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Christ as the Criminal's Substitute: An Enduring Patristic and Conciliar Image of the Atonement

Abstract

Standing at the center of the Christian faith, the question of Christ's atonement is an enduring question. And although involving the entirety of His incarnate economy, it answers especially the question of what God the Son accomplished through His death and resurrection on behalf of fallen humanity. A multifaceted action, the atonement has been understood in multiple ways and is seen to address multiple basic problems. The present study, then, selects from Patristic, confessional, and conciliar Eastern Christian sources in order to look at an enduring Patristic image that has been consistently used to describe the



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nature of Christ's sacrifice: That of the son of the king who stands in the place of the guilty and condemned criminal in order to receive his guilt and penalty. Thus, this paper will look especially at St. John Chrysostom, Blessed Theophylact, Patriarch Jeremiah II, Peter Mogila, Dositheus, and others to show that Christ's atonement has been understood in the Christian East in a substitutionary way. This enduring image, that of Christ as the criminal's substitute, has clear ecumenical import, showing that some Western approaches to the Atonement may not be later inventions, but, in fact, share a Patristic pedigree.

Keywords

John Chrysostom, Substitutionary Atonement, Blessed Theophylact, Dositheus, Peter Mogila

1 Introduction

The question of substitutionary Atonement, the at-one-ment, is extremely important to Orthodox Christian theology, and for the simple reason that it answers the question of how Christ dealt with the problem of sin and death, specifically mankind's sin and death. The question today has been controverted.¹ And so, in order to find a way out of a morass of opinions, it will be necessary

¹ For example, Patrick Reardon criticizes the notion of a substitutionary atonement considered as directed at a retribution incurred by sin. See *Reclaiming the Atonement: An Orthodox Theology of Redemption*, Vol. 1, *The Incarnation*, (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2015), pp. 9-10. Not only does he erect a strawman as regards the notion of divine anger by imputing passibility into substitutionary atonement's view of God, but seems especially to misrepresent the notion of divine wrath in order to dismiss it as irrelevant to the Atonement, cf. pp. 13-19.

to assess sources from the Orthodox Church's repository of official dogmatic teaching in order to get a clearer view of what the Orthodox Church has authoritatively taught on the subject. Of course, an entire exposition of the doctrine of the Atonement is beyond the scope of a single essay, and so the specific subject of what it means to say that the Atonement was *substitutionary* will be the focus of the present study, and, in particular, the Patristic image of Christ as the substitute for the criminal.

In order to bypass the singular opinions of various individuals, the sources drawn on here will begin with how the Jerusalem Council of 1672 understood the Atonement, and move from its internal references to unpack what it indicates only briefly. But, in order to come to a clear and accurate understanding of the Council's view of the Atonement, it is also important to note at the outset that there is no single Decree devoted to it specifically and exclusively, a fact whose significance will be touched upon more below. Therefore, in order to get a picture of the Council's view, after treating the statements within the Council that touch indicatively on the Atonement, the present study will then examine the documents which the Council formally presented as dogmatically canonical, progressing further from the internal citations presented there, in order to more fully clarify the Orthodox understanding of Christ's substitutionary Atonement.

At the outset, a practical distinction will be made for the sake of the current discussion, for Christ's work in dying and rising dealt not only with sin, but also with death, and so keeping this instructive distinction in mind is vital. For Christ, on the one hand, *atoned* for sin, i.e. effected its forgiveness, and on the other hand, *defeated* death, effecting life. For whereas death is the result of sin, an effect of sin (cf. Romans 6:23; James 1:15), the process of dying and death itself are not themselves sins. Sin must be forgiven, not death, and so one does not atone for death in that sense, but for sin. The concept of the Atonement, although in its

broadest sense includes all that Christ has done, from the Incarnation all the way to the Ascension, the Sitting at the right hand of the Father, and the Sending of the Holy Spirit,² in a narrower sense it does not strictly apply to death but to sin. Although not an absolute distinction, the present study focuses on the manner in which Christ's work on the Cross dealt with sin. In short: sin is atoned for; death is defeated.³

2 Conciliar Documents and Authors

To begin to look at Dositheus' view of the Atonement, in looking at Christ as Mediator, Decree 8 states:

We believe our Lord Jesus Christ to be the only Mediator, and that in giving Himself a ransom for all He has through His own Blood made a reconciliation (*καταλλαγὴν*) between God and man, and that Himself having a care for His own is advocate and propitiation (*ἰλασμόν*) for our sins.⁴

² Patrick Reardon speaks thus broadly and inclusively of the Atonement in his work *Reclaiming the Atonement*, p. 18.

³ The defeat of death is often referred to as the *Christus Victor* model or aspect of Christ's work, but again this model is not properly understood as *atoning* death or atoning for death but *defeating* death. Christ's death dealt with the forgiveness of sin, whereas His resurrection dealt with supplying life. As St. Paul teaches, "For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God" (Romans 6:10). In other words, His death was directed atoningly at sin, whereas His victorious resurrection was directed at defeating death. Thus the current study will not treat of the *Christus Victor* model or aspect of Christ's work, but specifically to the question of the atonement, i.e. the forgiveness of sins.

⁴ *Confession of Dositheus*, Decree 8, from *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem*, tr. J.N.W.B. Robertson, (London: Thomas Baker, 1899), pp. 120-121.

In other words, Christ reconciles through His Blood, which is to say He adjusts for the difference between man's unrighteousness and God's righteousness, thus causing man's return into favor with God. He propitiates for sin, which is to say He washes away the sin of man, which is expiatory or cleansing, and so turns away the wrath of God which otherwise rests on sinful man (cf. John 3:36, Rom 1:18, Eph 5:6, Col 3:6), which is propitiatory.⁵

Speaking of the unbloody Sacrifice of the Eucharist, which is one single sacrifice with the Cross,⁶ Dositheus states that "it is a true and propitiatory Sacrifice (*θυσίαν ἀληθῆ καὶ ἰλαστικὴν*) offered for all Orthodox" (Decree 17).⁷ In other words, the mystical reality, the inward identity of the Eucharist, is that it is one substance with the Lord's Supper and with Cross, applying the propitiation

⁵ Since the notion of divine wrath is frequently misunderstood, St. Cyril of Alexandria's definition of divine wrath will prove helpful: "the torments of the ungodly" are called "the 'wrath of God'" (*Commentary on John*, Vol. 1, tr. David Maxwell, ed. Joel Elowsky, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), Book 2, Ch. 4, para 260, p. 116. Not exclusive to St. Cyril, John McGuckin observes of St. John Chrysostom, that he "preached extensively about the death of Christ as a sacrifice that literally appeased the wrath of God" (*The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 37. See below for such a statement of his.

⁶ Chapter 4 of the Synod, denying that the Eucharist is merely a Memorial, anathematizes those who "infer that this [Eucharist] is other than that which was accomplished by the Savior at the beginning, and refer it unto that figuratively and typically, so that they make void the Mystery of fearful and divine celebration, through which we receive the earnest of the life to come; though our divine Father John Chrysostom has shown that the Sacrifice is not different, and has said it is the same in many places" (*The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem*, tr. J.N.W.B. Robertson, (London: Thomas Baker, 1899), pp. 67-68.

⁷ John McGuckin observes that "the cultic and liturgical images of sacrificial substitution were progressively subsumed into the theology of the Eucharist" (*The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*), p. 37. The inner unity of the Cross and the Eucharist makes this statement all the more relevant.

to man in the faithful reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. Thus the Atonement can also be understood through an understanding of the Eucharist which, as St. Peter Mogila says in Question 107 of his Catechism, is “for our sins,” which is also to say the Atonement is directed at the problem of sin.⁸

Given the brevity imposed on the length of the Confession, in order to understand more fully how the Synod of Jerusalem understood the Atonement, it will be necessary to look into the documents that were formally recognized as canonical by the Council and mentioned in the Confession, namely Jeremiah II’s responses to the Lutherans in the years 1572-1579, and in St. Peter Mogila’s Confessional Catechism from 1643. Of these Dositheus states towards the end of Question 4:

Concerning all these things it has been treated at large and most lucidly in what is called *The Confession of the Eastern Church (...)* (and) by Jeremiah, the Most Holy Patriarch of Constantinople, in three dogmatic and Synodical Letters to the Lutherans of Tubingen in Germany.⁹

The first title refers to St. Peter Mogila’s Catechism,¹⁰ which also being formally adopted by the four principle Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem,¹¹ and together with Patriarch Jeremiah’s responses to the Lutherans,

⁸ And so not directed at death only.

⁹ *Confession of Dositheus*, Question 4.

¹⁰ This is confirmed in the introductory portion of the documents from the Synod of Jerusalem (*The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem*, p. 15).

¹¹ It has also been called *The Orthodox Confession of Faith of the Catholic and Apostolic Eastern Church*, by Patriarch Nectarius of Jerusalem. It was also called *The Orthodox Confession of Faith of the Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ*, by Patriarch Parthenius of Constantinople. See *The Orthodox Confession of the Catholic and Apostolic Eastern Church*, tr. Philip Lodvel (1772), ed. J.N.W.B. Robertson, (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), p. 6, pp. 9-11.

were considered by the Council to answer authoritatively regarding the issues with which they treat. In this way they can be said to explain in fuller detail what Dositheus' *Confession* expressed only more briefly. In fact, through this process the Church immortalized these statements of Orthodoxy, and so consequently they take on great relevance in how Orthodox Christians understand Orthodox theology in general and, as will be further shown, the Atonement in particular.

Turning, then, to Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople, he urged the Lutherans to "consider the following" Orthodox view of the Atonement:

One might see a bandit or criminal being punished, and the king himself give his beloved, only-begotten, and legitimate son, who was not like that, to be put to death, transferring the guilt from the wicked man to the son in order to save the condemned criminal and rid him from an evil reputation.¹²

This is to say that, according to Patriarch Jeremiah and therefore the Council of Jerusalem, the Atonement is understood as including the transfer of guilt from the wicked to the righteous. In this it is shown how the one who is to be justly punished, according to the king's law, instead finds that the king's own son takes his place. In other words, instead of condemning the criminal, the king rather puts in that criminal's place his own innocent son, there to receive the condemned man's guilt and so be punished in his place in order to save him.

Illustrating the Atonement, the image of exchanging places illustrates how the Father places His willing Son, Jesus Christ, onto the Cross, in the place of the accursed sinner, in order to undergo

¹² *Augsburg and Constantinople: The Correspondence Between the Tübingen Theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession*, First Exchange, tr. George Mastrantonis, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982), p. 41.

that sinner's just punishment, and so to set him free. The Patriarch continued:

If, then, after these things the son were raised up to great authority after he had saved [the offender], and then he was insulted in his unspeakable glory by the one on whose behalf he had been punished, would not the latter prefer to die a thousand deaths, if he had any intelligence, rather to appear to be responsible for such great ingratitude?¹³

According to the image he uses to portray the nature of Christ's sacrifice, Patriarch Jeremiah expressly casts the Atonement in terms of Christ's being punished on the undeserving criminal's behalf. This is clearly a vicarious atonement, which is to say it is substitutionary because Christ stands as a substitute for the criminal, stands in the criminal's place and undergoes the criminal's punishment. In other words, the Son of God was punished with the just punishment due to sinners, willingly standing in the place of the condemned, out of love, and in order to reconcile them to God, "who, when becoming angry, turns away."¹⁴ Thus Patriarch Jeremiah presents the Orthodox view of the Atonement, which is itself rooted in the Old Testament sacrificial system:

The slaying of animals and the golden and silver vessels were offered to God by the ancients. The body of Christ clearly includes both. For He was slain for the glory of the Father. He was consecrated to God from the beginning. He was an offering to Him.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 41. Notice the reference to the divine anger, which according to Orthodox theology cannot refer to any passion in God. Of this subject St. John of Damascus writes: "By His wrath and indignation let us understand His aversion to evil and His hatred of it" (*On the Orthodox Faith*, tr. Frederic Chase, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), Book 1, ch 11, p. 192.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 66. This ought to make clear to whom the sacrifice was made, not the devil, but to God.

The foregoing not only affirms that Christ's death must be understood in terms of the substitutionary sacrifice for sin, undergoing sin's penalty in man's place, it is also presented in the context of an explanation of the Eucharist, for Christ is the sacrificial Lamb:

consecrated to God from the beginning. He was an offering to Him because He is the only-begotten, and because the bread is changed into the very body of Christ.¹⁶

This is to say that the bread is changed into the Body of fallen man's perfect Substitute, and so in this way in holy Communion man participates in the Covenant of Christ's Blood Atonement for sin.¹⁷

3 Patristic Sources

It is the case, moreover, that Patriarch Jeremiah was not attempting to be innovative in his use of the image of Christ suffering the punishment of sinners, being the substitute in their place. This image is originally taken from St. John Chrysostom, and although a quite lengthy quotation, the clarity it adds to understanding the Atonement more than compensates for its length. What follows, then, is St. John Chrysostom's commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:21: For Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our account. St. John Chrysostom comments:

Let us therefore not fear hell, but offending God; for it is more grievous than that when He turns away in wrath: this is worse than all, this heavier than all. And that you may learn what a thing it is, consider this which I say. If one that was himself a king, beholding a robber and malefactor un-

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 66.

¹⁷ St. Peter Mogila's Catechism also refers to Patriarch Jeremiah's response to the Lutherans, in Question 98, which is also concerned with the Sacraments.

der punishment, gave his well-beloved son, his only-begotten and true, to be slain; and transferred the death and the guilt as well, from him to his son, (who was himself of no such character,) that he might both save the condemned man and clear him from his evil reputation ; and then if, having subsequently promoted him to great dignity, he had yet, after thus saving him and advancing him to that glory unspeakable, been outraged by the person that had received such treatment: would not that man, if he had any sense, have chosen ten thousand deaths rather than appear guilty of so great ingratitude?¹⁸

The foregoing commentary clearly demonstrates the Patristic context shaping Patriarch Jeremiah's understanding of the Atonement, supplying the image of the king's son standing as substitute for the criminal, which is to say Christ the substitute for the sinner. The image of the sinner's punishment being meted out upon the Son of God, who out of love stood in mankind's place and suffered what was due in order to set sinful man free from what He owed to God's justice, is clearly an image of the atonement Christ wrought for man upon the Cross.

Not only once, however, St. John Chrysostom also uses this image in his explanation of Galatians 3:13: Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13; cf. Deuteronomy 21:23).

St. John Chrysostom comments:

As then both he who hanged on a tree, and he who transgresses the Law, is cursed, and as it was necessary for him who is about to relieve from a curse himself to be free from it, but to receive another instead of it, therefore Christ took

¹⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First and Second Corinthians*, NPNF, First Series, Vol. 12, rev. tr. Talbot Chambers, ed. Philip Schaff, (Christian Literature Publishing, 1889), *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, Homily 11, pp. 334-35.

upon Him such another, and thereby relieved us from the curse. It was like an innocent man's undertaking to die for another sentenced to death, and so rescuing him from punishment. For Christ took upon Him not the curse of transgression, but the other curse, in order to remove that of others. For, "He had done no violence neither was any deceit in His mouth" (Isaiah 53:9; 1 Peter 2:22). And as by dying He rescued from death those who were dying, so by taking upon Himself the curse, He delivered them from it.¹⁹

Again there is clearly the theme of the substitute suffering vicariously in the place of and for the sinner, for Christ did not only die, but, as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed declares, also suffered, which vicarious suffering was clearly part of the Patristic understanding. But this image was not only used by St. John, for also commenting on this verse, Blessed Theophylact, whose commentaries on Scripture are second only to St. John Chrysostom himself, states of Christ:

He paid the price by Himself becoming the curse and thereby redeeming us from the condemnation of the law. Christ (in His human nature) escaped that curse by fulfilling the law, but we, unable to fulfill it, were guilty under the law. *This is like an innocent man who chooses to die in place of a guilty man condemned to death.* Therefore, Christ accepted the curse of being hung from a tree and thereby loosed the curse to which we are liable for not fulfilling the law. This was a curse that lay upon us, but not upon Him, because He fulfilled the law perfectly, committing no sin.²⁰

¹⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians*, tr. by Alexander Gross. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 13, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889), p. 55.

²⁰ Blessed Theophylact, *The Explanation of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians*, tr. Christopher Stade, (House Springs, MO: Chrysostom Press, 2011), p. 27.

These comments clearly agree on the principle of criminal substitution, where the innocent takes the place of the guilty, dying in his place by receiving the punishment for which he was liable. In the place of the guilty, Christ received a curse in order to die in their place. Christ received the punishment of the curse in the place of the cursed, and so Christ paid the price of sin, delivering and redeeming sinful man from the law he was guilty of breaking, having Himself fulfilled the law perfectly. These, then, make clear what was implicit in the Jerusalem Synod's understanding of the Atonement.

4 Conclusion

It is also important to note that this understanding has also been maintained up to the present day. For example, Archbishop Averky Taushev, of blessed memory, in commenting on Galatians 3:13, similarly affirms the foregoing understanding of the Atonement. Noteworthily, in his citations he refers to St. Theophan the Recluse (19th century) as likewise affirming the substitutionary and penalty-directed nature of the atonement. Averky writes:²¹

Christ accepted the curse that burdened humanity, although he was innocent, and destroyed that curse, *"just as someone who was not convicted, but decided to die in place of the criminal condemned to death, saved that criminal from death."*²²

²¹ Archbishop Averky Taushev, *The Epistles and the Apocalypse: Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, tr. Nicholas Kotar, ed. Vitaly Permiakov, (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2018), p. 59. cf. pp. 58-59.

²² The footnote to this refers to St. Theophan's commentary on this verse, in *Collected Works*, vol. 15 (Moscow, 2013), p. 294.

In light of the foregoing, it is quite clear what Patriarch Jeremiah meant when he conveyed the Orthodox doctrine of the Atonement to the Lutherans, and moreover that this same understanding was incorporated into the conciliar statement regarding what is canonical Orthodox theology by Patriarch Dositheus at the Jerusalem Council, not to mention the preeminent Fathers whose works were quoted above and which gave rise to the image of Christ as the substitute punished on the sinner's behalf. Following Patriarch Jeremiah, and also affirmed conciliarly as authoritative in his presentation of Orthodox theology, St. Peter Mogila in the 17th Century again confirmed this understanding of the Atonement. From his Answer to Question 34:

He calls Christ a Priest, because he offered himself to God and the Father: saying, Who through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without Spot to God (Hebrews 9:14; cf. 9:11). And again, So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many (Hebrews 9:28).²³

In other words, Christ bore our sins, sacrificially, i.e. in relation to bearing them unto death. For He not only bore our death, but our sin, which since He is intrinsically sinless means He suffered their consequences, up to and including death, in perfect righteousness. And He offered Himself a spotless sacrifice for sinners as the substitute sin-bearer.²⁴ And, although it is again a longer

²³ *Catechism of Peter Mogila*, Question 34.

²⁴ Scripturally this is foreshadowed by, and so explained according to the logic of, the sacrificial Levitical substitution performed on the Day of Atonement: "He [Aaron, the High Priest] shall bring the live goat. Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, *putting them on the head of the goat*, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man. *The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities* to an uninhabited land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness" (Leviticus 16:20-22).

quote, in answer to Question 47 in the section treating of the Passion of Christ, Mogila reveals the clearly substitutionary and vicarious nature of Christ's suffering:

First, Because of the heavy burden of our sins, as says the Prophet Isaiah: "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:4-5). Also the Prophet Jeremiah, speaking in the person of Christ: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought on me, which the Lord has inflicted in the day of His fierce anger" (Lamentations 1:12). *Secondly*, For that on the Cross he fulfilled his *priestly office*, offering himself to God and the Father, for the redemption of mankind: as the Apostle speaks concerning him, "Who gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:6). And again, "Christ loved us, and has given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God, for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Ephesians 5:2). Also in another place, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). *Thirdly*, Because on the Cross he completed the reconciliation which he had undertaken between God and man; as the aforementioned Apostle declared: "By him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his Cross."²⁵

Quoting Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah both, the clear import of Mogila's presentation is that of Christ's vicarious suffering of the penalty of man's sin, standing in his place, carrying the weighty burden, "wounded for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5), suffering according to the human nature the divine anger "which the Lord has inflicted in the day of His fierce anger" (Lamentations

²⁵ *Catechism of Peter Mogila*, Question 47.

1:12).²⁶ Moreover, Christ offers Himself sacrificially to God in man's place as a "sweet-smelling aroma," to reconcile and so settle the debt incurred by sin, both in suffering and in dying.

To conclude, the Synod of Jerusalem's understanding of the Atonement was made clear by the documents which it formally approved as canonical statements of the Orthodox Church. Therefore, building on Scripture itself, St. John Chrysostom's and Blessed Theophylact's commentaries on them, and from them to St. Peter Mogila, Patriarch Jeremiah II, and Dositheus, and so on to St. Theophan the Recluse and Archbishop Averky, the Orthodox Church has consistently understood the Atonement sacrificially, as both substitutionary and aimed at settling the debt of sin through Christ's paying its price, i.e. suffering its penalty. An enduring Patristic image conciliarly affirmed, that of the king's son suffering in place of the criminal, it is clearly substitutionary and directed not only at death as mere expiration, but also the penalty of sin, its guilt, such that Christ truly suffered in man's place the punishment which mankind's sin deserved according to the holy justice of God.

²⁶ Here again there is no shying away from the notion of divine anger.