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# Penal substitutionary atonement in the later ante-Nicene period

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## I. Introduction

In previous articles I have argued that the understanding of the cross of Christ as a work of penal substitutionary atonement can be found in the writings of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will be citing passages from the writings of five further authors whose writings bear witness to the presence of the same understanding of the cross in the later ante-Nicene period.<sup>2</sup> Greater attention will be given to the first two, Hippolytus and Cyprian, because their references to the meaning of the death of Christ are more numerous, but the remaining three, namely Methodius, Lactantius, and Alexander of Alexandria, will also be found to confirm the general thesis of these articles, which is that the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross was not a creation of the Protestant Reformation, as some have recently alleged,<sup>3</sup> but was already present in the Church of the post-apostolic period.

There were, of course many other Christian writers who were active during the period under review. Some – such as Anatolius, Commodianus and Minucius Felix – refer to the fact of the cross only in passing, without mentioning its saving effects. Others refer to the saving benefits of the cross, such as the defeat of death or the devil, or the provision of redemption or the remission of sins, or a combination of such effects, and neither assert nor deny that it was a work of penal substitution.<sup>4</sup> Of the remaining writers, Origen is by far the most significant, but also the most ambiguous, since he seems to assert penal substitution on a

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1 'Justin Martyr and penal substitutionary atonement', *EQ* 83.3 (2011), 217–32; 'Clement of Alexandria and penal substitutionary atonement', *EQ* 85.1 (2013), 19–35; 'Tertullian and penal substitutionary atonement', *EQ* 86.2 (2014), 130–42.

2 Roughly understood as the period from the beginning of the 3rd century to 325 CE.

3 See n1 of the article on Justin Martyr in *EQ* 83.3 (2011), 217.

4 This is the case with authors such as Dionysius of Alexandria, Julius Africanus, Theonas, Archelaus, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria, Theodotus, and the authors of the various Early Liturgies, books of the Apocryphal New Testament, and Syriac documents which may be dated to this period.

number of occasions,<sup>5</sup> but also asserts that God's wrath is purely remedial,<sup>6</sup> and that the cross of Christ is, in the final analysis, a kind of visual aid which can be dispensed with by more advanced Christians.<sup>7</sup> The aim of this article, however, is not to prove that every Christian of the period under review held the penal substitutionary view of the atonement, only that some of its leading theologians did, with the likely consequence that a significant number of ordinary Christians did also.

## II. Hippolytus

### II.1. Introduction

Hippolytus of Rome has been called 'by far the most learned man and the most prolific writer which the Roman church produced before Jerome'.<sup>8</sup> He was also the last Roman theologian, as far as we know, to write in Greek. Much is unknown about his life, notably whether he was a bishop, and, if so, of what diocese,<sup>9</sup> and whether he set himself up as a kind of 'anti-pope' in opposition to Callistus,

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5 Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A. and C. Black, 1968, 4th edition), 186.

6 Cf. A. Thistleton, *The Last Things* (London: SPCK, 2012), 164.

7 Cf. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 187: for Origen, 'the mature Christian does not need the historical Jesus ... the ultimate truth of the matter transcends the categories of history and sacrifice'.

8 J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, First Part: S. Clement of Rome, vol. 2* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1890), 427. For general accounts of the life, works and theology of Hippolytus, see C. C. J. Bunsen, *Hippolytus and his Age* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1852), 4 vols; F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: G. Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1960), 155–67; J. Daniélou and H. Marrou, *The Christian Centuries, vol. 1: The First Six Hundred Years*, trans. by V. Cronin (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 144–51; *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, edited by G. Dix (London: SPCK, 1968, 2nd ed.), xii–xxxv; J. J. I. von Döllinger, *Hippolytus and Callistus*, trans. by A. Plummer (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1876); F. W. Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1889), vol. 1, 118–20; B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to AD 461, vol. 1: To AD 313* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 357–78; J. Lebreton and J. Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1946), vol.3, Part 1, 581–82, 601–14 and 993–98; J. B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 317–477; and C. Wordsworth, *Hippolytus and the Church of Rome in the Earlier Part of the 3rd Century* (London: F. and J. Rivington, 1853). Opinions differ on the date of his birth. Suggestions range from c.155 to c.170. There is a general agreement, however, that he died in c.235 while he was in exile in Sardinia.

9 Those who believe he was a bishop prior to his dispute with Zephyrinus (bishop of Rome c.199–217) and Callistus (bishop of Rome 217–22) mostly believe that his see was that of Portus, a harbour on the north bank of the river Tiber, opposite Ostia, near Rome. Lightfoot (*Apostolic Fathers*, 433f), however, thought that he was a bishop to 'Gentiles' in the area of Rome, and had simply had his 'headquarters' in Portus.

who was bishop of Rome 217–22 CE,<sup>10</sup> but there is no doubt that he left behind a substantial body of literature, and that he made significant contributions to the life and thought of the Church of his time. These contributions are mainly to be found in the analysis of heretical movements, discussions concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ arising out of the challenge posed by monarchianism (both adoptionist and modalist), questions of Church worship, order, and discipline, and the issue of the right date for the celebration of Easter.

As with most of the theologians of his time, the theology of the atonement does not figure prominently in his writings. To construct his beliefs in this area it is necessary to put together passing comments and allusions from writings which are basically taken up with other concerns. Many modern scholars do not even make the attempt.<sup>11</sup> Others consider the subject, but are inadequate or dismissive in their treatments.<sup>12</sup> But there is more to be said on this subject than is commonly imagined, as we shall now see.<sup>13</sup>

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10 No one disputes that Hippolytus regarded both Zephyrinus and Callistus as heretical in their Christologies, vigorously opposed their teaching, and broke away from communion with them, but the evidence does not allow us to be certain whether he ever actually proclaimed himself as the true bishop of Rome, and therefore the first 'anti-pope'. A. Stewart-Sykes (*On the Apostolic Tradition* [New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001], 15) even argues that the very institution of monarchical episcopacy had not yet been established in Rome by the time of Hippolytus's clash with Zephyrinus and Callistus, a view shared by A. Brent (*Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995], 1).

11 Among them are J. F. Bethune-Baker (*An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* [London: Methuen and Co., 1903]) and G. Lampe (*A History of Christian Doctrine*, edited by H. Cunliffe-Jones [Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1978]), both of whom are otherwise quite thorough in their treatment of patristic theology.

12 Kelly (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 178), for example, says that Hippolytus's most characteristic thought on man's redemption is of the Word as teacher. Otherwise, he echoes Irenaeus's recapitulation theory. No other aspect of Christ's atoning work is mentioned. H. N. Oxenham (*The Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement* [London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1881], 126), says that there is 'not much of special importance' on the atonement in the writings of Hippolytus. H. Rashdall (*The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* [London: Macmillan and Co., 1919], 289) says that it is scarcely possible to find an allusion to the death of Christ in the writings of Hippolytus which amounts to anything like a theory of atonement.

13 References will be made from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF) text, and will exclude those passages which are regarded as having been falsely attributed to Hippolytus. *The Apostolic Tradition* will also not be included in this survey. Though attributed to Hippolytus by many, its authorship is in fact uncertain, as recently argued by P. F. Bradshaw, M. E. Johnson, and L. E. Philips, *The Apostolic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). In any case, *The Apostolic Tradition* adds nothing substantially new to what can be learnt of Hippolytus's beliefs in this area from those works which are more certainly attributed to him. Where Hippolytus's works are cited in the original, the Migne text is used.

## II.2. The salvific effects of the cross

There are many passing references to the cross of Christ in Hippolytus's extant works, and on several occasions he mentions its salvific benefits. Thus, for example, he tells us that the blood of Jesus 'cleanses', 'washes' and 'purifies' us from sin.<sup>14</sup> Through the cross we find the 'remission' of our sins.<sup>15</sup> Our transgressions are 'blotted out'.<sup>16</sup> We are 'saved' from perishing,<sup>17</sup> 'redeemed',<sup>18</sup> 'reconciled',<sup>19</sup> and brought to the point of the 'ascent of heaven'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, through the cross the devil is conquered.<sup>21</sup> All this is because Jesus, our sinless Saviour, voluntarily died for us as a sacrifice for sin.<sup>22</sup> He is the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world',<sup>23</sup> the 'Paschal-lamb' who was 'sacrificed for us'.<sup>24</sup> In Hippolytus's view, this was 'the purpose for which He was sent'.<sup>25</sup> Such statements show how centrally the atoning death of Christ figured in Hippolytus's soteriology.

## II.3. Penal substitutionary atonement?

If we are to look for a deeper explanation for the fact that such blessings flow from the death of Christ, however, we may turn to two passages in particular

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14 Commentary on Gen. 49:11: by his 'blood' he 'cleanses [καθαρίζει] the whole calling of the Gentiles'; *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 11: in the blood and water which flowed from his side 'the nations are washed and purified [ἀπολούμενα καθαίρονται]'.  
 15 Commentary on Prov. 9:5: 'He gave His divine flesh and honoured blood to us, to eat and to drink it for the remission [ἄφεσιν] of sins'; Commentary on Dan. 2:17: he is 'One able to remit [ἀφιέναι] sins'.

16 Commentary on Dan. 2:15 [ἀπαλείψαι]. The expression is elaborated by a quotation of Col. 2:14: 'blotting out the handwriting of sins which was against us'.  
 17 *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 4: Christ took flesh that 'by uniting His own power with our mortal body, and by mixing the incorruptible with the corruptible, and the strong with the weak, He might save perishing man'.  
 18 *Against Beron and Helix*, frag. 2: 'With this purpose did the God of all things become man, viz., in order that by suffering in the flesh ... He might redeem [λυτρώσῃται] our whole race, which was sold to death ... and that he might restore it to that incorruptible and blessed life from which it fell away by yielding to the devil.'

19 Commentary on Dan. 2:15, 'to ... make reconciliation for sins [ἐξιλάσασθαι ἁμαρτίας] – words which carry sacrificial connotations'.  
 20 *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 59.  
 21 *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 18.

22 Commentary on Gen. 49:5f: 'Christ [submitted] voluntarily to the death of the flesh ... [he] did no sin, but rather offered Himself for us, a savour of a sweet smell to His God and Father.' Commentary on Prov. 30:31: 'he ... was offered for the sins of the world'. *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 18: he 'Himself hath borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases; and for our sakes He was afflicted', loosely quoting Isa. 53:4f. The voluntary nature of his self-offering is stressed in the *Expository Treatise against the Jews*, 4, where Christ is made to say: 'I suffered of my own will, (and) not by any compulsion.'

23 Commentary on Dan. 2:15, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 45, quoting Jn. 1:29.  
 24 Frag. 4, from a discourse on Elkanah and Hannah (*ANF* 5.238b); cf. Frag. 1 from other writings (*ANF* 5.240a).

25 Frag. 3, from a homily on the Lord's paschal supper (*ANF* 5.238a).

26 Commentary on Dan. 2:15, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 45, quoting Jn. 1:29.  
 27 Frag. 4, from a discourse on Elkanah and Hannah (*ANF* 5.238b); cf. Frag. 1 from other writings (*ANF* 5.240a).  
 28 Frag. 3, from a homily on the Lord's paschal supper (*ANF* 5.238a).

which seem to point us towards a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement.

The first passage is found in a fragment of Hippolytus's commentary on the story of Jacob and Esau in Gen. 27, recorded by Jerome.<sup>26</sup> In the story Rebecca says to Jacob, 'Go to the flock and fetch me two kids' (v.9), thereby, says Hippolytus

prefiguring the Saviour's advent in the flesh to work a mighty deliverance for them who were held liable to the punishment of sin [*peccatis tenebantur obnoxii*]; for indeed in all the Scriptures kids are taken for emblems of sinners.

Moreover the skins which were put on Jacob's arms after the kids had been killed are the sins of both peoples [Jews and Gentiles], which Christ, when his hands were stretched forth on the cross, fastened to it along with Himself.

And that savoury meats are offered, denotes

an offering pleasing to God, the salvation of sinners.

What interests us here is not whether Hippolytus's exegesis of this passage is justified, but what his commentary tells us about his understanding of the atonement. According to his commentary, sinners deserve to be punished, but Jesus identified himself with sinners (he became a 'kid', which Hippolytus takes to be an 'emblem' of a 'sinner') and took the sins of all to the cross ('fastened' them 'to it along with himself'), and offered himself to God as a sacrifice for sin ('an offering pleasing to God'), that sinners might find 'deliverance' or 'salvation' from the punishment due. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in this passage Hippolytus reveals a belief that Jesus took on himself the punishment for sin which we deserved, in order that we might be freed from it.

The second passage is found in the *Expository Treatise against the Jews*, 2–3, where he takes the words of David in Ps.69 and applies them to Christ:

He, singing a certain strain with prophetic reference to the true Christ, celebrated our God by the Holy Spirit, (and) declared clearly all that befell Him by the hands of the Jews in His passion; in which (strain) the Christ who humbled Himself and took unto Himself the form of the servant Adam, calls upon God the Father in heaven as it were in our person, and speaks thus in the sixty-ninth Psalm: 'Save me, O God; for the waters are come into my soul. I am sunk in the mire of the abyss', that is to say, in the corruption [*φθοράν*] of Hades, on account of the transgression in paradise ... then, in what next follows, Christ speaks, as it were in his own person: 'Then I restored that', says He, 'which I took not away'; that is, on account of the sin of Adam I endured the death which was not mine by sinning [*ἄπερ οὐχ ἡμαρτον, ὑπερ τοῦ ἁμαρτήματος Ἀδάμ ὑπεμείνα τὸν θάνατον*].'

Again our concern is not with the faithfulness of Hippolytus's exegesis, but with

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26 To be found in ANF 5.169a. Hippolytus's original Greek is lost.

the understanding of the achievement of the cross which his commentary on Ps. 69 reveals. Once again, Christ is presented as identifying himself with sinners. He takes the form of sinful Adam, and speaks ‘as it were in our person’. Though not a sinner himself, he endures that death, the ‘corruption of Hades’, which is the consequence of the original sin (‘the transgression’ committed ‘in paradise’), with the result that righteousness is restored to those who are of Adam (the apparent implication of the statement ‘I restored that which I took not away’).<sup>27</sup> To put the point more simply: the sinless Jesus endured the death which sinners deserve, that they might be saved from it and be made righteous instead.<sup>28</sup>

These two passages seem to provide us with the understanding of the cross which underlay Hippolytus’s account of its salvific benefits, and both imply the concept of penal substitution.

### III. Cyprian

#### III.1. Introduction

Cyprian of Carthage has been called ‘the greatest and most influential prelate of his age’.<sup>29</sup> Born c.200 CE into a wealthy, but non-Christian home, he received a good classical education and became a teacher of rhetoric and a prominent member of Carthaginian society. He was converted to Christ in 246, and in rapid succession became first a priest, then, in 248–49, bishop of Carthage. During his tenure of office, which lasted until his martyrdom in 258, he had to deal with the problems associated with the Decian persecution. These included the questions of how to deal with Christians who had lapsed, how to deal with breakaway movements which favoured a more rigorous or more lax policy than the one he favoured, and how to deal with those who had been baptised in one of the breakaway movements and who later wanted to join the mainstream church.<sup>30</sup>

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27 The ‘penal aspect’ of the death of Christ in this passage is recognised by J. Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1909), 150.

28 The reference to Adam in this passage recalls the recapitulation motif which Hippolytus probably derived from Irenaeus. Further traces of this motif may be found, e.g., in the *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 26, where Hippolytus says, ‘He became man in the midst of men, to re-create our Adam through himself’; cf. *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 17: ‘He had the heavenly (nature) of the Father, as the Word, and the earthly (nature) as taking to Himself the flesh from the old Adam by the medium of the Virgin’. The purpose was that ‘becoming ... all that man is with the exception of sin, He might save fallen man, and confer immortality on men who believe in His name’.

29 A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought, vol. 2 From Tertullian to Erasmus* (New York and London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1942), 25.

30 For general introductions to the life of Cyprian, see E. W. Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Work* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1897); A. Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); H. von

Theologically, Cyprian is not renowned for innovation,<sup>31</sup> and in most areas he tended to follow the lead of Tertullian, whose writings he is said to have read every day, and whom he regarded as his 'master'.<sup>32</sup> One exception to this general tendency lay in the field of ecclesiology. The treatise 'On the Unity of the Church' has been called 'one of the most influential documents in the world',<sup>33</sup> in that it laid the foundation for the later assertion of the Roman Catholic Church to be the sole true Church, outside of whose ministry, Cyprian believed, there can be no salvation.<sup>34</sup> In the field of atonement theology, however, which is our main concern here, there is no such innovation,<sup>35</sup> and our task is confined to the question whether or not there is evidence that Cyprian accepted the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross.<sup>36</sup>

Cyprian wrote many letters and at least 12 treatises, many of which make reference to the cross of Christ. Before we survey these references, however, we will first set them in their theological context by looking at the backdrop of Cyprian's vision of final judgment against which they are set, and secondly deal with the

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Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church* (London: A. and C. Black, 1964), 36–60; F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: G. Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1960), 148–54; J. Daniélou and H. Marrou, *The Christian Centuries, vol. 1: The First Six Hundred Years*, trans. by V. Cronin (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 196–202; F. W. Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889), 248–349; P. Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Publishers, 1974); B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to AD 461, vol. 1: To AD 313* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 436–79; A. N. S. Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (London: T.&T. Clark, 2006), 24–27; J. Lebreton and J. Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1946), vol. 3, 689–716, vol. 4, 1001–10; H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), vol. 2, 225–38; A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, 24–38; and M. M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Cambridge, MA.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975).

- 31 Farrer (*Lives of the Fathers*, 329) goes so far as to say: 'To theology he has not added a single original conception'.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 248, drawing on a story found in the works of Jerome.
- 33 Kidd, *History of the Church*, 454.
- 34 For McGiffert (*History of Christian Thought*, 34), Cyprian was 'In a very true sense ... the founder of the Catholic Church'.
- 35 Cf. H. Rashdall (*Idea of Atonement*, 328): 'In Cyprian there is no new thought about the death of Christ'. However, H. Chadwick's comment (*The Early Church* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967], 213) that 'Cyprian's interest in theology, apart from the church and sacraments, was negligible', and that of J. Rivière (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, 256) that the character of his doctrine concerning Christ's death is 'extremely meagre', are too minimalist.
- 36 Most works written on early church doctrine omit any reference to Cyprian's understanding of the cross. Kelly (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 178) is one exception. His treatment is very brief, but interestingly, for our purposes, includes the comment that Cyprian's works contain 'a hint of the doctrine of substitution'. H. E. W. Turner (*The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* [London: A. R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd., 1952], 104) states that, for Cyprian, 'The death of Christ is certainly vicarious in character', but he does not define vicariousness in explicitly substitutionary terms.

passages which mention how atonement can be made through other means.<sup>37</sup>

### III.2. Cyprian's Vision of Final Judgment

As with all the early church fathers, human sinfulness was axiomatic with Cyprian, but few describe the terrors of hell quite as graphically as he does. For him it is a place of never-ending punishment,<sup>38</sup> of unquenchable fire,<sup>39</sup> in which the lost will experience the wrath of God,<sup>40</sup> eternal torments,<sup>41</sup> infinite tortures,<sup>42</sup> and the destruction of body and soul.<sup>43</sup> It is a terrible 'dungeon' from which there is no escape,<sup>44</sup> whose occupants have no rest, day or night, and the smoke of whose torments ascend for ever and ever.<sup>45</sup> Such is the destiny awaiting those outside the one true Church, in which alone salvation can be found.<sup>46</sup> The question therefore arises: how did Cyprian envisage the means of avoiding this terrible fate?

### III.3. Atonement by Other Means

Casual readers of Cyprian's works may be misled by passages which seem to suggest that sinners can escape the terrors of hell purely by their own efforts. Cyprian sometimes speaks of believers 'appeasing', 'propitiating', or 'making satisfaction' or 'atonement' to God, and sometimes of 'washing away guilt', 'purging sins', or gaining 'redemption', through human works such as repentance, the public confession of sin, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and other good works.<sup>47</sup> The merits of martyrdom also count for much as far as final judgment is concerned.<sup>48</sup> However, it is important to realise that these activities relate to post-baptismal sin, not to that initial salvation sealed in baptism, which the cross of Christ alone makes possible, as Cyprian himself makes clear. For example, he says: "Alms do deliver from death," and not, assuredly, from that death which once the blood of Christ extinguished, and from which the saving grace of baptism and of our redeemer has delivered us, but from that which subsequently creeps in through

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37 The English translation of Cyprian's words is taken from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series, vol. 5. The Latin is taken from the *Corpus Christianum, Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954).

38 Ep. 54.13, 19; 76.5; *On the Lapsed*, 7; *Address to Demetrianus*, 23, 24.

39 Ep. 55.10; *Address to Demetrianus*, 9, 24.

40 *The Unity of the Church*, 23 (quoting Eph. 5:6), 26; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.27 (quoting Jn. 3:36).

41 Ep. 60.2; *The Unity of the Church*, 26.

42 *Address to Demetrianus*, 24.

43 Ep. 80.2, quoting Mt. 10:28.

44 *Address to Demetrianus*, 9.

45 Ep. 63.1, quoting Rev. 14:9–11.

46 *The Unity of the Church*, 6.

47 Ep. 7.2; 9.2; 18.1; 19.1; 28.1; 39.2, 5; 51.11, 22, 26, 28; 54.13, 16, 17, 21; 63.1, 5; *On the Lapsed* 17, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36; *Address to Demetrianus*, 20; *On Works and Alms*, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 3.1.

48 *On the Lapsed*, 17.

sins.<sup>49</sup> Our attention is turned, therefore, to that initial salvation and the role the cross of Christ plays in securing it for us.<sup>50</sup>

### III.4 Atonement through the Cross

‘In the passion and sign of the cross is all virtue and power’, Cyprian writes.<sup>51</sup> To those who are saved it is ‘the power of God’.<sup>52</sup> No wonder we find Gal. 6:14 being quoted in Cyprian’s extant works: ‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’.<sup>53</sup> Quite apart from these statements, there can be no doubt about the centrality of the cross in Cyprian’s thought in the light of his works as a whole.

As with other early church fathers, Cyprian found plenty of allusions to the cross in the Old Testament. He finds it, for example, in the wine which Noah drank,<sup>54</sup> in Melchizedek’s offering of bread and wine,<sup>55</sup> in the prophecy over Judah,<sup>56</sup> in the Passover lamb,<sup>57</sup> in Moses’s arms stretched out in the battle with the Amalekites,<sup>58</sup> in the brazen serpent in the wilderness,<sup>59</sup> in the righteous sufferer of Psalm 22,<sup>60</sup> in the ‘wine’ of Wisdom,<sup>61</sup> in the suffering servant of the Lord

49 Ep. 51.22. Similarly, in the treatise *On Works and Alms*, 2, we read: “By almsgiving and faith sins are purged.” Not assuredly those sins which had been previously contracted, for those are purged by the blood and sanctification of Christ.’ The same distinction should be understood elsewhere. Thus, in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 3.65, Cyprian says that ‘All sins are put away in baptism’, and, in *On the Dress of Virgins*, 2, that ‘... there is no further pardon for sinning after you have begun to know God.’ What he means is that at baptism we are given a clean sheet (through the cross of Christ and our faith in him), but thereafter sins need to be atoned for through penitential works.

50 Some authors never get this far. L. W. Grensted (*A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920], 30) and J. K. Mozley (*The Doctrine of the Atonement* [London: Duckworth and Co., 1915], 118) both content themselves with the (true) comment that Cyprian uses the word ‘satisfaction’ for the sinner’s penitence, but fail to make any reference to Cyprian’s teaching on the atoning effect of the cross.

51 *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.21.

52 *Testimonies against the Jews*, 3.69, quoting 1 Cor. 1:17–24.

53 *On the Dress of Virgins*, 6; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 3.11.

54 Gen. 9:21 in Ep. 62.3.

55 Gen. 14:18 in Ep. 62.4.

56 Gen. 49:11 in Ep. 62.6, ‘He shall wash His garment in wine and His clothing in the blood of the grape.’

57 Ex. 12:3 in *The Unity of the Church*, 8; *On the Dress of Virgins*, 16; *Address to Demetrianus*, 22; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.15, 22; 3.11.

58 Ex. 17:11 in *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 8; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.21.

59 Num. 21:9 in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.20.

60 Ps. 22:6–8, 15, in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.13; Ps. 22:16–22 in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.20.

61 Prov. 9:2 in Ep. 62.5.

in Deutero-Isaiah,<sup>62</sup> in the experiences of Jeremiah,<sup>63</sup> and in the pierced one of Zech. 12:10.<sup>64</sup> The cross so dominated Cyprian's thought that he was ready to see hidden references to it all over the Old Testament.<sup>65</sup>

It does not surprise us, therefore, to find Cyprian quoting Lk. 24:46 to affirm the necessity of the cross,<sup>66</sup> or 1 Pet. 2:21–23 as the chief example of a righteous sufferer,<sup>67</sup> or 2 Cor. 5:21 as a spur to total dedication to Christ.<sup>68</sup> Our interest is especially drawn to what Cyprian says about the salvific effects of the cross, and here we are met with an abundance of relevant material.

Firstly, with regard to the initiation of the atoning act, it is noteworthy that Cyprian says *both* that God delivered up Jesus for our sins,<sup>69</sup> *and* that 'Jesus Christ, our Lord and God ... offered Himself a sacrifice to the Father'.<sup>70</sup> There is no idea of God the Father sacrificing an unwilling Son, nor of God the Son sacrificing himself to placate an unwilling Father. Rather Cyprian pictures Father and Son working together in perfect harmony for human salvation. Indeed, the ascription of the titles 'Lord and God' to Jesus in the second quotation confirm his deity and thereby his unity with the Father in the plan of salvation.

Secondly, with regard to the effect of the atoning act as regards our relationship with God, Cyprian says that Jesus, the sinless one, suffered on the cross for us sinners<sup>71</sup> to bring us to God.<sup>72</sup> He bore,<sup>73</sup> purged,<sup>74</sup> and took away,<sup>75</sup> our sins. As both 'the chief priest of God' and at the same time a 'sacrifice',<sup>76</sup> he offered up

62 Isa. 42:2, 50:5f, 53:7 in *On the Advantage of Patience*, 23; Isa. 42:2–4; 50:5–7 and 53:1–7 in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.13; and Isa. 53:7–9, 12 in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 15.

63 Jer. 11:18f. in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.15, 20.

64 Zech. 12:10 in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.20.

65 Other verses quoted for this purpose include Deut. 28:66; Pss. 88:9; 119:120; 141:2; Isa. 65:2; and Zeph. 1:7, all in *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.20.

66 *Testimonies against the Jews*, 1.4.

67 *On the Advantage of Patience*, 9; cf. Ep. 6.4 and *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 5.

68 *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 6.

69 *On the Lapsed*, 17; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.13.

70 Ep. 62.14, cf. 4: he 'offered a sacrifice to God the Father ... His body and blood'.

71 Ep. 55.6 'He who had no sin of His own suffered for us.' Cf. 55.3; *On the Mortality*, 21; and *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 5.

72 *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.27, quoting 1 Pet. 3:18: 'Christ hath died once for our sins, the just for the unjust, that he might present us to God.' Cf. *On the Advantage of Patience*, 6: 'He suffers Himself to become mortal, so that the guiltless may be put to death for the salvation of the guilty.'

73 Ep. 7.5 'He was not a sinner, but bore the sins of others'; *On the Advantage of Patience*, 6, 'The Son of God did not scorn ... , although He Himself was not a sinner, to bear the sins of others'; cf. Ep. 62.13; 72.5; *On the Lapsed*, 17; and *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.13, 15.

74 *On Works and Alms*, 2.

75 *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.15, quoting Jn. 1:29, 'Behold the Lamb of God, and behold Him that taketh away the sins of the world.'

76 Ep. 62.14.

himself and became our advocate, intercessor and propitiation [*deprecatio*],<sup>77</sup> with the result that we are forgiven,<sup>78</sup> justified,<sup>79</sup> washed,<sup>80</sup> reconciled and restored [*reparati*] to God,<sup>81</sup> redeemed (bought or purchased),<sup>82</sup> and made his sons.<sup>83</sup> In a word, we are put right with God through the cross of Christ.

Thirdly, with regard to other effects of the atoning act, Cyprian shows that the cross of Christ opens the door to a new life and the hope of glory. Perhaps nowhere does Cyprian unfold the other effects of the atoning work of Christ on the cross more fully than in the closing sentences of his 'Address to Demetrianus', where he writes as follows:

... a passage is opened to immortality even in death itself. This grace Christ bestows; this gift of His mercy He confers upon us, by overcoming death in the trophy of the cross, by redeeming the believer with the price of His blood, by reconciling man to God the Father, by quickening [*vivificando*] our mortal nature with a heavenly regeneration ... He opens to us the way of life; He brings us back to paradise; He leads us on to the kingdom of heaven. Made by Him the children of God, with Him we shall ever live; with Him we shall always rejoice, restored by His own blood. We Christians shall be glorious together with Christ, blessed of God the Father, always rejoicing with perpetual pleasures in the sight of God, and ever giving thanks to God. For none can be other than always glad and grateful, who, having been once subject to death, has been made secure in the possession of immortality.<sup>84</sup>

Cyprian here shows that, along with our redemption, reconciliation and restoration, through the cross of Christ we also find eternal life,<sup>85</sup> a 'quickening' of our mortal nature (by regeneration) in this life,<sup>86</sup> leading to immortality,<sup>87</sup> para-

77 Ep. 51.18, quoting 1 Jn. 2:1–2; cf. Ep. 7.5, 'we have an advocate and intercessor for our sins, Jesus Christ the Lord and our God.'

78 Ep. 62.9 'blood ... shed for many, for the remission of sins,' quoting Mt. 26:28; *On the Lapsed*, 17, 'pardon for sins' bestowed by the one who bore our sins.

79 Ep. 51.18, quoting Rom. 5:9, 'justified by his blood.'

80 *On the Lord's Prayer*, 34, 'the Lord, being crucified, washed away our sins by His blood'. Cf. the robes 'made white' with the blood of the Lamb, quoting Rev. 7:14, in *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 11; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 3.16.

81 *Address to Demetrianus*, 25.

82 Ep. 59.2; 62.2; 14, 71.2; *On the Dress of Virgins*, 2; *On the Lord's Prayer*, 11, 30, 34; *On Works and Alms*, 2, 17; *Address to Demetrianus*, 25; *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Preface 3, Exhortation 6; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.15; 3.11, 63.

83 Ep. 55.6, cf. *Address to Demetrianus*, 25 'children of God'.

84 *Address to Demetrianus*, 25.

85 Cf. *On Works and Alms*, 7, where 'eternal life' is the pearl of great price in Mt. 13:46.

86 Cf. *On the Lord's Prayer*, 34; *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Preface 3, Exhortation 6.

87 Cf. Ep. 51.22, which refers to 'that death which once the blood of Christ extinguished'; Ep. 72.5, Christ 'conquered death by dying'; *On the Vanity of Idols*, 'It behoved Him to suffer ... that He might conquer death'; *On Works and Alms*, 26, says that Christ shall 'bestow upon us immortality and eternity, to which he has renewed us by the quickening of His blood'.

dise, the 'kingdom of heaven',<sup>88</sup> and everlasting joys in the presence of God in the next.<sup>89</sup> Other effects of the atoning act mentioned outside this passage include freedom from the 'jaws' of the devil,<sup>90</sup> 'healing',<sup>91</sup> the establishment of the new covenant,<sup>92</sup> and the founding of the Church.<sup>93</sup>

### III.5. Penal Substitutionary Atonement?

We have seen what penalties Cyprian believed awaited the lost hereafter. We have also seen that those same penalties no longer await believers, and that this is so because Christ suffered for us. Thus, in Cyprian's understanding, Christ suffered on the cross that we might not suffer the penal consequences of our sins. He died that we might not have to undergo that 'second death' which we deserve to undergo because of our sins. In the light of the language Cyprian uses to describe the atoning effects of the cross of Christ, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that he saw the cross as a work of penal substitution.

This conclusion is confirmed by some further passages. In two, Cyprian relates the significance of the Passover lambs at the time of the Exodus. The blood of the Passover lambs, he says, 'protected' the Israelites from the angel of judgment when the angel came to smite the land of Egypt. In effect, the Passover lambs died instead of the Israelites, so that the Israelites might not die along with the first-born of the Egyptians. In the same way, Cyprian infers, the blood of Jesus 'protects' those who take refuge in him so that they might not suffer eternal death. He died in their stead.<sup>94</sup>

Finally, in the treatise 'On the Vanity of Idols', after saying that it was necessary for Christ to die, Cyprian says that he rose again from the dead and after forty days

... was lifted up into heaven, that as a conqueror He might bring to the Fa-

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88 Cf. *On the Lord's Prayer*, 13, where, commenting on the clause 'thy kingdom come', Cyprian says 'We pray that our kingdom, which has been promised us by God, may come, which was acquired by the blood and passion of Christ.' In the context he clearly has the final manifestation of the kingdom in mind.

89 The negative counterpart of this vision is spelt out elsewhere. Thus in the *Address to Demetrianus*, 22, Cyprian says that 'when the world shall begin to be desolated and smitten, whoever is found in the blood and sign of Christ alone shall escape', i.e. from hell. Meanwhile in the treatise *On the Mortality*, 14, he tells us that the one who is 'not enrolled in the cross and passion of Christ ... shall pass over to a second death ... whom ... eternal flame shall torment with never-ending punishments'.

90 Ep. 59.2.

91 *On Works and Alms*, 1, he 'was wounded that He might heal our wounds'.

92 Ep. 62.10, quoting the eucharistic words of Jesus in 1 Cor. 11:25.

93 Ep. 71.2, cf. Ep. 73.6 and 75.2, where he quotes Eph. 5:25.

94 *Address to Demetrianus*, 22, "I will see the blood and protect [*protegam*] you" ... so also, when the world shall begin to be desolated and smitten, whoever is found in the blood and sign of Christ alone shall escape'; *Testimonies against the Jews*, 2.22, 'I will look on the blood and protect [*protegam*] you. And there shall not be in you the plague of wasting when I shall smite the land of Egypt', words quoted with reference to the salvation which is offered in Christ.

ther, Man whom He loved, whom he put on, whom He shielded from death [*hominem quem dilexit, quem induit, quem a morte protexit, ad Patrem victor imponeret*]; soon to come from heaven for the punishment of the devil and to the judgment of the human race, with the force of an avenger and with the power of a judge; whilst the disciples ... gave forth His precepts for salvation.<sup>95</sup>

Jesus's identification with the human race is clearly indicated by the phrase 'Man ... whom he put on'.<sup>96</sup> He died as our representative, but also as our substitute. The phrase 'shielded from death' surely means that it was the very death which sinners deserved which Jesus underwent, so that those who place themselves behind that shield may not have to endure it.

## IV. Some other authors

### IV.1. Methodius

In this and the next two sections we will consider the witness of some less well known authors of the later ante-Nicene period, whose comparatively scanty references to the doctrine of the atonement may be summarized more briefly. Despite the paucity of the evidence from these sources, the witness these fathers bear to the meaning of the cross of Christ nevertheless strengthens the case that it was understood in penal substitutionary terms in this period.<sup>97</sup> We will begin with the witness of Methodius.

Methodius was the bishop of Olympus and Patara in Lycia, and latterly, according to Jerome, of Tyre in Phoenicia. He died as a martyr in the last great persecution c.312 CE. Methodius's only complete surviving work is the *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, which is written in praise of virginity. In the discourse of Tusiane, we find the following criticism of the failure on the part of the Jews to understand the true meaning of the Passover:

[T]he mystery [of the immolation of the Lamb] ... they regard as solely in remembrance of the deliverance of their fathers from Egypt, when, although the first-born of Egypt were smitten, they themselves were preserved by marking the door-posts of their houses with blood. Nor do they understand that by it also the death of Christ is personified, by whose blood

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95 *On the Vanity of Idols*, 14.

96 Cf. Ep. 62.13, 'Christ bore [*portabat*] us all, in that He also bore our sins', an expression which J. Rivière (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, 257) regards as implying substitution.

97 There is a reference to substitutionary atonement in the *Sectional Confessional of Faith* attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus in ANF 6.45, but it has not been included above because there is no explicit reference to our deliverance from the penalty for sin through the sin-bearing death of Christ. The text simply refers to Christ as 'The Son of God, who of the Virgin Mary took flesh, and endured sufferings and death in our stead [ἀνθ' ἡμῶν]'. Nevertheless it remains a clear reference to substitutionary atonement from the period under review.

souls made safe and sealed shall be preserved from wrath in the burning of the world; whilst the first-born, the sons of Satan, shall be destroyed with an utter destruction by the avenging angels, who shall reverence the seal of the Blood impressed upon the former.<sup>98</sup>

The meaning is clear. Humanity is liable to ‘wrath in the burning of the world’. What hope is there of salvation from this dreadful prospect? Only the blood of Christ stands between us and that wrath, and can give us the protection we need, just as the blood of the lambs slaughtered in the original Passover protected the Israelites from the destroying angels who killed the first-born of the Egyptians. Christ’s death on the cross, in Methodius’s understanding, averted God’s wrath from sinful humanity. He died that we might not die in the coming judgment but rather be saved. He died in our stead.<sup>99</sup>

#### IV.2. *Lactantius*

Lactantius, the rhetorician and teacher, who flourished c.290–320, served at the courts both of Diocletian and of Constantine, and wrote a number of apologetic works after his conversion, the chief of which is *The Divine Institutes*.<sup>100</sup> He is renowned for his florid, Ciceronian style, for his reliance on philosophy rather than scripture for his defence of the Christian faith, and for his stress on the role of human works rather than that of divine grace in the realm of salvation.<sup>101</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that we find little on the atonement in his voluminous works, and that his understanding of Christ mainly revolves around his roles as teacher and example.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless there is a passage in book 4 of *The Divine Institutes* which deals with the meaning of the sufferings and death of Christ.<sup>103</sup> In this passage Lactantius stresses that, though the Jews were at fault in conspiring to put Jesus to death, their deeds were nevertheless done in fulfilment of God’s plan as already prophesied in Old Testament scripture. In his passion, Jesus not only set a perfect example of how to endure suffering but also died for our salvation, to make us ‘heirs of His everlasting kingdom’.<sup>104</sup> How this was achieved is spelt out a few chapters later in the parallel he draws between the

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98 *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, Discourse 9.1.

99 Rashdall (*Idea of Atonement*, 292–94) and Turner (*Patristic Doctrine*, 66) rightly draw attention to Methodius’s attraction to Irenaeus’s recapitulation theory, but neither mention the above evidence to his equal acceptance of the substitutionary understanding of the cross implicit in this passage.

100 For an account of Lactantius’s life and thought see H. von Campenhausen, *Fathers of the Latin Church*, 61–86.

101 H. von Campenhausen (*Fathers of the Latin Church*, 77) describes his theology as ‘superficial’, while W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), 451, comments that he was ‘scarcely interested in doctrinal questions’.

102 Rightly observed by Rashdall (*Idea of Atonement*, 326–27) and Turner (*Patristic Doctrine*, 34–35).

103 *The Divine Institutes*, 4.12–27, ANF 7.110–131.

104 *The Divine Institutes*, 4.20.

death of Christ and the death of the Passover lamb at the time of the Exodus:

For when God was about to smite the Egyptians, to secure the Hebrews from that infliction [*plaga*] He had enjoined them to slay a white lamb without spot, and to place on their thresholds a mark from its blood. And thus, when the first-born of the Egyptians had perished in one night, the Hebrews alone were saved by the sign of the blood: not that the blood of a sheep had any such efficacy in itself as to be the safety of men, but it was an image of things to come. For Christ was the white lamb without spot; that is, He was innocent, and just, and holy, who, being slain by the same Jews, is the salvation of all [*saluti est omnibus*] who have written on their foreheads the sign of blood – that is, of the cross, on which he shed his blood.<sup>105</sup>

Though the parallel is not drawn quite as explicitly and vividly as it is by Methodius, the basic structure of thought is the same: humankind is subject to a divine ‘infliction’ which will result in death; the only means of protection from that destiny is the blood of the sinless Christ; thus the blood of Christ saves us from the judgment of God, his death saves us from ours.<sup>106</sup>

### IV.3. Alexander of Alexandria

Alexander was the bishop of Alexandria at the time of the beginnings of the controversy over Arius. Among his extant writings is a short work *On the Soul and Body and Passion of the Lord* in which he speaks of the salvific effects of the cross of Christ.<sup>107</sup> ‘He hath given himself up as the price of our salvation’, he says;<sup>108</sup> ‘Christ suffered that we should live for ever’;<sup>109</sup> ‘He suffered shame for man’s sake, to set him free from death’;<sup>110</sup> ‘the Lord ... conquered hell.’<sup>111</sup> In an additional section on the same subject, the text is more explicit regarding how these effects were achieved:

Why else should Christ have died? ... Why did He who was reigning in heaven come down to earth? Who compelled God to come down to earth, to take flesh of the holy Virgin, ... to be nailed to the tree, to be buried in the bosom of the earth, and the third day to rise again from the dead; in the cause of redemption to give life for life, blood for blood, to undergo death for death? (*animam dando pro anima, pro sanguine sanguinem, mortem pro morte abeundo?*) For Christ, by dying, hath discharged the debt of

105 *The Divine Institutes*, 4.26, ANF 7.129.

106 The comment of Mozley (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, 119 n4) that Lactantius ‘[does] not rise above the idea of Christ’s death as a supreme example of virtuous endurance’, is therefore inadequate, as is Rashdall’s comment (*Idea of Atonement*, 326–27) that Lactantius says ‘nothing about the expiatory value of the cross’.

107 The original Greek of this piece of writing is lost, and it is preserved only in Syriac and Latin translations.

108 *On the Soul and Body and Passion of the Lord*, 2.

109 *Ibid.*, 5.

110 *Ibid.*

111 *Ibid.*, 6.

death to which man was obnoxious (*moriens mortis debitum, cui homo era obnoxius, dissolvit*). Oh, the new and ineffable mystery! The Judge was judged.<sup>112</sup>

This contains a strong witness to the idea of penal substitutionary atonement. It pictures sinful humanity as being liable to the punishment of death. Yet Christ the Judge was willing to take that adverse judgment upon himself, and his death discharges that 'debt' of death for us. In other words, his death took the place of our death, that we might be absolved from punishment and have life instead of death.

## V. Conclusion

In view of the texts cited drawn from the five authors mentioned in this article, along with the evidence adduced in previous articles from the writings of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, it may safely be concluded that there was a belief in at least some sections of the early Church that Jesus in his death bore the penal consequences of human sin in our place, in order that we might find, by faith in him, forgiveness, new life and a blessed immortality, instead of eternal death under God's wrath. It is, of course, impossible to say exactly how widespread this belief was, but the evidence has been adduced from the writings of important and influential authors who lived in different parts of the Roman world, including Rome, Carthage, Alexandria and Asia Minor, so it would not be unreasonable to assume that this belief was widespread and even taken for granted by a large number of Christians in the early Church period. Even though the doctrine of the penal substitutionary death of Christ was not explicitly spelt out in these precise terms until much later in the history of the Church, there can be little doubt that the understanding of the meaning of the cross which lies behind these terms had already been embraced in the post-apostolic period.

## Abstract

This article surveys passages from the writings of Hippolytus, Cyprian, Methodius, Lactantius and Alexander of Alexandria with a view to elucidating their implied understanding of the significance of the death of Christ on the cross. It is argued that the authors whose works are reviewed held the belief that Christ died in our place, bearing the punishment for sin we deserved, with the result that those who trust in him might receive forgiveness, eternal life, and all the other blessings of salvation. The evidence adduced in this article, together with that adduced in the previous articles on Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, combine to show that the doctrine of penal substitution was not an invention of the Protestant Reformation, as has recently been alleged, but was present already in the thinking of the Church during the post-apostolic period.

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112 ANF 6.302.