

ATONEMENT AND SCRIPTURE

Atonement in its scriptural significance has a special relevance for modern man. In the midst of world crisis, people today are experiencing a sense of collective guilt and the need for a truly cleansing expiation. The keen awareness of the ancient Hebrew that cosmic disorder is due to the corporate guilt of the people, and their duty as a people to make atonement, is more or less evidenced in the contemporary universal crisis. Modern literature is most eloquent in the description of the sorry and even absurd human predicament but it is empty of solutions for any true expiation for man. This is especially noted in the novels of Feodor Dostoevski and the French writers Malraux, Camus and Sartre. The recent, much discussed play *The Deputy* by the German Lutheran, Rolf Hochhuth, is highly critical of the collective guilt of the West for the murder of six million Jews, but the play is wanting in any genuine catharsis.

Literature, in many countries, reflects the preoccupation of modern man with the obvious fact that things are going badly and that there is a critical need for reparation. In his play *The Cocktail Party*, T. S. Eliot makes Celia Copplestone say in her confession to the psychiatrist:

It's not the feeling of anything I've ever done which I might get away from, or of anything in me I could get rid of but of emptiness, of failure toward someone, or something, outside of myself; and I feel I must . . . atone—is that the word?

The careful study of the notion of atonement in the Old and New Testament has special significance for us today, not only from a scholarly standpoint but also because of the contemporary widespread concern for man's guilt and the need for expiation. The very personal concrete articulation of the human predicament by our contemporaries sounds like the cry of anguish of the not always so patient Job in his dialogue with his three friends on the problem of evil.

A BIBLICO-THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF ATONEMENT

The title of this paper, *Atonement and Scripture*, connotes that our study, in the main, is concerned with biblical categories in our exploration of the meaning of atonement. It is a research in biblical theology: that branch of positive theology which may be provisionally defined as "the doctrine of God contained in Scripture, analyzed and systematized in biblical categories."¹ Scripture scholars today are equipped with a vastly increased understanding of sciences auxiliary to exegesis: principally, the cultural and political history of the Near East, linguistics, literary forms, comparative religion and Semitic psychology. Through these studies we are able to penetrate more deeply into the human elements of the inspired books and the mentality and intentions of the human authors. At the same time, in knowing more about these hagiographers as instruments of God, we are afforded a more intensive knowledge of the divine meanings of God's message to His people. It is a work of *fides quaerens intellectum*, as S. Lyonnet has aptly pointed out.² The theologian in studying the *pagina sacra* must never regard it merely as a human historical document but as divine-human testimony.³

In exploring the meaning of atonement in the Old and New Testaments, it is well to keep in mind the appreciation of development and change in history. In both Testaments we recognize a doctrinal evolution and so we do not put all scriptural affirmation on the one high plane of doctrinal perfection. Each text must be read and understood in context. Revelation in the Old Testament progresses in a series of revealed truths which stresses one aspect of truth regardless of other aspects. The Hebrew prophet is not deterred from speaking out by the fact that some predecessor had proclaimed the direct opposite. The Hebrew mentality experienced none of the difficulties that we tend to feel in following this development.

¹ R. A. F. MacKenzie, "The Concept of Biblical Theology," *Proceedings C.T.S.A.*, 1955, 49, ff.

² S. Lyonnet, "De notione et momento theologiae biblicae," *Verbum Domini* 34, (1956) 42-53.

³ J. De Fraine, "L'Encyclique Humani Generis et les erreurs concernant l'Écriture Sainte," *ScEcc*, 5 (1953) 7-28.

Numerous examples of antinomies can be cited: the need for ritual sacrifice versus the futility of ritual sacrifice; Yahweh's covenant was with the community, it was with the individual; the virtuous are rewarded with earthly blessings, the virtuous suffer more than the wicked. The Semite is conscious of one thing at a time and he proclaims it with all the vigor of his conviction.

The ancient Semitic mind has little ability for the abstract, the metaphysical, the rigorously logical statement.⁴ It is more prone to the symbolic, the concrete, more given to the poetic than to the philosophical style of thought. It communicates by a series of emphatic statements rather than by syllogisms. One simple message is conveyed at a time without plumbing the implications. The Semite often affirms something without intending to deny its opposite.

In our method of proceeding in delineating the evolving concept of the atonement in the Old and New Testaments, we shall first of all attend to the exact determination of the data, the truth revealed in a particular inspired book and, secondly, the arrangement of these truths in their true doctrinal relationships and coordinated in a systematic understanding of their implications. In this twofold endeavor the contributions not only of the expert in exegesis and the allied disciplines of linguistics, history, literary criticism, psychology must be taken into account but also dogmatic theology so as to keep the *analogia fidei* and tradition as guiding principles of interpretation. As the sacred magisterium affirms in *Divino Aflante Spiritu*, the Christian theologian must not believe that his work is done when the text is discussed from every literary, historical and cultural viewpoint. There remains the important task to make explicit and to synthesize the witness it bears to some particular stage of God's saving activity toward man.

THE WORD "ATONEMENT"

The word "atonement" is not a biblical term nor is it a term of Graeco-Latin derivation. It is of Anglo-Saxon origin and it is unique as a word coined in modern English that conveys a theological

⁴ W. Albright, *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 91f.

doctrine. The verb "atone" existed in Middle English prior to the substantive, "atonement." "Atone" was coined from *at* and *one* and signifies to be set at one: to reconcile. It originated in the phrase "to be at one," which is a translation of the Anglo-French phrase *être à un*, to agree. In *Le Livre des Rois* we read of Henry II and Thomas à Becket: *Ils ne peuvent être à un.* "They (Henry and Becket) could not agree."⁵

Wyclif already used the noun "onement" for reconciliation. From the frequent phrase "set at one" or "at onement" the combined "atonement" began to take the place of onement early in the sixteenth century. Saint Thomas More is the earliest known author to use the word "atonement" in his English work entitled "The History of Richard III." William Rastell, More's nephew, edited a strictly correct text in 1557. Rastell claims that More wrote this incomplete history in 1513. Referring to the discord of the nobles at the time of Richard's coronation, More observes their lack of regard for their new atonement. Atonement is used here to signify reconciliation.

**hauyng moze re-
garde to their olde variaunce, then-
their newe attonement.**

Since reconciliation is generally between one who has been offended⁶ and one who offends, atonement receives the ordinary meaning of satisfactory reparation or expiation for an offense. In the Old Testament, atonement is the reestablishment of Yahweh's communion with His people, who had offended Him by sin. It is a work of mercy on the part of God and on the part of man, the fulfillment of certain things prescribed by God. Anglican translators made frequent use of the word "atonement" to signify reconciliation or expiation for stylistic reasons. This is evidenced in Lv. 17, 11 "And Aaron shall bring the bullock of the sin-offering, which is for

⁵ *Le Livre de Reis*, ed. Glover, Revord Series, 420-421. W. Skeat, *Principles of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1887) 56. A. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (London, 1935) 245.

⁶ British Museum MS, C 11 b 14, *Thomas More's English Works*, ed. W. Rastell, 1557.

himself, and make an atonement for himself . . .”, and in Rm. 5,11 “We also glory in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement,” i.e., reconciliation.

ATONEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Hebrew verb *kippér pi'el*, of the root *kpr*, is translated as atone. It probably meant to cover, especially with a liquid. In the priestly documents, it signifies mainly to make atonement for sin by an expiatory rite. (Lv. 4, 31 f.)⁷ The *LXX* regularly translates *kipper* by ἐξιλάσκομαι which means to propitiate, also to atone. Since in every sacrifice man deprives himself of something useful in order to present it to God and since all sacrifice tends to establish good relations between God and man, every sacrifice has some expiatory or atoning value. Sacrifices in the Old Law are divided into various classes, such as the sacrifice of praise (Lv. 7, 12-15); the voluntary sacrifice made out of devotion, not because of precept or promise (Lv. 7, 16-17); the votive sacrifice, one to which a person has bound himself by a vow (Lv. 7, 18-23). Our main interest here, however, is with the expiatory sacrifice, which is also called the sacrifice for sin (*haṭṭa' th*) and the sacrifice of reparation (*'asham*). De Vaux points out that despite the length of the passages devoted to them, it is difficult to determine the exact significance of *haṭṭa' th* and *'asham* and to say why they are distinguished from each other.⁸

In Hebrew, the word *haṭṭa' th* means both sin and the rite which does away with sin (Lv. 4, 1-5:13; 6, 17-23). The type of victim depended upon the person who had sinned. A bull was to be offered for the sin of the high priest, the “anointed priest”; for his guilt defiled the entire people. A bull was also to be offered when the people had sinned. A he-goat was to be offered for the sins of the lay head of the community, a she-goat or a sheep for the sin of a private individual. The poor could offer two turtle doves or two pigeons.

⁷ L. Moraldi, *Espiazione Sacrificiale e Riti Espiatori* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1956) 182-221.

⁸ R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, tr. J. McHugh (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 418.

Two things marked the ritual for these sacrifices of atonement apart from other sacrifices. Firstly, the use to which the blood was put and, secondly, the way in which the victim's flesh was disposed of. The blood played an important part in an atoning sacrifice more than in any other. When the sacrifice was offered for the high priest or for the entire people, there were three successive rites. The priest who performed the sacrifice first collected the blood, entered into the Holy Place and there sprinkled the blood seven times against the veil which curtains off the Holy of Holies. Then he rubbed the blood upon the corners of the altar of incense, which stood before the veil. Finally, he poured out the rest of the blood at the foot of the altar of holocausts. These were the only animal sacrifices in which part of the victim was carried into the Temple. When sacrifice was offered for the sin of the lay head of the community or for the sin of a private individual, some of the blood was put on the horns of the altar of holocausts and the rest poured out at its base. In these two rites nothing was taken within the Holy Place.

These rites indicate the special value of blood in atoning for sin. It can be used to expiate sin because it is the means of life: "the life of flesh is in its blood. This blood I have given to you, in order that you may perform the rite of expiation upon the altar, for your lives; for blood makes expiation for a life" (Lv. 17, 11).⁹ We may compare this to the parallel text in He. 9, 22: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness at all."

Here we must take into account the Hebrew concept of life. Life was not divided into a manifold of spiritual and physical faculties. It was taken as an existential whole. The physical was not considered apart from the spiritual, nor the natural apart from the supernatural. This total involvement of man was most intensely experienced at the moment of worship. God and man set up a covenant, an alliance, a union, an at-one-ment. God and man remain distinct; there is no pantheism in the Bible but the union between Yahweh and his people is most intimate. The blood-ritual expressed a deep faith that man's life comes from God and must return to God in love.

⁹ L. Moraldi, *op. cit.*, "Il Sangue nel Sacrificio Espiatorio," 222-252. L. Sabourin, *Rédemption Sacrificielle* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961) 340f.

All the fat was burnt upon the altar but the meat was eaten by the priests. Since the person offering the sacrifice of *hatta' th* admitted his guilt he received no part of the victim. When the sacrifice was offered for the sin of the people or of the high priest as head of the community, the priests did not partake of the victim; it was carried outside and placed on the ash-heap. It is worth noting that the fat was burnt on the altar and that the meat of the victim was eaten by the priests "as a most holy thing" (Lv. 6, 22)¹⁰ in sacrifices for the sins of private individuals. This contradicts the opinion that the victim was loaded with the sins of the person offering the sacrifice and that the victim became sin. It was in truth a victim pleasing to Yahweh and He, in merciful consideration of this offering, took away the sin. In this sense St. Paul says: "Christ, who had not known sin, God made sin (*hatta' th*: a victim for sin), in order that we might become, in him, God's justice" (2 Cor. 5, 21).

Imposing hands never connoted that the holocaust substituted for the offerer. Rather, it was a sign to strengthen the union between the two. What happened to the holocaust externalized and intensified the spirit of the offerer. His spirit, so to speak, ascended to God as the smoke rose up to heaven from the altar of holocaust.

These sacrifices for sin took on a special solemnity on the Day of Atonement. The *Yom Kippur* is still one of the most solemn feasts of the Jews. It has always been observed on the 10th *Tishri* (September-October). No work whatsoever was to be done on this day. Penance and fasting were enjoined. There was to be a meeting in the Temple at which special sacrifices were to be offered in atonement for the sanctuary, the priests and the people. De Vaux comments that the ritual outlined in Leviticus 16 is evidently composed of various strata, for the text has been edited several times.¹¹

This ritual is a combination of two ceremonies which were different in their spirit and origin. There is, first of all, a Levitical ritual. The high priest offered a bull as a sacrifice for his own sinfulness and for that of his "house," that is, the Aaronite priesthood.

¹⁰ L. Sabourin, *op. cit.*, 174-176.

¹¹ De Vaux, *op. cit.*, 507.

Then he went on the only occasion of the year behind the veil that curtained the Holy of Holies and he incensed the mercy-seat (*kappōreth*) and sprinkled it with the bull's blood. After this rite he offered a goat for the sins of the people and he took the blood of the goat behind the veil and sprinkled it over the mercy-seat. Atonement for the sanctuary, and more particularly for the altar, was made by having blood rubbed and sprinkled upon it.

Into this ritual has been inserted another of diverse origin and spirit. The community took two goats and lots were cast. One was for Yahweh, the other for Azazel, which the English Bible translates as "scapegoat." It seems more accurate to say the name probably indicates a devil. This is how it is interpreted by the Syriac version, the Targum, and the Book of Henoch.¹² The goat for Yahweh was used in a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. The other goat, still alive, was "set before Yahweh." The high priest placed his hands on the goat's head and transferred to it the faults, deliberate and indeliberate, of the Israelites. A man then took this goat off to the desert which was believed to be the habitat of devils (Is. 13, 21; Tb. 8, 3; Mt. 12, 43). It was believed that the goat carried away with it the sins of the people (Lv. 16, 8-10; 20-22). The man who led the goat away was considered impure and could not return to the community until he washed himself and his clothes (Lv. 16, 26).

The transference of the sins to the goat and the atonement which results from it are said to be effective only because the goat is presented before Yahweh. Yahweh brings about the transfer and the atonement. The goat loaded with the sins of the people was considered impure and was not sacrificed as a victim of atonement. It is interesting to note that the goat of Azazel is never used as a figure of the atonement of Our Lord.

The other kind of atoning sacrifice was the sacrifice of reparation, an '*asham*'. The word means an offense and the means by which the offense is righted, and finally the sacrifice of reparation. Leviticus tells us that the rights to be followed are the same as in the sacrifice for sin (Lv. 7, 7). This sacrifice, however, was only offered for private individuals. The blood was never taken into the Holy Place and the

¹² De Vaux, *op. cit.*, 509.

victim was never burned away from the sanctuary. The only victim referred to is a ram. In certain cases the sacrifice was to be accompanied by the payment of a fine (Lv. 5, 14-16; Nb. 5, 5-8). If the rights of Yahweh or the person offended could be estimated in a monetary way, the equivalent sum plus one fifth had to be paid to the priests as Yahweh's representatives or to the person wronged. This restitution did not form part of the sacrifice itself. It is very difficult to distinguish the sacrifice for sin from the sacrifice of reparation.¹³ Nor is it possible to state the moral aspect of the sin being atoned for by these sacrifices.

For a long time after the Israelites began their national independence (in fact, for longer than six hundred years), expiatory sacrifices, sin offerings, held little place in Hebrew ritual. This may be partly due to a reaction against the false expiatory rites of pagan neighboring people. However, the prophets Amos, Michea, Sophonia, Jeremia and Ezechiel preached an interior renewal of spirit and the elaboration of expiatory sacrifice, which along with fasting and other penitential rites became fixed in the ritual. One has only to look through the books of Zacharia, Nehemia and Joel to witness this.

The study of the ritual of atoning sacrifices in the Old Testament offers important insights into the Hebrew understanding of atonement. This is built up on the background of the Old Testament teachings on God's holiness which does not always stress the same traits. Sometimes the numinous, the fascinating and fearful mysteries, are featured; sometimes the moral aspects of His sanctity are set forth. On the other hand, the Hebrew notion of atonement is also dependent on the nature of man's sin. Sin is not always estimated in the same way. In some passages it is presented objectively and concretely as a defilement. Other times it is taken subjectively and ethically as personal guilt which man deliberately assumes. These divergent notions of God's sanctity and man's sin give rise to various ideas of atonement which are difficult to bring to a perfectly consistent uniform doctrine.¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, 420-421.

¹⁴ L. Hartman, J. Heuschen, "Atonement" in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by L. Hartman (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1963) 167.

Certain ancient passages reveal a strongly anthropomorphic theme which present atonement as the appeasement of divine wrath. Thus, when Yahweh was punishing Israel with famine because Saul had massacred the Gabaonites, David asks how he can make atonement. It was only after he had executed seven sons of Saul at the petition of the Gabaonites that Yahweh heard the prayers for the people in the "hanging up of the corpses before Yahweh" (2 Sm. 21, 1-14). We witness here a quasi-cultic act to placate Yahweh, while there is complete satisfaction given to the injured party, the Gabaonites.

Later ritual laws of the P texts speak of "sweet smelling" sacrifice (Ex. 29, 18; Lv. 1, 9) which originally connoted the sacrificial "sweet smell of appeasement" (Gn. 8, 21). It is possible that ancient Israel also knew of lustral rites which were a washing away of sin. The sin was considered a stain to be washed away by sacrificial blood to which purifying power was attributed (Lv. 8, 14; Ez. 43, 19 f.). This kind of atoning rite was not directed primarily to appease God but rather to remove sin. It should be noted that the lustral rite did not stand alone but was accompanied by the people's attestation of innocence and prayer of pardon.

The laws concerning sin offerings speak very seldom about confession of sins (Lv. 5, 5; Nm. 5, 7). Penance, in the sense of fasting, is mentioned in the most recent part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lv. 16, 29 ff.; Nm. 29, 7). John McKenzie remarks that the Old Testament speaks more frequently of a national, a collective guilt than it does of personal guilt.¹⁵ The story of David exhibits some peculiarities of the Hebrew concept of atonement. When David was charged by Nathan, he confessed his guilt and was assured by Nathan that God forgave him but that he must atone for his sin. The child of his adultery must die. Against this threat, David fasted and put on the garb of mourning. This he did until he heard that the child died. Then he abandoned his austere ways. This astonished his household but David explained simply that the child was dead.

David did not intend these austerities as penitential. Guilt and

¹⁵ J. McKenzie, *The Two Edged Sword* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956) 273f.

punishment to his mind were one and the same. If his guilt were removed, there was hope that prayer might avert the threatened punishment. Once the punishment came, austerity had no purpose. For David, atonement took away the sin but not the punishment. He was made at one with God again but the punishment had to be exacted. His plaintive cry of the *Miserere* is one thing as a prayer for forgiveness of his sin. But the prayer for deliverance from the penalty of sin is quite another. Deliverance and forgiveness are not the same.

For the Hebrew, McKenzie points out, sin is a cosmic disturbance which disturbed the orderly process of events and human life. Atonement for sin did not remove the penalty of the disorder which sin has wrought. The sin of David was indeed the climactic point of change from his success to disaster. The consoling message of the penitential psalms is the possibility of man's repentance and reconciliation with Yahweh.

Ebed Yahweh

Atonement through a mediator, a man of God, chosen by Yahweh or especially pleasing to Him, whose intercession effected atonement, occurs in the Old Testament. His mediatory intercession is no more than a simple prayer that has no binding force on God (Gn. 18, 16-33; Ex. 9, 27f.; Jb. 33, 23f.). This personal manner of atonement is emphasized by the prophets, who were inclined to underplay external atonement and to preach an interior expiation through contrition, repentance and obedience to God's commandments (Is. 1, 10-20). Sometimes this was united with a juridical notion of atonement as in the payment of a debt achieved by carrying out a sentence (Is. 40, 2).

The highest spiritual approach of all Old Testament notions of atonement is found in the sacrifice of the suffering Servant of Yahweh (Is. 52, 13; 53, 12).¹⁶ The placation of divine wrath seems to have disappeared entirely and stress is laid on the guilt offering,

¹⁶ C. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956). An excellent historical and critical study.

the sacrifice of the life of the Servant. This expiation is not a liturgical action. The blood, in itself, no longer plays any role. The personal deeds of an innocent mediator, who stands in for the guilty and endures punishment due to sinners, effects their atonement by moving Yahweh to pity for his people.

But Yahweh was pleased to crush him with suffering; truly he offered his life as a guilt offering. He shall see a posterity, he shall enjoy length of days, the good pleasure of Yahweh shall prosper at his hand (Is. 53, 10).

This passage must have been read with a sense of profound mystery by the ancient Hebrews. Known as the Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant, it was composed during the last decade of the Babylonian exile (547-538 B.C.) by an anonymous prophet who delivered his message to his fellow exiles. The morale of the Hebrews in this period was low and they looked with fear toward the future. Their temple burned, their cities destroyed, they were confused and despondent. The prophet speaks to them of Yahweh's great redemptive act of deliverance from Egypt. This is about to be repeated in a second exodus from Babylon. St. Paul was to enrich this image when he compared our deliverance from sin to a new exodus from slavery.

Second Isaiah sings out that Israel's time of affliction is over and deliverance is at hand. God has not abandoned them. God had forgiven their sin and was about to speak to Israel's heart. Second Isaiah mentions Israel as the servant of God. Is the servant the historical Israel or an idealized Israel? Is he an individual living at the time of the prophet? Is he an individual of the future who will fulfill the destiny of Israel? Is it possible to combine the collective and individual in this image? It should be evident that no individual in history fulfills this description but Christ in his atonement. It also points to a purified Israel, the faithful remnant and the fulfillment of their destiny in Christ.

ATONEMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: EXPIATORY SACRIFICE

The concept of atonement in the Old Testament shows a progressive development in preparation for the good news of salvation

announced in the New Testament. The universal salvific work of atonement is consummated in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, by his passion, death and resurrection. The New Testament speaks of Christ's atonement both as an expiation (*ἱλασμός*) and as a reconciliation (*καταλλαγή*).

The precise role of suffering in the life of the Servant of Yahweh was, as we have seen, a profound mystery to the ancient Hebrew mentality. Israel itself for many centuries had no answer to the problem of suffering except humble submission to the ineffable wisdom of God. The preaching of the prophets, which emphasized the moral elements in the Old Testament doctrine of atonement in the sense of expiation, gave a believing Israel some understanding of the role of catastrophes in the purification and renovation of the people of God (Is. 30). This manner of thought is related to the Israelites' juridical sphere with its concept of satisfaction for sin and their pedagogical ideas which consider pain a necessary element in education.¹⁷

The oldest Christian preaching, both to the Jews and the pagans, as recorded in Acts frequently treated of the passion of Christ. This preaching explicitly treats of Christ's suffering and death as a trial laid upon him by God and victoriously sustained by him. The expiatory value of suffering is at least implicitly affirmed (Acts 2, 23ff.; 13, 17-41). According to the Synoptics an important part of Jesus' role as Messiah consists in his suffering and death in accomplishment of the divine will. After his resurrection Jesus made this perfectly clear to his disciples: "O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Christ have to suffer these things before entering into his glory" (Lk. 24, 25f.).

The theology of expiatory suffering comes to its high point in the epistles of St. Paul and particularly in his theology of the cross. For Paul the cross is the center of the salvation message. The vicarious atonement of the all innocent Jesus brings to mankind deliverance from sin, reconciliation with God, the conquest of death and all the cosmic powers of evil. The atoning message of the cross

¹⁷ Elihu speeches in Job.

does not conceal the humiliation of the suffering Christ (1 Cor. 1, 25; Heb. 2, 9f.). At the same time it is primarily a message of resurrection and of life (Heb. 2, 28; 9, 26).

The expiatory sense of atonement is most clearly given in Heb. 2, 17. Christ has become a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate (*ἱλάσκεσθαι*) for the sins of the people. The context shows that (*ἱλάσκεσθαι*) is not used in the sense of "to be gracious" but as a synonym for *LXX* (*ξειλάσκεσθαι*) which the *LXX* uses for *kippēr* "to make atonement for." St. Paul was skilled in the scriptures and trained by the rabbis. He presents Our Lord's atonement against a background of Hebrew wisdom.

Rom. 3, 25 speaks of "Christ Jesus whom God has set forth as a propitiation (*ἱλαστήριον*) by His blood"; although the meaning here connotes "a means of atonement for" since *ἱλαστήριον* is used regularly in the *LXX* to translate *kappōret*, propitiatory, mercy seat, there is probably an allusion here to the Old Testament rite in which the blood of the sacrificial victim was sprinkled on the propitiatory (Lv. 16, 14).

Christ himself is the perfect fulfillment of this Old Testament type, "the propitiatory." He was sprinkled on the cross with his own blood and not with the blood of sacrificial animals (1 Pt. 1, 18f.). He was set forth publicly in atonement for sin and not in a veiled manner as Yahweh revealed Himself to the high priest on the Day of Atonement.

According to the Greek usage of *ἱλαστήριον*, the gods, having become angry due to man's infidelity, were appeased and rendered benevolent by sacrifices. Paul uses the same metaphor but he understands it as a metaphor which did not imply any change in God and, still less, any power over God. Expiation had a definite meaning to the pagan mentality but Paul's terminology is to be taken in its original biblical setting.¹⁸

Lyonnet in an article entitled *Conception Paulinienne de la Rédemption* observes that, in the Old Testament, atonement con-

¹⁸ S. Lyonnet, *De Peccato et Redempione* (Romae: E Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1960) II, "De Vocabulario Redemptonis," 106ff.

sists in the removal of the guilt of sin, a purifying of the sinner's soul and a consequent reunion of the soul with God.¹⁹ It involves expiation and reconciliation. The essential element of the ritual of expiation was the blood of the sacrificial animal as is seen in the rabbinical adage: "There is no expiation without the flowing of blood."

Let us here note the role played by blood in earlier sacrifices, that of the paschal lamb and of the covenant. Lyonnet points out that the notion of redemption in St. Paul involves an allusion to two events to which these sacrifices are intimately connected: the deliverance from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai. It is also significant that the New Testament connects explicitly these two sacrifices with Christ.

In the ritual of the first Pasch the blood of the animal does not appease Yahweh but marks the homes of the chosen people for the exterminating angel. It separated Israel from the pagans. The paschal celebration was understood later as a figure of freedom from the slavery of sin. The Jews believed that by offering the paschal sacrifice they were purifying their homes.

In the sacrifice of the covenant as also in the paschal sacrifice, immolation is only preparatory and it was done by the servants (Ex. 24, 4). To Moses was reserved the essential rite of sacrifice, the pouring of blood on the altar and the aspersion of blood over the people. These twofold aspersions bear a resemblance to the pacts of friendship in which the bloods, which the extractants exchange, produce a psychic communion of the two parties. In the covenant of blood, which is symbolically the source of life, the blood is spread over the altar, the symbol of Yahweh, then on the people. Through contact with the source of life Yahweh and the people of Israel are united in one life.

Christ is referring to the mystical meaning of this sacrifice when he says in instituting the Eucharist: "This is my blood of the new covenant." The divine Savior clearly means that the blood of atonement would unite all men to God, making them His people, just as the blood of the old covenant had made the Israelites His people.

¹⁹ S. Lyonnet, "Conception Paulinienne de la Rédemption," *Lumière et Vie* 7 (1958) 35-66.

In the annual ritual of *Yom Kippur* the sevenfold aspersion of blood over the propitiatory, which was done by the high priest, was the main ritual. The purpose was to purify the Holy of Holies from all the faults of the people of God (Lv. 16, 16). By the ritual of atonement the tabernacle is purified and Yahweh returns to His people (Ezech. 10, 18). The purification of the tabernacle was a figure of the purification of the souls of the Israelites. God was reconciled with His people after this expiation which was acceptable to Him.

The Hebrews attributed to blood the role of purification and consecration. Blood, the carrier of life, is identified with life, which is an essentially divine reality in the Bible. In the holocaust, it was believed that the victim was not destroyed but rather was changed into an impalpable material, spiritualized, made capable of rising up to Yahweh.

To the Hebrew mentality sacrifices drew their principal value from the dispositions of the faithful who through their external gestures affirmed their interior desire to be at one with God and to renounce sin, the cause of their division from God. There is in the Old Testament a kind of prefiguration, in an imperfect way, of the perfect at-one-ment of Jesus in his obedience and love of Yahweh. As St. Paul says, the disobedience of Adam began the tragedy of sin and is opposed to the obedience of Christ through whom all are justified (Rom. 5, 19).

AT-ONE-MENT AS RECONCILIATION

It is impossible to discuss the notion of atonement as expiation without at the same time considering the notion of atonement as reconciliation. However, there are texts that more explicitly express the atonement work of Christ as a reconciliation of the sinner with God. St. Paul, above all the other New Testament writers, clearly and profoundly sets forth the doctrine of the sacrifice of Christ reconciling sinful man with God. The terms that he uses are καταλαγή "reconciliation" and ἀπο-καταλλάσσω "to reconcile." The fact that these terms occur only twelve times in all his writings shows that he does not lay the main stress on atonement in his doc-

trine of redemption. This is said in no way to denigrate the role of atonement, which characterizes the Pauline theology of the cross.²⁰

Where St. Paul uses the active form of the verb "to reconcile," he reveals atonement as primarily an act of God, Who of His own free will removed the enmity in man toward God. "But all things are from God, Who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5, 18). Man is not reconciled because of his dispositions. In the following passage St. Paul makes no mention of any previous change in man's dispositions. "For God was truly in Christ, reconciling the world to himself by not reckoning against man their sins and by entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5, 19).

When St. Paul uses the verb "to reconcile" in the passive sense, reconciliation of the sinner to God is presented primarily as an act of God's love and mercy for sinful humanity. "We exhort you for Christ's sake, be reconciled to God. For our sakes he made Him to be sin Who knew nothing of sin, so that in Him we might become the justice of God" (2 Cor. 5, 20-21). The stress here is given to the new state of man in relation to God, "the new creature" (2 Cor. 5, 17). Man, on his part, must freely cooperate and apply to himself this wonderful gift.

The atoning sacrifice of Jesus was a mystery of obedience and love of which the glorious resurrection is the outcome rather than the recompense (Phil. 2, 5-11). A central theme of the New Testament is that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus reconciling us with God is a work of love, the archetype of every Christian life: "Order your lives in charity, upon the model of that charity which Christ showed to us, when he gave himself up on our behalf" (Eph. 5, 2).

As the victim of the ancient sacrifice rose to God in the heavenward ascent of the smoke of the holocaust, so Christ by his act of

²⁰ L. Hartman-J. Heuschen "Atonement" in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible*, *op. cit.* 174. It is interesting to note that Lyonnet, in his treatment of the vocabulary of redemption, does not discuss the term *καταλλαγή*. A good deal of the content of our discussion of atonement as reconciliation, a work of obedience and love, is found in Lyonnet in his treatment of redemption as expiation.

love and obedience in his voluntary death returns to his Father and in him we all return and make our at-one-ment with the Father. We are reconciled with God. Lyonnet sums up by saying that, for St. Paul, to say Christ redeemed us is to say that he liberated us from the slavery of sin and purchased us for God. "This is well expressed in the English term at-One-ment."²¹

It is not that God is reconciled because of the prayers of men but rather that He shows himself conciliatory out of pure love and mercy. Christians must freely cooperate in this spirit of reconciliation "let yourselves be reconciled" (2 Cor. 5, 20). This concept of atonement as reconciliation is closely allied with St. Paul's doctrine of justification. The loving action of God not only declares a man justified and reconciled but makes him just and endows him with reconciliation with God. This is effected when a man is converted, when he accepts the gospel and is baptized (1 Cor. 6, 11).

SOME FALSE JURIDICAL CONCEPTS OF ATONEMENT

Lyonnet emphasizes that the Pauline vocabulary of redemption, although Hellenic, must be understood in the light of biblical categories. Thus, St. Paul calls Jesus the Savior (*σωτήρ*) in contrast to the illusory saviors of paganism.²² In its biblical context the term connotes vicarious atonement rather than purely penal expiation for sin. In pagan history the term *λύτρον* "liberation" concerns the ransom of a prisoner.²³ It designates either the price paid in exchange for freedom or the deliverance that it effected. Paul describes the redemptive work of Our Lord as a purchase or a repurchasing. It would appear that St. Paul is implying this pagan context of *λύτρον*. Since the servitude of sin is the enslavement to the devil, it would seem that the compensation is paid by Christ to Satan in exchange for our freedom.

This interpretation is contrary to the whole salvation message of the New Testament. Satan is nowhere pictured as having any right

²¹ S. Lyonnet, "Conception Paulinienne de la Rédemption," *Lumière et Vie*, 7 (1958).

²² S. Lyonnet, *De Peccato et Redemptione*, op. cit., 7f.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24f.

over man. It is not correct to say that St. Paul presents the redemption as a commercial transaction or an exchange in which the jailer frees a prisoner for a price. As we have already pointed out, St. Paul speaks of the redemption in the light of two great events in Hebrew history: the deliverance from the servitude of Egypt and the covenant at Sinai. The Jews loved to bring these two events together because they viewed them as complementary, as negative and positive aspects of a great mystery (Jer. 31, 32). In the Old Testament the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt was but the first phase of a salvific event which was attained in the covenant when Israel became the people of the Lord. So too, redemption is essentially positive as the redeemed become the people of God. For St. Paul, redemption in Christ Jesus means that he liberates us from the slavery of sin and purchases us for God.

A few Pauline texts might be rendered in favor of a juridical concept of atonement.²⁴ In Rm. 8, 3 it is said that God ". . . condemned sin in the flesh." Paul does not mean that God the Father condemned Christ but that Christ condemned Satan in his triumph over sin. The Apostle means no more in this text than when he said that Christ was ". . . born a subject of the law" (Gal. 4, 4). The divine Savior assumed our human nature and our condition with all its humiliations in order that in him man might return to the Father.

In the Epistle to the Colossians the sin of fallen man is called a debt. It is not certain that this is meant as a debt in respect to the law. Paul certainly has in mind the debt which the whole human race had contracted before God: the condemnation to eternal death. St. Paul does not say that Christ has paid the debt but only that God the Father ". . . has made us live again with His resurrected Son; He has pardoned us all our faults, erased the sentence of indebtedness, we had incurred from the law, completely taken it away from us and nailed it to the cross" (Col. 2, 14).

There is no explanation given here how God has removed the sentence. There is no reason, however, to say that it was by causing

²⁴ S. Lyonnet, "De Notione Redemptionis," *Verbum Domini*, 36, 3 (1958) 145-146.

the condemnation to be placed upon his Son. The reference to Christ's resurrection suggests that, by his death and resurrection, Christ goes beyond humiliation to spiritual glorification and we along with him. This does not connote purely penal expiation but rather vicarious atonement by obedience and love. This is the exaltation of the Old Testament figure of Israel's return to Yahweh, an essentially mystical return rather than a juridical exchange. Lyonnet finds in the parables of the prodigal son and the good shepherd in search of the lost sheep this theme of the merciful Atoner of the sins of mankind.²⁵

THE BIBLICAL NOTION OF THE ATONEMENT AND THE TEACHING OF ST. THOMAS

The presentation of the doctrine of the atonement in the light of present day biblical theology gives emphasis to atonement as a work of mercy and love of God for man. Silio de San Pablo, C.P., points out that it is true that atonement is a work of love but it is also a work of divine justice. It is realized without divine justice having to renounce any of its rights to satisfaction for sin.²⁶ Divine justice claims condign satisfaction. Since humanity cannot supply it either collectively or individually, divine mercy and love disposes the Incarnation to provide for it. Some modern Catholic authors deny this juridical element. Mersch, Hamman, De Montcheuil and those who agree with Rivièrre maintain that the penal element in the satisfaction of Christ is something merely accidental.

Rivièrre points out three trends in explaining the atonement of Christ.²⁷ (1) The punishment theory as proposed by Protestant thinkers, especially Calvin, holds that Christ was punished by God for our sins which he had taken upon himself. (2) The penal expiation theory admits that Christ freely took upon himself the penalties that he suffered but emphasizes the penal elements as an

²⁵ S. Lyonnet, *op. cit.*, 146.

²⁶ Silio de San Pablo, C.P., In XI Semana Teologica Espanolo, 1951, "La Enciclica Humani Generis," 459, 462.

²⁷ Rivièrre, "Redemption" in *DTC* 13, 1970-76. Cf. A. Vaughan, *The Nature & Necessity of Satisfaction According to the Mind of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rome, Gregorianum, 1954) 6-24. P. Grech, "Theoriae ad Explicandam Redemptionem" in *Doctor Communis* VIII, Romae, (1955) 91-96.

expiation and a restoration of order. This seems to have been defended by Christian Pesch, at least in his earlier writings. (3) The reparation theory stresses the importance of the free will offering of honor and glory by Christ to his Father through the love and obedience manifested in his atoning sufferings. This latter theory is divided into those who, like Rivi  re, stress the positive element of charity and those who, like Galtier, retain the penal element as necessary matter informed by charity.

Inasmuch as the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas is proposed by the Church as a constant guide in these complex questions, how does the Angelic Doctor consider the work of the atonement of Our Lord? St. Thomas is outstanding as the first great theologian who refuted the excessively juridical explanation of the satisfaction of Christ as presented by St. Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo*. St. Thomas teaches:

He properly atones for an offense who offers something which the offended one loves equally or even more than he detested the offense. But *by suffering out of love and obedience*, Christ gave more to God than what was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race. First of all, because of the exceeding charity from which he suffered; secondly on account of the dignity of his life which he laid down in atonement, for it was the life of One who was God and man; thirdly on account of the grief endured as stated above (Q. 46, a. 6). And therefore Christ's passion was not only a sufficient but a superabundant atonement for the sins of the human race. . . .²⁸

This presentation of satisfaction for sin in the atonement of Christ can hardly be classified as a rigid juridical approach. The imperative of love is evidenced. Christ atoned for the disobedience and ingratitude of men by his supreme obedience and love. For St. Thomas atonement is not merely a substitute for divine punishment. When St. Thomas speaks of vindictive justice and the atonement, he does so analogously. He is not saying that God has to punish the sinner like a human judge.

St. Thomas treats the atonement as satisfaction for sin, as Peter

²⁸ S.T. III, 48, 2.

Eder in his summary of St. Thomas' teaching on atonement points out.²⁹ Atonement presupposes an unbalance, an injustice in action, which arose by some injury. The relation to an antecedent offense is essential to the notion of the atonement. Its direct end is the restoration of justice, the reparation of friendship and love between God and the sinner. Since by the injustice of sin the divine justice and love has been injured.

St. Thomas' basic notion of sin describes it in terms of an action of man and its consequences from the human point of view. However, he does not neglect the aspect characteristic of revelation's descriptions of mortal sin as always and essentially an offense against God.³⁰ This is a notion that escaped the greatest of the pagan philosophers who treated moral evil only insofar as it is a violation of natural law and the order of reason. Theologians generally treat sin as an active and passive offense. Sin is active in respect to man, the sinner. It is passive in the sense that God is offended by sin. However, by reason of God's transcendence, God is incapable of receiving anything from man. The injustice of man's sin consists in a free distortion of the proper ordination, which man has for his terminus, the divine goodness itself.

Man's claim in justice to eternal life from God was actually constituted by his ordination to God, a consequence to the gift of baptism and his own meritorious acts, which are acts of justice relative to that end. So man's deliberate choice of deordination from God is the gravest of acts of injustice, resulting in a permanent state of injustice.³¹ Sin is principally an offense against the intrinsic goodness of God and not simply a deprivation of His external glory.

St. Thomas' notion of sin is fully in accord with the biblical notion as indeed is his insight that a cosmic disturbance results from sin. The Angelic Doctor teaches that sin is a rupture of cosmic order. It involves a disordering of the universe to God and a disordering of the parts of the universe to the perfection of the cosmos

²⁹ Peter Eder, *Suehne, Eine Theologische Untersuchung* (Wien: Herder Co., 1962).

³⁰ S.T. I-II, 72, 6, ad 5.

³¹ S.T. I, 48, 6; *De Malo* 1, 5.

as a whole.³² By this is not meant that sin destroys the order of divine providence because God directs all actions, good and bad, toward the attainment of the harmonious perfection of the whole.³³ It is false to put undue stress on the evil consequences of sin, since in its universal aspect evil will never outweigh the good. Thus the Church sings of the *felix culpa* of Adam, which was far outweighed by the goodness of the Incarnation, as Christ came to restore the order of God's justice and love.

St. Thomas teaches that the Incarnation is not necessary absolutely, since God is not necessitated by any creatures.³⁴ It is necessary only as the fulfillment of the free decree of God to liberate man from sin by the atonement of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. St. Thomas is at one with the teaching of the Council of Trent that the necessity for satisfaction for total remission of sin does not arise directly from the nature of sin as the necessity of full payment of a debt contracted by virtue of the injurious sinful act, a debt owed to divine vindictive justice. Nor does it arise from a need for full destruction of an evil resulting which otherwise would go unpaid.³⁵

Christ's vicarious atonement for sinful humanity was analogously a penal act as a perfect reversal of the sinful act of man.³⁶ Our one and only priest representing all humanity presents that humanity freely suffering and fighting against sin in himself to God and God in turn freely pours forth grace. This penal element of satisfaction corresponds to the victimhood of sacrifice and the repayment of honor corresponds to the priestly offering of the victim.

Christ atones in our stead by vicarious satisfaction in his real and mystical at-one-ment with us. This unity cannot be established unless the obstacle of sin be destroyed. It is precisely the Savior's vicarious satisfaction that performs this work of destruction as St. Thomas clearly explains:

Did the passion of Christ cause our salvation by way of merit?

³² *S.T.* III, 46, 2, ad 2.

³³ *S.T.* I, 48, 2.

³⁴ *S.T.* I, 19, 3.

³⁵ *C. of Trent*, sess. XIV, cap. 2-3, 8-9, can. 12-15.

³⁶ *IV Sent.* d. 15, q. 1, a. 4, q. 1.

I answer that, as we have said above, grace has been given to Christ, not only as an individual but as Head of the Church; that is to say, in order that it might flow from him into his members. Thus the actions of Christ have the same relation both to himself and to his members, as the actions of a man in the state of grace have to the man himself. But it is evident that any man in the state of grace who suffers for justice sake, by that very fact merits his own salvation, according to the text of St. Matthew: "Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice sake" (Matt. 5, 10). Wherefore by his passion Christ has merited salvation not only for himself but also for his members.³⁷

In this classical text, St. Thomas explains that it was not the suffering of an ordinary man but the suffering of him who is the Head, the new Adam of the human race, who contains all men mystically in him. Thus the sufferings of the Head were by their very nature fitted to effect the salvation of all the members. When Christ suffers, he is redeeming all mankind in his passion and death.

The passion of Christ causes the remission of sins by way of redemption. . . . The passion which he endured through *charity and obedience* is as it were a price; for by it he, as Head, delivered us, his members, from our sins. . . . For just as a natural body is one whole, composed of many members, so the whole Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is one person with its Head, Who is Christ.³⁸

These passages demonstrate the profound mystical understanding of the vicarious atonement of Our Lord as a work of mercy and of love. With the exception of a few eminent Thomists, they were to receive scant attention by the Scholastics, who appear to be more concerned whether the atonement was carried out according to the full rigor of law. Since the mystical questions dealt with the life of Christ, they were left to the exegetes. In our times when the rise of biblical theology gives emphasis to the atonement as a work of mercy and love, may we keep firmly in view the precise articulation

³⁷ *S.T.* III, 48, 1.

³⁸ *S.T.* III, 49, 1.

of this truth in the theological synthesis of charity and justice in the writings of the Common Doctor.

KENNETH F. DOUGHERTY, S.A.
St. Pius X Seminary
Garrison, New York