

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

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Introduction: Who is the Heir of the Ancients?

‘When we ask what the precise nature of this vicarious activity of Christ was, we find Nicene theologians regularly falling back upon familiar biblical and liturgical terms like ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation to describe it, but always with a deep sense of awe before the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the blood of Christ. They used these terms, however...to refer, to not any external transaction between God and mankind carried out by Christ, but to what took place *within the union of divine and human natures in the incarnate Son of God.*’¹

‘Atonement thus occurs for the Fathers through the dynamic of the incarnation itself, not by way of some extrinsic theory, i.e., satisfaction, penal substitution, and so on. Why, one wonders, did theology subsequently fail to reflect this? I am not sure. Part of the reason, I suspect, lies in how the incarnation came to be largely understood. With focus on the miracle of God becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus, the saving significance of the rest of Jesus’ life was overshadowed. With focus returned, so to speak, on the Cross, the climactic end of Jesus’ life, the impression *de facto* was that the real meaning of God’s identification lay at the beginning and at the end, not in the entire range of Jesus’ life.’²

Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, the authors of the recent book *Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, claim that penal substitutionary theory stretches back to the earliest fathers of the church.³ Of these early theologians, they impressively cite Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165), Eusebius of Caesarea (275 – 339), Hilary of Poitiers (c.300 – 368), Athanasius of Alexandria (c.297 – 373), Gregory ‘the Theologian’ of Nazianzus (c.330 – 390), Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397), John Chrysostom (c.350 – 407), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444), Gelasius of Cyzicus (fifth century), Gregory the Great (c.540 – 604). They then proceed to quote Thomas Aquinas (c.1225 – 1274), John Calvin (1509 – 64), and then others from the Reformed tradition. My focus here involves correcting their misunderstanding about the early theologians. They express some nervousness about whether penal substitution is historically attested in early church history, and their reason for hoping it can be vindicated:

‘The question of historical pedigree has acquired a further significance in recent years, for increasing numbers of people are suggesting penal substitution is a novel doctrine, invented around the time of the Reformation by a church that was (it is alleged) drifting ever further from the biblical faith of the early church Fathers. This is a serious challenge. To put the matter bluntly, we ought to be worried if what we believe to be a foundational biblical truth remained entirely undiscovered from the days of the apostles right up until the middle of the sixteenth century. At the very least, such a discovery would undermine the idea that penal substitution is clearly taught in the Bible. On the other hand, it would be immensely reassuring to find that our understanding of the Bible has indeed been the consensus of Christian orthodoxy for almost two millennia.’⁴

But scholarly opinion weighs against these authors. Most theologians and historians of the early church believe that the early church was united in upholding the broad Christus Victor theory for over a millennium. The varied language of Jesus as a healer, ransom, deliverer, and conqueror was used to denote Jesus being victorious over human sinfulness, death, and the devil.⁵ Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was victorious on our behalf and for our salvation. I am calling this view ‘ontological substitution,’ or ‘medical

¹ T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1983), p.168. I am indebted to this work, especially p.161 – 168, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), for the citations in this section.

² Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm; Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

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

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.162

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

substitution,’ although Eastern Orthodox theologian Stephen Freeman prefers ‘therapeutic substitution,’ and Reformed theologian T.F. Torrance calls it ‘total substitution.’ It was only Anselm of Canterbury who first articulated an atonement theory that positioned Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of ‘an attribute’ of God. In Anselm’s theory, Jesus satisfied God’s *honor*, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a ‘treasury of merit’ others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus. However, Anselm paved the way for John Calvin and others to position Jesus as satisfying God’s *retributive justice*, which became a broader category that was extended across people and across time, and which was understood in such a way that Jesus exhausted God’s wrath at one time, upholding God’s retributive justice on their behalf. Unlike Anselm’s theology where Jesus satisfied God’s honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin’s theology positioned Jesus against God’s justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.

In this essay, I will shed light on why I believe these three authors misunderstand the theological thought of the earliest Christian theologians, especially those at the Council of Nicaea. They were not advocates of the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Instead, they held what I am calling ‘medical substitution,’ which is an aspect – and in my opinion, the *foundation* – of the *christus victor* understanding. This position is the view that Jesus had to physically assume fallen human nature, unite it to his divine nature, overcome temptation throughout his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, and defeat the corruption within his human nature at his death, in order to raise his human nature new, cleansed, and healed, so he could ascend to the Father as humanity’s representative and share the Spirit of his new humanity with all who believe. That rather long-winded sentence can be boiled down to the saying that was popular with Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others: ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ God must assume to Himself what He intends to heal. Hence if God intends to heal the entire human being, He must assume the entire human being in Christ. My comparison of the two theological doctrines and their significance can be found in separate essays. This particular essay focuses on the atonement theology of the early church fathers.

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

Historical Context and Significance

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

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

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

⁶ Ibid, p.163

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

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

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

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

¹¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.5

Ignatius' Epistles

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

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

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

To the Ephesians, Ignatius writes:

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

The shorter version of this section reads:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christ our Lord.’¹⁸

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

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

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

‘Not that I know there is anything of this kind among you; but I put you on your guard, inasmuch as I love you greatly, and foresee the snares of the devil. Wherefore, clothing yourselves with meekness, be ye renewed in faith, that is the flesh of the Lord, and in love, that is the blood of Jesus Christ. Let no one of you cherish any grudge against his neighbour. Give no occasion to the Gentiles, lest by means of a few foolish men the whole multitude [of those that believe] in God be evil spoken of. For, ‘Woe to him by whose vanity my name is blasphemed among any’ [Isaiah 52:5].’¹⁹

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

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

The longer version adds some remarkable amplification:

‘Now I write these things unto you, not that I know there are any such persons among you; nay, indeed I hope that God will never permit any such report to reach my ears, He ‘who spared not His Son for the sake

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

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

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

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

of His holy Church' [Romans 8:32]. But foreseeing the snares of the wicked one, I arm you beforehand by my admonitions, as my beloved and faithful children in Christ, furnishing you with the means of protection [literally, 'making you drink beforehand what will preserve you'] against the deadly disease of unruly men, by which do ye flee from the disease by the good-will of Christ our Lord. Do ye therefore, clothing yourselves with meekness, become the imitators of His sufferings, and of His love, wherewith He loved us when He gave Himself a ransom [Ephesians 2:4; 1 Timothy 2:6] for us, that He might cleanse us by His blood from our old ungodliness, and bestow life on us when we were almost on the point of perishing through the depravity that was in us. Let no one of you, therefore, cherish any grudge against his neighbour. For says our Lord, 'Forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you.' [Matthew 6:14] Give no occasion to the Gentiles, lest 'by means of a few foolish men the word and doctrine [of Christ] be blasphemed.' [1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:5] For says the prophet, as in the person of God, 'Woe to him by whom my name is blasphemed among the Gentiles' [Isaiah 52:5].'²²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus took on *fallen* humanity. This fits with the language of Jesus becoming ‘subject to corruption’ for our sakes in the longer version to the Ephesians, above. This, again, is medical substitutionary atonement. Jesus did *for us* what we could not do *for ourselves*: heal his human nature, and rid it of sin, by uniting it perfectly with God. He can therefore do *in us* what we cannot do *by ourselves*.

Ignatius’ Epistles and 2 Peter

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

Notably, 2 Peter contains statements that penal substitutionary atonement advocates have found difficult to interpret. ‘There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master *who bought them*’ (2 Pet.2:2). ‘The Lord is... patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance’ (2 Pet.3:9). On the face of it, Peter does not seem to uphold the notion of limited atonement, the idea that Jesus died only to save some people, which the penal substitutionary model seems to require in order to avoid a double accounting problem. The problem can be stated this way: Can God pour out His wrath twice – once on Jesus at the cross for ‘all’ and then another time on ‘the unrepentant’ in hell? This double accounting problem is what persuades many adherents of penal substitution to also hold (sometimes reluctantly) the companion doctrine of limited (or ‘definite’) atonement – God must pour out His wrath on the crucified Jesus for ‘the elect’ and then pours out the remainder of His wrath for ‘the non-elect’ directly in hell. Yet Peter does not appear to be using a model of atonement where the retributive justice (Calvin) of God is ‘satisfied’, or a legal-penal one in any sense, as he extends the atonement to the unrepentant false teachers: ‘There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them’ (2 Pet.2:2). In the legal-penal satisfaction framework, Peter could only be mistaken about extending the atonement of Jesus to false teachers who are refusing and denying him. Hence the phrase, ‘the Master who bought them,’ raises concerns for penal substitution advocates. Is Peter suggesting that the false teachers’ denial of Jesus will have no material consequence for them? Hardly, for he speaks later of ‘the destruction of ungodly men’ (2 Pet.3:8). Why then does Peter speak of the atonement in an inclusive way?

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

Also, Peter does not seem to support the notion of God saving an ‘elect few’ or making a hidden, divine decree calling only some to salvation, which is also a companion doctrine to penal substitution and limited atonement: ‘The Lord is... patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance’ (2 Pet.3:9).

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

Ezekiel also offers the same sentiment as Peter: ‘Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?’ (Ezk.18:23) If God limits the scope of the atonement to an elect number, then how can Scripture also speak of God’s desire for all to come to repentance?

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

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

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

The Odes of Solomon (Pre-125 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

I will next consider the *Odes of Solomon*, another Christian literature that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not mention. The *Odes of Solomon* are a collection of the earliest known Christian book of hymns and psalms, called *odes*. Many scholars believe the Odes date from before 100 AD, and not later than the mid 2nd century.²⁸ The authors were probably Jewish Christians because the originals are in Aramaic; the Odes are clearly influenced stylistically by Hebrew biblical poetic style and bears resemblance to other Jewish poetic writings.²⁹ This collection of 42 odes bears the name *Odes of Solomon* because that is the name used in references to it in other ancient writings; the name probably connects Jesus to ‘Solomon,’ the royal Son of David. The many parallels with the Gospel of John are striking: Their references to ‘the Word’ and ‘living water’; the many references to the Holy Spirit; salvation consists in knowing and loving God; and the saving significance of the incarnation; etc.

The Odes were well known in the early church. James H. Charlesworth comments on the attestation to the *Odes of Solomon*:

‘The 11th ode was found among the Bodmer Papyri in a 3d-century Gk manuscript (no.11). Five were translated into Coptic in the 4th century and used to illustrate the *Pistis Sophia* (*Odes Sol.* 1, 5, 6, 22, and 25). Also in the 4th century *Ode* 19 was quoted by Lactantius (*Div. Inst.* 4.12.3). In the 10th century a scribe copied the *Odes* in Syriac, but only *Odes Sol.* 17:7 – 42:20 are preserved (British Museum ms. Add. 14538). In the 15th century another scribe copied them into Syriac, but again the beginning is lost (John Rylands Library Cod. Syr.9 contains only *Odes Sol.* 3.1b – 42:20).’³⁰

In his 2009 translation of the *Odes*, Charlesworth says, ‘Specialists on the *Odes* now agree that the collection was completed in the early second century, and most likely before 125 CE.’³¹ As to location, Charlesworth suggests, ‘The parallels with the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Gospel of John, and links with Ignatius of Antioch support the hypothesis that the Odes may have been composed in or near Antioch or somewhere in western Syria.’³² This remarkable early date and Jewish Christian authorship give the *Odes* an important weight.

Ode 17

Three of the odes are worth mentioning here for their references to the means of Jesus’ atonement: Odes 17, 15, and 11. Here is the full text of Ode 17:

- ¹ Then I was crowned by my God,
And my crown was living.
- ² And I was justified by my Lord,
For my salvation is incorruptible.
- ³ I have been freed from vanities,
And am not condemned.
- ⁴ My chains were cut off by His hands,
I received the face and likeness of a new person,

²⁸ The full collection has been reconstructed from manuscripts in the British Museum, John Rylands Library, and Bibliothèque Bodmer. James H. Charlesworth (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v.6, p.114) writes: ‘The date of the *Odes* has caused considerable interest. H. J. Drijvers contends that they are as late as the 3d century. L. Abramowski places them in the latter half of the 2d century. B. McNeil argued that they are contemporaneous with 4 *Ezra*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Polycarp, and Valentinus (ca.100 C.E.). Most scholars date them sometime around the middle of the 2d century, but if they are heavily influenced by Jewish apocalyptic thought and especially the ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls, a date long after 100 is unlikely. H. Chadwick, Emerton, Charlesworth, and many other scholars, are convinced that they must not be labeled ‘gnostic,’ and therefore should not be dated to the late 2d or 3d century.’

²⁹ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 1: The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964), p.244 writes, ‘It may perhaps be added that the Qumran Psalms, in which there is the same personal emphasis, and the same transition from the Teacher of Righteousness to the Community, confirms the Jewish Christian, and perhaps the Essene Christian, origin of the Odes.’

³⁰ Charlesworth, p.114

³¹ James H. Charlesworth, *The Earliest Christian Hymnbook: The Odes of Solomon* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2009), p.xxii

³² *Ibid* p.xxiii; on p.xxv, Charlesworth suggests a more specific Jewish-Christian authorship: ‘My own research suggests that the Odists may not have been a Qumranite, but he seems to have been influenced by the Essenes and conceivably once had been an Essene; that is, before he believed in Jesus’ Messiahship, he may have originally been a member of one of the numerous Essene communities that were located on the fringes of towns or cities in the Holy Land (as Philo and Josephus reported).’

And I walked in Him and was saved.
⁵ And the thought of truth led me,
 And I went after it and wandered not.
⁶ And all who saw me were amazed,
 And I seemed to them like a stranger.
⁷ And He who knew and exalted me,
 Is the Most High in all His perfection.
⁸ And He glorified me by His kindness,
 And raised my understanding to the height of truth.
⁹ And from there He gave me the way of His steps,
 And I opened the doors which were closed.
¹⁰ And I shattered the bars of iron,
 For my own shackles had grown hot and melted before me.
¹¹ And nothing appeared closed to me,
 Because I was the opening of everything.
¹² And I went towards all my bound ones in order to loose them;
 That I might not leave anyone bound or binding.
¹³ And I gave my knowledge generously,
And my resurrection through my love.
¹⁴ And I sowed my fruits in hearts,
And transformed them through myself.
¹⁵ Then they received my blessing and lived,
 And they were gathered to me and were saved;
¹⁶ Because they became my members,
 And I was their Head.
¹⁷ Glory to You, our Head,
 O Lord Messiah. Hallelujah. (*Odes of Solomon* 17:1 – 17)

Ode 17 is one of the odes which use the startling convention of speaking from the first person as Jesus himself (Odes 8, 10, 15, and 42 do this, and possibly 9 as well). The ode refers to the disciples' failure to recognize the identity of the resurrected Jesus (Lk.24:13 – 34; 24:37; Jn.20:11 – 16; 21:12) in v.6, even down to the 'amazement' with which the disciples responded to him, and even offered an explanation in v.4. Ode 17 speaks of Jesus loosening the bindings of the 'bound ones' (v.12). I take this as referring to the corruption of sin in human nature in human beings. For how is Jesus portrayed as doing this?

In the very next poetic line, Jesus shares his 'resurrection' – that is, his new humanity – with these 'bound ones': 'I gave my knowledge generously and my *resurrection* through my love' (v.13). As Jesus shares his new humanity with his followers, he plants new life and transformation in them: 'And I *sowed my fruits* in hearts, and *transformed* them through myself' (v.14). The phrase 'through myself' is remarkable because the new life and transformation come, not through a psychological rationale of debt-forgiveness as in penal substitution, but through sharing in the ontological personhood of Jesus, by his Spirit. This anticipates the later Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations of salvation: Jesus united human nature with divine nature in his one person, and then shares himself by the Spirit. Jesus, in and *through himself*, redeemed human being and reconciled human nature with God, and what Jesus worked out *in himself* the Spirit works out *in us*. Reception of this 'blessing' results in 'life' in the Johannine sense: 'Then they received my blessing and lived, and they were gathered to me and were saved' (v.15).

Mention of 'justification' in 17:2 draws our interest and confirms the medical substitution atonement theology standing behind it. The word in its cognate forms appears only four times in the Odes: 17:2; 25:12; 29:5; 31:5. In two of those occurrences, the odist speaks of being 'justified': 'I was justified by his kindness' (25:12); 'He justified me by His grace' (29:5). The basis and rationale for this proclamation does not appear to be on the surface of this liturgical material, arguably. However, Ode 17:2 and Ode 31:5 refer to Jesus himself as being 'justified': 'His face was justified / Because thus His Holy Father had given to him' (31:5). I am fairly certain that the question of whether the speaker in Ode 17:2 is the Christian or Christ himself³³ can be set aside for my purpose here. The

³³ The difficulty with trying to make a strong delineation between the Christian and Christ in Ode 17 and other Odes is discerning where one places the break. For example, Daniélou, p.244 asserts, 'In Ode XVII the baptised first celebrates his deliverance from vanity, and the new birth

strong Johannine ‘union with Christ’ theology running through the Odes and linking the Christian with Christ suffices for why we are able to say that the justification of the Christian happens *within* the justification of Christ, and because of it.

Lutheran and Reformed theologians typically argue that the believer is ‘justified’ because of one or both of the following. Christ died to absorb the divine retributive justice that God would have poured out on her or him; this is understood as God imputing sin onto Christ for our sakes, at his cross. This is paired with an imputation in the opposite direction: God imputes onto us the merits of Christ’s lived, human righteousness. ‘Justification’ is thus considered to involve a legal double imputation. What is remarkable about the *Odes* is that Ode 17 and Ode 31 speak of the Messiah Christ Jesus himself being ‘justified.’ In fact, as far as Ode 17 and 31 are concerned, Jesus was ‘justified’ per se at his *resurrection*.

In Ode 31, the odist begins by declaring how ‘chasms vanished before the Lord,’ and ‘darkness dissipated before his appearance’ (v.1), along with ‘error’ and ‘contempt’ (v.2). The ‘truth of the Lord’ (v.2) was declared by Jesus himself, when he ‘opened his mouth,’ ‘recited a new chant’ (v.3), ‘lifted his voice,’ and ‘offered to Him’ his disciples (v.4). This refers to Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. In connection with that movement into resurrection life, Ode 31 says that ‘his face was justified, because thus His Holy Father had given to him’ (v.5). The focus on ‘his face’ recalls Moses at the top of Mount Sinai with shining face, and Jesus at the top of Mount Tabor with a similarly transfigured face. The response called for is, among other things, to ‘take unto you immortal life’ (v.6 – 7), which certainly indicates that Jesus’ resurrection is in view. Then, some reflections are offered by Jesus in the first person about the bitter experience of the cross (v.8 – 12). The Ode closes with Jesus declaring that his purpose in dying and rising was to ‘redeem my nation and instruct it’ (v.12b), which recalls the ‘truth’ he spoke in v.1 – 4. This teaching ministry of Jesus after his death and resurrection is prominent because all together, this speaking and acting constitutes the fulfillment of ‘the promises to the patriarchs, to whom I was promised for the salvation of their offspring’ (v.13). In Ode 31, Jesus is justified by God the Father in connection with his faithful life, death, and resurrection. But if ‘justification’ can be reduced to a ‘moment,’ per se, then the connective tissue theologically is to the resurrection most immediately.

Ode 17 unquestionably ties ‘justification’ to resurrection as well. The speaker is ‘crowned by my God’ with a crown that ‘was living’ (v.1). The ‘justification’ connected to this crowning involves an experience of ‘salvation’ that ‘is incorruptible’ (v.2), which refers to resurrection. The odist celebrates new freedom (v.3), and even a new appearance (v.4 – 6), which sounds remarkably like the resurrection appearances of Jesus when he was not recognized by his closest disciples. And so on.

If ‘justification’ is grounded in resurrection, then it arguably does not sit on top of an exchange between God the Father and Christ Jesus in which some punitive, retributive transaction occurred between them. Something else is at work – something not *between* divine persons, but *within* the person of the God-man, Jesus Christ. I explore that something else as we examine Odes 15 and 11.

Ode 15

Here is a portion of Ode 15, which also uses the first person perspective of Jesus:

- ^{15:5} The thought of knowledge I have acquired,
And have enjoyed delight fully through Him.
- ⁶ I repudiated the way of error,
And went towards Him and received salvation from Him abundantly.
- ⁷ And according to His generosity He gave to me,
And according to His excellent beauty He made me.
- ⁸ I put on immortality through His name,
And took off corruption by His grace.
- ⁹ Death has been destroyed before my face,
And Sheol has been vanquished by my word.

which has followed. Then Christ begins to speak: ‘I opened doors that were closed and I brake in pieces the bars of iron.’’ But v.6 might aptly describe Jesus’ resurrection appearance, where he amazed others, and seemed to them like a stranger. Once we consider v.6 to be part of Christ’s experience, and in his voice, why not assign v.4 – 5 to him also? And if v.4 – 5, then why not v.1 – 3?

¹⁰ And eternal life has arisen in the Lord's land,
 And it has been declared to His faithful ones,
 And has been given without limit to all that trust in Him. (*Odes of Solomon* 15:5 – 10)

Ode 15 appears to speak of Jesus' earthly life as he repudiated 'the way of error' (v.6) in his struggle against sin in his flesh. The 'salvation' he received 'from Him [i.e. God the Father] abundantly' certainly include *physical* salvation from death. For the contrast between 'immortality' and 'corruption' in v.8 along with the references to 'Death' and 'Sheol' in v.9 stress the physical deliverance from death that Jesus experienced. But it also might be a *spiritual-moral* salvation from sinful actions as well, which is suggested by the Odist repudiating 'the way of error' and enjoying 'delight through Him.' And of course the 'eternal life' 'given without limit to all that trust in Him' (v.10) is not just *physical*, but *spiritual-moral* as well. In any case, in biblical thought, physical death follows spiritual-moral death (e.g. Rom.5:12 – 21). The former is an expression of the latter, because death is what relational alienation from God, as the source of life for all things, entails.

Thus, Ode 15 attests to a very early Christian understanding of Jesus' human nature, and what he accomplished for that human nature: Jesus' personal decisions to align his life and human nature ('I repudiated the way of error' in v.6) with the Father serves as the basis for his resurrected 'new humanity.' And this 'eternal life' – life centered and expressed physically, morally, and spiritually in Jesus' own resurrection body – 'has been given without limit to all that trust in Him' (v.10). The fact that these two songs are expressions of worship in liturgical settings makes this all the more significant for historical purposes.

Ode 11

The last Ode I will consider, Ode 11, uses the Pauline language of spiritual circumcision, and raises important questions:

^{11:1} My heart was pruned and its flower appeared, then grace sprang up in it,
 And my heart produced fruits for the Lord.
² For the Most High circumcised me by His Holy Spirit,
 Then He uncovered my inward being towards Him,
 And filled me with His love.
³ And His circumcising became my salvation,
 And I ran in the Way, in His peace, in the way of truth. (*Odes of Solomon* 11:1 – 3)

Ode 11 describes salvation in Christ as a fundamental heart transformation. From a theological standpoint, this is the outcome of the transformation of human nature in Christ. The language of circumcision of the heart follows the usage by Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul (and interestingly, not John) regarding heart transformation (once again attesting to the permeability of the Christian community to the writings of all the apostles). God would circumcise hearts when he renewed His covenant with Israel following the exile. Moses anticipated this in Dt.30:6, and Jeremiah in Jer.31:31 – 34. Then Paul in Romans 2:28 – 29 says that circumcision of the heart is ultimately what constitutes the true Israel of God (cf. Philippians 3:3, 'we are the true circumcision'). Hence this Ode is firmly anchored in biblical language of Israel's heart-level renewal when people participate by faith in the circumcision of *the flesh of Christ* (Rom.8:3; Col.2:11).

This Ode is also written from Jesus' first person perspective. Again, this is a familiar device in other Odes (8, 9?, 10, 15, 17, 28?, 36?, 42). This is not to claim that Jesus personally composed these Odes, only that early Syriac-speaking or Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians felt comfortable enough to compose these songs and use them in a liturgical setting. This is probably because of the stylistic form of the canonical Psalms being written in the first person from the voice of David and Solomon. The reason I argue that Ode 11 is Jesus' first person perspective is that only for him, as opposed to the believer, has there been an 'end' (v.4), presumably referring to his death on the cross. Henceforth, the Ode seems to refer to an experience of bodily resurrection by the Holy Spirit (v.5 – 9) and ascension to the heavenly throne in a new Eden (v.10 – 16).

⁴ From the beginning until the end I received His knowledge.
⁵ And I was established upon the rock of truth, where He had set me.
⁶ And speaking waters touched my lips from the fountain of the Lord generously.
⁷ And so I drank and became intoxicated, from the living water that does not die.

⁸ And my intoxication did not cause ignorance,
 But I abandoned vanity,
⁹ And turned toward the Most High, my God,
 And was enriched by His favors.
¹⁰ And I rejected the folly cast upon the earth,
 And stripped it off and cast it from me.
¹¹ And the Lord renewed me with His garment,
 And possessed me by His light.
¹² And from above He gave me immortal rest,
 And I became like the land that blossoms and rejoices in its fruits.
¹³ And the Lord is like the sun upon the face of the land.
¹⁴ My eyes were enlightened,
 And my face received the dew;
¹⁵ And my breath was refreshed by the pleasant fragrance of the Lord.
¹⁶ And He took me to His Paradise,
 Wherein is the wealth of the Lord's pleasure.
 I beheld blooming and fruit-bearing trees,
 And self-grown was their crown.
 Their branches were sprouting and their fruits were shining.
 From an immortal land were their roots.
 And a river of gladness was irrigating them,
 And round about them in the land of eternal life.
¹⁷ Then I worshipped the Lord because of His magnificence.
¹⁸ And I said, 'Blessed, O Lord, are they who are planted in Your land,
 And who have a place in Your Paradise;
¹⁹ And who grow in the growth of Your trees,
 And have passed from darkness into light.
²⁰ Behold, all Your laborers are fair, they who work good works,
 And turn from wickedness to your pleasantness.
²¹ For the pungent odor of the trees is changed in Your land,
²² And everything becomes a remnant of Yourself.
 Blessed are the workers of Your waters,
 And eternal memorials of Your faithful servants.
²³ Indeed, there is much room in Your Paradise.
 And there is nothing in it which is barren,
 But everything is filled with fruit.
²⁴ Glory be to You, O God,
 The delight of Paradise for ever. Hallelujah.' (*Odes of Solomon* 11:4 – 24)

Who else, after all, could be said to have glimpsed the heavenly reality that awaits God's people, if not Jesus himself? If I am correct about Ode 11 being in Jesus' first person perspective, then we must revisit v.1 – 3 as referring not only to salvation in and through Christ for the believer, but the salvation of Jesus Christ himself from the corruption of sin, and death! We would then read Ode 11 as Jesus' experience of the Spirit cutting away *in himself* sin's corruption from the originally good human nature God designed for Adamic humanity.

^{11:1} My heart was pruned and its flower appeared, then grace sprang up in it,
 And my heart produced fruits for the Lord.
² For the Most High circumcised me by His Holy Spirit,
 Then He uncovered my inward being towards Him,
 And filled me with His love.
³ And His circumcising became my salvation,
 And I ran in the Way, in His peace, in the way of truth. (*Odes of Solomon* 11:1 – 3)

Whether we can decide this question about Ode 11 is not exactly the point, however. The point that matters here is whether such a possibility is anchored in Scripture, and Ode 11 raises that question. I strongly believe that Scripture provides the underlying material for this possibility.

Israel could not ‘circumcise their own hearts’, as the prophets had called for. Moses had called for it (Dt.10:16), but in the end said that God Himself would have to circumcise the hearts of Israel on the other side of exile (Dt.26:4; 30:6). Jeremiah had called for it (Jer.4:4), but, like Moses, said that God Himself would have to change the heart on the other side of exile, in the new covenant (Jer.31:31 – 34). Ezekiel had his own idiom for it, and like Moses and Jeremiah, and again foresaw God performing a heart-level change on the other side of Israel’s exile, in the new covenant, when the Spirit was poured out (Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 37:14). Hence, circumcision of heart came to either denote or connote the restoration from exile, and in either case should be viewed as inseparable from it.

Paul explained Israel’s experience through his own personal autobiography. He said that the tenth commandment condemning coveting, jealousy, lust, and greed condemned him ever since he was mature enough to understand it (Rom.7:14 – 25). Significantly, the tenth commandment had no corresponding punishment, indicating that Anselmian ‘honor,’ or Calvinist ‘holiness’ and ‘justice,’ or whatever attribute is usually positioned against God’s love in a satisfaction-driven atonement theory, cannot actually be considered a symmetrical attribute to God’s love, but only a particular expression of God’s love and must be rethought through as a derivation of it. The tenth commandment recalled the primal sin of Adam and Eve. Not *pride* per se, which only comes into the human mind to justify the desire after the fact, but *jealousy* moved Adam and Eve to usurp from God the defining of good and evil, and internalize that power into themselves. *Jealousy* moved Cain to murder Abel. Hence, as Paul experientially discovered, jealousy of every kind was triggered by his mature awareness of the tenth commandment. This is what it meant for Paul to be ‘under the law’ (Rom.7:1 – 13; cf. 2:12; 3:19; 6:14 – 15; Gal.4:4) and have sin imputed to one’s self (Rom.5:13). The Sinai Law was supposed to be God’s holy partner to Israel to help them condemn sin in their own flesh. But ‘what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh [of Jesus Christ]’ (Rom.8:3). That is, Jesus was the only Israelite who was able to ‘condemn sin’ fully and totally within himself by never allowing himself to covet, to be jealous, to lust, to be greedy. He is the one true Israelite who is ‘the circumcised one’ (Rom.2:28 – 29) because he is ‘the resurrected one’ (Rom.4:25).

Hence, Jesus had to recapitulate Israel’s temptation in their fallen human flesh, not just Adam’s temptation in his pre-fall condition. Matthew’s Gospel in particular presents Jesus as the representative of Israel, and in fact as him *being* Israel, who did in himself what Israel did not and could not do. Jesus, like Israel, went to Egypt and came back into the land. Jesus, like Israel, was pursued by a genocidal foreign ruler. Jesus, like Israel went through the waters of the Red Sea in a kind of baptism (1 Cor.10:2), went through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River. Jesus, like Israel wandered the wilderness for forty years, wandered through the wilderness for forty days. Jesus, like Israel, pondered the words of Deuteronomy while in the wilderness, as shown by the fact that all three quotes of Scripture during Jesus’ temptation were from Deuteronomy. Jesus, like Israel, came to a mountain and received the covenantal law. God gave that law to help Israel ‘circumcise their hearts’ (Dt.10:16). But unlike Israel, who failed to do so, Jesus successfully resisted temptation – all of it, not just the outward action but all the way at the source, at the level of his identity as ‘Son of God.’ Unlike Israel, Jesus on the mountain both received into his own human flesh (i.e. demonstrated that he was already doing so) the law of God all the way onto the ‘tablet of his heart’ as Jeremiah saw as constituting the human person in the new covenant (Jer.31:31 – 34). At every point in his own life, Jesus succeeded where Israel failed, because Jesus succeeded on behalf of Israel, because Israel could only ultimately fail. Finally, Jesus, like Israel, went through the exilic experience – suffering pain, humiliation, and death at the hands of the Gentiles. And first among all Israel, and actually *as Israel*, Jesus emerged in his resurrection on the other side of exile.

Because ‘circumcision of heart’ had become the inner meaning behind Israel being restored from exile (Dt.30:6), and because Jesus himself was Israel and was restored from exile in his resurrection, then it follows quite logically and of necessity that he is the one who was ‘circumcised of heart.’ We can look at Jesus from the vantage point of his humanity, specifically his Jewish humanity. If Jesus entered into the place of Israel, then he recapitulated not only Israel’s early journey, he completed Israel’s appointed task which Israel could not do: he circumcised his heart with the assistance of the law (Dt.10:16). As man, he cut off the unclean aspect of his human nature; he put it to death. He fulfilled Israel’s side of the covenant to God.

But we can also look at Jesus from the vantage point of *God’s* covenant faithfulness to Israel. If Jesus entered into the place of Israel, the divine one who carried Israel’s humanity upon his shoulders, then and only then did God actually do what He said He would: circumcise the heart of Israel (Dt.30:6, cf. 29:4). That is, the Word of God

inscribed His law on a human heart. That simultaneously means that God was faithful to the covenant to produce a humanity that is restored from exile and resurrected into the intended life of the garden paradise (Dt.30:1 – 6). Ode 11, especially with this Christological interpretation, fits perfectly into that understanding. And if Jesus, in himself, circumcised something away from himself at his death (Rom.6:6), then Jesus must have taken on *fallen* humanity, not an already perfected or pre-fall humanity. The fulfillment of God’s long covenant with Israel logically requires Jesus’ full identification with Israel’s fallen condition.

The Significance of the Odes of Solomon

The early church developed its understanding of the atonement through a variety of means, including written prayers, songs, and symbols, and not only sermons and written treatises. Hence, I believe the significance of the *Odes of Solomon* for the purposes of understanding the atonement theology of the earliest Christians has been unfortunately overlooked. Yet a cursory glance at their major Johannine themes, including the idea that the *incarnation through resurrection* of Jesus constitutes the salvation of humanity, reveals their emphasis on medical substitution. What we find in them is theology put into liturgy, for use by worshiping congregations. And the widespread use and appreciation of these *Odes* is also significant. Here, we begin to see how deeply and how far the medical substitution theory saturated the life of the early church. We find nothing in this realm that resembles penal substitution.

The *Odes* are especially important because they give us the earliest glimpse into Syriac-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Christianity. This branch of the church is typically neglected by those who focus only on the Greek and Latin Christian writings. Yet numerically, they were surely greater in numbers than their Greek-speaking brethren for some centuries, and certainly far more numerically significant than their Latin-speaking counterparts. Not only do they reflect a more Semitic mindset, in general, they probably reflect at least some influence of the Jewish Christians who fled Jerusalem after 70 AD, which is deeply significant. The *Odes* lay a helpful foundation for understanding the magnificent hymnist and poetic theologian Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century, and the fifty homilies attributed to Macarius in the fifth. In both those exemplars of Syriac-speaking Christianity, we hear their proclamation of medical substitutionary atonement.

I conclude by quoting Ode 7, which contains an elegant, poetic statement of what can be discerned as medical substitutionary atonement:

- ² My joy is the Lord
 And my course is towards Him;
 This way of mine is beautiful.
- ³ For there is a Helper for me, the Lord.
 He has generously shown Himself to me in His simplicity,
 Because His kindness has diminished His grandeur.
- ⁴ He became like me, that I might receive Him.
 In form He was considered like me, that I might put Him on.
- ⁵ And I trembled not when I saw Him.
 Because He was gracious to me.
- ⁶ Like my nature He became, that I might understand Him.
 And like my form, that I might not turn away from Him. (*Odes of Solomon* 7:2–6)

Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 – 202 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach neither cite nor mention Irenaeus. This omission is quite problematic for their argument because Irenaeus is enormously significant as the first major theologian outside the New Testament. I discuss him extensively following Ignatius and the other ‘apostolic fathers’ because he brings together theological statements in a coherent way, as the discipline of theology is much like solving a jigsaw puzzle, and it is easy to let Irenaeus speak for himself. Interestingly, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach start with Justin Martyr and call him a theologian, when in fact he was less a systematic theologian like Irenaeus and more of a philosophical apologist answering particular questions put to him both Jew and Greek. Irenaeus is important as a historical witness to the thought of the earliest Christians, in his focus on writing on the atonement,³⁴ and as a source quoted by Athanasius and other orthodox defenders of the faith. And as I argue below, Irenaeus would not consider penal substitution to be correct.

Who was Irenaeus, and what role did he play in the early church? Irenaeus explicitly links the Greek East and the Latin West, although communication and ties between the two spheres were strong until the time of Augustine in the early fifth century. Irenaeus was born in Smyrna in Asia Minor, where he tells us, he learned of Jesus ‘in his youth’ through the impressive figure of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who reportedly had been a disciple of the apostle John.³⁵ Irenaeus continued to address concerns Polycarp did before him.

First, Polycarp had sent his pupil Pothinus as part of a significant Greek-speaking migration into Celtic Gaul to be the first Christian bishop in that region.³⁶ Irenaeus would later go to Lyons and serve as a priest under Pothinus. Church historian Philip Schaff notes, ‘Between Marseilles and Smyrna there seems to have been a brisk trade.’³⁷ Christian mission followed. As was true during the New Testament time period (e.g. Rom.15:18 – 24; Col.1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; Rev.2 – 3), Greek-speaking Asia Minor would continue to be the launching point for mission to the Latin West throughout the second century.

Second, Polycarp himself already demonstrates the strong ties between East and West which Irenaeus would inherit. Polycarp visited Rome while his fellow Syrian, Anicetus, was bishop of Rome (155 – 166 AD) to discuss the differences that already existed between the churches of Asia Minor and Rome, especially the date of Easter.³⁸ This fact again reminds us that the Christian communities in the Greek East and Latin West were well aware of each other and their differences; news and material circulated quickly and broadly. Polycarp and Anicetus quickly came to agreement about everything except the dating of Easter. Polycarp maintained the eastern practice of placing Easter on the 14th of Nisan, the day of the Jewish Passover, which usually did not fall on a Sunday. This demonstrated a closer cultural proximity to a Jewish Christianity. Anicetus and the Roman Christians, however, followed the western practice of observing Easter on the first Sunday after the spring equinox. Happily, the two decided to maintain fellowship with each other. This communion and cordiality between Greek East and Latin West was reenacted by Irenaeus later in 190 or 191 AD, when he prevailed upon Victor, then bishop of Rome, to not excommunicate the Greek speaking Christians of Asia Minor for continuing the practice, despite Victor’s wishes and, perhaps, growing ambitions.

Third, on Irenaeus’ testimony, Polycarp’s visit to Rome also won over disciples of the gnostic³⁹ teachers Marcion

³⁴ Aulen (1998) says, ‘The idea of Atonement recurs continually in his writings, freshly treated from ever new points of view; his basic idea is in itself thoroughly clear and unmistakable, and also, as we shall see in the next chapter, marks out the track which succeeding generations were to follow.’ (p.17) For an excellent treatment of Irenaeus, please see Aulen ch.2.

³⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.14

³⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1 – 27 is noted by Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), p.834 as an introduction to Irenaeus

³⁷ Schaff, p.834

³⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24 (also copied by Nicephorus, 4.39) includes this as Irenaeus’ recollection to Victor, bishop of Rome

³⁹ The usefulness of the term ‘gnostic’ has been considerably questioned. For example, French Jesuit and former Catholic cardinal Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume I: The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964), p.3ff. explains that the first usage of ‘gnosis’ as a term comes not from Hellenism, but *Jewish Christianity*, where it was used to denote the ‘gnosis of the mysteries,’ for example in extra-canonical Jewish Christian material like the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Epistle of the Apostles*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. In its original Jewish Christian context, ‘gnosis’ referred to the knowledge which was for ‘the mature’ (e.g. Heb.5:14 – 6:1), such as the typological interpretation of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7. In other words, Jewish Christian ‘gnosis’ was a way of approaching the biblical texts, respecting their historicity but also their thematic, historical, and theological relation to Christ. Daniélou finds that in the extracanonical Jewish Christian literature, ‘gnosis’ is a style of reading consonant with Jewish apocalyptic, coming from heavily symbolic and literary works like Daniel and Zechariah. As such, they have much in common with

and Valentinus. This left quite an impression on Polycarp's protégé Irenaeus, whose task it was to write the most extensive critique of gnosticism ever produced. In 177 AD, while Irenaeus was serving under Pothinus, then bishop of Lyons, he was sent by Pothinus from Lyons to Rome. He:

'had the mortification of finding the Montanist heresy patronized by Eleutherus the Bishop of Rome; and there he met an old friend from the school of Polycarp, who had embraced the Valentinian heresy. We cannot doubt that to this visit we owe the lifelong struggle of Irenaeus against the heresies that now came in, like locusts, to devour the harvests of the Gospel. But let it be noted here, that, so far from being "the mother and mistress" of even the Western Churches, Rome herself is a mission of the Greeks; Southern Gaul is evangelized from Asia Minor, and Lyons checks the heretical tendencies of the Bishop at Rome. Ante-Nicene Christianity, and indeed the Church herself, appears in Greek costume which lasts through the synodical period; and Latin Christianity, when it begins to appear, is African, and not Roman. It is strange that those who have recorded this great historical fact have so little perceived its bearings upon Roman pretensions in the Middle Ages and modern times.'⁴⁰

Fourth, and very relatedly, Irenaeus follows Polycarp's awareness of the four authoritative Gospels. The other specific differences discussed by Polycarp of Smyrna and Anicetus of Rome go unnamed, but historians infer that one of those differences was the relation between the Gospel accounts considered authoritative and apostolic. Matthew's Gospel had won early and widespread acceptance, and the Christians of Asia Minor had by this time developed a preference for John's Gospel, while the heretic Marcion in Rome held out his own edited version of Luke's Gospel as the one and only true account.⁴¹ Irenaeus is the earliest writer to *explicitly* affirm Matthew, Mark, Luke (in its full version), and John as canonical, demonstrating an awareness of Christian discussions on this matter.⁴² However, Polycarp, in his one brief but excellent letter to the Philippians, is *implicitly* the first to do so because of his Johannine language.⁴³

At some point prior to his service as a priest in Lyons, Irenaeus left Smyrna and stayed in Rome where he joined the school of Justin Martyr (100 – 165 AD), whom I will consider below. Irenaeus echoes material in Justin,⁴⁴ but whether Irenaeus learned this from Justin or whether they drew from a common understanding cannot be ascertained. Of the two, Irenaeus had the more extensive training and scholarly temperament. When Irenaeus returned from Rome to Lyons in 178 AD, he discovered that Pothinus had been martyred by Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. He was elected bishop of Lyons. And he wrote in Greek an extremely well-researched critique of gnosticism, which ranged throughout the Mediterranean, and defense of Christian faith called *Against Heresies* sometime between 175 – 188 AD. At some unknown date, Irenaeus put in writing a guidebook, called the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. As a church leader, he had probably used the contents of this book with

Jesus' parables. However, heretics influenced by Hellenistic trends redefined the meaning of 'gnosis' and reoriented this 'knowledge.' They accepted the dualistic view of the cosmos (somewhat latent in Platonic thought) and assigned each 'sphere' different moral weight. So heaven and the soul were good; the earth and the body were evil. As such, history itself, which was a supremely Judaic and Hebraic category, tended to become denigrated, in favor of an ideal of timelessness and static changelessness. This Hellenistic, soul-body dualistic type of 'gnosticism' is what I refer to here.

⁴⁰ Schaff, p.834

⁴¹ Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1985)

⁴² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8; the *Didache* assumes readers know Matthew, and quotes from unique material in Matthew and material common to both Matthew and Luke; Clement of Rome quotes from material common to Matthew, Mark, and Luke; Ignatius of Antioch quotes from Matthew and Luke; the *Shepherd of Hermas* quotes from Matthew explicitly, quotes from material shared by Matthew and Mark, and contains allusions to unique material in Luke.

⁴³ Polycarp quotes from Matthew, Mark, and Luke; allusions to John's writings, including the Gospel, are present: 'he that hath love is far from all sin' (Phil.3; 1 Jn.3:5 – 6); 'lusts that are in the world' (Phil.5; 1 Jn.2:16 – 17); 'for whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist' (Phil.7; 1 Jn.4:3); 'the first-born of Satan' (Phil.7; Jn.8:44; Rev.3:9); 'that we might live in him' (Phil.8; Jn.5:25 – 26; 14:19 – 20; 1 Jn.4:9). While Ignatius' knowledge of John is sometimes conceded, e.g. J.N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943) p.11 – 14, nevertheless Polycarp's intellectual superiority is acknowledged. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, Vol 1, Section 1: St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp* (1885), p.595 – 97 says, 'The divergence between the two writers as regards Scriptural quotations is equally remarkable. Though the seven Ignatian letters are many times longer than Polycarp's Epistle, the quotations in the latter are incomparably more numerous, as well as more precise, than in the former. The obligations to the New Testament are wholly different in character in the two cases. The Ignatian letters do, indeed, show a considerable knowledge of the writings included in our Canon of the New Testament; but this knowledge betrays itself in casual words and phrases, stray metaphors, epigrammatic adaptations, and isolated coincidences of thought ... On the other hand in Polycarp's Epistle sentence after sentence is frequently made up of passages from the Evangelical and Apostolic writings ... But this divergence forms only part of a broader and still more decisive contrast, affecting the whole style and character of the two writings. The profuseness of quotations in Polycarp's Epistle arises from a want of originality ... On the other hand the letters of Ignatius have a marked individuality. Of all early Christian writings they are pre-eminent in this respect.'

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

Christian converts for many years. Eusebius attests to other works written by Irenaeus, but these are now lost to us. In *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* he quotes from all four Gospels, all the letters of Paul except Philemon, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation; and possibly also James.⁴⁵ This would leave only Philemon and 3 John not explicitly mentioned.

By acquaintance with Polycarp, and having been nurtured in Christian faith in the community of Polycarp's town of Smyrna, there can be no doubt, therefore, that Irenaeus would have also been aware of the early shape of the New Testament, the writings of the 'apostolic fathers' including Ignatius' corpus and the letter to the Philippians from his mentor Polycarp,⁴⁶ all of Justin Martyr's writings, and probably others like Tatian the Assyrian (another student of Justin, who unfortunately became heretical), Athenagoras of Athens, and others. His keen interest in the church-wide observances of Easter must have made him aware of the fact that Christians in Palestine (following 70 AD) and Alexandria had shifted to the position of Rome, so he would have been aware of all the major centers of Christian faith, probably including Edessa in the Parthian Empire. He amassed incredible amounts of information about gnosticism and would surely have been aware of the pseudo-Christian literature that flowed in and out of that movement. Irenaeus sums up the whole of known Christian thought until that point.

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

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

God and Creation

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

'Now man is a mixed organization of soul and flesh, who was formed after the likeness of God, and moulded by His hands, that is, by the Son and Holy Spirit, to whom also He said, 'Let Us make man.' This, then, is the aim of him who envies our life, to render men disbelievers in their own salvation, and blasphemous against God the Creator. For whatsoever all the heretics may have advanced with the utmost solemnity, they come to this at last, that they blaspheme the Creator, and disallow the salvation of God's workmanship, which the flesh truly is...'⁴⁷

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

⁴⁵ Robinson, p.102; Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)

⁴⁶ Irenaeus quotes Ignatius' *Epistle to the Romans* 4 in *Against Heresies* 5.28.4

⁴⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4, preface, 4

image and likeness;’ He taking from Himself the substance of the creatures [formed], and the pattern of things made, and the type of all the adornments in the world.’⁴⁸

Irenaeus is quite well known for this ‘two hands’ expression. He uses it in other places, always with regards to creation, pointedly including humanity, and often in contrast to the idea that angels were intermediaries in creation.⁴⁹ Irenaeus denies that idea, seeing in it a danger of separating God from His creation. Through his clever gloss on the Hebraic anthropomorphic phrase ‘work of His hands,’ Irenaeus makes the equally biblical assertion that the Word-Son and the Spirit were the means by which God was personally involved with the creation. He does not disdain it. God’s involvement in the atonement is anchored and predicated on His involvement as creator.

God and Humanity

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

‘But who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except the Son of God, after whose image man was created? And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the *ancient production* [of His hands] into His own nature.’⁵⁰

‘...man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.’⁵¹

Irenaeus’ theology of atonement is therefore rooted in the goodness of God’s physical creation of humanity, the creation story itself with humanity’s original mandate to increase in stature and maturity, and behind that, an inner-trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. I will explore below Irenaeus’ use of the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ Suffice to say, at present, because we have tarnished the image and/or likeness of God within ourselves, including damaging the *relation* between ourselves and God, Jesus came to restore it. So he exhibited the ‘similitude,’ that is, the similarity with us: ‘the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.’ Now, the ‘ancient’ pattern in which God created human beings is affirmed by the Son of God who served as the template for that pattern in the first place. In himself, Jesus has renewed the likeness and/or image of God in human nature back into its proper relationship with God, which involves reconciling human nature to God by removing the hostility from it, and reconciling the human person back into the correct relation and trajectory of growth which God originally intended.

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

‘But man He formed with His own hands [i.e. the Word and the Spirit as the ‘hands of God’], taking from the earth that which was purest and finest, and mingling in measure His own power with the earth. For He traced His own form on the formation, that that which should be seen should be of divine form: for (as) the image of God was man formed and set on the earth. And that he might become living, He breathed on his

⁴⁸ Ibid 4.20.1

⁴⁹ Ibid 4.7.4; 4.20.4; 5.1.3; 5.5.1; 5.6.1; 5.28.4; cf.5.18; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 10, 11, 26

⁵⁰ Ibid 4.33.4

⁵¹ Ibid 4.38.3; John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p.50 is an example of a historian who credits Theophilus of Antioch (d.183 – 185 AD), *Letter to Autolytus* 25 with being the first to write that Adam had been *nepios*, ‘a child,’ and needing to properly mature. Irenaeus follows that view in *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11, 14. But it is just as reasonable to suspect that prior to Theophilus, some kind of view of Adam as not being static, but needing to mature in some way, was present in Christian thought.

face the breath of life; that both for the breath and for the formation man should be like unto God. Moreover he was free and self-controlled, being made by God for this end, that he might rule all those things that were upon the earth. And this great created world, prepared by God before the formation of man, was given to man as his place, containing all things within itself.⁵²

In debating the gnostics with their low view of matter, Irenaeus seems to revel even in the physical earth from which God formed Adam. He does not elevate the interiority of human rationality to be ‘the image of God’ as would Augustine and others who compared the individual’s psychological thought process (thought, word, and will) to the Trinity in what is now known as the ‘psychological model’ of the Trinity. Instead, Irenaeus celebrates the physical form of man as somehow mirroring the divine form, although he does not explain this.⁵³ I rather suspect that Irenaeus was thinking of the Hebraic, physical understanding of the oneness of male and female in marriage as being in the image of God, since it is that oneness which is life-bearing and life-giving, as reflected in the grammar of Genesis 1:27 and also the literary concern of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 where God makes all living beings to be life-bearing ‘after its kind.’ Irenaeus seems to be thinking this way, because he happily commingles phrases from Genesis 2 (‘from the earth’; ‘breathed on his face’) and Genesis 1 (‘image of God’; ‘be like unto God’; ‘rule all those things that were upon the earth’) in his explanation of human creation in the *Demonstration*. Hence, I think Irenaeus had a relational (in fact, marital, apparently) and physical (though not reducible to the physical) understanding for what it meant for human beings to be in ‘the image of God.’ To the extent that he set about to answer the question of how an individual human being – and not just a married couple – was in ‘the image of God,’ Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* appealed to the relational identity of the Word-Son as the image of God. Each human being was meant to be in relation to God by the Spirit, in some sense mirroring an internal relation of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. Irenaeus’ theological anthropology was relational to its core.⁵⁴ For Irenaeus, there was no individualistic notion of human personhood. This sets Irenaeus up to explain the fall in terms of damaged ontology and relationship, and the atonement in terms of restored ontology and relationship.

The Fall into Corruption

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

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’⁵⁵

This may be surprising for those accustomed to thinking that God imposed death as a retributive punishment in retaliation for sinning, much like sending children to their room as punishment for stealing cookies. In the human case, the punishment is *in its essence* disconnected from the crime. But in the story of the fall, the punishment *is* the crime: Eating from the Tree of Knowledge is taking into one’s self the power to define good and evil from within one’s own self. It is in its very essence a seizure of God’s prerogative to define good and evil, rebellion from God’s moral and kingly authority, displacement of God with the individual self in the moral sense, and a wounding of one’s very self because it implants into the human being a desire to be a relativistic absolutist – that is, the desire to define good and evil (to be an absolutist) but from within one’s own self (to be relativistic) by being the standard and measure of all things, rather than allowing God to define good and evil for us. So human death, to Irenaeus, was an ontological consequence that was *forced upon God*. Moreover, the other consequences of the fall – pain in

⁵² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11

⁵³ Dragoş Andrei Giulea, ‘Simpliciores, Eruditi, and the Noetic Form of God: Pre-Nicene Christology Revisited,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 108:2 (2015), p.263 – 288 discusses how ‘anthropomorphic’ descriptions of God were perfectly acceptable in the pre-Nicene period, but became problematic afterwards.

⁵⁴ For an excellent discussion of Irenaeus’ theological anthropology, see Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), ch.1. In particular, Steenberg notes that Irenaeus and Tertullian shared the view that the human soul grows in some sense with the human body, and that the Spirit of God gives life to the soul which mediates life to the body.

⁵⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

childbearing and fertility in gardening (Gen.3:16 – 19) – were ontological as well. They are not additional punishment or retribution from God. They are simply the outgrowth of Adam and Eve’s choice to try to separate themselves from God, the source of life. Human beings are wholly dependent on God for life and the production of more life; we are unable to be bearers of life and caretakers of life without Him. Anything having to do with producing more life would be difficult and frustrating.

Irenaeus’ interpretation of God preventing human beings from immortalizing our own sinfulness is maintained by representatives of the Greek-speaking East Methodius of Olympus,⁵⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria,⁵⁷ and Gregory of Nazianzus,⁵⁸ and the bilingual Ambrose of Milan.⁵⁹ Three hundred years later, well after the Nicene period, the Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor maintained this view.⁶⁰ Tellingly, however, this view would be lost upon Tertullian in Latin-speaking Roman North Africa (see below). It appears to disappear from the record in the extant writings of Cyprian and Augustine, who interprets death and exile as retributive punishment for eating from the tree of knowledge.⁶¹

Irenaeus’ position might also be surprising to those who have come to see death as the only enemy, or the greatest enemy. The apostle Paul said that death is the ‘last enemy’ (1 Cor.15:26), but that does not mean that death is the *only* enemy, or the *first* enemy, or even the *greatest* enemy. To Irenaeus, and the very significant patristic writers who followed him, death – in the sense of mortality due to our exile from the garden – does serve one productive purpose: it prevents us from immortalizing evil within our human nature. Death is an enemy, to be sure. But *the corruption of sin* in us is a *greater* and *prior* enemy. Death is also the enemy of another, more subtle and sinister, enemy.

For Irenaeus, Adam and Eve *forced* God to close access to the Tree of Life. God, being love, and having love for Adam and Eve and all the children who would come from them, was confronted by two options. Would God allow the rather likely possibility that human beings would immortalize the corruption of their human nature within themselves? Or would God instead interpose death as an instrument by which this fate could not happen? God chose the latter, because death could be overcome later by resurrection, and human beings could choose to receive into themselves the healing in Christ for their corruption. So death, though tragically unpleasant, was a type of mercy and pity.

Israel and the Sinai Covenant

Fourth, Irenaeus’ understanding of the role of Israel and the Sinai covenant is vital. Irenaeus is unusual among

⁵⁶ Methodius of Olympus (died 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* 1.4 says, ‘In order, then, that man might not be an undying or ever-living evil, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body, and was provided with immortal sustenance, God for this cause pronounced him mortal, and clothed him with mortality...’

⁵⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD), *On the Incarnation* 8.1 says, ‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition...’

⁵⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 390 AD), *Oration* 45 says, ‘Yet here too he makes a gain, namely death and the cutting off of sin, in order that evil may not be immortal. Thus, his punishment is changed into a mercy, for it is in mercy, I am persuaded, that God inflicts punishment.’

⁵⁹ Ambrose of Milan (340 – 397 AD), *On the Psalms* 48 says, ‘And if one consider accurately, it is not the death of our being, but of evil, for being continues, it is evil that perishes. That which has been rises again; would that as it is now free from sinning, so it were without former guilt! But this very thing is a proof that it is not the death of being, that we shall be the same persons as we were. And so we shall either pay the penalty of our sins, or attain to the reward of our good deeds.’

⁶⁰ Maximus the Confessor (580 – 662 AD), *Ad Thalassium* 44.5 says, ‘The phrase, ‘And now, lest he put forth his hand and take from the Tree of Life and live forever,’ providentially produces, I think, the separation of things that cannot be mixed together, so that evil might not be immortal, being maintained in existence by participation in the good.’

⁶¹ Augustine of Hippo (347 – 430 AD), *On Christian Doctrine* 1.14 says, ‘We used our immortality so badly as to incur the penalty of death: Christ used His mortality so well as to restore us to life.’ He speaks of ‘penalty’ without a qualified view that death served a constructive purpose. God imposed the first death – that of the body – upon us, to straightforwardly anticipate the second death, the eternal death, on the principle of divine retribution. In *On the Trinity* 4.12 he says, ‘We desired therefore the one [the tree of knowledge] through wicked persuasion, the other [death] followed us by a *just condemnation*; and therefore it is written, ‘God made not death,’ since He was not Himself the cause of death; but yet death was inflicted on the sinner, *through His most just retribution. Just as the judge inflicts punishment on the guilty; yet it is not the justice of the judge, but the desert of the crime, which is the cause of the punishment.*’ Whether Augustine’s meaning holds together logically is another matter. Augustine’s forensic and retributive orientation is particularly evident in *On the Trinity* 13.16, when he comments on Romans 5:1 – 10, uses the word ‘death’ more densely than any other place in the work, and says, ‘a temporal death, which was not due, was rendered by the eternal Son of God, who was also the Son of man, whereby He might free them from an eternal death which was due... Therefore we shall be saved from wrath through Him; from the wrath certainly of God, which is nothing else but just retribution.’ See also Augustine, *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love* 25 – 27. While it may be true that Augustine recognized divine justice as operating restoratively in other ways (see Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), p.23 – 43), nevertheless regarding these two ‘moments’ of salvation history, Augustine saw a simple relation of demerit and divine retribution.

patristic writers for the sheer volume of material he dedicates to analyzing – not simply quoting (as Justin Martyr did) – the Old Testament, and for the direct and indirect material by which he answers the question, ‘Why did God appoint an Israel in the first place?’ This is related to Irenaeus’ defense of the Old Testament against the gnostic heresies. Our interest today is different. Because of Jewish suffering in history, especially due to medieval Christian persecution, and because of post-World War II regrets about anti-semitism within so-called ‘Enlightenment’ nation-states, Christian theologians must develop an adequate answer to this question, ‘Why did God need, or appoint, an Israel in the first place?’ To this, Christian theology – resting especially on the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Ecumenical Councils – can answer that Jesus needed to be truly human, which means that he needed to have a community of people who would physically protect and nurture him, and also spiritually and intellectually help him develop.

Therefore, God needed to protect and purify Israel. That explains on the one hand, to some degree, why God protected Noah from the violence of his peers, Abraham and Sarah from the predations of Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. It also explains on the other hand why God purified Israel from those within Israel who would subvert God’s purpose, from the first generation of Israelites to false prophets and faithless kings. God needed a focus group – Israel – who would partner with Him to struggle against the corruption within human nature, produce a canonical written diagnosis of the problem, and hope for the cure in the Messiah. Given the human (Adamic) tendency to blame sinful choices on other people, circumstances, and God Himself, this was no small achievement. Thus, in order to produce the incarnation for humanity universally, God needed Jewish particularity. Irenaeus addresses this topic with more clarity than anyone else.

Irenaeus starts book 4 of *Against Heresies* with what sounds like a medical anthropology and medical diagnosis:

‘For it is impossible for any one to heal the sick, if he has no knowledge of the disease of the patients.’⁶²

God is like a good doctor who lays a challenging health regimen on His focus group, Israel. The first reason God appointed Israel, Irenaeus says, was because to demonstrate that sin was a terrible disease, and death was a terrible symptom.

‘But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death’s) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer.’⁶³

Irenaeus argues that the moral clarity expressed in the commandments of the Sinai covenant aimed at revealing the nature of sin and death. Both sin and death are unnatural, and not part of God’s original good design. This produced hope in Israel, and not fatalism. Ultimately, God in Christ rejects both sin and death as foreign intruders.

The second reason why God appointed Israel, correspondingly, was to call for Israel’s partnership in battling the corruption of sin within themselves. In the same passage, Irenaeus says:

‘It [the Sinai covenant] laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it.’⁶⁴

God’s aim was to get rid of the disease in His patients. Irenaeus recognizes that one of the biblical idioms for this was ‘circumcision of the heart.’ Physical ‘circumcision’ was an act, or a type, of healing.⁶⁵ It was then taken to represent the spiritual ‘surgery’ that people needed, which God called for with Israel’s partnership, as they were meant to fully internalize God’s commandments.⁶⁶ None of them were able to live up to it, however.

The third reason why God appointed Israel was to enlist them to document their self-diagnosis, and hope for God’s cure in the messianic God-man. Irenaeus writes:

⁶² Ibid 4.preface.2

⁶³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

⁶⁴ Ibid 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

⁶⁵ Ibid 4.12.1

⁶⁶ Ibid 4.16.1 and note that in 4.16.5, Irenaeus speaks of the laws of Jesus (e.g. Mt.5:21 – 26 and 27 – 30, etc.) that addressed the human heart

‘For the law never hindered them from believing in the Son of God; nay, but it even exhorted them so to do, saying that men can be saved in no other way from the old wound of the serpent than by believing in Him who, in the likeness of sinful flesh, is lifted up from the earth upon the tree of martyrdom, and draws all things to Himself, and vivifies the dead.’⁶⁷

‘The law,’ in Irenaeus’ mind, wound up being impossible to fully uphold, as the Israelites would have stumbled over the tenth commandment, as the apostle Paul had discussed in Romans 7:14 – 25. But the law ‘exhorted them’ to believe in the Son of God. ‘In the likeness of sinful flesh’ here comes directly from Romans 8:3, which is how the apostle Paul saw the vexing problem of ‘the flesh’ to be resolved: through the agency of the Son healing his own human nature via internalizing God’s commandments whereas the Israelites could not. Irenaeus also links John 3:14 – 15, John 12:32, Numbers 21:4 – 7, and Genesis 3:1 – 7 to this statement, showing that, in narrative form, a ‘medical diagnosis’ of sorts was written in ‘the law,’ which also prescribed a cure for the venom in the humanity of the Son of God.

The fourth reason why God appointed Israel was to prepare Israel and the Gentiles for the coming of the messiah. Irenaeus, again unusually among the fathers, addresses Jewish or Jewish-oriented questions like, ‘Why did Jerusalem fall?’ He replies, in 4.4.1 – 2, that there was appropriate fruit-bearing for a time and for a particular purpose. Irenaeus does not elaborate as much as he could, but presumably he would say that the temple arrangement, the sacrificial calendar cycle, and the Davidic monarchy served a purpose to foreshadow Jesus.⁶⁸ Irenaeus says that the Word

‘at that time, indeed, by means of His patriarchs and prophets, was prefiguring and declaring beforehand future things, fulfilling His part by anticipation in the dispensations of God, and accustoming His inheritance to obey God, and to pass through the world as in a state of pilgrimage, to follow His word, and to indicate beforehand things to come. For with God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.’⁶⁹

The law also trained Israelites in the virtues and ethical life, which is the fifth reason Irenaeus articulates.⁷⁰ The Sinai covenant, therefore, was not simply a legal backdrop against which God proved a supposed principle that He could punish people infinitely, as the Lutheran-Calvinist traditions would argue. Rather, God’s revelation to Israel constituted real progress for humanity.⁷¹ Irenaeus’ language of ‘becoming accustomed’ is vital. With Abraham, God ‘accustomed’ man to follow His Word.⁷² Because humanity had become ‘accustomed’ to the bonds of sin, God gave the law.⁷³ God was ‘accustoming man to bear His Spirit.’⁷⁴

Irenaeus may not have answered every question surrounding God’s historical relationship with Israel. Our present day sensibilities prompt us to ask more of the biblical text than Irenaeus sought to answer in *Against Heresies and Demonstration*. For example, he does not seek to explain *why* God drowned human life in the flood of Noah, rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, or took the Egyptian firstborn in the Exodus, etc. But, one might wonder whether in his lost work, Irenaeus explicitly said that God needed to preserve both the safety of Israel (thus, hostile Gentiles) and the integrity of Israel (thus, opponents of Moses’ leadership in Numbers, or Uzzah touching the ark in 2 Samuel 5, etc.) prior to Jesus’ incarnation for the sake of Jesus’ authentic humanity. Jesus had to be an infant and child

⁶⁷ Ibid 4.2.8

⁶⁸ Ibid 4.7 addresses the Old Testament theophanies of the Son appearing to Abraham, Moses, and others.

⁶⁹ Ibid 4.21.3

⁷⁰ Ibid 4.8.2, ‘For the law commanded them to abstain from every servile work, that is, from all grasping after wealth which is procured by trading and by other worldly business; but it exhorted them to attend to the exercises of the soul, which consist in reflection, and to addresses of a beneficial kind for their neighbours’ benefit.’ In 4.8.3, Irenaeus extends the purpose of the law to educate God’s people about general priestly roles and responsibilities: ‘For David had been appointed a priest by God, although Saul persecuted him. For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank.’

⁷¹ Ibid 4.9.3, ‘For the new covenant having been known and preached by the prophets, He who was to carry it out according to the good pleasure of the Father was also preached, having been revealed to men as God pleased; that they might always make progress through believing in Him, and by means of the [successive] covenants, should gradually attain to perfect salvation.’

⁷² Ibid 4.5.4

⁷³ Ibid 4.13.2

⁷⁴ Ibid 4.14.2, ‘Thus it was, too, that God formed man at the first, because of His munificence; but chose the patriarchs for the sake of their salvation; and prepared a people beforehand, teaching the headstrong to follow God; and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming man to bear His Spirit [within him], and to hold communion with God: He Himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but granting communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and sketching out, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those that pleased Him.’

raised by faithful Jewish parents, protected in a certain type of Jewish community, and presented to Jewish followers who were already sufficiently persuaded of God's goodness that they would follow an itinerant rabbi into the hostile Gentile world. Irenaeus would have surely said that after his crucifixion, Jesus descended to the realm of dead souls (1 Pet.3:18; 4:6; Eph.4:11) to present himself to all who died before him, offering them salvation and deliverance from Hades.⁷⁵ Thus, God was doing good by preserving Israel, by preventing the opponents of Israel from menacing the humanity of Jesus and therefore their own salvation from sinfulness, and also from damaging their human nature further in the moment.

The Incarnation of the Son, by the Spirit

Fifth, Jesus' incarnation and bodily resurrection is God's affirmation of His commitment to physical matter in general, human bodies in particular, and the creation story as a whole. After he demonstrates from Scripture that the Word of God himself took human flesh in Jesus,⁷⁶ Irenaeus says that Jesus saves human nature in himself by destroying the sin in himself.

Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished... But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death's) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it. For sin had no dominion over the spirit, but over man. For it behooved *Him who was to destroy sin*, and redeem man under the power of death, that *He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that *sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: 'God, true are His works.' But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated *in Himself* the ancient formation of man, that *He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.⁷⁷

This is a very significant passage in Irenaeus. In it, he insists that Jesus came to resolve a problem within human nature itself, and offer back to us his renewed humanity. Irenaeus says this in three ways. First, he says here and elsewhere that Jesus took his humanity not from some other substance, like the virgin soil from which Adam was first taken, but from the virgin womb of Mary.⁷⁸ The Word of God did this to partake of the same human nature that we all share, to renew it and save it. He did not start a different type of human being, because that would have been of no help to us! This is why Irenaeus constantly referred to Jesus' person and work as the 'recapitulation' – or the summing up, or literally, the re-heading up – of all humanity. Taking this concept from Paul (Eph.1:10), Irenaeus says that Jesus is the 'second Adam' (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 22; 45 – 49) the one from whom a new life passes into all other human beings.

In Irenaeus' teaching, human life itself is considered to have an intended, developmental shape, quite naturally from creation, regardless of the fall and notwithstanding it. So Jesus 'passed through every age' because he needed to 'fill' not just human nature as an abstract thing, but human nature in a developmental paradigm. Here is Irenaeus' famous statement:

'Being a Master, therefore, He also possessed the age of a Master [i.e. thirty years at least], not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in Himself that law which He had appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to Himself. For He came to save all through means of Himself – all, I say, who through Him are born again to God –

⁷⁵ Ibid 4.22.1

⁷⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7

⁷⁷ Ibid 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

⁷⁸ Ibid 3.21.10 says, 'Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.' Cf.3.22.1 – 2

infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, He came on to death itself, that He might be ‘the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence,’ the Prince of life, existing before all, and going before all.’⁷⁹

The natural course of a human life is such that it needs to be filled by God in time, at each stage of life, in the mode of a personal biography. This Jesus did in his own human life, which is part of God saving every aspect of human life in Jesus of Nazareth. Hence, Irenaeus asserted that Jesus ‘passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God.’⁸⁰

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

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

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

‘Thus then He gloriously achieved our redemption, and fulfilled the promise of the fathers, and *abolished the old disobedience.* The Son of God became Son of David and Son of Abraham; perfecting and summing up this in Himself, that He might make us to possess life. The Word of God was made flesh by the dispensation of the Virgin, to abolish death and make man live. For we were imprisoned by sin, being *born in sinfulness* and living under death. But God the Father was very merciful: He sent His creative Word, who in coming to deliver us came to *the very place and spot in which we had lost life, and brake the bonds of our fetters.* And His light appeared and made the darkness of the prison disappear, and hallowed our birth and destroyed death, loosing those same fetters in which we were enchained. And He manifested the resurrection, Himself becoming the first begotten of the dead, and *in Himself raising up man that was fallen,* lifting him up far above the heaven to the right hand of the glory of the Father: even as God promised by the prophet, saying: And I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen; that is, *the flesh* that was from David. And this our Lord Jesus Christ truly fulfilled, when He gloriously achieved our redemption, that He might truly raise us up, setting us free unto the Father.’⁸¹

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

⁷⁹ Ibid 2.22.4; cf. 4.38.2

⁸⁰ Ibid 3.18.7

⁸¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 32, 34, 37 – 38

Redemption, Irenaeus therefore defines, is the setting free of our human nature from our imprisonment to ‘sinfulness,’ the sinfulness into which we were born.

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

The Spirit’s Work with the Son

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

‘Wherefore He [the Spirit] did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with Him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ.’⁸²

Scholar Anthony Briggman, in his exceptional 2012 work *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, says aptly:

‘Irenaeus believes that the Spirit became accustomed (*adsuesco*) to dwell, rest, and work among human beings as Christ’s Unction. Irenaeus considers the anointing of Jesus to involve not only the Spirit acting on Jesus but also the Spirit as acted upon. He does not say here that the Spirit created an environment within the humanity of Jesus suitable to his presence and work. Instead, he says the Spirit himself had to become accustomed to dwelling, resting, and working in the human environment. The need for the Holy Spirit to become accustomed... entails the presupposition that the Spirit was not prepared to perform and so could not have performed such works prior to the period of accustomization.’⁸³

I believe Briggman goes a bit too far in leaving us with the impression from 3.17.1 alone that Irenaeus ‘does not say here that the Spirit created an environment within the humanity of Jesus suitable to his presence and work.’ For Irenaeus says that God ‘accustomed’ Abraham ‘to follow the Word of God’⁸⁴ and ‘accustomed’ Israel and her prophets to ‘bear His Spirit,’⁸⁵ ‘accustoming His inheritance to obey God,’⁸⁶ because human beings have become ‘accustomed’ to our enslavement to sin after the fall,⁸⁷ and even ‘accustomed to condemn the innocent, and to let the guilty go free.’⁸⁸ Moreover, Irenaeus says immediately after the passage Briggman quotes, in the very next chapter, 3.18.7, that the eternal Son of God corrected something within his human nature. He became genuine ‘man, who had sin in himself... to destroy sin... so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death. God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and

⁸² Ibid 3.17.1

⁸³ Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.72

⁸⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.5.4

⁸⁵ Ibid 4.14.2

⁸⁶ Ibid 4.21.3

⁸⁷ Ibid 4.13.2

⁸⁸ Ibid 4.26.3

vivify man.’ It seems that the effects on the Spirit and on humanity – including Jesus’ humanity – are *reciprocal*.⁸⁹ On the one hand, the Son, by the power of the Spirit, *accustomed his humanity* to the presence of the Spirit by cleansing his humanity of the corruption of sin through his life, death, and resurrection. On the other hand, the Son *accustomed the Spirit* to indwelling humanity, through his incarnation into flesh by the Spirit, reception of the Spirit at the Jordan-event baptism, triumph over sin by the Spirit especially at his death and resurrection, and eventual communication of the Spirit after his resurrection. But otherwise, I heartedly welcome Briggman’s remarks about Irenaeus’ linkage of the Spirit to the overall work of atonement.

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

‘Wherefore we have need of the dew [i.e. Spirit] of God, that we be not consumed by fire, nor be rendered unfruitful, and that where we have an accuser there we may have also an Advocate, the Lord commending to the Holy Spirit His own man [*suum hominem*], who had fallen among thieves, whom He Himself compassionated, and bound up his wounds, giving two royal denaria; so that we, receiving by the Spirit the image and superscription of the Father and the Son, might cause the denarium entrusted to us to be fruitful, counting out the increase to the Lord.’⁹⁰

In this passage, Irenaeus would seem to agree that the healing of human nature in and through Jesus involved, or consisted in, *accustomizing his humanity to the Spirit*. Irenaeus’ deployment of the good Samaritan parable was common among the early Christians.⁹¹ This would suggest that the work of atonement can be stated in terms which refer to the Spirit and the intended intrinsic relation between the Spirit and humanity. This is very different from the penal substitutionary atonement theory, which offers no explanation for the Holy Spirit’s role in the atonement per se, because it only envisions the Son absorbing some punitive divine wrath at his death.

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

The Fire of Hell and Human Becoming

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

⁸⁹ John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Origen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.109 recognizes the *accustomization as reciprocal*. Behr says, ‘The whole process, the movement of the economy itself, is one of God and man becoming accustomed to each other: of man learning, throughout the unfolding of the Old Testament, to acknowledge and follow God; of the Spirit, in Christ, becoming accustomed to dwell in and to vivify man...’ Behr seems to studiously avoid the question of the fallenness or unfallenness of Jesus’ human nature. So he does not quite describe Jesus’ human life as Jesus *accustoming his humanity to bear the Spirit*.

⁹⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.17.3

⁹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is the Rich Man Who Can Be Saved?* 29 – 30; Origen of Alexandria, *Homilies in Luke* 34.3; Ambrose of Milan, *Treatise on Luke* 7.73 – 83; Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Church* 33.3; Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.30 - 31. See discussion by Riemer Roukema, “The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity,” *Vigiliae Christianae*, February 2004, Volume 58, Number 1, p.56 – 74.

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

'For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.'⁹²

'But God, foreknowing all things, prepared fit habitations for both, kindly conferring that light which they desire on those who seek after the light of incorruption, and resort to it; but for the despisers and mockers who avoid and turn themselves away from this light, and who do, as it were, *blind themselves*, He has prepared darkness suitable to persons who oppose the light, and He has inflicted an appropriate punishment upon those who try to avoid being subject to Him.'⁹³

Hell, therefore, is not another attribute or face of God. Like the sun, God has a singular nature – love – and is not reducible to dueling attributes, which would ultimately make Him arbitrary. Hell is, in fact, the love of God: the love of God which is seeking to purify the person who happens to be resisting. But in this case, just as the person with weak or diseased eyes is pained by the light of the sun, so the person with a weakened or diseased nature is pained by the presence of God. Therefore, that person experiences the wrath of God against the corruption in their nature because the wrath of God is simply the love of God trying to burn away the impurity and sin and resistance which they do not want to give up, which they have chosen to identify with for all eternity precisely because they have rejected Jesus, the cleansed, purified, God-soaked new human being.⁹⁴ Other theologians, like fourth century theologian Gregory of Nyssa and the entire Eastern Orthodox communion, who Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach also do not examine, followed Irenaeus in this line of thinking. What explanation these authors might offer as to how the Eastern Orthodox tradition got it so wrong, in their opinion, is a matter on which they have remained silent thus far.

Human Free Will

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

Various supporters of penal substitution have tried to distance themselves from this straightforward, logical implication by holding onto contradictory assertions here and there – that human free will is still nevertheless real; that God can look ahead in time and see who would accept Jesus; that God is responding to human free choice in the future; etc. – but this can be shown to make one's systematic theology to be illogical and unclear. For example, why would God keep in hell those who want to get out and be with Him in eternity? Why not extend the scope of His

⁹² Ibid 4.29.1

⁹³ Ibid 4.39.4. Irenaeus, like Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 43 before him, understood God's foreknowledge as intuitive, not actual, and is caused by man's choices. Thus, God's foreknowledge is His understanding of all possible futures, not simply one future. If there are many possible futures, at least from important junctures in human life, then correspondingly, human free will is real. If there is only one future, it is not.

⁹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 69 seems to reiterate the same basic thought, but is a difficult passage. He produces a questionable translation and exegesis of Isaiah 53:8, but appears to say that the judgment of Jesus is upon the sinfulness he bore in himself, to bear away from humanity (68). That very 'judgment is for some unto salvation, and to some unto the torments of perdition... Now those [who crucified him] took away to themselves the judgment... And the judgment is that which by fire will be the destruction of the unbelievers at the end of the world.'

own self-appeasement of His retributive justice (supposedly) to those who reject Him, at some point in time? If Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, why doesn't God do His own moral will and carry out the very commands He gives to us?

As is clear throughout Irenaeus' thought, human free will is vital to being made in the image of God. Therefore human free will is not an assertion to be slipped in around discussions of the atonement in order to preserve God's character from the stain of arbitrariness and evil. Rather, human free will finds deep theological ground from the creation in the character of God. Irenaeus notes that God Himself guarantees human freedom:

'God has always preserved freedom and self-government in man.'⁹⁵

He does not see human beings as individualistic, autonomous agents operating with their own battery packs, as it were. Rather, he sees God as the one who sustains our being and our free will in relation to Him. God's providential care and grace precede human freedom and cause human choices to be genuinely free and personal. Hence, Irenaeus articulates the same view of relational humanity and freedom upheld by God's providential care that John Cassian⁹⁶ and John of Damascus⁹⁷ would later teach. Here is a substantial passage from Irenaeus:

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

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

⁹⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.15.2

⁹⁶ John Cassian, *Conferences* 13.12, says, 'It cannot then be doubted that there are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator: but unless these are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection... And therefore the will always remains free in man, and can either neglect or delight in the grace of God. For the Apostle would not have commanded saying: 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' [Philippians 2:13] had he not known that it could be advanced or neglected by us. But that men might not fancy that they had no need of Divine aid for the work of Salvation, he subjoins: 'For it is God that works in you both to will and to do, of His good pleasure.' And therefore he warns Timothy and says: 'Neglect not the grace of God which is in Thee,' [1 Timothy 4:14] and again: 'For which cause I exhort thee to stir up the grace of God which is in thee...' [2 Timothy 1:6]'

⁹⁷ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, book 2, chapter 30, says, "'Bear in mind, too, that virtue is a gift from God implanted in our nature, and that He Himself is the source and cause of all good, and without His co-operation and help we cannot will or do any good thing. But we have it in our power either to abide in virtue and follow God, Who calls us into ways of virtue, or to stray from paths of virtue, which is to dwell in wickedness, and to follow the devil who summons but cannot compel us. For wickedness is nothing else than the withdrawal of goodness, just as darkness is nothing else than the withdrawal of light. While then we abide in the natural state we abide in virtue, but when we deviate from the natural state, that is, from virtue, we come into an unnatural state and dwell in wickedness.'

‘For it is in man’s power to disobey God, and to forfeit what is good... If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things, and to abstain from others? But because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.’⁹⁸

Irenaeus’ teaching on the soul being the ‘location’ of human free will may also prove useful in the face of strict materialistic atheists who argue against free will. It is unclear to me whether neuroscience and quantum mechanics alone will decisively leave ‘room’ for human free will. Irenaeus is a helpful starting place for discussion on this subject. He simply summarizes the wide-ranging terms used in Scripture for different aspects of the human being, and relies on the concept of the incorporeal and immortal soul to ground his teaching on human freedom. In Irenaeus’ usage, the soul is the conduit of the divine life of God into the physical body.⁹⁹ We might also find Irenaeus helpful to ‘locate’ self-consciousness in the soul, perhaps in a manner that is shared with the body and impacts, say, our brain development.

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

‘If, then, thou art God’s workmanship, await the hand of thy Maker which creates everything in due time; in due time as far as thou art concerned, whose creation is being carried out. Offer to Him thy heart in a soft and tractable state, and preserve the form in which the Creator has fashioned thee, having moisture in thyself, lest, by becoming hardened, thou lose the impressions of His fingers. But by preserving the framework thou shalt ascend to that which is perfect, for the moist clay which is in thee is hidden [there] by the workmanship of God. His hand fashioned thy substance; He will cover thee over [too] within and without with pure gold and silver, and He will adorn thee to such a degree, that even ‘the King Himself shall have pleasure in thy beauty.’ But if thou, being obstinately hardened, dost reject the operation of His skill, and show thyself ungrateful towards Him, because thou wert created a [mere] man, by becoming thus ungrateful to God, thou hast at once lost both His workmanship and life. For creation is an attribute of the goodness of God but to be created is that of human nature. If then, thou shalt deliver up to Him what is thine, that is, faith towards Him and subjection, thou shalt receive His handiwork, and shall be a perfect work of God.’¹⁰⁰

In Irenaeus, human free will is connected to why the ontological-medical substitution atonement theory works the way it does. God has worked out a way to purify human beings in a loving way consistent with His own loving nature. God had to personally acquire a human body in the person of His Son and by His Spirit. He had to heal human nature of the sinful corruption that stained it – the true object of His wrath – through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And God offers the new humanity of Jesus back to us by the Spirit in order to purify us. For Irenaeus, the atonement’s purpose is to cleanse and purify us of our corruption. Thus does God remain committed to human free will from start to finish because of His love for us and because He will not damage His own image in us by overriding our freedom: ‘that the Church may be fashioned after the image of His Son, and that man may finally be brought to maturity at some future time, becoming ripe through such privileges to see and comprehend God.’¹⁰¹ I find it very significant that the early Christian writers uniformly believed in human free will for the same reasons Irenaeus did.¹⁰² Not until Augustine would controversy erupt about it.¹⁰³

Making Sense of Creation and Fall: Theology and Theodicy Retrospectively

⁹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1 – 2, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

⁹⁹ *Ibid* 2.33.4; 2.34.4; 5.7.1. Irenaeus even had a spatial conception of the soul: ‘Souls themselves possess the figure of the body in which they dwell, for they have been adapted to the vessel in which they exist’ (2.19.6). Steenberg, p.39 – 40, notes that Irenaeus agreed with Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 1.5; Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 18, 20 and *Dialogue with Trypho* 5; and Tertullian of Carthage, *DA* 5 – 9, especially 7.1 and 9.4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid* 4.39.2, see the whole chapter

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* 4.37.7

¹⁰² See my collection of citations, *Free Will and God’s Grace in the Early Church Fathers*, available here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-jesus>

¹⁰³ Seraphim Rose, *The Place of Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church* (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2017)

One small correction I would make in Irenaeus' articulation is when he considers the question, 'Could not God have exhibited man as perfect from beginning?' and answers with, 'It was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.'¹⁰⁴ Immediately afterwards, he says again, 'God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.'¹⁰⁵ Irenaeus uses the term 'perfect' in two different ways here, which makes his answer a bit elusive and self-contradictory. Is 'perfection' something that is a given condition in one's self? Or is 'perfection' something that is conferred from outside one's self? Irenaeus uses the term in both ways.

I believe Irenaeus relies overly much on the analogy of infancy for Adam, using physical infancy as an analogy for experiential and spiritual infancy. For the question can still be asked, 'So if God could have created Adam as 'an adult,' with already perfected love for God based on perfect knowledge of God, why did He not do so?'¹⁰⁶ To this Irenaeus has no answer. This silence is strange, because Irenaeus himself says, 'With God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.'¹⁰⁷ If God *could* have done something better *but did not*, what explanation can be offered for that? On this detail, Irenaeus might not be able to uphold his own stated conviction. Others fault Irenaeus for his theodicy, because he allows for an arbitrariness in God which resulted in suffering and evil.

I would have preferred, and I think it would have been even more consistent of him, if Irenaeus had answered, 'It was not possible for God to do so.' Irenaeus already had the framework for saying that. If God has a non-coercive love towards humanity, as Irenaeus has already said,¹⁰⁸ and even *is* non-coercive love in God's own being, as I would say, then He *could not possibly* create Adam and Eve with an already perfected love for Him, for that would not be a love they had personally chosen. Nor could God create them with an already perfect knowledge of Himself, for that would entail them somehow sharing the mind of God directly, and it is doubtful that the finite could comprehend the infinite in such a way. So God had to create them with the desire to receive from Him and an inclination to love Him, but yet at one small step removed from Himself.

If this is so, then God actually *had* to create the tree of life in the garden. He *had* to *invite* without coercion Adam, Eve, and their descendants to participate more deeply in His own divine life in a physically immortal and spiritually ever-increasing mode, which Irenaeus had already deduced of the tree of life, as I quoted earlier.¹⁰⁹ To an unfallen human being, the tree of life would have had the effect of sealing our will for God and uncorrupted human nature with divine life and the orientation of our personhood as directed outwards towards God, such that we would perfect our ontological freedom as relational creatures designed to depend on God and to constantly ascend intellectually and spiritually towards Him. In other words, under the necessity of authentic love, God *had* to create humanity so they might *freely* choose to *always* choose Him forever. It could not be automatic.

God also *had* to create the tree of knowledge of good and evil to invite us to leave the defining of good and evil with Him, and not take that power into ourselves. The second tree would have given human beings the knowledge of good, as we grew in relationship, love, and goodness. It would have also yielded human beings the knowledge of evil, as we imagined what it might mean to usurp God's place, or take up a posture to harm or alienate others, and experience the loss of the relationship, love, and goodness that we had gained. Adam experientially knew what being 'alone' had been like, after seeing all the animals parade by him in male-female pairs: 'not good,' by God's own assessment (Gen.2:18). Eve could imagine the aloneness even if she had never experienced it personally herself. If unfallen, they had had a child, and felt the joy of parenthood, they could *imagine* losing that child and the impoverishment of loss, Irenaeus says. The bishop maintains that through 'mental power man knew both the good of obedience and the evil of disobedience.'¹¹⁰ But they did not have to actually abandon, harm, or alienate that child

¹⁰⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid* 4.38.2.

¹⁰⁶ Steenberg, p.41, offers an answer which does not fully suffice, nor does he answer the objection I raise here.

¹⁰⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.21.3

¹⁰⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.4.3; 4.37; 4.39; 5:37

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid* 3.23.6

¹¹⁰ *Ibid* 4.39.1 stresses the role of the mind to think through the options of good and evil. But Irenaeus does not mean that we must *do* evil in order to know it. Irenaeus refers to 'the eye of the mind, receiving experience of both, may with judgment make choice of the better things...' But again, Irenaeus is referring to the activity of 'the mind.' The mind receives experience of both, by revelation and by growth in goodness, as I have suggested above. This is why Irenaeus can also say of the 'evil thing which deprives him of life, that is disobedience to God, [he] *may never attempt it at all.*' (italics mine) Irenaeus then says that the tongue tastes sweet and bitter, the eye sees black and white, the ear hears different sounds, and 'so also does the mind, receiving through the experience of both the knowledge of what is good, become more tenacious of its

in reality. They could simply imagine reversing their growth in relationship, love, and goodness. Irenaeus does not believe in a dualistic pedagogy where human beings must do and experience evil personally in order to appreciate goodness. God is good and wise enough to design a world and human nature so that evil is never logically necessary.

In effect, God did design the second tree to produce in us the knowledge of good and evil, but through the experience of growing in goodness and rejecting the evil, while we left its fruit alone, and its power in God's domain. Leaving the fruit uneaten would have been an act of trust and love. The one heinous act by which all of God's loving order and good authority could be rejected was taking the fruit from the tree of knowledge. And that, too, God had to offer as a non-coerced choice. It was bound up in His love for us.

Hence, the garden in Genesis was the *only possible world* God could have made for humanity. It flowed from His commitments and His character. This necessity removes all accusations against God of being arbitrary or of taking an unnecessary risk of letting suffering and evil materialize. Irenaeus himself was not far from offering this answer: 'It was *not even possible* for God to create man perfect from the beginning, because the definition of perfection itself involves an active choice.' All the elements were actually there in his biblical exposition and theology. Irenaeus' conviction can be maintained with this understanding: 'With God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.'¹¹¹

Irenaeus' written statements about the positive purpose of the tree of knowledge correspond to another second century work, the *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*. Taken together, Irenaeus and the *Epistle to Diognetus* indicate that the Christian community in the second century believed that God had an original, positive purpose for the tree of knowledge:

"For in this place the tree of knowledge and the tree of life have been planted; but it is not the tree of knowledge that destroys — it is disobedience that proves destructive. Nor truly are those words without significance which are written, how God from the beginning planted the tree of life in the midst of paradise, revealing through knowledge the way to life, and when those who were first formed did not use this [knowledge] properly, they were, through the fraud of the Serpent, stripped naked. For neither can life exist without knowledge, nor is knowledge secure without life. Wherefore both were planted close together."¹¹²

Although *Diognetus* does not explain how the tree granted true knowledge of good and evil, the letter nevertheless affirms points that corroborate my interpretation of both Irenaeus and Genesis itself. God intended human beings to grow in both life and knowledge together. God intended the tree of life and the tree of knowledge to reflect complementary principles from creation, not merely from the fall. Hence, God expected human beings to grow in the knowledge of both good and evil, through the direct participatory experience of goodness and life, and the knowledge of evil by imagining undoing one's own growth in goodness and life. Disobedience, not the tree of knowledge per se, was destructive for humanity and God's original purpose. Once again, the garden in Genesis was the only possible world God could have made for humanity, because God made human beings to grow. Both life and knowledge of good and evil are only possible through growth.

Shifting gears from the biblical narrative to the language of the creeds and councils of the church leads me to the following technical discussion of personhood, nature, freedom, and love in the cases of both God and humanity. In the case of the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot choose to turn away from each other. Why not? Because their divine persons are relationally fixed in love towards one another harmoniously.¹¹³ Their love is

preservation, by acting in obedience to God: in the first place, casting away, by means of [mental, intellectual] repentance, disobedience, as being something disagreeable and nauseous; and afterwards coming to understand what it really is, that it is contrary to goodness and sweetness, *so that the mind may never even attempt to taste disobedience to God.*' (italics mine) The intellectual, reflective, and imaginative activities of the mind are evident.

¹¹¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.21.3

¹¹² *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* ch.12

¹¹³ Greek Orthodox theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), p.5 reminds us that the term for *person* is 'a referential reality. The referential character of the term is revealed fundamentally by its primitive use, that is, by its grammatical construction and etymology. The preposition *pros* ("towards") together with the noun *ops* (*opos* in the genitive), which means "eye," "face," "countenance," form the composite word *pros-opon*: I have my face turned towards someone or something; I am opposite someone or something. The word thus functioned initially as a term indicating an immediate reference, a relationship.' It is vital to recall that the

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

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

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

Greek term for person (*prosopon*), as well as the Latin term (*persona*), were used in the Greek and Roman theater to indicate the 'masks' or 'faces' that the actors wore. When Christians brought this term into settled formal theological discourse by the time of Nicea (325 AD), the divine 'persons' were understood to be intrinsically and eternally persons-in-relation, 'facing' one another as it were. And we as human persons are always persons-in-relation as well, although our orientation in relationship, and experience of our relationship with God, is shaped by our nature and determined by our choices. See below.

Objection 1: A Penal Substitutionary Interpretation of Irenaeus

I will now evaluate two scholars who disagree with this assessment of Irenaeus' understanding of atonement. The outstanding Australian Patristics scholar Eric Osborn maintains that Irenaeus believed that we inherit the *guilt* of Adam and Eve. If that is true, then some doctrine of penal substitution built on God's retributive justice is not too far away. So Osborn's claim bears thorough investigation. Quoting two passages from Irenaeus, Osborn says, 'In the beginning we were led captive in Adam (5.21.1) and *we committed the sin* in the garden against Christ himself (5.17.1). Therefore Irenaeus understands original sin at least in the limited sense of *inherited guilt*.'¹¹⁴ In the first of those quotations, Irenaeus says:

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

I find it unlikely that Irenaeus meant that we are captives to Adam's *guilt* when he writes, 'captives in Adam.' Most historians and theologians attribute the theory of 'inherited guilt' to Augustine (354 – 430 AD) who by their accounts was the first to teach this.¹¹⁵ Augustine's corollary (or motivation?) was to strengthen infant baptism. He held that infants who died prior to baptism went to hell, albeit the least intense gradation of hell, which was envisioned as a shadowy existence without pain but without bliss. By contrast, the Eastern Greek-speaking theologians, exemplified by Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote on this very topic, believed that they had to stay silent when considering the question of infants who died prematurely.¹¹⁶ Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher David Bentley Hart faults Augustine for not being conversant enough in Greek, and using a mistranslated Latin copy of Romans 5 to reach conclusions about what the meaning of the phrase 'in Adam.'¹¹⁷ It is historically unlikely that Irenaeus made that mistake, or wanted to be read that way, as no one following him understood him to mean that, despite the very wide circulation of *Against Heresies* (see below).

Also, although Irenaeus does not quote Ezekiel 18 explicitly in *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration*, we are on safe ground to assume he knew it and considered it. In a very involved discussion, Ezekiel says that God will *not* attribute the sins of the father to the son as guilt, nor vice versa (Ezk.18:20). Ezekiel's statement refers especially to the new covenant in the Spirit, which Irenaeus understood well, as he quoted Ezekiel quite strategically to make his points.¹¹⁸ The significance of this passage is well known, as the doctrine of original sin defined as heritable guilt poses a well-known problem in relation to it. Would God hold the guilt of Adam and Eve against all their descendants, in direct disagreement with Ezekiel 18? Would Irenaeus assert such a thing? I find it doubtful.

Any theory of inherited Adamic guilt must answer the question of how Jesus could be human and yet not guilty at conception of Adam's sin. It must therefore offer a correlate: something special but unwarranted about Mary of Nazareth. Because Osborn projects this problem onto Irenaeus, he seems to feel that he must rescue Irenaeus, too. Correspondingly, Osborn writes in a *footnote*, curiously, 'The purity of Christ and his mother is seen as the great exception within a fallen race.'¹¹⁹ Exceptional in what sense? He seems to read Irenaeus' phrase, 'the pure One opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God, and which He Himself made pure'¹²⁰ as meaning that Jesus at conception instantly purified his humanity from the fallenness of Adam's flesh, and the womb of his mother, as well as her personhood perhaps (?), from Adamic guilt. But if so, is this really a plausible reading of Irenaeus? Or plausible in general?

Contra Osborn, I maintain that Irenaeus is referring to Mary's *virginal* status, not an *unfallen* status. Another

¹¹⁴ Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.218 emphasis mine

¹¹⁵ Myk Habets and Bobby Grow, *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), ch.11

¹¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Infants' Early Deaths*; see Habets and Grow, ch.11

¹¹⁷ David Bentley Hart, 'Traditio Deformis,' *First Things* (May 2015); <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/05/traditio-deformis>; last accessed June 16, 2015

¹¹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.15.1 quotes Ezk.20:24 with reference to the limitations of the Sinai covenant with regard to the transformation of the human heart. On many occasions, Irenaeus quotes Ezekiel to discuss the new covenant, the new heart, the promised Holy Spirit, and resurrection: Ezk.36:26 in *AH* 3.33.14; Ezk.37 in *AH* 5.15.1 and 5.34.1; Ezk.28:25 – 26 in *AH* 5.34.1; Ezk.11:19 in *Demonstration* 93. Irenaeus is clear about Ezekiel's subject matter.

¹¹⁹ Osborn, p.218; footnote 24

¹²⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.33.11

patristics scholar, John Behr, points out that in Irenaeus,¹²¹ Mary serves as a ‘recircling’ [*recirculationem*] of Eve.¹²² Given Irenaeus’ fondness for pointing out the strategic repetition in the biblical story, he probably means this: the virgin Eve was disobedient while yet unfallen; but the virgin Mary was obedient while still being fallen. Mary retold Eve’s story, not from within an unfallen human nature in the luxury of a garden, but from within the confines of her fallen humanity. She had to battle disbelief as part of her embattled people. This is similar to how Jesus retold Israel’s story and Adam’s story not from the ease of the garden but from the hard environs of the wilderness, Israel’s captivity to the Gentiles, and the cross. The retelling, the *recircling*, is admirable as a victory precisely because our later protagonists had to make their faithful choices, and did so. They proved more faithful than their predecessors who made *unfaithful* choices. What is more, they did so under the harder conditions of the fall, which were in fact *caused* by the former.

Moreover, Irenaeus also saw Mary as a fulfillment of the literary theme running through the Hebrew Scriptures concerning God giving the barren woman fruitfulness (Isa.54:1; Gal.4:27), Isaiah’s prophecy in particular. Significantly, barrenness in women was a Hebrew idiom marking life in the condition of the fall, and Irenaeus demonstrates an understanding of this.¹²³ This understanding lends weight to the impression that Irenaeus believed that Mary, while making the great and admirable choice to become the mother of the Messiah, was by all accounts *fallen* in her own human nature. It must be admitted by all that viewing Mary as sharing in our common fallen humanity is the most logical position.

And if Mary shared in our fallen humanity, did she not provide the material humanity from which Jesus drew his own humanity? Osborn’s otherwise careful handling of Irenaeus logically requires that Jesus struggle against fallen Adamic humanity (e.g. *AH* 3.19.3) to decisively and finally *correct* it in his death and resurrection. By contrast, Behr appropriately names a chapter in his book on Irenaeus, ‘Recapitulation: Correction and Perfection.’¹²⁴ Osborn seems to retreat from seeing or stating this point clearly: He says, ‘Christ shares our *mortal* nature’¹²⁵ all the while highlighting the theme of *participation* in Irenaeus. But what other humanity was available for Jesus to *participate in*? And how else can we, while fallen, *participate* in the Spirit if Jesus did not already *participate* in our fallen humanity first?

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

‘Now this being is the Creator (Demiurgus), who is, in respect of His love, the Father; but in respect of His power, He is Lord; and in respect of His wisdom, our Maker and Fashioner; by transgressing whose commandment we became His enemies. And therefore in the last times the Lord has restored us into friendship through His incarnation, having become ‘the Mediator between God and men;’ [1 Tim.2:5] propitiating indeed for us the Father against whom we had sinned, and cancelling (*consolatus*) our disobedience by His own obedience; conferring also upon us the gift of communion with, and subjection to, our Maker. For this reason also He has taught us to say in prayer, ‘And forgive us our debts;’ [Mt.6:12] since indeed He is our Father, whose debtors we were, having transgressed His commandments. But who is this Being? Is He some unknown one, and a Father who gives no commandment to any one? Or is He the God who is proclaimed in the Scriptures, to whom we were debtors, having transgressed His commandment? Now the commandment was given to man by the Word. For Adam, it is said, ‘heard the voice of the Lord God’ [Gen.3:8]. Rightly then does His Word say to man, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee’ [Mt.9:2; Lk.5:20]. He, the same against whom we had sinned in the beginning, grants forgiveness of sins in the end. But if indeed we had disobeyed the command of any other, while it was a different being who said, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee;’ such a one is neither good, nor true, nor just. For how can he be good, who does not give from what belongs to himself? Or how can he be just, who snatches away the goods of another? And in what way can sins be truly remitted, unless that He against whom we have sinned has Himself granted remission ‘through the bowels of mercy of our God,’ in which ‘He has visited us’ [Lk.1:78] through His Son?’¹²⁶

¹²¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4

¹²² John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.173 – 5

¹²³ Behr, p.173, quoting 1.10.3

¹²⁴ Behr, p.97 – 104

¹²⁵ Osborn, p.259, emphasis mine

¹²⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.17.1

Irenaeus says God is owed a ‘debt’ and had to be ‘propitiated.’ Does this not mean, as Osborn suggests, that a framework of guilt and retribution is in place in Irenaeus’ mind? Now it is true that ‘by transgressing [God’s original] commandment we became His enemies.’ But not in the sense that we became guilty parties pleading for mercy, deserving retributive justice and wrath from a God who pays out retribution in like manner. Rather, we became His enemies by wanting to define good and evil from within ourselves, and by asserting a desire to be our own gods. We became God’s enemies, ontologically and relationally, expressed by our own resistance towards Him. This is why Irenaeus adds that Jesus through his incarnation ‘conferr[ed] upon us the gift of communion with, and *subjection to*, our Maker.’ *Subjection* to God is an inseparable part of the gift of communion that is conferred by Jesus. If this is so, then Irenaeus is not defining the problem of sin legally and penally, as if human beings who are otherwise cooperative with God might survive the divine wrath given our blemished track record. No: He is concerned about how the problem of the bent and weakened will of humanity might be brought back into alignment with God, that we might bear the image and likeness of our Creator once again, rather than resist Him. When Irenaeus speaks of Christ giving us the gift of communion with and *subjection to* our Maker, he is already anticipating in seminal form the insight of Maximus the Confessor about Jesus healing the human will in himself. The Father is ‘propitiated’ when that which is in us which resists God’s commandments is abolished.

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

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

‘Therefore, by remitting sins, He did indeed *heal* man, while He also manifested Himself who He was. For if no one can forgive sins but God alone, while the Lord remitted them and *healed* men, it is plain that He was Himself the Word of God made the Son of man, receiving from the Father the power of remission of sins; since He was man, and since He was God, in order that since as man He suffered for us, so as God He might have compassion on us, and forgive us our debts, in which we were made debtors to God our Creator. And therefore David said beforehand, ‘Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord has not imputed sin’ [Ps.32:1 – 2]; pointing out thus that remission of sins which follows upon His advent, by which ‘He has destroyed the handwriting’ of our debt, and ‘fastened it to the cross’ [Col.2:14]; so that as by means of a tree we were made debtors to God, [so also] by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our debt.’¹²⁷

Irenaeus produces a fascinating exegesis of Colossians 2:14. Whereas N.T. Wright views the ‘handwriting’ fastened

¹²⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.17.3

to the cross as the Sinai Law,¹²⁸ Irenaeus equates it to *the corruption of sin in the human nature of Jesus*. It is not the Sinai covenant which made human beings ‘debtors to God.’ That happened, rather, ‘by means of a tree.’ The Sinai covenant was simply the chief means God used to identify and diagnose it. These views ultimately might not be mutually exclusive, as there may have been a poetic elision between the two concepts in Paul’s mind, via Jeremiah’s depiction of the human heart as a tablet with sin inscribed on it (Jer.17:1 – 10). Jeremiah indicates that the human heart was so deeply etched with the writing of sin that God would have to personally reinscribe His commandments upon it (Jer.31:31 – 34). Jeremiah drew out from the Pentateuchal narrative the parallelism between the damaged human heart residing in the human being, and the tablets of the law residing in the sanctuary in which God ‘dressed’ like the high priest – like the human being representing Israel’s side of the covenant. The second copy of the tablets (Ex.34:18 – 35) surely carried with them the memory of the first copy being broken by Moses when Israel sinned with the golden calves and broke the covenant as soon as it had started (Ex.32:1 – 29). We owe a debt to God to return our human nature to God whole and intact, which is expressed *both* in our current, fallen human nature, and also by the stone tablets of the Sinai covenant. That is why I detect a legitimate elision of concepts in the minds of Jeremiah and Paul. But the fall preceded the Sinai covenant, of course. And thus, I favor Irenaeus’ exegetical handling of Colossians 2:14.

Irenaeus’ penchant for poetry and sensitivity to the repeated themes of the biblical story shines again. His phrase, ‘As by means of a tree we were made debtors to God,’ means that Adam corrupted human nature by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and inscribed that legacy onto all humanity, creating our obligation to overcome that corruption. The Sinai Law expressed that obligation within the covenant with Israel (Rom.7:7 – 8:4), as Irenaeus is well aware. Irenaeus ascribed very positive value to the law as a ‘servant who escorts a child to school’ (the original meaning of ‘pedagogue’ in Gal.3:24) and guide to Israel, pointing them to the Messiah for healing.¹²⁹ But ‘by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our debt’ means that Jesus finally defeated within himself the corruption inscribed upon our humanity, erased that writing, and reinscribed the torah of God upon the human heart, as Jeremiah expressed in hope (Jer.31:31 – 34). By our spiritual participation with Jesus in his death ‘on the tree’ and in his resurrection as the source of God’s renewed humanity, we participate in the remission of the debt we owe to God. Jesus makes humanity whole and healed, first in himself and then in us by the Spirit. I submit that Osborn’s claim that Irenaeus believed in inherited Adamic guilt is an inappropriate reading.

¹²⁸ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.110 – 114

¹²⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.2.8, 4.13.2 for a positive function of the Sinai covenant following Paul’s argument in Romans 7:7 – 8:4: ‘For the law, since it was laid down for those in bondage, used to instruct the soul... But the Word set free the soul, and taught that through it the body should be willingly purified.’

Objection 2: The Unfallen Humanity View of the Incarnation

Another movement among scholars who have taken issue with this reading of Irenaeus comes from a different direction. Eastern Orthodox writer Emmanuel Hatzidakis, for example, asserts that if Jesus assumed ‘the ancient formation of man’ (Adam), that this implies an *unfallen, uncorrupted* human nature at conception; he therefore claims that Jesus did not inhabit fallen humanity from his conception.¹³⁰ Wesleyan scholar E. Jerome Van Kuiken examines this question of whether Jesus assumed unfallen or fallen human nature from a historical, patristic standpoint, and leans towards the unfallenness camp.¹³¹ This position is indirectly significant for my argument against penal substitution, but needs consideration for a number of reasons.

Attributing to Jesus’ conception what properly belongs (I argue) to his lifelong human obedience opens the interpreter to exegetical difficulties concerning biblical passages about Jesus’ death. Jesus bestowed the Holy Spirit only after his death and resurrection, which becomes challenging to explain if Jesus already cleansed human nature at conception – what else did Jesus need to do to bestow the Spirit? Why was Jesus’ death necessary? To answer that question, we must consult passages about Jesus’ death. There we find that Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross (and NASB considers possible ‘carried our sins in his body up to the wood/tree’) (1 Pet.2:24; Isa.52:13 – 15:12), put to death the old humanity (Rom.6:6), and condemned sin (Rom.8:3). The quizzical declarations that Jesus became sin (2 Cor.5:21) and became a curse (Gal.3:13) are often interpreted as referring to the cross, too. The interpreter who holds to the unfallenness view tends to interpret those passages as indicating that Jesus had to suffer some punitive action from God at the cross. Curiously, then, the unfallenness view *leads* to a penal substitution and retributive-satisfaction view of Jesus’ death. Not coincidentally, certain *Protestants* hold a penal substitutionary atonement view of Jesus’ cross together with the unfallen view of his incarnation. Although most of those Orthodox who support the unfallen view of Jesus’ conception and also resist penal substitutionary atonement tend to deny this logical conclusion, their own interpretive work does not (in my opinion) successfully escape the gravitational pull in biblical exegesis to interpret Jesus’ death in such a way.

Van Kuiken’s contribution is valuable because of his effort to survey modern unfallenness and fallenness theologians, and their respective appeals to the patristic writers. Most welcome are his desires to read and define terms like ‘sinful’ and ‘fallen’ and ‘unfallen’ carefully, and to avoid extreme characterizations of either side. His sympathetic hearing of both the unfallenness and fallenness theologians is impressive. My concern with his work is that, by selecting five Greek fathers (Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria) and five Latin fathers (Tertullian of Carthage, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, and Leo the Great of Rome), he risks mischaracterizing the early church along several dimensions.

(1) Van Kuiken underestimates the significance of how the early theologians were wrestling with matters of theological anthropology and metaphysics which would also color their view of atonement. Chiefly, how did the changing and varying conditions of human life and the natural world relate to the unchanging God, logically? In what sense was the Triune God ‘unchanging’? Did Jesus’ growth as a human reflect the unchanging God? His limitations as a human reflect the infinite God? Did Jesus’ emotions and suffering reflect divine ‘emotions’ and ‘suffering’ as well? What is now called the tension between ‘classical theism’ and ‘open theism’ was already a major concern in the encounter between Jewish communities and Hellenistic philosophies, most notably the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Hebrew Scriptures,¹³² but not limited to that. When the Christian monastic movement developed negative attitudes towards sex, even marital sex, they came to view conjugal pleasure itself as the mechanism by which the ancestral sin was passed down to each human being. Sexual desire even for one’s spouse – so celebrated in Hebraic Jewish history as *Song of Songs* attests – was seen as deeply problematic because the ‘oneness’ of husband and wife envisioned by Scripture was sacrificed in favor of the ‘oneness’ of the soul reigning perfectly over the body in one individual – a Hellenistic ideal. Origen was the first to attempt to ‘neutralize’ *Song of Songs*, as he focuses exclusively, in his commentary, on the allegorical union of God and the human soul; he dismisses out of hand the possibility that the book might be describing a human courtship and marriage. Correspondingly, the ‘unfallenness’ view of Jesus’ humanity developed out of the view that the Virgin

¹³⁰ Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p.213 – 215

¹³¹ E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ’s Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: T&T Clark, 2017)

¹³² Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Mary did not pass down the corruption of sin to Jesus on the grounds that she had no sexual pleasure when the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in her womb.¹³³ Van Kuiken does not explore the troubling network of ideas which facilitated the rise of the ‘unfallenness’ view.

(2) Relatedly, Van Kuiken downplays Origen’s particular attempt at brokering a synthesis, and his subsequent influence on the Greek-speaking Cappadocians, the bilingual Ambrose, and the Latin-speaking Augustine. This means that Van Kuiken’s categorization of theologians as ‘Greek-speaking’ or ‘Latin-speaking’ has less meaning than he suggests. (3) He neglects the Syriac-speaking church, which arguably was more Judaic in its orientation, due in large part to the relocation of Jerusalemites to Antioch after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. And (4) he overrepresents the significance of the Latin fathers relative to the earlier Greek and Syriac in terms of their theological weightiness and closeness to the apostolic sources.¹³⁴

Van Kuiken approaches the question much more sensitively than does Hatzidakis, however. Hatzidakis assumes that there is a patristic consensus on these questions, when that is precisely what is being debated. Hatzidakis also works within a framework of Eastern Orthodox dogmatic commitments, valuing patristic quotations more than the findings of more recent biblical scholarship. Biblical scholarship has the potential, at its best, of renewing our sensitivity to Hebrew narrative, literary and canonical intertextuality, and the Judaic undertones of New Testament Scripture. To varying degrees, the Greek- and Latin-speaking churches gradually lost these sensitivities, though of course there are some who would contest such a claim. Nevertheless, since these questions swirling around the biblical narrative about what it means to be *human* (termed *theological anthropology*), and what it meant for *Jesus* to be human, were never answered definitively by an ecumenical council of the church, there has not yet been a proper dogmatic answer. In other words, while the more fiery debates about the divinity of the Son, the three persons of the Trinity, and the two natures of Jesus Christ were settled (or hardened, depending on one’s perspective of Chalcedon 451 and Constantinople 680 – 681), matters of theological anthropology, which were in the background of all these debates, have yet to reach a stable conclusion. In my estimation, it is unlikely that there will be such a council. For that reason, the scholarship must move forward, involving the fields of both biblical scholarship and systematic-dogmatic theology.

Reviewing Hatzidakis’ arguments, however, will help us better understand a lively debate unfolding in Orthodox circles. We will also better understand Tertullian, who did stand in the unfallenness camp, and a later patristic tendency, initiated by Origen (our earliest witness), to explain our vulnerability to animal-like appetites and passions to the ‘coats of skin’ given by God (Gen.3:21), rather than the primal eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil itself. The Cappadocians received and modified Origen to varying degrees. These interpretations are being subjected to vigorous discussion, not least because some scholars are attempting to reconstruct and/or rehabilitate Origen. Their positions raise exegetical questions about the human body being part of the original *imago dei* or not

¹³³ For example, Augustine of Hippo, *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin* 2.47 says that Ambrose of Milan believed that Mary’s virginity allowed Jesus to have an unfallen humanity. The relevant passage is: ‘The same holy man [Ambrose] also, in his Exposition of Isaiah, speaking of Christ, says: Therefore as man He was tried in all things, and in the likeness of men He endured all things; but as born of the Spirit, He was free from sin. For every man is a liar, and no one but God alone is without sin. It is therefore an observed and settled fact, that *no man born of a man and a woman, that is, by means of their bodily union, is seen to be free from sin. Whosoever, indeed, is free from sin, is free also from a conception and birth of this kind.* Moreover, when expounding the Gospel according to Luke, he says: It was no cohabitation with a husband which opened the secrets of the Virgin’s womb; rather was it the Holy Ghost which infused immaculate seed into her unviolated womb. For the Lord Jesus alone of those who are born of woman is holy, inasmuch as He experienced not the contact of earthly corruption, by reason of the novelty of His immaculate birth; nay, He repelled it by His heavenly majesty.’ (italics mine) We find precursors to this negative view of marital sex in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.17, who believed that Adam and Eve fell because they had sex without explicit permission to do so.

¹³⁴ For example, Tertullian is indeed noteworthy by virtue of being the first Latin theological writer, and because of his intellect and voluminous output, which had an impact on Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in the next generation, and on Trinitarian language in Latin. But Tertullian also made curious exegetical mistakes (see below). Cyprian seems to have held some type of penal view of Jesus’ death, supporting my concern that the unfallen view of the incarnation often leads to a penal view of the crucifixion and a retributive view of God’s justice, because of exegetical considerations at the very least. And Carthage in the early centuries might represent a Christian missionary challenge because it was evangelized by courageous martyrs but not apostolic teachers, and was more relationally remote from the rest of the church. See Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 3: The Origins of Latin Christianity*, translated and edited by David Smith and John Austin Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1977), p.156 on what the second century Roman and North African churches regarded as Scripture, especially writings that devalued marriage; and p.163 – 167 regarding Tertullian’s acceptance of *1 Enoch* and its theory that angels gave women secret desires of vanity and powers of seduction. Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrose of Milan also spoke Greek, and their ties to Greek-speaking Christians are noteworthy: Hilary was called ‘the Athanasius of the West’ for his vigorous defense of Nicaea, but was probably influenced towards the unfallenness view through his contact with Origenist theology in Cappadocia while he was in nearby Phrygia. Ambrose had studied Alexandrian allegorists Philo, Origen, and Didymus the Blind, and J.W. Hanson (1899) argued Ambrose was influenced by them. By contrast, Leo of Rome famously did not know enough Greek to understand the controversy surrounding the Council of Chalcedon 451 of the two natures of Christ. And so on.

(Irenaeus says yes, Origen says no). Were the ‘coats of skin’ animal skins (Irenaeus¹³⁵) or the human bodies we now experience (Origen¹³⁶)? They raise theological questions about what is the ‘ancestral sin’ communicated from Adam and Eve to their descendants, where that ‘ancestral sin’ is ‘located’ (soul, body, or both), potentially impacting beliefs about the nature of Jesus’ human body, human experience, and human emotions. These interpretations impact hermeneutical questions about the influence of Platonic and/or Stoic thought on Christian theology. Does God experience ‘emotions’ or suffer in His divine nature? Does ‘divine simplicity’ and/or ‘impassibility’ rule that out? Do Jesus’ human emotions reveal anything about God? These interpretations bear on pastoral questions about to what degree Jesus’ human emotions and moral endurance can serve as direct comfort for us, or challenge to us. They shape apologetic questions about the ongoing dialogue between Christian theology, pastoral ministry, and modern science, especially neuroscience, which implies a stronger body-brain-mind-soul connection than Origen’s priority on the soul could admit. They also greatly determine our responses to historical and dogmatic questions about the degree of agreement among patristic writers. Views of atonement are deeply intertwined with those questions. In my opinion, as Hatzidakis is loathe to admit, Tertullian and Origen made serious mistakes on these points, and I will explore them below. Eastern Orthodox theologians such as Kallistos Ware, John Meyendorff, and Vladimir Lossky seem to also find their trajectory troubling, and correspondingly, also hold to the belief in Jesus’ assumption of *fallen* human nature. Hatzidakis criticizes his fellow Eastern Orthodox theologians for doing so.

Unfortunately, Van Kuiken was almost finished with his considerable research by the time he encountered Hatzidakis’ work, as well as an earlier version of this paper of mine, which contained this critique of Hatzidakis.¹³⁷ He did me the kindness of referring his readers to this essay in a footnote. While our methodologies are similar, we come to different conclusions about Irenaeus in particular. I wish to respectfully explore the differences here.

When Irenaeus speaks of Jesus taking up ‘the ancient formation of man,’ as Hatzidakis points out, what does he mean? He seems to mean the generic category of ‘humanity,’ which includes the basic qualities of being finite, having both a body and soul, being relationally dependent on God, and needing to develop from immaturity to maturity. More importantly, Irenaeus speaks of ‘sin’ as a corruption or disorder within human nature that needed to be dissolved through death rather than immortalized.¹³⁸ Hatzidakis does not comment on Irenaeus’ statement that ‘man, who had sin in himself, showing that he was liable to death,’ which is not referring to sin as ‘poor behavior,’ but as the quality or type of humanity (‘man’) which Jesus assumed, precisely ‘so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death... that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man...’¹³⁹ So it is difficult to know what he thinks about Irenaeus’ statements. In that passage and many others, Irenaeus stresses Jesus’ death as the moment in which he ‘destroyed’ and ‘kill[ed] sin,’ just as Jesus’ resurrection is the event in which he ‘deprive[d] death of its power, and vivif[ied] man.’

¹³⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.5 says, ‘Inasmuch as, he says, I have by disobedience lost that robe of sanctity which I had from the Spirit, I do now also acknowledge that I am deserving of a covering of this nature, which affords no gratification, but which gnaws and frets the body. And he would no doubt have retained this *clothing* for ever, thus humbling himself, if God, who is merciful, had not clothed them with tunics of skins instead of fig-leaves.’ (italics mine) It is apparent that Irenaeus viewed the ‘tunics of skin’ as ‘clothing’ of the ordinary sort, with continuity of ‘body’ between creation and fall and exile, for uncomfortable clothing ‘which gnaws and frets the body’ at present today is the same bodily experience Adam and Eve felt wearing ‘fig leaves,’ prior to the ‘tunics of skin.’ It is precisely Irenaeus’ *opponents*, the Valentinians, who argue that these ‘skins’ were ‘the final stage of human formation as the sensible element of the human form.’ See Stephen O. Presley, *The Intertextual Reception of Genesis 1 – 3 in Irenaeus of Lyons* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), p.121. John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.119 concurs that Irenaeus interprets Genesis 3:22 in the more straightforward way.

¹³⁶ Origen of Alexandria, *Dialogue with Heraclides*, translated by Robert J. Daly, edited by Walter J. Burghardt, Thomas Comerford Lawler, and John J. Dillon, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* No.54 (New York, NY: Paulist Press), p.69 says, ‘In creation, therefore, the human being first created was the one in the image (Gen.1:26) in whom is nothing material. For what is made in the image is not made from matter.’ Origen of Alexandria, *Homilies on Genesis*, translated by Ronald E. Heine, edited by Hermigild Dressler, Robert P. Russell, Robert Sider, Thomas P. Halton, Sister M. Josephine Brennan, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press), p.63 says, ‘We do not understand, however, this man indeed whom Scripture says was made ‘according to the image of God’ to be corporeal. For the form of the body does not contain the image of God, nor is the corporeal man said to be ‘made,’ but ‘formed,’ as is written in the words which follow... But it is our inner man, invisible, incorporeal, incorruptible, and immortal which is made ‘according to the image of God.’ For it is in such qualities as these that the image of God is more correctly understood. But if anyone suppose that this man who is made ‘according to the image and likeness of God’ is made of flesh, he will appear to represent God himself as made of flesh and in human form. It is most clearly impious to think this about God.’ Origen’s ‘Platonist-idealist’ or ‘spiritual’ reading of the pre-fall world in Genesis 1 requires him to explain how human bodies came to be, which he assigns to both the ‘earth’ in Genesis 2:7 and the ‘coats of skin’ in Genesis 3:22.

¹³⁷ Van Kuiken, p.7

¹³⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6; 3.18.7

¹³⁹ Ibid 3.18.7

Van Kuiken notes that, according to Irenaeus' fondness for parallels, the Virgin Mary is like the virgin soil of creation. Since the virgin soil of creation produced a human nature yet unstained by fallenness, Mary must have bestowed a human nature to Jesus that was purified from fallenness from conception.¹⁴⁰ Irenaeus does enjoy such comparisons but Van Kuiken overstates the significance of the parallel. Irenaeus' emphasis falls on how God brought about the first Adam and the second Adam. The parallel, Irenaeus says, and Van Kuiken agrees, indicates that 'humanity has been re-created' by God.¹⁴¹ The virginal soil of creation was virginal in the sense of being prior to human involvement by cultivation or farming, and thus God alone shaped Adam and breathed life into him. The virginal womb of Mary also had to do with being prior to human involvement by male sperm, and thus God alone shaped the embryonic Jesus and breathed life into him. For the bishop of Lyons, the parallel is simply this:

'For if the one [who sprang] from the earth [i.e. Adam] had indeed formation and substance from both the hand and workmanship of God, but the other [i.e. Jesus] not from the hand and workmanship of God, then He who was made after the image and likeness of the former did not, in that case, preserve the analogy of man.'¹⁴²

But Irenaeus does not press the parallel further to discuss the substance used as raw material (soil, womb) and what moral quality it had, before and after God's action. Had he done so, he would have to imply that human farming would have 'defiled' the original garden land in a moral sense, and that sexual intercourse even within marriage would have 'defiled' Mary *in a moral sense*. But both of those conclusions are untenable biblically and for Irenaeus. The latter position accompanies the Origenist monastic interpretation of marital sexuality I find problematic. On the virgin birth, Van Kuiken notes that scholars Antonio Orbe and Gustaf Wingren also hold to the unfallen view, and that Matthew Baker and Iain M. Mackenzie hold to the fallen view, but does not bring them into closer dialogue. Significantly, Baker points out the following: 'By summing up in Himself the whole human race from the beginning to the end, He has also summed up its death.'¹⁴³ That is, if Jesus' humanity was mortal, then the flesh of Jesus must have carried with it the reason for that mortality: the corruption of the ancestral sin. Baker continues, 'Nor was it only mortal, but, indeed, the very 'flesh which sin had mastered and seized and dominated... that He might fight for the fathers and vanquish in Adam that which had struck us in Adam.'¹⁴⁴ The notion of Jesus 'fighting' and 'vanquishing' the sin which had heretofore 'mastered and seized' human flesh lends support to the fallen view.

Is there any other evidence in Irenaeus that Jesus experienced an internal struggle with a contrary impulse? Irenaeus quotes Isaiah 7:14 in *Demonstration 53* to describe Jesus' early childhood. 'Before the child knows good from evil, he shall reject the evil, to choose the good.' He reasons from this citation that Irenaeus must have believed that Jesus possessed a purity in his infant life that was free from any contrary impulses.¹⁴⁵ Van Kuiken offers, 'Since Irenaeus never ascribes a contrary impulse to Christ's flesh, we should understand the Christ-child's humanity as being perfectly submissive to the divine will.'¹⁴⁶ From there, Van Kuiken characterizes Irenaeus' interpretation of Jesus' temptation experience as still not involving any contrary impulses: 'Christ dispassionately and calculatingly countering Satan's stratagems.'¹⁴⁷

A major difficulty with Van Kuiken's and Hatzidakis' assessment is that they make Irenaeus' Adam-Christ parallel avoid passing through Jesus' Jewishness and the experience of Israel. While Jesus' three temptations certainly map onto the temptations of appetite, pride, and power faced by Adam and Eve in the garden, as Irenaeus recognized,¹⁴⁸ they are also temptations Israel faced in the wilderness, as Irenaeus also recognized.¹⁴⁹ Israel was meant to be a recapitulation of Adam and Eve in their own way: the people of God in God's garden land. Hence, when Jesus

¹⁴⁰ Van Kuiken, p.99

¹⁴¹ Ibid p.98

¹⁴² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.22.1

¹⁴³ Ibid 5.23.2; cf. Matthew Baker, 'The Place of St. Irenaeus of Lyon in Historical and Dogmatic Theology According to Thomas F. Torrance,' in *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship* (T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship website, Volume 2, 2010), http://www.tftorrance.org/journal/participatio_vol_2_2010.pdf, p.22 – 23

¹⁴⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration* 1.3.31; Baker, p.22

¹⁴⁵ Van Kuiken, p.98

¹⁴⁶ Ibid p.98

¹⁴⁷ Ibid p.98

¹⁴⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.21.2

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 5.21.2 says, 'Fasting forty days, like Moses and Elias...'; in 5.22.1 quotes the Shema of the wilderness, Dt.6:4, 5, 13

went through the wilderness temptation, he was recapitulating *Israel's* origin story as a nation: passage through water, temptation in the wilderness for forty years (days, for Jesus), and meditation on Deuteronomy. N.T. Wright has demonstrated that in the apostle Paul, an 'Adam christology' is also an 'Israel christology.'¹⁵⁰ By this, Wright means that we cannot jump from 'Adam' to 'Christ.' We must consider 'Israel.' Part of what is at issue here is whether Irenaeus, and Scripture, can be read in such a way that christology can be developed without much reference to Israel, and in particular, Israel's experience of their own humanness. It is perfectly plausible, theologically, that the infant Jesus had an awareness of God the Father even before he had some recognition of boundaries in a proper sense (cf. Rom.7:9, 'before the commandment came'), but this does not mean that Jesus never had any contrary impulses which he internally fought to subdue, by the Spirit. Given the apostle Paul's recounting of his specifically Jewish experience 'under the Law' in Romans 7:1 – 25 and his use of the phrase 'under the Law' in Galatians 4:4 – 5, removing any such struggle from Jesus would effectively make Jesus *non-Jewish*. The ramifications of that move for theodicy are vast.

Moreover, Irenaeus *does* refer to Gethsemane, and it is not likely he would describe Jesus as 'dispassionately and calculatingly countering Satan's stratagems' there, as Van Kuiken reads Irenaeus' recounting of the wilderness. Instead, the bishop of Lyons stresses that Christ had 'sweat great drops of blood'¹⁵¹ and that Gethsemane was a token of Jesus' 'passion' and a participation in it already, because Jesus in Gethsemane awakened his disciples from sleep as he would descend into Hades and 'awaken' the dead from 'sleep,' in a deeper sense.¹⁵² Since Gethsemane is the literary bookend of Jesus' public ministry, where the wilderness temptation is the opening, it follows that Jesus' struggle against a contrary impulse in Gethsemane strongly suggests such a struggle in the wilderness, and in all likelihood, the time in-between and on the cross as well. When, therefore, I read Irenaeus saying, 'He became man in order to undergo temptation... that He might be capable of being tempted,'¹⁵³ we must ask, 'What is the nature of a temptation?' Is it not by definition the experience of a contrary impulse of some sort?

Hatzidakis interprets Jesus' temptation narrative in a peculiar way which shows his reliance on categories in the classical Greek Orthodox tradition. He defines Jesus' temptations as belonging to the category of 'innocent passions' like hunger, thirst, and tiredness. He suggests that, just as Adam and Eve were capable of being tempted prior to the fall, so Jesus' humanity was still vulnerable to temptation, though unfallen. Therefore, he argues, Jesus need not have assumed a fallen humanity at conception. He further claims that the Son of God was vulnerable to ordinary bodily limitations like thirst by free choice(s) alone,¹⁵⁴ rather than his categorical commitment to become bodily human at conception, incidentally. He quotes approvingly other Christian writers who insist that Jesus must not have gotten physically sick at any time because he was able to miraculously heal others' sicknesses, so for him to acquire a common cold would be a theological embarrassment. But arguably, Jesus' wilderness temptation and Gethsemane experiences were not reducible to ordinary bodily desires to biologically live; the satanic appeals to power and ego make more sense if they were designed to trigger something in a fallen human nature, especially interacting with kingly prerogatives. And part of the temptation experience exemplified Jesus' commitment to not use his miraculous power for his own benefit. Turning stones into bread for his own hunger's sake was a temptation to use power for himself alone. I maintain that there is no theological embarrassment in suggesting that Jesus was vulnerable to viruses and bacteria because he was human. If he never used his power for himself, it makes sense that he would catch a cold, for the same reason that he got thirsty.

Two data points which I noted before as part of my introduction to Irenaeus are also relevant to this question of unfallen or fallen humanity assumed by the Son in the incarnation. First, recall Irenaeus' creative use of the Good Samaritan parable to illustrate a history of human nature including the incarnation. In the same way that the Samaritan entrusted the innkeeper with the wounded man, the Son entrusted the Spirit with his own wounded humanity. This is suggestive that the human nature Jesus assumed was, between conception and death, wounded by the corruption of sin:

‘...the Lord commending to the Holy Spirit His own man [*suum hominem*], who had fallen among thieves, whom He Himself compassionated, and bound up his wounds, giving two royal denaria; so that we,

¹⁵⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), p.39 says, 'First, the apocalyptic belief that Israel is the last Adam is the correct background against which to understand Paul's Adam-christology'; cf. p.35 – 40.

¹⁵¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.35.3

¹⁵² *Ibid* 4.22.1

¹⁵³ *Ibid* 3.19.3

¹⁵⁴ Hatzidakis, p.422

receiving by the Spirit the image and superscription of the Father and the Son, might cause the denarium entrusted to us to be fruitful, counting out the increase to the Lord.’¹⁵⁵

Admittedly, using a parable for a typological purpose like this can only be suggestive. But it is one consideration among many. Moreover, it corroborates Irenaeus’ technical language of ‘accustomization,’ which is the second data point.

Irenaeus says that human beings have become ‘accustomed’ to our enslavement to sin after the fall,¹⁵⁶ and even ‘accustomed to condemn the innocent, and to let the guilty go free.’¹⁵⁷ In response, God ‘accustomed’ Abraham ‘to follow the Word of God’¹⁵⁸ and ‘accustomed’ Israel and her prophets to ‘bear His Spirit,’¹⁵⁹ ‘accustoming His inheritance to obey God.’¹⁶⁰ This process of ‘accustomization’ culminated in the ministry of the Son and the Spirit in the life of the incarnate Christ. In particular, the Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River, and commenced a special and climactic process of accustomization.

‘Wherefore He [the Spirit] did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with Him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ.’¹⁶¹

Reciprocally, Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, ‘accustomed’ his humanity to abide the Spirit. Since he had become genuine ‘man, who had sin in himself... to destroy sin... so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death. God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man.’¹⁶² Irenaeus’ rather formal use of the term ‘accustom,’ along with his interpretation of the Spirit-baptism event in the Jordan, reinforces his use of the Good Samaritan parable wherein the Son entrusted the Spirit with his wounded human nature *all throughout his earthly human life*.

Irenaeus’ Use of Romans 8:3: ‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh’

Hatzidakis asserts that if Jesus had a fallen human nature that he would be personally guilty of sin. But, to anticipate a further exploration of this issue, certain attributes of human nature are not descriptive of the human person in this way even for us. ‘Corrupted’ is an attribute of our human nature, formally speaking. ‘Guilty’ is an attribute of a person who has taken a sinful action. One’s human nature can be ‘corrupted’ without that person being ‘guilty’ yet of transgressing a given boundary or standard. It follows, contra Hatzidakis, that this was exactly the case with Jesus, who carried a ‘corrupted’ humanity without being ‘guilty’ of any transgression at all. In fact, Paul indicates that he, as a Jewish person ‘under the Law,’ was unable to control his own covetousness and lusting (Rom.7:7 – 25), although he was able to obey the other commandments. Furthermore, Paul asserts that Jesus did obey all the commandments, including ‘do not covet’ (Rom.8:3 – 4). The fallenness camp asserts that Jesus’ personhood and/or divine nature acted *with* and *under* his human nature (cooperatively, collaboratively, synergistically) in such a way so as to heal it. It is quite germane to Paul’s argument in Romans 7:1 – 8:4 that Jesus never yielded to the impulse of coveting and lusting, though he bore the same ‘flesh’ as the rest of the Jewish people (and all humanity), where Paul had just described ‘the flesh’ as containing some contrary impulse. Jesus, however, must have wrestled down that impulse prior to that impulse finding expression as coveting or lusting. Moreover, this action had to be progressive and not instantaneous, precisely because human nature itself is developmental, and needed to be healed and cleansed in a developmental way, as Irenaeus argues when he offers his recapitulation theory. Jesus’ most mature vocation as Davidic king provided the framework for his final and most intense temptations. For Jesus’ temptations had to be framed for him not only against the Law of the Sinaitic covenant as if he were an ordinary Jewish person, but against the Davidic prerogatives to rule the nations because he was the heir of David. The uniting of divinity with humanity, as fire uniting with iron, needed to be a *process unfolding in a human way*. Suffice to say here that Hatzidakis deploys certain assumptions rather than engaging with the text of Irenaeus’ work,

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 3.17.3

¹⁵⁶ Ibid 4.13.2

¹⁵⁷ Ibid 4.26.3

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 4.5.4

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 4.14.2

¹⁶⁰ Ibid 4.21.3

¹⁶¹ Ibid 3.17.1

¹⁶² Ibid 3.18.7

where Irenaeus devotes considerable space to the Sinai covenant and Davidic kingship. Also significant in the background is Augustine's problematic introduction of 'inherited guilt' from Adam as opposed to the more common 'inherited corruption' in the Greek fathers.

Along the lines of my argument, Irenaeus' reference to Paul's phrase 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' from Romans 8:3 is a data point that deserves very careful attention. In English, the word 'likeness' can mean 'resemblance' or 'the superficial appearance of.' In some uses, it implies an *antithetical* relation with the actual substance thereof. However, in Paul, the word 'likeness' cannot possibly mean that. For in Philippians 2:7, he says that Jesus was found 'in the likeness of humans,' and, lest we accuse Paul himself of being a gnostic dualist of the Hellenistic variety, he clearly does not mean 'resemblance only' or 'the superficial appearance of.' Consistency alone is a strong argument: this is the *same author* (Paul), writing in the *same time period* (he wrote *Romans* in 57 AD from Corinth, and *Philippians* most likely around 62 AD from Rome), about the *same subject* (the eternal Son of God), and the *same historical action of that subject* (the incarnation). It is difficult to conceive of a major theological point like this being described with a key term meaning two different things.

Furthermore, Paul seems to use 'likeness' in a more technical biblical sense derived from, and governed by, Genesis 1:26 – 28. 'Likeness' is complementary with 'image' but not reducible to it, or redundant with it. For God to make human beings 'in His image' means, at minimum, something about humanity's functional role in creation, moral value, and/or christological 'location.'¹⁶³ 'Likeness' in Genesis 1 seems to mean something akin to the 'growth in relationship and character' that God intended for human beings, or 'maturing' into the pattern of God's moral character of love, especially as it might have been expressed in relationships: as a communal co-rulership over the creation as God's representatives. These meanings of 'image' and 'likeness' from Genesis 1:26 – 28 are reinforced by Genesis 2:4 – 25 when God breathed into Adam to make him a living being (Gen.2:7), sharing something of Himself with human beings ('image'), and also expecting us to grow and mature, spreading the garden of Eden along the four riverways of creation, bringing beauty and order into the wild creation ('likeness'). If my thesis is correct, then when Paul says in Romans 8:3 that Jesus shared 'in the *likeness* of sinful flesh,' he was not saying that Jesus took human flesh but not *sinful* human flesh, any more than he would say Jesus was human in appearance but not in substance. He was saying that Jesus 'shared in the mature substance of' our sinful flesh. Does Irenaeus' usage reflect this understanding?

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

'Just as the physician is proved by his patients, so is God also revealed through men. And therefore Paul declares, 'For God hath concluded all in unbelief, that He may have mercy upon all;' not saying this in reference to spiritual aeons, but to man, who had been disobedient to God, and being cast off from immortality, then obtained mercy, receiving through the Son of God that adoption which is [accomplished] by Himself. For he who holds, without pride and boasting, the true glory (opinion) regarding created things and the Creator, who is the Almighty God of all, and who has granted existence to all; [such an one,] continuing in His love and subjection, and giving of thanks, shall also receive from Him the greater glory of promotion, looking forward to the time when he shall become like Him who died for him, *for He, too, was made in the likeness of sinful flesh*, to condemn sin, and to cast it, as now a condemned thing, away beyond the flesh, but that He might call man forth into His own likeness, assigning him as [His own] imitator to God, and imposing on him His Father's law, in order that he may see God, and granting him power to receive the Father; [being] the Word of God who dwelt in man, and became the Son of man, that He might accustom man to receive God, and God to dwell in man, according to the good pleasure of the Father.'¹⁶⁴

In this dense quotation, Irenaeus makes an explicitly medical statement about God being a physician and healer. We may therefore see the theme of healing running through the passage. When Irenaeus says, 'for He, too, was made in

¹⁶³ The functional meaning is evident against the backdrop of other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories where a god or hero places his image in a temple-palace he erects on the site of a victory, signaling God making human beings His living representatives on the earth; see Rikk Watts, 'Making Sense of Genesis 1,' *Stimulus Journal*, November 2004. The moral meaning is such that God created humanity with moral value and goodness, which is now functionally 'intrinsic' to humanity. The christological meaning is such that God created humanity 'in the Son' in some type of locational-relational sense, therefore 'in him all things hold together' (Col.1:17; Acts 17:28).

¹⁶⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.20.2

the likeness of sinful flesh,' he deliberately stresses the identification of the Son of God with our condition. The grammatical use of 'He too' makes Irenaeus' mind beyond dispute. For Irenaeus does not insert any distance between our current human condition and the human condition Jesus entered. Since we are made in the likeness of sinful flesh, so *He too*, was. Irenaeus also positions the significance of Jesus' taking sinful flesh between his death and the purpose of his death. The Son of God 'died for him [i.e. the human being] ... to condemn sin, and to cast it, as now a condemned thing, away beyond the flesh.' For Tertullian, as we will see below, Jesus abolished sin at the moment of his conception. Not so for Irenaeus. Irenaeus believed that Jesus' decisive victory over sinful flesh – not just pre-fallen Adamic temptation – was at his death. By using death as the means of finally separating sin and human nature, he 'cast' sin 'away' from his humanity, which he brought up again through resurrection. By doing this, as Irenaeus explores, Jesus enabled a union between God and the human. Jesus shared the 'power to receive the Father' with his disciples only after his death and resurrection, especially in John's Gospel. Throughout the narrative of John, Jesus refers to 'the' Father, or 'my Father,' but only speaks of 'your Father' after his resurrection (Jn.20:17) and in connection with his sharing of the Spirit (Jn.20:22), which could not happen prior to his death and resurrection (Jn.7:37 – 39). Thus, God revealed Himself precisely as a physician and healer of human beings in connection with Jesus fully healing his own human nature.

Van Kuiken believes that in this passage, Irenaeus makes the case that we will 'become wholly like' Jesus on the grounds that Jesus came 'in the likeness of sinful flesh.' Jesus taking on our likeness causes us to become wholly like him, over time. But Van Kuiken reduces 'likeness' to Christ here down to 'immortality.'¹⁶⁵ I have a difficulty with Van Kuiken's reading of this passage because I am persuaded Irenaeus is also considering the immoral-moral axis of Christian life, and not simply the mortality-immortality axis. Irenaeus speaks of the human 'continuing in His love and *subjection*.' Shortly afterwards, he speaks of 'imposing on him His Father's *law*.' Sandwiched between those statements, Irenaeus uses Romans 8:3. When referring to Jesus' death, Irenaeus says that Jesus, through his manner of incarnation, life, and death 'condemned sin.' The moral-ethical meaning of Jesus' death is notable, since Irenaeus points out that Jesus is the one 'who died for' human beings. That was the climactic moment when Jesus did not simply resist sin, but 'cast it, as now a condemned thing, away beyond the flesh.' If Irenaeus believed that Jesus had cast sin away from the flesh at conception, and had assumed unfallen human nature, then this statement would make little sense.

Worse yet, if Irenaeus believed that our becoming 'like' Jesus is rooted in Jesus coming 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' but without its actual sinfulness, then his reasoning would be ambiguous and faulty. If Jesus took on unfallen flesh at his incarnation, then our growing moral-ethical 'likeness' to Jesus – which Irenaeus is quite interested in – would not be well-grounded. First, the simple lexical meaning of the words 'like' and 'likeness' would suddenly be made double-minded and dubious even within the narrow confines of Irenaeus' statement here. For if Jesus' 'likeness' to our 'sinful flesh' is not grounded in his actual, substantial, and mature participation in our fallen humanity, or 'sinful flesh' as stated, then the phrase 'in the likeness' in this case means 'in the superficial appearance' only. Can we, then, use that definition of 'likeness' in reverse? If we are called to be 'like' Jesus, that is, to bear the 'likeness' of his immortality and/or moral stature, then can that 'likeness,' too, be merely superficial and not substantive? Such a suggestion would be jarring and damage Irenaeus' meaning beyond repair. The phrase, 'in the likeness,' when it describes our movement towards Christ, cannot mean something different than *the very same phrase* when it describes Christ's movement towards us.

Moreover, if Jesus came in the 'appearance only' of 'sinful flesh,' it is far from clear how that fact confers encouragement to us who struggle with 'sinful flesh' not in appearance only, but in actuality. For it would mean that Jesus' experience of human life was critically different from ours that we would have to find emotional solidarity elsewhere – the saints, perhaps? Leander E. Keck's comments on this phrase are succinct:

'It is the sin domiciled in the flesh that is condemned. In order to make that possible, the Son was sent "in the likeness of sinful flesh" – *en homoiomati sarkos hamartias*, clearly meaning identification with the human condition, not mere similarity. Had the Son been only "like" flesh, he could not have condemned sin "in the flesh," precisely where Paul had located the problem. Had the Son not participated in this kind of flesh, the "condemnation" would not have been liberating; it could only have exposed even more powerfully the human dilemma, so that the net result of knowing about such a Son would, like hearing the

¹⁶⁵ Van Kuiken, p.101 says, 'Hence the 'likeness of sinful flesh' relates to Christ's sharing our experience of sin's consequence, death, and contrasts with 'His own [present] likeness' as immortal, which we shall experience with him.'

law, have only made one conscious of sin (3:20). This formulation of the radical identification of the Son with the full depths of the human condition is similar to that of 2 Cor 5:21 – “him who knew no sin he made sin for our sakes... Christian theology, and especially Christian piety, has found it exceedingly difficult to follow Paul here because of the doctrine of Jesus’ sinlessness. Whatever one may think about Jesus’ sinlessness, Paul’s formulations move on a different plane. They do not have in view the question of whether Jesus committed sins but whether the Son participated in the human condition sufficiently to achieve that which the human dilemma required.”¹⁶⁶

That emotional disconnection from Jesus on the pastoral level is connected, at the very least, to speculations about a spiritual-theological disconnection as well. Why is it logically the case that Jesus’ coming in our ‘likeness’ will make us ‘like’ him? Only if Jesus came in the substantial, mature form of our sinful flesh, and condemned sin in the flesh by never sinning, do we have a participationist grounding for our moral growth in Christ as well as our resurrection in him, as well. It is much more straightforward to say that Jesus shared in our fallen humanity, that we might share in his healed humanity.

Here is the second quotation of Romans 8:3 in Irenaeus:

‘But as many as feared God, and were anxious about His law, these ran to Christ, and were all saved. For He said to His disciples: ‘Go ye to the sheep of the house of Israel, which have perished.’ And many more Samaritans, it is said, when the Lord had tarried among them, two days, ‘believed because of His words, and said to the woman, ‘Now we believe, not because of thy saying, for we ourselves have heard [Him], and know that this man is truly the Savior of the world.’’ And Paul likewise declares, ‘And so all Israel shall be saved;’ but he has also said, ‘that the law was our pedagogue [to bring us] to Christ Jesus.’ Let them not therefore ascribe to the law the unbelief of certain [among them]. For the law never hindered them from believing in the Son of God; nay, but it even exhorted them so to do, saying that men can be saved in no other way from the old wound of the serpent than by believing in Him who, *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, is lifted up from the earth upon the tree of martyrdom, and draws all things to Himself, and vivifies the dead.’¹⁶⁷

Although Irenaeus in book 4 of *Against Heresies* speaks extensively about the Sinai covenant and Israel’s experience, he links that period of salvation history to God’s saving purpose for *all humanity*. We see this here. Irenaeus quotes from Romans 11:26 (‘all Israel will be saved’) explaining not an ‘ethnic Israel’ theory but commending both Jews *and Samaritans* who ‘were anxious about His law.’ This concurs with Paul’s usage of the phrase ‘the Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16 as encompassing both Jews *and Gentiles* who profess faith in Christ.

If at this juncture, Irenaeus wanted to say that Jesus took on the likeness of Adam’s pre-fallen humanity, how might he have communicated that? Irenaeus was perfectly capable of saying, ‘In the likeness of Adam,’ when he so desired, and he meant ‘fallen Adamic humanity’ when he did.¹⁶⁸ In addition, Irenaeus seems to have in mind John 12:32 (‘is lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself’) and John 3:14 – 15 (‘is lifted up’) and behind that, Numbers 21:4 – 7, which use the image of the bronze serpent being lifted up on a ‘tree’ to offer healing from the bites of serpents. In Numbers 21, what was cast in bronze and thus portrayed as judged is not *an Israelite*, as penal substitution would require, but rather *a serpent*. So what God judges and views as cursed is the source of the venom. For Jesus to occupy that place on the tree is to identify sinful human flesh as the proximate source of the venom. An already cleansed human nature would not supply that image. This point may not be decisive on its own, but the cumulative weight builds up.

The fact that Irenaeus perceives the linkage between John 3:14 – 15 and John 12:32 around the significant word ‘lifted up’ (ὑψώω) deserves careful consideration, because it bears on the topic of atonement. Compared with the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus in John never says that he will be ‘killed’ (e.g. Mt.16:21; 17:22 – 23; 21:37 – 39). Rather, Jesus uses this peculiar phrase: he will be ‘lifted up.’ John the narrator, however, explains Jesus’ statement: ‘But he was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which he was to die’ (Jn.12:33). This phrasing is consistent with

¹⁶⁶ Leander E. Keck, “The Law and “The Law of Sin and Death”,” edited by James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel, *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (Ktav Pub Inc, May 1, 1980), p.49 – 50

¹⁶⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.2.8

¹⁶⁸ Ibid 5.21.1, ‘For from that time, He who should be born of a woman, [namely] from the Virgin, after the likeness of Adam’ refers to the fact that the enemy ‘led us away captives in Adam’

John's interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion as his enthronement and exaltation. John himself seems to use the term 'lifted up' (ὕψω) to forge a link to Isaiah's Song of the Suffering Servant, where LXX Isaiah 52:13 introduces the Servant by saying, 'Behold, My Servant shall... be high and lifted up (ὕψωθήσεται).' This, despite God saying in Isaiah that He will share his exalted status with no others.¹⁶⁹ Yet in John 3:14 – 15, Jesus indicates that the earthly vertical movement of being 'lifted up' on the cross is an exaltation. While Luke-Acts sees Jesus' ascension to heaven as the movement of exaltation, in John, that vertical upward movement on the cross itself corresponds to Jesus' enthronement. It is an exaltation laced with irony but simultaneously transfigured with profound meaning. Irenaeus seems quite aware that John's Gospel operates in this way, and seems intent on expounding on that meaning by bringing the literary themes to the surface.

Referring to the 'old wound of the serpent' indicates that Irenaeus is thinking of all humanity in the biblical narrative, because both Jews and Gentiles find their common parentage and plight from Adam and Eve. Irenaeus links John 3:14 – 15 and Numbers 21:4 – 7 to Genesis 3:1 – 7, the old wound of the serpent and Jesus being in the likeness of sinful flesh. Why does he do this? Van Kuiken suggests that Irenaeus might be viewing the bronze serpent 'lifted up from the earth' as a sign of victory over the ancient serpent portrayed in the Adamic fall,¹⁷⁰ as Justin Martyr interpreted it this way.¹⁷¹ I am happy to include that meaning. However, I perceive much more in Irenaeus' statement. The underlying logic in the bishop's mind is a parallel between Adam and Jesus where Jesus returned what Adam stole. Adam took from the tree in self-centered disobedience in a bid for 'life' apart from God, whereas Jesus came to a tree in martyrdom to give up his life for the Father and for us. Adam came to the tree and received the serpent's 'venom' into human nature, whereas Jesus returned sinful human flesh to a tree, healing the 'old wound' of the serpent. The idea of 'venom' being in human nature is early. Jesus spoke of serpents and scorpions as figures for Satan and the demons in Luke 10:19. Serpents and scorpions are dangerous not because of their size or appetite, but their venom: they can inject something into us which harms and/or kills us slowly. This usage by Jesus reflects the imagery of the serpent in the Pentateuch: in the garden (Gen.3:1 – 7); in Egypt as the power of Pharaoh (Ex.7:8 – 13); in the wilderness as the lingering 'venom' of Pharaoh drawing the Israelites back to Egypt (Num.21:4 – 7), and indicating the primal venom of the ancient serpent was coursing through the veins of the Israelites, and all humanity.

If I am correct in seeing Irenaeus' penchant for seeing the return movement, or recirculating, in the biblical story, then this would again require that Jesus *not* have cleansed his human nature at conception. He would have resisted sin, to be sure, but he must have carried his sin-bitten human nature all the way back to the tree to fulfill the return movement of human sin beginning at a tree. Jesus is exalted as the Isaianic Servant-king, and as God, when he was lifted up, revealing himself as the one who was removing the venom of sin from human nature, condemning the poisonous corruption of sin through death, and raising his human nature purified in his resurrection.

If we take seriously the likelihood that Philippians 2:6 – 11 and Romans 8:3 – 4 (and Galatians 4:4 – 5, which mirrors Romans 8:3 – 4¹⁷²) are pre-Pauline creedal material developed by the earliest Jewish Christian community,¹⁷³ as I argue below, then the significance of the phrase 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' means all the more, both in Paul, and in Irenaeus. Here, biblical scholarship makes a helpful contribution. It is even logically possible, and moreover likely, that the creedal material was developed by the apostles themselves, perhaps even with the resurrected Jesus in their midst. Regardless, it is exceedingly unlikely that Jewish Christians would use the Greek term for 'likeness' (ὁμοιώματι), which was used in LXX Genesis 1:26 for 'likeness' as well, in two different ways for the very same subject (the Son) and topic (his incarnation into human nature). They understood their context well enough: any terminological disagreement would have generated substantial confusion, pun intended.

¹⁶⁹ In Isaiah's prophecy, the phrase 'high and exalted' occurs with reference to God (2:17; 6:1; 33:5, 10; 57:15) and uniquely with the Servant (52:13). Negatively, God accuses human beings of pride and idolatry using the phrase 'proud and lofty...lifted up' (2:12, 13, 14; 10:33). So the phrase is a significant indication of the thematic unity of Isaiah's prophecy. Also, the phrase strikingly joins God and the Servant in terms of stature, position, and perhaps even identity. God guards that exaltation jealously. He says, 'the LORD alone will be exalted in that day' (Isa.2:17). Given Isaiah's use of terms, it must have surprised Jesus' contemporaries that he used this phrase for himself, and also that he would combine it with the image of the bronze serpent.

¹⁷⁰ Van Kuiken, p.101

¹⁷¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 91, 94, 112, quoted by Van Kuiken, p.101

¹⁷² Leander E. Keck, "The Law and "The Law of Sin and Death",," edited by James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel, *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (Ktav Pub Inc, May 1, 1980). See below my examination of AH 5.21.1 and the phrase 'born of woman' in the context of 'the likeness of Adam.'

¹⁷³ E.g. Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians 2:5 – 11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997 2nd edition), p.vii–ix

The Meaning of 'Likeness' in Second Century Christianity: Ebionite Literature as Comparison

Literary data from the Ebionite Jewish Christian sect provides more support for my view that the phrases 'in the likeness of humans' (Phil.2:7) and 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (Rom.8:3) preceded the apostle Paul and had a meaning that was anchored to the LXX Genesis 1:26 translation of 'likeness.' The Ebionites were a heterodox Jewish Christian group known to exist perhaps as early as the 1st century, but well into the 4th century, scattered in various places but centered in Palestine. Irenaeus mentions them.¹⁷⁴ Possibly, they existed well into the period of the Islamic caliphate. Like the Muslims, the Ebionites saw in Jesus 'the greatest of prophets and not the Son of God' in a divine sense.¹⁷⁵ Given that the Ebionites are thought to have rejected the apostle Paul, it is not likely that they would casually use the terms 'image' and 'likeness' in the same way Paul did, if Paul originated that usage. Yet their literature, the *Clementine Homilies* and *Clementine Recognitions*, where words are put into the mouth of Simon Peter, maintains the use of 'image' and 'likeness' in the way I described, above.

In *Clementine Homily 10*, the character Peter speaks of God creating heaven and earth and appointing man, 'being made after the image and likeness of God.'¹⁷⁶ Being made in the image of God has to do with our 'bodies,'¹⁷⁷ which seems to mean not simply embodiment but being able to move about in creation and exercise dominion, which means the fuller context of Genesis 1 is being considered. Being in the 'likeness,' however, has to do with exercising moral wisdom, judgement, personal holiness, and obedience. Growing in the 'likeness' is understood as the opposite of becoming like 'swine,' which are especially vulnerable to the demons. 'If, therefore, you receive the law of God, you become men... [for animals cannot respond to God's law]. Therefore do not refuse, when invited, to return to your first nobility; for it is possible, if you be conformed to God by good works. And being accounted to be sons by reason of your *likeness* to Him, you shall be reinstated as lords of all.'¹⁷⁸

In *Homily 11*, which continues Peter's interest in discussing 'purity,'¹⁷⁹ the following passage establishes that 'in the image of God' is ontological, and even physical, whereas 'in the likeness of God' is moral, intellectual, and relational.

'You are the *image* of the invisible God. Whence let not those who would be pious say that idols are images of God, and therefore that it is right to worship them. For the *image* of God is man. He who wishes to be pious towards God does good to man, because the body of man bears the *image* of God. But all do not as yet bear His *likeness*, but the pure mind of the good soul does. However, as we know that man was made after the *image* and after the *likeness* of God, we tell you to be pious towards him, that the favour may be accounted as done to God, whose *image* he is. Therefore it behooves you to give honour to the *image* of God, which is man—in this wise: food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, care to the sick, shelter to the stranger, and visiting him who is in prison, to help him as you can. And not to speak at length, whatever good things any one wishes for himself, so let him afford to another in need, and then a good reward can be reckoned to him as being pious towards the *image* of God. And by like reason, if he will not undertake to do these things, he shall be punished as neglecting the *image*.'

This usage clearly relies on Genesis 1:26 – 28, where the term 'image' is assigned the meaning of an ontological category, a givenness. The 'image of God' cannot be lost, by definition of being human. The 'image of God' persists in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, stranger, imprisoned – no matter if that person is of the same faith or not, apparently. In comparison, the 'likeness of God' *can* be lost. 'Likeness,' therefore, involves deliberate choices to develop one's self in various ways, with a view towards full participation in God's commandments, mission, and community. Developing the 'likeness of God' is predicated on hearing moral laws and acting on them. This growth involves listening, rationality, and will.

In my argument, the *Clementine Homilies* and the Ebionite Jewish Christians serve as a historical witness to Jewish Christians using the 'image – likeness' distinction in a way that supports my interpretation of both Irenaeus and Paul

¹⁷⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.33.4

¹⁷⁵ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 1: The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964), p.56; cf. p.55 – 64

¹⁷⁶ *Clementine Homilies*, Homily 10.3

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid* 10.6

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid* 10.6

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid* 11.1

as we examine Romans 8:3. Specifically, growing in the ‘likeness’ of something has to do with developing and maturing in that something. As a technical term, being ‘in the likeness’ means a developed participation in the substance or object in which one participates.

What makes the Ebionites particularly interesting for this purpose is that apparently they did not believe in the divinity of Christ, or the virgin birth. Given their additional distaste for Paul, they would not have believed it appropriate to say that the Son came ‘in the likeness of humans’ (Phil.2:7), or that ‘God sent His Son... in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom.8:3), for such statements implied the pre-incarnate existence of the Son. To them, Jesus was simply a human being with an ordinary human origin. That fact is germane to my argument because it is unlikely that they would take up creedal language which was thought to have been invented by Paul, and use it in the same way. After all, in Christian circles of orthodox and heterodox persuasions, the ‘image – likeness’ pairing of terms was used to describe the significance of creation *and* redemption. Instead, the Ebionites probably deployed the ‘image – likeness’ language because other early Jewish Christians – that is, the orthodox ones – had a developed use of those terms derived from Genesis 1:26 – 28. That would include the Ebionites’ contemporary, Irenaeus, in the second century, and prior to him, the apostle Paul in the mid-1st century, and prior to him, the earliest Jewish Christians.

The Meaning of ‘Likeness’ in Second Century Christianity: The Valentinians as Comparison Point

Another point of evidence that the term ‘likeness’ had acquired a stable meaning, especially in relation to the term ‘image,’ is the description Irenaeus gives of the Valentinians. In the second century, Valentinus was head of a school in Alexandria, who, along with his disciples, were responsible for the *Gospel of Truth*, the *Treatise on the Three Natures*, and the Jung Codex in the Nag Hammadi library.¹⁸⁰ He was a Hellenistic gnostic teacher who deployed Jewish Christian terms in a new context, where the dualism of body-soul, earth-heaven, matter-spirit framed all other concerns. Irenaeus had encountered the teaching of Valentinus in Rome through the permissive attitude of Eleutherus of Rome, reportedly then bishop of Rome, rebuked Eleutherus, and wrote against it.¹⁸¹

Irenaeus recognizes that the Valentinians had subtle differences amongst themselves especially about the creation of humanity.¹⁸² On Irenaeus’ report of the Valentinians, ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ have the same basic meaning much of the time.¹⁸³ This raises the question of redundancy. Why would they use these terms as synonyms except that they are parasitic on Christian discourse, along with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and *had to* use them? Did they not have to redefine them as synonyms, to disarm them?

The Valentinian cosmology is significant here. In the long chain of beings, the Aeons are first and propagated themselves through conjugal union. Sophia, the youngest of the Aeons, was moved with ‘passion’ to search out the nature of another older Aeon called ‘Nous’ and ‘Monogenes’ and ‘Father.’¹⁸⁴ While in this state of passion, she brought forth an ‘amorphous substance,’ without a corresponding ‘form.’¹⁸⁵ In the Valentinian system, the female principle gives substance, the male, form. This substance was called an ‘abortion’ (*enthymesis*). While Sophia eventually returned to the midst of the Aeons (the *pleroma*), this substance did not, and is identified as ‘Achamoth.’ Two other Aeons, called ‘Christ’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ ‘imparted a figure to her’ and left her with ‘the odor of immortality’ so that she ‘might be influenced by the desire of better things,’ ‘to return to him who gave her life.’¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁰ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 1: The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964), p.76

¹⁸¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 1 and 2

¹⁸² Ibid 1.18.2 indicates that the Valentinians tried to apply a linear timeline to Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 and 2:4 – 25. Hence, they refer to humans being created on ‘the sixth day’ and yet also ‘the eighth day,’ sometimes in contradiction with each other. Irenaeus says, ‘They affirm that man was formed on the eighth day, for sometimes they will have him to have been made on the sixth day, and sometimes on the eighth, unless, perchance, they mean that his earthly part was formed on the sixth day, but his fleshly part on the eighth, for these two things are distinguished by them. Some of them also hold that one man was formed after the image and likeness of God, masculine-feminine, and that this was the spiritual man; and that another man was formed out of the earth.’

¹⁸³ Ibid 1.8.1 says, ‘if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces...’; 1.14.6 says, ‘in the likeness of an image...’; 1.23.4 says, ‘They also have an image of Simon fashioned after the likeness of Jupiter, and another of Helena in the shape of Minerva; and these they worship’; 1.25.6 says, intriguingly, ‘They also possess images, some of them painted, and others formed from different kinds of material; while they maintain that a likeness of Christ was made by Pilate at that time when Jesus lived among them’

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 1.1; 1.2

¹⁸⁵ Ibid 1.2.3

¹⁸⁶ Ibid 1.4.1

Achamoth, desiring to return to the Father and the pleroma, produced the Demiurge,¹⁸⁷ the Framer of all things material and corporal. This Demiurge is the God of the creation and the Old Testament, ‘who said through the prophets, ‘I am God, and besides me there is none else.’¹⁸⁸ The Demiurge ‘created the earthy part of man, not taking him from this dry earth, but from an invisible substance consisting of fusible and fluid matter,’ and then ‘breathed into him the *animal part* [soulish] of his nature... which was created after his image and likeness.’¹⁸⁹ But his mother Achamoth hid within the Demiurge ‘a spiritual nature,’ even without his knowledge, which passed into all he created. That ‘spiritual nature’ caused in human beings the longing for a return to the higher spiritual realms, awaiting ‘the reception of perfect rationality’ to do so.¹⁹⁰ Human beings are therefore material and spiritual, and our a third part, the animal part, exists in-between the two and chooses between them. In the Valentinian system, ‘knowledge’ is sufficient for ‘salvation,’ even without living out an embodied morality, and Irenaeus criticizes them for it.¹⁹¹

Left to their own devices, the Valentinians would have probably preferred to dispense with one or both of these terms. But they could not, tethered as they were to the biblical text and pre-existing Jewish and Christian modes of discourse and liturgy, from which they borrowed. The Valentinians assigned meaning to what they considered to be female and male contributions to creation: substance and form. Those terms abound insofar as Irenaeus describes their cosmology accurately. Yet it is interesting that they did not, or could not, simply adapt the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ to mean ‘substance’ and ‘form’ as they might have wished. The Valentinians posited sharp and sometimes tragic discontinuities between each successive tier of Aeons, then between Sophia and Achamoth, then between Achamoth and the Demiurge, and yet again between the Demiurge and the material creation. So the material world did not serve as an ‘image’ or ‘likeness’ for the spiritual in any meaningful way. By contrast, the invisible, animal, soulish part of humanity did bear some kind of resemblance or connection to the Demiurge. But because the Demiurge himself was ignorant of the possibility of returning to the higher spiritual realms, it is the ‘spiritual outpouring’ from Achamoth which is hidden in us that must be awakened with ‘knowledge’ of our origins and the cosmic origins.

The following usage of these terms is intriguing:

‘Having thus formed the world, he (the Demiurge) also created the earthy [part of] man, not taking him from this dry earth, but from an invisible substance consisting of fusible and fluid matter, and then afterwards, as they define the process, breathed into him the animal part of his nature. It was this latter which was created after his image and likeness. The material part [of the human], indeed, was very near to God, so far as the image went, but not of the same substance with him. The animal [part], on the other hand, was so in respect to *likeness*; and hence his substance was called the spirit of life, because it took its rise from a spiritual outflowing. After all this, he was, they say, enveloped all round with a covering of skin; and by this they mean the outward sensitive flesh.’¹⁹²

Not all questions about this passage might be answered. The Demiurge apparently took the material substance of something like the air of the world (invisible, fusible, fluid) and then breathed into humanity ‘the animal part,’ also called ‘the spirit of life.’ Then, he enveloped the human being with skin and flesh. The animal, soulish-spiritual part – the substance called the spirit of life – was ‘created after his image and likeness.’ But there is one subtle difference between the use of the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ The (material) part of human beings does not share in the same ‘substance with him.’ Yet they use the term ‘likeness’ when there is actual substance shared. For the Valentinians, the deliberative, rational, and willing function within the animal portion of our humanity is influenced by ‘a spiritual outflowing.’ It is from Achamoth – the mother of the God of the Old Testament, and behind him – and shares its substance with her.

Curiously, then, the Valentinians declare, with Scripture, that human beings are ‘created after [the Demiurge’s] image and likeness,’ which of course in their view means the Demiurge’s ‘spirit of life.’ Though we are made of a different material substance, we can be said to be in the ‘image’ of the Demiurge, though perhaps loosely. But when

¹⁸⁷ Ibid 1.5.1

¹⁸⁸ Ibid 1.5.4

¹⁸⁹ Ibid 1.5.5

¹⁹⁰ Ibid 1.5.6

¹⁹¹ Ibid 1.6.1 – 4

¹⁹² Ibid 1.5.2; italics mine

we are said to participate in the same ‘spiritual outpouring,’ they use the term ‘likeness.’ The former is more distant; the latter is more intensified, and more participatory.

Does this Valentinian usage of terms hint at how their neighbors, the orthodox Christians, were using ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ to speak of some kind of baseline ontology, and its intensification? I believe so. Like the Ebionites, the Valentinians serve as another historical witness to the orthodox Jewish Christian use of the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ as meaning complementary but different things. It suggests that the orthodox Christians also used the term ‘in the likeness’ to mean ‘growth by participation’ or ‘deeper participation in,’ and said that Jesus came ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ to specifically mean ‘deeper participation in sinful flesh.’ To the representative of second century orthodox Christians we now turn.

The Meaning of ‘Likeness’ in Second Century Christianity: Irenaeus’ View of Creation

In 1948, John Lawson asserted that Irenaeus is *not* consistent in his use of the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’¹⁹³ In 1999, Albert Collver III accepted Lawson’s judgment.¹⁹⁴ More recent scholars have concluded otherwise – for example, John Behr in 2000. Behr finds that, in Irenaeus, ‘likeness’ for us means our never-ending, fully voluntary participation in the Holy Spirit, anchored in ‘Christ’s work of recapitulation.’¹⁹⁵ Matthew Steenberg in 2009 recognizes that for Irenaeus, ‘to be ‘in the image’ is to speak of the fabric of creation; to be ‘in the likeness’ is to realize economically the life that creation enables – the likeness of the incarnate Son, in obedience to his Father through the Spirit.’¹⁹⁶ This may seem like a circuitous way to demonstrate Irenaeus’ meaning when he writes, ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh.’ But it is entirely worthwhile, for these observations strengthen our understanding of Irenaeus as he uses a very important theological term. By extension, these observations will also strengthen our understanding of early Christianity and the way various groups laying claim to the title ‘Christian’ deployed critical biblical terminology.

When Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* book 2 critiques the Valentinian system, his own use of the term ‘image’ seems to mean ‘the fact of a relation between the copy and the original,’ whereas ‘likeness’ refers to *how well* the copy approximates the original source. For example, he says:

‘in some the *likeness* was preserved, while in others the *likeness* of the image was spoiled, that image which was here produced that it might be according to the image of that production which is above.’¹⁹⁷

Irenaeus also argues that the creation contains far too much variety to be ‘the images and likenesses’ of the thirty Aeons. In that context, he says that the Valentinian attempt to trace human evil back to some Aeons, and human goodness to others, fails because the Aeons do not seem to have personal characteristics like that. While engaging in that argument, and while describing human beings’ moral activities, Irenaeus uses the term ‘likeness’ and *not* the term ‘image.’¹⁹⁸ That fact is suggestive, because for Irenaeus, ‘likeness’ seems to refer to the *quality* of the resemblance between archetype and copy.

On yet another occasion, he faults the Valentinian cosmology for maintaining that the pleroma of Aeons is ontologically greater than the creation, because it is neither numerically greater, nor functionally greater, since it was a stepping stone with which to create the universe as we know it. Irenaeus says:

¹⁹³ John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: The Epworth Press, 1948), p.200.

¹⁹⁴ Albert B. Collver III, ‘Who is Man? Image and Likeness in Irenaeus,’ *Concordia Student Journal*, Epiphany 1999, p.29 says, ‘Inconsistencies do arise in Irenaeus where he does not appear to distinguish between “image” and “likeness.” Depending upon which inconsistencies are lumped together, several possibilities exist for interpretation. Each of these interpretations appears to be largely based on the presuppositions of the interpreter rather than on a clear text for Irenaeus. For example, Duncker sees the “image” of God as part of man’s nature before the Fall, while the “likeness” is the goal of perfection that is obtained at a future date. This interpretation fits well with those who seek to make evolutionary theory and Christian doctrine compatible. On the other hand, Zeigler would connect the “likeness” of God with man’s reason and free will. Others would follow Aristotle and connect reason and free will with the “image” of God. Before looking at the actual text, it is good to keep in mind Lawson’s comment that “the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ are somewhat fluid.” Collver cites Lawson, above.

¹⁹⁵ John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.48, 99 – 100 says, ‘But when this Spirit, commingled with the soul, is united to the handiwork, because of the outpouring of the Spirit man is rendered spiritual and perfect, and this is the one who was made in the image and likeness of God. But if the Spirit is lacking from the soul, such a one, remaining indeed animated and fleshly, will be imperfect, having the image, certainly, in the handiwork, but not receiving the likeness through the Spirit.’ Cf. p.114 – 115

¹⁹⁶ Matthew Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.38

¹⁹⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 2.7.2

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid* 2.7.3

‘the Pleroma can no longer be regarded as having been formed on its own account, but for the sake of that [creation] which was to be its *image* as possessing its *likeness*, just as the clay model is not moulded for its own sake, but for the sake of the statue in brass, or gold, or silver about to be formed.’¹⁹⁹

For Irenaeus, as he refutes the Valentinians, he relies on Christian definitions behind the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ ‘Image’ means a model, like a statue. ‘Likeness’ means the quality of the copy, or how well the image resembles the original. The ‘quality of the resemblance’ is clearly the meaning here:

‘For a type and emblem is, no doubt, sometimes diverse from the truth [signified] as to matter and substance; but it ought, as to the general form and features, to maintain a *likeness* [to what is typified], and in this way to shadow forth by means of things present those which are yet to come.’²⁰⁰

In *Against Heresies* book 3, Irenaeus begins to expound on the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption, and the apostolic teaching as he received it. He uses the term ‘likeness’ six times. Four of those times he uses the biblical phrase ‘image and likeness’ from Genesis 1:26.²⁰¹ In those cases, he does not expound on the difference he may perceive between those two terms, reserving that for books 4 and 5. The other two occasions of ‘likeness’ occur in the passage already studied above:

‘...looking forward to the time when he shall become like Him who died for him, for He, too, ‘was made in the *likeness* of sinful flesh,’ to condemn sin, and to cast it, as now a condemned thing, away beyond the flesh, but that He might call man forth into His own *likeness*, assigning him as [His own] imitator to God, and imposing on him His Father’s law, in order that he may see God, and granting him power to receive the Father...’²⁰²

When Irenaeus is speaking of the *intensified quality* of the resemblance/relation, and not simply the *fact* of a resemblance/relation however apparent, he uses the term ‘likeness.’ Irenaeus’ logic, once again, is as follows: If Jesus calls us back to ‘his own likeness,’ considering that the moral axis of human life (‘his Father’s law’) is under consideration here, then he must have been made in our likeness in his incarnation. That is, to intensify the quality of *our* moral and spiritual life to imitate *his*. Jesus had to intensify the quality of *his* relationship to *us*. His participation in our human nature, therefore, had the *real quality* of mature participation ‘in sinful flesh,’ that is, fallen human nature. He who wants full participation from sinful flesh in his life with the Father must have fully participated in our sinful flesh first. To call us into the fullness of our *likeness* to God, the Son of God came into the *likeness* of our sinful flesh.

In *Against Heresies* book 4, this usage of terms stays consistent. In his preface, Irenaeus refers to the text of Genesis 1:26, using the term ‘likeness,’ but *without* the word ‘image.’²⁰³ Can we account for this? The bishop is introducing *AH* book 4 and probably also book 5, warning against heresy, and lamenting it as a sort of ‘disease.’²⁰⁴ He compares the heretical Valentinians (‘these men’) to the serpent in the garden who beguiled Eve and offered what he did not have. He warns against their ‘blasphemy against God our Maker and Supporter... the Creator,’ because the flesh was created by the one true God, so there is salvation for it, contrary to what the Valentinians proclaim. Introducing book 4 this way, Irenaeus says:

‘Now man is a mixed organization of soul and flesh, who was formed after the likeness of God, and moulded by His hands, that is, by the Son and Holy Spirit, to whom also He said, ‘Let Us make man.’ This, then, is the aim of him who envies our life, to render men disbelievers in their own salvation, and blasphemous against God the Creator.’²⁰⁵

To be formed ‘after’ or ‘according to’ (κατὰ) rather than ‘in’ the likeness of God speaks to God’s intention for us from creation, which was never set aside, and resumed in full in the salvation Christ brings about. Irenaeus does not

¹⁹⁹ Ibid 2.15.3

²⁰⁰ Ibid 2.23.1; the same appears to be true in 2.35.1

²⁰¹ Ibid 3.18.1; 3.22.1; 3.23.1; 3.23.2

²⁰² Ibid 3.20.2

²⁰³ Ibid 4.preface.4

²⁰⁴ Ibid 4.preface.2

²⁰⁵ Ibid 4.preface.4

elaborate on the substance of the ‘likeness’ in his preface – he will expand on it throughout the work – but he does elaborate on the means by which that ‘likeness’ is formed. God made humanity in creation to be formed and moulded by His Son and Spirit, and this has significance for our bodies and souls. Irenaeus relishes the dynamic of recurring patterns in the biblical story Irenaeus’ account of creation, with God using his ‘two hands’ of Son and Spirit, lays down the pattern for his account of salvation, where God re-forms us by Son and Spirit. His point in his preface is to encourage his readers to not view the path of salvation in Christ by the Spirit as a terrible detour which jeopardizes God’s plan for humanity. God’s Son and Spirit are with us now as they have ever been.

Because the Valentinians denigrated the Old Testament and the history of Israel as the machinations of an inferior god, the Demiurge, it behooves Irenaeus to devote enormous effort to explain Moses, the law, the prophets, David, Jerusalem, etc. Above all, in book 4, the bishop explores the unity of the story from Israel to Jesus Christ.²⁰⁶ The Word sojourned with people of faith prior to Christ, especially Israel, and revealed God through the creation. The people of Israel, therefore, were both the carriers of God’s revelation and also recipients of it, and some aspects of the revelation were divine accommodations for them. Who, then, bears the ‘likeness’ of the Father, if the people of Israel did it imperfectly? Of course, the Son. In *AH* 4.17.6, Irenaeus makes the following analogy:

‘Just as a king, if he himself paints a *likeness* of his son, is right in calling this *likeness* his own, for both these reasons, because it is [the *likeness*] of his son, and because it is his own production; so also does the Father confess the name of Jesus Christ, which is throughout all the world glorified in the Church, to be His own, both because it is that of His Son, and because He who thus describes it gave Him for the salvation of men.’²⁰⁷

The painting, or production, is the ‘image.’ The production is the ‘likeness’ of the king on two counts. First, the son is the subject of the painting, where the son’s resemblance to his father is assumed to be quite strong. Second, the king himself produced the painting, where the king is assumed to be a good painter. Semantically, Irenaeus substitutes the word ‘production’ for ‘image’ and uses the word ‘likeness’ twice (the third is inferred by the translator) to make the point that the Son is the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ of the Father. The ‘likeness,’ in this case, is doubly strong because of the quality of the resemblance and the ability of the king to produce the painting.²⁰⁸

In *AH* 4.20.1, Irenaeus’ next use of ‘likeness’ occurs as he explains how we might know God. We know God not through His ‘greatness’ per se, but through His love for us as specially demonstrated in the creation.²⁰⁹ Creation sets a pattern of how we know God through His Son and Spirit, which is of course the same in our redemption. Curiously, Irenaeus finds it appropriate to stress that God spoke to ‘*all things*, to whom also He speaks, saying, ‘Let Us make man after Our image and likeness.’ God’s choice to involve the ‘all things’ of creation is an expansive interpretation of God’s audience, by any measure. Nevertheless, Irenaeus says twice in this passage that God involved the creation, as the pre-human material from which His Son and Spirit drew out humanity (‘established’ ... ‘taking from Himself the substance of the creatures’), the pattern of life containing and begetting life (‘selected’ ... ‘taking from Himself... the pattern of things made’), and the adornments He placed on things (‘adorned’ ... ‘taking from Himself... the type of all the adornments in the world’). Irenaeus seems to perceive a trinitarian pattern within God’s activity in the creation. More work would need to be done to explain this further, but at minimum, I think this reinforces the sense that the relationship among the Father, Son, and Spirit somehow serve as pattern by which God creates all things, especially human beings. There is an implicit sharing of ‘substance’ between Father, Son, and Spirit; this seems to serve as a basis for why God drew on the ‘substance’ of the earth to create Adam, and probably why we depend on the ‘substance’ of the air, water, and land to nourish us and grow. There is a relationship within God – between the Son and the Father, by the Spirit – which God ‘selects’ and replicates when He makes human beings in the Son, so we can participate in the Son’s relationship with the Father, by the Spirit, and grow in stature. There is an ‘adornment’ of the Spirit’s blessing resting on the Son which seems to serve as the pattern of the ‘adornment’ on us, that we might grow in goodness and beauty. Irenaeus seems to mean something like this. And in this context, as God establishes human beings with ‘growth’ clearly in mind, he speaks of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ perhaps to indicate that establishment and growth.

²⁰⁶ Ibid 4.6.2

²⁰⁷ Ibid 4.17.6

²⁰⁸ In 4.20.10, Irenaeus recalls when God appeared in Old Testament epiphanies. He uses the term ‘likeness’ in the more generic sense of describing the quality of the resemblance.

²⁰⁹ Ibid 4.20.1

In *AH* 4.33.4, Irenaeus repeats that God ‘formed’ us ‘after the likeness of God.’ This growth into God’s likeness was interrupted, however, because Satan ‘subdued... conquered... overcame... [and] retained him under his power.’ Fortunately, the Son was ‘greater than man who had thus been vanquished.’ For ‘who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except the Son of God, after whose image man was created?’²¹⁰

In *AH* 4.37.4, Irenaeus links free will to the ‘likeness.’ This passage demonstrates an important point about Irenaeus’ usage of this key term. Since God has free will, and since God made us in His likeness, we share in that ability and quality, too:

‘...because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.’²¹¹

This passage does not infer that the ‘likeness’ is reducible to ‘free will.’ Far from it. Exercising free will is similar to co-reigning with God in creation from Genesis 1:26 – 28.²¹² To Irenaeus, it is simply an ability, quality, or role that is shared between God and us because God invested it into us. ‘Free will’ is a functional ability and/or moral quality that we participate in, with God, for the greater purpose of ‘keep[ing] fast the good,’ ‘by... obedience to God.’ Irenaeus moves on to explore the nature and result of us ‘keep[ing] fast the good.’

In *AH* 4.38.3, Irenaeus provides the fullest statement of human spiritual growth, and how that relates to being in the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ of God. He says that ‘being in subjection to God is continuance in immortality, and immortality is the glory of the uncreated One.’ He thereby unites, in principle and in categories, the immortality-mortality axis with the mortality-immortality axis and the faithlessness-faithfulness axis. From there, the bishop explains beautifully:

‘By this arrangement, therefore, and these harmonies, and a sequence of this nature, man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God,--the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God. Now it was necessary that man should in the first instance be created; and having been created, should receive growth; and having received growth, should be strengthened; and having been strengthened, should abound; and having abounded, should recover [from the disease of sin]; and having recovered, should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord.’²¹³

Irenaeus repeats an early Christian formulation of the Trinity from *AH* 4.6.2, which he said in that passage Justin Martyr shared. The Father plans, the Son executes, the Spirit nourishes and increases. This provides Irenaeus the occasion to use the ‘image and likeness’ phrasing. Simply referring to the ‘image’ alone would be insufficient. From creation, and in salvation, God intended to move at the pace of human beings, in a harmonious and organized fashion. Our spiritual ascent, in response to God’s invitation and work, is both moral, physical, and relational. God’s intention was that we would eventually participate in His immortality as created beings.²¹⁴ In that sense, Irenaeus finds it proper to speak of our ‘likeness’ to God, a likeness grounded in our real participation in God (and to remind my reader of the point, just as Jesus being ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ means his grounded, real participation in sinful flesh from conception to death). But also, our infinite growth and relational ascent is a point

²¹⁰ Ibid 4.33.4

²¹¹ Ibid 4.38.3

²¹² Thus, Collver III, p.29 citing Zeigler and Lawson, suggesting that the ‘likeness of God’ might be reducible to ‘free will’ in the mind of Irenaeus, is incorrect. These authors do not integrate their various observations of Irenaeus. Of course the ‘likeness of God’ includes, involves, and requires ‘free will,’ but is not reducible to it.

²¹³ Ibid 4.38.3

²¹⁴ Ibid 4.38.4; cf. Matthew Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.32 notes that this is central to Irenaeus’ critique of the gnostic systems. The biblical God’s ability to create humanity *in the mode of his own life* is distinctive. ‘In the recounting of the Nag Hammadi codex, the demiurge is ultimately powerless to create an image of God, and as such he produces only lifeless, material objectifications of his personal defect. We have already seen Irenaeus comment on this, stating in no uncertain terms that a demiurgic fashioning of the divine image is not a possibility, ‘nor had angels power to make an image of God, nor any one else except the true God.’

of ‘likeness’ to God because within the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is infinite love and relationship. For a finite, created being to relate eternally with the infinite, uncreated God of love, we must grow infinitely. In that sense, too, we become ‘like’ God.

In *AH* 4.41.3, Irenaeus closes book 4 by using a human analogy that recalls the ‘image – likeness’ categories from Genesis 1:26 – 28. On one side of Irenaeus’ analogy is sons being biologically conceived by their fathers (and mothers), yet, over the course of their disobedient lives, losing their inheritance from their ‘natural parents.’

‘For as, among men, those sons who disobey their fathers, being disinherited, are still their sons in the course of nature, but by law are disinherited, for they do not become the heirs of their natural parents; so in the same way is it with God – those who do not obey Him being disinherited by Him, have ceased to be His sons. Wherefore they cannot receive His inheritance: as David says, ‘Sinners are alienated from the womb; their anger is after the likeness of a serpent.’²¹⁵

On the other side of the bishop’s analogy is the theological possibility of disinheritance. ‘So in the same way is it with God.’ People who ‘do not obey Him’ are nevertheless His creations. That does not change. However, they ‘have ceased to be His sons.’ Since the Father intended for us to relate to him through and in the Son, in a relational, positional, and moral sense, we can abandon the calling God placed on us, and reject this ‘sonship.’ ‘Obedience’ and ‘disobedience’ describe a relation of ‘son’ and ‘father,’ which begins ‘by nature’ and is in the ideal case fulfilled ‘by law,’ so that the son receives ‘inheritance’ and not ‘disinheritance.’ The terms of this analogy show that Irenaeus is perfectly capable of discussing the relation of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ without using those terms. For Irenaeus, the distinction is not simply the terminological. Similarly, my argument about Irenaeus’ thought about theological anthropology is not simply terminological. My argument that Irenaeus uses the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in this particular way – indicating ‘being’ and ‘becoming,’ ‘ontology’ and ‘teleology’ – finds support in the fact that Irenaeus can use other terms to describe the conceptual distinction between the two in his mind.

Irenaeus builds the analogy to the place where he uses the word ‘likeness’ to highlight that a human being can grow in the opposite direction from God’s intent, in a rebellious betrayal of being made ‘in the image’ of God. Irenaeus’ modified quotation of Psalm 58:3 – 4 (LXX Psalm 57:4 – 5) to conclude his point is poetically devastating. It is enlightening to see an English translation from the Hebrew Masoretic, the Greek Septuagint, and Irenaeus’ modified quotation side by side.

^{3a} The wicked are estranged from the womb;

^{3b} These who speak lies go astray from birth.

^{4a} They have venom like the venom of a serpent (*Hebrew Masoretic, NASB*)

^{4a} ἀπηλλοτριώθησαν οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἀπὸ μήτρας,

^{4b} ἐπλανήθησαν ἀπὸ γαστροῦ, ἐλάλησαν ψευδῆ.

^{5a} θυμὸς αὐτοῖς κατὰ τὴν ὁμοίωσιν τοῦ ὄφεως (*LXX Psalm 57:4 – 5*)

Sinners are alienated from the womb;

their anger is after the likeness of a serpent. (Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* 4.41.3)

Irenaeus eliminates Psalm 58:3b (LXX Psalm 57:4b). He compresses the quotation to emphasize *conception* on the one hand, and *maturity* on the other. Those who are alienated/estranged are that way ‘from the womb.’ The intervening line Irenaeus does not quote, I suspect he takes for granted, for it is still very much implied: ‘Those who speak lies go astray from birth.’ In standard non-poetic speech, newborns do not speak lies about God; they do not speak words at all. Poetically speaking, however, those people who grow up to become adults who speak lies about God reveal that something was wrong with them from birth, which they then acted upon. Much like fetal alcohol syndrome, the ancestral sin – the corruption of sin we inherit from Adam and Eve – influences our behavior. In their mature adult lives, they have cultivated ‘the likeness of a serpent,’ the inferior archrival of God. Various English translations of the Psalm blunt the fact that the Greek word ‘likeness’ (ὁμοίωσιν) is present. This is the same Greek word for ‘likeness’ in LXX Genesis 1:26, when God created human beings ‘according to Our image and likeness.’ In Irenaeus’ quotation, the phrase ‘from the womb’ corresponds with ‘image,’ but ‘their anger’ and other mature

²¹⁵ Ibid 4.41.3

choices are according to another ‘likeness.’

The decision for ESV, NASB, and NRSV (and others) to render θυμὸς as ‘venom’ instead of ‘anger’ is questionable. In Psalm 58, the opponents of God (and David the psalmist) are political rulers (‘gods’) who are entrusted with judgment (Ps.58:1), but instead use ‘heart’ and then ‘hands’ to first ‘devise wrongs’ and then ‘deal out violence’ (58:2). They are opposed to God, and to being held accountable by God against His truth. From that standpoint, there is some truth in saying their ‘lies’ are like ‘venom’ which courses in us and kills us slowly. However, it seems far more important to say that ‘their anger is according to the likeness of the serpent’ because ‘anger’ communicates the basic orientation of their whole being and the intensity of their resistance to God – their deliberated and cultivated posture of rebellion against Him.

Finally, the lack of a definite or indefinite article in Greek before the word for ‘serpent,’ which is in the possessive genitive case (τοῦ ὄφρατος), means that we could translate the phrase, in the LXX and in Irenaeus, ‘of *the* serpent’ rather than ‘of *a* serpent.’ I suspect Psalm 58 intends to position human rulers who rebel against God against *the* ancient serpent of old. It is ‘according to’ (κατὰ) *that serpent’s* ‘likeness’ into which those human rulers have grown. They have become, functionally, ‘sons’ of the ancient serpent. This rendering of Psalm 58:4 is corroborated by Jesus’ rebuke to the Pharisees, ‘You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires’ (Jn.8:44), where by their own choices they ‘are not from God’ (Jn.8:47). This rendering is also corroborated by Revelation’s devastating assessment, ‘They are... a synagogue of Satan’ (Rev.2:9). Neither Jesus nor David intend to say that some human beings are not in fact created by God. They are using a figure of speech. In Psalm 58, these judges have not remained true to their deepest, truest point of origin as God’s creation (‘image’). Instead, they have lived *as if* their point of origin is in the lie of the ancient serpent, and they have matured and developed by cultivating untruth and anger against God. In their ‘becoming,’ they have betrayed their true ‘being.’ And so their ‘likeness’ is not ‘of God,’ but ‘of *the* serpent,’ God’s enemy.

Looking once again to the question of whether Irenaeus consistently uses the term ‘likeness of’ to mean ‘mature participation in,’ or ‘shared characteristics by participation in,’ *AH 4.41.3* adds one more data point which shows he does. He stated his concern in the preface of *AH 4*, to elucidate how we might realize our being formed ‘according to’ or ‘after’ (κατὰ) ‘the likeness of God.’ By the end of *AH 4*, including one of the fullest demonstrations of a theology of Israel and a theology of history in the patristic literature, over against the Valentinian claim that the God of the Old Testament is neither good nor continuous with the God revealed in Christ, Irenaeus reaches a very full treatment of how God in Christ was always – and is still – working to restore His ‘likeness’ in us.

In his formal preface to his fifth book of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus reminds us of his purpose in writing. He desires to refute the heretics. But here, Irenaeus approaches these issues mainly by considering the Holy Spirit. This will correspond with an emphasis on human beings cultivating the ‘image’ into the ‘likeness.’ *AH 5.1* functions as an introduction along with the preface. In 5.1.1, Irenaeus establishes confidence in the Christian revelation, on the basis of the Word, and now the ‘Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation.’ In 5.1.2, he criticizes the Valentinians for ‘exclud[ing] the flesh from salvation, and cast[ing] aside what God has fashioned,’²¹⁶ for the reason that the Spirit truly rested on Jesus’ humanity. In 5.1.3, the bishop criticizes the Ebionites for their denial of the union of God and man in Christ, and the virgin birth. But once again he views these truths through the lens of the Spirit. The Ebionites, he argues, ‘do not choose to understand that the Holy Ghost came upon Mary’ to conceive the God-man, the union of divinity and humanity. Irenaeus repeats mentions of ‘birth’ or ‘generation,’ contrasting the ‘former generation’ over against the ‘new generation’ by the work of the Son and Spirit. Talk of origins begs the question of *telos*, or growth towards a goal. What goal? To begin to answer that, Irenaeus quotes Genesis 1:26, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness,’ and says that God resumed that plan by His Son and Spirit. ‘For never at any time did Adam escape the hands of God’ – His hands being His Son and Spirit. God therefore ‘formed a living man’ who was Jesus, contrasted with fallen Adam ‘who had been conquered, expelled from paradise... in [whom] we were all dead,’ ‘in order that Adam might be created [again] after the image and likeness of God.’ He will expand on what that entails throughout the rest of *AH 5*.

In *AH 5.6.1*, Irenaeus provides his most expansive and clear understanding of the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in the original creation and now in salvation. He begins with a summary statement, saying that the Son served as a model

²¹⁶ Ibid 5.preface

or template of sorts for human beings, but since human beings were intended from growth with assistance from the Son and Holy Spirit, we were made ‘in the likeness of God.’

‘Now God shall be glorified in His handiwork, fitting it so as to be conformable to, and modelled after, His own Son. For by the hands of the Father, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit, man, and not [merely] a part of man, was made in the *likeness* of God. Now the soul and the spirit are certainly a part of the man, but certainly not the man; for the perfect man consists in the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded after the image of God.’²¹⁷

The ‘image of God’ here refers to the Son of God. Elsewhere, in the *Demonstration*, Irenaeus celebrates two aspects of humanity: (1) the physical form of the human as somehow mirroring the divine form, which seems to be Irenaeus’ conception of the theophanic appearance taken by the Son in the creation prior to his incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth; (2) participation in the divine ‘breath.’²¹⁸ When our ‘fleshly nature’ is considered, we resemble the Son, even pre-incarnate, and it can be said that we were ‘moulded after the image of God.’ This is not simply a crude physical resemblance alone. The Son glorifies, or reveals, the Father in a temple-like relationship where the transcendent is made known in the immanent, which is the subject of 5.6.2 in its entirety.²¹⁹ The same principle of relation between humans and God is implied, where ‘God shall be glorified in His handiwork,’ as human beings grow and ascend in their life, since we were modelled after the Son, and made to be conformable to him.

This implies a relation by and in the Spirit. Notably, when considering our soul and spirit, which we have, but are not reducible to, Irenaeus says we are made ‘in the likeness.’ When humanity’s intended growth is in view, where the Spirit’s work is mentioned (and not just the Son’s), Irenaeus uses the term ‘likeness.’ The consistency is striking. To grow in our ‘likeness’ to God involves the work of the Spirit and Son in us; hence the term ‘likeness’ has ‘mature participation’ in view as the central part of its lexical meaning. Here, Irenaeus demonstrates the same basic understanding as the Ebionites in their usage of the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ The ‘image’ of God cannot be lost, but the ‘likeness’ can be lost, underdeveloped, developed, or perfected.

Irenaeus goes on to denote our physical bodies as minimally constitutive of our ‘form,’ whereas our voluntary cooperation with the Spirit minimally constitutes our ‘similitude,’ presumably referring to our resemblance to, and participation in, the Son’s relationship with the Father by the Spirit.

‘For if any one take away the substance of flesh, that is, of the handiwork [of God], and understand that which is purely spiritual, such then would not be a spiritual man but would be the spirit of a man, or the Spirit of God. But when the spirit here blended with the soul is united to [God’s] handiwork, the man is rendered spiritual and perfect because of the outpouring of the Spirit, and this is he who was made in the image and likeness of God. But if the Spirit be wanting to the soul, he who is such is indeed of an animal nature, and being left carnal, shall be an imperfect being, possessing indeed the image [of God] in his formation, but not receiving the similitude through the Spirit; and thus is this being imperfect.’²²⁰

This passage is decisive. If we conceptually remove ‘flesh’ from humanity, Irenaeus suggests as a hypothetical, with what would we be left? ‘The spirit of a man, or the Spirit of God.’ But the Spirit in fact is ‘blended with the soul’ (for Irenaeus seems to suggest that the ‘soul’ is the animating principle of life in the body) and ‘united to God’s handiwork,’ which is the flesh, the corporeal body. If we go the other direction, conceptually, and remove or diminish the Spirit – ‘if the Spirit be wanting to the soul’ – then with what would we be left? A human being in ‘an animal nature, and being left carnal.’ That human being is clearly ‘imperfect.’ And ‘imperfection’ to Irenaeus

²¹⁷ Ibid 5.6.1

²¹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11 says, ‘But man He formed with His own hands [i.e. the Word and the Spirit], taking from the earth that which was purest and finest, and mingling in measure His own power with the earth. For He traced *His own form* on the formation, that that which should be seen should be *of divine form*: for (as) the image of God was man formed and set on the earth. And that he might become living, He breathed on his face the breath of life; that both for the breath and for the formation man should be like unto God. Moreover he was free and self-controlled, being made by God for this end, that he might rule all those things that were upon the earth. And this great created world, prepared by God before the formation of man, was given to man as his place, containing all things within itself.’ Since our form is physical, it follows that the Son of God had a physical appearance prior to him becoming incarnate as human.

²¹⁹ Ibid 5.6.2 begins, ‘Whence also he says, that this handiwork is ‘the temple of God,’ and uses the term ‘temple’ twelve times, quoting the ‘temple’ passages 1 Corinthians 3:16, John 2:19 – 21, 1 Corinthians 3:17, and 1 Corinthians 6:13 – 14.

²²⁰ Ibid 5.6.1

means ‘possessing indeed the image of God in his formation, but not receiving the similitude through the Spirit.’

Significantly, Irenaeus uses the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in the same way that the Ebionites do. This does not suggest borrowing or copying one way or the other. Rather, I suggest that both Irenaeus – representing the orthodox Christians – and the heretical Ebionites – share a common inheritance of terms which was already established before them. The ‘image’ is never lost. The ‘likeness’ – or ‘similitude’ – can be. Because ‘likeness’ depends on our voluntary participation ‘through the Spirit,’ the relationship intended by God for us can be obscured and damaged.

In 5.8.1, Irenaeus uses the term ‘likeness’ as a relation meant to be fulfilled. He says, ‘But we do now receive a certain portion of His Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God.’ The Spirit renders us a participant in immortality, helps us cry, ‘Abba, Father,’ and helps us yearn for that day when ‘rising again, we behold him face to face.’ Arguing from the principle of increased participation in the Spirit between present and future, Irenaeus says:

‘For if the earnest, gathering man into itself, does even now cause him to cry, "Abba, Father," what shall the complete grace of the Spirit effect, which shall be given to men by God? It will render us like unto Him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God.’²²¹

In 5.10.1, Irenaeus uses the term ‘likeness’ in the context of the agricultural metaphor of Scripture involving fruitbearing. We were ‘grafted into the good olive tree, and been made a partaker of the fatness of the olive tree.’ Thus we, if we ‘take kindly to the graft,’ are ‘changed’ and ‘become a fruit-bearing olive,’ even one ‘planted in the paradise of God.’ The fruit of the flesh can be interrupted and pruned off, thankfully. ‘And again, those persons who are not bringing forth the fruits of righteousness, and are, as it were, covered over and lost among brambles, if they use diligence, and receive the word of God as a graft, arrive at the pristine nature of man--that which was created after the image and likeness of God.’²²² The developmental paradigm is evident, and ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ are used to anchor the foundation for that development, and denote its glorious trajectory.

In 5.12.4, Irenaeus says that accurate knowledge of God helps us develop the likeness, because through it we know accurately God’s intention for us, which is the complete salvation of humanity as God created us, including the fleshly body. ‘For the knowledge of God renews man. And when he says, ‘after the image of the Creator,’ he sets forth the recapitulation of the same man, who was at the beginning made after the likeness of God.’²²³ In 5.15.4, Irenaeus continues the theme of knowledge, and as our knowledge of God increases because of the incarnate Word’s ministry, ties this to the full statement in Genesis 1:26 involving both ‘image and likeness.’²²⁴

In 5.16.1 – 3, Irenaeus demonstrates his use of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ (along with its synonym, ‘similitude’) in conjunction with Jesus’ death on the cross. This is important for my larger point about the atonement. He encourages us to know the Father by knowing the creation and the activity of His Son to re-create us. Irenaeus uses ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ to keep the progression of biblical time before us. ‘Adam was fashioned, and we too have been formed.’ ‘From the beginning even to the end.’ What was mentioned beforehand, and shown forth by the Lord.’ The Son is the ‘hand of God’ who ‘from the beginning even to the end, forms us and prepares us for life, and is present with his handiwork, and perfects it after the image and likeness of God.’²²⁵

Human beings found it easy to ‘lose the similitude,’ that is, the ‘likeness,’ because the image of God was not yet shown. That is, the Son – who is the true image of God in the formal sense – had not yet become incarnate. But now that he has, ‘assimilating Himself to man, and man to Himself, so that by means of his resemblance to the Son, man might become precious to the Father.’²²⁶ By becoming incarnate, the Son ‘showed forth the image truly, since He became Himself what was the image, and re-established the similitude after a sure manner.’

To support that very point, Irenaeus immediately shines a spotlight on the cross as the reversal of the primal fall. Because the disobedience of man began on the occasion of a tree, the incarnate Son became obedient unto death

²²¹ Ibid 5.8.1

²²² Ibid 5.10.1

²²³ Ibid 5.12.4

²²⁴ Ibid 5.15.4

²²⁵ Ibid 5.16.1

²²⁶ Ibid 5.16.2

upon the tree. We had offended God ‘in the first Adam,’ Irenaeus says, meaning that ‘we’ as in ‘human nature’ had become corrupted and offensive to God because we failed to develop God’s intended beauty and goodness for ourselves. But ‘in the second Adam,’ ‘we are reconciled,’ because when Jesus went to his death on the cross, human nature was ‘being made obedient unto death.’²²⁷ Irenaeus says that Jesus completed the full restoration of the ‘likeness’ of God into human nature at the cross, not at the conception, through his human obedience, not simply his divine obedience to become incarnate. ‘Atonement,’ as we call it today, consisted of the lifelong obedience of the incarnate Son in his human journey. And it was only completed at his death. Irenaeus even goes so far as to say that ‘we had offended’ God ‘in the first Adam,’²²⁸ leading him to say in the very next chapter, 5.17.1, that Jesus ‘propitiated the Father against who we had sinned.’²²⁹ But far from being a ‘penal substitution’ appeasement of God’s offended retributive justice, or offended honor, this is a ‘medical substitution’ rectification of human nature to its intended beauty and goodness, as I have already argued above. ‘Image’ and ‘likeness’ language is central to describing that. The offense against the Father is the marring of human nature and the detour we have taken away from God’s likeness. The propitiation is the destruction of the disorder of sin which has now lodged in human nature.

In 5.21.1, the incarnate Son was born ‘after the likeness of Adam’ – since ‘Adam’ was led away as a captive to Satan, precisely because of the corruption of sin within human nature from Adam onwards²³⁰ – thus adding yet another data point of support for the fallenness camp. This usage of the phrase ‘after the likeness of Adam’ is very significant. This passage is worth examining closely:

‘He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam, and trampled upon his head, as thou canst perceive in Genesis that God said to the serpent, ‘And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; He shall be on the watch for thy head, and thou on the watch for His heel.’ For from that time, He who should be born of a woman, [namely] from the Virgin, after the likeness of Adam, was preached as keeping watch for the head of the serpent. This is the seed of which the apostle says in the Epistle to the Galatians, ‘that the law of works was established until the seed should come to whom the promise was made.’ This fact is exhibited in a still clearer light in the same Epistle, where he thus speaks: ‘But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman.’ For indeed the enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man [born] of a woman who conquered him. For it was by means of a woman that he got the advantage over man at first, setting himself up as man’s opponent. And therefore does the Lord profess Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned, in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death.’²³¹

While the unfallenness camp might read ‘that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned’ as an indication of pre-fallen Adamic humanity, it is quite clear that the passage in its entirety, as well as what follows, indicates a fallen Adamic humanity in the incarnation. For one, our human nature has been sin-bitten, and ‘at the beginning [we were] led away captives in Adam.’ As Catholic scholar Jean Daniélou indicates, ‘This humanity which Christ takes upon himself as a concrete actuality in all its fullness, and which he unites in himself by a numerical summation, is also a humanity which has fallen into the power of the devil.’²³² When Irenaeus now speaks of ‘the likeness of Adam,’ it is captive Adamic flesh of which he speaks. Second, speaking of ‘the original man’ is indeed an echo of Adam, but an echo whose fulness had to be established *in reverse order of the normal human sequence*. Not Jesus’ birth per se, but his *death*, gives us life, ‘the palm against death.’ Jesus had to restore ‘that original man’ not simply through his conception, but through his lifelong obedience, death, and resurrection, because God’s intended trajectory for Adam in the garden was eternal life via the tree of life. When Jesus restores the ‘original man,’ in Irenaeus’ vision, it is humanity not just in its pre-fallen state, but its perfected, post-tree of life state,

²²⁷ Ibid 5.16.3

²²⁸ Ibid 5.16.3

²²⁹ Ibid 5.17.1

²³⁰ Ibid 5.21.2 says, ‘the corruption of man, therefore, which occurred in paradise by both [of our first parents] eating’ which is notable

²³¹ Ibid 5.21.1

²³² Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 2: Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1973), p.178

bearing not only the ‘image,’ but also the ‘likeness’ of God.

Thirdly, the phrase from Galatians 4:4 – 5, ‘born of woman,’ or ‘made of woman,’ indicates a fallen humanity from conception in the womb of Mary. The phrase ‘born of woman’ is not merely an historical fact but a phrase from Job. To be ‘born of woman’ is to be ‘short-lived and full of turmoil’ (Job.14:1) because of the following question:

‘You also open Your eyes on him, and bring him into judgment with Yourself.
Who [among men] can make the clean out of the unclean? No one!’ (Job 14:4).

It is to ask,

‘How then can a man be just (righteous) with God?
Or how can he be clean who is born of woman?’ (Job 25:4).

I believe it is very significant that Job associates ‘Hebrew legal courtroom’ terminology like ‘judgment’ and being ‘just/righteous with God’ on the one hand with ontological terminology like ‘uncleanness’ on the other. It shows that the one is constitutive of the other. Specifically, the second stanza of the step parallelism of Hebrew poetry typically has the greater weight: The Hebrew (not Western, Latin) legal courtroom terminology is being enlisted to demarcate the *ontological*. Job does not envision a sequence of forensic justification which only later leads to a sanctification process of increasing cleanliness/holiness. Rather, the medical and ontological healing of human nature *is* the deeper, more robust explanation for any declaration of being ‘just/righteous with God.’ They may not be chronologically separated, though they can be logically separated, with the ontological-medical reality being the logical foundation for the vindication in Hebraic, legal terminology. This is consistent with Paul’s approach in Romans and Galatians.

The phrase ‘born of woman’ in Galatians and in Irenaeus, therefore, draws on Job to indicate that the human nature taken from Mary by the Son in his incarnation was initially *unclean*. To clean it, Jesus had to restore our intended ‘perfection’ from within the confines of our fallen condition. This leads Irenaeus to discuss next the temptation experience of Jesus in *AH* 5.21.2. From the angle of our captivity to Satan, Jesus had to liberate human nature. Thus, Jesus ‘did perform His command,’ and was obedient to the Father.²³³ But from the angle of our sin-bitten human nature, Jesus had to assume a fallen human nature, endure temptations in order to offer his obedience to the Father and correct the flaw in human nature. Jesus was not simply obedient by becoming incarnate and being conceived as an embryo in Mary’s womb. He was obedient throughout his life, all the way to the cross. For where Adam became the ‘vanquished one’ and ‘went down to death’ and gave us the inheritance of mortality, Jesus became the ‘victorious one’ when he went down to death but rose again, and gave us the inheritance of immortality, ‘by both destroying our adversary, and perfecting man after the image and likeness of God’²³⁴ in himself.

Significantly, Galatians 4:4 – 5 and Romans 8:3 – 4 are concerned with the following larger themes in common:

<i>Galatians 4:4 – 5</i>	<i>Romans 8:3 – 4</i>
The sending of God’s Son	The sending of God’s Son
Soteriological result: life by the Spirit	Soteriological result: life by the Spirit
Sons of God	Sons of God
Abba	Abba
Heirs	Heirs, fellow heirs with Christ

The two passages invite comparison, and Leander Keck offers one such analysis.²³⁵ In the fullness of time, Paul says, God sent out His Son to be ‘born of a woman, born under the Law, so that he might redeem those who are under the Law’ (Gal.4:4). This is not coincidentally similar in structure and terminology to God sending His own Son ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ as an offering for sin, to condemn sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law [that a human being fully condemn sin in the flesh] might be fulfilled in us (Rom.8:3 – 4). These are terms

²³³ Ibid 5.21.2

²³⁴ Ibid 5.21.2

²³⁵ Leander E. Keck, “The Law and “The Law of Sin and Death”,” edited by James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel, *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (Ktav Pub Inc, May 1, 1980)

denoting the participation of the Son in our human condition, and additionally in the *Israelite* condition.

From this point in *AH 5*, Irenaeus uses the word ‘likeness’ to describe other facets of the character, purpose, and relationships which God’s intended for humanity. In 5.28.4, Irenaeus considers human destiny and the divine fire of God. When he uses ‘image and likeness of God’ language here, Irenaeus again refers to the work of the ‘hands of God... the Son and Spirit’ in their work of ‘moulding’ us. ‘Tribulation is necessary for those who are being saved,’ he says, in the same way that good wheat (not chaff) is broken up, spread fine, sprinkled over by the Word, and rises in the fire. With this growth into the ‘likeness,’ we ‘may be fitted for the royal banquet.’²³⁶ Finally, in 5.36.3, Irenaeus rephrases the beautiful heights of human destiny. When we are ‘confirmed and incorporated with His Son... brought to perfection,’ we will ‘ascend to Him, passing beyond the angels, and be made after the image and likeness of God.’²³⁷ Since Irenaeus has already said that we do not lose the ‘image of God’ in spite of our disobedience, it can be settled that the ‘likeness of God’ refers to our growth and perfection, via our participation in God’s work in the humanity of Christ, in which the Son and the Spirit worked to undo the primal fall into the corruption of sin. Irenaeus thus concludes book 5 and his entire five volumes in *Against Heresies*.

I return to my argument that when Irenaeus quoted Romans 8:3 and spoke of Jesus being ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ he was using the word ‘likeness’ in a technical and specifically biblical sense, derived from Genesis 1:26. I have demonstrated above that Irenaeus’ use of ‘likeness’ when Genesis 1:26 is in view (‘likeness of God’) refers to our mature participation in God, in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, I have argued that the second century Christian usage of the term ‘likeness’ seems fixed and established, prior to Irenaeus and including him, especially in relationship to the term ‘image.’ Clement of Alexandria would make these terms ‘somewhat unstable,’²³⁸ and Tertullian of Carthage changed their meanings significantly.²³⁹ If Irenaeus uses the word ‘likeness’ with this kind of regular precision when referring to the positive, does he not use it with the same precision when referring to the negative, and quoting the apostle at that? If the Word became flesh, was not the incarnate Word made ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’? Did he not render himself incarnate in a mode of full, mature participation in our fallen human nature, to press his Spirit-led faithfulness to the Father into human nature and carry the corruption of sin ensconced in fallen Adamic flesh all the way back to a tree, there to be undone?

Irenaeus and Colossians 1

Van Kuiken, coming to the topic of the cross itself, also argues that Irenaeus’ use of the phrase ‘righteous flesh’ in the midst of his exposition of Colossians 1 in *Against Heresies* 5.14 indicates that the bishop believed Jesus cleansed human nature at conception back to its prelapsarian state, i.e. took on an unfallen human nature.²⁴⁰ He surmises that when Irenaeus speaks of ‘sinful flesh’ in contrast with ‘righteous flesh,’ he must mean that other human beings share with Jesus ‘simply a common substance rather than a common condition of enmity towards God.’²⁴¹ I am puzzled by Van Kuiken’s statements because the underlying Pauline material, Colossians 1, presents not the incarnation per se, but the *death and resurrection* of the fleshly body of Christ, as effecting reconciliation and peace (Col.1:20, 22). To be precise, Jesus’ death reconciled fleshly human nature, ‘alienated and hostile in mind’ (Col.1:21), presumably because through his death, Jesus utterly exhausted and defeated the hostility to God within human nature, and burned into his human nature peace with God, which exists now in his resurrected body. Later visceral imagery of ‘the circumcision of Christ’ (Col.2:12) recalls the fact that Jesus’ death is presented with the significance of a circumcision, with the cutting away of something impure, and the corresponding bloodshed: ‘peace through the blood of the cross’ (Col.1:20).

Irenaeus demonstrates this understanding of Colossians, for example when he makes a parallelism: Irenaeus says

²³⁶ Ibid 5.28.4

²³⁷ Ibid 5.36.3

²³⁸ John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch.4 begins on p.139, with, ‘This chapter also points out how Clement uses ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in different ways, making his vocabulary somewhat unstable.’

²³⁹ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 3: The Origins of Latin Christianity*, translated and edited by David Smith and John Austin Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1977), p.371 – 383. Tertullian used both terms – ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ – to denote the human soul and its freedom; he did not include the human body in his use of these terms. Daniélou, p.382 – 383, notes, ‘The essential point, however, remains valid, namely that it is man’s soul which is made in the likeness of God and above all reflects his freedom. In this, Tertullian’s thought was profoundly original, and was to have a great influence on Latin theological thinking after his time.’ Note Daniélou’s recognition of Tertullian’s originality. Tertullian’s reduction of our ‘likeness’ to God to mere ‘resemblance’ of His free will absent ‘participation’ would influence his interpretation of Romans 8:3.

²⁴⁰ Van Kuiken, p.99

²⁴¹ Ibid p.99

Jesus took on our flesh but ‘laid aside’ the lusts of the flesh, therefore we who receive the Holy Spirit of Christ must also ‘lay aside’ those lusts.²⁴² Therefore, when Irenaeus speaks of Jesus’ ‘righteous flesh,’ while undertaking a long exposition of Colossians,²⁴³ he is referring not to Jesus’ body from conception, but his resurrected body which has passed through death: ‘through his death... because the righteous flesh has reconciled that flesh which was being kept under bondage in sin, and brought it into friendship with God.’²⁴⁴ Insisting that the eternal Son took our human flesh, and not any other type of human flesh, Irenaeus says, ‘For that thing is reconciled which had formerly been in enmity.’²⁴⁵ Irenaeus was speaking of us being reconciled in and through the death of Jesus, but by the logic of participation, what became true for us in our humanity must have once been true for Jesus in his.

Irenaeus and Galatians 3:13

Moreover, Irenaeus is the first Christian writer to ascribe the phrase, ‘he became a curse for us’ in Galatians 3:13, to include *Jesus’ incarnation*, and not just his death.²⁴⁶ The overwhelming number of Protestant evangelical commentators take ‘became a curse for us’ as referring to Jesus absorbing some judicial punishment at his death on the cross. But if I am understanding Irenaeus correctly, then the bishop of Lyons understood the phrase as referring to the incarnation. Human nature itself was under the ‘curse’ referred to in Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23, and Jesus shared in it all the way *from his incarnation* to death. Here is the passage in question:

It is plain, then, that Paul knew no other Christ besides Him alone, who both suffered, and was buried, and rose again, *who was also born, and whom he speaks of as man*. For after remarking, ‘But if Christ be preached, that He rose from the dead’ [1 Cor.15:12], he continues, rendering the reason of *His incarnation*, ‘For since by man came death, by man [came] also the resurrection of the dead.’ And everywhere, when [referring to] the passion of our Lord, and *to His human nature*, and His subjection to death, he employs the name of Christ, as in that passage: ‘Destroy not him with your meat for whom Christ died’ [Rom.14:15]. And again: ‘But now, in Christ, you who sometimes were far off are made near by the blood of Christ’ [Eph.2:13]. And again: ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *being made a curse for us*: for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that hangs upon a tree’’ [Gal.3:13; Dt.21:23]. And again: ‘And through your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died’ [1 Cor.8:11], indicating that the impassible Christ did not descend upon Jesus, but that He Himself, because He was Jesus Christ, suffered for us; He, who lay in the tomb, and rose again, who descended and ascended,— the Son of God having been made the Son of *man*, as the very name itself does declare.’²⁴⁷

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

Whether Irenaeus is exegetically accurate in perceiving Paul’s true meaning in Galatians 3:13 is important but a bit secondary as far as my argument here is concerned. I do believe that Irenaeus was accurate about Paul, but that is another matter which must be explored elsewhere.²⁴⁸ What is most significant here is what associations Irenaeus had with this verse. Taken on its own, Irenaeus’ meaning might not be further developed with much confidence.

²⁴² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.12.3

²⁴³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.14.2 explicitly names Colossians, as he did in 5.12.3. He quotes Col.1:14 (5.2.2), Col.3:5, 9, and 10 (5.12.3 – 4), Col.1:21 and 2:19 (5.14.2, 4), Col.2:12 (5.17.3), Col.2:18 (5.36), Col.2:16 (5.38), Col.1:20 – 22 (5.39).

²⁴⁴ *Ibid* 5.14.2

²⁴⁵ *Ibid* 5.14.3

²⁴⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 32, 89 – 96 ascribes the phrase to Jesus’ death on a cross because Trypho the Jew connects it to the curse of being hanged on a tree (Dt.21:22 – 23)

²⁴⁷ *Ibid* 3.18.3

²⁴⁸ See Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Sacrificial System and Atonement in the Pentateuch* ch.1, 4, 8, found here:

<https://www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-israel>

But when we widen the scope to include other patristic writers, I believe we can be confident that Irenaeus referred to the ‘curse’ of Galatians 3:13 as the fallen humanity that Jesus took *at his incarnation*.

Justin Martyr, the Christian evangelist-philosopher whom Irenaeus reports meeting in Rome, who was martyred around 165 AD, uses the language of the curse of Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23 to mark as sinful the lives of Jews and Gentiles alike.²⁴⁹ This was one argument among many he employs with his Jewish interlocutor Trypho. Since both Jews and Gentiles sinned, with or without knowledge of the Sinaitic covenant and its commandments, every single person demonstrates that her or his existence is already cursed, according to Justin. Hanging on a tree is simply confirmation of that fact, not an additional punishment thrown on top of it. As far as Justin’s writings are concerned, we find evidence that the early Christians held that despite Jesus being morally blameless, he nevertheless shared in the curse upon all humanity. The ‘curse’ was not a divine punishment absorbed by Jesus instead of human beings. See below for Justin’s text and my treatment of it.

Athanasius of Alexandria, writing in 370 AD, roughly two hundred years after Justin and Irenaeus, would go one step further in his explicit written exposition and theological reasoning. For Athanasius, if Jesus shared in the curse upon all humanity, as designated clearly by the manner of death he endured, then his sharing in the curse must have begun prior to his death. But when? Athanasius answers that by explicitly uniting Galatians 3:13 with *John 1:14*. For Athanasius, ‘becoming a curse’ is a synonym for ‘becoming flesh.’²⁵⁰ Athanasius thus offers that the root cause of humanity’s cursedness was the underlying corruption of human nature. I will discuss Athanasius below as well.

Ambrose of Milan (circa 340 – 397 AD), in his *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, explains Galatians 3:13 by referring to *Philippians 2:5 – 11*, which is also about Jesus’ incarnation. Immediately after quoting Galatians, Ambrose writes of the incarnation, ‘Cursed He was, for He bore our curses; in subjection, also, for He took upon Him our subjection, but in the assumption of the form of a servant, not in the glory of God; so that while he makes Himself a partaker of our weakness in the flesh, He makes us partakers of the divine Nature in His power.’²⁵¹ Among the curses we experience as fallen human beings is ‘our weakness in the flesh,’ which recalls Paul’s assessment in Romans 8:3 that the Sinai Law could not accomplish its goal through Israel because it was weakened by the flesh. Weakened flesh is not simply mortal flesh, but morally rebellious flesh.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 389 AD), one of only three church leaders the Eastern Orthodox tradition labels ‘the theologian,’ also quotes Galatians 3:13 in reference to the incarnation. He does this in *Oration 2.55* and *Oration 30.5 – 6*. Most notably, however, in *Epistle 101.7*, titled ‘to Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinaris,’ Gregory rejects Apollinaris’ attempt to replace Jesus’ human mind with the Logos. Apollinaris made this theological move in order to avoid claiming Christ was sinful, since it was believed that sin resides in the mind or soul. Gregory, however, argued that such a move compromised Jesus’ true humanity, thus making it impossible for him to secure redemption for the whole human being: ‘For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole... Just as he was called a curse for the sake of our salvation, who cancels my curse, and was called sin, who takes away the sin of the world, and instead of the old Adam is made a new Adam – in the same way he makes my rebellion his own as Head of the whole Body.’²⁵²

John Chrysostom (circa 347 – 407 AD) in his *Commentary on Galatians* focuses on the death of Christ alone without discussion of the incarnation.²⁵³ However, in his *Homilies on John’s Gospel* 1:14, he immediately refers us to Galatians 3:13, saying, ‘It was fallen indeed, our nature had fallen an incurable fall, and needed only that mighty Hand. There was no possibility of raising it again, had not He who fashioned it at first stretched forth to it His Hand, and stamped it anew with His Image, by the regeneration of water and the Spirit.’²⁵⁴

This appears to be the standard patristic and Nicene interpretation of Galatians 3:13. Van Kuiken does not discuss the patristic conflation of the ‘he became’ passages together. Considering this patterned usage, I believe we are on

²⁴⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 94 – 96; see below

²⁵⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter 59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8; see below

²⁵¹ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 5.178

²⁵² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle 101.7*

²⁵³ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians* 3.10 – 14

²⁵⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John’s Gospel* 1:14; see also *Homily 13* from *Homilies on Romans* 8:3 – 4

fairly strong footing to see in Irenaeus an understanding continuous with Athanasius. Moreover, not only does this interpretation fit well with many other passages in Irenaeus, especially in the pivotal sections *AH* 3.18 and 3.19, but it logically fits the immediate context of 3.18.3. Irenaeus' main purpose was to prove that 'Jesus' and 'Christ' were not two separable beings, and he does so by tracing the union of Jesus' divinity and humanity all the way from conception to death and into resurrection. If Jesus' death finished unraveling our disobedience, then it can only mean that the quality of human nature which he took in his incarnation was in need of unraveling. This is why Irenaeus stressed that 'man, who had *sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death' needed the eternal Son of God 'himself [to] be made that very same thing which he was, that is, *man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage.' That is, the quality of 'man' assumed by the Son of God was the same quality of 'man' that we all share: the kind with 'sin in himself.' When God took human flesh to himself, He 'recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, *that He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man' in the physical body of Jesus. This, Irenaeus says, constitutes humanity's 'salvation' which many should receive and be justified by participating in Christ by his Spirit. 'Salvation' is not merely the turning aside of the wrath of God, as penal substitution advocates think of it, but the purging of the sinful corruption within us *by* the wrath of God, that God's life and power might be joined to the whole human person in the love of God.²⁵⁵

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

Moreover, if God acts 'perfectly,' then it is with reference to His love, specifically for humanity. Irenaeus believed that God does not and cannot coerce human beings, as I cited above.²⁵⁶ Admittedly, he did not explicitly say that God's 'Triune nature' logically makes 'non-coercive love' God's fundamental attribute – that language and those concerns were not foremost on Irenaeus' mind. But he is not far away from it either. In relation to humanity, for God to love perfectly is to always operate with human partnership. Human nature cannot be 'perfected' (brought into full union with himself) without human partnership. This is certainly true for Christians. Why would it not be true of Jesus himself? Does Jesus ask us to struggle against something that he did not? The pastoral implications of the unfallen view would be rather discouraging. It would render Hebrews 4:15 – he 'was tempted in all things as we are' – questionable and probably untrue. If Jesus did not struggle against temptation under the conditions of the same fallenness we experience, does he truly know our experience in a human way? How could Jesus serve as an encouragement to us in our temptations, if he did not experience them in the same basic way? Also, Hebrews 5:7 – 9 tells us that Jesus 'became perfect,' through his sufferings and obedience, at his *resurrection*. So, it would seem that God's requirement of covenant partnership with humanity from creation necessitates that God work *within and through* the lifelong obedience of the human Jesus as that perfecting process, from incarnation to resurrection.

This theological anthropology of human partnership with God, informed by trinitarian logic and a biblical exposition of covenantal partnership, lends weight to the assertion that we translate *pistis christou* as 'the faithfulness of Christ' to indicate precisely that lifelong obedience, but that is the subject of a much longer discussion.²⁵⁷ In this very important passage from *Demonstration*, Irenaeus writes to indicate precisely that the lifelong 'obedience of him' within 'that very flesh which sin had ruled' sets human nature free from sin:

'And, because in the original formation of Adam all of us were tied and bound up with death through his

²⁵⁵ Irenaeus later says, for example, that Jesus *saved* the physical material of human flesh and blood (*Against Heresies* 5.14.1 – 4). This theme runs throughout Irenaeus and demonstrates that he understood salvation as not merely a forensic forgiveness but an ontological union with the life of God through the person of Jesus and by the Spirit.

²⁵⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1 – 2, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

²⁵⁷ KJV Galatians 2:20 and Romans 3:22; cf. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, *The Pistis Christou Debate: The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009)

disobedience, it was right that through *the obedience of Him* who was made man for us we should be released from death: and because death reigned over the flesh, it was right that through the flesh it should lose its force and let man go free from its oppression. So the Word was made flesh, that, *through that very flesh which sin had ruled and dominated*, it should lose its force and be no longer in us. And therefore our Lord took that same original formation as (His) entry into flesh, so that He might draw near *and contend* [through his lifelong obedience and death] on behalf of the fathers, and conquer by Adam that which by Adam had stricken us down.²⁵⁸

I believe that another scholar of Irenaeus, John Behr, is closer to Irenaeus' meaning: 'Christ, who, as human, fought the enemy and *untied the knot of disobedience through his obedience* [not simply his incarnation], and, as God, destroyed sin, set free the weak, giving salvation to his handiwork,' and, '*By his obedience unto death Christ undoes the slavery of sin* and the bondage in death, into which Adam, fashioned from the untilled soil, had drawn the human race, and in doing so Christ vivifies the human being.'²⁵⁹ I argue therefore that Hatzidakis attributes to the incarnation (the cleansing of Jesus' humanity) what properly belongs to his death and resurrection. Catholic scholar Thomas Weinandy presses the issue, in his study of the early Christian theologians:

'Only if Jesus assumed a humanity at one with the fallen race of Adam could his death and resurrection heal and save that humanity. While the Fathers, as we will see shortly, protected Jesus from personal sin and from the morally debilitating consequences of Adam's sin, they nonetheless were adamant that his nature derived from Adam's sin-gnarled family tree. Irenaeus proclaimed a truth that would reverberate ever more loudly throughout patristic Christology: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might make us what he himself is.'²⁶⁰

In this reading of the Gospels, Jesus put the flesh to death through his moment-by-moment choices to always align himself with the love of the Father, never giving into temptation. And as Paul said, God personally condemned in this way, sin in the flesh of Jesus (Rom.8:3). Not instantaneously at his conception, but throughout his life and finally on the cross, Jesus put to death the old self, the body of sin (Rom.6:6), to raise his body into newness of life. This constitutes salvation of human nature for Irenaeus, even if it only happened in one particular individual, Jesus. For Jesus has become the source of that salvation (Heb.5:9) for the Spirit takes what is his – namely his renewed God-cleansed, God-soaked humanity – and discloses it to us (Jn.16:14).²⁶¹ And Jesus represents all other Israelites and all other human beings, and did this on our behalf, that he might share his Spirit with all who believe and trust in him. In the physical body of Jesus, through Jesus' human journey, human nature is in principle brought into full union with God by virtue of Jesus overcoming all sin and temptation in his personal choices. We become 'partakers' of the Spirit, the 'earnest of incorruption.'²⁶²

Irenaeus' Impact and Legacy

What do we make of Irenaeus' impact? He provides a trinitarian doctrine of creation with his designation of the Word and the Spirit as the 'two hands' of God. For Irenaeus, God is creator and sustainer, and is providentially involved with His creation. This served as a firm bulwark against 'gnosticism' of all forms, which wanted to divide God from the (sullied, in their opinion) creation, and even 'Arianism' (with all of its complexities) which made the Son into a created, temporal being separate from the truly divine. Interestingly, Irenaeus equates the Wisdom of God with *the eternal Spirit of God* rather than the Word of God.²⁶³ I prefer to identify the Wisdom of God from Proverbs 8:22 with one of God's many activities towards the creation, rather than a person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, Irenaeus' formulation is superior to Tertullian's, since the North African equated Wisdom with 'the unuttered Word' which was in the mind of the Father prior to the Father bringing it forth as Word (see below), and far superior to Arius, who equated Wisdom with a temporally created and temporally begotten Word/Son of God which made the Son a creature. That was a fatal move.

Commentators on the early church regularly write to this effect: 'The wonder of Irenaeus is the largeness of his outlook. No theologian had arisen since St Paul and St John who had grasped so much of the purpose of God for His

²⁵⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration* 31 emphasis mine

²⁵⁹ John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.169, 170; emphasis mine

²⁶⁰ Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p.28

²⁶¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.20.3; 3.24.1; 5.6.1 – 2; 5.8.1 – 4

²⁶² *Ibid* 3.24.1

²⁶³ *Ibid* 4.20.3

world.²⁶⁴ I find that the distinctive strength of Irenaeus is his comprehensive and integrated grasp of the entirety of the biblical story. And this strength is still formidable. Theologian Colin Gunton, for example, believed that Irenaeus and the Cappadocians provide better resources for our doctrine of the Trinity, in particular the Holy Spirit, than other places in Christian tradition, including Augustine.²⁶⁵ Indeed, Irenaeus also provides an alternative to the individualistic, ‘psychological model’ of the Trinity located in the individual human person’s thought process, which would become dominant among the patristic writers. The ‘psychological model’ of the Trinity would cause (or at least not prevent) the male theologians to explicitly or subtly denigrate women for being supposedly less rational than men, contributing to the view that women are not as made in the image of God as men. But Irenaeus’ use of Genesis 1 and 2 in *Demonstration 11* makes fairly certain that he believed human beings as male and female were in the image of God in a physical, embodied, relational, and explicitly marital way. If the image of God looked like a life-giving union of male and female in loving, lifelong marriage, what did that mean about God?

Given the above, I believe Irenaeus also provides better resources for Christian ethics, especially around issues of gender and sexuality. Irenaeus’ theological anthropology would have led the church to uphold and celebrate sexual desire within marriage and for marriage. This probably would have let the church retain some much needed humor about sexual desire similar to the Hebraic humor in the biblical book *The Song of Songs*. In turn, Irenaeus’ exposition of humanity, male and female, made in God’s image would have had the effect of strengthening the case for women’s leadership in the church. The fascinating fragment attributed to him about the serpent addressing Eve first because she was the stronger²⁶⁶ is utterly unique in patristic literature, and entirely credible as originating from Irenaeus. It is also, in my opinion, a legitimate exposition of Genesis 2 and even 1 Timothy 2. Irenaeus could have immediately served as a resource to stop the anti-female prejudice which influenced Christians, shown for example in the Greek-speaking church when Clement of Alexandria argued for veiling women,²⁶⁷ and in the Latin-speaking church when Tertullian did the same.²⁶⁸ These theologians departed from Paul’s encouragement to consider hair a sufficient covering for women while praying and prophesying, especially ex-prostitutes who had to refrain from wearing the Roman *palla* and wear ribbons in the hair instead, by Roman law.²⁶⁹ Irenaeus, by comparison, criticized the gnostic Valentinus for apparently using the word *kalumma* (veil) in 1 Corinthians 11:10, instead of *exousian* (power), to veil women in the worship service. Irenaeus is to be esteemed as an earlier witness to a reading of Paul consistent with Jesus, as Jesus, in the presence of other men, received the provocative and typically bedroom gesture of women who let down their hair for him (Lk.7:36 – 50; Jn.12:1 – 8), and made lust entirely a problem in the eye of the (typically male) beholder, not the body of the beheld (Mt.5:27 – 30). Irenaeus would have anchored the Christian church more firmly upon its Hebraic roots, when Christian mission to the Gentiles encountered other patriarchal cultures, and also cultures where people went without much clothing.

Such is what could have been. But what did in fact happen? In the opinion of Eastern Orthodox scholar Matthew Craig Steenberg, Irenaeus’ trinitarian vision is ‘well developed.’ His theological treatment of anthropology is ‘extensive.’²⁷⁰ And thus, Irenaeus has enjoyed interest among scholars since the 1940’s. Yet despite this, Steenberg says, Irenaeus’ writings seem to have not generated the kind of subsequent interest that we would expect:

‘While he seems today a kind of principal voice from the late second century, Irenaeus appears to have been a voice familiar to few in the third, fourth and beyond. A Latin translation of the Refutation was read by Augustine, and there are continuing hypotheses as to whether Athanasius might at times have lifted axioms from the document in its original Greek; but rarely do we hear Irenaeus’ name mentioned in the increasingly historically minded discourses of the fourth and fifth centuries. There is argument for an Irenaeian influence on Tertullian put forward by such scholars as Tränkle, Quispel, Moreschini and Waszink, repeated more recently in the work of Bray and Osborn; yet again such influence, if it existed at all (and this cannot be proved, though it seems hard to deny) was fairly secondary. Others would see his

²⁶⁴ J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1920), p.4

²⁶⁵ Although Joshua McNall, *A Free Corrector: Colin Gunton and the Legacy of Augustine* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015) asserts that Gunton really should have laid the blame, as it were, not on Augustine himself, but on some of his heirs. Regarding Irenaeus’ teaching on the Holy Spirit, see especially Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Leopoldo A. Sanchez M., *Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God’s Spirit: Jesus’ Life in the Spirit as a Lens for Theology and Life* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), ch.1

²⁶⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Fragment 14*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.1, par.14; cf. <http://newadvent.org/fathers/0134.htm>

²⁶⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *The Teacher* 3.1

²⁶⁸ Tertullian of Carthage, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 7

²⁶⁹ See my notes on 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16, found here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-paul-corinthians>

²⁷⁰ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.16

influence in Origen, though this seems less likely. Despite this vague situation, however, we know his texts travelled, and travelled quickly. The Oxyrhynchus papyri locate a copy of at least a portion of the Refutation in Egypt during Irenaeus' own lifetime. Presumably his texts travelled because they were being read, but this only makes more intriguing the lack of reference and reflection evident in the later corpus. Epiphanius (d. 403) would prove happy to lift whole passages from the Refutation for insertion into his own heresiological Panarion, but this function as sourcebook for information on various sects and schools of thought seems to be his only use for Irenaeus. The closest we come to any considered reflection on his life and thought by a patristic source in the centuries immediately to follow is located in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 341), a critical document for our knowledge of Irenaeus, containing several of his letters and imparting nearly all our scant bibliographical data on the man. Yet even in Eusebius' sweeping survey of the Church before Constantine, Irenaeus holds no special pride of place. Eusebius seems to have admired him, but does not make any great deal of his theological articulation. Irenaeus is no giant in the eyes of his successors, no *sphragis pateron*, 'seal of the fathers', as Cyril of Alexandria would be remembered after his death.²⁷¹

Immediately following, Steenberg cautions us to not make too much of this, since one cannot entirely judge the impact of an author by the number of times his or her work is explicitly cited. However, it is concerning that our manuscripts of Irenaeus' writings are in Latin and Armenian, and not in Greek. While I want to provide my readers with Steenberg's considered opinion, I wish to offer a different interpretation of the reception of Irenaeus.

In the judgment of patristics scholar Johannes Quasten, Irenaeus' second century contemporaries Hippolytus of Rome and Tertullian of Carthage seem to quote liberally from Irenaeus' writings. Although once again, we cannot be absolutely certain that they also shared material in common which existed in the church's life prior to Irenaeus writing it down. I am doubtful that Irenaeus viewed himself as being original in any way; for example, Christian hymns like the *Odes of Solomon*, which I examine below, were almost certainly used in Syriac-speaking worship for the purpose of teaching the congregation and expressing the faith of the community. Regardless, Irenaeus' writings were spread broadly. Today, we possess a full copy of *Against Heresies* in Latin. Quasten points out, 'According to H. Koch, it must have originated before 250, because Cyprian made use of it. W. Sanday goes beyond this, and assigns it to the date 200.'²⁷² We have a complete Armenian version of books 4 and 5, twenty-three fragments of a Syrian version, and almost all of the complete book in Greek through copious quotations by Hippolytus of Rome (170 – 235), Eusebius of Caesarea (~260 – 339), and Epiphanius of Salamis (~320 – 403), the fourth century bishop in Cyprus, and additional fragments.²⁷³

Irenaeus' poetic sayings would become touchstones for Nicene and post-Nicene conciliar orthodoxy. Eusebius of Caesarea named Irenaeus as one of two writers whose theology was eminently reliable: 'Who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito which proclaim Christ as God and Man?'²⁷⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, seems to repeat Irenaeus' pithy phrase, 'God made Himself man, that man might become god.'²⁷⁵ Again, we cannot adduce the spread of Christian language from written sources alone, but many scholars of the Christian doctrine of deification credit Irenaeus with being the first written source for the divine-human union accomplished first in Christ and purposed for all humanity: The Alexandrians Clement, Origen, and Athanasius either echo Irenaeus' language or quote him directly, and the Cappadocian theologians Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa do as well.²⁷⁶ Also, it seems quite plausible, based on the circulation of Irenaeus' writings in Syriac, that the Nicene theologian Ephrem the Syrian in Mesopotamia was also familiar with Irenaeus, as Ephrem wrote poetically in various hymns and sermons the basic thought, 'He gave us divinity / we gave Him humanity.'²⁷⁷ I wonder if

²⁷¹ Steenberg, p.19

²⁷² Johannes Quasten, *Patrology Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature: From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics Inc., 6th printing 1992), p.291

²⁷³ Richard A Norris, Jr, 'Irenaeus of Lyons', in Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth, editors, *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, third printing 2010), p.47; Schaff, p.511; Quasten p.291

²⁷⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75

²⁷⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 54; *De Decretis* 14; *Apology Against Arians* 1:39, 2:70; 3:19, 3:33, 3:53; *Epistle to Serapion* 1:24; *De Synodis* 51; *Epistle to Adelphi* 4 quoting Irenaeus' preface to *Against Heresies* 5. Khaled Anatolios, 'The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius', *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001), p.463–76 considers the question of Athanasius' reliance on Irenaeus.

²⁷⁶ J.A. McGuckin, 'The Strategic Adaptation of Deification,' edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.96 – 97

²⁷⁷ Thomas Buchan, 'Paradise as the Landscape of Salvation in Ephrem the Syrian,' edited by Christensen and Wittung, p.146 – 156

Ephrem felt he could be so bold and exuberant in poetic verse because there was a much more measured, precise account of Christian theology informing his community in Mesopotamia. Augustine quoted from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32). He might also have quoted *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in his *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60.

It seems to me that the light sprinkling of Irenaeus' writings dusting later Christian thinkers can be explained differently. Steenberg himself notes that Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and indeed the whole of conciliar orthodoxy stand upon the same theological architecture which Irenaeus first elaborated – that theology is connected to anthropology. Thus, we owe to Irenaeus the developmental view of the human person, theologically. Jesuit scholar Edward T. Oakes notes that Augustine was the first Christian theologian to believe in a static view of the human person, with very fateful consequences.²⁷⁸ If the human person is static, then a fall into sin at any time is repeatable in principle, perhaps even in eternity. This seemed to drive Augustine's energy and anxiety on the question of God's grace and human free will. Oakes draws a line from Irenaeus to Maximus the Confessor (c.580 – 662 AD) in the Greek-speaking East, and Paul M. Blowers surveys the growing consensus of Maximus's debt to Irenaeus on creation theology.²⁷⁹ Only a developmental view of the human person, where human nature and free will are being perfected in loving union with God, can sufficiently answer the questions of why God began creation in the way He did, and why human beings progress to the point of making their human nature eternally receptive to God, or eternally tormented by His command to be open to Him.

What explains, then, the absence of full Greek manuscripts of Irenaeus' writings? Some suspect that Irenaeus' more literal and Jewish-Christian view of the millennium of Revelation 20 became embarrassing for later Christians who interpreted more symbolically. Perhaps, although this does not seem to have spurred neglect for the *Ascension of Isaiah* or the writings of Methodius of Olympus, in which that view was also present.²⁸⁰ I suspect that the disagreement over theological anthropology between Irenaeus and Origen played some role here. For example, the fact that Origen promoted the same view of the 'coats of skin' that Irenaeus condemned as part and parcel of the gnostic heretics' view must have surely been embarrassing.

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

Irenaeus precedes Origen of Alexandria as a historical witness to the church teaching a doctrine of 'deification.' He was probably a background influence on Athanasius and the Cappadocians. He greatly qualifies, if not negates, any attempt to see Origen as such. Evidence of Irenaeus in Athanasius and the Cappadocians arguably anchors them in the biblical narrative even as they tend to leave behind biblical language and instead deploy Hellenistic terms to both evangelize their neo-Platonic contemporaries and defend Nicene trinitarian theology against their Arian opponents. In other words, N.T. Wright's concern that the Nicene theologians, in their use of Greek Platonic language of deification and philosophical terms used in the Nicene Creed, may have lost the Hebraic, historical, Eden-exile-restoration categories of Second Temple Judaism²⁸¹ is substantially answered by the presence of Irenaeus in the Nicene theologians. So Nicene orthodoxy stands in the debt of Irenaeus in more ways than one. Thus, we must appreciate a sturdy bridge, especially if we stand on the other side of it.

In my opinion, Irenaeus' role in the development of Christian thought seems more firm than in Steenberg's

²⁷⁸ Edward T. Oakes, S.J., *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p.162 – 164

²⁷⁹ Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.102 – 105

²⁸⁰ See Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 1: The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, translated and edited by John A. Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964), p.382; also ch.14

²⁸¹ N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2012)

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

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

Historical Context and Significance

Looking at Ignatius, Irenaeus, and the *Odes of Solomon* is helpful because these writings show how other Christians were using some terms that Justin Martyr uses. Justin (c.100 – 165) is the first writer that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach study. Trained as a Greek philosopher, Justin came to believe in Christ around 130 AD. Obviously, for Justin to have lived and written so early, within a generation or two of the apostles, makes him an important figure historically. Justin became a teacher in a Christian school in Rome during the reign of Antonius Pius (138 – 161 AD). Tatian the Assyrian and Irenaeus were among his students. Irenaeus quotes from him twice in *Against Heresies*²⁸² and multiple times in the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*,²⁸³ and attests to other works of Justin no longer extant, so we should reasonably expect a great deal of similarity between Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. Justin eventually angered the Cynic philosopher Crescens, who denounced him to the Roman authorities. He was tried along with six companions by Junius Rusticus, prefect of Rome from 163 – 167 AD, and was executed for his faith, probably in 165 AD.

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

Then Trypho remarked, 'Be assured that all our nation waits for Christ; and we admit that all the Scriptures which you have quoted refer to Him. Moreover, I do also admit that the name of Jesus, by which the son of Nave (Nun) was called, has inclined me very strongly to adopt this view. But whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we are in doubt about. For whosoever is crucified is said in the law to be accursed, so that I am exceedingly incredulous on this point. It is quite clear, indeed, that the Scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer; but we wish to learn if you can prove it to us whether it was by the suffering cursed in the law.'²⁸⁴

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

'For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.' [Dt.27:26] And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined. But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes?'²⁸⁵

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

'If, then, the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise Him up, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father's will, as if He were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves?'²⁸⁶

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

'In summary, Jesus took upon himself the curse of God that had rested upon 'the whole human family.' This explains why he was crucified even though he himself had committed no sin. It also amounts to a

²⁸² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.6.2 and 5.26.2

²⁸³ J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1920), p.10 – 44

²⁸⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 89

²⁸⁵ Ibid, chapter 95

²⁸⁶ Ibid, chapter 95

clear statement of penal substitution: although Christ was innocent, he bore the curse due to sinful humanity, enduring in his death the punishment due to us. Justin is a very early example of a writer who explained the doctrine on the basis of the ‘curse’ vocabulary of Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:23. As we shall see, Eusebius of Caesarea and Hilary of Poitiers are among a number of later theologians who also took this approach.’²⁸⁷

The problems I see here are numerous. First, penal substitution supposes that there is some punishment that flows from the ‘wrath of God’ absorbed by Christ and *not* poured out on others. But this is not what Justin Martyr was saying at all. He was saying that the Jews and the Gentiles were *already under the curse and participating in it*. They were suffering the results of their own disobedience and separation from God: for Gentiles, it was idol-worship, seduction of youth, and other crimes; for Israel, it was ongoing exile, knowledge that they broke the very law of Moses that they wanted to uphold, etc. Hence Justin, right before he says that ‘the whole human race will be found to be under a curse,’ says in chapter 94 how the curse on Israel is best understood:

‘For tell me, was it not God who commanded by Moses that no image or likeness of anything which was in heaven above or which was on the earth should be made, and yet who caused the brazen serpent to be made by Moses in the wilderness, and set it up for a sign by which those bitten by serpents were saved? Yet is He free from unrighteousness. For by this, as I previously remarked, He proclaimed the mystery, by which He declared that He would break the power of the serpent which occasioned the transgression of Adam, and [would bring] to them that believe on Him [who was foreshadowed] by this sign, i.e., Him who was to be crucified, salvation from the fangs of the serpent, which are wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts. Unless the matter be so understood, give me a reason why Moses set up the brazen serpent for a sign, and bade those that were bitten gaze at it, and the wounded were healed; and this, too, when he had himself commanded that no likeness of anything whatsoever should be made.’²⁸⁸

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

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

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

‘For the statement in the law, ‘Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree,’ [Dt.21:23] confirms our hope which depends on the crucified Christ, not because He who has been crucified is cursed by God, but because God foretold that which would be done by you all, and by those like to you, who do not know that this is He who existed before all, who is the eternal Priest of God, and King, and Christ. And you clearly see that this has come to pass. For *you curse* in your synagogues all those who are called from Him Christians; and *other nations effectively carry out the curse*, putting to death those who simply confess themselves to be Christians; to all of whom we say, ‘You are our brethren; rather recognise the truth of God.’ And while neither they nor you are persuaded by us, but strive earnestly to cause us to deny the name of Christ, we choose rather and submit to death, in the full assurance that all the good which God has promised through Christ He will reward us with.’²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Jeffery, et.al, p.166

²⁸⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 94

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, chapter 96

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

‘For [God] sets before every race of mankind that which is always and universally just, as well as all righteousness; and every race knows that adultery, and fornication, and homicide, and such like, are sinful; and though they all commit such practices, yet they do not escape from the knowledge that they act unrighteously whenever they so do, with the exception of those who are possessed with an unclean spirit, and who have been debased by education, by wicked customs, and by sinful institutions, and who have lost, or rather quenched and put under, their natural ideas. For we may see that such persons are unwilling to submit to the same things which they inflict upon others, and reproach each other with hostile consciences for the acts which they perpetrate.’²⁹⁰

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

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

‘He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her: wherefore also the Holy Thing begotten of her is the Son of God; and she replied, ‘Be it unto me according to thy word.’ And by her has He been born, to whom we have proved so many Scriptures refer, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him; but works deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.’²⁹¹

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

I have certainly proved that this man is the Christ of God, whoever He be, even if I do not prove that He pre-existed, and submitted to be *born a man of like passions with us, having a body*, according to the Father’s will; in this last matter alone is it just to say that I have erred, and not to deny that He is the Christ, though it should appear that He was born man of men, and [nothing more] is proved [than this], that He has become Christ by election.’²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Ibid, chapter 93

²⁹¹ Ibid, chapter 100

²⁹² Ibid, chapter 48

And Trypho said: ‘...you may now proceed to explain to us how this God who appeared to Abraham, and is minister to God the Maker of all things, being born of the Virgin, *became man, of like passions with all*, as you said previously.’²⁹³

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

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

‘Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, as the words of God in all these passages demand.’²⁹⁴

‘You have now need of a second circumcision, though you glory greatly in the flesh.’²⁹⁵

‘And God himself proclaimed by Moses, speaking thus: ‘And circumcise the hardness of your hearts, and no longer stiffen the neck. For the Lord your God is both Lord of lords, and a great, mighty, and terrible God, who regardeth not persons, and taketh not rewards.’ And in Leviticus: ‘Because they have transgressed against Me, and despised Me, and because they have walked contrary to Me, I also walked contrary to them, and I shall cut them off in the land of their enemies. Then shall their uncircumcised heart be turned. For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.’²⁹⁶

‘For your first circumcision was and is performed by iron instruments, for you remain hard-hearted; but our circumcision, which is the second, having been instituted after yours, circumcises us from idolatry and from absolutely every kind of wickedness by sharp stones, i.e., by the words [preached] by the apostles of the corner-stone cut out without hands. And *our hearts are thus circumcised from evil*, so that we are happy to die for the name of the good Rock, which causes living water to burst forth for the hearts of those who by Him have loved the Father of all, and which gives those who are willing to drink of the water of life.’²⁹⁷

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

‘For Isaiah did not send you to a bath, there to wash away murder and other sins, which not even all the water of the sea were sufficient to purge; but, as might have been expected, this was that saving bath of the olden time which followed those who repented, and who no longer were *purified* by the blood of goats and of sheep, or by the ashes of an heifer, or by the offerings of fine flour, but by faith through the blood of Christ, and through His death, who died for this very reason, as Isaiah himself said...’²⁹⁸

Justin’s understanding of salvation in Christ is thus a cleansing and purification from our sins and our vulnerability

²⁹³ Ibid, chapter 57

²⁹⁴ Ibid, chapter 15, after quoting Isaiah 58 about true fasting

²⁹⁵ Ibid, chapter 12

²⁹⁶ Ibid, chapter 16

²⁹⁷ Ibid, chapter 104

²⁹⁸ Ibid, chapter 13

to Satan. Salvation certainly includes forgiveness from God, and both medical substitution and penal substitution uphold the dimension of right standing with God. However, penal substitution separates forgiveness from God from union with Christ by locating forgiveness in the death of Christ alone, elevates forgiveness from God above the fundamental cleansing of the worshiper, the objective over the subjective, and tends to assign the former work to Christ and the latter work to the Spirit. Medical substitution, on the other hand, makes the cleansing of the humanity of Jesus Christ the firm basis for our forgiveness, since to be resurrected into new life is to be justified (e.g. Ezk.37:1 – 14). The worshiper then participates by the Spirit *in Jesus* and receives a new identity *in him*. We are justified by sharing in the new, cleansed humanity of Jesus by the Spirit, because Jesus emerged on the other side of the Sinai covenant with a circumcised heart as the true ‘Israel’ (Dt.30:6), not because Jesus took some amount of punishment from God at the cross such that God had no anger leftover for us. Medical substitution makes the subjective connection of the human person to Jesus by the Spirit the basis for our sharing in the objective shift in legal standing (justification) before God. Hence, our current and future participation in the resurrection of Christ is the foundation for our justification, as Paul said: ‘He was raised for our justification’ (Rom.4:25). And it makes the work of Christ to save human nature in himself the basis for the Spirit’s work to save human persons. In order to provide cleansing and purification and circumcision of hardness of heart to people, Jesus had to become human, struggle against all the human passions that we have that would have made him veer off on another trajectory, and *share* the place of the guilty among the guilty on the wooden tree of the cross.

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

‘For our sakes he became man in order to heal us of our ills by himself sharing in them.’²⁹⁹

This fits with the overall picture: all the early theologians believed in medical substitution because they inherited it from the apostles, and behind them, Jesus himself.

²⁹⁹ Justin Martyr of Rome, *Second Apology* 13

Melito of Sardis (died 180 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

Melito was the Christian bishop of Sardis in western Anatolia, in modern day Turkey, near the city of Smyrna. He was a trusted authority within the early Christian community on matters of theology. Eusebius of Caesarea named Melito alongside Irenaeus as the two writers who had impeccable Christology: ‘Who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito which proclaim Christ as God and Man?’³⁰⁰ Just as Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach overlook Irenaeus at great detriment to their own personal knowledge, so they also overlook Melito of Sardis.

Melito was a prolific writer, according to Eusebius and Jerome, who recorded lists of his writings. For example, he wrote a letter to Emperor Marcus Aurelius around 161 AD asking him to not overlook the Christians who were being plundered by lawless mobs. However, only fragments of his writings survive, with one exception: the homily called *On the Passover (Peri Pascha)* found in the Bodmer Papyri. Like the *Odes of Solomon*, Melito’s *On the Passover* is stylistically similar to the language of the Gospel of John.

Melito’s On the Passover

On the Passover begins with an introduction (1 – 10) and an explanation of the Jewish Passover (11 – 33). Melito then says that the Jewish Passover celebration is a ‘prefiguration’ of the salvation and truth that are found in Christ (34 – 45). Melito then goes back further to explain the creation and fall of humanity. What happened that God had to heal it?

Indeed, he [Adam] left his children an inheritance – not of chastity but of unchastity, not of immortality but of corruptibility, not of honor but of dishonor, not of freedom but of slavery, not of sovereignty but of tyranny, not of life but of death, not of salvation but of destruction. Extraordinary and terrifying indeed was the destruction of men upon the earth. For the following things happened to them: They were carried off as slaves by sin, the tyrant, and were led away into the regions of desire where they were totally engulfed by insatiable sensual pleasures—by adultery, by unchastity, by debauchery, by inordinate desires, by avarice, by murders, by bloodshed, by the tyranny of wickedness, by the tyranny of lawlessness.³⁰¹

Melito states his belief that Adam left his children ‘an inheritance’ and then proceeds to describe what that inheritance is. His list of contrasts is notable. They are moral and ontological conditions: unchastity, corruptibility (meaning at the very least, susceptibility to death, if not also moral decline), dishonor, slavery, tyranny, death, destruction. He then notes the degradation of human beings in the phrase, ‘the destruction of men upon the earth.’ As evidence, he returns to conditions that are moral and about our very being (ontology). Probably thinking of the passages in Scripture where desires become warped by human self-chosen alienation from God (e.g. Romans 1:21 – 32; Ephesians 4:17 – 19), Melito describes ‘desires... sensual pleasures... and inordinate desires.’

Melito’s idea of the inheritance from Adam reflects the Eastern Orthodox idea of ‘ancestral sin.’ There is a corruption internal to the human being that is being passed down from generation to generation. Melito does not describe the Western notion of ‘original sin’ developed by Augustine. Original sin is the idea that the moral *guilt* of Adam is inherited by all his descendants. In that framework, each descendant of Adam and Eve shares the moral culpability for the fall because they were ‘present’ in the loins of Adam and Eve; it was as if each human being committed the treasonous act of the fall. The Eastern Orthodox tradition, by contrast, believes that guilt is only personal, and not suprapersonal so as to be inherited from our ancestors. Interestingly enough, Augustine believed that the stain of original sin was washed away by the waters of baptism. Luther and Calvin, however, attributed the removal of such guilt away from the sacrament of baptism and onto Jesus at his death. These matters deserve a much fuller discussion that I cannot do here. Significantly, Melito, writing at least two hundred years before Augustine, does not have inherited *guilt* in view, for Adam’s personal life did not devolve into adultery, debauchery, murders, and bloodshed, as far as we know from the text of Genesis. Rather, Melito is viewing the development of humanity as a race, each generation and each person being distinct and perhaps becoming morally and spiritually worse than the previous. Regardless, once Melito identifies the problem as a corruption of human nature, he has set the stage. Melito then argues that God in Jesus Christ solves that problem.

³⁰⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75

³⁰¹ Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 49 – 50

Melito portrays sin as a ‘hostile and greedy counselor’ (48), a slavemaster and tyrant who led humans into regions of evil desires and sensual pleasures (49). Consistent with that introduction of sin as a cruel Pharaoh of sorts, Melito also personifies sin as a villain who exults over humanity’s fall, preparing the way for his hungry accomplice, death:

‘Because of these things sin exulted, which, because it was death’s collaborator, entered first into the souls of men, and prepared as food for him the bodies of the dead. In every soul sin left its mark, and those in whom it placed its mark were destined to die. Therefore, all flesh fell under the power of sin, and every body under the dominion of death, for every soul was driven out from its house of flesh. Indeed, that which had been taken from the earth was dissolved again into earth, and that which had been given from God was locked up in Hades. And that beautiful ordered arrangement was dissolved, when the beautiful body was separated (from the soul). Yes, man was divided up into parts by death. Yes, an extraordinary misfortune and captivity enveloped him: he was dragged away captive under the shadow of death, and the image of the Father remained there desolate. For this reason, therefore, the mystery of the passover has been completed *in the body of the Lord.*’³⁰²

Significant to this exploration is Melito’s language of sin as leaving a mark on every soul, and exerting power within all human flesh, and salvation and deliverance from those powers occurring ‘*in the body of the Lord.*’ Like Irenaeus, Melito sees the main problem of sin as not primarily one’s legal status before God, but ontological, having to do with humanity’s very being. ‘The image of the Father,’ he says, referring to the image of God in which humanity was made, was defaced. God’s remedy to this was to renew the image of God *in the body of the Lord.* God foreshadowed this by the Jewish Passover. In the Passover and Exodus, God delivered His people out of the bondage of Egyptian slavery. As the Israelites took the uncorrupted blood of the Passover lamb and applied it to the doorway, entering into new life by passing through blood, something deeper occurs in and through Jesus Christ. God delivered human nature *in the body of the Lord* out of the bondage to the corruption of sin and the resultant death. Jesus entered into new life through his own blood. All those who follow after him, through his blood and in his body, share in his new life.

Melito is clear that Jesus is none other than the God who made Himself known to Israel in a preliminary way, prior to making His character known fully in Jesus of Nazareth. As the apostle Paul did in 1 Corinthians 10:1 – 13, Melito sees the preincarnate Jesus as none other than YHWH present with Israel in Egypt as both the Passover lamb and the angel who took the lives of the Egyptian firstborn into his own care: ‘Pay close attention also to the one who was sacrificed as a sheep in the land of Egypt, to the one who smote Egypt and who saved Israel by his blood’ (60; cf. 84 – 85). Once again, Melito asserts that none other than God was in Christ: ‘The one who hung the earth in space, is himself hanged; the one who fixed the heavens in place, is himself impaled; the one who firmly fixed all things, is himself firmly fixed to the tree. The Lord is insulted, God has been murdered, the King of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel.’ (96)

But Melito goes further. He notes how YHWH identified Himself with key human figures in biblical history: ‘This one is the passover [lamb] of our salvation. This is the one who patiently endured many things in many people: This is the one who was murdered in Abel, and bound as a sacrifice in Isaac, and exiled in Jacob, and sold in Joseph, and exposed in Moses, and sacrificed in the lamb, and hunted down in David, and dishonored in the prophets.’ (69) Hence Melito sees Christological development in the Old Testament relating to God’s identification of Himself with human covenant partners. Ultimately God brings that development to a climax in Jesus when He permanently and irrevocably takes human nature to Himself. The one man Jesus has become God’s human dwelling place (44 – 45). In Christ, God redeemed human nature, to offer it back to us:

‘But he arose from the dead and mounted up to the heights of heaven. When the Lord had *clothed himself with humanity*, and had suffered for the sake of the sufferer, and had been bound for the sake of the imprisoned, and had been judged for the sake of the condemned, and buried for the sake of the one who was buried, he rose up from the dead, and cried aloud with this voice: Who is he who contends with me? Let him stand in opposition to me. I set the condemned man free; I gave the dead man life; I raised up the one who had been entombed. Who is my opponent? I, he says, am the Christ. I am the one who destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trampled Hades under foot, and bound the strong one, and

³⁰² Ibid 54 – 56

carried off man to the heights of heaven, I, he says, am the Christ. Therefore, come, all families of men, you who have been befouled with sins, and receive forgiveness for your sins. I am your forgiveness, I am the passover of your salvation, I am the lamb which was sacrificed for you, I am your ransom, I am your light, I am your savior, I am your resurrection, I am your king...³⁰³

Theologian T.F. Torrance observes of Melito's theology of atonement, 'There is no suggestion in the *Peri Pascha* that the atonement is something done by God outside of Christ as if in some external relation to the Incarnation or in addition to it, but as something done within the ontological depths of the Incarnation, for the assumption of the flesh by God in Jesus Christ is itself a redemptive act and of the very essence of God's saving work. This takes place, not just in some impersonal physical way, but in an intensely personal and intimate way within the incarnate Lord and his coexistence with us in our fallen suffering condition as sinners. Incarnation is thus intrinsically atoning, and atonement is essentially Incarnational, for the saving act and the divine-human being of the Savior are inseparable. As Savior, Christ embodies the act and the fact of our salvation in his own Person. This is made very clear by Melito in a series of 'I am' statements put into the mouth of Christ who personally and directly identifies himself in his vicarious death and resurrection with divine salvation and stands forth as our divine Vindicator in the face of all accusation and judgment.'³⁰⁴ Melito of Sardis says that in Christ is a new humanity, healed and cleansed of the corruption of sin inherited from Adam. Christ reconciled human nature to God in his own person and in his own body. That is the nature of the atonement to Melito of Sardis: not penal substitution, but medical substitution.

³⁰³ Ibid 100 – 103, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.83 – 84

³⁰⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.83 – 84

Tertullian of Carthage (160 – 220 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

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

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

God as Trinity

Tertullian’s view of the Trinity has been both appreciated and criticized, and we must consider whether a defective view of the Trinity affected his theology of the atonement. Tertullian was the first to use the word ‘Trinity’ to denote the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, he was speaking of the working of God in space-time, in history, for our salvation (the economic Trinity), and not about the being of God in eternity prior to creation (the immanent Trinity). Tertullian believed that a subtle shift within the being of God happened at the creation. He said: ‘God had not Word from the beginning.’ This is somewhat puzzling. However, in Tertullian’s defense, it has been noted that he counterbalances this with the assertion: ‘But He had Reason even before the beginning, because also Word itself consists of Reason, which it thus proves to have been the prior existence, as being its own substance.’ Moreover, he states: ‘For although God had not yet sent His Word, He still had Him within Himself, both in company with, and included, in, His very Reason.’³⁰⁵ I judge this to be a relatively minor problem of terminology in Tertullian.³⁰⁶

Tertullian would say that God’s Reason became God’s Word as God spoke creation into existence, and God’s Word became human flesh for our redemption. Furthermore, Origen of Alexandria in Egypt (185 – 254 AD), within one generation of Tertullian and writing in both Greek and Latin at the closest major center of Christianity to Tertullian’s Carthage, spoke of God the Father and his Wisdom each being a *hypostasis* (Greek) and *substantia* (Latin), with the clear intention of declaring that the Wisdom of God is personal and eternal.³⁰⁷ The use of these terms, which would become more fixed at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, gives us reason to assess Tertullian positively on this particular point. Patristics scholar Jean Daniélou, in his study of early Latin Christianity, says that Tertullian ‘created a remarkably coherent theological synthesis.’³⁰⁸

God’s Attributes and Humanity’s Fall Into Corruption

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

‘Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge both severe and, as the Marcionites will have it, cruel...’³⁰⁹ ‘But yet, when evil afterwards broke out, and the goodness of God began now to have an adversary to contend against, God’s justice also acquired another function, even that of directing His goodness according to men’s application for it. And this is the

³⁰⁵ Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 5

³⁰⁶ Tertullian wrote about the equality of the three persons in *substantia*, *status*, and *potestas* (substance, status, and power, in *Against Praxeas* 2 and *Against Marcion* 4.25); his distinction between *gradus*, *forma*, and *species* (*Against Praxeas* 2) points to the distinction between the persons and order of procession.

³⁰⁷ Origen of Alexandria, *On Principles*, 1.2: ‘If, then, it is once rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is His Wisdom hypostatically existing, I know not whether our curiosity ought to advance beyond this, or entertain any suspicion that that *hypostasis* or *substantia* contains anything of a bodily nature... Who that is capable of entertaining reverential thoughts of feelings regarding God, can suppose or believe that God the Father ever existed, even for a moment of time, without having generated this Wisdom?’

³⁰⁸ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 3: The Origins of Latin Christianity*, translated and edited by David Smith and John Austin Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1977), p.xvi

³⁰⁹ Tertullian of Carthage, *Adversus Marcionem*, bk.2, ch.11

result: the divine goodness, being interrupted in that free course whereby God was spontaneously good, is now dispensed according to the deserts of every man; it is offered to the worthy, denied to the unworthy, taken away from the unthankful, and also avenged on all its enemies. Thus the entire office of justice in this respect becomes an agency for goodness: whatever it condemns by its judgment, whatever it chastises by its condemnation, whatever (to use your phrase) it ruthlessly pursues, it, in fact, benefits with good instead of injuring... Thus far, then, justice is the very fullness of the Deity Himself, manifesting God as both a perfect father and a perfect master: a father in His mercy, a master in His discipline; a father in the mildness of His power, a master in its severity; a father who must be loved with dutiful affection, a master who must needs be feared; be loved, because He prefers mercy to sacrifice; [Hosea 6:6] be feared because He dislikes sin; be loved, because He prefers the sinner's repentance to his death; [Ezekiel 33:11] be feared, because He dislikes the sinners who do not repent. Accordingly, the divine law enjoins duties in respect of both these attributes: You shall love God, and, You shall fear God. It proposed one for the obedient man, the other for the transgressor.'³¹⁰

Tertullian starts out accurately: Prior to creation, and prior to the fall, God was simply good. Judging is a secondary activity of God which had not been expressed prior to creation. But just as in mathematics where you cannot maximize two variables at once – you must logically maximize one variable and then the second relative to it – Tertullian's theology starts to unravel. He seems to universalize the Sinai covenant with Israel as if God related to everyone that way as a function of His character, and therefore Tertullian seems to make deductions about the character of God primarily from within Sinaitic Israel's experience of blessings and curses. He conceives of God as a father and then as a master. Tertullian divides loving God from fearing (reverencing) God as if loving and fearing were always meant to pertain to two different groups of people. However, the two postures towards humanity cannot coexist in the same way and on the same level within the character of God. So the master wins out over the father in the end. Tertullian makes the meritocratic-retributive justice of God ascend to a place that is at least co-equal to, and arguably higher than, the love of God. He postulates that God must dislike sinners who do not repent, and reverses the meaning of Ezekiel 33:11 to make it conditional on the person's response. For Tertullian, God's primary characteristic is meritocratic-retributive justice. Those who love Him, He loves. Those who disobey Him, He punishes. At this point, love appears to be subordinate to meritocratic-retributive justice.

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

'Even His severity then is good, because just: when the judge is good, that is just. Other qualities likewise are good, by means of which the good work of a good severity runs out its course, whether wrath, or jealousy, or sternness. For all these are as indispensable to severity as severity is to justice. The shamelessness of an age, which ought to have been reverent, had to be avenged. Accordingly, qualities which pertain to the judge, when they are actually free from blame, as the judge himself is, will never be able to be charged upon him as a fault. What would be said, if, when you thought the doctor necessary, you were to find fault with his instruments, because they cut, or cauterize, or amputate, or tighten; whereas there could be no doctor of any value without his professional tools?'³¹¹

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

'Now, although Adam was by reason of his condition under law subject to death, yet was hope preserved to him by the Lord's saying, 'Behold, Adam has become as one of us;' that is, in consequence of the future taking of the man into the divine nature. [*This interpretation, while admirably hopeful, is not exactly the meaning of God's utterance in Genesis 3:22; God did not simply impose a 'law' unto death because of divine retribution, but because of divine mercy, preventing humans from eating from the tree of life while in a corrupted state.*] Then what follows? And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, (and eat), and live for ever. Inserting thus the particle of present time, 'And now,' He shows that He had

³¹⁰ Ibid, bk.2, ch.13

³¹¹ Ibid, bk.2, ch.16

made for a time, and at present, a prolongation of man's life. [This is grammatically strained, and narratively false; God prevented Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of life, and allowed them to begin the long process of 'dying you will die' as stated in Genesis 2:17; Tertullian apparently believed that God verbally promised to strike them dead immediately upon eating from the tree of knowledge.] Therefore He did not actually curse Adam and Eve, for they were candidates for restoration [This is ambiguous; it is possible that their human nature was, in fact, cursed, based on the narrative], and they had been relieved by confession [They were not relieved by confession per se, but by hoping in the messianic 'seed of the woman' prophecy of Genesis 3:14 – 15]. Cain, however, He not only cursed [Tertullian is wrong here; Cain cursed himself, and God diagnosed Cain's relation to the ground as cursed, in Genesis 4:11]; but when he wished to atone for his sin by death [Cain did not want to atone for his sins; he did not want to die; he wanted protection from being murdered out of vengeance!], He even prohibited his dying, so that he had to bear the load of this prohibition in addition to his crime [That is an incorrect way to interpret what seems to be God's mercy and protection to Cain, and invitation to repent].³¹²

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

Fallen Human Nature and God's Grace

Matthew Craig Steenberg sees Tertullian maintaining a place for human beings as *developmental* in nature, and I appreciate Steenberg's sympathetic analysis of Tertullian's writings on the subject.³¹³ However, Gösta Hallonsten, who writes the concluding chapter in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, which is dedicated to exploring the doctrine of *theosis*, argues that Tertullian began to weaken Irenaeus' theological anthropology. Irenaeus believed that human beings partake of the Holy Spirit in a preliminary sense by virtue of creation, and must choose to grow into full communion with God by further reception of the Word and Spirit. A *static* view of human beings, by contrast, tends to reduce to an emphasis on legal standing before God. Although Tertullian 'was highly dependent on Irenaeus,' as Hallonsten notes, his

'...later writings, however, are marked by the strong opposition to Gnosticism and hence stress more emphatically that the human as a created being, notwithstanding its spiritual part, is of a clearly distinct genus or species. Through this, Tertullian aims at avoiding the Gnostic thought of a divine spark in human beings and hence a predetermined salvation for the few. Tertullian's emphasis on the relative independence and special character of creature in relation to Creator, however, seems to be a common inheritance in the subsequent Latin tradition. Thus, we see the tendency to distinguish between nature and grace in a way that is foreign to Eastern tradition.'³¹⁴

If I am correctly interpreting Hallonsten's statement, and the historical and cultural trends in Christian theology which he describes, Tertullian contributed to an eventual difference between Eastern and Western Christianity over how we view the human being. Irenaeus viewed the human being in a developmental paradigm: the human person is a partner with God in the formation of her or his own human nature. This developmental view of the human being offers the only adequate explanation for the biblical data: why God created human beings to live in a narrative, why human nature and the human will even prior to the fall needed development through intentional partnership with God, why human nature in eternity will become fixed in its orientation for or against God, and why the medical-medical substitutionary atonement model provides the only logical foundation for our healing and renewed

³¹² Ibid, bk.2, ch.25

³¹³ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), ch.2

³¹⁴ Gösta Hallonsten, 'Theosis in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity,' edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.285 – 286.

development into fuller union with God. This paradigm continues in Eastern Orthodoxy. Tertullian, by contrast, began a trend to see the human person as fundamentally separated from God and therefore accumulating merit or demerits in a ledger external to the person, and held by a God who keeps such accounts. This emphasis came to influence the Latin-based Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. This tendency to distinguish between nature (namely, human will) and grace (that is, God's will) would return in Augustine, the greatest North African Latin theologian, who placed them in a competitive rather than complementary relation.³¹⁵

The Incarnation

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

'Every soul, then, by reason of its birth, has its nature in Adam until it is born again in Christ; moreover it is unclean all the while that it remains without this regeneration (Baptism); and because unclean, it is actively sinful, and suffuses even the flesh with its own shame... The corruption of our nature is another nature having a god and father of its own, namely the author of (that) corruption [i.e. the devil]. Still there is a portion of good in the soul, of that original, divine, and genuine good, which is its proper nature. For that which is derived from God is rather obscured than extinguished. It can be obscured, indeed, because it is not God; extinguished, however, it cannot be, because it comes from God.'³¹⁶

Tertullian believed that *the soul* was unclean, and infected *the body* with its uncleanness, or otherwise added to the problem of bodily mortality. This may have contributed to his faulty exegesis of Genesis where he interpreted Adam, Eve, and Cain as examples or not of penitence, which is a movement of the soul. For Tertullian, Jesus therefore needed to become incarnate in such a way so as to avoid the problem of possessing a human soul because it would necessarily be a corrupt one. This may have led Tertullian to have the same concerns as Apollinaris, the fourth century theologian who believed that the Word replaced the human soul in the human body of Jesus. We do not observe this in Tertullian's writing per se, but the logic of laying out the human categories in this way demands a solution.

Lactantius, Ambrose, and Jerome all repudiated traducianism³¹⁷ as did the Catholic Church as a whole.³¹⁸ They held that each soul was created by God, and that the human body of each person began in a state of deprivation because of the fall. However, the impact of Tertullian's thought, and/or the impact of Stoic philosophy, upon Christian theology seems to recur in the Latin bishops Hilary of Poitiers (315 – 367 AD) and Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD). Hilary believed that Jesus was not truly subject to ordinary human pain and needs like hunger and thirst, but only ate and drank to fit in with human custom.³¹⁹ Augustine praised Mary's immaculate conception for conceiving Jesus without any sexual desire, since Augustine defined sexual desire even for one's spouse (sadly) as a manifestation of the soul's fallenness which would itself corrupt the new human soul³²⁰ contrary to the Jewish celebration of marital sexuality (e.g. Pr.5:19; Song 3:6 – 5:1) and Paul's approval of marital sex as for the couple, not simply for procreative purposes (1 Cor.7:1 – 5). Augustine was drawn towards traducianism because it seemed

³¹⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 2nd edition), p.219 – 220, notes, 'According to Augustine, man in Paradise was endowed from the start with all possible wisdom and knowledge: his was a realized, and in no sense potential, perfection. The dynamic conception of Irenaeus clearly fits more easily with modern theories of evolution than does the static conception of Augustine.' Note that Ambrose of Milan (340 – 397), who led Augustine to faith, also held to a developmental view of humanity in creation where nature and grace are mutually intertwined (Ambrose of Milan, *Paradise*, chapter 5, paragraph 29; dated between 374 to 383 AD). Augustine was in Milan from the fall of 384 to the summer of 386 AD in his early 30's, so his neglect of Ambrose's teaching requires explanation. Furthermore, Augustine might have quoted Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60; he certainly quoted from *Against Heresies* 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and even mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32), yet apparently failed to understand Irenaeus on this point as well. (http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_2.htm#n2)

³¹⁶ Tertullian of Carthage, *De Anima (A Treatise on the Soul)*, 40 – 41; cf19

³¹⁷ Lactantius, *De Opificio Dei (On the Workmanship of God)*, 19, 1ff.

³¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Number 366

³¹⁹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 10.23; Hilary is criticized by T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p.162, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, p.24; Angelo Di Berardino, *Patrology* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1986), p.57 says, 'In this context, Hilary proposes the idea of the human body of Christ as a real body but a celestial one, devoid of imperfections and capable of feeling the violence of the passion but not the pain; an idea that is not without a slightest hint of Docetism (X.18, 23).'

³²⁰ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 14:24; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, book 3, question 31, articles 4 – 5 repeated the view that sexual desire itself transmitted some corruption to the newly conceived child

to explain the transmission of the guilt of Adam and Eve to their descendants, not simply their corrupted human nature. I suspect that the early fathers, who did not distinguish lust as an intentional, focused decision from an aesthetic appreciation of the human body as beautiful, or from awareness of sexual desire in a latent but unfocused sense, felt they needed to protect Jesus from experiencing all of the above. Hence, they simply called all sexual desire ‘concupiscence,’ or ‘lust,’ even the sexual attraction between husband and wife. Preachers and commentators worked hard to interpret the *Song of Songs* allegorically, as referring to Christ and the church, so as not to admit that the sexual attraction between husband and wife was to be celebrated. Married men ordained to church office were asked to make their marriages celibate.

By the fifth century, the view of Emmanuel Hatzidakis, which I covered above while discussing Irenaeus, started to emerge strongly: Jesus must have cleansed human nature at his conception in an instantaneous manner, and basically acquired a pre-fall Adamic humanity at his incarnation. Inconsistencies started emerging in how the fathers handle various biblical texts. For example, John Cassian in Gaul struggled to explain Paul’s assertion that Jesus came ‘in the *likeness* of sinful flesh’ in Romans 8:3.³²¹ The theologians know well that Paul said Jesus was ‘in human *likeness*’ in Philippians 2:7. But they make the word ‘*likeness*’ mean ‘in the appearance only’ in Romans, and ‘in the reality of’ in Philippians. But did this make lexical sense? Also, the death of Jesus started to take on greater significance in their minds, to explain, for instance, the Hebraic language of the ‘curse’ of Galatians 3:13. The overall teaching on atonement is still far from penal substitution; it is still incarnational and medical. But the pastoral significance of these moves was to diminish Jesus as an encouragement and source of strength for ordinary human beings struggling with temptation, sexual or otherwise.

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

‘We maintain, moreover, that what has been abolished in Christ is not *carnem peccati* (‘*sinful flesh*’), but *peccatum carnis* (‘sin in the flesh’) — not the material thing, but its condition; not the substance, but its flaw; and (this we aver) on the authority of the apostle, who says, ‘He abolished sin in the flesh’ [*a misunderstanding of Romans 8:3*]. Now in another sentence he says that Christ was in the likeness of sinful flesh, not, however, as if He had taken on Him the likeness of the flesh, in the sense of a semblance of body instead of its reality; but he means us to understand likeness to the flesh which sinned, because the flesh of Christ, which committed no sin itself, resembled that which had sinned—resembled it in its nature, but not in the corruption it received from Adam; whence we also affirm that there was in Christ the same flesh as that whose nature in man is sinful. In the flesh, therefore, we say that sin has been abolished, because in Christ that same flesh is maintained without sin, which in man was not maintained without sin. Now, it would not contribute to the purpose of Christ’s abolishing sin in the flesh, if He did not abolish it in that flesh in which was the nature of sin, nor (would it conduce) to His glory. For surely it would have been no strange thing if He had removed the stain of sin in some better flesh, and one which should possess a different, even a sinless, nature! Then, you say, if He took our flesh, Christ’s was a sinful one. Do not, however, fetter with mystery a sense which is quite intelligible. *For in putting on our flesh, He made it His own; in making it His own, He made it sinless.* A word of caution, however, must be addressed to all who refuse to believe that our flesh was in Christ on the ground that it came not of the seed of a human father, let them remember that Adam himself received this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father. As earth was converted into this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father, so also was it quite possible for the Son of God to take to Himself the substance of the selfsame flesh, without a human father’s agency.’³²²

For Tertullian, as with the other patristic theologians, Jesus uniting divine nature and fallen human nature in himself is the basis of God’s offer of salvation, of human nature, to others. As he argues with the gnostic heretics Marcion and Valentinus who denied Jesus’ true and actual humanity, Tertullian writes about Jesus taking on human flesh.

³²¹ John Cassian, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 4.3; but compare to 4.6 ‘being made in the *likeness* of men’

³²² Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi (On the Flesh of Christ)* 16; curiously, Demetrios Bathrellos, ‘The Patristic Tradition on the Sinlessness of Jesus,’ edited by Markus Vinzent, *Studia Patristica Volume LXIII*, Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford 2011, p.236 – 237, opens his observations of the patristic period with this very passage from Tertullian.

Tertullian belabors the point by saying that Jesus did not take on angelic nature to himself, an idea Tertullian evidently felt he needed to refute because some gnostics suggested it; but Jesus wanted to bring about the salvation of human beings, and thus he took on human nature.³²³

However, Tertullian differs from Irenaeus and others in his treatment of Romans 8:3 and his understanding of the flesh of Jesus. Tertullian explicitly says that the flesh of Christ had the same nature as Adam, but not the same corruption. This is probably due to his traducianism. He replaces the apostle Paul's term 'condemn' with 'abolish' in his reading of Romans 8:3, which is problematic. For Paul in Romans, to 'condemn' something is to cause it to die, which ties up 'condemnation' language that he started to discuss with Adam in Romans 5:12 – 21. In effect, Tertullian believes that Jesus' incarnation *instantly* purified the human nature he took on from Adamic corruption, whereas Irenaeus and others held that Jesus purified it by facing temptation and overcoming it all the way to his death, where the corruption was finally defeated. The earlier theologians would have agreed with Paul's view that the Sinai covenant and its laws were good and holy, that it helped Israel diagnose the indwelling presence of sin within themselves (Rom.7:14 – 25), but could not bring them victory because the Sinai covenant was always meant to be fulfilled by Jesus, the true Israel and the climax of the covenant (Rom.10:4). In this way, Tertullian was actually losing ground to the very gnostic influences he was so eager to defeat, detaching himself historically from the other patristic Christian theologians, and detaching Christ's connection to our common fallen humanity.

Tertullian departs from Irenaeus' use of 'image' and 'likeness.' It is true that at times, Tertullian uses 'image' and 'likeness' in a similar way to Irenaeus. For example, when discussing the resurrection, Tertullian refers to our material body as the 'image,' and the breath of God as the 'likeness':

'God fashioned this flesh with his hands in his own image. He animated it with his breath in the likeness of his own vitality.'³²⁴

Irenaeus also referred to the physical form of the human body as the 'image.' But he did not reduce the 'likeness' down to the breath first breathed into Adam, because the breath merely animated Adam's otherwise lifeless body as 'psychical' or 'a living soul' (1 Cor.15:45 – 49). Rather, Irenaeus regarded 'likeness' as participation in the Holy Spirit in a fully realized, endless way.³²⁵ Thus, Tertullian destabilizes the meaning of these terms. In fact, he used these terms to denote the human soul ('image') and its freedom ('likeness' unto God). He did not include the human body in his use of these terms elsewhere. Daniélou notes, 'The essential point, however, remains valid, namely that it is man's soul which is made in the likeness of God and above all reflects his freedom. In this, Tertullian's thought was profoundly original, and was to have a great influence on Latin theological thinking after his time.'³²⁶ Note Daniélou's recognition of Tertullian's originality, which should also be understood as his divergence from Irenaeus, whom he had certainly read. Tertullian's reduction of 'likeness' to mere 'resemblance' (of freedom) absent 'participation' would negatively influence his interpretation of Romans 8:3.

Tellingly, Tertullian is also a bit unclear about whether Jesus really experienced temptation during his earthly life.³²⁷ Strictly speaking, if Tertullian were to logically follow through from this point, he might have asserted that Jesus could have been transfigured, and even ascended to the Father, at any time after his incarnation without dying on the cross and being resurrected. For what reason, in Tertullian's mind, did Jesus have to undergo death? He does say that Jesus had to fulfill Scripture, and to experience death out of his human solidarity with the rest of humankind, which lies under the power of death because of the fall.³²⁸ But these are partial explanations at best. At least in *De Carne Christi*, he does not give any further explanation for the necessity of Jesus' death.

³²³ Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi* 14

³²⁴ Tertullian of Carthage, *De Resurrectione (On the Resurrection of the Flesh)* 9

³²⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1; 5.16.2; John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.48, 99 – 100 says, 'But when this Spirit, commingled with the soul, is united to the handiwork, because of the outpouring of the Spirit man is rendered spiritual and perfect, and this is the one who was made in the image and likeness of God. But if the Spirit is lacking from the soul, such a one, remaining indeed animated and fleshly, will be imperfect, having the image, certainly, in the handiwork, but not receiving the likeness through the Spirit.' Cf. p.114 – 115.

³²⁶ Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 3: The Origins of Latin Christianity*, translated and edited by David Smith and John Austin Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1977), p.382 – 383; cf.371 – 383.

³²⁷ Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi* 7; in 9, he reduces the devil's temptations in the wilderness to Jesus' physical hunger, rather than maintaining that the Adamic corruption in Jesus humanity made self-centeredness the larger and more powerful temptation

³²⁸ *Ibid* 6

Jesus' Death on the Cross

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

'God...spared not His own Son for you, that He might be made a curse for us, because cursed is he that hangeth on a tree, Him who was led as a sheep to be a sacrifice, and just as a lamb before its shearer, so opened He not His mouth; but gave His back to the scourges, nay, His cheeks to the hands of the smiter, and turned not away His face from spitting, and, being numbered with the transgressors, was delivered up to death, nay, the death of the cross. All this took place that He might redeem us from our sins. The sun ceded to us the day of our redemption; hell re-transferred the right it had in us, and our covenant is in heaven; the everlasting gates were lifted up, that the King of Glory, the Lord of might, might enter in, after having redeemed man from earth, nay, from hell, that he might attain to heaven. What, now, are we to think of the man who strives against that glorious One, nay, slights and defiles His goods, obtained at so great a ransom – no less, in truth, than His most precious blood? It appears, then, that it is better to flee than to fall in value, if a man will not lay out for himself as much as he cost Christ. And the Lord indeed ransomed him from the angelic powers which rule the world – from the spirits of wickedness, from the darkness of this life, from eternal judgment, from everlasting death.'³²⁹

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

Positioning Jesus' death as a 'payment' to outweigh and counteract the 'payment' requested by the Roman authorities risks being reductionist and placing God in the same role categorically as the Roman authorities. But that is precisely what is at issue: Did Tertullian think that Jesus offered a 'payment' to God at his death, as penal substitution asserts? Tertullian does use the term 'blood' in the sense of Jesus' life expended as a type of payment. Was this a payment to God, to satisfy His offended retributive justice? In a semantic sense, Tertullian can be read as edging in that direction. He differs from Justin Martyr by isolating the death of Jesus over against the rest of his life vis-à-vis the 'curse.' He does not define what 'curse' Jesus experienced uniquely at the cross; when he writes against his opponent Praxeas, he connects the curse with the Sinai law,³³⁰ although what he means by this is a bit uncertain. Likely that for Tertullian, there was not an 'extra' punishment that Jesus received upon himself, such as 'hell' on the cross, a later theory promoted by some Reformers. Rather, Tertullian seems to believe death *by itself* was the curse or penalty from God that Jesus took on himself.

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

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

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

³²⁹ Tertullian, *De Fuge in Persecutione* 12, v.3 – 5

³³⁰ Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeas* 29, 'But when we assert that Christ was crucified, we do not malign Him with a curse; we only re-affirm the curse pronounced by the law...'

confession, repentance, and good works.³³¹

In other words, for Tertullian, God is ‘satisfied’ by our apology to Him and repentance. God’s ‘satisfaction’ is not measured against God’s retributive justice as if it were a divine attribute equal and opposite God’s love, as it would be later for John Calvin. It is neither *categorical* nor *instantaneous*, that is, happening all at once, when Jesus hung on the cross and absorbed hell, or when he died. It is *personal*, that is, from person to person, and *dynamically ongoing*, in relation to the ups and downs of human behaviors and attitudes. This is probably what led Tertullian to think that Adam and Eve were rewarded with a taste from the tree of life because of their penitence, serving as the prototypical penitent figures. In this, Tertullian begins to read the categories of Latin culture (merit, penance, etc.) into the biblical text and concerns of theology. Why Tertullian believed that certain sins committed by Christians should not be forgiven by the church (murder, idolatry, fraud, apostasy, blasphemy, adultery, and fornication) even though God forgives them³³² may or may not be logically connected to Tertullian’s theology per se; pastoral flaws often flow out of personality quirks, as it did for Tertullian, who was a rigid perfectionist in temperament, as seen by his attraction to the demanding and heretical Montanist movement, in part because of his disgust with Christian mediocrity. Nevertheless, Roberts suggests that Tertullian did not think of God’s anger towards human sin as a divine attribute in tension or in conflict with God’s love for human beings, and Tertullian’s jumbling of the medical doctor analogy and the legal judge analogy leaves himself confused about what Scripture means, and interpreters confused about what Tertullian means. It appears that Tertullian still tries to uphold the view that God’s anger or wrath was an *activity* of God which flowed out of the deeper *attribute* of God: God’s unchanging love for us. Since God’s love is unchanging, it is that which makes God immutable. This corresponds with God being a Trinity, that is, a communion of love within Himself. If only Tertullian had been consistently trinitarian as a theologian and biblical exegete.

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

³³¹ Robert E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian*, Epworth Press, 1924, ch.9;
http://www.tertullian.org/articles/roberts_theology/roberts_00_index.htm; last accessed August 8, 2013

³³² Tertullian, *On Modesty* 19, 21

Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

I turn to examine another very important voice in the early church who Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach misinterpret. These three writers assert that Athanasius holds to penal substitution. However, Peter J. Leithart, an author, a frequent contributor to the journal *First Things*, and also a Reformed theologian in the Presbyterian Church of America, denies it. Leithart says, ‘He does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve.’³³³ Who is correct here?

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

We must note that this was an unavoidable struggle over words and the meanings to which they referred. The apostle Paul had already deployed the word *prosopon* when he spoke of seeing God ‘face to face’ (1 Cor.13:12) and God in one another with ‘unveiled faces’ (2 Cor.3:18). He used the term *prosopon* in a markedly different way than did his Greco-Roman cultural and philosophical surroundings. Thus the apostle was already engaged in the task of re-contextualization of pagan words to convey meaning in a distinctly Christian register. That is, he was engaged in theological hermeneutics. Paul provided more impetus for Christian theologians’ continuation on that journey, of necessity.³³⁴

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

Bishop Alexander took his young deacon Athanasius with him to the Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 AD to discuss the teaching of Arius and other administrative matters. ‘Some 22 of the bishops at the council, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, came as supporters of Arius. But when some of the more shocking passages from his writings were read, they were almost universally seen as blasphemous.’³³⁵ Of the 318 bishops assembled there, all but 3 signed their agreement to the use of the word *homoousios* (‘same substance or essence’) to describe the relation between the Father and the Son. The word guarded against Arian teaching by saying that Father shared everything he is and has with the Son, eternally. The Council thus confessed that there was never an interval of time when God was not a Father, prior to the Son. The Father always had his Son. This was despite the fact that in human experience, a man exists prior to begetting a son at a certain point in time and thus becoming a father; the connotation of temporality connected to ‘father-son’ and ‘begotten, not made’ language was identified as baggage from our creaturely existence which needed to be pruned away when ‘father-son’ language was used for God and ‘begotten’ language was used for the Son.

³³³ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154

³³⁴ See especially the excellent work by C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), ch.8 – 9 on how semantic similarities between rival traditions do not lead anywhere near conceptual agreement

³³⁵ Warren Carroll, *The Building of Christendom, 324 – 1100: A History of Christendom* volume 2 (West Chester, PA: Christendom Press, 1987), p.11; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch.2; John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology Volume 1: The Way to Nicaea* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001) gives helpful background to the development of technical theological terminology

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

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

Scholarly discussion has acknowledged that Athanasius used the term 'Arian' with deliberate polemical intent to lump his opponents into one category.³³⁶ Arius was never a bishop, merely an elder. Those whom Athanasius opposed for being 'Arian' did not call themselves by that name or label. 'Arian' is the victor's term. This was surely part of Athanasius' rhetorical strategy, to name the heresy for someone of lower rank than a bishop. And while Athanasius saw them as sharing a common flaw, the diversity of thought within that Athanasian category is significant. Nevertheless, these discussions, while interesting, do not have bearing on what my goal here, which is to examine Athanasius' teaching on the atonement, and to test whether penal substitution advocates can rightly claim Athanasius as a predecessor.

The nineteenth century church historian Archibald Robinson writes in his thorough review of Athanasius' work, 'Before 319 he had written his first books 'against the Gentiles,' the latter of which, *On the Incarnation*, implies a full maturity of power in the writer, while the former is full of philosophical and mythological knowledge such as argues advanced education.'³³⁷ However, the more dominant view of scholars today concerning the dating of *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation* is that Athanasius wrote these two volumes shortly after the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, for reasons I find compelling. Greek Catholic scholar Khaled Anatolios and Eastern Orthodox scholar Matthew Craig Steenberg view these theological treatises as typical of a bishop's early career, and even expected from a Christian bishop.³³⁸ In any case, Athanasius was a leading opponent of the Arian heresy; he was the main architect of the Nicene Creed; and he gave us the final form of the New Testament as consisting of the twenty-seven books we now recognize. C.S. Lewis was very well acquainted with Athanasius and admired him deeply, as shown by the introduction he wrote to *On the Incarnation*.³³⁹

³³⁶ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

³³⁷ Archibald Robinson, 'Athanasius' in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 4* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), p.16

³³⁸ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.161 in footnote 11 says that these documents were 'the type of doctrinal text relevant to and expected of an early episcopal career.' Also, on p.161 – 162: 'Here, more explicitly than anywhere else, Athanasius is able to present the core of this theological exposition in his own terms, mindful of the issues at stake at the Nicene council that had been held a few years before, but not yet wholly bound up in the disputes that would demand a polemical and often highly contextual shape to his later texts. The CG-DI is Athanasius at his least case-specific. He argues against the general practice of idolatry, but is not yet in disputes with single persons, perceived camps, or over specific terminologies; and this text, more than any of his others, articulates doctrinal theology through an anthropological perspective.' See also Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.27 – 31.

³³⁹ In his introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, C.S. Lewis writes with deep appreciation, 'This is a good translation of a very great book...He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, 'whole and undefiled,' when it looked as if all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those 'sensible' synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times... When I first opened his *De Incarnatione* I soon discovered by a very simple test that I was reading a masterpiece. I knew very little Christian Greek except that of the New Testament and I had expected difficulties. To my astonishment I found it almost as easy as Xenophon; and only a master mind could, in the fourth century, have written so deeply on such a subject with such classical simplicity. Every page I read confirmed this impression.' I have written a paper on Lewis' debt to Irenaeus and Athanasius on atonement theology, which includes some of this material: *C.S. Lewis' Theology of Atonement*, found here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-patristic>

God and Creation

First, I wish to explore Athanasius' understanding of creation, because this area of thought highlights how the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity was understood by the early Christians, and how all the theological puzzle pieces fit together. In his introduction to his first work, *Against the Heathen*, Athanasius directs Macarius his reader to view Jesus and his crucifixion not as a shameful defeat, but as 'the healing of creation.'³⁴⁰ And by 'creation,' Athanasius demonstrably means *all creation*, in such a way that involves all human beings without reservation, although human free choice will impact our experience of that healing. Christian faith, to Athanasius, does not set forward the question of 'how might God resolve a conflict of attributes between love/mercy and retributive justice/wrath' or 'how can sinners be justified before a holy God.' It solves the problem of human evil, both in its intellectual coherence and practical application. God in Christ solves *the problem of evil, especially human evil*, first by explaining why God's good creation *never required it in the first place* and then by explaining what a good God is doing to defeat evil and heal humanity, all the while not becoming evil Himself.

After introducing his subject, Athanasius immediately says:

'In the beginning wickedness did not exist. Nor indeed does it exist even now in those who are holy, nor does it in any way belong to their nature. But men later on began to contrive it and to elaborate it to their own hurt.'³⁴¹

In chapter 2, Athanasius then defends God from any accusation of evil or caprice on account of humanity's wickedness. He does this by explaining God's intention for the creation. After defending God as 'good and exceeding[ly] noble,' he defends God's creation of the world and humanity as originally unstained and called into deeper knowledge of and communion with God. Human beings were made in the image of the Word of the Father to have power in ourselves to freely ascend in love for God, receiving joy and pleasure and renewal by desiring Him.³⁴² In chapter 3, Athanasius accounts for human sin as a 'holding back' from that which God intended. Instead, human beings began to prioritize themselves and their own bodies higher than the knowledge of God which was accessible through the mind and the soul. Sin, therefore, is fundamentally a disordering of loves. Nothing is evil in itself, appreciated in the correct order. But we human beings betrayed our own vocation:

'They wholly forgot the power they originally had from God... For having departed from the consideration of the one and the true, namely, God, and from desire of Him, they had thenceforward embarked in diverse lusts and in those of the several bodily senses... They began to be habituated to these desires, so that they were even afraid to leave them: whence the soul became subject to cowardice and alarms, and pleasures and thoughts of mortality.'³⁴³

In chapter 4, Athanasius describes the addictive quality of sin, from the vantage point of the human soul. The soul, which is 'mobile,' has 'power over herself,'³⁴⁴ and in fact comes from God, abuses that power. The soul can still discern what is good, that is, God. Yet the soul, because of the pleasure it finds in lusts, pursues what is evil. In chapter 5, Athanasius explains evils such as murder, adultery, and slander as the result of 'disorder'³⁴⁵ in the human soul. He uses the illustration of a charioteer driving a fine chariot in a race, not towards the goal, but simply for the experience of racing at high speeds, even recklessly:

'All of which things are a vice and sin of the soul: neither is there any cause of them at all, but only the rejection of better things.'³⁴⁶

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

³⁴⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 1.4

³⁴¹ Ibid 2.1

³⁴² Ibid 2.3

³⁴³ Ibid 3.4

³⁴⁴ Ibid 4.2

³⁴⁵ Ibid 7.4, 'what she is is evidently the product of her own disorder'

³⁴⁶ Ibid 5.2

‘Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.’³⁴⁷

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

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

The Fall into Corruption

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

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?’³⁴⁸

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, Athanasius asks us to imagine Adam and Eve making a small mistake or committing a small offense against God, each other, or their future children – a raised voice, an inappropriate gesture, an unthankful or wasteful attitude, a fearful self-defense, etc. And he says that if they had done this, ‘repentance would have been well enough,’ because God would have easily forgiven them that. In a day and age where Anselm’s satisfaction theory and Calvin’s penal substitution theory have so colored our view of God that we view any small offense against God as calling forth infinite, unlimited anger from Him, it is startling to find Athanasius casually dismissing it as beneath God. Many have simply not known what to do about this statement other than say that Athanasius must have been wrong. American patristics scholar Donald Fairbairn is an example of many Protestants who are simply shocked at Athanasius’ casual declaration.³⁴⁹ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach sidestep this passage in Athanasius altogether. One suspects that they do so because it would completely ruin their attempt to enlist Athanasius into the penal substitution camp.

Unlike Fairbairn, I believe Athanasius was correct. But how do we explain his statement? Why did Athanasius say this? How could so great a theologian – an inspiration for twentieth century theologians Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance, no less – make this statement? What was his understanding of the character of God? Can we reproduce his logic?

Athanasius asserted that God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conditioned all His actions, and our understanding of all His actions. Typically, scholars of Athanasius position this conviction against the Arian controversy which

³⁴⁷ Ibid 6.1 – 2

³⁴⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2.8

³⁴⁹ Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.163.

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

So far so good. I would like to take a step further. The trinitarian nature of God also conditions how we understand God's attributes. The step Athanasius is making when he says, 'Had it been a case of a trespass only... repentance would have been well enough,' is almost certainly a logical deduction made by Athanasius' organized mind. Athanasius said numerous things about God's fundamental character. For example, Athanasius names God as being 'incorporeal and incorruptible, and immortal, needing nothing for any purpose.'³⁵⁰ He invokes the doctrine of divine simplicity: 'God is a whole and not a number of parts.'³⁵¹ Then, as he considers God's act of creation and the relationship God has with it, Athanasius says: 'God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness;'³⁵² 'God [is] the fountain of wisdom and life.'³⁵³ Most importantly, Athanasius taught that it is more true, accurate, and faithful to name the Father from the Son than to call God 'Creator' after the creation:

'He who names God Maker and Framer and Unoriginate, regards and apprehends things created and made; and he who calls God Father, thereby conceives and contemplates the Son... If they had any concern at all for reverent speaking and the honour due to the Father, it became them rather, and this were better and higher, to acknowledge and call God Father, than to give Him this name. For, in calling God unoriginate, they are, as I said before, calling Him from His works, and as Maker only and Framer, supposing that hence they may signify that the Word is a work after their own pleasure. But that he who calls God Father, signifies Him from the Son being well aware that if there be a Son, of necessity through that Son all things originate were created. And they, when they call Him Unoriginate, name Him only from His works, and know not the Son any more than the Greeks; but he who calls God Father, names Him from the Word; and knowing the Word, he acknowledges Him to be Framer of all, and understands that through Him all things have been made.'³⁵⁴

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

I am fairly confident, then, that Athanasius considered how God's trinitarian nature impacted what we call *attributes* of God versus *activities* of God playing out in the creation, and how we can identify them. In his criticism of the Greek pagan gods, Athanasius insists that activities flow out of attributes. In his words, 'their deeds must

³⁵⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 22.3; 29:1

³⁵¹ Ibid 28.3; elsewhere he asserts, 'For the Triad, praised, revered, and adored, is one and indivisible and without degrees' (*On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27, 6*)

³⁵² Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.3

³⁵³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.19

³⁵⁴ Ibid 1.33

correspond to their natures.’ That is why Zeus and the other Greek gods are both good and evil. That is, they have the character of ordinary men, and not sober ones at that:

‘For their deeds must correspond to their natures, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature. So that just as a man discussing about water and fire, and declaring their action, would not say that water burned and fire cooled, nor, if a man were discoursing about the sun and the earth, would he say the earth gave light, while the sun was sown with herbs and fruits, but if he were to say so would exceed the utmost height of madness, so neither would their writers, and especially the most eminent poet of all, if they really knew that Zeus and the others were gods, invest them with such actions as show them to be not gods, but rather men, and not sober men.’³⁵⁵

Another thought experiment can proceed as follows: Even before God created anything else, God was a loving, personal, relational, and other-centered being. Why? How is that possible if no one else existed? Because God is a fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the short phrase ‘God is love’ from 1 John 4:8 takes on the status of declaring God’s essential, eternal, and intrinsic attribute and character, which is arguably what the apostle John perceived and intended to say. Athanasius did not quote 1 John 4:8 in his surviving writings,³⁵⁶ and seemed reluctant to put to writing many elaborations about the relations between the divine persons. But he was nevertheless accustomed to identifying the Son by calling him the ‘beloved of the Father,’ for example, near the climactic conclusion of *On the Incarnation*.³⁵⁷ He is comfortable quoting Scriptures that identify Jesus as ‘the beloved’ or the equivalent.³⁵⁸

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

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

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

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

³⁵⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 16.4

³⁵⁶ James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) does not find 1 John 4:8 in the corpus of Athanasius

³⁵⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 52.1

³⁵⁸ For example, in quoting John 3:35, ‘The Father loves the Son’ in *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, 2.

(11.3), ‘God’s *goodness* then and loving-kindness being so great’ (12.6), ‘since it were unworthy of the Divine *Goodness* to overlook so grave a matter’ (43.4), ‘by His guidance and *goodness*’ (43.7).

Athanasius says that because God is ‘good,’ that God must be ‘good’ to humanity and ‘the lover of humanity.’³⁵⁹ Khaled Anatolios concurs:

‘Thus, in Athanasius, God’s goodness and love constitute as much of an ontological statement about God and a description of God’s nature (*physis*) as the apophatic statements that appear to indicate divine inaccessibility to the created realm: God is “good and exceedingly noble by nature. Therefore he is the lover of humanity. The fact that God is *philanthropos* by nature means that his actions are always characterized by that quality, since it is one of Athanasius’s principal maxims that actions must correspond to natures.’³⁶⁰

By comparison, we can consider ‘holiness’ or ‘wrath’ to examine if these are fundamental *attributes* of God, or derivative *activities* of God. In *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius never attributes these particular qualities to God’s very nature or character. Here I rely on Athanasius’ clarity in distinguishing from God as He is eternally in contrast to God as Creator, and his maxim that deeds must correspond to natures. Prior to bringing creation into being, God cannot be considered to be ‘holy’ or ‘wrathful.’ Holiness means ‘set apart from.’ Before God brought other things into existence, from what was God setting Himself apart? Nothing. So, holiness is logically impossible and irrelevant prior to creation. By saying that, we are not implying a defect in God. Rather, it is because holiness is a *secondary* quality of God, an *activity* of God towards the creation which flows from God’s love. Holiness actually reflects God’s loving will to make ‘space’ for beings other than Himself.

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

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

‘For He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption.’³⁶¹

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

³⁵⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 35.1; *On the Incarnation* 6.5 – 10; 12.6; 43.4

³⁶⁰ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.41; and on p.47, ‘God’s love and goodness thus constitute the basis within God of all the divine initiatives, from the structure of creation to the event of the incarnation...’

³⁶¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.4

‘God *not only foresaw* the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also *at his own pleasure arranged it*.’³⁶²

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

‘[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the glory *of His mercy*, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and *of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate*, who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.’³⁶³

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

‘His goal is that the full range of His perfections be known. I think this is the ultimate goal of the universe. God created the universe so that the full range of His perfections – including wrath and power and judgment and justice – will be displayed.’³⁶⁴

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

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

‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition...’³⁶⁵

In other words, once the corruption of sin had set in to human beings, death was the only way to rid it from us.

³⁶² John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7. I am aware of attempts to ‘nuance’ or ‘balance’ these statements, of course. At the very least, however, the question is whether Christians should feel the need to defend these statements in any sense. See also *Institutes*, book 1, ch.16, section 3; book 1, ch.17, section 5

³⁶³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 33, paragraph 2. Although Calvin had studied the patristic emphasis on God’s empowerment of human free will and their exposition of the biblical texts, he nevertheless decided that God’s sovereignty was mutually incompatible with human free will. In *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 2, section 4, Calvin writes, ‘Moreover although the Greek Fathers, above others, and especially Chrysostom, have exceeded due bounds in extolling the powers of the human will, yet all ancient theologians, with the exception of Augustine, are so confused, vacillating, and contradictory on this subject, that no certainty can be obtained from their writings.’

³⁶⁴ John Piper, *How Does it Glorify God to Predestine People to Hell?*, March 21, 2013; <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-does-it-glorify-god-to-predestine-people-to-hell>

³⁶⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1

Athanasius shares this view explicitly with several other patristic writers. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (130 – 202 AD) interpreted death as an act of mercy. Death was better than Adam and Eve eating from the tree of life in a corrupted state and making their own human evil immortal:

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’³⁶⁶

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

‘In order, then, that man might not be an undying or ever-living evil, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body, and was provided with immortal sustenance, God for this cause pronounced him mortal, and clothed him with mortality... For while the body still lives, before it has passed through death, sin must also live with it, as it has its roots concealed within us even though it be externally checked by the wounds inflicted by corrections and warnings... For the present we restrain its sprouts, such as evil imaginations, test any root of bitterness springing up trouble us, not suffering its leaves to unclose and open into shoots; while the Word, like an axe, cuts at its roots which grow below. But hereafter the very thought of evil will disappear.’³⁶⁷

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

‘Yet here too he makes a gain, namely death and the cutting off of sin, in order that evil may not be immortal. Thus, his punishment is changed into a mercy, for it is in mercy, I am persuaded, that God inflicts punishment.’³⁶⁸

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

How were they – including Athanasius – reading Genesis 3? Biblically, they read Adam and Eve as *forcing* God to curtain off the garden and withdraw His presence to some degree. That is a very reasonable interpretation. The fall was more like Adam and Eve trying to lock God out of the house, and trying to go about life on their own, as rebellious young children in a great house. God had made Adam and Eve to bring forth life – both human life and garden life. God would mercifully ensure that they would be able to carry out their original calling, albeit in a limited form. After all, God’s promise of a messianic ‘seed of the woman’ who would redeem human nature and defeat the serpent (Gen.3:14 – 15) depended on their ability to have children. But the sorrows in childbirth and gardening, along with physical death, took hold of humanity because Adam and Eve pushed God, the life-giver, aside. As Adam and Eve tried to bring forth of life, they would therefore have a harder time. So the early Christians

³⁶⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

³⁶⁷ Methodius of Olympus, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5

³⁶⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 45*

read the sorrows of childbirth and gardening in Genesis 3:16 – 19 as *already anticipating* the closing off of the garden in Genesis 3:22 – 24. The sorrows were not a retributive punishment. It was not God playing tit for tat. Rather, the sorrows in life-bearing were God as the life-source being forced by His love to withdraw from His life-bearers. He would not have Adam and Eve suffer a fate worse than death. Anything was better than immortalized sinfulness. Death was a severe mercy, but a mercy nonetheless. It played a positive role in God’s larger plan of restoration.

Many Protestant evangelicals, by contrast, influenced by the penal substitution view, assert that God *retaliated* against Adam and Eve by inflicting death upon them. But was God’s imposition of death a retributive punishment? Was God saying, in effect, ‘You caused me pain, so I will cause you pain’? The earliest Christians did not see it that way because they were firmly rooted in a medical and restorative view of God’s character. The early Christians rejected the view that God’s highest justice was retributive. According to a study by systematic theologian Adonis Vidu, they had retributive models of justice available to them in the Greco-Roman world, and deliberately rejected them.³⁶⁹ To the early Christians, God’s justice was restorative.

Jesus’ Atonement as a Medical Substitution

Third, I will examine texts that show Athanasius expounding on a medical-ontological understanding of atonement. Having identified ‘a subsequent corruption’ as the fundamental problem of the fall, Athanasius then goes onto to explain why Jesus is ‘the healing of the creation.’³⁷⁰ Whereas Irenaeus argued to preserve the full humanity of Jesus, Athanasius argued in *On the Incarnation of the Word* to preserve Jesus’ full deity. Notably, Athanasius reproduces Irenaeus’ ontological-medical substitution atonement theory, even though he was approaching it from the opposite direction, because Christ had to be both fully divine and fully human so that God could unite Himself with humanity in the person of Jesus and overcome the onto-relational problem of corruption and alienation within human nature. Athanasius writes:

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.’³⁷¹

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, as I discussed earlier, Athanasius distinguishes between lesser ‘trespasses’ and the ‘corruption’ of human nature. Athanasius briefly considers God’s responses to both human actions. In Athanasius’ mind, God’s attitude towards the former is not that of a nitpicky moralist who takes infinite offense at every slight. According to Adonis Vidu,³⁷² Athanasius and his predecessors would have been well aware of Greek and Roman conceptions of authority and justice, so he seems to be

³⁶⁹ Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). Vidu states up front that he is sympathetic to penal substitutionary atonement (p.xiii). Unfortunately, Vidu does not engage with Irenaeus and Athanasius (see footnote 6 on p.xvii), and reduces the patristic theory of atonement to the ‘ransom’ theory: Jesus ransomed us from the devil, or perhaps from death. He does not engage with what Jesus was doing to his very own humanity, in the ontological-medical theory. Sadly, Vidu does not seem to engage the full sweep of T.F. Torrance’s work on patristic theology, noting only one comment from Torrance on ‘propitiation’ on p.263. In his final chapter, he absolutizes ‘law’ as the essence of God from the standpoint of a carefully constructed doctrine of the simplicity (indissolubility) of God’s nature. ‘Condemnation of sin,’ too, Adonis reads as part of God’s *simple essence*, which he interprets as happening in the death of Christ. But if Adonis grounds both law, legal condemnation of sin, forensic satisfaction of retribution, and judicial mercy all in the simplicity of God, and none of these actions can be divided from the others, then none of these actions can be partial. The mercy must be the whole, undivided Godhead, as the retribution involves the whole, undivided God. This would lead Adonis logically into universalism. From a biblical studies perspective, the key question remains: Did the original Hebraic context teach any version of penal substitution? To which I would argue it does not.

³⁷⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 1.4

³⁷¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2:8 – 9

³⁷² Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014) explains the Greek conceptions of justice which Christianity rejected; Vidu, in his case study approach, notes that Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, one to two generations after Athanasius, argue that God’s justice is restorative.

intentionally dismissing the view that God's justice is retributive, and by extension the idea that the atonement consists of a satisfaction of divine retributive justice.

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

'When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and rapine filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and injustice, all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says: 'Their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own persons the due recompense of their pervertedness.'³⁷³

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

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

'It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits... It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.'³⁷⁴

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

Penal substitution theory also postulates that the object of God's love and the object of God's wrath are identical: our personhood. This is because the primary cultural context for Catholics and Protestants to draw up a model of God is the Latin judicial system of merit and penance, in which punishment must fall on *a person* for his disobedience to the law. I will highlight the significance of this misunderstanding below. The critical distinction

³⁷³ Ibid 1.5

³⁷⁴ Ibid 2.6

Athanasius makes is that the object of God's love is our personhood and the object of God's wrath is the corruption in our nature. God's love and God's wrath *do not have the same object*. That is why the corruption in Jesus' own body needed to be got rid of through his death as the very expression of God's love for us. God's wrath served God's love by purging away in Christ all that opposed intimate relationship with God.

'The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.'³⁷⁵

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

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

'The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.'³⁷⁶

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

'For Athanasius, then, Jesus' death was the purpose of the incarnation; the immortal Son of God needed to become man to die.'³⁷⁷

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

³⁷⁵ Ibid 2.9

³⁷⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 4.22

³⁷⁷ Jeffery, Ovey, Sach, p.172; while it is true that Athanasius says that the cross is the 'sum of our faith' (*On the Incarnation* 19.3), and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.77 translates this phrase as the 'primary reason for the incarnation,' the significance which Athanasius sees in the cross is the defeat and destruction of the corruption: 'to turn the corruption to incorruption' (*On the Incarnation* 20.1). Hence, Athanasius sees the death of Christ as one side of the coin of God's salvation of human nature, of which the other is his bodily resurrection; mention of one implies and requires the other. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not see the matter this way.

resurrection:

‘God became man in order to save sinful humanity from the divine curse on creation that is God’s punishment for sin, and Christ accomplished this by enduring and exhausting this curse in our place, as our substitute.’³⁷⁸

But Athanasius does not understand the ‘curse’ as an extra punishment Jesus took at his death, as I will show below, but rather his taking on fallen humanity in his incarnation and bearing it all the way until his death, to bear it away through death.³⁷⁹ Athanasius’ point is not that God wanted to simply bring Jesus under death to satisfy divine retributive justice. Death is not identical with the definition of ‘corruption’ for Athanasius. Corruption, as Athanasius defined it, is not simply our physical mortality. Corruption, for Athanasius, as I have shown above, is a weakening of human nature’s spiritual compass, a twisting and distorting of our original inclination towards God, and a genetic infection within us that leads to moral degeneracy and spiritual resistance to God. Corruption is distinct from simply ‘death’ or ‘mortality.’ Thus, for Jesus to die in our place is an act of joining us in death, of sharing in our whole condition, not an act of diverting an invisible torment from us to him.

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

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

Athanasius’ explanation of the atonement, like Irenaeus’, might be called ‘total substitution’ as T.F. Torrance understands it, or ‘ontological substitution’ or ‘medical substitution’ as I prefer, but not ‘penal substitution.’³⁸⁰ Unquestionably, the Son of God substituted himself totally in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as ‘a sufficient exchange’ (in Athanasius’ own words) for all human beings, solving the problem internal to humanity: our self-inflicted corruption to sin and death. The exchange was not simply penal, and not simply at the cross. Jesus’ ultimate solution to sin was not to remove the *consequences* of sin (with a strictly retributive conception of the wrath of God) but to deal with the *source*. Jesus offers his renewed, resurrected humanity which has been perfectly realigned with the Father in the Spirit – an ontological and relational solution physically embodied in him. Athanasius clearly did not think in penal terms.

Following Athanasius’ lead, we must not see the atonement as a ‘satisfaction’ of one or more attributes of God. God’s love is not ‘satisfied.’ In the medical-ontological framework, God continues to oppose human sin and pierce

³⁷⁸ Ibid, p.173

³⁷⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8

³⁸⁰ T.F. Torrance, *Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.72 says, ‘The New Testament speaks of the penal-substitutionary aspect of the atonement, *not* in the detached forensic categories that have developed in the Latin west, Roman or Protestant, but in terms of the intimacy of the Father-Son relation, in which the Son submits himself to the Father’s judgement and is answered through the Father’s good pleasure – see here the supreme importance of John McLeod Campbell and his great book *The Nature of the Atonement*, in which he rightly warned us against thinking of atonement *in purely penal terms*, for we *cannot* think of Christ being punished by the Father in our place and the New Testament *nowhere* uses the word *kolazo*, punish, of the relation between the Father and the Son.’ (emphasis mine)

with laser sharp focus the corruption within people by His Spirit, so God's wrath was not 'satisfied' in a broad sense pertaining to all humanity or to Christians. In fact, God's wrath continued to fall on Christians when He took their lives! Ananias and Sapphira lied, and God took their lives (Acts 5:1 – 11). The Corinthian Christians ate communion with an unworthy attitude, and apparently God visited death and sickness upon them (1 Cor.11:29 – 30). Is there divine wrath for which Jesus did not penally atone? Arminians may be able to resort to the explanation that they 'lost their salvation.' Some Calvinists insist that these people were never truly Christians to begin with. I am persuaded that although this was not God's wrath to some sort of ultimate condemnation for these people, it was undeniably God's wrath nevertheless. Perhaps God was acting in a way similar to a coach pulling underperforming players out of a game. But in any case, because we do not have to throw God's displeasure and wrath onto another side of a categorical divide on one side of a penal atonement model, this does not cause any deep consternation to anyone who holds to medical substitution. I may be imputing more theological weight behind their words, but I suspect that George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis are commenting on satisfaction theory when Lewis quotes MacDonald saying, 'God is easy to please, but not easy to satisfy.'³⁸¹

The Fire of Hell and Human Becoming

This brings me to explore a *fourth* area of Athanasius' theological thought: his understanding of hell. My exploration focuses on whether Athanasius' understanding of hell corresponds with penal substitutionary atonement theology. Penal substitution requires that hell be understood as the expression of divine retributive justice on those who reject Christ. If Christ died to absorb the retributive justice of God for some, then hell must be understood as the expression of retributive justice of God for the others. This is decidedly not how Athanasius explained hell.

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

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

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

The same is true for the literary theme of fire *in every biblical book in which it appears*. As far as I can tell, the Pentateuch,³⁸² Isaiah,³⁸³ Malachi,³⁸⁴ Psalms,³⁸⁵ Matthew,³⁸⁶ Luke-Acts,³⁸⁷ Hebrews,³⁸⁸ 2 Peter,³⁸⁹ and Revelation³⁹⁰

³⁸¹ George MacDonald, quoted by C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.158

³⁸² Mako A. Nagasawa, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel*, an essay exploring fire as a literary theme throughout the canon; for shorter explanations, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in the Pentateuch*. All studies of 'fire' referenced are found here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire>

³⁸³ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire and Purification in Isaiah*

³⁸⁴ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Malachi*

³⁸⁵ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire and Purification in the Psalms*

³⁸⁶ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Matthew's Gospel: What is Divine Fire?*

³⁸⁷ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Luke – Acts*

³⁸⁸ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire, Offering, and Cleansing in the Epistle to the Hebrews*

all use the motif of divine fire to first indicate God's purifying love, and then, only in a secondary sense, as destroying, towards those who resist their own purification. Malachi, the Psalms, and the apostle Paul assume that the language of divine fire should be understood this way (e.g. Mal.1:7 – 12; 3:1 – 6; Ps.12:6; 1 Cor.3:10 – 15; 2 Th.1:9³⁹¹). John in his Gospel works mainly with the motif of light, but that is connected to the theme of fire both logically and literarily through the 'I am' / 'Jesus as burning bush' / 'Jesus as Temple' motif that runs through the Gospel of John; thus John's usage of 'light' in the Gospel anticipates his usage of 'fire' in Revelation. My own perception of fire as a dual-edged literary theme was formed prior to my reading patristic literature. It was shaped by Jewish and Christian literary scholars like Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, James Kugel, John Sailhamer, Paul Borgman, Robert Tannehill, and others. Many of these scholars took up a literary approach to Scripture to make the case for literary cohesion in response to the Documentary Hypothesis and the quest for supposed 'sources' which made the final text appear to be a patchwork quilt of disparate pieces of literature. There is far more unity in the texts than we had hitherto understood. So when I encountered the likes of Athanasius and other early Christians saying the following, I was surprised that I was encountering something that could not be considered 'allegory,' which is what the patristic writers are often dismissed for doing. I was also impressed by their ability to perceive the literary quality of Scripture, and how they knew that had profound implications for the discipline of theology proper.

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

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

'Therefore, the God of all, 'Who makes His angels [spirits],' is a spirit, 'and His ministers *a flame of fire* [Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7].' Wherefore, in the departure from Egypt, He forbade the multitude to touch the mountain, where God was appointing them the law, because they were not of this character. But He called blessed Moses to it, as being fervent in spirit, and possessing unquenchable grace, saying, 'Let Moses alone draw near [Exodus 24:2].' He entered into the cloud also, and when the mountain was smoking, he was not injured; but rather, through 'the words of the Lord, which are choice silver purified in the earth [Psalm 12:6],' *he descended purified*. Therefore the blessed Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, 'Quench not the Spirit [1 Thessalonians 5:19].' For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. For he said, 'Quench not;' not because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to suffer anything from them; but because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. 'For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, nor dwell in a body that is subject unto sin; but will remove from thoughts that are without understanding [Wisdom 1:5].' Now they being without understanding, and deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having that 'Light which lights every man that comes into the world [John 1:9].' Now a *fire* such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, when the word was in him *as a fire*, and he said, 'I pass away from every place, and am not able to endure it [Jeremiah 20:9].' And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this upon earth, and said, 'And what? Would that it were already kindled [Luke 12:49]!' For He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death [Ezekiel 18:32]; so that *evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit*; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred. [Mark 4:20] Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas, although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were *inflamed* with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him [Luke 24:13 – 34]. The blessed Paul also, when seized by this *fire*, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of

³⁸⁹ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Second Peter*

³⁹⁰ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in the Book of Revelation*

³⁹¹ The KJV, ASV, YLT, CLNT, Douay-Rheims, and Ronald Knox translations of this verse indicate that fire comes 'in the presence of the Lord,' or 'from' his face, in agreement with all other indications of divine fire in Scripture. Other translations (ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NASB) read separation from Jesus into the meaning.

the Word [Acts 9]. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them [Luke 17:11 – 17]; nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, ‘while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor.’ But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful, *the last fire*, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.³⁹²

Athanasius sees God as ‘a consuming fire,’ as a derivative effect of God being ‘light.’ Once again Athanasius is organizing who God is in Himself prior to creation, and how God relates with respect to creation, and specifically fallen creation. Light is God’s intrinsic nature. Fire is the activity of God, who is light, in the midst of a fallen creation. This corresponds tightly with Athanasius’ use of the motif of fire to describe Jesus’ purification of his own humanity.³⁹³

Athanasius then shows that the primary purpose of God showing Himself as a fire is to purify His people, as Moses was purified in his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. God’s interaction with people and their willing reception of His word results in a certain type of human experience: the experience of internalizing this divine fire as a passion for God, for preaching, for proclamation as Jeremiah experienced it. Jesus came to cast this purifying fire upon the earth, for the purpose of bringing about repentance, and, very notably, ‘that evil should be entirely consumed in all men,’ for the purification of their souls. Purifying the corruption of sin away from people ‘clears the ground’ as it were for the word of God to bring forth fruit. Paul was ‘seized by this fire’ on the Damascus Road – for Jesus appeared in divine light – and became a preacher.

In a secondary sense, for Athanasius, God is also ‘the last fire’ towards ‘such men’ as Judas who are ‘ungrateful’ and ‘unthankful.’ The bishop of Alexandria integrates the motif of fire towards the resistant with the motif of fire towards the repentant. They are indeed two sides of the same coin. For God by His very nature cannot help but to shine – light can do no other – even upon those who do not want the light, and call for the surrender of everyone who has not yet voluntarily participated in their own purification. For those who somehow fix their resistance in place for all eternity, refusing to be thankful for Jesus’ action on their behalf, their ‘end’ will be ‘the last fire’ shared by the devil and his angels.³⁹⁴

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

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

³⁹² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #3: Third Easter Festal Letter* 3 – 4, emphasis mine

³⁹³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.4; 44.6 – 7

³⁹⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 24 goes even further to explain why the devil and his angels are already experiencing something of that last fire. In his biography of the famous Egyptian monk Antony of the Desert, Athanasius records Antony saying this: ‘For that which appears in them is no true light, but they are rather the preludes and likenesses of the fire prepared for the demons who attempt to terrify men with those flames in which they themselves will be burned. Doubtless they appear; but in a moment disappear again, hurting none of the faithful, but bringing with them the likeness of that fire which is about to receive themselves. Wherefore it is unfitting that we should fear them on account of these things; for through the grace of Christ all their practices are in vain.’

like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: 'A fire shall burn in His sight.' For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.'³⁹⁵

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

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

'For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to *their natural state*, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into *nothing* in the course of time. For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption. For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not; but by reason of his likeness to Him that is (and if he still preserved this likeness by keeping Him in his knowledge) he would stay his natural corruption, and remain incorrupt; as Wisdom says: 'The taking heed to His laws is the assurance of immortality [Wisdom 6:18],' but being incorrupt, he would live henceforth as God, to which I suppose the divine Scripture refers, when it says: 'I have said you are gods, and you are all sons of the most Highest; but you die like men, and fall as one of the princes [Psalm 82:6 – 7].'³⁹⁶

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

'Again, it were unseemly that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption. For it were not worthy of God's goodness that the things He had made should waste away, because of the deceit practiced on men by the devil... So, as the rational creatures were wasting and such works in course of ruin, what was God in His goodness to do? Suffer corruption to prevail against them and death to hold them fast? And where were the profit of their having been made, to begin with? For better were they not made, than once made, left to neglect and ruin. For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God's part— if, that is, He allows His own work to be ruined when once He had made it— more so than if He had never made man at all. For if He had not made them, none could impute weakness; but once He had made them, and created them out of nothing, it were most monstrous for the work to be ruined, and that before the eyes of the Maker. It was, then, *out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God's goodness.*'³⁹⁷

In other words, Athanasius is simultaneously saying that humanity came *from God*, and because we came from God,

³⁹⁵ Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170

³⁹⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 4.4 – 6

³⁹⁷ *Ibid* 6.4 – 5; cf. *Against the Heathen* 41.2 – 4

who is committed to our existence, returning to nothingness was not even logically possible, based on God's goodness. Returning to 'nothingness' as in non-existence is only a hypothetical, and a rhetorical device Athanasius is employing.

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

'Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.'³⁹⁸

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

'The truth of the Church's theology must be manifest: that evil has not from the beginning been with God or in God, nor has any substantive existence; but that men, in default of the vision of good, began to devise and imagine for themselves what was not, after their own pleasure.'³⁹⁹

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

Khaled Anatolios interprets Athanasius as intending to say, 'The essential principle is that there is no neutral mid-point in which humanity can "remain." The two fundamental ontological polarities are either God-ward or toward non-being.'⁴⁰⁰ I agree with the basic premise that humanity was not called to rest in a neutral state but rather ascend towards God and deepen in God. That is consistent with Athanasius' theological anthropology which seems identical with Irenaeus, which Anatolios is at pains to prove, and which I deeply appreciate. To the extent that we understand 'nothingness' to be a state to which human beings can never actually return, but only approximate in our resistance to God ('*toward* non-being'), I can agree with Anatolios' statement as it is.

However, in order to be absolutely clear that we are not taking Athanasius' rhetoric and giving 'nothingness' ontological status, I would recommend replacing the word and concept of 'non-being' with the word and concept of 'disorder.' For 'disorder' is what is implied by Athanasius' use of the term 'corruption.' He makes that explicit very early on in *Against the Heathen* by describing the impact sinning has on the human soul: 'what she is is evidently the product of her own *disorder*.'⁴⁰¹ The word 'disorder' fits both the narrative of Genesis and the technical theological terminology as the Nicene theologians developed it. Biblically, God commissioned human beings to bring forth *order* in the creation, by spreading the *ordered* garden over the wild creation through the four rivers which flowed out from Eden. This external work mirrored the internal work of *ordering* our understanding of God's goodness, *ordering* one's loves in accordance with the relational vision God had from creation (e.g. the one

³⁹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 6.1 – 2

³⁹⁹ *Ibid* 7.3

⁴⁰⁰ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.37

⁴⁰¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 7.4

flesh marriage union of male and female taking priority over family of origin; etc.), *ordering* one's own emotional life according to God's counsel and guidance, and ultimately *ordering* one's human nature and fundamental love for God into an eternal union with God via eating from the tree of life. God, the one who *orders* creation towards life and beauty, made human beings as partners with Him in the work of *ordering* creation towards life and beauty.

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

Objection 1: Penal Substitution in Athanasius?

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

'For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*.'⁴⁰²

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

'At one point, while alluding to the apostle John's explanation of why Christ came into the world in John 3:17, he states that Christ ('the Word') accomplished our salvation by suffering the judgment due to the guilty world: '*Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all*' [quoting from Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1, chapter 8, paragraph 60]. This is a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution. According to Athanasius, the whole world is guilty of failing to keep God's law, but Christ took upon himself the judgment due to us, and suffered in our place for our salvation.'⁴⁰³

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

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

⁴⁰² Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2

⁴⁰³ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, p.169

‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might, because of the Word which had come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the Grace of the Resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding-ground against men, by reason of the Word, which by His one body has come to dwell among them. And like as when a great king has entered into some large city and taken up his abode in one of the houses there, such city is at all events held worthy of high honour, nor does any enemy or bandit any longer descend upon it and subject it; but, on the contrary, it is thought entitled to all care, because of the king’s having taken up his residence in a single house there: so, too, has it been with the Monarch of all. For now that He has come to our realm, and taken up his abode in one body among His peers, henceforth the whole conspiracy of the enemy against mankind is checked, and the corruption of death which before was prevailing against them is done away. For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to meet the end of death.’⁴⁰⁴

Jesus’ human body was the ‘body capable of death.’ What is the debt that Jesus satisfied? To die, and to do so *as a dying being*. Previously in *On the Incarnation*, when he first brought up the topic of the fall in Genesis 3, Athanasius spoke of God saying, ‘dying you will die.’ Interestingly enough, Athanasius shows that he understands the Hebrew construction of the phrase, even though he admits elsewhere to not knowing the Hebrew language per se. Regardless, Athanasius shows his awareness that the formal Hebrew grammatical construction of God’s warning in Genesis 2:17 is the ongoing progressive tense plus the future tense: ‘dying you will die.’⁴⁰⁵ This understanding serves Athanasius through his book when he notes that Jesus, too, was ‘mortal.’⁴⁰⁶ Jesus had to take on a *dying* human nature, and die in it. If ‘dying you will die’ is the condition of every human being, then Jesus had to live under that condition, too: dying, he would die.

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

‘For if He took a body to Himself at all, and— in reasonable consistency, as our argument showed— appropriated it as His own, what was the Lord to do with it? Or what should be the end of the body when the Word had once descended upon it? For it could not *but* die, inasmuch as *it was mortal*, and to be offered unto death on behalf of all: for which purpose it was that the Savior fashioned it for Himself.’⁴⁰⁷

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

‘But just as this consequence must needs hold, so, too, on the other side the just claims of God lie against it: that God should appear true to the law He had laid down concerning death. For it were monstrous for God, the Father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation.’⁴⁰⁸

The same reality which held true for humanity also held true for Jesus, as a matter of the truthfulness and consistency of God. For the Word of God to come into human flesh, He had to take on *dying, mortal, fallen* humanity which owed a debt to God – ‘to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all’⁴⁰⁹ – and so to die.

⁴⁰⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid 3.5

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid 13.9; 17.7; 20.1, 4 (‘yet being mortal, was to die also, conformably to its peers’); 23.2; 31.4; 44.6, 8

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid 31.4

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid 7.1

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid 7.5

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

‘The perfect Word of God puts around Him an imperfect body, and is said to be created ‘for the works;’ that, paying the debt in our stead, he might, by Himself, perfect what was wanting to man.’⁴¹⁰

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

‘The proper Word and Image of the Father’s Essence, who at the beginning sentenced, and alone remits sins. For since it is said in the Word, ‘Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return,’ suitably through the Word Himself and in Him the freedom and the undoing of the condemnation has come to pass.’⁴¹¹

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

‘Moreover the words ‘He is become surety’ denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the ‘Word,’ He ‘became flesh [John 1:14]’ and ‘become’ we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression ‘He is become,’ expounding it according to a second sense, viz. because He has become man. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that His essence has become, knowing, as he did, that He is Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father; but here too he refers the word ‘become’ to the ministry of that covenant, in which death which once ruled is abolished. Since here also the ministry through Him has become better, in that ‘what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],’ ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word, He made us walk, no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, and say again and again, ‘But we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit [Romans 8:9],’ and, ‘For the Son of God came into the world, not to judge the world, but to redeem all men, and that the world might be saved through Him [John 3:17].’ Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all. With a view to this has John exclaimed, ‘The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ [John 1:17].’ Better is grace than the Law, and truth than the shadow.’⁴¹²

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

In fact, who ‘he is’ changed what ‘he became.’ Jesus condemned sin in the flesh, not simply at his death, but by his lifelong obedience which was inseparable from his death. We can be confident Athanasius had the lifelong obedience of Jesus in view because he refers to ‘the ministry through him’ and because he deploys the quotation of Romans 8:3 about the *positive*, guiding, and helping role of the Sinai Law. If the first purpose of the Sinai Law was simply to condemn Israel for its disobedience, then Paul and Athanasius really should have said, ‘What the Law *did* in that it was *strong against* the flesh of Israel...’ But Paul and Athanasius are reading the role of the Sinai Law positively, not negatively. Their reading of the Law is that God gave it to Israel to assist them in condemning sin in themselves. In other words, the Sinai Law served a medical purpose, something more like a health regimen given

⁴¹⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66

⁴¹¹ Ibid 2.67

⁴¹² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.60

by a caring doctor to a sick patient. The doctor intends the regimen to help the patient *over a long stretch of time*. Only in a secondary sense, given the sick condition of the patient who is unable to fully live within the regimen, does the Sinai Law further expose the sickness in the patient.

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

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

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

In the idiom of the Hebrew Scriptures, God gives His commandments *for the sake of His creation, and for the sake of human development*. In the Jewish wisdom tradition, in particular, God's commandments are perfectly appropriate to God's creation, especially human beings.⁴¹³ This is perhaps clearest in Proverbs 8:22 – 36. God's 'Wisdom' participated in God's creative acts and wove herself throughout the creation. Therefore, 'Wisdom' personified, who is present in God's commandments towards Israel can say, 'He who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me injures himself; all those who hate me love death' (Pr.8:35 – 36). In other words, God cares about His commandments *because* He cares for His creation, especially us. And the deep tragedy of all sin, but especially the original corruption, is that we deface ourselves. And, perhaps most importantly, the apostle Paul described his experience as a pre-Christian Jew 'under the Law' as conceptually separating his fundamental 'self,' which wanted to honor God and the Law, from 'the sin which indwelt' him, which he called 'the flesh,' which had taken him captive as a prisoner in his own body (Romans 7:14 – 25). Notice this is the language of captivity Athanasius uses in the passage above. It shows that Athanasius' mind reposes on Romans 7:14 – 8:11 as a whole unit when he quotes Romans 8:3 and 8:9 explicitly, and explains why Jesus himself had to come in sinful flesh.

So when Athanasius says, 'Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all,' we cannot read him as supporting the penal substitution view as Jeffery, Owen, and Sach propose. In context, everything

⁴¹³ Even in our sinful fallenness, the image of God in which we are created is not entirely eradicated. This is why, prior to the arrival of Christ, the Psalmists can say that, while our hearts are certainly corrupt and need remaking (e.g. Ps.51:9 – 10), nevertheless our hearts still rejoice in the law of the Lord (e.g. Ps.19:8). The poetic Psalmists also deploy images where the Israelite who meditates on the law of the Lord is like a tree nourished by life-giving waters (e.g. Ps.1:2 – 3).

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

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

‘How does the cross achieve this [i.e. our liberation from sin, death, and the devil]? Athanasius’ answer to that question does not easily fit into the traditional categories of atonement theology. He certainly sees Jesus as a representative of the human race and as a substitute for Adamic humanity. Yet he does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve. Instead, he tends to think in liturgical categories. Seeing that humanity was under the dominion of death, the Son was full of pity and compassion and so took on a body. His body was like all human bodies mortal and so he too “surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered to the Father” (*On the Incarnation* 8). Like a king who comes to the rescue of a city that has been attacked by robbers, the Son “by the offering of His own body...abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching” (*On the Incarnation* 10)... The Son, we might say, seizes humanity in the incarnation and in the cross entices it towards the heavenly sanctuary to worship the Father.’⁴¹⁴

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

At times Athanasius explains the cross in terms of debt. The Son “assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all” (*On the Incarnation* 9). All men owe a debt of death: “All men were due to die,” and the Word came in mortal flesh in order to “settle man’s account with death and free him from the primal transgression.” Because the Word’s body was capable of death, he offered it in death, but because it was the body of the incorruptible *Word*, it could not remain in corruption. Thus “it happened that two opposite marvels took place at one: the death of all was consummated in the Lord’s body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished.” Death was unavoidable “that the due of all might be paid” (*On the Incarnation* 20).⁴¹⁵

In the penal substitution theory, God cannot categorically ‘pay out’ the punishment for sin twice, because that would amount to a double accounting problem. That is, if God poured out His retributive justice upon Jesus at the cross, and then poured it out again in hell upon those who resist Jesus, that gives rise to the double accounting problem. That is why physical ‘death’ is a logical problem for penal substitution supporters, because all human beings

⁴¹⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154 – 155

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid* p.155

obviously still die. The problem might be conceptually avoided by saying that physical death only prefigures eternal death, and that Jesus absorbed the punishment of *eternal* death. But when we read Athanasius' statements, he clearly intends his audience to consider the significance of physical death.

Leithart's difficulty in interpreting this language of 'debt' in Athanasius appears related to his assumption that 'death' serves God as a strictly punitive measure. What Leithart does not perceive is that Athanasius and the patristic theologians use the word 'death' as a shorthand for the undoing of sin's corruption, a positive responsibility shared by every human being by God's design. Based on the literary evidence, this tradition among Christian appears to be unanimous. As I showed above, it is attested to by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, Methodius of Olympus in the third, Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth.⁴¹⁶ Despite being an enemy and a tyrant, physical 'death' to these bishop-theologians serves at least one positive, constructive purpose: fulfilling our 'debt' to put to death the corruption of sin in our own bodies. Death prevents human beings from immortalizing evil in themselves. That is why God exiled Adam and Eve from the tree of life. It was, in fact, an imposition Adam and Eve placed *on God* because of God's love for them. Based on the literary evidence from those patristic writers who comment on Genesis 3, this tradition among Christian also appears to be unanimous. Therefore, contrary to what Leithart seems to assume, God did not invent death as an additional retributive punishment for the fall, which under penal substitutionary logic would have to be deflected from us by Christ, but rather named it as a reality inherent to Adam and Eve's choice to corrupt their own human nature, with the constructive purpose being a check on the corruption of human sin.

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

'But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die [*because each person still needs to put to death the corruption of sin in his or her own body, so that sin would not be immortalized*], for which especial cause, indeed, he came among us [*vicariously for us and on our behalf*]: to this intent, after the proofs of his Godhead from his works, he next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding his temple [*that is, his body*] to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass [*which is not the inherited guilt but the inherited corruption from Adam and Eve*], and further to show himself more powerful even than death, displaying his own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all... And so it was that two marvels came to pass at one, that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord's body, and that death and corruption were wholly done away by reason of the Word that was united with it. For there was need of death, and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all [*rather than deflected from all*], that the debt owing from all [*to return our human nature back to God healed and intact*] might be paid.'⁴¹⁷

The Trinity and Atonement

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

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

And this is what is said, 'Who being in the form of God [Philippians 2:6],' and 'the Father in Me [John

⁴¹⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6; Methodius of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5; Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45

⁴¹⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 20

10:38; 14:10 – 11].’ Nor is this Form of the Godhead partial merely, but the fullness of the Father’s Godhead is the *Being* of the Son, and the Son is whole God. Therefore also, being equal to God, He ‘thought it not a prize to be equal to God [Philippians 2:6];’ and again since the Godhead and the Form of the Son is none other’s than the Father’s, this is what He says, ‘I in the Father.’ Thus ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself [2 Corinthians 5:19];’ for the propriety of the Father’s *Essence* is that Son, in whom the creation was then reconciled with God.⁴¹⁸

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

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

‘And that the words ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ are His, according to the foregoing explanations (though He suffered nothing, for the Word was impassible), is notwithstanding declared by the Evangelists; since the Lord became man, and these things are done and said as from a man, that He might Himself lighten these very sufferings of the flesh, and free it from them. Whence neither can the Lord be forsaken by the Father, who is ever in the Father, both before He spoke, and when He uttered this cry. Nor is it lawful to say that the Lord was in terror, at whom the keepers of hell’s gates shuddered and set open hell, and the graves did gape, and many bodies of the saints arose and appeared to their own people.’⁴¹⁹

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

Peter Leithart notes with considerable sensitivity and skill that Augustine’s understanding of the Trinity is different than Athanasius’. And since Augustine is often credited with being the foremost influence in Western, Latin Christianity, from which Roman Catholicism and Protestantism flow, it is worth noting here that Augustine’s conception of the Trinity is one of the many building blocks that made penal substitution possible. Augustine did not himself believe in penal substitution,⁴²⁰ which will be the topic of another exploration. But Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, as Protestants in the Reformed tradition, almost certainly inherit Augustine’s view of the Trinity. By contrast, Athanasius’ view of the Trinity, and that of the Cappadocians and the Eastern Greek church, *prevent any doctrine of penal substitution*.

To explain why, Leithart explains that Augustine imagined that the Father had his own wisdom, the Son had his own wisdom, and the Spirit had his own wisdom. The Father had his own power, the Son had his own power, and the Spirit had his own power. And so on. Augustine therefore suggests that the term *ousia* be understood as a divine

⁴¹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.6

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid* 3.56

⁴²⁰ Stanley P. Rosenberg, ‘Interpreting Atonement in Augustine’s Preaching’, edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p.233 – 238. It is notable that the editors of this book wanted to honor Dr. Roger Nicole, an American evangelical theologian, who upheld the penal substitution view. Rosenberg, however, recognizes that Augustine cannot be pressed into this editorial purpose.

substance, or collection of divine characteristics, which each person of the Trinity possessed in some measure, exhaustively. Leithart notes of Augustine,

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

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

Augustine would agree that there is not the slightest sliver of space between the Father and the Son, just as he would not allow the slightest sliver of space between the Father and his attributes. But for Athanasius, those two statements are identical: there is not the slightest sliver of space between the Father and his attributes because he has all that he has *in the Son*, who is proper to his essence. Augustine believes as strongly as Athanasius in an eternal radiance from the light of the Father. Yet Augustine is still capable of conceiving an unsupplemented origin: the Father ‘in himself’ having attributes ‘in himself,’ the light without radiance, the fountain without the stream. Augustine seems to leave a small crack open for thinking that the Father has something that is ‘his own,’ something that appears more intimate and intrinsic to his being than the Son. Athanasius will have none of this, and so he is more radically trinitarian, because he does not envision any glimmer of life for the Father that is not realized in the Son. In slight but significant contrast to Augustine, he sees that the Scriptures entail the conclusion that *‘the Son is the Father’s All; and nothing was in the Father before the Word (Discourses 3.67, emphasis added). For the Father, too, it is all about the Son, all about the eternal Word that became flesh.’*⁴²¹

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

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

‘But I believe another Athanasian insight is more fruitful. Above, I suggested that Athanasius’ trinitarian

⁴²¹ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.75 – 77 intriguingly also describes the impact of Augustine’s version of the Trinity on Thomas Aquinas and other western theologians: ‘We can see how the pressure of this argument led Thomas and others to conclude that the persons simply are their relations, top-to-bottom: the Father is Father all the way down, the Son is simply and sheerly Son.’

theology is more radically trinitarian than that of Augustine, since the latter appears to leave space to consider the Father ‘in himself,’ not sheerly as Father of the Son. To use Athanasius’ terminology, Augustine does not grasp as clearly as Athanasius that the Son is ‘proper’ to the Father, as intimate and intrinsic to the Father’s being as any wisdom of power the Father could call his ‘own.’ Augustine finds it nonsensical to say that the Father can beget his own wisdom, unless he has some prior wisdom of his own to confer. But that, it seems, is to fall into an Arian paradigm, and to run into Athanasius’ critique of the ‘double wisdom’ of Asterius. If the Father has ‘his own’ wisdom, which is eternally conferred on the Son, which is then also his Wisdom, then we are multiplying Wisdoms. That will not do. God is one, and his Wisdom must be one.⁴²²

Whether or not Athanasius’ understanding of the Trinity is the most faithful one is a topic for a much lengthier discussion. Suffice to say here, however, that I believe I have marshalled enough evidence to accomplish a much more specific goal. I believe I have discredited the claim of any penal substitution supporter that the great bishop of Alexandria, the Emperor-defying defender of Nicaea, would have supported it. Very contrary to Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, he would have vehemently disagreed with it, and probably anathematized it. Quoting from Peter Leithart has the additional benefit, for my purpose, of providing my readers with an example of a penal substitution advocate who respects Athanasius enough to be honest. Not only does Athanasius not speak of atonement in the legal-penal paradigm, but instead he employs a medical-ontological paradigm. Athanasius would have rejected any suggestion that a *separation* opened up between the Father and the Son *in any sense*; or that at the cross, the Father suddenly acted *upon* the Son rather than continued to act *in and through* the Son by the Spirit; or that the Son had a separate consciousness from the Father such that Jesus lost his awareness of the Father.⁴²³ Penal substitution did not exist in the mind of Athanasius, and *could not have existed*. Everything else in his theological system would have rejected it.

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

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

Finally, glancing ahead to the subsequent history of the church, we must acknowledge that it is the structure of theological thought, or ‘systematic theology,’ as it were, that has seemed more important to the church than the literal ‘name of Jesus’ or the word for ‘God.’ Even the English name ‘Jesus’ and the English word ‘God’ can become malleable ciphers with very different underlying definitions to various people. We need only think about what the name ‘Jesus’ means to Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. One of the many remarkable facts about the

⁴²² Ibid p.86

⁴²³ Ibid p.123 – 125, where Leithart explores Athanasius’ attempts to explain Jesus’ apparent and self-professed ignorance of certain matters. Athanasius, under the assumption that the divine mind meant omniscience, wants to actually deny Jesus’ human ignorance to bring his human mind into oneness with the divine mind of the Father.

growth of the church is that Christians were perfectly happy to contextualize the name of Jesus into whatever language and culture they encountered. And so from the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which carried the meaning ‘YHWH saves’ from the Hebrew verb root for ‘rescue, deliver’ evidenced in the naming of Jesus in Matthew 1:21, we have the Greek *Iesous*, the Latin *Iesus*, the Arabic *Isa*, and so on. Those names lost the conceptual link in their native tongues between the name and its meaning, but maintained a rough sound equivalent to the Hebrew. But it would be just as accurate to translate his name into the English *Joshua*, as some advocate, to remain closer to the Hebrew meaning and bypass the Greek altogether. Similarly, Christians were also eager to translate the word for ‘God’ from the Hebrew *Adonai*, *Elohim*, and *Yahweh* along with the Greek *Theos* into other languages: the Arabic *Allah*, the Korean *Hananim*, etc. But they perceived that the inevitable cultural baggage (e.g. relational distance and apathy, baleful authoritarianism, etc.) people heard in those words, as they carried them from their previous religious or philosophical contexts into a Christian context, could only be pruned off as people learned the biblical story and the story of theology which reached moments of clarity at Nicaea and Constantinople. This was, in fact, what happened as the early theologians realized they had to use the Greek and Latin words available to them, but they had to stretch or change their meaning.⁴²⁴ So Christians were at least as determined to teach the overall conceptual structure of theology, if not more so, as they were to proclaim the ‘name of Jesus.’

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

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

Objection 2: The Unfallenness View of the Incarnation

Having considered the arguments of penal substitution supporters over the theology of Athanasius, let me now come at his body of thought from another angle. I now return in more depth to the argument of Eastern Orthodox priest Emmanuel Hatzidakis, who I examined in regards to Irenaeus, above. Hatzidakis argues that Jesus assumed a pre-fallen Adamic humanity, because he must have cleansed his humanity of the corruption of sin at conception rather than throughout his lifelong obedience including his death on the cross. He argues that this view was the ‘consensus patrum,’ the consensus of the fathers.⁴²⁵ Hatzidakis says that the Alexandrian, in particular,

⁴²⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, p.204 says, ‘When our ordinary terms are applied to God they must be *stretched* beyond their natural sense and reference and must be employed in such a way that they indicate more than the actual terms can naturally specify.’ (emphasis his) Torrance is quoting Athanasius *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.23; 4.27; *De synodis* 42; *De decretis* 12; *Ad Marcellinum* 11 – 13; *Ad Serapionem* 1.8 – 9, 16 – 20. See also *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.3, ‘For terms do not disparage His Nature; rather that Nature draws to Itself those terms and changes them. For terms are not prior to essences, but essences are first, and terms second.’ And 2.6, where Athanasius discusses the meaning of the word ‘faithful’ in such a way that he anticipates the exegetical nuance N.T. Wright sees in the word ‘righteousness’ – that when we are talking about humans being ‘faithful’ or ‘righteous’ the words mean one thing, and when we are talking about God being ‘faithful’ or ‘righteous’ it means something related but different: ‘But when the saints spoke thus, they were not thinking of God in a human way, but they acknowledged two senses of the word ‘faithful’ in Scripture, first ‘believing,’ then ‘trustworthy,’ of which the former belongs to man, the latter to God.’

⁴²⁵ Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p.215

'is clear that what is mortal, upon its assumption by the divine Word was deified and rendered immortal. There was no time during which Christ was subject to death. So if He dies in His humanity, He does not die by necessity, but by embracing mortality voluntarily.'⁴²⁶

As evidence, Hatzidakis quotes passages in Athanasius which refer to the effect of the resurrection upon Jesus' human nature, and assigns them instead to his conception. So Hatzidakis holds that Jesus' humanity was deified, rendered immortal, not held under death, and so on, from the first point of Jesus' incarnation.⁴²⁷ How can we be confident that Athanasius believed Jesus took a fallen human nature at his conception?

Hatzidakis appears to be reading all the patristic fathers through the lens of John of Damascus (c.675 – 749 AD), who is considered by some to have written a summary of unanimous church teaching up to that point.⁴²⁸ That is precisely the subject I and others debate. By the time of John of Damascus, Hatzidakis' particular view of Jesus' humanity had become standard among the writing theologians – that much is true. That trend was evidenced most strongly in Roman North Africa with Tertullian and Augustine, and seemed somewhat more appealing to the Latin tradition rather than the Greek, as Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian espouse it, although Ambrose of Milan and the Ambrosiaster attest to the older view. Nevertheless the shift happened in the Greek East as well. I suspect that this shift about *how* exactly Jesus cleansed the corruption of sin out of his human nature was tolerated because it did not denigrate Jesus' humanity or his divinity. It was still a variation on the medical substitutionary atonement. The shift seems driven by various factors: a concern to protect Jesus' sinlessness in his divine person from the very negative view of human sexuality which became common; a concern to protect the unchanging nature of God ('impassibility') from the apparent instability of Jesus' human emotion, suffering, and 'passion' (*pathos* was difficult to define in Greek usage), and linguistic ambiguities about when 'sin' in the biblical text and the pre-Nicene fathers referred to the corrupt condition of one's human nature or actions which incurred guilt in one's person.

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

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

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

'For what John said, 'The Word was made flesh [John 1:14],' has this meaning, as we may see by a similar

⁴²⁶ Ibid, p.214

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p.218 – 221 citing Athanasius, Discourse Against the Arians 1.11; On the Incarnation 21.4; 22.3; 31.4; Against Apollinaris 10.18

⁴²⁸ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 3.27 said, 'Since our Lord Jesus Christ as without sin...He was not subject to death, since death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because He took on Himself death on our behalf, and He makes Himself an offering to the Father for our sakes.' John uses the language of the sacrificial 'offering' while taking away its substance; the sacrifice at the sanctuary was designed to be the vehicle by which the expiation of sin occurs, which is taught in Leviticus and Hebrews.

passage; for it is written in Paul: ‘Christ has become a curse for us [Galatians 3:13].’ And just as He has not Himself become a curse, but is said to have done so because He took upon Him the curse on our behalf, so also He has become flesh not by being changed into flesh, but because He assumed on our behalf living flesh, and has become Man.’⁴²⁹

Athanasius demonstrates continuity with the patristic writers before him, that Jesus took on fallen – and therefore, cursed – humanity. Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, as part of an argument that Jesus and Christ were not two separate beings but one, also quoted Galatians 3:13 in connection with Jesus taking human nature,⁴³⁰ but Athanasius’ use of language narrows to make a tighter and stronger identification with the incarnation. Like Justin Martyr, Athanasius reads Paul’s use of ‘curse’ language as describing humanity’s current sinful existence *identified and diagnosed* by the cross because of its connection to the tree of Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23, not an extra punishment occurring at Jesus’ death.⁴³¹

Athanasius’ *Letter* played a significant role in further theological developments in Christology. Critiquing Apollinarianism (the view that the Word assumed a human body but took the place of a human soul, thereby displacing it and leaving it unsaved), Epiphanius of Salamis (d.403 AD) quotes this *Letter* in his work *Panarion*, later titled *Against Heresies* (77:3 – 13), and attaches it in its entirety. Cyril of Alexandria (376 – 444 AD) read this *Letter* at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD in his debates with Nestorius over Christology, despite the fact that the Nestorians had in their possession altered versions of this letter, and circulated copies.⁴³² It was canonized by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD as the proper interpretation of the Nicene faith.⁴³³

Second, in his *First Discourse Against the Arians*, Athanasius spars with his Arian opponents about the nature of Jesus’ identity and incarnation. Athanasius seems to have written these *Discourses* between 356 – 360 AD while in his third exile from his bishop’s seat in Alexandria.⁴³⁴ He discusses many relevant passages in chapters 40 – 45, especially expounding on John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5 – 11 as key texts under debate. In this section, he says:

‘...the Lord who supplies the grace has become a man like us, He on the other hand, the Savior, humbled Himself in taking ‘our body of humiliation’ [Philippians 3:21], and took a servant’s form, putting on that flesh *which was enslaved to sin*. And He indeed has gained nothing from us for His own promotion...’⁴³⁵

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

Athanasius had made this critical distinction early in his career, in *On the Incarnation*: ‘For not even by being in the universe does He share in its nature...’⁴³⁶ For Athanasius, the Word could be ‘in’ something without ‘sharing in its nature.’ Whether the object under consideration was the universe – when he was stressing the transcendence of the Word – or the human body of Jesus – when he was stressing the imminence of the Word in the incarnation – the principle is the same. Athanasius finds this principle of supreme importance when he explains how Jesus could be

⁴²⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8, which seems to be an expansion upon e.g. *On the Incarnation* 25.2, where he says, ‘For if he came himself to bear the curse laid upon us, how else could he have ‘become a curse,’ unless he received the death set for a curse? And that is the cross.’ In other words, Jesus’ death on the cross was not itself the curse, but rather the visible outcome of carrying cursed human flesh.

⁴³⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.3

⁴³¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 94 – 95; see above for discussion

⁴³² Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Acacium Melitenum* 21; *Ad Succensum* 1.11; *Epistle* 39.11

⁴³³ Matthew R. Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.138

⁴³⁴ Philip Schaff, ‘Introduction to Four Discourses Against the Arians,’ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, p.663 judges that Athanasius wrote this material to ‘conciliate and win over the semi-Arians’ on the basis of conceptual, though not terminological, agreement, and isolate the true ‘Arians’ like Valens and Eudoxius.

⁴³⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.43, emphasis mine

⁴³⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17.6

‘in’ the ‘flesh which was enslaved to sin’ without ‘sharing in its nature’ in its corrupted form, and thence becoming enslaved to sin himself. For immediately after stating this principle, Athanasius makes a helpful comparison: just as the sun is not ‘defiled’ by touching the earth with its light, so also the Word of God is not ‘defiled’ by touching the body,⁴³⁷ and even sharing it.

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

‘To give a witness then, and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and destroy the works of the devil, the Savior came, and this is the reason of His incarnate presence. For otherwise a resurrection had not been, unless there had been death; and how had death been, unless He had had a mortal body? This the Apostle, learning from Him, thus sets forth, ‘Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [Hebrews 2:14 – 15].’ And, ‘Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead [1 Corinthians 15:21].’ And again, ‘For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit [Romans 8:3 – 4].’ And John says, ‘For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved [John 3:17].’ ... For as by receiving our infirmities, He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm, for He is the Power of God, and He became sin for us and a curse, though not having sinned Himself, but because He Himself bare our sins and our curse, so, by creating us in Him, let Him say, ‘He created me for the works,’ though not Himself a creature.’⁴³⁸

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

‘And the Word bore the *infirmities of the flesh*, as His own, for His was the flesh; and the flesh ministered to the works of the Godhead, because the Godhead was in it, for the body was God’s. And well has the Prophet said ‘carried [Isaiah 53:4];’ and has not said, ‘He remedied our infirmities,’ lest, as being external to the body, and only healing it, as He has always done, He should leave men subject still to death; but He carries our *infirmities*, and He Himself bears our *sins*, that it might be shown that He has become man for us, and that the body which in Him bore them, was His own body; and, while He received no hurt Himself by ‘bearing our sins in His body on the tree,’ as Peter speaks, we men were redeemed from our own affections, and were filled with the righteousness of the Word.’⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Ibid 17.7: ‘For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says [in 1 Peter 2:22], no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.’ See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.80 notes that Athanasius’ mind included ‘a certain conception of the unity of Christ by way of a unified dynamic by which the divinity acts upon the humanity.’

⁴³⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.55

⁴³⁹ Ibid 3.31 emphasis mine

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

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

‘Moreover the words ‘*He is become* surety’ denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the ‘Word,’ He ‘*became* flesh [John 1:14]’ and ‘*become*’ we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression ‘*He is become*,’ expounding it according to a *second sense*, viz. because *He has become man*. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that *His essence* has become, knowing, as he did, that *He is* Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father...’⁴⁴⁰

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

This is very important because Hatzidakis argues his position from a concern about the ‘communication of attributes’ (*communicatio idiomatum*).⁴⁴¹ This phrase is used by theologians to denote how attributes of Jesus’ human *nature* may be applied to his divine *nature* and vice versa, and from his divine *person* to his human *nature* and vice versa.⁴⁴² A common image deployed by the early church to help themselves appreciate the union of Jesus’ divinity with his humanity was the union of fire with iron: As an iron starts to glow white hot by being placed in a fire, the iron takes on the properties of fire. So in what sense did that happen with Jesus? In this sense, because the Son of God is life-giving, Athanasius’ successor Cyril of Alexandria could say, ‘We confess that the flesh of the Lord is life-giving flesh...because it is that of the Word who gives life to all.’⁴⁴³ Because Jesus’ human nature was finite as a body, we can say that Jesus himself was and is finite as a body, considered from the standpoint of his humanity. From the standpoint of his divinity, of course, the eternal Son of God remains who he has always been, and is therefore infinite.

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

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid 1.60, emphasis mine; cf. *Discourses* 2.47

⁴⁴¹ Hatzidakis, p.242 – 257

⁴⁴² Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.81 – 85 very helpfully analyzes Athanasius’ deployment of the *communicatio idiomatum*

⁴⁴³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Anathema 11 Against Nestorius*, cited by Hatzidakis, p.248

‘Calvinism ascribes to Christ one person in two natures, with each nature communicating its attributes to the person, never to the other nature.’⁴⁴⁴

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

Hatzidakis continues:

‘The Lutherans, on the other hand, believe in a real communication of divine properties and participation of the human nature in the divine glory. But what do they say about the fact that Christ, despite being endowed with divine attributes, displays many common human weaknesses and dies as a mortal man? They are at an impasse, not being able to reconcile their differences. The key rests with the Orthodox doctrine of the voluntary assumption by Christ of the blameless passions in His deified and deifying human nature.’⁴⁴⁵

In order to maintain clarity, and to avoid puzzles which plague Calvinists and Lutherans alike, Hatzidakis says, ‘The exchange of properties takes place because the properties are always expressed through the person, not by themselves.’⁴⁴⁶ To Hatzidakis, therefore, logic requires us to say that if Jesus took to himself a fallen human nature, that we must also say that he was himself fallen, or became fallen.⁴⁴⁷ For, as he assumes, the attributes must be communicated upward from the nature to the person at all times.

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

This fits the unbroken pattern of divine-human partnership in the Hebrew Scriptures and Israel’s experience of covenant relationship with God. God always worked in concert and cooperation with human partners, which is arguably what is required from Genesis 1, when God made human beings in His image to represent Him on the earth. And, not insignificantly, the patristic authors perceived the theophanies in the Hebrew Bible to be appearances, not of the Father or the undifferentiated Godhead, but of the *Logos*, or the pre-incarnate Christ.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁴ Hatzidakis, p.242

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid p.242 – 243

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid p.249 and note on p.248 the significant difference between Hatzidakis’ interpretation of Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation* 9, 20, and 21, and mine, above

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid p.253 – 257

⁴⁴⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 62 – 63; *Dialogue with Trypho* 61, 126; Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.14.2; 4.20.1 – 4.22.2;

When they read in Scripture, ‘The word of the Lord came to...’ (e.g. Gen.15:1, 4; 1 Sam.15:10; 2 Sam.7:4; 24:11; 1 Ki.16:1; Isa.38:4; Jer.1:2; Ezk.1:3; Hos.1:1; Jon.1:1), they believed it was the Word of God that appeared or spoke. Thus, in their view, God the Son appeared to Abraham and Sarah (Gen.15, 18), calling for their faith-filled partnership in the supernatural birth of Isaac. God the Son called to Moses from the burning bush (Ex.3), calling for Moses’ partnership in the deliverance of Israel. And so on. This was the widespread understanding in the early church. So if God the Son acted in this pattern of divine-human partnership before his incarnation, to ‘profit’ people, as Athanasius puts it when he cites these examples,⁴⁴⁹ would that pattern extend even into the divine-human partnership in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Why would it not? For human nature is not a static quantity, but dynamic and developmental, and dependent upon the Spirit of God and Word of God. The prior definitions of ‘human nature’ and its relation to ‘divine nature’ require that even in the hypostatic union of the two natures, the pattern of partnership undertaken by the Logos was maintained with respect to his own human nature when he first inhabited it.

As Irenaeus of Lyons saw, the very definition of human nature involves a developmental process in the divine-human partnership: ‘For as God is always the same, humanity, rooted in God, always progresses toward God.’⁴⁵⁰ In terms of the biblical narrative, God made human beings to be guided by His word and presence (by the Spirit), and thus internalize His word and presence (by the Spirit) more deeply into themselves by growing in stature, bringing forth life, deepening in trust, and receiving into themselves the deeper divine life God offered in the tree of life. Put in the terms of the technical theological vocabulary of the Nicene period, what else is human nature except that which must be progressively filled by, and work in partnership with, God’s divine nature? And what is *fallen* human nature but human nature which additionally has to overcome the corruption of sin in partnership with God’s divine nature? If God designed us to not simply be human *beings*, but human *becomings*, then the same must have been true for Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, we cannot fully employ the *communicatio idiomatum* at just any point in the earthly life of Jesus – if only for the fact that Jesus’s human nature could not be both ‘developing’ and yet also ‘fully developed’ merely by virtue of being connected to his divine nature or located within his divine personhood as the eternal Son. In fact, God’s divine nature itself must be defined as that which, in relation to us, *patiently respects the development of human nature in every human person*. The principle of *communicatio idiomatum* cannot simply refer to human nature as if it were a static quality. It must be employed in the context of Jesus’ human development, where Jesus resisted the corruption of sin throughout, brought his human nature to its full resting place as a conduit of ever-brightening transfigured glory by the Holy Spirit at the right hand of the Father. This is the logic Athanasius retained from Irenaeus’ view of a developmental humanity, which the later Latin theologians Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian misunderstood.⁴⁵¹

Protestant theologian Kathryn Tanner proposes a different solution that is worth mentioning here. She suggests that the divine nature of Jesus be thought of as radically transcendent from his human nature. In fact, her project in systematic theology stresses ‘firstly, a non-competitive relation between creatures and God, and secondly, a radical interpretation of divine transcendence.’⁴⁵² The two points she puts forward are intertwined and mutual. Tanner suggests that we view the divinity of Jesus as being on a different ontological plane as his humanity: The divinity of the Son participates in the human nature in a real way, but in such a way that the *communicatio idiomatum* cannot fully operate in the same way Hatzidakis proposes. Hence Athanasius utilizes the analogy of the sun which touches the earth with its rays, and that analogy might be understood in the way Tanner suggests.⁴⁵³ I suspect, however, that

Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching 45, 46; *Fragment 53*; Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 14 – 16; Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 60, 69, 96; etc.

⁴⁴⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.68 comments on these incidents briefly, and in *Discourses* 3.12 sees the pre-incarnate Son as the angel who wrestled Jacob

⁴⁵⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.8.3; 4.11.2; notably, Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009) and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.4 (‘my position is that Athanasius’ vision is markedly Irenaean in this regard’) and p.20 – 25 demonstrate that Athanasius’ theological anthropology is either dependent on, or otherwise identical with, that of Irenaeus.

⁴⁵¹ Hatzidakis, p.254 – 255; my treatment of Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian follows below in chronological order

⁴⁵² Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p.2; cf. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), chs.2 – 3

⁴⁵³ *Ibid* 17.7: ‘For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says [in 1 Peter 2:22], no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.’ See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.80 notes that Athanasius’ mind included ‘a certain conception of the unity of Christ by way of a unified dynamic by which the divinity acts upon the humanity.’

in Athanasius' writings, what prevented Jesus from actually succumbing to sin, and what prevents us from calling Jesus a sinner as regards his personhood while on earth, is not so much that divinity and humanity are positioned on different axes, but because (1) the difference between 'natures' and 'persons' requires that we use different adjectives for them, so that human nature can be 'corrupt' while a human person may or may not be 'guilty' of any particular act; and also (2) a developmental view of human nature requires that God, because of His intrinsic love and goodness, works with the partnership of the person to bring that person's human nature into a full union with Himself.

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

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

'Moreover, the good reason of what He did may be seen thus; if God had but spoken, because it was in His power, and so the curse had been undone, the power had been shown of Him who gave the word, but man had become such as Adam was before the transgression, having received grace from without, and not having it united to the body; (for he was such when he was placed in Paradise) nay, perhaps had become worse, because he had learned to transgress. Such then being his condition, had he been seduced by the serpent, there had been fresh need for God to give command and undo the curse; and thus the need had become interminable, and men had remained under guilt not less than before, as being enslaved to sin; and, ever sinning, would have ever needed one to pardon them, and had never become free, being in themselves flesh, and ever worsted by the Law because of the infirmity of the flesh.'⁴⁵⁴

This is a difficult passage to fully understand. Athanasius denies that God could have simply spoken and healed human nature instantly because by doing so, God would set up the conditions for human beings to eat over and over from the tree of knowledge of good and evil without ever developing a personal conviction that doing so is sinful. One reason for this, in his mind, is that if God had acted in such a way, humanity by definition would have 'received grace from without, and not having it united to the body.' Athanasius seems to be saying that human beings would never learn from that fundamental mistake. The phrase 'grace from without' seems to indicate the opposite of 'grace from within.' Presumably, 'grace from within' our human life and experience would mean us sharing with God a conviction about the awfulness of the corruption of sin and its effects, cognitive agreement with God that healing is necessary, and willing commitment to being renewed. The puzzling phrase, 'not having [grace] united to the body' probably presupposes an awareness of the then-standard patristic explanation of the soul's impact upon the body. Athanasius provided that explanation in *Against the Heathen* chapters 1 – 6, and Matthew Craig Steenberg very helpfully explores Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Tertullian, and Cyril of Jerusalem to show that they shared this common theological anthropology.⁴⁵⁵ The human soul – with its capacity to know God, to desire God, and to remember, to feel, to judge – must receive grace from God and mediate that grace into the human body.

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

⁴⁵⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.68

⁴⁵⁵ Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.16

‘For the Word being clothed in the flesh, as has many times been explained, every bite of the serpent began to be utterly staunched from out it; and whatever evil sprung from the motions of the flesh, to be cut away, and with these death also was abolished, the companion of sin, as the Lord Himself says, ‘The prince of this world comes, and finds nothing in Me [John 14:30];’ and ‘For this end was He manifested,’ as John has written, ‘that He might destroy the works of the devil [1 John 3:8].’⁴⁵⁶

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

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

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

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

While considering this excerpt, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that Athanasius has been criticized for leaving too unclear his view of whether Jesus had a human soul. Colin Gunton, for example, critiques Athanasius for saying ‘incautiously’ that the Word ‘wielded the human body like an instrument,’⁴⁵⁷ because that phraseology diminishes the proper qualities – such as the role of the human soul and human will – which are important to Jesus’ humanity within the definition of salvation as God’s recovery of true humanity. However, Khaled Anatolios’ defense of Athanasius on this point is persuasive.⁴⁵⁸ The constituent and conjoined parts of the human being – soul and body –

⁴⁵⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.69

⁴⁵⁷ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997 2nd edition), p.69 critiques Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17, 42

⁴⁵⁸ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.71 – 74, ‘His characterization of Christ’s body as an “instrument” is not to be interpreted in light of an analysis of the composition of Christ, but rather within the framework of the Creator-creature distinction, with its attendant dialectic of divine transcendence and immanence. The “instrumentality” of the body is concerned precisely with its being a medium for the immanent revelation of the transcendent God. In other words, the focus is not on the relation of the Logos to the

must be joined with God in the person of Jesus if they are to be saved. Moreover, Athanasius' lack of explicit attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in his early two volume work *Against the Gentiles – On the Incarnation* was rectified in his *Discourses Against the Arians*, and supported further in his three *Letters to Serapion*.

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

Athanasius gives evidence that he understood the importance of holding that Jesus had a human soul. In the work *Tome to the Antiochenes*, dated to 362 AD, in which Athanasius and others report on their investigations of a quarrel between two pro-Nicene groups who used Greek terms for theological matters in different ways. In response, Athanasius says he listened for the *underlying structure of their thoughts*, because they gave different meanings to words: 'Having accepted then these men's interpretation and defense of their language...'⁴⁵⁹ He then expresses his approval for one of the groups:

'For they confessed also that the Savior had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that His body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word Himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.'⁴⁶⁰

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

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

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

'...what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3], ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word...'⁴⁶¹

Since Athanasius uses the term 'flesh' to indicate the entire human being, body and soul, considered from the standpoint of being corrupted (as the apostles Paul and John did), and since the mind was held to be the first part of the soul, Athanasius can be understood as asserting that Jesus' divine mind did not displace his human mind. Rather, by and through his human mind working in partnership with his divine mind, Jesus consciously struggled to align his entire soul and body with his divine nature in the power of the Holy Spirit. He thereby governed his entire

body, so much as on the body as mediating between God and world. Athanasius himself speaks of the "instrument" of Christ's body not in order to emphasize that it is "directly and physically" moved by the Logos, but rather to characterize it as a privileged locus wherein the invisible God becomes knowable and visible.'

⁴⁵⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Tome ad Antiochenos* 6

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid 7

⁴⁶¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.8, paragraph 60

humanity in conformity with God's will, healing and strengthening it from within. Thus, he 'rendered the flesh capable of the Word.'

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

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

'These things were so done, were so manifested, because He had a body, not in appearance, but in truth; and it became the Lord, in putting on human flesh, to put it on *whole with the affections proper to it*; that, as we say that the body was His own, so also we may say that *the affections of the body were proper to Him alone*, though they did not touch Him according to His Godhead.'⁴⁶²

Athanasius means that we are freed from cowardice, fear, anxiety, and other emotions which would cause us to shrink back from a robust declaration of faith in Christ. Why? Because Jesus shook himself free of those 'affections.' In this context, 'affections' relate to human sinfulness, especially human shortcomings in the face of persecution against Christians. Athanasius argues that we are freed from the 'affections' of the flesh because Jesus shared in our flesh and its affections, and conquered them. This logically requires that Jesus assumed a fallen human nature, and cleansed it through his faithful obedience to the Father.

Once again, we find Athanasius taking a complementary step to erect a conceptual barrier between Jesus' fallen human nature and any accusation that he actually personally sinned: 'though they did not touch Him according to His Godhead.' Although Athanasius does not explicitly quote from Hebrews 4:15 or 5:6 – 10 in his surviving writings,⁴⁶³ likely because those he called 'Arians' were not contesting Jesus' authentic humanity, probably his mind was not too far off from the encouragement that in Jesus, God did experience temptation in all things like we do, yet successfully resisted those temptations and, in the power of the Spirit, turned his humanity back to the Father.

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

A Glance at Cyril of Alexandria

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

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

⁴⁶² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.32; cf.3.33 – 34, emphasis mine

⁴⁶³ James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p.416 does not treat the two books *Contra Apollinaris* as genuinely Athanasian. See below for my discussion of Pseudo-Athanasius *Contra Apollinarium*.

hand as they do indeed in us, but in order that when aroused they might be thoroughly subdued by the power of the Word dwelling in the flesh, the nature of man thus undergoing a change for the better.’⁴⁶⁴

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

However, my hesitation with Athanasius’ statement, and Cyril’s development of this trajectory, is that all of Jesus’ human emotions appear to be considered as if they were only reactive. Was Jesus only reacting to his surroundings? Was the true source of Jesus’ emotions his external environment? There was a tendency among some Jews and Christians alike to feel discomfort with anything which can be considered divine ‘emotions.’ The source of this discomfort is most decidedly not the Hebrew Bible, which attributes many anthropomorphic human emotions to God. Rather, unquestionably some flavor of Hellenistic philosophy – or a combination, say, of Stoicism and Neo-Platonism – provides the source of the discomfort with human emotions. The Hellenistic assumption that emotions meant personal change, and personal change meant imperfection, seemed to affect their assessment of Jesus, especially how he suffered at his trial and crucifixion.

The discomfort appears among the Alexandrian Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint.⁴⁶⁵ Similarly, Irenaeus chastised the heretical Marcionites for stripping God of anger. The heretical Marcionites, who were unhappy with the Old Testament presentation of God as not only the creator of the material universe but also emotional, wanted to ‘take away the vindictive and judicial power from the Father, imagining that to be unworthy of God, and thinking that they had found a god *angerless* (*sine iracundia*) and good.’⁴⁶⁶ Human emotionality was similarly called into question. In some Christian accounts, emotions were thought to fall away at some point. For example, in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Gregory asks his sister and spiritual mentor Macrina about how ‘passions’ can be redirected or refocused on God.⁴⁶⁷ ‘If the passions stimulate the life of virtue but are extinguished when the soul is purified, then, he asks, will desire for God also be extinguished? In a famous passage Macrina reiterates her position that it is only the faculty of contemplation that is the godlike part of the soul and that the passions do indeed fall away. Nevertheless, the soul that passes beyond desire, hope and memory remains in the activity of love, thus imitating the divine life.’ Others, however, maintain that the term ‘the passions’ (*ta pathe*) in Byzantine theology refers not to all emotionality per se, but emotionality energized by sinfulness and operating outside the governance of the rational-moral faculty, as in the related word *pathology*, meaning vice.⁴⁶⁸ The Greek assumption that emotions included personal change resulting in ‘motion’ or ‘movement,’ where personal change indicated some previous state of imperfection, seemed to affect their assessment of Jesus, especially how he suffered at Gethsemane, his trial, and his crucifixion. Perhaps this corresponds with Christian art tending to portray Christ as unflappably serene even on the cross, and Mary as calm and composed as she held the dead body of Jesus in the Pieta. Alister E. McGrath comments, ‘An excellent example of the influence of a Hellenistic milieu upon Christian theology is provided by the doctrine of the impassibility of God, which clearly suggests the subordination of a biblical to a philosophical view of God.’⁴⁶⁹

Hatzidakis, for instance, considers Jesus’ human emotion, but in my view unevenly.⁴⁷⁰ I stand with him when he says that Jesus ‘was not under the sway of uncontrolled passions.’ He also grants to Jesus the following: ‘Behind His humanity lies the inexhaustible ocean of divinity,’ and, ‘Christ’s personality was formed, as that of every human being, by His genetic makeup that carried the divine imprint and be His environs, His home upbringing and all the other factors that shape a human character.’ Beautiful is the sentiment, ‘His human thoughts, emotions, feelings, and actions were never purely or merely human thoughts, emotions, feelings, and actions. They swelled in Him by the intruding of the divinity into His human experience in an unfathomable way...’ But I am not sure why he immediately adds the modifier, ‘beyond and above human capacity.’ With that phrase I take issue: If Jesus came to share and participate in our humanity that we might do so in his, what is it that lies beyond human capacity?

⁴⁶⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* 12.27, 28

⁴⁶⁵ Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.37 – 46

⁴⁶⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 1.27.2

⁴⁶⁷ Lewis Ayres, ‘Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa,’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 49 4 (2005), p.378,

⁴⁶⁸ Martin Hinterberger, ‘Emotions in Byzantium,’ edited by Liz James, *A Companion to Byzantium* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), has an excellent discussion of how the term ‘passions’ in the Greek language were the causes of ‘motion’ or ‘movements’ of the soul and body.

⁴⁶⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; third edition 2005), p.32

⁴⁷⁰ Hatzidakis, p.232 – 234

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

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

Cyril and the tradition that followed him had some tendencies to see ‘suffering’ and ‘emotions’ as threats to divine impassibility from outside Jesus. But if God’s impassibility is defined as God’s love, based on His unchanging and eternal nature as a Trinity, then the threat vanishes.⁴⁷¹ If God is love because He is Triune, and if God cannot change His Triune being then His love is what is impassible and steady about Him, so then it also stands to reason that He will have the divine equivalent of human emotions towards us. If the apostle Paul can command Christians to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep’ (Rom.12:15), then emotionally mature responsiveness varies according to the person to whom one is relating. And if that is true for human beings, then it must logically also be true for God. But there is no need to fear that we are proposing a fundamental ‘changeability’ or ‘instability’ in God, or in us. For if a *character of love* is what is constant and unchanging in the divine Trinity, and what is hoped-for in us, then a certain healthy variability in human emotion and in divine emotion is *expected* and *necessary*. To suggest that God’s divine emotions, or our human emotions, should be unchanging suggests either stoicism, narcissism, or autism. God is both impassible and passible, understood properly. He is *impassible* in His love, for that is His nature, but He is *passible* in His divine emotions for us. He is *unmoving* from His loving commitment towards us, which results from His nature, and *most moved* on our behalf because of that unshakeable love.

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

⁴⁷¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p.155 – 167, esp. p.167, ‘Here I can at least offer a definition of divine apatheia as trinitarian love: God’s impassibility is the utter fullness of an infinite dynamism, the absolutely complete and replete generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit from the Father, the infinite ‘drama’ of God’s joyous act of self-outpouring – which is his being as God... Nor is this some kind of original unresponsiveness in the divine nature; it is divine beauty, that perfect joy in the other by which God is God: the Father’s *delectatio* in the beauty of his eternal Image, the Spirit as the light and joy and sweetness of that knowledge.’

Athanasius and Cyril perceived in Jesus as he faced persecution. But rather than label Jesus' resolution a 'lack of passion' or a 'lack of emotion,' we can see the determination of the Father to perfect the *emotional* quality of human nature despite the obstacles, and thereby reveal God's own self emotionally, in some sense. The full range of the emotions Jesus showed can be seen to reflect the 'divine emotions' of the Father, by the Spirit.

Not only that, but this account of Jesus' emotional life can be squared with what we now understand from neuroscience and even epigenetics about the relationship between our emotional health, physical health, and even brain development. Greek philosophical thought, especially Neo-Platonic and Stoic, emphasized a firm functional, and even ontological, order of soul over body. As Christians inherited this view, they developed some helpful insights about how the human soul was to mediate the knowledge of God and even the life of God into the body. But this prioritization of the soul over the body in all cases came with a high price. Some, including Athanasius, began to speak of the soul itself as being the image of God in a way that was distinct from the body,⁴⁷² which is a departure from Irenaeus and a more Judaic understanding of the human person; I believe this move to be erroneous. Christians began to frown upon sexual pleasure in marriage, which was an obvious example of a bodily experience that flowed 'backward' or 'upstream' into the soul and our emotional experience. This view that childraising was the only legitimate reason for a married couple to have sex came from Stoicism,⁴⁷³ but not biblical Judaism, which celebrated married sexuality for the couple, not just for childbearing (Pr.5:19; Song 3:6 – 5:1; 1 Cor.7:1 – 5). Any experiences in that general category were increasingly seen as problematic.

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

I believe *orthopathy*, right feeling, is both redemptive and revelatory. It is a relational state Jesus himself perfected and shares with us by his Spirit. For he *redeemed* human emotion back to the 'divine emotion' of the Godhead, and in so doing *revealed* how God feels, and how God's true humanity feels, in dynamic relationship with others and God. What to do about the direction started by Athanasius and taken further by Cyril of Alexandria (and others) about how to interpret Jesus' suffering in the face of persecution, and emotion more broadly? I would gently and, hopefully with good humor, criticize it for being insufficiently *Athanasian*.

⁴⁷² E.g. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 32.3

⁴⁷³ David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* retitled from *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.186

Interlude: The Debates About Jesus' Humanity in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

Introduction

The heresy of Apollinarianism in the fourth century signaled a close to the debates about the Trinity and a new focus on christology. It is highly significant that the lines drawn up on either side of the Apollinarian conflict concerned not the Trinity, or the divinity of the Son, but *theological anthropology*. Not coincidentally, the lines drawn up on the fallenness and unfallenness debate about Jesus' humanity concerns *theological anthropology* as well, not least because Apollinaris was the first to name the stakes as the sinlessness of Jesus and because this is the period in which the supposed 'unfallenness' position became strongly articulated by some. My position in this latter, ongoing debate lies in the fallenness camp, as I have explained above, especially as I believe we find it in Scripture and Irenaeus of Lyons. But I navigate my way through the patristic material in a fairly specific way. I foreground this material before I write my assessment of the theologies of Athanasius' *Contra Apollinarium*, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and subsequent patristic authors.

When we find the terms *body* and *soul* (and the related terms *flesh* and *mind*) they demonstrably mean different things across various patristic authors. It is hard enough to discern the meaning of these terms in New Testament – especially Pauline – scholarship. The challenge increases by another order of magnitude when we study early Christian literature in multiple languages (Syriac and Latin, and not just Greek) across multiple centuries.

In another paper,⁴⁷⁴ I argue that Irenaeus bears witness to an older Christian understanding of the relationship between body and soul in the human, where the two are deeply intertwined ontologically and functionally, from creation and in redemption. This view was rooted in a non-allegorical reading of the Genesis account of creation, along with a strong commitment to salvation history and the body even when allegorical methods were employed. For example, Irenaeus used the parable of the Good Samaritan allegorically for Jesus as the good Samaritan who recovered the 'fallen man' of his own human nature.⁴⁷⁵ Later Christians, however, elevated the soul above the body to such a degree that the separation between the two created lasting problems in the Christian appraisal of the human generally, and of Jesus in particular.⁴⁷⁶ The influences were many. Syriac-speaking Christians and others centered at Antioch were influenced by eastern Manichaean dualism – beginning with Tatian the Assyrian and the second century 'gnostics' like Marcion.⁴⁷⁷ The prestige of Plato and the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo influenced Greek-speaking Christians, especially Origen, who in turn, influenced many. The rigorous Christian monastics developed austere ways of treating the body, and rhetoric to match, sometimes drawing from eastern Syriac or Hellenistic sources as mediated by, for example, Origen's incorporation of Philo's allegorical method which turned away from salvation history and the body towards the eternal and the soul.

One set of questions that became difficult for Christian theologians to answer was: Where is the Adamic ancestral sin located? Is it found in the body or the soul? How exactly does it influence us? How do we assess Jesus' own human nature? And, as I have explored in the paper mentioned above, a second set of questions that arise from modern neuroscience is how to speak of the mind-brain relation when we find that the physical structure and health of the brain impacts our memory, personality, and even moral character. For example, loving touch, nutrition, relational stability, and verbal communication contribute to maximum neurological development and emotional health, whereas physical deprivation of loving touch, poor nutrition, relational instability, and a paucity of words contribute to trauma in extreme cases and the underdevelopment of our brains in other cases. Epigenetic factors

⁴⁷⁴ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Neuroscience and the Theological Anthropologies of Irenaeus and Origen*, found on this page:

<https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec-irenaeus-of-lyons>

⁴⁷⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.17.3

⁴⁷⁶ Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body, and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012) ch.11 provides a very helpful heretical Christian movements, especially as it relates to understandings of the human. Robert (Robin) M. Orton, 'Garments of Light, Tunics of Skin and the Body of Christ: St Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of the Body' (PhD thesis, Kings College, University of London, 2009) also demonstrates how the 4th century Cappadocian luminary Gregory of Nyssa developed inconsistencies because of the (arguably) Origenist influence on his thinking about the body. I will highlight Orton's and Hunt's work in future sections.

⁴⁷⁷ Second century Hellenistic 'gnostic' teachers, who saw the entire material world as evil, devised clever ways of misdirecting biblical texts about the body. Marcion (c.85 – 160), who was influential in both Mesopotamia and Rome, rejected marriage. Basilides, the earliest recorded of these (flourished in 120 – 140), asserted that Jesus 'the embodied mind (nous)' swapped places with Simon of Cyrene on the way to the cross, and presumably shed his body because only the soul could be saved. Valentinus of Alexandria, who also attempted to teach in Rome, believed that Jesus' body was physiologically different from ours, so much so that he did not urinate or defecate: 'Having endured everything he was continent; thus Jesus exercised his divinity. He ate and drank in a peculiar manner, not evacuating his food. So much power of continence was in food was not corrupted, since he himself had no corruptibility.' Mani, the third century bishop of Edessa, became the founder of the gnostic movement that bore his name ('Manichaeism'), and his influence spread in Syriac, Greek, and Latin speaking Christian circles. See Hunt, ch.11

from previous generations also seem to affect us. If the mind is, at minimum, physically anchored in the brain but not reducible to it (non-reductive physicalism), then, how do we conceive of the broader relation, of not just the brain-mind connection, but the body-brain-mind-soul connection?

For Irenaeus, the soul was the animating principle of the body. Irenaeus included the human body as made in the image of God, where the soul was the energy provided to the body by God's breath of life. Irenaeus believed that the soul spatially overlapped with the body and grew with it. In Irenaeus' framework, it would appear that the body's health and growth have a direct effect on the soul's health and growth, and in many cases, vice versa. Questions raised by modern neuroscience can fit comfortably in Irenaeus' conception of the human body and soul because Irenaeus would ostensibly welcome the possibility of a strong intrinsic relationship (conceptually distinct, but ontologically and functionally unified) between the physical brain and the mind. It is also relatively straightforward to say that in Irenaeus' view, the Adamic ancestral sin resided somehow *in the human body*. We inherit some structural disorder from our primal forebears that is expressed in our physiology, which probably does include the physical brain. Irenaeus regarded human death and the dissolution of the human body into the ground as accomplishing something positive in a penultimate sense while we await the resurrection. For the Son of God to become incarnate in our humanity meant that he took on both body and soul, and carried a fallen human nature while being perfectly faithful to the Father by the Spirit, to heal that human nature ultimately through his own death and resurrection.

Tertullian incorporated into his theology the Stoic notion of traducianism, the idea that the human soul came from the souls of one's parents. The view was shared by Augustine of Hippo. Jerome, the Latin translator and contemporary of Augustine, admitted that most Western Christians held to it as well, even though he himself denied it and asserted that the Eastern, Greek-speaking churches believed in creationism. But it is significant that Apollinaris held to traducianism.⁴⁷⁸ Gregory of Nyssa seems to have held it as well.⁴⁷⁹ Traducianism combined with Christian theology made space for the notion that the ancestral sin resided in the human soul, at least in part, and was passed down from parents to children. Around the fourth century, Christian theologians began to associate Mary's virginal status with Jesus' supposed 'unfallenness' – accompanied by the view that the Virgin Mary did not pass down the corruption of sin to Jesus on the grounds that she had no sexual desire or pleasure when the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in her womb.⁴⁸⁰ This view directly implied that the desire to have children was the only acceptable reason for even a married couple to have intercourse, because sexual desire and perhaps sexual pleasure itself passed along the ancestral sin to children. Clearly, there was considerable conceptual pressure to explain how Jesus could be sinless and yet still human.

Origen drew upon, not Stoic anthropology, but Plato's hierarchy of soul over body. Origen drew upon the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who had attempted his own version of making the biblical account more Platonic. Origen taught that the body was not made in the image of God, or even part of the image of God, on the grounds that both God and the soul are invisible and immaterial, whereas the body is visible and material. Along with this assessment, Origen divided properties between body and soul. The body had physical needs to breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, and urges like sexual lust, but was simply physical material, shared by the material world. The soul, however, came from God and is the location of free will, memory, rationality, morality,

⁴⁷⁸ Robin Orton, *St. Gregory of Nyssa, Anti-Apollinarian Writings* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), p.29

⁴⁷⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 29

⁴⁸⁰ For example, Augustine of Hippo, *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin* 2.47 says that Ambrose of Milan believed that Mary's virginity allowed Jesus to have an unfallen humanity. The relevant passage is: 'The same holy man [Ambrose] also, in his Exposition of Isaiah, speaking of Christ, says: Therefore as man He was tried in all things, and in the likeness of men He endured all things; but as born of the Spirit, He was free from sin. For every man is a liar, and no one but God alone is without sin. It is therefore an observed and settled fact, that *no man born of a man and a woman, that is, by means of their bodily union, is seen to be free from sin. Whosoever, indeed, is free from sin, is free also from a conception and birth of this kind.* Moreover, when expounding the Gospel according to Luke, he says: It was no cohabitation with a husband which opened the secrets of the Virgin's womb; rather was it the Holy Ghost which infused immaculate seed into her unviolated womb. For the Lord Jesus alone of those who are born of woman is holy, inasmuch as He experienced not the contact of earthly corruption, by reason of the novelty of His immaculate birth; nay, He repelled it by His heavenly majesty.' (italics mine) We find precursors to this negative view of marital sex in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.17, who believed that Adam and Eve fell because they had sex without explicit permission to do so. Notable personalities on the edges of the Christian movement also held to arguably non-human views of Jesus' body. The second century gnostic Valentinus of Alexandria believed Jesus did not urinate or defecate: 'Having endured everything he was continent; thus Jesus exercised his divinity. He ate and drank in a peculiar manner, not evacuating his food. So much power of continence was in food was not corrupted, since he himself had no corruptibility' (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.7.59.3; cf. Hunt, p.168). The fourth century desert monastic Evagrius of Pontus believed that the 'true shape' of Jesus' resurrection body, and ours, were spheres, because spheres were 'the perfect shape' in Hellenistic thought.

emotion, worship, etc. In Origen's framework, and in the framework of all who followed a similar line of thought, the question of inherited Adamic ancestral sin therefore emerged as a logical puzzle. If the soul comes directly from God, then how could it contain the corruption of sin within it? Would that not make God the author of each person's sinfulness? But if not the soul, then how might *the body* transmit the Adamic corruption of sinfulness, if in fact the soul contains our rationality and free will? Surely the body cannot transmit sinfulness if it was the mind (*nous*), the higher part of the soul (*psyche*), which fell away from God *prior to even being embodied*?

In fact, Origen undermined the idea of the unity of the human race in Adam by postulating that all beings existed as 'minds' prior to their embodiment. For Origen, embodiment happened after a cataclysmic, cosmic fall by all of these minds save one: the eternal Son of God. Origen then suggested, by allegorizing the text of Genesis, that embodiment was the result of various levels of the minds' intellectual neglect of God. Origen influenced subsequent theologians like Gregory of Nyssa to say that the 'coats of skin' were human bodies as we experience them today, but which are distinct in some way from the bodies (angelic, or 'heavenly') we had prior to the fall. This means that the human body that the incarnate Son took to himself is not ontologically intrinsic to true humanness: Jesus' body was not representative of the bodies we had (or not) prior to the fall; Jesus' physical body may not even be, in principle, a recapitulation of the unity that we purportedly share 'in Adam.'

Largely, Christians of late antiquity proposed a Neoplatonic Christian synthesis where the soul was to become impassible by governing the body under contemplation of the Word of God. This proposal rested on a distinction between the 'bodily passions,' especially sexual lust, and the intellectual ones like pride and anger. But problems with this synthesis of Christian faith and Neoplatonic hierarchy of soul over body would arise, as I discuss below. Not only do modern studies of the brain, human development, and trauma challenge this distinction, but the Christian Neoplatonic conception of the self did not fully answer the questions about the nature and location of ancestral sin, and the role of human desires prior to the faculty of the will and its exercise. This is what we must understand about the context of the debate between the orthodox and Apollinarian. Irenaeus' biblical-Jewish anthropology fully honoring the body and soul equally has been eclipsed in Christian discussions.⁴⁸¹ Origen's Platonic vision centered on the soul is ascendant. The upshot of this shift in conceiving of the body-soul relation is that all authors addressing the topic of the humanity of Jesus – including Athanasius, in his two books against Apollinarian, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and so on – face terminological challenges when they attempt to express the status of Jesus' humanity from conception, and his personal sinlessness in word, deed, thought, etc.

Glancing ahead beyond Athanasius, we know the Cappadocians had a cautious appreciation for Origen, not least because their grandparents had been converted and baptized by Origen's disciple Gregory Thaumaturgos, who proclaimed the gospel in the Cappadocian region in a ministry famous for miracles and wonders. Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea, aware of Origen's undue dependence on Platonic ideas inherited from Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, extracted a collection of Origen's teachings into the first *Philokalia*. Gregory of Nyssa developed his own way of correcting Origen in his *Life of Moses*, but not without also maintaining some critical differences from Irenaeus on the nature of the human body. I believe this lingering Origenist (or Platonic) influence hindered the Cappadocians' response to Apollinarian. This weakness is present to a lesser degree in Athanasius' two books *Contra Apollinarium*.

Apollinarian of Laodicea and His Teaching

Apollinarian the Younger (died 382) was bishop of Laodicea in Syria (not the Laodicea in Asia Minor which appears in Colossians and Philemon) during the latter half of the fourth century. His brilliance was well-known and appreciated before he developed or expressed views considered to be heretical. When in 362 Emperor Julian the Apostate forbade Christians from teaching classical Greek literature, Apollinarian and his father, Apollinarian the Elder, translated the Old Testament into Homeric and Pindaric poetic verse and the New Testament into the style of Platonic dialogues. He wrote letters, commentaries on Scripture, a thirty volume critique of the Neoplatonist Porphyry, and critiques of various heresies.⁴⁸² Moreover, Apollinarian was a staunch and able supporter of the Nicene Creed and Athanasius, with whom he had an extensive correspondence including discussion regarding a draft of the latter's *Epistle to Epictetus of Corinth*. Epiphanius says that Apollinarian was 'dear to us, to Pope

⁴⁸¹ John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.218 says, 'Irenaeus's emphasis on the flesh and his teaching that the body was in the image of God were soon marginalized by the pervasive influence of Origen's theology, and were never retrieved thereafter.'

⁴⁸² George Leonard Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (London: SPCK, 1968; originally published 1940), p.100; cf. Hunt, p.176

Athanasius, and to all orthodox men.⁴⁸³

Although some uncertainties exist about the historical timeframe concerning Apollinaris, his teaching, and his movement, what seems clear is that in the year 376, Apollinaris sent his disciple Vitalis to Rome to appeal to Pope Damasus I for support. Apollinaris seems to have believed that sin was invariably linked to thoughts in the human mind (*nous*). Apollinaris took seriously the assertion that ‘all sinned’ (Rom.5:12), and the Pauline anthropology that used the terms ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) and ‘mind’ (*nous*) (Rom.7:14 – 8:11). Apollinaris was concerned with both divinity and humanity and the relation between them.

Apollinaris believed that the Logos was the archetypal ‘mind’ in whose image all other minds were created and served as secondary replicas.⁴⁸⁴ The influence of Philo and Origen can be felt on this point, not least in the view that the fundamental ontological essence of a human being was her or his *mind*, not *body*. Apollinaris believed this model of Christ ensured a single subject in Jesus (no ‘two sons’ christology which tended towards adoptionism). To that end, he asserted that the human flesh was ‘mixed’ with the eternal Logos, and became ‘one natural reality’ (*mia physis*) with it. He regularly used the words ‘mixture’ (*mixis*) and ‘fusion’ (*synkrasis, synchysis*) to denote the union, assertions later denied by the Council of Chalcedon 451. He also believed his model ensured that passibility and suffering would be attributed to Jesus’ physical body alone, not to the Son in himself, protecting the Son proper from change, and showing once again that notions of passibility and impassibility were driving christological concerns.⁴⁸⁵ Apollinaris wished to narrowly interpret Athanasius’ already abbreviated statement, ‘the Word used the body as an instrument,’ as the totality of what happened in the incarnation.⁴⁸⁶

Apollinaris was also concerned to answer what caused all human beings to be sinful, and simultaneously protect Jesus from it.⁴⁸⁷ Not unreasonably, he answered the question by saying that all expressions of sin begin as thoughts; so the mental activity alone made one guilty in an active sense because he believed that thoughts move in more or less a linear movement into actions. What then of Jesus? Apollinaris implied that Jesus did not grow intellectually and emotionally as a human being, and that Jesus could not have been ignorant of anything at any point during his earthly life, which represented a docetic (‘mere appearance without the substance’) element as far as Jesus’ inner life was concerned. This raised troubling moral questions about the origins of Christian faith. Had the authors of the four Gospel accounts been deceptive? Had Jesus been himself? Athanasius had wrestled with such exegetical questions in his *Third Discourse Against the Arians* and not fared much better, unfortunately.⁴⁸⁸ While Athanasius was exploring these issues with the understanding that Jesus had a human mind, he nevertheless asserted that Jesus actually knew things when he professed ignorance or asked others for answers, etc. This was functionally identical to Apollinaris’ exegetical conclusions. If we take Athanasius’ opinions about Jesus’ human growth and knowledge-ignorance as somewhat typical of Christian theologians in the fourth century, then we can understand why this weakness in the realm of biblical exegesis left an opening in the realm of formal dogmatic theology.

E. Jerome Van Kuiken asserts that Apollinaris made or sustained a two-fold argument about Jesus. ‘Christ had heavenly flesh rather than flesh of Adamic descent and that, within that flesh, the divine Logos substituted for the human mind (or soul).’⁴⁸⁹ Van Kuiken is mistaken about the first point, and overly simplistic about the second. ‘His argument is far more subtle than this and in no single passage early or late does Apollinaris say that Christ did not assume a human soul.’⁴⁹⁰ Apollinaris’ agreement with Athanasius’ *Letter to Epictetus of Corinth*⁴⁹¹ signals

⁴⁸³ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 77.2

⁴⁸⁴ John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p.180

⁴⁸⁵ McGuckin, p.180

⁴⁸⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarium* 1.2 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, with Notes, and an Appendix on S. Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret* (translated by members of the English Church; Oxford: James Parker & Co., and London: Rivingtons, 1881), p.84 – 86 reports how the Apollinarians use this language

⁴⁸⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarium* 2.6 *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.122 – 123 addresses the Apollinarian argument, ‘But you say, ‘If he assumed all, then assuredly he had human thoughts; but it is impossible that in human thoughts there should not be sin; and how then will Christ be without sin?’

⁴⁸⁸ See Mako A. Nagasawa, *Athanasius as Nicene Interpreter of Jesus’ Humanity: Third Discourse Against the Arians / Contra Arianos 3 (345 AD)*, found here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec-athanasius-of-alexandria>

⁴⁸⁹ E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ’s Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), p.109

⁴⁹⁰ Hunt, p.180 quoting Charles E. Raven, *Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), p.173

⁴⁹¹ Robin Orton, *St. Gregory of Nyssa, Anti-Apollinarian Writings* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), p.10 notes that Apollinaris writes of his agreement with Athanasius on the human soul of Christ (in *Letter to Epictetus of Corinth 7*) in his own correspondence with Serapion of Thmuis. Scholars estimate the date of Apollinaris’ letter to Serapion between 360 to 370.

either that accounts to that effect are exaggerated by modern scholars, or that Apollinaris made a genuine shift in his terminology or thought. Regardless, in 376, Vitalis brought a creedal statement with him to Rome, hoping to win from Pope Damasus approval for his teacher Apollinaris. By that time, Apollinaris was willing to grant that Jesus had a real human body and an ‘animal soul’ (*psyche*). But Apollinaris asserted that the divine Logos replaced, or served as, the human mind (*nous*) in Jesus. Again, Apollinaris was motivated (among other things) by a concern to prevent the human Jesus from being described as ‘sinful,’ which is, notably, the same concern of the ‘unfalleness’ camp.

Complicating the situation was the crisis of church leadership occurring at Antioch. In 362, Athanasius wrote his *Tome to the Antiochenes* hoping to reconcile the two Nicene parties (led by Paulinus and Meletus, respectively) and uniting them against a third, an Arian, bishop. Athanasius was not successful. He did not mention Vitalis, so it stands to reason that sometime after 362, Vitalis broke away and formed a fourth group, an Apollinarian one.⁴⁹² In the judgment of Robin Orton, this move must have roughly coincided with Vitalis’ trip to Rome in 376.⁴⁹³ In 376, Damasus of Rome initially agreed to recognize Vitalis’ orthodoxy on Nicene grounds, but upon receiving more information about his christology, wrote to Paulinus of Antioch (one of the Nicene bishops there) to require of Vitalis agreement with dogmatic statements about the humanity of Christ. This move furnishes us with the first unambiguous and datable appearance and condemnation of Apollinarian christology. Damasus demanded that Vitalis specifically renounce ‘the doctrine that the Logos indwelt Christ’s human body as a mind.’⁴⁹⁴ Apollinaris’ mature writings, set forth in a document called the *Apodeixis*, asserted exactly that. Yet Vitalis refused to yield.

Apollinaris remained active elsewhere trying to gather support from others, but without success. In Palestine, the scholar and translator Jerome rejected his overtures. So did a group of pro-Nicene bishops exiled from Egypt, relocated to the Galilee region and led by Peter of Alexandria, the successor of Athanasius. With this latter group, Apollinaris tried to argue that ‘his Christology was identical with that of Athanasius.’⁴⁹⁵ This is significant to a historical appraisal of Athanasius’ own christology. The encounter suggests both how Athanasius might have been misrepresented by Apollinaris (probably Athanasius’ earlier writings where he said the Word used the human body as an instrument), and how he was (more properly) understood by his successor and fellow bishops from Alexandria. Orton writes bluntly, ‘But they were able to examine some of Apollinarius’s writings, became suspicious of his teachings, and rejected his approaches.’⁴⁹⁶ This strongly suggests that Athanasius had more developed views about the humanity of Christ than he left in, say, his writings against the Arians, where he was defending the divinity of Christ. Quite possibly, the two books which have been attributed to Athanasius were written by these Alexandrian bishops in exile.

Curiously, however, the response of the orthodox to Apollinaris was less than vigorous, even confused and self-sabotaging. Scholars cite church business, church politics, and imperial politics as factors. I suggest a theological reason, in addition. A retelling of the history will be helpful.

Shortly after Vitalis returned to Antioch from Rome, the heresy hunter Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, visited Antioch. He identified Vitalis’ teaching as heretical, and wrote in his *Panarion/Against Heresies* that Vitalis was teaching that Jesus had a human soul (*psyche*) but not a human mind (*nous*).⁴⁹⁷ Epiphanius asked Basil of Caesarea to intervene in Antioch, but Basil declined, probably not wanting to muddy the waters at Antioch further, and immediately alienate the Vitalian contingent. Basil did accuse Apollinaris of abandoning the literal sense of Scripture and wholly embracing its allegorical sense only. Although we do not have extant writings of Apollinaris to substantiate Basil’s accusation, assuming Basil’s accuracy, this is a sign that Apollinaris was expressing one wing of theology plausibly influenced by Philo and Origen, in terms of his biblical methodology.

The following year, in 377, Basil decided to seek Rome’s support in condemning various heretical views in the Eastern church. A synod was convened in Rome, which condemned the substance of Apollinaris’ teaching without naming him, along with the view of Sabellius (directed towards the followers of Marcellus of Ancyra with Paulinus of Antioch suspected) and the view of Eustathius of Sebaste that the Holy Spirit was not consubstantial with the

⁴⁹² Orton, p.13 – 14

⁴⁹³ Orton, p.15

⁴⁹⁴ Orton, p.16

⁴⁹⁵ Orton, p.17

⁴⁹⁶ Orton, p.17

⁴⁹⁷ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion/Against Heresies* 77.22 - 23

Father and Son. Administratively, however, very little of this was carried out. Basil died in January of 379.

The second ecumenical council, Constantinople 381, equivocated on Apollinarian teaching. ‘It may be, as Lietzmann suggests, that the message to the Apollinarians was that, provided they made no political trouble and did not set up their own bishops, a blind eye would be turned to their doctrinal peculiarities.’⁴⁹⁸ Whatever added imperial pressure that Emperor Theodosius brought to bear may have been a factor in the background, perhaps in unwritten backroom conversation. Yet in 382, Ambrose of Milan wrote to Emperor Theodosius complaining that Apollinarianism should be exiled from his bishopric (he was still presumably at Syrian Laodicea) and urging an explicit condemnation of his teaching. Later that year, Theodosius urged the Eastern bishops to hold a synod at Constantinople. But the bishops still allowed ambiguity to stand about Jesus’ divine *and human* minds. They said, vaguely, that ‘the dispensation of the flesh is neither soulless nor mindless nor imperfect’ and that ‘God’s Word was perfect before the ages, and became perfect man in the last days for our salvation.’⁴⁹⁹ Apollinarianism and his followers could co-sign statements like that. No one doubted that Jesus Christ had a mind. The issue was whether he had both a divine mind and a human mind, or only a divine one. I also note here the use of the term ‘perfect’ for Jesus’ humanity at conception, not the resurrection as the *Epistle to the Hebrews* declares (Heb.5:9), and will discuss it below. We are seeing here the redefining and redeployment of biblical terms about Jesus’ humanity.

By the autumn of 382, the Apollinarians had set up a bishop in Nazianzus and were worrying Cledonius the priest. Cledonius was an ally of Gregory of Nazianzus, who had stationed Cledonius there when he, being in poor health, took up residence in Xanxaris. Gregory wrote *Epistle 101* to Cledonius condemning Apollinarian teaching on Jesus’ humanity. This letter is where Gregory famously says that if God had not taken all of our human nature to Himself in the incarnation, including the human mind (*nous*), then some part has been left behind, unsaved: ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ Soon afterwards, Gregory wrote *Epistle 102* to Cledonius dismantling the Apollinarians’ common accusation against the orthodox that he and they believed in ‘two Sons’ – one divine and one human. In 383, Gregory had to return to Nazianzus to resume his ministry, preaching against the Apollinarians. Probably around this time, Gregory enlisted the help of his friend Gregory of Nyssa, the younger brother of Basil of Caesarea and the third of ‘the Cappadocian fathers,’ to take up the pen against the Apollinarian heresy.⁵⁰⁰ The younger Gregory would write two such books, which I will explore later.

In July 383, Emperor Theodosius issued a decree outlawing the eucharists and ordinations of various heretical groups: the Eunomians, the Macedonians (or ‘Pneumatomachoi,’ those who did not accept the divinity of the Holy Spirit, against whom Athanasius had written his *Letters to Serapion* around 360), and the Arians.⁵⁰¹ Yet curiously again, the Apollinarians were not mentioned. In September, this ‘oversight’ was corrected to include the Apollinarians.⁵⁰² From this point in time onward, ostensibly church leaders and imperial decrees were aimed squarely at the Apollinarian movement. Yet in 387, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote a letter complaining about the Apollinarians’ continued success. Gregory of Nazianzus’ letter was addressed to Nectarius, bishop of Constantinople. Perhaps not coincidentally, in 388, Emperor Theodosius promulgated his most forceful decree against the Apollinarians, outlawing their eucharists and ordinations, deposing their bishops, and banning them from the imperial presence.⁵⁰³

Yet despite this ostensibly formidable opposition from both church and state hierarchies, only the death of Apollinarianism himself in either 390 or 392 dealt the major setback to the movement.

‘The imperial decrees did not succeed, however, and the heresy was well received among many Orientals, but it did not long survive its originator.’⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁸ Orton, p.23

⁴⁹⁹ Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.9. See Robin Orton, p.26

⁵⁰⁰ Starting in 380, Gregory of Nyssa became unusually productive in his literary output against heretical movements. This included his *Against Eunomius*, *To the Greeks – Common Notions*, and *To Ablabius – On Not Three Gods*. Orton suggests that during the period 380 – 385, Nyssen also wrote his two treatises against the Apollinarians: the *Answer Against Apollinarianism* and the *Letter to Theophilus Against the Apollinarians*. See Orton, p.31.

⁵⁰¹ *Codex Theodosius* 16.5.11; see <http://ancientrome.ru/ius/library/codex/theod/liber16.htm#5>

⁵⁰² *Codex Theodosius* 16.5.12

⁵⁰³ *Codex Theodosius* 16.5.14

⁵⁰⁴ Encyclopedia.com, ‘Apollinarianism’; <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/christianity-general/apollinarianism>

The Catholic Encyclopedia offers:

‘His following, at one time considerable in Constantinople, Syria, and Phoenicia, hardly survived him. Some few disciples, like Vitalis, Valentinus, Polemon, and Timothy, tried to perpetuate the error of the master and probably are responsible for the forgeries noticed above. The sect itself soon became extinct. Towards 416, many returned to the mother-Church, while the rest drifted away into Monophysitism.’⁵⁰⁵

Robin Orton assesses the evidence as follows:

‘But even then, though Apollinarianism was at last clearly, definitively, and officially outlawed in both East and West, there is evidence for its survival into the fifth century— only in 425 were the Apollinarians at Antioch officially reconciled under Bishop Theodotus—and it seems certain that it provided fertile soil for the nurture of the monophysitism which was to trouble the church in that century.’⁵⁰⁶

Thus, one interpretation of Apollinarianism is that it did not, in fact, die out. It simply mutated. As the three way Nestorian-Chalcedonian-Monophysite debates on the humanity of Christ erupted in the fifth century, the concerns about the interaction between divine and human natures in Christ – whether expressed in Platonic notions of impassible divinity and passible humanity; in exegetical categories of Antiochene and Alexandrian approaches to Scripture; and with terminological confusion of how Jesus could be human (and ‘mortal,’ even ‘fallen’) and yet actively sinless – were absorbed and rearticulated along different lines. For example, Augustine said that his friend Alypius was confused when he came ‘towards the Christian faith, until he ascertained that it was the error of the Apollinarian heretics.’⁵⁰⁷

Seeking to explain the historical difficulties that the orthodox clergy had in mobilizing against Apollinarianism, Hans Lietzmann suggests that the Apollinarian movement must have had an advocate in the court of Constantinople.⁵⁰⁸ Orton, by citing Lietzmann, seems to grant that as a possibility. It certainly may have been so. Yet the ‘court advocate’ theory explains neither the reticence among bishops to criticize Apollinarianism nor the ground-level support and even momentum enjoyed by his followers. The felt need to maintain a pro-Nicene alliance in the fight against the Arian camps might also explain much – yet, again, it does not explain everything. Orthodox leaders criticized Marcellus of Ancyra, so why not Apollinarianism? Perhaps his esteem and his friendship with Athanasius protected him. Yet the divided church leadership at Antioch was already an open wound which the bishops were trying to address at least since Athanasius’ intervention in 362.

One more factor seems necessary to posit: terminological and conceptual weakness in the church, broadly speaking, about the humanity of Jesus, and specifically the nature of body. Hannah Hunt, in her insightful study of the theological views of the body in early Christianity, points out, ‘It is sometimes said that Apollinarianism predated Apollinarianism.’⁵⁰⁹ For example, Apollinarianism could appeal to the second century apologist Justin Martyr, who said, ‘Christ, who appeared for our sakes, became the whole rational being, both body, and reason (*logos*), and soul.’⁵¹⁰ Justin incorporated a Hellenistic understanding of the body-soul relation where the soul was divided into lower (animal) and higher (logical) functions. Not only does Justin’s deployment of these key terms correspond imprecisely with the apostle Paul’s, he demonstrates the Hellenistic Christian tendency to elevate reason (mind, *nous*) to the uppermost part of the human, even its most fundamental ontological portion, and left a terminological opening for Apollinarianism to claim that the Logos occupied that part.

Hence, I contend that the departure from Irenaeus of Lyons regarding the human body-soul unity, and the embrace of other understandings of the body-soul relationship, especially that of Origen of Alexandria, led to confusion and vulnerability on the part of the pro-Nicenes. This is where the ‘unfallenness’ camp starts to take an identifiable shape, using key biblical terms but at the cost of fidelity to apostolic meanings of those terms, as I will demonstrate below. It contributed to the tension between the ‘school of Antioch’ and the ‘school of Alexandria’ especially over the use of allegory. It contributed to the eventual split between the Eastern Orthodox who defended Chalcedonian

⁵⁰⁵ Catholic Encyclopedia, New Advent, ‘Apollinarianism’; <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01615b.htm>

⁵⁰⁶ Orton, p.27

⁵⁰⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 7.19

⁵⁰⁸ Hans Lietzmann, *Apollinarianism* (1904) cited by Orton, p.26 – 27

⁵⁰⁹ Hunt, p.178

⁵¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 10; cf. Hunt, p.178

dyophysite christology and the Oriental Orthodox who were ‘monophysite’ or ‘miophysite.’ It led to an emotional (if not theological) opening for the cult of the saints, since Christians wondering who could understand the struggle of trying to be faithful from within a fallen human nature could no longer look to Jesus. It contributed to a lack of appreciation of the role of biblical Israel, and a tendency to underappreciate the Jewishness of Jesus, since Jesus was considered to have lived ‘under the law,’ but without the fallen human nature that Israelites actually had while ‘under the law.’ It led to theological and pastoral weaknesses which emerged in curious eccentric views like apthartodocetism, which I will explain below. It contributed to the growth of extreme monastic views critical of marriage and sexuality. And so on.

Pseudo-Athanasius, *Contra Apollinarium* (4th – 5th century)

Introduction

Two books attributed to Athanasius take aim at the Apollinarian heresy. Even though church tradition ascribes them to the Alexandrian bishop who dominated the intellectual life of the church during the mid-fourth century, the writings themselves are anonymous. Modern scholars, perceiving some subtle but important differences between these two works and those uncontested in authorship, therefore call them ‘pseudo-Athanasius.’⁵¹¹ The question of authorship is an interesting one. In 1985, George Dion. Dragas put forward the most recent argument in favor of these writings being genuinely from Athanasius, perhaps written shortly before his death in 373.⁵¹² Dragas suggests that Athanasius refrained from naming both himself and Apollinaris in the text out of respect for their friendship and alliance under the Nicene banner. In 1988, however, R.P.C. Hanson maintained several meaningful objections to Dragas’ thesis, with some of which I concur.⁵¹³ For purposes of his own study, E. Jerome Van Kuiken takes them to be from Athanasius, and expresses confidence that the two books rest on the ‘unfallen’ view of Jesus’ humanity.⁵¹⁴ Van Kuiken believes the evidence contained within the two books *Contra Apollinaris* is sufficient to qualify and condition our understanding of Athanasius’ earlier writings. For purposes of my study, I am concerned about both the question of authorship and even more in the question of reception. Christians received these two letters as sufficiently Athanasian so as to pass them under his name. Although I am not persuaded that they are from Athanasius’ own hand, I regard them as reflecting many of Athanasius’ terminological and conceptual patterns. Hereafter, I refer to the author of the two books *Contra Apollinarium* as ‘Athanasius.’

The key sections in the two books where Athanasius explores the nature of Jesus’ humanity are *Contra Apollinarium* 1.6 – 8 and 2.5 – 11. Before and after those sections, Athanasius engages with Apollinarian ideas and rebuts them. I will focus my comments on *Contra Apollinarium* 1.6 – 8 and 2.5 – 11 since these two sections deal more positively with Scripture and logical points related to the incarnate Son’s human nature and his mission. Since 2.5 – 11 contains more material, I will address 2.5 – 11 before 1.6 – 8 and a few other sections. But before that, I address a major consideration about words and their definitions, a topic which must be regularly revisited in this study.

A Caution: When the Meanings of Key Terms Change

I believe what we find in *Contra Apollinarium* is another instance of Christians, in the midst of theological debate and controversy, taking key biblical terms at times, and shifting their meaning, or range of meaning. This had already happened long before the fourth century with the terms ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of Man.’ Starting from the second century, during the theological debates about the Son and the Trinity, ‘Son of God’ referred to Jesus’ divinity, and ‘Son of Man’ referred to his humanity. While this shorthand is perfectly understandable on one level, it is also an amusing, ironic, and potentially dangerous fact that Christians from the second century onwards swapped the underlying *meanings* of these biblical titles almost perfectly.

In biblical idiom, ‘Son of God’ was a title applied to Israel collectively (Ex.4:22; Hos.11:1; Ps.80:15; Rom.9:4) and especially to the Davidic kings (Ps.2:7; 89:27); thus Solomon was said to sit, not merely on the throne of David, but ‘the throne of the LORD’ (1 Chr.29:23). In the Bible, ‘Son of God’ referred to humans in our humanity, especially in the role as inheriting something from God, because ‘sonship’ invoked, among other things, ‘inheritance.’ Even

⁵¹¹ See e.g. the note on p.143 – 147 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*

⁵¹² George Dion. Dragas, *St. Athanasius Contra Apollinarem* (Athens: Church and Theology, 1985)

⁵¹³ R.P.C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318 – 381 AD* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p.645 – 651. In my opinion, Hanson’s most significant objections are: (1) the Apollinarians have been attacking the doctrine of the author, but it is incongruous that the historical Apollinaris would have attacked Athanasius outright because other literature in this purported time frame demonstrates good relations between them (p.647 – 8); (2) a very unusual use of the term ‘homoousion’; and (3) Athanasius pre-362 demonstrated a reluctance to stabilize and use the term ‘hypostasis’ so it is a surprise to find the phrase ‘hypostatic union’ in these letters. Hanson’s skepticism that Athanasius did not believe Jesus had a human soul and mind is less compelling, and has been significantly answered by Khaled Anatolios. Athanasius’ description of the human soul and mind in his earliest work, *Contra Gentes*, is sufficient evidence that his theological anthropology included such. At the core, in my view, Athanasius struggles in his christological terminology with the question and terminology of divine passibility and impassibility, which then affects his understanding of Jesus’ human changes – emotional and intellectual – and limitations (such as ignorance and his motivation for asking questions), when placed against the backdrop of a divine nature which, in some sense, was asserted to not change. While I differ from Athanasius in his definition of passibility and impassibility, I nevertheless affirm with Anatolios, et.al. that his early articulation of the incarnation and soteriology is spacious enough to contain a human soul and mind in Christ. Also, that the exiled Alexandria bishops, led by Athanasius’ successor Peter, rejected Apollinaris’ claim to be the intellectual heir of Athanasius, is a major historical attestation that Athanasius did in fact teach about the humanity in Christ in more robust ways than his surviving literary corpus suggests.

⁵¹⁴ E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ’s Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), p.108 – 112

the phrase ‘son of’ did not necessarily imply physical descent but inheritance, including the inheritance of certain characteristics (e.g. ‘Barnabus’ was a nickname that meant ‘son of encouragement’). ‘Son of Man,’ however, referred to the ambiguous but possibly divine figure in the vision of Daniel the prophet, who *looked* human: he looked ‘*like* a Son of Man’ (Dan.7:13). That figure, in the context of Daniel, might even be connected to the angelic one who protected the three Hebrew young men in the fiery furnace: ‘the fourth is like a son of the gods!’ (Dan.3:25). In the Bible, ‘Son of God’ referred to humans, and ‘Son of Man’ referred to an ambiguous but possibly angelic, even divine, figure. Jesus seems to have enjoyed using the title ‘Son of Man’ for himself because of the ambiguity present in the title. Again, Christians redeployed these terms but outfitted them with almost perfectly exchanged meanings. Incidentally, this is one clue that the church as a whole was gradually losing the ability to interpret the Old Testament in a literary-historical way.

In theory, responsible and sensitive observers could separate the context of Scripture from the context of the theological debates of the early centuries. In practice, however, the discourse was undoubtedly confusing. For example, we find Athanasius himself expending a massive amount of energy arguing in what sense ‘Wisdom’ personified in Proverbs 8 was ‘begotten’ or ‘created,’ simply because he equated ‘Wisdom’ with the Son directly.⁵¹⁵ He therefore believed he needed to parse out when Proverbs 8:22 – 23 referred to the eternal, pre-incarnate Son (who was ‘begotten by the Father’ eternally) and when this passage referred to the incarnate Son in his humanity (and whose humanity was ‘created’). While Athanasius’ solution is ingenious, the fact remains that he could have simply argued that ‘Wisdom’ personified in Proverbs 8 does *not* refer straightaway to the Son, but simply a type of relationship that the Creator God had with His creation, and how Israel served as a locus of that relationship. Yet he accepted the basic proposition – shared by Arians and orthodox alike – that Proverbs 8 was ‘about’ the Son.

The typological-allegorical practices that permeated the early church, both on the orthodox side and the heretical side(s), along with the detailed intensity with which both camps sought to ground their positions in Scripture, led to Christians reading back into Scripture meanings that did not exist there before. While some interpretations were admirably perceptive, others were clever and appreciable, and still others were alarming. These practices might even have fueled the fire of the heretics, who noticed that a few orthodox practices of reading and interpreting Scripture were arbitrary to some degree, which is a much longer story. Thus, during the theological debates, both sides used key biblical terms, and they assumed that the meanings they attached to these terms were perfectly continuous with their meanings in Scripture, yet this was not always the case. Although Athanasius, at the close of these two books says that he is simply resting on Scripture alone and encourages Apollinaris to return to Scripture,⁵¹⁶ it is not exactly Scripture alone that he was deploying.

The Redefining of Key Terms: ‘Perfect’

Throughout *Contra Apollinarium*, the meanings of a few biblical terms are being subtly but significantly *shifted*, particularly the words ‘perfect,’ ‘flesh,’ and ‘likeness.’ I will first discuss the word ‘perfect’ in biblical usage and in the context of the Apollinarian controversy. In Hebrews, the word ‘perfect’ refers to Jesus’ human status *after he was raised from the dead*. In critical passages, Hebrews discusses the earthly faithfulness of Jesus, and moves to consider his suffering on the cross, to the perfection he obtained in his resurrection:

2:10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to *perfect* the author of their salvation through sufferings.

5:7 In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.⁸ Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.⁹ And *having been made perfect*, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation...

10:1 For the Law... can never... *make perfect* those who draw near.

⁵¹⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.18 – 82

⁵¹⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinaris* 2.19 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.142 says, ‘And you, who employ the same sophisms [as earlier heretics], say what is not written in Scripture, and pervert the unstable. But it is enough to believe in what has been written, and what has taken place as Paul says, ‘Like to us in all things, without sin,’ and Peter, ‘Since Christ then suffered for us in flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind’, and not push speculations further, and so reject the truth.’

Jesus was not ‘immoral’ – that is, actively disobedient or unfaithful to the Father – before his resurrection. In that sense, he was ‘without sin’ (Heb.4:15). Yet in the language of Hebrews, there was something ‘incomplete’ and even ‘imperfect’ about Jesus’ human nature prior to his resurrection, at the very least because of the mortality that Jesus endured by virtue of partaking in a post-fall human nature and sharing in that baseline experience of all human beings (Heb.2:14 – 15).

I find it significant and concerning that Athanasius, in his earlier works, when describing the humanity of Christ, uses the term ‘perfect’ along the same lines as Hebrews – that is, ‘perfect’ refers to the resurrection and the quality or state of Jesus’ human nature being purified of mortality and sinfulness. Of course, Athanasius describes other things as ‘perfect,’ including the quality of arguments, the physical shape of objects, the nature of God, and so forth. But insofar as he describes the humanity of Jesus as ‘perfect,’ he restrains himself to the meaning already assigned to that word by Hebrews. In *On the Incarnation* (written ~328), he uses the word ‘perfect’ four times, each time referring to Jesus’ resurrected body, including the impact of his sacrifice on the cross to purify his human nature, and using the language of Hebrews 2:14.⁵¹⁷ In *Festal Letter* 11 (339), Athanasius refers to ‘all that is future and perfect,’⁵¹⁸ again demonstrating that ‘the perfect’ when denoting the human refers to that which is resurrected. In *Discourses Against the Arians 1 – 3* (342 – 3), he only refers to Jesus’ resurrected human nature as ‘perfect.’⁵¹⁹ In fact, in the *Second Discourse* 2.67, Athanasius states the logical complement to Hebrews about Jesus’ human nature being *imperfect* prior to his resurrection: ‘the *perfect* Word of God puts around Him an *imperfect body*, [that] He might, by Himself, *perfect* what was wanting to man. Now *immortality* was wanting to him, and the way to paradise...’ In his sermon *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, Athanasius refers to ‘all things’ being ‘set right and *perfected*’ because of Jesus’ resurrection.⁵²⁰ In *Life of Antony* (362), Athanasius deploys the word ‘perfect’ to the desired outcome of moral-spiritual commitments Christians make – purification of the soul and martyrdom – which derive their meaning from Jesus’ own death and resurrection.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2.10 (the incarnate Son was made ‘*perfect* through suffering,’ quoting Hebrews 2:14); 4.21 (‘He took the occasion of *perfecting* His sacrifice’ by dying on the cross); 4.21 (‘His body rose in *perfect* soundness’); 6.37 (‘by means of a cross [Jesus] *perfected* his sacrifice for the salvation of all’)

⁵¹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Festal Letter* 11.1

⁵¹⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourse Against the Arians* 1.59 (‘The Law...*perfected* no one, needing the visitation of the Word, as Paul has said, but that visitation has *perfected* the work of the Father... [because] the presence of the Word *abolished death*’); 2.9 (‘...the Saviour’s sacrifice, taking place once, has *perfected* everything, and has become faithful as remaining *for ever*’); 2.56 (‘by His dwelling in the flesh, sin might *perfectly* be expelled from the flesh’); 2.66 – 67 (‘man, though created *perfect*, has become wanting through the transgression, and dead by sin, and it was unbecoming that the work of God should remain *imperfect*... therefore the *perfect* Word of God puts around Him an *imperfect* body, [that] He might, by Himself, *perfect* what was wanting to man. Now *immortality* was wanting to him, and the way to paradise... Therefore it remains for us to say that when He has become man, then He took the works. For then He *perfected* them, by healing our wounds and vouchsafing to us *the resurrection* from the dead... For then, because the works had become imperfect and mutilated from the transgression, He is said in respect to the body to be created; that by perfecting them and making them whole, He might present the Church unto the Father, as the Apostle says, ‘not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish’ Mankind then is *perfected* in Him and restored, as it was made at the beginning, nay, with greater grace. For, on *rising from the dead*, we shall no longer fear death, but shall ever reign in Christ in the heavens.’); 2.74 (‘For so He is founded for our sakes, taking on Him what is ours, that we, as incorporated and compacted and bound together in Him through the likeness of the flesh, may attain unto a perfect man, and abide immortal and incorruptible’); 3.22 (‘The Word then has the real and true identity of nature with the Father; but to us it is given to imitate it, as has been said; for He immediately adds, ‘I in them and You in Me; that they may be made *perfect* in one.’ Here at length the Lord asks something greater and more *perfect* for us; for it is plain that the Word has come to be in us, for He has put on our body. ‘And Thou Father in Me;’ ‘for I am Your Word, and since You are in Me, because I am Your Word, and I in them because of the body, and because of You the salvation of men is *perfected* in Me, therefore I ask that they also may become one, according to the body that is in Me and according to its *perfection*; that they too may become *perfect*, having oneness with It, and having become one in It; that, as if all were carried by Me, all may be one body and one spirit, and may grow up unto a *perfect* man.’); 3.23 (‘For whence is this their *perfecting*, but that I, Your Word, having borne their body, and become man, have *perfected* the work, which You gave Me, O Father? And the work is *perfected*, because men, redeemed from sin, *no longer remain dead*; but being deified, have in each other, by looking at Me, the bond of charity’); 3.51 (‘If He advanced when He became man, it is plain that, before He became man, He was *imperfect*; and rather the flesh became to Him a cause of *perfection*, than He to the flesh. And again, if, as being the Word, He advances, what has He more to become than Word and Wisdom and Son and God’s Power? For the Word is all these, of which if one can anyhow partake as it were one ray, such a man becomes all *perfect* among men, and equal to Angels. For Angels, and Archangels, and Dominions, and all the Powers, and Thrones, as partaking the Word, behold always the face of His Father. How then does He who to others supplies *perfection*, Himself advance later than they?’); 3.52 (‘To men then belongs advance; but the Son of God, since He could not advance, being *perfect* in the Father, humbled Himself for us, that in His humbling we on the other hand might be able to increase. And our increase is no other than the renouncing things sensible, and coming to the Word Himself; since His humbling is nothing else than His taking our flesh. It was not then the Word, considered as the Word, who advanced; who is *perfect* from the *perfect* Father, who needs nothing, nay brings forward others to an advance; but humanly is He here also said to advance, since advance belongs to man.’)

⁵²⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27* chapter 2, says ‘Since then all things ‘were delivered’ to Him, and He is made Man, straightway all things were set right and *perfected*. Earth receives blessing instead of a curse, Paradise was opened to the robber, Hades cowered, the tombs were opened and the dead raised, the gates of Heaven were lifted up to await Him that ‘comes from Edom?’’

⁵²¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 34, 46.

In the Apollinarian controversy, however, writers on both sides attribute the term ‘perfect’ to Jesus’ humanity in other ways. Apollinaris claimed that his opponents – though Nicene in their doctrine of the Trinity – made Jesus out to be two ‘persons.’ This was because he accused them of applying the term ‘perfect’ to Jesus’ humanity in the sense that Jesus’ humanity had a ‘personhood’ of its own. Athanasius and other orthodox writers denied that, and argued for the distinction between ‘human nature’ and ‘human personhood.’ They replied that they must use the term ‘perfect’ to refer to the ‘completeness’ of the human nature the Son assumed in the incarnation. A key passage demonstrating this definition of ‘perfect’ is *Contra Apollinarium* 1.14 and 15:

‘Christ set us free in His own form which was like to ours, *perfect* and most real; how can you go on saying this, as if God had not yet been reconciled to mankind? How then was it that the Savior came among us? Was it as if He were unable to set free the whole of man? Or as if He abhorred the mind which had once sinned, or feared that he Himself might become a partaker in sin, if He, being God, were to become *perfect* man?’⁵²²

The density of references to our human nature make clear what Athanasius means. Jesus’ form was ‘like to ours, perfect’ in the sense of having body and rational soul. Jesus set free ‘the whole of man’ because he assumed ‘perfect man.’ Athanasius argues that Jesus had a human mind as well as a divine mind, which made his human nature ‘perfect’ in the sense that he had all the constituent components of human nature, which we have also. Consequently, Jesus was able to carry ‘the whole of man’ into resurrection and thus, salvation:

‘Because after God had made a nature in a sinless state, the devil perverted it into transgressing His commandment, and finding out deadly sin, therefore did God the Word restore for himself this nature in a state which it was incapable of being perverted by the devil and of finding out sin: and therefore did the Lord say, ‘The prince of the world comes, and finds nothing in me.’ But if the ruler of the world found in Christ not a single thing that was his, much more did Christ abandon to the ruler of this world nothing of his own handywork. Or this was another reason for his finding nothing in him – because Christ exhibited the principle of newness in its *perfection*, that he might accomplish in *perfection* the salvation of the whole of man, of reasonable soul and body, that resurrection might be *perfect*.’⁵²³

Apollinaris seems to have co-opted the term ‘perfect’ from the orthodox, and perhaps even Hebrews, and distorted it. Apollinaris argued the word required the inclusion of ‘human personhood’ and balked therefore at the suggestion of Jesus being ‘perfect God and perfect man.’ He argued that such a statement entailed two subjects or subjectivities in Jesus – thus, ‘two sons,’ which he accused the orthodox of upholding. Apollinaris also argued that if Jesus had a human mind, then he would have necessarily sinned in thought; Jesus would not have been ‘perfect’ in a moral sense.

In *Contra Apollinarium*, Athanasius attempts to reclaim the term ‘perfect’ from Apollinaris, but uses the term in a confusing way. While Athanasius seems to sometimes use the word ‘perfect’ to describe the quality of Jesus’ resurrected humanity, much like Hebrews does,⁵²⁴ at least on other occasions, he uses ‘perfect’ to describe the totality of the constituent parts of the human nature assumed by the Son at conception, without logically implying human personhood.⁵²⁵ While this was an understandable move, and while Athanasius is still clearly maintaining the qualitative difference between Jesus’ human nature before and after his resurrection, we must also acknowledge that Athanasius’ usage of the word ‘perfect’ is, at times, critically *different* from that in Hebrews *and his earlier writings*. In Hebrews, Jesus’ humanity could only be spoken of as ‘perfect’ following his lifelong faithfulness, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus needed to ‘purify’ (Heb.1:3; 9:13; etc.) mortality – at the very least – out of his

⁵²² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinaris* 1.14 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.105

⁵²³ Ibid 1.15 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.106

⁵²⁴ Ibid 1.14 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.105 probably refers to the resurrection when he says, ‘But if you cannot point out another place, beside the sepulchre and Hades, from which places man has been perfectly set free, because Christ set us free in his own form which was like to ours, *perfect* and most real...’ See also 1.15 in *ET*, p.106, ‘that he might accomplish in *perfection* the salvation of the whole of man, of reasonable soul and body, that resurrection also might be *perfect*.’

⁵²⁵ Ibid 1.7 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.93 says, ‘for he himself became man... he who is by nature God was born man, that these two might be one, *perfect* in all things, exhibiting his birth as natural and most true’. See also ibid 1.14 in *ET*, p.105, ‘How then was it that the Saviour came among us? Was it as if he were unable to set free the whole of man? Or as if he abhorred the mind which had once sinned, or if he, being God, were to become *perfect* man?’ See also ibid 1.20 in *ET*, p.113, ‘neither is an animated body in itself *perfect* man, nor is a “heavenly mind” in itself God’

humanity. One occurrence is quite critical: in *Contra Apollinaris* 1.21, Athanasius quotes Hebrews 10:1, ‘Why did the Law make nothing perfect?’ Did Jesus bypass life ‘under the Law’ by starting his human life already ‘perfect’? If he did that, could Jesus still be considered *Jewish*? Athanasius moves rather quickly onto other questions, leaving us to read the remainder of his two books very closely to understand his own answer.

The main problem associated with Athanasius’ language in *Contra Apollinarium* is that he encourages us to read back new content into a familiar word, even a biblical word. In Hebrews, the word ‘perfect’ is *eschatological*, refers to the *ultimate* plan of God for humans to make us immortal, and *includes* human volitional partnership and its reciprocal impact upon the human nature. In Athanasius’ *Contra Apollinarium*, by contrast, ‘perfect’ can sometimes be *creational*, refer to the *original* constitution of humans, and is *prior* to human volitional partnership. Athanasius quotes Hebrews straightforwardly and without exegetical qualification many times in *Contra Apollinarium*. This was sure to impact the reading and understanding of Scripture itself by others. The author of *Contra Apollinarium* gives the impression that his own understanding of when and how Jesus’ humanity became ‘perfect’ and in what sense it was ‘perfect’ is the same meaning Hebrews has about those matters. Yet it is not. And this tendency multiplies.

The Redefining of Key Terms: ‘Without Sin’

Another such phrase is also from Hebrews: the phrase ‘without sin.’ Both Apollinaris and Athanasius maintained that Jesus was ‘without sin,’ although how they envisioned Jesus doing that differed, of course. In *Contra Apollinarium*, Athanasius quotes the portion of Hebrews 4:15 that says ‘without sin’ in 2.5 and 2.19. The former serves as a kind of ‘thesis statement’ which Athanasius defends in 2.6ff., beginning with the central Apollinarian claim that having a human mind would have made Christ commit a sin. The latter occurs at the close of the second book. Its placement summarizes Athanasius’ case against Apollinaris.

The difference between how Hebrews describes Jesus as ‘without sin’ and how Athanasius does so is subtle but significant. Hebrews says this:

‘For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.’ (Hebrews 4:15)

When Hebrews declares that Jesus is ‘without sin,’ it does so to declare that he was victorious over every temptation. In other words, Hebrews uses the phrase to evaluate and celebrate Jesus’ spiritual and moral faithfulness as a human being. This was the journey Jesus took through the suffering, on his way to resurrection and to making his human nature ‘perfect.’ Hebrews argues that Jesus, as our true high priest, sympathizes with our weaknesses, and presumably even the time we capitulate to temptations.

By comparison, Athanasius deploys the same phrase but makes it, too, do double duty. In *Contra Apollinaris* 2.5, he argues that the manhood of the incarnate Son, and not his divinity, had a ‘beginning of existence from Nazareth.’ His humanity, which came through Mary, was from ‘David and Abraham, and of Adam.’ In other words, Athanasius is speaking here simply of Jesus’ authentic humanity. About this he says:

‘Having taken from the Virgin all that God originally fashioned and made in order to the constitution of man, yet without sin: as also the apostle says, ‘In all points like to us, yet without sin.’⁵²⁶

At the end of the two books, in 2.18 – 19, Athanasius summarizes his points and his terminology, saying:

‘But where there is the name of ‘flesh,’ there is the orderly form of our whole constitution, but without sin... And you, who employ the same sophisms [as earlier heretics], say what is not written in Scripture, and pervert the unstable. But it is enough to believe in what has been written, and what has taken place as Paul says, ‘Like to us in all things, without sin,’ and Peter, ‘Since Christ then suffered for us in flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind’, and not push speculations further, and so reject the truth.’⁵²⁷

These are not exact quotations of Hebrews 4:15. Athanasius has changed the context in which the phrase ‘without

⁵²⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinaris* 2.5 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.122.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid* 2.18 – 19 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.141 – 142.

sin' occurs. No longer does 'without sin' describe the faithfulness of Jesus to the Father, his victory over every kind of temptation, and his 'record,' so to speak, during and after his dynamic human life. Instead, Athanasius deploys the phrase *either* as a comment on the 'already purified' humanity of Jesus from the point of conception, *or* as a summary 'record' of Jesus' faithfulness and active obedience. The word 'sin' can legitimately refer to sin as a condition afflicting human nature, or sin as an action or activity. Thus, to repeat: Athanasius uses the phrase 'without sin' in a confusing way. It can be interpreted as a straightforward declaration of the 'unfallen' position, as Van Kuiken, for example, perceives it. Or, it can be interpreted as *not* declaring something about Jesus' ontological condition as human, either 'unfallen' or 'fallen,' but rather still as a record of his life activity, the telling of which is anticipated in 2.5, and summarized in 2.18 and 2.19.

This ambiguity exists because we are not absolutely sure how intertextual quotations work in this case. What was Athanasius' understanding of Hebrews 4:15 prior to writing *Contra Apollinaris*? Athanasius, curiously, does not quote Hebrews 4:15 in his earlier writings. James B. Ernest, in his thorough study of how Athanasius uses Scripture, finds it nowhere.⁵²⁸ This is remarkable, given that Athanasius wrote fairly extensively on pastoral topics like temptation. It is possible, after all, that Athanasius was bringing forward the summary 'report card' view of Jesus' earthly life, declaring him to be 'without sin,' and declaring it in advance in 2.5 and in retrospect in 2.18 and 2.19. We must keep in mind how Athanasius narrates the entirety of the ministry of the Son, from birth all the way to resurrection, and the importance he attributes to the parting of Jesus' body and soul in death for the plan of salvation. Also in 2.18, in the midst of summarizing the entire human career of Jesus, Athanasius offers the phrase 'his participation in our infirmities' which has tremendous meaning elsewhere in his writings, and would support the 'fallen' position.

Examining Athanasius' defense of the humanity of Jesus in 2.6 onwards will bring more clarity. In 2.6, Athanasius rebuts Apollinaris' accusation that granting a human mind to Jesus would invalidate the statement that he is 'without sin.' In 2.7, he counters Apollinaris' notion that a part of the world cannot save the rest of the world. In 2.8, he addresses Apollinaris' teaching that 'the transmission of sin' from parent to child would invalidate Jesus' claim to be 'without sin.'

Seed, Sowing, and the Human Mind

We can make a few key points about the main contours and terms of the debate. Both Apollinaris and Athanasius wished to vindicate Jesus of ever having had a sinful *thought*. They went about it in very different ways, however. In reply to Apollinaris' assertions about sinfulness being indelibly part of the human mind, Athanasius asserts that Jesus indeed had/has not only a genuine humanity, but in particular, a human *mind*. He advances the discussion beyond mere assertion, though, by arguing that there was no 'seed' of sin 'sown' in Jesus.⁵²⁹ By saying this, Athanasius is demonstrably referring to something happening *in Jesus' human mind*. The use of the terms 'seed' and 'sown' is very important. Throughout his writings, Athanasius consistently uses the image of the 'seed' being sown as an analogy for the reception of communication by the human mind. Naturally, he uses it while quoting straightforwardly from Jesus' parable of the four soils.⁵³⁰ Because the 'seed' image in Jesus' parables represents *a word*, the 'seed' in Athanasius' usage stands for rational communication that is understandable by human beings and received by us into ourselves. However, since Jesus also used 'seed' in the parable of the wheat and tares, 'seed' can have either a positive or negative meaning, depending on its content and origin. Tares, Jesus said, are negative 'seed' sown by the devil. Correspondingly, Athanasius uses the image of 'seed' to describe both the devil's influence on the human mind from the primeval fall⁵³¹ and the activities of heretics, demons, and the devil in spreading heresies in the church presently.⁵³² At issue is a message communicated, received, and internalized.

⁵²⁸ James B. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004)

⁵²⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarium* 1.15, 17; 2.6, 8, 10 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*

⁵³⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Festal Letter* 3.4; *Festal Letter* 10.4; *Ad Episcopos Aegypti et Libyae* 1

⁵³¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *First Letter to Virgins* 1.49 says, 'O virginity, you to whom many run, but who are not adorned by anyone as you are worthy! We are all far from you. The evil of the passions of destruction does not exist in us, for it is the snake, deceiving people with his teaching, who has cast it upon us. He has mixed the venom of the serpent with defilement for everyone. For he has sown within us like the serpent. He binds our inner thinking lest we be sober for him who is better and contemplate him who is higher, God.' This letter written in 337 might be his earliest known usage in this type. However, there is good reason to believe that the expansions that follow most of these apostrophes to virginity are not original. They were not known to Shenute, the Coptic archimandrite (c.350 – 466), whose quotation from this letter is one of its earliest testimonia, nor does their content reflect the distinctive themes of the letter. See David Brakke, 'The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana', *Or.*63 (1994), 17 – 56, at 21.

⁵³² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Arianos* 1.1 ('this second sowing of their own mortal poison'); 1.8 ('the devil, the author of heresies, because of the ill savour which attaches to evil, borrows Scripture language, as a cloak wherewith to sow the ground with his own poison also,

As further evidence of this, I point to Athanasius' references to human decisions made *from youth*. These occur in two places. First, in 2.6, Athanasius refers to Jesus' own youth by quoting Isaiah 7:16, when Isaiah refers to the messianic child choosing good and refusing evil 'before the child shall know [i.e. experientially] good or evil.'⁵³³ Athanasius immediately prefaces this remark by using the language of the seed 'sown in' to human nature, saying that the incarnate Son as a human child made choices, thereby 'contradicting that principle of contradiction which had been sown in with it.' Thus, for 'unfallenness' advocates to argue that Athanasius envisioned Jesus' human nature to be 'unfallen' or already 'purified' from conception, taking the Isaiah 7 quotation as evidence, goes beyond the text. Second, shortly thereafter in 2.8, Athanasius refers to the phase of youth for ordinary humans as the perilous time when the evil seed is sown into our minds. Apollinaris apparently quoted Genesis 8:21, which says, 'the mind of man is sedulously devoted to evil from youth.' The heretic used that as evidence that sinful activity commences from conception, inevitably, even in the case of Jesus. Athanasius retorts that Apollinaris is not 'understanding that by saying, 'from youth,' He [God] indicated what was 'sown in afterwards,' and perishable.'⁵³⁴ Once again, if Athanasius believed that Jesus cleansed his human nature of fallenness from conception, he does not say it here. Curiously, he seems to maintain, consistent with his emphasis on exploring the human mind, that there is some early childhood phase that is ontologically important, of course, but not morally relevant in the sense of assigning blameworthiness for having sinful thoughts. Although Athanasius does not quote Romans 7:9, he seems to agree with Paul's own description of human development, specifically under the teaching of the Sinai covenant, when he says, 'I was once alive apart from the Law, but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died' (Rom.7:9).

Van Kuiken feels certain that Athanasius rests his argument against Apollinaris on the unfallenness position, and as evidence cites *Contra Apollinarium* 2.10, the pivotal section where Athanasius declares that the devil did not find 'in him a token of the old seed sown in man.' Van Kuiken takes this statement as referring to Jesus' entire human nature in a static sense from conception. I believe his conclusion outruns the data. It is precisely in this context that Athanasius demonstrates his concern about desires and thoughts in Jesus' mind, following the use of the 'seed' image I just discussed. Jesus had 'flesh without carnal desires and human thoughts.' If Jesus had had interior desires and thoughts of a sinful type, then he would have failed the temptations from the devil, which Athanasius had denied in *Contra Apollinarium* 2.9. Instead, Jesus was perfectly faithful to the Father. The devil, as a result, was defeated: 'For on this account did the devil draw near to Jesus, as to a man, but not finding in him a token of the old seed sown in man, nor any success of his immediately attempt, he was defeated.' Thus, Athanasius discusses the 'seed sown' and the 'law of sin' in a dynamic, not static sense. This discussion, then, describes Jesus' exercise of his mind and will dynamically throughout his life. The 'nothing' that 'the prince of this world' found in Jesus – Athanasius strategically deploys John 14:30 here and elsewhere – referred to any record of active sin, even if interior sins, like coveting or lusting. 'But he did not find in him the things which he himself had produced in the first Adam, and thus was sin destroyed by Christ. Therefore also the Scripture testifies, 'Who did no sin, neither was guilt found in his mouth.'

Athanasius' quotation of Isaiah 53:9 at the end of 2.10 is well-chosen because it focuses our attention on sin as the *act*, not sin as the *condition*. Isaiah 53:9 sums up Jesus' record of active obedience by the time of his trial and crucifixion. The verse draws our attention to whether Jesus did any sinful *act*, and uses the Hebrew merism of deeds and words. The first line of the couplet is about deeds: he 'did no sin' in his deeds. The second line is about words:

and to seduce the simple'); 1.10 ('they may be put to shame, when they see him without resource who sowed this heresy in them'); 1.53 ('instead of the true sense sowing upon it the poison of their own heresy'); 2.32 ('For what is sown in every soul from the beginning is that God has a Son, the Word... But when the man who is an enemy, while men slept, made a second sowing, of 'He is a creature,' and 'There was once when He was not''); 3.59 ('they invent a fresh word, and by such clever language and specious evasion, they sow again that irreligion of theirs in another way'); *De Decretis* 3 ('If, the devil having sowed their hearts with this perverseness, they feel confidence in their bad inventions, let them defend themselves against the proofs of heresy which have been advanced') and 27 ('Not one of the understanding and wise; for all abhor you, but the devil alone; none but he is your father in this apostasy, who both in the beginning sowed you with the seed of this irreligion'); *Ad Episcopos Aegypti et Libyae* 3 (regarding demons sowing lies), 4 ('And strange it is, that while all heresies are at variance with one another concerning the mischievous inventions which each has framed, they are united together only by the common purpose of lying. For they have one and the same father that has sown in them all the seeds, of falsehood'), 18 ('But they will not do this, I am sure, for they are not so ignorant of the evil nature of those notions which they have invented and are ambitious of sowing abroad'), 22 ('who sowed among them the seeds of this heresy')

⁵³³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarium* 2.6 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.124. Significantly, earlier in this chapter, Athanasius discusses Adam and the fall. The parallel to Christ cannot be missed. Adam was 'without experience of evil, knowing only what was good... but when he disobeyed God's commandment, he became subject to thoughts leading to sin; not that God made the thoughts which were taking him captive, but that the devil by deceit sowed them...'

⁵³⁴ *Ibid* 2.8 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.126.

he said nothing sinful, so ‘neither was guilt found in his mouth.’ Jesus did not have to even confess by ‘his mouth’ interior sinful thoughts and desires that the apostle Paul said plagues the mind of every human being, in Romans 7:14 – 25. As such, Athanasius signals his interest in Jesus’ active, dynamic obedience, and Jesus’ perfect record of complete faithfulness compared with zero active sins, and not Jesus’ human nature as a simple category considered prior to his life of active faithfulness. A reference to Romans 7:14 – 15 is not incidental, for Athanasius recognizes that the sinful act of the devil took a similar shape in the sinful acts of human beings. There is a ‘law of sin,’ Athanasius says, in every human being except Jesus. The ‘law of sin’ is a Pauline phrase found precisely in Romans 7:14 – 25 to describe coveting – that is, the sin of the mind that involves conscious lusting, jealousy, and envy. The devil deceived Adam and Eve ‘through envy,’ emphasizes Athanasius, a phrase which describes both the devil’s own envious disposition and the jealousy which he inspired in the minds and motivations of Adam and Eve. This is what gave rise to the ‘law of sin’ now present as a principle in the record of human life.

Athanasius’ quotation of Isaiah 53:9 aligns well with his earlier point in *Contra Apollinarium* 2.9. There, Athanasius argues that human nature was not originally created by God to be sinful, so it was not a categorical ‘necessity’ that by becoming human, the incarnate Son had to commit sins. Athanasius says earlier, when directly repudiating Apollinaris’ position, that sin is not the nature, as the latter held, but ‘the operation.’⁵³⁵ In other words, sin is a mode of *activity*, at least when spoken of this way. Do these statements mean that Athanasius believed Jesus took on the equivalent of a pre-fallen human nature? Perhaps, but not necessarily, even taken by themselves. In *Contra Apollinarium* 2.9, we find a key phrase that may indicate the fallen human nature Jesus assumed: ‘Therefore also Jesus went completely through every form of temptation, because he assumed all those things that had had experience of temptation, and by them won the victory in men’s behalf.’ The footnotes added by the English translators say that the phrase ‘all those things’ refers to ‘both body and mind.’ If this is the correct way to understand the phrase, then all of the same human nature which we have, Jesus bore. The ‘temptation’ of Jesus spoken of is, at minimum, the wilderness temptation and the Gethsemane ordeal, considered as the beginning and ending brackets of Jesus’ public ministry and journey to his Davidic enthronement as king. Athanasius does not speak as if Jesus had assumed a pre-fallen human nature. Specifically, Athanasius does not say that Jesus ‘assumed all those things that had *never* experienced temptation.’ Technically, a pre-fall or ‘unfallen’ human nature would be a ‘reset’ of human nature, of sorts. Such a human nature, at the point of the Word assuming it, would have been the equivalent of Adam’s human nature prior to the serpent. But this, Athanasius does not say. Instead, he says the human nature which the Word assumed ‘had *had* experience of temptation’ – through Adam and Eve, of course, if not also the generations and generations of fallen human beings since them. What does it mean for Athanasius to say that the human nature the Word assumed ‘had had experience of temptation’ prior to being assumed by the Word?

The Poverty of Human Nature in 2 Corinthians 8:9

Another indication that Athanasius held to the ‘fallen’ view of Jesus’ human nature is in his deployment of 2 Corinthians 8:9 in *Contra Apollinarium* 2.11. The teaching of Apollinaris that brought about Athanasius’ statement is particularly relevant for the ‘fallenness’ position. According to Athanasius, Apollinaris argued, ‘It is impossible that man who has once been made captive should be set free from captivity.’⁵³⁶ Athanasius chides Apollinaris for boxing himself into a corner along with ‘the rest of the heretics,’ for believing ‘that sin cannot be destroyed in the nature of men, and that therefore the Godhead, which was not made captive, came in the likeness of soul and flesh, that it might remain itself out of captivity, and so righteousness might be seen as clear?’⁵³⁷ Athanasius is clear about where sin must be destroyed: ‘in the nature of men.’ Did the Son destroy it at the point of conception? Or death and resurrection?

Athanasius insists that Jesus’ resurrection, not simply conception, opened up an ‘identity of being and newness of nature.’⁵³⁸ He quotes Hebrews 10:20, which refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection using the imagery of the high priest and the sacrifice of blood (Heb.10:19). He insists that Apollinaris is wrong for teaching ‘those who believe are saved by likeness [in a cheapened sense] and by imitation, and not by the renewal and the firstfruits.’⁵³⁹ And in order to bring about the firstfruits of resurrection, Athanasius says:

⁵³⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarium* 1.12 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.102.

⁵³⁶ Ibid 2.11 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.130.

⁵³⁷ Ibid 2.11 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.130.

⁵³⁸ Ibid 2.11 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.130.

⁵³⁹ Ibid 2.11 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.130.

“He who was rich, became poor for our sakes, that we, through his poverty, might be rich.’ And how did God become poor? When He assumed to Himself the nature which had become poor, and, while retaining His own righteousness, put this nature forward to suffer for men while it was superior to men, and was manifested from among men, and had become wholly God’s.’⁵⁴⁰

If Athanasius had said that the Son of God ‘became poor’ simply by assuming human nature to Himself in the incarnation, he would have offered a perfectly valid interpretation of 2 Corinthians 8:9, since the apostle Paul did not further specify what he meant here. Yet, as Athanasius interprets this Pauline statement about the incarnation, he refers it to *the quality or state of human nature* which was available to the Son to assume. The human nature ‘He assumed to Himself,’ and through which He ‘manifested’ Himself, ‘had become poor.’ In short, human nature itself has become poor. It fell from a richer state or quality. Since all of human nature fell through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and thenceforth became mortal, it would appear that Athanasius has this fallen human nature in view when he thinks of Jesus’ incarnation. Jesus shared in our mortality not just in the sense that he voluntarily chose when to die, but in the sense that his mortality was bound up with his body from conception. This assertion is consistent with Athanasius’ earlier writings about the mortality of the human Jesus – a mortality not simply chosen at a particular moment but a mortality woven into human nature itself because of the fall.

The Old Self in Romans 6:6

Athanasius’ argument about Jesus’ human nature continues from ‘the nature which had become poor’ in 2.11 to Jesus’ climactic victory at the cross in 2.13. Athanasius says that the cross was ‘his victory in that which had been tempted, his newness in that which had waxed old - because ‘our old man was crucified with him.’” This quotation of Romans 6:6 demonstrates Athanasius’ ongoing engagement with Romans throughout his two books. Athanasius appears to use the term ‘old man’ to indicate human nature in its fallen mode. He regularly uses the admonition about putting off the old man and putting on the new from Ephesians 4:21/Colossians 3:9 so as to link our imitation of Christ to what Christ has already done on our behalf.⁵⁴¹ Athanasius grounds our participation in Christ, and thus the viability and possibility of us being able to put off the old man and put on the new, in Christ’s prior human life of faithfulness in doing that very thing.

Born of a Woman in Galatians 4:4

Moreover, the phrase ‘born of a woman’ in *Contra Apollinarium* 2.8 and 2.10 (mentioned also in 1.5) is significant towards building the case that Athanasius did have in mind what we would today call the ‘fallen’ humanity of Jesus. This phrase is important because it is another terminological tool which Athanasius would have had available to him at the time to indicate such a thing. The phrase ‘born of a woman’ emphasizes the ordinary humanity of Mary of Nazareth, as opposed to the phrase ‘born of a virgin’ which emphasizes the supernatural activity of God and was, of course, available from LXX Isaiah, Matthew, and Luke. The English translators make an oversight by not writing in the margins of the text a reference to Job 14 and 25:4 in addition to Galatians 4:4.⁵⁴² The phrase ‘born of woman’ is not merely a historical fact about Mary but a phrase from Job brought into a christological context by early Christian creeds. To be ‘born of woman’ is to be ‘short-lived and full of turmoil’ (Job.14:1) because of the following question:

‘You also open Your eyes on him, and bring him into judgment with Yourself.
Who [among men] can make the clean out of the unclean? No one!’ (Job 14:4).

It is to ask,

‘How then can a man be just (righteous) with God?
Or how can he be clean who is born of woman?’ (Job 25:4).

As relates to christology, incarnation, and atonement, perceiving Paul’s intertextual reference to Job is important. I believe it is very significant that Job associates ‘Hebrew legal courtroom’ terminology like ‘judgment’ and ‘just/righteous with God’ on the one hand with ontological terminology like ‘uncleanness’ on the other. It shows that the one is constitutive of the other. And specifically, the second stanza of the step parallelism of Hebrew poetry

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid 2.11 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.131.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid 1.5 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.90; ibid 1.17 in ET, p.109

⁵⁴² Ibid 2.18 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.120.

typically has the greater weight: The Hebrew (not Western, Latin) legal courtroom terminology is being enlisted to demarcate the ontological. Job does not envision a sequence of forensic justification which only later leads to a sanctification process of increasing cleanliness/holiness. Rather, the medical and ontological healing of human nature is the deeper, more robust explanation for any declaration of being ‘just/righteous with God.’ They may not be chronologically separated, though they can be logically separated, with the ontological-medical reality being the logical foundation for the vindication in Hebraic, legal terminology. This is consistent with Paul’s approach in Romans and Galatians.

Leander E. Keck argues that Galatians 4:4 – 5 and Romans 8:3 – 4 give evidence not only of being parallel statements to each other, but also of being early creedal statements which precede Paul’s apostolic ministry.⁵⁴³ The following comparison is striking:

Galatians 4:4 – 5	Romans 8:3 – 4
When the fullness of time came Ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου	What the law was unable to do... τὸ γὰρ ἀδύνατον τοῦ νόμου
God sent out His Son ἐξἀπέστειλεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ	God having sent His Son ὁ Θεὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ Υἱὸν πέμψας
born of woman γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός	in the likeness of sinful flesh ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας
born under the law γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον	and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας κατέκρινεν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐν τῇ σαρκί
in order that those under the law ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον	in order that the right requirement of the law ἵνα τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου
he might redeem ἐξαγοράσῃ	might be fulfilled in us... πληρωθῆ ἐν ἡμῖν..
in order that the divine adoption we might receive ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν	who walk... according to the Spirit τοῖς... περιπατοῦσιν κατὰ πνεῦμα

‘Sending’ language applied to Jesus is more strongly associated with John than with Paul, who does not use the term anywhere else in his corpus. That is one factor supporting the contention that Paul was quoting material that existed before him. Another factor is that this highly dense material makes more points than is necessary for Paul’s argument in either Galatians 3 – 4 or Romans 7 – 8.

Keck also notes that Galatians 4 and Romans 8 are concerned with the following larger themes in common:

Galatians 4	Romans 8
The sending of God’s Son	The sending of God’s Son
Soteriological result: life by the Spirit	Soteriological result: life by the Spirit
Sons of God	Sons of God
Abba	Abba
Heirs	Heirs, fellow heirs with Christ

The above connections between the two texts supports the theory that they are pre-Pauline creedal material. Arguably, Galatians 4:4 – 5 and Romans 8:3 – 4 therefore join Philippians 2:6 – 11 as early creedal statements, all having to do with the incarnation and mission of Jesus, Son of the Father.

⁵⁴³ Leander E. Keck, “The Law and “The Law of Sin and Death,”” edited by James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel, *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (Ktav Pub Inc, May 1, 1980)

Whether the phrase ‘born of woman’ indicates that Jesus had a ‘fallen human nature’ in Paul is one question. Whether it means that in Athanasius is another. After the passage of over three hundred years, the phrase may very well have lost this particular meaning, if it ever had that meaning at all. To consider this question more carefully, I will examine below how Athanasius uses one of his hallmark passages, Romans 8:3 – 4, in *Contra Apollinarius* 1.7, but still more comments are necessary about *Contra Apollinarius* 2.

The Redefining of Key Terms: ‘Flesh’

Curiously, the Apollinarian controversy *narrowed* the lexical range of the term ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) from its *broader* meaning in Scripture. At the end of his second book, as we recall, Athanasius defines ‘flesh’ as ‘the orderly form of our whole constitution, but without sin.’⁵⁴⁴ These are significant closing comments which Athanasius provides as a summary of his two books, including how to understand key terms. Van Kuiken recognizes that *Contra Apollinarius* 2.18 – 19 means that ‘flesh’ only carries neutral meaning, not negative ones. I agree with Van Kuiken’s judgment about how Athanasius appears to be using this term, but I disagree with him about its significance. Athanasius’ attempt to deploy these words – and the key, test-case verse where ‘flesh’ and ‘sin’ appear, Romans 8:3 – departs from how he did so *in his earlier writings*. In every instance in *Contra Apollinarius*, Athanasius *narrows* the lexical range of the word ‘flesh,’ while simultaneously using the word ‘perfect’ to refer to Jesus’ human nature in its creational components from conception, not its eschatological quality at his resurrection. This means Athanasius speaks of Jesus’ supposedly ‘perfect flesh’ from conception, even though Scripture never uses those terms in this way, and takes their intended meaning for granted.

Of course, there is a neutral, ‘ordinary’ sense in which biblical authors use the word ‘flesh’ to refer to the physical composition of the human body, as distinct from the rest of the material creation. If I eat a banana and digest it, that banana ceases to be potential food; at least some of it becomes part of my ‘flesh.’ But when the apostle Paul uses the term ‘flesh’ in the specific context of the ‘Spirit-flesh’ antithesis in key anthropological passages like Romans 7:1 – 8:13 and Galatians 5:13 – 6:13, he invests the word with strongly negative connotations. In Romans 7, Paul says that the Sinai covenant helped him, and other Israelites, accurately distinguish between the ‘I myself’ and the ‘flesh.’ So, far from saying that the human being is purely and wholly ‘evil’ because ‘nothing good dwells in me,’ Paul is actually clarifying that ‘nothing good dwells in me, *that is, in my flesh.*’ ‘Evil is present in me’ but that evil can be conceptually distinguished from the ‘me’ speaking. Of course, Paul feels like a prisoner in his own body, which he calls ‘the body of this death.’ This is why Paul believed he needs the Spirit of the victorious Messiah Jesus also in his own body. Paul seems to anchor his meaning not in any given Hellenistic usage of that term, but biblically, in the rite of circumcision (Rom.2:28 – 29; 6:6; Gal.6:12 – 16; Col.2:12). In the biblical presentation of Jewish circumcision, a bit of ‘flesh’ was cut away from the male body to represent God’s covenant cutting away uncleanness (Lev.12), which in turn memorialized God cutting away from Abraham sinful attitudes which – despite being culturally acceptable in the ancient world – detoured him and Sarah from being a renewed, faithful version of Adam and Eve, a ‘new creation’ of sorts (Gen.12 – 18). Surprisingly, then, from the story of Abraham and Sarah, circumcision symbolized ‘new creation.’

‘Circumcision of the heart’ became the biblical idiomatic expression for undoing the corruption of sin within Israel’s humanity, and the corresponding term to ‘circumcision of the heart’ is ‘flesh’ in a broader and deeper sense than simply the ‘flesh’ of the foreskin of a boy’s or man’s penis. Moses and Jeremiah associated the momentous ‘return from exile’ with ‘circumcision of the heart’ (Dt.30:6; Jer.4:4 anticipating 31:31 – 34). It would seem, then, that ‘flesh,’ when used by Scripture in this way, *cannot* simply refer to the human body in a neutral sense. Rather, it includes something we have internalized from the fall which needs to be cut away, and is cut away in Christ (Col.2:12). Athanasius, earlier in his career, had called it a ‘corruption’ or a ‘disorder.’ Nothing is physically *missing* from our humanity, but something might be spiritually, emotionally, and even physically *disordered*.

The apostle John also uses the term ‘flesh’ to signify human nature as affected by the fall. Jesus related the ‘Spirit-flesh’ antithesis (Jn.3:5 – 6) immediately to the image of the bronze serpent for himself (Jn.3:14 – 15). The fact that the Pentateuch narrative used the *source* of the venom (the serpent) rather than the *victim* of the venom (an Israelite), combined with the fact that Jesus used that image to interpret himself on the cross, strongly suggests that ‘the Word became flesh’ (Jn.1:14) to put to death the source of the venom, the ‘flesh,’ which is now bound up with human nature because of the fall. Jesus judged the venom within his own human nature, because human nature was now, in

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid 2.18 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.141. Quoted by E. Jerome Van Kuiken, p.109

a proximate sense, the source of the venom. In other words, Jesus needed to destroy the ‘flesh’ to heal human nature itself, like how a doctor needs to destroy the cancer to heal us. The host must die, however, in order to also kill the disease, the corruption, the perversion, the intrusion. Since, after the Johannine prologue (Jn.1:1 – 18), the term ‘flesh’ is used precisely and in relatively rare fashion in John’s Gospel, occurring ten times in association with Jesus’ death (Jn.3:6; 6:51 – 63; 17:2) and once in association with a superficial and probably fallen way of perceiving (Jn.8:15), it is fair to ‘read back’ this meaning of ‘flesh’ into John 1:13 and 14 where the word first appears. John’s narrative exposit his prologue. Thus, when we read, ‘The Word became flesh,’ it is human nature in its corrupted aspect that is indicated by ‘flesh.’

Therefore, Paul and John use the term ‘flesh’ in these key contexts to mean the deeper, internal ‘flesh’ implied by the phrase ‘circumcision of the heart’ (Dt.10:16; 30:6). ‘Flesh’ in this more comprehensive, interior sense takes its meaning from the ‘flesh’ of the foreskin cut away by circumcision of the penis. The cutting away of ‘flesh’ is part and parcel of Israel’s ‘return from exile’ (Dt.30:6) back to ‘new creation’ in a fuller sense. Paul, as a Jewish theologian working with the biblical, covenantal, and eschatological framework, names ‘circumcision of the heart’ in Romans 2:28 – 29 to foreground his exposition in Romans. For in Romans, Paul explains how Jesus returned human nature itself from exile by cutting away that deeper ‘flesh’ (Rom.5:10; 6:6; 10:4), and now does so in us by his Spirit. Below, I will examine Athanasius’ use of Romans 8:3. But this discussion was necessary because the motif of ‘circumcision of the heart’ serves as the conceptual backdrop of Romans 7:14 – 25 – where Paul delineates what the ‘flesh’ is in himself as a fallen human being – and Romans 8:3 – where Paul says God sent His Son ‘in the likeness of sinful *flesh*, and condemned *sin* in the *flesh*’ of *Jesus*. It is critically important that we observe the overall meaning built up by these intertextual references, from the Pentateuch, through Paul’s writings, to Athanasius’ *Contra Apollinarium*.

Another biblical source must be considered. Luke uses the physical rite of Jewish circumcision to interpret Jesus’ death, signifying the nature of the atonement Jesus accomplished with respect to ‘flesh’ when the term ‘flesh’ is used in the context of the Spirit-flesh antithesis and the circumcision-flesh pairing. Perhaps the strongest and most obvious literary parallel is this symmetry:

Mary ‘wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger’ (Lk.2:6, 12).

Joseph ‘wrapped [his body] in a linen cloth, and laid him in a tomb’ (Lk.23:53).

Luke parallels his death-resurrection narrative with the birth-infancy narrative. The repetition of key words ‘wrapped,’ ‘cloths,’ and ‘laid him in’ invite comparison. So do the parental figures for Jesus, who ‘wrapped’ him in ‘cloths’ for his brief stays in the Bethlehem manger and the Jerusalem tomb, respectively. While Joseph of Arimathea was not Joseph of Nazareth, he nevertheless bears the same name as Jesus’ stepfather, who was a descendant of King David. And Jesus’ journey from both those points – manger and tomb – bear out a symmetry which draw in the motifs of clothing and kingship. From the manger, Jesus embarks on a journey on earth as the anointed king claiming his earthly throne; from the tomb, Jesus embarks on a journey from earth to heaven as the anointed king claiming his heavenly throne. This parallel cannot be accidental or incidental to Luke’s story, and neither can the striking repetition of the name ‘Joseph.’ The Christian tradition knew of Nicodemus, who, in John’s Gospel, assisted Joseph of Arimathea in caring for the dead body of Jesus (Jn.19:38 – 40); Luke’s omission of Nicodemus from the narrative draws our attention to Joseph alone. In fact, Mary and Joseph seem to serve as the human, ‘parental’ counterparts to God the Father, who first clothes Jesus with the Spirit at his baptism, preparing him for his harrowing journey towards the earthly throne, and then clothes Jesus with a resurrected body for his ascension to his heavenly throne. The Lukan idiom for the Holy Spirit as ‘clothing’ lends literary support to this possibility, as when Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit, he told his disciples to await being ‘clothed with power from on high’ (Lk.24:49). The fact that Luke, alone among the Gospel writers, uses this metaphor for the Holy Spirit is surely significant.

Additionally, Luke invites us to parallel the circumcision of the infant Jesus and the death of the mature Jesus. The following inverted parallel (chiasm) can be discerned in comparing the birth and infancy of Jesus to his death and resurrection.

Two angel visits (1:18, 26)

Mary’s virgin birth: ‘How can this be, since I know no man?’ (1:34)

Mary ‘wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger’ (2:6, 12)

Jesus' infant circumcision (2:21 – 24)

Witnesses: Simeon, Anna (2:25 – 38)

Jesus and God: growth in wisdom, 'in favor with God and men' (2:39 – 52)

Jesus and God: 'this is the Christ of God,' 'the king of the Jews' (23:33 – 43)

Witnesses: Jewish criminal, Roman centurion, 'all his acquaintances and the women' (23:40 – 50)

Jesus' death, veil of the temple was torn in two (23:44 – 46)

Joseph 'wrapped it [his body] in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock' (23:53a)

Tomb's virgin state: 'where no one had ever lain' (23:53b)

Two angels (24:4 – 7)

Jesus' death as a mature man mirrors his circumcision as an infant, deepening and fulfilling it. Circumcision, in its expression in the Torah, was understood not simply as a mark of being part of the covenant community of Israel, but as a physical representation of becoming a 'new creation.' That fact will surely surprise most readers, who tend to understand circumcision as a defunct ritual because the apostle Paul's comments about it in Romans and Galatians are negative and largely convey that meaning. Yet 'new creation' is the inner meaning upon which physical circumcision reposed. Later Christian tradition would place the Feast of the Circumcision on a Sunday to associate it with resurrection and 'new creation,' so the imagery was not lost upon Christians, even if they did not explicitly reason this out from Luke.

The most straightforward implication of Luke's narrative symmetry comparing Jesus' circumcision as an infant to his death as a mature man is that Luke presents Jesus' earthly life as follows: Jesus had assumed a fallen human nature, received the physical rite of bodily circumcision as the sign of God's covenant demand upon all Israelites to 'circumcise their hearts' by receiving God's commandments more deeply into themselves (Dt.10:16), fought successfully against the corruption of sin within his own humanity by refusing every temptation during the long years of his earthly life, and spiritually 'circumcised' his own 'heart' – or his own human nature – through his death and resurrection. He cut away the 'flesh' – that is, the corruption of sin – from within his human nature, not at his conception, but by his own human faithfulness all the way unto death, as every Jew was called by God to do. Physical circumcision represented God's desired outcome of spiritual circumcision of the 'flesh.' This reading of Luke on 'circumcision' affirms my exposition, above, of the Pauline and Johannine use of the word 'flesh.'

The Redefining of Key Terms: 'In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh'

As I said before, Athanasius in *Contra Apollinarium* restricts himself to the neutral, ordinary meaning of 'flesh.' He narrows the lexical range of this critical term, including in one key passage *where he seems to have done so but should not have*. That passage is *Contra Apollinarium* 1.7, where Athanasius quotes Romans 8:3 and involves Paul's reference to 'the likeness of sinful flesh.'

'How is it that you again say that the body was brought from heaven, and why did Christ do this? Tell us, was it that he might bring down a body from heaven upon earth, and make the invisible visible, and that which could not be outraged susceptible of outrage, and the impassible passible and mortal? And what benefit was involved in this, O thoughtless men, if you say that that took place in Christ which took place in the protoplast Adam, unless Christ, having appeared *in the likeness of sinful flesh, and condemned sin in the flesh* [Romans 8:3], had restored by an incomparable restoration that which fell in Adam: so that he both lived in flesh on earth, and exhibited the flesh as incapable of sin, that flesh which Adam had in a sinless state from his first creation, and by his transgression made capable of sin, and fell down into corruption and death? This flesh he raised up in a condition of being by nature sinless, that he might show that the Maker was not the cause of sin, and he established it in accordance with the original creation of its own nature, that he himself might be the exhibition of sinlessness. Vain, then, are their imaginations who go astray and say that the Lord's body was from heaven. Rather, what Adam brought down from heaven to earth, Christ carried up from earth to heaven: and what Adam brought down into corruption and condemnation to death, when it had been sinless and uncondemned, that did Christ show forth as incorruptible, and capable of delivering from death, so that he had authority on earth to forgive sins, to exhibit incorruption by rising out of the sepulchre, and by visiting Hades to destroy death, and to proclaim to all the good tidings of resurrection, because God created man to be immortal, and made him the image of His own eternity, but by the devil's envy, death came into the world, and when it was under the reign of death unto corruption, he did not overlook it, for he himself became man; not that he was turned into the form of man, nor that, as if

neglecting real human existence, he exhibited himself merely under a shadow, but he who is by nature God was born man, that these two might be one, perfect in all things, exhibiting his birth as natural and most true.⁵⁴⁵

In this section, Athanasius charges Apollinarius with denying the ‘benefits’ of Christ’s ‘incomparable restoration’ of human nature. ‘What benefit was involved in’ the movement of the Son from heaven to earth in the Apollinarian proposal? Here, Athanasius criticizes the Apollinarians for rhetorical flourishes which pushed the logic of *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes) to a certain extreme. If it was an attribute of the human nature of Jesus to be without a human mind (because the Logos was the archetype for which all human minds served as images), then that human body became the body of the Logos in such a way that it was a mixture (*mixis*) with the Logos and formed one reality (*mia physis*) with him as regards his divinity. By association, Apollinarius pushed the attributes of human nature back upon the Logos retroactively; he mixed attributes that properly belonged to Jesus’ humanity as characteristic now of his person and his divinity. Although Jesus took a human body from the womb of Mary in an earthly sense, yet because this body did not have a human mind, according to Apollinarius, it could be said to ‘be’ a heavenly body.⁵⁴⁶

Athanasius objects to this. He says that such talk violates proper boundaries of speech that Christians must respect. Claiming that Jesus’ body was ‘brought from heaven’ because it is now ‘one reality’ with the eternal Son confuses the attributes proper to divinity and humanity. It means the invisible one must ‘be’ logically predicated as visible in himself and in his divinity, and not in a qualified sense because he assumed humanity. The impassible (unchangeable) one must ‘be’ logically predicated as passible (changeable) in himself and in his divinity. Apollinarius makes the eternal Son in himself and in his divinity variable in terms of human emotions (‘susceptible of outrage’) and even being ‘mortal.’ Athanasius finds this unacceptable, and then expands on how to properly understand the ‘mortality’ of Jesus.

Clearly, Athanasius refers in multiple ways to the resurrection of Christ as the antidote to the fall of Adam. For what happened to human nature at the fall? ‘That which fell in Adam’ needed to be ‘restored by an incomparable restoration.’ Adam made the flesh ‘capable of sin.’ Christ, by contrast, ‘exhibited the flesh’ – specifically his own flesh – as ‘incapable of sin.’ Those statements refer to the respective human activities of Adam and Christ, and the impact their choices had on the human nature they inhabited and share with others. Significantly, Christ’s movement of his human nature and impact upon it was completed at his resurrection. The flesh that Adam dragged down, Jesus ‘raised up in a condition of being by nature sinless.’ That statement refers to the resurrection, not the conception. Properly speaking, only Jesus’ resurrection overcame the mortality inflicted by Adam upon human nature at the fall. Jesus demonstrated ‘incorruption by rising out of the sepulchre’ via his human body, and ‘Hades’ via his human soul. His proclamation in Hades concerned ‘the good tidings of resurrection, because God created man to be immortal.’ Athanasius’ stress on the resurrection indicates that he does not regard Jesus’ conception as the moment when the Son decisively cleansed his human nature from sinfulness or mortality. The moment of conception did not make Jesus’ human nature ‘unfallen.’ His human nature, as Athanasius acknowledges, was yet mortal.

Assuredly, Jesus, during his earthly life and ministry, lived out what Athanasius elsewhere called ‘the principle of newness’ in anticipation of the resurrection,⁵⁴⁷ but it was not until the resurrection *per se* when Jesus returned human nature into ‘a condition of being by nature sinless.’ Athanasius’ statement in *Contra Apollinarium* 1.7 suggests that *prior to Jesus’ resurrection*, Jesus’ human nature *per se* – that is, considered ‘in itself’ – was not ‘by nature sinless’ as it was also not ‘by nature immortal.’ Like ‘immortality,’ ‘sinlessness’ as a *condition* (not simply as a record of activity) is attributable to Jesus’ personhood and divinity on account of him being the Son who was ever faithful to the Father. However, Athanasius suggests that like ‘immortality,’ ‘sinlessness’ as a *condition* (not as a record of activity) could not be directly and unequivocally assigned to Jesus’ human nature until the resurrection.

Some might wish to use the ‘communication of attributes’ to insist that the incarnate Son’s impeccability (inability to sin) should be invoked to immediately describe the *human nature per se* which the Son assumed from the point of conception in the womb of Mary. Fair enough: that qualified logic has merit. It is noteworthy, though, that

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid 1.17 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.109 – 111

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid 1.4 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.87 – 88

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid 1.15 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.106

Athanasius still appears capable of considering, and *prefers* to consider, human nature by itself – even when assumed by the Son. Athanasius says carefully in *Contra Apollinaris* 1.17, which is perhaps the passage which can, on its own, be most easily read as representing the ‘unfallenness’ position, that

‘the Incarnation of the Lord, having taken place in connection with the nature of God, involved an incapacity for those ways of acting which go on in us in consequence of our ‘old man,’ and on this account we are taught to ‘put off the old man, and to put on the new’ [Ephesians 4:21]. And in this consists the marvel – that the Lord became man, and yet apart from sin: for he became wholly a new man to exhibit what he could do [that is, going through conception, birth, life, death, grave and Hades, and resurrection] that where corruption was sown, there incorruption might spring up, and where death reigned in the form of a human soul, the Immortal One might be present and exhibit immortality, and so make us partakers of His own incorruption and immortality, by the hope of resurrection from the dead.’⁵⁴⁸

Athanasius says that the Lord ‘became man,’ and then ‘became wholly a new man’ at the point of his resurrection, which is the formal source of power for us to ‘put on the new man.’ It is perfectly true that the human nature assumed by Jesus was incapable of sinning because of its ‘connection with the nature of God.’ But referring to the person is different than referring to the human nature – that is, saying that Jesus’ human nature was incapable of sinning from conception because it had been transformed or impacted immediately on account of its assumption by the Son, prior to the human choices Jesus made, is a different formulation than what Athanasius actually says. This may seem like hair-splitting. Nevertheless, it is important, for in this way, the eternal Son could maintain his faithfulness to the Father, and, consequently, keep his humanity ‘apart from sin,’ as Athanasius says. Importantly, however, this phrase refers not to Jesus’ conception but to his lifelong faithfulness; it summarizes his human nature not in advance, but retrospectively, in light of his resurrection.

A parallel passage, but focused on the human mind of Christ, is 1.19. Here, Athanasius explains the full, human soul of Christ over against Apollinaris’ claim that Jesus did not have a human mind, which was the uppermost part of the soul:

‘For how could his death have taken place, if the Word had not constituted for himself both our outward and inward man, that is, body and soul? And how then did he pay a ransom for all, or how was the loosening of the grasp of death completely effected, if Christ had not constituted for himself, in a sinless state, that which had sinned intellectually, the soul? In that case, death still ‘reigns’ over the inward man: for over what did it ever reign, if not over the soul which had sinned intellectually... on behalf of which Christ laid down his own soul, thus paying a ransom. But what was it that God originally condemned? That which the Fashioner fashioned, or the action of what was fashioned? (i.e. the fall) ... He annuls the action, and renews the thing fashioned.’

Athanasius describes Jesus constituting his human mind ‘in a sinless state.’ He positions this declaration against his exploration of the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and this placement is significant. However much it is true that Jesus began his human life by keeping his human mind in a ‘sinless state,’ the potency and relevance of Jesus’ mental innocence is that he was able to escape the reign of death. So again, logic and literary placement place the emphasis on Jesus’ sinlessness after his lifelong faithfulness.

The above agrees with Athanasius’ other quotation of Romans 8:3, in *Contra Apollinaris* 2.6. In this chapter, Athanasius rebuts Apollinaris’ claim that Jesus ‘destroyed sin’ simply by assuming human flesh without a human mind and never sinning. Athanasius objects, ‘But that is not a destruction of sin.’ Because Adam had a human mind and received the devil’s ‘seed,’ or thought, by his fall ‘the devil established in man’s nature both a law of sin [Romans 7:23], and death as reigning through sinful action.’ This chapter discusses human ‘nature’ (the word occurs here ten times⁵⁴⁹) and human activity, especially thinking activity. Athanasius then addresses the thinking and intellectual activity implied by Romans 8:3. On the one hand, the Israelites could not fully align with the Law for their spiritual freedom from sin and death. On the other hand, Jesus from youth ‘refuse[d] evil in order to choose

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid 1.17 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.109 – 111

⁵⁴⁹ Which is higher than any other chapter in the two books. The word ‘nature’ as referring to ‘human nature’ occurs once in 1.5, twice in 1.6, twice in 1.6, once in 1.12, eight times in 1.15, twice in 1.17, three times in 2.1, twice in 2.3, twice in 2.7, three times in 2.8, four times in 2.9, four times in 2.11, once in 2.16.

good,’ says Athanasius, quoting Isaiah 7:16. From this point, Athanasius explains how Jesus ‘condemned sin in the flesh’ in the sense of his activity, especially his thinking activity. This defense stretches into 2.7 when he rebuts Apollinaris’ false idea that a part of this world could not save the rest of the world, 2.8 when he rebuts Apollinaris’ notion that the human mind/soul, including that of Jesus, by definition ‘is incapable of escaping sin,’ 2.9 when he rebuts Apollinaris’ notion of ‘necessity,’ 2.10 when he reminds Apollinaris that Jesus broke through the authority of Satan, 2.11 when he insists that the power of God is so great as to ‘destroy sin in the nature of men,’ even though human nature ‘had become poor’ from the fall, which is when he quotes 2 Corinthians 8:9, 2.12 when he refutes Apollinaris’ claim that the whole Godhead suffered when Jesus suffered, and 2.13 when he says that Jesus’ cross was a victory over temptation because there, ‘he crucified our old self,’ quoting Romans 6:6.

Thus, when examining Athanasius’ habits and patterns of speech in *Contra Apollinaris* 1.7, 17, 19 and 2.6 – 13, I reach the following conclusion: Athanasius speaks of Jesus’ human nature *prior* to his resurrection, he appears to consider it *as conceptually distinct from the Son’s divinity and personhood*, and therefore he keeps in view the qualities or condition of Jesus’ human nature: ‘mortal’ and ‘fallen.’ In other words, if we are looking for Athanasius to support the ‘unfallenness’ position in a formal sense, where the Son reverted the human nature to a pre-fallen state instantly when he assumed it, we do not find it here.

In the context of 1.7, Athanasius deploys Romans 8:3, but he unfortunately presses an ambiguity into the text. I have already argued, above, that the apostle Paul uses ‘circumcision’ and ‘circumcision of the heart’ as reference points for controlling what the term ‘flesh’ means in the Spirit-flesh antithesis in Romans 7:14 – 8:13. Given the focus of *Contra Apollinarium* 1.7 on resurrection and Jesus’ defeat of mortality, it is certainly possible, and in my judgment preferable, to read Paul’s original meaning into Athanasius’ use of that text here: Jesus bore a fallen human nature from conception to his death; Jesus not only defeated the mortality of post-fall human nature, but the underlying corruption of sinfulness that was lodged there; he held in check any impulse of the ‘flesh’ to fear death or covet, thereby conquering the temptations and defeating the devil. Maybe because of the need to be economical with time and space, and with his earlier writings available, Athanasius believed his earlier expositions of Romans 8:3 would suffice. Should we hear Paul’s originally negative meaning of ‘flesh’ in connection with ‘coveting’ and ‘sin’ in Romans 8:3 when Athanasius quotes the verse here? Perhaps.

However, because Athanasius seems to be encouraging us, throughout the rest of *Contra Apollinarium*, to define ‘flesh’ as the neutral, ordinary stuff of human materiality, he can also be interpreted as encouraging us to read this narrowed definition of ‘flesh’ back into *Contra Apollinarium* 1.7, and not only that text, but also Romans 8:3. In other words, there is a very significant ambiguity concerning this very significant word. Is the definition of ‘flesh’ dependent on whether or not the word is being used in the Spirit-flesh antithesis, as in Paul? Or does it have a one-dimensional meaning in Athanasius’ mind? This ambiguity becomes problematic for our understanding of Athanasius, Romans, and Paul. In effect, *Contra Apollinarium* starts to turn the apostle Paul into a spokesman for the ‘unfallenness’ camp. It also potentially turns Athanasius against his earlier writings, both of which I will now examine.

‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh’ in Paul

In English, the word ‘likeness’ can mean ‘resemblance’ or ‘the superficial appearance of.’ In some uses, it implies an antithetical relation with the actual substance thereof, as if deception were involved. However, in Paul, the word ‘likeness’ cannot possibly mean that. For in Philippians 2:7, he says that Jesus was found ‘in human likeness,’ and, lest we accuse Paul himself of being a gnostic, he clearly does not mean ‘resemblance only’ or ‘the superficial appearance of.’

Philippians 2:6 – 7

Ὁς...ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν...	ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων	γενόμενος
Who...Himself emptied...	in the likeness of men	having been made

Romans 8:3

ὁ Θεὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ Υἱὸν	πέμψας	ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας
God His own Son	having sent	in the likeness of sinful flesh

Other than the Son being spoken of as the active subject in Philippians 2:6 – 7 and the passive object in Romans 8:3, the two passages are strikingly similar. Paul’s choice of active subject corresponds to his pastoral purpose in each letter. In Philippians 2, he stresses the Son’s humbling himself and entering into the world of others because the Son’s mindset and activity is germane to the mindset Paul wants the Philippians to have (Phil.2:5). Therefore, Paul says in Philippians 2 that the Son is the active subject ‘who... emptied himself... in the likeness of men having been made...’ In Romans 8, Paul is supporting his overarching claim that *God* is righteous (Rom.1:16 – 17), that is, faithful to His promise to Abraham (Rom.4:1 – 25) and His covenant with Israel from Sinai (Rom.3:1 – 8, 21 – 26). Therefore, Paul emphasizes that *God* sent His Son: ‘having sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh...’

Paul uses ‘likeness’ in the more technical, theological sense of ‘image and likeness’ from Genesis 1:26 – 28. I have covered this ground in my earlier examination of Irenaeus of Lyons,⁵⁵⁰ and also in more depth in a paper exploring whether Paul’s statement in Romans 8:3 – 4 can be considered to be a fair exegetical treatment of the Old Testament.⁵⁵¹ For God to make human beings in His ‘likeness’ means moral and spiritual growth akin to humanity at some point ‘participating in the substance or reality of’ God. That would seem to be confirmed in Genesis 2 when God breathed into Adam to make him a living being (Gen.2:7) and then called human beings to grow and mature in partnership with Him. Surely this included stewardship-dominion over the creation as God’s co-regents. Not least, though, among the aspects of the divine-human partnership was eating from the ‘tree of life.’ There was some way in which God offered a deeper participation in the divine life via the ‘tree of life,’ which by any account offered ‘immortality’ and was thus sacramental. In this regard, growth in the ‘likeness’ would have impacted each person’s human nature.

Mention of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in Genesis brings me to the historical data about the early Christian usage of these terms. I have explored major second-century Christian sources, both orthodox (Irenaeus) and heretical (the Ebionites and the Valentinians) and argued that ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ demonstrate a stability of meaning across this literature. The only plausible historical explanation for this literary data is that Christians in the first century exercised communal controls over these terms through literary and/or liturgical methods.⁵⁵² Thus, when Paul says in Romans 8:3 that Jesus shared ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ he was not saying that Jesus was only human by appearance but not in substance, or that Jesus took human flesh but not sinful human flesh. He was saying that Jesus ‘participated in the substance or reality of’ our sinful flesh.

Significantly, Clement of Alexandria was the first major writer to not use ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in biblically precise and theologically robust ways, as John Behr highlights.⁵⁵³ Clement says simply that the human Christ fulfilled what God spoke.⁵⁵⁴ While this is true and not contradictory with the earlier Christian usage of the Genesis language, it is also quite truncated. It does not connect the human vocation in creation, or human ontology and the God-intended relationships and development laid out before us, to the word ‘likeness.’ By the time of Athanasius’ *Contra Apollinarium*, the word ‘likeness’ is no longer the term that Christian theologians use to indicate ‘actual participation in.’

‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh’ in Athanasius’ Earlier Writings

In his earlier writings, Athanasius deployed Romans 8:3 very judiciously and in tandem with both touchstone biblical verses and logical assertions which complemented it. These quotations are found in *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.51, 1.60, 2.55 – 56, and *Life of Antony* 7. There are no quotations of Romans 8:3 – 4, in whole or in part, in *Against the Heathen* (328), *First Letter to Virgins* (337), *Discourses Against the Arians* 3 (345), *On the Decree of the Nicene Council / De Decretis* (350 – 356), *On the Opinion of Dionysius / De Sententia Dionysii* (354 – 359), *Letter to the Bishops of Egypt and Libya* (356), *Defense Against the Arians* (357), or the other *Festal Letters*. I will discuss *Life of Antony* first.

⁵⁵⁰ See above, and also separately as Mako A. Nagasawa, *Irenaeus on ‘Image and Likeness’ and ‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh’: An Argument for Jesus’ Incarnation into Fallen Human Nature*, available here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec-irenaeus-of-lyons>

⁵⁵¹ See Mako A. Nagasawa, *God Condemned Sin in the Flesh of Christ: Romans 8:3 – 4 and Medical Substitutionary Atonement*, available here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-paul-romans>

⁵⁵² See above, and also separately as Mako A. Nagasawa, *Irenaeus on ‘Image and Likeness’ and ‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh’: An Argument for Jesus’ Incarnation into Fallen Human Nature*, available here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec-irenaeus-of-lyons>

⁵⁵³ John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.142 says, ‘Although Clement describes Adam as perfectly created for growth towards full perfection, as we have seen, he does not connect this dynamic to the process of developing the image into the likeness.’

⁵⁵⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 1.12.98.2 – 3; cited by Behr, above

In *Life of Antony*, Athanasius' influential biography of the desert father Antony of Egypt, the bishop of Alexandria introduces Antony's early life and entrance into the desert. Athanasius wrote this work sometime between 356 – 362, to memorialize Antony and to popularize monasticism beyond the Egyptian region where Antony was already well-known. As a literary work, Athanasius introduces Antony much like Luke introduces Jesus; I rather suspect that Athanasius used Luke's Gospel as a model.⁵⁵⁵ After Antony successfully fights off the devil's temptations, much like Jesus did, Athanasius the narrator interprets Antony's victory using Romans 8:3 – 4.

'This [series of victories over temptation] was Antony's first struggle against the devil, or rather this victory was the Saviour's work in Antony, 'Who condemned sin in the flesh that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.'⁵⁵⁶

We are extremely fortunate to peer into Athanasius' mind as a pastoral theologian here. Compared to his dogmatic works, Athanasius quotes Scripture relatively sparsely in *Life of Antony*. Thus, this quotation of Romans 8:3 communicates volumes. Athanasius' language doubles the active agency and provides a dual lens on Christian growth and sanctification. On the one hand, this victory was Antony's agency. But at the same time, it was Christ's work in and through him. This is a good example of Athanasius' vision of *synergeia*; Augustine's later *monergeia* would be quite foreign here.

Athanasius refers Romans 8:3 to both Jesus and Antony. His use of Romans 8:3 as having a double reference is one piece of the cumulative case for the 'fallenness' position. What Jesus did in relation to *Antony's* human nature, Athanasius indicates, he did first in relation to *his own*. If Athanasius held to the 'unfallenness' position, he might still be able to interpret Romans 8:3 in relation to Jesus, as he would have to, since Jesus is the original and proper subject of Paul's discussion there. In my opinion, he would face exegetical difficulties if he held the 'unfallenness' perspective. But it would be more challenging to apply Romans 8:3 to Antony and Jesus *at the same time*. On what basis could Athanasius do this? If Jesus did not have to struggle against fallenness in his own human nature, could Athanasius legitimately suggest that Antony's struggle was a participation in Jesus' struggle?

What follows is Antony's intensification of his monastic practice. He 'repressed the body and kept it in subjection, lest haply having conquered on one side, he should be dragged down on the other.'⁵⁵⁷ He bore the labor 'easily' because of his 'eagerness of soul' and 'great zeal.' Antony would 'often' go 'the whole night without sleep,' eat 'bread and salt and water' only once a day or two days, 'often even in four.' He slept on the bare ground, not a mat. Antony then speaks himself, commenting on the cultivation of 'virtue':

'Progress in virtue, and retirement from the world for the sake of it, ought not to be measured by time, but by desire and fixity of purpose.'⁵⁵⁸

Athanasius connects the cultivation of 'virtue' with Jesus' own victory over spiritual temptation as summarized in Romans 8:3 – 4. Athanasius uses the word 'virtue' twenty three times in *Life of Antony*. Athanasius writes in his prologue to the work as 'training in the way of virtue.' Athanasius then allows Antony to compare himself in his own voice to the apostle Paul and the prophet Elijah through biblical quotations.

For Athanasius, the logic of participation in Christ requires progress in 'virtue' in us. He uses Romans 8:3 to articulate what he understands as a life of partnership with Christ by the Spirit, participating in Christ in the life pursuing Christian *virtue*. In *Life of Antony*, then, Athanasius gives expression to his understanding and practical use of Romans 8:3, which he discusses in dogmatic terms in the *Discourses Against the Arians*.

Around 342 – 342, while in Rome on his second exile from Alexandria, Athanasius wrote his lengthy exegetical arguments against the Arians in *Discourses Against the Arians* 1 and 2. Since these works are focused on the divinity of the Son, especially in relation to the Father, statements about the human life, earthly mission, and human nature of Jesus are relatively rare. Nevertheless, when they appear, they are quite significant.

⁵⁵⁵ For my exploration of *Life of Antony* and engagement with scholars of the work, as well as pastoral theologians on the topic of sanctification, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *Athanasius as Theologian of Sanctification: Life of Antony / Vita Antonii* (c.362 AD), available here:

<https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec-athanasius-of-alexandria>

⁵⁵⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 7

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid 7

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid 7

When Athanasius deploys Romans 8:3 – 4 in *Discourses* 1.51, he does so in order to discuss both Christ’s atoning work, and Christ’s ministry towards us by his Spirit to provide us with virtue:

‘For since of things originate the nature is alterable, and the one portion had transgressed and the other disobeyed, as has been said, and it is not certain how they will act, but it often happens that he who is now good afterwards alters and becomes different, so that one who was but now righteous, soon is found unrighteous, wherefore there was here also need of one unalterable, *that men might have the immutability of the righteousness of the Word as an image and type for virtue...* For since the first man Adam altered, and through sin death came into the world, therefore it became the second Adam to be unalterable; that, should the Serpent again assault, even the Serpent’s deceit might be baffled, and, the Lord being unalterable and unchangeable, the Serpent might become powerless in his assault against all. For as when Adam had transgressed, his sin reached unto all men, so, when the Lord had become man and had overthrown the Serpent, that so great strength of His is to extend through all men, so that each of us may say, ‘For we are not ignorant of his devices. [2 Corinthians 2:11]’ Good reason then that the Lord, who ever is in nature unalterable, loving righteousness and hating iniquity, should be anointed and Himself sent, that, He, being and remaining the same, by taking this alterable flesh, ‘might condemn sin in it [Romans 8:3],’ and might secure its freedom, and its ability henceforth ‘to fulfil the righteousness of the law [Romans 8:4]?’ in itself, so as to be able to say, ‘But we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwells in us [Romans 8:9].’⁵⁵⁹

By itself and taken alone, this passage does not decisively indicate how Athanasius understands Romans 8:3 – 4, whether he would fall into the ‘fallenness’ or ‘unfallenness’ camps. However, it serves a preliminary purpose: it links mortality and morality. Created things, most notably humans, have an ‘alterable nature.’ Athanasius is not saying that human beings can become non-human. Rather, human beings can make moral and spiritual choices that impact our own human nature, shown especially by the fall and subsequent sinful decisions on the part of people. This is why Athanasius compares the nature of God to the nature of human beings along the lines of *moral* alterability. God ‘is in nature unalterable, loving righteousness and hating iniquity.’ It is this unalterable moral nature of God that impacted ‘this alterable flesh’ when the Son of God assumed it.

Human beings, therefore, require ‘the immutability of the righteousness of the Word as an image and type for *virtue*.’ To make himself available for that purpose, the Word of God had to become incarnate in sinful flesh in order to ‘condemn sin in it,’ and, through his resurrection, to secure human nature’s ‘freedom’ from sin for us, who walk by the Spirit. This is what qualifies the Son, says Athanasius immediately afterwards, to be *the dispenser of virtue*: ‘as being God and the Father’s Word, He is a just judge and lover of virtue, or rather its dispenser.’⁵⁶⁰ Jesus is not just the intellectual reference point for what virtue looks like, lived out in a human life from a distance. Rather, he is the dispenser of virtue into us as the Spirit of God dwells in us, which means, reciprocally, that we participate in him by his Spirit.

Athanasius often speaks of the mission of the incarnate Son in relation to human mortality; in that regard, he frames the resurrection of Jesus as the decisive victory. This might give us the impression that Athanasius had a merely ‘physical’ understanding of the human dilemma, as if resurrection into immortality provided a merely ‘physical’ solution to that. However, this passage establishes that there is a moral aspect to the fall and to resurrection as well – a moral dimension that is chronologically and logically *prior* to the mortality dimension. For Athanasius, like Irenaeus before him and many others after him, believes that mortality, though death be terrible, serves one beneficial purpose: it prevented human beings from immediately eating from the tree of life and immortalizing the corruption of sin within us.⁵⁶¹ If death serves but one beneficial purpose, then death per se cannot be the ultimate enemy. Death is the last enemy, but it is not the first enemy. The corruption of sinfulness is.

We are vulnerable to our own moral alterability as created beings, and especially so now because of the fall and our participation in ‘sinful flesh.’ Jesus condemned sin while in ‘alterable flesh,’ which was what the Sinai covenant

⁵⁵⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.51

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid* 1.52

⁵⁶¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.4 – 5 refers to the ‘corruption’ in connection with ‘death’ but also distinct from it. See also *Against the Heathen* 2 – 7 for his description of how sin as a disorder affects human beings. Thus, Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 8.1 says, ‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition...’

called the Israelites to do. The paradigm of Jewish wisdom stands behind the meaning of virtue-acquisition: obeying God's commandments produces a positive effect *in us*, *within* our human nature (Dt.10:16; Jer.4:4; Ps.119:32; Pr.1:8; 3:3 – 8; 6:21; 7:1 – 3; 8:22 – 36). We now participate in Jesus' purified and unalterable human nature which he perfected through his earthly faithfulness culminating in his death and resurrection. Thus, by his Spirit, we are now able 'to fulfill the righteousness of the law' by his Spirit (Rom.8:4).

Athanasius makes the link between morality and mortality more explicit in a second passage. In *Discourses* 2.55 – 56, Athanasius links several passages of Scripture to describe the significance of Jesus taking 'sinful' and 'cursed' human flesh. He links 'fear of death' in Hebrews 2:14 – 15 and 'sinful flesh' in Romans 8:3 – 4 to the infirmity language of Isaiah 53:4/Matthew 8:17, the sin language of 2 Corinthians 5:21, and curse language of Galatians 3:13. All of them are biblical categories of human fallen experience. Athanasius coordinates all of them for one purpose: to indicate Jesus' assumption of fallen human nature from conception. Athanasius moves from speaking of Jesus' body as 'mortal' for the sake of sharing in our death (Heb.2:14 – 15) to emerge in his resurrection as the victor over death (1 Cor.15:21), to explaining that Jesus' mortal body was composed of 'sinful flesh' so he could condemn the sin in his flesh (Rom.8:3 – 4) by never sinning. As in *Contra Apollinarium*, the link between mortality and morality under the umbrella condition of 'fallen' is present, and it appears that one implies the other. Here is the passage:

'To give a witness then, and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and destroy the works of the devil, the Savior came, and this is the reason of His incarnate presence. For otherwise a resurrection had not been, unless there had been death; and how had death been, unless He had had a mortal body? This the Apostle, learning from Him, thus sets forth, 'Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [Hebrews 2:14 – 15].' And, 'Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead [1 Corinthians 15:21].' And again, 'For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit [Romans 8:3 – 4].' And John says, 'For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved [John 3:17].' ... For as by receiving our infirmities [Isaiah 53:4/Matthew 8:17], He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm, for He is the Power of God, and He became sin for us [2 Corinthians 5:21] and a curse [Galatians 3:13], though not having sinned Himself, but because He Himself bare our sins and our curse, so, by creating us in Him, let Him say, 'He created me for the works,' though not Himself a creature... When for our need He became man... that, by His dwelling in the flesh, sin might perfectly be expelled from the flesh [Romans 8:3], and we might have a free mind [Romans 8:5 – 8].'⁵⁶²

As in *Contra Apollinarium*, we find here Athanasius' emphasis on Jesus' resurrection as the antidote to the fall of Adam. Resurrection required death, and death required that 'He had had a mortal body.' If Jesus had a mortal body, because for our sake he 'took part' in 'flesh and blood' (Heb.2:14), then he had a fallen body. And if he had a fallen body, then did he also have 'sinful flesh'? Or only the 'appearance' of 'sinful flesh'?

Of particular interest in this regard is Athanasius' use of the term 'infirm.' Athanasius assumes his audience, like he does, calls Jesus 'infirm': 'He is said to be infirm Himself...' This description, based on Isaiah 53:4, is fascinating and important. In his third *Discourse*, Athanasius quotes Isaiah 53:4 explicitly again, and does two very important things there. First, he interprets the term 'infirmity' by the term *sinfulness*. Second, he says that the Son 'carried' our infirmities-sins; he did not simply 'remedy' them from a distance by doing a miracle, or waving a wand, as it were. He 'bore them' and was personally involved and experienced at carrying 'infirm,' sinful flesh all the way to its death which was his death.

'And the Word bore the *infirmities of the flesh*, as His own, for His was the flesh; and the flesh ministered to the works of the Godhead, because the Godhead was in it, for the body was God's. And well has the Prophet said 'carried [Isaiah 53:4];' and has not said, 'He remedied our infirmities,' lest, as being external to the body, and only healing it, as He has always done, He should leave men subject still to death; but He carries our *infirmities*, and He Himself bears our *sins*, that it might be shown that He has become man for

⁵⁶² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.55 – 56

us, and that the body which in Him bore them, was His own body; and, while He received no hurt Himself by 'bearing our sins in His body on the tree,' as Peter speaks, we men were redeemed from our own affections, and were filled with the righteousness of the Word.'⁵⁶³

Athanasius uses Isaiah 53:4 to interpret Romans 8:3, which is rather compelling for the 'fallenness' position. He points out that Isaiah 53:4 means that Jesus 'carried' our infirmities and sins, which implies some length of time. Isaiah does not say, as Athanasius points out, that Jesus simply 'remedied' them, which could be instantaneous. In *Discourses* 2.55, therefore, Athanasius means this: The Jesus bore 'sinful flesh,' which to him meant what we today would call a 'fallen human nature.'

Discourses 2.55 also shows us how Athanasius handled the 'communication of attributes' (*communicatio idiomatum*). How do we properly discuss the properties of the incarnate Son when he is both divine and human? Athanasius says, 'He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm.' Athanasius perceives the fundamental 'subject' or 'person' of Jesus, although still decades away were the Second Ecumenical Council of 381 which brought about a terminological agreement about the use of 'hypostasis' for 'person,' and the Third Ecumenical Council of 431 which affirmed that the eternal Son was the single subject or person ('hypostasis') in Jesus of Nazareth; the human nature of Jesus did not give rise to a second subject or human person.

In *Discourses* 1.60, Athanasius delineates between who 'He is' as 'Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father' and what 'He is become' in 'a second sense' as 'flesh' and 'man.' Conveniently, yet not coincidentally, this passage also contains a quotation of Romans 8:3:

'Moreover the words 'He has become surety' denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the 'Word,' He 'became flesh [John 1:14]' and 'become' we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression 'He has become,' expounding it according to a *second sense*, viz. because He has become man. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that His essence has become, knowing, as he did, that He is Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father; but here too he refers the word 'become' to the ministry of that covenant, in which *death which once ruled is abolished*. Since here also the ministry through Him has become better, in that 'what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],' ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word, He made us walk, no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit [Romans 8:4], and say again and again, 'But we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit [Romans 8:9]' ...'⁵⁶⁴

The reason why Athanasius delineates who Jesus 'is' in 'his essence' in comparison with who he 'has become' seems to help his audience understand in what sense Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh. 'In the likeness of' for Athanasius did not mean a superficial resemblance, but the real substance. Jesus 'is' the Son of God who 'became' sinful flesh. He did not merely give 'the appearance' of becoming sinful flesh. He did become it in fact.

This disciplined structure of understanding and speaking of the divine and human attributes of Christ solves a central issue. In my examination of the undisputed writings of Athanasius, above,⁵⁶⁵ I examined Emmanuel Hatzidakis' assertion that Jesus must have cleansed his human nature from conception. One argument he advances is the objection that Jesus, during the years of his earthly ministry, cannot be described as 'fallen' and 'sinful' (in the sense of sinful as a condition, not a record of activity) on account of his human nature being in that condition. Hatzidakis asserts, 'The exchange of properties [of the divine and human natures] takes place because the properties are always expressed through the person, not by themselves.'⁵⁶⁶ Because Hatzidakis assumes the attribute of 'fallen' must be communicated upward from the nature to the person at all times in an unqualified sense, he therefore believes that

⁵⁶³ Ibid 3.31, emphasis mine

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid 1.60, emphasis mine; cf. *Discourses* 2.47

⁵⁶⁵ This section is included as part of this paper, and can be found separately in Mako A. Nagasawa, *Medical Substitutionary Atonement in Athanasius of Alexandria*, available here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec-athanasius-of-alexandria>

⁵⁶⁶ Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p.249 and note on p.248 the significant difference between Hatzidakis' interpretation of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* 9, 20, and 21, and mine, above

logic requires us to say that if Jesus took to himself a fallen human nature, that we must also say that he ‘was’ himself fallen in the same sense that we human beings are fallen.⁵⁶⁷

This concern also undergirds David Bentley Hart’s interpretation of Jesus’ human nature and will, partly mediated by his interpretation of Maximus the Confessor. One plank of Hart’s argument for universalism is to reason out from Jesus’ human nature what ‘freedom’ and ‘freedom of choice’ mean – what these terms meant for Jesus, and what they mean for us:

‘If human nature required the real capacity freely to reject God, then Christ could not have been fully human... According to Maximus, however, Christ possesses no gnostic will at all, and this because his will was perfectly free... What distinguished Christ in this regard from the rest of humanity, if Christological orthodoxy is to be believed, is not that he lacked a kind of freedom that all others possess, but that he was not subject to the kinds of extrinsic constraints upon his freedom (ignorance, delusion, corruption of the will, and so forth) that enslave the rest of the race.’⁵⁶⁸

This is not the place to evaluate the merits of Hart’s defense of universalism in its entirety. I simply note here that Hart appeals to the same basic argument that Hatzidakis builds: Jesus’ human experience was qualitatively different from ours, not because he had a super-human nature, but because his human nature, he argues, was constituted such that Jesus did not live with the same ignorance and corruption of will (‘infirmity,’ or weakness?) we do. Interestingly, Hart asserts that throughout his earthly life, Jesus’ will ‘was perfectly free.’ In Hart’s view, Jesus did not take a human will weakened by the fall to overcome the weakness through the Spirit and his human choices, all the way through his death and resurrection. Instead, Jesus apparently eliminated the will’s weakness at the moment of conception. His use of the word ‘perfect’ is not, I suggest, accidental or avoidable. Nor is it coincidental that Hart’s statement resembles how Athanasius in *Contra Apollinaris* deploys the word ‘perfect’ in a manner *unlike* that of Hebrews. Only now, Hart applies the word ‘perfect’ to the human *will* of Jesus, not simply to his human *nature*.

Hart’s methodology differs from Athanasius, however, which becomes a curiosity because Hart claims to represent ‘Christological orthodoxy.’ Despite Athanasius’ sometime divergence from Hebrews in how he uses the word ‘perfect,’ he develops new ways of saying what Hebrews says. Athanasius still recognizes that Jesus had to draw his human nature into ‘unalterability’ simply by virtue of it being created, and additionally to overcome the ‘infirmity’ – a weakness and/or resistance – because Adam and Eve had introduced a disorder into human nature. Unlike Hatzidakis and Hart, Athanasius was not concerned to protect the *person* of the Son from the attributes of a fallen human nature. By saying, ‘He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm’ in *Discourses* 2.55 – 56, for example, Athanasius indicates that the principle of the *communicatio idiomatum* does not require the ‘unfallenness’ position. He consistently says in his earlier writings, and he indicates in *Contra Apollinaris* 1.7, that the ‘infirm’ human nature of Christ *did not* transfer its property of being infirm ‘upwards’ to his person in an unqualified manner, for the simple reasons that the Son (1) could not sin, and (2) was not finished acting within human nature and upon it. He also maintains that the human nature of Christ during his earthly life could be conceptually considered in itself, even though it had become the possession of the Son when he assumed it. Thus, the attributes of Christ’s human nature which were *temporary* – infirm, corrupted by sin, mortal, cursed – can be discerned and can only be associated with his person in a qualified sense: i.e. in the sense that the Word ‘became’ these things in his incarnation. Of course, what the Son *became* in the economy of salvation did not change who and what He *is* as the divine Son of the Father. In effect, Athanasius structures the logic of the *communicatio idiomatum* to serve Jesus’ human agency, and requires our recognition that *Jesus had not yet brought his human nature to its full resting place*. Within the person of Jesus, Jesus was coordinating his human nature to carry out its human vocation of presenting itself cleansed and purified to God, circumcised of heart (Dt.10:16; 30:6) and receptive of the Spirit (Ps.51:9 – 11; Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 36). Put another way, in *Discourses* 1.51 and *Life of Antony* 7, Athanasius could also say that Jesus had to establish his human will and human nature in virtue, in the Spirit, in a human way, through human choices.

Consequently, if we take *Life of Antony* and *Discourses Against the Arians* 1 and 2 as characteristic of Athanasius’ earlier thought, then how do we interpret the critical quotation ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ there? The weight of evidence in Athanasius’ earlier writings points in the direction of the ‘fallenness’ camp. In fact, coordinated with

⁵⁶⁷ Hatzidakis, p.253 – 257

⁵⁶⁸ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019)

other statements outside of his quotations of Romans 8:3, the evidence is fairly overwhelming. For example, in *Discourses* 1.43, the bishop of Alexandria said the incarnation involved ‘putting on that flesh *which was enslaved to sin*.’⁵⁶⁹ He says Jesus undid the sinfulness of the flesh gradually, throughout the course of his life and death:

‘For the Word being clothed in the flesh, as has many times been explained, every bite of the serpent began to be utterly staunched from out it; and whatever evil sprung from the motions of the flesh, to be cut away, and with these death also was abolished, the companion of sin, as the Lord Himself says, ‘The prince of this world comes, and finds nothing in Me’ [John 14:30]; and ‘For this end was He manifested,’ as John has written, ‘that He might destroy the works of the devil’ [1 John 3:8].’⁵⁷⁰

By saying ‘the motions of the flesh [began] to be cut away,’ Athanasius suggests that ‘circumcision’ as an idea is present in his mind, which, if so, confirms my reading of Paul and ‘circumcision of the heart.’ Statements like these show that Athanasius was robustly capable of denoting the fallen humanity Jesus bore, which corroborates the strong impression that Athanasius’ earlier writings connect Romans 8:3 with the ‘fallenness’ position.

Van Kuiken acknowledges that, taken on face value, there is a notable difference of opinion between the earlier and later works on this particular point. He says, ‘*Contra Apollinarius*’s insistence on the assumption of flesh renewed to Edenic purity (and in that sense unfallen) complements the statements in Athanasius’ recognized writings regarding the assumption of enslaved, errant flesh.’⁵⁷¹ I will examine below what Van Kuiken means when he proposes that the later statement ‘complements’ the earlier, as well as where I believe he makes mistakes in his reading of *Contra Apollinarius*. I would approach the data less optimistically, however. Where Van Kuiken sees the possibility for the later writing to effectively *qualify* the earlier, I see more troubling relationships between them, and more difficulties concerning the possibilities for integration.

‘Likeness’ and ‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh’ in *Contra Apollinarius*

I have so far examined how Athanasius, in *Contra Apollinarius*, uses the key terms ‘perfect,’ ‘without sin,’ ‘flesh,’ and even ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ while stretching their meanings, or assigning them different meanings than those terms have, both in Scripture and in his own earlier writings. Does this reflect a change in how Athanasius understands and deploys these terms? I find the divergence significant enough that I conclude that Athanasius, if he was indeed the author of *Contra Apollinarius*, concedes significant ground to Apollinarius.

For Apollinarius, merely ‘imitating’ Christ is enough, because it was acceptable for Christ to merely ‘imitate’ us in our humanity. Van Kuiken aptly points out, ‘Apollinarianism reduces soteriology to simulacra: Christ mimics human nature and we mimic his sinlessness.’ Significant to my point, Apollinarius appears to use a watered-down version of the term ‘likeness’ to indicate behavioral copying or distant ‘imitation.’⁵⁷² According to Athanasius, Apollinarius teaches, ‘Wherefore Christ exhibited the flesh in a new condition, by way of *likeness*: and each man exhibits in himself the condition of the thinking element in us, by means of imitation, and *likeness*, and abstinence from sin. And in this way, Christ is understood to be ‘without sin.’’⁵⁷³ Athanasius foregrounds this teaching in the opening pages of the first book. Later in the work, when Athanasius groups Apollinarius into the same category as Marcion, he chides, ‘For wherein did Marcion’s statement differ from yours? Did he not say that the body appeared from heaven, in *likeness* of man, but not in reality?’⁵⁷⁴ Marcion was a second century figure. Although separated from Apollinarius by two hundred years, they demonstrate similar conceptual concerns and rhetorical techniques. Interestingly, they both distort the biblical word ‘likeness.’ ‘Likeness’ in Apollinarius’ hands means ‘superficial resemblance.’

For proposing a human nature without a genuine human mind in the incarnation, Apollinarius wins condemnation from Athanasius. Is imitating Christ even achievable in a moral sense, in Apollinarius’ framework?⁵⁷⁵ Logically, even ‘imitation’ is flatly impossible if Jesus was not fully human, because ‘imitation is imitation of a preceding

⁵⁶⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.43, emphasis mine

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid 2.69

⁵⁷¹ Van Kuiken, p.112

⁵⁷² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarius* 1.20 – 21 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.112 – 114 and 2.11 in ET, p.130

⁵⁷³ Ibid 1.2 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.86, emphasis mine

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid 1.12 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.101, emphasis mine

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid 1.20 in ET *Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.114 says, ‘Vainly, then do you imagine that you can effect in yourselves the renewal...’

piece of work.⁵⁷⁶ If something so central to us as the human mind were missing in Jesus, we might as well try to imitate another higher species or life form. Moreover, ‘why did the Law make nothing perfect?’ asks Athanasius, raising multiple questions at once.⁵⁷⁷ Why was no one able to perfect their own human nature under the Jewish Law? Doesn’t Christ as exemplar raise the bar even higher? Did Jesus bypass life under the Law by starting his human life already ‘perfect’? Did this functionally make him non-Jewish? As a behavioral model, if we are ‘external’ to Christ and he is ‘external’ to us, what makes Jesus actually ‘good news’ for us humans, and specifically ‘good news’ to Israel? Athanasius is very concerned to declare that ‘mere resemblance’ between Jesus’ human nature and ours is insufficient for salvation. If Jesus’ identification with our humanity is a ‘mere resemblance,’ then all is, in fact, lost. Apollinaris’ Christ possesses a human nature that bears only a ‘mere resemblance to ours, but was foreign to that human flesh of which he impiously asserts sin to be the nature, not the operation.’⁵⁷⁸ By protecting Jesus from bearing a fallen human nature, and protecting him from what he thought to be the inevitability of human sinful actions, Apollinaris removes Jesus and makes him unavailable to us. Apollinaris shifts the focus away from ‘participation’⁵⁷⁹ in Christ, because participation would only be possible if the Son first participated in our human nature *en toto*.

In *Contra Apollinarium*, Athanasius uses various biblical terms in different ways than he did previously. He therefore has to stake out new terminology and modes of argument. Critically, however, by not fighting for the original definitions of these biblical terms, Athanasius gives up ground. He legitimizes Apollinarian rhetoric about how biblical terms can and should be used, going forward. He contributes to the growing distance between Christian theological discourse and the Scriptures themselves. This was deeply consequential in the use of the terms ‘likeness’ and ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh.’ It is not that Athanasius’ orthodox christology, or even his earlier position in the ‘fallenness’ camp, is unrecognizable. We can still discern the structure of his argument, which I hope I have traced above sufficiently. Earlier in his life, Athanasius had already shown some principled flexibility about the use of key theological terms regarding the divine person of the Son – terms which were not used by Scripture on that particular subject, but nevertheless developed by the church because it was necessary to do so.⁵⁸⁰ But would he go this far about the human nature assumed by the Son, when there was already so much biblical data and context on that very subject?

Van Kuiken suggests that *Contra Apollinarium* ‘complements’ the earlier writings of Athanasius. Van Kuiken’s solution is to assume genuine Athanasian authorship of *Contra Apollinarium* and to qualify and condition the earlier writings based on what he believes he has found in the *Contra Apollinarium*. Van Kuiken’s operating principle, here, is to assume that any perceived differences in concept or terminology is due to ‘development beyond the bishop’s own thought.’⁵⁸¹

There are, however, other options. One option is to assert that the two books *Contra Apollinarium* do in fact teach the ‘fallenness’ position. My study of *Contra Apollinarium* finds that the author is using key terms in a subtly different way than he did before, which raises its own questions and problems, but that the conceptual architecture of the ‘fallenness’ position is still present. Hence, I disagree with Van Kuiken when he says:

‘The Son’s likeness to sinful flesh (Rom. 8.3) is an authentic participation in the Adamic substance of flesh, but not in its sinfulness, which Christ condemns by embodying flesh ‘unreceptive of sin.’⁵⁸²

Here, Van Kuiken chooses to take the word ‘sin’ as the condition associated with conception and inherited Adamic sinfulness. He appears to allow the phrase ‘without sin’ found at the end of the two books to mean the same. However, in context, Athanasius indicates that he is using the word ‘sin’ to mean ‘sin as actions’ which, when undertaken by us, have a reciprocally damaging effect on our own human nature. This is what Athanasius rules out in the case of Jesus Christ. Athanasius punctuates his point by strategically quoting Isaiah 53:9 (referring to deeds

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid 1.20 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.114

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid 1.21 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.114 – 115

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid 1.12 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.101 – 102

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid 1.21 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.114 says, ‘...we imitate and participate in the perfect newness of Christ’

⁵⁸⁰ When in 362, Athanasius, *Tome to the Antiochians*, tried to reconcile two competing pro-Nicene parties over the two uses of the term *hypostasis*, he demonstrated a remarkable flexibility, paying attention to the underlying structure of thought and the intention behind both parties’ deployment of the term. It is notable, however, that the New Testament usage of *hypostasis* carried with it a different lexical valence (2 Cor.9:4; 11:17; Heb.1:3; 3:14; 11:1).

⁵⁸¹ Van Kuiken, p.112

⁵⁸² Van Kuiken, p.110. The translation ‘unreceptive of sin’ is Van Kuiken’s; see footnote 109.

and words), for example, following his use of the ‘seed’ image which refers to sinful actions taken in the mind. His point is that Jesus did not undertake sinful deeds or words, because he never let the ‘seed’ of Satan enter his mind. But Jesus nevertheless was ‘born of a woman’ to assume ‘the nature which had become poor’ so he – even from youth – could be victorious over the temptations common to all human beings and ‘crucify our old self,’ making available to us his ‘new self’ which we can put on.

Therefore, my conclusion differs from Van Kuiken in that I do not think *Contra Apollinarium* simply ‘complements’ the earlier writings of Athanasius. I have no doubt that they do provide genuine Athanasian teaching into the human mind and soul of Jesus, along with the salvific importance of Jesus’ body going into the earth while Jesus’ soul went to Hades. The difficulty I perceive has to do with how *Contra Apollinarium* deploys key biblical terms and quotations from Romans and Hebrews about the humanity of Jesus in subtly different ways from Athanasius’ undisputed writings, and from Romans and Hebrews themselves. This is not a trivial matter. What do we do with this disparity? Were the two books *Contra Apollinarium* written by (say) Peter II of Alexandria or some other student of Athanasius? Pursuing that possibility lies outside the scope of this paper.

Alternatively, is Athanasius (or a successor of his) deploying a rhetorical strategy where he uses terminology shared by the Apollinarians in order to share common ground with them, only to draw them into his own conceptual structure?⁵⁸³ If so, then the *Contra Apollinarium* should not be treated as a *development* of the bishop’s thought, but as a particular *deployment* of it – in a strategy that captivates and captures the Apollinarians by initially conceding some ground to them, only to reel them back into the larger structure of Athanasius’ theological thought, and even his earlier writings and the original biblical meanings of ‘perfect,’ ‘without sin,’ ‘flesh,’ and ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh.’ If this more complex possibility is the case, then *Contra Apollinarium* cannot be treated as an evolution in Athanasius’ thought, and cannot be used, as Van Kuiken does, to qualify Athanasius’ earlier writings as placing him in the ‘unfallenness’ camp. Quite possibly, *Contra Apollinarium* should not be read as an exegetical commentary on Romans and Hebrews, strictly speaking, despite its value at times in that regard, but primarily as a polemic.

Consequences of Terminological Confusion

Regardless of what determinations one makes about the relationship between the *Contra Apollinarium* and the earlier writings of Athanasius, we must consider the impact these books had. What were the consequences? By largely accepting the way Apollinaris uses these key biblical terms related to the humanity and human experience of Jesus, as demonstrated by *Contra Apollinarium*, orthodox Christian leaders committed themselves to a path that contributes to troubles in the church, not merely the enduring debate about whether Jesus assumed a ‘fallen’ or ‘unfallen’ human nature.

Direct causation is hard to discern, but without a doubt, *Contra Apollinarium* contribute to various trends already happening in the church. He contributes to confusion in the reading of Scripture,⁵⁸⁴ what T.F. Torrance considers to be problems posed by the apparently ‘static’ view of Jesus’ humanity presented by some theologians and even the Chalcedonian Definition of 451.⁵⁸⁵ This trend raises the intriguing question of whether the ‘unfallenness’ camp is actually ‘semi-Apollinarian,’ although these views might also be credited to a strain of early Latin Christianity

⁵⁸³ Dr. Bruce Beck, in conversation, alerted me to this possibility. Some scholars argue, for example, that the apostle Paul used a ‘Jewish midrashic’ rhetorical strategy at times, perhaps with the word ‘seed’ in Galatians 3:16 – 29 drawn from Genesis 15:1 – 6 (see N.A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977), although, see N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), p.157 – 159 for an argument exempting Paul from this style of rabbinic discourse.

⁵⁸⁴ For example, John Cassian, *On the Incarnation (Against Nestorius)* 4.3 explains ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ as follows: ‘though the flesh was truly taken, yet there was no true sin, and that, as far as the body is concerned, we should understand that there was reality; as far as sin is concerned, only the likeness of sin. For though all flesh is sinful, yet He had flesh without sin, and had in Himself the likeness of sinful flesh, while He was in the flesh but He was free from what was truly sin, because He was without sin.’ Notice in 4.6, Cassian exposit Philippians 2:6 – 8 and renders ‘likeness of men’ to mean ‘actual substance of human nature.’ Compare with John Chrysostom, *Homily 13 on Romans*, who says, ‘He smote it with the blow of His death [*my note*: not his conception], but in this very act it was not the smitten flesh which was condemned and perished, but the sin which had been smiting. And this is the greatest possible marvel. For if it were not in the flesh that the victory took place, it would not be so astonishing, since this the Law also wrought. But the wonder is, that it was with the flesh (μετὰ σαρκός) that His trophy was raised, and that what had been overthrown numberless times by sin, did itself get a glorious victory over it.’

⁵⁸⁵ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.201 writes, ‘For many people the difficulty with Chalcedonian christology is this, that when it speaks of ‘the human nature’ of Christ, it seems to be speaking of some neutral human nature... even though we nowhere have any actual experience of such neutral human nature.’ Torrance’s discussion on p.198 – 206 is extremely valuable. However, I question Torrance’s unqualified endorsement of the doctrine of the incarnation put forward by Leo of Rome, on account of the latter’s sponsorship of John Cassian who argued for the ‘unfallen’ view.

represented by the Latin writers Tertullian of Carthage and Hilary of Poitiers, but here, I restrict myself to the terminological questions. It should be apparent that, although Apollinaris and his movement were ‘defeated,’ that Athanasius’ deployment of Apollinaris’ terminology represented a victory of sorts for Apollinaris. Apollinaris’ influence continued through the writings marshalled against him. The absorption of Apollinaris’ terms and need to refine them (e.g. *mia physis*) contributed to the church splits in the Third and Fourth Ecumenical Councils.

Moreover, on the pastoral level, continuing to distance Jesus’ human experience from our human experience has the consequence of contributing to what Peter Brown calls ‘the cult of the saints’ – a fascination with people and objects, which filled the vacuum that ordinary Christians felt, to mediate the growing distance they sensed between themselves and Jesus himself.⁵⁸⁶ The growth of these beliefs and practices during late antiquity is surely not coincidental with the spread of the ‘unfallenness’ view. So too, the two books *Contra Apollinarium* reinforce tendencies (already existing in the church) to diminish the biblical and creational affirmation of marriage and marital sexuality, not least because Athanasius holds up celibacy even within marriage as an ideal: ‘It is well attested that they [i.e. Mary and Joseph] continued inviolate.’⁵⁸⁷ This was not the first time Christian leaders would say this, but it is far from clear that the sources of the idea are reliable.

Earlier, I mentioned that the rise of apthartodocetism can be considered a weakness in the church’s teaching about the humanity the Son assumed in the incarnation. We are now in a position to appreciate why. Apthartodocetism was the view that Jesus’ physical body was always incorrupt, even from conception. Julian of Halicarnassus led an early sixth century sect which proposed it, and they won the support of Emperor Justinian (who was theologically trained and engaged) who almost declared it the official imperial Roman faith, but for Justinian’s death. The ‘unfallenness’ camp taught by many orthodox Christians left this logical opening. After all, if we say that the Son cleansed his human nature of fallenness at conception, and if death is the result of fallenness, then why would Jesus’ body still be mortal? Mortality and moral weakness were two intimately related qualities of fallen humanity bound up together, throughout Scripture and patristic literature. If the ‘unfallenness’ camp denied to Jesus any experience of fallenness in the dimension of moral strength, which also impacts our understanding of Jesus’ own dependence on the Holy Spirit, then perhaps it would make sense to assert that his mortality had been overcome earlier, too? Perhaps his human nature was actually incorrupt from conception? Apthartodocetism was declared a heresy, but the underlying logic still poses a problem. Apthartodocetism is a theological counterpart resulting from the growing sense of distance between Jesus’ humanity and ours.

What, in fact, was the ‘human nature’ (*physis*) in Jesus Christ? In what sense was Jesus’ humanity and earthly ministry anchored in the human nature that we have and experience as a result of the fall? Was his human nature ‘ignorant’ of some things? Did Jesus ‘learn’ things? If so, how? What does that mean for our human growth and development? And how do we coordinate the passible humanity of Jesus with his impassible divinity? In fact, how do we properly define the terms ‘passible’ and ‘impassible’? Are ‘emotions’ an aspect of ‘passibility’ straightaway? It is one thing to regard ‘divine emotions’ in the Old Testament as ‘anthropopathisms,’ which I question. It is quite another to regard Jesus’ human emotions and human word choices as merely related to his human nature, and not a revelation of the loving Father by the Spirit. These assertions require much more substantiation.

MORE TO COME

⁵⁸⁶ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, enlarged edition, 2013), p.xviii – xxxi gives a respectful treatment of the ‘two-tier’ (learned/aristocratic and non-educated/popular) approach to understanding the archaeological and literary remains of Christian communities in the late antique period. Brown, p.xxvii writes, ‘We are listening to a dialogue between two constituencies within the same Christian congregation. Augustine insisted that the congregation had gathered so as to learn how to imitate the martyrs. But the congregation had often come for a very different, less easily verbalized but more potent reason. They had not come to imitate. They had come to participate. They wished to be touched, if only for a blessed moment, by the burst of glory associated with heroes and heroines, whose victory over unspeakable suffering and instant entry into heaven sent a shock wave of numinous energy through the gathering.’ It is worth very sober reflection on why, as Brown notes on p.xxv, Christians at the popular level experienced enormous energy and excitement when the relics of Saint Stephen arrived at Mahon in Minorca in 417, which resulted in an ‘ugly pogrom of the Jewish community.’

⁵⁸⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Apollinarium* 1.4 in *ET Later Treatises of S. Athanasius*, p.88

Orton, *Garments*, p.98 in footnote 117 critiques Danielou for saying that Nyssen simply follows Irenaeus on the 'tunics of skin' question. Nyssen does not.

Primordial human unity in Adam. See p.148, footnote 66. Origen's idea of the unfallen spiritual existences as a 'Church of the pre-existence' (see p. 73 above and Crouzel, p. 206). At this stage, as already noted, Adam had not yet been created. So this is clearly a quite separate idea from the Pauline one (later developed by Irenaeus and Methodius) of the unity of the human race in Adam, the first man, 'der die ganze Menschheit in sich begreift und als deren Rapsentant erscheint' (VOLker, p. 64). VOLker implies (p. 65) that Gregory makes use of this concept, and indeed understands it in a Platonic way (see n. 71 below) but provides no references from Gregory's works to support this view and there seems in fact no good reason to believe that the concept played a significant role in Gregory's thought. (See p.149 also)

See p.245 especially. 'But the most difficult theological problem arises from the fact [that] the primal human perfection to which Gregory looks back (and forward) does not include a flesh and blood body.'

See p.202, footnote 113 about Irenaeus' use of image and likeness vs. Gregory's. Nyssen did not distinguish.