

## FORGIVENESS OF SINS WITHOUT JESUS

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When I was a young child, the story of salvation given to me by the Ursuline nuns at Holy Cross Grade School, was something so simple, so compelling, and so wonderful. Adam sinned and we inherited the consequences: God's grace dried up and the gates of heaven were sealed shut. For thousands of years, people were dying, but no one was able to get into heaven. Everyone was waiting for God to send a redeemer. Then, Jesus finally arrived and died for our sins on the cross. And, as my *Baltimore Catechism* so clearly demonstrated, at the moment that Jesus died on the cross, there, way up in the clouds, the gates of heaven were again being opened. Finally the souls of all the good people who had died could enter into heaven and be with God for all eternity.

I was a graduate student in theology before I first discovered that Jews did not have the vaguest notion that the gates of heaven had been sealed shut due to the sin of Adam.<sup>1</sup> Jesus, needless to say, appears to never to have made any reference to the gates of heaven or to original sin. Nor is this doctrine found in any of the apostolic preaching. Paul's notion of death coming into the world due to the first man (Rom 5:12) may be an initial step toward a doctrine of original sin, but it was not the touchstone by way of explaining how

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<sup>1</sup> See "Do Jews believe in the doctrine of original sin?" <http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/faq/faq123.html>

the gates of heaven were closed and how forgiveness of sins was impossible during the entire period of Jewish history prior to Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

### Salvation History that Overlooks God's History with Israel

Leaving these difficulties aside for the moment, an even greater defect appears from the vantage point of Jewish-Catholic dialogue. The drama of salvation incorporated in the *Baltimore Catechism*<sup>3</sup> is entirely devoid of any reference to Jews and Judaism. Seemingly eighteen hundred years of God's interactions with the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah amounted to nothing as far as salvation was concerned. This omission is a form of destructive silence: saying nothing is tantamount to obliterating the significance of Israel in God's plan of salvation.

Contrary to this destructive silence and misrepresentation of Judaism, it should not go unnoticed that, even in the Christian Scriptures, the drama of salvation is everywhere situated in relationship to Israel. This will be spelled out later in this essay. For the moment, however, let it suffice to note that the term "Israel"<sup>4</sup> appears in positive contexts no less than seventy times in the Christian Scriptures. Nor should it go unnoticed that, when Paul begins to argue for the inclusion of Gentiles in the drama of salvation, he does not fall back on any saying of Jesus but rather goes deep into the story of Abraham in order to argue that God, from the very beginning, had ordained "to make him [Abraham] the father of all who believe without being circumcised . . . and likewise the father of the circumcised" (Rom 4:11). Paul,

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Haag, *Is Original Sin in Scripture?*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969. By way of conclusion, Haag notes that "the doctrine of original sin is not found in any of the writings of the Old Testament" and "certainly not in chapter one to three of Genesis" (19).

<sup>3</sup> The *Baltimore Catechism* was produced as a result of the Council of Baltimore in 1884 and has served for the instruction of Catholics in the United States for four generations. It is an abbreviated version of the *Roman Catechism* that was produced in 1569 by way of propagating the decrees of the Council of Trent. It is superseded by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that corrects some of the deficiencies of both earlier catechisms by incorporating the teachings and the spirit of Vatican II.

<sup>4</sup> The term "Israel" never refers to the "State of Israel" or the "Land of Israel," but always to the people spiritually bound to the patriarchs and matriarchs, beginning with Abraham and Sarah. I say "spiritually bound" because it is evident that, in its long history, many outsiders (Gentiles or *goyim*) have become insiders without any genetic roots. The classical case is that of Ruth who, even after the death of her husband, attaches herself to Naomi saying, "Your people shall be my people, your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth, in due course, becomes the great grandmother of David. Even today, when outsiders embrace Judaism, the water immersion (baptism in a *miqva*) is understood as a death (to their old life) and a rebirth (as a son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah).

consequently, interprets his outreach to Gentiles as founded within Israel. When the totality of Paul is examined, it can be discovered that "Paul does not talk about a 'new, true Israel' and would never have applied the name of Israel at all to a purely Gentile Christian Church."<sup>5</sup> Nor should it go unnoticed that the bishops of Vatican II taught that "the Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his expressible mercy established the ancient covenant" (*Nostra Aetate*, 3).

The early Church Fathers regarded the revelations of the Hebrew Scriptures and the revelations of the Son of God as made out of the same whole piece of cloth. Justin Martyr puts the matter succinctly: "Formerly he [the Logos] appeared in the form of fire and the image of a bodiless being to Moses and the other prophets. But now . . . , he was, as I have said, made man of a virgin" (*1 Apol.* 63.16). The history of salvation, consequently, spans the whole of Jewish history. The drama begins with the Logos creating the world, then walking in the Garden with our first parents, then addressing the enmity between Cain and Abel, and so forth. Thus, even before Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob enter the picture, the *oikonomia* ("household plan" or "economy") of our salvation was unrolling according to the divine plan. In this vision of things, "the Incarnation represents only the high point of a permanent *oikonomia*."<sup>6</sup>

Irenaeus (130-200 C.E.), the bishop of Lyons, took the position of Justin and extended it by explaining that the work of salvation was a weighty endeavour that had to overcome difficulties on the part of humans and also difficulties on the part of the Logos. On the part of humans, they had to progressively learn the ways of God and gradually conform their lives thereto. On the part of the divine Logos, he had to familiarize himself with the ways of humans. Thus, the progressive ascent of humankind has to be met with a progressive descent of the eternal Logos. In both instances, the ascent and the descent pass through the whole history of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus, consequently, had no difficulty understanding that the synagogue as the mother of the Church. In the synagogue, the Torah "carried out the education of the soul" (*Adv. haer.* 4.13.2) in preparation for the freedom that would be revealed by Christ. Once revealed, however, Israel did not disappear. In fact, Irenaeus noted

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<sup>5</sup> Osten-Sachen, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, 147.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973, 161.

<sup>7</sup> For details of the descent and ascent in Irenaeus, see Danielou, *Gospel Message*, 168-182.

that “both slaves [Jews] and children [Christians] have a like devotion and obedience toward the head of the family; but the children have a greater boldness” (*Adv. haer.* 4.13.2).

For Irenaeus, consequently, the drama of salvation could not be told without telling the story of Israel. The divine Logos could not appear in human history without a progressive descent into the human condition. Judaism, in its turn, progressively pioneered the education of the soul in response to the Logos such that a people were ready to hear and to receive the advance stage in spiritual evolution revealed by Jesus Christ. Just as it is arrogant and dangerous today for humans to ignore their dependence upon their biological ancestors, in like fashion it is arrogant and dangerous for Christians to ignore their dependence upon their spiritual ancestors.

For over fifteen hundred years, Catholics were forbidden to enter a synagogue and, with even greater force, were forbidden to pray with Jews. In 1986, John Paul II broke a long-standing barrier when he visited the principal synagogue in Rome. It was on this occasion that John Paul II spoke of the “common spiritual patrimony that exists between Jews and Christians” (a theme already present in *Nostra Aetate*) and then confirmed, for those Jews present, that “you are our dearly beloved brothers, and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers”<sup>8</sup>

*Thesis One: The Christian Churches, misled by their triumphalism, have imagined that salvation history begins with the fall in the Garden and then jumps immediately to the birth of Jesus Christ. This is the heresy of the Gentiles whereby the importance of Jews and Judaism in God’s plan of salvation has been either systematically distorted or passed over in silence. Fidelity to Jesus and to the early Church requires that Christians return to their roots (a) by embracing Abraham and Sarah as our spiritual forebears and (b) by acknowledging the salvation history of Israel as the sine qua non for the descent of the Logos into humanity and for our ascent to the holiness of the children of God.*

### **Exploring Universal Claims Relative to Jesus’ Death**

While the Catholic Church has not officially endorsed any specific soteriology, the most popular by far is the theology whereby God forgives all sins due to the merits of Christ’s passion on the cross. During my eight years at Holy Cross Grade School in Euclid, Ohio, I

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<sup>8</sup>*New York Times* (4/14/86) sec. 1, p. 4. Michael S. Kogan rightly noted that “the pope’s statement recognized both that the validity of Christianity rests upon the prior validity of Judaism and that the two faiths remain siblings today in a unique relationship that clearly must involve the mutual recognition of the continuing validity of each”: *Journal of Theological Studies* 26/4 (1989) 704.

recall vividly how we knelt on the wood floor next to our benches every morning and faced the large crucifix above the blackboard as we recited our morning prayers. On Fridays in Lent, we were herded into the Church and confronted with an even more vivid reminder of the drama of our salvation. The Stations of the Cross consisted in fourteen graphically depicted sufferings of Jesus, which covered the sidewalls of Holy Cross Church. At the beginning of each station, Fr. McMonigle, vested in his sombre black cope, called out in a loud voice, "We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee." All of us children then dropped to our knees and answered in a deafening chorus, "Because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world!"

The Church Fathers had no uniform way of accounting for the efficacy of Jesus' death. Athanasius (d. 363), for example, depicted Jesus as entering into a wrestling match with the Devil. At the end of the match, Jesus was done in by the Devil, but, given the ferociousness of the match, the Devil was considerably weakened and exhausted - thereby allowing the disciples of Jesus to overcome him (*De Incarnatione* 8, 24, and 27). Augustine (d. 430), in his day, depicted the Devil as tempting Jesus, becoming frustrated, and savagely killing his body because he could not touch his soul. Yet, this was a divine plot to lure the Devil into overstepping his proper rights by killing the innocent. God, consequently, was then free to legally penalize the Devil by taking from him those persons whom he had claimed as his own (*On Free Will* 3.10.31).

Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) formulated a soteriology based on the claim that all sins in every time and in every place were forgiven *exclusively* due to the passion and death of Jesus. Anselm was a pastor doing pastoral theology. In his day, Anselm was disturbed by the prevailing notion that the devil was given such an important role in the drama of salvation and he set about to use the medieval notions of honour and fealty to reconstruct the drama of salvation. In this drama, the devils were no longer the chief antagonists, but it was the offended honour of God the Father that had to be appeased. Anselm's theological speculation and intellectual persuasiveness, key traits of the on-the-way-to-be-invented scholastic method, proved so compelling that he became the chief contender for accounting for the efficacy of the cross.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>In both Catholic and Protestant circles today, some form of substitutionary atonement is generally heralded as the principal mode for accounting for the importance of Jesus as our redeemer. Only in the Eastern Orthodox Churches does one find a primacy being given to the incarnational theologies of the Church Fathers and the continued insistence that "Christ became human in order that humans may become divine."

Thomas Aquinas, working more than a century later, spoke of the merits and the efficacy associated with the incarnation and the preaching of Jesus; yet, when it came to considering the passion, he entirely slipped into the path of penal substitution that Anselm had trod before him. Thus, according to Aquinas, "If he [God] had willed to free man from sin without any satisfaction, he would have acted against justice" (III 46, 6, ad 3). While the middle ages had invented gruesome forms of prolonged torture, Aquinas had no difficulty in affirming that "Christ's passion was the greatest pain ever suffered" (III 46, 6). In the end, therefore, "Christ's passion was not only sufficient but superabundant atonement for the sins of the human race" (III 48, 2).

While the late middle ages saw the creation of numerous dogmatic syntheses, the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas gradually came to be preferred in most circles. The *Roman Catechism* produced in 1568 following the Council of Trent was thus massively dependent upon Aquinas. The *Baltimore Catechism* produced in the United States in 1858, in its turn, was a brief version of the *Roman Catechism* that served for the religious formation of American Catholics for four generations prior to Vatican II. In this latter *Catechism*, the penal atonement theory of Anselm is presented as the sole explanatory matrix for delineating Jesus' identity and purpose. Protestant catechisms invariably assimilated variations of this and, accordingly, have also focused their attention upon Jesus' death on behalf of our sins.

### **Expansions in the Number of those Rescued from Hades**

At first, the efficacy of Jesus' preaching and healing mission was limited to those living persons who had encountered him or his immediate disciples and responded to "the Good News of God." With time, the death of Jesus was perceived to have some benefit to everyone then living: "He [Jesus Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). By the opening of the second century, some sectors of Christianity went even further and explored ways to extend the benefits of Jesus to those who had already died. In these scenarios, Jesus' death afforded the occasion for him to be able to offer his message to those who had died and were abiding in Hades awaiting the general resurrection of the dead on the last day. Hades was the mythical abode of the dead - a borrowing from Hellenistic culture - and should be understood as quite distinct from what the medievalists identified as "hell." The original intent of "he was not abandoned to Hades" in a sermon in Acts (2:31) was to reinforce the

reality of the death of Jesus prior to his resurrection. In 1 Peter, however, one finds the phrase "Christ also suffered for sins" (3:18) being used in connection with the explanation that "he was put to death in the flesh . . . and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison" (3:18f). Those to whom he preached, however, are expressly limited to those who "did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark" (3:20). The suffering and death of Jesus thus afforded him a few days in Hades wherein he "made a proclamation" to those who drowned at the time of Noah's flood. The implied meaning here appears to be that those who died in the flood without the benefit of a prophet's warning were now permitted to benefit from the Jewish prophet Jesus.

In the mid-first century, Justin Martyr (d. c. 162 C.E.) again makes reference of Jesus' mission to those who had died. In this case, however, it is not the sinners of Noah's generation who are recipients of the Good News but the Jews who had died: "The Lord God remembered his dead people of Israel who lay in their graves, and he descended to preach to them his salvation" (*Dial.* 72.4). In the early second century, Clement of Alexandria further extended the mission to the dead. In his way of thinking, Jesus preached his Good News to the righteous Jews in Hades (as just noted), and, the Apostles, following their deaths, preached to the philosophers who had lived righteous lives (*Strom.* VI, 6:45, 5). Thus, 1 Peter, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexander form something of the stepping stones whereby the efficacy of Jesus' preaching was gradually understood to have reached backward in time to liberate even those who had died. At each step, the outreach is extended.

The third-century *Gospel of Bartholomew* dramatizes Jesus' foray into Hades. The Gospel portrays the King of Glory as menacingly descending the stairway of a thousand steps into the underworld. Hades, the god of the underworld, trembles as he descends. Having arrived, Jesus "shattered the iron bars" and pummeled Hades "with a hundred blows and bound him with fetters that cannot be loosed" (19). Here now, one has a commando rescue operation designed to save "Adam and all the patriarchs" (9). Jesus specifically says to Adam, "I was hung upon the cross for your sake and for the sake of your children" (22). Jesus' death is here understood, not as a penal substitution, but as the necessary means for gaining access to the underworld whereby he might destroy the power of Hades and release those who were imprisoned by demonic powers. Hades is the pagan god guarding the underworld. By destroying Hades, Jesus was able to release not only the generation of Noah but also all

generations going all the way back to Adam himself. The intent of this narrative appears to be that those who died were not to be forever disadvantaged because they did not have a chance to hear Jesus' preaching. Furthermore, the narrative shows that Hades has been defeated and that those who died need no longer live in despair (since the bars of their imprisonment have been destroyed). This does not mean, of course, that everyone at the final judgment will be admitted into Paradise since, even on earth, only a small number of the living who heard the message of Jesus reformed their lives and anticipated the coming Kingdom of God. The *Gospel of Bartholomew* marks a high point, however, in so far as the scope of Jesus' message has been extended backward all the way to Adam. This would seemingly imply that those who did not hear the Good News during their lifetimes had the opportunity to hear it in the afterlife. It was with this intent that "he descended into Hades" was added to the Apostles' Creed during the 4<sup>th</sup> cen.<sup>10</sup> The outreach of Jesus' preaching of the Good News was thus extended back in time to the first humans.

What is plain to observe, however, is that the *Gospel of Bartholomew* firmly centres the efficacy of Jesus upon his preaching mission—"that I might come down on earth to heal the sin of the ignorant and give to men the truth of God" (65). Jesus' death is only by way of conquering Death and liberating those imprisoned by Hades. Secondly, Barnabas knows nothing of inherited sin or of the Gates of Paradise being forever closed. In line with the other Church Fathers, it was the Gates of Hades that needed to be broken down in order for God's plan of liberation to take place not only on earth but in the underworld as well. The mercy of God and the universal availability of salvation were thus triumphantly emphasized.

### **The Medieval Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas**

Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), along with other medieval theologians, attempted to consolidate and to harmonize the diverse traditions of the first five centuries. According to Aquinas, Jesus descends into the underworld, not to break the bars of those imprisoned there, but to gather the elect and to lead them into the gates of heaven that have been opened due to his atoning death on the cross. The underworld, at this point, is still being understood as the abode of all the dead,

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<sup>10</sup> The Apostles' Creed represents the Church's 2<sup>nd</sup> cen. summary statements of belief. *Rufinus*, in *The Exposition of the Creed* (ca. 400 A.D.), makes note of the fact that "descended into Hades" did not exist in the Roman version of the Creed. Hence, this phrase must have been added to the Apostle's Creed sometime in the fourth century. This would place it in the same era as the *Gospel of Bartholomew*.



both the righteous and the sinners. Now, however, fire torments are introduced. The souls of those who are damned are already in torment. The souls of those destined to be saved by Jesus experience only a temporal punishment calculated to purify them from their former sins. Fire for them is purgatorial and, in due course, later centuries will make a clear distinction in place between those in Purgatory and those in Hell. This need not concern us here. For our purposes, we need only to note that Jesus' descent into Hades/hell has come full circle. Jesus comes not just to preach to the generation of the flood as in 1 Peter. Nor does Jesus mount a commando raid to break down the gates of Hades. Rather, Jesus' death opens the Gates of Heaven, and his descent into hell is specifically to take those who have lived righteously and to carry them up, with him, into heaven. In Acts, Jesus ascends alone into heaven and waits, at the right hand of God, for the time of his return. In Aquinas, all the righteous, from Adam on forward - no matter what their religious affiliation - are carried by the resurrected Jesus into heaven where they can enjoy the Beatific Vision. When Jesus returns at the end times, all of these saints will come to earth with him, their bodies will be resurrected from the grave, and both the living and the dead will be judged at the final judgment. Then the righteous will enter into eternal joy and the unrighteous into eternal torment.

According to the medieval tradition, the mythical "gates of heaven" were permanently closed following the sin of Adam (*Summa Theologica* II-II 164, 2). This enforces the logic of Anselm pertaining to the universality of sin (both original and actual sins) and the utter inability of anyone to atone for their own sins. But then salvation arrives: "The gate of heaven's kingdom is thrown open to us through Christ's passion" (III 49, 5). Here, again, Aquinas notes that not even the Jewish patriarchs who were sinless were able to enter into heaven: "The holy fathers were detained in hell for the reason that, owing to our first parent's sin, the approach to the life of glory was not open" (III 52, 5).

Aquinas not only presents Jesus as descending into hell to rescue the righteous; he also has Jesus achieving on the cross those infinite merits that are required for the universal atonement of all sins, from Adam's first sin to the last sin on earth at the end of time.<sup>11</sup> Even

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<sup>11</sup> The *Roman Catechism* endorsed the Thomistic perspective saying, "Christ the Lord descended into hell that, having seized the spoils of the devils, he might conduct into heaven those holy fathers and other pious souls liberated from prison" (1.6.q.6). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeats the message of Trent placing an emphasis upon the fact that "the Gospel was preached even to the dead" (sec. 632 &

relative to the Jews, Aquinas says: "The holy fathers [of Israel], by doing works of justice, merited to enter the heavenly kingdom through faith in Christ's passion . . ." (III 49, 5, ad 1). The deliverance of the Jewish patriarchs, consequently, was not due to their assimilation of the faith of Abraham or to their lifelong fidelity to God; rather, it is "through faith and charity, [that they] were united to Christ's passion" (III 52, 7). Jesus' death, consequently, provides a store of merits that reach backward in time and serve to justify the Jewish saints. No one can gain entrance into heaven without faith in Christ's passion – Jews included.

### Whether Jews Know Forgiveness apart from Jesus

Such a scheme of things enforces the utter bankruptcy of Judaism. Without saying it in so many words, the synthesis of Thomas Aquinas takes the entire tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures regarding the readiness of God to forgive and turns it on its head. Consider, for example, Psalm 32:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Ps 32:1-5).

What one discovers here is the assurance of forgiveness for those who turn back to the Lord and acknowledge their sin. Quite independent of any question of the efficacy of sacrificial rites or of acts of atonement (by oneself or by another), Israel has always believed that the act of *teshuvah* ("turning back") insures God's forgiveness.<sup>12</sup> The

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634 following 1 P 4:6). This event is interpreted in universal and eschatological terms: "This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men [women] of all times and places . . ." (sec. 634). The implication here appears to be that when Christ returns on the Last Day and releases the dead from the prison of death in order to hear the Good News, this will be the final realization of the universal mission of Christ implied in the earlier "condensed in time" descent into hell following his death on the cross.

<sup>12</sup>E.P. Sanders, after making an extensive study of this topic, summarizes by noting that "the universal view [of the rabbis] is that every individual Israelite who indicates his [her] intention to remain in the covenant by repenting, observing the Day of Atonement and the like, will be *forgiven* for all his transgressions" (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 182).

medieval Christian tradition, however, would say the psalmist was sorely mistaken.<sup>13</sup>

In the Hebrew Scriptures one finds hundreds of instances wherein sins are forgiven. In the case of David, one remembers how the prophet Nathan confronted the king with the parable that served to expose his treachery in having Uriah killed in battle such that he could lay claim to his wife (2 Sam 12:2-4). David responds quickly and unambiguously, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13). Once David has confessed his guilt, then the prophet offers God's consolation: "Now the Lord has put away your sin. . ." (2 Sam 2:13b). The classical Christian tradition, however, would say that the prophet Nathan was misled by a deceiving spirit for no sin was forgiven for any Jew, David included, prior to or independent of the death of Jesus. Alternately, a Christian might want to credit David's forgiveness as true but only in so far as God anticipated the atoning death of Jesus, which came a thousand years later. Either way, the message is clear—the Hebrew Scriptures are false and need to be reinterpreted by the atoning death of Jesus.

### **Whether the Gospels Speak of Forgiveness apart from Jesus**

In the Gospels one also finds a challenge to the theology of the atoning death. When the Gospels speak of John "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3 and par.), this accords well with the prevailing Jewish tradition of forgiveness following upon repentance. Yet no mention of Jesus' death is made in this place. Later, even Jesus said to the man who was a paralytic, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (5:21). In this instance, if Jesus had studied the *Baltimore Catechism*, he should have said, "Friend, your sins will be forgiven once the Son of Man is lifted up on the cross."

As for Jesus' parables of the kingdom, none of them make any mention of the fall of Adam in the Garden and the impossibility of attaining atonement for sins prior to Jesus' death. In fact, none of them focus upon the passion of Jesus as opening up the Gates of

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<sup>13</sup>Within Judaism, sins were understood as freely forgiven by God. According to Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, even God was not free to forgive sins unless some suitable satisfaction was made for the loss of honour inflicted on the deity. While the early Church Fathers would have understood sorrow and penance as serving to effect such satisfaction, Anselm argued that such deeds done by humans were already expected by God and, hence, incapable of restoring the lost honour. In an absolute sense, therefore, Anselm argued that no sin (along with the satisfaction due to sin) could be forgiven without appealing to and transferring the merits of Christ's death on the cross.

Heaven. The Parable of the Prodigal Son goes to the extreme of having the son who squandered half of his father's resources with loose women return home in order to find his father running to him and pardoning him even before he gets a chance to confess his failings. According to the terms of this parable, the son feels that his sins are unpardonable, and he can only expect, at best, to get a job: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands" (Luke 15:18f). The thrust of Jesus' parable, however, is to demonstrate that the love of our Father in heaven exceeds the weight of our sense of being beyond forgiveness. In its essence, Jesus' parable dramatizes the Jewish notion that God is and has always been ready to forgive his children. Parables found among the rabbis capture the same lesson.<sup>14</sup> When all is said and done, therefore, the classical Christian tradition would have to end up saying that even Jesus was sorely mistaken when it came to the issue of forgiveness of Jewish sins.

### Recent Criticism of Substitutionary Atonement

Within the last twenty years, the soteriology of the atoning death has fallen upon hard times.<sup>15</sup> To begin with, God's threat of death (Gen 2:17) directed toward his own children in the Garden strikes modern ears as a cruel and excessive punishment for a single infraction of eating the forbidden fruit.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, studies by Herbert Haag,

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<sup>14</sup>To date, there have been many fine studies of how the rabbis taught in parables in much the same way as did Jesus. Especially noteworthy are the following: Harvey K. McArthur, et al., *They Also Taught in Parables*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990; Clemens Thoma, et al., eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, New York: Paulist, 1989; Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, New York: Paulist, 1989.

<sup>15</sup> The theological, biblical, and pastoral deficiencies of the substitutionary atonement is an immense topic. In what follows, I can only touch the surface. Readers who want an in-depth and very readable introduction to the topic might want to go to David Heim, "Rethinking the Death of Jesus," <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3167> or I. Howard Marshall, "The Theology of the Atonement," [http://www.eauk.org/theology/key\\_papers/Atonement/upload/ihowardmarshall.pdf](http://www.eauk.org/theology/key_papers/Atonement/upload/ihowardmarshall.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Some of the early Church Fathers (Irenaeus, Origen) regarded Adam and Eve as literally children growing up in their Parent's Garden. Being children, the "fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17) was naturally inaccessible to them; yet, God planted this tree in the middle of the Garden because he definitely wanted them to eat of it when he discerned that they were ready. As often happens, however, children rush ahead and seize adult ways prematurely. According to Origen, Eve's initiative merely represents the well-known case that girls mature earlier than boys. The serpent in this narrative is not what will later be identified as Satan in disguise (Wis 2:27; Rev 20:2) but the wisdom figure of ancient cultures. The serpent, accordingly, reveals quite rightly to Eve that by touching the fruit, she will not die—on the contrary, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be

demonstrate that “the idea that Adam’s descendants are automatically sinners because of the sin of their ancestor . . . is foreign to Holy Scripture.”<sup>17</sup> As Martin Buber would have it, the descendants of Adam sinned “as Adam sinned and not because Adam sinned.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the notion that forgiveness for the guilty must be achieved at the price of torturing the innocent runs the risk of supporting a very dubious and unbiblical notion of divine justice. Accordingly, Stephen Finlay notes quite pointedly: “It does us no good to perceive Jesus as heroic if we are forced to view God as sadistic.”<sup>19</sup> Richard Rohr, meanwhile, in his retreats and homilies, tells his hearers: “As our own Franciscan scholar John Duns Scotus taught, Jesus did not need to die. There was no debt to be paid. Jesus died to reveal the nature of the heart of God.”<sup>20</sup> Feminist theologians, for their part, alert us that classical soteriology espouses a sadistic case of “divine child abuse.”<sup>21</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, in equally telling terms, concludes his study of the topic of suffering by saying, “First of all, we must say that we are not redeemed thanks to the death of Jesus but despite it.”<sup>22</sup>

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opened [so as to discern good and evil] and you will be like God” (Gen 3:5). They ate and “the eyes of both were opened” (Gen 3:7)—just as the serpent revealed. The fact that they notice, for the first time, that they are naked only demonstrates that they are indeed seeing with adult eyes (and have lost the innocence of childhood). Then, once God discovers what has happened, he does not curse them. How could he? Rather, God says, “See, the man [lit., “earthling] has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:22). Thus, God excludes them from the Garden lest they might also eat of the tree of life and live forever. In so doing, God, acting like a prudent father, gets Adam ready for the curses of farming, and Eve is prepared for the curses of childbearing. In brief, Adam and Eve enter into the adult world wherein their Parent will no longer do everything for them. Before they go, however, God performs one last act of loving kindness: “And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.”

<sup>17</sup>Herbert Haag, *Is Original Sin in Scripture?*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969, 106.

<sup>18</sup>Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, New York: Macmillan, 1951, 158.

<sup>19</sup>Stephen Finlay, *Problems with Atonement*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005, 97.

<sup>20</sup>Richard Rohr, O.F.M., “Learning From the Cross,” <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/EDC/ag0301.asp>. For more details on Duns Scotus, see <http://www.franciscans.org.uk/2001jan-mulholland.html>

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Rita Nakashima Borck, “And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carol R. Bohn, New York: Pilgrim, 1989, 42-61.

<sup>22</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, New York: Seabury, 1980, 729.

In India, one also finds resistance to atonement theories. In a review of Robin Boyd's *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (1969), the reviewer summarizes the *status questionis* thusly:

Indian theologians . . . , steeped as they have been in Vedanta and bhakti, have tended to go light on such concepts as atonement and propitiation. So for [Keshab Chandra] Sen [d. 1884], the Cross is regarded as a *beautiful emblem of self-sacrifice* (p. 246). The *doctrine of penal substitution is not found*, says Boyd. Indian theologians have found it difficult to accept. Such suffering seems to contradict the idea of justice implicit in karma, where everyone must suffer for his own sins.<sup>23</sup>

*Thesis Two: Classical substitutionary atonement theories, ignoring the Jewish experience of God as a benevolent father, have imagined that God was somehow unwilling or unable to forgive sins beginning with the sin of Adam and going all the way to the moment that his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross. Furthermore, both Catholic and Protestant Churches have exaggerated the universal significance of Jesus' death by imagining that no sin, whether original or actual, could ever be entirely forgiven and atoned for without appeal, in faith, to the infinite merits of Jesus. This is the heresy of the Gentiles that emerged as Christianity broke free of the guidance and wisdom of Israel. Fidelity to Jesus and to the early Church require that Christians return to their sources in order to again reenvision God as lavishly open to forgiveness without any reference to the death of Jesus. Even the parables and activities of Jesus reinforce such a view. As for Gentile converts to Christianity, it is entirely understandable that they would celebrate their own graced teshuvah as coming to them entirely due to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They should not be deceived into imagining, however, that the atonement of Jewish sins must always and everywhere be funneled through the name, the person, and the merits of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Johnson, a review of Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Rev. Ed. 1975, New Delhi: ISPCK and Trivandrum: Indian Theological Library, 1969, <http://www.bhaktivani.com/volume2/number4/boyd.html>

<sup>24</sup> In brief, the failure Cardinal Ratzinger's *Dominus Jesus* does not lie in its endeavour to explain how it is that divine grace appears outside the visible boundaries of the Church. Rather, having done so, this treatise makes the error of assuming that (a) God's redemption can be entirely captured by the atonement for sins and (b) that the death of Jesus alone can accomplish this atonement. It then follows that the divine grace outside the visible boundaries of the Church must *always and everywhere* be the grace of Christ. In the case of early Israel, therefore, one has to further imagine that the sins of Israel were forgiven due to the *anticipated merits* of Jesus Christ. The moment (a) that God's forgiveness is received independent of Jesus and (b) that Israel is seen as the first recipient of salvation, then the whole argument of *Dominus Jesus* falls apart like a house of cards.

## Conclusion

My conclusions are disturbing even to myself. How far I have come from the teenager joining in the roar of the crowd that proclaimed, "Because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world!" The *Baltimore Catechism* that I then used entirely passed over two thousand years of salvation history. Jews were seen not as "the first to believe" but as "the first to betray" God. Salvation, meanwhile, was narrowly rescripted to mean "the forgiveness of sins" and the "opening of the gates of heaven" - realities that were given central and universal importance completely ignoring God's abiding love and enduring promises to Israel. In this climate, it was easy and natural for me, an impressionable Catholic youth, to pity (and even to despise) Jews.

I take courage in the fact that Vatican II began to extract the poison that infected my Church. It is not enough, however, to acknowledge with Paul that "Jews remain very dear to God" (*Nostra Aetate* 4) and to insist that we share "a common spiritual heritage" (*Nostra Aetate* 4) when, as this essay makes clear, Catholics have hardly begun to gauge the carefully disguised ways in which our ancestors have distorted the faith of the early Church in favour of a false gospel. The two theses in this essay (a) expose how the preaching of the Gospel has been poisoned and (b) suggest remedial steps whereby this poison can be purged. For far too long, the salvation history of the Christian Churches has been truncated and the abundant forgiveness of God among the Jewish people has been falsified. Unless this is remedied, our relationship with Judaism will remain distorted and our outreach to the Gentiles will tacitly dispose our converts to doubt God's mercy and forgiveness and salvation among his beloved people, Israel. On the other hand, once these defects are remedied, not only Judaism but the rich variety of Asiatic religions as well will more easily be reinvisioned as the arena of God's gracious forgiveness and saving action.