwell in man, according to the good pleasure of the Father.'⁹⁶

In this first quotation, Irenaeus makes an explicitly medical statement about God being a physician and healer. We may therefore see the theme of healing running through the passage. When Irenaeus says, 'for He, too, was made in the likeness of sinful flesh,' he deliberately stresses the identification of the Son of God with our condition. The grammatical use of 'He too' makes Irenaeus' mind beyond dispute. For Irenaeus does not insert any distance between our current human condition and the human condition Jesus entered. Since we are made in the likeness of sinful flesh, so *He too*, was. Irenaeus also positions the significance of Jesus' taking sinful flesh between his death and the purpose of his death. The Son of God 'died for him [i.e. the human being] ... to condemn sin, and to cast it, as now a condemned thing, away beyond the flesh.' For Tertullian, as we will see below, Jesus abolished sin at the moment of his conception. Not so for Irenaeus. Irenaeus believed that Jesus' decisive victory over sinful flesh – not just pre-fallen Adamic temptation – was at his death. By using death as the means of finally separating sin and human nature, he 'cast' sin 'away' from his humanity, which he brought up again through resurrection. By doing this, as Irenaeus explores, Jesus enabled a union between God and man. Thus, God revealed Himself precisely as a physician and healer of human beings.

Here is the second quotation:

'But as many as feared God, and were anxious about His law, these ran to Christ, and were all saved. For He said to His disciples: 'Go ye to the sheep of the house of Israel, which have perished.' And many more Samaritans, it is said, when the Lord had tarried among them, two days, 'believed because of His words, and said to the woman, 'Now we believe, not because of thy saying, for we ourselves have heard [Him], and know that this man is truly the Savior of the world.'" And Paul likewise declares, 'And so all Israel shall be saved;' but he has also said, 'that the law was our pedagogue [to bring us] to Christ Jesus.' Let them not therefore ascribe to the law the unbelief of certain [among them]. For the law never hindered them from believing in the Son of God; nay, but it even exhorted them so to do, saying that men can be saved in no other way from the old wound of the serpent than by believing in Him who, *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, is lifted up from the earth upon the tree of martyrdom, and draws all things to Himself, and vivifies the dead.'⁹⁷

Although Irenaeus in book 4 speaks extensively about the Sinai covenant and Israel's experience, he often links that period of salvation history to God's saving purpose for *all humanity*. We see this here. Irenaeus quotes from Romans 11:26 ('all Israel will be saved') explaining not an 'ethnic Israel' theory but commending both Jews and Samaritans who 'were anxious about His law.' This concurs with Paul's usage of the phrase 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16 as encompassing both Jews and Gentiles who profess faith in Christ. Referring to the 'old wound of the serpent' also indicates that Irenaeus is thinking of all humanity in the biblical narrative, because both Jews and Gentiles find their common parentage and common plight from Adam and Eve. Irenaeus makes a link between the old wound of the serpent and Jesus being in the likeness of sinful flesh. Why does he do this? The underlying logic is a parallel between Adam taking from the tree at the lie of the serpent, versus Jesus returning sinful human flesh to a tree in martyrdom. If I am correct in seeing Irenaeus' penchant for seeing the return movement, or recirculating, in the biblical story, then this would again require that Jesus *not* have cleansed his human nature at conception. He would have resisted sin, to be sure, but he must have carried his sinful nature all the way back to the tree to fulfill the return movement of human sin beginning at a tree.

If, at this juncture, Irenaeus wanted to say that Jesus took on the likeness of Adam's pre-fallen humanity, how might he have communicated that? Irenaeus was perfectly capable of saying, 'In the likeness of Adam,' when he so desired, and did.⁹⁸ It is telling that he does not do so here. In addition, Irenaeus seems to have in mind John 12:32 ('is lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself') and John 3:14 – 15 ('is lifted up') and behind that,

⁹⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.20.2

⁹⁷ *Ibid* 4.2.8

⁹⁸ *Ibid* 5.21.1, 'For from that time, He who should be born of a woman, [namely] from the Virgin, after the likeness of Adam'

Numbers 21:4 – 7, which use the image of the bronze serpent being lifted up on a ‘tree’ to offer healing from the bites of serpents. In Numbers 21, what was cast in bronze and thus portrayed as judged is not *an Israelite*, as penal substitution would require, but rather *a serpent*. So what God judges and views as cursed is the source of the venom. For Jesus to occupy that place on the tree is to identify sinful human flesh as the proximate source of the venom. An already cleansed human nature would not supply that image.

Moreover, Irenaeus is the first Christian writer to ascribe the phrase, ‘he became a curse for us’ in Galatians 3:13, to include *Jesus’ incarnation*, and not just his death. The overwhelming number of Protestant evangelical commentators take ‘became a curse for us’ as referring to Jesus absorbing some judicial punishment at his death on the cross. But if I am understanding Irenaeus correctly, then the bishop of Lyons understood the phrase as referring to the incarnation. Human nature itself was under the ‘curse’ referred to in Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23, and Jesus shared in it all the way *from his incarnation* to death. Here is the passage in question:

It is plain, then, that Paul knew no other Christ besides Him alone, who both suffered, and was buried, and rose again, *who was also born, and whom he speaks of as man*. For after remarking, ‘But if Christ be preached, that He rose from the dead’ [1 Cor.15:12], he continues, rendering the reason of *His incarnation*, ‘For since by man came death, by man [came] also the resurrection of the dead.’ And everywhere, when [referring to] the passion of our Lord, and *to His human nature*, and His subjection to death, he employs the name of Christ, as in that passage: ‘Destroy not him with your meat for whom Christ died’ [Rom.14:15]. And again: ‘But now, in Christ, you who sometimes were far off are made near by the blood of Christ’ [Eph.2:13]. And again: ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *being made a curse for us*: for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that hangs upon a tree’’ [Gal.3:13; Dt.21:23]. And again: ‘And through your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died’ [1 Cor.8:11], indicating that the impassible Christ did not descend upon Jesus, but that He Himself, because He was Jesus Christ, suffered for us; He, who lay in the tomb, and rose again, who descended and ascended,— the Son of God having been made the Son *of man*, as the very name itself does declare.’⁹⁹

This is the only place in *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration* where Irenaeus quotes Galatians 3:13. The significance of this quotation requires some background. Some Gnostics argued that there was a spiritual being named ‘Christ’ who left the human being ‘Jesus’ before death. Irenaeus assures his audience that ‘Jesus Christ’ signifies one unified being, not two. The burden of Irenaeus’ argument here is not the historical fact of Jesus’ death, which the Gnostics did not dispute, but whether there was an abiding union of divine (named ‘Christ’) and human (named ‘Jesus’) undertaken at his incarnation which carried through all the way to his death and resurrection. For good measure, Irenaeus quotes Scriptures where ‘Christ’ is explicitly named in connection with death on the cross. He begins with 1 Corinthians 15:12, connecting *Christ’s* bodily death and resurrection to what must logically precede it: his incarnation into truly human nature. Irenaeus stresses that Paul refers to Christ as the one ‘who was also born, and whom he speaks of as man.’ Stressing the reality of Jesus’ bodily death, Irenaeus enlists the help of four quotations from Paul.

Whether Irenaeus is exegetically accurate in perceiving Paul’s true meaning in Galatians 3:13 is important but a bit secondary as far as my argument here is concerned. I do believe that Irenaeus was accurate about Paul, but that is another matter which must be explored elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ What is most significant here is what associations Irenaeus had with this verse. Taken on its own, Irenaeus’ meaning might not be further developed with much confidence. But when we widen the scope to include other patristic writers, I believe we can be confident that Irenaeus referred to the ‘curse’ of Galatians 3:13 as the fallen humanity that Jesus took *at his incarnation*.

Justin Martyr, the Christian evangelist-philosopher whom Irenaeus reports meeting in Rome, who was martyred around 165 AD, uses the language of the curse of Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23 to mark as sinful the lives of Jews and Gentiles alike.¹⁰¹ This was one argument among many he employs with his Jewish interlocutor Trypho. Since both Jews and Gentiles sinned, with or without knowledge of the Sinaitic covenant and its commandments, every single person demonstrates that her or his existence is already cursed, according to Justin.

⁹⁹ Ibid 3.18.3

¹⁰⁰ See my paper *The Sacrificial System and Atonement in the Pentateuch* ch.1, 4, 8; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-atonement-and-the-pentateuch.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 94 – 96; see below

Hanging on a tree is simply confirmation of that fact, not an additional punishment thrown on top of it. As far as Justin's writings are concerned, we find evidence that the early Christians held that despite Jesus being morally blameless, he nevertheless shared in the curse upon all humanity. The 'curse' was not a divine punishment absorbed by Jesus instead of human beings. See below for Justin's text and my treatment of it.

Athanasius of Alexandria, writing in 370 AD, roughly two hundred years after Justin and Irenaeus, would go one step further in his explicit written exposition and theological reasoning. For Athanasius, if Jesus shared in the curse upon all humanity, as designated clearly by the manner of death he endured, then his sharing in the curse must have begun prior to his death. But when? Athanasius answers that by explicitly uniting Galatians 3:13 with *John 1:14*. For Athanasius, 'becoming a curse' is a synonym for 'becoming flesh.'¹⁰² Athanasius thus offers that the root cause of humanity's cursedness was the underlying corruption of human nature. I will discuss Athanasius below as well.

Ambrose of Milan (circa 340 – 397 AD), in his *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, explains Galatians 3:13 by referring to *Philippians 2:5 – 11*, which is also about Jesus' incarnation. Immediately after quoting Galatians, Ambrose writes of the incarnation, 'Cursed He was, for He bore our curses; in subjection, also, for He took upon Him our subjection, but in the assumption of the form of a servant, not in the glory of God; so that while he makes Himself a partaker of our weakness in the flesh, He makes us partakers of the divine Nature in His power.'¹⁰³ Among the curses we experience as fallen human beings is 'our weakness in the flesh,' which recalls Paul's assessment in Romans 8:3 that the Sinai Law could not accomplish its goal through Israel because it was weakened by the flesh. Weakened flesh is not simply mortal flesh, but morally rebellious flesh.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 389 AD), one of only three church leaders the Eastern Orthodox tradition labels 'the theologian,' also quotes Galatians 3:13 in reference to the incarnation. He does this in *Oration 2.55* and *Oration 30.5 – 6*. Most notably, however, in *Epistle 101.7*, 'to Cleodnius the Priest Against Apollinarius,' Gregory rejects Apollinarius' attempt to replace Jesus' human mind with the Logos. Apollinarius made this theological move in order to avoid claiming Christ was sinful, since it was believed that sin resides in the mind or soul. Gregory, however, argued that such a move compromised Jesus' true humanity, thus making it impossible for him to secure redemption for the whole human being: 'For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole... Just as he was called a curse for the sake of our salvation, who cancels my curse, and was called sin, who takes away the sin of the world, and instead of the old Adam is made a new Adam – in the same way he makes my rebellion his own as Head of the whole Body.'¹⁰⁴

John Chrysostom (circa 347 – 407 AD) in his *Commentary on Galatians* focuses on the death of Christ alone without discussion of the incarnation.¹⁰⁵ However, in his *Homilies on John's Gospel 1:14*, he immediately refers us to Galatians 3:13, saying, 'It was fallen indeed, our nature had fallen an incurable fall, and needed only that mighty Hand. There was no possibility of raising it again, had not He who fashioned it at first stretched forth to it His Hand, and stamped it anew with His Image, by the regeneration of water and the Spirit.'¹⁰⁶

This appears to be the standard patristic and Nicene interpretation of Galatians 3:13. Considering this patterned usage, I believe we are on fairly strong footing to see in Irenaeus an understanding continuous with Athanasius. Moreover, not only does this interpretation fit well with many other passages in Irenaeus, especially in the pivotal sections *AH 3.18* and *3.19*, but it logically fits the immediate context of *3.18.3*. Irenaeus' main purpose was to prove that 'Jesus' and 'Christ' were not two separable beings, and he does so by tracing the union of Jesus' divinity and humanity all the way from conception to death and into resurrection. If Jesus' death finished unraveling our disobedience, then it can only mean that the quality of human nature which he took in his incarnation was in need of unraveling. This is why Irenaeus stressed that 'man, who had *sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death' needed the eternal Son of God 'himself [to] be made that very same thing which he was, that is, *man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage.' That is, the quality of 'man' assumed by the Son of God was the same quality of 'man' that we all share: the kind with 'sin in himself.' When God took human flesh to himself, He 'recapitulated in

¹⁰² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter 59 to Epictetus of Corinth 8*; see below

¹⁰³ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith 5.178*

¹⁰⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle 101.7*

¹⁰⁵ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians 3.10 – 14*

¹⁰⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John's Gospel 1:14*; see also *Homily 13* from *Homilies on Romans 8:3 – 4*

Himself the ancient formation of man, *that He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man' in the physical body of Jesus. This, Irenaeus says, constitutes humanity's 'salvation' which many should receive and be justified by participating in Christ by his Spirit. 'Salvation' is not merely the turning aside of the wrath of God, as penal substitution advocates think of it, but the purging of the sinful corruption within us *by* the wrath of God, that God's life and power might be joined to the whole human person in the love of God.¹⁰⁷

One supporter of Hatzidakis argued with me in person that for God to perfect human nature simply means to unite it with Himself, since that was its teleological end. Therefore, by that reasoning, the incarnation was the moment (or perhaps proto-moment?) of perfection since the human nature of Jesus was in fact united with the divine nature. However, if the patristic theologians uniformly connected Jesus taking a 'curse' (Gal.3:13) not to his death but to his incarnation into human 'flesh' (Jn.1:14), then what was so accursed about pre-fallen Adamic humanity? Nothing is cursed about that *per se*. One can argue that the 'curse' pertains to Jesus' death, but the early theologians deploy Galatians 3:13 with reference to Jesus' *incarnation* and the flesh he took on, not simply his death. The connection between Galatians 3:13 and John 1:14 in the minds of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom seems to me to be an insurmountable problem for Hatzidakis and others who argue that the earliest theologians held to an instantaneous cleansing of human nature at the moment of Jesus' conception.

Moreover, if God acts 'perfectly,' then it is with reference to His love, specifically for humanity. Irenaeus believed that God does not and cannot coerce human beings, as I cited above.¹⁰⁸ Now he did not explicitly say that God's 'Triune nature' logically makes 'non-coercive love' God's fundamental attribute – that language and those concerns were not foremost on Irenaeus' mind. But he is not far away from it either. In relation to humanity, therefore, for God to love perfectly is to always operate with human partnership. Human nature cannot be 'perfected' (brought into full union with himself) without human partnership. This is certainly true for Christians. Why would it not be true of Jesus himself? Does Jesus ask us to struggle against something that he did not? The pastoral implications of the unfallen view would be rather discouraging. It would render Hebrews 4:15 – he 'was tempted in all things as we are' – questionable and probably untrue. If Jesus did not struggle against temptation under the conditions of the same fallenness we experience, does he truly know our experience? How could Jesus serve as an encouragement to us in our temptations, if he did not experience them in the same basic way? Also, Hebrews 5:7 – 9 tells us that Jesus 'became perfect,' through his sufferings and obedience, at his *resurrection*. So, it would seem that God's requirement of covenant partnership with humanity from creation necessitates that God work *within and through* the lifelong obedience of the human Jesus as that perfecting process, from incarnation to resurrection.

This theological anthropology of human partnership with God, informed by trinitarian logic and a biblical exposition of covenantal partnership, lends weight to the assertion that we translate *pistis christou* as 'the faithfulness of Christ' to indicate precisely that lifelong obedience, but that is the subject of a much longer discussion.¹⁰⁹ In this very important passage from *Demonstration*, Irenaeus writes to indicate precisely that the lifelong 'obedience of him' within 'that very flesh which sin had ruled' sets human nature free from sin:

'And, because in the original formation of Adam all of us were tied and bound up with death through his disobedience, it was right that through *the obedience of Him* who was made man for us we should be released from death: and because death reigned over the flesh, it was right that through the flesh it should lose its force and let man go free from its oppression. So the Word was made flesh, that, *through that very flesh which sin had ruled and dominated*, it should lose its force and be no longer in us. And therefore our Lord took that same original formation as (His) entry into flesh, so that He might draw near *and contend* [through his lifelong obedience and death] on behalf of the fathers, and conquer by Adam that which by Adam had stricken us down.'¹¹⁰

I believe that another scholar of Irenaeus, John Behr, is closer to Irenaeus' meaning: 'Christ, who, as human, fought the enemy and *untied the knot of disobedience through his obedience* [not simply his incarnation], and, as God,

¹⁰⁷ Irenaeus later says, for example, that Jesus *saved* the physical material of human flesh and blood (*Against Heresies* 5.14.1 – 4). This theme runs throughout Irenaeus and demonstrates that he understood salvation as not merely a forensic forgiveness but an ontological union with the life of God through the person of Jesus and by the Spirit.

¹⁰⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1 – 2, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

¹⁰⁹ KJV Galatians 2:20 and Romans 3:22; cf. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, *The Pistis Christou Debate: The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009)

¹¹⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration* 31 emphasis mine

destroyed sin, set free the weak, giving salvation to his handiwork,' and, 'By his obedience unto death Christ undoes the slavery of sin and the bondage in death, into which Adam, fashioned from the untilled soil, had drawn the human race, and in doing so Christ vivifies the human being.'¹¹¹ I argue therefore that Hatzidakis attributes to the incarnation (the cleansing of Jesus' humanity) what properly belongs to his death and resurrection. Catholic scholar Thomas Weinandy presses the issue, in his study of the early Christian theologians:

'Only if Jesus assumed a humanity at one with the fallen race of Adam could his death and resurrection heal and save that humanity. While the Fathers, as we will see shortly, protected Jesus from personal sin and from the morally debilitating consequences of Adam's sin, they nonetheless were adamant that his nature derived from Adam's sin-gnarled family tree. Irenaeus proclaimed a truth that would reverberate ever more loudly throughout patristic Christology: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might make us what he himself is.'¹¹²

In this reading of the Gospels, Jesus put the flesh to death through his moment-by-moment choices to always align himself with the love of the Father, never giving into temptation. And as Paul said, God personally condemned in this way, sin in the flesh of Jesus (Rom.8:3). Not instantaneously at his conception, but throughout his life and finally on the cross, Jesus put to death the old self, the body of sin (Rom.6:6), to raise his body into newness of life. This constitutes salvation of human nature for Irenaeus, even if it only happened in one particular individual, Jesus. For Jesus has become the source of that salvation (Heb.5:9) for the Spirit takes what is his – namely his renewed God-cleansed, God-soaked humanity – and discloses it to us (Jn.16:14).¹¹³ And Jesus represents all other Israelites and all other human beings, and did this on our behalf, that he might share his Spirit with all who believe and trust in him. In the physical body of Jesus, human nature is in principle brought into full union with God by virtue of Jesus overcoming all sin and temptation in his personal choices. We become 'partakers' of the Spirit, the 'earnest of incorruption.'¹¹⁴

What do we make of Irenaeus' impact? He provides a trinitarian doctrine of creation with his designation of the Word and the Spirit as the 'two hands' of God. For Irenaeus, God is creator and sustainer, and is providentially involved with His creation. This served as a firm bulwark against 'Gnosticism' of all forms, which wanted to divide God from the (sullied, in their opinion) creation, and even 'Arianism' (with all of its complexities) which made the Son into a created, temporal being separate from the truly divine. Interestingly, Irenaeus equates the Wisdom of God with *the eternal Spirit of God* rather than the Word of God.¹¹⁵ I prefer to identify the Wisdom of God from Proverbs 8:22 with one of God's many activities towards the creation, rather than a person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, Irenaeus' formulation is superior to Tertullian's, since the North African equated Wisdom with 'the unuttered Word' which was in the mind of the Father prior to the Father bringing it forth as Word (see below), and far superior to Arius, who equated Wisdom with a temporally created and temporally begotten Word/Son of God which made the Son a creature. That was a fatal move.

Commentators on the early church regularly write to this effect: 'The wonder of Irenaeus is the largeness of his outlook. No theologian had arisen since St Paul and St John who had grasped so much of the purpose of God for His world.'¹¹⁶ I find that the distinctive strength of Irenaeus is his comprehensive and integrated grasp of the entirety of the biblical story. And this strength is still formidable. Theologian Colin Gunton, for example, believed that Irenaeus and the Cappadocians provide better resources for a doctrine of the Trinity, in particular the Holy Spirit, than other places in Christian tradition, including Augustine.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Irenaeus also provides an alternative to the individualistic, 'psychological model' of the Trinity located in the individual human person's thought process, which would become dominant among the patristic writers. The 'psychological model' of the Trinity would cause (or at least not prevent) the male theologians to explicitly or subtly denigrate women for being supposedly less

¹¹¹ John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.169, 170; emphasis mine

¹¹² Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p.28

¹¹³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.20.3; 3.24.1; 5.6.1 – 2; 5.8.1 – 4

¹¹⁴ *Ibid* 3.24.1

¹¹⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.20.3

¹¹⁶ J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1920), p.4

¹¹⁷ Although Joshua McNall, *A Free Corrector: Colin Gunton and the Legacy of Augustine* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015) asserts that Gunton really should have laid the blame, as it were, not on Augustine himself, but on some of his heirs. Regarding Irenaeus' teaching on the Holy Spirit, see especially Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Leopoldo A. Sanchez M., *Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God's Spirit: Jesus' Life in the Spirit as a Lens for Theology and Life* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), ch.1

rational than men, contributing to the view that women are not as made in the image of God as men. But Irenaeus' use of Genesis 1 and 2 in *Demonstration* 11 makes fairly certain that he believed human beings as male and female were in the image of God in a physical, embodied, relational, and explicitly marital way. If the image of God looked like a life-giving union of male and female in loving, lifelong marriage, what did that mean about God?

Given the above, I believe Irenaeus also provides better resources for Christian ethics, especially around issues of gender and sexuality. Irenaeus' theological anthropology would have led the church to uphold and celebrate sexual desire within marriage and for marriage. This probably would have let the church retain some much needed humor about sexual desire similar to the Hebraic humor in the biblical book *The Song of Songs*. In turn, Irenaeus' exposition of humanity, male and female, made in God's image would have had the effect of strengthening the case for women's leadership in the church. The fascinating fragment attributed to him about the serpent addressing Eve first because she was the stronger¹¹⁸ is utterly unique in patristic literature, and entirely credible as originating from Irenaeus. It is also, in my opinion, a legitimate exposition of Genesis 2 and even 1 Timothy 2. Irenaeus could have immediately served as a resource to stop the anti-female prejudice which influenced the church fairly quickly, shown for example in the Greek-speaking church when Clement of Alexandria argued for veiling women,¹¹⁹ and in the Latin-speaking church when Tertullian did the same.¹²⁰ These theologians departed from Paul's encouragement to consider hair a sufficient covering for women while praying and prophesying, especially ex-prostitutes who had to refrain from wearing the Roman *palla* and wear ribbons in the hair instead, by Roman law.¹²¹ Irenaeus, by comparison, criticized the Gnostic heretic Valentinus, for apparently using the word *kalumma* (veil) in 1 Corinthians 11:10, instead of *exousian* (power), to veil women in the worship service. Irenaeus is to be esteemed as an earlier witness to a reading of Paul consistent with Jesus, as Jesus, in the presence of other men, received the provocative and typically bedroom gesture of women who let down their hair for him (Lk.7:36 – 50; Jn.12:1 – 8), and made lust entirely a problem in the eye of the (typically male) beholder, not the body of the beheld (Mt.5:27 – 30). Irenaeus would have anchored the Christian church more firmly upon its Hebraic roots, when Christian mission to the Gentiles encountered other patriarchal cultures, and also cultures where people went without much clothing.

Such is what could have been. But what did in fact happen? In the opinion of Eastern Orthodox scholar Matthew Craig Steenberg, Irenaeus' trinitarian vision is 'well developed.' His theological treatment of anthropology is 'extensive.'¹²² And thus, Irenaeus has enjoyed interest among scholars since the 1940's. Yet despite this, Steenberg says, Irenaeus' writings seem to have not generated the kind of subsequent interest that we would expect:

'While he seems today a kind of principal voice from the late second century, Irenaeus appears to have been a voice familiar to few in the third, fourth and beyond. A Latin translation of the Refutation was read by Augustine, and there are continuing hypotheses as to whether Athanasius might at times have lifted axioms from the document in its original Greek; but rarely do we hear Irenaeus' name mentioned in the increasingly historically minded discourses of the fourth and fifth centuries. There is argument for an Irenaeian influence on Tertullian put forward by such scholars as Tränkle, Quispel, Moreschini and Waszink, repeated more recently in the work of Bray and Osborn; yet again such influence, if it existed at all (and this cannot be proved, though it seems hard to deny) was fairly secondary. Others would see his influence in Origen, though this seems less likely. Despite this vague situation, however, we know his texts travelled, and travelled quickly. The Oxyrhynchus papyri locate a copy of at least a portion of the Refutation in Egypt during Irenaeus' own lifetime. Presumably his texts travelled because they were being read, but this only makes more intriguing the lack of reference and reflection evident in the later corpus. Epiphanius (d. 403) would prove happy to lift whole passages from the Refutation for insertion into his own heresiological Panarion, but this function as sourcebook for information on various sects and schools of thought seems to be his only use for Irenaeus. The closest we come to any considered reflection on his life and thought by a patristic source in the centuries immediately to follow is located in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 341), a critical document for our knowledge of Irenaeus, containing several of his letters and imparting nearly all our scant bibliographical data on the man. Yet even in Eusebius' sweeping survey of the Church before Constantine, Irenaeus holds no special pride of place. Eusebius seems to have admired him, but does not make any great deal of his theological articulation.

¹¹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Fragment 14*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.1, par.14; cf. <http://newadvent.org/fathers/0134.htm>

¹¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Teacher* 3.1

¹²⁰ Tertullian of Carthage, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 7

¹²¹ See my notes on 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16: http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/paul_1corinthians.11.02-16.sg.pdf

¹²² Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.16

Irenaeus is no giant in the eyes of his successors, no *sphragis pateron*, ‘seal of the fathers’, as Cyril of Alexandria would be remembered after his death.¹²³

Immediately following, Steenberg cautions us to not make too much of this, since one cannot entirely judge the impact of an author by the number of times his or her work is explicitly cited. However, while I want to provide my readers with Steenberg’s considered opinion, I wish to offer a different interpretation of the reception of Irenaeus.

In the judgment of patristics scholar Johannes Quasten, Irenaeus’ second century contemporaries Hippolytus of Rome and Tertullian of Carthage seem to quote liberally from Irenaeus’ writings. Although once again, we cannot be absolutely certain that they also shared material in common which existed in the church’s life prior to Irenaeus writing it down. I am doubtful that Irenaeus viewed himself as being original in any way; for example, Christian hymns like the *Odes of Solomon*, which I examine below, were almost certainly used in Syriac-speaking worship for the purpose of teaching the congregation and expressing the faith of the community. Regardless, Irenaeus’ writings were spread broadly. Today, we possess a full copy of *Against Heresies* in Latin. Quasten points out, ‘According to H. Koch, it must have originated before 250, because Cyprian made use of it. W. Sanday goes beyond this, and assigns it to the date 200.’¹²⁴ We have a complete Armenian version of books 4 and 5, twenty-three fragments of a Syrian version, and almost all of the complete book in Greek through copious quotations by Hippolytus of Rome (170 – 235), Eusebius of Caesarea (~260 – 339), and Epiphanius of Salamis (~320 – 403), the fourth century bishop in Cyprus, and additional fragments.¹²⁵

Irenaeus’ poetic sayings would become touchstones for Nicene and post-Nicene conciliar orthodoxy. Eusebius of Caesarea named Irenaeus as one of two writers whose theology was eminently reliable: ‘Who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito which proclaim Christ as God and Man?’¹²⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, seems to repeat Irenaeus’ pithy phrase, ‘God made Himself man, that man might become god.’¹²⁷ Again, we cannot adduce the spread of Christian language from written sources alone, but many scholars of the Christian doctrine of deification credit Irenaeus with being the first written source for the divine-human union accomplished first in Christ and purposed for all humanity: The Alexandrians Clement, Origen, and Athanasius either echo Irenaeus’ language or quote him directly, and the Cappadocian theologians Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa do as well.¹²⁸ Also, it seems quite plausible, based on the circulation of Irenaeus’ writings in Syriac, that the Nicene theologian Ephrem the Syrian in Mesopotamia was also familiar with Irenaeus, as Ephrem wrote poetically in various hymns and sermons the basic thought, ‘He gave us divinity / we gave Him humanity.’¹²⁹ I wonder if Ephrem felt he could be so bold and exuberant in poetic verse because there was a much more measured, precise account of Christian theology informing his community in Mesopotamia. Augustine quoted from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32). He might also have quoted *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in his *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60.

It seems to me that the light sprinkling of Irenaeus’ writings dusting later Christian thinkers can be explained differently. Steenberg himself notes that Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and indeed the whole of conciliar orthodoxy stand upon the same theological architecture which Irenaeus first elaborated – that theology is connected to anthropology. Thus, we owe to Irenaeus the developmental view of the human person, theologically. Jesuit scholar Edward T. Oakes notes that Augustine was the first Christian theologian to believe in a static view of the human person, with very fateful consequences.¹³⁰ If the human person is static, then a fall into sin at any time is repeatable in principle, perhaps even in eternity. This seemed to drive Augustine’s energy and anxiety on the

¹²³ Steenberg, p.19

¹²⁴ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature: From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics Inc., 6th printing 1992), p.291

¹²⁵ Richard A Norris, Jr, ‘Irenaeus of Lyons’, in Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth, editors, *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, third printing 2010), p.47; Schaff, p.511; Quasten p.291

¹²⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75

¹²⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 54; *De Decretis* 14; *Apology Against Arians* 1:39, 2:70; 3:19, 3:33, 3:53; *Epistle to Serapion* 1:24; *De Synodis* 51; *Epistle to Adelphi* 4 quoting Irenaeus’ preface to *Against Heresies* 5. Khaled Anatolios, ‘The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius’, *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001), p.463–76 considers the question of Athanasius’ reliance on Irenaeus.

¹²⁸ J.A. McGucklin, ‘The Strategic Adaptation of Deification,’ edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.96 – 97

¹²⁹ Thomas Buchan, ‘Paradise as the Landscape of Salvation in Ephrem the Syrian,’ edited by Christensen and Wittung, p.146 – 156

¹³⁰ Edward T. Oakes, S.J., *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p.162 – 164

question of God's grace and human free will. Oakes draws a line from Irenaeus to Maximus the Confessor (c.580 – 662 AD) in the Greek-speaking East, and Paul M. Blowers surveys the growing consensus of Maximus's debt to Irenaeus on creation theology.¹³¹ Only a developmental view of the human person, where human nature and free will are being perfected in loving union with God, can sufficiently answer the questions of why God began creation in the way He did, and why human beings progress to the point of making their human nature eternally receptive to God, or eternally tormented by His command to be open to Him.

Later Christians would turn their attention to two things: (1) presenting Christian faith in a more philosophical mode, especially as they engaged Neo-Platonic thought, most notably in Origen; and (2) defining the technical terminology in the debates about the Trinity. Irenaeus precedes these concerns, but would have recognized the significance of the later discussions. Irenaeus, while engaging with the fundamentally Hellenistic cosmology which produced Gnosticism, still makes the effort to overwhelmingly use biblical and Hebrew idioms (e.g. God's 'two hands'), even treating at length the question of why God needed to precede Christ with Israel in *Against Heresies* book 4. This makes good historical sense, since Irenaeus hailed from Asia Minor. If their preference for celebrating Easter according to the Jewish calendar serves as an indication, the Christians of Asia Minor seem to have had the advantage of maintaining a stronger connection to the Jewish community than Alexandria, Rome, or North Africa.

Irenaeus precedes Origen of Alexandria as the originator of the doctrine of 'deification' and probably as a background influence on Athanasius and the Cappadocians. He qualifies any attempt to see Origen as such. Evidence of Irenaeus in Athanasius and the Cappadocians arguably anchors them in the biblical narrative even as they tend to leave behind biblical language and instead deploy Hellenistic terms to both evangelize their neo-Platonic contemporaries and defend Nicene trinitarian theology against their Arian opponents. In other words, N.T. Wright's concern that the Nicene theologians, in their use of Greek Platonic language of deification and philosophical terms used in the Nicene Creed, may have lost the Hebraic, historical, Eden-exile-restoration categories of Second Temple Judaism¹³² is substantially answered by the presence of Irenaeus in the Nicene theologians. So Nicene orthodoxy stands in the debt of Irenaeus in more ways than one. Thus, we must appreciate a sturdy bridge, especially if we stand on the other side of it.

In my opinion, Irenaeus' role in the development of Christian thought seems more firm than in Steenberg's assessment. As written material was becoming ever more important to the church, Irenaeus gave to the community a rich literary legacy. Not only did Irenaeus bear witness to the basic shape of the New Testament canon, his works *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* became a touchstone of Christian orthodoxy against Gnosticism and continued to shape Christians in the coming centuries. This figure who sums up all who went before him and put his stamp on all who came after him for centuries can be defined as holding to 'medical substitution' or 'ontological substitution' atonement, not penal substitution. In my assessment, Irenaeus is insurmountably devastating for Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach's attempt to project penal substitutionary atonement back into the early church.

The Odes of Solomon (First or Second Centuries AD)

I will next consider the *Odes of Solomon*, another Christian literature that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not mention. 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 A.D., and not later than the mid 2nd century.¹³³ The authors were probably Jewish Christians because the originals are in Aramaic. 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

¹³¹ Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.102 – 105

¹³² N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2012)

¹³³ 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.'

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 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).’¹³⁴

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,
 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

¹³⁴ Ibid

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).

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.

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).

Although to my knowledge, other scholars of the Odes of Solomon have not identified Ode 11 as such, I will argue that 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). And I am not claiming that Jesus personally composed these Odes, only that early Syriac-speaking Christians felt comfortable enough to compose these songs and use them in a liturgical setting. 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).

⁴From the beginning until the end I received His knowledge.

⁵And I was established upon the rock of truth, where He had set me.

⁶And speaking waters touched my lips from the fountain of the Lord generously.

⁷And so I drank and became intoxicated, from the living water that does not die.

⁸And my intoxication did not cause ignorance,

But I abandoned vanity,

⁹And turned toward the Most High, my God,

And was enriched by His favors.

¹⁰And I rejected the folly cast upon the earth,

And stripped it off and cast it from me.

¹¹And the Lord renewed me with His garment,

And possessed me by His light.

¹²And from above He gave me immortal rest,

And I became like the land that blossoms and rejoices in its fruits.

¹³And the Lord is like the sun upon the face of the land.

¹⁴My eyes were enlightened,

And my face received the dew;

¹⁵And my breath was refreshed by the pleasant fragrance of the Lord.

¹⁶And 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.

¹⁷Then I worshipped the Lord because of His magnificence.

¹⁸And I said, ‘Blessed, O Lord, are they who are planted in Your land,

And who have a place in Your Paradise;

¹⁹And who grow in the growth of Your trees,

And have passed from darkness into light.

²⁰Behold, all Your laborers are fair, they who work good works,

And turn from wickedness to your pleasantness.

²¹For the pungent odor of the trees is changed in Your land,

²²And 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, as I argued above regarding Emmanuel Hatzidakis' claim of Irenaeus, 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. But unlike Israel, 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 against 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 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* of Jesus constitutes (albeit not completes but in the sense of undergirds) the salvation of humanity, reveals their emphasis on ontological 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 ontological substitution theory saturated the life of the early church. We find nothing in this realm that resembles penal substitution.

Justin Martyr of Rome (c.100 – 165 AD)

Looking at Ignatius, Irenaeus, and the Odes of Solomon is helpful because these writings show how other Christians were using some terms that Justin Martyr uses. Justin (c.100 – 165) is the first writer that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach study. Trained as a Greek philosopher, Justin came to believe in Christ around 130 AD. Obviously, for Justin to have lived and written so early, within a generation or two of the apostles, makes him an important figure historically. Justin became a teacher in a Christian school in Rome during the reign of Antonius Pius (138 – 161 AD). Tatian the Assyrian and Irenaeus were among his students. Irenaeus quotes from him twice in *Against Heresies*¹³⁵ and multiple times in the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*,¹³⁶ and attests to other works of Justin no longer extant, so we should reasonably expect a great deal of similarity between Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. Justin eventually angered the Cynic philosopher Crescens, who denounced him to the Roman authorities.

¹³⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.6.2 and 5.26.2

¹³⁶ J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1920), p.10 – 44

He was tried along with six companions by Junius Rusticus, prefect of Rome from 163 – 167 AD, and was executed for his faith, probably in 165 AD.

Justin recorded a conversation he had with a Jew named Trypho that took place sometime after Justin's conversion. This work, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, follows after his *First Apology* and *Second Apology* where Justin is mainly concerned to set the record straight on what Christian practices are. Jeffery, et.al believe that Justin Martyr upholds penal substitution based on the *Dialogue*. They cite the following passage from Justin, in chapter 89, and center their understanding of Justin on the language of the 'curse':

Then Trypho remarked, 'Be assured that all our nation waits for Christ; and we admit that all the Scriptures which you have quoted refer to Him. Moreover, I do also admit that the name of Jesus, by which the son of Nave (Nun) was called, has inclined me very strongly to adopt this view. But whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we are in doubt about. For whosoever is crucified is said in the law to be accursed, so that I am exceedingly incredulous on this point. It is quite clear, indeed, that the Scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer; but we wish to learn if you can prove it to us whether it was by the suffering cursed in the law.'¹³⁷

Against Trypho's objection, Justin says that Christ was not cursed for his own sins, but for others. Justin then says that all human beings – Jews and Gentiles – are cursed, in chapter 95:

'For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.' [Dt.27:26] And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined. But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes?'¹³⁸

In this same passage comes the passage that the three authors pin their interpretation of Justin and his supposed support of penal substitution:

'If, then, the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise Him up, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father's will, as if He were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves?'¹³⁹

Without any interpretation, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach move straight on to say:

'In summary, Jesus took upon himself the curse of God that had rested upon 'the whole human family.' This explains why he was crucified even though he himself had committed no sin. It also amounts to a clear statement of penal substitution: although Christ was innocent, he bore the curse due to sinful humanity, enduring in his death the punishment due to us. Justin is a very early example of a writer who explained the doctrine on the basis of the 'curse' vocabulary of Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:23. As we shall see, Eusebius of Caesarea and Hilary of Poitiers are among a number of later theologians who also took this approach.'¹⁴⁰

The problems I see here are numerous. First, penal substitution supposes that there is some punishment that flows from the 'wrath of God' absorbed by Christ and *not* poured out on others. But this is not what Justin Martyr was saying at all. He was saying that the Jews and the Gentiles were *already under the curse and participating in it*. They were suffering the results of their own disobedience and separation from God: for Gentiles, it was idol-worship, seduction of youth, and other crimes; for Israel, it was ongoing exile, knowledge that they broke the very law of Moses that they wanted to uphold, etc. Hence Justin, right before he says that 'the whole human race will be

¹³⁷ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 89

¹³⁸ Ibid, chapter 95

¹³⁹ Ibid, chapter 95

¹⁴⁰ Jeffery, et.al, p.166

found to be under a curse,' says in chapter 94 how the curse on Israel is best understood:

'For tell me, was it not God who commanded by Moses that no image or likeness of anything which was in heaven above or which was on the earth should be made, and yet who caused the brazen serpent to be made by Moses in the wilderness, and set it up for a sign by which those bitten by serpents were saved? Yet is He free from unrighteousness. For by this, as I previously remarked, He proclaimed the mystery, by which He declared that He would break the power of the serpent which occasioned the transgression of Adam, and [would bring] to them that believe on Him [who was foreshadowed] by this sign, i.e., Him who was to be crucified, salvation from the fangs of the serpent, which are wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts. Unless the matter be so understood, give me a reason why Moses set up the brazen serpent for a sign, and bade those that were bitten gaze at it, and the wounded were healed; and this, too, when he had himself commanded that no likeness of anything whatsoever should be made.'¹⁴¹

Justin makes a parallel between the incident of Israel in the wilderness being bitten by venomous snakes, and the Adam and Eve in the garden being bitten by 'fangs of the serpent.' Justin's reason for making that parallel is that he sees that human beings committing 'wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts' *is itself the curse*. The curse is not a legal-penal consequence that comes from God in response to these things. The curse is itself the spiritual alienation from God and the moral failure that results.

Hence, as Justin understood it, Jesus did not deflect the curse from Israel or the world. Instead, he *participated* in it with us even though he was innocent. Jesus forged a way through the curse on our behalf through his death and resurrection, so we could follow him through it. He therefore associated himself and identified himself with guilty human beings on the tree of the wooden cross. But Justin does not suggest that Jesus took some unique punishment from God. So the basic logic of penal substitution is undercut here at the start, which our three authors simply ignore or misunderstand in their haste to find support for penal substitution.

Second, and very related, they also misconstrue how Justin Martyr uses the curse vocabulary. In the very next chapter, chapter 96, Justin says this:

'For the statement in the law, 'Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree,' [Dt.21:23] confirms our hope which depends on the crucified Christ, not because He who has been crucified is cursed by God, but because God foretold that which would be done by you all, and by those like to you, who do not know that this is He who existed before all, who is the eternal Priest of God, and King, and Christ. And you clearly see that this has come to pass. For *you curse* in your synagogues all those who are called from Him Christians; and *other nations effectively carry out the curse*, putting to death those who simply confess themselves to be Christians; to all of whom we say, 'You are our brethren; rather recognise the truth of God.' And while neither they nor you are persuaded by us, but strive earnestly to cause us to deny the name of Christ, we choose rather and submit to death, in the full assurance that all the good which God has promised through Christ He will reward us with.'¹⁴²

In other words, Justin understands the curse language as, more or less, being separated from God, especially God in Christ, which results in moral failings. Justin says that the Jews curse Jesus and his followers in their synagogues, and that Gentiles 'effectively carry out the curse' by 'putting to death' the Christians. This demonstrates how Justin understands the Jews and Gentiles to be participating in the curse already. He says in chapter 93:

'For [God] sets before every race of mankind that which is always and universally just, as well as all righteousness; and every race knows that adultery, and fornication, and homicide, and such like, are sinful; and though they all commit such practices, yet they do not escape from the knowledge that they act unrighteously whenever they so do, with the exception of those who are possessed with an unclean spirit, and who have been debased by education, by wicked customs, and by sinful institutions, and who have lost, or rather quenched and put under, their natural ideas. For we may see that such persons are unwilling to submit to the same things which they inflict upon others, and reproach each other with hostile consciences

¹⁴¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 94

¹⁴² *Ibid*, chapter 96

for the acts which they perpetrate.’¹⁴³

And from there, in chapter 94, he refers to the episode of Israel in the wilderness bitten by venomous snakes, as I discussed above. By saying here that the Jews are under the curse, Justin is not saying that there is some additional external punishment that comes upon unbelieving Jews because of their unbelief. Instead, Justin says to Trypho, their unbelief is itself a curse, even though there is no readily apparent way in which the Jewish community was hanging on any tree. Nevertheless for Justin, living under the curse, or bearing the curse, is resisting God, and especially resisting Jesus. Jesus hung on a tree to reveal what was already cursed: human nature because of the corruption of sin within it. This understanding of Justin corroborates my earlier point and Justin’s earlier sayings. If the Jews and Gentiles are already under a curse, then Jesus does not uniquely take a curse on himself. The curse is already happening, and a state which Jesus shared with us.

Third, our three authors do not discuss this important statement from Justin:

‘He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her: wherefore also the Holy Thing begotten of her is the Son of God; and she replied, ‘Be it unto me according to thy word.’ And by her has He been born, to whom we have proved so many Scriptures refer, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him; but works deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.’¹⁴⁴

Justin sees a basic symmetry between the fall of human nature through Adam and Eve and in the redemption of human nature through Jesus. The disobedience which proceeded from the serpent, according to Justin, is not simply that of Eve and Adam, but of all humanity. ‘The word of the serpent’ was conceived and brought forth in Eve, meaning it took physical manifestation in human nature. All humanity subsequently became tainted by ‘disobedience and death.’ By contrast, the word of God conceived and brought forth in the Virgin Mary also took physical manifestation in human nature. And this word of God is none other than ‘the Son of God’ in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and he brings about ‘deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.’ To Justin, since the curse is the moral effect of Satan’s influence upon and within humanity, the salvation achieved by Christ had to correct that defect in our humanity. Thus, Jesus had to resolve that problem *physically*. Earlier, Justin refers to Jesus being born a man, ‘of like passions with us, having a body’:

I have certainly proved that this man is the Christ of God, whoever He be, even if I do not prove that He pre-existed, and submitted to be *born a man of like passions with us, having a body*, according to the Father’s will; in this last matter alone is it just to say that I have erred, and not to deny that He is the Christ, though it should appear that He was born man of men, and [nothing more] is proved [than this], that He has become Christ by election.’¹⁴⁵

And Trypho said: ‘...you may now proceed to explain to us how this God who appeared to Abraham, and is minister to God the Maker of all things, being born of the Virgin, *became man, of like passions with all*, as you said previously.’¹⁴⁶

‘Passions’ for Justin is primarily about negative desires. Justin, as Irenaeus does, understands Jesus as struggling to realign human nature and its passions with God. Hence, Justin comes closest here to stating the ontological substitution theory of the atonement. He does not say it as eloquently or as fully as Irenaeus would a few years later. But the basic insight is there. Since Irenaeus quoted twice from Justin Martyr in *Against Heresies*, it is reasonable to think that Irenaeus endorses Justin’s basic argument and that the two thinkers were identical on this point.

¹⁴³ Ibid, chapter 93

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, chapter 100

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, chapter 48

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, chapter 57

Fourth, our three authors do not integrate other themes in Justin's *Dialogue*. For example, Justin repeatedly calls for Trypho to be truly circumcised with a spiritual circumcision in Christ, as with the *Odes of Solomon*, above. Here is how Justin uses this Pauline theme:

'Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, as the words of God in all these passages demand.'¹⁴⁷

'You have now need of a second circumcision, though you glory greatly in the flesh.'¹⁴⁸

'And God himself proclaimed by Moses, speaking thus: 'And circumcise the hardness of your hearts, and no longer stiffen the neck. For the Lord your God is both Lord of lords, and a great, mighty, and terrible God, who regardeth not persons, and taketh not rewards.' And in Leviticus: 'Because they have transgressed against Me, and despised Me, and because they have walked contrary to Me, I also walked contrary to them, and I shall cut them off in the land of their enemies. Then shall their uncircumcised heart be turned. For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.'¹⁴⁹

'For your first circumcision was and is performed by iron instruments, for you remain hard-hearted; but our circumcision, which is the second, having been instituted after yours, circumcises us from idolatry and from absolutely every kind of wickedness by sharp stones, i.e., by the words [preached] by the apostles of the corner-stone cut out without hands. And *our hearts are thus circumcised from evil*, so that we are happy to die for the name of the good Rock, which causes living water to burst forth for the hearts of those who by Him have loved the Father of all, and which gives those who are willing to drink of the water of life.'¹⁵⁰

This theme of spiritual circumcision, or circumcision of the heart, is a prominent one in Justin's *Dialogue*, as it was in *Ode* 11. This is to be expected, given that Justin's discourse is with a Jew who is familiar with the Old Testament. But the task here is one of theological integration. Justin sees salvation in and through Christ as primarily an act of God cleansing and purifying the one who comes to Him. In chapter 13, he also quotes from the great passage Isaiah 52:13 – 54:6, applying it of course to Jesus, emphasizing that the blood of Christ will purify his followers.

'For Isaiah did not send you to a bath, there to wash away murder and other sins, which not even all the water of the sea were sufficient to purge; but, as might have been expected, this was that saving bath of the olden time which followed those who repented, and who no longer were *purified* by the blood of goats and of sheep, or by the ashes of an heifer, or by the offerings of fine flour, but by faith through the blood of Christ, and through His death, who died for this very reason, as Isaiah himself said...'¹⁵¹

Justin's understanding of salvation in Christ is thus a cleansing and purification from our sins and our vulnerability to Satan. Salvation certainly includes forgiveness from God, and both ontological substitution and penal substitution uphold the dimension of right standing with God. However, penal substitution separates forgiveness from God from union with Christ by locating forgiveness in the death of Christ alone, elevates forgiveness from God above the fundamental cleansing of the worshiper, the objective over the subjective, and tends to assign the former work to Christ and the latter work to the Spirit. Ontological substitution, on the other hand, makes the cleansing of the humanity of Jesus Christ the firm basis for our forgiveness, since to be resurrected into new life is to be justified (e.g. Ezk.37:1 – 14). The worshiper then participates by the Spirit *in Jesus* and receives a new identity *in him*. We are justified by sharing in the new, cleansed humanity of Jesus by the Spirit, because Jesus emerged on the other side of the Sinai covenant with a circumcised heart as the true 'Israel' (Dt.30:6), not because Jesus took some amount of punishment from God at the cross such that God had no anger leftover for us. Ontological substitution makes the subjective connection of the human person to Jesus by the Spirit the basis for our sharing in the objective shift in legal standing (justification) before God. Hence, our current and future participation in the resurrection of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, chapter 15, after quoting Isaiah 58 about true fasting

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, chapter 12

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, chapter 16

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, chapter 104

¹⁵¹ Ibid, chapter 13

Christ is the foundation for our justification, as Paul said: ‘He was raised for our justification’ (Rom.4:25). And it makes the work of Christ to save human nature in himself the basis for the Spirit’s work to save human persons. In order to provide cleansing and purification and circumcision of hardness of heart to people, Jesus had to become human, struggle against all the human passions that we have that would have made him veer off on another trajectory, and *share* the place of the guilty among the guilty on the wooden tree of the cross.

For Justin Martyr, Jesus took our curse in the sense that he, the innocent one who did not deserve it, identified with us and shared in our fallen humanity, mortality, and death. He invoked the curse picture of Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23 not because he took some consequence from God so that we now do not have to, but because he wanted to make sure that we could physically identify him as identifying with us in our guilt and cursed life. His resurrection marks him out as the truly innocent one, however, and the justified one. To the extent that I can discern an atonement theology in Justin Martyr’s writings, I find it to be ontological substitution, not penal substitution. This fits with the overall picture: all the early theologians believed in ontological substitution because they inherited it from the apostles, and behind them, Jesus himself.

Melito of Sardis (died 180 AD)

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?’¹⁵² 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.

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 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.¹⁵³

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

¹⁵² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75

¹⁵³ Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 49 – 50

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 than 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.*’¹⁵⁴

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. 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

¹⁵⁴ Ibid 54 – 56

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...’¹⁵⁵

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.’¹⁵⁶ 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 ontological substitution.

Tertullian of Carthage (160 – 220 AD)

Tertullian was a scholar and writer from Carthage in Roman North Africa (160 – 220 AD). He is called the first Latin and ‘Western’ theologian, and is considered the fountainhead from which Latin Christian theology began, later developed by his disciple Cyprian who became bishop of Carthage. He was the first author to produce a significant body of written Latin Christian material. He seems to have received an excellent education. Like many in Roman North Africa, Tertullian was a skilled orator and lawyer, based on his use of legal analogies. He was very familiar with jurisprudence. Tertullian is sometimes cited as the first Christian thinker who articulated Jesus’ atonement in terms of a background of Roman law, justice, merit, and punishment. As such, he is praised by some who defend penal substitution, and he is criticized by various Eastern Orthodox writers for departing from the New Testament.

Significantly, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not list Tertullian as being among the earliest witnesses to penal substitution. I assume from this silence that, in their reading of Tertullian, the three authors do not find sufficient evidence in Tertullian’s writings that support it. In this, I share their judgment.

Tertullian’s view of the Trinity has been both appreciated and criticized, and we must consider whether a defective view of the Trinity affected his theology of the atonement. Tertullian was the first to use the word ‘Trinity’ to denote the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, he was speaking of the working of God in space-time, in history, for our salvation (the economic Trinity), and not about the being of God in eternity prior to creation (the immanent

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 100 – 103, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.83 – 84

¹⁵⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.83 – 84

Trinity). Tertullian believed that a subtle shift within the being of God happened at the creation. He said: ‘God had not Word from the beginning.’ This is somewhat puzzling. However, in Tertullian’s defense, it has been noted that he counterbalances this with the assertion: ‘But He had Reason even before the beginning, because also Word itself consists of Reason, which it thus proves to have been the prior existence, as being its own substance.’ Moreover, he states: ‘For although God had not yet sent His Word, He still had Him within Himself, both in company with, and included, in, His very Reason.’¹⁵⁷ I judge this to be a relatively minor problem of terminology in Tertullian.¹⁵⁸ Tertullian would say that God’s Reason became God’s Word as God spoke creation into existence, and God’s Word became human flesh for our redemption. Furthermore, Origen of Alexandria in Egypt (185 – 254 AD), within one generation of Tertullian and writing in both Greek and Latin at the closest major center of Christianity to Tertullian’s Carthage, spoke of God the Father and his Wisdom each being a *hypostasis* (Greek) and *substantia* (Latin), with the clear intention of declaring that the Wisdom of God is personal and eternal.¹⁵⁹ The use of these terms, which would become more fixed at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, gives us reason to assess Tertullian positively on this particular point.

In rebutting the heretic Marcion’s claim that the portrayal of God in the Old Testament makes God out to be terribly cruel and unjust, Tertullian relates God’s justice to His love. In this, Tertullian fails. Although he begins well, he departs from a logically trinitarian way of organizing all the activities of God under the heading of God’s love:

‘Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge both severe and, as the Marcionites will have it, cruel...’¹⁶⁰ ‘But yet, when evil afterwards broke out, and the goodness of God began now to have an adversary to contend against, God’s justice also acquired another function, even that of directing His goodness according to men’s application for it. And this is the result: the divine goodness, being interrupted in that free course whereby God was spontaneously good, is now dispensed according to the deserts of every man; it is offered to the worthy, denied to the unworthy, taken away from the unthankful, and also avenged on all its enemies. Thus the entire office of justice in this respect becomes an agency for goodness: whatever it condemns by its judgment, whatever it chastises by its condemnation, whatever (to use your phrase) it ruthlessly pursues, it, in fact, benefits with good instead of injuring... Thus far, then, justice is the very fullness of the Deity Himself, manifesting God as both a perfect father and a perfect master: a father in His mercy, a master in His discipline; a father in the mildness of His power, a master in its severity; a father who must be loved with dutiful affection, a master who must needs be feared; be loved, because He prefers mercy to sacrifice; [Hosea 6:6] be feared because He dislikes sin; be loved, because He prefers the sinner’s repentance to his death; [Ezekiel 33:11] be feared, because He dislikes the sinners who do not repent. Accordingly, the divine law enjoins duties in respect of both these attributes: You shall love God, and, You shall fear God. It proposed one for the obedient man, the other for the transgressor.’¹⁶¹

Tertullian starts out accurately: Prior to creation, and prior to the fall, God was simply good. Judging is a secondary activity of God which had not been expressed prior to creation. But just as in mathematics where you cannot maximize two variables at once – you must logically maximize one variable and then the second relative to it – Tertullian’s theology starts to fall apart. He seems to universalize the Sinai covenant with Israel as if God related to everyone that way as a function of His character, and therefore Tertullian seems to make deductions about the character of God primarily from within Sinaitic Israel’s experience of blessings and curses. He conceives of God as a father and then as a master. Tertullian divides loving God from fearing (reverencing) God as if they were always meant to pertain to two different groups of people. Unfortunately, the two postures towards humanity cannot coexist in the same way and on the same level within the character of God. So the master wins out over the father in the end. Tertullian makes the meritocratic-retributive justice of God ascend to a place that is at least co-equal to, and arguably higher than, the love of God. He postulates that God must dislike sinners who do not repent, and reverses

¹⁵⁷ Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 5

¹⁵⁸ Tertullian wrote about the equality of the three persons in *substantia*, *status*, and *potestas* (substance, status, and power, in *Against Praxeas* 2 and *Against Marcion* 4.25); his distinction between *gradus*, *forma*, and *species* (*Against Praxeas* 2) points to the distinction between the persons and order of procession.

¹⁵⁹ Origen of Alexandria, *On Principles*, 1.2: ‘If, then, it is once rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is His Wisdom hypostatically existing, I know not whether our curiosity ought to advance beyond this, or entertain any suspicion that that *hypostasis* or *substantia* contains anything of a bodily nature... Who that is capable of entertaining reverential thoughts of feelings regarding God, can suppose or believe that God the Father ever existed, even for a moment of time, without having generated this Wisdom?’

¹⁶⁰ Tertullian of Carthage, *Adversus Marcionem*, bk.2, ch.11

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, bk.2, ch.13

the meaning of Ezekiel 33:11 to make it conditional on the person's response. For Tertullian, God's primary characteristic is meritocratic-retributive justice. Those who love Him, He loves. Those who disobey Him, He punishes. At this point, love is subordinate to meritocratic-retributive justice.

Later, Tertullian tries to regroup God's judging activity back under His love. Notably, he switches metaphors for God from the judge to the doctor, because by using the doctor analogy, he is able to separate the true object of God's wrath (the disease) from true object of God's love (the person):

'Even His severity then is good, because just: when the judge is good, that is just. Other qualities likewise are good, by means of which the good work of a good severity runs out its course, whether wrath, or jealousy, or sternness. For all these are as indispensable to severity as severity is to justice. The shamelessness of an age, which ought to have been reverent, had to be avenged. Accordingly, qualities which pertain to the judge, when they are actually free from blame, as the judge himself is, will never be able to be charged upon him as a fault. What would be said, if, when you thought the doctor necessary, you were to find fault with his instruments, because they cut, or cauterize, or amputate, or tighten; whereas there could be no doctor of any value without his professional tools?'¹⁶²

No wonder we are confused when reading Tertullian. Tertullian himself was confused and disorganized. Tertullian is also quite confused about the meaning of God expelling Adam and Eve from the garden. Here is a passage where he explains his interpretation of that passage. My comments are directly inserted into the brackets below:

'Now, although Adam was by reason of his condition under law subject to death, yet was hope preserved to him [*While this much is true so far*] by the Lord's saying, 'Behold, Adam has become as one of us;' that is, in consequence of the future taking of the man into the divine nature. [*This is most certainly not the meaning of God's utterance, but rather that Adam and Eve had become beings who try to define good and evil from within themselves, which was a self-contradiction for humanity because it was God's prerogative alone*] Then what follows? And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, (and eat), and live for ever. Inserting thus the particle of present time, 'And now,' He shows that He had made for a time, and at present, a prolongation of man's life [*This is false; God prevented Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of life!*]. Therefore He did not actually curse Adam and Eve, for they were candidates for restoration [*This is true, but their restoration did not come through eating from the tree of life*], and they had been relieved by confession [*They were not relieved by confession per se, but by hoping in the messianic 'seed of the woman' prophecy of Genesis 3:14 – 15*]. Cain, however, He not only cursed [*Tertullian is wrong here; God cursed Cain's relation to the ground in Genesis 4:11, but not Cain's personhood*]; but when he wished to atone for his sin by death [*Cain did not want to atone for his sins; he wanted protection from being murdered out of vengeance!*], He even prohibited his dying, so that he had to bear the load of this prohibition in addition to his crime [*That is an incorrect way to interpret what seems to be God's mercy and protection to Cain, and invitation to repent*].'¹⁶³

Tertullian is a bit contradictory, unlike Irenaeus, who as both a biblical scholar and systematic theologian was very clear and consistent about the meaning of this story. Tertullian seems to want to make of Adam, Eve, and Cain moral examples – either of penitence and confession (Adam and Eve), or the lack thereof (Cain). Tertullian's exegesis bears a distinctly Latin cultural flavor. Seeing Cain as wanting to atone for his sin by dying is beyond any reasonable reading of the text of Genesis 4:13 – 14. Why he sees God as prolonging Cain's life and imposing penance is even more mysterious and difficult to explain from a trinitarian standpoint. Confusion about this episode will contribute to mistakes Tertullian makes downstream. In addition, Tertullian does not understand God's expulsion of Adam and Eve as protecting them from eternalizing sin within themselves, and therefore God's motivation of love even in the expulsion.

Matthew Craig Steenberg sees Tertullian maintaining a place for human beings as *developmental* in nature, and I appreciate Steenberg's sympathetic analysis of Tertullian's writings on the subject.¹⁶⁴ However, Gösta Hallonsten, who writes the concluding chapter in *Partakers of the Divine Nature* which is dedicated to exploring the doctrine of

¹⁶² Ibid, bk.2, ch.16

¹⁶³ Ibid, bk.2, ch.25

¹⁶⁴ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), ch.2

theosis, argues that Tertullian began to weaken Irenaeus' theological anthropology. Irenaeus believed that human beings partake of the Holy Spirit in a preliminary sense by virtue of creation, and must choose to grow into full communion with God by further reception of the Word and Spirit. A *static* view of human beings, by contrast, tends to reduce to an emphasis on legal standing before God. Although Tertullian 'was highly dependent on Irenaeus,' as Hallonsten notes, his

'...later writings, however, are marked by the strong opposition to Gnosticism and hence stress more emphatically that the human as a created being, notwithstanding its spiritual part, is of a clearly distinct genus or species. Through this, Tertullian aims at avoiding the Gnostic thought of a divine spark in human beings and hence a predetermined salvation for the few. Tertullian's emphasis on the relative independence and special character of creature in relation to Creator, however, seems to be a common inheritance in the subsequent Latin tradition. Thus, we see the tendency to distinguish between nature and grace in a way that is foreign to Eastern tradition.'¹⁶⁵

If I am correctly interpreting Hallonsten's statement, and the historical and cultural trends in Christian theology which he describes, Tertullian contributed to an eventual difference between Eastern and Western Christianity over how we view the human being. Irenaeus viewed the human being in a developmental paradigm: the human person is a partner with God in the formation of her own human nature. This developmental view of the human being offers the only adequate explanation for the biblical data: why God created human beings to live in a narrative, why human nature and the human will even prior to the fall needed development through intentional partnership with God, why human nature in eternity will become fixed in its orientation for or against God, and why the medical-ontological substitutionary atonement model provides the only logical foundation for our healing and renewed development into fuller union with God. This paradigm continues in Eastern Orthodoxy. Tertullian, by contrast, began a trend to see the human person as fundamentally separated from God and therefore accumulating merit or demerits in a ledger external to the person, and held by a God who keeps such accounts. This emphasis came to influence the Latin-based Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. This tendency to distinguish between nature (namely, human will) and grace (that is, God's will) would return in Augustine, the greatest North African Latin theologian, who placed them in a competitive rather than complementary relation.¹⁶⁶

Tertullian's treatment of human nature since the fall seems to have influenced his view of the incarnation. He held to the mistaken doctrine of traducianism and the view of human nature which went with it. Traducianism was the belief that the souls of parents generate the souls of their children, in addition to their bodies. Stoic philosophers held to this belief. Tertullian, following the Stoic assumption, said:

'Every soul, then, by reason of its birth, has its nature in Adam until it is born again in Christ; moreover it is unclean all the while that it remains without this regeneration (Baptism); and because unclean, it is actively sinful, and suffuses even the flesh with its own shame... The corruption of our nature is another nature having a god and father of its own, namely the author of (that) corruption [i.e. the devil]. Still there is a portion of good in the soul, of that original, divine, and genuine good, which is its proper nature. For that which is derived from God is rather obscured than extinguished. It can be obscured, indeed, because it is not God; extinguished, however, it cannot be, because it comes from God.'¹⁶⁷

Tertullian believed that *the soul* was unclean, and infected *the body* with its uncleanness, or otherwise added to the

¹⁶⁵ Gösta Hallonsten, 'Theosis in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity,' edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.285 – 286.

¹⁶⁶ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 2nd edition), p.219 – 220 (also found here: http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_2.htm#n2) notes, 'According to Augustine, man in Paradise was endowed from the start with all possible wisdom and knowledge: his was a realized, and in no sense potential, perfection. The dynamic conception of Irenaeus clearly fits more easily with modern theories of evolution than does the static conception of Augustine.' Note that Ambrose of Milan (340 – 397), who led Augustine to faith, also held to a developmental view of humanity in creation where nature and grace are mutually intertwined (Ambrose of Milan, *Paradise*, chapter 5, paragraph 29; dated between 374 to 383 AD). Augustine was in Milan from the fall of 384 to the summer of 386 AD in his early 30's, so his neglect of Ambrose's teaching requires explanation. Furthermore, Augustine might have quoted Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60; he certainly quoted from *Against Heresies* 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and even mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32), yet apparently failed to understand Irenaeus on this point as well.

¹⁶⁷ Tertullian of Carthage, *De Anima (A Treatise on the Soul)*, 40 – 41; cf19

problem of bodily mortality. This may have contributed to his faulty exegesis of Genesis where he interpreted Adam, Eve, and Cain as examples or not of penitence, which is a movement of the soul.

For Tertullian, Jesus therefore needed to become incarnate in such a way so as to avoid the problem of possessing a human soul because it would necessarily be a corrupt one. This may have led Tertullian to an early Apollinarianism, the view that the Word replaced the human soul in the human body of Jesus. We do not observe this in his writing per se, but the logic of laying out the human categories in this way would require it. Lactantius, Ambrose, and Jerome all repudiated traducianism¹⁶⁸ as did the Catholic Church as a whole.¹⁶⁹ They held that each soul was created by God, and that the human nature of each person began in a state of deprivation because of the fall. However, the impact of Tertullian's thought, and/or the impact of Stoic philosophy, upon Christian theology seems to recur in the Latin bishops Hilary of Poitiers (315 – 367 AD) and Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD). Hilary believed that Jesus was not truly subject to ordinary human pain and needs like hunger and thirst, but only ate and drank to fit in with human custom.¹⁷⁰ Augustine praised Mary's immaculate conception for conceiving Jesus without any sexual desire, since Augustine defined sexual desire even for one's spouse (sadly!) as a manifestation of the soul's fallenness which would itself corrupt the new human soul¹⁷¹ contrary to the Jewish celebration of marital sexuality (e.g. Pr.5:19; Song 3:6 – 5:1) and Paul's approval of marital sex as for the couple, not simply for procreative purposes (1 Cor.7:1 – 5). Augustine was drawn towards traducianism because it seemed to explain the transmission of the guilt of Adam and Eve to their descendants, not simply their corrupted human nature. I suspect that the early fathers, who did not distinguish lust as an intentional, focused decision from an aesthetic appreciation of the human body as beautiful, or from awareness of sexual desire in a latent but unfocused sense, felt they needed to protect Jesus from experiencing all of the above. Hence, they simply called all sexual desire 'concupiscence,' or 'lust,' even the sexual attraction between husband and wife. Married men ordained to church office were asked to make their marriages celibate. Preachers and commentators worked hard to interpret the *Song of Songs* allegorically, as referring to Christ and the church, so as not to admit that the sexual attraction between husband and wife was to be celebrated.

By the fifth century, the view of Emmanuel Hatzidakis, which I covered above while discussing Irenaeus, started to emerge: Jesus must have cleansed human nature at his conception in an instantaneous manner, and basically acquired a pre-fall Adamic humanity at his incarnation. Inconsistencies start emerging in how the fathers handle various biblical texts. For example, John Cassian in Gaul struggles to explain Paul's assertion that Jesus came 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' in Romans 8:3.¹⁷² The theologians know well that Paul said Jesus was 'in human likeness' in Philippians 2:7. But they make the word 'likeness' mean 'in the appearance only' in Romans, and 'in the reality of' in Philippians. And the death of Jesus started to take on greater significance in their minds, to explain, for instance, the Hebraic language of the 'curse' of Galatians 3:13. The overall teaching on atonement is still far from penal substitution; it is still incarnational and medical. But the pastoral significance of this move was to diminish Jesus as an encouragement and source of strength for ordinary human beings struggling with sexual temptation.

So from what is Jesus saving us, in the thought of Tertullian? In the work dedicated to exploring the humanity of Jesus, *De Carne Christi (On the Flesh of Christ)*, Tertullian departs from the authors I have considered above: Ignatius, Irenaeus, the Odes of Solomon, Justin Martyr, and Melito of Sardis. He says that Jesus destroyed 'the birthmark of sin' in human flesh, not through his lifelong obedience and at his death, but at his incarnation:

'We maintain, moreover, that what has been abolished in Christ is not *carnem peccati* ('sinful flesh'), but *peccatum carnis* ('sin in the flesh') — not the material thing, but its condition; not the substance, but its flaw; and (this we aver) on the authority of the apostle, who says, 'He abolished sin in the flesh' [*a misunderstanding of Romans 8:3*]. Now in another sentence he says that Christ was in the likeness of sinful

¹⁶⁸ Lactantius, *De Opificio Dei (On the Workmanship of God)*, 19, 1ff.

¹⁶⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Number 366

¹⁷⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 10.23; Hilary is criticized by T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p.162, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, p.24; Angelo Di Berardino, *Patrology* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1986), p.57 says, 'In this context, Hilary proposes the idea of the human body of Christ as a real body but a celestial one, devoid of imperfections and capable of feeling the violence of the passion but not the pain; an idea that is not without a slightest hint of Docetism (X.18, 23).'

¹⁷¹ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 14:24; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, book 3, question 31, articles 4 – 5 repeated the view that sexual desire itself transmitted some corruption to the newly conceived child

¹⁷² John Cassian, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 4.3; but compare to 4.6 'being made in the likeness of men'

flesh, not, however, as if He had taken on Him the likeness of the flesh, in the sense of a semblance of body instead of its reality; but he means us to understand likeness to the flesh which sinned, because the flesh of Christ, which committed no sin itself, resembled that which had sinned—resembled it in its nature, but not in the corruption it received from Adam; whence we also affirm that there was in Christ the same flesh as that whose nature in man is sinful. In the flesh, therefore, we say that sin has been abolished, because in Christ that same flesh is maintained without sin, which in man was not maintained without sin. Now, it would not contribute to the purpose of Christ's abolishing sin in the flesh, if He did not abolish it in that flesh in which was the nature of sin, nor (would it conduce) to His glory. For surely it would have been no strange thing if He had removed the stain of sin in some better flesh, and one which should possess a different, even a sinless, nature! Then, you say, if He took our flesh, Christ's was a sinful one. Do not, however, fetter with mystery a sense which is quite intelligible. *For in putting on our flesh, He made it His own; in making it His own, He made it sinless.* A word of caution, however, must be addressed to all who refuse to believe that our flesh was in Christ on the ground that it came not of the seed of a human father, let them remember that Adam himself received this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father. As earth was converted into this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father, so also was it quite possible for the Son of God to take to Himself the substance of the selfsame flesh, without a human father's agency.¹⁷³

For Tertullian, as with the other patristic theologians, Jesus uniting divine nature and fallen human nature in himself is the basis of God's offer of salvation, of human nature, to others. As he argues with the gnostic heretics Marcion and Valentinus who denied Jesus' true and actual humanity, Tertullian writes about Jesus taking on human flesh. Tertullian belabors the point by saying that Jesus did not take on angelic nature to himself, an idea Tertullian evidently felt he needed to refute because some Gnostics suggested it; but Jesus wanted to bring about the salvation of human beings, and thus he took on human nature.¹⁷⁴

However, Tertullian differs from Irenaeus and others in his treatment of Romans 8:3 and his understanding of the flesh of Jesus. Tertullian explicitly says that the flesh of Christ had the same nature as Adam, but not the same corruption. This is probably due to his traducianism. He replaces the apostle Paul's term 'condemn' with 'abolish' in his reading of Romans 8:3, which is problematic. In effect, Tertullian believes that Jesus' incarnation *instantly* purified the human nature he took on from Adamic corruption, whereas Irenaeus and others held that Jesus purified it by facing temptation and overcoming it all the way to his death, where the corruption was finally defeated. The earlier theologians would have agreed with Paul's view that the Sinai covenant and its laws were good and holy, that it helped Israel diagnose the indwelling presence of sin within themselves (Rom.7:14 – 25), but could not bring them victory because the Sinai covenant was always meant to be fulfilled by Jesus, the true Israel and the climax of the covenant (Rom.10:4). In this way, Tertullian was actually losing ground to the very gnostic influences he was so eager to defeat, detaching himself historically from the other patristic Christian theologians, and detaching Christ's connection to our common fallen humanity.

Tellingly, Tertullian is also a bit unclear about whether Jesus really experienced temptation during his earthly life.¹⁷⁵ Strictly speaking, if Tertullian were to logically follow through from this point, he might have asserted that Jesus could have been transfigured, and even ascended to the Father, at any time after his incarnation without dying on the cross and being resurrected. For what reason, in Tertullian's mind, did Jesus have to undergo death? He does say that Jesus had to fulfill Scripture, and to experience death out of his human solidarity with the rest of humankind, which lies under the power of death because of the fall.¹⁷⁶ But these are partial explanations at best. At least in *De Carne Christi*, he does not give any further explanation for the necessity of Jesus' death.

Why, then, did Jesus have to die? In a work called *De Fuge in Persecutione (On Running Away from Persecution)*, Tertullian rebukes Christians who would pay the Roman authorities the bribe they demanded to get other Christians released from a death sentence. Saying that such a payment devalues the 'payment' Jesus made on our behalf, Tertullian deploys the following argument:

¹⁷³ Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi (On the Flesh of Christ)* 16

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 14

¹⁷⁵ Ibid 7; in 9, he reduces the devil's temptations in the wilderness to Jesus' physical hunger, rather than maintaining that the Adamic corruption in Jesus humanity made self-centeredness the larger and more powerful temptation

¹⁷⁶ Ibid 6

‘God...spared not His own Son for you, that He might be made a curse for us, because cursed is he that hangeth on a tree, Him who was led as a sheep to be a sacrifice, and just as a lamb before its shearer, so opened He not His mouth; but gave His back to the scourges, nay, His cheeks to the hands of the smiter, and turned not away His face from spitting, and, being numbered with the transgressors, was delivered up to death, nay, the death of the cross. All this took place that He might redeem us from our sins. The sun ceded to us the day of our redemption; hell re-transferred the right it had in us, and our covenant is in heaven; the everlasting gates were lifted up, that the King of Glory, the Lord of might, might enter in, after having redeemed man from earth, nay, from hell, that he might attain to heaven. What, now, are we to think of the man who strives against that glorious One, nay, slights and defiles His goods, obtained at so great a ransom – no less, in truth, than His most precious blood? It appears, then, that it is better to flee than to fall in value, if a man will not lay out for himself as much as he cost Christ. And the Lord indeed ransomed him from the angelic powers which rule the world – from the spirits of wickedness, from the darkness of this life, from eternal judgment, from everlasting death.’¹⁷⁷

Certainly paying out bribes or kidnapping ransoms for fellow Christians would become a practical and ethical problem in itself. Tertullian constructs, not an ethical argument, primarily, but a theological argument. He connects the self-offering of Jesus’ death as a redemption from human sin, a redemption from hell, and a ransom from the angelic powers which rule the world. A wide range of problems are thus arrayed in connection with Jesus’ death, packed in tight and dense rhetoric, rather than explained.

Positioning Jesus’ death as a ‘payment’ to outweigh and counteract the ‘payment’ requested by the Roman authorities risks being reductionist and placing God in the same role categorically as the Roman authorities. But that is precisely what is at issue: Did Tertullian think that Jesus offered a ‘payment’ to God at his death, as penal substitution asserts? Tertullian does use the term ‘blood’ in the sense of Jesus’ life expended as a type of payment. Was this a payment to God, to satisfy His offended retributive justice? In a semantic sense, Tertullian can be read as edging in that direction. He differs from Justin Martyr by isolating the death of Jesus over against the rest of his life vis-à-vis the ‘curse.’ He does not define what ‘curse’ Jesus experienced uniquely at the cross; when he writes against his opponent Praxeas, he connects the curse with the Sinai law,¹⁷⁸ although what he means by this is a bit uncertain. Likely that for Tertullian, there was not an ‘extra’ punishment that Jesus received upon himself, such as ‘hell’ on the cross, a later theory promoted by some Reformers. Rather, Tertullian seems to believe death *by itself* was the curse or penalty from God that Jesus took on himself.

Tertullian therefore believed something different than Irenaeus about human death. For Tertullian, death is *only* a penalty from God, and a more or less judicial one at that. But Irenaeus said that Jesus used death as a tool by which he defeated the corruption of sin within himself. For Irenaeus, death is an ontological consequence as much *imposed upon God* in His love, by Adam and Eve, because He had to respond in love to the corruption of Adam and Eve. It was not a proportional judicial response from God out of His justice. But Tertullian, taking the Latin cultural preoccupation with merit, alters the meaning of human death vis-à-vis the character of God.

Is this penal substitution? In my opinion, it comes close. But Tertullian specialist Robert E. Roberts explains why it is not:

‘It would be natural to expect that we should find in Tertullian, with his legal training, a forensic statement of the atonement wrought by Christ, but no such statement is to be found in his writings, or, indeed, to be detected in the background of his thought. He uses the term *satisfacere*, it is true, but never in the sense of vicarious satisfaction. With him it means invariably the amends which men make for their own sins by confession, repentance, and good works.’¹⁷⁹

In other words, for Tertullian, God is ‘satisfied’ by our apology to Him and repentance. God’s ‘satisfaction’ is not measured against God’s retributive justice as if it were a divine attribute equal and opposite God’s love, as it would be later for John Calvin. It is neither *categorical* nor *instantaneous*, that is, happening all at once, when Jesus hung

¹⁷⁷ Tertullian, *De Fuge in Persecutione* 12, v.3 – 5

¹⁷⁸ Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeas* 29, ‘But when we assert that Christ was crucified, we do not malign Him with a curse; we only re-affirm the curse pronounced by the law...’

¹⁷⁹ Robert E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian*, Epworth Press, 1924, ch.9;

http://www.tertullian.org/articles/roberts_theology/roberts_00_index.htm; last accessed August 8, 2013

on the cross and absorbed hell, or when he died. It is *personal*, that is, from person to person, and *dynamically ongoing*, in relation to the ups and downs of human behaviors and attitudes. This is probably what led Tertullian to think that Adam and Eve were rewarded with a taste from the tree of life because of their penitence, serving as the prototypical penitent figures. In this, Tertullian begins to read the categories of Latin culture (merit, penance, etc.) into the biblical text and concerns of theology. Why Tertullian believed that certain sins committed by Christians should not be forgiven by the church (murder, idolatry, fraud, apostasy, blasphemy, adultery, and fornication) even though God forgives them¹⁸⁰ may or may not be logically connected to Tertullian's theology per se; pastoral flaws often flow out of personality quirks, as it did for Tertullian, who was a rigid perfectionist in temperament, as seen by his attraction to the demanding and heretical Montanist movement, in part because of his disgust with Christian mediocrity. Nevertheless, Roberts suggests that Tertullian did not think of God's anger towards human sin as a divine attribute in tension or in conflict with God's love for human beings, and Tertullian's jumbling of the medical doctor analogy and the legal judge analogy leaves himself confused about what Scripture means, and interpreters confused about what Tertullian means. It appears that Tertullian still tries to uphold the view that God's anger or wrath was an *activity* of God which flowed out of the deeper *attribute* of God: God's unchanging love for us. Since God's love is unchanging, it is that which makes God immutable. This corresponds with God being a Trinity, that is, a communion of love within Himself. If only Tertullian had been consistently trinitarian as a theologian and biblical exegete.

More could be said in appreciation and critique of Tertullian. But for my purpose of highlighting Tertullian's atonement theology, I will stop here to draw a conclusion. Although Tertullian mistakenly believed that Jesus instantly purified human nature at his incarnation, thus rendering other aspects of Jesus' life and death less intelligible, he still accurately maintained the view that Jesus had to, in some way, undo the Adamic corruption in human nature. He also maintained the view that salvation and redemption was achieved from within the person of Jesus, in his uniting of the two natures, in a cosmic drama. And this did fit into the overarching trinitarian framework which was intact enough in Tertullian's mind that he did not recognize an attribute of God, equal and opposite to God's love, that needed to be 'satisfied,' whether it be labeled God's retributive justice, holiness, wrath, offended honor, and so on. God did not pour out on Jesus some additional quantity of wrath on top of death itself. For Tertullian, salvation did not involve a legal punishment absorbed by Jesus extrinsic to his person. For death was still intrinsic to the person of Jesus, something he had to share in and go through. By bursting through the domain of death, even death as conceived of as a *generic* punishment from God, into resurrection, Jesus rescues human nature from the evil spiritual powers of this world, offers rescue to human beings through union with himself. Hence, while Tertullian was fairly confused about the mechanics and timing of the ontological substitutionary atonement held by his contemporaries, he did not believe in penal substitution.

Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD)

I turn to examine another very important voice in the early church who Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach misinterpret. These three writers assert that Athanasius holds to penal substitution. However, Peter J. Leithart, an author, a frequent contributor to the journal *First Things*, and also a Reformed theologian in the Presbyterian Church of America, denies it. Leithart says, 'He does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve.'¹⁸¹ Who is correct here?

Some context is important to understand Athanasius and his times. The famous heretic Arius (c.250 – 336 AD), who provided his name for Athanasius' epithet 'Arian,' was an elder who had been theologically trained under Lucian of Antioch, and ordained a presbyter by him. The teaching of Lucian seemed to stress fighting the heresy of Sabellius. Sabellius argued that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were merely masks that God wore at different times in sequence. His position was influenced by the fact that the word 'person' (Greek *prosopon*, Latin *persona*) was the word 'mask' or 'face' from the Greco-Roman theater, where actors had to put on and off different masks to play their roles. Moreover, the world of Greek Neo-Platonic philosophy held that the ideal, spiritual Forms behind the physical world were not accessible. Sabellius' position imitated the structure of reality proposed by those frameworks: the true God remained hidden behind His three masks.

¹⁸⁰ Tertullian, *On Modesty* 19, 21

¹⁸¹ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154

We must note that this was an unavoidable struggle over words and the meanings to which they referred. The apostle Paul had already deployed the word *prosopon* when he spoke of seeing God ‘face to face’ (1 Cor.13:12) and God in one another with ‘unveiled faces’ (2 Cor.3:18). He used the term *prosopon* in a markedly different way than did his Greco-Roman cultural and philosophical surroundings. Thus the apostle was already engaged in the task of re-contextualization of pagan words to convey meaning in a distinctly Christian register. That is, he was engaged in theological hermeneutics. Paul provided more impetus for Christian theologians’ continuation on that journey, of necessity.¹⁸²

Arius returned to Alexandria, Egypt when Alexander was bishop. Arius was determined to fight anything that looked to him like the teaching of Sabellius. To his ears, Alexander’s claim that the Son was one with the Father did not safeguard against Sabellianism, because it could be heard as placing the divine oneness behind the Son and Father in a mysterious substance not disclosed to us. Arius’ approach was to stress the ontological difference between the Father and the Son, even going so far as to say that the Son was created by the Father at a certain point in time. He used the idea that the ‘Wisdom’ of God in Proverbs 8:22 – 36 – which was interpreted as also being the Son – spoke of herself as ‘created’ prior to everything else in creation. In Arius’ scheme, the Father remained on the other side of an unbridgeable chasm. This effectively meant that the Son did not give us real union with the Father, nor real knowledge of him. The Son was only a created being. He was not God.

Bishop Alexander took his young deacon Athanasius with him to the Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 AD to discuss the teaching of Arius and other administrative matters. ‘Some 22 of the bishops at the council, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, came as supporters of Arius. But when some of the more shocking passages from his writings were read, they were almost universally seen as blasphemous.’¹⁸³ Of the 318 bishops assembled there, all but 3 signed their agreement to the use of the word *homoousios* (‘same substance or essence’) to describe the relation between the Father and the Son. The word guarded against Arian teaching by saying that Father shared everything he is and has with the Son, eternally. The Council thus confessed that there was never an interval of time when God was not a Father, prior to the Son. The Father always had his Son. This was despite the fact that in human experience, a man exists prior to begetting a son at a certain point in time and thus becoming a father; the connotation of temporality connected to ‘father-son’ and ‘begotten, not made’ language was identified as baggage from our creaturely existence which needed to be pruned away when ‘father-son’ language was used for God and ‘begotten’ language was used for the Son.

When Alexander died in 328, Athanasius followed his mentor into the bishop’s seat at approximately the young age of 30. But the tide quickly turned against him. Opinion turned against the use of *homoousios* because of concerns held by other bishops that the word *ousia* carried a history, in an earlier theological controversy, of being used to denote a material or semi-material substance. Was God a semi-material substance, then? By contrast, Athanasius was sure the word could be, and must be, redefined in the context of Christian theology, much like the ‘father-son’ and ‘begotten’ language was. The main supporters of Arius himself were the bishops Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had been a fellow student of Lucian of Antioch with Arius and enjoyed great influence with Emperor Constantine, enough to persuade Constantine to exile Athanasius from his bishop’s seat. In the interest of historical fairness, the controversy might be more aptly named the ‘Eusebian’ heresy.

Over the course of the next few decades, all the way to his death, Athanasius became the church’s leading spokesman of the view that the Son was equal to the Father, and then the Creed of Nicaea for its use of the term *homoousios*. Athanasius saw the importance of this Nicene formula as it guarded the teaching around genuine salvation and revelation. If the Son was *homoousios* with the Father, then Jesus brought us real union with God, and thus God’s salvation of human nature. The Son also brought us real knowledge of God, and thus the Father revealed himself in and through the Son. These themes would occupy Athanasius’ attention.

Scholarly discussion has acknowledged that Athanasius used the term ‘Arian’ with deliberate polemical intent to

¹⁸² See especially the excellent work by C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), ch.8 – 9 on how semantic similarities between rival traditions do not lead anywhere near conceptual agreement

¹⁸³ Warren Carroll, *The Building of Christendom, 324 – 1100: A History of Christendom* volume 2 (West Chester, PA: Christendom Press, 1987), p.11; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch.2; John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology Volume 1: The Way to Nicaea* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001) gives helpful background to the development of technical theological terminology

lump his opponents into one category.¹⁸⁴ Arius was never a bishop, merely an elder. Those whom Athanasius opposed for being ‘Arian’ did not call themselves by that name or label. ‘Arian’ is the victor’s term. This was surely part of Athanasius’ rhetorical strategy, to name the heresy for someone of lower rank than a bishop. And while Athanasius saw them as sharing a common flaw, the diversity of thought within that Athanasian category is significant. Nevertheless, these discussions, while interesting, do not have bearing on what my goal here, which is to examine Athanasius’ teaching on the atonement, and to test whether penal substitution advocates can rightly claim Athanasius as a predecessor.

The nineteenth century church historian Archibald Robinson writes in his thorough review of Athanasius’ work, ‘Before 319 he had written his first books ‘against the Gentiles,’ the latter of which, *On the Incarnation*, implies a full maturity of power in the writer, while the former is full of philosophical and mythological knowledge such as argues advanced education.’¹⁸⁵ However, the more dominant view of scholars today concerning the dating of *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation* is that Athanasius wrote these two volumes shortly after the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, for reasons I find compelling. Greek Catholic scholar Khaled Anatolios and Eastern Orthodox scholar Matthew Craig Steenberg view these theological treatises as typical of a bishop’s early career, and even expected from a Christian bishop.¹⁸⁶ In any case, Athanasius was a leading opponent of the Arian heresy; he was the main architect of the Nicene Creed; and he gave us the final form of the New Testament as consisting of the twenty-seven books we now recognize. C.S. Lewis was very well acquainted with Athanasius and admired him deeply, as shown by the introduction he wrote to *On the Incarnation*.¹⁸⁷

First, I wish to explore Athanasius’ understanding of creation, because this area of thought highlights how the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity was understood by the early Christians, and how all the theological puzzle pieces fit together. In his introduction to his first work, *Against the Heathen*, Athanasius directs Macarius his reader to view Jesus and his crucifixion not as a shameful defeat, but as ‘the healing of creation.’¹⁸⁸ And by ‘creation,’ Athanasius demonstrably means *all creation*, in such a way that involves all human beings without reservation, although human free choice will impact our experience of that healing. Christian faith, to Athanasius, does not set forward the question of ‘how might God resolve a conflict of attributes between love/mercy and retributive justice/wrath’ or ‘how can sinners be justified before a holy God.’ It solves the problem of human evil, both in its intellectual coherence and practical application. God in Christ solves *the problem of evil, especially human evil*, first by explaining why God’s good creation *never required it in the first place* and then by explaining what a good God is doing to defeat evil and heal humanity, all the while not becoming evil Himself.

After introducing his subject, Athanasius immediately says:

‘In the beginning wickedness did not exist. Nor indeed does it exist even now in those who are holy, nor does it in any way belong to their nature. But men later on began to contrive it and to elaborate it to their own hurt.’¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

¹⁸⁵ Archibald Robinson, ‘Athanasius’ in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 4* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), p.16

¹⁸⁶ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.161 in footnote 11 says that these documents were ‘the type of doctrinal text relevant to and expected of an early episcopal career.’ Also, on p.161 – 162: ‘Here, more explicitly than anywhere else, Athanasius is able to present the core of this theological exposition in his own terms, mindful of the issues at stake at the Nicene council that had been held a few years before, but not yet wholly bound up in the disputes that would demand a polemical and often highly contextual shape to his later texts. The CG-DI is Athanasius at his least case-specific. He argues against the general practice of idolatry, but is not yet in disputes with single persons, perceived camps, or over specific terminologies; and this text, more than any of his others, articulates doctrinal theology through an anthropological perspective.’ See also Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.27 – 31.

¹⁸⁷ In his introduction to Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*, C.S. Lewis writes with deep appreciation, ‘This is a good translation of a very great book...He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times... When I first opened his *De Incarnatione* I soon discovered by a very simple test that I was reading a masterpiece. I knew very little Christian Greek except that of the New Testament and I had expected difficulties. To my astonishment I found it almost as easy as Xenophon; and only a master mind could, in the fourth century, have written so deeply on such a subject with such classical simplicity. Every page I read confirmed this impression.’ I have written a paper on Lewis’ debt to Irenaeus and Athanasius on atonement theology, which includes some of this material: *C.S. Lewis’ Theology of Atonement*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-cslewis-paper-atonement.pdf>

¹⁸⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 1.4

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid* 2.1

In chapter 2, Athanasius then defends God from any accusation of evil or caprice on account of humanity's wickedness. He does this by explaining God's intention for the creation. After defending God as 'good and exceeding[ly] noble,' he defends God's creation of the world and humanity as originally unstained and called into deeper knowledge of and communion with God. Human beings were made in the image of the Word of the Father to have power in ourselves to freely ascend in love for God, receiving joy and pleasure and renewal by desiring Him.¹⁹⁰ In chapter 3, Athanasius accounts for human sin as a 'holding back' from that which God intended. Instead, human beings began to prioritize themselves and their own bodies higher than the knowledge of God which was accessible through the mind and the soul. Sin, therefore, is fundamentally a disordering of loves. Nothing is evil in itself, appreciated in the correct order. But we human beings betrayed our own vocation:

'They wholly forgot the power they originally had from God... For having departed from the consideration of the one and the true, namely, God, and from desire of Him, they had thenceforward embarked in diverse lusts and in those of the several bodily senses... They began to be habituated to these desires, so that they were even afraid to leave them: whence the soul became subject to cowardice and alarms, and pleasures and thoughts of mortality.'¹⁹¹

In chapter 4, Athanasius describes the addictive quality of sin, from the vantage point of the human soul. The soul, which is 'mobile,' has 'power over herself,'¹⁹² and in fact comes from God, abuses that power. The soul can still discern what is good, that is, God. Yet the soul, because of the pleasure it finds in lusts, pursues what is evil. In chapter 5, Athanasius explains evils such as murder, adultery, and slander as the result of 'disorder'¹⁹³ in the human soul. He uses the illustration of a charioteer driving a fine chariot in a race, not towards the goal, but simply for the experience of racing at high speeds, even recklessly:

'All of which things are a vice and sin of the soul: neither is there any cause of them at all, but only the rejection of better things.'¹⁹⁴

From this point, having briefly summarized the biblical account of creation and fall, and explained God's goodness, humanity, free will, and the fall in such a way so as to defend the character of God from the accusation of being evil, Athanasius steps back. He has explained why evil is not part of the character of God. Now in chapter 6, he criticizes as illogical and impossible the Greek view that evil is a concrete *thing* apart from God:

'Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.'¹⁹⁵

In chapter 7, he refutes the dualistic view that there are two gods: one good and one evil. Then in chapter 8, he rejoins the biblical narrative and continues to explain the descent of humanity into error, idol-worship, and evil. From that point, he criticizes idolatry from various standpoints, concluding *Against the Heathen* with the only logical conclusion: that human beings must return to the Word of the Father in whose image we were made. This sets Athanasius up for his companion volume: *On the Incarnation of the Word*.

It should be clear from this very brief treatment that Athanasius wants to defend the Christian God from every possible accusation of acting in an evil way, or being evil. Athanasius is absolutely against any view which would make God into the 'maker of evil also.' For the bishop of Alexandria, God is only good. Therefore all God's creative works are good. And all God's intentions towards humanity are by definition good. Athanasius would eschew any attempt to say, like Calvin did, that God needed, willed, or caused the fall.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid 2.3

¹⁹¹ Ibid 3.4

¹⁹² Ibid 4.2

¹⁹³ Ibid 7.4, 'what she is is evidently the product of her own disorder'

¹⁹⁴ Ibid 5.2

¹⁹⁵ Ibid 6.1 – 2

Second, what is Athanasius' understanding of the fall? What is the problem which Jesus, in his atonement, solved? Athanasius negates one possibility. He says, in words that are quite provocative today:

'Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?'¹⁹⁶

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, Athanasius asks us to imagine Adam and Eve making a small mistake or committing a small offense against God, each other, or their future children – a raised voice, an inappropriate gesture, an unthankful or wasteful attitude, a fearful self-defense, etc. And he says that if they had done this, 'repentance would have been well enough,' because God would have easily forgiven them that. In a day and age where Anselm's satisfaction theory and Calvin's penal substitution theory have so colored our view of God that we view any small offense against God as calling forth infinite, unlimited anger from Him, it is startling to find Athanasius casually dismissing it as beneath God. Many have simply not known what to do about this statement other than say that Athanasius must have been wrong. American patristics scholar Donald Fairbairn is an example of many Protestants who are simply shocked at Athanasius' casual declaration.¹⁹⁷ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach sidestep this passage in Athanasius altogether. One suspects that they do so because it would completely ruin their attempt to enlist Athanasius into the penal substitution camp.

Unlike Fairbairn, I believe Athanasius was correct. But how do we explain his statement? Why did Athanasius say this? How could so great a theologian – an inspiration for twentieth century theologians Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance, no less – make this statement? Nowhere in his writings does Athanasius explain why God would simply accept repentance for 'ordinary' and, presumably, relatively minor trespasses – that is, trespasses not including eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. What was his understanding of the character of God? Can we reproduce his logic?

Athanasius asserted that God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conditioned all His actions, and our understanding of all His actions. Typically, scholars of Athanasius position this conviction against the Arian controversy which lowered the status of the Son to be ontologically less than God, and fundamentally different than the Father. In this regard, we understand Athanasius argued for the identity of the Son as being fully God, and fully one with the Father. Athanasius' reasoning was explicitly soteriological, rooted in biblical and classical definitions of *salvation* and *revelation*. (1) *Salvation* was defined as salvation from our own alienation from God which resulted in corruption and death. God's solution to this was uniting Himself with human nature in Jesus, that in and through Jesus, human nature might recover by being joined to the life of God, so that we might be partakers of the divine nature (life) by the Spirit (2 Pet.1:4). If the Son were not one with the Father and therefore fully God, then Jesus would not be able to bring about our salvation in that sense. (2) So too *revelation* was biblically and classically defined by Christians as God's personal self-revelation to us. In Jesus and by the Spirit we have real knowledge of God, and a revelation of the Father (Mt.11:25 – 27; Lk.10:21 – 24; Jn.14:8 – 21; Heb.1:1 – 4). If Jesus were *not* fully divine, however, and merely some super-angelic being, then he would only be revealing himself and not God. God would still rest on the other side of an impenetrable curtain, unknown and unknowable by us, imprisoned by His own transcendence. This is why Athanasius, in his *On the Incarnation*, stresses the reality of God's salvation of us in chapters 1 – 10, and God's revelation to us in chapters 11 – 19, all hinged on Christ Jesus being the divine Son of God who took human nature to himself. If God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the Father participates in the presence and work of the Son, by the Spirit. That is, the trinitarian nature of God is a prior condition for how we understand how the divine persons work together and imply each other.

So far so good. I would like to take a step further. The trinitarian nature of God also conditions how we understand God's attributes. The step Athanasius is making when he says, 'Had it been a case of a trespass only... repentance

¹⁹⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2.8

¹⁹⁷ Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.163.

would have been well enough,' is almost certainly a logical deduction made by Athanasius' organized mind. Athanasius said numerous things about God's fundamental character. For example, Athanasius names God as being 'incorporeal and incorruptible, and immortal, needing nothing for any purpose.'¹⁹⁸ He invokes the doctrine of divine simplicity: 'God is a whole and not a number of parts.'¹⁹⁹ Then, as he considers God's act of creation and the relationship God has with it, Athanasius says: 'God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness;'²⁰⁰ 'God [is] the fountain of wisdom and life.'²⁰¹ Most importantly, Athanasius taught that it is more true, accurate, and faithful to name the Father from the Son than to call God 'Creator' after the creation:

'He who names God Maker and Framer and Unoriginate, regards and apprehends things created and made; and he who calls God Father, thereby conceives and contemplates the Son... If they had any concern at all for reverent speaking and the honour due to the Father, it became them rather, and this were better and higher, to acknowledge and call God Father, than to give Him this name. For, in calling God unoriginate, they are, as I said before, calling Him from His works, and as Maker only and Framer, supposing that hence they may signify that the Word is a work after their own pleasure. But that he who calls God Father, signifies Him from the Son being well aware that if there be a Son, of necessity through that Son all things originate were created. And they, when they call Him Unoriginate, name Him only from His works, and know not the Son any more than the Greeks; but he who calls God Father, names Him from the Word; and knowing the Word, he acknowledges Him to be Framer of all, and understands that through Him all things have been made.'²⁰²

Athanasius recognized that God is eternally and intrinsically Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is Creator as well, but only became Creator at the moment He created the creation. He was not eternally Creator, since it is logically impossible to name God 'Creator' before the creation. Thus, it is more functional to name God 'Creator.' It is, of course, a true statement. However, it is more personal, perceptive, reverent, and honoring to name God 'Father' after the Son. Calling God thus, for Athanasius, means that we are perceiving and loving God for who He truly and eternally is, as He has revealed Himself to us.

I am fairly confident, then, that Athanasius considered how God's trinitarian nature impacted what we call *attributes* of God versus *activities* of God playing out in the creation, and how we can identify them. In his criticism of the Greek pagan gods, Athanasius insists that activities flow out of attributes. In his words, 'their deeds must correspond to their natures.' That is why Zeus and the other Greek gods are both good and evil. That is, they have the character of ordinary men, and not sober ones at that:

'For their deeds must correspond to their natures, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature. So that just as a man discussing about water and fire, and declaring their action, would not say that water burned and fire cooled, nor, if a man were discoursing about the sun and the earth, would he say the earth gave light, while the sun was sown with herbs and fruits, but if he were to say so would exceed the utmost height of madness, so neither would their writers, and especially the most eminent poet of all, if they really knew that Zeus and the others were gods, invest them with such actions as show them to be not gods, but rather men, and not sober men.'²⁰³

Another thought experiment can proceed as follows: Even before God created anything else, God was a loving, personal, relational, and other-centered being. Why? How is that possible if no one else existed? Because God is a fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the short phrase 'God is love' from 1 John 4:8 takes on the status of declaring God's essential, eternal, and intrinsic attribute and character, which is arguably what the apostle John perceived and intended to say. Athanasius did not quote 1 John 4:8 in his surviving writings,²⁰⁴ and seemed reluctant to put to writing many elaborations about the relations between

¹⁹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 22.3; 29:1

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid* 28.3; elsewhere he asserts, 'For the Triad, praised, revered, and adored, is one and indivisible and without degrees' (*On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27, 6*)

²⁰⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.3

²⁰¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.19

²⁰² *Ibid* 1.33

²⁰³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 16.4

²⁰⁴ James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) does not find 1 John 4:8 in the corpus of Athanasius

the divine persons. But he was nevertheless accustomed to identifying the Son by calling him the ‘beloved of the Father,’ for example, near the climactic conclusion of *On the Incarnation*.²⁰⁵ He is comfortable quoting Scriptures that identify Jesus as ‘the beloved’ or the equivalent.²⁰⁶

Hence, Athanasius is attesting to ‘love’ for humanity and ‘goodness’ towards humanity as fundamental to the Triune God because it is fundamental to God’s character and nature *independently of humanity*. In *Against the Heathen*, Athanasius piles up a long string of statements where he says that God is *intrinsically* good. Sometimes he notes how God shows His goodness through the creation.

‘God is *good* and exceeding noble’ (2.2), ‘For God, being *good* and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by Him’ (35.1), ‘His Word...proceeds in His *goodness* from the Father as from a *good* Fountain’ (41.1), ‘But the God of all is *good* and exceeding noble by nature, and therefore is kind; for one that is *good* can grudge nothing: for which reason he does not even grudge existence, but desires all to exist, as objects for his loving-kindness’ (41.2), ‘Because He is *good* He guides and settles the whole Creation by His Word’ (41.3), ‘Seeing the power of the Word, we receive a knowledge also of a *good* Father’ (45.2), ‘Being the *good* Offspring of Him that is *good*, and true Son, He is the Father’s Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation, nor as if these qualities were imparted to Him from without... but He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father’ (46.8).

His tendency in *On the Incarnation* is to observe how God’s intrinsic goodness is manifested in both creation and redemption, but especially in redemption. The mission of the Son of God to save all humanity from corruption and death reveals God’s goodness.

‘The *good* Father through Him orders all things’ (1.1), ‘what men deride as unseemly, this by His own goodness He clothes with seemliness’ (1.2), ‘He has yet of the loving-kindness and *goodness* of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation’ (1.3), ‘For God is *good*, or rather is essentially the source of *goodness*: nor could one that is *good* be niggardly of anything’ (3.3), ‘for what is evil is not, but what is *good* is... [and] they derive their being from God who is’ (4.5), ‘For it were not worthy of God’s *goodness* that the things He had made should waste away... what was God in His *goodness* to do? ... For neglect reveals weakness, and not *goodness* on God’s part... It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God’s *goodness*’ (6.5 – 10), ‘this great work was peculiarly suited to God’s *goodness*... much more did God the Word of the all-*good* Father not neglect the race of men’ (10.1), ‘inasmuch as He is *good*, He did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself’ (11.1), ‘being *good*, He gives them a share in His own Image’ (11.3), ‘God’s *goodness* then and loving-kindness being so great’ (12.6), ‘since it were unworthy of the Divine *Goodness* to overlook so grave a matter’ (43.4), ‘by His guidance and *goodness*’ (43.7).

Athanasius says that because God is ‘good,’ that God must be ‘good’ to humanity and ‘the lover of humanity.’²⁰⁷ Khaled Anatolios concurs:

‘Thus, in Athanasius, God’s goodness and love constitute as much of an ontological statement about God and a description of God’s nature (*physis*) as the apophatic statements that appear to indicate divine inaccessibility to the created realm: God is “good and exceedingly noble by nature. Therefore he is the lover of humanity. The fact that God is *philanthropos* by nature means that his actions are always characterized by that quality, since it is one of Athanasius’s principal maxims that actions must correspond to natures.’²⁰⁸

By comparison, we can consider ‘holiness’ or ‘wrath’ to examine if these are fundamental *attributes* of God, or derivative *activities* of God. In *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius never attributes these particular qualities to God’s very nature or character. Here I rely on Athanasius’ clarity in distinguishing from God as He is eternally in contrast to God as Creator, and his maxim that deeds must correspond to natures. Prior to

²⁰⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 52.1

²⁰⁶ For example, in quoting John 3:35, ‘The Father loves the Son’ in *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, 2.

²⁰⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 35.1; *On the Incarnation* 6.5 – 10; 12.6; 43.4

²⁰⁸ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.41; and on p.47, ‘God’s love and goodness thus constitute the basis within God of all the divine initiatives, from the structure of creation to the event of the incarnation...’

bringing creation into being, God cannot be considered to be 'holy' or 'wrathful.' Holiness means 'set apart from.' Before God brought other things into existence, from what was God setting Himself apart? Nothing. So, holiness is logically impossible and irrelevant prior to creation. By saying that, we are not implying a defect in God. Rather, it is because holiness is a *secondary* quality of God, an *activity* of God towards the creation which flows from God's love. Holiness actually reflects God's loving will to make 'space' for beings other than Himself.

The same logic pertains to God's wrath. Prior to creation, towards what was God 'wrathful?' Nothing. For was there something about which the Father was angry at the Son? Certainly not. So, wrath cannot be considered a fundamental, intrinsic attribute of God. Rather, wrath is not even a secondary order activity directed at the pristine creation, but a *third order* activity of God, for it is directed at the disordered corruption of sin within fallen humanity (and fallen angels). Even given the corruption into sin, God does not direct His wrath at creation per se, and that is why I would understand 'wrath' not as a secondary order activity, but tertiary. It is astonishing that Athanasius never uses the terms 'wrath' and 'anger' in his two-volume magnum opus *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*. Athanasius was quite capable of telling the biblical story and communicating what he believed to be the essential gospel message without referring to those attributes, qualities, or emotions in God. To a Protestant evangelical mind nurtured on penal substitutionary atonement, that is impossible.

Significantly, Athanasius did not believe that God required the fall of humanity to eventually draw human beings into eternal life:

'For He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption.'²⁰⁹

For Athanasius, it was actually possible that Adam and Eve and all human beings might not have fallen into corruption. As with Irenaeus, he believed that God was somehow present in the tree of life, and that all human beings prior to the fall were invited to partake of this life of God. Athanasius' emphasis in this passage fell on God's desire for them that they 'kept the grace and remained good... [that] they might still keep the life in paradise...' Put differently, if God empowered His precious image-bearing human beings with freedom to perfect their freedom in love for Him, then God did not logically need the fall. This consistent patristic theme stands in stark contrast with John Calvin's view that God actively willed the fall, and then brought it about:

'God *not only foresaw* the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also *at his own pleasure arranged it*.'²¹⁰

This is because Calvin believed that God's retributive justice was an eternal and intrinsic attribute in God, equal and opposite to His love. If God has two fundamental characteristics, then He must arrange all creation and history and humanity in such a way that He can assuredly demonstrate both of those characteristics. Hence, Calvin believed that God had to cause the fall of humanity, so that some human beings could be damned. The Westminster Confession says that God's glory is the revealing of both His mercy and His justice:

'[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the glory of *His mercy*, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of *His justice*, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.'²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.4

²¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7. I am aware of attempts to 'nuance' or 'balance' these statements, of course. At the very least, however, the question is whether Christians should feel the need to defend these statements in any sense. See also *Institutes*, book 1, ch.16, section 3; book 1, ch.17, section 5

²¹¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 33, paragraph 2. Although Calvin had studied the patristic emphasis on God's empowerment of human free will and their exposition of the biblical texts, he nevertheless decided that God's sovereignty was mutually incompatible with human free will. In *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 2, section 4, Calvin writes, 'Moreover although the Greek Fathers, above others, and especially Chrysostom, have exceeded due bounds in extolling the powers of the human will, yet all ancient theologians, with the exception of Augustine, are so confused, vacillating, and contradictory on this subject, that no certainty can be obtained from their writings.'

John Piper also makes this position quite clear. When asked why God required a world in which He sent some people to hell, Piper answers:

‘His goal is that the full range of His perfections be known. I think this is the ultimate goal of the universe. God created the universe so that the full range of His perfections – including wrath and power and judgment and justice – will be displayed.’²¹²

For Calvin and his heirs, God required the fall. For Athanasius, God did not. In fact, Athanasius would say that anyone who thought in that way was actually denying that God was a Trinity. For there is simply no logical way the Triune God could have two faces like this. Retributive justice cannot possibly be an equal and opposite attribute of God as His love is. For prior to creation, God could not express retributive justice on anything or anyone, so retributive justice cannot be an eternal divine attribute. More importantly, if God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then He has only one face: that of love – a love which purifies and cleanses, to be sure, but love nonetheless. Since justice must therefore be an activity of God – not an attribute – towards the creation, God’s justice must be an *activity of His love*, and thus God’s justice must be a restorative justice, not a retributive justice. If I am correct, then penal substitution actually negates the doctrine of the Trinity, turning God into a two-faced Janus, and erroneously redefining God’s justice from being restorative to retributive. And, to my knowledge, the early theologians of the first millennium would agree. God’s wrath can only be an *activity* of His love, directed at that which opposes and resists Him. God’s love and God’s wrath cannot be aimed at the same object. God only expresses wrath towards the corruption of sin which His creatures (human and angelic) acquired of their own free will. Therefore, Athanasius serves as a correction to John Calvin, the Westminster divines, and John Piper. The doctrine of penal substitution and its companions – the doctrines of double predestination, divine retributive justice, and limited atonement – *cannot co-exist with the doctrine of the Trinity*.

To substantiate that assertion, I will show how Athanasius understood *what* the fall entailed, and why God decreed that death was the consequence for it. Was not God acting retributively towards Adam and Eve? Not at all. Athanasius recognized that God preferred human death over immortalized sinfulness.

‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition...’²¹³

In other words, once the corruption of sin had set in to human beings, death was the only way to rid it from us. Athanasius shares this view explicitly with several other patristic writers. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (130 – 202 AD) interpreted death as an act of mercy. Death was better than Adam and Eve eating from the tree of life in a corrupted state and making their own human evil immortal:

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’²¹⁴

In other words, according to Irenaeus, God was not acting retributively, but restoratively. Nor was Irenaeus alone in this opinion. Methodius, bishop of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), said the same:

‘In order, then, that man might not be an undying or ever-living evil, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body, and was provided with immortal sustenance, God for this cause pronounced him mortal, and clothed him with mortality... For while the body still lives, before it has passed through death, sin must also live with it, as it has its roots concealed

²¹² John Piper, *How Does it Glorify God to Predestine People to Hell?*, March 21, 2013; <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-does-it-glorify-god-to-predestine-people-to-hell>

²¹³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1

²¹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

within us even though it be externally checked by the wounds inflicted by corrections and warnings... For the present we restrain its sprouts, such as evil imaginations, test any root of bitterness springing up trouble us, not suffering its leaves to unclose and open into shoots; while the Word, like an axe, cuts at its roots which grow below. But hereafter the very thought of evil will disappear.’²¹⁵

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 390 AD), a bishop in modern day Turkey, also repeated the idea that God was not retributively punishing Adam and Eve, but already looking to restore them:

‘Yet here too he makes a gain, namely death and the cutting off of sin, in order that evil may not be immortal. Thus, his punishment is changed into a mercy, for it is in mercy, I am persuaded, that God inflicts punishment.’²¹⁶

What is so significant about these early theologians? Irenaeus was led to faith by Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who was himself mentored by the apostle John. This occurred at a time when Asia Minor, including Smyrna, was the intellectual and missionary center of the Christian faith, not least because Paul, Peter, and John all invested enormous time and effort there. Irenaeus was the first to explicitly quote from all four Gospels, and was the first biblical theologian – outside of the apostles – to write extensively. So the likelihood is high that Irenaeus acquired his understanding of Genesis fully intact from the apostle John, and behind John, Jesus himself. Methodius, bishop of Olympus, was a contemporary of the great Origen of Alexandria. Methodius was one of the only church leaders who raised concerns about worrying trends in Origen’s thought. And Gregory, bishop of Nazianzus, was one of the most significant Christians *ever*. The Orthodox church calls him ‘the Theologian’ in appreciation for his thoughtful and precise work in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 AD and the intense fourth century debates with heretics. The Orthodox bestow that title only on two others: the apostle John ‘the Theologian’ and Simeon ‘the New Theologian.’ For these great Christian leaders to corroborate one another explicitly on this issue is weighty.

How were they – including Athanasius – reading Genesis 3? Biblically, they read Adam and Eve as *forcing* God to curtain off the garden and withdraw His presence to some degree. That is a very reasonable interpretation. The fall was more like Adam and Eve trying to lock God out of the house, and trying to go about life on their own, as rebellious young children in a great house. God had made Adam and Eve to bring forth life – both human life and garden life. God would mercifully ensure that they would be able to carry out their original calling, albeit in a limited form. After all, God’s promise of a messianic ‘seed of the woman’ who would redeem human nature and defeat the serpent (Gen.3:14 – 15) depended on their ability to have children. But the sorrows in childbirth and gardening, along with physical death, took hold of humanity because Adam and Eve pushed God, the life-giver, aside. As Adam and Eve tried to bring forth of life, they would therefore have a harder time. So the early Christians read the sorrows of childbirth and gardening in Genesis 3:16 – 19 as *already anticipating* the closing off of the garden in Genesis 3:22 – 24. The sorrows were not a retributive punishment. It was not God playing tit for tat. Rather, the sorrows in life-bearing were God as the life-source being forced by His love to withdraw from His life-bearers. He would not have Adam and Eve suffer a fate worse than death. Anything was better than immortalized sinfulness. Death was a severe mercy, but a mercy nonetheless. It played a positive role in God’s larger plan of restoration.

Many Protestant evangelicals, by contrast, influenced by the penal substitution view, assert that God *retaliated* against Adam and Eve by inflicting death upon them. But was God’s imposition of death a retributive punishment? Was God saying, in effect, ‘You caused me pain, so I will cause you pain’? The earliest Christians did not see it that way because they were firmly rooted in a medical and restorative view of God’s character. The early Christians rejected the view that God’s highest justice was retributive. According to a study by systematic theologian Adonis Vidu, they had retributive models of justice available to them in the Greco-Roman world, and deliberately rejected them.²¹⁷ To the early Christians, God’s justice was restorative.

²¹⁵ Methodius of Olympus, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5

²¹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 45*

²¹⁷ Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). Vidu states up front that he is sympathetic to penal substitutionary atonement (p.xiii). Unfortunately, Vidu does not engage with Irenaeus and Athanasius (see footnote 6 on p.xvii), and reduces the patristic theory of atonement to the ‘ransom’ theory: Jesus ransomed us from the devil, or perhaps from death. He does not engage with what Jesus was doing to his very own humanity, in the ontological-medical theory. Sadly, Vidu does not seem to engage the full sweep of T.F. Torrance’s work on patristic theology, noting only one comment from Torrance on ‘propitiation’ on p.263. In his final chapter, he absolutizes ‘law’ as the essence of God from the standpoint of a carefully constructed doctrine of the simplicity

Third, I will examine texts that show Athanasius expounding on a medical-ontological understanding of atonement. Having identified ‘a subsequent corruption’ as the fundamental problem of the fall, Athanasius then goes onto to explain why Jesus is ‘the healing of the creation.’²¹⁸ Whereas Irenaeus argued to preserve the full humanity of Jesus, Athanasius argued in *On the Incarnation of the Word* to preserve Jesus’ full deity. Notably, Athanasius reproduces Irenaeus’ ontological-medical substitution atonement theory, even though he was approaching it from the opposite direction, because Christ had to be both fully divine and fully human so that God could unite Himself with humanity in the person of Jesus and overcome the onto-relational problem of corruption and alienation within human nature. Athanasius writes:

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.’²¹⁹

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, as I discussed earlier, Athanasius distinguishes between lesser ‘trespasses’ and the ‘corruption’ of human nature. Athanasius briefly considers God’s responses to both human actions. In Athanasius’ mind, God’s attitude towards the former is not that of a nitpicky moralist who takes infinite offense at every slight. According to Adonis Vidu,²²⁰ Athanasius and his predecessors would have been well aware of Greek and Roman conceptions of authority and justice, so he seems to be intentionally dismissing the view that God’s justice is retributive, and by extension the idea that the atonement consists of a satisfaction of divine retributive justice.

Second, Athanasius says that the deep tragedy of the fall lies in the ‘subsequent corruption’ of humanity, not in God’s offended honor or justice. In Athanasius’ usage, ‘corruption’ means more than simply our mortality and eventual death. In his previous chapter, Athanasius also refers to moral, spiritual, and relational corruption as well:

‘When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and rapine filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and injustice, all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says: ‘Their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own

(indissolubility) of God’s nature. ‘Condemnation of sin,’ too, Adonis reads as part of God’s *simple essence*, which he interprets as happening in the death of Christ. But if Adonis grounds both law, legal condemnation of sin, forensic satisfaction of retribution, and judicial mercy all in the simplicity of God, and none of these actions can be divided from the others, then none of these actions can be partial. The mercy must be the whole, undivided Godhead, as the retribution involves the whole, undivided God. This would lead Adonis logically into universalism. From a biblical studies perspective, the key question remains: Did the original Hebraic context teach any version of penal substitution? To which I would argue it does not.

²¹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 1.4

²¹⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2:8 – 9

²²⁰ Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014) explains the Greek conceptions of justice which Christianity rejected; Vidu, in his case study approach, notes that Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, one to two generations after Athanasius, argue that God’s justice is restorative.

persons the due recompense of their pervertedness.’²²¹

Corruption is an ontological and relational category for Athanasius, reflecting the ontological change and relational opposition to God that humanity acquired from Adam and Eve internalizing rebellion into their very selves, their spiritual *and* physical beings. Notice that corruption for Athanasius is not identical with death – as he separates the two when he says, ‘so involved themselves in death *and* corruption’ – although they are certainly connected. This is important because Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not adequately grasp this distinction; I will comment on that mistake below.

The divine dilemma in the penal substitution theory postulates a conflict between God’s attributes (love and wrath). But in Athanasius, and in the ontological substitution theory, the divine dilemma was not internal to *God*, but external to Him and internal to *humanity*. Athanasius says that it was ‘monstrous and unfitting’ for human beings to degenerate spiritually, morally, and physically like this.

‘It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits... It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.’²²²

Whereas some aggressive exponents of the penal substitution theory say, perhaps out of sincere theological conviction, and perhaps for dramatic effect to play up God’s act of mercy in Jesus, that God could have let the whole humanity-creation project go to ruin and ultimately to hell (since they also conceive of hell as an eternal prison system), Athanasius would have found that view repulsive. It denigrates God’s love for humanity and goodness to say that God could have sat back and done nothing to save humanity in our fallen state. In Athanasius’ mind, God’s Word *had* to become incarnate in Jesus to bring us the salvation of human nature; He had no choice, given His nature as ‘good’ and ‘lover of humanity.’ God had a choice to create us and rest of creation; He could have chosen not to do that. But once He did, He was committed. He could not have chosen to ignore our fall into sin; that was not a choice open to His loving character.

Penal substitution theory also postulates that the object of God’s love and the object of God’s wrath are identical: our personhood. This is because the primary cultural context for Catholics and Protestants to draw up a model of God is the Latin judicial system of merit and penance, in which punishment must fall on *a person* for his disobedience to the law. I will highlight the significance of this misunderstanding below. The critical distinction Athanasius makes is that the object of God’s love is our personhood and the object of God’s wrath is the corruption in our nature. God’s love and God’s wrath *do not have the same object*. That is why the corruption in Jesus’ own body needed to be got rid of through his death as the very expression of God’s love for us. God’s wrath served God’s love by purging away in Christ all that opposed intimate relationship with God.

‘The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father’s Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word’s indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of

²²¹ Ibid 1.5

²²² Ibid 2.6

all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.’²²³

Like Irenaeus (and Paul and John) before him, Athanasius says that God’s resolution to this problem was first to have the Word-Son of God take on human flesh, resist the corruption inherent in human nature since the fall, and overcome it through death and resurrection. Athanasius affirms along with Irenaeus that Jesus lived a sinless life as ‘an offering and sacrifice free from every stain,’ even though he had taken on the same sin-ridden humanity we all have.

Given that the fall entailed human corruption and death, the bishop of Alexandria viewed the resurrection as an essential part of God’s act of salvation, because it was a salvation of human nature by ridding it of its sinful corruption and antagonism.

‘The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.’²²⁴

Here is where Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach flatly contradict Athanasius himself and place a heavy emphasis where Athanasius would not. They say:

‘For Athanasius, then, Jesus’ death was the purpose of the incarnation; the immortal Son of God needed to become man to die.’²²⁵

Failing to grasp Athanasius’ central theological concern that Jesus brought forth a purified, Spirit-imbued, resurrected humanity in his own person, free of the stain of sin’s corruption, they also ignore the corruption of human nature as the central problem God was trying to resolve. Instead, they say that Jesus’ death was God’s way of inverting His own punishment so that, by punishing Jesus with death, death would now serve as the gateway to resurrection:

‘God became man in order to save sinful humanity from the divine curse on creation that is God’s punishment for sin, and Christ accomplished this by enduring and exhausting this curse in our place, as our substitute.’²²⁶

But Athanasius does not understand the ‘curse’ as an extra punishment Jesus took at his death, as I will show below, but rather his taking on fallen humanity in his incarnation and bearing it all the way until his death, to bear it away through death.²²⁷ Athanasius’ point is not that God wanted to simply bring Jesus under death to satisfy divine retributive justice. Death is not identical with the definition of ‘corruption’ for Athanasius. Corruption, as Athanasius defined it, is not simply our physical mortality. Corruption, for Athanasius, as I have shown above, is a weakening of human nature’s spiritual compass, a twisting and distorting of our original inclination towards God, and a genetic infection within us that leads to moral degeneracy and spiritual resistance to God. Corruption is distinct from simply ‘death’ or ‘mortality.’ Thus, for Jesus to die in our place is an act of joining us in death, of sharing in our whole condition, not an act of diverting an invisible torment from us to him.

Notice that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach must imply that Jesus’ death was somehow filled with more torment than our

²²³ Ibid 2.9

²²⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 4.22

²²⁵ Jeffery, Ovey, Sach, p.172; while it is true that Athanasius says that the cross is the ‘sum of our faith’ (*On the Incarnation* 19.3), and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.77 translates this phrase as the ‘primary reason for the incarnation,’ the significance which Athanasius sees in the cross is the defeat and destruction of the corruption: ‘to turn the corruption to incorruption’ (*On the Incarnation* 20.1). Hence, Athanasius sees the death of Christ as one side of the coin of God’s salvation of human nature, of which the other is his bodily resurrection; mention of one implies and requires the other. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not see the matter this way.

²²⁶ Ibid, p.173

²²⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8

death, because of something God was doing to him that He did not do to everyone else. 'Death' for Jesus means something other than 'death' for us, they would say. Perhaps he descended to hell while on the cross, or after his last breath? Jeffery, et al, do not specify what it is. But notice that Scripture says nothing of the sort. Peter says that Jesus, after being 'made alive in the Spirit,' went to 'hades' to visit those who were dead and preach to them (1 Pet.3:19; 4:6). But this certainly does not seem like an additional torment Jesus undertook; it was ministry! Jesus seems to have experienced death in a different way than the rest of us because of his nature as divine-human, but that is different than saying that God did something to Jesus in his death that He does not do to the rest of us. Death is death for each person. Even the scourging of the crucifixion process is minimized by the apostolic writers, because it was not his physical pain that was providing the atonement. For them, as for Athanasius, it was Jesus' death and resurrection.

By dying, Jesus killed the corruption in his human nature, and by his resurrection and ascension, brought human nature to its full union with God. This is why Athanasius says what Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach simply do not understand: 'The supreme object of His coming was to bring about *the resurrection of the body*. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.' God will, therefore, by virtue of Jesus' resurrection, resurrect all human beings from the dead. All will bow the knee to Jesus whether they like it or not.

Athanasius' explanation of the atonement, like Irenaeus', might be called 'total substitution' as T.F. Torrance understands it, or 'ontological substitution' or 'medical substitution' as I prefer, but not 'penal substitution.'²²⁸ Unquestionably, the Son of God substituted himself totally in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as 'a sufficient exchange' (in Athanasius' own words) for all human beings, solving the problem internal to humanity: our self-inflicted corruption to sin and death. The exchange was not simply penal, and not simply at the cross. Jesus' ultimate solution to sin was not to remove the *consequences* of sin (with a strictly retributive conception of the wrath of God) but to deal with the *source*. Jesus offers his renewed, resurrected humanity which has been perfectly realigned with the Father in the Spirit – an ontological and relational solution physically embodied in him. Athanasius clearly did not think in penal terms.

Following Athanasius' lead, we must not see the atonement as a 'satisfaction' of one or more attributes of God. God's love is not 'satisfied.' In the medical-ontological framework, God continues to oppose human sin and pierce with laser sharp focus the corruption within people by His Spirit, so God's wrath was not 'satisfied' in a broad sense pertaining to all humanity or to Christians. In fact, God's wrath continued to fall on Christians when He took their lives! Ananias and Sapphira lied, and God took their lives (Acts 5:1 – 11). The Corinthian Christians ate communion with an unworthy attitude, and apparently God visited death and sickness upon them (1 Cor.11:29 – 30). Is there divine wrath for which Jesus did not penally atone? Arminians may be able to resort to the explanation that they 'lost their salvation.' Some Calvinists insist that these people were never truly Christians to begin with. I am persuaded that although this was not God's wrath to some sort of ultimate condemnation for these people, it was undeniably God's wrath nevertheless. Perhaps God was acting in a way similar to a coach pulling underperforming players out of a game. But in any case, because we do not have to throw God's displeasure and wrath onto another side of a categorical divide on one side of a penal atonement model, this does not cause any deep consternation to anyone who holds to medical-ontological substitution. I may be imputing more theological weight behind their words, but I suspect that George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis are commenting on satisfaction theory when Lewis quotes MacDonald saying, 'God is easy to please, but not easy to satisfy.'²²⁹

This brings me to explore a *fourth* area of Athanasius' theological thought: his understanding of hell. My exploration focuses on whether Athanasius' understanding of hell corresponds with penal substitutionary atonement theology. Penal substitution requires that hell be understood as the expression of divine retributive justice on those who reject Christ. If Christ died to absorb the retributive justice of God for some, then hell must be understood as

²²⁸ T.F. Torrance, *Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.72 says, 'The New Testament speaks of the penal-substitutionary aspect of the atonement, *not* in the detached forensic categories that have developed in the Latin west, Roman or Protestant, but in terms of the intimacy of the Father-Son relation, in which the Son submits himself to the Father's judgement and is answered through the Father's good pleasure – see here the supreme importance of John McLeod Campbell and his great book *The Nature of the Atonement*, in which he rightly warned us against thinking of atonement in *purely penal terms*, for we *cannot* think of Christ being punished by the Father in our place and the New Testament *nowhere* uses the word *kolazo*, punish, of the relation between the Father and the Son.' (emphasis mine)

²²⁹ George MacDonald, quoted by C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.158

the expression of retributive justice of God for the others. This is decidedly not how Athanasius explained hell.

One document I examine is known to scholars as *Letter #3*, also called Athanasius' *Easter Festal Letter of 331 AD*. This was a letter from Athanasius as bishop, sent to all of his presbyters, monks, and congregations in the area of Alexandria. This was the third such letter that he sent since coming into his seat as bishop in 328 AD. Here we find Athanasius in the midst of his pastoral responsibilities.

Consistent with medical-ontological substitution atonement theology where Jesus purifies human nature, Athanasius conceives of hell as the purifying love of God, who meets those who eternally resist Him with His implacable purifying love nevertheless. Athanasius does this through a literary and thematic approach to the motif of fire in the biblical narrative. Protestants have traditionally not approached the motif of fire in a literary way. They have instead approached exegesis in a piecemeal fashion. As a result, Protestants tend to make conclusions about hell by taking a text like Revelation 20 – the lake of fire as destroying – separately from Revelation 1, where Jesus is portrayed as the fiery, purifying one, or Revelation 2 – 3, where Jesus offers the church gold purified in fire. Similarly, Protestants tend to take texts in Matthew which speak of hell as a destroying fire (Mt.5:22; 13:40 – 42, 50; 18:8 – 9; 25:41) separately from the texts in Matthew which speak of the Holy Spirit having a ministry of purifying fire (Mt.3:11), or the believer being indwelt by fire, like a lamp (Mt.5:15 – 16; 25:1 – 12).

The significance of one's methodological approach is as follows. In Acts, God frees the apostles from prison three times (Acts 5:19 – 20; 12:6; 16:25 – 26). Should a Christian read Acts and conclude that she should go to Saudi Arabia and preach the Christian message, because God will break her out of prison like He did the apostles in Acts? That would obviously not be a correct interpretation of Acts. And the most straightforward reason is because there are three times in Acts where God did *not* free the apostles or other Christians from prison (Acts 8:3; 12:1 – 2; 23:11 – 28:31)! One must correctly perceive a literary theme in a unit of biblical literature like Acts. And in this case, a reader must take into account both sides of the theme of imprisonment.

The same is true for the literary theme of fire *in every biblical book in which it appears*. As far as I can tell, the Pentateuch,²³⁰ Isaiah,²³¹ Matthew,²³² Luke-Acts,²³³ Hebrews,²³⁴ 2 Peter,²³⁵ and Revelation²³⁶ all use the motif of divine fire to first indicate God's purifying love, and then, only in a secondary sense, as destroying, towards those who resist their own purification. Malachi, the Psalms, and the apostle Paul assume that the language of divine fire should be understood this way (e.g. Mal.1:7 – 12; 3:1 – 6; Ps.12:6; 1 Cor.3:10 – 15; 2 Th.1:9²³⁷). John in his Gospel works mainly with the motif of light, but that is connected to the theme of fire both logically and literarily through the 'I am' / 'Jesus as burning bush' / 'Jesus as Temple' motif that runs through the Gospel of John; thus John's usage of 'light' in the Gospel anticipates his usage of 'fire' in Revelation. My own perception of fire as a dual-edged literary theme was formed prior to my reading patristic literature. It was shaped by Jewish and Christian literary scholars like Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, James Kugel, John Sailhamer, Paul Borgman, Robert Tannehill, and others. Many of these scholars took up a literary approach to Scripture to make the case for literary cohesion in response to the Documentary Hypothesis and the quest for supposed 'sources' which made the final text appear to be a patchwork quilt of disparate pieces of literature. There is far more unity in the texts than we had hitherto understood. So when I encountered the likes of Athanasius and other early Christians saying the following, I was surprised that I was encountering something that could not be considered 'allegory,' which is what the patristic writers are often dismissed for doing. I was also impressed by their ability to perceive the literary quality of Scripture, and how they knew that had profound implications for the discipline of theology proper.

²³⁰ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf> is an essay exploring fire as a literary theme throughout the canon; for shorter explanations, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in the Pentateuch*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/pentateuch-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

²³¹ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire and Purification in Isaiah*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/isaiah-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

²³² Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Matthew's Gospel: What is Divine Fire?* <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness.sg.pdf>

²³³ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Luke – Acts*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/luke-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

²³⁴ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire, Offering, and Cleansing in the Epistle to the Hebrews*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/hebrews-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

²³⁵ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Second Peter*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/peter2-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

²³⁶ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in the Book of Revelation*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/john-revelation-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

²³⁷ The KJV, ASV, YLT, CLNT, Douay-Rheims, and Ronald Knox translations of this verse indicate that fire comes 'in the presence of the Lord,' or 'from' his face, in agreement with all other indications of divine fire in Scripture. Other translations (ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NASB) read separation from Jesus into the meaning.

Here is an extended quotation from Athanasius' *Easter Festal Letter of 331 AD*:

'For when a man despises the grace given him; and immediately falls into the cares of the world, he delivers himself over to his lusts; and thus in the time of persecution he is offended, and becomes altogether unfruitful. Now the prophet points out the end of such negligence, saying, 'Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord carelessly [Jeremiah 48:10].' For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea, moreover, *burning like a flame*, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called '*a consuming fire* [Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:26; Hebrews 12:29]'

'Therefore, the God of all, 'Who makes His angels [spirits],' is a spirit, 'and His ministers *a flame of fire* [Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7].' Wherefore, in the departure from Egypt, He forbade the multitude to touch the mountain, where God was appointing them the law, because they were not of this character. But He called blessed Moses to it, as being fervent in spirit, and possessing unquenchable grace, saying, 'Let Moses alone draw near [Exodus 24:2].' He entered into the cloud also, and when the mountain was smoking, he was not injured; but rather, through 'the words of the Lord, which are choice silver purified in the earth [Psalm 12:6],' *he descended purified*. Therefore the blessed Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, 'Quench not the Spirit [1 Thessalonians 5:19].' For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. For he said, 'Quench not;' not because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to suffer anything from them; but because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. 'For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, nor dwell in a body that is subject unto sin; but will remove from thoughts that are without understanding [Wisdom 1:5].' Now they being without understanding, and deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having that 'Light which lights every man that comes into the world [John 1:9].' Now a *fire* such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, when the word was in him *as a fire*, and he said, 'I pass away from every place, and am not able to endure it [Jeremiah 20:9].' And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this upon earth, and said, 'And what? Would that it were already kindled [Luke 12:49]!' For He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death [Ezekiel 18:32]; so that *evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit*; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred. [Mark 4:20] Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas, although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were *inflamed* with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him [Luke 24:13 – 34]. The blessed Paul also, when seized by this *fire*, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of the Word [Acts 9]. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them [Luke 17:11 – 17]; nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, 'while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor.' But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful, *the last fire*, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.'²³⁸

Athanasius sees God as 'a consuming fire,' as a derivative effect of God being 'light.' Once again Athanasius is organizing who God is in Himself prior to creation, and how God relates with respect to creation, and specifically fallen creation. Light is God's intrinsic nature. Fire is the activity of God, who is light, in the midst of a fallen creation. This corresponds tightly with Athanasius' use of the motif of fire to describe Jesus' purification of his own humanity.²³⁹

Athanasius then shows that the primary purpose of God showing Himself as a fire is to purify His people, as Moses was purified in his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. God's interaction with people and their willing reception of His word results in a certain type of human experience: the experience of internalizing this divine fire as a passion

²³⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #3: Third Easter Festal Letter* 3 – 4, emphasis mine

²³⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.4; 44.6 – 7

for God, for preaching, for proclamation as Jeremiah experienced it. Jesus came to cast this purifying fire upon the earth, for the purpose of bringing about repentance, and, very notably, ‘that evil should be entirely consumed in all men,’ for the purification of their souls. Purifying the corruption of sin away from people ‘clears the ground’ as it were for the word of God to bring forth fruit. Paul was ‘seized by this fire’ on the Damascus Road – for Jesus appeared in divine light – and became a preacher.

In a secondary sense, for Athanasius, God is also ‘the last fire’ towards ‘such men’ as Judas who are ‘ungrateful’ and ‘unthankful.’ The bishop of Alexandria integrates the motif of fire towards the resistant with the motif of fire towards the repentant. They are indeed two sides of the same coin. For God by His very nature cannot help but to shine – light can do no other – even upon those who do not want the light, and call for the surrender of everyone who has not yet voluntarily participated in their own purification. For those who somehow fix their resistance in place for all eternity, refusing to be thankful for Jesus’ action on their behalf, their ‘end’ will be ‘the last fire’ shared by the devil and his angels.²⁴⁰

Athanasius’ younger contemporary on the northern side of the Mediterranean, Ambrose (337 – 394 AD), bishop of Milan, the courageous excommunicator of Emperor Theodosius, wrote and preached on the theme of fire in the same way:

‘And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire [Isaiah 10:17]. So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said [Deuteronomy 4:24]. For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [Exodus 3:6]. The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin [Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16]. So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: ‘A fire shall burn in His sight.’ For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.’²⁴¹

Ambrose’s writings show that very important representatives of the Greek and Latin churches were preaching this way. It attests to the widespread, if not universal, view of the church about hell among its learned. For the church prior to Luther and Calvin, hell was not understood as the retributive justice of God. The entire Eastern Orthodox communion maintains that position. Hell was not an experience of some attribute of God equal and opposite to His love. For there is no such attribute of God called ‘retributive justice.’ Hell is simply the purifying love of God, experienced by those who eternally resist that purification. It is an activity of God’s love, as God in His love continues to call for those who have turned their capacity for love selfward, so that God’s command to that person to love others more than the self becomes utter torment.

One aspect of Athanasius’ thought which I believe needs clarification is his discussion of ‘nothingness’ or ‘non-being.’ In his explanation of creation and fall in *On the Incarnation* chapter 4, Athanasius asserts that since God called humanity out of nothingness, therefore ‘nothingness’ was a ‘natural state’ of humanity:

²⁴⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 24 goes even further to explain why the devil and his angels are already experiencing something of that last fire. In his biography of the famous Egyptian monk Antony of the Desert, Athanasius records Antony saying this: ‘For that which appears in them is no true light, but they are rather the preludes and likenesses of the fire prepared for the demons who attempt to terrify men with those flames in which they themselves will be burned. Doubtless they appear; but in a moment disappear again, hurting none of the faithful, but bringing with them the likeness of that fire which is about to receive themselves. Wherefore it is unfitting that we should fear them on account of these things; for through the grace of Christ all their practices are in vain.’

²⁴¹ Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170

‘For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to *their natural state*, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into *nothing* in the course of time. For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption. For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not; but by reason of his likeness to Him that is (and if he still preserved this likeness by keeping Him in his knowledge) he would stay his natural corruption, and remain incorrupt; as Wisdom says: ‘The taking heed to His laws is the assurance of immortality [Wisdom 6:18],’ but being incorrupt, he would live henceforth as God, to which I suppose the divine Scripture refers, when it says: ‘I have said you are gods, and you are all sons of the most Highest; but you die like men, and fall as one of the princes [Psalm 82:6 – 7].’²⁴²

My discomfort with this statement comes about because I think the language and concept of ‘nothingness’ is a dangerous and inconsistent term for Athanasius to use. In this passage, he speaks of ‘nothingness’ as if it were a real possibility. But in the chapters that follow, Athanasius hastily adds that it is not. Letting humanity sink backwards towards corruption, death, and nothingness was against God’s love, design, and most importantly, goodness. For God to allow this to happen was ‘out of the question’:

‘Again, it were unseemly that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption. For it were not worthy of God’s goodness that the things He had made should waste away, because of the deceit practiced on men by the devil... So, as the rational creatures were wasting and such works in course of ruin, what was God in His goodness to do? Suffer corruption to prevail against them and death to hold them fast? And where were the profit of their having been made, to begin with? For better were they not made, than once made, left to neglect and ruin. For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God’s part— if, that is, He allows His own work to be ruined when once He had made it— more so than if He had never made man at all. For if He had not made them, none could impute weakness; but once He had made them, and created them out of nothing, it were most monstrous for the work to be ruined, and that before the eyes of the Maker. It was, then, *out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God’s goodness.*’²⁴³

In other words, Athanasius is simultaneously saying that humanity came *from God*, and because we came from God, who is committed to our existence, returning to nothingness was not even logically possible, based on God’s goodness. Returning to ‘nothingness’ as in non-existence is only a hypothetical, and a rhetorical device Athanasius is employing.

Moreover, suggesting that nothingness was a natural state to which humanity had a conscious interest in returning not only reads a strange motivation into Adam and Eve’s stated desire to be like God, it also runs the danger of turning ‘nothingness’ into a ‘thing’ which exerts a pull on all of God’s creation. It would become another kind of dualism, not a substance-oriented dualism which Athanasius vigorously denies in *Against the Heathen* chapter 6, but a privation-oriented dualism.

‘Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.’²⁴⁴

²⁴² Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 4.4 – 6

²⁴³ *Ibid* 6.4 – 5; cf. *Against the Heathen* 41.2 – 4

²⁴⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 6.1 – 2

In fact, Athanasius views himself as defending a truth he has received. This strict separation of evil from the character of God was long taught by the church:

‘The truth of the Church’s theology must be manifest: that evil has not from the beginning been with God or in God, nor has any substantive existence; but that men, in default of the vision of good, began to devise and imagine for themselves what was not, after their own pleasure.’²⁴⁵

Since Athanasius says that good must not be ‘mixed in its nature’ with evil, categorically, he must also say that human beings, who are created good, must not be ‘mixed in their human nature’ with evil. That also translates into saying that human nature must be created good and not ‘mixed in its nature’ with nothingness. Therefore, Athanasius’ statement in *On the Incarnation* 4 about human beings returning to their ‘natural state’ or ‘normal state’ needs to be understood as a rhetorical slip, or otherwise modified. Athanasius will shortly declare on the basis of the goodness of God that death is *not* ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ for human beings. So Athanasius is confusing categories and falling into a logical conundrum when he says that *non-existence* is ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ for humanity. How can non-existence be the natural state of something that exists?

Khaled Anatolios interprets Athanasius as intending to say, ‘The essential principle is that there is no neutral midpoint in which humanity can “remain.” The two fundamental ontological polarities are either God-ward or toward non-being.’²⁴⁶ I agree with the basic premise that humanity was not called to rest in a neutral state but rather ascend towards God and deepen in God. That is consistent with Athanasius’ theological anthropology which seems identical with Irenaeus, which Anatolios is at pains to prove, and which I deeply appreciate. To the extent that we understand ‘nothingness’ to be a state to which human beings can never actually return, but only approximate in our resistance to God (‘*toward* non-being’), I can agree with Anatolios’ statement as it is.

However, in order to be absolutely clear that we are not taking Athanasius’ rhetoric and giving ‘nothingness’ ontological status, I would recommend replacing the word and concept of ‘non-being’ with the word and concept of ‘disorder.’ For ‘disorder’ is what is implied by Athanasius’ use of the term ‘corruption.’ He makes that explicit very early on in *Against the Heathen* by describing the impact sinning has on the human soul: ‘what she is is evidently the product of her own *disorder*.’²⁴⁷ The word ‘disorder’ fits both the narrative of Genesis and the technical theological terminology as the Nicene theologians developed it. Biblically, God commissioned human beings to bring forth *order* in the creation, by spreading the *ordered* garden over the wild creation through the four rivers which flowed out from Eden. This external work mirrored the internal work of *ordering* our understanding of God’s goodness, *ordering* one’s loves in accordance with the relational vision God had from creation (e.g. the one flesh marriage union of male and female taking priority over family of origin; etc.), *ordering* one’s own emotional life according to God’s counsel and guidance, and ultimately *ordering* one’s human nature and fundamental love for God into an eternal union with God via eating from the tree of life. God, the one who *orders* creation towards life and beauty, made human beings as partners with Him in the work of *ordering* creation towards life and beauty.

Using the technical Nicene terminology of the fourth century, we can say this: Since we are *created beings* destined for an eternal existence with God, yet also *co-creators* since we are made in the image of a God who creates, we participate in the final *ordering* of our own created human nature (*physis*), in a divine-human partnership of co-creation. Thus, our ordering of ourselves can become a *disorder*. To *disorder* our capacity for love by prioritizing self-love first and foremost, to *disorder* our understanding of good and evil out of conformity with God’s own definitions of good and evil, and to become so *disordered* that God’s love becomes fiery torment – that is the awesome and awful choice that human beings are called to reject as co-creators with God of our own human nature. If we call that unwanted condition ‘*reaching* towards, while never actually arriving at ‘nothingness,’ understood as an attempt to be free from God while never being able to,’ that is acceptable to me. But *disorder* seems the most appropriate word to correlate with ‘corruption,’ with which to indicate the negative ontological pole to which Athanasius refers. Having a ‘disordered human nature’ by one’s own choice seems to be the best – and only – explanation which avoids both a substance-dualism and also a privation-dualism. And that rounds out my understanding of how to best articulate the medical substitutionary view of atonement and all its ramifications for how we approach the topics of good and evil, human nature, and the goodness of God.

²⁴⁵ Ibid 7.3

²⁴⁶ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.37

²⁴⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 7.4

I want to consider specific objections to this understanding of Athanasius. What do penal substitution supporters say about him? Reformed theologian Peter J. Leithart notes that Athanasius speaks of a ‘debt’ which needed to be paid. In his discussion on the nature of salvation, in the first section of *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius says:

‘For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death.*’²⁴⁸

Penal substitution advocates like Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach enlist this language of ‘satisfaction’ from Athanasius. By inflicting death on human beings, is not God satisfying His own need to punish sin? And by sending Jesus to die on the cross, is not God exhausting that punishment, at least for some? The three authors say:

‘At one point, while alluding to the apostle John’s explanation of why Christ came into the world in John 3:17, he states that Christ (‘the Word’) accomplished our salvation by suffering the judgment due to the guilty world: ‘Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all’ [quoting from Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1, chapter 8, paragraph 60]. This is a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution. According to Athanasius, the whole world is guilty of failing to keep God’s law, but Christ took upon himself the judgment due to us, and suffered in our place for our salvation.’²⁴⁹

These three authors believe that Athanasius held up human ‘guilt’ was the problem as God saw it, that the Sinai Law both measured and called down penal judgment for that guilt, that Jesus took the divine penal judgment that would have otherwise been placed by God on human beings, and that this deflection of punishment constitutes ‘salvation.’ But if this is true, then why do human beings still die? For if Jesus absorbed all the punishment which God meted out on account of human lawbreaking, then followers of Jesus should no longer physically die.

Notice that in penal substitution, the penalty and the underlying ‘debt owed’ must be transferred from human beings *over to Jesus*, so that we as human beings no longer have to pay the debt ourselves. Athanasius does not speak that way. The full context of what he says involves every human being owing to God *their own death*. Each human being *including Jesus as a human being* owes God their own death, because death is the necessary prerequisite for us to be rid of the corruption. Death is not sufficient in itself, says Athanasius, because we must choose to participate in the work of the Son of God on our behalf. But death is nevertheless required:

‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might, because of the Word which had come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the Grace of the Resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding-ground against men, by reason of the Word, which by His one body has come to dwell among them. And like as when a great king has entered into some large city and taken up his abode in one of the houses there, such city is at all events held worthy of high honour, nor does any enemy or bandit any longer descend upon it and subject it; but, on the contrary, it is thought entitled to all care, because of the king’s having taken up his residence in a single house there: so, too, has it been with the Monarch of all. For now that He has come to our realm, and taken up his abode in one body among His peers, henceforth the whole conspiracy of the enemy against mankind is checked, and the corruption of death which before was prevailing against them is done away. For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to meet the

²⁴⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2

²⁴⁹ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, p.169

end of death.’²⁵⁰

Jesus’ human body was the ‘body capable of death.’ What is the debt that Jesus satisfied? To die, and to do so *as a dying being*. Previously in *On the Incarnation*, when he first brought up the topic of the fall in Genesis 3, Athanasius spoke of God saying, ‘dying you will die.’ Interestingly enough, Athanasius shows that he understands the Hebrew construction of the phrase, even though he admits elsewhere to not knowing the Hebrew language *per se*. Regardless, Athanasius shows his awareness that the formal Hebrew grammatical construction of God’s warning in Genesis 2:17 is the ongoing progressive tense plus the future tense: ‘dying you will die.’²⁵¹ This understanding serves Athanasius through his book when he notes that Jesus, too, was ‘mortal.’²⁵² Jesus had to take on a *dying* human nature, and die in it. If ‘dying you will die’ is the condition of every human being, then Jesus had to live under that condition, too: dying, he would die.

Later in *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius says that Jesus ‘could not *but* die’:

‘For if He took a body to Himself at all, and— in reasonable consistency, as our argument showed— appropriated it as His own, what was the Lord to do with it? Or what should be the end of the body when the Word had once descended upon it? For it could not *but* die, inasmuch as *it was mortal*, and to be offered unto death on behalf of all: for which purpose it was that the Savior fashioned it for Himself.’²⁵³

Only in this way would God’s pronouncement in the garden about the consequences of the fall be strictly true. Can God lie? No, Athanasius avers in the chapter just prior to the quotation above. It cannot be:

‘But just as this consequence must needs hold, so, too, on the other side the just claims of God lie against it: that God should appear true to the law He had laid down concerning death. For it were monstrous for God, the Father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation.’²⁵⁴

The same reality which held true for humanity also held true for Jesus, as a matter of the truthfulness and consistency of God. For the Word of God to come into human flesh, He had to take on dying, mortal, fallen humanity which owed a debt to God – ‘to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all’²⁵⁵ – and so to die.

This is even more apparent in *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66 – 67, where Athanasius says that, to correct the ‘imperfection’ which has set into human nature from the fall,

‘The perfect Word of God puts around Him an imperfect body, and is said to be created ‘for the works;’ that, paying the debt in our stead, he might, by Himself, perfect what was wanting to man.’²⁵⁶

The bishop does not say ‘suffer what was due man,’ as if some amount of pain constituted the ‘debt.’ Rather, he says, ‘perfect what was wanting’ constituting the healing of human nature including death in a godly way which only He could live out. Therefore Athanasius says that the one who spoke Genesis 3:19 is also the one to live under it and pass through it to the other side:

‘The proper Word and Image of the Father’s Essence, who at the beginning sentenced, and alone remits sins. For since it is said in the Word, ‘Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return,’ suitably through the Word Himself and in Him the freedom and the undoing of the condemnation has come to pass.’²⁵⁷

With that understanding in place, we are in a better position to read the full context of Athanasius’ statement from which Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach believe they have found, in their words, ‘a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution’:

²⁵⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8

²⁵¹ Ibid 3.5

²⁵² Ibid 13.9; 17:7; 20:1, 4 (‘yet being mortal, was to die also, conformably to its peers’); 23:2; 31:4; 44:6, 8

²⁵³ Ibid 31.4

²⁵⁴ Ibid 7.1

²⁵⁵ Ibid 7.5

²⁵⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66

²⁵⁷ Ibid 2.67

'Moreover the words 'He is become surety' denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the 'Word,' He 'became flesh [John 1:14]' and 'become' we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression 'He is become,' expounding it according to a second sense, viz. because He has become man. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that His essence has become, knowing, as he did, that He is Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father; but here too he refers the word 'become' to the ministry of that covenant, in which death which once ruled is abolished. Since here also the ministry through Him has become better, in that 'what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],' ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word, He made us walk, no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, and say again and again, 'But we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit [Romans 8:9],' and, 'For the Son of God came into the world, not to judge the world, but to redeem all men, and that the world might be saved through Him [John 3:17].' Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all. With a view to this has John exclaimed, 'The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ [John 1:17].' Better is grace than the Law, and truth than the shadow.'²⁵⁸

In this passage, Athanasius actually provides the substance of the medical, not penal, substitutionary atonement. He distinguishes between who the Word of God 'is' as 'Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father,' and who the Word 'became' in 'a second sense' as 'man' and even 'flesh.' Athanasius prepares his audience to understand Paul's pivotal statement in Romans 8:3, where Paul says that God's own Son came in the likeness of sinful flesh. The implication of Athanasius' prefatory remarks is that Jesus 'is' the Word of God who 'became' sinful flesh at his conception without changing who he 'is.'

In fact, who 'he is' changed what 'he became.' Jesus condemned sin in the flesh, not simply at his death, but by his lifelong obedience which was inseparable from his death. We can be confident Athanasius had the lifelong obedience of Jesus in view because he refers to 'the ministry through him' and because he deploys the quotation of Romans 8:3 about the *positive*, guiding, and helping role of the Sinai Law. If the first purpose of the Sinai Law was simply to condemn Israel for its disobedience, then Paul and Athanasius really should have said, 'What the Law *did* in that it was *strong against* the flesh of Israel...' But Paul and Athanasius are reading the role of the Sinai Law positively, not negatively. Their reading of the Law is that God gave it to Israel to assist them in condemning sin in themselves. In other words, the Sinai Law served a medical purpose, something more like a health regimen given by a caring doctor to a sick patient. The doctor intends the regimen to help the patient *over a long stretch of time*. Only in a secondary sense, given the sick condition of the patient who is unable to fully live within the regimen, does the Sinai Law further expose the sickness in the patient.

Thus, Jesus' lifelong obedience *as an Israelite* was necessarily guided by and measured against 'the Law' of the Sinai covenant, for he substituted himself in for Israel. Jesus 'is' the doctor who 'became' one of his sick patients in order to live fully within his own health regimen, heal the sick human nature he had taken to himself, and become the source of salvation. 'Salvation' here is defined fundamentally as his healed new humanity fully united with his own divine nature in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus' goal – which he achieved – for his 'sinful flesh' was 'ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind.' In Athanasius' usage, 'the trespass' presented not a forensic problem but an ontological one, embedded as it was in human nature. It was the corruption of human nature which was inherited by every human being from Adam and Eve. The word 'trespass' is not a shorthand way of referring to whatever long list of 'trespasses' committed by every single person, kept on a ledger in the mind of God. Rather, Athanasius is referring to the primal 'trespass': the original defacing and corruption of our pristine human nature as God created it. Athanasius indicates this by referring to the fact that human nature was 'continually held captive' to the trespass. The sinful condition even reached into our minds, in that we 'admitted not the Divine mind.' We bear a relational resistance to God which affects the qualities of human existence, showing forth in both our moral inconsistency and our alienation to a life dynamically led by the Spirit. Significantly, as Athanasius describes how

²⁵⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.60

Jesus undid this in his own humanity, he says that Jesus' ministry as a human being acting upon his own human nature 'rendered the flesh capable of the Word' and 'made us walk...according to the Spirit.'

By speaking this way, Athanasius shows that he regards 'the trespass' as an intrusion upon human nature. We laid claim to something upon which God Himself laid claim: ourselves. And that is where the damage occurred. That is also the problem which God, as the loving creator, had to resolve. Often, in penal substitution, one gets the distinct impression that God cares more about His commandments than He cares about human beings. I regard this as not accidental: It is part of the necessary rhetoric inherent in a penal substitution framework which requires its advocates to prioritize God's commandments above God's creation. Penal substitution requires that God look upon our breaking of His commandments as damaging Himself and detracting from Himself, rather than as damaging ourselves and detracting from ourselves as God's beloved creation. But to the bishop of Alexandria, suggesting that God cares about His commandments more than He cares about humanity would be an utterly foreign thought.

In the idiom of the Hebrew Scriptures, God gives His commandments *for the sake of His creation, and for the sake of human development*. In the Jewish wisdom tradition, in particular, God's commandments are perfectly appropriate to God's creation, especially human beings.²⁵⁹ This is perhaps clearest in Proverbs 8:22 – 36. God's 'Wisdom' participated in God's creative acts and wove herself throughout the creation. Therefore, 'Wisdom' personified, who is present in God's commandments towards Israel can say, 'He who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me injures himself; all those who hate me love death' (Pr.8:35 – 36). In other words, God cares about His commandments *because* He cares for His creation, especially us. And the deep tragedy of all sin, but especially the original corruption, is that we deface ourselves. And, perhaps most importantly, the apostle Paul described his experience as a pre-Christian Jew 'under the Law' as conceptually separating his fundamental 'self,' which wanted to honor God and the Law, from 'the sin which indwelt' him, which he called 'the flesh,' which had taken him captive as a prisoner in his own body (Romans 7:14 – 25). Notice this is the language of captivity Athanasius uses in the passage above. It shows that Athanasius' mind reposes on Romans 7:14 – 8:11 as a whole unit when he quotes Romans 8:3 and 8:9 explicitly, and explains why Jesus himself had to come in sinful flesh.

So when Athanasius says, 'Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all,' we cannot read him as supporting the penal substitution view as Jeffery, Owen, and Sach propose. In context, everything Athanasius is saying points to the medical activity of Jesus in his own person, which he had to undertake to solve an ontological problem which had set in to human nature. Human beings were 'guilty' of obstructing God's *love*, by damaging our own human nature and God's intention for humanity to be voluntary conduits of God's love, not for damaging God's sense of honor, holiness, and/or retributive justice. Israel was 'under judgment from the Law' in the sense of failing to return their human nature back to God 'circumcised' (Dt.10:16), which is precisely what the Sinai Law was intended to assist the Israelites to do. But it was not that God gave the Sinai Law to Israel so that the Law (and God) would be Israel's adversary. 'The Word has taken on Himself the judgment' in the sense that the judgment of God was contained and implied in the positive carrying out of the Law, in its judgment upon sin. That is why Athanasius follows the apostle Paul in saying that Jesus condemned sin in his own flesh when he followed the Law (Rom.8:3). Jesus 'suffered in the body for all [and] has bestowed salvation to all' not in the sense of turning aside some kind of retributive justice of God which loomed over our heads, but in the sense of medically carrying out upon his own human nature, and within his own human nature, the good will of our divine healer. And finally, 'salvation' must be defined as God's healing and recovery of human nature from death, by the divine Son in his own person. It is as much a claim upon 'all' as it is 'bestowed' as a gift 'to all,' and not simply 'the elect,' which is what penal substitution logically requires. In this passage's context, and in its every detail, Athanasius does not support Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach's project of advocating penal substitution. Instead, he gives us a straightforward statement of medical-ontological substitution.

Fellow penal substitution supporter Peter Leithart confesses his inability to find penal substitution in Athanasius:

²⁵⁹ Even in our sinful fallenness, the image of God in which we are created is not entirely eradicated. This is why, prior to the arrival of Christ, the Psalmists can say that, while our hearts are certainly corrupt and need remaking (e.g. Ps.51:9 – 10), nevertheless our hearts still rejoice in the law of the Lord (e.g. Ps.19:8). The poetic Psalmists also deploy images where the Israelite who meditates on the law of the Lord is like a tree nourished by life-giving waters (e.g. Ps.1:2 – 3).

'How does the cross achieve this [i.e. our liberation from sin, death, and the devil]? Athanasius' answer to that question does not easily fit into the traditional categories of atonement theology. He certainly sees Jesus as a representative of the human race and as a substitute for Adamic humanity. Yet he does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve. Instead, he tends to think in liturgical categories. Seeing that humanity was under the dominion of death, the Son was full of pity and compassion and so took on a body. His body was like all human bodies mortal and so he too "surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered to the Father" (*On the Incarnation* 8). Like a king who comes to the rescue of a city that has been attacked by robbers, the Son "by the offering of His own body...abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching" (*On the Incarnation* 10)... The Son, we might say, seizes humanity in the incarnation and in the cross entices it towards the heavenly sanctuary to worship the Father.²⁶⁰

Leithart's statement that Athanasius' atonement theology does not fit into traditional categories comes from a Protestant evangelical perspective. Evangelicals tend to be familiar with only three main 'atonement theories': penal substitution, moral exemplar, and christus victor. One might include Anselm's satisfaction of divine honor theory, Grotius' governmental theory, and others, I suppose. But Leithart seems unfamiliar with the patristic doctrine of atonement. Thus, he continues by sharing his perplexity that Athanasius does not deploy the language of 'debt' in a penal substitution sense:

At times Athanasius explains the cross in terms of debt. The Son "assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all" (*On the Incarnation* 9). All men owe a debt of death: "All men were due to die," and the Word came in mortal flesh in order to "settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression." Because the Word's body was capable of death, he offered it in death, but because it was the body of the incorruptible *Word*, it could not remain in corruption. Thus "it happened that two opposite marvels took place at one: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished." Death was unavoidable "that the due of all might be paid" (*On the Incarnation* 20).²⁶¹

In the penal substitution theory, God cannot categorically 'pay out' the punishment for sin twice, because that would amount to a double accounting problem. That is, if God poured out His retributive justice upon Jesus at the cross, and then poured it out again in hell upon those who resist Jesus, that gives rise to the double accounting problem. That is why physical 'death' is a logical problem for penal substitution supporters, because all human beings obviously still die. The problem might be conceptually avoided by saying that physical death only prefigures eternal death, and that Jesus absorbed the punishment of *eternal* death. But when we read Athanasius' statements, he clearly intends his audience to consider the significance of physical death.

Leithart's difficulty in interpreting this language of 'debt' in Athanasius appears related to his assumption that 'death' serves God as a strictly punitive measure. What Leithart does not perceive is that Athanasius and the patristic theologians use the word 'death' as a shorthand for the undoing of sin's corruption, a positive responsibility shared by every human being by God's design. Based on the literary evidence, this tradition among Christian appears to be unanimous. As I showed above, it is attested to by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, Methodius of Olympus in the third, Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth.²⁶² Despite being an enemy and a tyrant, physical 'death' to these bishop-theologians serves at least one positive, constructive purpose: fulfilling our 'debt' to put to death the corruption of sin in our own bodies. Death prevents human beings from immortalizing evil in themselves. That is why God exiled Adam and Eve from the tree of life. It was, in fact, an imposition Adam and Eve placed *on God* because of God's love for them. Based on the literary evidence from those patristic writers who comment on Genesis 3, this tradition among Christian also appears to be unanimous. Therefore, contrary to what Leithart seems to assume, God did not invent death as an additional retributive punishment for the fall, which under penal substitutionary logic would have to be deflected from us by Christ, but rather named it as a reality inherent to Adam and Eve's choice to corrupt their own human nature, with the

²⁶⁰ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154 – 155

²⁶¹ *Ibid* p.155

²⁶² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6; Methodius of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5; Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45

constructive purpose being a check on the corruption of human sin.

Keeping that interpretation before us, I will briefly reexamine one of the passages Leithart cites, chapter 8 of *On the Incarnation*, placing explanatory comments in brackets. I believe the comments show how readily the medical substitutionary atonement model fits not only the semantics of Athanasius' language, but the larger and deeper structure of Athanasius' thought.

'But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die [*because each person still needs to put to death the corruption of sin in his or her own body, so that sin would not be immortalized*], for which especial cause, indeed, he came among us [*vicariously for us and on our behalf*]: to this intent, after the proofs of his Godhead from his works, he next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding his temple [*that is, his body*] to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass [*which is not the inherited guilt but the inherited corruption from Adam and Eve*], and further to show himself more powerful even than death, displaying his own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all... And so it was that two marvels came to pass at one, that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord's body, and that death and corruption were wholly done away by reason of the Word that was united with it. For there was need of death, and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all [*rather than deflected from all*], that the debt owing from all [*to return our human nature back to God healed and intact*] might be paid.'²⁶³

Having considered the arguments of penal substitution supporters over the theology of Athanasius, let me now come at his body of thought from another angle. I now return in more depth to the argument of Eastern Orthodox priest Emmanuel Hatzidakis, who I examined in regards to Irenaeus, above. Hatzidakis argues that Jesus assumed a pre-fallen Adamic humanity, because he must have cleansed his humanity of the corruption of sin at conception rather than throughout his lifelong obedience including his death on the cross. He argues that this view was the 'consensus patrum,' the consensus of the fathers.²⁶⁴ Hatzidakis says that the Alexandrian, in particular,

'is clear that what is mortal, upon its assumption by the divine Word was deified and rendered immortal. There was no time during which Christ was subject to death. So if He dies in His humanity, He does not die by necessity, but by embracing mortality voluntarily.'²⁶⁵

As evidence, Hatzidakis quotes passages in Athanasius which refer to the effect of the resurrection upon Jesus' human nature, and assigns them instead to his conception. So Hatzidakis holds that Jesus' humanity was deified, rendered immortal, not held under death, and so on, from the first point of Jesus' incarnation.²⁶⁶ How can we be confident that Athanasius believed Jesus took a fallen human nature at his conception?

Hatzidakis appears to be reading all the patristic fathers through the lens of John of Damascus (c.675 – 749 AD), who is considered by some to have written a summary of unanimous church teaching up to that point.²⁶⁷ That is precisely the subject I and others debate. By the time of John of Damascus, Hatzidakis' particular view of Jesus' humanity had become standard among the writing theologians – that much is true. That trend was evidenced most strongly in Roman North Africa with Tertullian and Augustine, and seemed somewhat more appealing to the Latin tradition rather than the Greek, as Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian espouse it, although Ambrose of Milan and the Ambrosiaster attest to the older view. Nevertheless the shift happened in the Greek East as well. I suspect that this shift about *how* exactly Jesus cleansed the corruption of sin out of his human nature was tolerated because it did not denigrate Jesus' humanity or his divinity. It was still a variation on the medical-ontological substitutionary atonement. The shift seems driven by various factors: a concern to protect Jesus' sinlessness in his divine person from the very negative view of human sexuality which became common; a concern to protect the unchanging nature

²⁶³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 20

²⁶⁴ Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p.215

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.214

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.218 – 221 citing Athanasius, Discourse Against the Arians 1.11; On the Incarnation 21.4; 22.3; 31.4; Against Apollinaris 10.18

²⁶⁷ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 3.27 said, 'Since our Lord Jesus Christ as without sin...He was not subject to death, since death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because He took on Himself death on our behalf, and He makes Himself an offering to the Father for our sakes.' John uses the language of the sacrificial 'offering' while taking away its substance; the sacrifice at the sanctuary was designed to be the vehicle by which the expiation of sin occurs, which is taught in Leviticus and Hebrews.

of God ('impassibility') from the apparent instability of Jesus' human emotion, suffering, and 'passion' (*pathos* was difficult to define in Greek usage), and linguistic ambiguities about when 'sin' in the biblical text and the pre-Nicene fathers referred to the corrupt condition of one's human nature or actions which incurred guilt in one's person.

But the shift introduced confusion, for example, about the significance of the 'become cursed' language of Galatians 3:13 or 'became sin' language of 2 Corinthians 5:21. For what could possibly be 'cursed' or 'sin-soaked' about pre-fallen Adamic humanity? Those passages had to be reassigned to Jesus' death. Christians then imagined Jesus undergoing at his death some kind of punitive experience extrinsic and external to his person. In addition, it diminished the pastoral significance of Jesus' humanity and temptation experience as a point of encouragement and counsel to other human beings. That is, the emotional significance of the doctrine of the mediation of Christ was dampened. Ordinary Christians in the pew, who were told that Jesus did not share in the experience of being a fallen human being, could only look to saints and priests to fill the emotional vacuum.

So what is the evidence I adduce from Athanasius in favor of Jesus' humanity being progressively, rather than instantaneously, cleansed? My exploration above of our 'debt' as 'a debt owed to God to die' shared by all humanity after the fall – including Jesus as a human being – is one data point in support of this view. Another data point would be Athanasius' insistence on using the biblical term 'flesh' (*sarx*) in its Pauline and Johannine sense as indicating the disordered corruption of sin throughout both soul and body (Rom.7:14, 21; Jn.1:14), rather than only the terms 'body' (*soma*) or 'humanity' (*anthropos*) as was more common, but that undertaking would be too massive for this essay. Instead, I cite five more passages in Athanasius' corpus, significant for their language and logic.

The first piece of evidence that Athanasius believed the Word assumed a fallen human nature is found in one of his letters to another bishop. In a letter to Epictetus, bishop of Corinth, whose congregation was mired in questions about the nature of Jesus' humanity, Athanasius argues this time not for Jesus' divinity as he was customarily called upon to do, but for his full humanity. This letter is now known as Athanasius' *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth*. In it, quite remarkably, Athanasius ties Paul's statement of Jesus 'becoming a curse for us' from Galatians 3:13, not to Jesus' crucifixion or death, but to his 'becoming flesh' in the incarnation according to John 1:14:

'For what John said, 'The Word was made flesh [John 1:14],' has this meaning, as we may see by a similar passage; for it is written in Paul: 'Christ has become a curse for us [Galatians 3:13].' And just as He has not Himself become a curse, but is said to have done so because He took upon Him the curse on our behalf, so also He has become flesh not by being changed into flesh, but because He assumed on our behalf living flesh, and has become Man.'²⁶⁸

Athanasius demonstrates continuity with the patristic writers before him, that Jesus took on fallen – and therefore, cursed – humanity. Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, as part of an argument that Jesus and Christ were not two separate beings but one, also quoted Galatians 3:13 in connection with Jesus taking human nature,²⁶⁹ but Athanasius' use of language narrows to make a tighter and stronger identification with the incarnation. Like Justin Martyr, Athanasius reads Paul's use of 'curse' language as describing humanity's current sinful existence *identified and diagnosed* by the cross because of its connection to the tree of Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23, not an extra punishment occurring at Jesus' death.²⁷⁰

Athanasius' *Letter* played a significant role in further theological developments in Christology. Critiquing Apollinarianism (the view that the Word assumed a human body but took the place of a human soul, thereby displacing it and leaving it unsaved), Epiphanius of Salamis (d.403 AD) quotes this *Letter* in his work *Panarion*, later titled *Against Heresies* (77:3 – 13), and attaches it in its entirety. Cyril of Alexandria (376 – 444 AD) read this *Letter* at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD in his debates with Nestorius over Christology, despite the fact that the Nestorians had in their possession altered versions of this letter, and circulated copies.²⁷¹ It was canonized by the

²⁶⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8, which seems to be an expansion upon e.g. *On the Incarnation* 25.2, where he says, 'For if he came himself to bear the curse laid upon us, how else could he have 'become a curse,' unless he received the death set for a curse? And that is the cross.' In other words, Jesus' death on the cross was not itself the curse, but rather the visible outcome of carrying cursed human flesh.

²⁶⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.3

²⁷⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 94 – 95; see above for discussion

²⁷¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Acacium Melitenum* 21; *Ad Succensum* 1.11; *Epistle* 39.11

Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD as the proper interpretation of the Nicene faith.²⁷²

Second, in his *First Discourse Against the Arians*, Athanasius spars with his Arian opponents about the nature of Jesus' identity and incarnation. Athanasius seems to have written these *Discourses* between 356 – 360 AD while in his third exile from his bishop's seat in Alexandria.²⁷³ He discusses many relevant passages in chapters 40 – 45, especially expounding on John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5 – 11 as key texts under debate. In this section, he says:

‘...the Lord who supplies the grace has become a man like us, He on the other hand, the Savior, humbled Himself in taking ‘our body of humiliation’ [Philippians 3:21], and took a servant's form, putting on that flesh which was enslaved to sin. And He indeed has gained nothing from us for His own promotion...’²⁷⁴

Athanasius makes a connection between our body and Jesus' body, identifying ‘our body of humiliation’ as identical with Jesus' body, which was composed of ‘that flesh which was enslaved to sin.’ The only way this enslavement to sin could be broken, and human nature liberated and saved, was from within. The later Cappadocian language distinguishing nature and personhood was yet to be developed, but Athanasius anticipates it through his logic. He shows that that which defined or affected Jesus' human nature did not necessarily transfer ‘up’ to his personhood. Hence, Jesus could bear a fallen human nature, and yet not be personally guilty of committing any sin. For fallenness pertains to human nature; guilt pertains to personhood. Jesus as a person was not victim to this enslavement because he was the eternal Son of God who was the power and wisdom of his Father.

Athanasius had made this critical distinction early in his career, in *On the Incarnation*: ‘For not even by being in the universe does He share in its nature...’²⁷⁵ For Athanasius, the Word could be ‘in’ something without ‘sharing in its nature.’ Whether the object under consideration was the universe – when he was stressing the transcendence of the Word – or the human body of Jesus – when he was stressing the imminence of the Word in the incarnation – the principle is the same. Athanasius finds this principle of supreme importance when he explains how Jesus could be ‘in’ the ‘flesh which was enslaved to sin’ without ‘sharing in its nature’ in its corrupted form, and thence becoming enslaved to sin himself. For immediately after stating this principle, Athanasius makes a helpful comparison: just as the sun is not ‘defiled’ by touching the earth with its light, so also the Word of God is not ‘defiled’ by touching the body,²⁷⁶ and even sharing it.

The third piece of evidence that Athanasius believed Jesus assumed a fallen human nature comes from a passage in his *Second Discourse Against the Arians*. In this lengthy passage, he links several passages of Scripture to describe the significance of Jesus taking ‘sinful’ and ‘cursed’ human flesh. When we find Athanasius quoting Romans 8:3 – 4, and interpreting it in a medical substitutionary sense, we must pay special attention to it, as we did with Irenaeus. Note the link he draws between the language of Hebrews 2:14 – 15 and Romans 8:3 – 4 to the compacted references to Isaiah 53, 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13. Athanasius moves from speaking of Jesus' body as ‘mortal’ for the sake of sharing in our death (Heb.2:14 – 15) to emerge in his resurrection as the victor over death (1 Cor.15:21), to explaining that Jesus' mortal body was composed of ‘sinful flesh’ so he could condemn the sin in his flesh (Rom.8:3 – 4). Mention of the word ‘condemn’ in Romans 8:3 appears to make Athanasius immediately think of John 3:17, where the apostle John explains that the focal target of God's condemnation in and through Christ was not ‘the world.’ Rather, the whole point of the incarnation of the Word was so that ‘the world through him might be saved.’ This corroborate Athanasius' previous quotation of Romans 8:3 – 4. God's condemnation fell on the sinful flesh, or rather the sin in the flesh, of Jesus. Here is the passage:

‘To give a witness then, and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and destroy the works of the

²⁷² Matthew R. Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.138

²⁷³ Philip Schaff, ‘Introduction to Four Discourses Against the Arians,’ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, p.663 judges that Athanasius wrote this material to ‘conciliate and win over the semi-Arians’ on the basis of conceptual, though not terminological, agreement, and isolate the true ‘Arians’ like Valens and Eudoxius.

²⁷⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.43, emphasis mine

²⁷⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17.6

²⁷⁶ Ibid 17.7: ‘For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says [in 1 Peter 2:22], no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.’ See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.80 notes that Athanasius' mind included ‘a certain conception of the unity of Christ by way of a unified dynamic by which the divinity acts upon the humanity.’

devil, the Savior came, and this is the reason of His incarnate presence. For otherwise a resurrection had not been, unless there had been death; and how had death been, unless He had had a mortal body? This the Apostle, learning from Him, thus sets forth, 'Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [Hebrews 2:14 – 15].' And, 'Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead [1 Corinthians 15:21].' And again, 'For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit [Romans 8:3 – 4].' And John says, 'For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved [John 3:17].' ... For as by receiving our infirmities, He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm, for He is the Power of God, and He became sin for us and a curse, though not having sinned Himself, but because He Himself bare our sins and our curse, so, by creating us in Him, let Him say, 'He created me for the works,' though not Himself a creature.'²⁷⁷

The dense references to the infirmity language of Isaiah 53:4/Matthew 8:17, the sin language of 2 Corinthians 5:21, and curse language of Galatians 3:13 at the end of this paragraph are extremely important. All of them are biblical categories of human fallen experience. Athanasius coordinates all of them not to Jesus' death but to his *incarnation*. In his third *Discourse*, he quotes Isaiah explicitly, as well as attributes the term 'infirmity' to *sinfulness*:

'And the Word bore the *infirmities of the flesh*, as His own, for His was the flesh; and the flesh ministered to the works of the Godhead, because the Godhead was in it, for the body was God's. And well has the Prophet said 'carried [Isaiah 53:4];' and has not said, 'He remedied our infirmities,' lest, as being external to the body, and only healing it, as He has always done, He should leave men subject still to death; but He carries our *infirmities*, and He Himself bears our *sins*, that it might be shown that He has become man for us, and that the body which in Him bore them, was His own body; and, while He received no hurt Himself by 'bearing our sins in His body on the tree,' as Peter speaks, we men were redeemed from our own affections, and were filled with the righteousness of the Word.'²⁷⁸

Considering that Athanasius was writing to persuade Eastern Greek-speaking bishops to take an anti-Arian stance, it makes sense that he would appeal to a broad tradition they shared of calling Jesus 'infirm': 'He is said to be infirm Himself...' This attestation is fascinating and important. Athanasius appears to mean this: The early church bore witness to Jesus' infirmity, because Jesus bore 'sinful flesh,' as suggested by the quotation of Romans 8:3 – 4 before it. The bishop of Alexandria was simply repeating the tradition he inherited which he presumably shares with his audience. Probably due to the Greek philosophical bias against attributing change to any being considered divine, the early Christians were drawn to the passages in the New Testament which said of the Son, 'he became' something which he was not before. The Son became: flesh (Jn.1:14), sin (2 Cor.5:21), poor (2 Cor.8:9), a curse (Gal.3:13), a slave, human, obedient to the point of death (Phil.2:7 – 8). To the Greek mind, that was certainly unexpected. Opponents of Christianity demanded explanations, and heretics sought to evade those passages. As a result, these passages were frequently the most debated passages between the advocates of various forms of 'Gnosticism' and 'Arianism' who sought to separate true divinity from becoming true humanity, and the orthodox who sought to preserve it.

As the technical terminological distinction between 'nature' (*ousia*) and 'person' (*prosopon* or *hypostasis*) had not yet developed and stabilized in the church by the late fourth century, Athanasius finds this statement struggling to express in what sense Jesus was infirm: 'He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm.' The subtlety which Athanasius perceives in this statement relates to what we consider to be the fundamental 'self' or 'essence' of Jesus. For in another passage from the first *Discourse Against the Arians*, Athanasius forcefully and clearly delineates between who 'He is' as 'Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father' and what 'He is become' in 'a second sense' as 'flesh' and 'man':

'Moreover the words '*He is become* surety' denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the 'Word,' He '*became* flesh [John 1:14]' and '*become*' we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated

²⁷⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.55

²⁷⁸ *Ibid* 3.31 emphasis mine

and created, so do we here the expression ‘*He is become,*’ expounding it according to a *second sense*, viz. because *He has become man*. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that *His essence* has become, knowing, as he did, that *He is Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father...*²⁷⁹

Judging from the first *Discourse*, Athanasius is clearly capable of deploying more precise language to reflect his full intent. And, as I said above, Athanasius goes on to quote Paul’s very important statement in Romans 8:3 that the Son came in the likeness of sinful flesh. The reason why Athanasius delineates who Jesus ‘is’ in ‘his essence’ in comparison with who he ‘has become’ seems to help his audience understand in what sense Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh. ‘In the likeness of’ for Athanasius did not mean a superficial resemblance, but the real substance. Jesus ‘is’ the Son of God who ‘became’ sinful flesh.

This is very important because Hatzidakis argues his position from a concern about the ‘communication of attributes’ (*communicatio idiomatum*).²⁸⁰ This phrase is used by theologians to denote how attributes of Jesus’ human *nature* may be applied to his divine *nature* and vice versa, and from his divine *person* to his human *nature* and vice versa.²⁸¹ A common image deployed by the early church to help themselves appreciate the union of Jesus’ divinity with his humanity was the union of fire with iron: As an iron starts to glow white hot by being placed in a fire, the iron takes on the properties of fire. So in what sense did that happen with Jesus? In this sense, because the Son of God is life-giving, Athanasius’ successor Cyril of Alexandria could say, ‘We confess that the flesh of the Lord is life-giving flesh...because it is that of the Word who gives life to all.’²⁸² Because Jesus’ human nature was finite as a body, we can say that Jesus himself was and is finite as a body, considered from the standpoint of his humanity. From the standpoint of his divinity, of course, the eternal Son of God remains who he has always been, and is therefore infinite.

Theologians have wrestled with how to apply the principle of *communicatio idiomatum*. Hatzidakis aptly observes that some Protestant traditions struggle to organize their thoughts along these lines.

‘Calvinism ascribes to Christ one person in two natures, with each nature communicating its attributes to the person, never to the other nature.’²⁸³

This is done to avoid logical puzzles like the following: If the infinite divine nature of Jesus transfers its infiniteness to his finite human nature, would the finite human nature cease to be finite? The more serious conundrum would involve asking whether Jesus’ human nature ceases to be human nature because of the possibility that the divine nature would overwhelm it. However, is the Calvinist not limited in trying to explain how we express the nature of Jesus’ bodily resurrection? Is not Jesus’ human nature somehow impacted by his divine nature? Has not Jesus applied his immortality to his mortality?

Hatzidakis continues:

‘The Lutherans, on the other hand, believe in a real communication of divine properties and participation of the human nature in the divine glory. But what do they say about the fact that Christ, despite being endowed with divine attributes, displays many common human weaknesses and dies as a mortal man? They are at an impasse, not being able to reconcile their differences. The key rests with the Orthodox doctrine of the voluntary assumption by Christ of the blameless passions in His deified and deifying human nature.’²⁸⁴

In order to maintain clarity, and to avoid puzzles which plague Calvinists and Lutherans alike, Hatzidakis says, ‘The exchange of properties takes place because the properties are always expressed through the person, not by themselves.’²⁸⁵ To Hatzidakis, therefore, logic requires us to say that if Jesus took to himself a fallen human nature,

²⁷⁹ Ibid 1.60, emphasis mine; cf. *Discourses* 2.47

²⁸⁰ Hatzidakis, p.242 – 257

²⁸¹ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.81 – 85 very helpfully analyzes Athanasius’ deployment of the *communicatio idiomatum*

²⁸² Cyril of Alexandria, *Anathema 11 Against Nestorius*, cited by Hatzidakis, p.248

²⁸³ Hatzidakis, p.242

²⁸⁴ Ibid p.242 – 243

²⁸⁵ Ibid p.249 and note on p.248 the significant difference between Hatzidakis’ interpretation of Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation* 9, 20, and 21, and

that we must also say that he was a fallen human person.²⁸⁶ For, as he assumes, the attributes must be communicated upward from the nature to the person at all times.

However, Hatzidakis admits that his is not the only Orthodox position, for in his book, he critiques those of his fellow Orthodox like Kallistos Ware and John Meyendorff, among others, who return to the confession of Jesus' assumed fallen humanity. And while I would agree with Hatzidakis' basic formulation about the two natures of Christ being expressed *through* the person of Christ, I would argue, further, that the key rests in the earlier Athanasian formulation exemplified here and elsewhere, whereby the 'infirm' human nature of Christ *did not* transfer its property of being infirm 'upwards' to his person in a straightforward or causal manner. Athanasius says that *communicatio idiomatum* simply does not work that way. The attributes of Christ's human nature which were *temporary* – infirm, corrupted by sin, mortal, cursed – can only be said to describe his person in a derivative sense: i.e. in the sense that the Word 'became' these things in his incarnation. Instead, the person of Christ, empowered by his divine nature and in the power of the Holy Spirit, acted 'downward' upon, and yet also within, his 'infirm' human nature through his life, death, and resurrection, to deify it and make it deifying to other human beings. Those particular fallen, but temporary, attributes of his human nature were *healed* by him as a person as he 'grew in stature,' as Luke says (Lk.2:52), using the term *proekopten* from the domain of metalworking where a smith hammers a metal forward with blows. In effect, Athanasius curtails the *communicatio idiomatum* and says it *does not apply in this way because Jesus had not yet brought his human nature to its full resting place*. The properties are not passive qualities of static natures. Thus, within the person of Jesus, Jesus' divine nature was strengthening his human nature to carry out its human vocation of presenting itself cleansed and purified to God, circumcised of heart (Dt.10:16; 30:6).

This fits the unbroken pattern of divine-human partnership in the Hebrew Scriptures and Israel's experience of covenant relationship with God. God always worked in concert and cooperation with human partners, which is arguably what is required from Genesis 1, when God made human beings in His image to represent Him on the earth. And, not insignificantly, the patristic authors perceived the theophanies in the Hebrew Bible to be appearances, not of the Father or the undifferentiated Godhead, but of the *Logos*, or the pre-incarnate Christ.²⁸⁷ When they read in Scripture, 'The word of the Lord came to...' (e.g. Gen.15:1, 4; 1 Sam.15:10; 2 Sam.7:4; 24:11; 1 Ki.16:1; Isa.38:4; Jer.1:2; Ezk.1:3; Hos.1:1; Jon.1:1), they believed it was the Word of God that appeared or spoke. Thus, in their view, God the Son appeared to Abraham and Sarah (Gen.15, 18), calling for their faith-filled partnership in the supernatural birth of Isaac. God the Son called to Moses from the burning bush (Ex.3), calling for Moses' partnership in the deliverance of Israel. And so on. This was the widespread understanding in the early church. So if God the Son acted in this pattern of divine-human partnership before his incarnation, to 'profit' people, as Athanasius puts it when he cites these examples,²⁸⁸ would that pattern extend even into the divine-human partnership in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Why would it not? For human nature is not a static quantity, but dynamic and developmental, and dependent upon the Spirit of God and Word of God. The prior definitions of 'human nature' and its relation to 'divine nature' require that even in the hypostatic union of the two natures, the pattern of partnership undertaken by the *Logos* was maintained with respect to his own human nature when he first inhabited it.

As Irenaeus of Lyons saw, the very definition of human nature involves a developmental process in the divine-human partnership: 'For as God is always the same, humanity, rooted in God, always progresses toward God.'²⁸⁹ In terms of the biblical narrative, God made human beings to be guided by His word and presence (by the Spirit), and thus internalize His word and presence (by the Spirit) more deeply into themselves by growing in stature, bringing forth life, deepening in trust, and receiving into themselves the deeper divine life God offered in the tree of life. Put in the terms of the technical theological vocabulary of the Nicene period, what else is human nature except that

mine, above

²⁸⁶ Ibid p.253 – 257

²⁸⁷ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 62 – 63; *Dialogue with Trypho* 61, 126; Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.14.2; 4.20.1 – 4.22.2; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 45, 46; *Fragment 53*; Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 14 – 16; Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 60, 69, 96; etc.

²⁸⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.68 comments on these incidents briefly, and in *Discourses* 3.12 sees the pre-incarnate Son as the angel who wrestled Jacob

²⁸⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.8.3; 4.11.2; notably, Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009) and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.4 ('my position is that Athanasius' vision is markedly Irenaeian in this regard') and p.20 – 25 demonstrate that Athanasius' theological anthropology is either dependent on, or otherwise identical with, that of Irenaeus.

which must be progressively filled by, and work in partnership with, God's divine nature? And what is *fallen* human nature but human nature which additionally has to overcome the corruption of sin in partnership with God's divine nature? If God designed us to not simply be human *beings*, but human *becomings*, then the same must have been true for Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, we cannot fully employ the *communicatio idiomatum* at just any point in the earthly life of Jesus – if only for the fact that Jesus's human nature could not be both 'developing' and yet also 'fully developed' merely by virtue of being connected to his divine nature or located within his divine personhood as the eternal Son. In fact, God's divine nature itself must be defined as that which, in relation to us, *patiently respects the development of human nature in every human person*. The principle of *communicatio idiomatum* cannot simply refer to human nature as if it were a static quality. It must be employed in the context of Jesus' human development, where Jesus resisted the corruption of sin throughout, brought his human nature to its full resting place as a conduit of ever-brightening transfigured glory by the Holy Spirit at the right hand of the Father. This is the logic Athanasius retained from Irenaeus' view of a developmental humanity, which the later Latin theologians Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian misunderstood.²⁹⁰

Protestant theologian Kathryn Tanner proposes a different solution that is worth mentioning here. She suggests that the divine nature of Jesus be thought of as radically transcendent from his human nature. In fact, her project in systematic theology stresses 'firstly, a non-competitive relation between creatures and God, and secondly, a radical interpretation of divine transcendence.'²⁹¹ The two points she puts forward are intertwined and mutual. Tanner suggests that we view the divinity of Jesus as being on a different ontological plane as his humanity: The divinity of the Son participates in the human nature in a real way, but in such a way that the *communicatio idiomatum* cannot fully operate in the same way Hatzidakis proposes. Hence Athanasius utilizes the analogy of the sun which touches the earth with its rays, and that analogy might be understood in the way Tanner suggests.²⁹² I suspect, however, that in Athanasius' writings, what prevented Jesus from actually succumbing to sin, and what prevents us from calling Jesus a sinner as regards his personhood while on earth, is not so much that divinity and humanity are positioned on different axes, but because (1) the difference between 'natures' and 'persons' requires that we use different adjectives for them, so that human nature can be 'corrupt' while a human person may or may not be 'guilty' of any particular act; and also (2) a developmental view of human nature requires that God, because of His intrinsic love and goodness, works with the partnership of the person to bring that person's human nature into a full union with Himself.

Returning to the second *Discourse*, then, Athanasius is protecting that 'self' or 'essence' of Jesus from being 'infirm' even as he says that Jesus had taken it on in his saving mission and human experience. The statement as it stands seems to pre-date Athanasius. It may or may not be considered fully adequate in a technical sense to convey what it intends. My impression is that the statement is reaching for language not yet available to it. But I do think it is fair to simply 'update' this statement (anachronistically, I admit) to the following terms which became settled after the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD: 'He is said to be infirm according to his human nature, though not infirm in his person.' In which case, Athanasius is a witness to a tradition shared by him and others that Jesus' human nature was called 'infirm' in the sense of 'sinful,' even while Jesus as a person was not.

The fourth piece of evidence that Athanasius believed Jesus assumed a fallen human nature comes from a passage in his *Second Discourse Against the Arians* where Athanasius considers a hypothetical possibility. Could God have simply spoken and healed human nature instantly, and without human voluntary participation? Apparently this was an objection raised by some in the broad 'Arian' camp. I expected Athanasius to make an argument from God's loving nature and His commitment to human agency. That may very well be faithful to Athanasius' mind also, but his actual reply proceeds in the following manner:

'Moreover, the good reason of what He did may be seen thus; if God had but spoken, because it was in His

²⁹⁰ Hatzidakis, p.254 – 255; my treatment of Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian follows below in chronological order

²⁹¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p.2; cf. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), chs.2 – 3

²⁹² Ibid 17.7: 'For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says [in 1 Peter 2:22], no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.' See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.80 notes that Athanasius' mind included 'a certain conception of the unity of Christ by way of a unified dynamic by which the divinity acts upon the humanity.'

power, and so the curse had been undone, the power had been shown of Him who gave the word, but man had become such as Adam was before the transgression, having received grace from without, and not having it united to the body; (for he was such when he was placed in Paradise) nay, perhaps had become worse, because he had learned to transgress. Such then being his condition, had he been seduced by the serpent, there had been fresh need for God to give command and undo the curse; and thus the need had become interminable, and men had remained under guilt not less than before, as being enslaved to sin; and, ever sinning, would have ever needed one to pardon them, and had never become free, being in themselves flesh, and ever worsted by the Law because of the infirmity of the flesh.²⁹³

This is a difficult passage to fully understand. Athanasius denies that God could have simply spoken and healed human nature instantly because by doing so, God would set up the conditions for human beings to eat over and over from the tree of knowledge of good and evil without ever developing a personal conviction that doing so is sinful. One reason for this, in his mind, is that if God had acted in such a way, humanity by definition would have ‘received grace from without, and not having it united to the body.’ Athanasius seems to be saying that human beings would never learn from that fundamental mistake. The phrase ‘grace from without’ seems to indicate the opposite of ‘grace from within.’ Presumably, ‘grace from within’ our human life and experience would mean us sharing with God a conviction about the awfulness of the corruption of sin and its effects, cognitive agreement with God that healing is necessary, and willing commitment to being renewed. The puzzling phrase, ‘not having [grace] united to the body’ probably presupposes an awareness of the then-standard patristic explanation of the soul’s impact upon the body. Athanasius provided that explanation in *Against the Heathen* chapters 1 – 6, and Matthew Craig Steenberg very helpfully explores Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Tertullian, and Cyril of Jerusalem to show that they shared this common theological anthropology.²⁹⁴ The human soul – with its capacity to know God, to desire God, and to remember, to feel, to judge – must receive grace from God and mediate that grace into the human body.

Then, in contrast to this hypothetical scenario which he regards as impossible, Athanasius explains why Jesus’ infirm, fallen humanity has theological importance: Jesus had to progressively rid his flesh of ‘every bite of the serpent.’ He says:

‘For the Word being clothed in the flesh, as has many times been explained, every bite of the serpent began to be utterly staunched from out it; and whatever evil sprung from the motions of the flesh, to be cut away, and with these death also was abolished, the companion of sin, as the Lord Himself says, ‘The prince of this world comes, and finds nothing in Me [John 14:30];’ and ‘For this end was He manifested,’ as John has written, ‘that He might destroy the works of the devil [1 John 3:8].’²⁹⁵

Protestants often view the role of Satan as external to humanity, which leads Protestants to view as crude and primitive various patristic passages which speak of Jesus ransoming us from Satan. Satan is seen as the accuser, based on the meaning of the word ‘satan,’ as somehow connected to our guilt before God. Satan is also seen as having a legal claim upon fallen humanity, shown when the devil offered Jesus the nations in the wilderness (Mt.4:8 – 9), counteracted by Jesus when he claimed for himself all authority on heaven and earth (Mt.28:18). But this is only half the truth.

By contrast, the imagery of ‘venom’ is what the church fathers recognized to be the main import of Scripture’s literary portrayal of the enemy as a serpent, from Genesis 3. That focus is demonstrated by Athanasius in this passage. By following the lead of the serpent and participating in his rebellion against God, we have internalized a ‘venom.’ So that ‘venom’ must be removed. Jesus is the only human being who has completely drained and healed his own human nature of that ‘venom,’ not forgetting also ‘the motions of the flesh, to be cut away’ – which I suspect to be the desires and affections of the flesh. I also suspect that Athanasius, by using the phrase ‘cut away,’ was hearkening back to the ‘circumcision of the heart’ language of Moses (Dt.10:16; 30:6), Jeremiah (Jer.4:4), and Paul (Rom.2:28 – 29; 6:6; 8:3; 10:4; Col.2:12). Each of us is called to participate in Jesus’ spiritual surgery in himself, in partnership with his Spirit and empowered by him, to resist these diseased and disordered things that are foreign to our human nature, fundamentally. Jesus is the only one who has done so, on our behalf; he is a medical substitute for us. And this healing is also liberating, for it brings us out from under the influence of the serpent of

²⁹³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.68

²⁹⁴ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.16

²⁹⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.69

old, the devil.

What is important to me in this passage is the progressive nature of the cleansing. Athanasius demonstrates an understanding that ‘every bite of the serpent’ was not instantly ‘stunched.’ Rather, every bite ‘*began* to be utterly stunched from out of it.’ This indicates that, in Athanasius’ mind, Jesus cleansed his human nature through his lifelong, faithful obedience. It was not an instantaneous reversal from conception to pre-fallen Adamic humanity. Rather, it was a cleansing and healing from within, throughout the course of Jesus’ life, as Jesus took his human nature from the depths of human fallenness to the heights of resurrected new humanity seated at the right hand of the Father. In Athanasius we have a very clear statement about how medical-ontological substitution serves as the foundational stone of the overall christus victor edifice.

Athanasius seems to view Israel’s experience of the Sinai Law and Jesus’ assumption of fallen human nature and progressive healing of the primordial wound as the appropriate answer to the hypothetical possibility he entertained just before. He argues that God could not instantly heal human corruption by fiat because human beings had to personally learn how terrible the wound is. Part of that education process would surely include reflecting on one’s own life. It probably also included seeing in Scripture how disastrous sin’s effects are, how deeply Israel struggled under the Law, how deeply Jesus struggled to overcome temptation. That is the type of devotional reflection that would nurture godly and Godward convictions, and shape one’s own desire for healing.

While considering this excerpt, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that Athanasius has been criticized for leaving too unclear his view of whether Jesus had a human soul. Colin Gunton, for example, critiques Athanasius for saying too ‘incautiously’ that the Word ‘wielded the human body like an instrument,’²⁹⁶ because that phraseology diminishes the proper qualities – such as the role of the human soul and human will – which are important to Jesus’ humanity within the definition of salvation as God’s recovery of true humanity. However, Khaled Anatolios’ defense of Athanasius on this point is persuasive.²⁹⁷ The constituent and conjoined parts of the human being – soul and body – must be joined with God in the person of Jesus if they are to be saved. Moreover, Athanasius’ lack of attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in his early two volume work *Against the Gentiles – On the Incarnation* was rectified in his *Discourses Against the Arians*, and supported further in his three *Letters to Serapion*.

In the mid to late fourth century, Apollinarius of Laodicea (died 390 AD) taught a heretical view much like the one Athanasius is sometime accused of subtly endorsing. Apollinarius opposed the Arians and wanted to uphold the divine-human unity of Jesus, but in such a way that he denied to Jesus a human mind and soul. Those who followed him, called the Apollinarians, were large in number. Apollinarius, the one time ally of Athanasius and Basil, seems to have suspected that sin somehow resided in the soul, and therefore the Word must have assumed a body but displaced the mind and soul and occupied its place instead. The orthodox critique in reply was that this denied salvation to the human soul for all the rest of humanity. For if Jesus did not also save the human soul in himself, then he has no redeemed human soul to offer. It would be left for Gregory of Nazianzus to deploy against the Apollinarians the logic used by Athanasius against the Arians, ‘The unassumed is the unhealed.’ That is, what God does not assume to Himself in the person of Jesus must, of necessity, remain unhealed.

Athanasius gives evidence that he understood the importance of holding that Jesus had a human soul. In the work *Tome to the Antiochenes*, dated to 362 AD, in which Athanasius and others report on their investigations of a quarrel between two pro-Nicene groups who used Greek terms for theological matters in different ways. In response, Athanasius says he listened for the *underlying structure of their thoughts*, because they gave different meanings to words: ‘Having accepted then these men’s interpretation and defense of their language...’²⁹⁸ He then expresses his approval for one of the groups:

²⁹⁶ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997 2nd edition), p.69 critiques Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17, 42

²⁹⁷ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.71 – 74, ‘His characterization of Christ’s body as an “instrument” is not to be interpreted in light of an analysis of the composition of Christ, but rather within the framework of the Creator-creature distinction, with its attendant dialectic of divine transcendence and immanence. The “instrumentality” of the body is concerned precisely with its being a medium for the immanent revelation of the transcendent God. In other words, the focus is not on the relation of the Logos to the body, so much as on the body as mediating between God and world. Athanasius himself speaks of the “instrument” of Christ’s body not in order to emphasize that it is “directly and physically” moved by the Logos, but rather to characterize it as a privileged locus wherein the invisible God becomes knowable and visible.’

²⁹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Tomus ad Antiochenos* 6

‘For they confessed also that the Savior had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that His body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word Himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.’²⁹⁹

The postscript by Paulinus and Karterius adds, for good measure:

‘For the Savior had a body neither without soul, nor without sense, nor without intelligence. For it were impossible, the Lord being made Man for us, that His body should be without intelligence.’

What this brief mention of the human soul might mean for our view of Athanasius is at the very least this: The robustness and complexity of his theological thought should not be seen as constrained to the topics of the Arian controversy. Maximally, however, it might mean this: If Athanasius’ understanding of the human soul from the first part of *Against the Heathen* also reflects his basic understanding of what happened in the human soul of Jesus throughout the course of Jesus’ life and ministry, which is reasonably likely, then Athanasius can be seen as anticipating the explicit work of Gregory of Nazianzus. To substantiate my point on this further, we can revisit this critical passage in which Athanasius quotes the important passage Romans 8:3 to assert that Jesus made the flesh fully admit the ‘Divine mind’:

‘... what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],’ ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word...’³⁰⁰

Since Athanasius uses the term ‘flesh’ to indicate the entire human being, body and soul, considered from the standpoint of being corrupted (as the apostles Paul and John did), and since the mind was held to be the first part of the soul, Athanasius can be understood as asserting that Jesus’ divine mind did not displace his human mind. Rather, by and through his human mind working in partnership with his divine mind, Jesus consciously struggled to align his entire soul and body with his divine nature in the power of the Holy Spirit. He thereby governed his entire humanity in conformity with God’s will, healing and strengthening it from within. Thus, he ‘rendered the flesh capable of the Word.’

If this is the case, then we must read Athanasius’ language in the *Second Discourse* in a fresh light. Where he says, ‘every bite of the serpent began to be utterly staunched from out it; and whatever evil sprung from the motions of the flesh, to be cut away,’ that phrase ‘motions of the flesh’ likely refers in Athanasius’ mind to the sinful inclinations of the soul and body which Jesus cut away at the source, the feat that no one else was able to do. Does this provide us with a genuine and reliable insight into the inner life of Jesus as he battled his fallen human nature? I believe so.

A fifth passage which shows Athanasius witnessing to Jesus having assumed a fallen human nature comes from his *Third Discourse Against the Arians*. Here, Athanasius draws an application from Jesus’ experience of battling the ‘affections’ of the flesh to our experience of battling them. The point is pastoral. The entire argument hangs on the assumption that Jesus assumed a fallen human nature, and cleansed it not at conception but through his faithful obedience to the Father.

‘These things were so done, were so manifested, because He had a body, not in appearance, but in truth; and it became the Lord, in putting on human flesh, to put it on *whole with the affections proper to it*; that, as we say that the body was His own, so also we may say that *the affections of the body were proper to Him alone*, though they did not touch Him according to His Godhead.’³⁰¹

Athanasius means that we are freed from cowardice, fear, anxiety, and other emotions which would cause us to shrink back from a robust declaration of faith in Christ. Why? Because Jesus shook himself free of those ‘affections.’ In this context, ‘affections’ relate to human sinfulness, especially human shortcomings in the face of persecution against Christians. Athanasius argues that we are freed from the ‘affections’ of the flesh because Jesus

²⁹⁹ Ibid 7

³⁰⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.8, paragraph 60

³⁰¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.32; cf. 3.33 – 34, emphasis mine

shared in our flesh and its affections, and conquered them. This logically requires that Jesus assumed a fallen human nature, and cleansed it through his faithful obedience to the Father.

Once again, we find Athanasius taking a complementary step to erect a conceptual barrier between Jesus' fallen human nature and any accusation that he actually personally sinned: 'though they did not touch Him according to His Godhead.' Although Athanasius does not explicitly quote from Hebrews 4:15 or 5:6 – 10 in his surviving writings,³⁰² likely because those he called 'Arians' were not contesting Jesus' authentic humanity, probably his mind was not too far off from the encouragement that in Jesus, God did experience temptation in all things like we do, yet successfully resisted those temptations and, in the power of the Spirit, turned his humanity back to the Father.

This is a very helpful pastoral connection point to Christ. To hold out to other people a Jesus who has experienced our struggle as a fallen human being can minister comfort to people, especially under persecution and duress. And the fact that Jesus *was successful* at resisting every temptation to actually sin is important in ministering appropriate Christ-centered challenges, as well. So one can see that Athanasius was appealing to his fellow bishops and priests in their shared capacity as preachers and teachers.

Athanasius' heir Cyril of Alexandria (c.376 – 444 AD), who served as a long stint as bishop of Alexandria from 412 to his death, and a renowned theologian in his own right, continued down this line of thought a bit more explicitly with regards to a wider range of human emotions. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, for example, Cyril writes:

'Moreover, just as death was brought to naught in no other way than by the Death of the Savior, so also with regard to each of the sufferings of the flesh: for unless He had felt dread, human nature could not have become free from dread; unless He had experienced grief, there could never have been any deliverance from grief; unless He had been troubled and alarmed, no escape from these feelings could have been found. And with regard to every one of the affections to which human nature is liable, thou wilt find exactly the corresponding thing in Christ. The affections of His flesh were aroused, not that they might have the upper hand as they do indeed in us, but in order that when aroused they might be thoroughly subdued by the power of the Word dwelling in the flesh, the nature of man thus undergoing a change for the better.'³⁰³

In this passage, Cyril assumes that Jesus took to himself a fallen human nature. For how else were 'the affections of his flesh' first 'aroused' and then 'thoroughly subdued'?

However, my hesitation with Athanasius' statement, and Cyril's development of this trajectory, is that all of Jesus' human emotions appear to be considered as if they were only reactive. Was Jesus only reacting to his surroundings? Was the true source of Jesus' emotions his external environment? There was a tendency among Jews and Christians alike, starting from the Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint translation, to feel discomfort with anything which can be considered divine 'emotions.'³⁰⁴ The source of this discomfort is most decidedly not the Hebrew Bible, which attributes many anthropomorphic human emotions to God. Rather, the source over the discomfort with emotions is Greek. The Greek assumption that emotions meant personal change, and personal change meant imperfection, seemed to affect their assessment of Jesus, especially how he suffered at his trial and crucifixion. Perhaps this corresponds with Christian art tending to portray Christ as unflappably serene even on the cross, and Mary as calm and composed as she held the dead body of Jesus in the Pieta.

Hatzidakis, for instance, considers Jesus' human emotion, but in my view unevenly.³⁰⁵ I stand with him when he says that Jesus 'was not under the sway of uncontrolled passions.' He also grants to Jesus, 'Behind His humanity lies the inexhaustible ocean of divinity,' and, 'Christ's personality was formed, as that of every human being, by His genetic makeup that carried the divine imprint and be His environs, His home upbringing and all the other factors that shape a human character.' Beautiful is the sentiment, 'His human thoughts, emotions, feelings, and actions were never purely or merely human thoughts, emotions, feelings, and actions. They swelled in Him by the intruding of the divinity into His human experience in an unfathomable way...' But I am not sure why he immediately adds

³⁰² James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p.416

³⁰³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John's Gospel* 12.27, 28

³⁰⁴ Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.37 – 46

³⁰⁵ Hatzidakis, p.232 – 234

the modifier, ‘beyond and above human capacity.’ With that phrase I would take issue: If Jesus came to share and participate in our humanity that we might do so in his, what is it that lies beyond human capacity? Moreover, saying that Jesus ‘did not laugh, because He was not startled or surprised’ goes a step too far, making assumptions about the sources of human laughter and taking the absence of evidence as evidence of absence categorically, which is a logical mistake in how one handles the New Testament material. When Hatzidakis asserts, ‘He was neither happy nor sad,’ he offers no interpretation of those occasions when Jesus is said to be. On the one hand, Jesus ‘rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit’ (Lk.10:21) or referred to his own joy at the return of the lost (Lk.15:1 – 32). On the other hand, Jesus wept angrily over Lazarus’ condition (Jn.11:44) and wept over Jerusalem’s rejection and its consequences (Lk.19:41). Jesus told his disciples he ‘lusted’ to eat the Passover with them before he suffered (Lk.22:15). Hatzidakis applies to Jesus adjectives such as ‘serene,’ ‘balanced,’ ‘peaceful,’ ‘resolute,’ and other descriptors that indicate steadiness and constancy. But was Jesus’ emotional life as absolute and constant as Hatzidakis suggests, as if Jesus’ divine nature served him first as a wall beyond which no emotion entered, and second as a short anchor from which his human nature did not wander? Might Hatzidakis also be influenced by a certain commitment to the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible, which struggles with anthropomorphic emotional language attributed to God, and so translates them into something else?³⁰⁶

What if Jesus’ human emotions can be considered to have their true source in his divinity? What if they are not reactionary, but *revelatory, even in his responsiveness*? For example, what happens when we try to make sense of Jesus’ suffering in a text like John 11, the incident where Jesus weeps by the tomb of Lazarus? Is the thought of his impending suffering and death affecting Jesus from the outside in? Or is the direction of the emotion rather inside out? What if Jesus weeping in anger and sorrow over Lazarus’ death because that is the inner anger and sorrow of God now being manifested in the physical body of Jesus? Similarly, the suffering felt by Jesus on the cross is not primarily a ‘problem’ of how something outside Jesus could press into his inner reality as the unchanging, divine Son of God. Rather, the grief long felt by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit since the fall – and we know God can feel grief because the apostle Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit can be ‘grieved’ (Eph.4:30) – is now revealed and made manifest by Jesus on the cross.

Cyril and the tradition that followed him had some tendencies to see ‘suffering’ and ‘emotions’ as threats to divine impassibility from outside Jesus. But if God’s impassibility is defined as God’s love, based on His unchanging and eternal nature as a Trinity, then the threat vanishes.³⁰⁷ If God is love because He is Triune, and if God cannot change His Triune being then His love is what is impassible and steady about Him, so then it also stands to reason that He will have the divine equivalent of human emotions towards us. If the apostle Paul can command Christians to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep’ (Rom.12:15), then emotionally mature responsiveness varies according to the person to whom one is relating. And if that is true for human beings, then it must logically also be true for God. But there is no need to fear that we are proposing a fundamental ‘changeability’ or ‘instability’ in God, or in us. For if a *character of love* is what is constant and unchanging in the divine Trinity, and what is hoped-for in us, then a certain healthy variability in human emotion and in divine emotion is *expected* and *necessary*. To suggest that God’s divine emotions, or our human emotions, should be unchanging suggests either stoicism, narcissism, or autism. God is both impassible and passible, understood properly. He is *impassible* in His love, for that is His nature, but He is *passible* in His divine emotions for us. He is *unmoving* from His loving commitment towards us, which results from His nature, and *most moved* on our behalf because of that unshakeable love.

³⁰⁶ Emotionality itself was called into question. In some Christian accounts, emotions were thought to fall away at some point. For example, Lewis Ayres, ‘Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa,’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 49 4 (2005), p.378, notices that in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Gregory asks his sister and spiritual mentor Macrina about how ‘passions’ can be redirected or refocused on God. ‘If the passions stimulate the life of virtue but are extinguished when the soul is purified, then, he asks, will desire for God also be extinguished? In a famous passage Macrina reiterates her position that it is only the faculty of contemplation that is the godlike part of the soul and that the passions do indeed fall away. Nevertheless, the soul that passes beyond desire, hope and memory remains in the activity of love, thus imitating the divine life.’ Others, however, maintain that the term ‘*ta pathe*’ (*the passions*) in Byzantine theology refers not to all emotionality per se, but emotionality energized by sinfulness and operating outside the governance of the rational-moral faculty, as in *pathology*, or vice.

³⁰⁷ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p.155 – 167, esp. p.167, ‘Here I can at least offer a definition of divine apatheia as trinitarian love: God’s impassibility is the utter fullness of an infinite dynamism, the absolutely complete and replete generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit from the Father, the infinite ‘drama’ of God’s joyous act of self-outpouring – which is his being as God... Nor is this some kind of original unresponsiveness in the divine nature; it is divine beauty, that perfect joy in the other by which God is God: the Father’s *delectatio* in the beauty of his eternal Image, the Spirit as the light and joy and sweetness of that knowledge.’

So if we consider Jesus' human emotions to be *revelatory*, then Athanasius' twin emphases in *On the Incarnation* – redemption and revelation – are cemented together in this aspect of Jesus' incarnate life. Jesus refused to fall into the temptation of feeling jealous, lustful, greedy, anxious, competitive, etc. For those feelings and emotions are but manifestations of 'covetousness,' and Jesus condemned the sin of covetousness in his own sinful flesh (Rom.8:3), by never coveting anything. Paul's exposition in Romans illustrates the fact that the quality of Jesus' emotional life is indeed *redemptive* for us as he shares himself with us by his Spirit. Since Jesus also *reveals* a normative humanity, his demonstrated emotions reflect a normative kind of emotional health for human beings: compassion for the lost and the marginalized (e.g. Mt.9:36), joy at the conversion of a lost one (Lk.15:6 – 7, 9 – 10, 22 – 24), humor even including amusing innuendo about sexual matters (e.g. Lk.14:18 – 20; Jn.4:1 – 18), angry sorrow at human death and the condition of sin that led up to it (Jn.11:44; Lk.13:35), etc. We can retain all the strength and resolve that Athanasius and Cyril perceived in Jesus as he faced persecution. But rather than label Jesus' resolution a 'lack of passion' or a 'lack of emotion,' we can see the determination of the Father to perfect the *emotional* quality of human nature despite the obstacles, and thereby reveal God's own self emotionally, in some sense. The full range of the emotions Jesus showed can be seen to reflect the 'divine emotions' of the Father, by the Spirit.

Not only that, but this account of Jesus' emotional life can be squared with what we now understand from neuroscience and even epigenetics about the relationship between our emotional health, physical health, and even brain development. Greek philosophical thought, especially Neo-Platonic and Stoic, emphasized a firm functional, and even ontological, order of soul over body. As Christians inherited this view, they developed some helpful insights about how the human soul was to mediate the knowledge of God and even the life of God into the body. But this prioritization of the soul over the body in all cases came with a high price. Some, including Athanasius, began to speak of the soul itself as being the image of God in a way that was distinct from the body,³⁰⁸ which is a departure from Irenaeus and a more Judaic understanding of the human person; I believe this move to be erroneous. Christians began to frown upon sexual pleasure in marriage, which was an obvious example of a bodily experience that flowed 'backward' or 'upstream' into the soul and our emotional experience. This view that childraising was the only legitimate reason for a married couple to have sex came from Stoicism,³⁰⁹ but not biblical Judaism, which celebrated married sexuality for the couple, not just for childbearing (Pr.5:19; Song 3:6 – 5:1; 1 Cor.7:1 – 5). Any experiences in that general category were increasingly seen as problematic.

By contrast, neuroscience now tells us that sexual intercourse produces oxytocin, a chemical that influences our brain development and produces in us emotions about bonding with a partner. A mother, while breastfeeding her infant, experiences an increase in oxytocin as well, to help her emotionally bond with her baby. We also know that emotional bonding, especially with our parents, through physical affection and even laughter, is essential for our neurological and emotional development, whereas relational separation leads to stress and anxiety which registers in the body. Realizations like this reinforce what Christians have long called the indissoluble union of soul and body, and even the way the Eastern Orthodox have called human beings the personalization (hypostasis) of nature. But they require us to drop the 'one-way street' view of the soul ideally taking priority over the body in every sense. In fact, we now know that physical affection and good nutrition facilitate healthy brain development, and by contrast, the presence of toxins like lead and plastic cause mental, emotional, and even sexual dysfunction. Moreover, the relatively new field of epigenetics tells us that our traumatic experiences can impact the genes of our children. These understandings of the human body and our interior life require us to deeply revise the Christian appropriation of the Neo-Platonic and Stoic views of our emotions, and our understanding of body and soul. They require us to fall back upon the Hebrew Scriptures, which tells us that God wanted us to grow up in the healthy physical environment of a garden, and have a strong but appropriate emotional life as part of our earthy and image-of-God nature. The body must be developed and/or redeveloped to know in its own way what the soul wants it to know about the goodness of God. Once again, if Jesus' human emotions mirrored God's divine emotions in such a way that they impacted his own neurological and bodily development, then his human emotions were *redemptive* of human nature and *revelatory* of divine nature, simultaneously. In fact, if Jesus' utter human dependence on Mary his mother and Israel his cultural environment impacted his humanity in such a way that helped prepare him to hear and obey his heavenly Father, then we must properly account for the role of Israel in whatever story of redemption we tell.

I believe *orthopathy*, right feeling, is both redemptive and revelatory. It is a relational state Jesus himself perfected

³⁰⁸ E.g. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 32.3

³⁰⁹ David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* retitled from *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.186

and shares with us by his Spirit. For he *redeemed* human emotion back to the ‘divine emotion’ of the Godhead, and in so doing *revealed* how God feels, and how God’s true humanity feels, in dynamic relationship with others and God. What to do about the direction started by Athanasius and taken further by Cyril of Alexandria (and others) about how to interpret Jesus’ suffering in the face of persecution, and emotion more broadly? I would gently and, hopefully with good humor, criticize it for being insufficiently *Athanasian*.

These passages do not exhaust the places in Athanasius’ extant writings where he discusses Jesus’ assumption of a fallen human nature and progressive cleansing of it. But they do demonstrate the various pastoral and theological uses Athanasius made of the idea. If Athanasius believed that Jesus cleansed his human nature from conception and lived in a pre-fall Adamic humanity, I suspect that he would not have been able to make the particular points he did. In some cases, he simply would have found no need to explore and defend the Scriptures in the way he did, or develop the terminological distinctions he did. I believe this exploration is sufficient to establish my point that Athanasius believed Jesus assumed a fallen human nature and cleansed it through his faithful, lifelong obedience, climaxing in his death and resurrection. Therefore, I maintain that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, are quite wrong about Athanasius. He did not believe in penal substitutionary atonement.

One final point can be made on top of all this evidence. Athanasius’ understanding of the Trinity makes penal substitution flatly impossible. Why is this? Athanasius was a zealous defender against anything he considered to be ‘Arian.’ The theologies of the various camps Athanasius considered to be ‘Arian’ had in common an aversion to naming the Son as fully divine and equal to the Father.

Athanasius consistently makes use of Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 1:24 that ‘Christ is the wisdom and power of God.’ He takes what he observes about Christ in the outworking of salvation (the economy) to be what is true about God prior to creation (the ontology). For Athanasius, that is an important point because if we are given knowledge of God proper, then who God is in the economy of salvation must be who God truly is as He knows Himself to be. Hence, Athanasius says repeatedly that the Son *is* the Wisdom and Word and Power of the Father. Athanasius even ventures to say that the Father’s *fullness* is the Son, and that the Father’s *essence* is the Son:

And this is what is said, ‘Who being in the form of God [Philippians 2:6],’ and ‘the Father in Me [John 10:38; 14:10 – 11].’ Nor is this Form of the Godhead partial merely, but the fullness of the Father’s Godhead is the *Being* of the Son, and the Son is whole God. Therefore also, being equal to God, He ‘thought it not a prize to be equal to God [Philippians 2:6],’ and again since the Godhead and the Form of the Son is none other’s than the Father’s, this is what He says, ‘I in the Father.’ Thus ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself [2 Corinthians 5:19];’ for the propriety of the Father’s *Essence* is that Son, in whom the creation was then reconciled with God.³¹⁰

This is markedly distinct from saying that the Son *shares* in the Father’s Wisdom, Power, fullness, essence, etc. as if there were some qualities or substances that the persons of the Trinity share in common. Athanasius’ statements bind the Father and Son closer together. Whether or not we can fathom all Athanasius’ reasons for phrasing matters this way, we can see that it certainly is a formidable position from which to defend the faith against any denigration of the Son. It is also a way to understand the ‘Father-Son’ language around the idea of bestowing an inheritance: the Father gives all of who he is to the Son.

Athanasius even denies that Jesus uttered his cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ for his own sake. Instead, he said it for ours, since we often feel forsaken by God, to identify with us and so lighten our sufferings.

‘And that the words ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ are His, according to the foregoing explanations (though He suffered nothing, for the Word was impassible), is notwithstanding declared by the Evangelists; since the Lord became man, and these things are done and said as from a man, that He might Himself lighten these very sufferings of the flesh, and free it from them. Whence neither can the Lord be forsaken by the Father, who is ever in the Father, both before He spoke, and when He uttered this cry. Nor is it lawful to say that the Lord was in terror, at whom the keepers of hell’s gates shuddered and set open hell, and the graves did gape, and many bodies of the saints arose and appeared to their own people.’³¹¹

³¹⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.6

³¹¹ *Ibid* 3.56

Whether Athanasius' exegesis of this text is persuasive is a separate, worthwhile question. I believe he would have been more accurate to first see this as an intertextual reference: Jesus was invoking King David's journey of exile before enthronement for the sake of the criminals being crucified beside him who thought that the Messiah should not face death at Gentile hands. Jesus' point is that if King David suffered at the hands of the Gentiles (Ps.22), how much more would the heir of David? I do agree with Athanasius, however, in his assessment that Jesus was not forsaken by the Father in a way that their conscious communion was broken, as even David did not feel that (Ps.22:9 – 10, 19, 24); rather, Jesus was forsaken by the Father *to the Gentiles* in the sense of losing his physical protection (e.g. Ps.34:6 – 7). But regardless, my only point here is to highlight the bishop of Alexandria's understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. To Athanasius, there can be no 'gap' in the Son's awareness of the Father. To suggest that the Son has a different self-consciousness from the Father would be inconceivable for him. To suggest that the Father has his own personal power from which to punish the Son, while we still call the Son the Father's own power, would have been contradictory, and equally inconceivable.

Peter Leithart notes with considerable sensitivity and skill that Augustine's understanding of the Trinity is different than Athanasius'. And since Augustine is often credited with being the foremost influence in Western, Latin Christianity, from which Roman Catholicism and Protestantism flow, it is worth noting here that Augustine's conception of the Trinity is one of the many building blocks that made penal substitution possible. Augustine did not himself believe in penal substitution,³¹² which will be the topic of another exploration. But Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, as Protestants in the Reformed tradition, almost certainly inherit Augustine's view of the Trinity. By contrast, Athanasius' view of the Trinity, and that of the Cappadocians and the Eastern Greek church, *prevent any doctrine of penal substitution*.

To explain why, Leithart explains that Augustine imagined that the Father had his own wisdom, the Son had his own wisdom, and the Spirit had his own wisdom. The Father had his own power, the Son had his own power, and the Spirit had his own power. And so on. Augustine therefore suggests that the term *ousia* be understood as a divine substance, or collection of divine characteristics, which each person of the Trinity possessed in some measure, exhaustively. Leithart notes of Augustine,

'...But the way Augustine finally interprets 1 Corinthians 1:24 suggests that the Father has attributes that are more proper than the Son, more intrinsic to the being of the Father than his being Father. Perhaps this is where the criticisms leveled against Augustine hit home, particularly the criticism that he privileges the one essence over the persons. Saying that the Father has 'his own' wisdom is not exactly 'privileging' unity over plurality, but Augustine leaves open the possibility that the Father has some surplus goodness left over that is not exhaustively poured out in the Son, that is not wholly expressed in his being Father...

Athanasius points, I think, in another direction, a path towards cognitive rest, if not 'resolution.' He insists that the Father's wisdom simply *is* the Son, as is his power. This might be taken in two ways. On one view, the Father truly is nothing without the Son. Of course, since the Son is begotten of the Father, the Son is nothing without the Father either. Of course, too, the Father never has been without the Son, who is his own Word, 'proper' to his essence, so the Father has never been without his power, wisdom, goodness, being. Yet the Father's attributes are utterly dependent on the existence of the Son and are realized in the Son, just as much as the sun is realized and is light because of the radiance that supplements it. On this interpretation, God is radically dependent internally. *I am* before I am a father; I am apart from at least some of my human relations; I am more than my fatherhood. The heavenly Father *is not* before or apart from being Father; the person Paul calls 'God' is not God except as he is Father of the Son. On another interpretation, Athanasius is saying that the Father has 'his own' wisdom, but that wisdom is paternal wisdom, which means wisdom that exists in the Father (*ad se*) only as it is the wisdom poured out for and manifest in the Son. The Son too has 'his own' wisdom, but has that wisdom only as receptive wisdom, received eternally from the Father. Each of the persons shares all the same attributes, and these attributes are their 'own,' but these attributes are 'inflected' relationally, 'held' by each person distinctly as a person.

³¹² Stanley P. Rosenberg, 'Interpreting Atonement in Augustine's Preaching', edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p.233 – 238. It is notable that the editors of this book wanted to honor Dr. Roger Nicole, an American evangelical theologian, who upheld the penal substitution view. Rosenberg, however, recognizes that Augustine cannot be pressed into this editorial purpose.

All the Father's attributes are inflected paternally, the Son's filially, the Spirit's spiritually.

Augustine would agree that there is not the slightest sliver of space between the Father and the Son, just as he would not allow the slightest sliver of space between the Father and his attributes. But for Athanasius, those two statements are identical: there is not the slightest sliver of space between the Father and his attributes because he has all that he has *in the Son*, who is proper to his essence. Augustine believes as strongly as Athanasius in an eternal radiance from the light of the Father. Yet Augustine is still capable of conceiving an unsupplemented origin: the Father 'in himself' having attributes 'in himself,' the light without radiance, the fountain without the stream. Augustine seems to leave a small crack open for thinking that the Father has something that is 'his own,' something that appears more intimate and intrinsic to his being than the Son. Athanasius will have none of this, and so he is more radically trinitarian, because he does not envision any glimmer of life for the Father that is not realized in the Son. In slight but significant contrast to Augustine, he sees that the Scriptures entail the conclusion that '*the Son is the Father's All*; and nothing was in the Father before the Word (*Discourses* 3.67, emphasis added). For the Father, too, it is all about the Son, all about the eternal Word that became flesh.'³¹³

If the Son *is* the Power of the Father, then what Power is there from which the Father judges or punishes the Son? If the Son *is* the proper Essence and inheritor of all that the Father *is* except the Father's divine personhood, then what leverage point is there from which the Father can forsake the Son? Such things are quite impossible. Yet this is precisely what penal substitution requires. God the Father – or, in more careful formulations, God as a whole – must have some 'power' of his own / God's own, which is then applied to the Son in judgment and wrath. One can see why Athanasius' view of the Trinity could not possibly support that view.

Leithart makes these further remarks about these 'Western' Augustinian and 'Eastern' Athanasian views of the Trinity by voicing his appreciation of Athanasius:

'But I believe another Athanasian insight is more fruitful. Above, I suggested that Athanasius' trinitarian theology is more radically trinitarian than that of Augustine, since the latter appears to leave space to consider the Father 'in himself,' not sheerly as Father of the Son. To use Athanasius' terminology, Augustine does not grasp as clearly as Athanasius that the Son is 'proper' to the Father, as intimate and intrinsic to the Father's being as any wisdom of power the Father could call his 'own.' Augustine finds it nonsensical to say that the Father can beget his own wisdom, unless he has some prior wisdom of his own to confer. But that, it seems, is to fall into an Arian paradigm, and to run into Athanasius' critique of the 'double wisdom' of Asterius. If the Father has 'his own' wisdom, which is eternally conferred on the Son, which is then also his Wisdom, then we are multiplying Wisdoms. That will not do. God is one, and his Wisdom must be one.'³¹⁴

Whether or not Athanasius' understanding of the Trinity is the most faithful one is a topic for a much lengthier discussion. Suffice to say here, however, that I believe I have marshalled enough evidence to accomplish a much more specific goal. I believe I have discredited the claim of any penal substitution supporter that the great bishop of Alexandria, the Emperor-defying defender of Nicaea, would have supported it. Very contrary to Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, he would have vehemently disagreed with it, and probably anathematized it. Quoting from Peter Leithart has the additional benefit, for my purpose, of providing my readers with an example of a penal substitution advocate who respects Athanasius enough to be honest. Not only does Athanasius not speak of atonement in the legal-penal paradigm, but instead he employs a medical-ontological paradigm. Athanasius would have rejected any suggestion that a *separation* opened up between the Father and the Son *in any sense*; or that at the cross, the Father suddenly acted *upon* the Son rather than continued to act *in and through* the Son by the Spirit; or that the Son had a separate consciousness from the Father such that Jesus lost his awareness of the Father.³¹⁵ Penal substitution did not exist in the mind of Athanasius, and *could not have existed*. Everything else in his theological system would have rejected

³¹³ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.75 – 77 intriguingly also describes the impact of Augustine's version of the Trinity on Thomas Aquinas and other western theologians: 'We can see how the pressure of this argument led Thomas and others to conclude that the persons simply are their relations, top-to-bottom: the Father is Father all the way down, the Son is simply and sheerly Son.'

³¹⁴ Ibid p.86

³¹⁵ Ibid p.123 – 125, where Leithart explores Athanasius' attempts to explain Jesus' apparent and self-professed ignorance of certain matters. Athanasius, under the assumption that the divine mind meant omniscience, wants to actually deny Jesus' human ignorance to bring his human mind into oneness with the divine mind of the Father.

it.

In fact, the development of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 AD and 381 AD rest on what I am calling medical substitutionary atonement. The bishops in the first two Ecumenical Councils were guided by the larger theological thought structure which is described by the phrase deployed by Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ If true divinity did not personally unite with true humanity in the person of Jesus, then there is no salvation. Looking at the theological structure from the standpoint of its ‘atonement theology,’ we can see that the definition operating in the mind of Athanasius is that the eternal Son of God, who is one substance with the Father, shared our fallen human nature in order that we might share his healed human nature, by the Spirit. This is exactly what I am labelling ‘medical substitutionary atonement,’ or ‘ontological substitutionary atonement,’ although it has certainly gone by other names.

Looking towards an examination of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 and 381 AD, we can begin to ask a related question. Do those earliest and greatest Creeds of the church foreclose the possibility of penal substitution? The word *homoousion*, which means ‘same in being,’ was applied to the relationship between the Father and the Son in a certain way and for a certain purpose. Famously, even the word *homoiousion*, differing by one iota, literally, and meaning ‘similar or like in being,’ was not sufficient for Athanasius, even though he was eager to appeal to those bishops in that camp, to win them over. If the arguments and conceptual understanding of Athanasius can be taken as determinative on this matter, and if the logic behind the word choice of *homoousion* over *homoiousion* operated in such a way so as to preclude the possibility of a separation between the Father and the Son, or the idea that the Son shared ‘attributes equal to the Father’s attributes,’ or had ‘stuff in common’ with the Father, but acted in a way so as to not reveal the Father personally, then penal substitution is excluded on the grounds of the Nicene Creed itself. And that would be quite an obstacle to overcome.

Finally, glancing ahead to the subsequent history of the church, we must acknowledge that it is the structure of theological thought, or ‘systematic theology,’ as it were, that has seemed more important to the church than the literal ‘name of Jesus’ or the word for ‘God.’ Even the English name ‘Jesus’ and the English word ‘God’ can become malleable ciphers with very different underlying definitions to various people. We need only think about what the name ‘Jesus’ means to Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. One of the many remarkable facts about the growth of the church is that Christians were perfectly happy to contextualize the name of Jesus into whatever language and culture they encountered. And so from the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which carried the meaning ‘YHWH saves’ from the Hebrew verb root for ‘rescue, deliver’ evidenced in the naming of Jesus in Matthew 1:21, we have the Greek *Iesous*, the Latin *Iesus*, the Arabic *Isa*, and so on. Those names lost the conceptual link in their native tongues between the name and its meaning, but maintained a rough sound equivalent to the Hebrew. But it would be just as accurate to translate his name into the English *Joshua*, as some advocate, to remain closer to the Hebrew meaning and bypass the Greek altogether. Similarly, Christians were also eager to translate the word for ‘God’ from the Hebrew *Adonai*, *Elohim*, and *Yahweh* along with the Greek *Theos* into other languages: the Arabic *Allah*, the Korean *Hananim*, etc. But they perceived that the inevitable cultural baggage (e.g. relational distance and apathy, baleful authoritarianism, etc.) people heard in those words, as they carried them from their previous religious or philosophical contexts into a Christian context, could only be pruned off as people learned the biblical story and the story of theology which reached moments of clarity at Nicaea and Constantinople. This was, in fact, what happened as the early theologians realized they had to use the Greek and Latin words available to them, but they had to stretch or change their meaning.³¹⁶ So Christians were at least as determined to teach the overall conceptual structure of theology, if not more so, as they were to proclaim the ‘name of Jesus.’

Athanasius intrigues me as a theologian, therefore, for another reason: He was deeply concerned about evangelism. His opening salvos in *Against the Heathen* are about the nature of good and evil as his pagan contemporaries would

³¹⁶ T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, p.204 says, ‘When our ordinary terms are applied to God they must be stretched beyond their natural sense and reference and must be employed in such a way that they indicate more than the actual terms can naturally specify.’ (emphasis his) Torrance is quoting Athanasius *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.23; 4.27; *De synodis* 42; *De decretis* 12; *Ad Marcellinum* 11 – 13; *Ad Serapionem* 1.8 – 9, 16 – 20. See also *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.3, ‘For terms do not disparage His Nature; rather that Nature draws to Itself those terms and changes them. For terms are not prior to essences, but essences are first, and terms second.’ And 2.6, where Athanasius discusses the meaning of the word ‘faithful’ in such a way that he anticipates the exegetical nuance N.T. Wright sees in the word ‘righteousness’ – that when we are talking about humans being ‘faithful’ or ‘righteous’ the words mean one thing, and when we are talking about God being ‘faithful’ or ‘righteous’ it means something related but different: ‘But when the saints spoke thus, they were not thinking of God in a human way, but they acknowledged two senses of the word ‘faithful’ in Scripture, first ‘believing,’ then ‘trustworthy,’ of which the former belongs to man, the latter to God.’

have engaged the questions and peered in on Christian faith with questions of their own. Where did human evil come from? How could God not be evil if the creation, especially humanity, has evil in it? How could God be good if the biblical story narrates such and such? What are the metaphysical alternatives for configuring good and evil? Athanasius took time to answer those questions. In that sense, Athanasius' two-volume work seems to be the fourth century precursor to C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, which also opens with the logical options for understanding good and evil, and the roles humanity and God would play in each option. Athanasius desired to present to his pagan world a truly good God who was defeating human evil without Himself ever becoming evil. He clearly believed that this was the only 'god' – as well as the only rendering of the Christian God – who had truly good news for the world.