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# Justin Martyr and penal substitutionary atonement

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## 1. Introduction

It has recently been asserted that the theory of penal substitutionary atonement is a relatively modern doctrine, going back no further than the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Prior to that, it is said, the dominant theories were those which spoke of the death of Christ as being the means by which evil was conquered, a ransom was paid to Satan, God's honour was satisfied, or God's love for the human race was supremely demonstrated. The implication of this understanding of the history of the theology of the atonement is, of course, that the theory of penal substitutionary atonement as a way of explaining the meaning of the death of Jesus is a theory which can now be safely abandoned as a distortion of the original teaching of Christ and the apostles.

It is not the purpose of this article to examine the evidence of the New Testament itself for the view that Jesus' death was understood in Christian circles as a case of penal substitution during the 1st century. This task has already been ably undertaken by many others in the modern period.<sup>2</sup> Rather the aim will be to

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- 1 B. Jersak and M. Hardin, eds., *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): the 'penal satisfaction theory' is a 'post-Reformation development' (55); the 'penal substitution' theory 'was developed during the 16th century Reformation' (358); 'penal substitutionary atonement' is a 'Reformed' theory (435). A similar view is taken by P. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), 102, and L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), 191. Both allow only for 'hints' of the idea prior to the Reformation.
  - 2 E.g. by D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1981); C. E. Hill and F. A. James, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 90-208; S. Jeffrey, M. Ovey and A. Sach, eds., *Pierced for our Transgressions* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007); G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974); I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2004); idem, *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity* (London etc.: Paternoster, 2007); L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Leicester: IVP, 1965); idem, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1976); J. I. Packer and M. Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2007); D. Peterson, ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001); J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), besides many earlier writings on the subject and commentaries on individual books of the New Testament.

examine the view of one particular early church theologian, who is also regarded as the greatest of the 2nd century apologists, Justin Martyr.<sup>3</sup> If it can be shown that Justin Martyr believed that Jesus' death should be understood in terms of penal substitutionary atonement, then the assertion that the idea did not appear in Christian theology until the 16th century is once again refuted; and if there are grounds for believing that Justin's teaching at this point reflects the traditional teaching of the Church of his time rather than being simply a personal view, then it may further be argued that this particular understanding of the meaning of the death of Jesus was widespread in the post-apostolic period.

This subject is worth exploring further not least because Justin's teaching has been variously interpreted in modern discussion. There are some who have argued in favour of the view that Justin regarded Jesus' death as a case of penal substitutionary atonement,<sup>4</sup> and others who have argued that he did not.<sup>5</sup> The

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- 3 For an English text of Justin's extant writings, see A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers Inc., 2004), vol.1: *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*. For general introductions to the life and thought of Justin Martyr (c.114-165), see especially L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967); idem, 'Justin Martyr in Recent Study' in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol.22, 1969, 152-164; H. von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (London: Black, 1963) ch.1; H. Chadwick, 'Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity' in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol.47, no.2, 1965, 275-297; idem, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968); E. F. Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1973); P. Parvis, 'Justin Martyr', in the *Expository Times*, vol.120.2, 2008, 53-61; S. Parvis and P. Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and his Worlds* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); and G. T. Purves, *The Testimony of Justin Martyr to Early Christianity* (London: James Nisbet and co., 1888).
- 4 E.g. T. G. Donner, *Justin Martyr: A Theology of History* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1982); S. Jeffrey, M. Ovey, and A. Sach, eds., *Pierced for our Transgressions*, 164-166; A. L. Williams, *Justin Martyr, the Dialogue with Trypho: Translation, Introduction and Notes* (London: SPCK, 1930), 201; G. Williams, 'Punished in our Place: A Reply to Steve Chalke on Penal Substitution' in *The Theologian: The Internet Journal for Integrated Theology*, <http://www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/punished.html>, accessed 16.12.09.
- 5 E.g. L. W. Grensted, *A Short History*, 25, believed that the Dialogue with Trypho proved the *opposite* of the 'penal' theory of the Atonement, and H. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1919), 200, claimed that Justin 'never speaks of Christ's death as being a punishment for sin'. J. F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen, 1903), 352, went so far as to say that before Augustine 'the sufferings of Christ were not regarded as an exchange or substitution of penalty, or a punishment inflicted on him by the Father for our sins'. The quotations from B. Jersak and M. Hardin, eds., *Stricken by God?*, quoted in n.1 above, automatically rule out the possibility that Justin taught penal substitutionary atonement. More recently still, D. Flood, in 'Substitutionary atonement and the Church Fathers: A reply to the authors of *Pierced for Our Transgressions*', *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. 82.2, 2010, 144-145, accepts that Justin's works contain 'elements of substitutionary atonement', but doubts whether Justin conceived of the substitution as 'penal'.

evidence is disputed, and needs a fresh examination.

I propose, therefore, firstly to begin by looking at the importance of the cross in Justin's writings, highlighting in particular those passages in which he clearly teaches that it had salvific significance; secondly to argue that he understood the cross specifically in penal substitutionary terms, with special reference to the particular passage where his thought on this subject finds its clearest expression; and thirdly to ask whether his view represents the beliefs of the Church of his time.

## 2. The importance of the cross in Justin's writings

There are only three works which may safely be attributed to Justin: the two Apologies and the Dialogue with Trypho.<sup>6</sup> We will look at them in turn.

### 2.1 *The First Apology*

On several occasions in this work, Justin affirms that the message of a crucified saviour lies at the heart of the Christian faith. 'We give to a crucified man', he says in ch.13, 'a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all'. Other passing references to the cross as central appear also in chs.21, 22, 46, 55 and 63. It is the death of Jesus which is commemorated by Christians, Justin says in chs.66-67, in the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Equally there are several places in the First Apology in which Justin seeks to demonstrate that the death of Jesus was prophesied in Old Testament scripture. Sometimes the fact of this fulfilment is just asserted, as in chs.31, 36, 42 and 53, but on most occasions the Old Testament scriptures are themselves cited, as in chs.32 (Gen. 49:10-11), 35 (Ps. 22:16, 18; Isa. 9:6, 58:2, 65:2; Zech. 9:9), 38 (Ps. 3:5, 22:7-8, 18; Isa. 50:6-8, 65:2), 41 (Ps. 96:1-10), 48 (Isa. 57:1-2), 49 (Isa. 65:1-3), 50 (Isa. 52:13-53:8, 12), 51 (Isa. 53:8-12), and 60 (Num. 21:8). Justin also occasionally claims to see hidden signs or foreshadowings of the cross in pagan mythology (ch.21-22), in ordinary life, as for example in ships' sails, agricultural implements, the human form, and Roman banners (ch.55), and in Plato's *Timaeus* (ch.60). This tendency is, of course, thoroughly consistent with his understanding of Christ as the *Logos* of God, pervading time and space, and not simply one who is known through his historical manifestation.

On just two occasions in the First Apology, Justin hints at the salvific power of the cross: at ch.32, where he says that through his passion Jesus was 'cleansing by his blood those who believe in him'; and at ch.63, where he says that his purpose in suffering was that 'by dying and rising again he might conquer death'. Beyond these simple phrases, no theory of the atonement is spelt out in this work.

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6 E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 79; S. Parvis and Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and his Worlds*, xiv; W. A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr* (London: SPCK, 1965), 1.

## 2.2 *The Second Apology*

In this work, which is by far the shorter of the two Apologies, and which is addressed to the Roman Senate at a time of persecution, Justin makes just one passing reference to the crucifixion, in ch.6. He does not seek to prove its fulfilment in Old Testament prophecy, nor does he mention its salvific power.

## 2.3 *The Dialogue with Trypho*

The picture is quite different with the Dialogue with Trypho,<sup>7</sup> Justin's main surviving work (written c.155-167), which takes up over 70% of the entire extant corpus of his undisputed writings, and which is saturated with references to the cross.

Passing references to the cross may be found in the following chapters: 10, 11, 34, 35, 46, 49, 64, 67, 70, 88, 93, 108, 116, 117, 118, 126, 131, 132, 133, 136, 137, and 141.

The argument for the truth of the Christian faith from the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy is one major plank in Justin's defence of Christianity in his conversation with Trypho the Jew. The chapters where this argument is used with reference to the cross include the following: 32, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 51, 63, 68, 71, 76, 85, 86, 89, 90, 94, 107, 110, 112, 125, 134, and 138. Specific Old Testament texts are cited or alluded to with reference to the cross in chs.13 (Isa. 52:10-54:6), 17 (Isa. 53:5), 32 (Isa. 53:2, 5, 7-9; Zech. 12:10), 43 (Isa. 53:5, 8), 52 (Gen. 49), 53 (Zech. 9:9, 13:7), 54 (Gen. 49:11), 63 (Gen. 49:11; Isa. 53:8), 64 (Zech. 12:10), 72 (Isa. 53:7, Jer. 11:19), 73 (Ps. 96, though the key phrase 'reigned from the wood' in v.10 does not appear in our texts), 74 (Ps. 96), 89 (Isa. 53), 91 (Deut. 33:13-17; Isa. 27:1), 95 (Isa. 53:5), 96 (Deut. 21:23), 97 (Ps. 3:4-5; Isa. 53:9, 65:2; Ps. 22:16-18), 98-106 (Ps. 22), 107-8 (Jonah), 111 (Isa. 53:7), 114 (Isa. 53:7), 118 (Isa. 53:8, Zech. 12:10), and 137 (Isa. 53:5).

It is particularly noticeable how much use is made of Isa. 53 in the above list. Once the whole chapter is quoted (in ch.13), and various parts of it are quoted on at least nine other occasions. Isaiah is quoted more often than any other book of the Old Testament in his extant writings, and, from the book of Isaiah, ch. 53, the chapter which is regularly regarded as prophetic of the atoning work of Christ in the New Testament, is the most quoted chapter. These facts alone demonstrate how important the sufferings and death of Christ were to Justin.

In addition to this list we may add hidden allusions to the cross which Justin

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7 On which see H. P. Schneider, 'Some Reflections on the Dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho' in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol.15, 1962, 164-175. Schneider argues that the Dialogue is an artificial work, yet nevertheless reflects a genuine Jewish-Christian Dialogue which was taking place at that time. By contrast T. J. Horner, *Listening to Trypho: Justin Martyr's Dialogue Reconsidered* (Leuvan: Peeters, 2001) argues that it incorporates a record of a genuine encounter. A similar view is taken by H. Chadwick, in 'Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity', 280, and A. L. Williams, *Justin Martyr*, xxiv. One's stance on this question does not directly impinge on the subject of this article.

finds in the Old Testament. In ch. 86 Justin finds many such allusions in references to wooden items: the tree of life (Gen. 3:22), Moses' staff, with which effected the people's redemption (Exod. 4:2), divided the sea (Exod. 14:16, mentioned also in ch.138), and struck the rock to produce water (Exod. 17:5), the piece of wood which made the bitter water sweet (Exod. 15:25), the rods Jacob put in the water troughs (Gen. 30:38), the staff with which he crossed the Jordan (Gen. 32:10), and the ladder he saw in his dream (Gen. 28:12), Aaron's rod which budded (Num. 17:1-11), the rod of Jesse (Isa. 11:1), the tree planted by the water (Ps. 1:3), the palm trees to which the righteous are likened (Ps. 92:12), the oak of Mamre from which God appeared to Abraham (Gen. 18:1), the palm trees at Elim (Exod. 15:27), David's rod and staff (Ps. 23:4), Elijah's stick with which the axe head was raised from the water (2 Kgs 6:6), and Judah's staff which was given as a pledge to Tamar (Gen. 38:18, 25). To this list we may add the reference to the wood of Noah's ark in ch.138 (Gen. 6-8). Other typological allusions to the cross include the Passover lamb (Exod. 12, found in chs.40 and 111), the figure of a roasted (Passover?) lamb with two spits at right-angles (ch.40), the two goats on the day of Atonement – one sacrificed and the other sent into the wilderness as the 'scapegoat' (Lev. 16, chs.40 and 111), the figure of Moses' outstretched arms, whereby he won victory through Joshua over the Amalekites (Exod. 17:12, chs.90, 97, 111, 112 and 131), the horns of the wild ox (Deut. 33:17, ch.91), the brazen serpent (Num. 21:6-9, chs.91, 94, 112 and 131), the scarlet thread of Rahab in Jericho (Josh. 2:18, 21, ch.111), Jacob's thigh which was put out of joint (Gen. 32:25), and Jacob's service under Laban, which is likened to Christ's 'slavery of the cross' (Gen. 30:25-42, ch.134). The range of allusions to the cross Justin finds in the Old Testament is astonishing. The work of Christ on the cross as something which was prophesied beforehand in the Old Testament is clearly a dominant theme in the Dialogue with Trypho.

Places in which the cross is given salvific meaning include the following: ch.13, sins are 'washed away'... we are 'purified'... Christ (quoting Isa. 53) 'bore our sins... was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities', 'with his stripes we are healed' (a statement repeated in chs.17, 32, 43 and 137), 'the Lord laid on him our iniquities'; 24 speaks of 'the blood of salvation'; 41, we are 'purified in soul from all iniquity... delivered from evil... principalities and powers are overthrown'; 49, those who believe in him are 'washed... with his own blood'; 54, we are 'washed'... our 'sins remitted'; 86, we are 'purified... redeemed'; 91 'the serpent' is 'put to death'; 94 we have 'salvation from the fangs of the serpent'; 95 'Christ took upon himself the curses of all...' that we might be 'healed' and have our sins remitted; 111, 'the blood of Christ will deliver from death those who have believed', we have 'salvation through the blood of Christ', the unrighteous 'receive remission of sins' and 'continue no longer in sin'; 131, 'demons' are 'destroyed'; 134, he 'acquired' races of mankind 'by the blood and mystery of the cross'; 138, believers 'shall escape from the impending judgment of God'.

There can be no doubt on the basis of this evidence that, for Justin, the cross of Christ was a central element in the Christian message as a whole, because it

was for him the means of our salvation.

Given that the cross mattered to Justin, that he saw it as the fulfilment of OT Scripture and that he believed it had salvific value, we must now enquire whether he saw it in penal substitutionary terms.

### 3. Justin's penal substitutionary understanding of the Cross

#### 3.1 *Textual analysis*

Those who see an inescapably substitutionary meaning in the role of the suffering servant in Isa. 53 or in the scapegoat ritual of Lev. 16 will already be prone to believe that Justin Martyr saw the cross of Christ in these terms because he refers to them in the passages already cited.<sup>8</sup> However, it is in the Dialogue chs.93-96 that Justin's atonement theology comes to its clearest and fullest expression, and it is to this passage we turn in this section.

It is important to realise that Justin's statements about the meaning of the death of Christ are set in the context of a polemic against the Jews which begins towards the end of ch.93, where Justin says of the Jews whom Trypho represents:

To this very day you abide in your wickedness, execrating those who prove that this man who was crucified by you is the Christ. Nay more than this, you suppose that He was crucified as hostile to and cursed by God, which supposition is the product of your most irrational mind. For though you have the means of understanding that this man is Christ from the signs given by Moses, yet you will not.

Here Justin accuses the Jews of (i) cursing ('execrating') Christians, (ii) thinking that Jesus was crucified as 'hostile to and cursed by God', and (iii) not understanding that Jesus is the Christ.

The same accusations are recapitulated with some additions in ch.95, where Justin says:

... why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father's will, as if He were accursed (κεκατηραμένου), and do not rather bewail yourselves? For although His Father caused him to suffer these things in behalf of the human family, yet you did not commit the deed as in obedience to the will of God. For you did not practise piety when you slew the prophets. And let none of you say: If His Father wished Him to suffer this, in order that by His stripes the human race might be healed, we have done no wrong. If, indeed, you repent of your sins, and recognise Him to be the Christ, and observe His commandments, then you may assert this; for, as I have said before, remission of sins shall be yours. But if you curse Him and them that believe on Him, and when you have the power, put them to death, how is it possible that requisition shall not be made of you...?

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8 As is T. G. Donner, *Justin Martyr: A Theology of History*, 213.

Here again we find Justin accusing the Jews of (i) believing that Jesus was accursed (κεκατηραμένου – probably echoing the LXX of Deut. 21:23), (ii) not recognising Jesus to be the Christ,<sup>9</sup> and cursing Him, and (iii) cursing Christians. In addition, Justin accuses them of (iv) wrongfully crucifying Jesus ('you did not commit the deed as in obedience to the will of God'), and (v) claiming exemption from guilt if the Christian interpretation of the cross is true (since on this interpretation the human race is 'healed' by His stripes).<sup>10</sup>

Justin affirms, by implication, the opposite, namely (i) that Jesus was not accursed, (ii) that he was the Christ, (iii) that those who believe in him are blessed, (iv) that the Jews are guilty of crucifying him, and (v) that their guilt is not removed by the fact that God used their wrongdoing to bring healing to the human race.

In chs. 94-95 (i.e. the passage sandwiched by the two passages quoted above), Justin tries to explain the paradox (which he twice calls a 'mystery') that though in one sense Jesus was not 'accursed', in another sense he was. In ch.94, he uses the story of the brazen serpent in Num. 21:4-9 to illustrate this point: Moses transgressed the law he had himself promulgated when he made the brazen serpent and commanded the Israelites to look at it in order to be healed, yet was blameless because he did so under orders from God. God too is 'blameless', though he commanded Moses to do something which he himself had forbidden (i.e. make an image), and therefore was a transgressor of his own law (and by implication theoretically subject to the curse imposed on transgressors of the law). In the same way, Justin says, Jesus appeared to be under God's curse as one who died on the cross, yet as the Saviour of humankind he was not under a curse:

Just as God commanded the sign to be made by the brazen serpent, and yet He is blameless; even so, though a curse lies in the law against persons who are crucified, yet no curse lies on the Christ of God, by whom all that have committed things worthy of a curse are saved.

The reference to those crucified being under a curse clearly alludes to Deut. 21:23, which Justin quotes explicitly in his conclusion to the argument at the beginning of ch. 96.

In ch. 95, however, Justin reaches the heart of his understanding of the cross:

For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, 'Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them'. 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

9 Cf. the words of Trypho in ch.98: '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'.

10 W. A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr*, 78, notes that there is evidence that this argument was actually used by Jews at the time.



requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes? 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...?

The matter is summed up at the beginning of ch.96 with the following words:

For the statement in the law 'Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree', 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 you, who do not know that this is He who existed before all, who is the eternal Priest of God, and King, and Christ.'

Justin clearly is at pains to emphasise that Jesus was not cursed by God on the cross, as the Jews believed, and that in fact he was cursed rather by the Jews themselves. But at the same time he says that God wished His Christ to 'take upon Him the curses of all'.

If we now attempt to unfold systematically Justin's understanding of the atonement, the matter can be put into the following five propositions:

(i) For Justin, the whole human race is under a curse because of its failure to keep God's law. The curse, then, is regarded as the penalty for sin.<sup>11</sup> This is asserted on the basis of Deut. 27:26, which Paul also quotes in Gal. 3:10. Justin applies this text firstly to the Jews, to whom the law was given, but then adds that the Gentiles, who behave even worse, are even more subject to the curse of God.

(ii) Christ, by contrast, as the eternal Son and Word of God made flesh, was perfect, innocent of all sin, and blameless. Outside this passage, Justin calls him 'the only blameless and righteous Man' (ch.17), 'sinless' (chs. 102), and 'the most righteous, and only spotless and sinless Christ' (ch. 110). As such, he was clearly not personally subject to God's curse.

(iii) Nevertheless, the Father willed that Christ should take upon himself (ἀναδέξασθαι) the curses of all. This clearly reflects Gal. 3:13, where Paul says that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (NRSV). The verb ἀναδέχομαι means in this context 'take upon oneself', 'take responsibility for', or 'stand as surety for'.<sup>12</sup>

11 Cf. ch.88: 'For God, wishing both angels and men, who were endowed with freewill, and at their own disposal, to do whatever He had strengthened each to do, made them so, that if they chose the things acceptable to Himself, He would keep them free from death and from punishment; but that if they did evil, He would punish each as He sees fit'. For God's curse being thought of in the Bible as his word of judgment which has power to effect what it pronounces, cf. C. Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986 rvd.), vol.1, 416-17.

12 G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 101. W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 20003), 62, also gives the meaning 'take upon oneself' for this verb in Justin's text at this point.

(iv) The Father's purpose was that (in the words of Isa. 53:5) 'by his stripes the human race might be healed', a healing which takes effect, as Justin goes on to explain, if one repents of sin, recognises Jesus to be the Christ, receives remission of sins, and observe his commands. Inevitably, this 'healing' must include the removal of the 'curse' which hung over us because of our failure to fulfil God's law.

(v) The Father knew that, after he had been crucified and was dead, he would raise him up. Everything took place according to God's will,<sup>13</sup> and Christ's personal blamelessness and freedom from any personal curse is confirmed by the Father's plan to raise him up from death after his atoning work was complete.

The picture which emerges, then, is this: that the blameless Christ, who, because of his blamelessness, is not personally under God's curse, takes upon himself by God's will the curses of all, who are under a curse because they are guilty of transgressing God's law, and dies on the cross for our sakes. The result is that we are freed from the curses which were on us, and are 'healed'. To put it more simply still, the curse we bear as the penalty of our sin is laid on the innocent Christ instead, with the result that Christ suffers, but we are healed. Diagrammatically we may illustrate what happened on the cross, according to Justin, as follows:

Christ		Humanity
Blameless		Guilty
Not under a curse		Under a curse
	X	
Under a curse		Not under a curse
Crucified		Healed

I can think of no better explanation of Justin's thought than that which says that, by God's decision, Christ bore our curse, the penalty for our sin, that we might not have to bear it ourselves. This means that Christ died in our place,<sup>14</sup> that we might live, which is the essence of the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement.<sup>15</sup>

13 Cf. ch.102 'the Father had decreed that He... should be put to death'; ch. 103 'the cross was given to Him by his Father'; idem. 'the Father wished His Son really to undergo such sufferings for our sakes'.

14 As A. L. Williams puts it, 'In order to free mankind from this condemnation, which rested upon them, Christ took it upon Himself.' In the case of Justin's understanding of Christ's death for us, therefore, 'The *for...* passes naturally over to the *instead*' (italics original), *Justin Martyr*, 201.

15 This is not to say, of course, that those who are saved do not die physically. They are in fact promised something better: resurrection. Nor is it to say that those who are saved do not need to die spiritually, in the sense of 'dying to sin' (Rom. 6:2). But it

### 3.2 Critique of alternative views

If the above analysis of Justin's understanding of the atonement is correct, then we must challenge various other positions which have been held by scholars who have worked in this field. I identify and critique four in particular:

(i) The first is the position of *W. H. C. Frend*, who says of Justin that 'there is no evidence that he was influenced by any of the writers of the New Testament.'<sup>16</sup> In view of the evidence presented above, we may see that this assessment is very wide of the mark. In fact, *O. Skarsaune*, in a detailed study of Justin's language, goes so far as to say that Justin actually had Paul's letter to the Galatians open before him as he wrote this passage.<sup>17</sup> Nor is this an isolated instance of the influence of the New Testament on Justin's thought. In the index of biblical texts cited by Justin Martyr in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, there are over 130 verses from the New Testament, taken from all four gospels, Acts, four Pauline letters, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, and the book of Revelation.<sup>18</sup> It can therefore scarcely be denied that, contrary to what Frend says, Justin was extensively influenced by the writers of the New Testament.

(ii) The second is the position that, though Justin was influenced by the writers of the New Testament, he was not influenced by them to the extent of seeing any salvific significance in the cross of Christ. Thus *H. Lietzmann* says that 'the "soteriological significance" of the death of Jesus, or the "work of Jesus", is not considered' in Justin's writings. In the light of the references presented above, we may say that this position also could hardly be further from the truth.<sup>19</sup>

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is to say that the death of Christ frees the believer from that death which is the final consequence of sin. Christ has gone through what we who believe will not have to go through, because he has gone through it for us and in our place. See also S. Jeffrey et al., eds., *Pierced for our Transgressions*, 262-63.

16 W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: DLT, 1986), 237.

17 O. Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition – Text-type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 99, 119. D. Rokeah, *Justin Martyr and the Jews* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 43, also sees a 'clear link' between Dialogue 95-96 and Galatians 3:10, 13.

18 *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, 591. For further illustration of Justin's use of New Testament books, see O. Skarsaune 'Justin and his Bible' in S. Parvis and Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and his Worlds*, 53-76.

19 H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 183. It is true, as Lietzmann points out, that Justin also spoke of the work of Christ as the universal *Logos* in the lives of all people, giving them the opportunity to choose the path of virtue, but the above denial that any salvific meaning is given to the cross in Justin's theology simply does not match the evidence. A more positive appreciation of the Justin's teaching about the cross as the means of our salvation may be found in L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr, his Life and Thought*, 124; J. Danielou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea, vol. 2: Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973, trans. J. A. Baker), vol. 2, 158-59, 165-66; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968<sup>4</sup>), 169-70; E. F. Osborn, 163; and C. M. Watts, 'The Humanity of Jesus in Justin Martyr's Soteriology', *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. 56, 1984, 33.

R. Werline makes the same general point as Lietzmann, but specifically with reference to Paul's writings as used in Dialogue chs.95-96. Werline accepts that Justin was influenced by Paul, but asserts that he 'ignores the original contexts of Paul's letters and reads them through his own sociohistorical setting and theological agenda'.<sup>20</sup> Thus the Dialogue with Trypho chs.95-96 is to be seen entirely against the background of the Jewish cursing of Christians in the synagogues of Justin's time, and has lost sight of Paul's original teaching concerning how the curse of the Torah can be removed. While not denying Werline's positive point, we may say that, in his treatment these chapters, he has himself ignored those sentences which clearly have soteriological significance.

(iii) The third position is that of J. S. Lidgett, who accepts that Justin was influenced by the New Testament, and that he saw salvific meaning in the cross, but who argues that the plural word 'curses' in Dialogue ch.95 reflects the multiple effects of human sin, 'the evils which have come on the human race because of sin', rather than 'the direct infliction of an ever-active wrath of God'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Lidgett, the efficacy of the death of Christ lies 'not in a satisfaction to God, but in His identification with the sufferings of the humans race on account of sin (its "curses") in order that men may become partakers of His blessings, sharing with Him His victory over death'.<sup>22</sup> However, in the immediate context of the passage quoted, Justin has just spoken of the 'curse' which has come upon the Jews because of their disobedience to the law, and which, in conjunction with the quotation of Deut. 27:26, can hardly be taken as anything other than penal, and the 'curse' which has similarly come upon the Gentile nations because of their bad behaviour. He then goes on immediately to say that Christ, 'for the whole human family', took upon himself 'the curses of all'. It therefore seems much more natural to take the word 'curses', in this context, to refer to the combined curses laid upon the Jews and the Gentiles, rather than to give the word 'curses' a quite different meaning.<sup>23</sup>

(iv) The fourth position is perhaps best represented by H. Rashdall, a historian of the doctrine of the atonement, who, like Lidgett, accepts that Justin was to some extent influenced by the New Testament, and saw the cross of Christ as in some sense salvific, but who resists the idea that Justin believed in penal substitutionary atonement on other grounds than those used by Lidgett.

Speaking of the Apostolic Fathers and Apologists in general, Rashdall argues

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20 R. Werline, 'The Transformation of Pauline Arguments in Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho', in the *Harvard Theological Review*, vol.92.1, 1999, 92.

21 J. S. Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (London: C. H. Kelly, 1898), 426. 22 *Ibid.* 427.

23 A similar interpretation is to mine is given by Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 259: 'By dying upon the cross Christ became, in accordance with law an accursed person, but the curse which was upon Him He took upon Himself, and it was, we infer, a collection of all the curses upon the entire human family. This collected curse Christ took upon Himself at the wish of the Father...'. Goodenough clearly sees the 'curses', contrary to Lidgett, as God's direct punishment for sin.

that the cross was seen as a counterblast to docetism, the fulfilment of prophecy, a revelation of the love of God, something which enabled Christ to sympathise with humankind and so save them, etc., but says that 'there is nothing in any of these ways of treating the death of Christ which shows the influence of St. Paul's characteristic teaching'<sup>24</sup> and 'a complete absence of any definite theory of vicarious punishment or substitution'.<sup>25</sup> 'What the earliest Church really believed in was salvation by the influence of Christ and of his teaching'.<sup>26</sup> Speaking specifically on Justin, Rashdall writes that he 'never speaks of Christ's death as being a punishment for sin',<sup>27</sup> and on Dialogue ch.95 he says that Justin 'expressly denies that Christ was accursed by God'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, L. W. Grensted says that the Dialogue has been thought to prove the penal theory of Atonement, but does the opposite. The curse on Jesus is not the curse of God. It is from the Jews.<sup>29</sup>

Rashdall and Grenstead are right in saying that Justin denies that Jesus was cursed by God on the cross, but this is not fatal to the view that Justin held a penal substitutionary view of the efficacy of Jesus' death, because, as we have seen, he also affirms that on the cross Jesus took upon himself, or took responsibility for, the 'curses' of all. Rashdall and Grensted fail to appreciate the distinction which needs to be made between the sense in which Jesus was not accursed and the sense in which he was. He was *not* accursed in the sense the Jews used the word, as one who was permanently under a curse (note the perfect passive participle *κεκατηραμένου* in this context) because he was 'hostile to God' (ch.93). But he *was* accursed in the sense that he took responsibility for the sins of the world, and bore the 'curses' of all on the cross. In other words, he endured God's curse not for any sins of his own, but for our sins, that we might be saved.

This paradox may be illustrated by a consideration of the ways in which Gal. 3:13 has been interpreted from the time of the Reformation to the present day. It is true that the doctrine of penal substitution has been expressed in such a way as to conflict with Justin's expression of it. Martin Luther, for example, in his commentary on Gal. 3:13, does not shrink from the thought that Christ was cursed by God on the cross. Christ on the cross was 'a sinner and accursed', he says.<sup>30</sup> He was 'punished',<sup>31</sup> and made 'a sinner under the wrath of God'.<sup>32</sup> Echoes of this kind of language may be found in more recent commentaries also. For ex-

24 H. Rashdall, *The Idea of the Atonement*, 195.

25 *Ibid.*, 206.

26 *Ibid.*, 208.

27 *Ibid.*, 200.

28 *Ibid.*, 201.

29 L. W. Grensted, *A Short History*, 25.

30 M. Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978, ed. J. P. Fallows, ET E. Middleton), 164.

31 *Ibid.* 166.

32 *Ibid.* 171. Similar language was used by Thomas Aquinas: 'He was truly cursed by God, because God decreed that He endure this punishment in order to set us free', St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books Inc., 1966), 88.

ample, H. Ridderbos calls Christ ‘a cursed one’ on the basis of this verse.<sup>33</sup> J. D. G. Dunn likewise interprets Paul to be affirming that ‘the crucified Jesus was cursed by God.’<sup>34</sup> The same language may be found in the work of T. A. Wilson, who says with reference to this passage that ‘the crucified Christ is also the *cursed* Christ.’<sup>35</sup> All these interpreters use language which Justin does not use with reference to the meaning of the death of Christ on the cross.<sup>36</sup>

However, the doctrine of penal substitution has not always been expressed in this way, and does not need to be. A more nuanced formulation is also possible. Let us take three examples from the modern period:

G. S. Duncan in his commentary stresses the fact that Paul calls Christ a ‘curse’ but not ‘accursed’. ‘Paul avoids the implication that in His own person Christ was actually “accursed”’, he says. Rather, ‘He allowed himself to come under a curse.’<sup>37</sup> As sinless, Jesus was immune from the curse of the law, but he took upon himself the curse which was really ours, that we might be delivered from it.<sup>38</sup>

Likewise F. F. Bruce draws attention to the fact that in Paul’s quotation of Deut. 21:23 in Gal. 3:13, he omits the words ‘by God’ after ‘cursed’,

probably... to avoid the implication that that Christ in his death was cursed *by God*. This implication would conflict with Paul’s conviction that Christ’s enduring the cross was his supreme act of obedience to God (cf. Rom. 5:19) and that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor.5:19). Paul leaves the question, ‘By whom was Christ cursed?’ unanswered; what he does make plain is that the curse which Christ ‘became’ was his people’s curse, as the death which he died was their death.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly R. Y. K. Fung accepts a substitutionary meaning for Gal. 3:13, yet expresses the achievement of Christ on the cross according to Gal. 3:13 in these terms:

Paul understands Jesus’ death on the cross (to which a curse was attached according to Dt. 21:23) as a bearing of the curse of God incurred (accord-

33 H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 127.

34 J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1993), 178.

35 T. A. Wilson, *The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 114, italics original.

36 Other scholars who assert that, according to Gal. 3:13, Christ was cursed by God on the cross include E. G. Edwards, *Christ, a Curse, and the Cross: An Interpretative Study of Galatians 3:13* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1972), 258-266; T. George, *Galatians* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 241-42; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Letters to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 152; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 57-58.

37 G. S. Duncan, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1934), 97.

38 *Ibid.* 99-102.

39 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), 165-66, italics original.

ing to Dt. 27:26) by all who fail to continue in obedience to the law... By submitting to the curse of the law on behalf of his people, both Jew and Gentile, Christ redeemed them from the law's curse and condemnation... V.13 thus represents Christ's death as a vicarious bearing of the curse of the law which delivers his people from the same curse.<sup>40</sup>

Fung, like Duncan and Bruce, avoids saying that Christ was cursed by God, and, like Bruce, draws attention to the fact that Paul himself omits to repeat the LXX words ὑπὸ θεοῦ in his quotation of Deut. 21:23 so as to protect the understanding of the cross as an act of obedience on the part of Christ to the will of God.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to realise that, despite the difference of opinion between these two groups of interpreters over the question whether it is appropriate to say on the basis of Gal. 3:13 that Christ was 'cursed by God', there is at least a broad agreement over two points: firstly that Christ was not 'cursed' for any personal sin, and secondly, that he bore the 'curse' deserved by sinners. It just happens to be the case that Justin's way of expressing his understanding of the atonement on the basis of Gal. 3:13 is closer to the second group of commentators than to the first. His denial that Jesus was 'cursed by God' on the cross does not entail a denial that on the cross he bore the penalty for our sins as our substitute. As Goodenough puts the matter in his exposition of Justin's teaching on this subject:

The Son was... never in a full sense accursed. Blameless and unaccursed in His own right, He took upon himself our curses, and... dying with them upon him, they died with Him. Thus Christ, though He fulfilled the saying that every man is accursed who hangs upon the tree, as the Jews insist, was never personally accursed.<sup>42</sup>

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40 R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 147-150.

41 Ibid. 148. This point is also noted as significant by G. Findlay, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891), 194n.; J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1910), 140; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Words Books, 1990), 122; K. A. Morland, *The Rhetoric of Curse in Galatians* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1995); and C. D. Stanley, 'A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3:10-14' in *New Testament Studies*, 36 (1990), 505, n.64. Some scholars have sought to draw a distinction between the 'curse of God' and the 'curse of the law', and have argued that, for Paul in Gal. 3:10-14, Jesus was subject to the latter but not the former, e.g. R. A. Bryant, *The Risen Crucified Christ in Galatians* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 178; E. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1921), 164-175; J. L. Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 320-21; and P. C. Onwuka, *The Law, Redemption and Freedom in Christ: An Exegetical-Theological Study of Galatians 3:10-14 and Romans 7:1-16* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007), 101. All of the above regard it as inappropriate to say that Christ was 'cursed by God' on the basis of this Pauline text.

42 Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 259-60.



#### 4. Was Justin's view representative of the church of his time?

It has been argued in this article that Justin Martyr believed that the cross lay at the heart of the Christian faith and that Christ had died in our place, taking upon himself the 'curses of all', which constitute the penalty for sin, that he might deliver us from it. Nevertheless, he does not elaborate his doctrine of the atonement. Dialogue chs.93-96 is the one passage in the whole of his works in which he goes into the subject at any length. Otherwise he confines himself to the mentioning the cross in passing, showing where it is prophesied or prefigured in the Old Testament, or making brief references to its salvific effects. This evidence supports the view of many that in this particular area of theology Justin was not making creative innovations, but rather was voicing the traditional understanding of the wider Church.<sup>43</sup> His creative contributions to theology clearly lay elsewhere, notably in his *Logos* doctrine and his way of synthesising the gospel with Greek philosophy.

This widely accepted view, however, has another implication, which is that, if our view is correct that Justin understood the cross as a means of penal substitutionary atonement, and that this is the only view which he elaborates, then it is likely to have been a widely accepted view of the meaning of Christ's death within the Christian circles in which he moved. We do not know exactly how extensive those circles may have been, but they probably included at least the populous and influential churches at both Ephesus and Rome.<sup>44</sup> According to the commonly accepted tradition preserved in Eusebius,<sup>45</sup> Justin was converted at Ephesus through the witness of an old man whom he met by the sea.<sup>46</sup> If so,

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43 Cf. L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 125, in this area 'Justin accepted the traditional faith of the Church'; H. Chadwick, 'Justin Martyr's Defence of Christianity', 293, 'he wants to stress the points prominent in the minds of ordinary Christian folk'; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 170, on Justin's understanding of redemption, 'he remained all the time a churchman, with his feet firmly planted in the Church's living liturgical and Scriptural tradition'; H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, 185, when Justin speaks of the 'mystery of the cross' he echoes 'the unreasoned faith of the Church'; G. T. Purves, *The Testimony of Justin Martyr to Early Christianity*, 252-282, similarly argues strongly that Justin thought of himself as passing on the tradition of the Church in his basic doctrinal teaching, including his teaching concerning the saving work of Christ. On the particular subject with which this article has been concerned, S. Jeffrey, et al., eds., *Pierced for our Transgressions*, 163, remind us (after surveying a selection of theologians from different periods of Church history, including Justin) that 'if a writer makes a passing, but nonetheless explicit, reference to the doctrine of penal substitution in a work largely devoted to another subject, this probably indicates that penal substitution was both widely understood and fairly uncontroversial among his contemporaries'.

44 O. Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy*, 373, thinks it possible that he might even have 'got his fundamental theological "education" in Palestine', the land of his birth, where he may have been converted before he began his travels.

45 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.18.6.

46 An encounter recorded in the Dialogue, ch.2, though Ephesus is not mentioned by name.



we may reasonably assume that his early faith would have been nourished and strengthened through association with the church which existed there at that time. Sometime later he moved to Rome. It is here that Justin almost certainly wrote those extant works which are generally accepted as authentic. The first Apology was probably written c.153-155,<sup>47</sup> and the Dialogue probably sometime between c.155 and c.165, the estimated date of his death.<sup>48</sup> Written up towards the end of his life, therefore, after periods spent in Palestine, Ephesus and Rome, and perhaps other places also, it is quite likely that Justin's atonement theology expressed in the Dialogue reflects a view which was commonly accepted in his day.

## 5. Conclusion

I conclude therefore that Justin believed that the cross of Christ was of central importance to the Christian faith, that it was prophesied in many passages of the Old Testament, and that on the cross Christ, though personally blameless, bore the 'curse' we deserved that we might be freed from it. I have also given grounds for believing that this understanding of the cross was a widely held view at his time. If this is so, then here is additional evidence both to challenge the view that the theory of penal substitutionary atonement was a 16th century invention, and also to affirm that it was the view of a large number of Christians in the early post-apostolic period.

## Abstract

This article seeks to analyse Justin Martyr's understanding the atoning work of Christ, specifically in the light of the modern view that the idea of penal substitutionary atonement was a 16th century invention. It adduces evidence for the centrality of the cross in Justin's thought, highlighting especially those passages which speak of the cross as having salvific value, and argues specifically that in his Dialogue with Trypho, ch.95, Justin implicitly affirms a penal substitutionary view. Finally, the article argues that this view was not simply Justin's personal opinion, but reflects the traditional understanding of the Church of his time.

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47 Parvis, 'Justin Martyr', 56, gives c.153; Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 81, and S. Parvis and P. Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and his Worlds*, xiii, c.154-5; and D. Rokeah, *Justin Martyr and the Jews*, 2, c.155.

48 Dialogue ch.120 implies that the Dialogue was written after the First Apology. The *terminus ante quem* is fixed by the fact that Justin died while Rusticus was Prefect of Rome, therefore sometime between 163 and 167. A. L. Williams, *Justin Martyr*, x, dates the Dialogue to 155-161; Schneider, 'Some Reflections', 165, to 155-167; T. J. Horner, *Listening to Trypho*, 7, S. Parvis and P. Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and his Worlds*, xiii, and D. Rokeah, *Justin Martyr and the Jews*, 2, to c.160.