

What Did the Suffering Servant Suffer? Isaiah 53, Penal Substitution, and Ontological-Medical Substitution

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Introduction

‘But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.’ (Isaiah 53:5)

Penal substitutionary atonement means that Jesus takes a punishment from God onto himself that no one else takes. In other words, in penal substitution, Jesus has to suffer and die *instead* of people, in some manner, to satisfy the retributive justice of God.

Undeniably, according to Isaiah 53:5, Jesus endured something he himself did not deserve. But Isaiah envisioned the suffering Messiah as entering into a punishment that Israel *was already suffering*. He shared in it *with* them, and experienced the same things his people did: captivity under the Gentiles and all the exposure to imperial police brutality, hostility, discrimination, vulnerability, and shame that went with it.¹

Hence, I believe Isaiah 53 supports the Eastern Orthodox (ontological substitution) view of the atonement better than the penal substitution view held by the majority of Protestant evangelicals. He does not seem, in Isaiah 53, to take on an additional punishment that Israel did not already suffer, which is what penal substitution requires.

Isaiah’s Understanding of Israel’s Exile

It is true that Isaiah 53:5 says that the Suffering Servant will experience a ‘punishment’ (NIV) or ‘chastening’ (NASB). The cluster of other words that have close connotations, like being ‘crushed’ by God (53:5, 10) or being ‘cut off’ (53:8), can be essentially understood together with this punishment or chastening.

What is that punishment? The conditions of exile.

The Karaite Jewish scholar named Yefeth ben Ali, in the 10th century, said of Isaiah 53, ‘As to myself, I am inclined, with Benjamin of Nehawend, to regard it as alluding to the Messiah, and as opening with a description of *his condition in exile*, from the time of his birth to his accession to the throne: for the prophet begins by speaking of his being seated in a position of great honour, and then goes back to relate all that will happen to him *during the captivity*. He thus gives us to understand two things: In the first instance, that the Messiah will only reach his highest degree of honour after long and severe trials; and secondly, that these trials will be sent upon him as a kind of sign, so that, if he finds himself under the yoke of misfortunes whilst remaining pure in his actions, he may know that he is the desired one....’² What is explicit in Yefeth ben Ali is implicit in those rabbinical writings which are open to the possibility of Isaiah 53 being messianic. This is the most natural way to read Isaiah.

Exile is the dominant Jewish way of expressing the human problem. Restoration from exile is the hoped-for resolution. Exile needs to be understood in two main stages, which is the way Isaiah himself would have understood

¹ R.N. Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53*, JSOTSS 4 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978) p.30 says that ‘the Servant cannot be said to be suffering, or to have suffered, in place of the exiles in such a way that they escape the consequences of their sins, since...it cannot be said that they have escaped punishment: they are all actually suffering the consequences of defeat and banishment. The Servant...shares their suffering.’ Whybray thus interprets the prophet Isaiah himself as the subject of Isa.53. However, J. Alan Groves, ‘Atonement in Isaiah 53’, edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) debates Whybray on whether Isaiah 53 is about a vicarious sufferer. I will evaluate Groves’ essay below.

² S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer, editors, *The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (2 volumes; New York: Ktav, 1969), p.19 – 20. The English translations used here are taken from volume 2. The original texts are in volume 1. Cf. Soloff, pp. 107 – 109.

it. First, God exiled Adam and Eve from the garden because they corrupted their own human nature. They took into themselves the desire and power to define good and evil from within their own selves. Out of *love*, and not out of jealousy or vindictive retribution, God prevented Adam and Eve and all their descendants from eating from the Tree of Life in their corrupted state and eternalizing the corruption of sin within them (Gen.3:22 – 24). He closed the garden to them. Thus, humanity in general began an existence in exile, still called to be life-bearers made in God's image but without a direct, face to face connection with God as the source of life, alienated from the full fruitfulness of the land, and subject to forces without the benefit of God's sheltering protection and wise guidance.

Second, God brought Israel into a new 'garden land,' albeit of a lesser sort than the original garden of Eden. Israel also sinned by breaking commands of God. God exiled them from their garden land as well. So when the Messiah comes, Isaiah says, Israel will already have been 'punished' or 'chastened' (26:16) by God through exile. Even though Israel came back to the land under Cyrus the Persian, the Israelites recognized that they were still 'slaves' as they had been in Egypt before, subject to and feeding the 'kings whom [God has] set over us because of our sins; [who] also rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please, so we are in great distress' (Neh.9:36 – 37).

This is where Isaiah, living and writing still prior to the Babylonian invasion, offers hope to those who would come after him. At the pivotal point when Isaiah begins to comfort Israel with the news that God will bring her exile to an end (Isa.40 – 55), he says that God will one day say to the people of Israel and to Jerusalem, 'She has received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins' (Isa.40:1 – 2). In other words, Isaiah sees that the Jewish people will endure the punishment of exile. He also sees that the Messiah, being born under those conditions, will also endure that same punishment. That is decisive for a proper understanding of how Isaiah thought of 'atonement.'

But Israel, this unusual segment of humanity, will have the revelation and conditions to logically reflect on their own exile so that they could produce a self-diagnosis in the form of the Hebrew Scriptures. The reason for their exile is the corruption of sin within the human heart (Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21; Lev.26:41; Dt.30:6; Ps.51:10; Isa.1:4 – 6; 29:13; 32:6; Jer.4:4; 17:1 – 10; 31:31 – 34; Ezk.36:26 – 36). Given the evasiveness of Adam in his blame-shifting when questioned by God (Gen.3:11 – 12), and given the propensity of human beings to evade responsibility, this self-diagnosis, willingly offered and documented and defended by Israel, is remarkable. The prophetic writers of the Hebrew Scriptures understood that if God was going to truly bring Israel back from exile once and for all – and not merely into the temporary arrangement of the garden land of Canaan, but the fuller, original version of it which would be the actual garden of Eden once again – then God would have to heal the corruption of sin itself. In other words, He would have to heal the deepest ontological problem behind the exile of humanity from Eden.

That is exactly what Isaiah envisioned. He saw Israel as suffering from sin as an infectious, genetically inherited disease (Isa.1:4 – 6). He traces sinful actions and words, along with hypocrisy, down to the heart (29:13; 32:6). If the suffering Messiah of Isaiah 53 can bring Israel back from exile, which is clearly what he does as Isaiah 54 and 55 describe, then he must do so by healing the corruption of sin within human nature. Isaiah uses language of healing because he is concerned about being, or ontology: 'for our well-being... we are healed' (53:5). I will explore the meaning of Israel's sacrificial system below, but before we go forward, I want to examine Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 53:4.

Matthew's Quotation of Isaiah 53:4

How did the New Testament understand Isaiah 53? I will explore Matthew's use of Isaiah 53:4 in one specific place where he quotes it (Mt.8:17). Did Matthew understand Isaiah in a way that aligns with penal substitution? I would argue not.

As Isaiah connected the suffering of the Suffering Servant to *sharing in Israel's exile*, so Matthew seems to also want us to understand Jesus of Nazareth as suffering from precisely that. His introduction using the Davidic genealogy calls attention to the exile, using the phrase 'deportation to Babylon': 'So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the *deportation to Babylon*, fourteen generations; and from the *deportation to Babylon* to the Messiah, fourteen generations' (Mt.1:17). This genealogy does not include *all* the literal generations between Abraham and Jesus (compare with the much longer lists in Luke 3 and 1 Chronicles 1 – 8). Hence we know that Matthew is making a special introduction by selecting these names. Fourteen was the number that represented David. Hebrew had no vowel marks at the time, and each letter had a numerical value. D-V-D was dalet (4) – vav (6) – dalet (4) and had the numerical sum of fourteen. So Matthew again associates Jesus with David through the number fourteen. And because of the numerical symmetry of

fourteen from the exile to Jesus, we know Matthew's point: Jesus is the Son of David who will deliver the true Israel out of exile.

Therefore Jesus had to share in Israel's *exilic suffering*. That had concrete physical, material, emotional, and relational consequences for Jesus. He was vulnerable from his infancy to the paranoid rage of a brutal dictator, Herod the Great (Mt.2:1 – 20). He was exposed to the reality of a hostile military occupation. He and his parents became refugees, running away from targeted religious-political persecution to a foreign country. Although we know of a sizable Jewish population in Alexandria, Egypt from which they might have received help, Joseph and Mary likely had to beg on the street for a season. When his family returned to Israel, Jesus had to deal with the consequences of that occupation: oppressive taxes; a fractured community divided about what to do about the Romans; the fearful and humiliating presence of foreign soldiers who could legally force Jews to carry their gear; disruptive events like the census; etc. But even so, Jesus retold Israel's story in his own life, as he too escaped from a 'genocidal Pharaoh' and came out of Egypt into the promised land. He passed through water in his baptism, like Israel went through water in the Red Sea. He went through a wilderness journey for forty days, like Israel went through a wilderness journey for forty years. He came to a mountain with followers and delivered new commands. He lived under the threat of Roman brutality and a factious Israel, trying to unite his people and even show God's blessings to those Gentiles willing to receive him. Eventually, like other Jews passionate for Israel's cause, he was crucified at the hands of the Romans, a victim of a travesty of justice and callous police brutality.

Jesus also shared in *King David's exile and his suffering*. Like David, Jesus was anointed king and yet pursued by the reigning, hostile powers; Jesus cleverly alluded to David's plight when referring to himself (Mt.12:3 – 4; cf. 1 Sam.21:1 – 9). Like David, Jesus was chased into remote Gentile areas. Like David, Jesus had to gather his movement in unofficial, clandestine, and sometimes haphazard and desperate ways while being carefully watched and threatened in certain areas; arguably when Jesus did the two loaves miracles (Mt.14:13 – 22 and 15:29 – 39), he invoked the Davidic numbers 5, 7, and 12 from the incident where David took 5 of the 12 loaves in the tabernacle, leaving 7 behind (1 Sam.21). Like David, Jesus was exposed to the hostile Gentile powers. Jesus even interpreted his own death on the Roman cross as an act of paralleling David. Jesus quoted from David's Psalm 22 to evoke David's experience of being forsaken *to the Gentiles*. Jesus quoted it to persuade the criminals crucified with him that if David suffered in exile, then the greater Son of David would also suffer in exile (Mt.27:46). But as the greater David, Jesus' exposure to the police brutality of the reigning Roman powers was greater.

But on the deepest level, Jesus *suffered humanity's internal condition* which made the exile from Eden necessary in the first place. That is, he shared in the corruption of sin within human nature, the common human condition since the fall. Jesus really did struggle against the flesh, especially in the wilderness (Mt.4:1 – 11) and at Gethsemane (Mt.26:36 – 75). Those two episodes bracket his public life and ministry. I believe that Matthew's Gospel is one large chiasmic structure, and the two episodes are parallel to each other.³ But even if one is not inclined to perceive the chiasm and make conclusions based on it, the literary parallels would suffice. Jesus struggled in three categorical ways during his temptation in the wilderness; he also struggled three times during his temptation in Gethsemane. Simon Peter and the other disciples succumb to temptation three times in Gethsemane, which serves as a contrast with Jesus' faithfulness to pray and prepare himself for the trial to come. In both episodes, Jesus' identity as Son of the Father is sorely tested. In both episodes, Jesus' awareness of his impending death and resurrection is fresh and immediate; in the wilderness, his baptism serves as a foreshadowing of his death, burial, and resurrection; in Gethsemane, his actual death, burial, and resurrection are awaiting him the next day.

This parallel means that Jesus, throughout his life, and even at the Sermon on the Mount, was receiving the Father's writing of His law on the tablet of his human heart, so that Jesus might be able to share his own heart by his Spirit with others. He was condemning sin in his own sinful flesh (Rom.8:3), to put to death the old self (Rom.6:6), and produce the heart circumcised by the Spirit (Rom.2:28 – 29), making him out to be the true Israelite, the one restored from exile (Dt.30:6). Paul understood this act to embody Israel's true vocation under the law (Rom.7:14 – 8:4). If Jesus embodied Israel in himself, he therefore embodied that very vocation: to return his human nature back to God circumcised of heart. This involved for Jesus an intense suffering which we can only existentially understand through the hardest moments of our own temptations and choices to faithfully grow in obedience with him, by his Spirit. The author of Hebrews notes, 'In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with

³ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Chiasmic Structure of the Gospel of Matthew*, <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-chiasm.pdf>

loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.’ (Heb.5:7 – 8)

This treatment of Matthew’s Gospel as a whole is helpful to understanding the immediate context where Matthew quotes Isaiah 53. Matthew quotes the Greek Septuagint translation of Isaiah 53:4 in the literary context of paralleling Jesus’ life with the early life of Israel: hunted by a ruler, escaped from Egypt, passage through water and wilderness, arrival at a mountain, commandments. That has decisive theological considerations. The quotation occurs in the context of Jesus performing miraculous healings. After Jesus heals a leper with a touch (Mt.8:1 – 4), a centurion’s servant (Mt.8:5 – 13), and Simon Peter’s mother-in-law (Mt.8:14 – 15), Matthew then narrates:

^{8:16} When evening came, they brought to him many who were demon-possessed; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill. ¹⁷ This was to [‘fill to the full’] what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: *‘He himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.’*

I have translated the word ‘fulfill’ in Matthew 8:16 as ‘fill to the full’ because it is quite clear that Matthew and the other New Testament writers as a whole understand the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures not merely as piecemeal ‘predictions’ isolated to particular verses from the Hebrew Scriptures, but to entire themes and institutions that are amplified and retold within the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, and then ultimately and decisively by Jesus.

Following the Sermon on the Mount, which are commandments directed towards the human heart in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s new covenant prophecy (Jer.31:31 – 34), Jesus gives ‘ten commandments’ in Matthew 8:1 – 9:38 by his word.

Structure of Matthew 8:1 – 9:38

Text	Subject	Beneficiary/Audience	Healing or Teaching topic
8:1 – 4	Miracle 1	Jewish	Uncleanness, leprosy
8:5 – 13	Miracle 2	Gentile	Illness, suffering
8:14 – 17	Miracle 3	Jewish	Fever, demons
8:18 – 22	Teaching 1	Crowd	Jesus requires everything from us
8:23 – 27	Miracle 4	Jewish	Stormy sea
8:28 – 34	Miracle 5	Gentile	Demons
9:1 – 8	Miracle 6	Jewish	Paralysis
9:9 – 17	Teaching 2	Disciples, Pharisees	Jesus has come for sinners
9:18 – 26	Miracles 7 & 8	Jewish	Uncleanness, death
9:27 – 31	Miracle 9	Jewish	Blindness
9:32 – 34	Miracle 10	Jewish	Mute, demons
9:35 – 38	Teaching 3	Disciples	Laborers for harvest!

Matthew is clearly grouping these miracles together to present a sustained reflection on the Sermon on the Mount. The two sections in Matthew, 5:1 – 7:28 and 8:1 – 9:38, are mutually interpreting. That is, the heart commandments and the verbal-healing commands are literary reflections on each other. The identity of Christ is played up in a vigorously Jewish way: Jesus is God, giving a new ‘ten commandments.’

But there is more regarding the nature of salvation and atonement itself. Matthew begins his Gospel by speaking of Jesus saving ‘his people from their *sins*’ (Mt.1:21). Not their punishment, which is already unfolding through the exile, but their *sins*. Matthew is saying that Jesus shares in the diseased human nature of all humanity. He shows this through Jesus’ baptism, in that Jesus confesses sin through his baptism: not sins of action or thought that he had actually committed, but the sinfulness of his flesh (Mt.3:13 – 17). His wilderness temptation and trial reflects his struggle against the sinfulness in his flesh (Mt.4:1 – 11), otherwise, there would be no temptation or struggle at all. But whereas at Mount Sinai, God had discourse with Moses alone, when Jesus speaks from the top of a mountain, giving the Sermon on the Mount, he is opening up face to face contact with Israel, represented by his disciples. And this is further portrayed as Matthew as a ‘ten commandments’ delivering people from diseases and demons.

Matthew begins this section of the ten word-miracles with the phrase ‘stretched out his hand’ (Mt.8:3). That is a Jewish way of describing the power of God. It referred to God delivering Israel out of Egypt. Long ago, God said,

‘So I will *stretch out My hand* and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that [Pharaoh] will let you go’ (Ex.3:20; 7:5; etc. culminating in 15:12), and this was mirrored anthropomorphically by Aaron and Moses stretching out their hands to signal God performing the miracles through them (Ex.7:19; 8:5, 6, 17; etc.). Psalm 136 recounts God’s love for Israel and says of the Exodus, ‘With a strong hand and an outstretched arm’ (Ps.136:12). David generalizes this phrase: ‘You will stretch forth Your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and Your right hand will save me’ (Ps.138:7). Here we see the full character of God’s outstretched hand. It is Jesus’ hand, reaching out to deliver a man from leprosy. The phrase is a trigger, helping a Jewish reader think of God’s mighty Exodus deliverance through the ten plagues.

So when we read this little phrase, ‘Jesus stretched out his hand’ (Mt.8:3), we must understand that phrase to be not just an act of kindness towards the leper, though it is at least that. It is certainly not a throwaway gesture or comment. It is also a significant literary marker calling for our attention. Jesus is about to demonstrate power unlike anything we have ever seen, power that will rival and surpass what was demonstrated in the Exodus. Now God in Jesus, by stretching out his hand, is liberating people from disease, demons, and death. These acts are outward pictures of Jesus liberating people from the even deeper problem of human sin, evil, and separation from God. Jesus is restoring humanity to what God meant us to be. The three lessons on discipleship woven into the ten miracles suggest that Jesus’ call for disciples to follow him should be understood as his way of healing us.

Also, Matthew condenses his narration of these miracle stories to highlight Jesus’ word. For example, in the demoniac story in Mark, Jesus engages in a longer process of exorcism through repeated questions and commands (Mk.5:8 – 9). But in Matthew, Jesus says one word, ‘Begone!’ and expels the demons into the pigs. Similarly, in both Mark and Luke, the hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus’ cloak and then tries to hide in the crowd. But in Matthew, there is no touch; Jesus simply turns around and speaks, and heals her (Mt.9:22). Hebrew biblical narrative and common sense allow a narrator to leave out information, but not to make up anything (Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*). Rest assured, Mark and Luke would heartily agree with Matthew’s emphasis: Jesus heals by his word.

Furthermore, Matthew seems to group these miracles together in a way that is not strictly chronological. Mark and Luke record these miracles as well, but spread them out in different places in Jesus’ ministry, and sometimes in a different order from Matthew. I believe Matthew does this to highlight a parallel between Jesus’ ten miracles and other sequences of ten utterances from God. Matthew is clearly aware that there is already a pre-existing pattern around the number ten concerning God’s activities in the history of Israel. Here is that pattern:

Scripture	Ten acts leading up to a new work of God
Genesis 1:1 – 2:3	Ten declarations of Creation; God forms all life
Genesis 5:1 – 6:8	Ten generations from Adam to Noah, new creation
Genesis 11:10 – 30	Ten generations from Shem to Abram, new humanity
Genesis 2:4 – 50:26	Ten genealogies of Israel; God forms the nation Israel
Exodus 7 – 11	Ten plagues; God un-creates Egypt to free Israel
Exodus 19 – 20	Ten commands; God makes the Sinai covenant, forms new nation
Matthew 8 – 9	Ten word miracles; Jesus heals people and makes a new humanity

In effect, Matthew’s parallel extends to even before the Exodus and the Ten Commandments. That is because the Ten Commandments and the ten plagues from Exodus were *already referring* to the ten declarations in the Genesis creation narrative (Gen.1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28). God was making Israel into his new humanity, who lived in a garden land like the original humanity. Ten utterances from God bring forth new life; they inaugurate a covenant; they set free and liberate; they order and declare. They demonstrate God’s power to do all these things. Thus, when we listen to Jesus’ teaching on our hearts, we must receive his word with the understanding that his word contains his power to change us. Jesus brings forth new life in us; he liberates us from our own sinfulness; his word orders and declares a new spiritual reality in human nature. This is possible because Jesus himself is touching corrupted human nature in his own person. His healing of the leper, the paralytic, etc. are external pictures of a singular, deeper, internal reality at work within the person of Jesus. As the Chalcedonian Definition states, Jesus is two natures in one person, with the divine nature healing the human.

Tentative Conclusion #1

It is puzzling for penal substitution advocates to claim that Isaiah 53 supports them, because Matthew himself does not understand Isaiah 53 that way when he explicitly quotes it. He does not quote it in a legal-penal context, but in a healing-ontological context, and in a literary unit that asks us to situate Isaiah 53 itself in the framework of ontological substitution (the heart of Christus Victor), not penal substitution. My very brief argument does not decisively prove that the rest of Matthew's Gospel would weigh against penal substitution. Much more would need to be written on that. However, suffice to say here that the punishment Jesus took onto himself, as described by Isaiah, was Israel's exile, which was already unfolding. It was a punishment or chastisement that he did not deserve relative to himself, of course. But neither was it a punishment or chastisement which he deflected from Israel.

Jesus shared in Israel's exile, so that he could share with them his restoration from exile. Isaiah and Matthew would seem to agree with that statement. This statement is symmetrical, not coincidentally, with the patristic saying that he shared in our corrupted humanity, so that he could share with us his new humanity. For the latter is the deeper explanation of the former.

Isaiah's Understanding of Israel's Sacrificial Animals

^{52:15} Thus he will sprinkle many nations...

^{53:10} But the LORD was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief;
if he would render himself as a guilt offering,

Reference to sprinkling and sacrificial animals like a lamb or sheep (Isa.53:7) takes us deep into the heart of Israel's sacrificial system. Isaiah describes the Messiah as a sin/guilt offering (Isa.53:10). Those offerings involved the sprinkling of blood, as described in Leviticus 4 – 5. The fact that (1) Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 can be perceived as chiasmic, and the fact that (2) the sin/guilt offering is mentioned in section A' as a development of the 'sprinkling' mentioned in section A, are significant in understanding Isaiah's arrangement of his poetic material.

The Structure of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

- A. The Reign of the Servant (52:13 – 15)
- B. The Rejection of the Servant (53:1 – 3)
- C. The Death of the Servant, for Others (53:4 – 6)
- B'. The Rejection and Death of the Servant, for Others (53:7 – 9)
- A'. The Reign and Resurrection of the Servant, for Others (53:10 – 12)

How did Isaiah understand the animal sacrifices? Interestingly, the Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation of Isaiah 53:10 reads:

And the Lord desired to purify/cleanse him from/by his stripes

By comparison, the Masoretic text (the Hebrew text of the Masoretic Jewish community between the 7th to 10th centuries AD) reads:

NIV: Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin

NASB: But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering

NKJV: Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin

NRSV: Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain [or *by disease*; meaning of Hebrew uncertain]. When you make his life an offering for sin [meaning of Hebrew uncertain]

The difference between the LXX and the Masoretic text on Isaiah 53 has generated much discussion.⁴ Suffice to say that the manuscript difference could be significant because Matthew quotes from the LXX version of Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17. That fact by itself weakens the case for penal substitution just a bit. If the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:10 standing behind the LXX was the more accurate version, the case for penal substitution is further weakened. For to speak of the Messiah himself being purified or cleansed leads us very naturally into the ontological-medical substitution atonement theory. The NRSV's acknowledgements about the uncertainty in Isaiah 53:10 reflect that possibility. The NRSV's acknowledgement that Isaiah 53:10 can be translated 'crush him by disease' is significant to determining what Isaiah's understanding of 'sin offerings' were.

It is also quite significant, in my opinion, that Paul in Romans 11:26 follows the LXX of Isaiah 59:20 in referring to the Redeemer who will come to *turn transgression from Jacob*, not the Masoretic Text which refers to the Redeemer who will come to *those who turn from transgression in Jacob*.⁵ However, the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QIsa^a) version of Isaiah 53:10 agrees with the Masoretic Text, so we cannot categorically say with confidence that the LXX reflects the correct Hebrew text here. For the sake of discussion, therefore, I will not take the LXX as authoritative. I will instead consider the Masoretic text, and the larger framework of Israel's sacrificial system.

Through the sacrificial system involving animals, God was acting like a modern-day dialysis machine. I have given a much more thorough explanation and defense of that view in a longer essay.⁶ In brief, through the sanctuary system, God summoned Israelites to give Him their impurity by laying their hands on an animal, slaying it, and sending that animal to Him for Him to symbolically consume, while He returned back to them His purity by giving Israel the uncorrupted blood of the animal. The Messiah is clearly put into the place of the sacrificial animal: a lamb, a sheep (Isa.53:7).

What were sin/guilt offerings? In Leviticus 4 – 5, the offering is referred to by both names, but it is one type of offering regardless of which name is used in translation. Whereas burnt offerings and peace offerings existed long before the sanctuary (Gen.4:3 – 4; 8:20 – 21) and mention of altars implies sacrifices (in Gen.12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:13; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1 – 7; Ex.17:15; 18:12; 24:4, 6 – 8), the sin/guilt offerings were added to the sanctuary system specifically because of the need to maintain the purity and holiness of the sanctuary. That included its furniture, its vessels, its gifts and offerings – in other words, non-human objects. Obviously, the sanctuary also promoted purity and holiness in the community at large.⁷ Sin/guilt offerings were unique because of the blood sprinkling rite attached to them. The blood of innocent animals cleansed the things on which they were sprinkled. It was therefore an act of reconsecrating something for service after a human sin had been committed.

A priest who sinned had to reconsecrate the sanctuary objects that he regularly touched (Lev.4:5 – 7). If the whole congregation committed error, the priest needed to reconsecrate the sanctuary with innocent animal blood, too (Lev.4:13 – 18). If a leader of Israel unintentionally committed error, the sanctuary needed to be reconsecrated with innocent animal blood as well (Lev.4:22 – 25). If anyone of the common people unintentionally sinned and became aware of it, he or she needed to do the same (Lev.4:27 – 35). A person who was under court order to tell the truth as a witness but failed to (Lev.5:1), or a person who touched something or someone unclean (Lev.5:2 – 3), or a person who swore thoughtlessly and then recalled it (Lev.5:4 – 5) had to bring a sin/guilt offering to cleanse the altar of the

⁴ William Bellinger, Jr., and William Farmer (editors), *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Norcross, GA: Trinity Press, 1998)

⁵ Rikk Watts, 'Isaiah in the New Testament', edited by David G. Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 225 – 226 says, 'The two are not divergent views as different ways of expressing the same reality.' However, while I agree that the reality *contains* both views, the LXX view that the Redeemer has come to turn transgression from Jacob is logically prior, is much closer to my analysis of Isaiah 53:11 – 12 and the scapegoat motif, and is attested by Paul's quotation.

⁶ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Sacrificial System and Atonement in the Pentateuch*, <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-atonement-and-the-pentateuch.pdf>

⁷ R.E. Averbeck, 'Sacrifices and Offerings,' in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (editors), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p.706, italics mine; see also Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), p.60 – 89 and Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.44

sanctuary with innocent animal blood (Lev.5:6 – 9). The only case in which blood was not demanded in the sin offering was when the person was exceptionally poor and had to use fine flour (Lev.5:10 – 13).

The priests were to avoid eating blood at all costs, since it represented the life of the animal (Lev.17:11), and the uncorrupted life-blood was God's gift to Israel to provide a measure of life from God on behalf of Israel so they could live in the garden land (Mal.3:6 – 12). The uncorrupted animal blood served to buffer the presence of corrupted Israelites on the land, and perhaps also to mitigate the bloodshed committed by human beings akin to Cain's slaying of Abel (Gen.4:1 – 16), which would have caused the garden land to become unfruitful for Israel.

Equally significant as the *blood* of the animal in the sin/guilt offering was its *flesh*. Yet the *flesh* of the sacrificial animals is strangely but frequently overlooked by those who study the sacrifices, by defenders and critics of penal substitution alike.⁸ The priests were to eat some of the *flesh* of the sin offerings (Lev.6:24 – 30). This act was connected to the overall symbolism of eating, which represents internalization of the sin as it traveled from the people of Israel into the priests. Moses took this so seriously that he became angry with Aaron's sons Eleazar and Ithamar for not eating the goat offered as a sin offering (Lev.10:16 – 18). As Moses queried Aaron, he made very explicit the connection between the priests eating the sin offering and atonement: 'Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place? For it is most holy, and He gave it to you to bear away the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD.' (Lev.10:16; cf. Num.18:9 – 11) This incident shows that the priests' responsibility to eat the sin offering is of enormous significance to our understanding of atonement, especially in Isaiah who says that the Servant will 'bear the sin' of others. If the Israelite worshiper approached God in the sanctuary, there was a reciprocal eating. God would feed him a meal at His sanctuary, representing something of what humanity lost in Eden: the chance to eat with God. But God would also 'eat' the sin of the worshiper through His priests. In this way, the priests '*bore the guilt* in connection with the sanctuary' and 'in connection with [the] priesthood' itself (Num.18:1).

Moreover, very unlike sin offerings on every other occasion, which were eaten by the priests (Lev.6:24 – 30; 10:24 – 26), on the Day of Atonement, the remains of the bull and the first goat were *not* to be eaten:

²⁷ But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire. ²⁸ Then the one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body with water, then afterward he shall come into the camp. (Leviticus 16:27 – 28)

Any valid treatment of Isaiah 53 and the Day of Atonement rite needs to account for this irregularity.⁹ Normally, on all occasions except for the Day of Atonement, the priests would eat the flesh of the sin offering. It was a picture of the priests internalizing Israel's sin, storing it up within themselves. Those remains were considered to be so holy that, unlike every other occasion when human contact with a dead animal was a bit circumspect, touching the flesh of the sin offering made the person 'consecrated' (Lev.6:27), which means, I presume, *committed* to the eating of the remains. This was a serious matter. Moses was quite angry with Aaron's sons on the occasion when they did *not* eat the remains of the sin offerings (Lev.10:24 – 26). However, in the case of the Day of Atonement, the ritual law is very clear that absolutely *no one* was to eat the hides, flesh, or refuse of the bull or goat. That is, the sin was *not* to symbolically cycle back into the priests. The purpose and symbolism of the Day of Atonement absolutely

⁸ Penal substitution defender Emile Nicole, 'Atonement in the Pentateuch,' in Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (editors), *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p.43, completely neglects the eating of the sin offering, as do Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.42 – 52. Penal substitution critic Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), p.60 – 89 similarly neglects the motif of the priests eating the sin offering sacrifice. This neglect has significant consequences for both biblical studies and systematic theology.

⁹ Thus I disagree with J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p.439 about the sin/guilt offering being about 'reparation or compensation.' The flaw in Motyer's exegesis of Leviticus 5 is that he only treats the death of the animal, and assumes it to be a penal substitute straightaway. Motyer ignores the separate aspects of the blood sprinkling rite and the priests eating the flesh of the animal, culminating in the annual Day of Atonement rite with the high priest and the two goats. Because his understanding of the sin/guilt offering is truncated, his understanding of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is also incomplete.

requires that God consume all the sin (iniquity and uncleanness) of Israel, putting all of it to death by simultaneously consuming it within Himself by fire, and separating it from the people and priests through the scapegoat.

As J. Alan Groves points out, Isaiah describes the Suffering Servant using scapegoat language in the final stanza of the Servant Song.¹⁰ 'He will bear their iniquities' (Isa.53:11) and 'He himself bore the sin of many' (Isa.53:12). The linguistic and conceptual ties are convincing. Because the scapegoat was said to 'bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land' (Lev.16:22), the sin-bearing of the Servant is undeniably a reference to the scapegoat, although the Servant is clearly human. So how did the scapegoat bear the sin of Israel originally? Through the death of the bull, the high priest offered atonement for himself on the Day of Atonement, and then through the death of the first goat, he appeared before God in the holy of holies so that God could symbolically receive the stored up uncleanness of the Israelites, eaten by all the priests in the sin offerings. The laying on of the high priest's hands onto the scapegoat (Lev.16:21) appears to represent a symbolic transfer of some sort serving as a parallel image to the first goat. The scapegoat running off into the wilderness can be said to represent God separating our *sinfulness* from Israel by taking it into Himself, which is the only place for it to go. The scapegoat probably served as the poetic inspiration for saying, 'As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us' (Ps.103:12), and 'You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea' (Mic.7:19).

The two goats of the Day of Atonement ritual simultaneously represent one action taken by God in connection with all the sin stored up by the priests. He takes sin into Himself to destroy it, simultaneously sending it away. With reference to Jesus and the Servant Song in Isaiah, the two goats refer not to the death of Jesus and *his forsakenness* from the presence of God, but to the death of Jesus as he killed the corruption in his human nature, and his sending the corruption of sin far, far away from both God and his human nature. In him, God consumed it. Within Jesus, therefore, who is the new temple of God, where God and human nature co-mingle in fully reconciled union, there is no more corruption of sin.

Importantly, the Epistle to the Hebrews also sees each of the two goats as foreshadowing Christ. Just as the first goat was slain by the high priest so he could enter the presence of God in the sanctuary, so Jesus entered the more perfect sanctuary through his own blood (Heb.9:11 – 12). Even the disposal of the bodies of the animals, including the first goat, outside the camp/city (Lev.16:27 – 28) is compared to Jesus' suffering 'outside the gate' (Heb.13:11 – 13). And, just as the second goat, the scapegoat, was driven out into the wilderness to 'bear the sins of many,' so also Jesus was 'offered once to bear the sins of many' (Heb.9:27 – 28) in order to actually and ontologically 'take away sins' (Heb.10:4). Hence, the language of sin-offering and sacrifice in Scripture denotes *God's act of separating the corruption of sin from the human person*. God was enacting medical symbolism in the sanctuary to eventually enact a medical reality in the body of Jesus. The modern dialysis machine is the best and most appropriate analogy to the sacrifices in the Old Testament. The animal sacrifices and blood atonement in the Old Testament did not represent a bloodthirsty God. They represented a blood-purifying and blood-donating God. Or, more precisely, a life-purifying and life-donating God. God was saying, and is saying, 'Give me your impurity. I will give you back purity.'

Hence we must be careful to read Isaiah 53 with reference to the *death* of the Servant, not the *torture* or *torment* of the Servant. Since Jewish tradition requires the death of the animal be as painless as possible, as absolutely nothing in the Pentateuch suggests that the animal must suffer pain, close examination of the sacrificial system leans us towards the conviction that Jesus' *death* is significant, not whatever *Roman torture* or hypothetical *spiritual torment* he suffered along the way. John Calvin's theory that Jesus endured hell on the cross is completely unfounded, both in Scripture and in theological logic. In this case, as always, the antitype [Jesus] provides more clarity than the type [the scapegoat; the Servant prophecy].

The motif of blood sprinkling can be integrated carefully as well. In the Jewish sacrificial system, blood represented life (Lev.17:11). Animal life was not corrupted by sin; only human life was. Hence, symbolically, uncorrupted animal blood was a cleansing, life-giving agent. That Jewish memorial anticipated Jesus' blood being cleansed by him. Jesus spiritually cleansed his own body and blood throughout his obedient life (Heb.5:7 – 9), death, and resurrection, and then become a sacramental reality, available for us to internalize by his word and Spirit (e.g. Jn.6:51 – 63). The Eucharistic communion elements of bread and wine thus serve as a reminder that Jesus – who

¹⁰ J. Alan Groves, 'Atonement in Isaiah 53', edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004)

carried the same sinful flesh that we have, resisted it, defeated it, and cleansed his humanity of it – is the nourishment from God which we must internalize by the Spirit. Jesus' life now cleanses us by our participation in him and receiving him into ourselves. The sprinkling points to an ontological substitution, not a penal substitution.

This is why Isaiah sees the Messiah's work as extending beyond Israel to all Gentile peoples of the world, the coastlands, the nations far away who will stream to him, etc. (Isa.2:1 – 4; 42:1 – 9; 60:1 – 16). He will 'sprinkle many nations' (Isa.52:15), in effect by his Spirit in connection with his life (blood), because his life (blood) has been cleansed of the impurity of iniquity. The Messiah will share in all the conditions of Israel's exile, including her fallen, corrupted humanity. He himself will not sin, but he will bear sinfulness for others, consuming it, in order to extend his healing to them.

Tentative Conclusion #2

Once we understand the Pentateuch's treatment of the sin/guilt offering and the sprinkling, we can see that Isaiah did not understand the Suffering Servant Messiah as a penal substitute for Israel. That is not what the sacrifices were, in particular, the sin/guilt offering of Leviticus 4 – 5 and the Day of Atonement offering of Leviticus 16. Isaiah's Servant did not absorb a punishment that would have fallen on Israel to deflect it from them. Rather, he suffered a punishment with Israel and with humanity that Israel and humanity were already experiencing. He was a medical, or ontological, substitute for Israel and humanity. He was the doctor who became the patient to acquire the disease and defeat it, and develop the antibodies within himself. He did within himself what humanity could not do. He put to death the corruption of sin. He raised his humanity fresh and new, to offer himself to us by his Spirit. Hence Isaiah says poetically, referring to the Servant's resurrection, 'He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand' (Isa.53:10).

A Response to J. Alan Groves' Essay on Isaiah 53

In a book dedicated to theologian Dr. Roger Nicole and the doctrine of penal substitution, Dr. J. Alan Groves contributed an essay on Isaiah 53. In the bulk of his essay, Groves makes a persuasive case that the sin-bearing language of Isaiah 53:11 – 12 is a reference to the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, now reconfigured around the human Servant-Messiah.¹¹ As noted earlier, I agree with that part of Groves' argument. I disagree, however, with Groves' assessment that this is evidence for penal substitution. Two aspects of Groves' argument are worth pointing out here.

First, Groves in his essay does not actually integrate his understanding of Isaiah 53 into his broader treatment of Isaiah, which he says, remarkably, can be summarized by the word *purification*. He says:

'In the singular vision of Isaiah, a 'new' and startling purification was unveiled. Isaiah 40 – 66 revealed a purification that secured global, permanent purity and that actually changed the object for which purification had been made – removing sin, sin's effects, and sin's source. It was a purification that began with judgment and culminated in salvation. It was a purification of Zion (Is 1:25, 27) and her inhabitants (Is 4:4) that (unthinkably) included the nations (Is 2:2 – 4) and even the entire heavens and earth (Is 24:1 – 6; 65:17)! ... Such extraordinary purification required an atonement of equally extraordinary and radical nature...accomplished by a new thing (Is 48:7), something previously unknown and not derived from human experience or wisdom – the astounding suffering of one righteous Israelite (Is 52:13 – 53:12), who bore the sins of others.'

Groves believed that the sin-bearing of Jesus was of the legal-penal-judicial kind. In keeping with the aim of the book *The Glory of the Atonement*, Groves was arguing that we must interpret Isaiah 53 as supporting penal substitution. In which case, the question left unanswered is how exactly God's satisfaction of His own retributive justice organically fits with His purifying the whole heavens and earth, and everything and everyone in it (except unbelievers). Does atonement refer to God solving a problem within Himself, as in penal substitution? Or does it refer to God solving a problem within humanity and the creation? Groves' surprise, however worshipful and delightful and inspiring, shows that to him, atonement is the former (satisfaction of God). The deeper, organic connection to the latter (purification of the person), though, is therefore never explained and is fundamentally separate.

¹¹ J. Alan Groves, 'Atonement in Isaiah 53', edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004)

In the ontological-medical substitution model of the atonement, God purifies that which He loves. To be sure, He expresses the fire of His purifying action towards that which must be burned away. That is, He has a wrath that flows *out of His love*, not His retributive justice as a separate attribute *equal and opposite to His love*. In fact, His wrath is a derivative expression of His love. It is His love in purifying action, directed at the corruption of sin within the human. Therefore, God in atonement solves a problem within humanity and the creation, ontologically and fundamentally. He does not exhaust an attribute that demanded satisfaction, or otherwise change His own disposition towards us while leaving us the same. Purification *is* atonement.

Second, Groves tried to rebut scholar R.N. Whybray, who made the case that

‘the Servant cannot be said to be suffering, or to have suffered, in place of the exiles in such a way that they escape the consequences of their sins, since, as in the case of speakers in Lam.5:7, it cannot be said that they have escaped punishment: they are all actually suffering the consequences of defeat and banishment. The Servant, if, as is here maintained, he is one of them, shares their suffering. Chapter 53 indeed makes it clear that he has suffered more intensely than they, and the ‘we’ who speak there confess that, at any rate compared with themselves, he is innocent; nevertheless this is shared and not vicarious suffering.’¹²

Apparently, Groves believed that by successfully establishing that the Servant of Isaiah was functioning as a sin-bearing scapegoat of sorts, that he has answered Whybray’s argument. I do not believe he did. For Whybray argued that the Servant did not deflect the punishment of exile from Israel. And on this particular point, I agree.

Groves did not explain in his essay what punishment he believed the Servant took as a *replacement* for Israel and the world, for that question must be answered by any proponent of penal substitution. Sadly, Groves passed away in 2007 at the age of 55, before finishing his theological commentary on Isaiah. He finished his last class at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2006 while battling cancer. His colleagues Peter Enns, Douglas J. Green, and Michael B. Kelly edited a collection of essays in his honor, and they write in the preface,

‘His untimely death prevented Al from finishing his intended contribution to that series, *The Gospel According to Isaiah*. His remarkable biblical-theological work on Isaiah, seen, for example, in his article “Atonement in Isaiah 53”, and contained in over a decade of students’ notes, will have to wait to see the further light of day as many of us pick up his ideas and explore and expand them in other venues.’¹³

Although I did not benefit from Groves’ lectures personally, I presume that Groves would say the Servant absorbed the eschatological wrath of God, which would ordinarily be expressed towards every human being in the fires of hell itself because the retributive justice of God requires an infinite punishment in response to insults done to an infinite Being. Given his standing in the Reformed tradition characteristic of Westminster Theological Seminary, Groves probably viewed Israel’s exilic banishment from the garden land as a *foreshadowing* of the much more profound banishment of hell. He probably viewed them as being theologically connected through the retributive justice of God exacting punishment for the offended holiness of God.

But is that how Isaiah himself understood the motif of fire as a literary symbol of purification, the exile of Israel and the broader exile of the world, the suffering of the Servant on behalf of others, the renewal of all things, and the character of God? And is that how Jesus and the apostles understood Isaiah? Arguably not.¹⁴ Isaiah was drawing from the fiery mountain motif of Sinai from Exodus 19. At Sinai, God summoned Israel up on the mountain to meet

¹² R.N. Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53*, JSOTSS 4 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978) p.30

¹³ Peter Enns, Douglas J. Green, and Michael B. Kelly, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: Essays in Memory of J. Alan Groves* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), p.xiv

¹⁴ See my treatment of Isaiah’s use of the Sinai ‘fiery mountain’ motif, and the Gospel writers’ use of Isaiah in Mako A. Nagasawa, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew’s Gospel*; <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf>; see also my summary of how Christians historically and theologically understood hell in *Hell as the Love of God*; <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-hell-as-the-love-of-god.pdf>

with him face to face.¹⁵ Israel, however, declined. Moses alone went up to meet with God face to face. Moses reminded the second generation of Israelites that the first generation was afraid of the fire (Dt.5:4 – 5). Yet the significance of Mount Sinai is its literary-theological resemblance to Eden, the original mountain on which God's presence dwelt (Ezk.28:13 – 14). God even made water to flow from the rock at Sinai (Ex.17:1 – 7) just as water flowed from Eden (Gen.2:10 – 14).¹⁶ The motif of fire comes from the older biblical antecedent, Eden, outside of which burned the flaming sword of the cherubim (Gen.3:24), which Isaiah was surely recalling (e.g. Isa.66:16). Mount Sinai burned with God's purifying fire, which Moses alone entered, and his face shone with light as a result. Isaiah sees that Mount Zion, as the next mountain of God's presence, also fits into this pattern. God purifies those who allow Him to do so, but that same fire will be a fiery judgment for those who reject Him and His work. It can only be so, since the fire symbolizes and expresses the purification God still insists upon, even towards those who continue to resist Him. What happened at Sinai will be repeated at Zion:

³ It will come about that he who is left in Zion
and remains in Jerusalem
will be called holy—
everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem.

⁴ When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion
and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst,
by the spirit of judgment
and the spirit of **burning**,

⁵ then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion
and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke,
and the brightness of a **flaming fire** by night;
for over all the glory will be a canopy. (Isa.4:3 – 5)

Isaiah uses fire as an expression of God's judgment on others (e.g. 5:24 – 25; 10:16 – 17; 26:11; 30:27 – 33; 33:10 – 14; 42:25). But he also sees that the fire of God will purify them, and as their silver has become dross (1:22), God says that He 'will also turn My hand against you, and smelt away your dross as with lye, and will remove all your alloy' (1:25). That is the image of a metalworker's refining fire. Isaiah even experiences the fiery judgment of God on himself. In his encounter with God in the temple vision, Isaiah offers his unclean lips to be touched by a burning coal (6:6). This attests to the use of a single motif – fire – with dual effects depending on one's posture: purification for those who yield their uncleanness and sinfulness to God, and for those who do not, the burning pain of being subjected to God's fiery purity. Similarly, Isaiah says of Israel that the exile served the purpose of a refining fire: 'Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction' (48:10).

Isaiah's final vision ends with the vision of renewed holy mountain Jerusalem on which God's people enjoy life and peace, but outside of which is a fiery graveyard of sorts, where living corpses feed the worm that does not die. Those inside Jerusalem, i.e. within God's presence, can be joyful (66:10), be nourished and comforted like a young, nursing child (66:11 – 13), and be strengthened (66:14a – c). But towards those who choose to remain outside of God's presence, 'He will be indignant towards His enemies' (66:14d). God will 'come in fire...His rebuke with flames of fire, for the Lord will execute judgment by fire and by His sword on all flesh' (66:15 – 16). The motifs of fire are telling, reminding us of the covenant offered and refused at Sinai. Then comes a devastating warning against impurity (66:17) and an invitation to all nations to come to 'My holy mountain Jerusalem' (66:18 – 20), from which God 'will also take some of them for priests and for Levites' (66:21), which is a remarkable statement about Gentiles. This will constitute a 'new heavens and new earth' centered in this renewal of God's presence at Jerusalem (66:22 – 23). Outside of that will lie the eternally dying bodies of those 'who have transgressed against Me, for their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind' (66:24). Since Jesus quotes that very verse from Isaiah's final vision in Mark's Gospel (Mk.9:43 – 48), he indicates

¹⁵ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p.51 – 59; see also the discussion of Jeremiah's recollection of Sinai in Jer.7:23 – 24 on p.51.

¹⁶ Note that people meeting with God on a mountain, from which life originates and spreads, is a motif that also recurs. In the story of Noah and family, the ark rested on the top of the mountains of Ararat (Gen.8:4) and from there, new life spread on the earth. In the story of Abram and Sarai, Abram went to the mountain on the east of Bethel, between Bethel and Ai, and built an altar on the mountain and worshiped (Gen.12:8; 13:5). Mount Sinai is yet one more example of God using the literary motif of a mountain.

his awareness of the whole of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus also used the language of fire in the same dual way that Isaiah did; fire speaks of the purification by the Holy Spirit (Mt.3:11; Acts 2:3) and is logically connected to having light in one's self (Mt.5:14 – 16; 6:22 – 23; 17:2; 28:3); but fire is also used to describe the burning of those who resist (Mt.3:10, 12; 5:22; 13:40 – 42, 49; 18:8 – 9; 25:41, 46). Jesus clearly oriented Isaiah's final vision around himself – since he embodies God's presence within himself and is himself the covenant, he becomes, in the truest sense, the renewed Jerusalem, the renewed place where God dwells. Those outside of him, i.e. not joined to him by his Spirit, are those who will be eternally burning in a death more terrible than the physical death we understand.

Within *this* understanding of Isaiah's understanding of fire as both purifying *and* destroying, depending on one's posture towards God, and how Jesus continued using that language, we can situate Israel's exile and restoration from exile. God will have to burn and purify away something unclean from Israel and each person who willingly surrenders to that process, just as He did in archetype when the burning coal touched Isaiah's unclean lips which he offered voluntarily (Isa.6:6). God did that in the Servant-Messiah when he offered himself as a sin/guilt offering. In that offering, at least portions of the slain animal were burned in fire (Lev.4:10 – 11, 21, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 12), and that fiery image is an intrinsic part of Isaiah's understanding of the purification process which happened *within* the Servant-Messiah as he bore human sinfulness into God for God to consume (Isa.53:10 – 12). Consequently, he is the one who God has returned from exile as the true Israelite. We can tell that Isaiah makes him out to be this because of the language he uses in the fifth and final stanza of the Servant Song (Isa.53:10 – 12). The Servant-Messiah inherits the creational blessing of a 'prolonged life' and the fruitfulness of 'offspring' (Isa.53:10) along with his 'portion' of the garden land which he will 'divide' with others (Isa.53:12). That language reaches back through the experience of Israel all the way to the original creational vision of Genesis 1 and 2. The Servant-Messiah goes through this purification process for all others, Jew and Gentile. But he does this to represent all others, on their behalf, so that the purification required to return from exile can be reproduced by his Spirit in all people who willingly and voluntarily become the Messiah's subjects.

Those who resist the Messiah experience fire. But why? Not, I submit, because the fire of the 'retributive justice' of God is another 'attribute' of God equal and opposite to His purifying love. Rather, those who resist the Messiah continue to experience God's love as a demand to surrender and be purified through union with Himself. As later Christian reflection will articulate about human nature in eternity, people who resist God will be unable to stop resisting God for the same reason people who love God will be unable to stop loving God. John of Damascus, a Syrian priest who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries under the Arab Islamic conquest, who is thought to sum up the deposit of Christian thought until that time, said,

'In eternity God supplies good things to all because He is the source of good things gushing forth goodness to all... After death, there is no means for repentance, not because God does not accept repentance – He cannot deny Himself nor lose His compassion – but the soul does not change anymore... people after death are unchangeable, so that on the one hand the righteous desire God and always have Him to rejoice in, while sinners desire sin though they do not have the material means to sin... they are punished without any consolation. For what is hell but the deprivation of that which is exceedingly desired by someone? Therefore, according to the analogy of desire, whoever desires God rejoices and whoever desires sin is punished.'¹⁷

This conclusion, which might be surprising to Protestant evangelicals, was already implicit in Isaiah's vision of eternity and his understanding of God's desire to purify all things (e.g. Isa.24:5; 25:6 – 9; 34:1 – 35:10). This makes much more sense of God's purposes. God never stops trying to purify His creation through union with Himself, because He loves each and every being. This is true even for those who resist Him. God does not suddenly shift His posture towards the unredeemed from purifying love to 'retributive justice', as if He could turn one of His 'attributes' off and another on like light switches. He is simply doing one thing: He acts out of purifying, healing love towards all, at all times. If people try to hold on to the corruption God wants to burn away, then they will experience God as a burning, destroying fire. But His posture in eternity is the same as His posture towards them now in the present. The experience of God by the unredeemed is different than that of the redeemed based on their posture towards God, not based on God having two categorically different 'attributes' between which He toggles.

¹⁷ John of Damascus, *Against the Manicheans* 94.1569, 1573; Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, said, 'Every inordinate affection is its own punishment.'

Tentative Conclusion #3: Atonement and Restorative Social Justice

Here is one application of Incarnational, ontological atonement to Christian ethics. In Isaiah 58, Isaiah gives his rousing sermon about the lack of social justice with regards to fair wages, debt-enslavement and debt-forgiveness, hospitality and economic sharing, and Sabbath rest (Isa.58:1 – 14). All of these issues are both interpersonal and structural issues because they are based on the original Mosaic vision of fair land distribution, limitations on inheritance, regular debt-forgiveness, and upholding the dignity of the poor (Lev.25; Dt.15:1 – 18; 24:10 – 22). Behind the Mosaic vision lies the original creation order, even if only in part due to the ‘hardness of heart’ that had set in since the fall (Mt.19:8; cf.19:3 – 12) since Israel was called to be God’s true human family living in God’s garden land, like Adam and Eve lived in the original garden. Isaiah then foresees God intervening. The Redeemer will come to Zion in what appears to me as a passage about incarnation and atonement, to bring about social justice:

¹⁴ Justice is turned back,
And righteousness stands far away;
For truth has stumbled in the street,
And uprightness cannot enter.
¹⁵ Yes, truth is lacking;
And he who turns aside from evil makes himself a prey.
Now the LORD saw,
And it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice.
¹⁶ And He saw that there was no man,
And was astonished that there was no one to intercede;
Then His own arm brought salvation to Him,
And His righteousness upheld Him.
¹⁷ He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
And a helmet of salvation on His head;
And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing
And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.
¹⁸ According to their deeds, so He will repay,
Wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies;
To the coastlands He will make recompense.
¹⁹ So they will fear the name of the LORD from the west
And His glory from the rising of the sun,
For He will come like a rushing stream
Which the wind of the LORD drives.
[²⁰ ‘A Redeemer will come to Zion,
And to *turn transgression from Jacob,*’ declares the LORD; LXX translation]
[²⁰ ‘The deliverer will come *from* Zion,
he will *remove ungodliness from Jacob,*’ declares the LORD; quoted by Paul in Romans 11:26]
²¹ ‘As for Me, this is My covenant with them,’ says the LORD:
‘My Spirit which is upon you,
And My words which I have put in your mouth
Shall not depart from your mouth,
Nor from the mouth of your offspring,
Nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,’ says the LORD,
‘From now and forever.’ (Isa.59:14 – 21)

Isaiah had already said that the Servant would bring about ‘justice’ to the coastlands (Isa.42:1 – 4) precisely by freeing captives from prison, giving sight to the blind, and so on (Isa.42:5 – 9). In other words, the restoration of liberty, sight, and so on serve to illustrate the meaning of the ‘justice’ that the Servant brings. The Servant brings a *restorative* justice. Now, Isaiah uses retributive justice language (e.g. ‘vengeance’, ‘recompense’) for the larger purpose of demonstrating God’s *restorative* justice. In and through the person of His Servant, the Redeemer who will come to Zion (and in Paul, *from* Zion), God will *remove ungodliness from Jacob* – that is, according to Paul and the LXX reading of Isaiah 59:20! I read this as meaning that the Servant will ontologically remove the corruption of sin, first from himself as the true Israelite, and then inaugurating the removal of ungodliness from all those who come to him. He will extend His covenant to *them* by the Spirit upon *him*, ‘to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,’ as the Masoretic Text reads in complementary fashion, and not just to those ‘from Jacob’ but even to those

far off from ‘the coastlands.’ By doing this, Isaiah indicates that the covenant relationship between God and Israel is precisely to express God’s *restorative* justice, within which *retributive* justice has some smaller part to play but is not the highest form of justice within God. As John Goldingay observes, God’s ‘chastisement is not merely punitive but also restorative (1:21 – 31).’¹⁸ This is much more consistent with Trinitarian logic, insofar as we can immediately see that restorative justice is an organic expression of God’s very nature as Triune love. God seeks to restore all that has been marred. It is not immediately obvious, by contrast, why retributive justice is an organic expression of God’s nature as Triune love.

The Redeemer will be the locus of a healing, purifying, and transformative change among people. The Spirit of God will be on him, and extended through him to others. The word of God will be in his mouth, and extended through him to others, which means that God is trying to do justice by healing the corruption and impurity of sin *in every single person*, which means that God is not at all complicit in human evil. The goal of such ‘salvation’ (59:16) is not a salvation *from God*. Nor does salvation mean waiting for the next world while assuring people that the wrath of God has been appeased, which is where penal substitution most naturally and logically leads. Rather, this salvation is a salvation *from impurity, corruption, injustice, and sinfulness*, to bring about restorative social justice through the purifying transformation of people through Jesus by his Spirit. This is an appropriate motivation for ontological substitutionary atonement. If Isaiah said, ‘It was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice,’ and also said that divine displeasure was a primary motivation for the incarnation and atonement of Jesus, then who are we to deny that working towards social justice, in both the structural and interpersonal arenas, *is an intrinsic part of the gospel?*¹⁹

In fact, in two places in his letters, Paul reinforces our union with Christ the Redeemer, and simultaneously reminds us of God’s call for restorative social justice. He surely had Isaiah 59:17 in mind when he admonished the Thessalonians and the Ephesians (which was probably an open chain letter to all believers) to take up the ‘breastplate of righteousness’ and the ‘helmet of salvation’ (1 Th.5:8; Eph.6:13 – 17). Jesus has already ‘clothed’ himself with this ‘battle armor’ (which can perhaps be said to begin within our fallen human nature and culminate in his new humanity!) to accomplish our redemption from sin and to bring about justice among the people of God, and through the people of God in the wider world. He removes sinfulness from human nature, first in himself and then in us. Now we are to consciously ‘clothe’ ourselves with Christ, that is, to live out of our identity *in Christ*. We must live out our redemption from sin and God’s desire for justice, which he renews at the very core of our being by his Spirit.

I am not sure how Groves would respond to my treatment of Isaiah. Perhaps that would be a task one of his colleagues or former students would undertake. Suffice to say, however, that in 2004, Groves did not adequately answer Whybray’s skepticism about finding penal substitution in Isaiah 53. My explanation, however, does adequately answer Whybray. Jesus shared in Israel’s exilic punishment – including the ontological condition of corruption in particular – precisely to bear sinfulness away from his human nature, and by his Spirit to offer his new humanity back to Israel and the world to bear theirs away, too. This is exactly what leads Isaiah to think about the work of the Servant-Messiah in global terms. Whybray overstated the case when he said that the Servant’s suffering is not vicarious. The Servant did not have to *deflect* a punishment in order to suffer vicariously for others. He could share in it, experience it to the full, and conquer it from within. This Jesus did. So while Whybray correctly noted that the Servant did not deflect the punishment of exile *from* Israel, but rather shared in it *with* Israel, he did not consider the thesis of ontological substitution: Jesus had to overcome the condition of bearing corrupted human nature that made the exile from the tree of life necessary in the first place. The Servant, by suffering the struggle of loving God fully and bending human nature back towards the Father in the Spirit, accomplished something vicariously for Israel and the world that no Israelite could accomplish. Nor could Israel as a whole accomplish it as

¹⁸ John H. Goldingay, ‘The Theology of Isaiah’, edited by David G. Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.177

¹⁹ A pressing issue about which American evangelicals today are sometimes confused. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, USA: 2001) explain why white American evangelicals tend to be blind to structural and systemic problems; see also the much shorter article by Alan Noble, Sin’s Part in the System (and Vice Versa): Thoughts on Voddie Baucham’s ‘Thoughts on Ferguson’, *Christ & Pop Culture*, Nov.28, 2014; <http://christandpopculture.com/sins-part-system-vice-versa-thoughts-voddie-bauchams-thoughts-ferguson/>; last accessed Dec.28, 2014.

a covenant community. He bore our sinfulness, and bore it away from us, so he could bear a new humanity for us and towards us.

Appendix A: Matthew and Isaiah

<i>Matthew's Gospel: Quotes and Allusions to</i>	<i>Isaiah's Prophecy of Exile and Restoration from Exile</i>
The angel Gabriel explains Jesus' conception to Joseph. This is Isaiah's virgin birth prophecy, 1:21 – 23	Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah being born of a virgin (almah), 7:14
John the Baptist begins his ministry and is 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness', 3:1 – 3	This is the beginning of Isaiah's vision of the 'return from exile' and the 'redemption of Jerusalem' starting from Isa.40.
Jesus passes through water and then the 'fire' of temptation, 3:13 – 4:11	God promised to be with 'Israel' through water and fire, 43:2
Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, guided by Isaiah's prophecy of light shining in darkness in Galilee, 4:12 – 25	Isaiah's saw the Messiah ministering in Galilee first, bringing light into darkness, 8:22 – 9:1
Jesus pronounces beatitudes, 5:1 – 12	Isaiah prophesied a Messianic reversal using the same language in 57:12 – 21 and distinguishes between the faithful remnant and the remainder of Israel in the same terms, Isa.65:13 – 15
Jesus heals the Roman centurion's slave and praises the centurion for his faith. 8:5 – 13	Isaiah foresaw a time when foreigners would be fully welcomed into the covenant people's worship, contrary to the Mosaic Law. Contrast Isa.56:1 – 8 with Dt.23:1 – 6
Jesus heals, using physical healing as representations of his spiritual healing, 8:16 – 17	Quoting from Isaiah's Servant Song from Isa.53:4
Jesus brings his disciples across a stormy sea and casts demons into it, 8:23 – 34	Suggesting the New Exodus of Isaiah 40 – 43
Jesus casts out demons from Gentiles, 8:28 – 34	Suggesting the conquering Messiah passage of Isaiah 61:1 – 2
Jesus forgives sins, 9:1 – 13 etc.	Echoes Isaiah's Servant Song from Isa.53
Jesus calls a remnant in Israel, making an analogy to new wine, 9:9 – 13	Remnant preserved, analogy to new wine. Isa.65:8 – 9
Jesus looks ahead to when he, as the bridegroom, 'is taken away from them,' 9:14 – 17	This is probably a quotation from Isa.53:8, 'By oppression and judgment he was taken away'
Jesus clarifies his identity to John the Baptist, 11:4 – 5	By quoting Isaiah 35:5; 42:1 – 9; 61:1 – 2
Jesus will bring justice to the Gentiles, 12:18 - 21	By quoting Isaiah's Servant Song, 42:1 – 9
Jesus teaches the parable of the soils, 13:1 – 20	Using 'restoration from exile' motifs from Isa.55 (seed, rain, thorns, word)
Jesus says that Isaiah gives the precedent for parables, 13:14 – 15	'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand' Isa.6:10
Jesus shepherds and feeds people in the wilderness, 14:14 – 22	Feeding in a wilderness was described in Isa.55:1 – 3 and 65:10 – 12
Jesus is frustrated with the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and invalidation of God's commands, 15:7 – 9	Quotes Isa.29:13; frustration over Israel's holier than thou attitude prophesied in Isa.65:2 – 5
Jesus challenges Israel's historic relation to material wealth, 19:13 – 31	Isaiah foresaw a time of expanding Israel's traditional land boundaries in Isa.54:2
Jesus challenges Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard and the equal wage, 20:1 – 16	Isaiah challenged Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard in Isa.5:1 – 8
Jesus turns tables in the Temple and says its role as a house of prayer is being betrayed, 21:12 – 13	Isaiah and Jeremiah called the Temple a 'house of prayer' (Isa.56:7, Jer.7:11) and spoke of its betrayal
Jesus challenges Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants, 21:33 – 46	Isaiah challenged Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard in Isa.5:1 – 8
Jesus spoke of laying a new cornerstone for a new Temple, 21:42	Isaiah spoke of the Messiah being a new cornerstone for a new Temple, 8:14 – 15 and again in 28:16 – 17. Psalm 118:22 – 23 shares this idea with Isaiah, and Jesus quotes from this Psalm.
Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, 23:1 – 38	Frustration over Israel's holier than thou attitude prophesied in Isa.65:2 – 5
Jesus prophecies Jerusalem's destruction. 24:1 – 51	Isaiah prophesied Jerusalem's destruction in Isa.1; 29:1 – 4; 65:1 ff.
Jesus speaks of the sun and moon being darkened, the stars and heavens being shaken, 24:29	Quoting from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4
Jesus' death and resurrection inaugurates a covenant where 'forgiveness of sins' is offered to 'many', 26:28	Isaiah prophesied about the Servant's teaching going out to the Gentile coastlands in Isa.42:6 and 49:6
Jesus says that his death is to fulfill all the Scriptures of the prophets, 26:56	In Matthew, Isaiah has certainly been chief among the prophets
Jesus' crucifixion is paralleled to the Suffering Servant,	Isaiah's Suffering Servant restores Israel (and the nations) from

restoring humans to paradise, 26:57ff.	exile in Isa.53 (see below)
Jesus' great commission to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, 28:16 – 20	Draws from Isaiah's vision of kingly rule emanating out from a renewed 'Mt. Zion' of God's presence, 2:1 – 4, and also a vision of enlarging the tent of dwelling because reconciliation to others is offered, 54:2